



Shuffling from place to place, the homeless camps stay hidden but near

by [Joe Tarr](#)

When Doug first saw the place, he knew it was home.

He'd begun his sad skid into homelessness years before, but until then he'd managed to stay off the streets. He would stay with friends or girlfriends. But he was living the party life, and one by one those friends got tired of putting him up, so he wound up living out of his car, a reliable '86 Ford Tempo.

As his problems with drugs and alcohol got bigger, he'd started hanging out with other homeless folks. And one day some of them took him to a bridge in downtown Knoxville.

Staring up at the concrete, he saw "Doug's Cave" spray-painted on it. "My middle name is Doug, I thought it was a sign," he says.

So he moved in.

There were already people living there, friends he'd met on the street. It's right near downtown, but up on that ledge underneath they were perfectly hidden. There was room for several of them to stretch out and sleep as cars thumped overhead.

One day the police chased them off, but a few weeks later Doug went back. Nobody was staying there so he claimed the camp as his own. He lived there for about two years, even in the winter.

"Get a little mattress, get a stack of blankets about that thick," he says, holding his hands about 6 inches apart. "Maybe you got a [kerosene] furnace. Get you a woman. My little camp was very dry. The rain and snow couldn't get you. It's very warm."

Camps like Doug's old one exist all over the city, hidden in the nooks and crannies that most of us ignore. They're all around downtown, in abandoned industrial areas and even in the suburbs. The people who live in the camps live in a kind of shadow culture. The camps are frequently uprooted and demolished, but there's no shortage of homeless campers.

Roosevelt Bethel steers the slightly weathered Ram pickup into a parking lot near the Cedar Bluff exit of I-40. The rain has let up so Bethel and his partner, Carl Williams, shed their jackets and head out across a field stranded by highways and busy arteries. The grass needs to be cut, and their pants and shoes soak up water. Cars speed by in every direction.

They wander over to an overpass and wade through the slick weeds to climb up underneath. Williams yells out his usual greeting: "Hello in the camp, hello in the camp."

Inside is bedding and gear for two or three people. Williams says they're probably off panhandling at busy intersections.

They walk down to another overpass where they spotted a guy sitting out of the rain. He sips from a bottle—it's hard to tell from down below if it's soda or beer—and stares down at them over the steep incline and thick jagged rocks.

The two yell up that they work for an outreach program and wonder if he needs any help—finding shelter, a doctor, a job or maybe a ride. The guy says he's only been here a day, passing through on his way to Florida from Kentucky.

They smile and wave. Bethel yells up, "Be good," and the two are on their way. "You see that board he had with him?" Williams says as they walk away. "He's using it to climb up and down again. He's been here more than a day."

The Cedar Bluff area might seem like an unlikely place to search for homeless camps, but these two have seen them just about every place around the city. As outreach workers for Community Action Committee's Homeward Bound, it's Bethel and Williams' job to get to know the homeless in Knoxville.

The homeless living out in the suburbs tend to be more transient, Williams says. They hitch rides from truckers on the Interstate and stop in busy suburban areas like this one, panhandling from cars at stoplights. Many will sleep up under bridges; some will have tents and camp in woods off the interstate. There used to be a rather large camp off Lovell Road, but it was dispersed by the interstate expansion.

"Out west [Knoxville] is more of a transient crew. There are more panhandlers," he says. "You rarely get to know them because they're so transient."

The more gregarious and talkative of the two, Williams is prone to waving at nosy motorists who stare at him as they pass.

The two go out once a week to see if anyone needs help, if they're looking for housing. It would take weeks to hit all the camps they've been to, so usually they stick to one section of town.

"I'd say about 70 percent of the time guys want help," Williams says. It might just be to get their ID back from the police or help with a ticket, but most of them have some needs.

On a rainy day in September, they tour a number of camps around downtown. They hit some old familiar spots and look out for new places, looking up at the sides of every bridge they drive under, or for clothes dangling on a fence along the highway, usually a sign someone is living nearby. Many of the camps are empty when we get there, the camps occupants gone to do day labor or scrounge for food.

Early in the morning they roust a man who looks to be in his 40s or 50s from a tent in an industrial section of East Knoxville. He's not far from a road, but you can hardly see his camp because of the thick rhododendron growing around it. His tent is on platforms. The man's from Texas and has lived in Knoxville before. "I like sleeping out," he says.

They aren't judgmental and don't try to talk him into finding housing.

At many camps, the residents have already gone for the day, stashing their clothes and bedding in bundles behind bridge columns.

Williams and Bethel have known most of Knoxville's chronic homeless of the last decade.

"Most of the people I've met are good people. I've not met too many who are mean-spirited," Williams says. "Most of them try to work. With a lot of them, the alcoholism and mental illness keeps them from working a steady job."

Larger camps usually have a social structure, Williams says.

"There's usually one guy who controls the camp. He's been out on the streets the longest, and everybody respects him. He's got the most gear. He sets the rules in the camp," Williams says. "He's usually got three or four enforcers with him in the camp."

The rules vary with each camp, Williams says, but are typically things like no stealing—food, booze and drugs must be shared. Sometimes women are shared, Williams says.

In the nine years since Bethel's been doing this work and the seven since Williams started, they've noticed some changes. They're seeing more women and children camping out. There used to be more cronyism among the homeless, they say. It was mostly older men, who would all look out for each other.

It's not so chummy now. "Now you're getting crack and meth addicts, young kids, and they're crazy. They prey on the homeless," Williams says.

Often the camps have booby traps around them, cans strung to wire to warn them if a stranger approaches. They've never been attacked themselves, but once in a while they've felt threatened. At one camp, a homeless man dangled a large knife and said, "I sure would like that watch of yours." In another they were almost jumped from behind by two men with bricks.

There's evidence of the trouble all around them. We visit an old camp at Tyson Park where a woman burned to death one evening. Her old mattress is there, next to the fire pit, and the log where her charred body was found.

Although most people stay homeless for only a short period, there are also a number of chronic homeless, ones who stay outside in all conditions.

"There are a lot of people who lived for an extensive time outside before we convinced them to come in," Bethel says. The longest was a man named Sarge who lived for 27 years before he let them help him find housing. "He said it finally got too rough," Bethel laughs. The man died a few years later.

Williams and Bethel are careful about who they show the camps to. They don't want people preying on their clients, and they also want the homeless to trust them. "[The homeless] think you'll hurt them just as much as you think they'll hurt you," Williams says.

However, they gave tours recently to some groups. Word must have gotten out because a few of the camps were cleared out shortly after that.

The two pass through a number of old spots where camps were recently cleared out by the city. There was a large camp of about 70 people underneath the maze of highway interchanges sometimes called the Spaghetti Bowl. The city cleared the camp out.

"We used to be able to go to a large camp like that and get the word out. But since the city went through and cleared the camps out, people don't trust us as much. They've started camping farther out," Williams says.

Camps have also gotten smaller. Williams and Bethel say they've noticed the camp clearings have become more aggressive after downtown development. They try to stay out of the politics involved and just help the homeless. They know they also need support from government officials as much as they need the trust of clients to do their outreach.

"I understand cities and growth. But there's a humane and an inhumane way do to it," Williams says. "The city came in and cleaned them out. They just throw away whatever's there."

Bob Whetsel, Knoxville's director of public works, says city workers clean out homeless camps about once a month, responding to police reports or complaints.

"We wait until we have three or four camps that we need to get to. [We] put together a little crew with gloves and pitchforks. You have to go through by hand and clean them out," Whetsel says. "If somebody's there, [the crew] asks the KPD to come out and talk to them and give them time to get their stuff. If they go and nobody's there, we just pick it up and move on."

No advance notice is given, and whatever the workers collect goes straight to the dump, he says.

Many cities around the country have similar practices. Some cities use much harsher tactics. In Cleveland, Ohio, city workers used to drive the homeless out of town, says Donald Whitehead, spokesman for the National Coalition for the Homeless.

But courts have found these practices illegal, Whitehead says. Because of lawsuits some cities are now required to give advance notice if they're going to clean out a camp and if no one is there, they're required to hold onto the possessions for a period of time. (In Pittsburgh, it's a year.)

"It really is a myopic solution to homelessness," Whitehead says of the camp clearings. "When you take people and destroy their belongings and sweep them away, it does nothing to end their homelessness.... It often times exacerbates their homeless situation."

Another abuse that Knoxville's homeless frequently say happens is police take their IDs and don't return them. It's something that goes on at communities throughout the country, Whitehead says.

"You would hope it's a mistake. But once a person doesn't have an ID, it makes them, at that point, illegal. They become vagrants, and they can be arrested for vagrancy laws. Their ability to access services at that point is almost zero. Very few providers let someone access services without some form of identification."

Doug is trying to get himself off the streets. A native of Alabama and an Army vet, he first came to Knoxville in the 1980s to attend Knoxville College.

When he started smoking crack, things started to go downhill, he says. "When I messed with it, I had to have girls, it was like Viagra for me," he says. He's vague about the breakup of his marriage, the wounds still a bit too painful. His daughter was hospitalized at one point, and he told his wife to move their children away from Knoxville.

He panhandled occasionally, but preferred working. Usually it was day labor, but he held a job a Buddy's Bar-B-Q for six months while he lived under his bridge. He'd shower every morning at the VMC before going to work.

When he had money, he'd celebrate. "I'd go get a hotel room for the night, get me a woman. Next morning I'd wake up with \$20 or \$30 in my pocket. I didn't care. I lived for

pleasure. But you don't feel bad about it because you know you're not going to get a place," he says.

Doug's an odd mix of vulnerability and menace, the latter no doubt a useful tone cultivated over years on the street.

"When you're out there living the street life, you don't let anybody come on your turf. They will try to rob you. That 5th Ave. Hotel, the last time that guy got killed there, it was over a dime bag of rock," he says. "People who are weak are vulnerable. Older people who have money—they'd better not be caught walking alone along the railroad tracks.

"You have to let them know, dude, I will hurt you," he adds. "It's just like another lion will come up and invade your turf... I'm a wolf and you're gonna get ate. You have to be that way."

One look at him will tell you how menacing those streets can be.

It was back in 1997 when some men came looking for him. They had been arguing over a woman. Doug was asleep up on his bridge when they found him and one man swung at his face with a metal crutch. A piece of it knocked out his left eye and blood spurted out of his socket.

"For some reason, when he hit me, he stopped because he knew I'd lost my eye," he says. He was stunned, and the other men ran.

The injury has disturbed him greatly. In one breath he talks about his fury at the man who did it, in another he's weeping about it.

He hasn't seen the man who attacked him since and says he isn't planning on revenge. But asked how he'd react, he says, "The guy who did this to me, what do you think I'm going to do when I see him? You know what I'm going to do."

Since the assault, he's been unable to face his parents. It took years before he could even tell them what happened. But he wants to visit them soon and starts crying thinking about it. "It took me this long to get strong enough to talk about it," he says.

A six-month stint in jail—he won't say for what—woke him up.

Doug's working now, doing day labor jobs, and trying to stay out of trouble. He says he was also just hired at a fast food restaurant. He says he's no longer homeless, but a friend says he's actually squatting in an abandoned building.

He said he went back to his old bridge a few times, but it didn't feel right. He wants his own house.

"I have to be strong now. I know I can do it and I don't want that [street life] anymore," he says. "I like going home, taking a hot bath, watching TV late at night. Opening up the fridge at 2 or 3 in the morning and having a snack and there's beer in the box."

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A HOMELESS MECCA?

Some believe that Knoxville is attracting the indigent

by [Joe Tarr](#)

The flyer advertises something of Shangri-la for the poor: "Need A New Start? Knoxville, TN is the answer!"

The benefits listed include bus access, "TenCare" (sic), "KnoxArea Rescue Ministries offers clean sleeping area," Volunteer Ministries medical services and daytime TV, vagrancy laws not enforced, day labor jobs and a moderate climate.

It's hard to imagine who would bother to advertise the city as such and even harder to believe where Bill Pittman says he found the poster—a Dallas bus station.

Pittman says he'd heard a rumor about the sign and then had a work associate swing by to see if it was real and photograph it. Pittman, who lives in the Fourth and Gill neighborhood, admits that he can't actually prove the poster was hanging there. "I've heard there's one in Miami," he says.

There have been stories about Knoxville's allure for the homeless for decades. Some Knoxvilleans believe the city's homeless services are so generous the city is actually attracting homeless from around the country. As the Volunteer Ministry Center prepares to move from downtown to Broadway Avenue, they're wondering whether the city shouldn't adopt a different tactic in caring for the homeless.

"Knoxville is a hub for East Tennessee, and it should be. And I don't have a problem with that. If we can help people in our general area, we should," says Pittman, who lives in Fourth and Gill.

But Pittman believes Knoxville is drawing indigents from all over the

country, not just East Tennessee. He points to the study University of Tennessee professor Roger Nooe does every other year to study homeless in Knoxville. The most recent one, done in 2002, identified homeless people coming from 35 states other than Knoxville and three foreign countries.

To some that's alarming. "The missions say they need space. My question is, how many of these people are from East Tennessee?" says Patti Smith, who owns P. Smith Signs & Displays off of Broadway and lives on the 100 block of Gay Street. Her shop is around the corner from where the Volunteer Ministry Center is moving, but Smith says she's not trying to stop the move—as she points out it's moving off of her home block to where she's working.

"I've lived [downtown] for 8-1/2 years, and I've worked here for 16 years. I knew there were homeless people when I moved here, so I'm not telling people to leave," she says. "It's my responsibility to take care of people, whether they're drug addicts or alcoholics or mentally ill or whatever. But why don't we take care of the people in East Tennessee? But they're trying to serve more than half the nation."

In July, Smith wrote the pastors of all of Knoxville's mega-churches, asking them to help out the homeless by taking in a few families, giving food, shelter, clothing and education. The letter was a not-so-subtle attempt to shame the church leaders into taking on some of the burden of caring for the homeless. "If the larger churches in our area would take on the responsibility, it would lessen the burden on everybody," Smith wrote. "Also, families would be in a neighborhood and children would be in neighborhood schools and churches. This would be far more beneficial, as Gay Street and Broadway cannot be considered a reasonable place for children."

None of the churches replied to her letter, she says.

The idea that Knoxville is a Mecca to the homeless is absurd to homeless advocates.

"It comes up all the time," says Roger Nooe. "In a way, there's some validity to it, in a way, it's an urban legend. I suspect if you were living out here in some rural county and got sick or had a problem, you probably would come here looking for help. You're not going to find a substance abuse center in some little rural community."

But that is characteristic of all cities, he says. "Even the Bible talked about people going to the lawless cities—they've always had that problem."

You can certainly find homeless people who have migrated to Knoxville for a specific reason, Nooe says. He remembers interviewing a homeless man who traveled from Florida just to be with Monroe Free, a Florida native who is the former executive director of the Knox Area Rescue Ministries. "I wouldn't be surprised if there are people sitting around a camp saying Knoxville is the place to be. But I think those reports are blown way out of proportion," he says.

Nooe says the number of homeless coming from out of state has remained relatively stable since he started doing his study in 1986 at right around 50 percent. Nooe adds that the state-of-origin figures in his study might be misleading—they don't measure how long the person has been in Knoxville. The person might have lived here for years before becoming homeless. The study shows that 70 percent of all respondents consider Knoxville home.

"About 40 percent of those from outside said they came here seeking employment. I think you'd find this in other cities," Nooe says.

Pittman says that Knoxville's homeless services, while having good intentions, operate like big business. He points out KARM's annual budget is \$9 million; while Monroe Free's salary was more than \$100,000. "It's not exactly the Mother Theresa-esque group you see in the ads around Thanksgiving," he says. "For an industry to continue to exist, it has to grow."

Pittman compares a study similar to Nooe's done in Memphis and says it shows that the Memphis has a much lower per capita homeless rate than Knoxville. You do get a higher percentage—.22 percent for Memphis, .32 percent of Knoxville—but the studies aren't really comparable. Nooe's study measures homelessness for the entire month of February 2002; the Memphis study is an estimate of the number of homeless on any given night. The Memphis study also found that throughout 2001, more than 7,000 people were homeless for some period of time.

In fact, estimating the number of homeless people is difficult to do. National estimates range from 200,000 to more than 3 million, according to Nooe's study. Censuses are difficult to make because the population stays largely hidden (with many staying with family or friends) and because most people don't stay homeless for long.

Between a Knoxville survey of 775 homeless in July 1987 and of 761 the following January found only 92 people were the same, Nooe reports.

In some ways, the services in Knoxville are relatively good. There are plenty of free meals in Knoxville. The Salvation Army, Knox Area Rescue Mission, Love's Kitchen and Volunteer Ministry Center all serve free meals every day, some of them breakfast, lunch and dinner. A few church groups also serve food during the week.

Ginny Weatherstone, executive director of the VMC, talks about "raising the discomfort level" for the homeless who aren't mentally ill.

The VMC has a dual approach of tough love, separating its day shelter into two sections. Folks who are enrolled in VMC programs, committed to dealing with their problems, are allowed into the basement area where there's a TV, library, shower room, and lockers. Those who haven't committed to a program are only allowed upstairs, where they can get out of the heat or cold but only have chairs to sit on. "If you're homeless with no interest in changing, you can come in here, but you won't be as comfortable," Weatherstone says.

But in other ways, Knoxville's services for the homeless are seriously lacking. There's a huge demand for shelters for women with children, especially since the Volunteers of America shelter in Parkridge closed. There's also a huge demand for mental health services, Weatherstone says. If someone has severe mental illness, the state will take them for only three days, before releasing them. If they don't have family they're usually released to a homeless shelter. But it takes weeks to stabilize someone who is mentally ill and find a regiment of drugs that suits them, and homeless shelters are ill-equipped to deal with problems of the mentally ill.

The National Coalition for the Homeless recently found that the country in general is becoming meaner toward homeless people, criminalizing activities they need to survive. The coalition surveyed homeless advocates in 147 cities, but Knoxville wasn't included. (Nashville, however, ranked as the 18th meanest; Las Vegas, San Francisco and New York ranked as the top three meanest.)

Donald Whitehead, a spokesman for the group, says there aren't any cities that are big magnets for homeless.

"When studies have looked at this issue, they've found that the idea that people migrate to different communities because of services is an absurd notion. For the most part, people are homeless in the place they grow up in," Whitehead says. "We don't see this mass migration. That idea stems from homeless people after the Civil War.... The very fact that they're homeless would prohibit them from the ability to travel."



The criminalization of homelessness seems to be on the rise everywhere, he says.

"What happens is that because communities don't see changes happening, they see the numbers growing, the attitude of benevolence goes away," Whitehead says. "Cities don't understand it's not the same population. Once people get into services, there's 10 more [homeless people] to replace them."

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