

# Research on the homeless population: the particular utility of case study methodology

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## ABSTRACT

This paper describes a research study that uses the case study method to build theory concerning the lived experience context of destitute individuals who reside in homeless shelters, and the homeless shelter built environment's potential influence on resident satisfaction and recovery. In so doing, this presentation identifies the potentially unique suitability of case study methodology for inquiry with the homeless population.

**Keywords:** Case study method, Homelessness, Homeless families, Homeless shelters, Interior design, Environmental behavior, Pattern matching.

## 1. CONTEXT

This study's ultimate goal was to generate theory regarding the often under-addressed aspect of the applied translation and testing of psychological theory within tangible built space. Specifically, the study explored the potential for supportive architecture to counter adverse effects associated with the sense of helplessness that often accompanies homeless persons, hindering their ability to find permanent employment and domicile. It springs from existing homeless shelter conditions that are often crowded, lack privacy and may suppress the sense of personal control that can aggravate pre-existing feelings of hopelessness. See Figure 1. The study altered a homeless shelter bedroom, adding personal control features such as personal fans, radios and bed draperies. See Figure 2. The researcher then interviewed the resident (a single mother with two children) about her experience with the room, and her perceptions of the

room's usefulness and emotional qualities. A second mother with two children who resided in an unaltered bedroom was also queried, using a case study pattern matching tactic.



*Figure 1.* A typical bedroom for a family of four living in a homeless shelter. Length of occupancy can range from 3 months to a year.

## 2. CASE STUDY METHOD FOR HOMELESSNESS INQUIRY

Case study method and its qualitative approaches may be particularly suited to understanding perceptions and influences affecting homeless persons for a variety of reasons. Indeed, a number of researchers have selected case study methods for their studies in this arena [3][2]. First, case study method is suited to explore a "contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident" [6, p. 13].



*Figure 2.* The improved family bedroom within a shelter used in the study. The added privacy drapery, shelving, bulletin boards, marker board, personal fan, clock radio and personal lighting are shown.

In the case of this study, for example, it is difficult to untangle specific aspects of human-built space effects from many possible variables. That is, there may be many reasons why homeless persons do not feel empowered that do not involve the built environment. The question here, however, was whether an altered shelter personal environment can be assistive toward empowerment while allowing other factors to simultaneously exist. This speaks to the heart of architectural inquiry and theory building that holds inseparable the complexity of the human contextual relationship to inhabited built space. Simultaneously, examining the ‘squishy’ contextual factors of homeless persons’ experience echoes homeless experts’ stated need for a broader, ecological perspective in research methodologies and questions that can “consider both social and other contextual factors, in addition to individual vulnerabilities, when developing interventions” [5, p. 129]. Conversely, an experimental research approach for this project would have been difficult in its management of the many potential variables at play.

Secondly, researchers generally agree that compromised populations such as the homeless are prone to alter their responses in research study data collection, as these persons may sense their access to programs and services may be adversely affected unless they answer in a way that may satisfy researchers. This issue can manifest itself as misinformation, evasions, outright lies or fronts [1]. Thus, case study’s allowance for mixed methods that encourage cross-check triangulation can facilitate “a crucial combination of the cooperative and investigative methods” [1, p. 56]. This study triangulated its data gathering methods through quantitative and qualitative questionnaire, observation, environmental photography and interview.

Third, case study methods permit a focus on literature-supported *a priori* research questions of an exploratory nature that may lead to the development of foundational theory. As previous literature on the impacts of personal environmental control features specifically in shelter environments is scarce, this study’s case study method permitted and in fact encouraged findings that could not have been anticipated, and that emerged naturally from its inquiry. These findings potentially proved to be among the most important of the study.

Fourth, there are many different subgroups within the homeless population that can vary widely in their perceptions, concerns and needs. Indeed, the umbrella term “the homeless” includes such disparate categories as families with children, destitute veterans and AIDS survivors [4]. Case study methods’ specific approaches can help address unique circumstances, teasing out specific discovery with finesse. In actuality, the ability to detect specific needs of niche user groups is precisely what is required in homelessness research at present. Uncovering this differentiated information can both help improve the services offered to the various groups of homeless individuals and also determine if the causes of homelessness are changing over time [4].

Lastly, applied inquiry that explores what happens when built space is constructed and inhabited is inherently expensive -- and naturally limits the study’s sample size that can be observed and queried. For example, this study required \$8000 of construction funds to install 20 new features such

as built in shelving, lighting, personal fans, radios and enhanced storage within a single homeless shelter family bedroom. This financial state of affairs supports case study methods that often limit and celebrate the advantage of single or small sample sizes that can be feasibly studied within these limited-scope facilities.

### 3. STUDY CONCLUSIONS

The homeless shelter research study described here facilitated a number of emergent conclusions, and some of the most important of these were not anticipated at the outset. This helped established theory that might be pursued further in later studies that would serve to validate them appropriately:

- Crowded, low-control family bedrooms in the transitional shelter can compel teenage children to spend as much time as possible away from the shelter campus. This is likely not conducive to healing, but rather to scattering of the family, and with it the potential for unfavorable outside influences that may impede children's positive development.
- Parents reported that their children misbehaved more in the unaltered shelter bedroom than in the altered room with the added personal control features. This suggests that such features may stimulate and engage children more fully, providing further interest that is beneficial to their mental growth. See Figure 3.
- The altered bedroom reportedly provided the single parent with the means to exert enhanced authoritative control over her children, primarily through her ability to withhold 'fun' privileges within the room. The mother's sense of control over her near environment may have served to enhance her sense of personal empowerment at a time when parents often feel ashamed of their circumstances with regard to their children.
- The mother and children in the altered room exhibited territorial behavior such as space claiming and boundary setting whereas the family in the unaltered room did not. Researchers suggest that territorial behavior is linked to a sense of personal control and is thus a positive quality. See Figure 4.



*Figure 3.* A child living in the study's unimproved bedroom reportedly got into trouble more often, potentially because there were fewer acceptable opportunities for stimulation than in the altered bedroom.



*Figure 4.* Example of territorial behavior shown by a child inhabiting the study's altered bedroom.

In summation, this research study, aided through its use of case study methodology, revealed potentially key points for homeless shelter environments and links between built space and sense of personal control. Further follow up of these ideas may lead to guidelines for future shelters that provide enhanced comfort to homeless persons at a time of particular crisis in their lives. In short, it made sense to start with small samples to determine potential foundation-level theory that case study makes possible, then build on these initial findings through subsequent studies. The flexibility and usefulness of the case study method was central to the study's outcomes, and more broadly for investigation of issues concerning this compromised population.

#### 4. REFERENCES

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