

Kristina E. Gibson (2011)

***Street Kids – Homeless Youth, Outreach and the Policing of New York’s Streets.***

New York: New York University Press, pp.247, \$24.00

For those interested in youth homelessness either from the perspective of research or practice *Street Kids*, a new book by urban geographer Kristina Gibbs, is a welcome addition to the literature. In this book Gibbs presents a detailed ethnographic description and analysis of the lives of young people who are homeless in New York City. She also explores features of the response to youth homelessness, including an in depth focus on street outreach as a practice, and conversely, on the policing of youth homelessness as a revanchist practice

One of the strengths of this book is Gibbs’ effort to historically ground her ethnography and analysis. Discussions of homelessness – the conditions that give rise to it and the response – are often ahistorical, or engage in an analysis that frames the problem in terms of contemporary or recent historical trends. Gibbs reminds us that while neoliberalism, for instance, may shape particular features of homelessness and our response to the problem – the use of policing for instance – it must also be understood that there are deeper historical roots that contribute to how we frame the problem, and most notably, how it is experienced by the young people she has engaged and worked with.

Her analysis of youth homelessness and its relation to ‘the streets’ is thoughtful and engaging. As with many contemporary urban geographers, Gibbs is concerned with the space of the streets, and in this case how young people both construct a sense of self while homeless, but also how those spaces are also constructed and governed externally, and how these forces are continually enacted upon young people who are engaged in street life either because they are absolutely homeless (of the streets), or are housed, but participate in street youth culture (on the streets). She also suggests that street youth are “sandwiched between two powerful social ideologies – the Street (a subjective place laden with concepts of democracy, civil society, danger, romance, chaos and social order) and Youth (a subjective position encompassing social understandings of innocence, development, freedom, competencies, potential, hope and fear)” (p.26). This is crucially important, and a key reminder to those involved in

research, practice or policy that our understanding of, and responses to youth homelessness, must necessarily and always be cognizant of how social frames regarding youth (adolescence and young adulthood), and in the context of homelessness produce unique experiences for young people, and therefore require different solutions. Too often our response to youth homelessness takes the adult system (emergency shelters, day programs, soup kitchens, outreach), and creates “adult homelessness light”; a watered down, age specific version of essentially the same services and approaches, perhaps with an added dose of concern about young people’s penchant for delinquency, moodiness and irrationality.

In thinking about these social frames, Gibbs offers an interesting and thoughtful historical account of youth homelessness in the US. Here she bridges some of the research on the invention of adolescence (ground well covered by researchers such as Nancy Lesko), with a historical account of youth homelessness. The three eras she offers as key to framing paradigms – 1) Immigrant Youth and the Child Saver’s movement, 2) Youth Development, Delinquency and Subcultures, and 3) Street Kids and Youth Geographies, provide a colourful and nuanced account of how cultural norms and trends, research findings and social work practice have evolved steadily from the early days of concern about working class “street Arabs” to the present. This history is interesting, and is also an important reminder that as paradigms, these social frames do not simply go away, or be replaced by the next one, but in many ways are sustained and incorporated in present day thinking and practices. The whole historical discussion provides an important touchstone for understanding what we (and others) do regarding youth homelessness and street culture, and how history frames how we think about such young people and the spaces that we occupy.

While situating youth homelessness within an analysis of geographies of exclusion is an important contribution of this book, it is the ethnographic description and analysis of street outreach as a philosophy and practice that is the core of this work. It is significant, for in spite of the widespread use of street outreach as a way of engaging homeless persons who are not connected to agencies or services, it is an activity that has drawn very little attention from researchers over the years. As with her discussion of youth homelessness, Gibbs provides a thoughtful historical analysis of street outreach, and the social and cultural frames and practices that underlie this work. She seeks to make sense of how neoliberal shifts underlie the ‘outsourcing’ of this important work largely to charitable (and religious) service providers, and the implications this has on the practice. Lack of funding, the heavy use of volunteers, inadequate training, and challenging working conditions mean that workforce retention is problematic, which undermines the knowledge-base that supports effective street outreach practice.

She also explores the actual practice of street outreach in a very nuanced way. That Gibbs herself participated in street outreach for several years strengthens her perspective, and makes her participant-observation ethnographic account that much richer. As a Geographer, she is aware of the spatial dimension to this work, and how the work of outreach staff is both a response to the social production of the 'streets' not only by street youth, the police, but also by outreach workers as well. Her description of doing street outreach, augmented by quotes by colleagues, provides a rich and nuanced description of the work. Much time is spent exploring this practice, and beyond mere description; this allows for a more careful explication of her analysis of the work.

The theoretical framing of all of this is important, although sometimes there is a sense that this aspect should be more focused. While relevant theoretical perspectives drawn from urban geography are presented, other theoretical perspectives (and theorists) are brought to bear with much less success. Foucault is mentioned briefly, as are another theorists, in ways that may demonstrate the breadth of reading that went in to this work, but do not move the discussion forward in a strong way. Likewise, the discussion of Judith Butler does not necessarily add to the analysis of outreach as performance, and represents a missed opportunity, for an analysis of the gendered nature of the streets, and the very important question of how homeless youth 'perform' their gender(s) is not adequately explored.

The final key theme of this book is to explore the policing of youth homelessness, and its impact on the young people involved, and how the streets as a 'space' are constituted. There is a growing body of work on the criminalization of homelessness, and Gibbs makes an important contribution to this literature. She takes the reader through the impact of Wilson and Kelling's "Broken Windows" philosophy of policing and on what happened in the transformation of New York (Manhattan). This philosophy was adopted and implemented in a most robust – and one could argue, uncritical – way in New York, with full support of the Mayor and Chief of Police William Bratton, to rid the streets of crime and 'disorderly' people, including the homeless. Lest we think that Broken Windows policing is merely a manifestation of neoliberalism, Gibbs reminds us once again of the historical roots of current punitive practices to address poverty and homelessness. The streets have always been contested as 'public spaces', and social norm theory has long had an influence on how we govern such spaces in light of perceived threats by marginalized populations seen to be delinquent or operating in ways counter to 'dominant' social norms.

A key point of all this is that the heavy handed criminalization of homelessness through new laws, through existing practices (arrests for minor offences), and through regular harassment and "stop and search's" – practices for which there is no official record – have had a huge impact on the lives of homeless youth. First,

the efforts to eradicate money making practices such as panhandling (begging) and soliciting funds from transit users, as well as curtailing the use of spaces such as parks, streets and public transit, has had the effect of pushing homeless youth into other activities to earn money, and also displacing them from many key areas of Manhattan. The second major impact has been a shift in the culture of youth homelessness. It can be argued that if it is the persistent visibility of homelessness that produces a law enforcement response, it is the persistent policing of people who are homeless that renders them invisible. Gibbs explores how street youth now very proactively dress and behave in ways that do not identify themselves as homeless. She also relates how the need to be less visible also creates challenges for street outreach, in that it becomes harder and harder to identify homeless youth, and at the same time, many youth in these circumstances may seek to avoid outreach workers altogether, in order to avoid having such an interaction contribute to a very public identification of their homelessness.

All of this leads to some major questions, which Gibbs begins to explore. In light of the impact of revanchist policing on street youth, what does this really mean for street outreach in the future? She has some thoughts on this, but perhaps because of her closeness to the field, she avoids addressing some of the really big questions. For instance, as youth homelessness becomes less visible, what new tactics and strategies are needed? In many cities, including New York, young people who are homeless are being pushed more and more to marginal and distant areas, and those that remain in gentrifying downtown cores are more difficult to identify. How can street outreach, as a practice, adapt? A second consideration is to address the challenges and opportunities that technology has and will have on outreach? She remarks that web-based technology has completely transformed the sex trade and drug dealing, for instance, bringing these activities indoors and underground, out of the view of the police, the public, and most certainly street outreach workers. This presents real challenges for those wishing to make connections with young people and to help reduce their exploitation. If technology has become part of the problem in this case, does it also offer any solutions? Where do we go from here? All of this suggests a need to reconsider the role of street outreach. Is the process of street outreach a means to an end, or an end in itself? While she does explore various points of view as to why we should support street outreach in the end one is not left with a solid justification for the practice. Helping young people make connections with adults is important on one level, but to what end, especially if those adults are poorly trained, and may carry with them their own ideological baggage? How does street outreach contribute to moving young people forward in their lives? More discussion would be helpful here.

Overall, taken as a whole, this is an excellent book that makes an important contribution to the literatures on youth homelessness, urban geography, street outreach and the criminalization of homelessness. Gibbs is a very strong writer who is able to use her narrative skills to bring the content alive, so that we can understand the experience of youth homelessness and street outreach in a very visceral way. Though at times the content is a bit repetitive and in need of editing (for instance, a story about approaching a sleeping girl appears twice), the book is engaging and easy to read. The book is very informative and should be of interest not only to students and researchers, but also to policy makers and those who work with homeless youth. Though the focus is on New York City, its applicability is broad, and could inform thinking in a number of national and local contexts. We need more books on homelessness such as this.

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