

City Sanctioned Homeless Encampments: A Case Study Analysis of Seattle's City-Permitted Villages

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“The anti-homeless laws being passed in city after city in the United States work in a pernicious way: by redefining what is acceptable behavior in public space, by in effect annihilating the spaces in which the homeless must live, these laws seek simply to annihilate homeless people themselves... We are creating a world in which a whole class of people simply cannot be, entirely because they have no place to be.”

(Don Mitchell – Annihilation of Space by Law)

Acknowledgements

When I was ten, my family survived a house fire that resulted in the loss of everything but each other. Thankfully, my parents had the financial and social supports necessary to recover, something far too many families and individuals are lacking. We stayed in a rental home for a year while we rebuilt on the foundation of our previous home. However, I often think about the transitory time when the only clothes I had were the pajamas I had slept in that night. I remember being most upset about losing my beloved stuffed animal, Belle. My mom mourned the loss of pictures documenting our childhood that were never digitized. My dad was in awe that the roof he had worked so hard to put over his family's head ceased to exist. Every material possession we had was gone in the matter of a couple of hours. If my parents had lost their job or faced a health complication at that time we could have easily become a statistic on HUD's website. As unfortunate as this loss was, it sparked an interest in homelessness advocacy in me when I was a mere third grader. Twelve years later I was given the opportunity to pursue this fixation in a way that could potentially inspire lasting changes in homelessness policy around the country. I have the following people to thank for their crucial roles in the process of creating this thesis.

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Introduction

The United States is amid an affordable housing crisis, which has further perpetuated a homelessness crisis. As cities increasingly respond to the proliferation of homelessness with criminalization as a means of managing visible poverty, homeless individuals are left with no legal place to exist. Many homeless individuals come together to form supportive communities and provide a sense of belonging through homeless encampments, sometimes referred to as tent cities due to their unique urban form. This is not a new phenomenon and has a long history of recurrence in the United States, but it is a trend that has become seemingly unmanageable in the past few decades. Public officials often derail this nontraditional settlement pattern through sweeps, and cite zoning and public perception as the driving force behind their decisions. In spite of this, homeless encampments have persisted. In the first section of this thesis I explore the existing literature on homeless encampments and their history. I focus specifically on PhD Candidate of Sociology Chris Herring's typology of large scale durable homeless encampments shaped by the differing relationships between city officials and homeless individuals residing in the camps on the West Coast. Few cities are experimenting with alternative approaches in response to the growing crisis.

Seattle has created a legalized form of encampments that relies on a partnership between the city and nonprofits, the first of its kind in the country. This research is a case study analysis that seeks to understand the historical context that contributed to the implementation of Seattle's network of permitted villages, and what lessons can be learned from their development thus far. Following my literature review I discuss the research methods I used to study Seattle's model. I then share my analysis of interviews and secondary research which consist of key themes used to understand the historical context of the model and lessons that can be learned thus far. I conclude with a discussion as to why this is relevant research for cities across the country to consider. It is meant to ultimately inform cities with growing rates of unsheltered homelessness a more sustainable means of mitigating the hardships of such a vulnerable population.

Literature Review

Affordable Housing & Homelessness

The United States does not have enough affordable and available housing, nor does it have substantial federal subsidies to adequately address such deficiencies, “More than 38 million US households have housing cost burdens, leaving little income left to pay for food, healthcare, and other basic necessities. As it is, federal housing assistance reaches only a fraction of the large and growing number of low-income households in need. Between the shortage of subsidized housing and the ongoing losses of low-cost rentals through market forces, low-income households have increasingly few housing options” (JCHS, 2018, p. 30). The Urban Institute produced a report funded by Housing Authority Insurance, Inc. (HAI, Inc.), as part of the Housing Assistance Matters Initiative, to provide a fact-based analysis of the housing affordability gap for extremely low-income renters. A key finding was that without the support of federal rental assistance such as Housing Choice Vouchers and Section 8 Assistance, not one county in the United States has adequate affordable housing for its extremely low-income renters. Rather, “the market provides only 21 adequate, affordable, and available (AAA) units for every 100 renter households with income at or below 30 percent of the area median income (often called extremely low-income, or ELI, renters). Federal assistance adds another 24 AAA units” (Getsinger, 2014, p. 1). The National Low Income Housing Coalition’s 2018 annual report measuring the availability of rental housing affordable to extremely low income households and other income groups, *The Gap*, estimates a shortage of 7 million affordable and available rental homes for the nation’s ELI households. Although 7.4 million units are affordable, only 4 million are available and affordable. This leaves 71% of the 11 million ELI renter households severely cost burdened meaning they are spending more than 50% of income on housing costs (NLIHC, 2018).

This wicked problem has become seemingly unmanageable with recent budget cuts to programs supported by the Department of Housing and Urban Development. Only one of every four families eligible for rental assistance receive aid due to funding limitations, leaving 17 million renter households at risk (CBPP, 2017). As the housing affordability gap widens and accessibility to affordable and available rental units declines, homelessness has evolved into a nationwide epidemic since its reemergence in the 1980s. The most recent national estimate of homelessness in the United States accounted for 552,830 homeless individuals on a single night in January of 2018 (HUD, 2018). This estimate comes from the U.S. Housing and Urban Development Department’s Annual Homeless Assessment Report to Congress for which data is collected through a Point in Time (PIT) count which includes both a shelter and street count. The National Law Center on Homelessness & Poverty argues that this number is significantly under representative of the actual population due to the flaws in the PIT count and inconsistent methodology guidelines across the country, “Regardless of their methodology or execution, point in time counts fail to account for the transitory nature of homelessness and thus present a misleading picture of the crisis” (NLCHP, 2017, p.6).

Especially vulnerable is the unsheltered homeless population. Of the 552,830 individuals experiencing homelessness on a single January night in the United States, 35% were staying in unsheltered locations- “a public or private place not designated for, or ordinarily used as, a regular sleeping accommodation for people (for example, the streets, vehicles, or parks)” (HUD, 2018, p. 3). According to the 2017 Annual Homeless Assessment Report by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, homelessness increased for the first time in 7 years, all of which can be attributed to a rise in unsheltered homeless individuals. The unsheltered homeless population rose again from 2017 to 2018 by another two percent, or around 4,300 people (HUD, 2018).

Homeless Encampments

Not only do homeless individuals lack a roof over their head, they are also deprived of the safety, storage, privacy, and stability that come with a home. In an attempt to recreate those benefits many of these unsheltered homeless individuals form homeless camps to store their items and provide a sense of belonging through a community. This make shift urbanization relies on self-sufficiency which is due in large to disinvestment in supporting homeless individuals beyond the traditional shelter model. This is a pattern that has fluctuated over the course of U.S. history:

“Homeless camps have long been a part of America’s urban landscape. Their ebb and flow followed the booms and busts of business cycles (Roy 1935) and the seasonal rhythms of farm work (N. Anderson 1923) until the early 1970s. After that, the street homeless and their camps became a permanent fixture in most cities of the United States as the country experienced a period of economic decline, the de-institutionalization of its mental health institutions, and welfare state retrenchment (Jencks 1995). Homeless camps during this period tended to remain smaller and more dispersed than those of the pre-war era, as local law-enforcement agencies would sweep into action when they perceived an area was dominated by the homeless (Snow and Mulcahy 2001). The camps also took the form of short-lived political events in staking “tent-cities” on the steps of city halls, the lawn of the White House, and on contentious parcels of public land to press political demands (Wagner and Gilman 2012)” (Herring, 2014, p. 285).

Reported cases of homeless encampments has increased by 1342% in the past 10 years from 19 reported encampments in 2007 to 274 reported in 2016 (NLCHP, 2017). The reemergence of media attention to homelessness camps has brought the apparent lack of adequate emergency shelter options to light (Skinner, 2016). However, “encampments are not simply the product of inadequate shelter capacity, a form of homeless habitation that would simply disappear if more beds were made available indoors. They are rather preferred safe grounds that offer various moral and material benefits denied in the shelter” (Herring, 2014, p. 306). PhD Candidate of Sociology Chris Herring argues that although this “journalistic discovery” portrays modern large-scale durable homeless encampments as

rooted in the 2007-2009 recession, they are also due in large to exclusionary spatial policies and deficiencies of the traditional shelter system dating back to the 1980s (Herring, 2015).

National Responses

The National Law Center on Homelessness & Poverty conducted an unprecedented national study, *Tent City, USA*, in which 187 cities chosen for geographic and population diversity were researched to determine “the existence and nature of current statutory and other formal and informal policies with respect to homeless encampments [defined as a group living arrangement in a public location involving semi-permanent shelters and storage of possessions]” (NLCHP, 2017, p. 28). This study branches off from a previous NLCHP study, *Housing-Not-Handcuffs*, in which the same 187 cities were followed from 2006 to 2016 to see the evolution of laws related to the criminalization of homelessness. Seven categories of conduct disproportionately performed by homeless people were identified in order to research laws that restrict or prohibit those actions ranging from camping in public to begging. *Tent City, USA* focuses solely on formal and informal policies related directly to homeless encampments that were determined by researching ordinances, judicial decrees, published policy statements, news reports, and interviewing organizations assisting the homeless. This research informs much of my understanding of existing conditions of homeless encampments across the U.S. today. These policies are expanded on in the context of Chris Herring’s research.

Homeless Encampment Typology

Through his research focused on durable large-scale encampments along the west coast, Chris Herring has developed “four distinctive socio-spatial functions of encampments shaped by administrative strategies of city officials and adaptive strategies of campers” (Herring, 2014, p. 285). Herring’s model draws from sociologist Loïc Wacquant’s concept of social seclusion in order to provide a holistic perspective that considers homeless encampments as not only a product of exclusionary spatial policies such as the anti-homeless laws discussed above, but also an elective choice that is “critical to understanding the co-constitutive roles of homeless people’s preferences to camp amidst varied administrative constraints” (Herring, 2014, p. 289). An assessment of each typology is beyond the scope of this research, but it is important to understand that a range exists so to not generalize this unique settlement pattern and the various responses cities have developed to mitigate them. The four types are outlined below.

Contestation

The most common approach to homeless encampments is criminalization. This consists of eviction and demolition of homeless encampments due to publicly voiced concerns with public health hazards, waste management, crime, and general aesthetic (Jones, 2015). Eviction occurs through sweeps, “a practice designed to remove homeless people and their belongings from a given area, typically involving both police and other governmental actors, like city or county parks departments or state transportation departments” (NLCHP,

2018, p. 30). Homelessness has long been policed, “And long before New York City police evicted the homeless from Tompkins Square Park in 1991, janitors spread ammonia on the floor of Grand Central Terminal to prevent the homeless from sleeping there” (Blau, 1992, p. 4). Often denoted as “quality of life” campaigns, anti-homeless laws include anti-social behavior laws, hostile architecture, food sharing bans, and other measures that contribute to “an emerging model of urban governance, through which the police are enlisted to ‘purify’ streets and sidewalks due to an increasing pressure to redevelop and revitalize the urban core (Herring, 2015, p. 690).

Cities legitimize these inhumane policies with the explanation that they are a necessary measure to address homelessness: “Many communities state they need criminalization ordinances to provide law enforcement with a “tool” to push people to accept services, but providing outreach backed with resources for real alternatives is the far better, proven approach” (NLCHP, 2017, p. 10). The expectation is that sweeps will push encampment residents to shelters, but the underlying issues of shelter inadequacies remain. A considerable amount of literature exists scrutinizing anti-homeless laws in terms of disruption of homeless individuals’ pathway to permanent housing and redundant city expenses. In terms of homeless encampments, despite the apparent intent of improving urban blight, “these policies are tremendously expensive for communities, and involvement in the criminal justice system often results in the further entrenchment of homelessness. It costs time and money to extricate oneself from the criminal justice system; criminal records make it more difficult to find jobs or housing” (NLCHP, 2017, p. 28).

Homeless individuals have lost both their belongings and lives in the pursuit to rid the presence of camps, “The cost to individuals from sweeps of encampments can be life-threatening: numerous lawsuits have documented necessary medications and shelter being stripped from persons forced to live on the streets” (Tent City, USA NLCHP). In November 2016 a video went viral of police officers in Denver removing blankets from people sleeping outside in below freezing temperatures due to the Camping Ban that makes it illegal to use any form of protection from the elements other than clothing (NLCHP, 2017, p. 33). Cities also suffer negative consequences of a punitive approach to homeless encampments through excessive spending on ineffective policing. Examples include:

“The City Administrator’s Office of Los Angeles, CA, found the city spends \$100 million annually on homelessness, but \$87 million of that was devoted to law enforcement responses leaving only \$13 million for housing and services” (NLCHP, 2017, p. 33).

“Honolulu, HI, spends \$15,000 per week – \$750,000 per year – on encampment sweeps, with many homeless residents simply moving around the corner for a day or two and the coming right back” (NLCHP, 2017, p. 9).

Despite the funding devoted to this punitive approach and the disruption it causes to camper’s daily lives, the encampments persist, “Encampments exist because of a lack of

suitable housing. Clearing encampments without notice or provision for appropriate housing solutions simply exacerbates the problems. Only ensuring access to permanent housing resolves encampments for good” (NLCHP, 2017, p. 33). Herring likens the tenacity of cities to deny these faults to a “penal-welfare strategy designed to protect governmental competency in poverty management by reinforcing an image of law and order while concealing the failures of the welfare state” (Herring, 2014, p. 292). The process of contestation is not only unsuccessful but also rooted in denying the visibility of homelessness rather than addressing the source of the issues.

Toleration

Some cities have opted to informally tolerate homeless encampments in the outskirts of cities in order to ensure homelessness is removed from the public eye of revitalizing urban cores but avoid costly policing campaigns city wide. Herring refers to Fresno as an example, “In the higher rent districts of the downtown, police carry out an emboldened punitive approach, while simultaneously taking an unprecedented hands-off toleration of homeless habitation within the abandoned industrial zone” (Herring, 2014, p. 294). As anti-homeless policies are selectively enforced in specific areas, costs of enforcement are reduced, complaints by businesses fall, and homelessness is out of sight out of mind.

This toleration creates a blatantly segregated urban landscape in which designated homeless zones in marginal spaces face limited public services especially in terms of safety, “the city not only tolerated camping and shopping carts, both criminalized by city ordinances, but also actively ignored an open-air drug market and fires on the sidewalks even in the presence of officers” (Herring, 2014, p. 296). Although residents do not constantly face eviction as with contested camps, residents are disregarded as equal citizens of the city through this flexible enforcement.

Co-optation

Co-optation creates authoritative government-led encampments that “reflect similarly existing state-run institutions such as the shelter and jail or transitional housing” (Herring, 2014, p. 301). This model seeks to regulate encampments in order to improve health and sanitation services and eliminate illegal activities. The primary function is to rehouse the homeless populations residing in the camps, and residents are stripped of autonomy to do so rapidly. An example was Temporary Housing Services Area in Ontario, California.

Accommodation

Few cities have sparked an agreement with nonprofits or religious organizations to act as the third party responsible for provision and management and accommodate homeless encampments through zoning ordinances. Often denoted as transitional housing, accommodated homeless encampments divert attention away from homelessness induced stressors so focus can be on long-term housing. This model seeks to work with the homeless rather than against them, “Rather than viewing tent cities as a threat to public

safety, communities should view self-organization by homeless persons as an opportunity to provide services and to address the root cause of homelessness and guarantee the human rights of all their residents” (NLCHP, 2014, p. 8). Camps are overseen entirely by nonprofits and cities provide their support through zoning ordinances that allow encampments to exist without fear of eviction. Examples include Dignity Village and Right 2 Dream Too in Portland, Oregon.

Inconsistent Approaches

Cities have yet to find one unifying and successful approach to homeless encampments, “Camps aren’t popular with the right or left. Liberals criticize them as inadequate welfare and see the city failing to provide adequate shelter. Conservatives see the camps as a sort of magnet for the region’s homeless and a sign that the government is being too soft” (Herring, 2014, p. 298). The most obvious and mainstream solution is affordable housing however “without subsidies, developers often cannot build housing for ELI renters that “pencils out.” The expected revenue from rents is too low to cover maintenance costs or to pay back the debt incurred in development...Creating or preserving affordable housing typically requires the support of a patchwork of subsidy programs” (Urban Institute, 2014, p. 3). Thus, there is a need for an interim solution that ensures the safety of the homeless individuals as the affordable housing crisis persists. Herring argues that “camps function as complementary (rather than contradictory) seclusionary strategies to the pre-existing exclusionary policies of the local state, while serving as safe zones for homeless people seeking refuge from police harassment” (Herring, 2015, p. 691). Much of his research concludes that legalization of encampments is not a radical contradiction to existing homelessness policies, but rather a means of compromise between cities and their homeless populations. The rest of this thesis explores this very idea through a case study analysis of Seattle’s city permitted villages.

Methodology

My research is both explanatory and exploratory. The first half of my question, how has the historical context of homeless encampments in Seattle shaped today's policies, seeks to explain what pivotal points in history have led to this model. The second part of my question, what can be learned from their development thus far, is more exploratory and is of interest to other cities interested in adopting this model. I used a mixed-method approach consisting of secondary research, content analysis, and interviews. The multifaceted approach to my research allowed me to cross reference many different perspectives to piece together a comprehensive understanding of my research question. My research was determined exempt by The Ohio State Institutional Review Board.

Secondary Research

My literature review gave me a foundational understanding of homeless encampments at the scale of the entire country. I consulted reputable local media sources such as The Seattle Times and Real Change to gain perspective of the socio-political environment at the scope of my specific case study. I specifically sought out articles including interviews with city officials, nonprofit actors, and residents of the villages to substantiate my findings.

Content Analysis

The content analysis component of my research consisted of reviewing policy reports, zoning codes, and meeting minutes for latent content. The City of Seattle has council meeting minutes, evaluation of the encampments, zoning regulations, and other various reports publicly available which gave me a better understanding of the city-permitted villages model.

Interviews

Eight interviews with city officials and nonprofit actors provided additional in-depth data that go beyond what could be inferred through content analysis. Most interviews were carried out over the phone due to distance. My sampling technique was purposive as I wanted to identify specific perspectives of both the city officials who execute policy changes and the nonprofits that advocate for the population directly impacted by the policy decisions. This evolved into snowball sampling as my original point of contact was often able to direct me to someone with more knowledge on the topic following our discussion. This mix of interviewees consisting of staff at both LIHI and SHARE/WHEEL, a Seattle City Council Member, a professor at the University of Washington, and city-officials provided a holistic understanding of past and present thoughts and concerns regarding the city-permitted villages. Interviews were semi-structured so to allow for flexibility of the interviewees to guide the discussion based on what they deemed most relevant to my established learning goals. Example questions include:

What role has your nonprofit/department played in the implementation and development of the city permitted villages?

What is your relationship with other stakeholders?

Do you often deal with the perception that this model enables and encourages homelessness? What do you have to say in response to that?

What benefits and challenges does this model have?

Do you think this model is successful, in terms of your own definition of successful?

Seattle Trip

I was fortunate enough to have visited Seattle for a week in March. Over the course of the week I carried out in person interviews, toured one of the permitted villages, and sat in on a class at the University of Washington in which students were evaluating the Tent City 3 Code of Conduct. I was also exposed to the innumerable unsanctioned encampments throughout the City, and was able to better understand the homelessness crisis through my own observations.

Analysis

The analysis of my data is qualitative. Interviews were audio recorded, transcribed, and coded for themes. I followed the process of open coding to make the data manageable by creating key concepts and categories (Babbie, 2017, p. 398). I also took advantage of memoing and concept mapping to further understand and organize the data (Babbie, 2017, p. 401-403). Themes from interviews and content analysis were aggregated to develop a comprehensive profile of the factors that contributed to the decision to implement city-permitted villages and what lessons can be learned from their development thus far. These findings evolve into a discussion of how my findings may be transferable to other cities throughout the country in lieu of a primarily punitive approach to homelessness cities are resorting to.

Case Study Analysis

In 2015, Seattle implemented an innovative form of accommodating its homeless encampments through what it has coined as City-Permitted Villages, “The City of Seattle is the first in the country to offer public land and funding to support permitted encampments” (Seattle Human Services Department, 2017). A growing network of eight villages exist throughout the city. This model has challenged Herring’s typology by providing the governmental funding and oversight present in co-optation but maintaining the autonomy that makes accommodation preferable for camp residents through nonprofit partnerships. Rather than relying solely on nonprofit or religious administration, Seattle is a unique example of city officials and nonprofit leaders working towards a compromise in which both entities are held responsible for the well-being of camp residents. A study of this unique form of accommodating homeless encampments is intended to inform other cities of a more sustainable means of mitigating the hardships of such a vulnerable population. Rather than resorting to criminalization, this research hopes to display Seattle’s best practice model as relevant and attainable for other cities.

Homelessness in Seattle

King County, WA has 39 units of affordable housing for every 100 extremely low income renters. This equates to only 32,468 adequate, affordable, and available unites for 82,390 extremely low income renters. Without HUD assistance, this availability more than halves to 14 units for every 100 extremely low income renters, or 11,871 total units (Urban Institute, 2017). For those unable to attain the limited affordable and available housing options, a minimum wage of \$36.12 would be necessary to afford rent and utilities for a two-bedroom apartment in Seattle at Fair Market Rent (NLIHC, 2018). Despite City Council’s recent adoption of the \$15 minimum wage requirement, affordable housing is still inaccessible to low-income renters.

Much like the country as a whole, the shortage of affordable housing and inadequate wages are contributing to a growing homeless population in King County. According to the 2018 Point in Time Count carried out by All Home, King County’s lead agency for the Seattle/King County Continuum of Care, 12,112 individuals were experiencing homelessness on a single night in January. Of that population, 52% were unsheltered - living on the street, or in parks, tents, vehicles, or other places not meant for human habitation (All Home, 2018). This is a 4% (469 individuals) increase in the overall homeless population compared to 2017.

Historical Context

The limitations of shelters and affordable housing options in Seattle have contributed to the persistence of homeless encampments since its inception. Economic factors are not the sole cause of the crisis however, “Seattle’s homelessness crisis has been years in the making, and its roots run deep, touching racial inequity, economic disparities, mental health treatment, rising housing costs, mental health, addiction, and so much more” (City of Seattle). I attempt to capture this complex history through the following timeline. This chronicle of events was developed largely through secondary research, but was supplemented by my interviews, some of which were with nonprofits that have been advocating for homeless encampments in Seattle for nearly three decades. All resources used to develop this timeline are in the references section. Although not an entirely comprehensive analysis of every documented encampment in the City’s history, I focus on pivotal moments of the city’s history to explain how past events shaped today’s policy decisions surrounding homeless encampments.

Hooverville

Seattle was once home to one of the largest Hoovervilles in the country housing a population of 1,200 on nine acres of public land from 1931 to 1941. It was self-governed with its own unofficial Mayor, and was tolerated by the city due to the housing crisis at the time. However, Seattle formed a Shack Elimination Committee in 1941 in the wake of WWII, and Hooverville was burned to the ground so the City could reclaim the land for the war efforts.

Tent City 1 (1990)

In the summer of 1990, Seattle hosted the Goodwill Games, an international sporting event conceived as an apolitical alternative to the Olympics. In an attempt to bring the issue of homelessness to light at the same time, homeless advocates came together to form the Seattle Housing and Resource Effort (SHARE) and organize a protest in the heart of downtown, coined the Goodwill Gathering. For two weeks, homeless individuals gathered in Myrtle Edwards Park during the day, but were forced to disperse at night despite a shortage of shelter. In November of that year, SHARE’s efforts extended to the establishment of a camp consisting of 25 homeless individuals south of downtown on the site previously home to Seattle’s Hoovervilles. The encampment, Tent City, rapidly gained media attention. Through negotiations with the city, residents of Tent City were offered refuge in an abandoned METRO bus barn near the Seattle Center for the winter, but they were forced to leave in April.

Tent City 2 (1998)

In response to the persistence of shelter shortages and continued sweeps of existing homeless encampments such as The Jungle, SHARE collaborated with the Women’s

Housing Equality and Enhancement League (WHEEL) to organize a second encampment, Tent City 2, in June of 1998. This encampment was located on Beacon Hill near Jefferson Park. In response, the city offered the Municipal Building lobby as shelter. Instead of accepting, SHARE/WHEEL moved the encampment to a greenbelt near Jose Rizal Park, a wooded area south of downtown, with their sights set on the long term goal of securing a public land encampment. As with Tent City, the encampment was intended to provide shelter and community space for homeless individuals, but was also crucial in spurring changes through political activism. Later that same month, the City bulldozed Tent City 2 and arrested eighteen people (charges were later dropped) citing safety and sanitation concerns.

Tent City 3 (2000)

Tent City 3 was formed on private land at MLK Way and South Charleston Street in April 2000. The city notified property owners they were in violation of land use codes and risked being fined, which led to Tent City 3 making multiple moves before El Centro de la Raza agreed to host the encampment for six months. The nonprofit community center accrued \$17,000 in fines during the permit processing period, and the permit was ultimately denied. This decision was overturned by the King County Superior Court the next year, which was appealed by the City. This prompted a legal battle in which SHARE/WHEEL argued that the city did not have the shelter capacity necessary for its homeless population. Seattle settled the lawsuit in 2002 by issuing a consent decree permitting Tent City 3. The document outlines basic operating principles such as the requirement that only one encampment may exist of a maximum of 100 individuals, and said encampment must relocate every three months. Tent City 3 is still operating to this day through this consent decree.

Tent City 4 (2004)

Tent City 4 was created in 2004 to serve the homeless population of Seattle's affluent eastside. The first location was the suburb of Bothell which attempted to evict the encampment as no ordinance existed for homeless encampments. However, protection was claimed under the Religious Land Use and Institutionalized Persons Act (RLUIPA), which allows religious institutions to bypass zoning regulations that may burden their free exercise of religion. Tent City 4 continued to rotate around King County every 90 days using a special use permit that allows churches to sponsor encampments.

Nickelsville (2008)

Nickelsville, aptly named after Mayor Nickels, was a protest camp organized to mock and protest the Mayor's strict zero-tolerance policy for homeless encampments despite shelter deficiencies. The encampment was founded with the intention of establishing a stationary version of Tent City 3 and 4. Nickelsville set up 150 bright pink tents on vacant city land along Highland Park Way and Marginal Way in September of 2008. Five days later, dozens of homeless individuals and their allies were arrested for trespassing after refusing to

leave. Nickelsville persisted and relocated to an adjacent state owned parking lot where Governor Gregoire allowed the encampment to stay until they found a new location. Nickelsville then rotated between public, private, and church owned land, oftentimes without a permit over the next few years, during which time they continued to advocate for a legally recognized permanent site.

[Washington State Law House Bill 1956 \(March 2010\)](#)

In March of 2009, a legal battle between the City of Woodinville and Northshore United Church of Christ over Tent City 4 was resolved. Although religious institutions are authorized to host temporary encampments, Woodinville had passed a temporary moratorium on such permits and denied Northshorth United Church of Christ's application to host Tent City 4 in the summer of 2006. The case was brought to the Washington State Supreme Court which held that the moratorium substantially burdened the church's free exercise of religion, a right protected by the First Amendment. The next year Washington passed Bill 1956 which guarantees the right of religious organizations throughout the state to host temporary encampments due to free exercise of religion. The bill prohibits local governments from imposing excessive fees, liability insurance requirements, or any special conditions other than to protect public health and safety.

[Citizen Review Panel on Housing and Services for Seattle's Unsheltered Homeless Population \(2010\)](#)

In response to the growing unsheltered homeless population, Mayor McGinn, who was much more tolerant of homeless encampment than the previous administration, organized a ten person citizen review panel in 2010 tasked with developing recommendations for homeless encampments in the City, namely Nickelsville. The panel recommended that the City offer available property for a semi-permanent sanctioned encampment as the existing 90 day restriction at each site disrupted the stability of residents, hindering their ability to transition into permanent housing. They argued that although sanctioned encampments are not a long term solution to homelessness, they are a viable option as permanent solutions are explored. Despite support from Mayor McGinn, much of City Council opposed pursuing a semi-permanent encampment. Nickelsville made its seventeenth move and returned to its original site in May of 2011, but lacked legal protections in its decision to lengthen their stay.

[Seattle City Ordinance 123729 \(2011\)](#)

In October of 2011, Seattle adopted Ordinance 123729 which added the definition of "transitional encampment" to the Land Use Code, and outlined standards for encampments sponsored by religious entities (Appendix #). No use permit was required for these encampments to operate, and there was no limit to the length of an encampment's stay, so long as the encampments were an accessory to a religious organization. However, secular entities were still required to apply for a temporary use permit that limited the encampment's stay. Without Council's support, Nickelsville was not granted a permanent

site per the 2010 Citizen Review Panel on Housing and Services for Seattle's Unsheltered Homeless Population recommendations, and was eventually evicted from the site they made home for two years in August of 2013 due to the location of their encampment on city-land rather than church property. They continued to rotate around the city following their eviction, and were even forced to split up into multiple encampments at one point.

[Seattle City Council Bill 117791 \(2013\)](#)

The proliferation of unsanctioned encampments continued to prompt concerns with safety and public health. In response, Councilmember Nick Licata referred back to the Citizen Review Panel on Housing and Services for Seattle's Unsheltered Homeless Population's recommendations and sponsored a bill to legalize and regulate encampments on city-owned or private land. As with the previous attempt to establish an encampment on city-land, the bill ultimately failed in a 5-4 vote. Many opposed the bill due to the belief that legalized encampments are an inadequate response, and efforts should be focused on long term affordable housing solutions instead. However, Councilmember Licata argued, "This bill was never intended to be a solution to homelessness, rather, it was introduced to provide an interim step between living exposed on the streets and permanent stabilized housing. Encampments are a way to improve the public safety and public health of homeless people who have no shelter whatsoever. Further, regulated encampments can be gateway to housing by providing people a safe and legal place to stay while they are trying to access services. However, I acknowledge the perspectives of my colleagues who disagree" (Council Connection, 2013).

[Low Income Housing Institute \(2013\)](#)

In 2013, LIHI, an affordable housing developer amongst many other things, hosted Nickelsville on a vacant property owned by the nonprofit that had not yet been developed. LIHI began to take an interest in the encampment which led to a partnership with Nickelsville. Without any real plan set in stone, LIHI began upgrading the site with tiny homes, an idea of a Board Member that was determined they could do better than tents.

[Mayor's Emergency Task Force on Unsheltered Homelessness \(December 2014\)](#)

The City continued to suffer from a rapidly escalating unsheltered homeless population, so in December of 2014 Mayor Murray convened an Emergency Task Force on Unsheltered Homelessness. The diverse team of community stakeholders were tasked with identifying immediate, short-term action steps for the unwavering homelessness crisis. One of the main recommendations was that the City expand the existing transitional encampment standards to include the permitting of encampments on city-owned or private property:

“We believe that the city should support and stabilize the existing camps, and can play a helpful role in siting camps, and in ensuring good communication with neighbors and partner organizations. Several well-run organized camps have operated at the same time within Seattle for a number of years. The city can help address what is currently a limiting factor: available appropriate land on which to site organized camps” (Emergency Task Force on Unsheltered Homeless, 2014, p. 8).

The task force outlined three objectives to support this recommendation: expand and define City policy and role in siting homeless encampments, provide City funding for encampment operations, and building on the small scale housing idea.

[Seattle City Ordinance 124747 \(March 2015\)](#)

Per the Emergency Task Force on Unsheltered Homelessness’ recommendations, City Council unanimously adopted Ordinance 124747 which permitted three transitional encampments on city-owned or private property in March of 2015. The ordinance details all legal requirements surrounding the establishment of encampments, including community outreach, operations standards, location, liability, duration and timing. This shift from a 5-4 vote against city-sanctioned encampments was attributed to both newly elected council members and the sense of urgency as the homeless crisis continued to grow.

[Nickelsville Ballard, Othello Village, Tent City 5 \(2015\)](#)

Following the adoption of Ordinance 124747, three transitional encampments were legally recognized and began receiving city funding late 2015 through early 2016. Nickelsville Ballard, Othello Villages, and Tent City 5 were located in Ballard, Othello, and Interbay respectively. Daily operations of Nickelsville Ballard and Othello Village were managed by Nickelsville, and Tent City 5 by SHARE/WHEEL. The Low Income Housing Institute provided case management to all three, and had direct oversight of funding through a contract with the City.

[Mayor Murray Declares State of Emergency \(11/02/15\)](#)

In November of 2015 Mayor Murray and King County Executive Dow Constantine declared a State of Emergency, “Emergency declarations are associated with natural disasters, but the persistent and growing phenomenon of homelessness – here and nationwide – is a human-made crisis just as devastating to thousands as a flood or fire” (Office of the Mayor, 2015). This declaration allowed the City more authority and flexibility in their homelessness response. As Seattle shifted into crisis mode, the demand for innovative responses become critical. This contributed to Seattle’s receptiveness to the permitted village model.

Georgetown Village, Camp Second Chance, Licton Springs (2017)

The success of the first three encampments led to adoption of another three. Georgetown Village, Camp Second Chance, and Licton Springs were constructed in Georgetown, West Seattle, and North Seattle. These encampments operated the same as the previous three through partnerships with LIHI, Nickelsville, and SHARE.

Whittier Heights Village, True Hope Village, Lake Union Village (2018)

Under the new administration of Mayor Jenny Durkan, Whittier Heights Village, True Hope Village, and Lake Union Village were established. Mayor Durkan promised 1,000 tiny homes in her campaign efforts, and this is the first fulfillment of said promise. These three villages provide shelter for 155 homeless individuals. Unlike the previous six villages, these three were managed and operated independently by LIHI without a partnership with SHARE/WHEEL or Nickelsville.

Seattle's Permitted Villages (Present)

Seattle is now home to eight city funded tiny house villages, "Seattle's permitted villages offer a place for unsheltered people to find stability and connect to housing resources. Each night, the villages provide more than 300 people a tiny house structure that locks, access to restrooms and showers, case management, a kitchen and a managed community. Seattle contracts with the Low Income Housing Institute (LIHI) to operate the villages. In many of the villages, residents create community norms and codes of conduct under the guidance of Nickelsville and SHARE" (City of Seattle). Recent disputes which will be further discussed in my analysis have severed relations between LIHI and camp operators Nickelsville and SHARE/WHEEL. LIHI is now the sole manager of Seattle's permitted villages. Each village is granted a permit for one year with the option of renewal for an additional year based on successful operation, after which they are required to move to another site for another year before they can return to the original site. Tent City 3 and 4 continue to rotate throughout Seattle under the direction of SHARE/WHEEL, and are a crucial component of Seattle's homelessness response. However, the scope of this research focuses specifically on the city-permitted villages.

Lessons Learned

The following section is an analysis of lessons learned from Seattle's permitted villages which were compiled from key themes found in my research. Seattle's permitted villages yield a number of positive outcomes for a multitude of stakeholders involved in the homeless crisis: homeless individuals are able to maintain a sense of dignity in their experience, the City saves money, and nonprofits and community members have the opportunity to give back and support their fellow Seattleites. Seattle's permitted villages are not without their challenges though. The collaboration of many different nonprofit groups and city departments oftentimes results in contradictory missions, governance models are highly contested, and success is difficult to measure. Each village has its own unique lessons, but the following themes are prevalent to the system as a whole.

Inclusivity

At its very base, a home is a place where one lives. However, for the population that lacks the privilege of a permanent place to live, the definition takes new forms in less concrete definitions such as companionship. Unlike many traditional shelters, the permitted villages permit couples, the LGBTQ community, families with children, and pets. During my site visit to True Hope Village I noticed a child's pink bicycle leaning against one of the tiny homes, a humbling reminder of how unique each story of homelessness is. Many interviewees attested that homeless individuals are much more likely to accept shelter in a tiny house village than a traditional emergency shelter. The City's Navigation Team, a group of trained individuals that provide direct outreach to those residing in unsanctioned encampments, show trends that in 2016 those who did accept services, which was 39% of the total number of individuals the Navigation Team came in contact with for this data set, 37.3% were more likely to choose sanctioned tent encampments as their next step compared to only 14.3% willing to accept emergency shelter (Davila, 2017). The most common choice was enhanced shelters, but these are very limited in availability. Although there are many factors that contribute to this decision, many interviewees believed that the inclusivity of the villages is a major determinant.

Autonomy & Stability

Each resident of the permitted villages is given access to an established home base and private space to call one's own. Residents have the freedom to leave and go at their own will knowing that their belongings will be there when they return. This creates a sense of normalcy that individuals are stripped of in traditional shelters, "It gives you the chance to focus on the real issue behind the homelessness, rather than focusing on where will my next meal come from, what will I do for the next seven hours before I can rest my head again," says J.R., a camper at a city-funded site" (Kinney, 2016). The resident captures the idea that the culture of homeless encampments is very different than that of traditional shelter. The autonomy revives a sense of dignity that is difficult to maintain while homelessness.

The villages also instill stability in the lives of residents, allowing them to focus on long term goals. In a discussion with an on site case manager at one of the villages, she described her primary role as working alongside residents to address immediate concerns so they are able to obtain steady employment, permanent housing, and any other services necessary. These case managers are full time staff at the villages provided by LIHI. This consistent engagement with a social service provider helps residents become “housing ready” so they are able to move on from the village when they find permanent housing.

Community as an Asset

One of the most notable hardships of the homeless experience is the lack of a support system. Social networks are crucial to overcoming homelessness, but difficult to maintain with a migratory lifestyle. Seattle’s permitted villages establish a sense of community - a concept made apparent with the intentional terminology of a village rather than encampments, the latter often having a negative connotation. One interviewee noted that “just at its most human level, it’s better than being on your own” (Personal Interview March 2019).

A resident from Tiny House Village remarked, “It has created a sense of pride, or something to take pride in, alleviating the isolation you feel from being homeless. There are so many places where people will go years without knowing their neighbor’s name. Here at Nickelsville Tiny House Village, people are connecting and helping each other” (Real Change, 2016). Each village has a Code of Conduct outlining responsibilities residents must uphold including attending weekly community meetings and contributions to the village through hours of service. This required involvement along with the solidarity in shared hardships fosters a strong sense of community.

Health & Safety

The average life expectancy of a homeless individual in Seattle is 48 years old (Bann, 2016), while the average housed person lives to 82 years old (King County Public Health, 2016). Even more striking is the record breaking 191 deaths of homeless individuals in King County in 2018 “from exposure, chronic health conditions, violence, accidents, and suicide” (Lee 2019). Homeless deaths in King County have risen 117% since 2012 (Greenstone, 2019).

A major factor contributing to this statistic is disparities in access to a healthy lifestyle, “The difficulty getting rest, maintaining medications, eating well, staying clean and staying warm prolong and exacerbate illnesses, sometimes to the point where they are life threatening” (National Healthcare for the Homeless Council, 2006). The stability of Seattle’s permitted villages offers homeless individuals the conditions necessary to maintain a healthy lifestyle. Each village has restrooms and showers, heated tiny homes, and mobile medical care that frequents the camp on a regular basis.

Exposure to unsafe and sometimes violent living conditions further contributes to lower life expectancies and chronic stress. Many unsanctioned homeless encampments are reported to have issues with drugs and money related altercations that lead to assault, theft, and even murder. A large illegal encampment in Seattle, The Jungle, has been highly publicized for deadly shootings (Clarridge, 2016). Permitted villages transform vacant land throughout the city into what LIHI jokingly refers to as a gated community, “it has a fenced perimeter, gatehouse, locking doors, foot patrols, arbitrators for squabbles and eyes on the street” (Schmid, 2018).

There are also instances of deaths due to unfortunate circumstances such as homeless individuals falling from highway overpasses where encampments often situate themselves (Holden, 2014). Due to the often punitive approach to homeless encampments, they are left to reside in locations considered undesirable which perpetuate unsafe living conditions. The City of Seattle has direct oversight in the decision process of siting permitted villages, and as stakeholders in their success they conduct a thorough analysis in the selection process to ensure villages are located in safe spaces with access to services such as transit.

Cost Effective

The cost-effectiveness of the permitted villages is apparent in Human Services funding efforts, “Spaces in tiny home villages represent approximately 12.5% of all shelter beds and safe places the City supports and make up less than 3% of all homelessness response investments made by the City of Seattle” (Lee, 2019). As discussed in my literature review, homelessness is expensive to cities, not only in terms of emergency service costs, but also other obscure costs such as policing, healthcare, and incarceration. The city holds a contract with LIHI to fund operations and services for the villages, but the nonprofit also relies on fundraising and their partnerships with donors and the greater community to subsidize costs as well. This joint-effort reduces the burden on the City and creates a network of financial support that holds other community stakeholders accountable for Seattle’s most vulnerable population.

The cost of constructing and operating a permitted village is much less than that of a traditional shelter. The villages cost between \$100,000 and \$500,000 to construct, and the bulk of that initial investment is water, sewer, and electricity connections (Lee, 2019). Each tiny house is estimated to cost \$2,500 in materials, and almost all are constructed through voluntary labor (LIHI). Annual operating costs range from \$60,000 to \$500,000 depending on staffing and services offered (Lee, 2019). Executive Director of LIHI, Sharon Lee, compares these costs to that of an alternative shelter option, “King County just announced a plan to open and renovate an unused portion of the county’s jail to shelter 100 people. It is budgeted to cost \$2 million to convert the space plus \$4 million to fund the next two years of operations. Concerns include not only the optics of putting homeless people in a

jail facility, but the cost per person is more than double that of a tiny house village” (Lee, 2019).

In growing urban cores such as Seattle, real estate costs often pushes shelter provision to marginalized locations in the city with limited accessibility to transit, food, and social service providers. However, the villages can locate in prime urban spaces without blocking investment from developers. Due to their transitory nature, villages can locate on vacant properties that are awaiting development until permits are acquired and construction begins, and then rotate to the next site. This allows villages to capitalize on existing social infrastructure without sacrificing development opportunities.

Another more controversial justification of cost effectiveness is the perspective of the villages as a method of containing the homeless population - the word containment was used in three separate interviews without prompting. Despite the negative connotation, this concept is discussed in the literature of homeless encampments. In allocating funding for a regulated version of homeless encampments, the City would ideally cut down on funding and time spent on the many unsanctioned encampments, “Sweeps require a lot of human power including, but not limited to, police overtime, paperwork, logging of personal belongings collected, SDOT involvement, waste management services, visits from public health officials and, in some cases, hourly labor by private contractors” (Olsen, 2017).

Advocacy

Seattle’s first organized encampments, the many iterations of “Tent City” and Nickelsville, were partially founded on the concept of acting as an organizing tool to educate the public. Seattle’s permitted villages carry on this tradition in a way that is legitimized through support of the City.

The concept of NIMBY-ism (Not In My Backyard Yard) has always dictated the conversation of homelessness response methods. In the site selection process Seattle does face immediate public backlash due to fear of crime and decline in property values. However, multiple interviewees mentioned the shift in public perception of the encampments within months, even going so far as to say residents of the surrounding neighborhood adopt the permitted villages as part of their community. This is reinforced through the Community Advisory Committees each village is required to have per Ordinance 124747. The CAC is a group of neighboring stakeholders that meet monthly to review camp operations and ensure community concerns are addressed. This continuous engagement is key to building a relationship between the village residents and neighbors.

The visibility of the permitted encampments brings the issue of homelessness to light, and invites the greater community to lend a helping hand. In preparing for a new village, LIHI hosts build day events that offer opportunities for people of all ages to make a direct impact. In May of 2018, 400 Vulcan employees devoted themselves to a day of service and built 30 tiny homes in a mere eight hours (Markovich, 2018). LIHI was proud to share the fact that hundreds of volunteers have pitched in on build days around the City for each

village. In collaboration with Environmental Works, a nonprofit architectural firm, LIHI developed a Tiny House Building Assembly Instruction booklet to allow community members of any capacity the opportunity to build a tiny home.

Conflicting Leadership Styles & Mission Statements

While I had anticipated the potential of tension between the city and nonprofit stakeholders, I was surprised to find key nonprofit stakeholders to have such opposing values instead. This is common in nonprofit practice, oftentimes due to the competitive nature of funding sources, but can also be prompted on the basis of competing mission statements as well (Heyes & Martin, 2015). Both Nickelsville and SHARE/WHEEL pride themselves in being grassroots organizations led by the very people they are advocating for, while LIHI is a more traditionally structured nonprofit organization. Most apparent in my interviews were the differing values of the nonprofits, often likened to clashes of personalities. Below are the mission statements of each nonprofit per GuideStar, or in the case of Nickelsville, the organization's website.

Low Income Housing Institute (LIHI)

"The Low Income Housing Institute develops, owns and operates housing for the benefit of low-income, homeless and formerly homeless people; advocates for just housing policies at the local and national levels; and administers a range of supportive service programs to assist those we serve in maintaining stable housing and increasing their self-sufficiency."

Seattle Housing and Resource Effort (SHARE)

"We provide safety, security, and community to up to 500 adults each night. Because we are self-organized and -managed, our participants gain valuable skills, as well as confidence and feelings of empowerment, which enable them to work towards permanent solutions to their homelessness."

Nickelsville

"Creating community, supporting homeless families."

As mentioned, LIHI is primarily an affordable housing developer, "LIHI owns and/or manages over 2,000 housing units at 50 sites in six counties throughout the Puget Sound region" (LIHI). Their mission is developing permanent affordable housing, and offering services to assist those in need to maintain that housing. In contrast, "SHARE and Nickelsville officials say their focus isn't to get people into housing, but to connect them with services and make them feel safe. SHARE/WHEEL's own website notes that it's not a social-service agency, but 'a self-help group'" (Greenstone 2019). SHARE/WHEEL registers under NTEE codes L41 (Temporary Shelter for the Homeless) and L01 (Alliance/Advocacy), and Nickelsville registers under S99 (Community Improvement, Capacity Building N.E.C).

The relationship between the nonprofits was described by one interviewee as “forced by the city” and “a disaster” due to the divergent goals of LIHI compared to SHARE/WHEEL and Nickelsville. The City certified SHARE/WHEEL and Nickelsville as operators of the villages, but contracted with LIHI for funding and case management, who the city admits to siding with. SHARE/WHEEL and Nickelsville were described as hard to deal with due to different allegations of fraud. In order to mitigate these concerns, LIHI was chosen as a liaison between the two due to their experience with similar large scale projects and more traditional structure. This hierarchical power-dynamic made finding compromise in the collaboration of the nonprofits difficult, and provoked infighting that ultimately led to LIHI cutting ties with SHARE/WHEEL and Nickelsville. LIHI’s Executive Director, Sharon Lee, attributed this to “fundamental differences in our organizations’ approaches and aspirations” (Herzog, 2019).

Management & Governance

Within the differing missions of the nonprofits, there exist two polarizing perspectives regarding the management and/or governance of Seattle’s permitted villages. This was the most contested topic and evoked an emotional response in many interviewees. According to the Director’s Rule Requirements for Transitional Encampments, the governance model is meant to be democratic in order to “promote balanced and shared power, and skill development in conflict resolution, communication and leadership” (Human Services Department, 2015). As discussed in the historical context section, SHARE/WHEEL and Nickelsville founded the homeless-led democratic encampments model from the ground up. Residents contribute to the day-to-day operations of the encampments through security shifts, neighborhood service activities, and elected leadership positions. Although controversial, interviewees from the organizations were proud of the self-determination and leadership development that self-governance invoked in participants.

However, LIHI had concerns that the organizations were not enforcing the requirement that residents meet with case managers on a regular basis, and also opposed the barring (temporary or permanent expulsion that is determined through a voting process) of residents for what LIHI deemed to be unfair or discriminatory reasonings (Greenstone, 2019). LIHI’s management model emphasizes social service provision more so than self-governance, and although there is no maximum stay in the villages, the end goal is preparing residents for permanent housing in a timely manner. SHARE/WHEEL and Nickelsville criticize this outcomes-based success metric, and argue that there is more to success than what can be measured with numbers. LIHI further argued that SHARE/WHEEL and Nickelsville governance models have led to corruption and discourages village residents from seeking permanent housing. The tensions have continuously worsened over time.

As previously mentioned, LIHI has terminated contracts with both SHARE/WHEEL and Nickelsville as camp operators, and is now the sole manager and operator of all

city-permitted villages. Executive Director of LIHI, Sharon Lee, explains the recent decision to sever ties with Nickelsville as necessary for the well-being of residents, “We feel it’s very important to take care of the families and singles and couples that are homeless and need support and help, and not be caught in this draconian management-operation system that they’ve created” (Greenstone, 2019).

In response, Nickelsville went so far as to lock LIHI and city officials out of the villages as a form of protest, dubbed Occupied Nickelsville, “the villages, managed by Nickelsville, aren’t allowing staff from LIHI inside their camps unless they are case managers ‘who are actually here to case manage, not here to make trouble,’ according to Peggy Hotes, a longtime volunteer and one of the founders of Nickelsville” (Greenstone, 2019). In response to LIHI’s notification that they would be taking over operations and replacing Nickelsville staff with their own, residents voted to refuse to accept the decision asserting that “LIHI’s phony claims of big problems are hogwash they have never bothered to try to back up” (Nickelsville Facebook).

This conflict has not yet been resolved, but the city has given statements confirming their support for LIHI in taking over operations of the three villages Nickelsville was involved with despite the efforts of many residents to protest the shift in leadership. A letter addressed to LIHI and Seattle’s Human Services Department stated, “Please back off. Do not attempt to push us out of Nickelsville. You have no right to do so” (Nickelsville Facebook). This will not result in eviction of any residents, although “if residents don’t want to agree to LIHI’s new code of conduct, ‘then unfortunately they have to go’” according to Lily Rehrmann, a strategic advisor with the City (Greenstone, 2019). LIHI hopes to continue the tradition of self-governance, but on their own terms with a staffed site coordinator - a structural component that contradicts the grassroots culture. This decision has resulted in hostility between the nonprofits, SHARE/WHEEL specifically noted they felt “stripped away from programs they [we] founded and ran very well” following the acquisition of the villages they operated (Personal Interview March 2019). Unfortunately, the deadline of this thesis is in the midst of this controversy, so there is no clarity of the implications this will have on residents in the coming months.

Success Metrics

As a relatively new addition to Seattle’s homelessness response system, a formal analysis of their success or lack thereof is premature and outside the scope of this research. However, in discussing preliminary success with interviewees, two different methods of analysis were described.

Government entities favor quantifiable measurements. All Home, an organization dedicated to providing oversight of King County’s Continuum of Care, provides quarterly updates on the progress of all homelessness response programs, including an individualized breakdown for each permitted village. This data is recorded using the Homeless Management Information System, “Each Continuum of Care is responsible for

selecting an HMIS software solution that complies with HUD's data collection, management, and reporting standards" (HUD). These numbers-based qualifiers are a federal requirement for annual reporting to HUD and also provide an accurate account of homelessness in the County to better inform the services needed.

It is only natural for the City to expect such methods of reporting back on their investments. As the budget devoted to homelessness is continuously constrained, what limited funding that is allocated is expected to have some form of return. This is most often measured in exits to permanent housing - permitted villages exited 135 households to permanent housing of the total 658 unique households serviced in 2018 (Homelessness Response, 2019).

However, one interviewee questioned how to uphold the standards of exits to permanent housing when that housing just doesn't exist yet, referring to the shortage of affordable housing units in Seattle. The interviewee explained that the success of the villages should not necessarily hinge on the production of those numbers because regardless of the rates of exits to permanent housing, the permitted villages have been described as quite literally saving lives. A resident of one tiny house village noted, "This community around us has really shown us that, if given a chance, these little microcosms of transitional housing for folks between places can serve a greater good than any naysayer can possibly argue against" (Real Change, 2016). These qualitative outcomes are much more difficult to measure, and also the root of many conflicts between the nonprofits. The contract between the City and LIHI requires monthly reporting back of quantitative outcomes, and although LIHI did allude to appreciation of the qualitative outcomes, funding is secured through this reporting back process. Licton Springs, an attempt at a low-barrier village that permitted alcohol and drug use on its premises closed this past March, one of many reasons being the limited exits to permanent housing, "its exit rates were lower than other villages. The city wants shelter stays to last fewer than 90 days; the majority of Licton Springs residents stayed for over a year" (Dennon, 2019). This again relates back to the differing missions of the villages. It is difficult to assert that statistics should influence such a humanitarian based crisis, but in the effort to rehouse the residents this data is crucial to understand what is or isn't working to achieve that goal.

Conclusion

I originally attributed this unique permitted village model to Seattle's progressive culture, but it is instead largely a response to a growing crisis. One interviewee simply said, "What are we going to do, ignore it?" a sentiment many cities around the country can relate to. While not a substitute for permanent homes, Seattle's permitted villages provide residents the opportunity to focus on their path out of homelessness by alleviating the hardships associated with homelessness. Fear of criminalization, chronic stress, and poor health are only a few of the many barriers to rehousing the homeless. In regards to the City's role in the homelessness crisis, a city official bluntly put, "That's on us to figure out, and to punish them while we can't get our shit together... let's give them the best we can and let's make sure we're working on the other shit too" (Personal Interview, 2019). There is no one size fits all approach to the homelessness crisis, and reliance on one method, namely the Housing First policies cities are eager to adopt, is not sustainable. Rather, "Encampments can be a first step in the Housing First model, providing a safe place for people to go and a stable base from which to move on" (Emergency Task Force, 2014, p.19). Housing First requires affordable permanent housing to exist, and in cities that have not yet satisfied that imperative, there is a demand for provisional shelter.

However, establishing city-permitted villages is not an easy feat by any means. It requires a strong partnerships, community support, and nonprofits committed to making a difference. As shown through the timeline, advocacy for Seattle's encampment residents has been ongoing for nearly three decades. Today's city-permitted villages can be attributed to the tenacity of key nonprofit leaders and city officials in the face of arrests, failed bills, and stakeholder conflicts. Seattle's attempts have not been without shortcomings, one of the largest being the City's failure to provide conflict resolution mechanisms for the nonprofits they required to collaborate. Other cities can learn from this through improved engagement with nonprofit stakeholders involved.

The resilience of encampments across the country tells a story of a national crisis that needs solutions. My analysis of the many positive outcomes that Seattle's permitted villages produce is proof that this is a viable solution other cities can look to as a reference point. Each city is different and will have its own challenges, but this research provides a preliminary understanding of how some form of a city-permitted village may benefit cities with failing homelessness response outcomes.

"Nearly one quarter of the world's urban population lives in informal settlements or encampments, most in developing countries but increasingly also in the most affluent. Living conditions are shocking and intolerable. Residents often live without water and sanitation, and are in constant fear of eviction" (United Nations, 2018, p. 2). As a country we have increasingly become desensitized to the plight of homelessness. The visceral reaction city dwellers feel towards the appalling living conditions of many unsanctioned homeless encampments is not an invitation to remove them, but rather a demand for justice. We cannot ban poverty out of existence. As one of the wealthiest countries in the world, we

can do better than that. It is the moral responsibility of cities across the country to continuously learn from each other how to do better.

Limitations

A number of limitations impacted my research, the biggest being my constrained time frame of one academic semester, which resulted in only three months to carry out data collection and analysis following my final IRB approval. That, along with the distance of my case study, added a degree of difficulty to my timely completion of the research. The issue of reliability was also apparent in my interviews as the topic of homelessness is a highly controversial one. My research lacked the direct perspective of homeless individuals residing in the villages, so the differing views of the nonprofit actors tended to dominate a lot of my discussions. Those personal accounts are a valuable component of truly understanding the success of the model and should be further explored.

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