

Archeology of homelessness

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No matter what you see in the movies, archaeology isn't really about finding ancient temples or golden idols. It's about the day-to-day "stuff"—the material culture—of people's lives. It doesn't even have to be ancient, as a study of homeless peoples' stuff in Indianapolis is showing. Instead of being an exotic field, archaeology may even help the homeless to live better lives.

Larry J. Zimmerman, Ph.D., an Indiana University–Purdue University Indianapolis professor of anthropology and museum studies at the School of Liberal Arts and Jessica Welch, an IUPUI student and a formerly homeless woman, have completed a unique study of the material culture of the homeless. The researchers discovered that the problem of homelessness is broader and much more complex than previously thought.

They presented their findings this summer at the World Archeological Congress in Dublin, Ireland. Results of the study are to be published early next year in the peer-reviewed journal *Historical Archeology*.

Archeological perspectives on the production, use and disposition of material culture – clothing, utensils and other "stuff" that helps people to survive can provide insight into lives. Homeless people, often invisible to those around them, have, use and dispose of material culture as they move across the landscape. But because people are homeless, many Americans think they lack material culture.

"Archeology can help in the way a story is told, can raise issues of social

justice and can inform the public and policy makers," said Zimmerman. "This study of the material culture of the homeless is preliminary in every way, but we believe that it shows the utility of applying archeological methods to help understand a contemporary social problem. Archeology can be a tool for making decisions, not just for understanding the past."

Past anthropological studies of the homeless have been mostly ethnographic – focusing on everything from HIV/AIDS to drug use or job training– and primarily have been done in the controlled settings of shelters. Yet, according to Zimmerman, most homeless individuals, especially men, live most of their lives outside of shelters, and we know almost nothing about it. This is the first study to use the tools and techniques of archeology to understand the broader environment and activities of the homeless. "We tend to see the homeless as a small extension of our lives but they are not; this is almost a different culture," said Zimmerman.

It's different because priorities change when finding food and having a place to sleep are your top concerns. Many people in the mainstream culture are closer to slipping into homelessness than they realize," said study co-author Jessica Welch, an IUPUI student who was herself homeless, living under trees and squatting in abandoned houses in Long Beach, Calif., in the early 1990s. Welch recently completed a bachelor's degree in psychology and anthropology this and plans to go into public service working with the homeless.

"You develop coping mechanisms – a fight or flight response - when you are homeless that are probably not appropriate in mainstream culture. You get increasingly defensive and desperate. This is just one of the many things that make it difficult for homeless people to re-enter 'normal society. We have to understand that a goal of simply creating more affordable housing units is not enough; we need a complete social

safety net, including better treatment and counseling options, and plenty of compassion and understanding on the part of the community," she said.

For this study, Zimmerman and Welch focused on sites near downtown Indianapolis where homeless sought outdoor shelter. They avoided direct interaction with the homeless so as not to interfere with the lives of this vulnerable population. They did not open homeless "caches," often sealed black trash bags partly hidden in out of the way places, in which homeless individuals store items they wish to keep or have access to in the future.

They located camps – many of them in use for long periods of time – where the homeless found or created shelter. They photographed these sites and conducted inventories of what the homeless threw away or left behind when they were away from the camp. They looked for patterns or clusters of certain types of materials such as clothing, shoes, food, cardboard laid out as furniture, or tarps providing shelter.

"We always kept in mind that these sites were peoples' homes and we respected them. They already have difficult lives and we did not want to make them more difficult," said Welch.

Some of their findings and even what they did not find surprised them.

"We found a large number of food cans. Most had been opened, often not very successfully, with knives or by banging them against rocks or even by heating them until the contents exploded. We rarely found cans that had been opened by a can opener. That made us realize that they didn't have can openers, which must have been very frustrating to them," said Zimmerman.

"We also found a lot of hotel-size bottles of shampoo and conditioner, deodorant and toothpaste. Only the toothpaste was used. This tells us that giving things like shampoo and conditioner to individuals without access

to water doesn't make sense. It would be better to send these kinds of things to shelters and not distribute them to people living on the streets. When we try to deliver aid to the homeless we tend to give them what we think they need. A much better way to deliver aid is to target what they actually need, and our work on the material culture of the homeless may help us find out what that really is," said Zimmerman.

According to Zimmerman and Welch, their study provides evidence that some homeless survive well, occasionally living in organized camps. "This work is an odd reaffirmation of how adaptable our species is. As an anthropologist I know this, but it's good to have it reaffirmed," said Zimmerman.

Source: Indiana University

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