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Stories of home and homelessness: young men's experiences of Jo'burg city centre

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Abstract: Stories of home and homelessness: Young men's experiences of Jo'burg city centre.

This study paper aimed to explore phenomenon of homelessness through the narratives of young men living in Johannesburg. Current research focuses on 1) the prevalence of homelessness or 2) homelessness in relation to social problems. While the first focus serves to perpetuate the conceptualisation of homelessness as only about the absence of a house, the second focus identifies homeless people as the social problem and fails to recognise the social factors that cause and maintain this phenomenon. This study views home+less+ness as not just the lack of shelter but also as a state or experience that is not separate from the rest of the individual life. Seven young men were recruited on the basis of being currently or recently homeless, or living on the streets. The data were collected through narrative interviews and subjected to two forms' of analysis, thematic analysis and a structural analysis that maps movement in space and time. Main themes identified were related to home as elsewhere; home (lessness) and belonging in past, present; and imagined future relationships and spaces. Mapping the life histories of the participants reveals trajectories of frequent movement, including that participants may journeys 'home' to their places of origin but always once again returning to the streets of Johannesburg. This suggests that the conventional ideas of home as a safe space of belonging and homelessness as a place of loss and hopelessness, are not binary, rather these are oscillating, intertwined experiences.