

Homelessness and Policy in Sonoma County

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Abstract: Due to the ongoing crisis of homelessness in Sonoma County, this study aims to examine underlying causes, resources, and solutions that have been implemented to remedy this problem. Particularly, this study examines what are the main causes and proposed solutions and policy that can address the crisis effectively. It is desired to understand what policies are needed to address the homeless crisis in Sonoma County. Students from Sonoma State university undergo qualitative research methods and interview advocates, front line workers, and elected officials to get firsthand perspectives of needed policy for the community they serve. Data collected are from 23 interviews conducted from most areas of Sonoma County. Analysis shows that underlying causes of homelessness are policy toward economic development in the United States have contributed to a systemic problem of inflation, stagnant wages, housing shortage, and stigma. Resources are fragmented and cannot address the issue effectively. Interviews demonstrate hope in current developments and desire to act now with safe parking, supported camps, and tiny homes while current developments are being implemented. Policy is desired on the federal level to reimplement housing projects that were historically effective. Also, it is desired that all cities in Sonoma County work as a community to address the crisis with public education, connectivity with resources, and effective program implementation with the insight from the homeless community. Further research is needed on an ongoing basis to identify effective methods and root out less effective and costly methods of addressing the homeless crisis.

Introduction

In the United States, the people cherish the freedom to choose. Choice of lifestyle, beliefs, values, career, and where to live. Choice is the ability to decide how one engages in their environment. Despite this core value, the ability to choose how to engage in society is not equal. Housing is one of these choices that is simply not equally accessible to communities all over the world. Today in the United States, homelessness rates have been higher than ever. Increasing world disasters due to changes in climate, the ever growing gap in income, and more presently, we have experienced a new world of COVID-19 and its variants that has left the world clinging to normalcy. However, with the available wealth present in the world today, why are so many people left without housing?

To understand the phenomenon of the houseless, looking at statistics is a helpful tool in order to grasp the magnitude that it has become, but it is not enough. We need a better understanding of what is happening in our communities with high rates of homelessness. Sadly, there are numerous locations across the United States with high rates, however, California is among the highest which has gotten a lot of national attention in recent years. Sonoma County has one of the highest income rates per capita, but experiences some of the highest rates of homelessness in California. Students of Sonoma State University have turned to evaluate the situation here in Sonoma County to not only understand the homelessness issues, but to evaluate what has been done to address the crisis. Despite efforts and millions of dollars spent to get a handle on the ever growing homeless crisis, the rates continue to increase and this needs attention.

The communities all over our country have a voice. Part of our national identity is to use that voice to set forth how things are organized under the umbrella of our Constitution of the United States. To help be an organized and just society, policies are established to provide a roadmap of how things are done with a set of rules in order to influence positive change. There have been policies established to address the homeless, however, the crisis continues. This study aims to understand what policies have been established, why the homeless crisis continues to grow, what is currently being done to address the issue, and what policies could be proposed to end the status quo of the growing crisis among the houseless in our community of Sonoma County. Through qualitative research, students of Sonoma State University interview advocates on the front lines, staff of organizations, and elected officials to get their verbal account of what is currently being done, the barriers experienced in accomplishing the goal, and what policies are needed to ultimately establish some progress to end the homeless crisis in Sonoma County.

Literature Review

HISTORY

Homelessness of the Past

Homelessness of the past is not defined or looks like what it is today. The first traces of homelessness are cited to be since colonial America (Rossi 17). Homeless were looked at as “vagrants”, in that the homeless were responsible and punishable for their plight. The term “homeless” was first used in the United States in the 1870s as more attention around the homeless across cities in the United States (National Academics of Sciences, 2018). “Hobo” originated from the term *Homeward-Bound*, from post Civil War individuals and were defined as those who were without families, support systems and aimless wanderers. Mainly white and male individuals would travel along the railway system for job opportunities provided by the railway system. Skid Row was part of the urbanization of cities during the industrial period of the United States and often located closely to downtown cities where the railway intersected with the city where resources and lodgings that would be very cheap and affordable to “unattached non-permanent workers.” (Ropers 91). These men were a large part of the mobile workforce along the growing rail system of lumber, mining, and agriculture, (Ropers 89), and the building of the infrastructure to American cities across the States, but Skid row was also a common place for older and disabled or unemployed individuals. The rise and decline of homelessness during the last half of the 19th and early 20th century ebbed with economic change to industrialization as well as war (Ropers 20 - 22). This was also very present in Sonoma County, which had its own Skid Row and the culture it brought to what we know as Old Railroad Square in downtown Santa Rosa in its “heyday” in 1910 (Elliot, 2019). Elliot describes that “hoboes never considered themselves homeless. Living a rootless life under the sky was theirs by choice” and is very different to what we have seen in such encampments such as the Joe Rodota Trail, but only one thing remains in common; the Skid Row services on Morgan and Wilson streets. An evangelical group started a rescue mission close to where Catholic Charities is now located. This subculture lasted almost 100 years from post Civil War to the 1970’s. Homeless was recategorized and transformed from it’s romanticized view, to a social issue today.

The “New Homeless”: Change in Policy and Global Economy

Most people may not understand it’s origins, but what remains clear is that the homeless problem has grown astronomically. Homeless today has transformed over the

years. Historical perspective and analysis can shed light on the “new homeless to be an expression of the fundamental change of the global political economy” in relation to changes in policy (Barak 11). Examining how we invest in our society cannot be separated from the government decision-making towards profits with an ideology of “trickle-down economics” (Barak 53). Post WWII through the 1960s, the United States experienced an economic boom. Both the rich and the poor advanced together as set by New Deal policies in the 1930s, but this changed in the 1970s as the process of “deindustrialization” took place as the U.S. saw itself at a economic and production disadvantage to other leading countries . In consequence, factories and other manufacturing businesses closed their doors and relocated. The result was catastrophic to the labor market and 38 million jobs were permanently lost (Ropers 100).

Policy Changes

The 1980s brought on a lot of new changes in policy following change in the global economy and disinvestment to American industries. Reagan's Federal Tax Reform Act of 1981, cut taxes disproportionately which favored the more affluent; corporate taxes fell over half of what it was in the 1960s, and taxation on the rich fell from 78 to 28 percent (Barak 65). During the 1980s, a lot of welfare and housing programs were “readjusted” along with the poverty line which skewed the perception and view of those living in “real” vs. “defined” poverty (Barak 66). Urban renewal programs in the 1970s and 1980s transformed American cities as industrial buildings were torn down and repurposed for upscale offices and apartment buildings. Skid Row was universally transformed (Ropers 94). The Housing and Urban Renewal Act of 1965 was part of this process but it did open rent supplementation for low income renters. In 1965, part of the Civil Rights Act was established to prevent discrimination in housing. In 1974, Section 8 was enacted as part of The Housing and Community Development Act of 1974 which turned the federal subsidized housing to the private sector (National Academics of Sciences, 2018). The Tax Reform Act of 1986 did remove the incentive to invest low-income housing as investors could not raise enough capital for the production of low-income housing (Barak 69). Because the incentives for investing in low income housing were removed by the Reagan administration, the number of affordable income housing units fell.

Housing

PROJECT ROOMKEY

Project Roomkey is a program that was started in the beginning of Covid-19 to provide a non-congregate shelter to keep the most vulnerable homeless individuals

safe. This program provides a room to those who are recovering from Covid or has been exposed to Covid, offering a safe place to get well. These utilized rooms are only a temporary solution to the ever growing population of unhoused population. It can also serve as a pathway to permanent housing. This program allows hospitals to not exceed capacity due to high volumes of Covid patients.

PROJECT HOMEKEY

On the Sonoma County website, it lists Project Homekey which is a program that “provides local communities the opportunity to purchase and develop hotels,” this allows for 19 vulnerable individuals to be safely out of the harms of being on the street. Two hotels have been bought, one in Santa Rosa and one in Sebastopol, California. The hotel that was bought is located at 635 Healdsburg Ave, Santa Rosa. Mickey Zane Place, formerly known as Azura Hotel, offers 44 recently remodeled rooms. This is located in the center of Santa Rosa and offers the necessary amenities and services that each individual needs. Elderberry Commons, formerly known as Sebastopol Inn is located 6751 Sebastopol Ave, Sebastopol California. Elderberry Commons offers 31 rooms for those on the streets that are most vulnerable. Mickey Zane Place will be undergoing further renovations and will have an outdoor garden area, dog run area, outdoor seating garden area, exterior and interior areas, and other services and amenities for the residents that will occupy the building.

CATHOLIC CHARITIES of the DIOCESE OF SANTA ROSA

Catholic Charities of the Diocese of Santa Rosa is the largest non-profit here in Santa Rosa that serves Sonoma County, Napa, Lake Counties, Humboldt and other counties. Catholic Charities has, as the website states, served “an official Catholic population of 178,443 people” and provides over 20 programs that are not limited to, counseling services, food services, temporary housing and other services that may be needed by different individuals (Description and Statistics). Although there are so many services that they provide, the needs of the individual vary so the services vary. There are more homeless in the community than services available. Currently, Catholic Charities received a 5 million dollar grant from Amazon founder Jeff Bezos. With this money, Catholic Charities can expand their work and the amount of people that they are able to help. It is a groundbreaking development that will help more people live in affordable housing and obtain the help they need. Caritas Village is going to be broken into two buildings, Caritas homes and Caritas Center. Caritas homes which will consist of 128 permanent supportive housing for low income and working class families and individuals. It will have on-site managers on site, one in each building. Burbank Housing

will provide management as well as will be working together with the city's of Santa Rosa and Catholic Charities to provide services to those who are homeless, about to be homeless or any other people who may need their services. Caritas Center which will have a medical clinic on-site operated by Santa Rosa Community Health. They will provide services for those most vulnerable. A blog on the Caritas Village website describes that this money will help operate this new supportive housing, "a 46,000-square-foot homeless housing development under construction at 465 A St. in the historic St. Rose neighborhood". Caritas Village even made national news that it caught U.S Congress Mike Thompson's attention mentioning, "the wrap-around services that will be provided will not only put a roof over their heads but also will help get their feet on the ground". There are more and more people becoming homeless. The cost of living in Sonoma County as well as other parts of California are increasing. The demand to just be able to keep up with the rent rises is difficult to begin with, then add other compounding factors and anyone can find themselves in a situation where they are just an accident or loss of job away from becoming homeless.

LOS GUILICOS SHELTER VILLAGE

When there were hundreds of the homeless population uprooted from the Joe Rodota Trail that runs along highway 12, and included more than 200 hundred people living in tents that ran more than a mile along the bike trail that runs to Sebastopol, California. When this encampment was dismantled due to safety and health hazards, there was this problem of where would all of these individuals now go? The Board of Supervisors thought fast on their feet and thought to take a county parking lot into a temporary, emergency shelter community. This pallet home comes with a way to lock your door and have a sense of security while people sleep or while people just go to look for a job or seek food. They have storage shelves for storage as well as a bunk bed that is more comfortable and safer for those who once lived on the trail in a tent. These homes are a temporary shelter and way out of homelessness. These pallet shelters are called Pallet Shelters because they are shipped on pallets, each "panelized shelter" comes in seven pieces (the floor, four walls and the floor panel) and can be assembled with minimum tools and can be assembled anywhere on leveled ground. Each entrance has a beautiful piece of art donated from a local Sonoma artist. The site is equipped with a sanitation trailer where people can have a warm shower. On the Pallet Shelter website it states that there are "communal showers, laundry, meals, parking for residents' vehicles, a dog run and over-sized storage for residents' belongings". There is even a shuttle that takes residents into town when needed.

Housing Need

Abraham Maslow's, an American Psychologist's, hierarchy of needs describes that individuals must satisfy lower-level deficit needs before meeting higher-level growth needs. A person that does not meet their basic needs is unable to grow and achieve self-actualization. Self-actualization is the highest of Maslow's stages that refers to a human achieving the desire to become the best that one can be. (Kendra, 2021). Disruption of this process usually occurs from lack of satisfaction from lower levels of needs including psychological and safety needs, love and belonging, and self-esteem. One of the reasons for the lack of progress is homelessness. The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) requires a count nationwide for unsheltered homelessness. Currently, Sonoma County in its role as the HUD-mandated Continuum of Care (CoC) planning effort, receives approximately 3.9 million dollars annually in federal funding which is a key source of funding for the county's homeless services (2020 SoCo Homeless Census). The Point-In-Time Count in February 2020 reported about 2,745 homeless people in Sonoma County and 70% of them can't afford rent as a primary reason for homelessness. Secondly, 50% of homeless people reported no job or enough income to cover housing, and 84% of survey respondents said they would like affordable permanent housing if it became available soon.

Home Development

It is stated that "Exurban development occurs beyond suburbs and is an outside easy commuting range to the central city," it is viewed "as a middle ground between densely populated urban regions" (Crump 188). Sonoma County is an example of current trends in residential choice. Sonoma County is one of the counties with the most spectacular views that attract people for residential development. Sonoma County is a middle ground between San Francisco, giving residents access to attractiveness, the wine country, and the ocean view. A lower number of residents keep their privacy and a quiet environment that people prefer. In conclusion, Crump mentions that "exurban growth appears to reflect the desire to live in rural locations that offer quiet, privacy, and access to nature" (Crump 191). According to *Sonoma County Geography, Demographics, and Socio-Economic Data* remarks that "Since 2006, the county population has grown at an overall rate of 1.8% with the cities of Sonoma, Santa Rosa and Windsor experiencing the fastest growth rates.

Rent Prices Average

According to Apartment List National Rent Report website, there has been “a significant slowdown, rent growth is continuing to exceed its pre-pandemic trend.” (Salviati, et al. 2021). Currently, the median rent in Sonoma County is 1,673 for a bedroom apartment and \$2,168 for a two-bedroom. According to the 2020 Census, Demographic Data Map Viewer, the Percent Occupied Housing units is 91.7, which is a total occupied housing units of 187,701 with 204,742 Total Housing Units in Sonoma County. The Total Population is 488,863 with a 310.3 population density.

Resources

Sonoma County currently has one of the highest per capita rates of homelessness in the Country and is very high in the cost of housing. According to the Soar Center, defining homelessness means for families who lack a stable home, including those who live in shelters, transitional housing, couch surfers, and people who live in their vehicles. The 2020 Sonoma County Census and Survey, reports on the demographics of those individuals experiencing homelessness in Sonoma County.

With the topic of homelessness becoming a more pressing subject during the pandemic, the County has no choice but to address this problem that has been ongoing for years. With the lack of policies addressing the homelessness issue, many programs and cities believe that it can't just fall under their responsibility but must come from a regional effort. Each city in Sonoma County has different approaches for their homelessness issues, so creating programs for both immediate need and longer term programs are necessary for eliminating homelessness.

As per long term assistance there are very few resources available, one program found quite helpful was Sonoma County SHARE, in which the city of Rohnert Park recently allocated \$150,000 to the program, with hopes to match homeless individuals or at risk of homelessness with home providers who have an extra room in their house. Support is also provided to both parties during the living arrangement, and SHARE also creates affordable housing opportunities called “community homes” which provides housing opportunities to individuals who are unable to qualify for an apartment due to barriers like low income or poor credit.

Cities have also allocated a budget this fiscal year towards different Catholic Charities to operate in their Rapid Re-housing program, which provides financial assistance and support to people experiencing homelessness get into a home of their own. Catholic charities will ‘master lease’ several units to provide an opportunity to

those who might not qualify, included are a portion of monthly rent for an average of six months, security deposit, and assistance for utilities. Supports include assistance with budgeting and increasing income, and education on landlord-tenant rights and responsibilities.

There are multiple resources available to individuals experiencing homelessness in Sonoma County, but very few are able to reach out to the rising population. As per long term solutions, there are very few, we need more long term solutions to permanently fix homelessness. By creating more housing, and programs to support homeless individuals to re-enter the workforce, we're able to create a stable home and provide an income to allow them to further succeed. With these programs they should also be able to support these individuals with their challenges whether it be drugs, alcohol, to mental health.

Mental Health & Healthcare

An article published with KQED describes that in the 1800's the State was reasonable for housing individuals experiencing mental illness and in the 1960's the Federal State was responsible for mental ill patients, however, President John F. Kennedy was assassinated and the funding for the Mental Health Act failed (Green, 2019). In 1965, Medicare and Medicaid was established but psychiatric hospitals were excluded. By 1967, Ronald Reagan, Governor of California, made cuts in the department of mental health and eventually closed psychiatric hospitals as he signed the Lanterman-Petris-Short Act. This act was seen by some as "patients Bill of Rights" but in certain criminal justice systems the number of incarcerated individuals increased due to the bill passing. In 2004, the Department of Justice states about 10% of state prisoners showed symptoms of mental illness. Which leads to the number of homeless individuals in Sonoma County (Green 2019).

The Sonoma County, Behavioral Health Division, provides mental health and substance use disorder services throughout the County. They state they provide services in all languages, and they also provide a 24-hour hotline. Some of the services include, alcohol and drug use treatment, mental health services, crisis services, driving under the influence programs, and community response and engagement.

Medi-Cal is a benefit that offers free or low-cost medical and dental care for Sonoma County residents. There is a process when applying to Medi-Cal benefits and you also must submit documents necessary to determine your eligibility. The downgrade of this program is not all medical providers are contracted, so not every individual can be seen by the right medical provider.

Within Sonoma County, the Goodwill Redwood Empire offers a couple of different programs to the community. One of the programs that stand out is the Goodwill Guide Program. This specific program helps local individuals in the community connect with local resources. These resources help with affordable housing, parenting support, drug, and alcohol treatment. The program allows individuals to have a better direction and encourages individuals to move forward.

On the Sonoma County website, there is the Homeless Resource Guide to help with counseling for individuals, couples and families amongst other resources. The above source gives a good number of different sources within Sonoma County for individuals to seek opportunities. The only downside is that within Sonoma County there is not much public transportation that is reliable and free for everyone to get around within Sonoma County despite the listed resources in this guide.

As a community we want to house the homeless population which sounds like an amazing notion; however, as a community we need to acknowledge that the homeless population often needs medical and mental health care. Providing a home does not eliminate their health and mental health concerns they are experiencing. Action needs to take place in terms of providing medical care and mental health care for our homeless community.

Funding

Sonoma County released a public document for the 2019-2020 Fiscal year for the Home Sonoma County Consolidated Notice of Funding states “administration and allocation of \$9,291,527 in combined annual and one-time federal, state, and local funding for homeless services in Sonoma County”. It discusses federal and state funds and where they were being disbursed. It includes “funds from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development’s (HUD) Public Services Community Development Block Grant (CDBG), the federal and State Emergency Solutions Grants (ESG), and several local homeless services funding sources” (Home Sonoma County Consolidated Notice of Funding, 2019). Almost ten million dollars to assist one of the largest homelessness crisis in the country that is being disbursed to several different homelessness assistance agencies. These funds are also only one-time federal funds which are to supposedly help the homelessness issue that has taken years to where it is today.

In 2021, an article written for the Press Democrat discussed a \$12 billion state aid that is the result of the “state’s nearly \$76 billion budget surplus — fueled by tax revenues that surpassed expectations during the pandemic — and \$27 billion in federal

aid” (Varian, 2021). The article highlights Sonoma County’s purchase of the Sebastopol Inn to “permanently house homeless people as an example of the kind of effort the new funding will support” (Varian, 2021). Of those \$12 billion, the article states that “\$5.8 billion of the new funding will go toward helping local governments buy hotels and turn them into permanent supportive housing through the state’s Project Homekey program”(Varian, 2021).

Income

Although it seems that billions is a significant amount of money to assist the homelessness issue, it will mean nothing if the income bracket does not equate to the cost of living in Sonoma County. In an article back from 2016 for Sierraclub.org discussed the gap between rising rents and income stating that “According to the California Housing Partnership Corporation, a combination of falling incomes and high rents is driving the worst rental-housing crisis in California since World War II (Bennett, 2016). From 2000 to 2014, the median household income dropped by 8% while the median rent cost jumped up by 20% (Bennet, 2016). Without affordable housing and an increase in wages, the homelessness rate will continue to rise and will constantly need billions to assist the issue, instead of getting to the root of the issue which is the affordable housing crisis. The rent cost has continued to increase between 2014 and 2021 and wages have only slightly increased.

Criminalization

The rates of homelessness are increasing rapidly in the County of Sonoma. Although it is not illegal to be homeless, living out in the streets makes you vulnerable to law enforcement. The rise of this crisis has received a lot of attention and criticism from residents and community officials. Many residents are concerned about the hazardous conditions of encampments in which many people live. At the same time, the law enforcement and city officials debate who is responsible for dealing with the homeless crisis in our County of Sonoma (Chabria, 2020). Meanwhile, there are discussions about the topic that there seem to be more people becoming homeless. The criminalization of the homeless incorporates lack of solutions to address the growing homelessness issue, and is a complex issue facing the community and law enforcement.

Crime exists among the homeless community, but it usually consists of petty crimes, however, those who experience homelessness have a higher chance of being victims of criminalization by the criminal justice system and society. As writer Shonbrun states, “they are guilty of the crime of being poor.” (Shonbrun, 2021). According to the Los Angeles Times, in the year 2020, around 250 people were evicted from the Joe Rodota Trail (JRT) in Sonoma County. Among those who were camping along the trail

were veterans, teenagers, older adults, and women. People living on the JRT were devastated by natural disasters such as the wildfires, floods, and the Covid-19 pandemic. After several complaints of the hazardous conditions of the encampments by residents who walk and bike around the trail, there have been reports of violence, thievery, and usage of heroin and fentanyl from the encampment making several people feel unsafe around the area. The County of Sonoma declared a state of emergency by the end of 2019 on the JRT (Hopkins, 2020). The inhumane conditions the people lived in and the hazardous conditions led park rangers to evict the people who lived along the trail. The evictions can be disturbing as most people are not able to carry all of their property with them; many will leave behind a good portion. It also leaves a certain amount of them to relocate to another location or encampment.

In addition to the criminalization of homelessness, many people cited for loitering offenses. These fees become unattainable to pay off because many of them do not have a job. The downside of citations is that they don't go away; they must pay by the deadline or the amount increases. If they do not pay their fines or make it to court, it can create a warrant for their arrest and any criminal offense can result in receiving a criminal record. Suppose you are homeless, you get warned and eventually ticketed for "loitering" as you try to sit and rest from moving all day, and you enter the criminal justice system. In that case, life can get very complicated because now your record will be a primary barrier to receiving housing, treatment services, and any government assistance, depending on the criminal offense. Along with the criminal record, some people experience housing voucher discrimination from landlords, significantly impacting their options. Landlords who run a background check tend to avoid selecting those with crimes on their record because they view them as a liability. (Chabria, 2020)

Although being homeless is not a crime, the law still penalizes behavior and stigmatization by residents. As a resident states, "we should simply arrest all of the homeless people." (Hopkins, 2020). The crisis has populated many areas out in the streets, and they are likely to attempt to live next to residences or businesses, creating mixed feelings among them. There are misconceptions that homeless people are criminals and cause inhumane conditions. Although many suggest incarcerating homeless people as a solution. Sheriff Essick says, "jail costs nearly \$200/day per inmate. Oh, and the jail is full." (Hopkins, 2020). If we chose to lock everyone sleeping out in the streets, there would not be space in our county jails. It would affect the usage of taxpayers because, in the long term, it will cost more to keep them inside jail than find an alternative solution as well as continue to add to the homeless population because of criminal records eliciting barriers to housing, employment, and services.

In 2009, six homeless plaintiffs filed lawsuits. They challenged the constitutionality against an anti-camp ordinance in the city of Boise, Idaho. It was in response to police officers citing them sleeping in public places and after several years. In 2018, in the case of *Martin vs. Boise*, the 9th circuit court decided to hold the rule (Chabria, 2020). Any law enforcement couldn't cite people experiencing homelessness for sleeping in public places if there isn't any shelter available. The decision was held by the 9th circuit applying to western states, including California, under their jurisdiction. The decision stood because of the eighth amendment of the US constitution's prohibition on cruel and unusual punishment. This ruling allows many people to sleep in public areas until they can find a home.

The criminalization of homelessness can seem to many to be a reasonable solution, but we must ask ourselves what led that individual to end up on the streets. In the County of Sonoma, they have experienced a lot of natural disasters, wildfires, severe floods, and the Covid-19 pandemic to the unaffordable homes in our County. These all play factors in the increase of homelessness. In addition, there must be more accountability from city officials and law enforcement on this issue because we must remember that everyone has the right to an adequate living.

COVID

When the COVID-19 pandemic surfaced in 2020, the entire world was at risk of contracting the virus. However, the economic downturn has put homeless communities in more unstable living conditions and face a higher risk of contracting and spreading the virus without vaccinations, especially if they have prior medical conditions. With approximately 2,745 unhoused people residing throughout Sonoma County, efforts to vaccinate and safely shelter all of these individuals remains a complex issue to solve (Varian, 2021).

In Sonoma County, Santa Rosa Community Health and Sonoma County Medical Association have vaccinated hundreds of homeless (Varian, 2021). However, many are still unvaccinated, which has led to a lack of bed space within homeless shelters in efforts to minimize the spread of the virus (Patch, 2021). Despite this, a COVID outbreak of the Delta Variant occurred at the Sam Jones Homeless Shelter in Santa Rosa after it reopened to full capacity. As a result, 47 homeless individuals tested positive for the virus, some of whom were vaccinated, and one elderly man died from complications of COVID (Varian, 2021).

It's important to note that homeless persons are primarily getting the Johnson and Johnson vaccine, which has proved less effective in counteracting the delta variant

(Varian 2021). Therefore, administering doses that are the most effective against the delta variant ought to be received by the most vulnerable community, the homeless, and the elderly. To make matters worse, the amount of time allowed in the shelters is limited, which means it's only a temporary solution. Also, if individuals are getting their first dose of the vaccine in the shelters, they might be forced to leave before a second dose is administered. This puts the public community at risk until the homeless are fully vaccinated.

Furthermore, the lack of available beds in shelters has caused the county to establish temporary homeless camps. In Santa Rosa, Finley Park Community Center, a county funded encampment has provided supervision, aid and shelter to the homeless. Meanwhile, the homeless set up an un-permitted camp encampment in Rohnert Park off Roberts Lake Drive. Here, there is no aid support or vaccine sites provided by the city. Also, the laws for the city of Rohnert Park cannot enforce the evacuation of the homeless encampments since there are no shelters in the city (RPCITY). In other words, when considering less available beds in homeless shelters outside of Rohnert Park, and a lack of a shelter within it, the homeless can legally reside at their encampments.

Although city officials have “cleared out” the encampment, many still remain, while those who have left migrated to other areas in the county or were evacuated to shelters in other cities (KSRO, 2021). Having said that, according to the City of Rohnert Parks website, “Addressing homelessness is a priority for Rohnert Park. The Rohnert Park City Council dedicated \$1.3 Million to fund solutions to this pressing issue for the fiscal year that started July 1, 2021.” (RPCITY). With this funding, Rohnert Park has been able to move 43 homeless individuals into permanent housing and 83 into temporary shelters. Nevertheless, more city laws need to be implemented towards encampments, housing, and the homeless.

Methods & Study Design

Purpose and Method:

Our research examines which policies have been established that are currently assisting the homeless crisis in Sonoma county, which policies, if any, that are being thought over and enacted to further assist the issue, and changes that could be made to better understand and help the homeless population. With such a large homeless population in Sonoma County, our purpose was to gain understanding of existing assistance and then from there, see what can be done to aid the homelessness epidemic within the county. With an inductive, qualitative approach of in-depth interviews, this allows different perspectives to the barriers and limitations of policies and policy making. It also emphasizes the areas where assistance could be improved and policies that can be made to effectively help with the growing homeless crisis.

Participants:

Our participants consist of 23 participants with first hand experience and knowledge of the homelessness crisis in Sonoma County. Being that our study aims to understand a complex phenomenon, we obtained a sample of advocates, frontline workers and elected officials to provide more insight from their knowledge and experience of the issue. The sample of this population was chosen because experience can bridge the understanding of what is happening in the homelessness crisis and what is desired in needed change in Sonoma County. Participants were selected by evaluating research conducted by students. Some of the participants' include workers of homeless service programs and mayors and representatives of cities across Sonoma County Contact information of organizations, advocacy groups, and elected officials listed were obtained by online public domains that provided names, emails, and phone numbers. All participants involved were a range in age and gender.

Some participants were referrals that were given to us from those contacted and invited to participate in our interviews. Participants of this study were informed of the importance and purpose of this research and invited to the interviewing process. Most participants were open to answer every question on our interview guide whether they were short brief answers or long, in depth responses. Some participants requested we send them the questions before the day of the interview and others responded there on the spot. Some participants also allowed us to record the interview for later, for our own personal in depth note taking of the interview, being that the interviews were anonymous.

Tools:

The tools developed were an interview guide, (APPENDIX A), which directed each of the interviewers on how to introduce the study to every participant, what it was for and under whose auspices, and ensured that there was informed consent of anonymity. The guide provided the interviewers a consistent method of questions to maintain the data collection consistent and organized. The interview guide consisted of twelve questions that we came up with as a group to obtain the most information possible for our data collection. These questions included what each participant thought were the causes of homelessness, questions in regards to resources, legal issues faced when discussing homelessness and homeless people, where funding comes from for the county and how it's dispersed to assist the homelessness issue, and policy.

Procedure:

A contact list was developed in consideration of prior research and knowledge, and built upon as the data collection progressed. Each student added contacts to the list from organizations and elected officials of different cities of Sonoma County that they believed carried valuable information in regards to our study. Students were in charge of contacting potential research participants until at least five different people responded. Once contacted, the participant was informed of the study's purpose and intent and then finally scheduled for an interview once they confirmed their willingness to contribute to the study. Many of the interviews were taken over video conference, being that in person interviews seemed unsafe due to the COVID pandemic. Some of our interviews consisted of telephone conversation as well. Interviews conducted were in groups of two or more students. Student pairs would determine who would interview the participant and who would take notes for each question asked. We wanted to keep the interviews within a certain time frame since we understood that the people we were contacting very likely had busy schedules, so having students do separate tasks seemed the most time efficient. All names and organizations have been omitted in our data to respect and stand by our anonymity claim. Data was collected and compiled for analysis.

Limitations:

Some of the limitations of our study was that we were not able to walk the streets and encampments to talk to the people personally being affected by homelessness. In other words we were unable to get answers from those being most affected which are the homeless. We couldn't ask them what they felt like they needed and what limitations

they experience with seeking out and receiving assistance. We couldn't ask them personally how organization and policies have or have not helped them in their circumstances. The pandemic is another big reason that we couldn't get the perspectives or experiences of those struggling with homelessness. The lack of technology that the homeless population have would make it even more challenging for us to safely conduct our study. We also were unable to just walk up to an organization's building and ask for someone to talk to. It all had to be through email or phone call which many times were ignored or maybe overshadowed by all the other emails the organization or representative was receiving. In person visits may have been more personal which maybe would have inclined more people to get to us sooner. Although we were able to get a lot of valuable information and insight for our research study, there were still some grey areas that we were not able to access.

Data Analysis

Causes to Homelessness

Our data collection provided some insight to the community perceptions, opinions and experiences towards homelessness and it's underlying causes as to why there are very high rates of homelessness despite Sonoma County being one of the highest income communities per capita in California. A big cause that has contributed to homelessness is that this area is very desirable for families and more people have moved to the area seeking opportunities. Sonoma County is surrounded by various places of interest such as San Francisco, Napa Valley's "Wine Country", Bodega Bay, many national parks, trails, sightseeing, shopping, the Junior College and University. It's also within commuting distance to surrounding areas for job opportunities.

The weather in Sonoma County was also mentioned in tandem with the resources to families. Generally, Sonoma County and the surrounding cities experience very favorable weather conditions as this part of California does not experience extreme weather conditions. Many interviewees mentioned that homeless are able to live outside mostly year-round. In turn, the wildfires that have been ever presently increasing and directly affecting high populated areas since 2017 in California have put major strain on housing availability and added to inflation. It was reported that many lower income families and individuals have lost their homes due to being squeezed out of the rental market with continuously increasing rental prices, property values, and land.

In all 23 interviews, there is an overwhelming consensus that the high cost of living in proportion to low wages is the main reason why Sonoma County has had a very difficult time getting ahead of the homeless crisis. As buying goods, renting or purchasing homes, food, transportation, insurance, and other prices of goods have been on the rise, income has remained mostly stagnant. Income inequality was mentioned to affect the public disproportionately as those with lower incomes have a more difficult time in self-sustainment.

Housing was also most prominently mentioned as the cost of housing, rental prices, and the decrease of affordable housing units have been an increasing problem. There also has been a lack of development in the housing market. Higher income developer's and individuals will also purchase lower priced homes and repurpose them for Bed & Breakfast rentals as well as sell homes at a higher price. Developer's will invest in building higher priced homes as it is more equitable on the market. There is no government or cultural support for low-income housing developers as there is no financial incentive for developers to invest in low income housing units. A historical perspective was given in our interviews in that the Reagan Administration did cut a lot of programs for housing that have never been remedied. "Services disappeared as they were cut with his agenda" and that the homeless issue was more of an "invisible issue as the public was told by the government in the 1980s that homeless did not exist."

In regards to housing, HUD vouchers were mentioned as a helpful tool but because it is in the hands of the private sector, there is no incentive for landlords to agree to rent to those with HUD vouchers. Those who are able to acquire a voucher, which is extremely difficult to do, are left to find a unit that will allow the voucher and pass inspections. Activists in the community did shed some insight on the HUD voucher community and the barriers they experience. "Villainization is the new form of redlining, which has historically racist practices". A person seeking to rent a unit with a HUD voucher needs to go through the process of convincing the landlord of their good nature as individuals are judged of who they are based on their status. There was also mention of landlord vs. tenant rights; "when fighting for rights to elected officials, landlords and property owners have the time and the resources to have representation in city council meetings, so voices of the community are disproportionately being heard".

Its not just the HUD voucher community that faces discrimination, most interviewee's responded to the stigma every present about homelessness in our society. A historian with the homeless community did comment a lot on the puritan ethic of our society and community. That people should pave their own way and not rely on the government by "pulling yourself up by your own bootstraps" mentality has been an ideal of pride but also an ideal of superiority and judgment to those who have so many factors

stacked against them. There were many interviewees that did share these views. One respondent did state that the “collective consciousness” in the stigmatization around homelessness is the ultimate issue when examining it’s cause. No real solutions have been made because how one is seen in the community as an “outsider” will be addressed and regarded as such.

In our data collection, there was substantial mention of the difficulties homeless experience on the street. Drug addiction and mental health affliction were mentioned as a cause due to broken up and lack of resources. With the housing market extremely difficult to penetrate, homeless individuals are left to the streets with having no real place to settle to address other issues. Post Traumatic Stress Disorder from childhood or other trauma such as domestic violence do put an added weight on the community. An activist that has worked very closely with the homeless community for decades explained that “losing housing is a poverty issue... rich people can experience drug addiction, mental health crisis, domestic violence, health issues... but when poor people experience it, they lose their home”.

Current Developments

In Sonoma County there are current developments upon housing programs, such as Project Homekey on a State level, mental health services, homelessness prevention, rental programs and repurposing hotels all serve the homeless community. More active movements such as Los Guilicos tiny house villiage, hotels/motel, rental programs like Reach for Home are some of the resources within Sonoma County.

HUD is a program that serves low-income households also known as Section 8 and provides assistance within their local community. HUD offers rental assistance, rent relief, and can provide mortgage insurance on loans as the focus is for secure housing.

Many vouchers have been available for individuals needing a home, but more housing needs to be available for those vouchers to be put into use. Zoning laws, funding and construction delays appear to be occurring. This ongoing issue can be frustrating for individuals who are seeking a home and for the community members that are trying to run successful programs. The State legislature is confident to state they are not willing to wait for federal government approval to get homes approved for the homeless community. As Project Homekey is run by the state and recently Project Homekey has been repurposing hotel rooms, but these hotel rooms do not offer kitchens therefore, it makes it more expensive to not have a kitchen because now you must provide meals as to providing actual homes or apartments makes better sense when providing actual housing.

Reach for Home is an organization based out of Healdsburg that provides support and opportunities for homeless individuals and overall affordable housing for clients. This organization engages with individuals who are seeking affordable housing or simply need the access to resources. Reach for Home focuses on providing supportive housing programs in the north part of Sonoma County.

Sonoma County has a Homeless resource guide to help with counseling for individuals, couples & families. This gives a good number of different sources within Sonoma County for individuals to seek opportunities. The only downside is that within Sonoma County there is not much public transportation that is reliable and free for everyone to get around within Sonoma County

In order for current developments to be achieved it is essential that a community acknowledges the homeless population, and a community also needs to consciously hold policy makers responsible for the homeless population.

Helpful Resources

In Sonoma County, there are powerful programs to aid people suffering homelessness that are unique and are not offered in other places. In our community, most programs are available free of charge and with compassionate people that are very inspiring in helping others in need. It is noted that many community members have passion and sympathy for the homeless population and shared acts of kindness; however, sometimes, they don't get so much credit for what they do. COTS outreach teams have been working hard to provide from the simplest things such as jelly sandwiches in the morning, band-aids, masks, water, or socks that are little things that are in need daily. The outreach is essential because some people are not aware of the available programs or are not ready to receive the help, so they work depending on what is needed at the moment. Having people accept all those services has been a challenge for these programs because it is not a mandate and people are not utilizing all the benefits because they are not ready to get the services despite resource availability.

Moreover, rapid re-housing has been a beneficial resource as it helps people with security deposits, case management, housing search and location, and rent payments that allow them to move to permanent housing. Similar resources are emergency vouchers and outreach for home/rental assistance. The Russian River Alliance stresses a crucial need to support people on the verge of homelessness or who have become homeless because prevention is an ideal strategy to support the working

people to help them avoid homelessness. FISH in Sonoma, does offer monetary assistance to help with rent expenses.

As we face the COVID-19 pandemic, resources have changed in dealing with issues and creating new funding sources that have been unpopular such as converting hotels for housing, safe parking, temporary encampments, or tiny homes. Some of these outstanding programs were mentioned multiple times in interviews like Los Guilicos, which allow people to have their own secure space where they can leave their stuff to go out and fill out paperwork, look for other resources, attend to their mental health and health issues to better their situation. Another feature about tiny homes, safe parking, or Los Guilicos programs, is that there are not congregated places which has been very helpful when facing the pandemic as it avoids "superspreading events." The SOS Program in the City of Sonoma offers food every day and together with The Heaven are able to offer showers and laundry facilities. These programs are designed to have fewer restrictions, allowing more freedom as homeless people are vulnerable to triggered trauma flashbacks.

Nevertheless, it is essential to acknowledge that homelessness comes together with mental health, trauma, and substance abuse in many cases. Many people have been untreated for many years, and there are not enough resources available, which becomes overwhelming. COTS and Petaluma Health Center work together with people who cannot afford health insurance so health services are provided.

Funding

Sonoma County and its many programs that are here to aid the homeless population get much of their funding from the Community Development Commission (CDC). Interviews provided information that there was 147 million dollars from rounds of funds from Project Homekey. This money has been put to great use buying and renovating motels and hotels in various counties to take the most vulnerable off the streets. These motels are equipped with wraparound services from medical to mental health. The Housing Urban Development (HUD) has released and given out thousands of housing vouchers to better help get some individuals off the streets. Unfortunately, there are not very many landlords who will accept them for whatever reasons and this further complicates the situation. There have been private donations that come in from various sectors and private donors. Since Covid has been around, there has been funding from the Covid Stimulus. During our lengthy research and interviews with various frontline workers, and advocates, we found that there are more funds that may come in through the state level but using the private sector path seems to be more

flexible. Through various grants, Sonoma County and other surrounding areas have been able to provide shelter and food for the counties most vulnerable.

Measure O was voted on “a quarter-cent sales tax voters approved by an over two-thirds majority last November” and the first 13 million of that will go towards “mental health services on bolstering existing psychiatric care programs as part of an effort to combat chronic homelessness in the region”(Press Democrat, 2021). The Continuum of Care is another revenue source that provides funds to the county in combating homelessness. There are Emergency Solutions Grants (ESG) that are provided to the various agencies around the county that help with some of the immediate needs of the homeless population. There just is a higher demand of need than the help provided. There are some hospitals such as Kaiser, St. Joseph’s Providence, and Sutter who provide monetary donations to various sectors and organizations in the county.

During our research we found out what some of the current revenue sources and what are the new revenue sources available. President Biden “signed the American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) on March 11, 2021 to combat the COVID-19 pandemic,” this has helped some but there still is so much more that needs to be done. The CARES ACT was signed into law on March 27,2020, “marking the third and largest major legislative initiative to address COVID-19 to date” and contains a number of health provisions that has been put in place to focus on the wide-spreading Covid-19 virus. During our interviews it was said that “Covid has caused more homeless but also offered up more housing for the homeless population. We are still learning the effects from COVID but overall it has exacerbated the housing and income for all families.” State funds and different grants are made available to help the ever increasing homeless population. We need to find real solutions to this problem. We are in a sense just finding a remedy for some of the issues that homeless individuals face. We need to come to a better understanding of what those needs are and fully address them.

Most Important Aspects

From the data we collected, some of the most important aspects of homelessness that need to be addressed include mental health services. Almost every participant mentioned mental health and general health services. Homeless people have no safe space, and have endured traumas that many don’t seem to understand. They are exposed to harsh environments and are in constant survival mode, which are both physically and emotionally exhausting. A lot of the time because of these traumas, they participate in substance abuse to temporarily relieve themselves of their mental

state. Which is another important aspect that many participants said that needed to be addressed, drug abuse.

Of course the resources provided for the homeless were also mentioned in our data collection. The amount of resources and what cities and counties have to offer them. If we think of what an average person needs to survive, that is everything that the homeless are entitled to when it comes to resources. Food, shelter, means of communication and internet, and several other things that are necessary for survival.

COVID-19 and Homelessness

Regarding COVID-19, our research team asked the question- due to the global pandemic of COVID-19 and it's variants making it difficult for everyone to engage in their community, what is being done to help the homeless as the pandemic has complicated the situation? Data from interviewees have provided insight into the struggles the homeless have faced because of the COVID, and how select services in Sonoma County are helping the homeless during this pandemic. The data compiled from their responses is a primary source of information, since their respective fields are dedicated to serving the homeless in Sonoma County.

Responses in our interviews shared that during the onset of the pandemic, the homeless population was in a state of panic because they were uneducated on the virus, meaning they did not know what was going on or how to protect themselves. Twenty homeless people died during the first 6 months of COVID. It was added that during the winter in 2020, Code Blue Shelters were not open because of the pandemic, which meant that when temperatures get below freezing cold, options for shelter were severely limited. Churches did offer shelter to the homeless when temperatures were under 50 degrees, but this still put the homeless at risk of contracting the virus. We were also reminded in our interviews that everyone overstocked on toilet paper products and food from the grocery stores, which left little to no resources for the homeless population. Those that did have housing shut their doors and ignored the struggles that the homeless were facing.

More insight in interviews shared that Sonoma County has made extra efforts during the covid pandemic to help the homeless. For example, the temporary tent camps that provided aid and shelter to the homeless, as well as housing vouchers, hotel money vouchers, vaccination efforts, and a year round extension of the seasonal winter shelter. It was stated that the county created 208 housing vouchers for people to find homes in response to shelters reducing capacity, coupled with the fact the COVID-19

outbreaks were appearing in these shelters, such as Sam Jones homeless shelter in Santa Rosa.

Moreover, it was shared that great contribution to extra efforts by providing ongoing services such as food, housing, COVID testing, and vaccinations to the homeless. The vaccines are being supplied by Sonoma Valley Community Health Center. Contracts with Sonoma County and health providers were established and created long term housing for some homeless individuals, forming many long-term opportunities. It was acknowledged that more medical testing sites eventually opened up with rapid testing services. In order to avoid over concentration of infected patients in hospitals, alternate care sites were implemented at Sonoma State University and in the city of Windsor. Importantly, services from Project Homekey use their state funding to purchase old hotels and turn them into a living space for the homeless, such as the Sebastopol Inn.

Interviews did give insight into the overall impact of Project Homekey and Project Roomkey. Essentially, purchasing and repurposing hotels and motels, such as Los Guilicos Village and Tiny Homes Village, creates movement away from congregant and barracks style shelters and is economically cheaper than building entirely new structures. This shift helps transition the homeless away from traditional homeless shelters, since putting the homeless back into these shelters can trigger their PTSD from past traumas, such as sexual assaults, substance abuse, and physical abuse. Shelters also have too many rules that limit the freedom of the homeless person. Project Homekey provides supportive wrap around services, such as medical attention and mental health rehabilitation, which offers a necessary progressive engagement of homeless individuals.

Some interviews shared their belief that these services are not going away anytime soon and that more funding for Project Homekey is imperative to maintain and progress the efforts to support the homeless with safe and adequate shelter during the pandemic. COVID positive persons had nowhere to go during the Pandemic until the County responded to this issue with Project Homekey and Project Room Key. COVID has created more homelessness, but it is celebrated by the fact that more housing options are being offered to the homeless population through Homekey and Roomkey.

It was shared that the homeless community was reluctant at first to accept the information about COVID since they demonstrate a tendency to believe in conspiracies. Also, when COVID hit our community, the homeless population had no idea what was going on and had no information. This insight was shared by front line workers working with the homeless population during the onset of the pandemic; that the homeless population did not understand what COVID was or how to protect themselves. The

homeless did not initially get sick during the pandemic due to being outside in open air and not in confined spaces. Nevertheless, when COVID started spreading among the homeless community, the reality that a lot of services closed their doors during the outbreak put them at greater risk of contracting COVID. It was reported that the city of Santa Rosa opened up the Family Center Tent Camp as an emergency COVID camp, which was very successful in sheltering the homeless, but funding ran out and it was closed. This demonstrates how important state funding is to maintain programs and services long-term that support the homeless. It was also acknowledged that Project Roomkey being a positive response to the homeless community, which gives infected persons a safe place to quarantine and recover.

Legal Issues

During our data collection, we learned more about the homeless crisis in Sonoma county. We discovered how impactful legal issues could present themselves on individuals experiencing homelessness. It was shared in interviews that many people on the streets do not intentionally mean to break the laws or rules when seeking a place to sleep in public but because there are regulations, many of them will be in violation often. It leads to being either evicted and leaving or refusing and being arrested and taken into Sonoma county jail. The Sonoma County Jail does not rehabilitate individuals; it can leave them in a worse state if not given adequate treatment. Many suffer from drug addiction while incarcerated in county jail and suffer devastating withdrawal symptoms.

Another observation is learning that 53% of the homeless population in Santa Rosa are living in a vehicle such as a car, SUV, or RV. Some refuse to go into shelters even when available because of the strict policies and regulations the shelter homes often enforce on them which include having curfews, drug testing, covid-19 testing; all these factors can make an individual not want to stay temporarily. While there have been changes and every shelter is different.

Lastly, many homeless people are suffering from severe trauma that they have experienced in their lifetime. During one of our interviews they gave an example of a female that became triggered while sleeping because of the pandemic and to avoid spread of the virus. Many of them sleep with masks on and that allowed her to be triggered. She panicked because it reminded her of her past. Although to many it does not seem to be a big deal there are many who get triggered differently and this allows us to realize that many people have not healed from traumatizing events. Still, we can reduce the number of people without housing with adequate treatments and compassion from the people helping and supporting them.

Outcomes with Current Resources

After further interviews the question of whether or not Sonoma County's current available resources are able to ultimately eliminate homelessness. According to the majority of our interviews we came to a conclusion that with the current resources we are unable to completely eliminate homelessness, even with a variety of resources like Project Homekey, SHARE, shelters, safe pilot program, and many more. Although an abundance of resources very few focus on long term assistance for aiding homelessness. During our discussions many officials said that there are plans on using data and statistics to allow their resources to focus on key needs which would help allocate their funds towards programs that work.

Programs like SHARE, which not only focuses on providing affordable housing for individuals who are experiencing homelessness but also provides them with different resources like therapists, and scheduled meetings to create a plan on how they are going to get back on their feet. Fortunately a few cities are planning on implementing this with their own programs and are now planning on creating a brighter future.

Many focused on mental health, more property for housing, and more funding. Fortunately with the pandemic the focus of homelessness has risen and now officials have no reason to ignore this pressing problem. There are individuals who are currently struggling to get by, and many agree that starting with the root of homelessness like creating policies for rent regulation, implementing living wage, and better access to healthcare will not only prevent homelessness but eliminate it as a whole.

Outside Policy

While interviewing members of the community that hold experience working with homeless individuals, we asked about known policies that are used outside of Sonoma County that have been helpful? And many commented about community driven outreach programs, and communities building homes. Some members of the community suggested agencies from different countries working together for a better approach to successfully help individuals who are homeless. Shadowing different communities outside Sonoma County allows for more creative public space to be occupied by the homeless community and focusing on stability in mental health and providing services for individuals to be "able to bridge the gap and mental health services."

Some communities hold available safe parking; that provides individuals a safe parking spot to live in their vehicle. Offering parking permits for those who live in their

car as well as offering work within their community. New Zealand did a pilot program where they provide a safe place to live, case management to assist with other issues of income and resources in a lump of money to help stabilize the individual or family and it holds a 70% success rate. Also the city of Portland was mentioned in one of our interviews, where Portland is being more creative by allowing public spaces to be used for public housing as well as certain designated areas to have individuals park their vehicles and use county yards.

In some outside communities more availability of public transportation has been helpful to homeless individuals who do not have reliable transportation. Reliable transportation is key when someone needs to get to a program, an appointment or any type of interview. One can learn plenty from outside programs and resources.

Needed Policy

In our interviews, we asked advocates and elected officials what policies they believe are needed to ultimately address homelessness in our community. The most prominent responses were that of policies around housing including expanding on the Housing First Model, increased efforts to community education around homelessness, and better organized resources .

There needs to be an overall effort and policy for more housing and not just low income housing. The housing market should reflect closely to population needs in each area. There was a call to address the Reagan administration cuts to housing programs. The government should incorporate a housing project that was historically effective. To support this, there needs to be more incentive for development for low income housing as well as a policy around the rental market limiting out of town entities from purchasing homes for repurposing them for profit such as Bed & Breakfast sites which are high priced. Included in a much needed and desired housing policies and efforts, a policy on rent control was mentioned to address the inflating prices as many people in the community are losing their housing because of rising costs.

A policy for districting in our county was mentioned as well - that each area needs adequate representation in government from each district and not all from a concentrated affluent part of the County. It was mentioned in interviews that understanding the needs of each community is important in addressing problems and concerns effectively as a representative approach will establish some better equilibrium on proposed solutions to problems.

A policy around safe parking and camping where those who are struggling and waiting to obtain permanent housing have a safe place to park and camp with supports

such as case management, hygiene facilities, and wrap-around services and not be constantly moved and ticketed so they can establish a sense of safety and support within their own community. Organizing safe parking and camping in conjunction to better communication between each area to address needs and available resources to be utilized and accessed more effectively.

Addressing the existing legislation on tax was mentioned during our interview process in that big corporations and insurance companies get huge tax write-offs as a non-profit entity in exchange for community benefit contributions. There are many loopholes to these write-offs to where accountability is not fully in place. A lot of corporations get away with experiencing huge tax benefits without the accountability of following through with their community contributions.

A policy mentioned during our interview was creating a department within the correctional detention facility that will focus on treatment for substance abuse. It will have a different approach than simply being in a cell all day. Sometimes, homeless people create a strategy of wanting to get incarcerated because county jail provides shelter and daily meals. These are things that they are seeking daily out in the streets.

In regards to community education, a policy for ongoing research and obtaining information and feedback from the homeless community about what is and what is not working. Better support in public education was mentioned several times to have a policy in including basic living skills to developing children entering adulthood and the workforce.

What Can Be Done in Sonoma County NOW

In our data collection, an overwhelming response to housing was a main priority to addressing the homeless crisis. Many are calling for changes in policy, increase investment to housing development and resources, however many of our interviewees recognize that while Project Homekey is promising, it is going to take time to implement and that the homeless population on the street “waiting another year is simply not acceptable. Homeless lose 30 years of their life from the harsh conditions of living on the street”. In our interviews, we asked what can be done in immediate response to homelessness. The overwhelming majority agrees that Homekey is very promising including the current developments in higher places in government, paying more attention to the crisis, however, local efforts to address homelessness now is very desired. Many interviewees responded to opening up safe parking and camps for tents immediately as it is low cost and it could be organized quickly so that communities can establish a sense of community and safety if the County and it's areas allowed

unoccupied spaces to be utilized for such purposes. More efforts to tiny home villages such as Los Guilicos could alleviate pressure on the County and its cities to address unofficial homeless encampments. It was expressed that supported safe parking, camping sites, and tiny home villages can be implemented within the year and help drastically reduce the number of homeless sleeping under bridges and bushes. A call to open the Sonoma County Fairgrounds today would be a big solution but an interviewee acknowledged its barriers. "There is the space and the capacity to get people from not sleeping under a bush. It's a largely unused space. The fairgrounds is owned by the farm community which is the Farm Bureau which is a very conservative part of our County". It was shared that "Most homeless people can help each other and help themselves if we allow them to establish some safety in their community."

Conclusion

In our qualitative research, we were able to understand that the homeless population will not be resolved without some serious changes. If the cost of living is going to keep rising then wages need to rise also. When wages stay the same and the cost of living is constantly rising, we are bound to have more at-risk residents of our community become part of the homeless crisis.

We have established that we have a fragmented system of solutions; that each area of Sonoma County has an abundance of resources but communication between cities is sparse. This research team at Sonoma State University is very passionate about finding solutions that relieve pressure on the crisis and find ways to give people back their pride and dignity. Public education is also a key to help with the problem because most of the time people are unaware or uneducated of the problem that is easy to adhere to social norms of stigma and discrimination about the homeless population. When combining stigma to other compounding situations such as trauma, illness, and deprivation of safety, problems are then magnified and stacked against members of our community who do want to help themselves. This insight would not have been possible without the insights shared by the advocates in our community. As we unfortunately were not able to obtain insight from houseless members themselves, front line workers do have the capacity and capability to empathize with the community they serve.

There are many resources that are helpful for the homeless community, however, we are very far away from solving the problem and there are many gaps in the process. We learned that many programs have the ability to collect fundings from our government, but they come with many restrictions that make it hard for providers to address the problem. Since the problem has continued and may very well increase with

inflation, local officials are responsible to effectively communicate with the government and stress the need for housing development. Also, elected officials could ultimately benefit from hearing directly from the population in which they are attempting to service.

Proper management of the houseless appears to be best handled if done as a community approach in all cities. All nine cities in the County need to work as one, share ideas to introduce new policies, and pursue a final solution to end homelessness. Better support for working families is highly needed as a preventive measure and building stronger families because it's essential for every human to have it for communities to thrive. A home and family fulfills needs of every person's development and are powerful motivators to avoid homelessness and live a healthier life.

Homeless prevention programs that will assist with finding a place to live that is affordable and providing unique counseling for individuals or families who are experiencing some type of stress. Also, Roomkey and Homekey are promising programs that many are hopeful about, however, there is a concern of the homeless that are continuing to live under bridges, next to buildings, or under bushes while our community gets projects and programs underway. There is a call to address the crisis now with equitable solutions that have already proven themselves such as supported safe parking, camp sites, and tiny home villages.

Ultimately, in our research we observed that there are a lot of great programs, great ideas, and hope of incoming projects. However, we are fragmented in our approaches to address the problem. Despite the great ideas and hard work and millions of dollars put into the homeless crisis, it will not be enough unless the entire community comes together in consensus that we need to address the problem as a community and not push it off to corners of our area where we do not want to see it. Our research team applauds the decades efforts of those who have served our community and listened to those whose voices and pain that have been lost or are left unheard. We urge leaders in Sonoma County to continue to invest in continued research to the root causes of homelessness in our community with the voices that need to be heard most: the houseless.

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APPENDIX A

Interview Guide

Telephone prompt to speak with staffer/provider to schedule interview:

Hello, my name is _____, I am doing a research study collectively as a group under the auspices of Dr. Peter Philips at Sonoma State University. We are studying effective policies to address homelessness. Is (insert specific staff member here) able to speak to me in an interview by phone or zoom with one/two other students? The interview will only take about 30 minutes of your time.

Interview Guide:

Hello, our names are _____, we are students doing a collective group study under the auspices of Dr. Peter Philips at Sonoma State University to address homelessness in Sonoma County. Sonoma county has one of the highest homeless rates in the nation. The interview will only take about 20-25 minutes. We are conducting 20-25 interviews with experts in the area. Your name will not be used and your interview is completely anonymous. The collected data will be published in a research study at the end of the Semester. Are you willing to proceed with the interview?

Questions:

- Sonoma County has one of the highest rates of homelessness in America, why do you believe this is?
- The homeless rates have gone down slightly but still very high in our area. What are the current solutions or governmental policies to address this?
- What programs do you believe has helped the homeless population?
- What are the main revenue sources available to lessen homelessness in Sonoma County?
- As an agency, what aspects of homelessness do you feel is most important to address?
- Due to the global pandemic of COVID-19 and it's variants making it difficult for everyone to engage in their community, what is being done to help the homeless as the pandemic has complicated the situation?
- Are there new revenue streams coming from city, state, or federal to address housing for the homeless?

- What type of legal issues do homeless individuals deal with?
- Do you think the available resources in Sonoma County can ultimately eliminate homelessness?
- Do you know of any active policies outside of Sonoma county that have been effective in aiding the homeless that you wish the county would adopt?
- What policies do you believe are needed in Sonoma County to work towards eliminating homelessness?
- What can be done in Sonoma County to alleviate homelessness in the near future?