Displaced and Barely Visible:
Translating an Archaeology of Homelessness into Social Activism

Homeless people, although identified as a significant social problem, are barely visible to many citizens. In urban areas most of us actually do come across the homeless every day. They may be objects of scorn or pity, or sometimes just a problem for local governments. Unfortunately, we rarely try to understand who they are and what their lives must be like, and we also make unwarranted assumptions about their needs. Almost all the studies of the homeless have been centered on homeless shelters, with few scholars moving into the areas where homeless individuals stay after dark or after the shelters close. By examining these areas, archaeologists can provide a useful perspective, but they need to emphasize the use and disposal of material culture more than time. They also need to be willing to engage in “politics” and involve themselves in research that seeks to translate its findings into information useful for developing social policy.

This illustrated presentation focuses on an early-stage translational archaeology project that examined homeless sites in St. Paul, Minnesota, and Indianapolis, Indiana. Material culture inventories of more than 60 route and camp sites immediately demonstrated problems in delivery of assistance to homeless people The project already has been influential in Indianapolis, changing the way some services are delivered to homeless people away from shelters.

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