



Inequality, Poverty, and Neoliberal Governance: Activist Ethnography in the Homeless Sheltering Industry (Teaching Culture: UTP Ethnographies for the Classroom)

Vincent Lyon-Callo

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Why did the rate of homelessness remain at significant levels while the US economy was supposedly booming and hundreds of millions of dollars were spent in the homeless sheltering industry? Drawing upon five years of ethnographic fieldwork in a homeless shelter in Northampton, Massachusetts, Lyon-Callo argues that homelessness must be understood within the context of increasing neoliberal policies, practices, and discourses. As advocates, activists, policy makers, and homeless people focused attention on market-based and individualized practices of reform and governance, collective efforts that challenged an economy dependent on low wage jobs, declining housing affordability, and the dismantling of the social safety net were marginalized and ignored. Homelessness continued, despite, and partly due to, the limitations of the neoliberal approach.

Combining the rich detail of an ethnographic study with the systemic examination of political economic studies, this book offers a view of homelessness and inequality that is rarely explored elsewhere. Chapters include discussion of the medicalization of homelessness, the difficulty of finding paid employment given broader political economic conditions, how shelter staff are trained to manage homeless people, how statistics are used to produce ideas of homeless people as deviants, and how funding concerns affect possibilities for resistance. Key to the study is an activist approach that raises the possibilities and problems associated with a publicly engaged anthropology.

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