

## The nexus Homelessness and incarceration in two American cities

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**ABSTRACT** ■ Using street ethnography and interviews with homeless men in San Francisco and St Louis, this article examines the dynamic connection between incarceration and homelessness. Among the homeless men in the study, crimes of desperation, aggressive policing of status offenses, and the close proximity of many ex-cons created a strong likelihood of incarceration and reincarceration. Conversely, for jail and prison inmates, time inside consistently eroded employability, family ties, and other defences against homelessness: several of the men had become homeless for the first time directly following release from a carceral establishment. Each of these dynamics was present in both San Francisco and St Louis but the process of becoming homeless and the experience of homelessness itself varied significantly with the differing economic and cultural configurations presented by the two cities. In both cases, each trajectory reinforced the other, creating a homelessness/incarceration cycle more powerful than the sum of its parts, a racialized exclusion/punishment nexus which germinates, isolates, and perpetuates lower-class male marginality.

**KEY WORDS** ■ homelessness, poverty, incarceration, crime, quality-of-life policing, masculinities, neoliberalism, United States

In both the public sphere and academia, representations of male ex-convicts and of homeless men are quite different, but in practice there is much continuity between the two groups. Several recent surveys of shelter users and the street homeless report that between 40 and 80 percent of male respondents have spent time in jail or prison (O'Flaherty, 1996: 311–14). Yet, the possibility of a causal link between incarceration and homelessness is only rarely discussed in the homelessness literature (O'Flaherty, 1996: 266). The sparse criminological material on the subject is limited to discussions of the effect of homelessness on rates of crime and recidivism (Baron and Kennedy, 1998; Hagan and McCarthy, 1998). I myself did not set off with any intention of studying incarceration but within the first year of my ethnographic fieldwork with homeless men it became apparent that jail time had the effect of both creating and reinforcing homelessness. This was even more true for prison time, which is of longer duration and which segregates inmates geographically from their pre-prison relationships.

In general, the road from homelessness into jail is better charted and understood (Irwin, 1986; Parenti, 1999; Snow and Anderson, 1993: Ch. 8). For more than a century, American jails have sheltered many of the vagrant or indigent, often upon their own request. Old-timers have half-affectionately called jail time 'three hots and a cot', for at least 60 years. Always ready to round up the disorderly and the disreputable, municipalities have historically responded to mass street homelessness by stepping up the criminalization of 'private' home practices (sleeping, drinking, urinating) when undertaken in public space. The current homelessness wave is no exception. By the mid-1990s, 70 percent of US cities had passed laws forbidding sleeping or loitering in public places (Brosch, 1998), increasing the likelihood that homelessness would lead directly to incarceration.

During my five years of street ethnography with homeless men in San Francisco I paid careful attention to the various paths from incarceration to homelessness and from homelessness to incarceration. Recognizing certain idiosyncrasies in the San Francisco case, I extended the research to a second field site with an intensive seven-month study in St Louis in 1999. In both cities the research involved my spending extensive time working, hanging out, and moving through various institutions with bottle and can collectors, drug dealers, thieves, and panhandlers. The street ethnography was supplemented by participant observation and interviews undertaken in shelters and drug rehabilitation facilities. My sample in San Francisco was composed of 26 can and bottle recyclers, with a smaller counter-sample of 12 men living on income from stealing, small-time drug dealing, junk selling or panhandling.<sup>1</sup> St Louis was clearly a very different city, and I let the differences be expressed in my sampling. Given the much higher prevalence of criminal activity I found among the homeless St Louisans, it made sense that a smaller number of the St Louis sample would be recyclers (7), and more of them hustlers of

various kinds (39). To ensure that this research design did not exaggerate the contrast between the cities, I paid careful attention to the composition of the smaller control samples (the recyclers in St Louis and the dealers and thieves in San Francisco). I tried to find people whose lives corresponded as closely as possible to the corresponding primary sample in the other city. As there are far more black than white homeless men in St Louis, over three-quarters of my sample were African-Americans, the remainder white. My San Francisco sample was more diverse, with 14 African-Americans, 14 whites, seven Latinos, an Asian-American, a Native American, and a Gypsy.

I focused on men alone because the situations of homeless men and women are very different. While there are growing numbers of women moving between homelessness and incarceration, historically, poor women have been differently positioned vis-à-vis the law, benefit entitlements, and the state.<sup>2</sup> At the cost of close monitoring by social services, they have been given limited financial support and shelter on the basis of their status as mothers and/or victims of domestic violence (Abramovitz, 1988; Piven and Cloward, 1993). Poor unemployed men, on the other hand, tend to be understood as the source of not only their own but their female family members' problems as well. Typically they are referred to as 'deadbeat dads', sexual predators, and perpetrators of domestic violence (Mincy and Sorensen, 1998; Nichols-Casebolt, 1986). They consequently receive little to no financial support and are overwhelmingly caught up in the criminal justice system. It is men, therefore, more than women, who cycle continuously through homelessness and incarceration, populating the 'exclusion/punishment nexus' of the society.

After a discussion of the difference between the nature of homelessness in San Francisco and St Louis, I discuss the various ways that incarceration leads to or reinforces homelessness. In San Francisco, where the majority of the men were not from the city, the path from incarceration to homelessness was often immediate. Several of the men became homeless for the first time directly following release from jail or prison. In St Louis the process progressed more slowly, as repeated spells of incarceration left men more and more alone in the world, passing slowly along a 'homeless continuum'. In both cities, the experience of incarceration led men to tolerate homelessness rather than put up with chaotic or overcrowded living situations.

I then examine the reverse process, showing how crimes of desperation, 'rabble management', and bad company create a constant flow of homeless men into the jails and prisons of the United States. Again, these processes worked quite differently in the two cities studied. Some of the San Francisco men had minimal or non-existent criminal records, and their street lives led to their first spells of incarceration. In crime-ridden St Louis, all but one of the men passed through the doors of the criminal justice system long before becoming homeless. Homelessness in St Louis therefore had the function of

bouncing 'ex-cons' back into incarceration rather than producing criminalization for the first time. Finally, I extend the analysis into the broader society by arguing that the homelessness/incarceration cycle is best theorized as an *exclusion/punishment nexus*, a racialized space which germinates, isolates, and perpetuates lower-class male marginality.

### Comparing San Francisco and St Louis

The look, feel, and experience of urban poverty in the United States shows both depressing uniformities and surprising contrasts. Choosing to compare cosmopolitan, booming, San Francisco with the conservative, economically depressed Midwestern city of St Louis, I sought to understand what the categories of 'the homeless' and 'ex-con' actually represent in two places with very different configurations of culture, economy, and politics.

San Francisco, the most prosperous, beautiful metropolis of the western United States, held onto its skilled working population and commercial importance throughout the Reagan era. Until very recently it was experiencing a dramatic boom as one of the research and development centers of the information technology revolution, and it remains one of the most culturally vital cities in the United States. At the same time, the city is over crowded and exorbitantly expensive,<sup>3</sup> and has become notorious recently for exhibiting one of the worst cases of street homelessness in the country. Panhandlers work every major intersection while residential and industrial streets alike are regularly punctuated by the shopping carts and encampments of the street homeless.

St Louis is a much poorer city, located in the Midwest near the junction of the Mississippi and the Missouri. The fourth biggest city in America in the early 20th-century, St Louis has experienced both devastating deindustrialization and the most extreme population loss of any American city, down from 1 million in 1910 to less than 350,000 at the end of the century. In recent years, its poorest citizens have been abandoned by their more prosperous neighbors and relatives to languish in a dilapidated and violent terrain, where occupied houses are scattered among stretches of urban prairie and several thousand boarded-up buildings.<sup>4</sup> The vast majority of legal business activity has moved outside the city, with the important exception of the many churches, big and small. Meanwhile the drug industry has become the major game in town.

The cities have opposite relationships with their metropolitan areas. During the 1980s and 1990s, San Franciscans without homes of their own struggled to remain in the city, as rents moved up towards Manhattan levels. Large numbers of working class and poor residents, especially African-Americans and Latinos, left the city for more affordable towns across the bay (Belluck, 1998; Nieves, 2001; Weston, 2001). St Louis, on the other hand,



Figure 1 Homeless encampments, Division Street, San Francisco.

has trapped and concentrated the local poor population, swelling the city's African-American population to a majority. Many, perhaps most, St Louisans aspire to join the persistent exodus leaving the city's rotting core for the surrounding suburbs of 'the County'. The cost of housing in St Louis is much lower than in San Francisco, with equivalent apartments going for a third to one-half of San Francisco prices; yet at the bottom of the housing market there is a similar shortage of very cheap housing, a shortage which in fact extends across the entire country. Rather than making up the shortfall of affordable housing, the federal government has steadily decreased its role in housing provision, consistent with the broad reduction of federal aid to the cities since 1980 (Katz, 1989: 189–90).

Many of the men in this study were strongly affected by the dearth of casual housing for poor single adults. Throughout the country, the availability of casual housing for poor single adults has steadily decreased since the 1970s. The single room occupancy (SRO) hotel, traditionally the last resort of impoverished single adults, has almost disappeared in most American cities (Blau, 1992: 74–5). St Louis is a typical case: the buildings which still take in tenants on a traditional daily-weekly-monthly basis can be counted on one hand. Without this intervening buffer, those unable to initiate or sustain long-term rental accommodation move into the shelters or onto the streets. San Francisco, on the other hand, has retained far more of its SRO units than most cities, primarily due to the concerted efforts of

housing advocates and their political allies over the last 30 years. While vital units continue to be lost through fires and makeovers for the tourist trade, the city has given various nonprofits grants for charities to take over several hotels, and it has entered into a close relationship with the hotels still in private hands through various voucher programs. Many men and women living on disability (Supplemental Security Income) or Social Security retirement payments make permanent homes out of their hotel rooms. Yet it is difficult for able-bodied men on General Assistance (basic relief for indigent single adults) to sustain this kind of accommodation long term given that monthly rent costs more than their entire check. Those who manage to double up, sharing the tiny space, appear to be the most successful in retaining housing. Although the rates are high and the quality low, especially in the hotels run for profit, the San Francisco SRO hotels provide a lifesaving market in easy access housing which is missing in St Louis.

Both St Louis and San Francisco have a high homelessness count, somewhere between 8000 and 12,000, depending on which sources one uses, but the reasons for this homelessness are somewhat different.<sup>5</sup> One way to put it is that the 'threshold' of homelessness is low in San Francisco and relatively high in St Louis. A San Franciscan man or woman with employment, health, or relationship problems can easily find him or herself homeless, and there is considerable demographic diversity among the street homeless. In St Louis, easier access to housing means that the threshold of homelessness is much higher: with the important exception of outsiders and those with serious mental illness, homelessness for St Louisans usually represents the result of a long career of addiction, incarceration, and crime. Yet the population is so much poorer than that of San Francisco – with over a third of the population receiving welfare support – that the resulting numbers of homeless men are roughly similar.

On initial observation, however, St Louis' homelessness problem is far less visible. Routine elements of the San Francisco landscape – encampments, panhandlers, and people pushing carts full of their possessions – are much less common in St Louis. The most important reason for this difference is the availability of squats: St Louis has thousands of squatters and people live for years in abandoned buildings 'out in the neighborhoods', as they say. In fact, many indigent St Louisans stay in the remains of houses abandoned by their own relatives, which gives their residency a tenuous legitimacy in the neighborhood. The general access to squatting greatly reduces demand for shelter beds, so it is possible to stay in the shelters month after month, if one can weather miserable conditions and frequent violence. Staying invisible in San Francisco is far more difficult. Rich and poor, it is a city of newcomers, so only a minority of those who are homeless have any family connections in the city. The high value of San Francisco land means that there are very few abandoned buildings to 'squat'. San Franciscans also



Figure 2 Van living on 16th Street, San Francisco.

suffer from an acute shortage of shelter beds, with the biggest shelters running lotteries to assign scarce sleeping space.

The more fortunate minority of the San Franciscan homeless live in cars and vans, lining the scarce industrial zones of the city with their ancient trailers and buses. But many of the San Francisco homeless live completely out of doors year-round, something impossible in St Louis' much harsher climate. Congregating in parks and along sidewalks, they use shopping carts and tarpaulins to create encampments, trying to protect themselves from criminal victimization or police action by their strength in numbers. In a long-standing war of maneuver, police and merchants associations work on driving these homeless encampments out of neighborhood after neighborhood, only to see them return when moved on from the next location.

The homeless in San Francisco often complain bitterly of ill treatment by the police but by staying in the city they retain access to a rich variety of social services, a vital street life facilitating panhandling, and a critical mass of people in the same situation. San Francisco is far safer than most US cities, even for people living on the street. In comparison, for those without the resources to segregate themselves from the dangerous streets and their seductions, St Louis is a frightening and demoralizing place.<sup>6</sup> Armed robbery

is rampant in many areas of the city, and a source of constant fear for most residents, homeless or not (Wright and Decker, 1997). Many of the homeless men said that their most immediate aim was to get into a shelter outside the city, away from the drug-saturated street culture and astronomical crime levels. Given the NIMBYism (Takahashi, 1997) and tight zoning controls of the suburban municipalities surrounding the city, shelters are few and over-subscribed and such a move is unlikely.<sup>7</sup>

No large-scale study exists of the origins of the homeless population in San Francisco or St Louis. But service providers estimate that the majority of San Francisco's homeless, like most residents of the city, moved there as adults, in many cases from nearby cities in northern California. In St Louis, by contrast, the great majority of the homeless are believed to have been born and raised in the city or across the river in East St Louis. The only newcomers I came across during my fieldwork were white men from rural Missouri who had been paroled there following prison terms. As I will show below, the higher level of support from friends and family in St Louis had a dramatic effect on the nature of the homelessness/incarceration cycle.

### How incarceration leads to homelessness

The two million Americans incarcerated on any given day are not counted in any official homelessness statistics, though they are without several basic elements of a home (privacy, freedom to go in and out, safety). They only join the homeless when they leave prison, jail, or a halfway house and find themselves with nowhere to go. The connection is most immediate for those coming out of jail, as they are frequently released in the middle of the night with nothing but the clothes on their backs. In St Louis, men were likely to have family or friends to call on but in San Francisco, a city of migrants, many people become homeless precisely at this point.

The War on Drugs and its resultant crackdown on the African-American street dealer has been by far the most significant factor in producing the tripling of the US prison population since 1980 (Irwin and Austin, 1994; Tonry, 1995). In the years 1986–1991 the number of African-Americans doing time for drug offenses in state prisons increased by 465.5 percent (Mauer, 1997). Many of these men were first offenders, part of the nearly 40 percent of Americans entering prison in the early 1990s who had never been previously incarcerated (Tonry, 1995: 25).

Several of the San Francisco men in my study were first incarcerated in their 30s or 40s for non-violent drug offenses, mostly possession of crack cocaine. These spells behind bars produced sharp transitions within each life course: from low-wage work to unemployment, from rental housing to hotels or the street, from marriage to solitude or casual, unstable relationships. While few had known prosperity in their lives, imprisonment had



definitely moved them down the class scale, into the realm of the lost (on this dynamic of penal impoverishment, see Marchetti, this issue). The story of Desmond, a guitarist from Newark, illustrates the destructive power of mandatory sentencing for possession of crack cocaine (see box).

### *Desmond*

*When I met him, Desmond was a tall slender black man in his early 50s. He had a charming quiet confidence – unlike many homeless ex-cons he gave the impression of complete social competence – but his marginal status was marked by his cart and his missing front teeth. He had come to San Francisco from Newark, New Jersey, where he had spent a peaceful, protected childhood with his older sisters and maternal grandparents. At 14, Desmond traded his dead mother's fur trimmed coat for his first electric guitar and amplifier. His grandma was not pleased, but let him have his way as long as he stayed in school.*

*Over the next 15 years Desmond gradually moved up to playing rhythm guitar with a successful east coast touring band. On tour in Washington, DC, he fell in love with a Trinidadian singer, and they eventually married and started a family. This was when things started to get difficult financially. Touring with a kid was crazy, they decided. Desmond tried in vain to find a slot in a local cover band where he could make decent money. After their second child was born in 1983, Desmond gave up the struggle to make a living from music and tried to get some 'regular' work. A few weeks surveying the wreckage of the Newark economy moved them to drive all the way out to Los Angeles, where Desmond's sister had settled. The situation there looked more promising but months of pounding the pavement failed to turn up a job with 'prospects' of any kind.*

*See I never knew it would be so hard. All that time I was with the band I used to think how everything would be easier with the family if I just gave up playing out for a while, put in my time doing some honest labor. [Laughs] Guess I wasn't reading the papers. I would have been more responsible if I had only got to build up seniority somewhere, but I wanted to follow my dream. I should say our dream in fact.*

*Desmond insists that the dismal labor market pushed him into drug dealing.*

*I couldn't find anything, only jobs for kids. So after a few months starving my babies and losing my self-respect at Taco hell I quit. . . . Then I started dealing bud (marijuana) instead. In fact, not instead*

*exactly, I kept a part-time day gig at another fast-food joint, dealt out the back door.*

*Marijuana got more and more expensive during the 1980s due to a heavy crackdown on the growers upstate. Crack cocaine, on the other hand, became far cheaper and more easily available. Like several other men in the sample, Desmond slipped from dealing marijuana into dealing crack cocaine without really thinking about the difference between the two drugs.*

*It was around 1987. I was still into reefer myself, but crack was where to make the easy money. That's what the people want now. Back in the seventies we wanted to be mellow, now it's 'Beam me up, Scotty', 'Make me crazy.' Now maybe if I'd had a decent sized place I would have grown it (the reefer) myself, but that wasn't an option with four people in a one-bedroom apartment.*

*In 1989 Desmond was caught sitting in his car with over six grams of crack in his inside pocket. Unfortunately for him and thousands of other black Californians, the federal mandatory sentencing laws which had come into effect the previous year required that he serve at least five years of prison. This was a first drug offense and Desmond was a strictly small-time independent street dealer, yet ironically this relative 'innocence' left him vulnerable, with no money for a decent lawyer or information to trade with the prosecutor.*

*Once behind bars, Desmond suffered the panic, humiliation and despair common to first-time prisoners. He did not know how to fight.*

*See, I grew up with womenfolk, and then, well the music world, there's a bunch of mellow dudes. . . . You don't want to know the shit I went through in there. Losing my teeth, that wasn't the worst of it. . . . I got myself through by reading and watching too much TV. Staying out of certain people's way, trying not to rattle this or that psycho's chain, that's a full-time occupation.*

*After Desmond was sentenced, Shirley took the girls back to Trinidad, promising to come back when he was released. According to Desmond, his wife's mother, an evangelical Christian, was horrified by his offense and put pressure on Shirley to divorce him during his fourth year inside. He has never seen any of them since.*

*On release Desmond was paroled to San Francisco, and he hoped to make a fresh start in a place where no one knew him as a dealer. He did not contact his sister Donna, back east, hoping to surprise her with good news later on. But good news never reached Donna.*

*Desmond's spirits were not high leaving prison, and he easily sank into the Tenderloin's sea of indigent ex-cons. Work seemed harder than ever to find, as he had no friends among the working population. It was at this point, doubling up in a windowless SRO room with a prison acquaintance, that Desmond developed a crack habit for the first time. 'I knew what I was getting into. I was thinking, okay, things can't get any worse. May as well get high before I die.' With no one to turn to, crack quickly exhausted his minimal income and he could no longer afford his share of the room. He hit the street and failed to bounce back.*

*Recycling, Desmond often told me, is the best San Francisco street life offers, 'less of the bullshit, maybe a fraction more of the respect'. Keeping his cart in the mouth of one of three alleyways, Desmond would sit out on one of the main drags, retrieving containers as soon as people discarded them. Every 15 minutes or so he made a small collection with a plastic bucket from the nearby public trash cans and sorted it into the different bags tied onto his cart. The rest of the time he sat on doorsteps, reading the paper or talking.*

*Desmond's friend Julio, a Salvadoran bus boy at one of the upscale Italian restaurants, used to arrive every couple of days with a load of empty wine bottles and a spliff of marijuana to share in the alley. Sometimes he brought leftovers. Julio was convinced he could eventually get Desmond a job as dishwasher: 'Have to keep trying, amigo, you'll do good, I know'. Desmond would play along, nodding his head, 'Maybe, we'll see', but told me privately that Julio was a great guy but he didn't understand America yet.*

*A couple of months after this conversation, Julio got Desmond an interview with his manager. Desmond was ambivalent about going but eventually came to my place to spruce up, saying he did not want to hurt Julio's feelings. By the time he left he seemed optimistic, cracking jokes about those free meals he would serve us when he was promoted to waiter.*

*Julio and Desmond came away from the unsuccessful interview with different stories. Julio seemed frustrated that Desmond acted too unenthusiastic, telling him, 'You got to look like you want that job.' Desmond was softly unyielding:*

*Look hombre, I knew he wasn't interested. He took one look at my face and knew I was on hard times. I doubt they ever hire blacks in those joints anymore, even if I wasn't a bum and a felon. . . . I know my mouth doesn't help. If I was really serious about trying for employment I need to get me Medicaid and see about some dentures. . . . But with my record, what's the point?*

### San Francisco: homelessness as 'recovery'

Jordan, an African-American can and bottle recycler, explains how the jail-to-homelessness trajectory worked in San Francisco before they started closing the ferry building at night in the early 1990s.

See, it happen to a lot of folks like me. You come out of the city jail, or the county jail, don't make no difference. You have nowhere to go, you lost your apartment, you don't know where your buddies are. Then you remember, that's what people said, go to the ferry building. You can always sleep the night there . . . What you didn't know, is you might be staying there a long time.

As Jordan says, some people in this situation recover quickly, but others struggle for years to recover a viable social location.

The restrictions, authoritarian micromanagement, and routinized abuse of prison life profoundly alter the habitus (Bourdieu, 1990) of the inmate, as their situation forces them to relinquish outside values and practices in favor of new strategies for survival. Reflecting the conditions inside, those who had done extensive time seemed to combine repressed fury with the kind of existential passivity born of extreme regimentation (Sykes, 1958). Such altered feelings and habits directly precipitated some of the ex-cons into homelessness. The low tolerance for discipline and authority they felt after their prison experiences led them to prefer the freedom of street homelessness to the low status and high insult level of bottom-rung work and accommodation in shelters or Single Room Occupancy hotels.<sup>8</sup>

George is a middle-aged white San Franciscan who spent his late 20s and 30s working as a delivery driver for an office furniture company. His modest prosperity ended abruptly when he killed somebody during a fight in the early 1980s. He emerged from prison six years later traumatized and cut off from his family and former friends. In San Francisco, where many ex-cons are without any family support, the only likely option in the rental market is an overpriced SRO room. George first found housing in the welfare hotels of the Tenderloin, San Francisco's pungent skid row neighborhood, but could not bear the numerous rules and hostile treatment from the people on the desk. One day we visited Maurice, a prison friend, in a foul smelling cubicle hotel on Eddy Street. The rudeness of the man at the desk brought back bad memories which George vented as soon as we got into his friend's room:

*George:* Can you believe that shit? And coming out of the joint, it's the worst. When you do eight years behind prison walls . . . Yeah, everything stops. When I got out like, you know, when I got out and I came here and I applied for GA [General Assistance, a welfare program for indigent adults], the first thing was the looks I got from the hotel owners. I wasn't used to that. And I'd already done eight years of that shit . . . Orders and looks and 'No, you can't have that.' Hey, I've done my time, okay . . .

*Maurice:* Done hard time.

*George:* Your chick is gonna go to your hotel room, and they treat you like, it's unreal, they talk to you like duh-duh-duh-duh. Even if my brother came from out of town to see me, he would get . . . read the rights. And for this you're paying all your GA.

Maurice looked at the floor then shrugged and brought out his bong (marijuana pipe). As we watched an ancient portable television, Maurice told George that he thought he could persuade the hotel management to let them double up together, which would save them \$150 a month each. But George again confirmed that he preferred to stay outside, where at least he could come and go as he pleased, rather than in an institution which reminded him all too viscerally of prison. 'Thanks man, but I can't take it down here', he said. 'All the bullshit, and knowing you're being ripped off, that you're paying more for a fucking shit-hole than other people are paying for their nice apartments.'

When we were alone again, we talked about the trade-offs involved in choosing to sleep outside.

Trouble with homelessness is, it's hard to sleep well unless you have something in you. Alcohol in my case. See . . . even with a good sleeping bag and a roll, you have to deal with . . . well you always wake up with the little noises. You don't know what's going down. There's the cold hard ground, and various creeps hanging around. . . . But if you can knock yourself out some, then you're better off.

As George's homelessness pushed up his consumption of beer, his sense of alienation from the 'straight' world only grew stronger. The few companions he found on Haight Street reinforced George's 'hard living' habits, only putting aside their wary, scornful manner for laughing camaraderie with the pass of the bottle. Both of us found it impossible to hang out with them without drinking. If he wanted to maintain a social life George had little choice but to drink. Over the course of a couple of years, his sharp, articulate manner disappeared into foggy repetitiveness, leaving only occasional bursts of lucidity around the middle of the day.

Other men who said they had 'chosen' street homelessness over the hotels or the shelters articulated similar motivations. Especially in social situations with other homeless men, many talked of homelessness as a necessary period of 'recovery', during which they could relax after the tension of prison and prepare themselves for the uphill struggle ahead. The discourse of recovery served as a collective, optimistic interpretation of homelessness which made it possible to maintain mutual respect in a stigmatized situation. Dobie, who did six years in San Quentin for permanently disabling his ex-girlfriend's lover, spoke most convincingly on this subject

one day when working with myself and Maddox, another African-American recycler.

*Dobie:* Prison is bullshit, you know. They talk about rehabilitation, and that is the biggest joke in the world if it wasn't so mother-fucking cold. It's not rehabilitation, it's punishment, that's all, like Bible vengeance. They say rehabilitation so they can look professional and like they're not in the business of sadism. . . .

*Maddox:* When they running just a slave camp.

*Dobie:* Slave camp is right. People come to the joint normal, but no one leaves with their head straight . . . There's something about being locked up, just being locked up anywhere. It breaks you down, your confidence, your get-up-and-go, your social, like your social instincts, your health, all of it. It's such a strain, and you have to hold yourself high, like you don't give a damn.

*Maddox:* Yeah that crazy fronting. Makes you psycho.

Sorting some bottles from a dumpster into the bags slung around his cart, Dobie meditated on his time since prison.

For me, it held me in a time warp. I mean I came out and I was still angry at Denise. Six years and I still wanted revenge. I dreamed of killing her. . . . I knew I had to chill, and, well this homeless thing, that's one thing you can do, *you can take some time for yourself*. You stay out of the shelters, you sleep in the park, do some good honest work canning (recycling), and *you can start to get yourself back to a better state*. So you would be more ready to deal with people without losing it. (Emphasis added)

I was skeptical, and asked Dobie, 'But do you think it's really helping you? You have been having all this flu, and . . . well it's not exactly a career ladder, the street.' Dobie and Maddox, irritated with my comment, both shouted at me: 'Career ladder! What kind of career ladder wants me? I wouldn't get my foot on any mother-fucking career ladder. "One violent criminal, ready for work, sir" '.

Homelessness may indeed represent some kind of psychological recovery from imprisonment. Dobie seems to have liberated himself from revenge fantasies and thrown his anger into his recycling work, at which he excels. Yet one form of suffering has been exchanged for another. Street life is drug-saturated, very unhealthy, dangerous and highly unpredictable (Anderson, 1996; Rossi, 1989; Snow and Anderson, 1993). Under these conditions, economic recovery is impossible, and psychological recovery unlikely. Contrary to Dobie's representation of homelessness as recovery from the traumas of prison, I came to feel that it only compounded the difficulties of readjustment to life outside. I also felt that Dobie overstated the degree of

choice leading to homelessness. In general the men tended to emphasize their own agency in their downfall. Although many were very angry at the criminal justice system or at the government agencies, they ultimately preferred to see themselves as wrong-headed rather than victims of individual pathologies or structural forces. Dobie's construction of homelessness itself as a 'choice' was consistent with this broader narrative of choice.

#### St Louis: – the homeless continuum

The situation for the former convicts in St Louis was very different. Release from prison or jail led immediately to homelessness only in cases where men had been in and out of 'the system' for many years. Most of those exiting jails and halfway houses were native to the city and likely to find at least temporary support and shelter. Such support was also easier to supply, given that many people living on low incomes have quite large apartments or houses. Families often extend generosity to out-of-luck or miscreant sons, daughters, nieces, nephews, and grandchildren for many years. St Louisian African-Americans often used expressions implying that they understood homelessness as a *continuum* rather than the sharper break usually experienced by most of the San Franciscans. Men would often say, 'I was getting to be more and more homeless' or, 'I started to realize I was homeless.' For many, street homelessness often came only after many years of circulating in and out of jail, prison, and the houses of parents, girlfriends, friends, grandparents, great-uncles, and brothers and sisters.

A minority of the San Franciscans, but most of the men in the St Louis sample, were African-Americans who had grown up in poor neighborhoods. Most of the latter had been frequently arrested for petty crime and public misdemeanors since the age of 11 or 12. The superior economic pull of street crime, especially drug dealing, contrasted with the low-wage, low-status, legal employment available, keeping them only marginally attached to the labor market (Bourgois, 1995; Fairlie, 1999; VanNostrand and Tewksbury, 1999). Up until early adulthood the life stories of the (mostly African-American) St Louisians closely resembled those of some of the black San Franciscans, the major difference being that many of the San Francisco men came from other cities. In their early 20s, the typical life paths started to diverge. The homeless San Franciscans with extensive criminal records have 'gone down fast' in their 20s or early 30s, becoming homeless in their mid-30s or early 40s. The St Louisians moved towards the street far more slowly. Their growing 'rap sheets' and sketchy employment records assured them a firmly marginal social location, but this marginality did not manifest itself as literal homelessness for a long time.<sup>9</sup> The wealth of family connections for most of the St Louisians combined with relatively low housing costs to slow their downward trajectories.

In the St Louis case, incarceration was just as important a precipitant of homelessness as it was in San Francisco but it worked far more slowly. By their late 20s or 30s many of the St Louisans had started to serve serious sentences. It became much harder to move into the legal economy and those who failed to thrive in the illicit economy moved slowly towards the street, in most cases only becoming fully homeless in their 40s or 50s. Once engaged on the homeless continuum, each loss of a saving relationship marked another step on the road towards absolute destitution. Some of these losses were deaths, usually of older relatives. Others were 'bridges burned', where family members and friends gradually withdrew their support or even casual acknowledgment of their relationship. Long prison sentences were especially destructive to family ties, substituting only the dubious connections between fellow convicts. Wilson, an African-American former bookkeeper from St Louis, described losing his most important romantic relationship because of his incarceration for armed robbery.

Kamila came to see me when I was at the Workhouse (the St Louis city jail), right before I went to the penitentiary, and when she came to see me I knew there was something different about her. Then we started talking and all of a sudden she started crying and I didn't know why. I still was going to be at the Workhouse for about another month and she finally told me . . . that she knew that was going to be the last time she'd see me because she couldn't take seeing me like that. And she had, she already had three young kids and was young, she was only 20 years old, and she knew she needed someone to help her raise the children.

So I actually didn't hear from her no more until after I got to the penitentiary. She wrote me a letter and told me that she was going to get married and that she wished me the best and all that . . .

Wilson is a husky, formidably smart African-American man who had an unusually varied career including two years of bookkeeping and several bank robberies. After leaving a halfway house, he was roaming the mean streets of St Louis with nothing but an old army bag, a toy pistol, and a letter proclaiming that he was indeed alone in the world. Wilson explained how his pride prevented him from calling on his family after his brother had denied him a loan.

Me, my pride got in the way and I didn't want to [call on my family] . . . there was certain people I could have called. I could call my sister at any time. I knew that when my brother told me no I could call my sister and she would say yes. But I said, that's all right, none of them want to have anything to do with me, I don't want to have anything to do with them.



You know that's when I wrote the letter . . . 'If I'm found dead please give this to my family' and inside the letter was like, 'If the police call you and tell you I'm dead, why don't you-all tell them that I'm no kin of yours, I'm not related to you all. That way it won't cost you any money to have a funeral if I die . . . Because I'm a veteran, you know, the government, they'll take care of my funeral, you don't have to take care of my funeral,' you know, talk like that . . . I kept it on me at all times. That way if something was to happen then they would have to read it.

Most of the St Louis men who had moved through the homeless continuum in this way were heavy, if sometimes sporadic, substance abusers. Often the last family members or friends prepared to give drug-using 'ex-cons' accommodation would themselves be in trouble with heavy drug use. Reggie Riley, a genial 48-year-old thief and alcoholic who looks about 70, had been staying with his crack-using sister Nancy since his last release from prison. Reggie had burned his bridges during a long career 'playing the ladies' (pimping) in his home neighborhood, and he continued to drink and steal from stores. His brother would not even wave to him on the street and Nancy was the only relative who would still tolerate him in her house. Reggie explained how he ended up at the Salvation Army:

Money came up missing. I didn't know anything about it, but that drug, cocaine, crack, have a person in such a paranoid state of mind to where like everyone is suspect, and the money could be right here. Sometimes she would find money that she thought had been stole, she looked through her door, her mattress, her purse, anything and she would find it.

I hate to be accused unjustly, and that would bring out the anger in me, so I just told her, 'Yeah sis', it's time for me to go on and make a move. I can make it on the streets, I've been on the streets more or less all my life anyhow.' So, she said, 'Well, all right, Reggie, you know you're always welcome'. And I said, 'All right, cool.' So that's what happened. I went down to the Salvation Army and started living down there.

Like George in San Francisco, Reggie weighed the alternatives and opted for homelessness over an uncomfortable housing situation. Unlike George, Reggie was inured to the aggression and indignities of prison-style culture and conditions, and he was willing to spend years in the same Salvation Army shelter that intimidated and disgusted some of the other men. The last step on the continuum was less a dramatic fall than a choice of what he considered the lesser of two evils. In both cities, spells of incarceration increased the men's vulnerability to homelessness. But the different housing conditions in the cities and the lack of family ties for most of the San Franciscans had greatly accelerated their descent into the street.

## How homelessness leads to incarceration

The trajectory from homelessness to imprisonment worked in more similar ways in the two cities. The ways the homeless in the study came to be arrested can be broken down into three different mechanisms: crimes of desperation, 'rabble management', and bad company.

### Crimes of desperation

The extreme poverty and mental strain suffered by people who are homeless compels them to commit actions which are against the law. Crimes (and misdemeanors) of desperation ranged from simple offenses of need like shoplifting a toothbrush and toothpaste to serious incidents precipitated by the difficulty of street life. A good example of a crime of desperation was demonstrated by Declan, a middle-aged Irish immigrant in San Francisco.

*I got to know Declan early on in my recycling career. I was sitting on the curb of an alleyway in Chinatown with a pathetically small load of bottles and cans, writing field notes in my notepad. Declan pushed his cart into the same alleyway. He is a slight, forward leaning man with a permanent frown and a formal manner.*

*'Just coming through. I'll leave you the findings,' he said to me, pushing on past.*

*'That's okay, take what you can, I'm taking a break.'*

*'That's right. You can't be getting frantic about this job.'*

*'Do you want to join me? I have a couple of cans of soda.'*

*'Soda! That's a new one. All right then,' he said hesitantly, sitting down three or four feet away from me.*

*After a couple of minutes he asked me what I was writing. 'I'm doing a study of recycling,' I said.*

*'So you are doing this for fun?' His tone was neither friendly nor antagonistic.*

*I remarked on his Irish accent, and he told me that back in the UK he used to make a living playing Irish music on the road. Declan offered to share some beer. We agreed to go recycling together a couple of days later.*

*To my pleasant surprise, Declan actually showed up at the place and time we had agreed. Sitting in Washington Park after we had worked for a few hours, Declan told me that before he became homeless he had been living for many years in a Chinatown SRO hotel, cleaning the hallways and bathrooms in exchange for rent. In 1994 the hotel*

manager decided that Declan needed to come up with some money to supplement his work-for-rent trade.

*'I mean, it was outrageous. This fella was already working me 30 hours a week for rent alone, so I was having to work another janitor position for my other living expenses. . . . They put the rent up to 500 dollars a month, and they were getting people in who had that kind of money.'*

*'How much were you making?'*

*'Ooh, I was making 8.25 an hour at my outside job, but the hours were not regular enough for me. I couldn't get my rent in on time, and they threatened me with eviction . . . like I walked in off of the street last week. . . . I didn't want to stay anymore. After that, I was too angry. I could not look the fella in the eye anymore. I wanted to punch him.'*

*'Did you?'*

*'No. I'm not a violent man.'*

*Far from it. Declan said that he had not had a fight since he was a teenager, and it was easy to believe him. If anything, he did not have enough fight in him, but was browbeaten and stooped by a harsh childhood and a life of hard work. He accepted the condition of homelessness phlegmatically, moved his possessions into a storage locker, and bought a 20-year-old Corolla with a dying clutch for somewhere to sleep. Another man living in a van suggested to him that he start recycling, as the chaos of car living was making it hard for him to keep regular hours with the janitorial work. As long as he had his car, where he could sleep with locked doors or read the latest from the racetrack, Declan was willing to push around a shopping cart without the shame which plagued most of the homeless men. 'See,' he told me, 'you can tell that I'm not really homeless like some of these fellas, because I just have the bottles and cans in my shopping cart, there's no clothes in there. I'm not carrying broken down pieces of junk. And I keep myself clean. Altogether there's not much reason for anyone to think I was sleeping out on the street.'*

*One morning Declan called me in quite a state.*

*'Look, I'm sorry but I need your help. I'm having a terrible time with my car.'*

*'What's the matter?'*

*'The bastards towed it this morning. I didn't know what time it was because my watch was stopped.'*

*'You were out recycling?'*

*'No, I just went down to the donut shop for a cup of coffee. I thought, well my watch said it was only seven but it was already eight fifteen.'*

Declan asked me if I could come down and help him deal with the towing company. I could not afford to lend him the \$130 he needed to get the car out of the pound, but he thought it would help if I came down 'dressed nicely'. (Little did he know that dressing up nicely was not one of my strong points.) He was desperate to get his stuff out of the car.

At first the clerk at the window was merely officious in his refusals, but when it became obvious that Declan was living in his car he became rude, pointedly ignoring Declan's requests to speak to a manager, and eventually turning to direct insults.

'If you can't handle the responsibility of a car, you shouldn't have one,' he barked.

This little poverty-as-irresponsibility stab worked wonders. Declan stormed out, his fists clenched, with me teetering after in silly dress-up shoes. Outside on the street the cars roared by, forcing us to shout. I could tell Declan had given up on me.

'It's all right, it's all right,' he kept repeating. 'I'll figure something out. You haven't the time for all this.'

I did not really have any appointments, but I was as embarrassed as Declan. I so wanted to be able to help him get his things, but I didn't have the pull. Declan would not admit how afraid he was, so there was no way for me to console him. I offered him a couch for the night. He said he would call later, and we parted quickly.

I was not surprised that Declan did not call me that night. But when I had not heard from him after a week I started to worry. Reluctantly I picked up the phone to call the usual trinity: the jail, the hospital, and the morgue. Suicide was my biggest worry. Pushing these morbid thoughts away, I called the jail. To my surprise I was told that he was indeed there. I could not find out what the charge was but assumed it was minor, for Declan had never been in trouble with the law.

The next Sunday I went down to see him. He was looking gray and lined.

'What did you do?'

'I don't know what I was thinking. I was wandering round the place for a few hours, and you know I could see my car. I didn't know what to do. So when it got to about three in the morning I tried to jump the fence and get my papers out of the car. I couldn't see anyone around.'

'But you got caught?'

'Mmmm.' Declan looked at the table. We sat in silence.

'Are you okay?'

'You can't relax, there's all this fighting and bully-boy tactics like.'

*I gave Declan some cigarettes and money for phone calls. I was going away for a few weeks, and I was sure that within a week or two he would be out. I could not imagine that a first offender would be given any serious jail time for trying to get his car back. Many of the recyclers cycled regularly in and out of jail, only rarely staying more than a few weeks.*

*What Declan had not told me was that he had got into a long drawn out fight with the security guard who had caught him. He was charged and convicted of both burglary and assault.*

*I was away when his case came up, but I can imagine how it went, with Declan alternately self-deprecating and resentful, but without the fire of a man who believes he deserves better. His clean record may have stood for something, but his lack of employment and legitimate housing probably sent another, more important message. Here was just another member of the rabble, a natural inhabitant of the jail, a man with little to recommend him, and little to lose.*

### Rabble management

The second road to criminalization is what John Irwin (1986) calls 'rabble management': the routine jailing of the disreputable and disaffiliated for minimal offenses in the interests of public order. Legislation and police actions specifically target homeless people because their very homelessness makes them offensive. Panhandling, 'encampment', sleeping, drinking or urinating in public, selling clothes without license: all these offenses are primarily status offenses where the offensiveness of the person supersedes the offensiveness of the crime, meaning that similar behavior by the non-indigent would not be sanctioned in the same way. Reggie, for example, was constantly in and out of jail on public drunkenness charges, but as he lived in the shelter there was nowhere he could legally drink. In effect, drinking became illegal for him because of his homeless status.

While street alcoholics have always been subject to police intervention, in the current period, homelessness itself has become a major policing target, especially in cities where tourism is a leading sector of the economy.<sup>10</sup> Local governments throughout the United States have passed new laws against panhandling, and revived many of the status offenses which had lain dormant on the books since the Depression, or even since the great homelessness waves of the 1870s and 1880s.

Of the two cities in this study, San Francisco presents a much more extensive case of rabble management. First of all, San Francisco is a very popular tourist destination, and merchants and hotel owners are most concerned to

retain the appeal of the city among visitors. The strategies to remove the homeless have included various ballot measures to abolish General Assistance and the introduction of private police forces to patrol major shopping areas. Several thousand tickets are given to homeless people every year for 'quality-of-life' offenses such as sleeping, setting up encampments, disturbing the peace, urinating in public, and possession of open beverage containers (Vitale, 2001).

The practical effect of this kind of policing on the homeless is to continuously circulate them through the jails, making it very difficult to sustain employment or job training. Most importantly, it makes them feel disrespected, despised, and not part of the broader society. The demoralization is most noticeable among downwardly mobile whites, as they have memories of being treated quite differently. For example, George, the former delivery driver from San Francisco mentioned above, has had a long and bitter conflict with a couple of police officers about his dumpster-diving activities.

*George:* And when I got kicked off GA, the police were constantly telling me, stay out of dumpsters, stay out of the dumpsters.

*TG:* Where was that?

*George:* Three years ago . . . in the Hayes neighborhood . . . there's some apartment complexes around Golden Gate and Gough. There's two long ones, and their dumpsters are unbelievable . . . the people there throw away jewelry, quite a few people when they move out of there they just leave, leave everything. And the landlords, they don't even go through it.

*TG:* So the police were trying to stop you from dumpster-diving around there?

*George:* Uh-huh. We battled for a long time . . . they actually put me in jail one time. Three years ago.

*TG:* What for?

*George:* For disturbing the peace. The lady that owned the dumpster came into court and said he's welcome there anytime he wants. (Laughing)

*TG:* So she testified for you?

*George:* Yeah. That was good.

*TG:* How did you get her to do that?

*George:* When they arrested me, she was right there. Me and the cop didn't get along anyway because I don't like him, and if somebody's getting harassed I'd speak out. Like I'd be really mad when somebody's having a sidewalk sale

and they give them a ticket or tell them to pack it up. I get real hard about it because how else is the person supposed to make money? Don't they have something else better to do?

I was somewhat incredulous that this woman, a prosperous property owner, had bothered to come out and testify on George's behalf. But another day I was working with George, we met her out shopping and they talked about the incident. George was wrestling with a vanity table that he had found, and she offered to buy it from him for \$40. She asked him if he had had any more problems with the police, to which he responded that he had been given a ticket for urinating in public.

Unpaid tickets eventually turn into 'bench warrants' (warrants for arrest), and exacerbate the hunted mentality common to many on the streets. Men become increasingly unwilling to interact with any service providers or welfare programs which demand IDs. Interestingly, my research in both cities suggests that in fact few service providers would share information on their clients with the police. Professionals in such organizations generally oppose the punitive discourse deployed by the enforcement of 'quality-of-life' legislation. Even where they do not, coordination with law enforcement appears to be weak. This separation between treatment and punishment appeared to be equally true in cases where the police are trying to pick up suspects wanted for more serious crimes. For example, in the St Louis drug rehabilitation facility I studied, neither the director nor any of his staff, from the authoritarian nurse on the front desk to the most hard-line of the counselors, would allow the police to arrest their clients inside the facility. In fact, they kept everybody inside at times when it looked as if the police were waiting around to capture one of their residents out on a walk.<sup>11</sup> But this reality bore little relevance to the fears of their potential clients on the street that asking for treatment would result in doing time.

### Bad company

The third way that the homeless are drawn towards incarceration is through their geographic concentration within a 'rabble zone'. A rabble zone consists of high-crime residential ghettos, remaining 'skid row' areas of cheap hotels and other organizations which have historically catered to marginal single adults, and the institutional ghettos where the welfare, parole, probation, health, and homeless services are located (Vergara, 1995). There is a paradox here. Many of the homeless gravitate into these 'rabble zones' because of harassment by police in wealthier neighborhoods. Quality-of-life legislation is rarely enforced in these places so, at least initially, a very poor man has more chance of remaining outside of jail if he confines himself to poor neighborhoods. Yet in other ways the skid row/ghetto experience

accelerates a person's slide towards the criminal justice system. In the soup kitchens and shelters of the institutional ghettos, homeless men without criminal records or histories are drawn into prison culture by both fellow clients and the front-line staff. Some are victimized until they learn to display a potential for 'craziness'. But even if a man is not victimized, there is likely to be considerable peer pressure tempting him into illegal acts.

Victor, a Latino recycler in San Francisco, lived on his own under the freeway, working for heroin and reading history magazines. He was extremely thin, as his heroin habit took almost complete precedence over his need for food. Victor always hated going to the Tenderloin, which functions as institutional ghetto as well as skid row. Like many of the recyclers, he would only use services for the homeless when he was sick or when the weather was making life outside unbearable.

*Victor:* I hate those places. Depressing, and there is always some kind of bullshit, people messing with you.

*TG:* What kinds of people?

*Victor:* You know, people wanting you to do stuff that will get you into trouble. 'Let's get some skin,' or 'There's someone I want you to meet.'

*TG:* Where do you know these guys from? You haven't been in the joint here have you? [Victor is from New Mexico]

*Victor:* Well I did 30 days for possession a few months ago. This other Latin guy, Duarte, helped me get through it, for which I was duly grateful . . . But you don't get something for nothing.

*TG:* He got you heroin while you were inside?

*Victor:* Right.

*TG:* And now he wants a partner in crime?

*Victor:* Uh-uh, or someone to do his dirty work, and I'm not interested. That's a lot of the reason I left New Mexico. My brother got me in with the wrong crowd and I was sick of it. . . . That's why I'm sticking to scrapping.

I later lost touch with Victor. Even his dealer, his closest acquaintance, had no idea where he was. I hoped that he had gone back to New Mexico, but I feared Duarte had succeeded in drawing him into serious crime.

### How the nexus exacerbates marginalization

The comparison between San Francisco and St Louis highlights the variation in the workings of the exclusion/punishment nexus. In St Louis the





**Figure 3** Looking for recyclables in Potrero Hill, San Francisco.

categories of 'homeless man' and 'ex-con' overlapped so much that they became more like two viewpoints on the same population than discrete groups of people or conditions. The road to the street almost always included stretches of prison or jail time; only one of the St Louis men started the cycle with homelessness.<sup>12</sup> The San Francisco population was more diverse, with more men initially entering the cycle through homelessness. As rabble management was so much more intense and the level of criminal activity lower, sentences were shorter and charges less serious. Yet in both cases, once the cycle was initiated, men were carried along in its momentum. Regardless of how they had entered the nexus, they continued to tumble from incarceration to homelessness, homelessness to incarceration.

The men entering the nexus on each side shared certain characteristics regardless of city. Seventeen out of the 25 men (San Franciscans and St Louisans combined) who first became homeless shortly after periods of incarceration were African-American, a reflection of the far greater proportion of black men moving through the criminal justice system. Those of any race whose family of origin was far away, lost, or dead seemed to be the most vulnerable, with no one to break their fall. Paradoxically, class of origin appeared to have offered little advantage to those former convicts

who had become homeless. Among the more local men, those like George (the San Franciscan ex-delivery man) or Wilson (the St Louisan ex-book-keeper) who had come from lower middle-class or respectable working-class backgrounds became homeless far quicker than those from poorer backgrounds. Incarceration was more stigmatized in the communities that they came from, and shame kept the men from making any contact with potential helpers. On the other hand, the numbers of those who were incarcerated for the first time while homeless were too small to make any strong claims, but it does appear that they were disproportionately immigrants, men with severe mental illness, and ex-military men. The military connection made sense, given that the ex-soldiers were mostly migrants from other parts of the country, and many of them had lost touch with their families years before quitting the military.

The research clearly indicates that the initial entry point into the homelessness/incarceration nexus was more likely to be incarceration than homelessness. In other words, for men entering the cycle for the first time, the road from incarceration to homelessness was more well-trodden than the road from homelessness to penal confinement. Yet once they were trapped within the cycle, causality moved both ways with equal strength, as men shuffled backwards and forwards between the prison and the street, between punishment and abandonment by the wider society.

Violent crime rates in the United States have been static, and in some cases decreasing.<sup>13</sup> Yet increased arrests and more severe sentences have created a hypertrophied prison system which in turn spews out a class of disaffected, traumatized, permanently unemployed men and women bigger than any since the Great Depression. This homeless/criminal mass is disproportionately African-American, both in reality and in public perception, and this racialization legitimizes their exclusion in the eyes of many Americans, steeped as they are in four centuries worth of racist discourse which associates dark skin with violence, stupidity, and lack of self-discipline (Jordan, 1974; Roediger, 1991; Wacquant, 2000; Williams, 1991: Ch 2).<sup>14</sup>

Punishment and exclusion predicated on symbolic and institutional racism do not only affect the despised group themselves (unemployed or criminal men of the African-American ghettos), but in practice draw from the much broader-skilled and semi-skilled working class, both black and white, multiplying the ranks of the permanently excluded. In effect, to the extent that poor black men become synonymous with criminality, then incarceration reinforces, even creates, blackness in its subjects. In this study, the *racialization of the incarcerated* was especially striking in the case of white men from rural areas. Four of the white men in St Louis were alcoholics from mid-sized or small towns. Entering the carceral system through repeated DUI (Driving Under the Influence) offenses, they served their sentences in majority black prisons and were then paroled to St Louis. Gary,



Figure 4 Inside a homeless encampment, Dogpatch, San Francisco.

an industrial electrician from northern Missouri, described how the local sheriff had taken delight in telling him that he would not be paroled back home. The sheriff implied that the most enduring punishment for his behavior would be felt after his release in St Louis.

Yeah, he was happy all right. He says, 'You want to act wild? You go to the jungle if that's how you want to be. You don't act wild around here, not a man of your age. You had your chance to be a man, and you blew it.'

The sheriff explicitly expelled Gary from white civilization into the (black) 'jungle' of St Louis. He was no longer to have the privileges of whiteness. Gary got the message. Learning how to get along with some of his black fellow inmates in prison and in the halfway house, Gary adapted to the African-American cultural style hegemonic in St Louis poverty institutions. In the St Louis halfway house he made a close friend of Elijah, an African-American from Kansas City, and they went together to work for just above the minimum wage in a small industrial shop in the remains of the light industry belt west of downtown. According to Elijah and Gary, this business hired almost exclusively from the halfway houses. Gary was horrified by the work conditions.

You know, we are working with these industrial solvents, with warning signs all over them, and there's no air extraction whatsoever, and no real masks,

just those useless little white ones. You feel so nauseous at the end of the day, you don't even want to eat.

It's just like slavery, you know. It really is . . . Hard, dangerous work and you don't have no choice. But the guys don't know it, they don't know any better. They never got treated any better. I never used to think it was like that any more. We thought, you know, with affirmative action, all the blacks had it so good. Ha-ha. Well now I know.

Two other white parolees complained about not being treated as 'free white men' by their St Louisan parole officers, recognizing they had lost their white skin privilege. In particular, they felt that their labor market potential was minimized, both in terms of practical skills and in their ability to get on with employers or customers, and they were only sent out for the most menial training and jobs. 'The way they treat you, it's like you never did a real job in your life, like you've always been some kind of no-hope loser,' said Tim, who spent many years working as an engineer on the barges on the Missouri and Mississippi. 'I don't mean to be rude about the other fellas, but it's doesn't seem right to send someone with my age and experience to flip burgers or bust my hands up doing demolition. Now I know employers, they might be prejudiced against me because of my drinking problem, but my Parole Officer doesn't even let me try. Feel like she's laughing at me, like, "Who does he think he is?" I'm not allowed to work outside the city limits, and she won't give me any decent leads inside the city. I just don't get it. You know, I've been clean for five months now, but she just wants to embarrass me with these teenage jobs.'

If, as these men assert, the repertoire of parole practices in St Louis is framed around the ideal type of an African American from the ghetto with a sketchy or non-existent work record, whites and (ex) middle-class black 'ex-cons' alike are drawn into the same circuit of exploitative post-con labor, no-frills rehab centers, and, ultimately, homelessness.

### The moral discourse on poverty, exclusion and punishment

In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault (1975) describes a great turn in social control, as the early modern reliance on bodily punishment gave way to discipline, judgment to treatment, the dungeon to individuated containment, unbearable pain to suspended rights, execution to rehabilitation. And indeed discipline, as Foucault describes it, certainly flourishes in middle-class institutions, hospitals, schools, and in the images of popular culture. Yet those more brutal, primitive forms of social control that he believed to be obsolescent in late modernity are fiercely alive in the United States. Discourses of vengeance, 'zero tolerance', and victims' rights have regained the high

ground over the rehabilitation ethic prevalent until the early 1970s (Allen, 1987), reaching their broadest application in the imprisonment of several hundred thousands for non-violent drug peddling, and gaining an apotheosis in the media circus which follows the steady parade of executions.<sup>15</sup>

In the US, the dominant discourse on poverty is moral and punitive, more than rehabilitative or disciplinary. Within this moral discourse, *punishment* (overwhelmingly of poor people) works hand-in-hand with the *exclusion* of a substantial minority of the population from the preconditions of sustainable existence. Not only people who are homeless but a far larger class of poor Americans have no access to health care, dentistry, luxury consumption, or safe and pleasant public spaces. Many are dependent on charity for survival.<sup>16</sup> While most nation states can make the argument that they do not have the resources to provide minimum conditions of health care or basic income, in the case of the contemporary United States, the maintenance of an insecure, low-wage layer at the bottom of the workforce is a deliberate policy choice. More than other advanced capitalist democracies, US government agencies from the local to the federal level tend to see the economic mission first and foremost as the responsibility to provide a 'business-friendly' environment. They do little to mediate the relationship between vulnerable low-wage workers and their employers. Regulation of workplace conditions and wage levels is mild and enforcement minimal (Freeman and Katz, 1994).

While the United States has never developed a welfare state like those of Western Europe, the doctrine of *laissez-faire* is currently enjoying more popularity than at any time since Herbert Hoover's administration. The new American *laissez-faire* extends towards both the legal economy and the vast areas of the informal economy – the garment 'sweatshops', corporate agriculture dependent on undocumented laborers, and the off-the-books contractors who dominate the residential market in the building trades (Portes et al., 1995). The result is a large pool of workers with no health insurance and little financial security. At the turn of the 21st century, one quarter of American workers earned less than eight dollars an hour and job quality for non-supervisory workers has declined steadily since the 1970s across a broad range of indicators: wages, fringe benefits, due process in discipline, security, upward mobility, and control of the labor process (Tilly, 1996; Uchitelle, 2000). Those who fail to thrive are provided with little in the way of a safety net. Lower-level, short-term jobs rarely qualify a person for unemployment benefit while second-tier welfare benefits are low and difficult to obtain. As a result, healthcare, wealth and income distribution are more polarized in America than in any other advanced industrial country (Freeman, 1994).

When people cannot sustain in the formal economy or even in the informal sectors, their motivation to move into the illegal activities

themselves grows. The collapse of the job market for less skilled men has driven growing numbers of young men into crime (Freeman, 1996), especially in situations where illegal pursuits are both easy and lucrative, as is the case in the St Louis drug industry. Mainstream taboos against criminal activity cannot be sustained over long periods when other options are so limited. The more the poor are excluded from a living wage, healthcare, decent education, and other basic conditions of 'life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness', the more they will eventually move into the illegal economy, and ultimately get caught by the punishment machinery of the criminal justice system.

The resurgent moral discourse on poverty has two faces. The first face turns away from the poverty and misery of the poorest Americans, cynically assuming that insecure, low-wage, low-status jobs will keep them socially integrated and financially afloat. When some of the poorest sink, the other face appears: a punitive face turns towards the now excluded individual, defining and treating him or her as a criminal. Those cycling through homelessness and incarceration experience both faces of the discourse, in often bewilderingly rapid succession. But the incarceration/homelessness cycle possesses a force greater than the sum of its parts, locking its victims into an irreversible descent. For those trying to adjust after prison or jail time, homelessness reinforces social marginalization, unemployment, alienation, and criminal status. While street homelessness was experienced by some as a space of relative freedom from what was felt to be illegitimate authority, street life reinforced their isolation from mainstream social institutions, trapping them at the same time as it provided them with temporary respite. Once living on the street, crimes of desperation, rabble management, and the close proximity of many former convicts made incarceration and reincarceration far more likely than it would have been for the same people if they were not homeless.

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## Notes

- 1 My sample count includes only those with whom I spent a significant amount of time, not the many with whom I had more fragmentary contacts.

There were at least 30 more homeless men and women in San Francisco with whom I regularly visited or talked, and hundreds more with whom I had illuminating conversations, but I did not keep detailed field notes about our encounters.

- 2 The replacement of AFDC (Aid to Families with Dependent Children) with the time-limited TANF (Temporary Assistant to Needy Families) is likely to transform the gender differentials. Sharply rising rates of women's imprisonment suggest that the decline of welfare benefits to poor women will coincide with increasing criminal activity.
- 3 Both cities are geographically small compared with the biggest American cities, but San Francisco packs 777,000 people into its 47 square miles while St Louis, at 62 square miles, had declined to under 350,000 in 1998 (US Census Bureau, 1998).
- 4 According to the 1990 Census, St Louis had 7046 boarded-up housing units, compared with San Francisco's 902 (Database C90STF1A) 2000 census details for Missouri and California were not available at the time of writing this article.)
- 5 Unsurprisingly, advocates for the homeless in both cities give considerably higher estimates than city officials.
- 6 During the decade 1985–1994, St Louis had the fifth highest mean homicide rate (in proportion to its population size) of any American city, higher than New York City, Miami, and Atlanta. During the same years, San Francisco ranked 46th (Lattimore et al., 1997). While homicides in St Louis have decreased since the crack cocaine frenzy of the early 1990s, violent crime remains consistently higher there than in San Francisco, which has more than twice the population:

<b>Total violent crime</b>	1985	1986	1987	1988	1989	1990	1991	1992
San Francisco Police Dept	9502	9506	9298	9667	10,064	12,388	12,160	13,676
St Louis Police Department	8642	9889	9778	10,481	12,644	13,682	14,076	13,247

  

<b>Total violent crime</b>	1993	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999
San Francisco Police Dept	13,365	10,837	10,903	9886	8549	7337	6555
St Louis Police Department	14,998	14,644	12,452	10,203	9591	8848	7611

Source: Bureau of Justice Statistics; [www.ojp.usdoj.gov/bjs/](http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/bjs/)

- 7 'NIMBY' is an acronym for 'Not in My Back Yard', an umbrella term for 'community' resistance to the location of homeless shelters, AIDS hospices, toxic dumps or any other institutions that residents' or merchants' organizations consider threatening to property values, neighborhood safety, or the overall tone of the 'community', however defined.
- 8 There were signs that some of the men already had a low tolerance for authority. Imprisonment only intensified an already existing habitus and produced extreme social and economic marginality which made it highly unlikely that they would be treated respectfully. In addition, long-term incarceration loosened or broke ties to older family members, who were in most cases seen as the only people with a legitimate right to regulate their behavior.
- 9 In a couple of cases, men had stayed a few nights in a shelter to gain certification as officially 'homeless', on the advice of social workers trying to get them housing subsidies.
- 10 For an excellent account of the clearance of the homeless of Atlanta, see Rutheiser (1999).
- 11 Conversations with the facility director suggested that, as far as he was concerned, this policy was determined by several concerns: the pragmatic desire to preserve the trust of the clients; a belief that treatment and punishment should be kept separate; and the need to assert the autonomy of the institution.
- 12 If those with delusional mental illnesses had been included in the primary sample, they would have shown a considerably lower rate of incarceration.
- 13 The only areas where rates have gone up, that is, the categories of rape and assault, are probably a result of greater reporting of rape and assault, as crime victims have become more unwilling to tolerate these crimes in silence (Tonry, 1995: 20).
- 14 Loïc Wacquant (2000) argues that the racialization of the US criminal justice system has reached such a point that the prison is becoming a surrogate ghetto, an instrument for containing and controlling a surplus population of African Americans.
- 15 Michel Foucault (1975) discussed the public execution as precisely the kind of celebration of despotic power which was made unnecessary and undesirable in the new disciplinary regime.
- 16 In 1998, 44 million, or more than one in six non-elderly Americans did not have health insurance (Kaiser Commission on Medicaid and the Uninsured, 2000: 3). In 2001 the charitable network Second Harvest served 23.3 million people seeking emergency hunger relief (America's Second Harvest, 2001).



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