Making Invisible: The Eradication of “Homeless Mothers” from Public Policy in Ontario, Canada

By
Melinda Vandenbeld Giles
Editors' Note
We are delighted to present this collection of research papers from the Comparative Program on Health and Society based on work that our fellows undertook during 2012–2013. Founded in 2000, the Comparative Program on Health and Society (CPHS) is a vital and growing research institute based at the Munk School of Global Affairs at the University of Toronto. Generously funded by the Lupina Foundation, the CPHS supports innovative, interdisciplinary, comparative research on health, broadly defined through our extensive range of fellowships, which for 2012–2013 included CPHS MA Fellowships, Junior Doctoral Fellowships, CPHS Senior Doctoral Fellowships, Lupina/OGS Doctoral Fellowships, Postdoctoral Fellowships, Research Associate Positions, and Senior Academic Fellowships. Our program builds on the scholarly strengths of the University of Toronto in the social sciences, humanities, and public health.

In 2011, CPHS adopted a renewed vision of the social determinants of health which recognizes the complexity and interrelatedness of domestic, transnational, regional, and global factors that may have an impact on health conditions and access to health-related services within any country, including Canada. We recognize similarly that emerging and entrenched health inequalities may require policy-makers, communities, and researchers to grapple with challenging ethical, human rights, and social justice questions. We accordingly expanded the program's thematic focus to accommodate research that specifically focuses on these definitional and operational challenges. The research papers you will read in this year's collection reflect these themes and demonstrate the variety, complexity, and importance of comparative health research.
Making Invisible: The Eradication of “Homeless Mothers” from Public Policy in Ontario, Canada

Melinda Vandenbeld Giles

Abstract

Homelessness in Canada is gendered in a particular way. Since the 1993 dismantling of the national housing program, there has been an unequivocal increase in homelessness for families, the majority of which are led by women. This paper merges the particulars of human experience—mothers experiencing homelessness in Ontario—with the macro concepts of social change, particularly the emergence of what has been called “neoliberalism.” Examining the place of disjunction between theory and practice can provide a framework to better comprehend and create visibility regarding the contemporary state of Canada’s social welfare system, thereby producing social policies that are relevant for the homeless mothers they purport to represent.

In Theorizing Welfare: Enlightenment and Modern Society, Martin O’Brien and Sue Penna argue that “just as, in our everyday lives, we employ theories as part of the ways we act in the world, so social policies and welfare programmes are also built on theoretical foundations” (1998, 3). A young homeless mother who gives birth in a Toronto hospital on a Friday afternoon, loses custody of her baby one hour later as a CAS (Children’s Aid Society) worker “apprehends” the child, and is back on the street the next day is not an isolated nor individualized occurrence. That particular moment has to be understood within the larger social structure it is intrinsically a part of. This paper merges the particulars of human experience—mothers experiencing homelessness in Ontario—with the macro concepts of social change, particularly the emergence of what has been called “neoliberalism.” Examining the place of disjunction between theory and practice can provide a framework to better comprehend and create visibility regarding the contemporary state of Canada’s social welfare system, thereby producing social policies that are relevant for the homeless mothers they purport to represent.

Homelessness in Canada is gendered in a particular way. Since the 1993 dismantling of the national housing program, there has been an unequivocal increase in homelessness for families, the majority of which are female led (Layton 2008, 50). According to the Wellesley Institute Report, there are over 22,500 children currently homeless in Canada (Sky 2009). Cathy Crowe, a Toronto street nurse and author of Dying for a Home: Homeless Activists Speak Out, says she has seen a shift in the demographics of homelessness over the past fifteen years. “Across the country, the fastest-growing group of homeless people is families with

Biography

Melinda Vandenbeld Giles is a PhD candidate in socio-cultural anthropology at the University of Toronto. Her research involves working with mothers who are living with their children in Toronto motel rooms. She is investigating interconnections between public policy, dominant neoliberal narratives, and lived realities. She edited a book called Mothering in the Age of Neoliberalism published by Demeter Press in 2014. Her work has also been published in several Demeter Press collections and MIRCI (Motherhood Initiative for Research and Community Involvement) journal issues, in addition to the publication of a two-part series regarding mothers experiencing homelessness in Toronto for Dispatches International. She was a research associate for the University of Toronto Munk School of Global Affairs Comparative Program on Health and Society (CPHS) where she has two publications in their Working Paper Series and she is co-editor for the 2012-2013 CPHS Working Paper Series.
children” (Banks 2004). As of 31 December 2012, there were 158,445 households on the rent-geared-to-income waiting list in Ontario. Many families are waiting up to ten years for subsidized housing (ONPHA 2013).

THE STRUCTURAL CAUSES OF HOMELESSNESS IN CANADA

From World War II until 1993, Canada had a national housing program responsible for building 650,000 units and housing two million Canadians (Layton 2008, x). Consistent with the post-war modernist Keynesian focus on federal funding for urban infrastructure, the Central Mortgage and Housing Corporation was established in 1946 (now known as Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation or CMHC) as a crown corporation to administer on behalf of the Canadian government federal participation in housing as described by the 1944 National Housing Act (Layton 2008, xxvi). CMHC played an integral role in creating new affordable housing across Canada. However, in the 1980s, the federal Conservative government began the process of slowly eroding the federal housing program by cutting almost $2 billion in housing spending, and then in 1993 cancelling funding for new social housing. In 1995, the Ontario Conservative government made policy changes to “liberate” the private rental housing market from rent control as part of Ontario Premier Mike Harris’s “common-sense revolution” (ibid., 138). In the 1996 federal budget, most of the national housing programs were “downloaded” to the provinces (ibid., xxvii). In 1996, the United Nations Centre for Housing and Human Settlements recognized Canada’s co-operative housing program as a “global best practice” (ibid., 7). However, a decade later, in May 2006, the United Nations Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights recommended that homelessness and inadequate housing in Canada should be addressed as a “national emergency” (United Nations 2006).

THE PHILOSOPHY OF NEOLIBERALISM

The extreme funding cuts to Canadian social housing programs in the mid-1990s coincided with the larger picture of neoliberal initiatives directly targeting social welfare globally. Jesook Song's definition of neoliberalism in South Koreans in the Debt Crisis: The Creation of a Neoliberal Welfare State is useful here. “Neoliberal is defined as an advanced mode of social governing that idealizes efficiency and productivity by promoting people's free will and self-sufficiency. Thus, both liberalism and neoliberalism do not just refer to political economic principles but to social ethos” (Song 2009, x). However, as Song illustrates, “the major difference between neoliberalism and liberalism is the ascendancy of finance capital over assembly-line industrial capital and the seeming withdrawal of the state (which is instead working through quasi- or nonstate agencies)” (Song 2009, x). The loss of a national housing program in 1993—the effects of which are being felt today—needs to be positioned within this larger global neoliberal narrative. The increasing financialization of society has led to a “marketization” of nearly every aspect of social/cultural life. The state's regulatory role becomes one of promoting the “free” market to ensure its “unhindered” functioning. The market then becomes the defining element of society.

The direct impact of neoliberal policies was definitively felt during the 1990s’ Ontario Harris Conservative government, particularly in terms of the social welfare system's erosion. The 1990 neoliberal welfare reforms in Ontario consisted of “the dislocation of the ‘public’ in favour of ‘private support’ in the family” (Gavigan and Chun 2010, 64-65). The neoliberal extreme focus on individual “freedom” promoted by the concept of the individual as a “consumer” necessarily shifted societal thinking from public to private arenas. While the public/private dichotomy has always been an integral element within liberal philosophy, neoliberal philosophy emphasizes the private.

Given the neoliberal anti-state agenda, it is no surprise the Canada Assistance Plan (CAP)—the policy introduced in 1966 that established national standards for welfare programs—was replaced in 1996 with the Canada Health and Social Transfer. In “Intimate Intrusions: Welfare Regulation and Women’s Personal Lives,” Janet Mosher argues that “the demise of CAP also signaled a new era of decentralization, from the federal government to the provinces, and subsequently from the provinces to local municipalities” (Mosher 2010, 168). This policy shift resulted in a 30 percent decrease in federal transfers to the provinces between 1995 and 1998. And yet, while privatization and decentralization became primary, so too did the concept of “welfare fraud.” “Neo-liberals do not claim that the market can do everything—for example, there remains
a role for the state in providing national security” (O’Brien and Penna 1998, 213-14). Indeed, the welfare reforms of the late twentieth century shifted the state's role from “beneficently meeting the needs of citizens, and further toward that of disciplining and reforming these flawed citizens” (Mosher 2010, 165).

If we move ahead to the 2000s, we can further examine the erosion of the Canadian social welfare state as a direct consequence of neoliberal-inspired “non-interventionist” philosophy. The neoliberal philosophical basis has been grounded in Canadian public policy in terms of eroding social supports for mothers and children and defunding research related to gender equity. The operating budget of the Status of Women Canada (SWC) has been cut and the Policy Research Fund (PRF) was terminated in 2006 (Brodie and Bakker 2008, 6). In the PRF Report, Where Are the Women? Gender Equity, Budgets and Canadian Public Policy, Janine Brodie and Isabella Bakker describe how “the ascendance of neo-liberal thinking in political and policy circles … have been accompanied by the progressive disappearance of the gendered subject” (Brodie and Bakker 2008, 7). The erasure of gender has severe implications for maternal and childhood poverty since public policy initiatives separate the mother and child. As protection of the child is elevated, protection of the mother becomes irrelevant.

THE CANADIAN SOCIAL WELFARE SYSTEM

The increasing situation of familial homelessness in Canada is a direct consequence of neoliberal policies and practices that “off-load” government fiscal and social responsibility. The consequences of government “non-intervention” and austerity measures in the Canadian child welfare system are best revealed by Karen Swift, a York University professor in the School of Social Work, who points out in her book, Manufacturing “Bad Mothers”: A Critical Perspective on Child Neglect, “Each child welfare worker has the well-known problem of case overload, each organization is chronically underfunded, crises abound, virtually everyone involved complains of feeling ineffective, and many have come to feel that the system does not work” (Swift 1995, 4).

THE NEOLIBERAL DISJUNCTIVE: BUREAUCRATIC INSTITUTIONS IN A NEOLIBERAL SOCIETY

In The Theory of Social and Economic Organization, Weber says that “bureaucratic administration means fundamentally the exercise of control on the basis of knowledge” (1947, 339). This concept of expert knowledge arises within enlightenment assumptions about the human subject as rational and functioning within a collective of like-minded fellow citizens. In sharp contrast, the concept of “tacit” knowledge forms the basis of Hayek's neoliberal philosophy (Hayek 1988). Rather than idealizing objective, evidence-based knowledge, Hayek idealized subjective, experiential knowledge. Since the 1970s, anti-science, anti-rationality, anti-expert, and anti-bureaucracy philosophies have been popularized through the ascendancy of the media as prominent sources of disseminating “knowledge.” The result: individuals inspired daily by postmodern concepts of individual “choice” and “freedom” forced to work within rigidly defined yet underfunded bureaucratic systems. Bureaucratic systems require an ideology of compliance and collectivity, alongside enormous financial and human resources—elements lacking in a neoliberal ethos of individualized market actors.

Since May 2010, I have been conducting interviews with social service coordinators and public policy-makers; organizing focus groups with nurses and social workers; attending community and faith-based meetings; touring women's shelters, detox centres, and women's resource hubs; and visiting families living in motels in an effort to better understand the daily lives of mothers experiencing homelessness in Ontario and those with whom they interact. There has been remarkable synchronicity in what individuals working and living within the homelessness sector have said. They all describe the need to “work outside the system” and to “be creative” and they recognize the slow process of social change. People in different roles each describe the underfunding, the instability of short-term projects and pilot programs, and the need for integration of resources. It is not surprising that within such a dysfunctional environment, individuals are forced to “be creative.” They are forced to “creatively” subvert the ingrained bureaucratic logic requiring evidence in exchange for neoliberal short-term and immediately pleasing results. However, as Weber writes in Bureaucracy, the bureaucratic system cannot be so easily subverted. “Where administration has been completely bureaucratized, the resulting system of domination is practically indestructible” (1947, 487).
In “Complexio Oppositorum: Notes on the Left in Neoliberal Italy,” Andrea Muehlebach says that “neoliberalism is often better understood as a form that can contain the oppositional … and fold them into a single moral order” (495). In other words, as bureaucratic systems become increasingly vilified in popular discourse and thus underfunded, so, too, do they become increasingly regulatory. Social workers and public health nurses thus have to conform to increasingly stringent guidelines and surveillance requirements demanding “accountability” while simultaneously being told to be “innovative” and “take the initiative” in devising work strategies to cope with increased workload and decreased labour power.

NOTES FROM THE FRONT LINES

A discussion with four public health nurses who work directly with women who are pregnant and homeless in Toronto gives insight into how bureaucratic elements remain deeply entrenched within the policies and practices of Children’s Aid Societies in Toronto. Since child apprehension is often a potential factor when working with individuals categorized as “at risk,” the nurses frequently work directly with social workers from the Children’s Aid Societies. As one nurse said:

Oh, CAS is complicated. I have a sixteen-year-old right now, but because she’s sixteen she has her own worker because she’s a Crown Ward. While she was pregnant, she had the PAC (Children’s Aid Pregnancy After-Care Worker) coming out to see her. And then when the baby was born, now the baby has a worker and a high-risk nurse so she’s seeing four different CAS workers, one for herself and three for the baby. I don’t even know who to call. No wonder these clients are so overwhelmed. They have so many workers. Why can’t the worker that’s for her baby be her worker? But they don’t do it that way. It’s confusing. So they can have multiple workers throughout their lives. And then depending on where they are living in the city, it’s a different office. And if they move during the pregnancy, then they get another new worker. They can’t continue with the same worker.” (Saleha, Public Health Nurse)

This lack of service coordination often arose as an issue during the interviews. The tragic death of baby Jordan Heikamp in 1997 due to chronic starvation while under the care of Children’s Aid sharply revealed the extent to which division and segregation of resources and services had become amplified, both in the Children’s Aid Societies and in the Toronto shelter system. This initiated an inquest that resulted in the Chief Coroner’s Report containing recommendations, many of them since implemented, regarding the Children’s Aid Societies, the Ministry of Community and Social Services, and Toronto Public Health (Coroner’s Report 2001). A number of programs, particularly in Toronto Public Health, received increased funding or were initiated as a direct result of this inquest. There are a number of excellent programs in Toronto Public Health specifically targeting young pregnant women experiencing homelessness or marginal housing, such as the Young Parents No Fixed Address Program and the St. Michael’s Hospital Passport Program. And the HARP (Homeless At-Risk Prenatal Program), run by five nurses who help women at any age who are pregnant and experiencing homelessness, is another excellent program initiated as a direct result of this inquest.

However, rather than being evidence based, the Coroner’s Report is filled with subjective and ideological statements recommending increased division between the mother and child in Children’s Services and increased surveillance of “lying” and “manipulating” young people who reside or have resided in shelters (Coroner’s Report 2001). Instead of investigating an entire dysfunctional system in an effort to create structural change, the Coroner’s Report provided a convenient and politically expedient launching point for particularized short-term initiatives with no guarantee of long-term funding. While the programs I mentioned are beneficial, the increased surveillance and regulatory requirements within Children’s Aid were not. And even the benefit of these programs is mitigated by their constant funding instability.

According to the University of Toronto Centre for Urban and Community Studies report called “A Visceral Grief: Young Homeless Mothers and Loss of Child Custody,” “a major constraint on providing services for young homeless pregnant women or mothers in Toronto is the lack of stable funding for agencies … With reduced government funding and an emphasis on temporary project funding, agencies struggle to maintain their core services and meet administrative costs. Without stable funding, more projects and programs are short-term, making it more difficult to maintain service coordination” (Novac et al. 2006, 28-29).
Demanding bureaucratic procedures without proper funding or labour power inevitably produces a system made irrational through its redundancies, which leads to increasing polarization. Bureaucratic demands for “accountability” in effect eradicate all accountability by diffusing responsibility. Paperwork becomes prioritized over people. Systems become represented as “accountable” while mothers and children remain in motel rooms. The most detrimental result of this neoliberal disjunctive is the way in which mothers experiencing homelessness have been systematically eradicated from the bureaucratic public policy realm, in effect leaving them and their children with no social supports.

**NEOLIBERALISM AND INTENSIVE MOTHERING**

The height of neoliberal public policy in Canada during the mid-1990s coincided with what has been called “intensive mothering.” This involves positioning children as social capital to be “invested in.” In “Why Can’t a Mother Be More Like a Businessman?” Sharon Hays defines intensive mothering as “child-centred, expert-guided, emotionally absorbing, labour-intensive, and financially expensive” (Hays 2007, 414). The current singular focus on “productivity” and the increased demand on the “family,” specifically mothers, to reproduce socially appropriate neoliberal subjects is consistent with the free-market focus on choice and individual responsibility. State responsibility becomes private familial responsibility. Homeless mothers with their children represent an aberration of the neoliberal promise of success and advancement. Silencing them, both socially and physically, becomes paramount to continuing the neoliberal project. Spatially, their segregation into overcrowded shelters and undesirable and marginal motel strips ensures their invisibility. Socially, the individualized discourse of pathology constructs homeless mothers as “bad” mothers—this othering process enables the rest of society to feel justified in their marginalization.

When I spoke with individuals working directly with mothers experiencing homelessness in Ontario, many commented on how the current neoliberal focus on “good motherhood” as defined by white, middle-class consumption does not apply to those mothers living on the margins. Many social policies effectively render their capacity to emulate “good mothering” practices negligible, thereby guaranteeing their societal condemnation and social exclusion. Valerie, a researcher manager whose work focuses on issues of homelessness and women’s rights says, “The ideal mother—that breastfeeding is the best thing, that mother-child bonding is best, that the most important thing is attachment—all of these discourses determine if someone is a good mother or not, and that all just falls by the wayside. All of those idealized things … all of that stuff doesn’t apply to mothers at the margins, whether it’s good or bad, regardless of what kind of mothers they would be.” Many of the public policies pertaining to homeless mothers necessitate work requirements and maternal/child separation that invalidate the claims of “intensive mothering,” thereby delegitimating and visibly removing mothers experiencing homelessness from the discourse itself.

According to Janice, a Toronto public health manager who has coordinated a number of programs for mothers experiencing homelessness in Toronto, “I don’t think there’s been enough of a focus on homeless women’s issues. I think as a society, we just don’t want to acknowledge it or see it or admit it. And there aren’t as many visibly homeless women as there are visibly homeless men.” In reference to the “My Baby and Me” Infant Passport Program at St. Michael’s hospital that enrolled 101 pregnant women experiencing homelessness between July 2005 and October 2007, she went on to say “St. Michael’s was interested in looking at pregnant homeless women because it’s one of those things where they’re marginalized and you don’t necessarily hear a lot about it, or it’s all negative if you do, always focusing on something terrible without realizing that there are some people who are actually making amazing changes in their lives to be able to achieve a healthy pregnancy.” As Valerie says, “If a mother living in poverty who is single is made visible in the mainstream media, you will immediately find this backlash, and it’s all the same messages, they’re all prostitutes, they’re drug addicts. It arises in relation to poverty, welfare, and housing issues.”

There’s an obvious need to address the issue of mothers experiencing homelessness. These women are not only rendered invisible through a lack of societal recognition other than condemnation. They are also made invisible through statistical categories that do not even acknowledge them as mothers. And these statistical categories in turn lead to invisibility in terms of public policy-making. For example, in the statistical categories for The Toronto Report Card on Homelessness 2001, there are categories for single persons,
couples, two parents with children, and single parent with children. The number of homeless single persons is by far the largest category at 81.3 percent, but as the Centre for Urban and Community Studies “Better Off in a Shelter?” paper states, “Many seemingly ‘single’ homeless women are in fact mothers separated from their children” (Paradis et al. 2008, 2). In the course of the study, one-quarter of the mothers lived separately from their children. However, if a mother is not directly with her child—for a number of reasons, including having an older son who is not eligible to live in a women’s shelter—the mother statistically becomes a “single person,” thereby erasing her motherhood status.

Think about it. You see these homeless women on the street, you find out that they’ve had five or six pregnancies in their life … has anybody ever seen a mother standing on the corner? We don’t even consider them a mother because they don’t have their kid. You know, it’s just something I wonder about sometimes, how many of the women living in these shelters who are called “depressed” are actually suffering postpartum depression that has never been diagnosed or treated.

(Janice, Toronto Public Health Manager)

In Who’s Counting? Marilyn Waring on Sex, Lies and Global Economics—a National Film Board documentary regarding the invisibility of domestic labour in national accounting—Waring says, “It’s perfectly obvious that the people who are visible to you as contributors to the economy are the people who will be visible when you make policy. And if you’re not visible as a producer in a nation’s economy, then you’re going to be invisible in the distribution of benefits” (qd. in Nash 1995). In other words, the way in which productivity is statistically determined will construct those who are rendered visible as productive or, alternately, as dependent. Regardless of whether a mother is actively working to sustain the livelihood of her children and perhaps also engaging with the informal labour market, she will be statistically identified as “dependent.” But because the mothers who have lost custody of their children have been statistically eradicated as “mothers,” they become visible as only single dependents thus eliminating all access to familial resources. Waring’s pivotal book If Women Counted reveals the extent to which statistical categorizations determine redistribution. As Waring puts it, “The system cannot respond to values it refuses to recognize” (Waring 1988, 4). How can a mother regain custody of her children if she is allotted housing based on her “single status” yet she must have familial housing to regain custody?

MOTHERS EXPERIENCING HOMELESSNESS AND LOSS OF CHILD CUSTODY

If we return to the discussion of a young homeless mother who gives birth in a Toronto hospital on a Friday afternoon, has her baby apprehended, and is back on the street the next day, we can now position this narrative within the larger structural and ideological framework within which it’s embedded. According to the “A Visceral Grief” report, “there is no more disenfranchised group in the child welfare field than parents whose ties with their children have been permanently severed” (Novac et al. 2006, 11). The report’s authors say, “Our literature and document search identified some programs to assist pregnant homeless women, but almost none to help homeless mothers or birth parents at risk of losing custody of their children” (ibid., 22-23). The report quotes Teresa Hinton who wrote Forgotten Mothers: Meeting the Needs of Homeless Women Who Have Lost Their Children. “The category ‘single homeless woman’ obscures the fact that many women who are homeless have had children and lost custody of them to adoption, fostering, and the care system. The impact of this stays with women throughout their lives and their invisibility as mothers has an additional emotional impact” (Hinton qtd. in Novac et al. 2006, 18).

Many of the women who are not accompanied by children are actually mothers. And a lot of services are only for women accompanied by children. For me, one of the starkest things is the apprehension at birth by default. It’s one of those examples where everyone agrees it’s not ideal for the newborn. And it just happens almost for administrative reasons. It can be related to what kind of day the birth takes place on—whether it’s a weekend or a holiday. (Valerie, Policy Research Manager)

There hasn’t been funding available to develop many programs to the capacity that they need to be developed, including our own, which is restricted by whether or not we have children involved. What is hugely lacking are bereavement, grief, and loss programs for this population. You might be in a shelter; then you deliver the baby; then you’re going to a different shelter and they wouldn’t
even know that you had a baby. And it's nobody's fault. It's just the way things are set up to deal with either single people or people with children. (Janice, Toronto Public Health Manager)

During the afternoon focus group session with four Toronto public health nurses who work directly with homeless mothers, many of the nurses' comments reiterated these points: “The whole grief after baby is apprehended is something that's not really talked about very much.” “One of my clients said that when her baby was taken away from her it felt like her soul was being ripped out of her.” “It’s just such an untouched subject and we always say there's no support afterwards for these women. It's just such a common occurrence and there's no follow-up. It's terrible—the process they go through. Their baby's apprehended, then they have to be in court within five days and retain a lawyer. They have to apply for a legal aid certificate. It's just insane.” “A lot is expected out of a woman after they give birth.” “Everyone gets on board if they keep their baby, but if not…”

The situation of a young mother having her newborn baby apprehended can now be positioned within a much larger underfunded bureaucratic reality that demands immediate results and preventative measures without time or funding for proper assessment and follow-up. The result is that these mothers are literally abandoned by current social policy—not because of a lack of concern or initiative on the part of public health workers—but because the demands of an underfunded, underresourced bureaucratic system require a convenient slot within which such mothers can be legibly identified. Without such bureaucratic identification, they become invisible.

THE SPACE OF UTTER NEGLECT

In Economies of Abandonment: Social Belonging and Endurance in Late Liberalism, Elizabeth Povinelli argues that:

Any form of life that could not produce values according to market logic would not merely be allowed to die, but, in situations in which the security of the market … seemed at stake, ferreted out and strangled … Any form of life that is not organized on the basis of market values is characterized as a potential security risk. If a social welfare program, for instance, can be shown to lengthen life and increase health, but cannot at the same time be shown to produce a market value, this lengthened life and increased health is not a value to be capacitated. Instead, it is a value to be actively attacked and rooted out of the state and national psyche. (Povinelli 2011, 22)

The neoliberal paradigm is more insidious than creating legibility for “deserving” versus “undeserving” individuals. As research regarding homeless shelters in North America makes evident (Bridgman 2003; Hopper 2003; Lyon-Callo 2004), the repercussions are increased surveillance and regulation for those labelled “undeserving.” However, an additional space exists outside even these categorizations—the space of utter neglect. These mothers are not only “undeserving”—they do not exist. Once a person ceases to be legible within the rigidly bureaucratic confines of the currently eroded social welfare system, they cease to be.

CONCLUSION

In these women’s own words we see the direct impact of neoliberal-inspired public policy. The demands of bureaucratic philosophy combined with the neoliberal focus on “tacit” knowledge have created a particularly potent framework within which public policies emphasizing political expediency and representation are prioritized over long-term structural change. Procedure and regulatory administrative requirements become prioritized above meeting material human need. Decreased funding and job instability lead to a corrosive environment in which individuals are overworked, underresourced, and forced to comply with increasingly stringent administrative requirements of so-called accountability.

Within such a decentralized framework, mothers experiencing homelessness who lose custody of their child/children fall through the cracks of the underfunded administrative system and thereby are “erased” from the public policy framework itself. And mothers who are sent to motels as part of the “emergency shelter system” get lost in the public policy framework because there is no way in which to make them legible within the current system. Creating context for the social/political/economic/historical influences of public policy initiatives shifts the discussion away from particularizing, individualized short-term funding-
driven imperatives and toward long-term policies that render visible the individuals such policies purport to represent—mothers who are experiencing homelessness in Ontario.

NOTE

1. Saleha like other names here is a pseudonym.

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