

*The pathway from “under the bridge” to sheltered living and occupational wellbeing*

*-a clinical doctoral capstone, University of St. Augustine, Austin, TX, USA*

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# Objectives

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- To provide OTs with an understanding of the mechanisms at play with the homeless population as they attempt to transition to sheltered living, so we can better serve this pop.
  - highlight the challenges and the enablers they encounter
  - highlight the various forms of occupational injustices encountered that relegate them to a culture of poverty



# Homelessness - Introduction

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- **Global phenomenon**
- **Definition: “absence of stable or secure housing”**
  - **Sleeping rough\*** vs. hidden homeless
- Implications: Experience social disengagement and lack of inclusion in social and economic life
  - Life of poverty w/ severe living conditions
  - **Increased vulnerability and health risks**
- Mental health and substance abuse can be contributors and a consequence
- **Risk of recidivism is high**, particularly with the lack of support



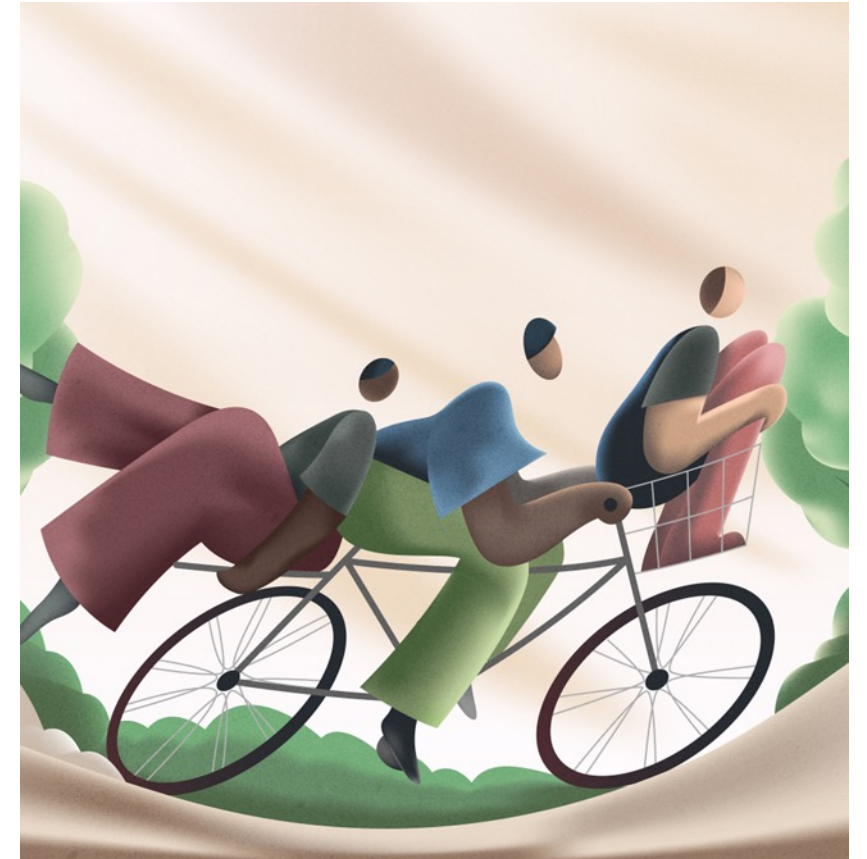
Tseole & Pillay, 2025

Thomas, Gray & MC Ginty, 2010

# Homelessness –the US context

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- Peaked by 18 % from 2023-2024 (653,104 → 771,480 people)
- Key factors that account for homelessness
  - Low income
  - Housing affordability
  - Weak safety nets
- **Over-representation of minorities and indigenous communities**
  - Due to long standing inequality and discrimination (long standing)
- **↑ in vulnerable groups -children, PWD and older adults**
- **Current issues: Lack of personnel and resources to address homelessness**



National Alliance to end Homelessness, 2025

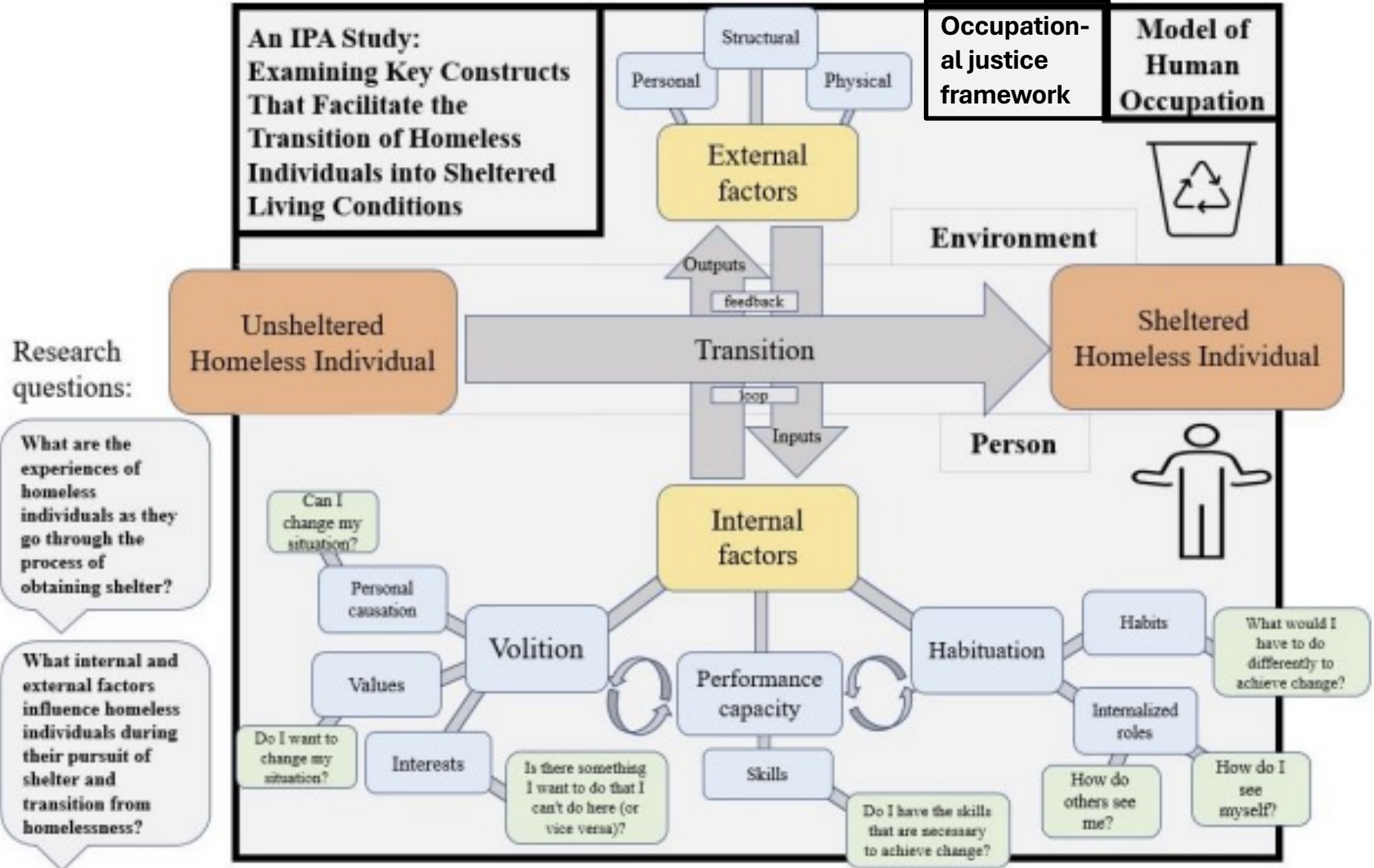
# In what capacity can OTs be involved?

- Reasons for remaining unsheltered are complex
  - Structural factors and policies are contributors (NAEH, 2022).
    - Key factors: poverty, lack of affordable housing, and a safety net
    - Recommendations for advocacy
  - Occupational injustice and health risks experienced
    - OTs are vital and successful in providing client centered care (Thomas, Gray & Mc. Ginty, 2010)
    - **There is a paucity of research on the processes and challenges encountered when unsheltered individuals attempt to transition to sheltered living.**

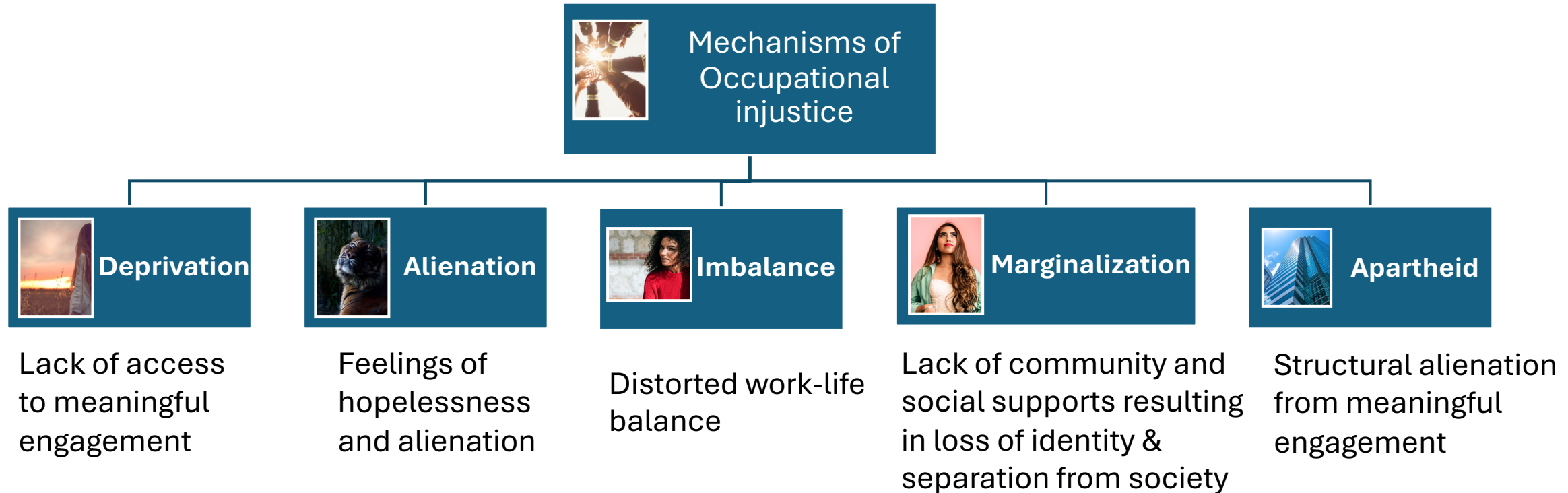


Thomas, Gray & Mc. Ginty, 2010  
Townsend and Wilcock, 2004

# Research question and theoretical framework



Occupational justice is “**the right of every individual to be able to meet basic needs and to have equal opportunities** and life chances to reach toward her or his potential but specific to the individual’s engagement in diverse and meaningful occupation (Wilcock & Townsend, 2009, p. 193)



Townsend & Wilcock, 2004  
Virani, R. 2022

# Methods

- **Qualitative study** - Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) methodology
- USAHS IRB exempt approval was obtained
- **Recruitment:** Participants (N= 9) were recruited using a combination of snowball sampling - flyers, and emails.
- **Inclusion criteria:**
  - Males >30 years, who have experienced homelessness
  - have lived in supportive housing for at least 2.5 years run by a faith-based organization (FBO)
  - are English-speaking
  - have a score of > 23 on the Mini-Mental State Exam (MMSE)

# Methods

- **Informed consent & screening**
- **Participants:** (N=9), all male who had transitioned for ~2.5-4 years, living in the New Orleans area
- **Data collection: Semi-Structured Interviews were conducted**, audio recorded, transcribed, and de-identified and recordings were destroyed
- **Data-analysis:**
  - Subjected to open line coding, memo-ing, fracturing the data.
  - Emerging themes were examined for similarities and dissimilarities within and across narratives
    - Emerging themes included categories>> second order themes>> (subordinate)>>superordinate themes(Peacock & Paul-Ward, 2017).
- Methodological congruence and transparency: audit and peer review and member checking was observed

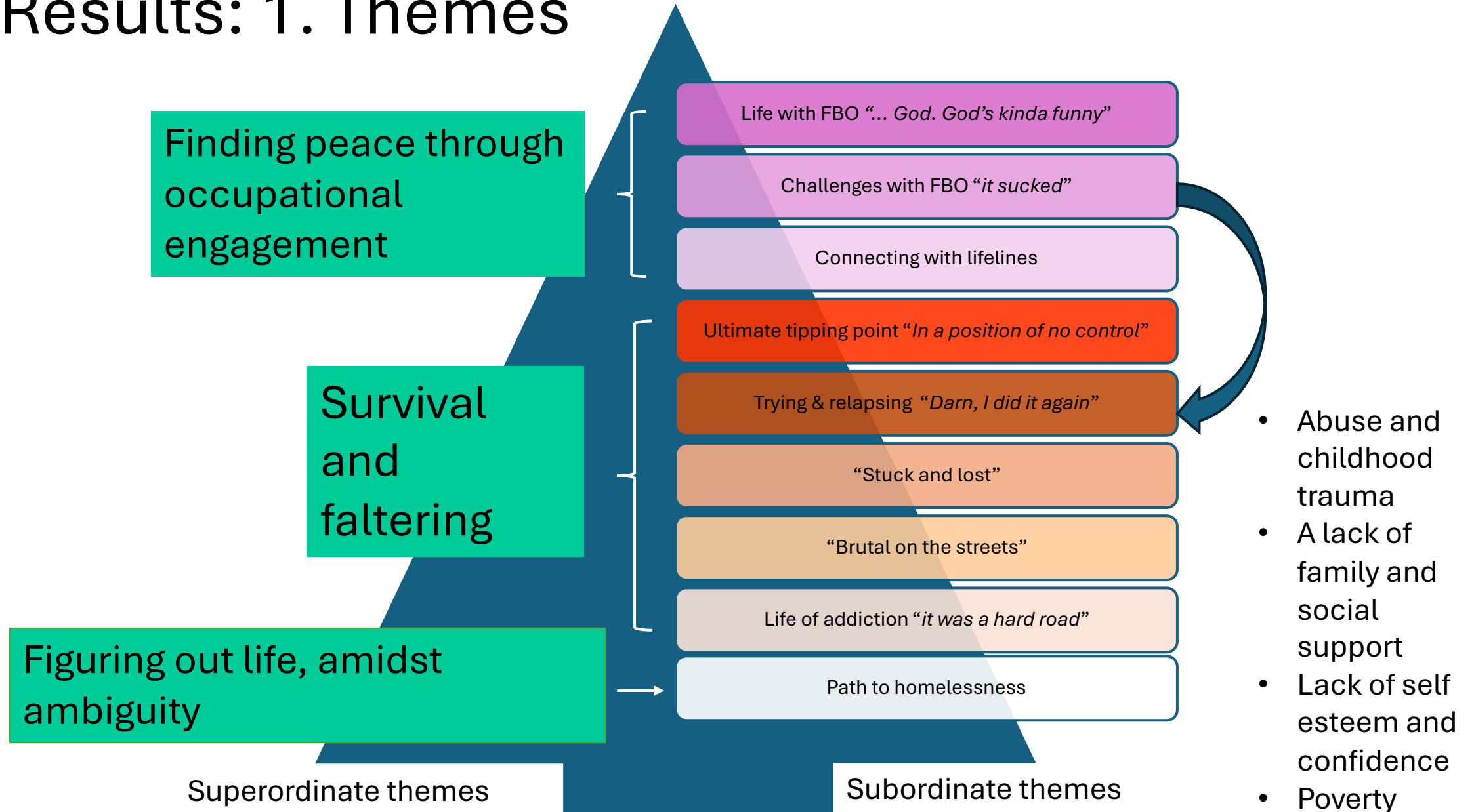


# Results

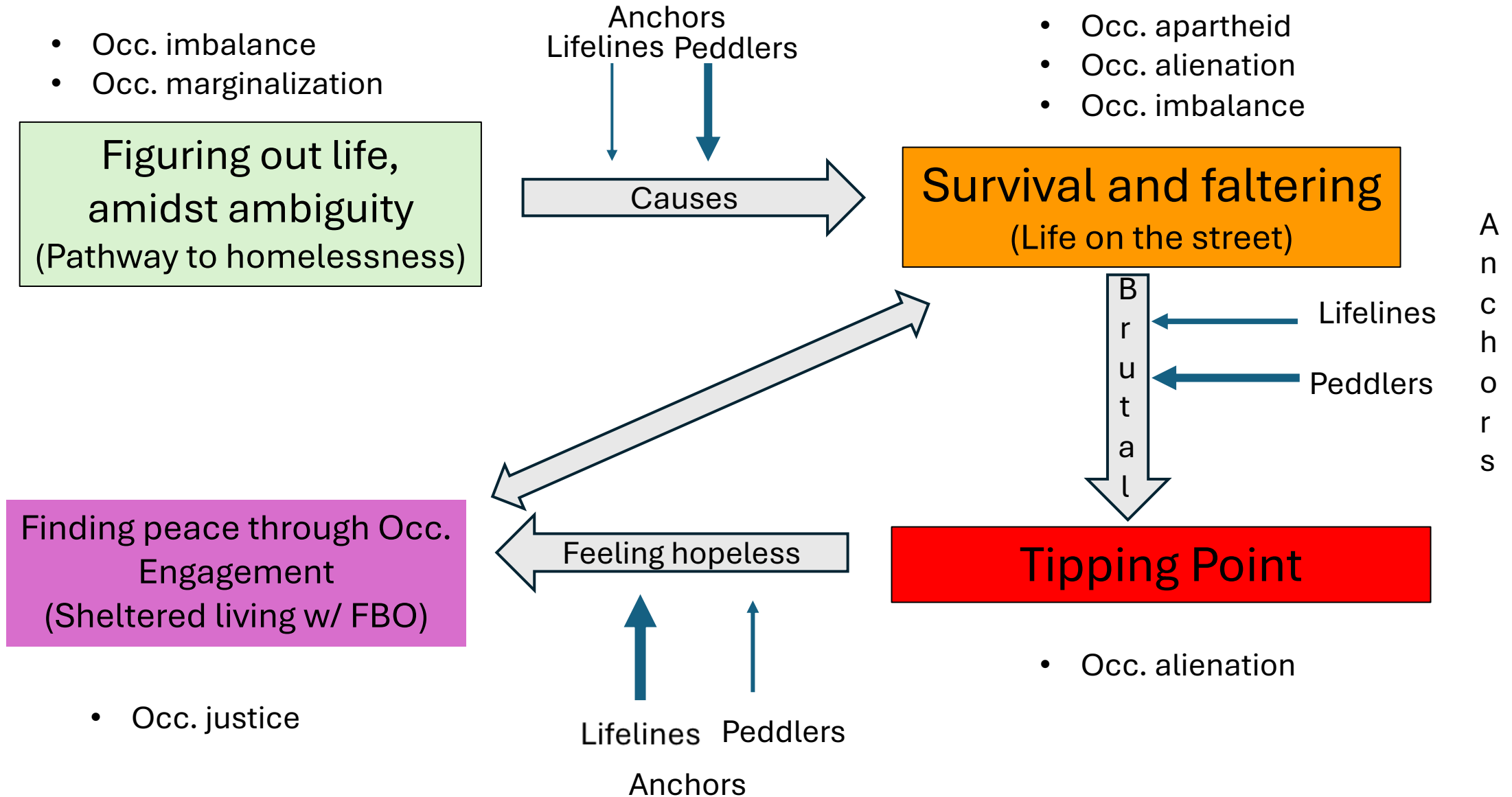
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# Results: 1. Themes



## 2. Mechanisms at play: A journey fraught with occupational injustices, w/FBO acting as key enablers



# Occupational alienation and tipping point

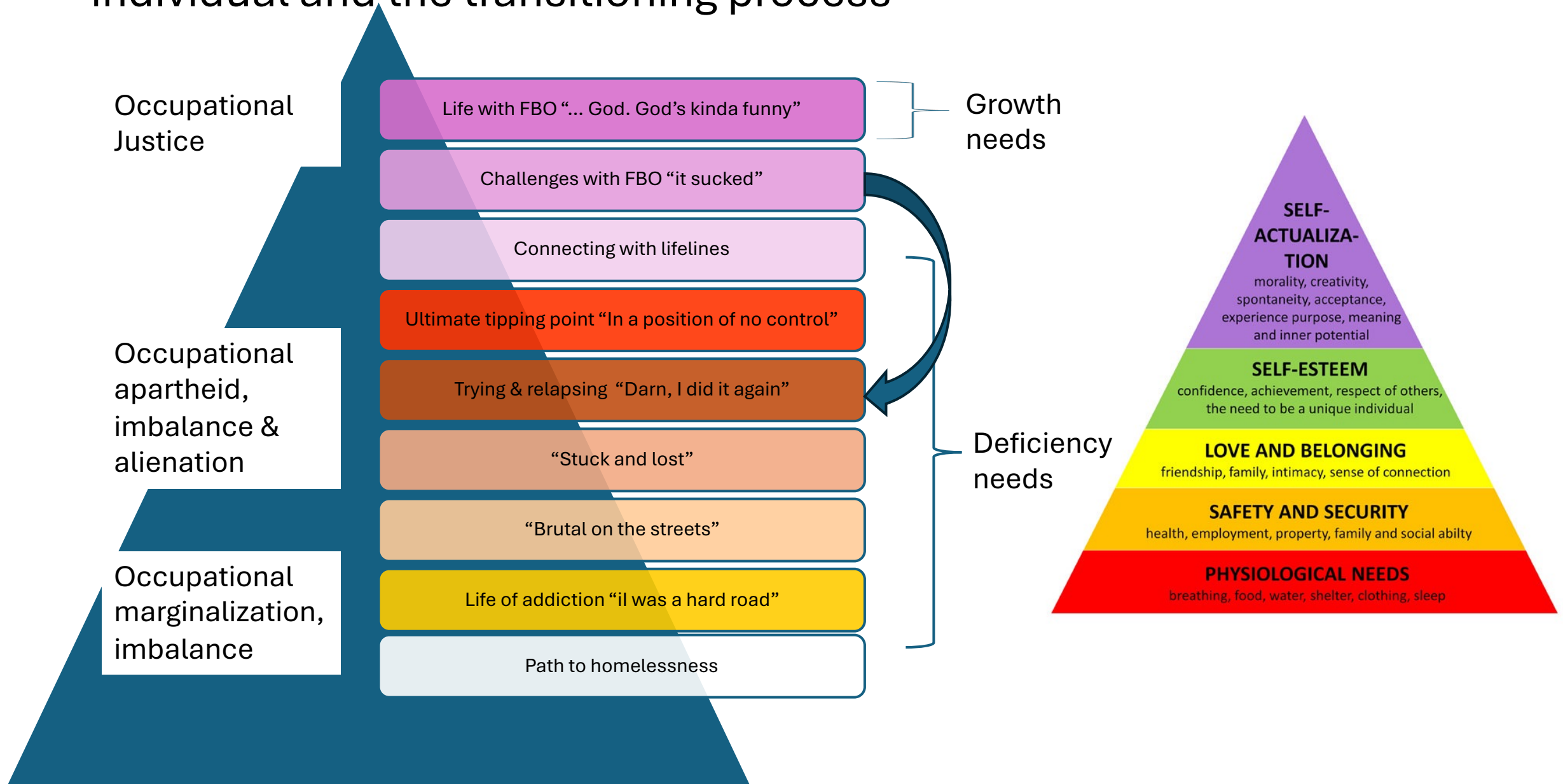
Yes. Well, I needed that to see that I had to have something different. Uhm, **I was coming to the end of my rope with the drugs. I was tired of, of using. I was tired of, uhh the heavy weight I felt** when I was coming off of them. **Everything else setting in from—the reality setting in of I don't have a job, I've been trying to get my driver's license back three times it didn't work, I don't know how to do this. Uhm to really come to the point of knowing somethings got to really change.** Otherwise—and on top of that—within five months, because of those things I just expressed, **I ultimately tried to take my life five times. Uhm didn't happen, but I gave it a good try. I was desperate. I was wanting. I was wanting not to be here, uhm, because I couldn't--I couldn't see a way out. I wanted a way out. I was looking for a way out. I couldn't see a way out.** And then finally when nothing else worked, like I said, in the situation with my stepson hit home for me because I looked at him and loved him like my own kid. It hurt, so that kind of gave me the push to be like, **You know what, I'm just going. Whatever happens is gonna happen.' And that's what I did, and then that's when God stepped in to give me other alternatives. So."**

## Occupational apartheid

I: I know you mentioned that you lost your driver's license. Can you tell me about the process that you went through trying to reapply for those things?"

P: *“Well I had people give me money to—to go and get my license, and uhmm, I had went to the uhmm ABC title and they told me they couldn't do this. I had a flag on my license. I went to the DMV they said we can't do this unless you pay the full amount. Uhh and then I went back to the DMV and they said well you got all these tickets you got to pay off first. Yeah well it was just like all kinds of stuff and it's like—man I just. .... Yeah, I just got bounced around.”*

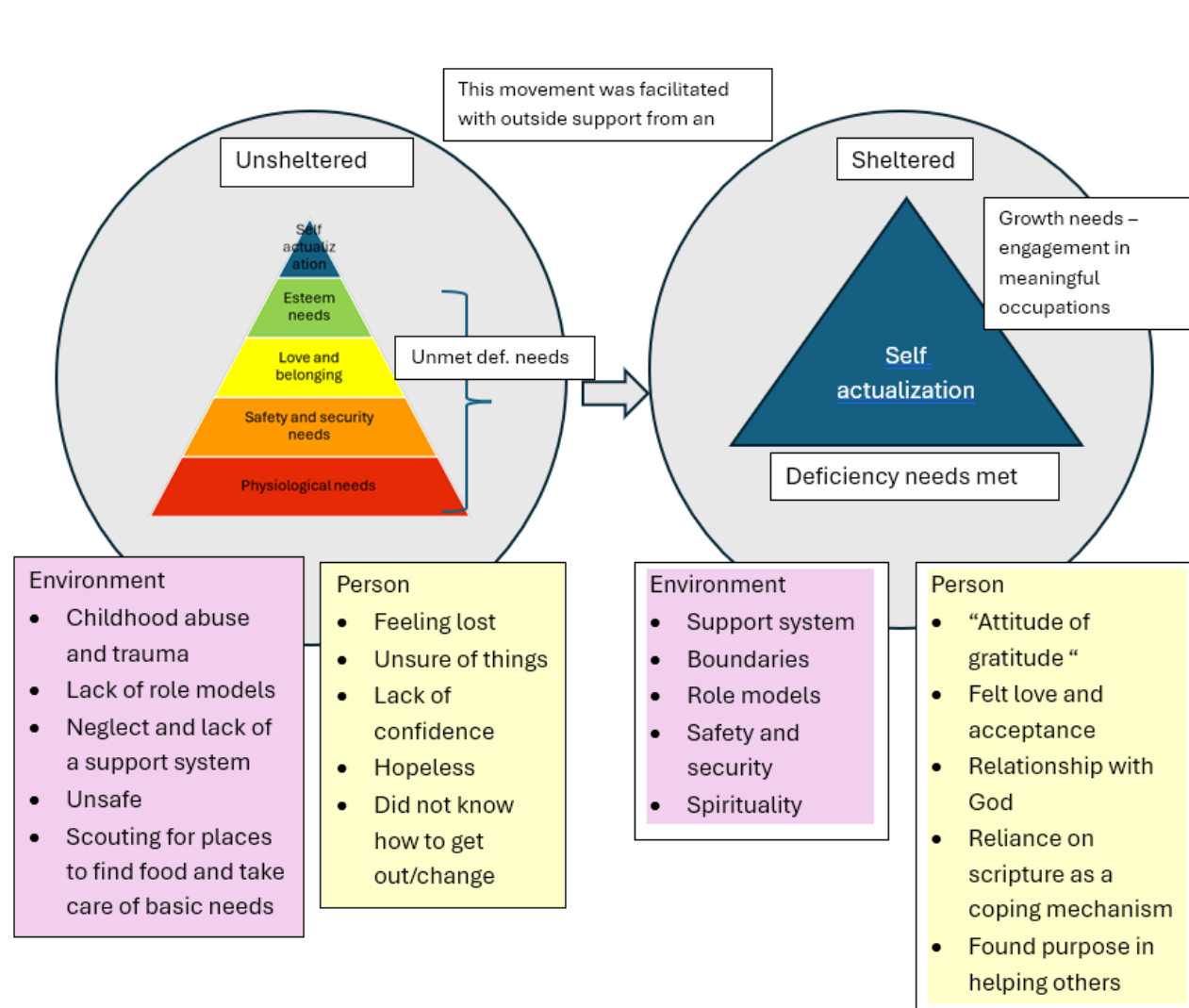
### 3. Maslow's Hierarchy of needs epitomized the life of a homeless individual and the transitioning process



# Maslow's theory of survival

- **Deficiency needs: Occupational injustices**
- **P: “Well, my focus was finding a job. Uhm, but that wasn't my main priority at that point. At that point it was trying to find somewhere where I don't have to worry about where my meals gonna come from, where I'm gonna sleep, am I gonna have to still be defensive and aware of my surroundings and on alert. Uhm, I really wanted to be somewhere where I could get peace. Uhm so that became the main focus was to find somewhere that I could do that while I'm starting all over. Uhmm and then I knew the job would come after that, ..... You know what I mean?”**
- **Growth needs: Meaningful engagement in occupations - Occupational justice**
- **P: “when I started working and going off campus, I started being able to feel peace.”**

# The importance of person-environment fit



# Conclusions and recommendations

- FBO are successful -- persistence, patience, structure, discipline and support
  - They are good collaborators to address occupational injustices using person centered approach
- Occupational justice framework was helpful in naming the problems
- Maslow's hierarchy of needs explains behavior on the streets
- Use of an ecological model can help OTs improve person-environment
  - Clear indication the environment on the streets was rough

# Conclusion and recommendations

- Recommend use of trauma-informed care framework to help transcend from deficiency needs to growth needs .
  - will guide clinicians **to provide safety**, support to help make the right choices and engage in self care management in the transition process
  - Create a safe, nurturing environment enabling feelings of respect, **being heard and empowerment**
  - **Limit retraumatization**
  - **Get them to a point of self actualization and growth, limit recidivism and promote long-term recovery**



<https://www.lightningstep.com/blog/providing-trauma-informed-care-a-patient-centered-approach?>

# Future implications for research

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- Recommend mixed methods studies with a larger sample size to validate these findings or otherwise (critique the findings of this study)
- Similar studies understanding other enablers like the role of nongovernmental organizations in helping with the transition.
- More studies on the needs of the hidden homeless population.



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Thank you

