

Ph.D. position: SFU Geography/Nick Blomley: Critical Legal Geography: the governance of the personal property of the precariously housed

Please contact me if you are interested in pursuing a PhD in Vancouver in September 2019, joining a recently funded project exploring the governance of the personal possessions of the precariously housed (project summary below). This is an interdisciplinary project, bringing critical legal and geographic analysis to bear. I am seeking a highly motivated and qualified student, ideally with a) some practical experience in working with and collaborating with marginalized people (e.g. the homeless, poor, indigenous people etc); b) interview/focus group training; c) relevant research experience in related work. You would work within the project, carving out a research area connected to it. You would collaborate with lawyers and social scientists. You would also work with and mentor MA and LLM students, recruited to the team, and would play an important role in shaping the project in its formative months.

A stipend of up to \$20,000/annum over 4 years is available. Additional funding (including TA support, graduate fellowships etc.) is also readily accessed.

Please email me (blomley@sfu.ca) with a quick note expressing your interest, followed by a) a short statement of interest/motivation; b) a c.v., c) unofficial transcripts and d) contact details for two references.

SFU Geography is a dynamic and lively place, with some great people. We rank 5th (2nd in citations per paper and 3rd in H-index citations – a remarkable testament to the productivity and quality of our research faculty) of all Geography departments in Canada, and 1st amongst Canadian comprehensive universities in the 2018 QS World University Rankings. Grad student fees are affordable, with no differential for international students.

Project summary: Almost 1.7 million Canadian households live in a housing that is unaffordable, over-crowded, below standard, or a combination of all three. At least 200,000 Canadians experience homelessness annually, and as many as 1.3 million have experienced homelessness over the past five years (Canadian Observatory on Homelessness, 2016). Collectively, this ‘precariously housed’ population faces many challenges. An often-hostile legal environment governs poor people’s personal possessions in the private and public spaces they occupy and navigate. Personal possessions, which provide a measure of security, identity, and memory for the poor, are often at threat, given their heightened vulnerability to the interests of others, whether private individuals, like bailiffs and landlords, or state actors, like police and bylaw officers. Poor tenants experience higher rates of eviction, with themselves and their household goods placed on the kerb, for example. High levels of debt may lead to liens or seizure of vehicles. Shelters provide inadequate or insecure storage. People on the street face intensified challenges, as their sleeping bags or pets are seized by bylaw officers, and family photos and vital medications destroyed in clean-ups. We all value our possessions, but their practical and emotional significance may be more profound for the vulnerable. Their loss or damage may exacerbate existing forms of precariousness, reducing their access to necessary resources. Regulators, both public, private, and in-between, may judge their value differently.

Surprisingly, there has been no sustained research on this topic. The proposed research project aims to provide vital information on the manner in which both private and public individuals and institutions govern the possessions of precariously housed people in Canadian cities. Drawing from literatures on governance, precarity, and evaluation, we will study how the personal property of poor people is governed, and by whom. We ask how these possessions are evaluated (by regulators, media, or their owners), and investigate how governance intensifies or mitigates people’s

precariousness. We frame our analysis through a legal geographic lens, alert to the manner in which vulnerably housed people's possessions move between hybrid and overlapping public and private regulatory spaces. Through two carefully focused and methodologically rigorous comparative case studies in Ontario and British Columbia, we derive conceptual and policy tools for the systematic analysis of the governance of poor people's possessions.