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# Better Must Come: Exiting Homelessness in Two Global Cities

Matthew D. Marr

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# Better Must Come: Exiting Homelessness in Two Global Cities

## **Abstract**

[Excerpt] In this book, I address two sets of research questions by analyzing the experiences of people who used transitional housing programs in Los Angeles and Tokyo. The first set of questions emerges from the shared goal of escaping homelessness exhibited by my interviewees. It includes the following: How do people get out of homelessness? How do they navigate the social and economic contexts that contribute to their homelessness to obtain income and housing? How is the process of exiting homelessness experienced and interpreted? Why do some people fail in their attempts to get out of homelessness? How are some people able to translate these exits into longer-term stability? Social science research has primarily focused on processes of becoming homeless and surviving materially, socially, and psychologically in that condition, without following people out of homelessness. Although this literature humanizes homelessness by highlighting the structural forces that push people into that condition and their individual and collective resilience in enduring it materially, socially, and emotionally, it does not say much about the aspect of homelessness that I found those experiencing it obsess about—how to get out of it. Thus, I push for a more balanced portrayal of homelessness by using a longitudinal, ethnographic approach that follows people experiencing homelessness as they seek to secure, and sometimes succeed in securing, more stable income, housing, and lives.

## **Keywords**

homelessness, housing, exiting, stability

## **Comments**

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# **BETTER MUST COME**

Exiting Homelessness in Two  
Global Cities

**Matthew D. Marr**

**ILR PRESS**

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## Part I

# **HOMELESSNESS AND GLOBAL CITIES**

# Exit Stories: Carlos and Takagi-san

## Carlos

On a sunny fall day in 2003, I sat with Carlos, a short and stocky fifty-one-year-old Mexican American, on folding chairs in a church parking lot in Los Angeles's Skid Row district to hear about his experiences living in a transitional housing program nearby.<sup>1</sup> Born in El Paso, Texas, he moved with his family to Bakersfield, California, when he was an adolescent. His father died a few years later, and Carlos dropped out of school after the tenth grade to help his mother, a farmworker, raise his eleven siblings. Although he continued to contribute to his family, he also had a case of wanderlust. "See, I'm the kind of person that, I used to see the mountains, and that's where I wanted to be, whether it was cold or not. But I enjoyed it because I wanted to see the world. I was young, I was like a big old bull, strong, and nothing would stop me from working."<sup>2</sup> So he began traveling between California and Nebraska, working most often on farms slaughtering cows or in restaurants as a cook. He became active as an organizer in the farmworker movement led by Cesar Chavez, where he met his wife with whom he eventually had seven children. His family stayed in Bakersfield, but he continued to migrate for work. The hard physical labor wore on him, and when the men he played pool with suggested an easier way to make money, he began couriering packages of cocaine and heroin.

Carlos was captivated by the easy money and started trafficking drugs up the West Coast, through the Midwest, and to Northeastern cities, sometimes getting caught by police and serving time along the way. His wife initially waited for him, but as time passed she found a new man who could provide her with a more stable and fulfilling relationship. While at first he did not use hard drugs, he eventually tried

heroin with a woman he met on the road, got hooked, and was addicted and homeless between the ages of roughly twenty-seven and forty. One lengthy stint in jail was the impetus to kick his habit, but for about a decade afterward he continued to traffic drugs, staying on the streets, in missions, and in motels when he could avoid jail. Eventually he made his way to Los Angeles and stayed in Skid Row missions. Trying to make a new start in life, he resisted the temptation to get back into the drug business, but he had to begin taking insulin for diabetes, had chronic pain in his feet, and even had thoughts of suicide.

One day he stopped by a Skid Row drop-in center in search of better housing and was referred to a transitional housing program. Carlos said, “That’s where I met my case manager, Marisol. And we had some real good conversations. She’s a very, very, nice person. And she helped me as much as she could, talked to me, counseled me, and tried to help me to go to this other counselor, things like that. And I saw her interest was not about money, it was about really helping the person. So I started talking to her—even going into my problems of (possibly) relapsing back into drugs and all that.” Carlos saw Marisol, a Latina and a trained social worker in her late twenties, as being a person who offered sincere help when he was at a particularly vulnerable point in his life. At first, he was intimidated by the numerous program requirements, such as attending employment readiness courses, feeling that he could not keep up given his poor health. But once he felt he could trust Marisol, he was motivated to meet her high expectations for him to pursue his General Education Development certificate (GED), find a job, and secure housing.

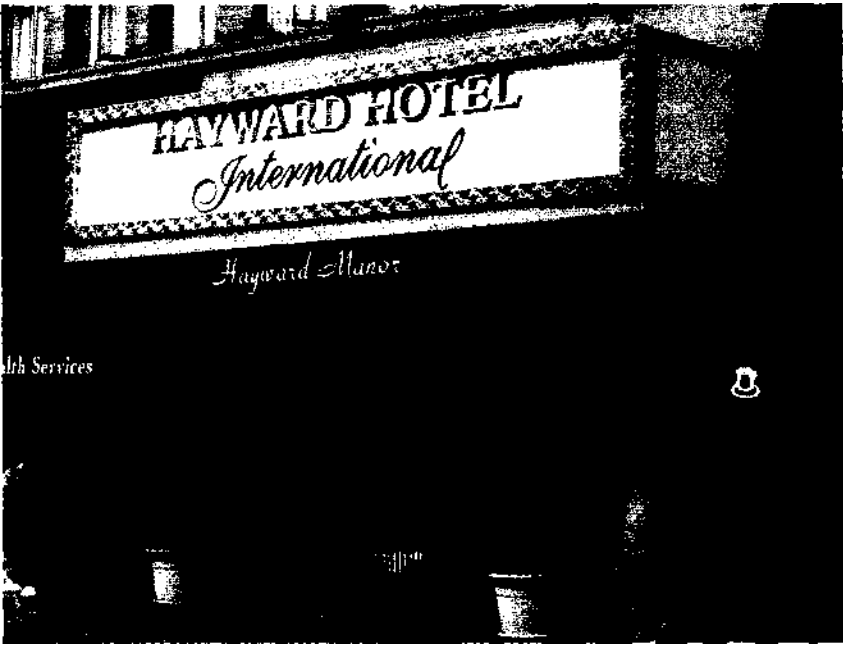
He also pointed out other staff who aided him, describing the entire environment of the program as helpful and healing. “They treated me just like family. And I really love them, every one of them, how they work. I told Marisol one time, ‘I don’t hold back or I don’t need to get mad at what you’re trying to do for me. I know you’re trying to help, but it’s me that’s gotta want help.’ And that I was already determined that I was going to do something about my life. That little help they give me, something nobody ever done.” Marisol and other staff provided Carlos an array of instrumental assistance in addition to emotional support. They arranged meals appropriate for his diabetes at the program cafeteria, enrolled him in GED courses, introduced him to an employment program for felons, referred him to health care services, and helped him put together an application for Social Security Insurance (SSI) benefits.

Despite medical documentation of his various disabilities, his application to SSI was rejected. The reasons largely escaped him, but he said he was told by a welfare office caseworker that he had to be at least sixty-five years old. He tried a job selling hotdogs at Dodger Stadium introduced by the program for felons, but had to quit after enduring a day of throbbing pain in his feet. With his lack of education and applicable job skills, limited contact with family and friends, and income of \$221 per month from General Relief (GR),<sup>3</sup> Carlos’s prospects for exiting homeless from the program



appeared to be dismal. He reached a crisis point amid the stress of group living and felt that he might do something that would derail his progress. So he went to see Marisol. “I was about to bust. I was so mad. And I wanted to cry but I wasn’t gonna cry in front of a lady, but I told her, ‘You know what, Marisol? I need to move on. I’m living among nine other roommates. I’m in there with men. These are just the same feelings that I had when I was in prison. No respect, no privacy, no nothing.’ Somebody stole my TV. I didn’t do nothing about it. Nobody said nothing about it. I said, ‘I need to move out. You know what? If I lose my control, I’ll kill someone. And I don’t wanna go back to jail.’” Fortunately for Carlos, Marisol was able to provide a solution to his predicament. “She told me to go see this lady at the Hayward Manor [a single room occupancy hotel]. And so she helped me to get into the housing. From there, they sent me to Section 8, the Housing Authority, and I paid \$25 to see in the computer about my credit and felonies and stuff. Well, they approved me, and in two weeks, I was in. I said, ‘Thank God!’ I praise God for helping me get in there, but I also put a little blessing on the people at the [program] for helping me.” The last time we spoke, almost a year had passed since Carlos had left the transitional housing program, and he was still living in a subsidized room in the hotel. A long-term case manager from the transitional program was helping him apply for MediCal benefits from California’s medical aid program for the very poor so he could get into a rehabilitation program for his leg pain. Since his only income was from GR, with about 30 percent going toward his subsidized room and another 10 percent tithed to his church, he relied on free meals at local missions or his church, but occasionally he had to skip meals for a lack of funds. His only contact with his large family was with his brother Mario, a truck driver with whom he talked by phone about once per month and who would take him out to eat whenever his route brought him through Los Angeles. However, he was thoroughly engaged with his church, studying to be a minister and substance abuse counselor, using a church van to bring Skid Row residents to services in nearby Eagle Rock. Sometimes he would even connect unemployed parishioners with jobs through contractors who worked on the church building. Although he was clearly still living in poverty, physically unable to do manual labor, and hoping to move somewhere with a private bathroom and kitchen, he did feel that he was in a much better material, emotional, and spiritual state than before he entered the program:

I am learning through the help of programs like [the transitional housing program]. Because I came here with no goals, no direction, no hope,



The entranceway of the single room occupancy (SRO) hotel where Carlos lived in a subsidized room after leaving transitional housing

no nothing. By them opening the door and trusting and believing in me when I found, look this is my goal, this is what I want to do, and I am willing to do whatever I can. So they stretched out their hand for me and believed in me. Something that, in the world, nobody ever did. I was always afraid. Every little problem that came up, I solved my problems by getting stoned, doing drugs, drinking, and doing the craziest things. But they showed me how to set goals and to be able to achieve them. And I learned this because they had the faith to teach me and show me even though when I did wrong, they were patient to help me understand. If it wouldn't have been for the program, I don't know where I would have been. I probably would have been out there still.

## Takagi-san

About one year after my first conversation with Carlos, and approximately fifty- four hundred miles across the Pacific Ocean in Tokyo, I sat down with Takagi- san,<sup>4</sup> a thirty-eight-year-old man from nearby Ibaraki Prefecture. Takagi-san was staying in a temporary emergency shelter funded by the Tokyo Metropolitan Government that, due to widespread opposition from local residents, was placed in a

parking lot adjacent to the large bayside Rinkai Park. With nothing better to do that day, unable to look for work until he was transferred from the shelter to transitional housing (called *jirzYsw shien senta*, or self-reliance support center), he sat with me on a bench in the park and described how he ended up in the shelter.

Takagi-san grew up in a working-class family, his mother a homemaker and his father employed first by a subcontractor of Tokyo Gas and then moving on to work as a taxi driver. When his parents divorced, he stayed with his mother and lost contact with his father. After completing junior high school, the highest compulsory level in Japan, he worked full time for eight years in a sushi restaurant. Since the job did not provide benefits, such as payment into a pension for retirement, or offer opportunity for upward mobility, he moved on to see new places and have new experiences, working as a sushi chef along the way. Aside from one stint at a restaurant in Yokohama where he rented an apartment, he usually stayed in the dorm of his employer, very rarely having a room of his own. He eventually began working at a “family restaurant” in Ibaraki and moved in with a girlfriend. But Takagi-san quit because his pay was lower than he was used to, and after a bit of unsuccessful searching he broke up with his girlfriend and went to Tokyo to find work. He used his 60,000 yen (about \$538)<sup>5</sup> in savings to stay in small but cheap “capsule hotels” and all-night “comic book (*manga*) cafes” just outside of Tokyo in Matsudo City, Chiba Prefecture. He would bike to “Hello Work,” the local public employment agency, to look for jobs. But his money ran thin, so he moved into scenic Mizumoto Park in nearby Katsushika Ward. He stayed there for about a month, sleeping on a bench under an awning to protect himself from the seasonal tropical rains of the early summer (*tsuyu*), enduring the humidity but feeling lucky that it was not during the winter cold. He fended for himself, keeping his distance from numerous other men who lived in the park, and used what money he had left to buy lunch boxes (*bento*) and cup-sized ramen noodles from a convenience store.

Takagi-san had heard about programs for people in situations like his on TV, and after a few weeks in the park he went to the Katsushika Ward welfare office to seek help. “I was a little unsure. I thought I could find work, I really did. But then you need a guarantor if you get an interview [for a security job], right? That’s no good. But I didn’t have any money, so after talking to them [the welfare office staff] a bit, I decided to go for it.” By chance, there was an opening in the emergency shelter and he was able to get in two days later. He was still in contact with his mother, but when I asked why he did not return to live with her he said, “Even if I try to go back, I have no place there. My mom remarried and I don’t get along with her husband.” He did not give her any details about his homelessness and initially refrained from asking her to be a guarantor, but instead had her send him some clothing once he was in the shelter. Takagi-san had about 900,000 yen (\$8,007) in debt from predatory lenders (*sarakin*) and credit cards from a period of unemployment in the early 1990s when he tried to make ends meet by gambling on horse races. He hoped to get some assistance

in dealing with his debt from the program or outside nonprofit organizations that sometimes visited the shelter, but at the time he was more focused on finding employment. He thought about getting a driver's license or training as a "home helper" for the elderly in case he was unable to find restaurant work, but he did not have time before being transferred to transitional housing.

After moving into transitional housing in Tokyo's working-class Sumida Ward, Takagi-san soon found work in a pub (*izakaya*) through the local Hello Work. However, he thought his boss was too picky and quit after one week. About one month later, he found another job through referral by a friend in the program. He began working as a register and stock clerk at a twenty-four-hour chain supermarket in Hatchobori, central Tokyo, about a thirty-minute train ride away. Two other men from the center worked there alongside young students from China. His first three months was a training period where he worked forty hours per week with part-time status, and after that they would decide whether or not he was to become a full-time employee with benefits and security. His starting wage was 880 yen (about \$7.18) per hour, and 1,110 yen (about \$9.87) per hour for the night shift.<sup>6</sup> He preferred to work nights, from 11 p.m. to 8 a.m., not only for the higher wage but because he was used to working late in sushi restaurants and pubs. His assignment was to work twenty days a month for a take-home salary of about 130,000 yen (about \$1,166) after paying social insurance (*shakai hoken*), pension (*nenkin*), and taxes. Despite rigid rules, he said he had no problems with the staff at the center. Still, he rarely sought them out for help. Most of his complaints were reserved for other residents. Since he shared a room with men who had not found work, he had trouble sleeping during the day in preparation for his night shift and even got into shouting matches with them. Feeling that the nonworkers were simply scamming the center and not trustworthy, he became friends with others who had found work and tried to get out with them on days off to bowl or play pinball-like gambling games (*pachinko*) for stress relief.

When I met him again two months after he left the transitional program, Takagi-san described himself as "living a normal life." He sometimes had difficulty making ends meet the week before his monthly paycheck but said, "Isn't that how it is for everyone? Even for people working normally as a salaryman?" He had moved into an apartment in Takenotsuka, on the fringes of Tokyo near Saitama Prefecture, renting for 42,000 yen (about \$377), with a private "unit bath" so he did not have to use a public bath. He looked without help from the program staff and settled on the first place he was shown since he thought the rent was reasonable and it was close to a station, about a thirty-five-minute commute from his job. His move-in costs were approximately 170,000 yen (about \$1,524), of which the center covered 60,000 yen (about \$538). Also, Takagi-san got over his pride and called his mother, who agreed to serve as his guarantor. His training period ended and his hourly wage rose slightly to 900 yen (about \$8.07) but his night shift wage stayed the same, barely increasing his monthly income. He felt his current work to be much easier than the long hours he

would put in as a sushi chef. But he was concerned that he had not been made a full-time employee, which would have increased his wage more and provided seasonal bonuses, as well as more stability, respectability, and potential for upward mobility.

Life was not as stable for Takagi-san when I caught up with him again five months later. He quit his job abruptly because he was not promoted to full-time status. In hindsight, he acknowledged that he had reacted rashly, but he also just did not see any sense in being stuck in a low-paying part-time job and was confident in his ability to find a better opportunity. He had been out of work for about three months, paying rent with the last of his savings, leaving him without money to buy food. He did not have money for the following month's rent and arranged for his landlord to wait for a month as he looked for work. He had been going to Hello Work every other day and went on interviews but had no offers. "I didn't think it would come to this. I've been on a lot of interviews, about 10. I've been turned down by them all. I've gotten caught up because of my age. They were almost all jobs at restaurants. I haven't interviewed at chain restaurants because they are even stricter about age. They hire full-time employees, but only up to thirty or thirty-five. Thirty-eight and thirty don't sound too far apart, but I guess it makes a difference." Also, most restaurant jobs he saw in "sports newspapers" popular among working-class men were in Hachioji in western Tokyo or Yokohama and other parts of Kanagawa Prefecture, too far to commute from his apartment. He also looked for work at *pachinko* parlors, but he found they also preferred younger workers in their twenties. He considered dispatch work in factories or event set-up that would pay about 6,000 yen (about \$53) per day, but that would not ensure any long-term stability. As we talked in a fast-food restaurant in Kita-Senju Station near his apartment he lamented, "There is no work. It's driving me crazy. I'm going to end up on the streets again."

He saw no use in contacting the transitional housing program staff about his problems, feeling that they would not be sympathetic because he had quit his job. Instead, he pondered *going to the Adachi Ward welfare office, the closest to his apartment, to apply for welfare benefits called livelihood protection (seikatsu hogo)*. However, he had been there once already and was told that he needed to demonstrate he was sick. Otherwise, the only option was to apply for a 50,000 yen (about \$449) loan from a social welfare organization (*shakai fukushi kyogikai*) but the application process was complicated and required a guarantor. He was clearly demoralized by his situation, staring off into space, sighing, and saying he was simply tired ("Mo *tsukarechatta yo!*") and did not want to go back into a shelter or program. After sternly refusing my offer to buy him lunch several



The building in which Takagi-san rented an apartment after leaving transitional housing times, he eventually relented. When we parted, he said he would try finding help again at the welfare office and I wished him luck and encouraged him to stay in touch by mail because I soon had to return to Los Angeles. A letter to Takagi-san I sent from the United States a few months after this meeting was returned with a stamp indicating he no longer lived in the apartment. Although I do not know his destination or whether or not he returned to a state of homelessness, it is clear that Takagi-san was struggling, largely on his own, in a labor market that offered few opportunities for stability and security.

## Introduction

Although there are glaring contrasts, the similarities in Carlos's and Takagi-san's experiences challenge popular images of homelessness as complete destitution, demoralization, defeat, and entrenchment. Their moves in and out of homelessness also contrast with scholarly research documenting and interpreting the worldviews, survival strategies, and experiences of "homeless people" lodged in a "homeless culture," "homeless identity," or "homeless community." Indeed, in my conversations with Carlos, Takagi-san, and other transitional housing program users in Los Angeles and Tokyo, they distanced themselves from these images and the people around them who they felt embodied the degradation of homelessness. In both cities, all persons I followed formed plans to improve their economic and housing stability, although these plans varied in detail, practicality, and alignment with program requirements. Neither their attitudes toward work nor their social networks could be best described as oriented toward acculturation into a homeless lifestyle, subculture, or identity. They fought hard to change their circumstances and improve their lives, with some overcoming tremendous challenges such as addiction, depression, social isolation, denial of state welfare benefits, tedious paperwork requirements to access aid, paternalistic programs, group living arrangements, a lack of myriad resources, and constrained opportunities in labor and housing markets.

In this book, I address two sets of research questions by analyzing the experiences of people who used transitional housing programs in Los Angeles and Tokyo. The first set of questions emerges from the shared goal of escaping homelessness exhibited by my interviewees. It includes the following: How do people get out of homelessness?

How do they navigate the social and economic contexts that contribute to their homelessness to obtain income and housing? How is the process of exiting homelessness experienced and interpreted? Why do some people fail in their attempts to get out of homelessness? How are some people able to translate these exits into longer-term stability? Social science research has primarily focused on processes of becoming homeless and surviving materially, socially, and psychologically in that condition, without following people out of homelessness. Although this literature humanizes homelessness by highlighting the structural forces that push people into that condition and their individual and collective resilience in enduring it materially, socially, and emotionally, it does not say much about the aspect of homelessness that I found those experiencing it obsess about—how to get out of it. Thus, I push for a more balanced portrayal of homelessness by using a longitudinal, ethnographic approach that follows people experiencing homelessness as they seek to secure, and sometimes succeed in securing, more stable income, housing, and lives.

The similarities I found among interviewees in Los Angeles and Tokyo also drive my argument that homelessness, at individual and societal levels, should be viewed primarily as a predicament that is extremely traumatic and stigmatizing but surmountable, rather than as a stable condition, identity, or culture. This draws on anthropologist Kim Hopper's (2003) approach to homelessness as liminality, or a disorienting in-between space void of clear roles, but builds upon it by de-emphasizing how people adjust to this state and emphasizing the social processes that shape transitional process out of this ambiguity. By focusing directly on the process of exiting, I not only examine an understudied aspect of homelessness but also advance a shift in the understanding of homelessness, emphasizing the potential for its transcendence. I show how persons experiencing homelessness orient cognitively and behaviorally toward transcending the condition of homelessness itself. Instead of engaging in a debate for or against the influence of a culture or a social psychology of homelessness, a debate that can reinforce social boundaries of a housed "us" versus a homeless "them," I shift focus toward revealing how economic, material, social, emotional, and other resources such as information and trust are secured to exit homelessness. Moreover, I examine how access to such resources is affected by contexts at multiple social levels. Practically, this is important because truly ending homelessness at a societal level requires not just addressing individual vulnerabilities but also increasing access to living-wage employment, affordable housing, and social ties.<sup>1</sup> My focus on exits thus promotes a more holistic understanding of homelessness and how the social problem is created, sustained, and alleviated by the interaction of social contexts at multiple levels.

But the processes by which Carlos, Takagi-san, and others were able to exit homelessness differed in many ways between the two cities. My interviewees in Los Angeles generally relied on social ties with family, friends, and program staff to secure



subsidized housing, having had little success in penetrating mainstream labor and housing markets. Their counterparts in Tokyo, however, succeeded in obtaining employment, albeit low wage and unstable, and moved into simple rental housing with very little help from family, friends, and program staff. The focus of this book is to explain how these similarities and differences in the process of exiting homelessness are produced by the interaction of social contexts at multiple levels, from the global to the individual. Where the experiences of my respondents in Los Angeles and Tokyo diverge, questions linking homelessness and broader social transformations occurring in global urban society emerge. How are processes of exiting homelessness affected by both global and local conditions? What are the conditions at different social levels that can promote exits from homelessness?

Critical urban scholars see homelessness as a result of neoliberal globalization—a process in which rising inequality and instability of employment and housing in global cities, the “command centers of the global economy,” accompanies economic growth predicated on low-wage service-sector employment, financial and real estate speculation, and a state retreating from welfare and social service provision (Sassen 2001). While in this book I use the term “global city,” my study provides insights beyond the limited set of cities that commonly receive that label, including what could be described as “globalizing cities” (Marcuse and Van Kempen 1999)—urban areas seeing broad trends associated with globalization.

In the current age of globalization, which began roughly in the early 1970s, goods, financial investment, workers, culture, and ideas move across borders at heightened levels and speeds. One ideology that has become increasingly powerful is that of neoliberalism, which posits that the logic of free markets aimed at macroeconomic growth should take precedence over state intervention and social redistribution (Harvey 2005). In the age of neoliberal globalization, economic inequality *between* nations has decreased, but socioeconomic inequality *within* nations, especially in cities that connect to the global economy, has widened (Forster and d’Ercole 2005). So while some people are becoming wealthy, and a select few fabulously wealthy, many more are finding opportunities for upward mobility or even basic stability eroding, with the most unfortunate falling into homelessness. The neoliberal response has not been social redistribution or bolstering safety nets, but an increased emphasis on “personal responsibility” for improving labor market competitiveness with limited help from programs like transitional housing. But amid these global tendencies, local variation in

experiences of marginality, as evident in the stories of Carlos and Takagi-san, persists. Thus, with a longitudinal qualitative approach, my purpose is to explain how and why processes of exiting homelessness are different in two global cities, not whether the rate of exiting homelessness is higher in one city or why that might be.

Using analytical leverage provided by my comparison, I advance a second argument, that processes of exiting homelessness are not determined by any singular context, such as the constraining forces of neoliberal globalization, punitive state policies toward the poor, or individual-level resilience or lack thereof. Popular depictions of homelessness often favor either poor victims of a global trend toward heightened inequality and exclusion or defiant individual survivors fighting valiantly for a sense of worth amid demeaning conditions. However, neither the production nor amelioration of homelessness at individual and societal levels is determined by a singular context. Instead, my comparison demonstrates that processes of exiting homelessness are shaped by the interaction of multiple embedded contexts that operate at different social levels. Thus, even though economic, demographic, and (neoliberal) ideological globalization are driving forces behind “new inequality,” “advanced marginality,” and homelessness across global cities (Sassen 2001; Wacquant 2008), more local contexts, including labor and housing market structures, welfare state protections, social service settings, and predominant cultural views and practices, greatly shape the extent and content of experiences of marginality in any particular global city. Also, while surmounting the complex problems that drive people into homelessness requires substantial individual resilience, exits from homelessness also depend on *forgiving contexts* at multiple social levels—whether favorable conditions in local labor and housing markets, flexible and holistic social service settings, or cultural milieus that promote mutual aid among friends, family, and community. These are social contexts that work against the global and local trends driving inequality and that can promote exits from homelessness.

## Comparing Los Angeles and Tokyo

I have selected Los Angeles and Tokyo for comparison because they are global cities that are seeing wide social polarization accompany both economic growth and stagnation, but they also contain different labor markets, housing markets, welfare policies, social service delivery settings, and cultural milieus. I draw on fising-Anderson’s (1999) *classification of postindustrial welfare regimes* to examine how state action interacts with labor *markets*, households, and community organizations in various ways to buffer the effects of market risks on individuals. The United States has a liberal welfare regime type, characterized by highly deregulated labor markets, individualized risk, and lean welfare state outlay restricted to needs- rather than rights-based assistance. Also, the American welfare regime is criticized for institutional discrimination against African Americans and Latinos and for taking a punitive approach to rising social insecurity via welfare retraction and mass

imprisonment of the “war on drugs” (Wacquant 2009). Japan has a hybrid welfare regime, combining elements of the liberal type with the corporatist type of continental Europe. Japan’s regime is more interventionist in labor markets than its American counterpart, placing primary responsibility on employer protections for a male breadwinner/female homemaker family model, and augmenting it with a lean welfare state (Estevez- Abe 2008; Miura 2012; Schoppa 2006).

At the city-region level, national welfare regimes intersect with local contexts, including *urban regimes*, or local political coalitions of government officials, business representatives, and community leaders (Dreier, Mollenkopf, and Swanstrom 2004). I use the concept *urban welfare regime* to represent the interaction of national welfare regimes with more local conditions that shape processes of neoliberal globalization. Global influences are not making national or local agency and variation irrelevant, but various scales interact in complex processes of neoliberal “glocalization” (Brenner and Theodore 2002; Harvey 2006). Los Angeles is deeply penetrated by global capital and by labor migration, and it has a tax-averse public and a fragmented governmental structure with a weakened capacity to provide social services that caters to powerful financial interests, all of which have radically transformed the local labor market (Dear 2002; Keil 1998; Wolch 1996). These forces have produced highly spatialized racial inequality partially countered by a diverse civil society that is vibrant but overwhelmed by its inability to meet growing social needs (Davis 1990; Milkman 2006). Tokyo is less penetrated by global capital and labor and led by a strong developmental state, which is highly coordinated nationally and locally and has kept unemployment and inequality comparatively low and spatially even (Fujita 2003; Hill and Fujita 2000; Machimura 1998). But the developmental state has been increasingly ineffective amid global economic vicissitudes and has used a conservative approach to social welfare insufficient to meet rising needs, countered by a growing but still small and limited civil sector (Fujita 2011; Hasegawa 2006; Saito and Thornley 2003; Waley 2007).

I compare how Tokyo’s more forgiving labor and housing market conditions, centrality of male breadwinners, and lean and paternalistic state social services affect efforts to exit homelessness differently from Los Angeles’ more liberalized (and racialized) labor and housing markets, more gender-egalitarian households, and lean but privatized model of social service delivery. These institutional differences produce a larger and more diverse homeless population in Los Angeles but also pathways out of homelessness supported by family and friends, community organization staff, and subsidized housing amid meager chances for living-wage employment and affordable housing; in Tokyo, they produce a comparatively small and less diverse homeless population and pathways out of homelessness largely devoid of social ties but with opportunities for unstable low-wage employment and austere but affordable housing. My comparison contributes to the critical urban literature focusing on rising

marginality amid globalization by showing how these varying structural and institutional contexts interact to affect experiences and interpretations of urban marginality in these two global cities. Although I do explore differences within each city by race, ethnicity, gender, and age where appropriate, in this book I give precedence to the comparison across the two cities.

Comparing exits from homelessness in two global cities sheds light on how processes of globalization interact with local variability, demonstrating how neo-liberal globalization is a contingent rather than a monolithic force (Peck and Tickell 2002). Urban studies has long been criticized for an American and western European bias in the development of urban theory; more recently, scholars are making advances in transforming it into a truly global social science endeavor (Auyero 2011; Robinson 2010). Central to this advancement is inclusion of a diversity of cities in efforts to understand general urban processes amid globalization and how local contexts interact with them to result in on-the-ground similarities and differences, particularly in various forms of social exclusion and inclusion (Abu-Lughod 2007). In contrast to depictions of globalization as rendering national borders and institutions increasingly irrelevant, I use my comparison to highlight how different welfare and urban regimes affect a particular form of mobility at the margins of global urban society. As such, I use analogical theorizing (Vaughan 2004), comparing similar processes (exiting homelessness) across two different settings to refine theory in two sets of literatures, ethnographies of homelessness and critical urban *studies*. I generally *follow the* approaches of the extended case method and global ethnography (Burawoy 2009; Burawoy et al. 2000), demonstrating how broad social forces and institutions such as neoliberal globalization, national welfare regimes, and urban regimes shape lived experiences of urban marginality. I engage in a dialectical process in which theory is both explanatory of specific observed experiences and interpretations as well as reconstructed by these observations. Rather than attempt to use the standards of statistical inference to make generalizations about the representativeness of specific events, such as the rate of exit from homelessness among my interviewees in the two cities, my approach relies on logical inference, extrapolating (in this case developing and revising theories) based on the validity of in-depth qualitative analysis of a social process (Small 2009a).

## **Following Exits from Homelessness in Two Global Cities**

I address my research questions and develop my arguments by following thirty- four people, seventeen each in Los Angeles and Tokyo, as they attempted to exit homelessness. Rather than taking a cross-sectional snapshot of these individuals amid

homelessness in a single-time interview, I conducted longitudinal interviews with people participating in transitional housing programs in the two cities. These programs provided time-limited assistance to help their clients address perceived individual limitations so that they could secure stable income and housing. In Los Angeles, I had permission from the program to place flyers in the mailboxes of approximately two hundred program participants, inviting them to an onsite information session about the study. I recruited ten participants at the session and then an additional eleven more through snowball sampling and through requesting participation from others I met while observing at the program. I was able to maintain long-term contact after departure from the program with all but four of these people. In Tokyo, the semigovernmental body subcontracted by the Tokyo Metropolitan Government to operate transitional housing (*jiritsu shien senta*, or self-reliance support centers) denied me access. So, I accompanied members of local nonprofit organizations when they visited the programs and emergency shelters where transitional housing users were required to stay before moving in. There, I distributed flyers about my study and requested participation. Twenty-six persons agreed to the first interview, with two providing introductions to two more participants. I lost contact with more people in Tokyo (nine), likely given my limited access to program sites there and primary residence in Los Angeles. In both cities, those who left the study did not demonstrate substantial differences in their experiences of homelessness, demographic characteristics, and the circumstances they needed to overcome in order to exit. Although my data are not statistically generalizable to all clients and staff in the programs I studied in the two cities, it is important to remember that attempting to replicate representative sampling techniques in qualitative case studies often does not meet standards of statistical inference because of low response rates for cold-called, in-depth interview requests and the limits of small sample sizes and populations (Small 2009a). Instead, I used theoretical sampling to capture a diversity of program experiences by ensuring that my interviewees had demographic characteristics (age, gender, race/ethnicity, and so forth) and lengths or forms of homelessness that reflected the client populations in the programs.

My longitudinal interviews began in the summer of 2003 in Los Angeles and in the summer of 2004 in Tokyo. I followed interviewees for at least one month after they left these programs, but in many instances I followed them for several months, and for some, for several years afterward. I conducted recorded interviews with them two to six times over a period ranging from three months to eleven years, with a median of one year. My interviews started off semistructured, using a rough guide of questions about how they fell into homelessness; their upbringing; their experiences amid homelessness on the streets, in shelters, and in programs; and their hopes and plans for the future. However, subsequent interviews were *less* structured and aimed to capture a diversity of experiences related to homelessness and exiting that my

interviewees deemed important. I also spent time *with some outside of these interviews*, “going along” on *daily* routines (Kusenbach 2003), accompanying them on job interviews and as they searched for employment, and for those who were able to exit homelessness, visiting them in their homes. In a few instances, more so in Los Angeles, I was able to witness interviewees reconnect with family and friends and even build new families. These longitudinal interviews and other meetings allowed me to understand the outcomes of their efforts in these programs, and, for some, the implications for longer-term trajectories.

I also collected data from the organizations and staff responsible for fostering exits from homelessness. In both cities, I interviewed several staff persons in the transitional housing programs who interacted with and attempted to aid my program participant interviewees. I was given full access to the program in Los Angeles and thus was able to observe in classes, dorm rooms, case manager offices, hallways, and dining halls. In Tokyo, I was denied access to observe by authorities administering the programs, but I was able to informally interact with a few staff outside of the program when they were “off the clock.” Also, I observed the support activities of a few private nonprofit and volunteer groups in Tokyo that supplement the self-reliance support centers. In both cities, I also interviewed local government officials, NPO representatives, activists, and researchers and collected secondary materials to understand the broader political, economic, and institutional contexts in which my primary interviewees were attempting to exit homelessness.

These data sources are supplemented by my other research projects and applied *work on homelessness in the United States and Japan spanning some twenty* years. This work has taken myriad forms and led me through various “home-  
homeless shelters and other programs in Los Angeles’s Skid Row and San’yū, Tokyo’s major *yoseba* or *doiyagai*;<sup>2</sup> and volunteering in shelters, programs, and street outreach in multiple cities across the United States (Los Angeles, San Francisco, Washington, D.C., and Miami) and Japan (Tokyo, Nagoya, Osaka, and Kyoto). Also, I have been able to interact with volunteers and staff of support groups and NPOs as well as research experts in both countries. These experiences have exposed me to the trauma, harshness, and demoralization of homelessness. But at the same time I have witnessed the fortitude that people experiencing homelessness must draw on to survive and improve their condition, sometimes obscured by stigma, emotional drain, disability, and addiction. *Better Must Come*, the title of this book, depicts the defiant optimism and persistence that individuals and communities in global cities need to muster to overcome obstacles at multiple social levels that create and sustain homelessness and urban marginality. In parts of this book, I discuss why some people I followed for this study were unable to exit homelessness during our contact. However, I do place a special focus on processes of exiting homelessness. I do so not to present a sanitized version of homelessness. Indeed, there are many stories of frustration, failure, misery, and degradation in these pages. But my focus on exits allows me to highlight what I believe to be transgressive resistance to homelessness (getting out of the condition rather than merely adapting to it in situ) and how it is shaped by economic, social, and cultural contexts.

## Homelessness, Ethnography, and Culture

I first met Barry, a forty-one-year-old white man from Rhode Island, one early morning outside the Skid Row transitional housing program while waiting for a job preparedness class to begin. George, a fifty-three-year-old white man from Maine whom I interviewed the day before, was contemplating taking a Greyhound bus back to New Orleans where he had sold hot dogs as a street vendor. The two men had long worked as day laborers, mostly distributing flyers in residential neighborhoods and on commercial thoroughfares. But they both complained they were excluded from Latino immigrant networks that had come to dominate Los Angeles's informal sector. George introduced me to Barry, telling me that he would probably be easier to keep track of for my interviews. Before I could even ask, Barry voiced his dissatisfaction with the transitional program—there were too many requirements to attend classes and he could get little support for what he saw as his only way out of homelessness, building up his flyer distribution business and moving into subsidized housing. When we sat beneath the trees outside the Los Angeles Central Library a few days later, he told me that he had been living on the streets, in shelters, and in unsubsidized single room occupancy (SRO) hotels<sup>3</sup> around Skid Row for nearly twenty years. He originally moved to California for the warm weather after he was honorably discharged from the military. His savings were stolen while he was staying in a cheap hotel near the Los Angeles International Airport. With few marketable skills as a high school dropout, he learned that there were day labor jobs available on Skid Row, and he got work from agencies like Minuteman and informal hiring sites like the one outside Martha's Kitchen, a deli. However, he struggled to find enough work to pay for his room, and he ended up building a plywood shack in a parking lot on the fringes of downtown, recycling cardboard to make ends meet.

Barry signed up for the local county welfare program (General Relief, or GR), but the \$221 per month was not enough to keep him housed. With lower back pain from construction work, he applied for federal disability benefits (Supplemental Security Income, or SSI) that would provide more income than GR. Despite the help he received from staff of the nonprofit organization Legal Aid, his application was rejected and appealed multiple times over fifteen years. He tried the transitional housing program but eventually dropped out when he was told that he had to attend more job search classes, which would conflict with his flyer distribution work. He took the savings he accumulated from his year in the program and moved into an unsubsidized SRO. However, when money ran thin, he began alternating between staying at the Midnight Mission and on the streets. For his bed at the Mission, he had to line up every morning at 4 a.m. to ensure that he received a temporary cardboard bed ticket distributed at 7 a.m. Given the Mission's rules, which were implemented to ensure those who demonstrated the most need for a bed received a ticket, he had to come back at 8 a.m. after breakfast to get a laminated "real ticket" for his bed.

Although this was a tedious and precarious way to secure housing, other programs, including those for veterans, also had course requirements that would prevent him from working day labor. He used his contact at Legal Aid to get help in applying for a federally subsidized SRO room, but demonstrating what urban poverty ethnographer Javier Auyero (2012) describes as the modal experience of state poverty relief, Barry was made to “sit and wait,” as he did with his SSI application and bed tickets. In frustration, Barry said, “If you’re working, you’re on your own. You’re a drug addict or an alcoholic, there’s millions of places you can stay. That’s wrong. I mean it’s like they’re rewarding you for being a drug addict or alcoholic.”

Barry’s experiences highlight a number of issues of central concern for scholarly research on homelessness in general, and specifically research that has taken an ethnographic approach. Since the reemergence of sizable and visible homelessness in U.S. cities beginning in the late 1970s, and in Japanese cities in the early 1990s, extensive research literatures on contemporary homelessness have developed. The most common theme in reviews of the American literature is the debate about individual and structural causes of homelessness (Lee, Tyler, and Wright 2010; Shlay and Rossi 1992). Whereas much of the early Japanese literature on homelessness consistently took a structural approach (Aoki 2000; Aoki et al. 1999; Iwata 2000), more recently there has been a focus on individual-level vulnerabilities such as mental illnesses and developmental disabilities (Morikawa 2013; Suzuki 2012). I see this debate as potentially being resolved by the work of Paul Koegel, Audrey Burnam, and James Baumohl (1996) on the complex mix of forces driving people into homelessness. Structural conditions such as deindustrialization, the rise of bifurcated labor markets, the decline of affordable housing stocks, and retreating social protections, including the restructuring of mental health systems, have created a sizable precariously housed population. Individual-level vulnerabilities, such as mental illness and substance abuse, and a limited ability to tap social ties, make certain people among the precariously housed more likely than others to fall into literal homelessness. These vulnerabilities are not distributed evenly across society in either prevalence or consequence. For example, from a social stress perspective, substance abuse and addiction as well as resource-poor social networks among extremely poor and disadvantaged racial or ethnic groups are likely to be at the very least partially a result of their marginalized position. This mix of structural forces driving precariousness and individual factors making some more vulnerable to homelessness is often exacerbated via traumatic, “triggering” events such as domestic violence, tragic accidents, the sudden death of intimates and caregivers, loss of employment, robbery, divorce, sickness, and the like, ultimately pushing people into homelessness. Thus, the setting for Barry’s fall into homelessness was the broad shifts in Los Angeles’s local labor and housing markets and welfare systems in which competition for low-skill living-wage paying jobs and affordable housing increased, and



opportunities for adequate welfare aid were sharply cut back (Wolch and Dear 1993). Barry's lack of human capital and social ties ultimately made him among the most vulnerable to these changes; the theft of his savings pushed him to Skid Row, precarious day labor, and eventually literal, on-the-streets homelessness.

This structural approach contrasts with that of more applied fields such as psychology, social work, and mental health, which have tended to emphasize the disproportionate and varied vulnerabilities of those experiencing homelessness. The influence of this latter type of research has contributed to a medicalization of the problem of homelessness, especially in the United States, resulting in the embedding of a discourse of "sick talk" in an expansive "homeless archipelago" of housing and services (Gowan 2010). Although approaches based on a medical model, including the provision of subsidized housing with supportive services to persons with disabilities instead of emergency shelter, have been key to reducing street homeless populations in many national contexts (Hombs 2011), the medicalization of homelessness has major limitations. Such a model directs policy and resources toward addressing individual vulnerabilities instead of tackling the broader social, economic, and policy contexts that drive and sustain the social problem (Lyon-Callo 2004). As Barry experienced directly, medicalization can also exclude those without sufficiently documented disabilities from subsidized housing and other forms of aid.<sup>4</sup> Also, it can justify aggressive outreach to those who, due to mental illness, allegedly do not know what is best for themselves, and police and private security sweeps of the "service resistant" who remain in public spaces (Murphy 2009).

Sociologist David Snow and colleagues challenged the "distorting tendencies" prevalent in the booming field of research on homelessness, seeing much of it as reliant on cross-sectional—primarily survey—data, thus overrepresenting individual vulnerabilities in support of the medicalization of the problem (Snow, Anderson, and Koegel 1994; Snow et al. 1986). Since persons with disabilities tend to experience homelessness for longer periods of time, they make up a larger proportion of the point-in-time population compared to the population experiencing homelessness over time. Cross-sectional studies thus tend to exaggerate the prevalence of mental illness and substance abuse and fail to capture the contexts that generate severe depression and alcohol and other drug use, which can be seen as responses to extreme poverty and homelessness. Instead, Snow and others advocate longitudinal studies that are sensitive to context and avoid the overapplication of reductionist perspectives that see homelessness as driven by individual-level causes and dynamics.

In addition to resisting medical reductionism, a longitudinal ethnographic approach that pays attention to multiple social contexts *and follows people out of homelessness* challenges the tendency to narrowly focus on how people acculturate to, identify with, and become entrenched in homelessness. My interactions with Matsuyama-san over time in Tokyo revealed a much more complex process. I first met

him as part of a weekly street outreach conducted by staff and volunteers of Sanyukai, a private, nonprofit medical clinic in Tokyo's San'ya district. In the summer of 2004, a staffing manager from a packaging factory in nearby Saitama Prefecture contacted the clinic. The manager said that local young people would not work in his old factory because it lacked air conditioning in the summer and heating in the winter. He thought that the unemployed people the clinic served in Tokyo would be willing to endure those conditions. He offered 250,000 yen (\$2,243) per month and a modest furnished apartment renting for 50,000 yen (\$449). But since the company itself was "restructuring" its workforce of those over fifty by encouraging early retirement, we were asked to try to find job candidates in their forties or younger. That afternoon, next to the "water bus" (ferry) stop on the Sumida River near Asakusa (a major entertainment district), a few other volunteers and I approached a group of men who were resting and drinking. They had spent the entire previous night scavenging through several nearby neighborhoods for aluminum cans. Most of the men appeared to be closer to their sixties than their forties, but I struck up a conversation with a much younger-looking man in grubby pants with a towel tied around his head to keep the sweat from his eyes. When Matsuyama-san told me that he was in need of work, I asked his age and he replied "forty-eight." I explained the opportunity in Saitama and although he thought it sounded good, he wondered if his somewhat older friends could get hired as well. Also, he said, "In fact, I've only been here [the riverside park] two days. I just got out of a live-in construction job (*hanba*) and my friend, or someone I thought was my friend, stole my savings. I'm really too tired so I'm not in any condition to go to an interview."

We exchanged information, and Matsuyama-san showed up at the clinic the next morning. I sat in on his interview, in which the staffing manager berated Matsuyama-san for being tricked out of his money and becoming literally homeless. Beads of sweat multiplied on Matsuyama-san's neck as he was questioned, and eventually he broke into tears when repeatedly asked by the manager if he was truly ashamed ("*Honto ni nasakenai desu ka?*"). The manager went on to explain the details of the job, and Matsuyama-san kept expressing interest, asserting that he would grow through the work experience. In contrast to the tense beginning of the interview, it ended with Matsuyama-san planning to move to Saitama the next day and the two smoking cigarettes and chatting casually. However, when I arrived at the clinic the following morning, I was told that Matsuyama-san had called from a pay phone to say that he would not be taking the job. The staff person that took the call relayed that Matsuyama-san said, "I have too much baggage" (*Ni ga omosugiru*), which he interpreted as obligations to the men in the park for their help. Also, the men apparently told Matsuyama-san that he probably would not be paid, a form of exploitation not uncommon among underground job recruiters (*tehaishi*) who prey on unemployed and vulnerable men in Tokyo's parks and stations. It appeared that

Matsuyama-san simply did not trust the manager, the clinic as an organization, the staff and volunteers, or any of us.

A week later, Matsuyama-san was sitting outside the clinic in the morning with glazed eyes and a lazy smile reflecting that he had enjoyed a beer or two after his night of recycling. I had visited the factory and apartment in Saitama and told him that the job was legitimate. He told me that he was not bothered by the manager's brash approach and was extremely thankful for what he thought was a tremendous opportunity, but everything was just too "heavy" (*omoi*)—he would have to borrow money up front, interview again at the company with an application falsified by the manager to hide periods of unemployment, and he was beginning to wonder why we were so focused on him. The staff and I phoned the manager, who was willing to be flexible and provide a trial period where he would not incur debt and they could resolve his concerns about the second interview. However, when I relayed this, Matsuyama-san thanked me sincerely and refused the offer. As he turned to walk back toward his small hut (*koya*) along the Sumida River, he smiled and said, "I'm satisfied with my life" (*Jujitsu shiteru yo*). The staff, the manager, and I were baffled by someone turning down a rare offer that would immediately remove them from the harshness of literal homelessness. At a staff meeting, the director of the clinic, often featured in the media for his insight into the hearts and minds of the dislocated men who come to San'ya, said, "If you've been on the streets long enough, you depend on your companions (*nakama*) and you can't leave them."

If my interactions with Matsuyama-san had ended with this weeklong exchange, I may have concluded that his case demonstrates a micro process of acculturation into a homeless culture and identity. This process seemed unaffected by what we thought was a fix to the structural problem of a lack of employment and housing. Although the stage was set for his homelessness given his marginal position as an informal live-in construction worker, once he was pushed into homelessness, he began a new process of learning to "do homelessness" (*homuresu wo yarn*) (Margolis 2008). However, I was able to keep in touch with Matsuyama-san long enough to see that this was not the best way to understand his experience of and orientation toward homelessness. Nearly a year after we first met, Matsuyama-san and many of his neighbors in the park were able to take advantage of a special Tokyo Metropolitan Government "housing first" program in which they moved directly into subsidized housing and were provided with public work while they looked for longer-term employment. Many residing in Sumida Park, like Matsuyama-san, were initially skeptical of the promises of work and housing, a hesitance viewed by some observers as indicating acculturation and entrenchment, and even a preference for homelessness. However, gradually outreach workers for the program built up trust through periodic, low-pressure interactions, and were able to assure program participants that they would be provided adequate housing and employment. Matsuyama-san moved into a simple

apartment on the edges of San'ya and began working as a cook, his chosen trade, in a small soba noodle restaurant. Although he noted that those he cooperated with in eking out subsistence in the park were the first in his life to show him the true "goodness of people" (*hito no yosa*), he preferred that they all move on to a more humane (*ningen rashii*) living situation in which they would be free to visit each other as they liked. Thus, rather than illuminating a process of acculturation and entrenchment in homelessness, a longitudinal approach to