Why some workers are opting to live in their vans
9 November 2020, by Scott B. Rankin, Angus J Duff

A growing number of people are redefining what "home" looks like. For many of them, it looks like a van.

The trend to #vanlife is fuelled by the declining affordability of homes, rental shortages in urban centers and resort communities, and by a shift in our definition of "community" from physical neighborhood to online social networks.

Judging from our research, there are very different understandings of this choice of residence depending on which side of the steering wheel you're on. But understanding the experiences of van dwellers is important not just for those looking to cut their ties to rents and mortgages, but also for community planners and employers.

As organization scholars, we believe understanding the shifting definition of home in the work-life balance equation is important. Most research on work-life balance focuses on finding ways to fit work into our homes and lives. That includes by either changing the way work is done or by providing programs such as daycare, eldercare or telecommuting that help workers better fit their work into their homes.

But these adaptations aren't available for many workers. Construction work can't take place on a Zoom call and flexible schedules don't work well when you're a bus driver. And many companies, for many reasons, are unwilling to invest in the programs that make work more flexible.

Redefining homes

Our research, based on interviews of working people who live in vans, finds that some workers are redefining their homes rather than relying on employers to redefine their work. They're enabled by the social media movement #vanlife that provides tips on refitting vehicles with beds, baths and kitchens, on friendly (and unfriendly) places to park overnight and a thriving community of #vanlife commodities. The people known as vanlifers reject traditional notions of home ownership and take their residence on the road.

This may sound like mobile home vacationers, but the vanlife phenomenon is not about vacationing. Rather, it's a choice that people with jobs are making, especially in high-cost markets like Vancouver, San Francisco and Seattle.
From the point of view of communities and homeowners, van dwellers **occupy a category of homelessness**. In the winter of 2019, the resort town of Canmore, Alta., **grappled with the growing number of vans parking in community centers and shopping mall parking lots**. Local residents complained of noise, mess and the use of recreation center facilities by the van dwellers.

There have been similar stories in Canada, including in **Vancouver**, **Victoria** and **Squamish**, B.C.

Local news narratives tend to paint the van dwellers as a transient group squatting on public space. These are valid concerns for communities, but the communities that complain about non-standard living arrangements are often dependent on the low-wage workers who tend to populate them and provide them with the goods and services they need.

**Made a different choice**

We set out to understand the van dweller lifestyle from their perspective and found several common themes. First, van dwellers categorically reject the homeless label. Many respondents made clear they'd simply made a different choice than most when it comes to how they live.

They see van dwelling as a source of freedom from mortgages, rent, utilities and the possessions that come with traditional dwelling places.

One respondent, a club disc jockey, told us that as a renter, he needed to work more than two weeks every month just to pay his rent. In a van, he says, he has extra time and money to live a lifestyle he otherwise could not afford.

A construction worker lived in a van so that he could take half the year off for recreational travel, something that owning or renting would make unaffordable for him.

In addition to financial freedom, van dwellers told us it gave them more career freedom, opening up opportunities they couldn't otherwise have taken.

A warehouse worker from California relocated to Washington to take advantage of higher wages. An on-call schoolteacher in Vancouver could take different assignments without suffering two-hour commutes. Instead, he moved his home/van in the evening when traffic was light.

**Harmony**

Finally, van dwellers extolled the harmony between work demands and their lives. They consistently told us they could enjoy their lifestyle regardless of work locations and schedules that would be challenging for many. Like the schoolteacher, a bus driver who works out of three depots scattered across B.C.’s lower mainland talked of how her living arrangements eliminated the stress by ridding her of the morning commute.

Van dwellers did report some negatives.

Some found the chore of finding parking places where they weren't targets for ticketing or community frustration to be an ongoing challenge. Others felt their workplaces might stigmatize their choice, requiring them to hide their lifestyle in fear of harming their or their employer's reputation.
On the whole, though, van dwellers rejected typical notions of home.

Just as vanlifers have reimagined the definition of home, perhaps it's time for society and employers to reimagine where workers live. For employers, van living may provide access to workers, particularly in high-cost housing markets or tight employment markets.

Providing basic services such as showers or parking spots with power sources, ensuring employees are not discriminated against based on how they've chosen to live or simply acknowledging that someone's choice of residence is no threat to anyone's livelihood may create better outcomes for van dwellers, their employers and the communities where they work.

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