

Mobile Media and Homelessness

- An overlook of homelessness
- Use of mobile phones by homeless people
- A study of social capital and roofless people
- Google WaSH map study

Homelessness

- Home
 - Home is defined as a sense of security, stability, privacy, safety, and the ability to control living space (Humphry, 2022: 6)
- Homelessness is defined as an absence of these qualities across the physical, legal, and social domains (Humphry, 2022: 6)
- Broad consensus that the term 'homelessness' covers more living situations than being without a roof over one's head

ETHOS – European Typology of Homelessness and Housing Exclusion

- What is home?
 - 3 dimensions of home
 - Physical
 - Legal
 - Social
 - Homelessness as an absence of two or more domains
- ETHOS
 - *Poverty line* – pre-covid and now?
 - Inadequate housing (unfit, overcrowded, non-conventional structures)
 - Insecure housing (friends/family, eviction, violence)
 - Houseless (homeless accommodation, immigrants, prisons, hospitals)
 - Roofless (night shelters, rough)

Causes of homelessness

- Long-term trajectory, transition (one-off event)
- Structural
 - Economic processes, access to social protection, housing market
- Institutional
 - Shortage of services, coordination between existing services
- Relationship
 - Family status, relationship situations
- Personal
 - Disability, long-term illness, addiction, education, age and gender, immigration situation

Roles of mobile media in homelessness

- A safety device
 - Support and emergency services
- Parenting, versatility of apps
 - Contact with family, banking, budgeting, shopping, studying
- Mobile communication and social network sites
 - No other way to call, identity, belonging, overcoming marginalisation
- Entertainment and normality
 - Music, videos, games

Risks

- Dependency
- Older and digital exclusion
 - Services, vulnerability, exclusion
- *Second class* access
 - Older mobiles, expensive plans, exploitative retail practices, debts
 - Access instability
- Online services, connectivity costs
- Power, Connectivity
 - Malls, social services, public transportation

A social capital study

- Use of mobile media by people experiencing rooflessness
 - Family, relationships, emergency contact, medical services
 - Loss of phones, charging phones, credit
- Research questions
 - a) how they use social media
 - b) how they comment on issues related to homelessness that they come across on their social media, and most importantly
 - **c) how they present themselves on the social media?**

A social capital study

- Method
 - In-depth interviews 60 to 90 minutes
 - Inductive reflexive thematic analysis
- Sample
 - 180 → 138 mobile phones → 30 smartphones → 20 active on social networks
→ 4 out → → **16 people experiencing rooflessness**
 - Active profiles on Facebook, Instagram, Twitter
 - Access via mobile phones

Social capital

- An ability to secure benefits such as information, social support, access to resources from membership in social networks (Portes, 1998)
- Relationships matter
 - Maintaining (Ellison, Steinfield & Lampe, 2007)
 - maintaining existing connections
 - Bridging (Putnam, 2000)
 - 'bridging' between individuals or groups with different backgrounds, which helps create social inclusion
 - Bonding (Rice & Barman-Adhikari, 2014)
 - 'bonding' between those with similar backgrounds and cultures to reinforce existing ties
- Social media may raise social capital (Antheunis et al., 2015)

Findings: Maintained social capital

- The shame of failure, past self

“very happy photos, and many experiences, where we are, at concerts, the moments we share with our friends [...]. The photos are mostly from the time when we weren't on the street because if my friends saw me, they would see me completely differently [...], and that's what I don't want [...]. I don't feel [like myself] in my real body, but in my profile photo, I have makeup and long hair.” (Veronica)

- Successful, hardworking people

“I have a profile photo, where I wear a suit, and you wouldn't tell that I'm homeless [...] looking successful.” (Tom)

- Life-saving situations

Findings: Briding social capital

- Work, housing

"There are the offers [...], you can immediately contact the person via the chat, and apply for the advertisement [...] it is better because you can see more about the person that offers [...]. On Facebook, it is written clearly [...] this much, you work this much [...], and it works. That's thumbs up as for me; there are day labor offers a lot [...] it is a means to arrange things." (James)

- Connection with other social groups

- Facebook groups: hobbies, interests

- A temporary escape

- Music, movies, games

Findings: Bonding social capital

- Commenting on issues related to homelessness
- Advocacy for others

“It is possible to get back, but it takes a long time to get back to the level where one was before [...] the man doesn't often realize, that he's rich today, but tomorrow will be on the street.” (Claire)

“I was never ashamed of being homeless. I'd say, in my opinion, on the contrary, that to hide it and not admit it is to give these people an opportunity to hurt you. If you admit that you're homeless, that you are on the street, what else can they take away from you? [...] I think that even [the fact] that I'm on social networks, that they consider it a certain social status. That I can work and express myself, that was some bonus that they perceived as, like, good – he has a smartphone, he's on the social nets, functions, probably okay.” (Hugh)

Some conclusions

- Importance of mobile phones
 - Practical
 - Possibility of keeping former identity
 - Implications for prevention of chronic homelessness
 - Escape from the harsh street life
 - Social cohesion
 - Potential effect on the public perception

A link to the US context

- Lifeline Assistance (*government or Obama phones*) since 2008
 - Free smartphones
- Affordable Connectivity Program (ACP)
 - Free-to-greatly-reduced voice and data plans based on income
- Limits of techno-solutionism → Čára app
 - <https://play.google.com/store/apps/details?id=cz.podaneruce.cara&hl=cs&gl=US&pli=1>

WaSH google map study (Polson, Botta & Van Houwelling, 2023)

- Drawing on fieldwork-based course on WaSH and Homelessness in Denver, CO
- Stemming from Hartmann's idea of “homing”
 - digital media can help unhoused people create everyday routines, exercise some control over their lives and spaces, and gradually create a safe environment
- Can Google WaSH map help unhoused people integrate bathroom access into their routines?
- Focus group
- Showing the limits of techno-solutionism

„Where someone with a home might walk from the bedroom to the bathroom to the kitchen and to the living room each morning in order to perform routine care activities, this is fundamentally different for homeless people whose health maintenance depends on their movements around the city and the appropriation of (semi)public places at particular times.“ (Parys & Krause, 2017)

Participant A:

You smell the urine and stuff.... Because there's no place to go. So, if we could have a place to go and a map to find it, with a place ... close around us, that would be good.

Polson:

The map exists, but it seems like there are some barriers to making it useful. Do you think if you saw it printed somewhere like around the neighborhood—maybe like near bus stops that showed all the public restrooms in the area—would that be better, maybe less intimidating than needing your phone?

Participant A:

That'd be beautiful. For everybody, everybody who needs to use the restroom.

Polson:

Did anybody think it would be useful as it already is, loaded onto your phone?

Participant C:

Well, if you really have to go to the bathroom and you're messing with your phone ... it's all about time!

You could use it to learn ahead of time and mark it in your head as a good place to go.

Botta:

Are there layers [of information] that are more important to you?

Participant D:

Which ones work and don't work. You hate to walk that way and you're still doing "the dance," and it's one of those situations ...

"Well, most of the public toilets in Denver aren't open anyway, they're always closed, and when it comes to an emergency ..." Participant D, from above, finished his sentence: "You're going to an alley."

“in this city, it's definitely even easier to charge your cellphone
than it is to find clean water.”

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