The Larimer area is a small (two square miles) industrial sector of Denver adjacent to the northern border of downtown and northeast of Denver's lower downtown district. When I began my research in 1992 I imagine it looked much like it did in the 1950s, when it was a mecca for the underclass described by Jack Kerouac in *On the Road* (Kerouac, 1957). Kerouac's autobiographical journey across America came to embody the Beat Generation's search of meaning in the times after the Great Depression. He spent a lot of time "... among the old bums and beat cowboys of Larimer Street." During the 1990s this part of town was still the central gathering place and home to the majority of Denver's inner-city homeless population. The heroin-dealing network Kurt and Danny developed emerged from and is intimately connected to the history of this area and its people.

To summarize the history of the street-people in Larimer I have divided it into three eras: before the ballpark era (pre-1994), the cleanup era (1994–1996), and after the clean-up era (1997–present). The majority of my research with the heroin-dealing network portrayed in this book occurred between 1997 and 2000 (after the cleanup era) and did not directly involve the Larimer scene. Kurt and Danny began their existence in this part of town in 1995. From their humble homeless beginnings, they successfully sold heroin from approximately September, 1996 until October, 1999.

The formative years of Kurt and Danny's dealing operation were vital: they began selling heroin in Larimer by filling a very specific vacancy within the heroin market of the time. The strategy they used to establish their business inaugurated patterns of exchange behaviors with their customers, and set the tone for future dealings. These patterns of exchange served as the foundation of their organization, and would be altered to accommodate a new setting when they eventually moved away from Larimer in 1997. While in the Larimer area, Kurt and Danny were members of a group of local homeless heroin junkies. Much of their early business success was attributable to their membership in this informal group. To Kurt especially, the ramifications of this peer group affiliation were critical. It was a combination of their membership in this group
and the historic events of the area that launched their dealing operation, and made it a success.

THE HOMELESS SCENE: BEFORE THE BALLPARK ERA

The Larimer area of Denver is well demarcated: Coors Field (the home of major league baseball’s Colorado Rockies), the Platt River flood valley, and Interstate 25 form the western border. Before the stadium (prior to late 1994) a large undeveloped tract of land extending to the Platt River marked this border. The area’s northern and southern borders were housing projects. While there were no homes in Larimer, there were a number of local businesses, light industrial factories and warehouses. With no residential sector, and sandwiched as it is between downtown and housing projects, this part of the city had always been a buffer zone between downtown and Denver’s northern residential neighborhoods, a sort of no-man’s-land. The main thoroughfare, Broadway Street, served as a primary access road to downtown that commuters used every day to get to and from Interstate 25 (see Figure 2.1).

When I began fieldwork in 1992, few people had any legitimate reason to visit this part of town. There was very little attraction for Denverites, suburban commuters, or tourists. The area was home to a small El Paso/Denver bus station, three large homeless shelters, a day shelter, one walk-in medical clinic, several small weekly-rate hotels, several pawnshops, three auto body shops, a recycling center, one diner, a few small liquor stores, several Mexican bars and restaurants, and a few storefront businesses. All the establishments were within easy walking distance from one another. Because of the abundance of street people, it was considered to be one of the more dangerous parts of the city, a fact confirmed annually by the Uniform Crime Reports of the Denver Police, (1993–1998). The area’s bad reputation kept middle-class people away.

During the early 1990s, Denver’s homeless population flourished in Larimer because it was home to all the relevant housing, social, and medical services the city had to offer to the underclass. The close proximity of these facilities made it an ideal area for a single person (or family) to find the help they needed to make the transition back to a more upscale lifestyle. There were many places a person with no money or job could eat, sleep, and socialize. In summer months, the homeless were even allowed to sleep on the sidewalks in front of shelters already full for the night. As a result, the area was teeming with street-people.

Not all of the street people in the area were technically “homeless.” People who were on the fringe of stable lifestyles also found refuge in the area. Those who lived in weekly rate hotels, were transiently homeless, kicked out of their homes temporarily, or just passing through also found the area attractive because of the low-budget bars, hotels, and places to eat. Many locals came to the area from other parts of the city to socialize, drink, and generally escape the areas of town where their questionable behavior, primarily loitering and drinking, was not welcome. I often encountered men who lived in other parts of Denver but just had to get away for a while. These interludes in their normal lives were typically the result of domestic problems caused by drugs and/or alcohol. Larimer was an ideal refuge because the rules of mainstream society were relaxed. It was
a safe-haven where expectations were not an issue. No one would get hassled for sitting on a park bench all day. No one would call the police if you were seen lying on the sidewalk. If you wanted help you could get it and, if you didn’t, no one cared. This attitude was most apparent in Triangle Park.

Triangle Park (also known as Gilligan’s Island, The Beach, or Needle Park) was a small triangular grass median between the three main streets of Larimer: Broadway, Lawrence, and Twenty-Third Street/Park Avenue West (see Figure 2.2). Other than three small trees and a few trash cans, this unofficial park was simply a strip of grass. Two of Denver’s largest homeless shelters were across the street from the small green space. For years this was the primary social gathering place for Denver’s street people. In the summer months during the early 1990s, every day forty to fifty street people would crowd into this space. Because of its central location, the park was the best place to lounge,
Figure 2.2 "Triangle Park." In the background is one of the two large homeless shelters located adjacent to and across the street from the unofficial park.

hangout, and catch up on local events and gossip. Many street people would spend the entire day at the park because, as one informant told me, "wait long enough in the park and eventually everybody in the area will pass by."

My observations of the park in 1993 suggested that the Larimer street people were overwhelmingly white, male, and between the ages of 30 and 60. The ethnic makeup of the population reflected Denver's demographic makeup. The largest group in the area was non-Hispanic whites. Also, the majority of homeless who were temporarily in the city, on their way somewhere else, were also white. In the comfortable summer climate, this transient or traveling population could grow to be quite large.

Another group almost as large, and in the summer sometimes even larger, included Mexican and Central American nationals from Honduras, Guatemala, Costa Rica, Nicaragua, and El Salvador, who spoke very little English. These men were looking for or were on hiatus from seasonal work, either farming or other labor-oriented activities. Many were in Colorado on a short-term basis to make money to take home to their families across the border. Sometimes the day shelter looked like an immigration center. Due to cultural and language barriers, these immigrants typically did not mingle much with the whites.

Mexican-Americans were the third largest ethnic group in the area. Historically, Larimer had been known as a more Hispanic part of the city. Most of the bars, restaurants, and small grocery stores were Hispanic-owned-and-operated. Although Hispanics were not the largest homeless population, their disproportionately small numbers belied their importance. Many of these men had long-standing roots to Denver's Westside and Old Northside neighborhoods adjacent to Larimer. Other ethnic groups on the street did not have local
social support connections to call upon when needed. These connections were also important in the context of the local drug and heroin dealing in the area.

Few homeless people in Larimer were African-American. Historically, most African-Americans in Denver did not live close to Larimer. African-Americans comprise 6 percent of Colorado’s population, a demographic consistent with Larimer’s ethnic composition.

The Drug Scene

In the era before the ballpark, there were large congregations of all types of street people in Larimer, and street-based drug and alcohol use was rampant and out of control. The area was notorious, even among many non-drug users, as the best place in the city to buy drugs. Its dangerous reputation was due in part to this common understanding. In interviews with people who were passing through, I found that this reputation extended outside the state.

Many of the homeless in Larimer were alcoholics. “Drinkers” or “winos” constituted a distinct social group and had a separate social identity from other people in the area. Small groups of three to five men could be seen drinking in alleyways and other public spaces. While many of the local heroin users also drank, few hung out with winos. A few heroin users, like Kurt, claimed membership in both groups because of a shared history with winos, but that was uncommon. Why junkies did not associate with winos was more a matter of self-preservation than personal preference. The winos were the most highly visible group, drawing the most attention from both the public and police. Since winos were unpredictable and could get violent, most junkies stayed away from them. Kurt’s physical stature was intimidating and he was not bothered by the threat of violence.

At night the prime targets for robbery and other assorted violence were drunks exiting bars. More than a few times while walking through Larimer I would see a badly beaten wino sleeping or drinking in the street. The homeless were often the victims of violence, although the locals were not always the perpetrators. During this period, several homeless people had been decapitated and the police were searching for a suspect they believed was coming to the area for easy prey. There were also instances where youth from the suburbs would come into the city to beat up the homeless for sport.

“Huffers” were another drug-using group inhabiting Larimer. These men gathered in small groups of two or three to buy and use paint and other inexpensive inhalants. They typically kept the inhalant, usually spray paint or gasoline, in an empty soda can and would use a bandanna as a funnel to heighten the intensity of snorting the fumes. Most huffers were immigrants who, as one heroin user noted, “could not afford any other high.” Everyone in the area considered the huffers to be the lowest and most degenerate type of drug user. The locals called them “golden boys” because the favorite paint to huff was gold metallic spray paint, which inevitably ended up on users’ clothing and faces. Golden boys were a popular target of violence. A common sight was a man lying semi-conscious on the curb with gold paint all over his face and a black eye. The golden boys were zombies, ostracized by their peers, and as a group remained entirely to themselves.
Dealing Heroin and Local Junkies

When I first met Kurt and Danny in 1993, the most visible street market for heroin and other illegal drugs was a small three-block, east-west corridor on Larimer, Market, and Curtis streets and 23rd Avenue in the heart of this district. Early in my days visiting this area the dealers were all Mexican or Latin-American nationals. Few spoke English beyond the minimum needed to sell heroin or cocaine. The dealers sold everything—marijuana, cocaine, crack, pills, and speed—mingling unnoticed in the crowds of homeless people. On walks through the area I was frequently solicited to buy drugs. “Chiva” (heroin) was the most frequently solicited drug. Among the loitering of the populations in the area, dealers had a protected anonymous street environment in which they could conduct business.

There seemed to be a heroin dealer on every corner. It was not hard for anyone entering the area to buy drugs. Further, “drive-through” service was available; customers would drive into the area, invite a dealer into the car, drive around the block, and then drop the dealer off near where they had been picked up. It was not uncommon to see several dealers at once rush up to cars cruising the area. Other times one could spot a person who, by his or her dress, was obviously not from the area (for example, a man in a suit or a nurse in uniform); the person would walk up, meet with a dealer, buy what they wanted, and walk away.

The area was not only crazy with heroin and other drug sales, but also with heroin use. If you knew what to look for, it was easy to find evidence of use. Used, and sometimes reusable syringes and other drug paraphernalia littered the alleyways. It seemed every few steps one could find the orange cap to a syringe lying in the gutter. On several occasions I noticed needles still containing blood. Heroin was packaged in balloons for sales, and used and torn balloons were scattered on the streets. My first impromptu observation of a heroin user injecting occurred unexpectedly in 1992. One day while casually walking through the area I saw a man injecting while sitting on a crowded sidewalk in front of a shelter.

By spending time on the streets and interviewing local heroin users, I found the Larimer scene gradually started to make sense. The random, chaotic, free-for-all of drug selling and buying on the street was somewhat deceiving. Although various foreign nationals publicly and visibly ran heroin dealing in Larimer, the market also supported a large, tight-knit local population of heroin users who lived and/or frequented the area year round. The majority of the street dealers’ business was not conducted so publicly. Local junkies’ support was integral to many of the street sales in the area. This group of local junkies set the tone on the streets and their activities provided the guidelines for many customers coming into the area to buy heroin. The relationship between these local junkies and the foreign dealers (sellers) was conflicting because it was both symbiotic and antagonistic.

The local heroin-using (junkie) group in Larimer was not, in any specific way, a formal group; it was open to all ethnicities. It had no leader and no particular membership criteria other than being a heroin injector and spending
consistent time on the streets. The local junkies were all daily heroin injectors and many had strong addictions. The only obvious criteria for exclusion from this group was that one could not be part of the “foreign” Mexican/Latin American street-dealing crowd. The local dealers had a personal relationship with heroin because they used it, but most of the foreign dealers did not use the drug. In reviewing my street contact notes, I found that approximately thirty heroin users comprised the core of this local junkie group and that Kurt was one of its most active members. Kurt and Danny’s heroin-dealing operation emerged from and was successful because of their membership in this informal group.

A number of considerations made this local group of street-based heroin users more instrumental to the local drug economy than one might imagine. First, information traveled quickly and relatively freely between them. Gossip, information about local events, and other relevant news traveled through this group with remarkable speed and accuracy. On several occasions I heard separate stories from users about specific events or people—how “Jimmy” got arrested, or where the police were located—that were almost identical. Information about heroin deals, including prices, the quality of the available drugs, and who was or was not dealing in the area were the most common topics in the network. This type of information was freely exchanged because partnerships between members of this group were common. For example, in a typical three-month period Jerry and David might partner up one month, the next month David might partner up with Kurt, and the month after that Kurt would partner up with Jerry. With a relatively small group, eventually everyone got to know everyone else through this shifting partnership process.

Partnerships among the local junkies were not typically based on mutual trust, fondness, or affinity, although in many cases over time those feelings would develop. Relationships between the junkies were a matter of survival. All the junkies in the area needed information to maintain their heroin habits. As a result, holding important things back within the group was socially sanctioned. Over time a degree of social and economic support emerged through many of their associations and many considered their fellow local heroin users to be friends. This familiarity between members produced a certain loyalty between them.

This peer-based camaraderie also promoted certain beliefs within the group that, in turn, supported the group’s continued existence. Their mutual heroin addictions and limited resources to obtain heroin were the prime issues to rally around. For example, all the local junkies understood that they needed heroin to maintain what habits they could, and to perhaps get high in the process. They also all understood that cash for heroin was hard to come by. With this in mind, helping each other out was not viewed as generosity or charity but rather as insurance for their own future in maintaining their addiction. For example, if Kurt and Jerry were partnered up, Kurt might have some money to buy heroin one day, but the next day Jerry might. They would help each other out because their time on the street had taught them one important lesson: at some point it would be their turn to share and by sharing they would earn the right to receive from others in the future. Importantly, the same types of reciprocal exchange among street-based heroin users have been noted by other researchers.
(Bourgois, 1995; Zule, 1992). This vague reciprocity between local junkies served a dual purpose. On an individual level, it was an efficient survival strategy because it increased resources but it was also an important building block in cohesive social relations between group members.

As one might imagine, these relationships were sometimes rocky. There was competition between members because of limited resources; at times, members would hold things back, rip one another off, or generally hustle something from somebody in this local group. These occasions, though, were surprisingly rare and almost always dismissed. This relaxed attitude was accepted within the group because of the normative experiences and understandings the users had in common. Despite understanding the code of reciprocity, all the members of the group were junkies so they also understood that some transgression of equitable interactions was simply “typical junkie behavior.” These activities were not condoned and verbal reprimands were common, but unless the behavior continued nothing much happened because of the lapses. As a result, violence between members of this community was very rare. Many heroin users I interviewed who were from other cities were surprised by this lax local attitude, and considered Denver a “soft city.” On the few occasions a local was socially ostracized from the group, transgressions would eventually be overlooked and the user would be allowed back. However, users who did not ultimately cooperate were forced out. Despite sanctions and pressure to conform to these informal local guidelines, the most important way local junkies came together and stayed together was through their common economic role in the heroin market of Larimer. They had a specialized relationship with the foreign street dealers that made their existence and camaraderie much easier than it would likely have been in other contexts or markets. And it was this relationship that served as the foundation of Kurt and Danny’s dealing operation.

### THE LOCAL JUNKIES AND IMMIGRANT DEALERS’ RELATIONSHIP

The overwhelming majority of heroin sellers in Larimer were immigrants on relatively short stays in the area, who never effectively marketed their own product. Essentially, they were only successful because of their monopoly. They sold a lot of heroin to a lot of different people, but the most popular method they used to attract customers was standing on the street corner saying, “Chiva?” to every person or car that passed. This sales technique was not advisable, efficient, or safe, and arrests within this group were common. The immigrant dealers were also notorious for ripping off customers by selling highly diluted or sometimes even fake heroin.

Cheating customers was a common practice because the dealers were transient, both to the area and to selling heroin, and therefore did not care about the customers beyond getting their money. Reprisals were rare because customers coming into the area could never be assured that the dealers they were buying from today would even be in the state, much less the Larimer area, tomorrow. The dealers knew this, so ripping off customers, selling them “more cut than drug,” was not really going to get them into much trouble. Besides, their
stranglehold on the market meant there was no one else for customers to go to. Not knowing English (and in some cases pretending not to know English) assisted dealers in ripping off customers. If a customer came back to complain about a previous deal the dealer could pretend he did not understand the complaint. This unscrupulous attitude earned the immigrant dealers distrust among many of the customers entering the area to buy heroin. To be evenhanded, some customers did appreciate the anonymity of not knowing their dealer, but this group was in the minority and was repeatedly cheated.

The local street junkies specifically promoted distrust of the foreign dealers. Danny, who spoke fluent Spanish and occasionally interacted with the immigrant dealers, explained the common perception many locals had of the street dealers. He told me the dealers were not “real” dealers because they were not heroin users. They were brought into the country to sell heroin by higher-level distributors who were in charge. Every day the suppliers who would drop them in the area gave them a specific quantity of heroin. When they were done selling that amount, they left the area for the day. Every day was the same for these sellers until they made enough money to go home to their families, or until they got arrested. They were just here for the money. Danny told me that they were crazy in their sales—even chasing down cars—because getting arrested was simply an inconvenience. After getting arrested and spending a few days in jail, the INS Immigration Naturalization Service (INS) usually deported them home. Once back in their home country some would even get back into the United States, hop on a bus, and return to Colorado to sell again. Conveniendy, the bus stop dropped them in the heart of the area. Danny had personally witnessed this cycle for several dealers over the years. He explained, “For the money they can make here in a few months they can buy a ranch and horses in their home country. They can support their family for a year.”

Because the immigrant dealers’ monopoly excluded many local users from dealing, the most lucrative economic opportunity available in the area, most local junkies reviled the immigrant dealers. The locals’ sentiment was: they are not from the area, they do not live on the streets, they don’t even use heroin, they do not care about customers (heroin users), and they do not belong here. The dealers were “foreigners,” and this common enemy was just one more reason for them to stick together. But the locals were trapped, and they knew it. Without their own consistent contacts to supplies of heroin, they were powerless. To add to this frustration, local street-based heroin users were homeless, or close to homeless, and many had no means of financial support beyond what they could hustle every day. Some received government aid that they could use a portion of to buy heroin but beyond that the options were limited. Shoplifting was not much of an option because one needed transportation to stores to steal. The homeless also stood out in stores and security would be vigilant. Taking money out of self-pay parking lot slots, a hustle called “hooking boxes,” was popular. This activity was risky since parking lot owners (usually large companies) were known for being aggressive prosecutors.

Many local heroin users adapted to this combination of circumstances within the market by maintaining their heroin habits through setting up customers with dealers, a process commonly called “middling,” “brokering,” or “copping.”
Copping has been noted in previous research as being a popular and important economic activity within the heroin economy (Koester, 1994). This activity has also been noted to contribute to increased HIV risk behaviors among injectors through drug sharing processes (Koester & Hoffer, 1994). Because the dealers were foreign, copping drugs for customers was much easier than it might have ordinarily been and it became the most popular mode of heroin subsistence for local users. In essence, by copping heroin for others they could directly exploit a niche within the market produced by cultural advantages they had over the dealers. Not only did many customers not trust the dealers, they were simply uncomfortable dealing with them. It was easier from the customers' perspective to work with a local junkie who was always around, who knew the people, the area, the best deals, and the best dope.

The relationships between local junkies were fundamentally based on taking advantage of opportunities to broker heroin deals. Of all the aspects of their common street-based existence, hustling heroin from such deals was the one activity that brought all the locals together. The setup was:

1. A customer would come into the area because they did not have a regular dealer contact, did not trust the Mexicans, or did not want to deal with a foreigner.
2. The customer would connect with a local user to broker their sale. Local users were keenly aware of spotting and attracting customers in the area and often worked together in these activities.
3. The local would take the customer's money, go to the dealer and make the heroin purchase. This procedure was acceptable to the customer because the local knew the Mexican dealers in the area, knew who had the best dope at the time, and who was giving the best deals.
4. As compensation for this service, the local users would inject some of the heroin purchased with the customers they helped in purchasing the heroin.

The procedure for buying through a middleman became an institution in Larimer because of how well it fit with the local market and afforded assurances to all the parties in the deals. Since local junkies relied on future exchanges to maintain their own heroin addiction, it was in their best interest to remain relatively fair with their customers. In other words, junkies were dependent on brokering to acquire heroin. As a result, customers could trust the junkie to return with the heroin. Customers were also aware that the junkie would not get ripped off by the immigrant dealer because locals could put the word out on the street to avoid the dealer if necessary. This was a valid threat to dealers because they were already under suspicion by customers but, unlike the customers, the junkies knew the dealers. Finally, the immigrant street dealers did not get ripped off because they were the only people in the area with heroin for sale. The heroin sold in the area came through the foreign dealers and no one else. The small number of local Hispanic users in the area was significant in brokering because many were bilingual and could readily interact with both parties.

Figure 2.3 diagrams this tripartite market link and is important for understanding not only how Kurt and Danny's network was successful but also the public health concerns this market produced. In the figure, the junkies' and
customers' resources are outlined. The reciprocal relationship between these actors could either be fair or unfair as demonstrated by their actions (detailed in italics). Comparing the results of both potential outcomes for both participants within their market context, it is clear why these two groups usually decided to work together instead of hustling one another.

The Larimer market was an open market for customers. Anyone who wanted to could buy heroin there, but to dealers the market was a monopoly. The group of immigrant street dealers who sold heroin in the area were a classic example of what Curtis and Wendel refer to as a "socially-bonded” business (Curtis and Wendel, 2000). Their extra-economic ties, the result of being foreigners, unified their access to both becoming dealers and simultaneously prevented outsiders from encroaching on their dominance. However, the bonds between immigrant dealers were not strong. As a group they acted more as a loose association of freelance sellers than as a single unified organization. The implications of how the Larimer market was arranged exposes areas of it that were exploited by the
local junkies. The local junkies also formed a type of “socially-bonded business.” In the margins of the immigrant dealers’ operation, local junkies took advantage of their ability to broker sales. The bond that emerged reinforced their norm of reciprocity. It was this extra-economic tie that allowed junkies to foster their economic position between dealers and customers. The implication of this tie between the local junkies would cast a long shadow on the relationship Kurt eventually formed with his customers.

The Importance of Group Identity

A primary factor that supported the interdependence between the local heroin users, customers, and the immigrant dealers was the social identity of being a heroin user. The perceptions of the local junkies were that the immigrant dealers were not heroin users, and did not interact with local junkies beyond selling heroin. Most immigrant dealers had no particular allegiance to their customers. Most of the locals assumed, based on their treatment, that the dealers did not hold customers in very high regard. The issue of respect was important to many of the local junkies; many of them had maintained heroin habits over many years, which was not an easy thing to do, but the dealers did not care. This indifference was further supported because the immigrant dealers were outsiders to the social conventions and intimate understandings of heroin users. The immigrant dealers were not heroin users, nor were they part of the users’ social groups. As nonmembers, they lacked the intimate knowledge of the normative behaviors and expectations associated with heroin dealing. They did not know they were violating an expected and socially appropriate relationship between a heroin dealer and customer, nor were they concerned about it. To them the relationship was about money. They were freelance businessmen and relationships beyond sales were meaningless. Once they were done selling they left the area. The customer’s addiction was inconsequential and meaningless to them. The sales were a means to an end and what they were doing had a limited time frame.

The most fundamental way customers and the local junkie community felt mistreated by the immigrant dealers was when they as users were “dope sick” and short the full amount to buy their heroin fix. Among the junkies, this situation occurred frequently while trying to make ends meet. Inevitably, even the best hustler has a run of bad luck. The immigrant street dealer’s attitude was “so what;” no sale would occur without all the cash. From the dealers’ point of view, their time was limited and waiting to be paid was not an option. To the local heroin users and customers, this heartless attitude was not the way heroin dealers were supposed to do business. In their experience, only crack dealers were cold-hearted; the norm for heroin dealers was different. If a customer was in dire need, a heroin dealer would understand and help them out. In other words, a real heroin dealer used the drug and knew what it meant to be dope sick. A real heroin dealer could empathize with the customer in this way because he has been in the same pathetic position.

A “real” heroin dealer might “front” the drugs, that is, give drugs to customers with the expectation that the customers will pay the dealer when they have money, or at least give them a small break on the price. A real heroin dealer
was around for the long haul and part of the local scene and needed customers as much as they needed him. Immigrant sellers knew nothing of the expectations of customers and local junkies, nor did they care. The immigrant dealers were entrepreneurs taking advantage of a lucrative economic opportunity. The foreigners did not have any commitment to a career as a heroin dealer because they were not heroin users and did not have to support a drug habit, and their motives involved using the profits from dealing for non-drug-related purposes.

The local junkies exploited the immigrant dealers’ cultural shortcomings to solidify their own position within the market. They did this by usurping the typical dealer/customer relations formed between dealers and customers and developing independent relationships with customers. Because the locals were always in the area and easy to find, repeated contact with customers was integral to developing these relationships, but relations were further consolidated through the “in-group” activity of injecting. When the customer came to buy heroin, the local broker would inject with the customer after the sale. Through these social processes, locals effectively allied themselves with customers and through this alliance were able to maintain their drug habits quite effectively. This worked because customers were not from the area and just as trapped by the circumstances of the market as the locals. Meeting and dealing directly and consistently with an immigrant dealer was difficult. Street dealers were often suspicious and did not want to meet new customers; locals were more convenient. As a result, customers who returned to the area would more often look for the local who brokered their last deal rather than a new dealer.

Relationships between customers and local junkies often developed into long-term relationships because both parties in the indirect exchange benefited. The junkie had a source of heroin and the customer had a conduit to a fair heroin deal. Many junkies developed strong ties to the customers they copped for and vice versa. Serving as cultural brokers by middling for customers, the local homeless heroin users as a group established a foothold of power within a heroin market that was otherwise not benefiting them. The local junkies controlled two important potential sales markets: 1) customers unsure about going to dealers in the area or those unfamiliar with the area, and 2) customers who did not trust the dealers. Thus, the street dealers had to respect them. By fostering these relations, locals became an integral part of the overall heroin street market and sales process, even though they did not control the drug and were otherwise powerless. With the popularity of heroin sales in the area there was more than enough opportunity for both dealers and local middlemen to coexist and thrive and both groups did so until the area began to change.

The Heat

As the description of the “before the ballpark era” insinuates, the police had their hands full with Larimer in the early 1990s. There would occasionally be a multiple arrest of local street dealers, and roasting wins was a regular occurrence, but for the most part the police and homeless mutually coexisted. The populations of street people were too large for the police who patrolled the area to make much of a difference, but the undesirables were geographically contained, and primarily
only bothered one another, so no one in the city seemed to care. Nonetheless, the streets were always active with arrests. Denver Uniform Crime reports always rated the area as one of the highest in arrests (Hoffer & Mendelson, 1998), but the police were outnumbered. A substantial cleanup of the area was not an important issue. On several occasions, subjects I was interviewing would get arrested, spend a week or two in jail, and then resurface on the streets.

This enforcement attitude was due to other factors as well. Because Larimer had no permanent residents, community pressure to clean up the area was insignificant. There were no houses, apartments, or condos, and with no one living in the area, not too many people complained about the activity. There was no community activism requesting increased patrols or more arrests because there was no community to be active. Furthermore, for area bars, hotels, and restaurants the street people, while a nuisance, represented profits, and the reason they did not complain much was more a matter of self-interest. For years, the homeless—temporary, out-of-state, foreign, or otherwise—were their clientele and they had adapted to a mutual coexistence. A final component of the enforcement issue during this era was geopolitical.

Police District Six was in charge of the area. This district also happened to be responsible for the large neighborhood and housing projects north of the Larimer area. This neighborhood was densely populated and had a high crime rate. In the 1980s and early 1990s, this area also had a reputation for youth gang and crack sales activity. The visible nature of the crack problem had mobilized the community and local city council to action. Geographically, district six responsibilities were spread thin, and police priorities were directed to the city residents. The homeless, who no one particularly cared about, did not have an antagonistic community group pressuring the police for more action. The area and its people were not a priority to anyone, but this would soon change.

**THE HOMELESS SCENE: THE CLEANUP ERA**

The revitalization of lower downtown (LoDo) Denver that began in the mid-1980s and continues today, has been recognized nationally as one of the most successful urban revitalization projects in the country. This area of Denver has been recognized by urban developers and planners as a model to replicate. However, when LoDo renovations began, the Larimer area was too far away to cause much concern for developers. This started to change as development expanded northward. However, building Coors Field (home of the Colorado Rockies, a major league baseball franchise) in 1995 was the catalyst and single most profound factor in the monumental changes Denver’s homeless would experience between 1994 and 1996. The new stadium, which cost roughly $200 million and had a seating capacity of 50,000, was the cornerstone to the continued redevelopment success of downtown Denver and directly connected the concerns of developers and city officials to the homeless situation.

With a young professional population, Denver commuters and suburbanites were already enjoying all the new places to go and things to do in LoDo, even before the stadium was built. However, with the stadium, baseball became the
primary draw to the area. Not only were locals coming back to the city to take in an evening baseball game; the team also drew fans from a multi-state region (including Wyoming, Nebraska, and even Montana). Colorado’s tourism industry received a major boost by major league baseball, and revenues that visiting, suburban, and local fans spent in the city substantially invigorated development. During these early years, the area of LoDo near the ballpark exploded with restaurants, sports bars, and sports memorabilia shops. However, to assure that families driving into the city were safe, and would return for another game, the area around the ballpark needed to be sanitized. Of all things, parking was the issue.

With Coors Field as the new western border of Larimer, many businesses in that part of the city began to convert their parking lots into pay lots during day and evening baseball games. The area was instantly the prime baseball parking location for fans and some local businesses even repaved their parking lots to attract this business. For $8 to $15 per space, even a small parking lot could be a moneymaker. Ironically, besides a few trendy brewpubs opening directly across the street from the stadium, the actual businesses in Larimer did not change overnight as they did in LoDo—only their parking lots did. Nonetheless, this change brought thousands of fans face to face with Denver’s homeless problem as they parked their cars, and this was unacceptable. Denver’s homeless people were now an eyesore for the chamber of commerce and a potential blight on the city’s ever-improving national reputation.

The Larimer cleanup era, as I have labeled it, began in 1994, a year before the stadium opened. It can best be described as a comprehensive, yet not necessarily coordinated, effort by civic leaders, law enforcement, business leaders, and policy makers to remove and reduce the visibility of the homeless and other undesirables from the stadium area and make it safe for baseball fans. No formal start date, agreement, or mission statement for the cleanup era was developed. It was more like a committed effort of independent projects, organizations, and individuals toward the same goal: the success of the new stadium.

In this monumental effort, community leaders of Denver were mobilized against the same public enemy: the homeless. But this common effort was not a grassroots movement, nor was it spontaneous in origin. The “clean up the area” mission was most vigorously supported through political pressure exerted by the “Ballpark Community” (a local interest group made up of business people in the area), and other newly formed LoDo community groups. These interest groups convened private meetings with the mayor, chief of police, and other high-ranking city officials to decide what to do. It may seem unusual that community groups could have such political power until one realizes that the members of these community groups were not typical grassroots activists. Members of these groups had to own property—in this case, condominiums and lofts—or a business in LoDo. This made membership particularly exclusive. At the time, a one-bedroom condominium in LoDo sold in the $400,000-$500,000 price range with larger ones selling in the millions. The political force that such an organized group of upstanding citizens could wield was impressive. But the interests of these deep-pocketed civic leaders were the same as everyone else in the city. The interests of Colorado’s rich, middle-class, and poor were unified. After all,
Colorado taxpayers paid for the majority of the stadiums costs, and everyone wanted to see it succeed.

Ironically, these local LoDo community groups who now pressured the city were not from Larimer. They were not constituents of the local community. At the time, there was no indigenous Larimer area community group lobbying for anything. As mentioned earlier, the people of the area, including the business owners, were ambivalent about fixing the homeless problem. Having a long history in the area, they were content to leave things the way they were. These attitudes were borne out by the fact that none of the local businesses changed to attract the new clientele coming to the baseball games. Parking was the only real issue because businesses in the area were not that invested in the people staying much longer than the game. In other words, the local businesses already had an established and consistent customer base.

Serendipity played an initial role in the changes to Larimer. One evening in 1994 a popular homeless encampment under the railroad bridge, which had existed there for years, mysteriously burned to the ground. After the incident, which was rumored to have been perpetrated by a stranger who came off the train, the railroad decided not to reopen the area to the homeless, and they cordoned it off to any future inhabitants with a chain-link fence. This unfortunate occurrence marked the unofficial kickoff to the cleanup era. The city’s parks and recreation department and police were the first to officially start the cleanup.

In 1994, in anticipation of the new stadium, the city changed the borders of the sixth police district. With its new borders, the only area the district was responsible for was Larimer and it was their job to clean it up. This meant that the police began constantly rousting and stopping the homeless to check identification and reduce the ability of the homeless to loiter. This pressure was particularly intense and obvious in the hours before, during, and after a baseball game. At these times, entirely vacant of any street people, the streets felt eerily empty. Some officers would simply park their patrol cars in front of the shelters and stay there for hours questioning and ticketing anyone who might not belong. They were making sure that the only people in the area had a legitimate reason to be there. “No other place to go” was not an acceptable excuse to be in the area. The pressure worked.

The homeless who were in Denver on their way somewhere else were the first to permanently disappear from the scene. They never reappeared in the same overwhelming numbers. Denver’s reputation for being a homeless-friendly city was changing. Ticketing the homeless was a simple and effective tactic to pressure the street populations. Public intoxication, loitering, criminal mischief, trespassing, and similar petty misdemeanor charges were easy citations for police officers to write the homeless in the area. Fines for these types of offenses were inconsequential—usually $20–$100—and a court date was typically unnecessary if the ticket was paid. Of course, the homeless were usually not able to pay even the smallest of these fines nor were they consistent in making court appearances. This helped the police because after a number of unpaid fines and missed court dates, small charges turned into jailable offenses. Jail time was also trivial, only a few days, and was not a real deterrent. The deterrent was the process and the hassle. The number of street people in the area dropped significantly because
it became easier to go elsewhere and not get hassled than to stay in the area and have to deal with the police. The procedure was professional, efficient, and effective. The street people told many stories about police misbehavior during this time. A popular story of this era was that Denver police were transporting some street people in their patrol cars to Aurora and dropping them off, telling them not to return. Aurora is a large suburb east of Denver and a forty-five minute drive from Larimer. These reports, many of which I could not substantiate, were evidence that the police were doing their job. They were making it difficult and unpopular just to be in the area. However, police efforts were only one part of the battle to clean up the area.

As affective as police pressure was the elimination of Larimer area’s public spaces. Overnight, Denver’s parks and recreation department removed all bus stop benches, other street benches, and pay phones. The next target: the parks. Triangle Park, Denver’s most frequented unofficial park, was top of that list. The closing of Triangle Park exemplifies the commitment to the cleanup typical of the era. First, city signs were posted in the park stating it was closed and anyone loitering in the park would be ticketed (see Figure 2.4). Even the police ticketing violators had only a minimal effect. A few weeks later, a team of city workers and a tractor arrived. After cordoning off the park, the team spent a few months removing all the grass from the area. The park was now a hideous patch of dirt; with Denver’s dry climate and high winds it continuously produced intense dirt tornados. A few weeks later the parks department returned, placed

bark over the dirt, and put up temporary chain-link fence around the grill and playground. Residents, it was hard to detect the undesirable activity people lost the view.

Removing the parks eliminated the atmosphere and the balance ofugged streets. People congregated for the same reasons because the parks were less visible, which still contrasted with the con-

Figure 2.4 Sign in Triangle Park. The sign notes that the unofficial park is closed.
bark over the dirt, sprayed it with a foul-smelling sealant, and removed the barricades: that was the end of the park. What was once literally the hub of social activity for all manners of street people in Larimer was now a vacant crop of dirt, dust, and bark. The landmark of Denver’s homeless was gone.

Later in this era a much larger official city park, Lawson, located on the eastern border of the Larimer area at Twenty-third Street and Welton, was temporarily closed. Because the park had a popular community baseball diamond and playground, both of which were used by the neighboring community residents, it was reopened. However, before the park reopened, a seven-foot high chain-link fence was erected around the park’s perimeter (see Figure 2.5). It was hard to determine if the fence was intended to keep people out or trap those undesirables who might wander into the park. Either way, it worked. The street people lost interest in going there.

Removing the public spaces was surprisingly effective in changing the atmosphere of Larimer. Through these efforts there was a significant shift in the balance of power. The homeless no longer had anywhere to hang out. Areas to congregate were removed. The large and unmanageable groups were gone because the places they could come together no longer existed. The small groups which still loitered in the area were easy targets. But the area was vacant in comparison to what it used to be like and crowds seemed to dissipate overnight. With the visibility of the homeless diminished, commuters driving through or arriving to park for a baseball game now had a different impression. In fact, if you had not seen the previous incarnation you would never have believed such crowds once congregated there.
Another of the more profound aspects of the cleanup that contributed fundamentally to its success was a result of private sector changes. By 1995, the two large overnight homeless shelters were on board with the cleanup agenda. Both successfully reduced the homeless populations loitering in front of their establishments by instituting new rules. The most effective of these were 1) earlier curfews for residents of the programs, and 2) requiring that residents leave the area during the day. Shelter employees monitored the streets and enforced the rules. Both shelters also stopped overflow sleeping accommodations. Overflow sleeping was a service that offered the homeless who could not get rooms elsewhere the option of sleeping on the floors of a common area of the shelter overnight. Overflow was not a preferred option; however, it was popular among two groups that the cleanup targeted. Street-based drug and alcohol-consuming populations often used overflow because they typically could not abide by the rules of the shelters’ programs for a more permanent bed. Overflow was also popular for men in the area for the weekend. These men did not have to find a place to stay; they could just go to overflow for free.

The second policy was that the homeless waiting for a bed to become vacant at a shelter could no longer congregate in front of the shelter. Absurd as it sounds, they had to take a number and wait elsewhere. These changes significantly reduced the populations of street people. It also effectively moved those who remained farther east toward the day shelter and away from Coors Field. Before the ballpark opened and the cleanup era started, the sidewalk and street in front of the only day shelter in the area was popular and seemed to attract a constant sea of people. It was a major rendezvous and hangout for day laborers and migrant workers, but was also frequented by winos, homeless heroin users, and dealers. Day labor vans made multiple stops there to pick up and drop off workers. Everyone on the streets seemed to migrate to the shelter from time to time during the day. Even though the shelter closed at 6:00 p.m. in the winter and 8:00 p.m. in the summer, it was the most popular place for the homeless to congregate during the day.

The popularity of the shelter was due to the services it offered the homeless who could not get or did not want a more established residency in other programs. The staff of the shelter was also excellent at serving the needs of the homeless and was not generally judgmental. There were only a limited number of slots in the overnight shelter programs and everyone else on the streets had to manage however they could. Many of these people were genuinely homeless, but for a variety of reasons could not get into or abide by the rules of the local programs. These people needed a place to eat, store personal belongings, shower, pick up mail, make phone calls, talk to counselors, and look for work. The day shelter afforded all these services and one did not have to be part of a program to receive the services offered, so it became a popular refuge for many of the area’s street-based drug users. Many people kept needles and other drug paraphernalia in the lockers that the shelter operated; although this was against the rules.

During the cleanup era, this shelter was the farthest shelter from the ballpark and therefore was the last to make changes. This shelter changing its policies signaled the end of street activity reminiscent of the “before the ballpark era.” The shelter’s new moment, to loiterers, was excommunicated policy was either a shelter that hired who diligently told all of this rule was “the only street in front of the shelter to congregate and just live.

THE HOMELESS

Through the complete and resounding success on the streets seemed a to the poignant example of powerless and desperate of the hordes of Larimer was a shelter in matter of reducing that dispersed, the streets seemed as if there would always be the exodus of the people I was mobs of people just a weekend break and immigrants on the years earlier. Yet people went or was like this do not lose contacts with other social interviewing at this usually still go to Larimer limited number of Broadway, and Algebra worked for a traveling party and relax— smoky that because the specific area they would go into the background they did. The people who had been shelters remained the only part of the using the services.
The shelter's new policy was innocent: no one was allowed, even for the briefest moment, to loiter anywhere on the sidewalks or street in front of the shelter. The policy was either "in the shelter" or away from the area. A security officer was hired who diligently called the police if he needed to enforce the rule. The effect of this rule was profound: within a year the majority of the homeless on the street in front of the shelter were gone. This reduced the ability of the homeless to congregate and many street people left the area seeking other places in the city to live.

THE HOMELESS SCENE: AFTER THE CLEANUP ERA

Through the combined efforts of all involved, the cleanup of Larimer was a resounding success. From 1994 through 1996, each day I went into the area the streets seemed a little less crowded than my previous visit. The change was a poignant example of what a city can do if it mobilizes all its resources against a powerless and disenfranchised population. By 1997, after the area was cleared of the hordes of street people, the intense pressure from the police and others seemed to abate. For the homeless who made it through this transformation, Larimer was a shadow of what it was. Much of the area's appearance was a matter of reducing the density of the people on the street. With the population dispersed, the streets looked less crowded. The area was under control, but it was still the only part of the city where shelters and services for the homeless existed; there would always be some street people in Larimer.

The exodus of the masses during the Larimer cleanup era was quiet. Many of the people I was interviewing at the time just disappeared. Gone were the mobs of people just moving through the area in the summer, and the men taking a weekend break from their ordinary lives. Gone were the substantial groups of immigrants on the streets. By 1997 the area looked nothing like it had just four years earlier. Yet despite repeated efforts, I was unable to determine where these people went or what areas of the city absorbed them. Of course, street people like this do not leave forwarding addresses and are usually found through contacts with other street people, but everyone was gone. Some heroin users I was interviewing at the time moved in with friends or relatives and would occasionally still go to Larimer, but only if they absolutely had to. Others left town. A limited number did relocate to other parts of the city (Capitol Hill, Colfax, South Broadway, and Aurora) and remained homeless. Some people—like Bobby, who worked for a traveling carnival and only came to the area during down times to party and relax—decided to go elsewhere to spend their free time. It was clear that because the groups were broken up and not allowed to congregate in any specific area their presence within the city was simply less visible; but most of them did not go anywhere. The people I knew on the streets knew how to meld into the background of ordinary society and be inconspicuous, and that's what they did. The people who remained in Larimer were divided into two groups: the people who had no choice to leave and those who adapted. Many residents of the shelters remained in the area because they had nowhere to go. The area was still the only part of the city for the homeless to find services. These people were using the services that the programs in the area offered and had a legitimate
reason to be there. Although in much smaller numbers, many immigrant work-
ers also still used the day shelters to find work and meet the work van. With no
local support networks, they too had nowhere to go.

The street dealers and the local junkies were two groups that remained in
Larimer by adapting to the new environment, and some adapted better than
others. With pressure from the police, it became much more challenging for the
immigrant dealers to operate in the ways in which they were accustomed. With
large crowds no longer on the streets, their “homeless” cover was blown. In fact,
the dealers were often the only ones left on the street corners and as a result
many were arrested. Many of the immigrant dealers could not leave the area pri-
marily because their abilities to market their product were extremely limited.
Many did not have a phone, transportation, or even a residence. However,
despite the hard times, street dealers still sold heroin in Larimer, and it was dur-
ing these uncertain times that Kurt and Danny began dealing heroin. And their
business took off.