

**Exploring Human Stories of Illness**  
**The Health Humanities**  
**Portrait Project**

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**Life without Shelter in the United States**  
**Veterans and Homelessness**  
**Teaching Guide**

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**Reading List:**

First-Person Narrative

Selections from “The Forgotten Fight: An Oral History of Homeless Veterans” (2016)

Interview transcripts:

- Don ([Don Transcript](#))
- Cordell ([Cordell Transcript](#))

Please read the brief biographical statements for each of these veterans as well:

[Veteran Biographies](#)

\*If possible, please watch the following video clips. Many of these clips will be reviewed during the discussion.

- Don: Clips 1, 7, 9, 10, and 13.
- Cordell: Clips 1, 2, 4, 6, 7, 9, 12, and 13.

## Scholarly Readings

Glossary of key terms, located at the end of this document.

Puar J, et al., "Precarity Talk: A Virtual Roundtable," *TDR: The Drama Review* 56 (2012): 165-166, 169-170. [Precarity Talk](#)

Bourgois P and Schonberg J. *Righteous Dopefiend* (Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 2009): 4-7, 219-235, 287-294, 302-307, 309-316. [Righteous Dopefiend](#)

## Supplemental readings

- Wright J. "Address unknown: Homelessness in Contemporary America." *Society* (New Brunswick). 26(6): 1989, 45-53. <https://doi.org/10.1007/BF02700239>. (highly recommended)
- Robertson J. "Homeless Veterans: An Emerging Problem?" in *The Homelessness in Contemporary Society*. ed. Bingham, Green, and White (Thousand, Oaks, California: SAGE Publications, 1987), 64-81. (highly recommended)
- Abelson E. "Homeless in America," *Journal of Urban History* 25 (1999): 258-270. <https://doi.org/10.1177/009614429902500204>
- Baxter E and Hopper K. "Pathologies of Place and Disorders of Mind: 'Community Living' for Ex-Mental Patients in New York City," *Health PAC Bulletin*. 11(4): 1980, 1-2, 6-12, 21-22. PMID: 10246283.
- Blau J. "Grappling with Homelessness," *Reviews in American History*. 42 (2014): 524-528. <https://doi.org/10.1353/rah.2014.0081>
- Bourgois P and Schonberg J. *Righteous Dopefiend* (Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 2009), 91-93, 298-302, 316-320. <https://doi.org/10.1525/j.ctt1pn5bs>
- Eisenberg A. "New Histories of Homelessness," *Reviews in American History*. 46: 2018, 319-323. <https://doi.org/10.1353/rah.2018.0048>

- Gerber D. “Disabled Veterans and the Wounds of War,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Disability History*, ed. Rembis, Kudlick, and Nielsen (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 12-17. ISBN 9780190234959, 0190234954.
- Katz MB and Thomas LR. “The Invention of ‘Welfare’ In America,” *Journal of Policy History*. 10(4): 1998, 399-418.
- Kerr D. “‘We Know What the Problem Is’: Using Oral History to Develop a Collaborative Analysis of Homelessness from the Bottom Up,” *Oral History Review*. 30:2003, 27-45. <https://doi.org/10.1525/ohr.2003.30.1.27>

### **Additional background reading**

- Starr P, Bonner RP, Henry JF, Nader R. *The discarded army: veterans after Vietnam; the Nader report on Vietnam veterans and the Veterans Administration*. (New York: Charterhouse, 1974). (OCoLC): 614587717.
- Adler JL. *Burdens of War: Creating the United States Veterans Health System* (Baltimore, Maryland: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2017). ISBN: 1421422875.
- Tsai J. ed., *Homelessness Among U.S. Veterans: Critical Perspectives* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018). ISBN: 0190695137.

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This teaching guide is divided into two sections: a guide for discussing the Health Humanities Portrait (HHP) among faculty and a guide for using it as a teaching unit in the medical student classroom.

**Plan:** Spend 75-80 minutes reviewing HHP content and discussing the theme of veterans and homelessness.

### **A. Discussion of HHP Content and Theme**

#### **1. Learning Objectives:**

1. Identify the historical origins and key political economic causes of

homelessness in the late twentieth-century United States.

2. Analyze the interaction between individual vulnerabilities and macrolevel structural determinants when considering the etiology of homelessness. Apply the theory of precarity to this dynamic. 3. Identify the dynamics that make homelessness among military veterans a particularly visible social problem. 4. Describe the ways in which stigma and moral judgment shape our perception and understanding of the lives of homeless men and women.

## 2. Background

The goal of this portrait is to understand both the specificity and the commonality of being homeless as a veteran. Veterans have access to care through the Veterans Affairs (VA) medical system and are an object of historical reverence within American society. In many ways, however, the causes and experiences of their homelessness do not differ substantially from those of the general homeless population. The assigned transcripts and video clips capture historically significant issues relevant to our broad social theme, including the meanings of homelessness; the indignity of reliance on inadequate or poorly organized social services; the role of addiction and mental health concerns; housing instability and discrimination; work and the labor market; stereotypes and the stigma associated with homelessness; and the social obligation to veterans. The scholarly articles provide analytic depth to the issues Don and Cordell raise in their oral histories. The Puar excerpts (Berlant and Butler) suggest an overarching, theoretical framing device (precarity) to understand the insights that each veteran communicates, while the ethnographic analysis of Righteous Dopefiend situates individual experiences of homelessness, addiction, and illness within the broader context of late twentieth-century neoliberalism.

## 3. **HHP Content Discussion** (45-55 min)

Sub-themes

- Martial citizenship and the particularity of veteran homelessness
- The dynamic between Individual vulnerability and social-structural determinants of health
- Homelessness and stigma

Historical analysis allows students to reflect on social, cultural, political and economic dynamics in the past and how historical forces have contributed to contemporary dilemmas and patterns. Because of the complexity of the portrait and potential for

discussion, we recommend a small group setting (8- 15 students) for discussion. We chose themes that would elicit reflection upon the influence of past experiences of veterans and past formations of homelessness upon this present social issue. To help with some potentially unfamiliar key terms, a glossary is appended at the end of the reading list; this should be distributed to the students when the readings are assigned.

To frame the social theme, we recommend starting the session with a short overview of the historical context related to homelessness, the public's perception of veterans, the socio-political factors driving housing shortages in the 1980s, and how historical information can be used to contextualize the first- person narratives and scholarly readings the students have completed. We also recommend incorporating the clips of Don and Cordell, as noted below, when possible. These clips can be used to help transition between various sub-themes, engage students that may not be prepared for the discussion, and most importantly give a voice and a face to the narratives used in the portrait. This setup introduces the key elements of the portrait discussion.

We chose the sub-themes below to highlight the similarities and differences among the narrative voices and to focus on the complex dynamics that make up this social theme. Each sub-theme has two discussion questions designed to help students synthesize and meaningfully reflect on the assigned readings. Depending on the size and familiarity of the group, the facilitator may wish to deliver a structured seminar, allowing a specific amount of time for the discussion of each sub-theme, or they may prefer to allow the conversation to evolve more organically, transitioning among and between the sub-themes as the discussion evolves. Regardless of the facilitator's preference, we recommend challenging students to think about these sub-themes in distinct periods of time (e.g. the 1980s, the 2000s, and today). Periodization allows students to think critically about similarity and difference across eras, as well as to connect historical currents to present-day phenomena without falling back on presentist biases. It also allows students to analyze potentially controversial, broad socio-political forces with an awareness of historical flux.

#### 4. Historical Context (10 min)

The use of historical methods allows us to draw upon a wide variety of sources and perspectives. A critical goal of historical analysis is to integrate these diverse accounts—here, oral history, critical ethnography, and cultural theory—into a single compelling narrative that acknowledges tensions and contradictions while still providing insight into the phenomenon in question. The interpretive element that is

inherent in history writing allows us to draw connections among disparate sets of facts and opinions, in the service of narrative cohesion. Historical distance, moreover, encourages us to look for long-term trends and the forces that underpin them; forces that are often difficult to appreciate when from within a particular moment. At its best, historical analysis makes the dynamics of seemingly inscrutable social issues accessible and relevant—a worthy goal for such a politically fraught and affectively-laden topic as homelessness among veterans in the late twentieth century United States.

While “homelessness” emerged as a social category in the United States in the late twentieth century, there have always been men and women who endured a life without shelter. During the colonial era and early republic, civic leaders typically agreed that local residents without the means to support themselves were entitled to some degree of assistance to remain housed; this might include the abandoned wife, the mentally unstable, the disabled soldier, or the chronically ill. The transient poor, however, were strongly discouraged from remaining within a community and could be “warned out” by legal action. In the nineteenth century, casual laborers and the very poor were typically able to support themselves during times of prosperity, but in economic crises, many found themselves without income or shelter. Single men might be identified as tramps or hobos, viewed alternately as a threat to the social order or as rugged individualists. For those who could not support themselves in the nation’s growing cities, poorhouses provided the bare necessities of life, but at great cost to one’s personal dignity.

During the Great Depression of the 1930s, enormous numbers of formerly self-sufficient Americans were forced to move from place to place in search of work, underscoring that even morally upstanding citizens could be rendered homeless during hard times. In 1932, 17,000 unemployed World War I veterans along with their families and supporters gathered in Washington, D.C. to demand cash-payment redemption of their service bonuses. President Hoover ordered the Army to clear this “Bonus Army” from the city; the ensuing conflict contributed to his political downfall. The unprecedented economic growth that began in the 1940s pushed homelessness to the margins of the social landscape. In the ensuing years, the public understanding of homelessness centered primarily on urban “Skid Row” districts, populated mostly by alcoholic white men—a very limited population that receded in importance beginning in the late 1960s.

The late 1970s and 1980s witnessed the emergence of what many observers described as “the new homeless.” As sociologist James Wright noted, homeless individuals were increasingly visible throughout the cities in which they lived—not just in overtly marginal or impoverished sectors. They were, as a whole, younger than the previous generation of Skid Row denizens, with a larger proportion of racial and ethnic minorities. An unknown but significant percentage appeared to be suffering from

serious psychiatric disabilities. Veterans have historically been overrepresented among those without reliable housing (not least because homeless populations have generally been primarily comprised of unattached men), and this era was no exception. Social critics had already identified Vietnam veterans as a vulnerable population, cast aside by the government who drafted them and rejected by those who opposed the war in which they served. For many, limited vocational skills, elevated rates of substance abuse, and lingering health problems represented real barriers to social reintegration. Veterans suffering from the long term effects of traumatic exposure to war were a very different population than those who would previously have occupied beds in the nation's shrinking network of state psychiatric hospitals. Few appreciated this distinction, though, and the homeless, troubled Vietnam veteran became a common cultural trope in the 1980s. Paradoxically, all of this occurred during a time of economic growth and unprecedented military spending—it was, as Reagan argued, morning in America.

The veteran narratives from “The Forgotten Fight” underscore the complexity and heterogeneity of homelessness as a category. After Don lost his housing (clip 7), he employed a variety of strategies to secure shelter at night. He describes hanging out at friends' houses and falling asleep watching TV, but knowing that he should not be there the next day; while he was not sleeping on the street or in a shelter, it is clear that he was homeless at that time, just as he was when sleeping in his car. Cordell (clip 9) cites an earlier time in his life when he voluntarily went without reliable housing for brief periods when he was hustling in New York, relying on his own resourcefulness to get by. There is some intimation, though, that he had reliable housing to which he could return in New Jersey when he was ready. Later, when he was unable to secure an apartment as quickly as he thought he could, he stayed at a “recovery house.” Though the details are unclear, this type of temporary housing is far more than a shelter, but far less than an apartment or home of one's own. Wright draws a basic distinction between the literally homeless (e.g. those on the streets, in cars and tents, in hallways and lobbies, and in emergency shelters) and the much larger population of individuals who are marginally housed in rented rooms, friends' apartments, and therapeutic or carceral institutions. As he writes: “There is ... a continuum of housing adequacy or housing stability. Just where in the continuum one draws the line, defining those above as adequately if marginally housed and those below as homeless, is of necessity a somewhat arbitrary and therefore disputable decision.” Cordell and Don's experiences also illustrate that for many, homelessness is a short-term and transitory phenomenon. Even if they might dip in and out of homelessness several times over the course of months or years, Cordell and Don's experiences are very different from those described by Bourgois and Schonberg in *Righteous Dopefiend*; for Carter and Petey,

homelessness was a long-term state of being.

## **Discussion of Sub-Themes (45 min)**

### **Sub-theme 1: Martial Citizenship and the Particularity of Veteran Homelessness**

Recommended: Don clip 13

(<https://theforgottenfight.com/veteran-biographies/don/>)

Don talks about why he thinks veterans become homeless. He feels that many think they are entitled to services and rely on the system too much.

1a. What does it mean to be a veteran?

This question is meant to elicit preconceived notions or stereotypes of veterans that students may hold—and ultimately challenge them. For example, do veterans who served during wartime command more respect than those who served during peacetime? What about combat as opposed to non-combat veterans? Do those who volunteered have an equal claim on public services as those who were drafted? Does society have different obligations to officers as opposed to enlisted men? In what ways does a veteran's race or gender affect how they are seen by society? What about the era of service (e.g. World War II, Vietnam era, OEF/OIF)? Does it matter how the veterans are discharged (honorable, general under honorable, other than honorable)?

The military is inherently hierarchical, both formally with respect to rank and seniority and informally with respect to military occupational speciality. Does this necessarily translate into a similar set of gradations with respect to veterans in the eyes of civilians? Both Don and Cordell discuss their experiences as black men in the armed forces. Don volunteered for the Marine Corps in 1978, and Cordell was drafted during the Vietnam War. Neither, however, served abroad or experienced combat. Do these distinctions matter when it comes to their deservingness of services (e.g. employment, housing, healthcare) compared to other veterans? Should they have a greater claim than non-veterans with a similar social background?

1b. Why do homeless veterans occupy a privileged place in the population of homeless men and women? Should the needs of homeless veterans be prioritized above the needs of others who are homeless? Why or why not?



Veterans are often seen as deserving a reasonable standard of living because of their volunteer service—voluntary or not—to their country, sacrificing their own comfort and safety for the protection of others. Many Americans feel indebted to these individuals, which leads them to privilege veterans’ interests upon completion of their service. While this concept stretches back in some respects to the Continental Congress, it assumed its modern form in 1930 with the establishment of the Veterans Administration.

These attitudes toward veterans have developed and evolved over time. In the introductory clip, Don interestingly blames the high rates of veteran homelessness on veterans’ sense of entitlement to services, rather seeing their privileged position as a welcome avenue for helping those in need. Both Don and Cordell implicitly invoke the concept of martial citizenship elaborated by historian David Gerber in the supplementary readings—the idea that veterans deserve a guaranteed reasonable standard of living and have a greater claim on social resources than non-veterans. The entire premise of “The Forgotten Fight,” the project responsible for collecting homeless veteran oral histories, is a nod to martial citizenship. “The Forgotten Fight” suggests not only that veterans’ stories should be preserved over others, but also that without such a project veterans’ struggles after their service would be erased or silenced—an unacceptable outcome for those who served their country. Sociologist James Wright touches on the theme of martial citizenship as well in his reconstruction of his conversation with his mother about the “deserving homeless,” which includes veterans alongside such other conventionally worthy populations as women, children, the elderly, the disabled, and those who remain employed.

Society’s belief that veterans should receive priority in their claims for services is further complicated by the large proportion of veterans living with physical and mental disabilities, often related to their military service. Wright’s mother’s surprise at the number of homeless veterans is based on her assumption (and that of many others) that the VA cares for those who served their country. The VA’s failures notwithstanding, disabled veterans and veterans living in poverty are among the only Americans who qualify for universal health care coverage. All veterans—but disabled veterans in particular—have access to exclusive social programs for housing, education, employment, and financial assistance. These benefits are framed as a repayment for their sacrifice to the nation.

The intersection of veteran status with other identities, including race, gender, and socioeconomic status complicates the meaning of the “deserving poor.” Both Cordell and Don address their encounters with racism in the service, and it stands to reason that such experiences might have followed them into civilian life. People of color are disproportionately represented among the homeless in the United States—does whiteness convey an additional degree of privilege among homeless veterans? Though gender is not raised explicitly in the stories of Don and Cordell, we must also recognize the historically unprecedented number of female veterans today. How does the traditional view of women as deserving support and sympathy cohere with a system that has been built on the needs of men? The historical era during which veterans served also informs social attitudes toward them. Vietnam veterans served in a deeply divisive war and were not able to claim victory on their return home. Though they were entitled to many of the same benefits as their peers, Vietnam veterans did not receive the public support, recognition, and gratitude afforded to veterans of other, more socially accepted, conflicts. The varying response to veterans depending upon how a war is viewed raises questions about whether the extent of national repayment and obligation to veterans is colored by national victory or loss.

### **Sub-theme 2: The Dynamic Between Individual Vulnerability and Social-Structural Determinants of Health**

Recommended: Cordell clip 7

(<https://theforgottenfight.com/veteran-biographies/cordell/>)

Cordell talks about becoming homeless “by accident” when he was between apartments. He was briefly on the streets and then ended up in transitional housing.

2a. Based on the narratives that Don and Cordell share, what social-structural factors contributed to their ability or inability to remain domiciled?

Cordell gave up his apartment because he feared that remaining there might lead him back to an unhealthy and destructive lifestyle (clip 7). As he tells the story, Cordell initially thought that he would be able to find new housing without difficulty, but this

turned out not to be the case. Cordell's experience calls our attention to the importance of local housing markets in any given individual's path to homelessness. As Wright has argued, a lack of affordable housing is a major driver of homelessness; nowhere was this clearer than urban enclaves in the early 1980s, when cheap housing and single room occupancy hotels were demolished in favor of condos and commercial development. Cordell's limited income—likely a combination of disability entitlements and informal entrepreneurship—was almost certainly another factor. As Wright notes, homelessness is ultimately a problem of poverty, whose rates are driven by social policy and economic trends far more so than individual life decisions. Finally, Cordell reveals that he has faced difficulties because of his prior felony convictions. While he does not share the details of his convictions, it is not unreasonable to speculate that they might have been related to his history of substance abuse. Arrests and convictions soared for drug-related offenses in the late 1980s and 1990s, and they did not always reflect actual patterns of crime or substance use. Employers and landlords frequently interpret a felony conviction as evidence of personal irresponsibility, making it difficult for those who are seeking a second chance to fully reintegrate into society. (Cf. Bourgois and Schonberg's description of Carter's experience in *Dopefiend*.)

Cordell's limited income via entitlements together with the barriers he has faced as a felon illustrate essential elements of what Bourgois and Schonberg describe as punitive neoliberalism in the late twentieth century—a political economic regime involving minimal redistribution of income together with massive spending on the policing of the poor. These challenges notwithstanding, Cordell also recognizes that he enjoys some privileges and legal protections. As a veteran, he is eligible for the HUD-VASH program, a collaboration between the Departments of Housing and Urban Development and Veterans Affairs that provides rental assistance to veterans. Federal regulations, moreover, stipulate that a felony conviction history cannot be used to deny housing to an applicant if the landlord wishes to participate in the program.

Don's account of how he became homeless initially sounds like a simple story of bad luck and unfair treatment by his employer, who would not listen when he protested that he had followed protocols at the apartment complex where he worked. When his rent increased, he was unable to remain: "I don't have no income, I'm not working, what can I do?" (clip 7). But this brief and offhand comment communicates an essential point about the structural causes of homelessness. Don has a variety of technical and interpersonal skills—why is he not able to find a job? While it is possible

that his personal problems would have made it difficult for him to secure employment in any era, prior to the 1980s he would have been a good candidate for a manufacturing job with generous wages (cf. Cordell clip 4). By the 2010s, these jobs were almost entirely gone, replaced by service industry and low-level healthcare positions for which he was ill-suited. As with Cordell, the fact that he was unable to find affordable housing of any kind reminds us of the local housing market's role in an individual's path to homelessness. These structural factors are notably absent from Don's off-the-cuff explanation for why veterans become homeless (clip 13)—that they are inappropriately entitled and look to the government for support rather than taking care of themselves.

2b. What do Don and Cordell's narratives reveal about the interaction between homelessness, precarity, and mental health and substance abuse within the context of the scholarly readings (Dopefiend; Berlant and Butler selections in "Precarity Talk")?

These narratives reveal the difficulty of extricating oneself from the mutually reinforcing and at times overwhelming dynamics of structural disadvantage and personal vulnerability.

Cordell and Don's narratives illustrate the distinction between what Wright (47) describes as the "literally homeless" and the "marginally housed," as well as the frequency with which people shift between these categories. As Wright notes, the number of literally homeless individuals is far smaller than the number who are marginally housed, but the risk of slipping from the latter to the former state is quite high at any given moment. Cordell variously had his own apartment, stayed with family, and resided in a shelter; Don similarly lived in his own apartment, but also resided temporarily with a female friend and in a shelter. An individual may avoid literal homelessness only at the cost of damage to one's support network and relationships with family and friends; individuals may overstay their welcome and place additional burdens on the already strained resources of those with whom they are residing.

Both the "Forgotten Fight" narratives and the experiences of the Edgewater homeless (Dopefiend) reveal the highly individualized connections between mental health, substance abuse, and homelessness. As we would expect, substance abuse can make people vulnerable to housing loss. But housing loss can also precipitate

substance abuse, and the two can also interact in other even more counterintuitive ways. Cordell acknowledges that substance abuse was a central part of his life for thirty years (clip 1). His recent slip into homelessness, though, was driven in part by a desire to maintain his sobriety at all costs, walking away from an apartment in order to avoid the culture of violence associated with addiction (clip 7). The recovery community provided a temporary respite; prior to moving into Liberation Family Services (the site where his oral history was recorded), Cordell lived in a recovery house, a small-scale cooperative residence where everyone is trying to maintain their sobriety (clip 9).

Literal homelessness carries with it significant stressors that can only worsen mental health problems and substance abuse. Cordell (clip 9) relates how not having a roof over one's head, not having one's own space, and navigating multiple personalities in transitional housing creates a constant sense of stress. Don describes how his depression worsened precipitously when he ended up on the street, leading ultimately to a serious suicide attempt. It is impossible to know what role Don's depression played in his loss of housing, but it is not unreasonable to think that low mood, low energy, and feelings of hopelessness, guilt, and shame might have made it difficult for him to endure the sorts of stressors he faced. Wright tells us that in his Health Care for the Homeless project (1989), one-eighth of the individuals served had psychiatric disabilities of at least moderate intensity; elsewhere he suggests that a third of literally homeless men and women in the late 1980s suffered from psychotic disorders. For the Edgewater homeless, the constant hustling, the difficulty of reliably accessing services, the daily grind of having to find a place to sleep, and the vigilance one has to maintain against the police or those who would prey on them created a particularly debased form of self understanding (lumpen subjectivity) in which violence and exploitation were normalized.

Carter's story, as related by Bourgois and Scoenberg, vividly illustrates the difficulties of battling addiction while homeless. Carter is a forty-something Vietnam era veteran who did not serve in the war but had been battling addiction for many years. In 2001, California passed a law giving non-violent, drug-abusing criminals the option to seek treatment rather than be incarcerated. Carter was already in jail and seized the opportunity for early release, committing to attend a residential treatment program and remain abstinent for ten months. Because he was a veteran (martial citizenship), Carter was also able to access free job training to work in the tech industry. While he did not secure work in that sector, he managed to obtain a license to operate heavy

machinery instead. Bourgois and Schonberg describe Carter as a generous actor in the economy of sharing who existed among the Edgewater homeless. Carter starts out marginally housed, staying at his eldest sister's home, but quickly slips into literal homelessness when he stops contributing rent and food to her household. He briefly goes to a single-room occupancy (SRO) hotel, then takes up with the Edgewater community.

It is not difficult to imagine how an individual early in recovery may be overwhelmed by the stressors of homelessness. Carter's story initially gives the reader hope that he will enjoy a sustained recovery. Bourgois and Schonberg write about the male bonding that occurs in the treatment program, the ways in which Carter resists a relapse on heroin despite numerous stresses, his position as a mentor in the treatment program, and his initial resistance to rejoining the Edgewater crowd's practices. But employment and a single episode of treatment prove inadequate against the broad structural forces he faces. Carter is laid off from his job as a result of fluctuations in the labor market. His social network outside of treatment is thin and fragmented, overpopulated with peers who remain involved in using and selling drugs. Without robust family support or access to long-term treatment, Carter relapses and ultimately dies.

The notion of precarity helps us think through this dynamic and to make analytic sense of these individual narratives. Precarity helps us theorize how material conditions affect individuals; it helps situate the featured veterans within the current regime of punitive neoliberalism (Dopefiend). As Butler states, "our precarity is to a large extent dependent upon the organization of economic and social relationships, the presence or absence of sustaining infrastructures and social and political institutions[.] ... Precarity exposes our sociality, the fragile and necessary dimensions of our interdependency." (170)

Berlant articulates several aspects of precarity:

- The contingency of life and life circumstances: Cordell and Don's easy slippage into homelessness from stable housing underscores how quickly one's life conditions can change, especially in the context of a capitalist labor market that no longer promises stable and long-term employment (Cordell clip 4).
- Reproduction of life: Sustaining manageable, material conditions for oneself is increasingly difficult in the contemporary moment. Large numbers of Americans live paycheck to paycheck; for those who are marginally housed, episodes like the brief

December 2018-January 2019 government shutdown can push them into literal homelessness.

- Accumulation of wealth and government austerity: Social welfare funding and public services as a whole have declined markedly under the current economic regime. All these veteran's narratives point to insufficient veterans' services; when they are present, they are often rendered inaccessible by bureaucracy (Cordell clips 6 and 13). That being said, veterans still have access to far more resources than other homeless individuals.

- Structure of feeling (loss of fantasy of upward mobility): Dopefiend is perhaps the best example here. Bourgois and Schonberg describe Carter's recovery narrative in terms that echo the American dream of a stable job and a home of one's own. Carter's dreams are shattered, though, and his narrative ends in death. This sense of precarity — as affect/structure of feeling — is widespread among Americans now, particularly those who are hanging on to middle class status as deepening income inequality diminishes the middle class. It is particularly acute for veterans, who are told that they have a privileged claim on this status but are just as vulnerable as anyone else to its degradation. According to Berlant, this loss of faith in institutions has contributed to a particular politics for both the right and the left in the current cultural moment.

Butler further theorizes precarity in two critical ways:

- The unequal distribution of precarity: Berlant's four elements are not evenly distributed in the population. We see this in Wright's overview of those who inhabited the homeless category in the late 1980s, as well as in the accounts of Don (who has a psychiatric disability) and Cordell (who was convicted of a felony and served time). The fact that Don and Cordell are African American is not incidental. Rather, it reflects the structural and social inequities that particularly affect communities of color and supports the notion of punitive neoliberalism that Bourgois and Schonberg articulate.

- Precariousness as an ongoing process: Carter's story in Dopefiend best reflects Butler's point here. He experiences numerous assaults on his stability (e.g. losing jobs, car accidents, death in family). While in the structured environment of the recovery program, he feels he can withstand these setbacks and losses. But once he feels stable, he loses his job again and relapses. These are structural, social and personal assaults that threaten an already very vulnerable man. This threat of cyclical slippage marks the iterative nature of precarity.

### Sub-theme 3: Homelessness and Stigma

Recommended: Don clip 9:

<https://theforgottenfight.com/veteran-biographies/don/>

Don talks about the difficulties of not having a home and the challenges of dealing with all of the different types of people in transitional housing.

3a. Describe the stereotypes you generally associate with people who are homeless. How do Don and Cordell reinforce or reject those stereotypes? How do these stereotypes play out in the case studies described by Bourgois and Schonberg in *Dopefiend*?

The men who populate the pages of Bourgois and Schonberg's ethnography embody many of the most dramatic stereotypes of homelessness—in Wright's words, "the drunk, the addicted, and the just plain shiftless." These men regularly engage in petty crime; they are literally and metaphorically unclean. Their behavior and even their presence are disruptive to normative social institutions, whether a hospital (as patients or visitors) or their own families of origin. They are physically and mentally unhealthy, though many of their problems seem to have originated with or been exacerbated by their own poor decisions and lack of self care.

Don and Cordell challenge these stereotypes, though at times they inadvertently reinforce them. Don acknowledges a history of depression (clip 13), and his transcript reveals a serious suicide attempt. He is, in this sense, not well. But substance abuse is not a central aspect of his struggles. While Cordell speaks openly about his history of addiction, it was his commitment to recovery that prompted him to give up his last apartment (clip 7). He also makes it clear that he does what his care providers ask him to do, though he fears that this renders him ineligible for additional services (clip 6). Both men are well-groomed and reasonably articulate, a far cry from the descriptions of Petey, Carter, and the other Edgewater homeless. It is worth recognizing, though, that Bourgois and Schonberg attend primarily to those phases of their subjects' lives when they are at their most debased; had Carter survived his addiction, it is possible that he would have resembled Cordell in another ten or fifteen years, and Petey



ultimately achieves a remarkable degree of stability. While both Don and Cordell recognize a kind of hierarchy within the community of homeless veterans, Don in particular brings some of his class assumptions to bear on his experience, speaking derisively of “the riff raff” and drawing a distinction between “people that’s used to having things, ... people that’s not used to having things ... [and] people that just don’t care” (clip 9). It is clear that Don identifies with the first of these categories; others like Petey and Carter would presumably occupy the third, and Don has little patience or respect for such men, despite the fact that they are united in their label of “homeless.” Cordell’s reference to an elderly peer who is a “pain in the behind” and the many “personalities” that populate a shelter convey a similar impression (clip 9).

### 3b. How does stigma affect these men’s ability to find and maintain housing?

Stigma operates in multiple, overlapping ways in these narratives, communicating implicit negative ideas about veterans, homeless men and women, and those with an incarceration history. Stigma is the mechanism by which cultural assumptions are brought to bear on individual judgments and discriminatory decisions. It is also, however, often embodied in formal mechanisms of exclusion, whether in organizational policies or legal codes.

Don (clip 12) directly addresses stereotypes about veterans, noting that many people derive their ideas from TV and popular culture. Though Don does not elaborate, the implication is that many Americans assume veterans are deeply and irrevocably damaged by their time in the military or their exposure to war. Popular narratives of the traumatized veteran depict him as a “ticking time bomb,” struggling with substances and prone to outbursts of violence. Even in the current climate of respect for veterans, what landlord would want to rent to such a person? Don rightly notes that there are “good veterans” and “bad veterans” — “we’re human.” Both Don and Cordell argue that veterans must be understood as a heterogeneous group, and that stigmatizing assumptions are based on a monolithic understanding of the population. Indeed, their narratives powerfully demonstrate this fact.

The stigma associated with Cordell’s incarceration history (clips 6 and 12) forces him to confront both interpersonal bias and formal discrimination. He is all too familiar with the stereotype of the felon and bemoans people’s tendency to judge based on a label rather than getting to know another person. Though we know little about Cordell’s

crimes, he lived through the height of the war on drugs, when politicians sought to convince the public that they were tough on crime by supporting felony convictions for non-violent offenses. He does not embody the stereotype of the hardened criminal, but given the stigma of a felony conviction, anyone learning of his history is likely to pause and reconsider their approach to him.

This is directly relevant when it comes to the search for housing. Cordell notes that landlords often reject applicants with a felony history out of hand. The rights and protections that a felon enjoys vary widely by state. In some, felons must petition just to have their voting rights restored, while in others potential landlords or employers are not permitted to conduct background checks that extend beyond seven years. Cordell recognizes that if a landlord accepts HUD funding, they are barred by federal law from discriminating on the basis of conviction history. This is not always honored, however, and in a state without a tradition of fighting for the rights of ex-prisoners, recourse may not be readily available. Patterns of discrimination are sensitive to local housing markets, as landlords are less likely to bar a potential tenant for their conviction history if the landlord is desperate to fill units. Even with this in mind, however, the stigma associated with a felony conviction tends to concentrate ex-prisoners and parolees in lower income and less safe neighborhoods—precisely the areas they are cautioned to avoid.

A history of homelessness can, by itself, make it more difficult to secure housing. An applicant who has been staying with friends or on the street may struggle when asked to provide contact information for former landlords. The stigma associated with homelessness—lazy, shiftless, unreliable—cannot help but inform a landlord's thinking. And yet as Cordell (clip 10) explains, he has continued to work even while living in a shelter, maintaining a business that sells women's clothing at flea markets. According to Wright, many nonelderly homeless men were either working or actively seeking work in the late 1980s, and most of the Edgewater homeless jumped at the opportunity to work (driven, admittedly, by their addiction). Without some source of income, survival in even the most basic sense is a challenge; most homeless individuals are desperate to return to housing, which provides further impetus to paid employment.

The structural barriers that shape experiences may be similar but how those factors interact with individual circumstances challenges us to think critically and in nuanced ways about the dialectic between structural and personal vulnerabilities.

## **Concluding the Discussion (15min)**

1. How have historical and structural forces (1980s and 1990s) shaped the more recent landscape of homelessness (2000s-today)?
2. As a future physician, how do you envision confronting structural inequities when caring for the homeless population, both veterans and non-veterans? What about stigma? Precarity?

## **Additional Student Activities**

1. Before the class, instruct students to take a picture with their cell phones that captures an essential aspect of homelessness and/or veterans. In class, ask them to explain how and why they chose this image in light of the portrait discussion.
2. In small groups, ask students to formulate a policy initiative that would address one of the issues covered in the discussion.
3. In small groups, ask students to critically evaluate a current economic or social policy that has been proposed and determine whether it will ease or exacerbate homelessness. Suggest reasons why.
4. Come up with a list of other social problems that involve an interaction between personal vulnerability and structural forces. How is the dynamic different from or similar to the dynamic seen in homelessness among veterans? How do you think historical forces have influenced these problems differently?
5. Display a series of images (modern and historical) and ask for students' interpretations
  - a. Photos of narrative subjects next to each other
  - b. Montage of photos capturing various aspects of homelessness.