

# Sociocultural Context and Occupational Choice: How the Experience of Homelessness Shapes Leisure Occupations



Rachael Perrin, OTS

University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Division of Occupational Science and Occupational Therapy

## Background

- Leisure → health-promoting occupation, QOL
- Choice is inherent to leisure, choice over one's life is paramount for well-being<sup>4</sup>
- Occupational choices are constrained by political and sociocultural environments<sup>3</sup>
  - To equate choice with volition is a culturally privileged perspective<sup>4</sup>
- Occupational justice: Lack of access to leisure as a breach of human rights<sup>5</sup>
  - Homeless populations experience occupational alienation, boredom<sup>6</sup>
- Current OT/OS research → routines, ADLs, self-care, whereas leisure and other aspects of QOL are neglected<sup>1,2</sup>

**Study Aim:** *Through the lens of leisure occupations, this study aimed to elucidate the ways that broader sociocultural context impacts occupational choice for people experiencing homelessness.*

## Method

- Qualitative design, phenomenological approach, purposive sampling
- Focus group, 1 male & 1 female participant
- Data triangulation via secondary analysis and interview with local shelter
- Thematic analysis/coding

## Findings

**TEMPORAL CONTEXT:**  
Exclusively Leisure vs.  
Devoid of Leisure

*"Some people think it's like free time, but when I was on the street, all I had was free time and it wasn't like it was relaxing or fun, I was trying not to die... thinking, 'how can I get out of this thing'"*

**SUBCULTURAL CONTEXT:** Navigating Tension Between Homeless Culture & Broader Society

*"For normal people, leisure is like taking a family vacation, kicking up your feet after work. You need to feel comfortable and safe... We don't have those things. So we turn to other things that aren't socially acceptable and then get ostracized for it. It's sad the way I've seen people go down "*

**PHYSICAL CONTEXT:**  
Role of Space, Place, & Structure

*"Shelters are seriously like prisons. I don't have opportunities to myself to do the leisure that I wanna do"*

## Discussion

- Experience of homelessness allows for little choice in occupations, especially leisure
- Leisure as free time presumes privilege
- Marginalization of homeless perpetuated by norms and values of dominant, privileged society
  - Reproduction of social order<sup>3</sup>
- Societal and physical constraints prevent those experiencing homelessness from utilizing their agency to pursue leisure → occupational injustice

## Implications for OT/OS

- OT's core values, holism and context
- Community based practice
- Recognition of societal constructs that limit agency → elimination of deeply embedded sociocultural barriers to participation for homeless populations
- Occupational rights as human rights<sup>4,5</sup>

## References

1. Bradley, D. M., Hersch, G., Reistetter, T., & Reed, K. (2011). Occupational participation of homeless people. *Occupational Therapy in Mental Health, 27*(1), 26-35.
2. Coleman, J. (2017). Increasing overall well-being is salient in treating homelessness. *Social Work in Public Health, 32*(3), 154-165.
3. Galvaan, R. (2015). The Contextually situated nature of occupational choice: Marginalised young adolescents' experiences in South Africa. *Journal of Occupational Science, 22*(1), 39-53.
4. Hammell, K. W. (2017). Opportunities for well-being: The right to occupational engagement. *Canadian Journal of Occupational Therapy, 84*(4-5), 209-222.
5. Hocking, C. (2017). Occupational justice as social justice: The moral claim for inclusion. *Journal of Occupational Science, 24*(1), 29-42.
6. Marshall, C. A., Lysaght, R., & Krupa, T. (2017). The experience of occupational engagement of chronically homeless persons in a mid-sized urban context. *Journal of Occupational Science, 1-16.*