

Carl: "Somebody went through my stuff while I was sleeping. And that's when they do it the most. When you're sleeping, they rob you. They rob you of your money." Amanda: "It's really stressful. [Your stuff] gets stolen, thrown out, misplaced, just, you don't even know." Rae: "I can't even fall asleep with a lighter in my pocket. It's gone." Tiffany: "A couple of times, we came back in our whole campsite was destroyed and dismantled. And I don't know if it was our friends, or if it was the City. I'm sure if it was the City, they would have taken everything, not just everything that was sellable. So, I don't know, it could have been both." Caitlin: "Every time you go anywhere you have to take everything with you. You can't really trust many people, unfortunately." *Do you feel like that really affects your ability to look for housing?* "Yeah, because the whole carting everything around or having people watch your stuff, and then having a bunch of shit go missing, it's just stupid stuff like that every day."

“Anything you turn your back on gets stolen right away.”

- Stan

Dusko: "And now the city's enforcing all these laws, you can't set up a tent anywhere. So, if, say, I set up a tent somewhere and I had to go somewhere and leave quickly. All my tent and all my belongings are there, I'll come back, and it's all gone. It's thrown in the garbage. All my personal belongings. Everything's gone. And there's no getting it back. And it's stuff I work hard for, you know. So it sucks." Coli: "You know how many times I've lost a tent and all my belongings so far? 5. I've had the city literally scoop up with a bulldozer my shit and dump it into a fucking thing." Steve: "About seven times now, I've lost tents something like seven times. At least that many times. And all my stuff. Like you got a laptop or you know what I mean whatever. It's gone. It's just poof, threw my clothes out, gone ... What you have you try to carry it and it's gonna take you forever to carry all that. It's a pain in the ass. And if you're not there fast enough they'll throw it all out on you. And they don't reimburse you or nothing. They don't care."

Park Stories

Issue Two: Possessions

**Warning:
This zine contains
strong language and
distressing content**

In the summer of 2022, the Research for Social Change lab set out to learn: What is it like to experience homelessness in Peterborough, Ontario? And what are people's experiences seeking services from Peterborough's homeless-serving system?

Over about a month, we interviewed 48 people who were experiencing homelessness or had a history of homelessness in Peterborough. Most of these interviews took place in Victoria Park, a popular hangout and sometimes camp site across the street from the One Roof Community Centre. Participants were given a \$25 honorarium to thank them for their time.

We are sharing what we heard in a series of zines called Park Stories. When the series is complete, we will collect them into a larger volume. Every individual quoted in this zine has been given a pseudonym to protect their privacy.

This zine and the research it draws on was supported by Reaching Home: Canada's Homelessness Strategy and United Way Peterborough & District.

When you are homeless, it is challenging to have any personal possessions with you. Emergency shelters do not have secure spaces to store your things. Anything you choose to keep with you (e.g., in your pockets or in a backpack) could be taken from you while you sleep. And the use of amnesty boxes or lockers (e.g., to get the beer or smokes you've put there for safe-keeping) requires a person to vacate the shelter for five hours – no small amount of time in rain or snow.

For these reasons, some people choose to camp. But camping does not mean your personal possessions are safe.

If you don't pack up your tent and belongings every morning, there is a good chance the tent and all your things will be removed by city staff and placed in the garbage. Some people we interviewed had their tents and belongings put in the garbage four or five times in 2022 alone. Repeatedly losing one's things in this way results in a loss of dignity and hope. It gets harder and harder to start over.

37 (out of 48) people talked about their possessions during interviews. The interview excerpts chosen for this zine represent experiences shared by some of these 37 people. This zine is about people's things and what happens when our municipal response to homelessness does not acknowledge how hard it is to lose all the things that remind a person of their worth, their loved ones, and the life they lived before they became homeless.



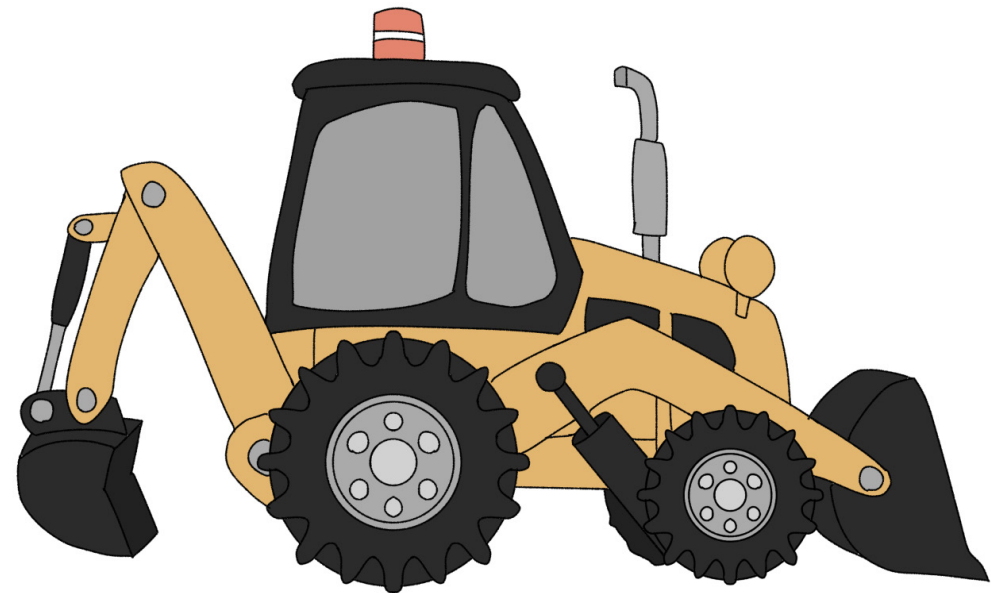
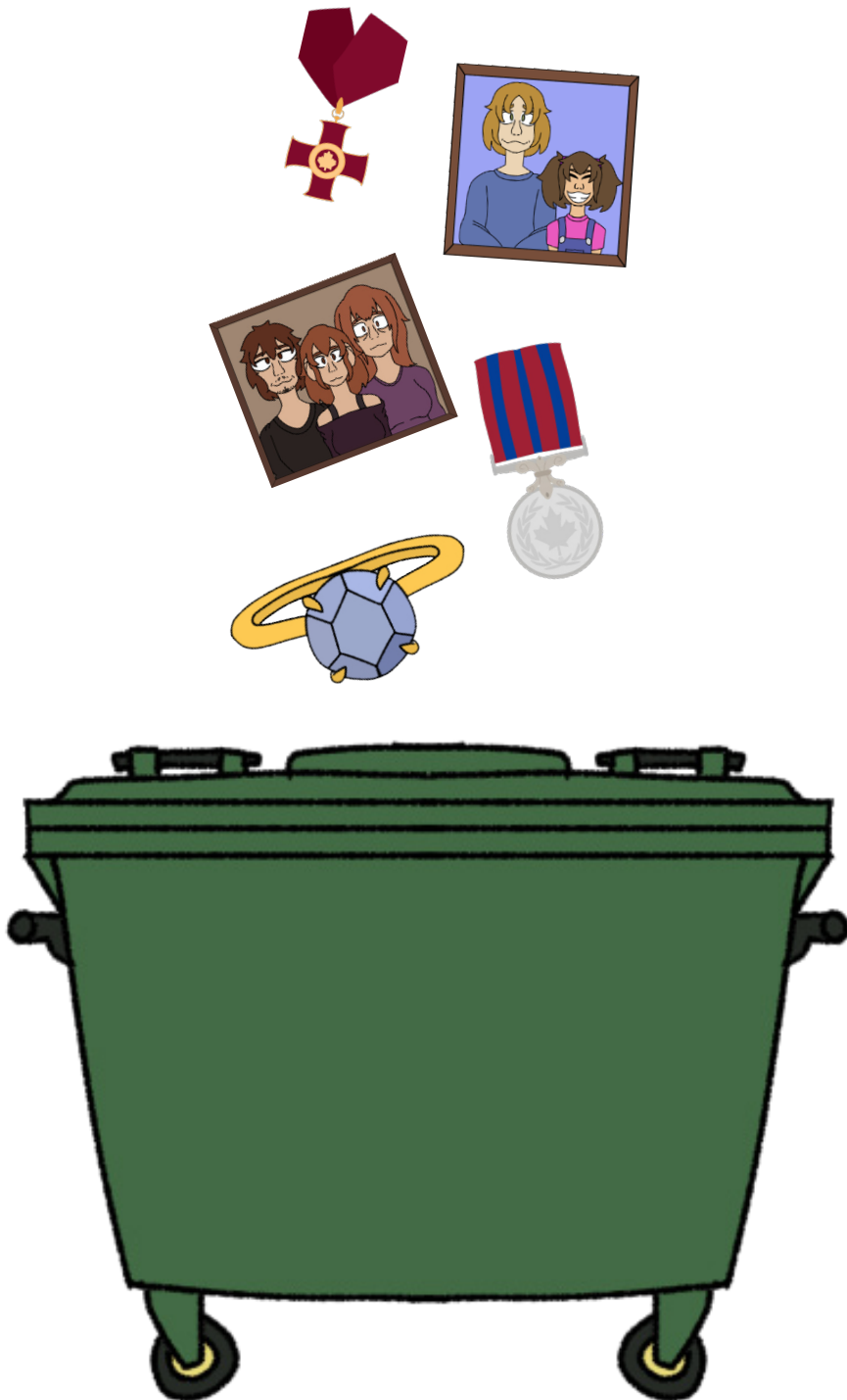
The things that make us human

It's easy to forget that our things -- our clothes, homes, furniture, bikes, cars, pets, photographs, music and books -- play a role in defining us. People we interviewed shared how hard it is to have all this stripped away because of an experience of homelessness.

During an interview, Hillary recounted losing her engagement ring when city staff put her tent and all her possessions into a dumpster. She went on to note that, "everything gets taken," before she dissolved into tears.

Steve put it simply: "It sucks not having your own stuff ... you lose like family albums and things like that. Serious shit...family photos, yeah, you can't get those back."

Similarly, Ron shared that when he went into the shelter, he "lost war metals from my father, things that were given to me by my father and mother that I can't ever replace because my dad's dead."



Losing your housing — and your stuff

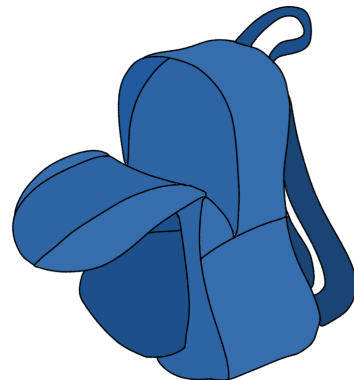
For many people we interviewed, housing loss coincided with the loss of one's things, often — but not always — due to evictions.

When an interviewer asked Jake if he had time to get his stuff moved out after he was evicted, he explained: “No, it was really fast. We just moved on” with what he and his roommate could carry.

Similarly, Lois recalls that after only four days renting a room in a new place, her landlord “said ‘you’ve got to be out of here by two [o-clock].’” Lois was outraged, reminding her landlord, “I paid you first and last.” Eventually, however, she gave in. But she asked to keep her stuff in the room over the weekend, she said. Unfortunately, “I wasn’t even gone for three fucking hours, and he was already throwing my shit out to the curb. My brand-new bed, everything, \$10,000 worth of shit ... He gave me my last month’s rent back but that’s only because I went to the landlord and tenant board.”

After Hillary’s rent increased from \$1,100 to \$1,750 in January 2022, she and her two roommates were unable to pay their rent. One day when she was home alone, the police arrived: “A man knocked, he was a police officer, like a movie police officer, pretty intense. And I was like, oh my god, I thought that we had tribunal on the first [of the month]. So, I was like, this can’t be them kicking us out, because if you have tribunal on the first, it doesn’t make sense. But that was that. ‘You have 15 minutes.’ And [my boyfriend] wasn’t home and my other roommate wasn’t home ... I had to get everything that I thought was important to three other people in 15 minutes.”

Derek described losing his possessions after being evicted from housing units dedicated to those on the By Name Priority List. Derek shared that being kicked out of his housing “caused me to lose my address and everything that I owned.” Derek continued, “I lost all my stuff at that place because I don’t drive. I couldn’t come up with somebody with a vehicle within the week they gave me to get my stuff out of there. So I ended up losing everything I owned and then I ended up in a shelter.”



Losing your stuff at shelters

If people don’t lose their things when they lose their housing, they lose them when they seek out emergency shelter. One can’t bring furniture and other large items with them into the shelter. Furthermore, if you are evicted from the shelter or do not turn up by curfew, you risk losing any of your things that have been left there.

When Rose and her roommate were looking for housing, they chose not to use the shelters “because like we had stuff with us, we have property with us and there’s no facilities for that at the Overflow shelter whatsoever ... if we had already had the car, we would have locked our stuff in the car and left it somewhere nearby. But because at the time we didn’t, we would have been showing up with like, a whole bunch of both of our clothes and like food and stuff and probably being forced to abandon that somewhere to be allowed into the shelter.”

Julia explained that you cannot store “furniture and stuff, no” when you stay at the shelter, but that you can store some clothing. Unfortunately, there have been changes to the rules about how long and whether local shelters will store your things, and some of the people interviewed have lost their possessions.

For instance, we learned from Julia that if a person fails to show up at Cameron House for more than one night, “then they just pack up your stuff and you go.” The storage shed was destroyed in a recent storm, “so there’s nowhere to store anything.”

Others explained that a service restriction can also result in a loss of stuff stored onsite. While the shelters used to store people’s things for 30 days, according to the people we talked to this timeline has recently changed: “It was at the Brock Mission, and I got kicked out for 30 days. And within the first 10 days they threw all my stuff out ... Threw it in the garbage ... I was at the other shelter — [I was told] by staff, not by the management, that you had 30 days to get your stuff if you get kicked out.”

Like Ron, Coli learned the hard way that the shelters will no longer store a person’s things for 30 days, “They only keep your shit there now for 10 days, and it’s in the fucking dumpster ... everything you own is gone. And they don’t tell you that, and neither does Overflow. I had to get 20 bags, everything I owned, out of a dumpster ... It used to be 30, now it’s 10. Everything you own in the world. It’s awful.”

Theft at shelters

For smaller personal items, some shelters provide unlocked storage or small lockers within which one can store some possessions while staying at the shelter; others only offer access to an amnesty box. But if a person brings their personal belongings into the shelters, they risk having them stolen. Most of the stories we heard about theft occurred in the local shelters.

Nathan recounted, "I've had every cell phone I've ever had stolen from the Mission." And Ron explained that people "go through your stuff at night when you're sleeping."

The constant threat of losing your things provokes a state of vigilance among shelter residents. For this reason, people noted that staying at a shelter can be "stressful, always looking over your shoulder" (Quinn).

But not all the shelters are equally stress-provoking in this regard. For instance, Derek says the Brock Mission is "not as bad as the Overflow was because at the Overflow I lost three phones in three months due to thieves, because we had no lockers or nothing there. At Brock mission [on the other hand], you have a locker, so if you have something valuable you can lock it up."

Gary affirmed the importance of lockers. "You had to watch the stuff in the Brock, or they'd steal it," he said. "So, they gave us lockers. And then I put all my valuables in my locker."

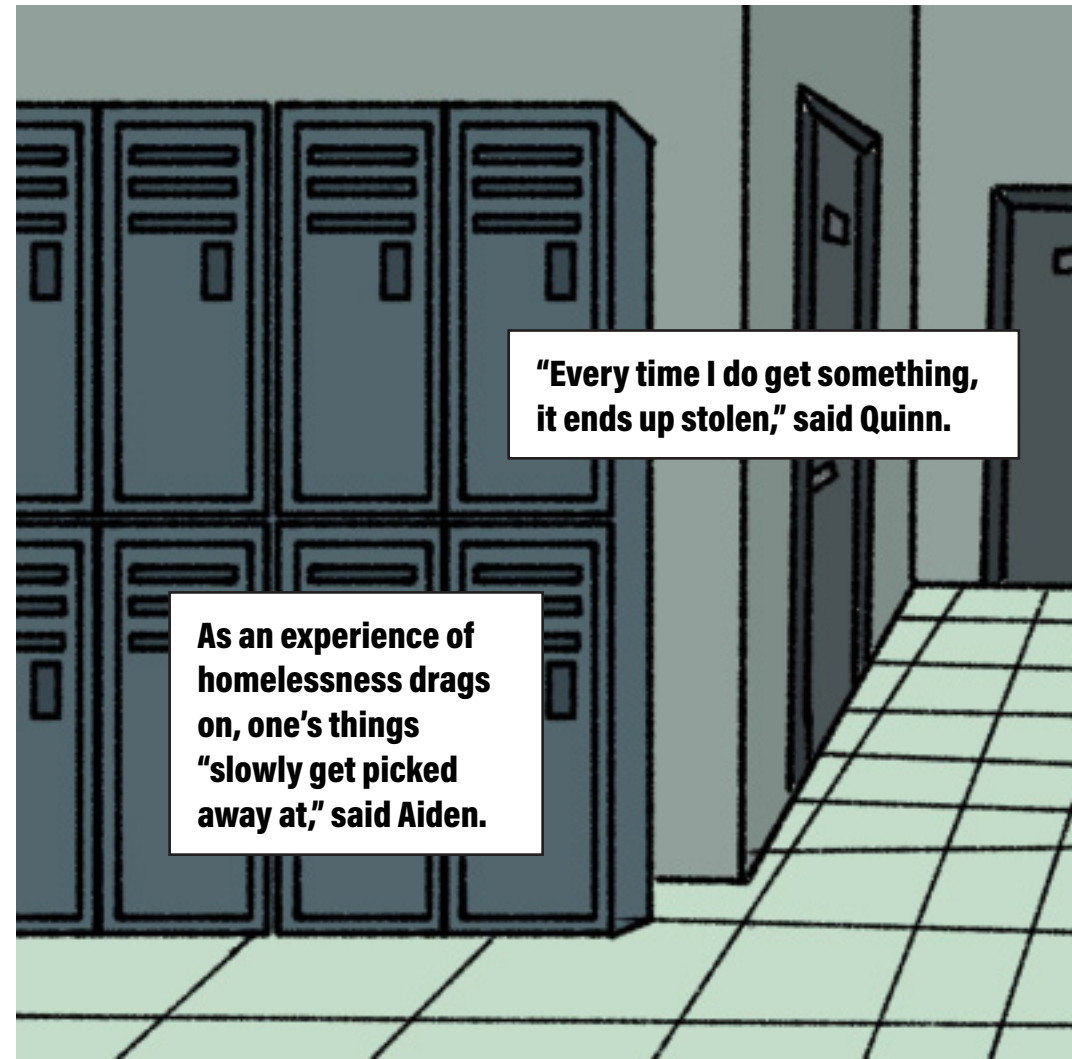
But given prior experiences, not everyone trusts that their things will be safe in a locker. Julien observed that he chooses to "carry a backpack

with all my belongings. Now, like Brock Mission has lockers and you can lock up your stuff, but I don't really trust those. I know people that had theirs broken into."

As an experience of homelessness drags on, one's things, "slowly get picked away at" until you only have the clothes on your body, Aiden said.

Once people have been homeless for a while, they no longer have anything to try to keep safe. Aiden talked about only having "my clothes and stuff like that. So, I would just keep it up by my bed."

Eventually, some people resign themselves to an utter lack of possessions. "I had clothes. They all got stolen. Every time I do get something it ends up getting stolen," Quinn said.



As an experience of homelessness drags on, one's things "slowly get picked away at," said Aiden.

Searches and security

Because some items cannot be brought into the shelters, people are searched by security upon entry and provided with amnesty boxes (e.g., to store drugs and alcohol or weapons). But the rule that people must leave the shelter for five hours after taking something from their amnesty box undermines the utility of this measure.

Aiden explained his understanding of the rules during an interview: “No weapons allowed. And yeah, no drug paraphernalia or anything like that.”

In a move to embrace a harm reduction approach, all prohibited items are meant to be placed in amnesty boxes so people can store these items and are less likely to try to sneak them in. The people we interviewed explained why the amnesty boxes don't work as designed; people continue to sneak things in (and out) because of the rule that requires people leave the shelter for five hours after removing anything from an amnesty box.

Julia explained, “I got caught with a crack pipe in my boot in the winter ... I had to throw it out. They give you an amnesty box to put all your paraphernalia and shit in.”

An interviewer questioned Julia, “But people don't [use the boxes]?” And she said, “Yeah, I don't think so. Because once you take anything out of that box, you have to be gone off property for five hours.”

As Ariel notes, the five-hour rule is out of touch with the realities of substance dependence. As such, people still bring in drugs and supplies, which makes the shelters less safe: “I don't think the shelters are any safer [than the streets]. A lot of times, you're probably safer on the street ... The fact that you have to lie, you have to be more sneaky ... Sneaking stuff in, sneaking stuff out so that you're not sick [from withdrawal].”

Keith echoes Ariel's observation that the security searches and the amnesty boxes do not make the shelter safer: “You're not supposed to bring drugs in ... Everybody brings drugs in ... Almost every time that I went through those doors, I had some kind of illegal substance on me. They do wave you down with a metal detector. It doesn't work ... It probably would catch a gun or a knife. I had a skewer, but it was to scrape a tube. But a skewer could go through somebody's neck.”

The five-hour rule is not aligned with a harm reduction approach.

Choosing to tent to keep things safe

Some people explained that exposure to thefts and the challenges associated with keeping one's personal possessions close-by and safe shaped a decision to sleep outside. Unfortunately, this did not reduce their exposure to theft.

On the day we interviewed Carl, someone had taken his bike tools while he slept. He explained: “Somebody went through my stuff while I was sleeping. And that's when they do it the most. When you're sleeping, they rob you.”

Substance dependence and prolonged exposure to scarcity can make people do desperate things. As Stan notes, “You tend to go to sleep and you lose everything you own. If anybody's around, like, if you overdose, people are taking everything out of your pockets and stealing your shoes and your hat before they revive you. It's horrible.”

People also lose things during the day, if they leave their tents unprotected. As Steve notes, “when you go out for the day too right. What happens is, you can lock your tent, but it's a fucking tent, they can just cut it open or do whatever ... I don't even buy stuff anymore.”

Tiffany shared, “A couple of times, we came back and our whole campsite was destroyed and dismantled ... I'm sure if it was the city, they would have taken everything, not just everything that was sellable.”

In order to protect their things, some people pack everything up every single day to keep it safe. Stan explained that it takes a lot of time and energy to look after your things when you don't have a home: “Because when you're homeless, it's just having everything that you own with you and looking after that and taking care of that. It just takes up a bunch of your day.”

Caitlin shared this view of things, when she remarked “It's stupid because every time you go anywhere you have to take everything with you. You can't really trust many people, unfortunately.”

Losing belongings in encampment clearings

For others who choose to tent or sleep rough, the loss of personal possessions is a consequence of a tent eviction – this is when the Parks and Facilities Bylaw is evoked to justify the removal of people’s things from public property. People told us their personal possessions, including their tents, were put in the garbage.

Dusko had been tenting for a year when we interviewed him. He explained that it’s “been hard like I have three jobs and you know? ... It sucks [to live in a tent]. It gets dirty fast. There’s no washroom, no running water. You wake up in the middle of the night you’re thirsty. And now the city’s enforcing all these laws. You can’t set up a tent anywhere. So if, say, I set up a tent somewhere and I had to go somewhere and leave quickly. All my tent and all my belongings are there, I’ll come back, and it’s all gone. It’s thrown in the garbage. All my personal belongings. Everything’s gone. And there’s no getting it back. And it’s stuff I work hard for, you know. So, it sucks.”

Daniel shared a similar story of returning to find his tent and all his belongings were gone: “I came back and my stuff was gone; they took everything ... They took my tent and everything that was in my tent.” Daniel’s interviewer asked if he got a letter or any other warning. “No,” he said, “they just came.”

“I came back and my stuff was gone; they took everything ... They took my tent and everything that was in my tent.” - Dusko

“I’ve had the city literally scoop up with a bulldozer my shit and dump it into a fucking thing.” - Coli

We talked to Steve the day after an encampment clearing when he’d had his tent removed by City of Peterborough staff. Like Dusko, he expressed how hard it is to lose your things over and over again: “About seven times now, I’ve lost tents – something like seven times.” *Seven times in five years?* the interviewer asked. “Oh yeah,” Steve replied, “at least that many times. And all my stuff.”

Like Steve, Hillary and Coli shared that they had also lost their things during repeated encampment clearings. During an interview, Hillary explained that she no longer bothered to set up a tent: “I have a tent now. But the city just keeps taking them away, so it doesn’t really matter ... they take everything you own and throw it in the dump without any warning.” Hillary told us she’d had her things thrown out by city staff four times in six months. While she had resigned herself to this reality, Coli remained incredulous that this keeps happening to her: “You know how many times I’ve lost a tent and all my belongings so far? Five. I’ve had the city literally scoop up with a bulldozer my shit and dump it into a fucking thing.”



Once housed, holding on to your stuff becomes easier

People are simply unable to keep their things safe when they are homeless; it is only when a person gets access to housing with adequate personal space and protections (e.g., a bedroom door that locks) that they protect their things and begin to relax.

Quinn shared that even in a rooming house, it's hard to keep your things safe because people can break your lock or kick open your door. He explained, "Once they know you have something, then it's gone."

John shared how all this changes once you get access to your own space: "So now I have a dedicated space, my own apartment. I made all these small steps to attain my goals. Within basically almost two years, I'm in my own apartment. I got a fridge and stove and I get to cook my own meals."

Aiden was living in transitional housing associated with a local shelter when we interviewed him. Now that he's housed, he can keep his things safe: "You have a key card that you to scan into your room, so nobody else can go in there, which is good."

Jake, Gary and John talked about having social service workers help them access beds, shoes, pots and pans and other things they had lost when they became homeless. John expressed gratitude for the people who have helped him: "Sometimes I get overwhelmed with the gratitude. I needed a new pair of shoes. Somebody heard that I needed a new pair of shoes. I went to PARN to get a taxi ticket ... [my worker] says "Oh, by the way, John, I got something for you" ... She opens up her drawer. Bang. Box of new shoes."

Talking to a social worker at a shelter, Jake learned that "Peterborough Social Services would pay your last month's rent ... they would give you are free double bed. Gary and I got a free double bed. \$800 Bed. Beautiful bed, love it. Okay, plus a couple of \$100 for pots and pans."

Most of the people we interviewed wanted access to safe and adequate housing and the things a person needs to start over.

Check out the other zines in this series:

Issue One: Jail
Issue Two: Possessions
Issue Three: Shelters
Issue Four: Navigating the System
Issue Five: Losing Housing
Issue Six: Encampments
Issue Seven: Coordinated Access

This zine's lead author was Naomi Nichols, the RSCL's director. It relied on contributions from Thamer Linklater, Jimmy Frickey, Samantha Blondeau, Marisa Mackenzie, Will Pearson, and Joey Lavictoire (who did all the illustrations).

Thanks for reading!

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Daniel: “I left one day, forget where I went. I came back and my stuff was gone, they took everything. They took my tent and everything that was in my tent ... They just came ... it fucks a person up because what do they expect you to do now?” Hillary: “I have a tent now. But the City just keeps taking them away, so it doesn’t really matter ... they take everything you own and throw it in the dump without any warning.” *How many times has that happened?* “Four. [Since January, 2022.] And then you have to try to rebuild and get your own stuff back. And how are you supposed to have a job? You can’t get an address, you can’t get mail, you can’t have a phone because someone is just going to steal it. No computer access. You have nothing.” Gary: “You couldn’t even leave a pack of cigarettes in your pocket. And they’d steal your cell phone, your wallet, your cigarettes, your shoes, your socks.” Julia: “I got caught with a crack pipe in my boot in the winter ...I had to throw it out, but they give you an amnesty box to put all your paraphernalia and shit.” *But people don’t?* “Yeah, I don’t think so. Because once you take anything out of that box, you have to be gone off property for 5 hours.” Stan: “You tend to go to sleep and you lose everything you own. If anybody’s around, like, if you overdose, people are taking everything out of your pockets and stealing your shoes and your hat before they revive you. It’s horrible.”



PARK STORIES is a series of zines produced by BfE SuperCrew at Trent University’s Research for Social Change Lab. The zines document the stories and observations that people with experiences of homelessness shared with us in Victoria Park in 2022.

You’re holding Issue Two — Possessions.
