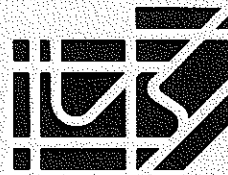


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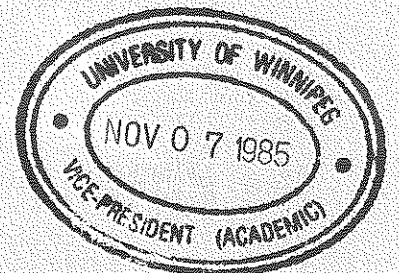
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**COPING STRATEGIES AND STREET LIFE:
THE ETHNOGRAPHY OF WINNIPEG'S SKID ROW**
Christopher Hauch



**INSTITUTE
OF URBAN
STUDIES**

UNIVERSITY OF WINNIPEG



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COPING STRATEGIES AND STREET LIFE:
THE ETHNOGRAPHY OF WINNIPEG'S SKID ROW REGION

Report No. 11

by

Christopher Hauch

Institute of Urban Studies

1985

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1.0 INTRODUCTION

This paper provides an overview of life on Skid Row in Winnipeg. The focus is on social and economic phenomena, and, to a lesser degree, the rules of behaviour that are specific to Skid Row subculture.

The research was performed intermittently over an eight year period and involved participant observation and the collection of data from files of a Skid Row area social agency. Its format, to within practicable limits, was that of ethnography. Many of the conventional categories of ethnographic interest were employed, as were approaches to information gathering and presentation.

The orientation of the research extended from ordinary premises-- social and economic organization and culture are devices of adaptation. At first this may seem redundant. The Skid Row setting demands not only the initial declaration of these premises, but their sustained reaffirmation throughout the text. Skid Row is not a distant and isolated place. It is part of a larger thriving society. We see Skid Row residents regularly, and feel free to speculate about what they do and think. The residents are obviously poor, and many appear to be in ill health. On the basis of this, at least presuming that they have reasonable access to opportunities, we may be tempted to assume that their lifestyles are pathological.

By some evidence, the temptation is not wholly unfounded. Casualties are clearly visible in the society, among them victims of pain and frustration turned inward. There is considerable violence, as well as the enigma of severe poverty in a population surrounded by affluence.

It is proposed here, however, that a successful application of the premises is not based on any level of comfort enjoyed by informants.

It is neither intended nor necessary to prove that Skid Row residents live in perfect adaptive balance with the condition of sparse resources. Such a balance does not exist.

It will be argued that they are not the sole architects of that condition, and further, that much of what can be interpreted as pathological behaviour reflects adaptational efforts. As elsewhere, despite casualities, the need to survive is preeminent in the logic and wisdom of most residents. What follows is a report on some of the ways in which that need is expressed in social life.

1.1 The Research Setting

Access to the field was largely made possible by Winnipeg's Main Street Project, an inner city social service where the author was employed from April of 1976 to the time this study was prepared.

Established in 1972, the Project remains one of Skid Row's premiere social agencies. Directly in the heart of the region it operates as a "crisis centre," providing both drop-in and emergency shelter facilities for Skid Row's often homeless men and women. Part of the service is an ongoing outreach program; staff patrol the area, maintaining contact with residents and responding to crises as they occur in the community. At a separate location, a non-medical detoxification centre run by the Project provides safe accommodation for persons in mild to moderate withdrawal from alcohol.

The Project was an ideal field base. First, it was the only large social service in Winnipeg which designated Skid Row residents as its principle population.

This was a major consideration for the collection of data. Many social agencies which begin, as the Project did, as modest "store-front"

operations change substantially over time, and/or increased budgets. Their mandates are often redefined to focus on longer-term and professional involvements with individuals that are outside the population originally served. The Project, however, always recognized that there was a large, and more or less socially homogeneous population on Skid Row which was consistently in need of basic services. It grew over the years, and where possible added long-term support services to its repertoire. But its major interests were always short-term emergency aid for the largest Skid Row populace.

Secondly, the Project was never involved in programs which Skid Row residents might interpret as intrusive or punitive. Staff were not concerned with routinely arresting lawbreakers, for example, or apprehending neglected children en masse. There was little formal contact with welfare agencies -- agencies which residents often claimed doled out funds on the basis of "unfair" eligibility criteria.

Instead, the intention of the Project was to identify and correct any of a host of problems that were both relevant and perceptible to the community. This largely entailed keeping in close contact with residents, supplying some emergency services, and advocating on residents' behalf for access to existing sources of assistance.

Hence, having neither mandate to directly issue nor withdraw subsistence or freedom, the Project was considered ethnographically "clean." Residents had little incentive to routinely "con" Project staff-- or in terms of the research, supply selective and/or erroneous information under duress of shortages--either to make material gain or safeguard against outside interference.

Finally, in that the Project was in contact in one way or another with virtually all Skid Row residents, the agency served as an extremely useful source of demographic information. Indeed, it was the only re-

liable source available. As the Skid Row population is quite fluid, it is not readily amenable to study across even the most rudimentary dimensions (as an example, simple morbidity and mortality figures are impossible to establish as health care facilities in Winnipeg cannot determine Skid Row residency.)

Subtle changes in statistical procedures over the years limited the information which could be gleaned for a single long period; the information displayed in Figures 6 through 10, for example, could not be extracted for the sample of Figure 1. The means employed by the Project to collect data--which often involved repeating interviews at multiple intervals--ensured to every reasonable degree the accuracy of client reportage.

1.2 The Skid Row Area: Perceptions From the Outside

As elsewhere in North America, Winnipeg's Skid Row is a recognizable, if decaying, fixture on the city. It is also persistent. For four to five decades it has contained less than one per cent of the city's population. But despite the efforts of governments, the police, hospitals, and the social service community, Skid Row remains, in the eyes of non-residents, an immutable blight on the larger world, a squalid place for the indolent and disaffiliated and tenuous harbour for crime and pestilence.

Its physical boundaries enclose what, in the beginning of this century, was Winnipeg's principle business district. With the city's growth, and the development of business adjacent and beyond, the region underwent what longtime observers describe as a slow relentless collapse.

In this area, time appears to have stopped in the 1930s. The buildings are old and stylistically curious. Some are abandoned, and virtually all show the effects of decades of neglect. Dust and litter are

everywhere along the front streets.

As often happens with Skid Rows, the area is marked on all sides by residents and non-residents by acknowledged barriers. Stretching across one outer edge is an imposing collection of expensive restaurants, lounges, and playhouses. There affluent patrons enjoy a sort of protected adventure by skirting the "rough" part of town. But contact with Skid Row residents is minimal. The zone is small, and non-residents constitute the majority of passers by. Two other peripheries are defined by a river and, opposite to it, rows of warehouses, manufacturing plants, and railway tracks.

The fourth, and most amorphous border lies in the region furthest from the city's downtown. Here are found blocks of old and inexpensive private homes, apartment blocks, and moderately successful retail trade. Further on, away from Skid Row at a safer distance, newer and more prosperous residential and business districts reappear.

It is virtually never necessary for a non-resident to visit within the confines of Skid Row. There are not shopping malls or office complexes, and amusement centres rarely cater to mainstream society. Not surprisingly, many citizens of Winnipeg report that they have never actually walked through the area. Most will have only driven through, and from their limited contact, can only comment on the appearances of the men and women entering and exiting taverns, or the children clustered near the doorways of pool halls. Some may have witnessed a brawl from the safety of their cars, or a side trip on a street adjacent to Skid Row's main thoroughfare, may have resulted in passing by one of the region's prostitutes.

From these most cursory encounters, most observers will have formed an opinion about Skid Row. And whether partly derived from fear, frustration at the thought of subsidizing "drunks" with tax dollars,

or even a distant concern for the plight of the down-and-outer, that opinion will almost certainly be pejorative. A typical impression is that Skid Row inhabitants never work (one never sees them working, after all, and they are clearly impoverished) since they prefer a life of perpetual intoxication (taverns abound in the area). Another is that violence is prevalent in the area and that the residents subsist on petty crime and welfare.

These impressions are not nourished by direct observation alone--they are steadily refined by the media. This is not surprising as reporters are only casual observers, and their contact with the community is always brief. The focus of their curiosity is not unlike most other non-residents.

Newsmaking, as the art of reinforcing common beliefs, was fascinating to observe on Skid Row. From time to time Project staff would be enlisted to escort reporters through the area. Invariably they came equipped with ideas about who "the real Skid Rowers" were, or at the least specified what type of individual it was that they wanted to study. A two day search for one of the region's few street-based juvenile prostitutes would result in a feature exposing "an increasingly prevalent social problem." An alcoholic in withdrawal might be sought out and interviewed, and depicted as representative of the community. On two occasions the author observed reporters photograph each other, in staged supine and dishevelled poses, when efforts to locate an unconscious "drunken derelict" had failed.

Admittedly, the reporters' methods reflected some authentic concern. But their works were rarely edifying. The main focus was always the Skid Row hotel and tavern district--the place where residents assembled, however briefly, in greatest concentration. Within that space, only the most dramatic occurrences were recorded. Whole important locales and activities of Skid Row men and women--indeed, most features of the Skid Row experience, of embarrassment, uncertainty,

and tedium--were always just out of view.

1.3 How Residents Describe Themselves

Most of the residents of Skid Row are transient casual labourers. By western standards, their condition is one of undeniable poverty. Opportunities for employment, comprised largely of day jobs, are few and the work decidedly arduous. Worse, the very small sums earned, like the labour, are quickly absorbed into a parasitic business network which has adapted over the years to take full advantage of an economy of dire need.

Being marginally employed, Skid Row residents constitute a distinctive social group. There are limits to the extent they may participate in certain social systems (Goode 1972:10). They employ specialized skills and customs (Spradley 1970) and reside in specialized urban zones.

Despite these defining features, however, the reports of residents themselves do not always seem to reflect an homogeneous and insular emic system. The phenomenon is at least partly a consequence of the relationship between the researcher and the Skid Row informant. In his studies of Skid Row men in Seattle Washington, James Spradley discusses the problem of "subcultural interpreters" (1980:330). Being aware of their inferior social position, Skid Row informants, Spradley notes, become adept at directing communications in the cultural frame of reference of non-residents. As a result, the researcher may only succeed at having his own opinions about Skid Row culture and society corroborated.

The problem was more evident in the Winnipeg Skid Row setting. As it happens, few of the residents are compelled to remain on Skid Row for extended periods. Most are able to at least intermittently discharge themselves, through seasonal or permanent work. Among Native Indians, who make up the majority of residents, many if not most are able to relocate to

nearby reserves.

This has produced a sort of cultural heterogeneity on Skid Row. Descriptions of events, and their explanations, often varied from one resident to the next. Ironically, though, it was more the one element of common reportage that impeded investigation. Residents universally indicated that life on Skid Row was a more or less unpleasant experience. Moreover, as their stays there were only brief, they all seemed to agree that membership in the society reflected some sort of transient (that is, redeemable) personal failure, or stroke of bad luck.

Virtually all reported that their "permanent" social affiliations were elsewhere, on reserves, or among the mainstream urban working class. For the moment, according to most, they were "out of control" and their behaviour was largely irrational and involuntary. In effect, their perceptions of Skid Row appeared to be not unlike those of most casual observers.

They would rarely admit to any logical purpose inherent in their common behaviours, however one might expect that "purpose" was locally defined. Instead, a whole host of behaviours were attributed to temporary flights of madness. Inquiries such as "what did you do when you got your welfare cheque?" for example, might be responded to with only brief and disparaging replies. "I blew it [meaning it was wasted, in terms of conventional non-Skid Row economy] because I got drunk and didn't know what I was doing."

Whether or not residents did in fact "know" what it was that they were doing, or rather, had subcultural explanations, remained in many cases an unanswered question. For the most part, their self-portrayals were negative, and fashioned out of the cultural context of mainstream society. They were social misfits, by their own admission, and fairly parasitic on the larger and tolerant world of worthwhile citizens.

1.4 Approaching the Problem

The intent of the research was to uncover the broadest elements of Skid Row social and economic organization. Essentially, this entailed a consideration of two questions: what are the prevailing activities of most Skid Row residents, and, what major social and material benefits do those activities confer?

Without question, the transience of the population was the severest stumbling block in this effort. Entering the field for the first time the inclination was to locate "good informants," or persons who had at the very least longtime involvement with the Skid Row community. Before long, however, it became apparent that these few residents were atypical of the mainstream Skid Row populace. There were a few among the elderly: men with small pensions who were either regularly infragal or robbed in the first week after payment and for years were "carried over" by the Salvation Army, hospitals, or public welfare in sequences of short-term disbursements of aid. There were also the chronically mentally ill, in particular those whose impairment was partly manifest in a fear and avoidance of proper care. And a few others, mostly Native men who had once been trappers, who apparently chose to fend for themselves, living for months in abandoned buildings or in small camps along the city's riverbanks. These made up the visible minority, the truly "disaffiliated Skid Row men," but a minority nonetheless. In many ways disaffiliated from Skid Row itself.

The best or at least most typical informants, in contrast, spent only a small portion of their lives on Skid Row--in fact very few residents remained in the area continuously as long as the author. In consequence, by the brevity of their stays, few had either opportunity or inclination to learn very much about Skid Row. As previously mentioned, most tended to give very personal explanations for the way they lived, reiterating, in one way or another, the disparaging view of the

larger world. Before all else they were Skid Row men, they felt, because of transient bouts of alcoholism, laziness, irresponsibility, or "hard luck."

Determining what "most people" did "most of the time," then, was largely a matter of making direct observations over time. Given the wealth of occurrences, of course, there was an inclination to record only the most salient. Recognizing that a decision about salience is often oriented by the observer's expectations, an effort was made to restrict observations to "normal" Skid Row behaviour.

As to an interpretation of the advantages of elements of social life, direct observation was again most fruitful. Emic data, however, was used selectively where it illustrated etically observable positive outcomes of behaviour. The process of selection is obviously suspect, and the author will not pretend that Skid Row culture is formally delineated here. The focus was subsocietal activities, and hence only those features of subculture were considered which appeared most ostensibly to either motivate or aid informants in explaining those activities.

2.0 THE POPULATION: GENERAL CHARACTERISTICS

2.1 Introduction

The problems inherent in isolating any so-called "discrete" urban "sub-population" are numerous. In the one instance we insist that our informants at least claim some identification with the community in question, that is, are generally willing to explain something about its social character. But at the same time--and this is especially problematic in Skid Row studies--we must somehow ensure that our informants actually participate in community life, that they are expressing more than a romantic affiliation with it. Further, urban populations are seldom stable. Over time they may exhibit considerable variation in size and density, and comprise specific individuals for only the shortest periods.

Simply identifying "true informants," then, seems an ominous research task in itself. We may, as Spradley suggests, use emic criteria primarily to determine "...how the men identify themselves" (1980:333). This has tremendous practical advantage to ethnography, as illustrated in Spradley's work. But in a population in which a high rate of mobility is evident, we run the risk of including individuals who do not properly belong. Ironically, those persons who are most outspoken on the subject of "life on the drag" (on Winnipeg's Skid Row) are often the ones most capable of leaving it; to comment freely on one's associations there, especially to "outsiders," may in many ways jeopardize them.

Conversely, as the same author illustrates, numerous of the usual etic criteria--geographic, behavioural, economic, legal--are equally suspect. "Times in jail" might simply outline which race, age group, and so on the police prefer to arrest while "work and drinking histories" outline the numbers of individuals exhibiting certain types of personal preferences. Doubtless, no perfect means of delineating the population exists--and none is advanced here. But working out of the Project afforded something of at least a crude solution to the dilemma, in that the categories "users" or "clients" of that service seemed roughly to distinguish residents in the broadest way acceptable to both those ostensibly "inside" Skid Row and those "outside." First, both "insiders" and "outsiders" (apparent residents and lifelong non-residents) seem to agree that alcohol usage and transience characterize Skid Row life, though disparate interpretations of the Skid Row experience might differ radically. Whereas residents may know themselves to be poor, "hard drinking," homeless, many outside their world disdain them as "public inebriates;" in some way, out of divergent emic dimensions, the same phenomena are identified and affixed to the same performers.

It is natural that the Project, situated in the inner city and providing emergency shelter and detoxification facilities, be considered the home of Skid Row men. One even observes a social identity defined by the Project; many residents pride themselves in their frequent use of the service, equating it with independence. Some openly refer to themselves as "Project Rubbies."

Throughout the course of this paper, any use of the terms "Skid Row" or "Core Area residents" will be synonymous with "regular Main Street Project users" or "clients," that is, persons who made use of that facility with some regularity over a significant period (nominally, one year) of the duration in which the paper was researched.

2.2 Regular Project Users

In each of the years of 1975 through 1979, the Project made contact with approximately 3500 individuals. Figure 1 gives some indication of the pattern and scale of use of the facility for shelter alone (all clients are considered).

A certain number of these were seen only once or twice by the Project, but another--and there appears a marked division between the two groups--was regarded as the regular client population, members having had an average of 8.5 contacts annually.

Regulars totalled about 2000 per year. Interestingly though, this core population shows no significant variation in size over time, although, it appears extremely unstable in composition. For example, 1232 regular clients (or about 62% of the total) seen by the Project in 1975 disappeared, making no reappearance in all of 1976.

Despite the fluidity of the population, a number of its general characteristics are fairly consistent. Roughly 72% are Native (treaty and non-treaty) 26% are caucasian, and 2% are of non-caucasian/non-Native ethnicity.

Most of the adult Native residents of the Core Area are Ojibwa or Saulteaux speaking and state as their original residence reserves in south and central Ontario and Manitoba. Of the approximately one-fourth to one-third of the Native population which is Cree speaking, the largest proportion comes from northern Manitoban settlements.

The largest portion of the population is male while approximately 25% is composed of women (mostly Native). Initially, Figure 1 seems to suggest otherwise, and that 25% would at best be a low estimate. Keeping in mind, however, that Figure 1 includes all Project users, the discrepancy is explained by an apparent inverse relationship between the ratio of women to men using the Project and the frequency of use by all current clients. Women are less likely to be "regulars," or members of the population of interest. Women enjoy greater freedom than men in leaving Skid Row, a situation which may be facilitated by their access to City and Provincial Welfare (see Section 7.0). Figure 6, which examines extreme-high-frequency Project users corroborates that the percentages of women are quite low.

Determining accurate occupation histories of men in the Core Area is understandably difficult. Some, in order to impress, tend to exaggerate the quality and duration of previous employment while others, hoping to gain access to certain types of agency assistance, do the reverse.

With all caution, Figures 2 and 3 illustrate stated occupations--or most recent employment prior to entering Winnipeg's Skid Row region--of long-time Native and white male Skid Row residents (from histories obtained in interview for admission to the Project Detox). The 144 sampled were confirmed to have made use of the Project emergency shelter and Detox in each of the five years of 1975 through 1979. An effort was made to exclude erroneous reportage by way of comparison with the writer's personal knowledge and observations of informants.

FIGURE 1
Usage of the Main Street Project Shelter
By All Clients Over a Two Year Period

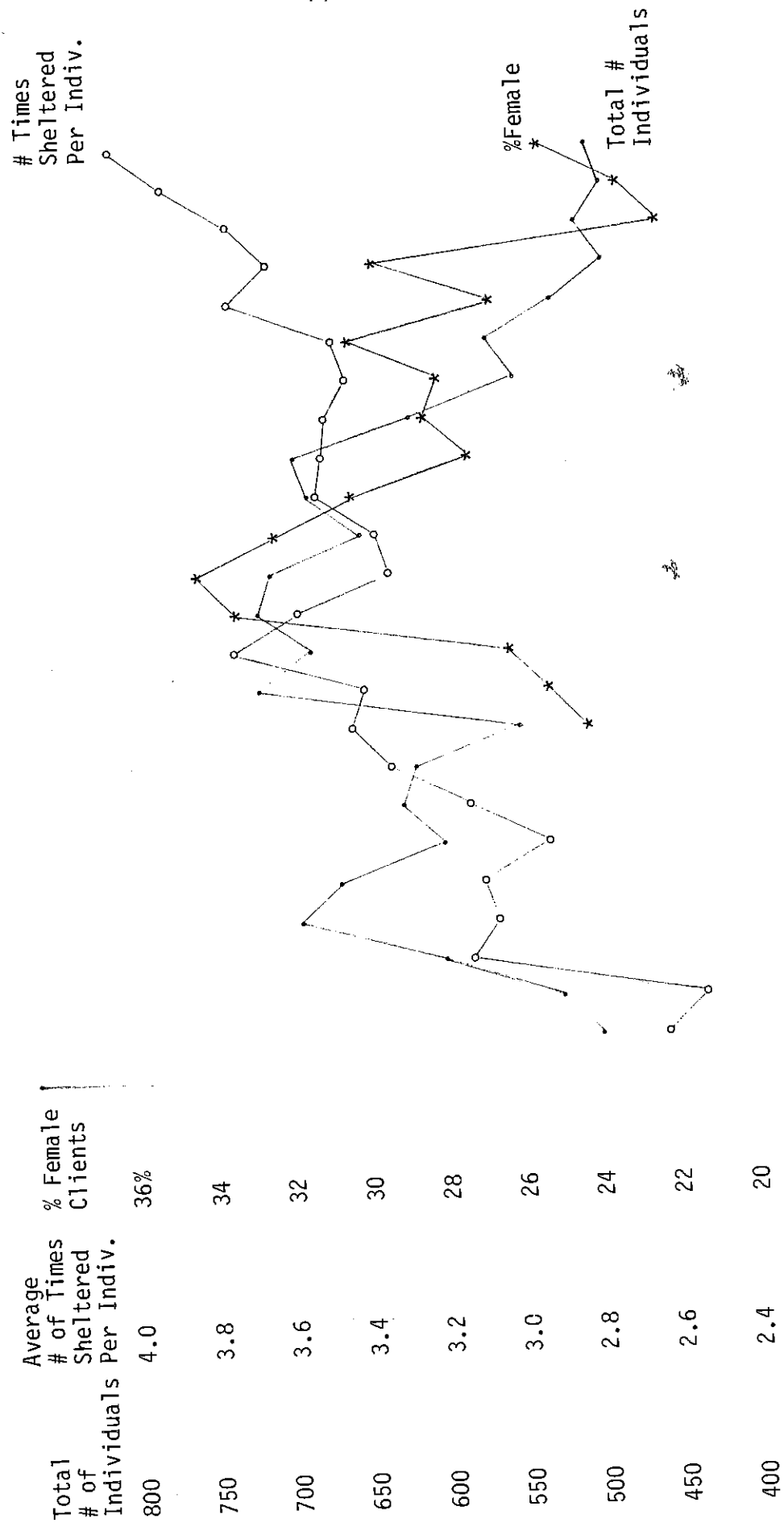


FIGURE 2
Occupation Histories on Men in the Core Area (Native)

Number of Men	Occupation	Percentage
68	Labourer (Casual)	73.0%
7	Semi-Skilled Trade	7.5
12	Skilled Trade	13.0
0	Major Professions	0
0	Retired	0
6	Self-employed (Artist, Guide, etc.)	6.5
Total 93		100.0%

FIGURE 3
Occupation Histories on Men in the Core Area (White)

Number of Men	Occupation	Percentage
21	Labourer (Casual)	41.0%
12	Semi-Skilled Trade	23.5
11	Skilled Trade	21.5
0	Major Professions	0
6	Retired	12.0
1	Self-employed (Artist, Guide, etc.)	2.0
Total 51		100.0%

Years - 1977 & 1978 J F M A M J J A S O N D J F M A M J J A S O N D

FIGURE 4

Age Distribution of Men in the Core Area (Native)

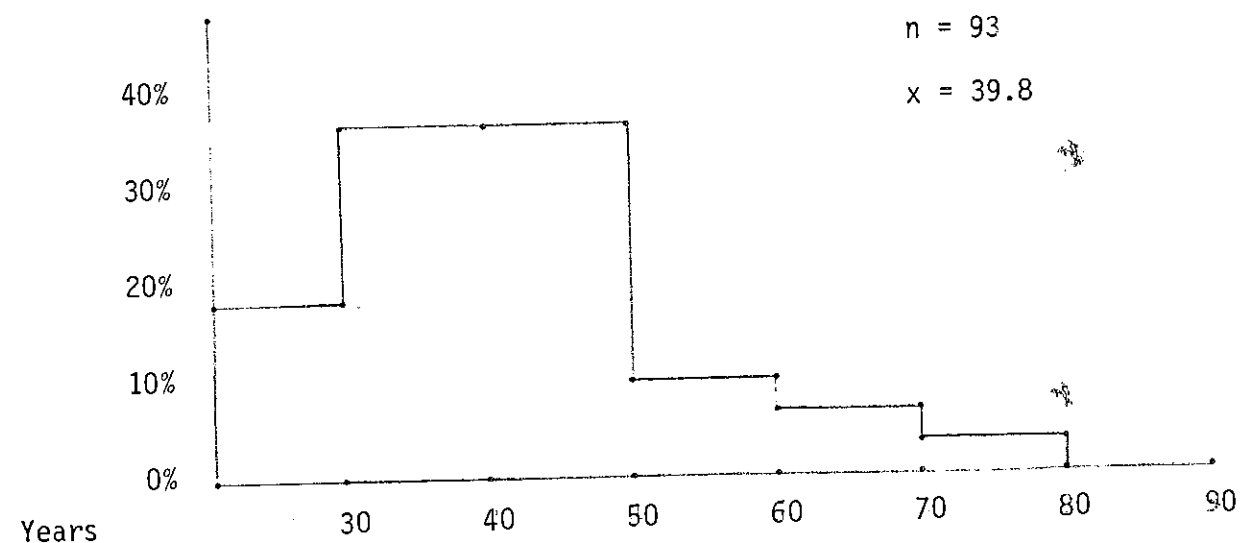
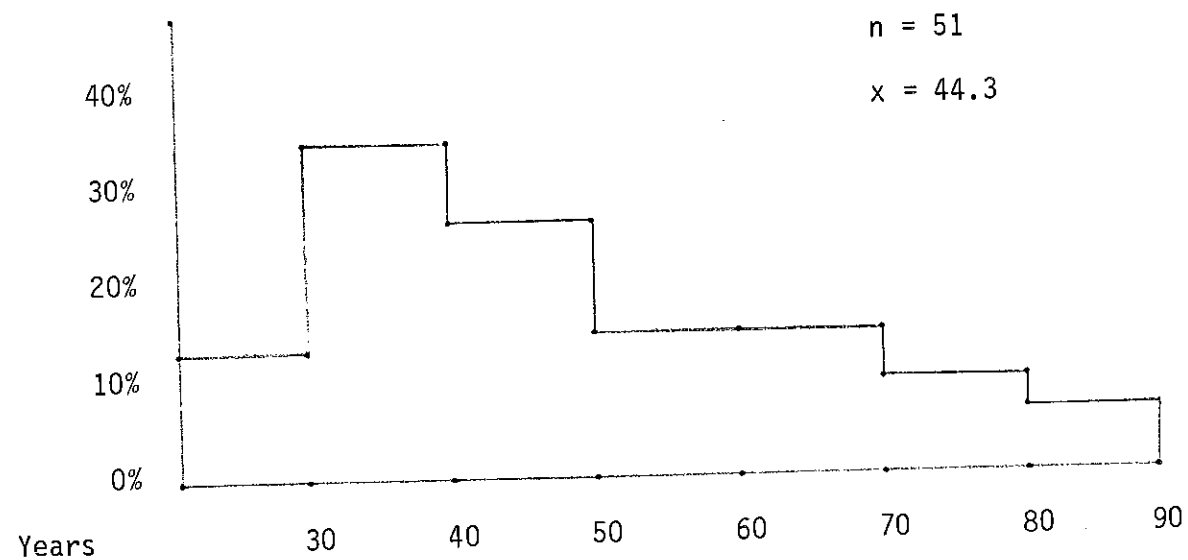


FIGURE 5

Age Distribution of Men in the Core Area (White)



2.3 Supernormal Clients

The apparent division between "1-2 contact" and "regular" clients suggests the existence of a single discrete Skid Row population, one for which a generalized demographic statement could be made. This is a big premise, of course, and it might well be argued that a reasonable intrapopulation homogeneity has not been demonstrated. The question remains--do small groups exist among regulars which should be subject to their own ethnographic treatment?

In an effort to answer this question, "extreme-high-use" or "supernormal" clients were examined. No such differences appeared between the two groups. Data regarding the heaviest users of the Project showed very similar age, sex, and ethnicity distributions to all regulars. Further, much the same circannual pattern of usage (showing heaviest in winter months) was evidenced and rates of transience, or disappearance of clients from one year to the next, were comparable as well.

The objective at this stage was to locate the most frequent Project users in numbers small enough to be considered a minor fraction of the larger regular population, yet large enough to produce useful data. By trial and error, the criterion "10 or more occasions of sheltering per year" proved to be a satisfactory compromise.

In 1979, 168 such clients, hereafter referred to as supernormal clients, appeared (or 8.2% of that year's total individuals sheltered), 67 in 1980 (6.4%), and 99 in 1981 (7.3%).

Of the 1981 sample, none were sheltered for a major proportion of the whole year; the average number of occasions sheltered per year per individual appears as approximately 15.5. Further, heavy usage would not seem evident over extended periods in this population. Only 73 of the 1981 supernormal clients made any appearance at all in 1980,

5 in 1979 (missing 1980), and 22 in each of the years 1979, 1980, and 1981. Twenty-one of the 1981 sample appeared as clients in 1981 only.

Figures 6 through 9 show distribution of supernormal clients by age, sex, and ethnicity (age charts are not included for 3 year clients).

In Figure 10 the pattern of shelter usage of supernormal clients in 1981 is illustrated, where clients who appeared in 1981 only, 1980 and 1981, and 1979 through 1981 (n=99, n=73, and n=22 respectively) are considered.

FIGURE 6
Clients Sheltered at MSP on 10 or More Occasions
in 1979, 1980, and 1981

Clients	1979	1980	1981	Average
Native males	n = 99 59% total age = 40.0	n = 46 69% total age = 40.8	n = 65 66% total age = 40.4	n = 17 77% total age = 40.1
White Males	n = 34 20% total age = 39.0	n = 11 16% total age = 43.6	n = 24 24% total age = 44.8	n = 3 14% total age = 48.3
Native Females	n = 34 20% total age = 39.5	n = 10 15% total age = 33.3	n = 10 10% total age = 31.4	n = 2 9% total age = 27.5
White Females	n = 1 1% total age = 36			

FIGURE 7

Age Distribution of Native Male Clients Sheltered at MSP
on 10 or More Occasions in 1979, 1980, and 1981

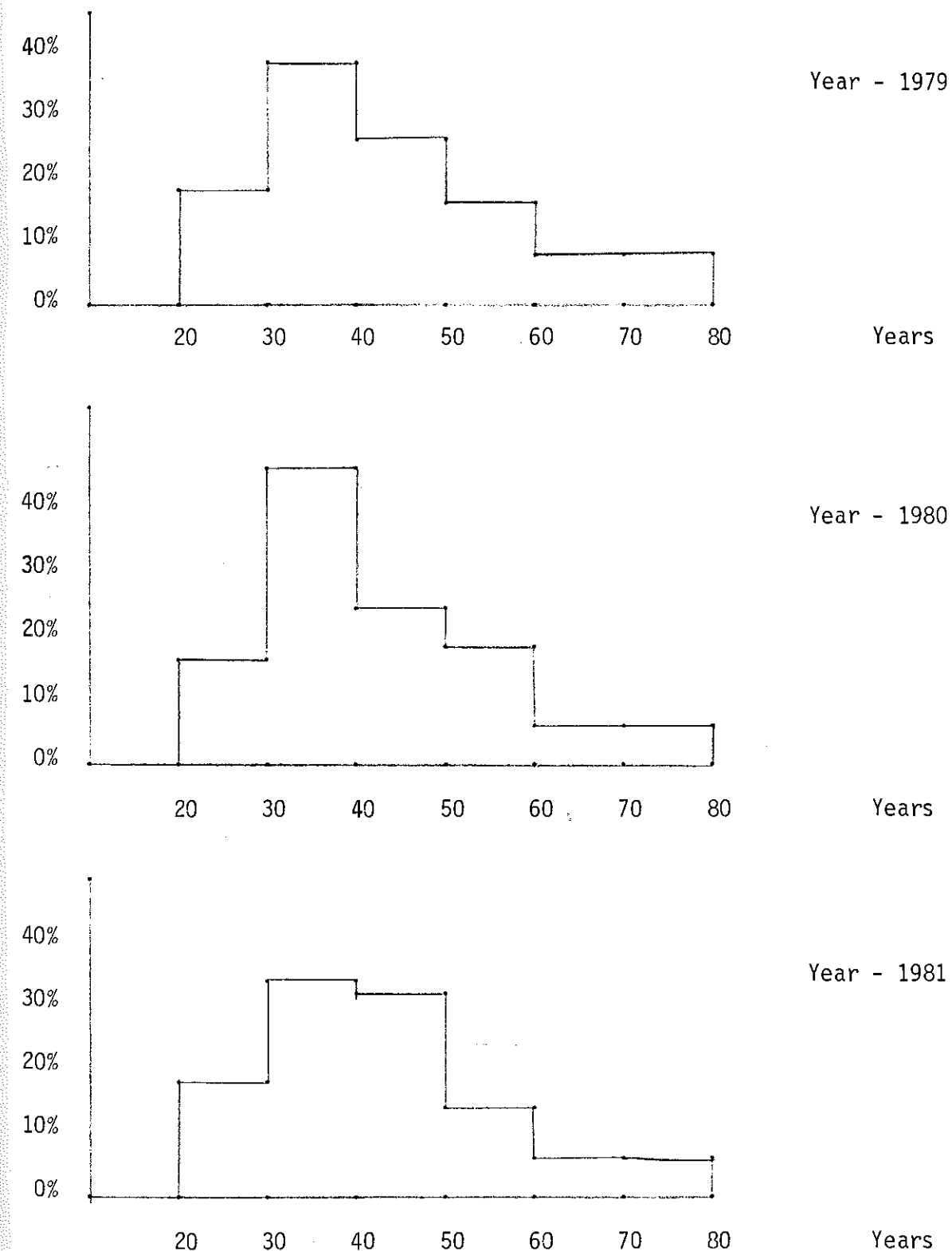


FIGURE 8

Age Distribution of White Male Clients Sheltered at MSP on 10 or More Occasions in 1979, 1980, and 1981

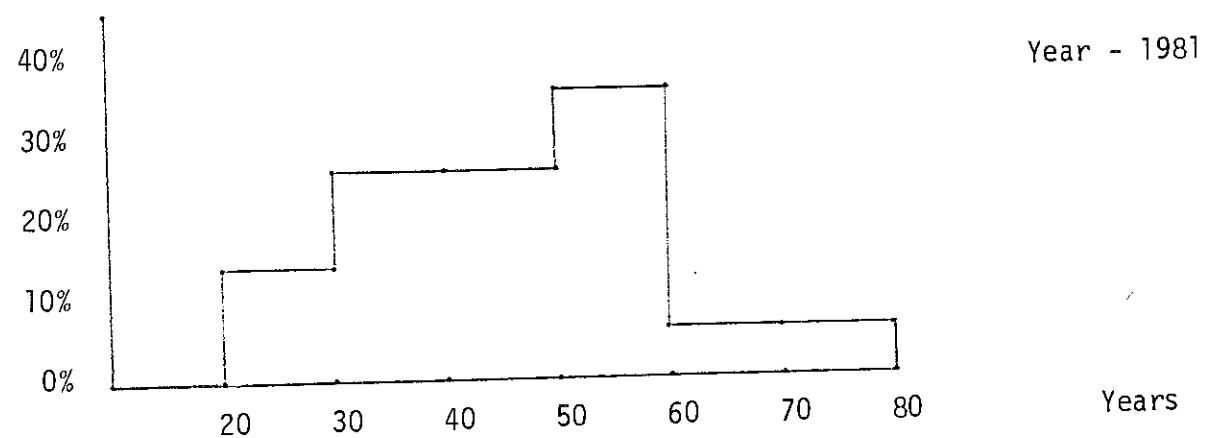
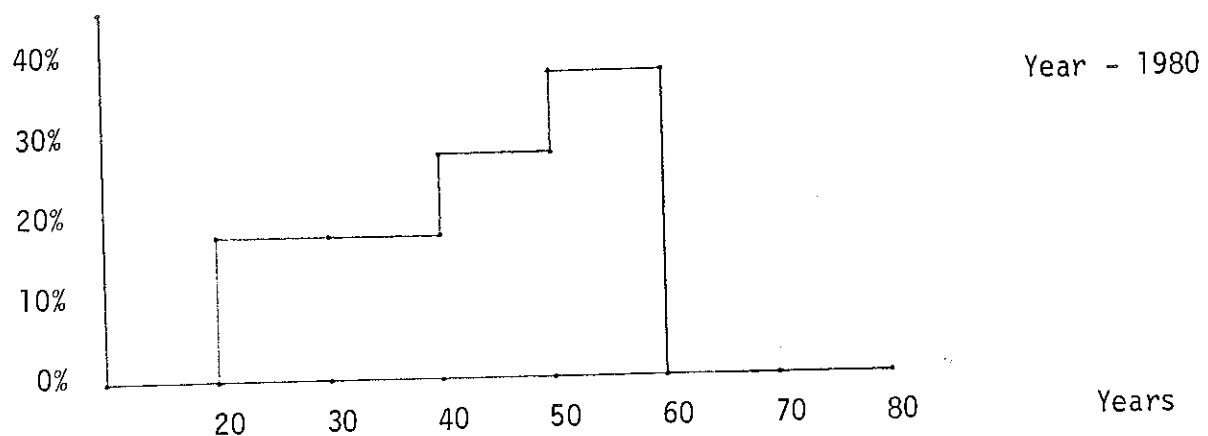
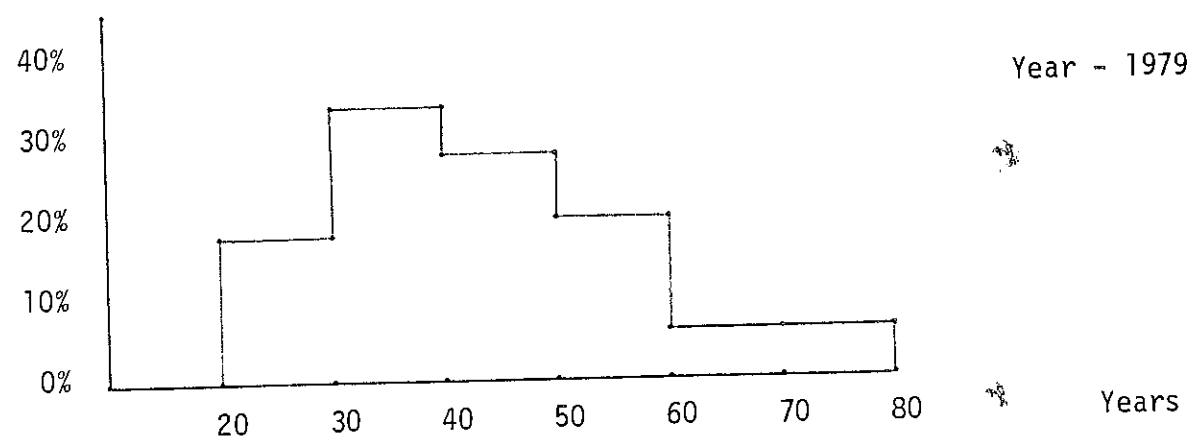
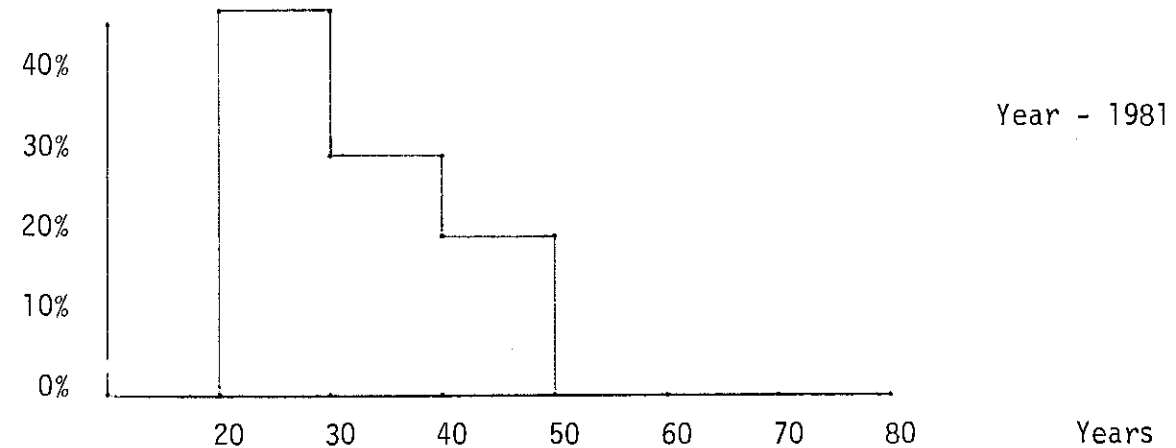
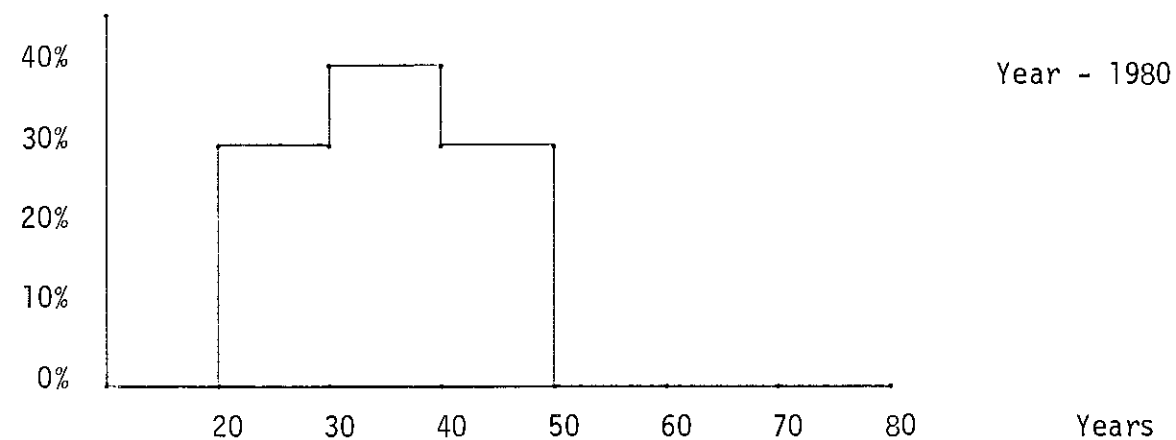
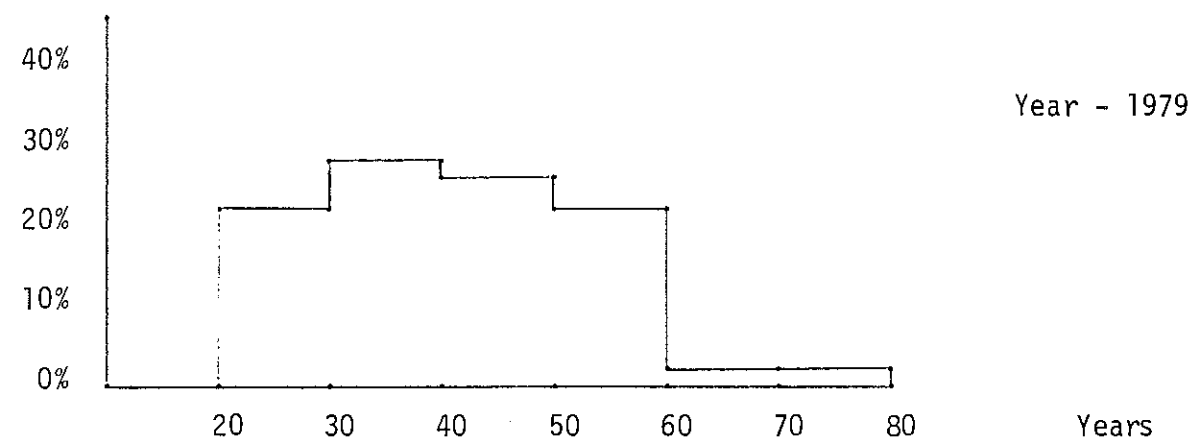


FIGURE 9

Age Distribution of Native Female Clients Sheltered at MSP on 10 or More Occasions in 1979, 1980, and 1981



2.4 Observations

Without question, the most frustrating impediment to the assembling of demographics in that case was the transience of the population. Given that individuals "stood still," or remained in the Skid Row area for only brief periods, and differing periods at that, the very discreteness of the population seemed debatable. Still, Project data consistently suggested that a unique Skid Row residential population existed. And when examined, again, at various intervals synchronically, each time it displayed fairly uniform characteristics. The first of these was size. Every means of isolating residents showed them to number about 2000 to 2500 over the years.

Second, like size, the composition of the Skid Row populace remained largely unvarying over time. It was normally about 75% Native, mostly male, middle-aged, and individuals had few marketable skills. Income information was difficult to determine, but frequent homelessness suggested the relative poverty of the population (ethnographic information corroborated this, but usage of the Project shelter was at least some measure of itinerancy).

3.0 THE SKID ROW BUSINESS COMMUNITY

3.1 Introduction

The business district of Skid Row in Winnipeg lies in about eight to ten city blocks on Main Street in the city's core. Originally an important centre of commerce, the area presently comprises some 80 enterprises. Among these are 15 hotels (each with beer parlours) 13 restaurants, 24 grocery, clothing, hardware, and department stores, 5 jewelers, 6 pawn shops, and an assortment of barber shops, casual labour and tax return offices, and pool halls. Very little of the intense retail trade enjoyed by Main Street businesses in the early part

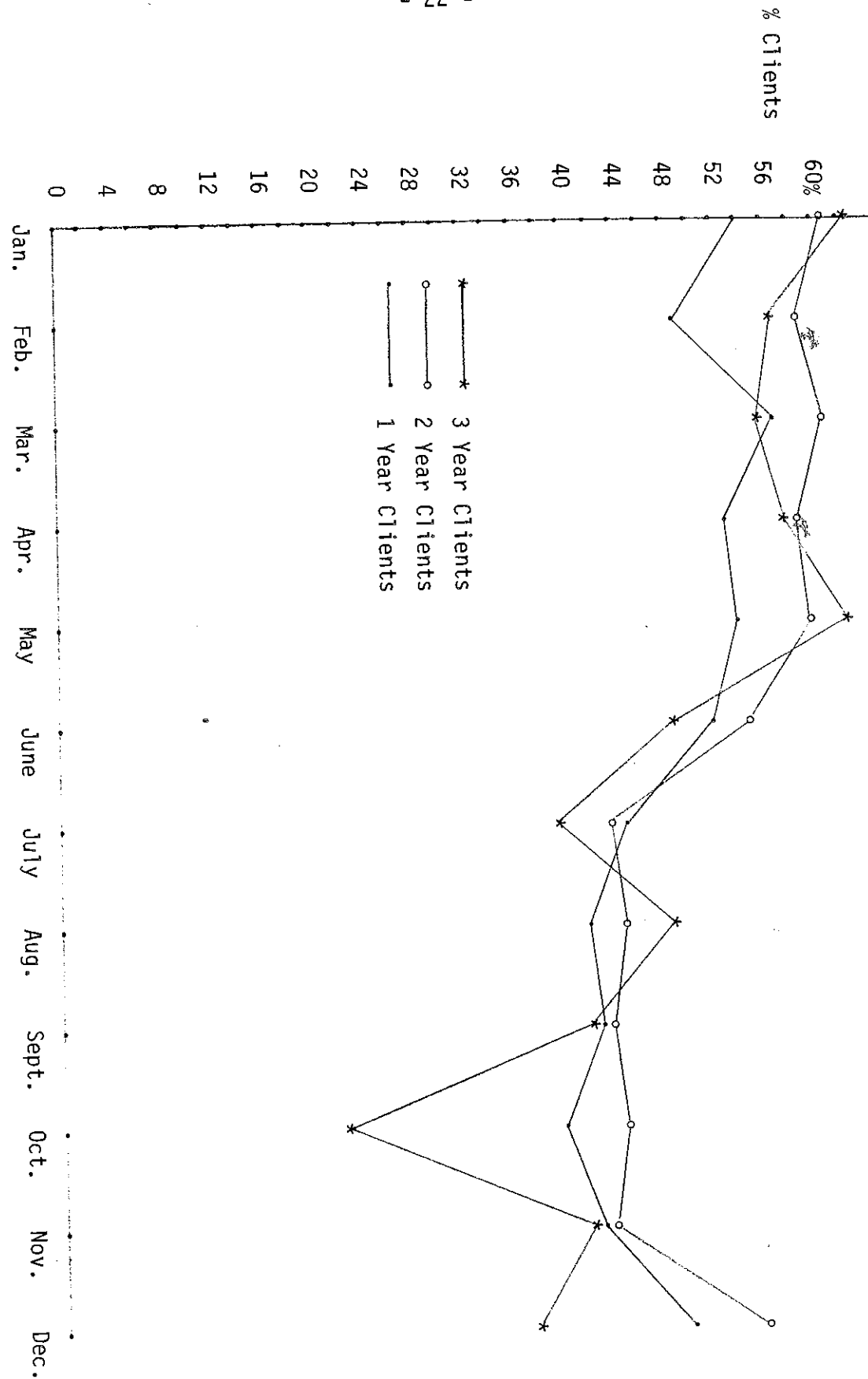


FIGURE 10 Percentage of Supernormal Clients Using MSP for Shelter in 1981

of the century takes place today. Many operators survive only because of grossly depreciated rents and a small but fairly regular stream of low-income customers.

Others, whose trade has dwindled over time, rely in part on small scale illegal activities. Of the once thriving retail stores, restaurants, and other businesses, at least eight are "fences" (dealers in stolen goods) and seven are "bootleggers" (unauthorized sellers of alcohol) and three operate small illegal gambling casinos. Few businessmen will openly admit to this, even though the policing of such petty operations is minimal. Those who do, however, claim they are merely making ends meet by cashing in on the inevitable. Many trivialize their unlawfulness, reporting "The cops don't care anyway" and "If I didn't do it, somebody else would."

The relationship between Skid Row residents and the business community is strained at best. Skid Row men say businesses of the area exploit them by charging excessively for inferior goods. Sometimes, residents claim they are robbed, either by out-and-out theft or failure to deliver promised goods and services, and that if they complain the police are enlisted against them. Businessmen on Skid Row make similar accusations against residents. They say that much of their stock is lost to area shoplifters, and most of their trade to the "unsavory" presence of the men themselves.

The relationship, however, also has a harmonious aspect. Despite this seeming cloud of mutual contempt and suspicion, "business" never suffers. All manner of dealings, some quite complex, occur as if by universal tacit adherence to common rules. The nature of this relationship is the subject of this and the following section. The connection between businesses and residents, both at the cultural level and in terms of reciprocating adaptive strategies, makes it difficult to describe each in isolation. In this chapter, however, an effort is



Illustration 1. Destitute and homeless, a Skid Row resident finds some comfort on a city bench.



Illustration 2. After spending the night at the Main Street Project shelter, a group of Skid Row residents start planning their day at 7:00 a.m. The temperature was -30° C.



Illustration 3. The Salvation Army provides vital services in the area including accomodation, food, employment, etc.



Illustration 4. The casual labour offices in the area specialize in buying and selling labour.

made to focus on common business practices.

Three businesses in particular are considered--casual labour, the hotels, and the Salvation Army. Both in the reports of residents, and in direct observation, these three were the most significant in the daily routine of Skid Row life. Casual labour was an important source of income. The hotels were centres of socializing. They also supplied accommodation which, though expensive, according to the men, afforded the rare luxury of privacy. The Salvation Army, in addition to its social service function, was the largest single source of the men's accommodation and sustenance.

3.2 Casual Labour

The biggest single employer of Skid Row residents is the casual labour office. At least five privately owned offices operate in the immediate core area, and depending on the current employment needs, they can accommodate anywhere from one-tenth to one-half of Skid Row's prospective applicants.

The offices retain the men's labour, at wages not usually exceeding the minimum, and subsequently "sell" it to secondary employers on a casual (daily) basis for approximately the cost of hiring full-time and unionized employees in the same positions. Many industries and businesses depend on this unusual employment practice. By hiring men sporadically, they are able to stabilize operating expenses. The outlay of wages is always congruent with fluctuating market conditions.

For example, a train will arrive in Winnipeg, and men will be required to pick up or deliver a single large block of goods quickly. The task is labour intensive, and, where speed is a factor, it involves a greater number of labourers than could be retained on a permanent basis. In this case, the role of the casual labour office is to meet

the railway's short-term requirement. In short, their product is men who are willing to work without the expectation of security.

Because of the poverty of men in the area, virtually all make at least periodic use of casual labour. As early as four o'clock in the morning (or two to three hours before opening) dozens of men can be seen staking positions near office entrances waiting to fill any of a number of semi-skilled and unskilled positions. Often, the jobs are arduous, and involve physical risk. On one occasion, for example, Project staff were aware of a business in the area which was purchasing discarded automobile batteries to salvage the metal content. Many men on Main Street were being hired by the company through a casual labour office to work eight hours a day splitting open batteries on exposed concrete pads with sledge hammers. As the men were expected to provide their own protective gloves, eyeglasses, trousers, and so on, and since the company was not prohibiting men from working who were unable to afford such equipment, several returned to the Project in the evenings complaining of serious battery acid burns. Despite the risks, as many as a half dozen men returned to the job daily for up to six weeks.

Outside of the established offices, casual labour also has an illicit aspect on Skid Row. Knowing that Skid Row men rarely complain about low pay or poor working conditions, small businesses sometimes "imitiate" casual labour operations in spurious ways by exploiting the men's need for work. One instance involved a bootlegger/grocery store owner in the area who had illegally hired dozens of Skid Row men for a small out of town demolition operation. The men were trucked to small towns around Winnipeg and for five to ten dollars a day, plus food, shelter and alcohol, to raze grain elevators which had been purchased for the resale of their usable lumber. None of the men were registered for disability or unemployment benefits although the work, performed sometimes at considerable height and without safety equipment, was clearly dangerous in addition to temporary. Ironically, the men's great-

est complaint was that the employer had reneged on some of the payment. They seemed willing to take great risks, but were angered at being swindled out of a paltry remuneration.

Though it would appear that the casual labour outlet operates on a comparatively low overhead--reaping payment without the expense of manufacturing a product--most office managers insist that theirs is very much a "volume industry;" little profit, they claim, can be realized in the business unless great numbers of men can be hired and sold daily. The survival of the industry on Skid Row would seem to depend, therefore, not only on the availability of large labour contracts, but also on the sustained poverty of its work force. Few outlets would be able to continue operating if the best of their workers were regularly hired full-time by purchasing industries.

In order to protect this investment--the unemployed hard labourers--the majority of labour outlets will require industries to sign contracts indicating that they will not under any circumstances hire casual labourers on a permanent basis within a period of six months subsequent to those labourers' last casual referral. For the most part, purchasing industries tend to respect these agreements; few will attempt to surreptitiously take on a labourer that they had recently hired casually.

It is not uncommon, however, for an industry representative to approach a casual labour office and "request," informally that a man be released from the contract. This frequently occurs in the case of men who are especially skilled or ambitious. And since labour offices in the area are fiercely competitive for business, most will comply eagerly, considering the loss of a regular worker as little more than a "gift" to a valuable customer.

Residents of the area are aware of this common business practice. Aside from their salaries, in fact, one of the men's most frequently

stated reasons for working casually is that it exposes them to potential full-time employers. Some will actually quit for a brief period or change offices if the jobs they get are too various, or entail only the most nominal skill. The ideal situation, they claim, is to be able to remain several consecutive days in the same position. This makes it possible to demonstrate competence and responsibility to a single employer over an extended period.

Casual labour, then, is in no way considered by the men who use it as a side source of income for casual or capricious needs. Outside of daily subsistence, it is an instrument for locating full-time and better paying employment, and affords them far greater chances of success than approaching a prospective employer directly, via a Canada Manpower referral.

In this system of "giving away" labourers, however, it is generally only the most experienced workers who benefit--a condition responsible for one of the few salient differences between Natives and Whites on Skid Row. Possessing fewer saleable skills, as a rule, Native men of the area tend to be far more competitive, and consequently more proficient, than Whites at jobs promising the very least opportunities for advancement. Often, owing to their reputed special ability to endure near intolerable working conditions, their services are solicited expressly. One casual labour office manager stated that he is frequently requested to "...send over a dozen Indians" for a day's labour. Unfortunately, despite their efforts, these same men experience inordinate difficulty securing permanent positions. Lacking in expertise they become part of a large labour pool, competing for scant and futureless work.

3.3 Hotels

Hotels in the immediate Skid Row region provide close to 500 rooms, but do not play a predominant role in the regular sheltering of Skid Row

men. By the day, the rooms are fairly expensive and amount to a substantial portion of the men's daily casual income. They are used, however, in the event of windfall earnings. Also, City and Provincial Welfare offices commonly refer the men to the hotels for monthly accommodation (the difference between daily and monthly rates, and its consequence, is discussed in Section 4.0).

A more ostensible function of the hotels is the sale of liquor. At almost any time of the evening most taverns of the area are filled near to capacity, and virtually no restrictions are made by owners on quantity of alcohol one may consume. Often, patrons are thrown out onto the street unconscious and sometimes penniless and others, who have become belligerent, may be brutally beaten and exited by employees retained specifically for their fighting acumen.

It is interesting, that over the period of this research, none of the taverns of the region were ever closed by the authorities for more than one or two days for assaulting customers, serving alcohol to juveniles, or allowing persons to drink until becoming unconscious, although many were guilty of these and various other offences daily.

In order to minimize the risk of closure, hotel owner-operators of the area employ two highly effective strategies. First, by tacit agreement, information concerning the whereabouts of liquor inspectors is swiftly communicated among them. Only a single tavern, as a result, may be found in violation of the law in any particular evening. Forewarned, the remaining owners immediately clear their premises of unconscious or underage patrons. Secondly, hotels in the area are generally run by families. If an owner is found in violation three times, (two warnings are usually issued by inspectors before suspending an operator's licence) he may simply transfer ownership of the business to his wife or other family member until such time as he may legally reapply for licencing.

3.4 The Salvation Army

Oddly enough, among all the businesses on Skid Row the most prosperous and powerful, according to residents, is the Salvation Army. This seems at once peculiar, in light of our traditional, albeit distant, knowledge of that service's function. To many the "Sally Ann" is seen as an altruistic effort, an age-old, self-sufficient, and entirely charitable social service dedicated to meeting all of the various spiritual and material needs of Main Street's "drunken derelict." To those who make use of its services, however, the Salvation Army is a major thriving business enterprise, an inexpensive hotel and restaurant, a potential employer, and the largest and most risk-free locale for the purchasing and distribution of top quality stolen goods.

The first and most obvious of its services is the men's hostel. As the agency ostensibly responsible for the welfare of Winnipeg's "transient single males," as they are referred to by welfare workers, the Salvation Army provides basic and inexpensive accommodation for 300 to 350 individuals. The majority of the shelter areas are dormitory-styled. Most of the men sleep in large unpartitioned rooms, with little privacy and no facilities for the secure storage of possessions. A few private rooms are available, however, but they are almost as expensive as the hotels and require lump-sum payments.

In the dormitory section, there is rarely a shortage of beds. But long-term shelter is not automatically assured for those who require it. A man will normally be allowed to remain in the hostel, without question or cost, for a period not exceeding three days. Thereafter, policy requires him to arrange payment, either directly from City Welfare--as is often recommended by Salvation Army staff--or by way of casual labour.

This poses some important practical problems. Workers at City Welfare tend to grossly overestimate the availability of casual and full-

time work. After wasting precious potential working hours waiting to see a social worker, many are refused funds by virtue of fit appearance "there's plenty of work out there for you" or, more often, by way of seemingly deviant behaviours--binge spending (especially if it involved welfare payments) hard drinking, or apparently suspended employment. Many are unable to pay for a fourth night's lodging.

Other men, preferring to avoid this bind, head directly out to the employment office. Often they are unsuccessful; either they get no work at all, or a job lasts only three or four hours. But by opting for this latter strategy, as most do, the men are able to at least increase their chances of exploiting both resources.

Few men are able to sustain this pattern of work, welfare use, and residence at the "Sally" for extended periods. Many have been indefinitely barred from the hostel for either drinking or fighting on the premises. Others, through inability to pay for their fourth successive night, are denied emergency assistance until they can provide adequate funds.

A common technique for reacquiring shelter is to gain admission to the "Rehabilitation Unit." This is the true business end of the Salvation Army. The Unit, housing approximately 25, is a long-term live-in treatment centre which enlists Skid Row men in what it refers to as "work therapy." The men entering the program are usually deemed chronic alcoholics who, for whatever reason, have experienced considerable difficulty locating permanent employment and accommodation. Once in the program, they are immediately put to work in any of a variety of the Salvation Army's commercial enterprises, and are paid, in addition to room and board, a starting salary of five dollars for a 40 to 48 hour work week.

Discarded rags and clothing are bundled and sold to industry,

non-returnable bottles, glass jars, and newsprint are collected for recycling, and hundreds of used items are picked up daily at private homes to be repaired and resold at the Salvation Army's eight thrift stores.

The most copious of the Unit's sources of income, however, is derived from donations of new goods by retail sales and manufacturing outlets in Winnipeg. Virtually all of the food provided to the men both in the hostel and treatment program, and much of the clothing, furniture, and appliances sold in the thrift stores is supplied free of charge (for tax purposes) by private industry.

The sheer quantity of these goods, and the haphazard manner in which records are kept, enables a small number of the industrious to develop their own lucrative businesses. Stealing and distributing such items as boots, coats, coffee, sandwich meat, and so on--all of which finds its way into the local "buy and sell" stores and restaurants--can increase a man's income to the level of steady casual labour.

4.0 SKID ROW'S CIRCADIAN ECONOMY: THE BUSINESS OF MANAGING SPORADIC RESOURCES

4.1 Introduction

The most conspicuous feature of Skid Row and its inhabitants is poverty. Money is scarce, and the inhabitants are reliant upon either infrequent welfare disbursements or the lowest paying temporary work. Many are homeless and few ever seem to accumulate more than the most meager and concealable articles they carry. Nonetheless, the very fact of abject, indeed oftentimes life threatening poverty on Skid Row is not at once explicable as a relationship between annual income and the expected minimum cost of a "decent standard of living."

Determining accurate disposable income information about persons whose earnings are supplemented by thieving, among other endeavours, is naturally difficult. But in the course of examining residents' income tax forms, the author was surprised to discover that men known to be "living on the street"--sleeping under loading docks, stealing, and taking meals in the Salvation Army soup lines--earned sums in excess of \$4,000 annually.

This is no exorbitant income but one would expect it to be more than sufficient for at least basic provision. Many of the necessities of life may be acquired free of cost on Skid Row; one may eat well and regularly, whether employed or not and even be outfitted in new clothing from time to time by way of certain benevolent organizations. As to accommodations, beds at the Salvation Army men's hostel cost as little as \$3.00 per night, and hotels and rooming houses in the area seldom charge beyond \$8.00 to \$140.00 monthly, sums well within the means of even the most infrequently employed of casual labourers.

Another enigma surrounding this question of poverty, one which causes tremendous distress for those in the helping professions, is the so-called "binge style" spending considered typical of the (especially Native) Main Street "public inebriate." The accounts of social workers regarding this phenomenon are by no means mythical. For example, men would work out of town and upon returning to Skid Row would host long and extravagant drinking parties for friends and relatives, divesting themselves of literally hundreds of dollars daily until their savings were exhausted. They would again be destitute, sleeping out of doors, stealing, and working casually until the same or similar employment became available.

In view of this practice, and virtually all other salient features of money usage on Skid Row, it is difficult to envision the poverty there as originating from anything other than bad planning or immoderacy.

Not surprising, much of the literature on the subject concurs, depicting Skid Row men as largely the willing authors of their impoverishment. Brody (1971) attributes binge spending, or the "spree," on a Canadian Skid Row to "Indian culture." Describing the same group ostensibly, Price (1975) on "bar culture" explains the spree as a technique enabling Native young people to experiment in western society.

Elsewhere, borrowing from Lewis (1966), Wiseman (1970) determines some aberrant quality of mind--"present time" or "now" orientation--to be the predisposing factor. Here, some manner of reciprocal casualty is suggested. Lack of sustained income and capital is said to accustom Skid Row men to making daily transactions for basic necessities, food, clothing, and shelter, dealings made far less frequently and with more meticulous planning by members of the middle class. Soon, Wiseman argues, this pattern of crisis economy becomes routinized for its agent victims, and thereafter perceiving it as normal the men are less willing to aspire to, let alone successfully exploit, long-term economic opportunities as they arise.

In many such studies, two general themes appear to be most persistent. First, there is a presumption that cultural traits on Skid Row are immutable. Skid Row men are routinely described as being more or less incapable of modifying their culture, regardless of external influences. Secondly, whatever phenomena that fall under the aegis of "local economy" are supposed at once to be ineffective at meeting any needs beyond the psychological.

The premises, however, have been examined in the literature. In the broad field of urban poverty studies, the idea that subculture is static has long been under criticism. S.M. Miller (1965) was among the first to reevaluate the nature of the "non-deferred gratification pattern," for example. Though readily evidenced in urban poor populations, Miller argued, it tended often to be replaced with long-term

planning strategies on the availability of long-term economic opportunities. An interesting corroboration appears in Davidson and Krackhart's (1977) study of "hardcore unemployed" (by the authors' description, a group similar to the group of interest here) in a job creation and training program. At certain junctures of the program, funding for long-term job placements became tenuous, and subsequently improved. The researchers observed that the appearance of such traits as "external locus of control" and "low achievement motivation" (1977: 308), those frequently associated with hardcore culture, fluctuated in sympathy with the stability of the funding.

The idea that the products of these cultural traits are largely maladaptive in the macro-setting has also been questioned. Jan Newton's (1977) research illustrates the practicality of spending habits among the urban American poor. The more broadly based investigations of Eames and Goode (1973;1980) do much the same, making cross cultural comparisons to economic traditions, among others, outside the west.

Studies of this kind, however, have only focused on very large segments of the ostensibly poor urban population. Economic phenomena on Skid Row, in particular, with the notable exception of Liebow's (1967) ethnography of streetcorner men, have been largely overlooked. This has left Skid Row men out of current research, with only their apparently dysfunctional behaviour to speak for them.

This section addresses the problem. A description of material conditions, as they filter through the business community, is provided. As well, Skid Row economic culture and behaviour is described, and an argument for their selective advantage is advanced.

4.2 Antecedents of Transiency

Though casual labour may be described as a vehicle for securing

permanent wage opportunities, the question of the men's usual homelessness, especially in light of annual earnings, is still at issue. Why would one man, let alone literally hundreds in any instance, be lacking even basic accommodations given the relative low cost of these accommodations on Skid Row? Wiseman (1970:33) states that owing to the "now" orientation, Skid Row men actually prefer transience, noting that most (she claims) perceive it as availing freedom and, therefore, adamantly deride the entanglements of fixed residency and full-time employment.

In all deference to the author, even the most contrary explanations would have to admit to some limit the existence of "now" orientation. Residents by incessant desperate circumstances are faced daily with life threatening difficulties; drastic and expedient solutions are often effected. But to suggest that this somehow reflects a self-styled state of homelessness is inapplicable to the present case. Residents on Skid Row in Winnipeg all know someone who has either died by hypothermia or lost appendages by sleeping outside. Everyone claimed to have been beaten and robbed at the men's hostel. And though living on a small day-to-day income, everyone on Skid Row works hard to locate safe shelter--if permanent, all the better.

A more ecological focus orients Liebow's (1967) study of street-corner men in Washington D.C. Here, employment and residency patterns are shown to be much more a reflection of low wages, arduous and demeaning labour, and scant long-term employment opportunities than some predisposing feature of personality. The argument is at once relevant to the Winnipeg situation. Despite all claims of outlet operators, the casual labour industry in no way imitates a job creation or placement service. Requiring great numbers of men daily, few will ever "donate" more labourers to business than is necessary to solicit long-term contracts.

Rejecting casual labour, one of the men's options may be to approach the larger federal employment services. But owing to their general lack of saleable skills and interrupted work histories, they are often referred either directly back to the core area day labour purchasers or the actual casual labour outlets themselves.

Escaping the situation is next to impossible. Presuming that there is an abundance of day jobs, and that the men volunteer for the "Skid Row lifestyle," City Welfare workers will often supply Skid Row applicants with as little as a \$2.00 meal voucher--the operating logic here being that poverty (imagined to be self-induced) will extinguish indolence by necessity (welfare workers refer to this, astutely, as "crisis precipitation"). Virtually never will a man from Skid Row wishing to avert casual labour receive from City Welfare workers initially more than a one to two week referral to the Salvation Army men's hostel. No matter where he turns, then, the Skid Row man is directed to the casual labour office. This is always his starting point, and while there he is reduced to complete poverty.

But it is not so much his casual earnings which impoverish him, interestingly, though by all accounts they are quite small. It is the way he receives them. Working one day, one day's wages is paid, minus deductions the company may make for coffee, transportation to the work site, and lunch. With seldom more than \$20.00 in his possession at the end of the day, he is first at the mercy of the men's hostel, where, if he wishes accommodations, any monies remaining after payment plus personal property may be stolen from him.

Daily rental fees are usurious at the hotels of Main Street. Regardless of how often a casual labourer may work, he is consistently victimized by a bizarre payment scheme. As an example, one typical hotel in the area charges a not unreasonable \$80.00 per month for a single room (renting mainly to pensioners and permanent welfare recipients) but on a

daily basis charges \$18.00 for the same room, or close to seven times the monthly rate.

Through different styles of robbery, neither the hotels nor the hostel enable the men to save money. Unable to afford non-Skid Row hotel rooms, or accumulate one month's rent plus damage deposit for apartments, the men are effectively circumscribed within the Skid Row business district. There they are worked, as a group (consequently denied welfare benefits) policed, and drained of their disposable income. Under these circumstances "present time orientation" seems much more a consequence of high powered coercion than choice (at least if "they who benefit" in any way suggests the direction of casuality).

Clearly, no one wishes to be homeless, so businesses of the area--afforded literally a captive market--utilize homelessness, or rather the daily possibility of it as a threat. The message is "you can't work full time, so if you don't work here..." or "if you don't rent here...you'll have to sleep outside."

4.3 Local Rules and the Division of Wealth

With all of the great hazards associated with being penniless on Skid Row, arrest, violence, and discomfort in winter months, philanthropy remains the singlemost admired virtue. The very urgency of life compels this, as the men there often philosophize, "you can't turn people down on the street."

But beyond simple virtue, philanthropy in this setting permeates every aspect of social life. Where it is known that a literal consequence of privation may be death by exposure, the secretive hoarding of even small sums is seen as both hostile and isolationist in the extreme.

Gestures of seeming kindness and sharing, among men so evenly impoverished, are routine. But unlike our own society such acts are never accompanied with sentiment. No message of obligation, even to return thanks, is imposed on the receiver. And similarly, when receiving, none is taken. All men on the street simply perceive themselves as "just poor." No one "owns" anything. Just as external conditions produce a uniform poverty on Skid Row, the residents have developed a corresponding network of egalitarian distribution.

Any money is considered surplus, and therefore belongs to the community--and where dissension of this precept occurs, violence and robbery may result. But violence, like other subsistence activities on Skid Row, is only tolerated when it conforms to the rules of an egalitarian economy, and consequently, it never permits the sustained wealth of the assailant above that of group members.

Even if possessing a fighting acumen, any one who consistently robs group members for purposes other than sharing the avails risks retaliatory aggression. Weakened by drunkenness at some moment, those noted for such cruelty are robbed. Moreover, they incur the unusual wrath of passers-by, those who on other occasions might simply be passive observers--in brutal episodes of gang violence.

One common expression of Skid Row applies here- "beatings always come back to you." But interestingly the context in which it most frequently appears suggests that its sentiment refers far less to the victim's actual violence--which is commonplace--than it does the futility of his efforts at assuming power by violent reputation. The statement indicates ridicule for pretention and stupidity. The victim may be called a "punk," "kid," or "crazy,"--terms which underscore either his ingenuousness or lunatic departure from the mainstream Skid Row ethic.

A somewhat similar indiscretion, of "putting on airs," appears in

the case of the Skid Row labourer who after securing full and regular employment changes his attitude and severs previous relationships. Small, testing versions of this are frequent. On landing a good job, many complain of the encumbrance of needy friends and relatives. Indeed, this is the norm, but realizing how tenuous security may be away from Skid Row, protestations are only issued cautiously, and are seldom realized in denials of aid.

Even so, some men will attempt a clean break from the street despite all the resultant pressures to the contrary. Still living on Skid Row, perhaps being able to afford a hotel or cheap rooming house by the month in the area, a new "straight" may be less than amicably reminded by old friends of "street obligations." Censuring takes the form of open ridicule, often of his presumed lost freedoms, neat appearance, and imagined obsequiousness with employers. In the extreme, though, particularly if the accused's work in any way effects Skid Row men directly, derision may become manifest in actual threats or acts of violence.

One illustration of this was the case of L, a man on Skid Row who had managed to acquire work as a security guard at the Salvation Army hostel. Among many of L's duties was the distribution of meal tickets to non-residents of the hostel entitling them to a free breakfast there. According to Salvation Army policy, however, he was supplied with only a finite number of tickets--fewer than would accommodate all who queued in front of the building--and was specifically instructed to distribute them only to those appearing most needy. Naturally, this forced him to withhold tickets on occasion to many of his former friends, even relatives, who quickly slandered him as a result for "forgetting where he came from." He was labelled untrustworthy and a misfit, a reputation was quickly communicated throughout the street community, and was even warned by some with threats of violence to never venture out onto the "main drag," beyond the safety of his workplace.

As is common, hostilities abated in time. The duration of his employment demonstrated that he had acquired the solid respect of his bosses, and L was eventually able to turn admonition onto understanding. He was seen as accepted by "the system," and therefore his airs were considered legitimate by former associates and part of "doing his job."

The pressures encouraging egalitarianism are fierce and effective--in the one instance being the tacit intramural acceptance of the very necessity of sharing, and second, a consequence, a similar resignation to the possibility of violent theft and ostracism.

But as suggested in the last example, the imperatives to such an economy in no way automatically conflict with the men's overriding desire to improve their condition, to extricate themselves altogether from the Skid Row setting. No one is condemned for "doing good," if success is not flaunted; some even speak of certain prominent citizens they have gotten drunk with on Main Street, extolling, despite these citizen's obvious success and status, the very virtues of their unpretentiousness.

Instead, the ethic of sharing is imposed, as if opportunistically, on those who are likely to benefit from it in the future--men who are similarly impoverished and lacking insurance in the larger society. The economy is distinctly situation-bound, then; one "expects" gifts from fellows because internal sanctions can be utilized against them, and "borrows" or panhandles, cautiously, from outsiders because they cannot.

4.4 The Function of Binge Spending

Given Skid Row's economic customs and organization, the practice of binge-spending begins to make some sense. It is difficult for the Skid Row resident to save money as the out-and-out robbery of savings, "community surplus," is both sanctioned and inevitable. Even by banking, one cannot insure against this; by removing small sums periodically, one is still compelled each time to be generous.

On acquiring a rather large amount of money, then, perhaps as a result of working in an isolated northern camp, the Skid Row resident finds himself in the position of having to do something with it. Of course, Skid Row offers few alternatives in such instances; one may attempt to conceal it, and end up beaten and robbed, or share--generously. These being the choices, sharing, especially quick and thorough binge-style sharing, is clearly wise.

Still, certain important characteristics of binge spending remain unexplained. It might be anticipated that binging would result in a fairly broad distribution of funds consumed at once in the form of needed commodities. In fact, the practice typically involves only limited numbers and notoriously frivolous purchases. Alcohol is especially favoured and is the focus of week long, mobile parties. Further, unlike the usual modesty one finds characteristic of givers in most smaller transactions, those who host a sizable binge often exhibit great braggadocio in the process. Announcing new found wealth, the men will boast of their limitless philanthropy, distributing cash on the street, in bars, and even throwing it away proclaiming (the frequent expression) "it means nothing to me." Attracting a circle of friends and relatives in short order, the generous host fairly ventilates self-aggrandizement, spending furiously as if to confirm each claim of greatness.

Much of this is uncharacteristic of the usual quiet, practical, and unassuming nature of gift giving in everyday life. Even so, it is not the case that binging reflects an essential deviation from custom; rather, it is the sheer size and impoverishment of the Skid Row population that makes for unusual stress in the normal distribution process.

A comparatively large sum - such as a \$500.00 income tax refund - affords no special advantage to the individual Skid Row resident inasmuch as it cannot be saved, given the threat of robbery, and it is not sufficient to aid one in relocating from Skid Row. But, in addition, unlike possible analogues in smaller, egalitarian societies, such windfalls are similarly useless in meeting even the most basic immediate needs of the group. The very number of potential receivers makes this the case. Of course, this poses no problem in the majority of instances in which only small sums pass hands. On encountering someone in need, one simply relinquishes all one has at the moment, and being at once penniless cannot be blamed for failing to assist the next applicant.

With the large size of windfalls, however, many divisions are necessary before no one is conspicuously wealthier than another. Total distribution not being feasible, the recipient is in a tenuous social position. He might attempt to make like-sized donations to a finite number but by doing this he would invariably alienate some of the community. Moreover, should one so overlooked, or more likely a group of omitted associates wish to avenge the giver's selectivity (interpreted by them as an effort at manipulation) virtually no one would come to his assistance for fear of appearing "payed off."

Binge spending is the perfect solution. Coming into a large sum, the recipient commences swift and indiscriminate distribution. As quickly as possible he purchases food, liquor, and gifts of myriad description, showing no preference for binge participants, but donating

randomly to anyone who happens by. Further, as if abrogating publicly any subsequent obligation of receivers, the host boasts of his great generosity, impressing upon all his belief in the virtues of sharing and fellowship, and showing near literal contempt, by comparison, for money. Here, the host almost insists that no one leave feeling in any way indebted to him; thus the louder his boasting the better, as those friends and relatives, hearing too late of his spree, can bear no grudge on the basis of miserliness.

The binge use of alcohol provides an additional advantage. Often, former hosts would report having "lost a couple of days" in the course of a binge, meaning that their memory of the episode had been impaired by sustained drinking. On occasions in which relatives protested their exclusion from binges, this would frequently be used as a defence. Common reports were "I was on a wild drunk ...I didn't know what I was doing." Many times this would placate the accuser, or at least, it would terminate discussions.

Owing to indigenous sanctions on spending, then, binges are an adaptive response to the problem of distributing large sums on Skid Row. And it cannot be overstated that the distribution in all instances reflects an effort to maintain egalitarianism. Any resemblance the custom might bear to potlatching, for example, especially by virtue of performers' grand ostentation, is coincidence since: 1) binges on Skid Row are spontaneous and promote no expectation of reciprocity; and 2) internal law does not permit the accumulation of funds for binge purposes. Quick wealth is an accident on Skid Row, which places the recipient in great physical danger. Therefore, the spontaneous spree-style spending of wealth is a matter of group enforcement, having no greater purpose than to afford the safest and most equitable division, and swiftest consumption.

What binges are clearly not, however--despite any idea of their connection to 'present time orientation'--are exercises in frivolous

indulgence, evidence of the Skid Row man's inability to plan for the long-term. One of the more famous Skid Row spending sprees witnessed during the research illustrates this. The host in this case, V, had sustained serious and permanent injury to both legs as a result of a casual labour-related accident. Hoping to avert a lawsuit, the purchasing industry offered, while V was still hospitalized, an initial lump sum of \$3000, in compensation. V quickly agreed to the offer, and discharging himself from care at the encouragement of friends, began a long and unrestrained bout of partying in the Skid Row hotel district.

Well aware of his history of drinking, Main Street Project workers naturally became concerned by this--especially since V's physicians indicated that not only was V not likely to work again at labour positions, but that a period of sustained drinking might impede his recovery. Nonetheless, no efforts of Project staff would deter him, and within a week, V was both penniless and unemployable.

The episode might well have been written off to a lack of money management skills, and disregard for personal health. But the researcher's experience with V at that time, and for three years subsequent, proved the contrary. Immediately after distributing his windfall, V applied for and received permanent welfare assistance for reasons of physical disability. Every month he received a cheque, again a lump sum. Although he occasionally visited the Main Street area, he was seldom observed intoxicated, or even patronizing the local taverns. Instead, given a secure income, V managed a largely sedentary lifestyle, living alone and exhibiting great aptitude for budgeting a decidedly modest income.

In the institution of binge spending, Skid Row men are committed to the even distribution of resources, even when such commitment necessitates great sacrifice. "Straights," or those who favour

saving, and prudent non-social sorts of investments, are therefore threatening to group integrity. And they are dealt with harshly.

Similarly problematic to the group, however, are those who profess the virtues of generosity, but by circumstances, are too often unable to contribute equally if at all to other members. In this instance, as Harris (1974:285) notes of egalitarianism in band societies, an obvious and immediate danger to especially marginal economy is realized. The most odious of the group's problems is that no pertinent remedial sanction exists in the emic domain; how is habitual dependence on others to be prohibited where the calculation of personal debt is also? For the most part, the state intervenes in such cases. Those, for example, whose infirmity prevents them from generating income are usually recipient to permanent welfare. Given secure income, they may vacate Skid Row altogether, or continue affiliating voluntarily.

But in certain very rare instances no such coverage is available. The group might encounter the chronic intramural panhandler--one unable by hardship to work casually, but not yet eligible for state assistance --and be helpless to rebuke him without risking demonstrations of miserliness. The problem is a very cumbersome one socially, but the solution here is most interesting, bearing eerie resemblance to the witchcraft accusation said by Harris (ibid.) to occur in parallel situations in the non-western analogue. As expected, the group never exacts direct punishment to the offender initially, accomodating for some time, his incessant and unreciprocated requests for assistance. Nonetheless, ill will may result; but unable to accuse him of malingering, the group instead instigates rumours unrelated, exaggerating in gossip some concocted transgressions which, unlike "bumming," can be emically purported hostile or antisocial. The most frequent offending behaviour here is "unsolicited" hostility, favoured inasmuch

as it can be easily orchestrated. An individual might be goaded into violent outbursts, for example, and being already the focus of malevolent undercurrents be labelled dangerous and unpredictable.

Still, rumours of craziness may not be easily promoted, especially if the alleged offender has always been well-liked, or where violence is otherwise incongruous with past performance. In either case, group explanations for the behaviour often originate in a sort of medical consensus. The offender may be said to be afflicted with "wet brain," an emically specified derangement attributed to excessive alcohol use. Thereafter, eliciting fear by way of purported unpredictability, persons so diagnosed are excluded from many necessary group activities, particularly those involving the pooling of group resources.

The victim is socially and therefore economically exiled. And any protest he might advance only corroborates damning rumour, as does his resultant and now worsening poverty. In fact, being the focus of this effort, he is held responsible for his circumstance within the local setting just as Skid Row men are generally by those outside of it. The tactic is both simple and familiar.

As mentioned, such instances are infrequent on Skid Row, the state usually being willing to sustain persons who become seriously and chronically ill. There are few recorded cases. Further, protracted unemployment, disaffiliation, erratic behaviour, and even increased drinking--all salient features of the ostracism process--appear almost simultaneously in the lives of victims. One may argue convincingly, then, for the astuteness of local definitions for "craziness," especially if conditions encourage crazy people to enter "treatment" facilities for subsistence.

Nonetheless, the process is still apparent, especially for those

men whose material conditions fluctuate. One such example involved a longtime Skid Row casual labourer, F, who in late middle age developed arthritis in the fingers of both hands. Although he suffered greatly at hard manual jobs, F's ailment was considered by authorities insufficient to warrant permanent welfare assistance for medical reasons. Not actually "prevented" from working, the great pain he endured frequently diminished his desire to work, and consequently, for lack of funds he was forced out onto the street, to sleep outside or in friends' rooms, and panhandle for necessary items.

By all appearances he was more or less as impoverished as anyone else on the street, living a daily subsistence, "bumming," and drinking heavily. But seldom able to work a full day at casual labour, he was rarely able to accommodate friends for gifts of money, or contribute towards a group's investment in a bottle. Some months after F effectively ceased working there was an occasion to speak with two of his longtime drinking companions. Discussing F's recent misfortunes, both commented that he had changed subtly for some reason since developing arthritis, that he'd become generally hostile. One claimed that F was seldom appreciative of favours, noting that although he had given his sandwich meat the day before, he had reacted angrily the following day when less was supplied on request.

The behaviour seemed uncharacteristic of F, but to quell the speaker's obvious impatience with him it was suggested that this might have been caused by the pain which accompanied his affliction. This suggestion was not developed, but the friends speculated that F's drinking was largely the culprit, and that being a "counselor" the author should refer him to treatment before someone less sympathetic than he "punched him out on the street."

This secondhand information, of course, cannot be taken as evidence of an exchange sanction; even the simplest transaction might well be

greatly affected by hidden personal factors. Even so, certain direct observation did seem to illustrate the process.

First, the sentiments of F's two friends were not at all isolated. Many on the street held the same opinions, commenting on F's unsociability and now destructive pattern of drinking. More important, F was seldom seen in the company of former associates at this time. Second, now stranded from group support, F was obviously imperiled in many areas. Food and lodging were not easily procured, and "backers" in episodes of violence were non-existent.

All this, in time, served to exacerbate F's circumstance; he was almost always homeless, without work, and suffering. Ironically, this eventually worked to F's advantage. Once it was shown that F was incapacitated by arthritis, and destitute in every respect, F acquired permanent welfare assistance. Subsequent excursions to Skid Row were only voluntary, then, as regular income facilitated security and routine. Also, actually importing money to the street on occasion, F's status there changed considerably, resembling more that of V in the earlier example of binge practices. Now drinking infrequently, F's "wet brain" was considered remedied--several on the street spoke of his improvement.

4.5 Conclusions

An obvious antecedent of poverty on Skid Row was income. The majority of employment opportunities in the region provided no more than the minimum wage--many paid less. Moreover, jobs were never guaranteed from one day to the next. Given the preeminence of job demand over supply, the resident invariably suffered "gaps" in the work week. As a result, over the course of a full year it was effectively impossible, working from Skid Row, to earn the equivalent of 52 weeks' minimum wage.

Less conspicuous causes were found in the relationship between the method of payment to labourers and the practices of area businesses. Casual labour paid the men in daily amounts. In response, the Salvation Army provided "affordable" room and board (charging only a fraction of the men's daily earnings) but, out of parsimony, failed to supply facilities for the secure storage of possessions. Hotels provided security, in the way of locked rooms, but set daily rates which were equivalent to one day's pay. Men were not permitted to make installment payments on the smaller monthly rate, and thereby cover brief periods of unemployment.

Rooming houses in the area also provided security--a place where one could sleep and store possessions--but demanded monthly payments in advance. Starting out poor on Skid Row, and initially being dependent on per diem shelter sources, a resident was rarely able to save the required rent.

The men's inability to save and store any measure of surplus was a reflection of poverty in the society. But it was also encouragement for the emergence of egalitarian organization. Two additional factors cemented the adaptation. First, almost everyone on Skid Row experienced essentially the same conditions. No one earned substantially more than anyone else, and no amount of expertise could aid in circumventing exploitation in the Skid Row business district. Second, given the sporadic nature of income, everyone on Skid Row experienced periodic homelessness, the consequences of which were often life threatening.

No matter what the Skid Rower did, these conditions were always unrelenting. But at the same time, one would invariably come into surplus from time to time, either in the way of food or a bottle, or knowledge of a place to stay. Common sense dictated sharing. One could never store surplus for very long, and so in a perilous ecosystem, a reputation for extreme generosity was the most valuable investment possible.

5.0 'UNLAWFUL' EMPLOYMENT

5.1 Introduction

Many of the aptitudes requisite for survival on Skid Row involve a class of strategies normally referred to as "criminal." This comes as no surprise; indeed, members of the larger society often envisage crime as one of Skid Row's most pernicious social products. But to understand crime, as it exists within Skid Row's strict geographic and cultural parameters, it is necessary to abandon traditional attitudes on causes and consequences of crime. Some laws are never enforced in Skid Row., since the kinds of activities they were intended to prohibit are either of no significant consequence to the larger society or are of such a nature, as in the case of prostitution, that they actually provide a service to it. Conversely, of the endeavours the larger society considers "honest" or "commendable," many (according to the common Skid Row ethic) are opposite to socially acceptable behaviour; they are violations of "internal law."

A "rat," for example--one who informs on activities of criminals to the police--is universally despised on Skid Row. Oddly enough, this hatred is only partially due to the fact that "rats" interfere with the performance of crime. As it turns out, they are generally disliked and distrusted even by the police. What is considered by "insiders" to be most despicable about rats is that they operate surreptitiously outside the realm of honour among thieves. A rat is frequently called a "phoney," meaning he cannot be trusted; thus he differs considerably from a policeman, whose behaviour is entirely predictable and therefore respected.

This section explores the nature of Skid Row crime. Particular attention is paid to the description of beliefs and common practices

of residents, and the process whereby crime is circumscribed to the society.

5.2 Crime as a Subsistence Activity

Leaving aside the question of "internal rules" pertaining to Skid Row crime, it is essential to comment on Skid Row crime's general etic nature.

First, virtually all crimes committed by immediate Skid Row residents may be understood as specialized adaptations to poverty in that they: invariably involve some kind of remuneration (so-called "senseless" acts of violence, vandalism, and so on are extremely rare); and are performed almost exclusively by persons who have either exhausted or have otherwise been deprived of all other avenues of income.

One woman in the Detox explained her financial problems associated with "going straight." Occasionally, she would cease drinking and secure welfare--which provided only a room in the immediate Skid Row area--and take up fixed residence with her common-law husband. Buying groceries and other items with whatever small amount her husband could earn casually, she frequently ran over budget as less prosperous friends and relatives besieged her for food and shelter.

Living so physically close to the street, and knowing that a cut in payments might occur for any of a number of reasons, she feared refusing such favours. Soon she was supplementing her income by petty thieving and prostitution while her apartment, which as a result was frequently left unattended was becoming used by friends as a temporary residence.

This marked a critical point; a boisterous party might break out in her absence, the landlord would complain to welfare officials, and she would be back on the street with no legitimate source of income. "But when I'm on the street" she informed the author "I always seem to be better off financially."

Second, the efficiency and organization of crimes on Skid Row increases as a direct function of the extent to which their performers are limited in economic mobility. Very few people on Skid Row make a "profession" of crime; most prefer, and pride themselves in, legitimate employment. Those who do become involved in such activities as organized robbery, prostitution, and so on, generally do so only if the periods of their financial despondency are unusually protracted.

Both the nature and prevalence of Skid Row crime largely operates as a function of external conditions. As an example, in the summer of 1979 periodic residents in the area were faced with an across-the-board cut in the delivery of City Welfare payments. A number of common-law couples, mostly Native and ranging in age from 20 to 30 years, lost their only source of income. Many migrated to the street: the women taking temporary residence with friends and the men eking out whatever casual labour was available. Within a brief period they started forming into their own small social groups. Lacking saleable skills, and being generally unfamiliar with techniques for acquiring temporary work, they survived by terrorizing the regular population.

For the first time in several years, Main Street Project workers were faced with the phenomenon of organized street-gang violence. The situation became so serious that the Winnipeg City Police Department commissioned a special unit of undercover officers known as the "garbage patrol" (so-called because of their unkempt and supposedly inconspicuous

appearance) to deal with it exclusively.

5.3 Violent Crimes

On the surface, the phenomenon of violence on Skid Row appears irrational. In the average violent episode the participants (often enraged and intoxicated) seem to assume tremendous risk with little possibility of concomitant gain. However, the reverse is generally the case; fights often occur among Skid Row men, but they adhere to a fairly sensible and predictable pattern (it is important to distinguish between "involuntary" residents and persons from outside Skid Row who occasionally appear in the area for amusement):

- 1) They are seldom "fair." Most fights involve uneven numbers; if not, one party usually has a clear physical advantage over the other.
- 2) The physical damage sustained in fights is minimal. Broken limbs or serious lacerations are infrequent; a bloodied face is usually sufficient to declare a winner.
- 3) Fights almost always involve a robbery. When questioned as to their motives for violence, instigators will often claim that they had been slighted in some way by their victims in the past. More often than not, goods change hands in such altercations.

The nature and prevalence of violent robberies alters significantly according to external economic conditions. A paucity of work and welfare will generally result in an increase in the frequency of violent crimes.

Similar to most other criminal activities, poverty is not sufficient to bring violent crime to any high level of organization. Residents are faced, after all, with the problem of creating enemies. Although a

resident may have had supporters at the time of an assault, even their briefest retreat into the work force might make them inaccessible when the assault is avenged. Organized street-gang violence can only occur in sub-groups of the Skid Row population which are consistently deprived of legitimate economic opportunities.

The conditions for this type of phenomenon generally existed for the young ex-welfare recipients mentioned earlier. But their effects are most prominently evidenced in the case of children. One night two Project staff members noticed a group of four juveniles beat an elderly man to the ground and run off with his recently purchased case of beer. The staff member followed at a distance, to ensure that they would not disperse and abandon the evidence, and in transit solicited the assistance of two police officers. When the Project staff finally approached the group, which had by this time settled in a crowded hotel lobby, each of the four members had concocted an alibi and had passed on to other friends the stolen bottles. Surprisingly, all of these elaborate precautions had been taken even though the group seemed unaware that anyone had actually witnessed the crime.

Organized efforts of this sort, which are typical of the crimes of children, do not exist among the activities of older and presumably more "seasoned" frequenters of the area.

5.4 Internal Rules

All crimes involve risk. The location of a crime, the circumstances under which it was committed, and the identity of the victim all figure more prominently than the crime itself, in determining whether or not the performer will be arrested and convicted.

Deciding the relative advantage of breaking the law, then, requires

a meticulous calculation of complex social, rather than legal, conditions, most of which may be gleaned from the internal rules of the profession:

1) "Don't rat"

Ratting is the most flagrant and dangerous violation of trust among criminals. The practice of ratting is considered generally dishonest by Skid Row residents. Everyone recognizes that on the street residents seldom steal to accumulate luxuries. Stolen goods, and the avails of any other criminal endeavour on Skid Row, are immediately exchanged for necessary items--food, clothing, alcohol, and so on--and are distributed at once to less fortunate friends and relatives. Ratting is considered similar to stealing a working man's paycheque, and is afforded, accordingly, similar repulse.

2) "Don't interfere in something that isn't your affair"

Interference in a criminal act (for example, intervention in an uneven fight) is comparable to ratting, as it usually represents the obstruction of possibly "honest" labours. It differs, however, in that it is in some instances permissible; one may be expected to come to the aid of friends and relatives in the case of an assault or robbery, for example. Further, the consequence to the criminal of interference alone is considerably less than that of being victim to an informer; indeed, it is parallel to the immediate risk assumed by the intruder himself, namely, violence.

One who continually intrudes in people's affairs for reasons other than the protection of kin, therefore, is considered more "stupid"--by creating needless potential danger--than morally reprehensible.

Regardless of its relative informality, the proscription of

non-interference has broad and often startling consequences. There are numerous occasions in which brutal violence, even murder, take place in the presence of dozens of onlookers.

As it appears, revulsion with any criminal act per se is not in itself sufficient to elicit interference. On one occasion, frustrated with a man who was selling contact glue (a substance inhaled for its intoxicating effect) to children, and successfully avoiding arrest, the researcher informed on his activities to a number of young men in the area hoping they might give at least some vicarious satisfaction. Each of the men expressed their disgust with his crime, but at the same time relayed no more than the most casual resignation "yeah, I hate that sort of thing...but it's none of my business."

3) "The person with the least charges takes the blame"

Just as the avails of crime are expected to be distributed equally among confederates, so are its less fortunate consequences. If a group is caught drinking in public, for example, the bottle is typically passed to the person lacking prior convictions, unpaid fines, or outstanding warrants. Often, as in the case of more elaborate group crimes, the most dangerous assignment--that is, the one most likely to result in an arrest--is intentionally designated to the one least likely to receive a harsh prison sentence. Interestingly, few seem to object to this practice, even if it makes them recipient to the greatest danger. Such an arrangement is believed entirely equitable; one may assume either a high risk of receiving a low sentence, or vice versa.

Transgression of any of these rules, which in themselves bear no relation to the actual "techniques" of criminal acts, can have

disasterous consequences. A "punk" or "performer," as he is derisively referred to on the street, may be well acquainted with the law, and be fairly talented at breaking it, but he tends to commit his crimes outside of the appropriate social context. "Punks" start fights for no reason (ie: there is no money involved), they get drunk at inappropriate occasions, and share information about criminals solely for their own aggrandizement. They tend to be vulnerable to arrest; they are conspicuous both to insiders and outsiders, and generally lack the support of accomplices.

For most of the Skid Row population, there is a fairly universal adherence to these internal rules. This poses some important problems for the police. Faced with this complex network of customs--designed to minimize the risk of incarceration--most police officers in the area have resigned themselves to a reciprocal array of working attitudes:

1) "Those people (on Skid Row) cause their own trouble..."

It is frequently assumed by the authorities that people who live on Skid Row remain there, in part, by virtue of the inherent dangers. One may experience tremendous difficulty, as a consequence, attempting to convince the police that a crime, in the usual sense, has actually taken place. Relating the details of an assault and robbery, the police may comment that "he probably asked for it" or "they should have known better than to be there at that time."

Considered by the police to be truisms, these attitudes tend to protect criminals and perpetuate certain types of criminal endeavours. J was well known on Skid Row for his extreme violent behaviour directed toward women. On numerous occasions, workers at the Main Street Project were called to attend to his victims, many of whom had been beaten and sexually assaulted to a degree which exceeded even Skid Row propriety. But despite all attempts at documenting J's violence and gathering

witnesses for possible court proceedings, workers were unable to persuade the authorities to act in the matter. The "character" of his victims (the victims being Skid Row residents) was always called into question by the police, and when he was finally arrested, J was quickly released on his own recognizance. This enabled him to terrorize witnesses for the prosecution before they could be protected.

2) "...and they'll never lay a charge."

Frequently, in the course of interviewing a victim of Skid Row crime (once the existence of a "crime" has been established to their satisfaction) police officers will employ a tactic of intimidation, by attempting to "break down" rather than encourage a complainant by insulting him or initiating argument. It was observed during this project that when police had been called to attend to a victim, upon their arrival they lamented "this probably isn't going anywhere," or addressing the victim himself "why bother us when you won't go to court anyway?" This in no way suggests that the police are entirely insensitive to the indignities suffered by victims of crime on Main Street. Most officers are sincerely appalled by the brutality which is so common to life in the area. But experience has taught them that Skid Row complainants seldom maintain long lasting cooperation with the police--life for them would be intolerable otherwise--thus in interviews they are afforded far less than the usual courtesies.

By all appearances, then, a very delicate, almost symbiotic relationship exists between Skid Row residents and the authorities--one which would become immediately subverted were significant numbers of one group to develop a real affinity for the condition of the other. This, of course, by virtue of their respective social organizations, never occurs. On the one hand, a Skid Row resident never takes the

opportunity to develop a liason with the police for fear of generating suspicion. And among members of the police department, similar sanctions exist. Officers are not allowed to remain in the area for more than six months to a year as it is feared that they might become "too close" to the people, an event which is believed might reduce their effectiveness ("sympathy inhibits objectivity" one² advised). Another officer informed the researcher that during training he was instructed to be cautious even when physically handling Skid Row people as it was believed that they were the carriers of virulent diseases and were habitually infested with lice.

5.5 Estimating Risk

The planning of a crime, even if the "planning process" is fairly immediate, involves determining the possibility of encountering two types of risk: arrest and imprisonment, and violent retaliation on the part of the victim.

Clearly, the "internal rules" of crime--which are maintained by often startling consensus--serve to minimize the risk of conviction; police on Skid Row often experience tremendous difficulty assembling witnesses for court cases. But they also tend to dissuade the authorities from actually preventing certain crimes. On a few occasions, in fact, the researcher witnessed prolonged assaults taking place in full view of on-duty police officers (mainly detectives, whose inconspicuousness reduced the imperative to intervene).

Minimizing the possibility of arrest, therefore (with the exception of murder, where the victim is not free to refrain from laying a charge) merely demands that the Skid Rower predetermine the appropriate site of a crime--the least hazardous being deep in the Skid Row culture area.

The "parameters of safety" describing Skid Row can be easily physically circumvented by non-residents except at a few locations where major thoroughfares intersect it. Wherever this occurs there exists a park (due, usually, to City Council's periodic efforts at "revitalizing" the core area) which however modest is nevertheless appealing. Though obviously intended for the benefit of passers by, these parks are also frequently: used by local residents as a place to share a social drink; frequented by panhandlers; and are the centre for fights between individuals over the ownership of liquor.

One summer, responding to complaints from the public, an employee of the provincial court and senior Winnipeg City Police official met with staff of the Main Street Project to discuss how best to eliminate these latter practices. Asked for reasons why residents tended to congregate in the parks, the staff reported: 1) that they were convenient meeting places for persons seeking a drink; and 2) that by drinking in the parks, as opposed to in alleys, one could observe the police approaching at a distance and consequently have time to finish a bottle before they arrived. (It should be noted that the police seldom "arrest" persons on Skid Row for drinking in public. More often, the contents of an offender's bottle are simply poured over top or in front of him, thus saving a great deal of inconvenience to both parties). Subsequent to that meeting, the recommendations of the police department were to increase daytime patrols in the region of the parks and encourage the arrest or removal of "public inebriates" found there.

Unlike police intervention, the risk of retaliatory violence--determined largely by the style of a crime--is not easily anticipated. Coordinating a risk-free assault, for example, of someone who you are likely to meet again requires at least some rudimentary knowledge about his fighting ability, and general size and strength of his immediate circle of friends.

As this information is not safely ascertained from experience alone--the victim possibly having accumulated supporters--assaults are often preceded by lengthy and conspicuous threats and accusations. This enables the instigator to publicly defend his violence (however contrived the explanation may be) while at the same time determining the numbers who will likely come to his victim's assistance.

Violence among the most regular residents of the area is seldom severe; one generally employs only as much force as is required to accomplish a theft. Often, by virtue of this consensus, there is no long lasting animosity between the thief and his victim (although the roles may be reversed at a later date).

Even in the case of "rolling a drunk" (robbing someone who has become unconscious drinking) there often appears an eerie observance of common courtesies. On a few occasions it was reported that persons being relieved of the contents of their wallets while sleeping were left with about two dollars--the price of a bottle of inexpensive wine. More frequently, informants reported having at some time awakened in the men's hostel to find that their new boots, left at bedside, had been "replaced" in the night with inferior pairs.

A complex determination of both the site and style of any criminal activity on Skid Row is requisite to a preassessment of the inherent dangers. The manner in which these factors work to create risk, either independently or in combination, may be illustrated in Figure 11, and in the examples which follow.

FIGURE 11

Common Skid Row Crimes and Factors in the Estimation of Risk

<p><u>Example 2</u> Risk: Violent retaliation only</p>	<p>rolling a drunk assault and robbery break and enter (private residence) minor shoplifting (small business)</p>		<p><u>Example 4</u> Risk: Violent retaliation and arrest</p> <p>assault and robbery break and enter (private residence)</p>
<p>illegal transaction no specific victim</p>	<p>bootlegging (distributing liquor or solvents) prostitution selling stolen goods</p>		<p>minor shoplifting (large dept. store: no specific victim) selling stolen goods</p>
<p><u>Example 1</u> Risk: None</p>	<p>occurring in Skid Row Area</p>	<p>occurring outside Skid Row Area</p>	<p><u>Example 3</u> Risk: Arrest</p>

Example 1: One evening, a Project worker and the researcher had occasion to overhear a late middle-aged man making arrangements with a young girl on the street to sell her a can of contact glue. As two police officers were nearby, the staff informed them of the impending transaction, and indicated that the two had relocated to a nearby alley.

By the time the police approached them, the sale had just been completed; the man was discovered to have several cans of glue in the open trunk of his car, and the girl had one can, which she was quickly attempting to conceal. It was learned later from the police, that since both the man and the girl vehemently denied the transaction, no arrest had been made.

Example 2: K, a regular Skid Row resident, announced to a number of nearby Project staff that two men had just forced entry into his home, and were presently ransacking the premises and assaulting his friend inside. The police were at once notified, and the workers returned to the house with K to intervene. On their arrival the assailants were discovered to have fled; K's friend had been badly beaten and was unconscious in one of the rooms, and most of K's belongings were either missing or destroyed.

Shortly after the police appeared and requested to interview K on the incident. Although K maintained that he was personally acquainted with the assailants, he refused to divulge their identities. "Don't worry, I'll see those guys on the street" he insisted, indicating that he would avenge their violence himself.

Example 3: G was fairly proficient at shoplifting from the local Skid Row retail outlets, and usually had little difficulty exchanging his stolen items for money. As he was well known for his talent, people in the area would often pay him in advance, requesting that certain items be stolen for them specifically.

It was learned, however, that G had recently been arrested for possession of stolen goods. Apparently he had taken a number of small kitchen appliances from a local "buy-and-sell" store, but fearing being caught by the proprietor--who had too late observed him making off with

the articles--G went somewhat out of the area, to a park near the downtown of the city, and attempted to sell them there.

Approaching several people in the park, G was unable to find a buyer, but in the course of his efforts prompted one individual to complain to the police. Unable to account for the articles, G was held in custody until the store owner could be located.

Example 4: L, who was reputed on Skid Row to have a particular inclination to violence, entered a restaurant late one evening just outside the Main Street area and ordered a meal. In the course of eating, and apparently without much provocation, he initiated an argument with one of the restaurant staff and refused to pay his bill. Shortly, a brawl ensued as the man attempted to restrain L and contact the police. L managed to break free, and exiting, proclaimed he would return with friends to continue the battle.

About two hours later, L reentered the restaurant alone, having had little success recruiting supporters. This time he was greeted by two of the restaurant's employees who were laying in wait and delivered him a considerable beating, notified the police, and had him arrested for assault and robbery.

5.6 Conclusions

It is not insignificant to both ethical and empirical concerns that the notion of crime (when pertaining to violations of established law) holds a far richer meaning for non-Skid Row residents than residents. Citizens outside the area fear Skid Row crime, considering it evidence of the encroachment and the cost of Skid Row to the larger society. Conversely, residents, though well aware of this outlook on the profession, see their crime as confined to their environs. It seems less

intrinsically evil to them than does much of the legal encroachment residents see of the larger society into theirs.

The dangers of casually admitting crime information to the domain of etic data should be obvious. Failing to be sensitive to the word's normative import it can be suggested that crime, as a specific and a priori problematic phenomenon, flourishes on Skid Row; unlike "working class citizens" Skid Row residents are unencumbered by the law in the case of fully one half of all crimes they commit (more than half, if the crime-site selection is not random); and 1 is a consequence of 2.

The assertions are not wholly incorrect, but neither are they edifying. Regarding the first, crime is indeed apparent on Skid Row. However, Skid Row residents engage in crime only as a final subsistence measure, to eat, drink, and find shelter; most will abandon crime at once if better legal opportunities avail themselves.

It is significant here that despite the clear ingenuity of residents, they rarely commit crimes which involve some capital investment, say, in burglary tools, expensive weapons, vehicles, or illicit drugs.

As to the second assertion, of the freedom of criminals on Skid Row, another disclaimer is needed. This freedom is achieved by a sort of "border policing," policing from the outside in. In the one instance, this does indeed afford residents some measure of protection. But inasmuch as the very purpose of it is to contain residents, and their supposed criminality, so does it work against them outside of Skid Row. Elsewhere, in better districts, Skid Row men are more susceptible to police contact. Appearing suspicious, they are arrested for suspicion. Appearing intoxicated they are arrested, or "hustled" off the street, for public drunkenness. Further, if they actually do commit crimes off Skid Row, the risk is enormous. They are conspicuous to all security

personnel, and are more likely to be caught stealing than, say, a department store employee. Once in the courts, their appearance as Skid Row criminals--their records, and lack of supports in the community--invariably assures them the harsher judgement.

By way of external constraints, internal freedoms, and poverty, then, the performance of criminal occupations by residents tends to be restricted to the area described by Skid Row geographic and cultural parameters. Within those boundaries, the style of distribution and consumption of criminal avails is always molded by the overriding rules of egalitarian economy. There are few 'prosperous' criminals on Skid Row. At the same time, there is no visible wealth of goods derived from the robbery of non-Skid Row residents. The crime of residents is almost always specific to the Skid Row culture area, and tends to result in a redistribution of goods to those most requiring them.

An additional consequence of the crime area demarcation is that it encourages the importation of crime to Skid Row. As a result, gang violence is regularly wreaked upon the populace by outsiders for amusement. The city's organized prostitution largely takes place here, which, though involving non-residents almost exclusively, exposes Main Street women to vicious harassment by non-resident customers.

Among all else, then, to live on Skid Row is to be incessantly victimized by crime--without recourse--to be required to commit certain crimes for subsistence, and to have a criminal record.

6.0 SOCIAL ORGANIZATION

6.1 Introduction

The title of this section is something of a misnomer. Very little social organization exists in the Skid Row of Winnipeg. There are no distinctive family structures, or at least those that appear fail to reach any specialized organization unique to Skid Row. Mostly, preexisting families disassemble, to varying degrees, when members move into the society, and reassemble on members' departure.

There are no specialists, and hence no stratification, in subsistence activities. Nor are there means of determining affiliation on the basis of less prescribed behaviours, for example, as might be expressed in drinking or travelling preferences.

As it happens, this is not an automatic consequence of egalitarianism. Elsewhere such societies are capable of producing a fairly elaborate organization by comparison, both at the level of kinship and leadership systems and professional specialties (cf. Lee 1979).

Instead, the most powerful influence was the fluidity of the population. Individuals escaped Skid Row in a variety of ways. Native residents, who were able, returned to reserves periodically. Others found full-time work, or simply relocated to different Skid Rows. A not insignificant number were "broken down," by sickness, in the arduous routine of daily life, and made their way into the social service support system.

Residents were rarely in one another's company for any significant duration, and as a result, formalized subsocietal groups of any description, were never able to congeal within the Skid Row setting. Inside

the system, for however long residents were constrained there, social networks evolved only to the limited extent to which they were 'permitted' by rules of economy. One might cultivate a small community of friends, for example, as long as one did not restrict economic exchanges to them. One might become unusually proficient at crime, but never an excessive consumer of the avails.

Rather than describe basic organization per se, which would essentially be a reiteration of observations regarding economy, this section focuses on the evidence of disorganization on Skid Row. Local beliefs about subsistence specialties are discussed, as well as some of the influence which militate against family life.

6.2 The Universal Specialization of 'Conning'

Living on Skid Row implies a fairly uniform economic, and hence social destiny. Everyone by necessity steals, works, panhandles, and seeks welfare on occasion. Thus, no one is ever identified as being especially adept at or dependent upon those professions. Further, and owing to the depth of economic adversity on Skid Row, there is an almost unearthly tolerance, even respect, for the most bizarre preferences and occupations. Simply, in this dire setting all occupations are presumed subsistence motivated. Even the greatest eccentricities are tolerated. And consistent with the impartial nature of organization, the society assigns all to a single category. If initially perplexing behaviour is evident, the Skid Row observer will merely refer to it--in presumption of explanation--as a "gaff," or specialized survival strategy.

The gaff, or "con," on Skid Row generally refers to an activity involving gross misrepresentation by the performer to a "mark," or prey, of its real nature or desired outcome. Its purpose is always

related to subsistence. Misrepresentation is the defining feature of gaffs, distinguishing them from "all crimes," for example. Of course, the latter set may incidentally intersect the former. Inciting a man to violence with invented claims of his wrongdoing, and robbing him in ostensibly justified retribution would be considered an "illegal" gaff. A mere assault and robbery in contrast, by local definition, would be illegal only (but otherwise an "honest" Skid Row labour).

Most residents of Skid Row agree that gaffs are employed frequently by nearly everyone for survival in that habitat. Few deny their own involvement, and all cite the perils of being victimized by this class of strategies. As such, gaffs figure prominently in reconnoitering, and not surprisingly, an applied knowledge of their nature (both for offence and defence) is believed a prerequisite for survival. Indeed, such knowledge equates with "street wisdom" (a common Skid Row ethnocentrism being the phrase "you can't con a con").

Most interesting is how pervasive a feature of Skid Row life residents believed gaffs were, so much that almost any behaviour--having the remotest possibility of conferring subsistence--could be counted among them. Examples of this were abundant. Quite often, in full view of an apparent suicide attempt or one exhibiting compelling signs of sickness, residents commented that "he knows what he's doing...he's just trying to get into the hospital" (interpretations used also by many social service personnel in the core area who themselves want to appear "street wise").

The actual relation of gaffs to subsistence is difficult to ascertain. Among all else, the salient differences between real and contrived self-mutilation, sickness, rage, and poverty (in the case of panhandling) seemed trivial.

The local belief in gaffs-as-subsistence, however, does aid in illustrating the undifferentiated nature of organization. Virtually all "odd" behaviours, considered gaffs, were acceptable. Women could become reputed street fighters, children prostitutes, men even transvestites without so much as appearing conspicuous let alone raising or lowering social position. All things being equal on Skid Row, no social positions exist.

Even street wisdom failed to produce stratification--appearing to operate only in 'off-on' positions. Faced with a gaff, either as an intended victim or observer, one could either be responsive and seem a mark (by others' speculation of one's compliance) or do nothing, and appear wise. (It often appears that residents consciously restrain themselves at times from intervening in such things as suicide attempts, for example, for fear of appearing foolish.)

At even the most unusual and complex of occurrences one could demonstrate absolute wisdom by merely not acting (a simple extension of the principle "don't interfere in something that isn't your affair"). Therefore, there are no gaff specialists. This may be unique to the Skid Row in question. Elsewhere, Spradley records a literal spectrum of social categories recognized by Skid Row men to denote specialty--'working stiffs,' 'airedales,' 'boxcar tramps,' and so on--all, as the author indicates, being mobility related, specifying "mode of travel, type of home base, and economic survival strategies" (1980:334).

In the Winnipeg situation avenues of economic advancement--however tenuous--stifle even the beginnings of such an organization. A resident claiming to be of a specific variety of tramp, or even a tramp per se, would appear ostentatious in front of his fellows and rather silly and intolerant of others' preferences.

Nonetheless, economic mobility suggests its own questions on the subject of organization. Being bound to Skid Row for only finite periods, some of the men reside in two different societies in their lifetimes. They live communally on Skid Row, and departing find permanent living quarters, accumulate property, even return to or assemble families.

The problem remains, then, how this effects mobility processes; to what extent does each 'class' of affiliation intersect the opposite setting, or imperil the men at inappropriate moments?

6.3 Race and Family

In view of the large Native and white populations on Skid Row, it is noteworthy that race in itself does not seem to mirror any appreciable heterogeneity in the Skid Row social organization. Virtually nowhere do there appear any special rules for segregation of differences in the behaviour of Natives and whites in this setting; all men seem willing to cooperate on tasks of the day, working, drinking, and committing crimes together without any of the tensions normally associated with racial or cultural differences. This absence of conflict may originate in the relative small size and uniform impoverishment of the population. The fact that all men on Skid Row experience similar adversities, and at some point have dealings with most others, mitigates heavily against racist policy.

Drawing on largely emic data, Brody, in his Canadian Skid Row study argues the converse, that there exists a sort of consentient racism whereby "...whites console themselves that they are better than Indians" and "Indians feel enhanced in status by sharing their way of life with whites" (1971:71).

At no point was there evidence for the assertion; in fact, more

often the very reverse seemed the case. Many whites on Skid Row give the appearance of emulating what they believe, often erroneously, to be the "traditional Indian way of life," espousing the virtues of philanthropy, stoicism, and family vendettas, and acquiring the occasional word or phrase in the Cree or Ojibwa languages. Many claim to have lived on reserves in the province, often boasting the ease with which they assimilated to the "Indian community."

Similarly, Native men rarely indicate resentment for their white fellows. Nor do they show any "enhancement" by virtue of white company, mostly being ambivalent.

Whatever evidence substantiates the claims of racism among Native men is usually derived from their perceptions of non-residents. As it happens, some whites on Skid Row do run into difficulty-- in particular, policemen, social workers, security guards, government employees, and non-resident passers-by generally. Suspicion and misunderstanding of these groups, however, are not exclusive to Natives. Whites are similar in this respect, and frequently use such terms as "straight John" to voice their prejudice.

The apparent contempt extends from a belief common to almost all residents that only they have a working knowledge and sensitivity regarding the nature of street life (a common indictment of most non-residents being "they don't know what it's like down here"). Even previous affiliation with Skid Row does not provide immunity. One who has left Skid Row, having secured permanent income, and continues to frequent the area for amusement may encounter hostility. This is most likely to occur if they depart themselves in ways contrary to normal Skid Row behaviour, for example, by refusing to make gifts of money, or failing to join in spontaneous criminal or binge activities.

Membership in the Skid Row community is the primary and indivisible marker of social affiliation. Any racism in residents is most often only an incidental expression of antipathy for "outsiders" in general.

It is possible that different conditions might advance different outcomes, for example were both groups on Skid Row sufficiently large to sustain their own disparate communities. But as it happens here, individual Skid Row residents who frequently find themselves homeless in the cold of winter, lacking a drink, or needing information pertaining to work opportunities would soon find it maladaptive to divorce themselves, by racism, from any of so small a number of potential helpers.

Despite this, it is interesting that many social workers operating in the Core Area tend to assume that there are significant social and economic differences between the Native and whites; differences believed not to originate in culture but in demographics. While only a minority in the province, Native people comprise some 74% of the population on Skid Row. Unlike whites who tend to have been all but abandoned by more prosperous friends and relatives, Native residents are not usually so disaffiliated. Many have numerous immediate kin from outside of Winnipeg--indeed, onetime whole domiciliary units--living on Skid Row itself.

Naturally, this is a matter of great concern to social service personnel, especially those responsible for disbursing funds, since it appears to them that monies intended to assist one Native person on Skid Row are distributed by the recipient to less fortunate kin.

No doubt the observation is partly bolstered by much of the literature in the social sciences, where poverty and the extended family have

been regarded mutually causative. Lacking access to guaranteed income, theory suggests, the poor rely on elaborate networks of reciprocal exchange; personal goods are pawned among neighbours and relatives, cash loaning is frequent, and so on. Thus the poor are allegedly insured against periods of economic destitution--a phenomenon Lewis described as that of the economy of the slum "turning inward" (1966:12)--but at the same time are inhibited in social and economic mobility by way of extended reciprocal obligation (Foster 1973:107).

From this, and selective observation, the privately expressed view of social workers is that the Native "family" on Skid Row, actually inhibits mobility for individual Native residents. This is not generally the case. Both Natives and whites on Skid Row are forced to suspend most of their customary family life for even the briefest periods of their residence. In fact, this is universally understood. Every resident is aware that Skid Row disassembles, indeed precludes, the family--thus no one is ever expected to behave as a "family member" in the usual sense. Special favours over and above the normal philanthropy evidenced in the group are almost never expected of kin.

Regardless, confusion on the subject of family is understandable. In some measure kin groups at least seem to congeal in the Skid Row setting. Native siblings, cousins, spouses, and so on do periodically apply for joint welfare assistance, travel, commit crimes, and work together. The event of engaging kin at random is so inevitable, in fact, that for some its absence would entail a literal pattern of kin avoidance. In addition, some will at least attempt to remain in the company of family members, sharing their support whenever possible.

Associations of this kind, however, are always undertaken within the framework of the broader subcultural system. One rarely sees a

completely independent subsocietal network of friends and family, arranged for the purpose of exclusive mutual aid. Such a group would be immediately conspicuous on Skid Row, and labelled potentially hostile, as a "gang," for its autonomy from the broader system.

In 1976 only one such gang persevered in the area. Its members, numbering about ten to fifteen young Native men, each shared a common surname and described themselves as each other's brothers and cousins. They had frequented the area for three or four years, but in their youth they had been residents in the nearby homes of older relatives.

By this time they were in early adulthood and becoming independent. They had gravitated to Skid Row almost simultaneously, working, drinking, and committing crimes together. Much of their behaviour and life circumstances suggested formal Skid Row residency. Being unskilled, and having interrupted work histories, they were largely dependent on casual labour, and frequently made use of the Salvation Army for accomodation.

What made them unique, however, was that they tended to maintain exclusive association with one another, and were either hostile or ambivalent in their dealings with other Skid Row men. They acquired a reputation for this behaviour, particularly since their crimes were always extramural, and were commonly described as being dangerous and untrustworthy. Over the course of several years, the gang dissolved. None of the members, living in the region, were immune to the forces which drew residents away from Skid Row. Some left town in search of work. Many others were jailed, from time to time, for crimes they had committed in the area (being identified as gang members, they were frequently the objects of police surveillance).

As the support network attenuated, and as this process became

increasingly known in the community, members of the gang suffered the usual stresses of pointed mistreatment and ostracism. Few, by this time, were able to make many friends. Being generally disliked for their reputations, they were frequent targets of unsolicited violence.

The case illustrated that family networks entering the region tended to persist only by virtue of the residual efforts of participants. Nothing in the nature of Skid Row society encouraged kin cohesion, or set the foundations for the development of alternative systems.

Little of the adaptive value of family life as described, for example, by Carol Stack (1974; 1980) which exists in American ghetto society was evidenced. Despite an equivalent level of poverty, the evolution of domestic networks on Skid Row was frustrated at all times by the extreme fluidity of the population.

The observation, of welfare workers in particular, that family membership on Skid Row inhibited economic mobility was thus largely erroneous. What was sometimes observed, though rarely, and likely formed the basis of the opinion, was egalitarian distribution expressed somewhat preferentially through broad-based pre-Skid Row kinship affiliations.

7.0 ALCOHOL AND WELFARE: THE MYTH OF THE SUBSIDIZED DRUNK

7.1 Introduction

Two of the most popularized features of Skid Row life are hard drinking and welfare usage. Like unlawful employment, these are among the "social problems" which many presume reflect a parasitization by Skid Row of the larger society. It is not to be denied that alcohol

and welfare figure into Skid Row social life, albeit not exclusively, and so some treatment on the subject is warranted here. But it must be noted that whole dimensions of the subject lie far outside the scope of this paper. There will be no effort, for example, to explain hard drinking on Skid Row, or somehow characterize the personality associated with its apparent destructive aspect. The intention here is to supply basic introductory information, to describe material conditions and social phenomena.

Very little is actually known about the relationship between drinking behaviour and welfare use on Skid Row, although from the outside that world seems little more than a state funded repository for alcoholics. Observation suggested that alcohol was a relatively minor feature of Skid Row daily life. "Alcoholics" did not descend onto Skid Row en masse merely to conveniently drink, nor did all social life extend from the procurement, distribution, and consumption of alcohol.

Secondly welfare was rarely an important subsidizer of drinking on Skid Row. In fact, the deliverers of welfare--being fearful of funding "indolent alcoholics"--actually denied aid to residents by virtue of a whole spectrum of behaviours only peripherally connected with drinking. The net effect was a sort of overkill in which aid was generally restricted on the basis of Skid Row citizenship.

7.2 Drinking in the Community

Virtually all Skid Row residents drink, make use of various of the alcoholism 'treatment' facilities in the city, and have in one way or another been recorded by the staff of such agencies, and therefore often by the courts, police, hospitals, and welfare departments as "alcoholic." Indeed, these standards fairly describe the population

as there are nearly no exceptions.

Almost all beverages containing alcohol appear in wide use in the population, but among those most commonly associated with Skid Row drinking are 'rubbie' (denatured ethyl alcohol) and Lysol disinfectant spray.

Diluted with water, rubbie assumes a misty appearance--the mixture being referred to as "steam"--a quality distinguishing it from the highly toxic methyl or wood alcohol sold in a deceptively similar bottle. Lysol, which has gained popularity in recent years owing to the relative ease with which it may be purchased or stolen, contains about 68% denatured ethanol (in conjunction with various toxins) and is taken in half proportions with warm water to increase its potability.

Just as outsiders consider the Skid Row drinker to be "hopelessly alcoholic," however defined, so do the people of Skid Row themselves readily admit to this status. They openly refer to themselves as "rubbies," or as members of "Lysol gangs." (Once, two dozen or so regulars signed their names below the headings 'Rubbies List' which someone had neatly pencilled onto the front outside face of the Project drop-in. As evidence of a sort of black humour, the response did show some community/behavioural affiliation.) Conversely, among those more occasional of Skid Row frequenters, most vehemently deny any such membership claiming "I never get that bad" or "I don't have to drink what 'they' drink."

By agreement of both insiders and outsiders the rubbie's general style and pattern of drinking, as well as most favoured beverage, underscores many aspects of his relative social position; only rubbies drink the substances mentioned, steal liquor to pass among friends,

or get arrested for public drunkenness.

Although the broader "causes" of drinking professed by Main Street's rubbie and Lysol users themselves are varied, the singlemost reason for drinking is that it alleviates sickness. Being habituated to a heavy pattern of daily alcohol consumption, many residents fear--and for legitimate reasons--the often horrifying effects of alcohol withdrawal. Periodically their daily routine includes locating and consuming sufficient quantities of alcohol to maintain a "safe," or withdrawal preventing state of intoxication.

Understandably, drinking on this order has deleterious consequences. Many of the more regular Skid Row residents suffer from disorders directly attributable to alcohol--gastroenteritis, cirrhosis of the liver, and so on--but few volunteer for long-term treatment. There are a number of reasons for this, but among those reported by drinkers--particularly where out-patient treatment is concerned--is their reluctance to interrupt sustained drinking. Seldom will residents request medical attention unless their particular ailment is so severe as to preclude necessary daily activities.

Most casual labourers, for example, complain occasionally of infected leg sores, a condition often treated with antibiotics over an extended period. The men are aware that such drugs can only be effective if they remain fairly sober for the duration. Consequently, they reject treatment, disposing of their prescriptions, and continue to work casually until their pain becomes debilitating. Only when the pain exceeds fear of withdrawal will the men volunteer to remain sober, often requesting, at the outset, detoxification facilities.

A notable exception to this "treatment avoidance" involves the legal procurement of pharmaceuticals which have effects similar to

alcohol. Occasionally, persons in the early stages of withdrawal will approach Project workers requesting to be sent to the hospital for "downers." Many obtain prescriptions, especially for sedatives and seizure managing drugs, and use them with alcohol to enhance the intoxication.

Outside of severe pain inducing disorders, the only other physical hazard which subordinates withdrawal fear among residents is hypothermia, a condition locally (and exaggeratedly) purported to be a common cause of death on Skid Row. Once, in fact, the researcher observed several residents actually attempting to use alcohol and withdrawal in hypothermia management. The utility of this effort was debatable, and certainly did not explain Skid Row drinking. But the case made for a point of ethnographic interest, if for no other reason than to illustrate that the imperative to survive life threatening perils on Skid Row usually overrides withdrawal avoidance. During a significant part of one whole winter the Project emergency shelter was forced to remain closed. As it happened, the closure was quite sudden, and literally hundreds of Project regulars had to adapt to its absence overnight. The outreach effort continued in this period, however, so staff were able to observe events in the inner city and aid residents with what few resources they had. Naturally, their principle concern was with those who now had to make camps outside, particularly since temperatures were well below freezing.

As staff predicted, many more Project clients than usual were sleeping outside, a number finding shelter under loading docks in the area. Interestingly, the loading dock shelter strategy was fairly common, even among novices. A spot would be located beyond pedestrian traffic to minimize the risk of surprise assault. The men would then cocoon themselves in whatever insulating material obtained, extra

clothing, cardboard, snow and ice, and without disturbing the construction deliberately drink, from a source reserved for this purpose, to the point of unconsciousness.

Inquiries were made with a number of clients about the reasoning behind this, expecting to hear that drunkenness aided in the initial sleeping. The obvious was confirmed, but clients added that equally important was the process of awakening. Each said they feared freezing to death, and that by drinking heavily at the end of the day they could be assured of being awakened by "the shakes" following a brief sleep.

Alcohol is by no means a hypothermia prophylaxis (although as a vasodilator it confers at least short-term advantage to the extremities). In this instance, however, residents maintained it facilitated a delaying arousal mechanism, a sort of adrenal alarm clock in which the imminence of withdrawal permitted a safe sleep for three or four hours.

Needless to say, very few maintained this regimen. A number of alternatives surfaced in time; many went to the men's hostel, which had become more lenient in their admission policies; owing to the closure residential alcoholism treatment facilities filled to capacity; and some even orchestrated their own arrest and imprisonment.

Despite the apparent importance of alcohol on Skid Row, drinking groups never persist or achieve stability. Persons frequently come together to pool resources, but these groups are typically eclectic in composition and loosely knit, suggesting no more commitment among members than is necessary to procure and consume alcohol at the moment. This seems their singular purpose, making them appear ancillary to Skid Row social life.

Contrary to the myth of the drunken derelict, drinking in Skid Row never interferes with other of the more subsistence related activities of the day--working, stealing, seeking welfare, and so on. Indeed, the manner in which Skid Row residents manipulate states of intoxication according to circumstance, or in anticipation of circumstance, virtually facilitates such activities, often with startling precision.

A typical daily regimen of drinking for men who stay at the Project, for example, begins with a moderate amount of alcohol to "cut the shakes" prior to heading out to the casual labour office. If a job avails itself, alcohol is almost invariably avoided for the rest of the working day. Otherwise, another drink is required in preparation for a lengthy wait in a welfare office. In the latter event, the amount of alcohol consumed must be carefully adjusted. Entering an interview either "shaky" or drunk can indicate a history of heavy drinking to a welfare worker, and consequently jeopardize the possibility of acquiring funds.

As might be expected, excessive alcohol abuse appears most frequently among the most destitute of Skid Row residents. It would be dangerous, of course, to routinely posit a casual relationship between alcohol intake and degrees of poverty. Actual amounts of alcohol consumed were virtually beyond recording, as drinking is a secretive activity. Further, sickness seemingly related to alcohol was often exacerbated by the conditions on Skid Row--poor diet, exposure due to homelessness, violence, and so on.

In any case, many residents intermittently experience a crisis in which hard drinking and commensurate destitution reach critical levels. For the victim, ill health and extreme poverty are indistinguishable at these times, each being the apparent antecedent of the

other. Ostracism from friends, a temporary absence of work, or a physical inability to perform work by virtue of any of a host of health problems precludes even the most modest provision. Accordingly, those affected will apply for help from the social services, their most pressing aim being to absent from Skid Row life at its most perilous.

For many, the assistance effort originates from the Project. First, clients are directed to the Project detoxification centre where they remain for approximately three to five days. In this time they may become acutely ill and require temporary hospitalization, but they almost always make contact with the Project subsequent to treatment.

From the detox, once withdrawal has abated, an effort is undertaken to secure them assistance for the period following discharge. The process is as variable as the client population. Some reject help, simply wishing to be "dried out" (housed for the withdrawal period) and sent back to the street; others are referred to short-term residential alcoholism treatment facilities. But among Skid Row residents in particular, most are eventually referred to welfare, their intentions being, ostensibly, to remain sober and relocate from Skid Row.

7.3 Social Welfare and the Interpretation of 'Alcoholic' Behaviour

Skid Row men describe Winnipeg's social welfare system as being one of the toughest in the country. They say that disbursements are meager; the givers punitive; and the attendant bureaucracy complex, intimidating, and insensitive to the most urgent of their needs. As a comparative observation, the astuteness of this is debatable; no doubt the same report could be found on Skid Rows elsewhere.

What is noteworthy, however, is the experience which underlies the indictment. None of the men complain that welfare in Winnipeg is stringent per se--that it forces poverty in every case. Many, in fact, rail like reactionaries against invisible recipients of the system, people they do not know but assume 'live high' exploiting the selective generosity of welfare staff. Instead, their greatest complaint extends from the treatment they feel is afforded them specifically, that by virtue of unalterable features of their lifestyle--of economic obligations, work and residence patterns, and their reputation as drinkers--they are singled out and denied aid regardless of the severity of their need.

To a significant degree, their observation was correct. Many of the men used welfare prior to their residence, and some escaped Skid Row the same way. But when living on Skid Row, doing all that was necessary for survival there, they had only the most limited access to welfare payments. It was interesting that the reality of limited access was never disputed by welfare staff. Indeed, it was agreed by both the men and the authorities, that living in Skid Row society was to not be funded by the state.

Disagreement, however, surrounded both the causes of the men's poverty and the nature and necessity of Skid Row subsistence tactics. Skid Row men felt their very identity as residents elicited ill treatment. They claimed that welfare acted arbitrarily to punish them while they were down on the hardest times. Welfare staff, in contrast, often appeared to treat the men as alcoholics before all else, interpreting their behaviour and circumstances as evidence of the "dysfunction" occasioned by destructive drinking. For their part, welfare staff saw themselves as objects of the men's conning efforts, and so refused to be "manipulated" into subsidizing the "Skid Row alcoholic lifestyle."

Welfare staff usually won the debate. Having greater power, they could simply refuse to extend funding. Oddly enough, though, there seemed to be no real malice reflected in this; in fact, denial of aid was frequently viewed as a "treatment" device, a means of effecting "desirable behavioural changes" in recipients.

Unfortunately, the distinction between malice and therapy in this case was fairly academic to Skid Row men, since many of the desirable behaviours were maladaptive in the macro setting. And so, the conflict made for a fascinating paradox. One saw, on Skid Row, evidence both of an apparently humane and well funded welfare system, and life threatening poverty.

Financial assistance in Winnipeg is delivered from two independent offices--City and Provincial Welfare--each having its own mandate and funding source. Their programs and policies are myriad, and not all relevant to the population of interest. As such, a full and formal description is not needed; only those services which affect residents will be considered.

Of the two agencies, City Welfare plays the more visible role in Skid Row life. It differs from Provincial welfare in two important respects. First, chronic work-impeding impairment is not prerequisite to establishing eligibility. In the first few contacts with City Welfare, at least, destitution alone can determine access. Secondly, it is normally temporary. For some, disbursements are permitted to cover short periods of need occasioned by unforeseen disasters--apartment fires, for example. Others may be assisted briefly, determined incapable of ever becoming self-sufficient (most often by virtue of illness or injury) and directed to long-term aid sources.

But for a certain number--and Skid Row men compose this group--

poverty is attributed to repairable inadequacies, bad habits (alcoholism, laziness, poor money management), gross deficiencies in education, and so on. Accordingly, aid is contingent on the performance of what welfare staff deem basic poverty solving behaviours. The brevity of assistance is caused either by the sustained compliance of the recipient, and successful operation of the behaviours, or apparent failure at compliance, in which event the client is "cut off," or denied further service.

Initially, none of the qualifications of City Welfare reciprocity--as they bear on this latter group--seems inherently unfair. They involve clear demonstrations of need, and very general sorts of spending related practices that have obvious application in the larger society. And as mentioned, that aid source is fairly accessible; even where fraud is suspected, at first welfare staff prefer to err on the side of applicants.

Despite its efforts, however, little of the "help" of City Welfare is ever reflected in an eradication of poverty on Skid Row. Individuals are assisted, usually sparsely and in the short term, but the overall level of impoverishment in the populace remains unvarying both in depth and prevalence.

In the main, this has nothing to do with any serious acrimony between helpers and applicants. In the course of conversations with many welfare workers over the years, the researcher was impressed with their concern for the condition of Skid Row residents generally, although interactions between the two were sometimes tenuous. Similarly, residents, when speaking away from their fellows, tended to show unusual understanding of the logic of welfare policy.

Instead, the failure of City Welfare to effect any real change on

Skid Row extends from the limitations of "client centred" aid programs; in this case, manifest in the face of the overwhelming power the egalitarian economy holds its participants.

On making application to welfare, Skid Row men enter the large pool of all persons requiring financial assistance. Appearing as destitute, and being identified as "transient single males," the first outcome of their visit is a short term (2 day-1 week) voucher to the Salvation Army Men's hostel, and a return appointment. In the interim, at the hostel all normal Skid Row economic conditions continue, and the men may or may not decide to return to welfare at the designated time. In any case, making another "first contact" at some time in the distant future, the first step is repeated. They are lodged at the hostel and told to return to speak with a social worker, presumably, about securing more substantial and longer lasting subsistence.

It was most often only the most destitute of Skid Row men (or rather, nearly all Skid Row men in their most relentless episodes of privation) who returned to the Welfare office. These were the men who were unable to find any day work or were otherwise stranded from local supports, particularly accommodation, for extended periods. Being forced to compliance by lack of options, they were enlisted into a more formal partnership with welfare, one in which--commencing with the social worker's interview--a sort of remedial effort was undertaken.

In fairness to welfare staff, this stage of the assistance process, of assessing 'clients' needs,' is often complex (notably, it is not wished to trivialize the effort by rendering too cursory a review of it). But in the case of Skid Row men, some gross similarities surface. Most obvious, staff usually acknowledge that

applicants are authentically destitute. Their observations seemed to be that "keeping the appointment" was an indicator of real need.

Beyond that, though there was a universal suspicion that this condition was in some degree voluntary. Because the men are transient, with long interrupted work histories, it appears they prefer a life of vagrancy. They have criminal records. And above all, their visibly deteriorated health suggests hard "Skid Row style" drinking (if the client is referred from the detox, the presumption is automatic).

The first time a Skid Row man applies for welfare, these factors may figure only nominally in the delivery of aid. He may initially get full or optimal service comprising a paid room (often, by virtue of cost, in the Skid Row area) and monies sufficient for two weeks' minimal provision. But subsequent appointments and periodic "home visits" by a social worker are mandatory in this case. Here, both the monitoring process and slow invariable withdrawal of service begin.

In large part, this latter event proceeds from the ideas welfare staff have of Skid Row men's unwillingness to become "self-sufficient"--in particular, regarding what appears to them their persistence at irrational behaviours--and of the scope of employment opportunities in the community. So far in the process, recipients are treated as "employable." But where the men reason that in some measure their unemployment reflects an actual lack of jobs, welfare staff do not. Staff may or may not accede to the men's interpretation as it applies to the economic situation. Nevertheless, their view is that sustained unemployment is more likely the result of indolence, or lack of "life skills" (techniques of exploiting opportunity). In consequence, the nature of welfare's work is to militate against poverty inducing lifestyles, using the threat of suspension as leverage, and, if all goes well, to supply provision in the interim preceding the "invariable"

job prospect. The idea is to withdraw service, in a deliberate and systematic way, with each bit of evidence suggesting "misuse" of funds. At worst, policy dictates the "cutting off" process, a hard teaching strategy intended to simulate "real world" economic life, or life without welfare. Welfare social workers refer to this as "crisis precipitation."

Not surprisingly, crises of the sort which are built into the aid system abound in the relationship between residents and welfare authorities. Having "full service," an apartment and money, the recipient on Skid Row is compelled to distribute, as he would in the case of any other windfall. Typically, the money is gone in a matter of days in binge episodes.

Again being destitute, he has few options. He may work, but welfare will demand reimbursement of all sums greater than \$50 earned during a single month of aid. (Due to a connection between City Welfare and The Unemployment Insurance Commission, income information is difficult to conceal.) Failing to report outside earnings, the recipient risks being cut off for reasons of fraud.

He may return to welfare, requesting "duplicate assistance" (aid allotted for the same period) but if staff glean that the need resulted from binging, at best food vouchers will be issued in lieu of currency. These are quickly converted (sold at half value to friends, or the grocers authorized to receive them) or used to make food purchases. But in any case they are shared in the usual way. In the meantime, the apartment has invariably lodged a host of other less fortunate residents, often, at the peril of the chief tenant's eviction. More money may be lost to welfare as a result. Damage deposits may be withheld by landlords, sometimes indiscriminately, and alternative accommodation must be paid for.

By this stage, the social worker can only decide that the recipient is inherently incapable of managing money. At the very least, there is a presumption of his alcoholism, as all evidence suggests his preference for binging over normal subsistence practices. There are few useful options in the delivery of service. The recipient may be referred to alcoholism treatment programs. But "success," as it is usually measured, rarely materializes. Either he drops out, opting for survival on Skid Row, or completes a program with little change evidenced in subsequent spending or drinking behaviour.

More often than not, if the recipient is not denied aid altogether, the "crisis" welfare precipitates is to reintroduce step one--to lodge him at the hostel. This becomes a more or less permanent condition, as any improvement in circumstances now depends on him. Each time he reports to the worker for renewal of the Salvation Army voucher, there must be signs of progress, in appearance, deportment, or records of voluntary treatment (usually alcoholics anonymous) attendance, before anything more substantial can be considered.

Predictably, improvement rarely occurs. As a result, in the experience of Project workers, most users of the Project shelter and detox are not welfare recipients. Most will have abandoned efforts to comply with welfare's policies, and instead will only "hit up their workers" for the odd few nights' shelter at the hostel.

The use of City Welfare by Skid Row men is less than might be expected in light of their poverty. The men might make relatively extensive contact with welfare authorities, but few get full service more than once or twice per year, and then, only for a month or less at a time. Worse, by virtue of accumulated reputation, the longer they stay in Skid Row society, the less likely they will get any help at all.

According to Skid Row men, the Provincial Welfare office is superior of the two welfare sources. Funding here is moderately better and it is most often secure since recipients first need to be assessed by outside agencies (usually City Welfare) as incapable of working.

Justification for the assessments are varied, but almost always extend from some manner of chronic work-impeding debility. Clinically treatable conditions or circumstances external to the individual are not considered. Transient illness, for example, does not normally figure into an assessment. Nor does a paucity of jobs requiring no skills (particularly where young to middle-aged men are concerned). Only a demonstrable inability to perform work, most often for reasons of impaired physical or mental status, is acceptable.

As far as Provincial Welfare bears on Skid Row ecology, two factors are most relevant. First, it is not easily procured. The men rarely bother to "con" their way into eligibility as they know the assessment process, which frequently includes thorough medical examinations, is decidedly rigorous. Secondly, once "on" Provincial, one is assured some measure of financial security in the long-term.

Owing to the selectivity of the program, most Skid Row residents are unaffected by Provincial Welfare. The majority see alternative avenues of mobility as more practicable. Still, Provincial support is not without its influence on the local scene. It accounts for the paucity of women on Skid Row since child rearing is considered a fundable enterprise. And for a few others who, for any of a number of reasons, remain on Skid Row for extended periods, it becomes a sort of pension for longtime service to poverty.

Here, in the latter case, there is a critical duration of residence

threshold on Skid Row beyond which deteriorating health ceases to be an area of high concern. During the research residents were not observed actively instigating illness or injury to become eligible, but among certain chronically ill detox clients, especially, a distinctly laissez-faire attitude about health was sometimes evidenced. In extreme cases, clients refused to be compliant with simple treatment regimens where, say, an infection to an appendage threatened gangrene and amputation.

Two such clients (on separate occasions: a middle-aged Native man and woman, unrelated) cited the practical impediments to convalescence on Skid Row and the relative advantage of serious illness. Neither actually expressed intentional self-destruction. But in each case, the individuals made ironic references to their condition, stating "I'd be better off dead anyway" or "at least they take care of cripples."

This pointed to their despair, as they had both lived in serious poverty for years. But more important, their statements underscored the idea that Skid Row was the lowest economic stratum--downward mobility was impossible. According to both, even the simplest outpatient treatment regimen was beyond implementing. Each received temporary City Welfare assistance through housing, special diet allowances, and medication. But having only short-term access, they were vulnerable to all the rules of community distribution. As the medico-social service expectation was that each would recover and return to their former way of life, neither could safely deny friends food, shelter, even prescription drugs (particularly analgesics).

In each case, the individuals persisted in irrational behaviours, ignoring all of their physician's instructions. Neither attended regular follow-up examinations, and both lost temporary welfare-funded

accommodations for permitting overoccupancy and incessant partying by homeless friends. In the case of the man, incapacitating pain from a literally gangrenous leg forced compliance with treatment. A lengthy hospital admission made for secure and private shelter--once treated, he lived on Provincial Welfare for a brief period and finally returned to his home reserve.

At this writing, the woman mentioned continues in apparent self-destruction. Following treatment to a complex ankle injury, her failure to get rest, abstain from drinking, and follow prescriptions resulted in severe surface infection and osteomyelitis; her physicians predict an otherwise needless amputation. Despite all evidence of mental soundness on her part, she keeps no permanent address, drinks heavily, and is a frequent user of both the Project emergency shelter and detox.

8.0 CONCLUSION

For most of those who are only distantly acquainted with Winnipeg's Skid Row, and even for some fairly close acquaintances, a discussion about that world will invariably centre on the myriad social problems which are presumed to exude from it like virulent infection. Most people have a fascination with Skid Row's more Dionysian aspect, with crime and violence, and the abandonment of convention--all those things which are at best improbable in mainstream society. There is also fear, both about the possibility that Skid Row might somehow be able to export itself into the larger society, especially in the way of crime, and of the tenuousness of one's own affluence. Skid Row is, if nothing else, a reminder of the hideousness of poverty.

The idea that social problems can be described as discrete and

tangible products of social life, of course, has no quantifiable basis in social science. Or at least, all that may rightfully be said by anthropological fieldworkers is that these are social phenomena about which some pejorative decisions have been made by significant numbers of non-participants.

Accordingly, this paper has not addressed itself heavily to the subject of social problems, even though Skid Row residents themselves may maintain they are the authors of them. As was noted, Skid Row men are more inclined to describe themselves as inferior members of society in general than as contributing and positioned members of their own.

Instead, the intention here was to supply basic ecological and ethnographic data, and, in whatever limited way, the beginnings of a framework onto which the behaviours of Skid Row men might appear as rational, creative, and adaptive.

Initially, this required an understanding of the relationship between Skid Row men and the immediate business community. Being unskilled, the men were largely dependent on casual labour. On a daily basis they competed for scant jobs, and if successful earned only modest salaries doled out in daily installments. Having only small amounts of savings, they were then circumscribed within a network of businesses in the area which specialized in providing daily parcels of the necessities of life. As a rule, the price of goods and services was attuned to daily income so that few of the men were ever able to amass capital. Combined with the infrequency of work, which caused many to be periodically homeless, this made Skid Row residents secondarily dependent on the goodwill of their fellows.

Egalitarianism was, as a result, widely prevalent in the society

since no other investment beyond a reputation for generosity was achievable. In fact, given the dire consequences of destitution, it was socially unacceptable to be conspicuously wealthier than anyone else. Where consentient egalitarianism failed, intramural crime restored the balance. Sanctions against the acquisition of personal property vastly exceeded any normal inhibitions at thievery. One might either share, or as easily be robbed. In either case, surplus was likely to flow in the direction of the most destitute.

A second major influence on the pattern of social life was the fluidity of the population. Only very few were compelled to remain on Skid Row at all times over the years. An immediate consequence of this was that support networks, arranged for mutual and exclusive aid, never evolved in the society. The smallest social unit, outside of only the most tenuous and informal unions, was always the Skid Row membership itself.

An unfortunate limiting factor inherent in the application of ethnographic strategies, in this case, was the need to at all times restrict observations to the population of interest. The focus of the study was always Skid Row, and thus it was difficult to see and record many of the forces which acted on the men outside the society. Using ethnography, it was possible to glean some information as to why informants acted, for, at least, the duration of their informant status. But at the same time the fundamental questions regarding what predisposed Skid Row membership, what successfully extinguished it, and what place Skid Row had in the larger society had to remain unanswered. Notably, simply dismissing the notion of social problems did not conceal my informants' suffering, or belie the expense of Skid Row to the larger society.

Still, from merely the inside, it was possible to see some basic

areas that demanded change. First, it was clear that external intervention was required in the structure of Skid Row economy. There was, for example, an obvious need for more jobs.

Less obvious was the need to stabilize the men's modest incomes. Skid Row men were never able to provide themselves with insurance against imminent homelessness; their dependence on area businesses precluded it. Worse, given what was likely an evolution in the business sector towards the maximum exploitation of the men, extricating oneself from the problem was not a matter of making more money. The problem was always the uneven nature of income. Casual labour and welfare disbursements were sporadic, and as these were the primary sources of income, planning for future needs was extremely difficult.

Apart from major structural intervention, there is, of course, an ongoing demand for basic support services. A free emergency shelter will always be heavily utilized in the area. Further, crisis intervention and advocacy services will also always be needed. The extent to which Skid Row is incapable of producing complex social organization demands this. As long as the population is fluid, the people of Skid Row will never actively protest their circumstances.

On the matter of strategies for facilitating the men's social readjustment, this paper can supply few suggestions. If any recommendations might be made on the subject, however, it would be that researchers should exercise great caution when making presumptions about the tenacity of Skid Row culture. As it is, one cannot help but observe what radical change is sometimes evidenced in the world view of Skid Row habitues on even the smallest measure of improvement to their material conditions.

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