

Culture



Skid Row Indians and the Politics of Self

E. Alan Morinis

Volume 2, Number 3, 1982

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1078115ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1078115ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Canadian Anthropology Society / Société Canadienne d'Anthropologie (CASCA), formerly/anciennement Canadian Ethnology Society / Société Canadienne d'Ethnologie

ISSN

0229-009X (print)

2563-710X (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

Morinis, E. (1982). Skid Row Indians and the Politics of Self. *Culture*, 2(3), 93–105. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1078115ar>

Article abstract

At the same time as native Indians have been increasing their political lobbying and organizational activity in Canada, the slum neighbourhoods of the inner cities have been witnessing a steady growth in Indian residents. Based on a study of the "Skid Row" Indian community in Vancouver, this paper seeks to link these two apparently disparate phenomena. It is argued that the underlying theme of Indian life on Skid Row is also political. The self-neglect, violence and other disvalued behaviours of Skid Row are seen as the political statements of a group who sees itself as powerless. Acting out the political process of the rejection of society on the stages of their own personal minds and bodies, Indians engage in "the politics of self".

Skid Row Indians and the Politics of Self

E. Alan Morinis
University of Victoria

At the same time as native Indians have been increasing their political lobbying and organizational activity in Canada, the slum neighbourhoods of the inner cities have been witnessing a steady growth in Indian residents. Based on a study of the 'Skid Row' Indian community in Vancouver, this paper seeks to link these two apparently disparate phenomena. It is argued that the underlying theme of Indian life on Skid Row is also political. The self-neglect, violence and other disvalued behaviours of Skid Row are seen as the political statements of a group who sees itself as powerless. Acting out the political process of the rejection of society on the stages of their own personal minds and bodies, Indians engage in 'the politics of self'.

Au moment où les autochtones développent leurs institutions politiques et forment des groupes de pression, on assiste à une migration régulière d'Indiens qui viennent s'installer dans les quartiers défavorisés des grandes villes (« skid row »). Ce texte tente d'établir un lien a priori paradoxal entre ces deux phénomènes. En effet, certains traits distinctifs de la vie dans les « skid row » passent par le politique : la déchéance, la violence et des comportements de dévalorisation sont perçus comme le manifeste d'un groupe sans pouvoir. Expriment au moyen de leurs corps et de leurs esprits le processus de rejet de la société, les Indiens du « skid row » engagent une autre dimension, celle de la « politique du soi ».

Native Indian activism in Canada has been increasing in recent years. Indian organizations have become stronger and more sophisticated and Indian leaders have become experienced, skillful and articulate. Representations to Royal Commissions, the Canadian Parliament, and international bodies have come to be an accepted part of contemporary Indian political affairs. Indian leaders have shown themselves to be at home lobbying the British Parliament, as they did recently over the question of patriation of the Canadian constitution.

Yet at the same time as this process of heightened political sophistication and organization has been taking place, another and apparently opposite development has been occurring. This one has received almost no publicity. We are witnessing an explosive increase in the number and prominence of Indians on the Skid Rows which are to be found in every one of Canada's major cities and in a few towns. Welfare Indians and Métis are in fact the fastest growing native grouping in the city (Dosman, 1972 : 68). Drunken, sick, malnourished, criminal, violent communities have long existed at the heart of the downtown core of urban Canada. Now these are becoming heavily Indian communities. It would seem that the communities of Skid Row Indians are completely outside the sphere of attention and influence of the renascent Indian political conscious-

ness. In this paper, I would like to explore the nature of life for Indians on Vancouver's Skid Row, and then use this ethnography to make sense of the simultaneous and apparently paradoxical increase in numbers of politically-effective Indians, and numbers of Indians on Skid Row today.

Not all, or perhaps even a majority of urban Indians spend much of their lives on Skid Row. But Indians have come to make up a sizeable proportion of the Skid Row population. The importance of studying this community lies in two factors. One is that Indians on the skids represent the current installment of Indian-White relations in this society, but it is a chapter just opened. We have reason to be concerned as an increasing number of Indians abandon the isolation and boredom of the rural reserves to seek out the exciting life of the city. Those who find a ready welcome into the established Indian community on Skid Row enter a world of poverty, sickness, abuse, racism, violence, prostitution and crime. There must be concern to find the causes of their suffering in the midst of affluence.

Secondly, it is misleading to see Indians on Skid Row as just another group of hopeless social misfits. From a dispassionate perspective, it is possible to see that the burgeoning communities of Indians at the heart of every one of Canada's cities are engaged in a struggle for the control over personal life in the face of an oppressive, immensely powerful Society that they emphatically reject but feel they lack the means to subvert. The Skid Row Indian, like the chief's delegate to Westminster, is therefore engaged in a political action. The politics of the Skid Row Indians do not take place in the more conventional arenas of public politics, but rather through life-styling on the stage of their personal minds and bodies. Their lives are their manifestos. Their politics is the *politics of self*.

This investigation has both a theoretical and an applied intent. Theoretically, I will demonstrate the limitations of accepted theories of Skid Row when applied to the unique case of Indians on the skids. Concepts such as marginality, deviance and under-socialization which are common in discussions of Skid Row communities must give way to an idea such as the *politics of self* if we are to gain real understanding of the phenomenon of Indians on Skid Row.

The applied dimension of the paper concerns Skid Row as a social and human blight. A number of schemes have been developed to improve or remove life on Skid Row. What will be the outcome if these are applied to derelict, vagrant Indians? In line with the theoretical conclusions of the paper, I suggest that a social welfare, rehabilitation approach to the

Skid Row Indian perhaps may help some individuals in isolated cases, but in general will not make a major positive contribution to improving the welfare of this community because the causes underlying their situation are more social-structural and political than such solutions acknowledge.

The Study of Skid Row

This report is based on a study done of the Skid Row Indian community in Vancouver during the summer of 1981¹. The original project set out to study patterns of illness and health behaviour in the small but growing, extremely disadvantaged Indian community living in poverty at the heart of Vancouver. The goal was to assess the incidence of health problems prevalent within this group, as well as their patterns of utilization of, and levels of satisfaction with, the health care facilities that are available to them on the *downtown eastside* (Mears *et al.*, 1981).

Vancouver's Skid Row is both a neighbourhood and a way of life. It constitutes a community in both the physical and sociocultural uses of the term. The clearly demarcated physical centre of Skid Row is the intersection of Hastings and Main Streets. The outer boundaries of Skid Row are not clearly marked, but the community fades out as one moves away from the central focus. The few blocks around Hastings and Main are its principal territory.

To be part of the Skid Row community is: to sleep in bug-ridden, dirty, dilapidated flop houses, eat in greasy cafes, fight in back alleys and drink in seedy bars — when there is money. And when there is not, to sink lower still, to sleep in garbage bins, eat in the 'soup and salvation' mission food lines, to be beaten and rolled for the last change, to drink Lysol and Sterno or bootlegged homebrew, or to find your way to the clinic or hospital for the drugs that will stop the shakes of alcohol withdrawal. The life on Skid Row is hard; it is hardest for Skid Row Indians.

The population of Skid Row is difficult to estimate. The community is fluid and transient. Census-takers primed to count people by knocking on doors at regular dwelling places are not likely to get an accurate tally of people who sleep in parks, doorways and under wrecked cars. Also, not everyone who lives at Hastings and Main is on Skid Row. There is, for example, a large Chinese population not sharing at all in the social status or life patterns of the Skid Row. Furthermore, Skid Row membership is a question of degrees, with people living on the skids to varying extents at different times.

Nevertheless, we do have a reasonably good

estimate of the number of people of Indian origin living in downtown Vancouver. A recent survey of Indian people in the city (Ward, 1979) estimates the innercity Indian population at between 1,940 and 3,860. A good proportion of these people would, to some degree, be living on Skid Row.

While it would only be wild guessing to try to estimate the proportion of the Skid Row population that is Indian, it is indisputable that in Vancouver the proportion is high. Indians are a regular and highly visible sub-group on Skid Row.

In the course of our four months of research, we conducted detailed interviews with a total of 94 Indians, all of whom were on Skid Row. This sample constitutes between 2.6 percent and 5.2 percent of the downtown Indian community, depending on which population figure is used. Subjects were selected informally, according to their willingness to be interviewed, but a quota match was used to bring our sample into line for age and sex with the most reliable demographic information on urban Indian population in Vancouver. Interviews were conducted at community centres, clinics, street corners — wherever individuals were relaxed and willing to talk. A standard set of questions was asked (see Mears *et al.*, 1981 : 98-106) and answers were recorded on the spot. The basic demographic breakdown of the survey sample is provided in Table I. In the end, our sample deviated from our target quotas. There was a definite discrepancy between our expectations of numbers of younger women on Skid Row and the numbers we encountered. I attribute this difference to the fact that most of the interviews were conducted by young women (Indian and non-Indian) interviewers, who did not feel comfortable approaching women on the skids. Nevertheless, our sample does represent a spectrum of male and female, young and old Indians in the

inner city. For the purposes of this paper, much information is drawn from participant observation. Health care workers, the police and courtworkers and government officials were also interviewed.

Before proceeding, a word about the definition of the term *Indian* as I use it is in order. On Skid Row, there is but one category of Indians, and membership is determined on the basis of subjective and social criteria. A person is Indian who looks Indian, regards him or herself as an Indian and is thought of by others as being an Indian. The legal distinction between status and non-status Indians is of no significance here.

Life on the Skids

Although the homeless, wandering vagrant has always been known to society, 'Skid Row' is a uniquely North American phenomenon, the name itself having been coined in Seattle. First used to describe the road down which logs were skidded to the sawmill, it was later extended to the neighbourhood of flop-houses, saloons, gambling halls and brothels that serviced the homeless workingmen of the lumber industry (Morgan, 1951). Periodic economic upheavals created a group of dispossessed, rootless men, who migrated to the cities and clustered around the labour exchanges and lodging houses in the poorer districts, alternating between temporary work and idle diversion. It is estimated that in the early part of the century there were forty to sixty thousand men on Chicago's Skid Row. Estimates of the population of New York's Bowery in 1915 range from 26,000 to 75,000 (Wallace, 1965 : 19).

Life in Skid Row is distinctive from the rest of society in every category : economic, legal, social, cultural, nutritional, medical. I will look particularly

TABLE I
Demographic Characteristics of the Skid Row Indian
Interviewees and Interview Target Quotas.

	MALE		FEMALE	
	Actual	(Quota)	Actual	(Quota)
AGE				
18-24	13	(14)	12	(18)
25-34	13	(14)	11	(18)
35-44	9	(9)	8	(11)
45-54	11	(5)	5	(5)
55-64	7	(3)	2	(3)
64 +	2	(2)	1	(2)
Total	55	(47)	39	(57)

at the patterns of social interaction within the Skid Row Indian community, and then at relations between Skid Row Indians and the police and health care deliverers. The principles of social life depicted in these two sets of relations hold true as well for other areas not being discussed here. The police and medical workers are very distinct in outlook, purpose and practice from one another. Yet we will find that Skid Row Indians manifest basically the same attitudes and behaviours towards both. These parallel relations are taken to imply that, from the point of view of the Skid Row Indian, the similarities between the police and medical workers outweigh the differences. Hospitals, jails, clinics and courts all represent the Society to which Skid Row Indians are hostile, and so hostility is expressed in equal measure towards a policeman making an arrest and an ambulance driver dressing a wound.

SOCIAL LIFE WITHIN THE SKID ROW INDIAN COMMUNITY

Vancouver's Skid Row is to a great extent an Indian community. Many of the Indians to be found there are from other provinces, but the majority are from British Columbia. They represent every band and corner of the province. This diversity could be a source of fragmentation in the community, but under the pressure of common opposition to White, middle-class, urban society, the Skid Row Indian community forges pan-Indian solidarity. One urban Indian puts it: "An Indian is an Indian no matter what kind of Indian he is."

The city is the strong attraction for the migrating Indian. *Bright lights* is how an employment counsellor described the pull, rather than employment, housing, health or the other more practical motives which can stir migration. Skid Row is a place where the Indian wins the bright lights of city living, yet he can avoid the opprobrium of alienating wage labour and the social strictures of dominant white urban society. As Brody (1971 : 4) puts it :

The Skid Row community... stands between the limitations and constraints of a rural reserve and the rejection and alienation of white-dominated city life.

Three important relationships make Skid Row the natural terminus for much migration of Indians to the cities. First, Skid Row provides the contemporary Indian with an escape from the rural backwater of the reserves while still leaving intact some important socio-cultural features of reserve life. The unemployment, welfare and drinking as well as the intense and vital interactions among people that characterize reserve society are carried over to the city.

Secondly, at the same time as the city provides the Indian with access to the urban main currents of contemporary life, Skid Row protects him from being engulfed by the forces of the dominant white, middle-class society. He does not fit into that society, and in fact is not welcome to it, his efforts at adjustment frequently being met by discrimination and rejection.

The third important relationship to influence this community is with traditional, pre-contact society. Some cultural patterns observable on Skid Row may owe something to traditional life-ways. Urban drinking patterns on the Northwest Coast have been related to traditional forms of generosity, feasting and status-building, for example (Lemert, 1954). But these connections are tenuous at best. Traditional society is more a force on Skid Row by virtue of its absence. Much of the alienation and hostility towards White society manifested by Indians can be traced to evident roots in the devastation of the colonial encounter.

Skid Row is thus uniquely suited to receive Indian migrants. Because it is already home to many Indians, it is likely that the newcomer will find a friend or relation there. But Indians on Skid Row are very friendly to the newly arrived, and make him welcome anyway. Skid Row offers an "enclave of acceptance in the usually hostile milieu of the city... where they can get drunk without criticism, easily joining social groupings with little concern for outside criteria for status" (Price, 1975 : 20).

To a high degree, life for Indians on Skid Row revolves around alcohol, although some Indians do not drink and some are militantly anti-drinking. A poster in a downtown drop-in centre reads : "Drinking is un-Indian". But drinking is a factor underlying much of the social life on Skid Row, for Indians as well as non-Indians. "Alcohol", as Blumberg *et al.* (1973 : 137) have put it, "is the cement of Skid Row relationships, even though it may be the solvent of other relationships in the larger community."

Much of life is spent in pursuit or consumption of alcohol. The open hours of the day are spent in the parks, drop-in centres and missions of the Skid Row area. Not an inconsiderable amount of time is spent in the *bucket* (jail) and the drunk-tank. Work tends to be seasonal and temporary ; most subsist on welfare supplemented by begging, petty crime and hustling. Some cook food in their rooms, or eat in the down-at-the-heel cafes of the neighbourhood. Others follow a daily trail from mission to drop-in centre to hostel, getting breakfast here, coffee there, lunch and dinner elsewhere, all for the price of listening to a sermon, or perhaps not even that.

Social ties in the city tend to be few, but many of the Indians retain ties with family on the reserves, whom they visit when the taste of the city sours.

But life for the Skid Row Indian focuses on alcohol. Indian and non-Indian drinking differ in several critical ways. Indian drinking tends to be more of a social event. The sullen, solitary drinker drooped over a glass is almost unknown. Indians in bars, as in fact everywhere on Skid Row, tend to be in groups, often of eight or nine, but still willing to make room for more. Drinks, loud conversation and laughter are exchanged. People move from one group to another, and the bar favoured by Indians takes on the appearance of one big party. The bar-party is a context for social display, and so it is the stage for exaggerated generosity, sexual innuendo and violence. One makes, keeps and displays their social status at the liquor feast.

The bars are also not cut off from street life — they are not forbidden places where one goes to practice vice in secret. It is a commonly reported finding that native Indians exhibit little or no guilt about drinking and drunkenness (Leland, 1976). The social animation of the bar spills over into the street, and is drained off into private parties after closing time.

As has been reported of drinking on the reserves, Indian drinking on Skid Row tends towards the spree. Savings and welfare are consumed in lavish and short-lived display; of conspicuous consumption lasting as long as money holds out. There are many important aspects to spree drinking, but only several concern us here. One is that the spree is an opportunity for intense social interaction, the incurring and repayment of debts and the acquisition of social status. Because alcohol is so central to Skid Row society, the spree expresses basic Skid Row values in a context which forges much social solidarity. In this way it shares many of the characteristics of a festival. But in this case, it is more an anti-festival, for the values and displays being enacted are precisely antithetical to dominant Canadian mores: drinking, drunkenness, conspicuous displays of emotion, violence and sexuality, wanton generosity and especially the complete disregard for thrift. The spree is the sub-group's celebration of its identity as the antithesis of society.

Life within the Indian community on Vancouver's Skid Row is active and lively. Brody (1971) and Dosman (1972) found the same to be true in Saskatchewan. Even the drinking, violence and sexual informality, when divested of the stigma these activities bear in the mainstream of society, can be seen to contribute to the vitality of social

interaction. Among themselves, Indians have a home on Skid Row.

But Skid Row is not the Canadian dream of home. In contrast to the middle-class suburbs, it is surely hell. For most Indians, however, that comparison is irrelevant. The only meaningful comparison is between Skid Row and the rural reserves, and in this Skid Row does not come off nearly so badly. Conditions of life may be abominable on the skids, but they are often not much worse than some people have experienced on the reserves. For some people, Skid Row is likely an improvement! And Skid Row allows for the preservation of key forms of social interaction, and especially the density of interaction, which Indians value and are accustomed to but which would be lost in the isolated alienation of suburbia and wage labour. The point I would like to emphasize is that life on Skid Row has clear positive advantages to some Indians, while the disadvantages appear more minimal to them than they would to anyone who has not experienced the reality of reserve life.

I do not want to be misinterpreted as suggesting that Indians are happy and contented on Skid Row. Most who are there frequently and easily vocalize their discontent. But Skid Row is the most satisfactory of all the conceivable options, some of which are worse, some unattainable. The internal satisfactions of being a member of the Skid Row Indian community are important factors. So too are the attractions of the city. The illness, crime, violence, injustice, dirt, racism and poverty are definitely regretted. Further, and less obviously, Skid Row provides an ideal stage for the forms of Indian protest that show up clearly in dealings between Indians and the police, and Indians and health care workers.

DEALINGS WITH THE POLICE

Mean dudes is how Skid Row Indians describe the police. According to the Native Courtworkers' Association, an average of two serious complaints of police brutality against Indians in Vancouver are filed weekly. To date, not a single policeman has been suspended or reprimanded for physical abuse against Indians in custody, although one officer is said to have been transferred. It is also certain that only a very few Indians take the trouble or run the risk of reporting police wrong-doing, even if they are aware of the procedures for making such complaints. The present arrangement is that the police police the police, a situation not likely to inspire confidence of obtaining justice amongst people who have come to expect police discrimination. The well known fact that police officers resent their Internal

Investigations Division and do not cooperate in its workings further exacerbates the problem.

It is also the case that neither the police nor a justice of the peace will take a report of any kind from someone who appears drunk. Since Indians on Skid Row are most likely to become the victims of crime when they are drunk, and so most vulnerable, the police are unlikely to take a complaint from them.

From the Indian point of view, the police represent oppression, discrimination and injustice. Two stories, both culled from official complaints filed with the Native Courtworkers and subject to internal police investigation, depict clearly Indian perceptions of the treatment they can expect from the police. Whether the statements are true and accurate is of much less significance than the fact that these sorts of stories are common, and reflect Skid Row Indians' attitudes towards the police.

Two young B.C. Indian men were walking on Main Street one night when a car passed by and turned in ahead of them. Realizing it was the police, the pair decided to run: "We thought we were going to get jumped" said one. They went in different directions, crossing lanes and hopping fences. One escaped, but the other became exhausted and hid behind a fence. A policeman, accompanied by a snarling, barking dog, came up and began to kick at the fence from the other side, swearing and threatening the cringing man. Eventually the fence gave way and fell, sending the Indian sprawling. The dog attacked. While the Indian pleaded for the dog to be called off, and ineffectively fended him off with his hands, the policeman stood by. His plea, he records in his statement, was "We're not from Van and we don't have nowhere to go. We were just walking around." Eventually the dog was called to heel. A police wagon arrived with more police. The Indian was interrogated in the dark backyard by flashlight. He had sustained severe tears on his thigh, shoulder and neck. He sought hospital care the next morning, after being released from custody, a threatened armed robbery charge not having been pressed.

A forty year old Indian man entered a Skid Row bar just after midnight on a Saturday night to use the toilet, but was denied entry, on the grounds that he was wearing blue jeans. He went into another bar, ordered a drink and went to the bathroom. He was followed by three men who came into the bathroom and yelled at him "Hey buddy, didn't you ear what I said ?", and then shoved him hard against the wall. The three were not in uniform, but showed him badges as they interrogated him. They pushed and slapped him until one punched him squarely on the jaw and he fell to the floor. When he regained consciousness, he was alone again. He phoned his brother, who came and picked him up. They filed a report at the police station that night.

Indians in Vancouver complain that the police are discriminatory, abusive, violent and dishonest.

If they commit a crime or are taken in as suspects, they expect to be arrested, then beaten and robbed while in custody. If a crime has been reported, Indians are frequently pulled in as suspects, regardless of the absence of evidence. Both the Indians and the police agree that Skid Row Whites also use the Indians as scapegoats, unhesitatingly pointing out Indians to the police as suspects in crimes without a shred of evidence.

Most of the police violence against Indians is said to occur in the police station. Tales of robbery abound. One old Indian sadly walking the streets in a pair of worn, glossy, black and white patent leather shoes told of having been forced to give up a new pair of boots and \$180 when he was arrested. He was not given a receipt for goods or money, and never saw either again.

Indians view the police as being hostile agents. As one said: "they don't give a damn about Indians. They're just taking care of up-town folks. Six or eight years on the beat down here and they get cynical and hard. Just nothin' but another dirty, god-damned Indian." Certain named policemen are known by the community as being especially tough on Indians.

From the police point of view, Indians are a problem. More liberal policemen see the problems in socio-economic and historical context. They tend to see Indians as good, once-proud people on hard times. They acknowledge the damaging effects of the reserve system, deculturation, economic dislocation and missionizing. One said "They have low esteem for themselves. They have low esteem for others. They've lost respect for human life and body. That's how come they can do things like put the boots to some old drunk and kick the shit out of him 'til his body is pulp'." In these men one can sense a real, if stereotyping, affection for Indians. There are some "assholes, some real mean dudes", but most are "happy-go-lucky, always laughing, joking with us. They don't lose their sense of humour. Except when they've been drinking, and then they can turn mean."

But even the liberal policemen acknowledge that there are much less sympathetic members of the Department. One said "The Indian still has pride. In a funny way, in a very preserve way, they have pride. But you can't tell that to most cops, after they've spent the evening throwing people out of bars for pissing in the corner."

The police acknowledge that physical abuse of Indians takes place. Their justification is that Skid Row is a physical place, and one has to speak that language to be understood: "You can't talk sense to a drunk." Furthermore, the police see Skid Row as

an explosive place that has to be controlled or it will blow. Force is needed "to keep the lid on it. You can't give anyone the opportunity to get you I'll give them one chance. If they fuck me, they're gone. It may not always be pretty, but down here you're the Man. You have to be the Man."

The police feel that the situation is stacked against them. They have to play rough to do their job. And just a little strong arm on an Indian and his arm or nose breaks. "Its under-nutrition", one said. "It makes them brittle and fragile. A little twist and 'snap' like a dry branch."

Many police express the same view as held by Indian social workers and leaders that 99 percent of the problems of Indians on Skid Row trace back to alcohol. Drinking exaggerates every problem area, they feel. Some policemen repeated the often heard but conclusively disproven theory that Indians are physiologically unable to hold liquor, although others stated categorically that this was a misconception.

Skid Row appears dangerous to the police, but has seldom proven so, perhaps because of the precautionary and pre-emptive measures they take. During their regular nightly bar checks, they as a rule throw into the street three categories of people : drunks, sleepers and what they call "assholes", these being anyone who makes a remark, gesture or look hinting of hostility or disrespect towards the police.

There is continual tension in these relations. One way in which this tension is diffused is through the police tolerating teasing and derogation from certain well-known characters on Skid Row. These are harmless people, for example one old Indian who is confined to a wheelchair whose joking verbal abuse of the police speaks the community's mind and is tolerated. The same words from anyone except a permitted 'clown' would lead in the least to being moved along, and not uncommonly to an arrest, with perhaps a beating, a charge, a conviction and a criminal record.

The core attitude of the Skid Row Indian community is one of avoidance of contact with the police. Both sides agree that it is the police who will come out on top from any situation of conflict. Yet the police express themselves and act as if the community was poised at the brink of eruption. What they are reacting to, I think, is community-felt hostility towards what the police represent. The police are charged to enforce the law. On Skid Row this duty involves the imposition of a set of ethical and behavioural standards which the Skid Row Indian from the depth of his being rejects. He does not want to be punished for being drunk, he is on

Skid Row in order to be drunk. He does not want to be jailed for robbery or breaking and entering, he sees himself as the victim of much greater social wrong-doing. The eruption that the police fear is not likely to be physically directed at them, but more likely at the moral and behavioural social principles they have the responsibility to enforce. The danger of Skid Row is the danger of all outcaste communities which live by norms and values antithetical to the codes of society and the law. Skid Row is hostile to Society, and Society responds through its police with hostility to Skid Row. This principle holds true for all people on Skid Row, but is especially true for the Indian community, which is in degrees more outcasted than its White counterpart on the skids.

DEALINGS WITH MEDICAL WORKERS

When all categories of health care personnel in downtown Vancouver were asked to compare Indians and non-Indians as patients as part of our research project, 30 percent of our respondents² stated that Natives were poor at keeping appointments, 23 percent found Indians non-compliant with therapy, 12.5 percent stated that Indians delayed in seeking medical care until a crisis existed, 10 percent thought Indians to be passive, 10 percent complained that Indians were poorly educated, 8 percent felt Indians were non-communicative, 8 percent considered Indians apathetic, 6 percent thought Indians were nervous as patients, 6 percent found Indians hostile and 2 percent stated that Indians were overly dependent. Twenty-one percent found no differences, 8 percent considered Indians to be better patients and 12.5 percent did not respond. In replying to another question, 23 percent of respondents indicated that communication with Indians was a problem for them.

This shows a high degree of dissatisfaction with native Indians as patients. Although the single greatest cause of this dissatisfaction is Indians' notorious irregularity in keeping appointments, in general the picture is one of poor relations between health care deliverer and recipient. Downtown Indians do not perform the patient role to the satisfaction of health professionals.

In a study of 117 tuberculosis patients at the Vancouver General Hospital, Frank (1980 : 2) reveals that, slightly over half the Native patients are discharged against medical advice or for disciplinary reasons, and "of the Native people with alcohol-related problems who are discharged in the first three months, 71 percent are against medical advice or for disciplinary reasons." Most of the Skid Row population would fall into this latter category.

Compared to the 51 percent of all Indians and the 71 percent of Indians with alcohol-related problems, the over-all figure for patients discharged against medical advice or for disciplinary reasons was 34 percent. This contrast implies a large gap between the situation for Indians and the general population, but since 29 percent of all patients in the study were native Indian, the variation between Indian and non-Indian disciplinary and self-discharge problems is even greater. Further, compliance with treatment regimes after discharge from hospital "is lower for people with alcohol-related problems (30%), particularly Native people (14%)" (Frank, 1980 : 2). In other words, 86 percent of the population which we can reasonably expect includes Skid Row Indians is non-compliant with medical therapy for tuberculosis. It is not surprising then, that of the 94 Indians whom we interviewed on Skid Row, 16, or 17 percent, had active or past tuberculosis.

These statistics paint a picture of poor Indian health and a poor record of participation in health care relationships. In fact, the situation among Skid Row Indians is worse than these facts suggest because a sizeable proportion of this population does not bring their medical problems to the attention of health care personnel. A discussion of the interaction of downtown Indians and the health care system must include a look not only at hospitals and clinics but also at the front-line of medical care for Indians. It is the ambulance crews and the inhalator services of the Fire Department that deal with the collapses, injuries, attempted suicides, burns, accidents and acute health crises that are so typical of Skid Row Indians.

The captain of one safety and rescue team stated that the majority of their alcohol-related calls in downtown Vancouver are for native Indians. Many of the calls for stabbings and assaults also involve Indians. When asked how Indians respond to the crew's care, he said "I find them belligerent, feeling sorry for themselves, they don't want to co-operate. So you just have to use a stronger arm on them." As a result, health care workers tend to develop a paternalistic attitude towards Skid Row Indians.

In one case, a white man had been hit by a car. The two Indian women with him sat down in the middle of the street and would not move. In the words of an attending fireman :

There was just no talking to them, they would not move. You could pick them up and they sat right down again. You had to drag them to move. That's the kind of attitude they take. On some occasions you tell them either we are going to treat you and take you to hospital, or you are going to jail. That is the only way you can get co-operation out of them.

Other problems of treating Skid Row Indians are related to their uncommunicativeness to health care deliverers :

What makes it difficult in my opinion is the fact that when somebody is hurt and you need some information from them, they are all closed-mouthed — they know nothing, they see nothing, they want to tell you nothing. When you need information because some guy is bleeding and you don't know how he was stabbed or how he was beaten, they are totally unco-operative.

Indians are reported as being non-compliant to a remarkable degree :

If you start bandaging them and you say "Leave the bandage alone", they will immediately go and knock the bandage off, as if you were doing it to aggravate them, or they are doing it to aggravate you, one of the two.

The patterns of use of health services by Skid Row Indians indicate that these services are used more as an assistance to the Skid Row way of life than to change the problem-causing features it contains. Hospitals and clinics are where you go to get patched up, or to get the pills to stop alcohol withdrawal. It is an understatement to say that there is little individual drive to health. Life on Skid Row moves in the opposite direction. Many Skid Row Indians end up receiving medical care not because of their own action but because someone else has called an emergency service. Skid Row Indians can be openly defiant against health care. When one researcher suggested to an Indian man she had interviewed that he seek medical care for his heart problem, which was flaring up, he responded : "Look, I'm a brave. I'm not afraid to die. I'm going to die soon anyway. I'll die a brave."

We can see clearly that the relationship between Skid Row Indians and medical personnel is different in degree but not in kind from relations with the police. How are we to account for this fact ? Distrust of the police makes sense, given their law-enforcement duties. But why should the Skid Row Indian be non-compliant, unco-operative and even defiant to health care workers ? The answer, I think, lies in the overarching relationship between this Indian community and the society which provides the police, hospitals, clinics, courts, jails, welfare offices and banks. The differences between these services are submerged in the commonality of their roots in a society that the Skid Row Indian rejects.

Discussion

In some of its most characteristic aspects, life for Indians at Vancouver's Hastings and Main is typical for all Skid Row residents. Many are

homeless or transient. Alcohol abuse and drunkenness are common. Unemployment is the rule. Social ties often seem tenuous to non-existent. But these apparent consistencies do not mean that the theories that have been proposed to account for Skid Row in general automatically apply to Indian Skid Row in particular.

Both Bogue (1963) and Bahr (1973) stress the social isolation of individuals on Skid Row, thereby minimizing or ignoring the role of community. Especially in the case of Indians, there exists a distinctive sub-culture and an open, vital social solidarity which provides individuals with a satisfying sense of place and meaning within the group. Furthermore, the hostile relations between the Indian Skid Row community and the representatives of the wider Canadian society reinforce the solidarity of the group. Indians living elsewhere in the city, who may own houses or hold down steady jobs, are not infrequent visitors to the Skid Row bars, where they reconnect with community and experience the social identity lacking to them in the White-dominated world in which they survive but seldom find a comfortable place.

Indians on Skid Row are not failed, hopeless casualties of the system who have been unable to succeed despite their best attempts. Success does not seem to have been a major motivator, if by success we mean employment, financial security and social approval. One fact that is evident to all providers of services to Skid Row Indians is that members of this community have pride and dignity. Indian identity is taken seriously and appreciated. Few share the self-hate reported for Whites on the skids.

Dependency (Wallace, 1965 : 132), undersocialization (Pittman and Gordon, 1958) and all psychoanalytical theories (*e.g.*, Myerson, 1956) that have been proposed to account for Skid Row do not pertain in this cross-cultural context. The growing numbers of Indians on Skid Row represent a social fact, which cannot be explained in terms of personality defects or failures in child-rearing practices. Anyone acquainted with Skid Row Indians knows that there exists a wide range of personality types. No doubt Skid Row harbours more than its share of extreme personalities, since it offers a haven to all forms of aberration within the wider community, but the average Skid Row Indian is neither socially inept nor psychologically dysfunctional. It has been pointed out that the social processes required to form a *bottle gang* of drinkers are not inconsiderable (Rooney, 1961). Indian social life in the bars, community centres, cafes and streets is lively and vivacious. Furthermore, Skid Row is home to many

Indians for only part of the year. During the summer, many return to their reserves to fish and hunt. They do not lack the practical and social skills that these activities require. An important topic for future research is the identification of the factors that lead some Indians to the alleys of Skid Row and others to the halls of parliament.

The earlier work of Blumberg and his collaborators (1966, 1973) come closer to applicability with the idea that lack of achievement and aspiration contribute to the placing of Indians on Skid Row. He also gives credence to the community factor in Skid Row life which makes it a recognizable sub-culture and society. The importance given to sustenance, power and status relationships between Skid Row and wider urban society is useful and applicable to the Indian case. But his later idea (Blumberg *et al.*, 1978 : xix) that Skid Row is a life-style located wherever liquor and poverty intersect generalizes the issue to the point of dilution. Liquor and poverty intersect on the rural Indian reserves, but clearly to Indians, Skid Row is a very separate socio-cultural reality from the reserves. Blumberg's theory is useful for looking at the place of alcohol in the social life of those not motivated by society's most cherished goals, but is too general to account for the specific social and cultural patterns of Indians on urban Skid Row. Nevertheless, his insistent attention to the relationship between Skid Row and wider society is well placed for our purposes as well.

Socio-economic explanations for Skid Row flounder over one unique aspect of the Indian case. The conditions of poverty and socio-economic displacement characteristic of the Skid Row Indian have not put him on Skid Row. He is likely to have been unemployed and just as poor on the rural reserve. The move to Skid Row is not so much a fall as a sideways shift for most.

A similar argument applies to alcoholism theories (*e.g.*, Jellinek, 1952 ; Kane, 1981). The Skid Row Indian tends to be a drinker, but so too does the Indian on the reserve. Both unemployment and alcohol are characteristic circumstances which the Skid Row Indian shares with other Skid Row residents, but neither can be considered a *first cause* for Skid Row membership because they tend to be general to contemporary Indian conditions, not just to Skid Row.

It is unlikely that any single factor is prior or causal of the Indian situation on Skid Row. We are dealing with a complex phenomenon. Disaffiliation, personality disorders and undersocialization are notions with at best very limited applicability to the Skid Row Indian. Alcohol, economic displacement

and lack of motivation to succeed on society's terms are more useful. The terms alienated (Spradley, 1970) and lumpenproletariat (Brody, 1971) seem to apply, although these are very broad categories. It would probably even be possible to find individual Indians on Skid Row whose personal life histories conform to the models proposed for the general Skid Row personality. In behaviour and in certain important social characteristics (e.g., use of alcohol, unemployment, poverty, self-neglect) Skid Row Indians are like non-Indians on the skids. These similarities are the reason why Skid Row has proven such a popular destination for so much Indian urban in-migration today. But this said, there still remain important considerations that distinguish the Indian social group from the general population on Skid Row. The behavioural similarities are not the whole picture.

One of the prime distinguishing features is the frames-of-reference for Indians and non-Indians on Skid Row. While for non-Indians Skid Row stands in contrast to the valued norms of the urban middle, or at least working class, for many Indians, especially the newly arrived transients who are swelling the Skid Row population, the main referent against which Skid Row stands is the rural reserves. The apparently deviant lifestyle and social problems of Skid Row take on a very different colouration when compared on the one hand to a middle-class suburban referent, or on the other to a rural Indian reserve.

A second consideration is the historical realities of which all Indians are conscious and which separate Indians from Whites in all contexts. When we include White society's record of treatment of Indians into our analysis, it becomes much clearer why Indians might knowingly opt for a non-participatory, non-productive lifestyle of immediate gratification coupled with active hostility and latent aggression towards the dominant White social entity. Against the background of discrimination and exploitation which Indians have been subjected to, Indians on Skid Row cannot be dismissed as psychosocial deviants whose rehabilitation requires only the application of more socio-medical services. Indians who tear off their own bandages, walk out of hospitals, are non-compliant with prescriptions, do not press criminal charges, and so on, are rejecting the extensive services already available. More will be unlikely to have a significant impact on their life circumstances. Considering Skid Row Indians to be marginal, depressed, psychosocial deviants is not illuminating, nor has such an approach made much contribution to the health and well-being of the Indian people. Indians

on Skid Row are sane and competent people. They have opted for a lifestyle of aberrant behaviour. There is a very consistent message in their inverted behaviour which makes sense only in the context of more pervasive Indian historical and social realities.

Conclusions : From Deviant Marginality to the Politics of Self

The life situation of the Skid Row Indian, involving poor housing, inadequate nutrition, violence, disrupted social relations, illness, injury, crime and, of course, alcohol and drugs, have made Skid Row a major preoccupation with local government and social service agencies. For the police, health workers, social service teams, churches and academics, Skid Row presents a clear-cut set of problems.

This point of view is not shared by most Skid Row Indians. While life on Skid Row is hard, it is not without its rewards, and for Indians, who are confronted with a dominant society that rejects them, a rural society that is stagnant and unsatisfying and a history that cannot be recaptured, Skid Row is not an unappealing option. It offers a vital community in the exciting city, plus the bonus that one can survive there without having to join the wage-labour world. True, Skid Row comes with illness, crime, dirt, violence, racism and poverty, but those conditions are common on the rural reserves as well. The benefits of the city redeem the difficulties.

I suggest that the problems of Indian people on Skid Row are less the unfortunate symptoms of a depressed people than they are acts of defiance, rejection and opposition to society. No matter how loud the protests from the rural reserves, they will not catch the ear of modern Canada.

In general, Indian-White relations can be characterized as an opposition. While some Indians have chosen to grapple with this opposition by meeting the White world on its own ground, and have become experienced and skillful lawyers, politicians, lobbyists and media propagandists, a much larger number have chosen another route to protest. These latter reject even the fundamental premises of contemporary, bureaucratic, middle-class culture which the Indian lawyer must master and use in his political dealings with the dominant society. The Skid Row Indians' protest is more profound. Their defiant statement of opposition denies them even the possibility of participating in the values, norms or behaviours of the Society they reject. To be drunk in a Vancouver alley, to neglect your TB follow-up, to court arrest, to act out all of the other

disvalued behaviour so common on Skid Row is to grapple with political realities of a much deeper sort than the Constitution. The consistency and determination with which Skid Row Indians adhere to their lifestyle, and the extent to which membership in the community depends on performance according with the values and norms of Skid Row, which invert dominant mores and principles, indicates clearly the force of social protest movement underway on Skid Row. The Skid Row Indian lives out his statement which may doom him, but perhaps in a very real sense within the flow of history, any other form of action offers only a more painful form of death.

The Skid Row Indian provides an example of behaviour which I would call the *politics of self*. In this politics, political processes are enacted on the stage of individual minds and bodies. There are no rallies or organizations or parties. There are rather groups of people agreeing on certain principles of action as strategies for contending with widespread, and powerful social and political realities. Skid Row Indians face a culture and society which oppress them, which they reject but which they lack the power to subvert. The individual life is then transformed into the locus of the protest of rejection, opposition and defiance more familiarly known to be staged in less personal, more public, arenas.

The politics of the Skid Row Indian are not reasoned and intellectual. They are lifestyle politics emerging naturally from personal history and the imprint of social forces. There is no stated immediate aim for these politics. Rather, they are the politics of protest. These may be unfamiliar politics, but I venture that labeling the consistent demonstrative behaviour of Skid Row Indians to be political rather than problematical permits us to see more clearly why every form of service provided to that community has not succeeded in eradicating its problems. Be they medical, legal, emergency, social, economic or other forms of service, they share the idea that Skid Row is a social problem. The thrust of their programmes has been to cure the individual Skid Row resident. The Indians have not cooperated. To give up their problems is to give up their protest. To surrender to rehabilitation is to yield the political field. Skid Row Indians want a better life, with health, peace and prosperity, but not at all costs. The root causes of their protest must be addressed if they are to gain a better life, as is their due, and these causes are political.

Society is at present very far from addressing this reality. More typical are the comments of Dr. Edward L. Margetts in the introduction to a symposium

on Canada's Native Peoples published in the *Canadian Psychiatric Association Journal* (1974:33) :

The Indian has high rates of alcoholism and drug addiction... Migration to towns may lead to problems of prostitution and criminality. Explanations of these phenomena have been mostly sociological, but that is only part of the story — there may also be biological susceptibilities, and these have been minimized in research so far.

He later criticizes psychiatrists for having recourse to sociological explanations for Indian deviancy and illness :

The answers to illness syndromes lie in individual psychodynamics, psychopathology and pathology and not in social stresses, most of which can be taken by people in their stride if they are individually healthy in their total makeup of genetic and constitutional endowments, with normal growth and development in mental and physical facets.

The implication about the faulty genetic and constitutional makeup of Indian people is clear.

As a direct result of this sort of perception, all of the resources directed towards Skid Row people go either to protecting society from the blight of Skid Row, or towards rehabilitating the individual. There has long been a call to organize the vagrant transients into labour armies. In Vancouver, Reverend Andrew Roddan, the Superintendent of the First United Church, which is located right in Skid Row, proposes in a book entitled *Canada's Untouchables* (1932 : 13) that rather than police action against transients and vagrants, as had been ordered by Prime Minister R.B. Bennett, "The men ought to be organized into a working army and put to work for reasonable wages under proper conditions."

In the 1960's the thrust of approaches to the Skid Row problem shifted to *urban renewal*, that is, tear it down. The justification for such drastic measures is the protection of society (Bogue, 1963).

Few studies have acknowledged the social or sub-cultural reality of Skid Row. The community is seen as a collection of deformed individuals, and the route to transforming Skid Row is through the servicing of individuals (B.C. Department of Social Welfare, 1960). This dominant view of Skid Row as a place of problems at the individual level has given rise to solutions which consist of the provision of services to lead the individual from being a useless, deviant parasite to being an upstanding, responsible working citizen (Vancouver City Council, 1966).

These approaches to the Skid Row problem differ from one to the next, but they share the strong implicit notion that Skid Row is a wound in need of cleaning up. The remedies address superficial

symptoms only. They ignore the political dimension of the Skid Row Indian's lifestyle, and their "adequate socio-medical services" are tantamount to the stifling of that protest, which is raised through the inverted, perverse and defiant behaviour of those at Hastings and Main. In this light, no amount of services provided by society will have any impact on the situations they are intended to change until the basic relationship between Indians and Canadian society is resolved. Until such time, we can expect that Indians will continue to practice the politics of self, that Skid Row will thrive, and that a portion of Canadian society will suffer a high incidence of illness, incarceration, inhumanity, violence and degradation.

On a theoretical note, the politics of self is not a phenomenon exclusive to Skid Row Indians. The concept sheds light as well on other contemporary social movements, *e.g.*, punck rockers and Buddhist meditators. Wherever members of social groups jointly enact behaviours which have as their essence a statement about wider social patterns, but do so outside the realm of conventional political action and instead through their personal dress, eating habits, health behaviour, language, etc., then they are practising the politics of self.

NOTES

1. I would like gratefully to acknowledge the support for this project provided by Health and Welfare Canada, Health Promotions Directorate (grant No. 1216-9-166), and the assistance of researchers Bronwen Mears, Karen Pals, Maureen Tallio and K. Kuczerpa.

2. The number of questionnaires distributed was 119. There were 50 responses: 18 physicians, 19 nurses, 6 dentists, 1 pharmacist, 1 physiotherapist, 5 medical secretaries. Staff at two downtown health clinics, several municipal public health clinics, downtown hospital emergency wards and in several private practices with a heavy Indian clientele were interviewed.

REFERENCES

- BAHR, H.M.
1973 *Skid Row: an Introduction to Disaffiliation*, New York, Oxford University Press.

- BLUMBERG, L., T.E. SHIPLEY, Jr., I.W. SHANDLER and H. NIEBUHR, Jr.
1966 *The Development, Major Goals and Strategies of a Skid Row Program*, *Quarterly Journal of Studies on Alcohol*, 27 : 242-258.
BLUMBERG, L., T.E. SHIPLEY, Jr. and I.W. SHANDLER
1973 *Skid Row and Its Alternatives*, Philadelphia, Temple University Press.
BLUMBERG, L., T.E. SHIPLEY, Jr., and S.F. BARSKY
1978 *Liquor and Poverty: Skid Row as a Human Condition*, New Brunswick, NJ, Rutgers Center for Alcohol Studies.
BOGUE, D.
1963 *Skid Row in American Cities*, Chicago, Community and Family Study Center, University of Chicago.
BRITISH COLUMBIA DEPARTMENT OF SOCIAL WELFARE
1960 *Report on Homeless Transients in the Province of British Columbia*.
BRODY, H.
1971 *Indians on Skid Row*, Ottawa, Northern Science Research Group, Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development.
CAPLOW, T., H.M. BAHR and D. STERNBERG
1968 *Homelessness*. In David Sills (ed.), *International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences*, New York, Macmillan, 6 : 494-499.
DOSMAN, E.J.
1972 *Indians: The Urban Dilemma*, Toronto, McClelland and Stewart.
FRANK, R.
1980 *Proposal for a Comprehensive Management Program for Tuberculosis Patients: Hospital, Halfway House and Follow-up Components*, Vancouver, Vancouver General Hospital.
JELLINEK, E.M.
1952 *Phases of Alcohol Addiction*, *Quarterly Journal of Studies on Alcohol*, 13 : 673-684.
KANE, G.P.
1981 *Inner City Alcoholism*, New York, Human Sciences Press.
LELAND, J.
1976 *Firewater Myths: North American Indian Drinking and Alcohol Addiction*, New Brunswick, NJ, Rutgers Center of Alcohol Studies.
LEMERT, E.M.
1954 *Alcohol and the Northwest Coast Indians*, University of California Publications in Culture and Society, Berkeley, University of California Press.
MARRIAGE, A.
1957 *The Police Court Drunkenness Offender*, Vancouver, The Alcoholism Foundation of British Columbia.
McCLELLAND, D.C., J.W. ATKINSON, R.A. CLARK and E.L. HOWELL
1953 *The Achievement Motive*, New York, Appleton-Century-Crofts.
McSHEEHY, W.
1979 *Skid Row*, Boston, Hall.

- MEARS, B., K. PALS, K. KUCZERPA, M. TALLIO
and E.A. MORINIS
1981 Illness and Treatment Strategies of Native Indians
in Downtown Vancouver : A Study of the Skid Row
Population, Vancouver, Health and Welfare Canada.
- MORGAN, M.
1951 Skid Road : An Informal Portrait of Seattle, New
York, Viking Press.
- MYERSON, D.J.
1956 The 'Skid Row' Problem, New England Journal of
Medicine, 254 (25) : 1168-1173.
- PITTMAN, D.J. and C.W. GORDON
1958 Revolving Door : A Study of the Chronic Police
Case Inebriate, New Haven, Yale Center of Alcohol
Studies.
- PRICE, J.A.
1975 An Applied Analysis of North American Indian
Drinking Patterns, Human Organization, 34 (1) :
17-26.
- RODDAN, A. (Rev.)
1932 Canada's Untouchables, Vancouver, First United
Church.
- ROONEY, J.F.
1961 Group Processes Among Skid Row Winos ; Re-
evaluation of the Under-socialization Hypothesis,
Quarterly Journal of Studies on Alcohol, 22 :
444-460.
- ROSENMAN, S.
1955 The Skid Row Alcoholic and the Negative Ego
Image, Quarterly Journal of Studies on Alcohol, 16
(3) : 447-473.
- SPRADLEY, J.
1970 You Owe Yourself a Drunk, Boston, Little Brown.
- VANCOUVER CITY COUNCIL
1966 Skid Road : The Chronic Drunkenness Offender.
- WALKER, R.D.
1981 Treatment Strategies in an Urban Indian Alcohol-
ism Program, Journal of Studies on Alcohol, Suppl.
9 : 171-184.
- WALLACE, S.E.
1965 Skid Row as a Way of Life, Totowa, NJ, The Bed-
minster Press.
- WARD, B.
1979 A Study of the Native Indian Population of Van-
couver, B.C.. In Relation to the Vancouver Indian
Centre, Vancouver, Department of Secretary of
State/Pacific Region.