

From Sweeping to Stability: Sustainable Practices for Seattle Homeless Encampments

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Thesis II

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\*Author's Note: The names of some individuals have been changed to maintain their confidentiality. Portions of this thesis have been previously submitted from the following International Community Development coursework: Program Evaluation, Fieldwork, Research for Social Change, Social Entrepreneurship, Community Development, and Cultural Studies.

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## Part I: Introduction and Groundwork

### Introduction

I remember the defeated look in her eyes when I saw her for the first time after the sweep of the encampment she was staying in. It was a cold, dark night, and “Mamma” (the street name her community had given her) looked utterly exhausted as we stood by the Search and Rescue van and reconnected for the first time in weeks. The community she was a part of had lost the grill they used to cook family dinners on along with many other personal belongings. Not only that, but they were in a completely different area of the city and some members had decided not to relocate with them. The look in her eyes communicated the unsuccessful effort to stay in the home she and her close-knit community had built under Seattle’s I-5 overpass, and she had no choice but to rebuild all over again. I have seen a similar look in the eyes of many others who share this experience.

As a case manager, volunteer, and outreach worker to Seattle’s homeless community over the past few years, I must admit that I’ve felt the entire spectrum of emotions toward this population. This is specifically true for the unsheltered homeless population and the practice of sweeping encampments. An agency in King County that tracks data by completing a one night count each year determined that this group makes up almost half of the 11,000 people who are homeless in the Seattle area (All Home). I have often felt nothing but compassion and empathy toward people who are staying in encampments. During these times, I found myself desiring outcomes that met their basic needs and helped them stay comfortable where they were without pushing them to get off of the streets and into a program, shelter, or housing.

On the other end of the spectrum, I've felt complete indignation. This resulted in wanting outcomes that pushed people out of their perceived complacency by requiring them to move from the streets. Most of the time, I found myself navigating the tension of these two extremes and wrestling with the nuances of them. I now know that neither enabling nor punishing people who are homeless is the appropriate response because both lack components that contribute to lasting, dignifying change.

Research shows that affordable, supportive, permanent housing is the primary solution to solving homelessness (qtd. in Collins, Loftus-Farren, Mackie, and Sylla). However, this solution does not answer the more immediate question: What options do people have in the meantime? The waitlists for current affordable housing units can range from 1-7 years depending on the property. The City of Seattle hired McKinsey & Company to conduct a study on the housing affordability crisis in Seattle. This portion of the final report communicates the extent of the issue:

Although the county's annual "point-in-time" count identified more than 11,000 people needing housing on a single night, as many as 22,000 households sought help from the county's homelessness services across the full year of 2017 at a time when only 8,000 permanent homes were available. Yet even these figures mask the true extent of the shortage. (Stringfellow and Wagle)

It will take many years and millions of dollars to provide the kind of infrastructure that could adequately house the homeless community. Short-term solutions need to be thoughtfully considered while long-term solutions are in process. Is Seattle's only option to continue moving people like Mamma and her community from one unauthorized encampment to the next? The

answer is no; there is a better way.

The appropriate response toward unauthorized homeless encampments in Seattle is one that addresses each individual as a whole person, utilizing their strengths while helping them overcome their barriers. This response expects responsibility from the homeless community while also demonstrating compassion toward them. Rooted in observation and interviews with the homeless community and outreach workers, this thesis demonstrates the importance of ending the practice of sweeping encampments by exploring how they cause instability and ineffective outcomes for the campers. In place of the sweeps, it will then suggest practices that encourage ownership and permanency in the lives of people who are homeless by recognizing their strengths and addressing the barriers that are contributing to their homelessness.

The specific scope of this paper is limited to the practice and process of removing unauthorized encampments in Seattle, Washington. Because unauthorized encampments fit into the overall issue of homelessness, there will be some overlap into other topics relating to homelessness such as housing affordability and availability, addiction, mental illness, and crime. However, this thesis does not seek to provide solutions specifically relating to these topics. Using qualitative research and the values of the International Community Development program, this thesis addresses how the practice of clearing encampments can be replaced with a more cohesive and effective response.

## Background and Framework

There are a couple of important things to note that will lay a foundation before diving into the topic at hand. I will use the terms “sweeps” and “clearings” interchangeably. Although they mean the same thing, “clearing” is the preferred term by the city, and the term “sweep” is also commonly used when referring to the practice. I have also chosen to refer to people who are experiencing homelessness as “people who are homeless.” It is important to emphasize that regardless of housing status, people are people first and foremost. I decided to use the term homeless over houseless because homeless is the term most broadly recognized by organizations. The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development defines literal homelessness as:

An individual or family who lacks a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence, meaning: (i) Has a primary nighttime residence that is a public or private place not meant for human habitation; (ii) Is living in a publicly or privately operated shelter designated to provide temporary living arrangements (including congregate shelters, transitional housing, and hotels and motels paid for by charitable organizations or by federal, state and local government programs); or (iii) Is exiting an institution where they have resided for 90 days or less and who resided in an emergency shelter or place not meant for human habitation immediately before entering that institution.

(Homeless Definition)

Based on this definition, encampments fit into the first category as a primary nighttime residence that is not meant for human habitation.

An experience of homelessness looks different for each person, and every individual has a unique story for how they became homeless. There is not one explanation for why this happens. Because each person has a unique reason for how they became homeless, they also have unique goals and needs for getting out of homelessness. Some of the services that people might need are mental health care, a recovery program, physical health care, financial assistance, job training, or education. Some might even need a combination of these services, and others might need something completely different. The process for getting out of homelessness looks different for everyone, and it is typically not a clear path.

Since each reason is unique, people of all backgrounds have the potential to become homeless; however, some groups of people are more likely to experience homelessness than others. Appendix 1 provides the racial demographics of the homeless community in the Seattle area. The graph shows that while people of color make up a smaller percentage of the general population, they are disproportionately represented in the homeless community. Because of this disproportionality, it is crucial to pay special attention to race, and I will emphasize this throughout the thesis.

Although encampments seem to be popping up more and more, the history of encampments in Seattle goes back to the time of the Great Depression. During this time encampments known as Hooverilles emerged near the waterfront downtown. In the late '70s through the early '80s, Seattle saw a new wave of encampments emerge when affordable housing units were transformed into higher end development (Biernacki, 6:06-6:11, 6:43-6:50). This was also during the time that institutions for people who were mentally ill were closed (Raymond and Whemeyer). When services within the community could not make up for what

was lost as a result of deinstitutionalization, many people who were experiencing mental illness had no place to go but the streets. As one scholar explains, “People have always had problems, and people with problems used to still be able to put a roof over their head for a few pennies a night” (Biernacki, 7:25-7:40). When issues such as mental illness, addiction, and poverty are coupled with a lack of affordable housing, people are more likely to live in unsheltered areas.

Chris Herring’s framework for how local governments and homeless encampments interact with each other provides a way of understanding the evolution of Seattle’s approach to encampments in more recent years. This framework takes several factors into consideration, including the strategies that local governments use to oppose or embrace the homeless community (Herring 290). The four typologies that explain these dynamics are co-optation, accommodation, contestation, and toleration. When encampments are legal and more institutionalized, they are under the co-optation or accommodation approaches. The difference, though, is that co-optation is controlled by the local government while accommodation leaves the autonomy to the camp. Contestation and toleration are the types of encampments that are illegal and informal. Cities use control in the contestation typology while they allow for autonomy in the toleration type.

The City of Seattle originally approached encampments with contestation. In some ways, this approach has remained; however, some campers have made progress as they’ve organized in protest of the sweeps. Over time, these groups transitioned their status with the city to an accommodation approach that has most recently evolved into a co-optation phase. This process began in the early 2000’s when people living in encampments decided to join in opposition of the sweeps that Mayor Greg Nickles was executing. Through advocacy, protest,



and negotiation, they advanced the experience of people living in encampments. When these encampments were swept, the members remained together. Over time, their encampments have become recognized by the city as authorized encampments.

These authorized encampments were self-governed with mutually agreed upon communal rules and responsibilities. Raymond and Wehmeyer explain the characteristics of these encampments, also known as tent cities, when they write, “Tent cities are democratically organized, self-managed communities that offer security and operate within codes of conduct. Tent City 3 has one of the more rigorous standards for conduct, requiring sobriety, nonviolence, cooperation and community participation” (Raymond and Wehmeyer). The encampments were also required to move from the land that they were on every 3 months, but most of these camps have recently been able to extend their stay and find more permanent locations.

This is where the shift from an accommodation phase to a co-optation phase has taken place between the City of Seattle and these encampments. There are now seven city recognized encampments. The city has redefined these encampments and now uses the term “village.” While most of the leadership that initially began these encampments has been transitioned out, the City of Seattle sponsors these encampments, and the Low-Income Housing Institute provides case management and general support. Maintaining some self-governed principles, campers still hold community meetings and collectively take responsibility for security shifts, cleaning duties, and other maintenance around the camp. Although they began with tents, makeshift kitchens, and port-a-potties, the villages are moving toward building tiny houses for each person, installing plumbing, and creating more permanent and sanitary

structures for eating and using the restroom. The City of Seattle's website states that there are more than 300 tiny house units in the city (Homeless Response: Addressing the Crisis).

These authorized encampments show that a path for moving away from sweeps and keeping encampments in place is possible. While there are authorized camps within the city now, many more camps remain unauthorized. The progression of these remaining unauthorized camps can be seen starting with the history of The Jungle. The Jungle was initially an example of toleration by the city. Herring writes, "Seclusion through toleration creates encampments that are sanctioned by the lack of enforcement, but not by law" (294). The Jungle was made up of a long string of encampments under Seattle's I-5 corridor in south Seattle, and people had been living there for years. I heard a woman describe her experience in The Jungle who had lived there about 20 years ago. She said:

I'm standing at a tree, right, and I remember this as clear as day. I'm standing at a tree looking out with my daughter who's in her stroller and over here I have the drug area, over there I have the area for sex, and over here I have the bathroom area. It was no place for a child. (Dorothy)

In 2016, the issues of the Jungle and controversy over how to respond were illuminated when three teenage boys killed two people and injured three more over a drug related issue. As attention on this encampment grew, so did the awareness of the horrific things that took place there. I once met a man who became known in the news when a rat ate his eye while he was passed out on heroin in The Jungle. There were also reports of sexual assault, heavy drug use, and violence. From this point, Mayor Ed Murray decided that The Jungle needed to be cleared out. The Jungle moved into a contestation phase with the city. When the time came for this to

happen, there were an estimated 336 people and 201 tents and structures (Young and Coleman). The undertaking of sweeping The Jungle began with outreach workers from Seattle's Union Gospel Mission connecting with campers and trying to find them alternative places to live. After this, the actual clearing of The Jungle took a few months. While some people returned to this area or accepted resources that got them off the streets, the main effect was a displacement of the homeless population into other areas of the city. A Seattle Times article written a couple of months after the clearing of The Jungle reported that a new encampment was forming nearby as people moved out ("SODO Camp is Stopgap Site for Homeless Leaving The Jungle").

This is about the time that I moved to Seattle to participate in an internship program with Seattle's Union Gospel Mission (UGM). When I arrived, I immersed myself in the issue of homelessness specific to Seattle and began to walk in the very encampments I had read about. At this point, The Jungle was almost fully cleared out and some authorized encampments had been adopted by the city. As an intern, I became involved with the homeless community in varying capacities.

With a background and understanding of the basic landscape of homelessness in Seattle, I began my fieldwork for this thesis in the summer of 2018. Working in an administrative role for the Mission at the time, I felt like I was on the outside looking in as I interviewed various outreach workers in Seattle. In *Fieldworking: Reading and Writing Research*, Sunstein and Strater write, "The fieldworker's perspective is an emic one- to capture the perspective of the insiders in the culture" (16). I felt that I was truly able to gain the perspectives of the insiders when I was hired as an outreach worker at the Mission in the fall of

2018. In this role, I was responsible for going to encampments to connect people who were homeless with resources and provide basic needs items, and I was able to make observations and talk with campers daily. This is also the point in time when I began to observe the sweeps firsthand.

The practice of sweeping encampments became problematic in 2016 when there were multiple miscommunications between outreach workers, cleaning crews, law enforcement, and the campers (“‘Hot Mess’: Seattle’s Civil Rights Monitors Slam Breaks on Some Homeless Encampment Sweeps”). People in encampments were unaware that their camp was being swept until the crew showed up to clear it. There were also times when law enforcement would leave early, outreach workers would not show up, and the lack of proper permits would delay the clearing. In response to these issues, Mayor Ed Murray put together a task force that developed procedures and protocols for properly clearing encampments (Office of the Mayor). The creation of the Navigation Team was a specific outcome of this plan. The Navigation Team is made up of police officers and outreach workers who are employed by organizations that are contracted with the city. Their objective is connecting people to shelter and other resources while moving them from areas where they are not allowed to be, thus sweeping encampments.

### **Seattle’s Current Approach to Unauthorized Homeless Encampments**

The City of Seattle defines an encampment as:

One or more tent, structure, or assembly of camping equipment or personal property located in an identifiable area within the City of Seattle, which appears to a reasonable person as being used for camping. Encampments do not include sites a reasonable

person would conclude are no longer in use for camping because remaining materials are garbage, debris, or waste” (FAS Encampment Removal Rule 2).

Using Herring’s framework, these unauthorized encampments are contested by the city, and they are regularly swept as a strategy for getting people into shelter, keeping the city clean, and reducing their overall growth. The process for clearing an encampment begins with reports from the community. There are several avenues that reports can come from including a “Find it Fix it” mobile app, the Customer Service Bureau, and the Seattle Police Department. From this point, a city field worker will go out to assess the encampment using a standard set of criteria and prioritize it for a clearing based on this report. Reasons for an encampment to become a high priority for a clearing are as follows: a safety concern, criminal activity, complaints from surrounding businesses, hazardous materials or waste, harm to the environment, or the camp continuing to grow and spread out. While these are the criteria used for prioritization, a leader of the Navigation Team once clarified that all encampments need to be cleared eventually. She said, “It’s not a matter of if it will be cleared, it’s a matter of when” (Doe).

Once an encampment is prioritized, it will be placed on the calendar that the Navigation Team uses to schedule clearings, and the people who live there will receive a notice that they are expected to move within 72 hours. This notice is posted on tents, on the surrounding trees, or on the light poles or fences nearby. There is no avenue for advocacy on behalf of the encampment, and there is no process in place for the campers to make changes to improve their camp once an initial assessment has been completed.

## The Uniqueness of Encampments

A common belief about the homeless community is that they have little to no power in changing their circumstances. This is a false narrative, and changing it is crucial to their success. In *Theories and Practices of Development*, Katie Willis discusses the dimensions of power in relation to people who are marginalized. She writes, “empowerment is something that comes from within” (113). From this viewpoint, one can conclude that all people have access to some sort of power. Although people who are homeless are among the most marginalized in the city of Seattle, the individuals in this community have the potential to find power when they know their self-worth and when they organize with others to achieve their goals. An example of this was demonstrated earlier when I discussed how people in encampments joined to fight the city on continually sweeping them. They were eventually heard, and their success was the beginning of tiny house villages that are now producing many positive outcomes.

When people who are homeless are seen as individuals who hold power, who have strengths, and who can develop their own positive change, we begin to see how they may already hold the solutions for what will solve their experience of homelessness. Encampments play a particularly unique role in this because they offer people a sense of community and self-determination. No other model allows a group of people to stick together and create their living situation in the way they decide to do so. The unsheltered community is incredibly resourceful, and the ingenuity displayed in these encampments cannot be overlooked.

Some examples of how I’ve seen this resourcefulness are beds made of wooden pallets and whole couches inside of tents. Appendix 2, Figure 3 has a photo of a porch that some campers constructed. I have also seen people make campfires and shelters that any

experienced survivalist would be proud of. These campers are just as good at packing it all up if they have to. I have always marveled at the way people in encampments manage to move all their belongings and set them up over and over again, sometimes within the matter of a day. These people are genuinely hard workers who stick together and help each other out. On top of their ingenuity and hard work, some of the most loyal and selfless people I know are from the homeless community. I regularly visited an encampment that rallied behind their leader when he was wrongfully put in jail. They insisted on visiting him and put their money together to post his bail. I have not seen many other communities demonstrate this kind of generosity as willingly as they did.

While these are the unique strengths that encampments provide, it is important to present the full picture. The conditions of the encampments that I stepped foot in were unlike anything I have ever seen. It is genuinely surprising and appalling to come to terms with the fact that people, my very neighbors, are living in such atrocious conditions within the same proximity that the rest of the city works in, drives near, walks by, and eats around. It was common for camps to have heaps of trash and clutter. The most random items were strewn about or grouped into piles, usually with no rhyme or reason. I once saw an undressed mannequin next to empty cans of food, bottles, plastic bags, shopping carts, and clothes. Another item I remember was an entire clear tub filled to the brim with marijuana scraps that had been retrieved from dumpsters behind dispensaries. People would lay down rugs, blankets, or pallets to make it easier to walk on some of the terrain. These eventually became worn into the mud and were almost unrecognizable. I remember marveling at the items in these camps and wondered how so few people could accumulate so many things. During a clearing, multiple

garbage trucks could be filled with trash, rain-soaked tents, mattresses, furniture, and many other items that campers would leave behind. The City of Seattle wrote that in 2017, they picked up more than 3,200 tons of garbage and waste from the unauthorized encampments (Homeless Response: Addressing the Crisis). Some of this accumulation can be attributed to hoarding, which may be developed as a means to find security in the midst of scarcity. Other times, people accumulate as much as they can because the items may be useful in the future.

Another common characteristic was the lack of proper sanitation. With no running water, there were no toilets, showers, or sinks. The waste was usually kept contained in one specific area of the camp. One camp even created a makeshift outhouse which consisted of a shower tent and a bucket lined with a garbage bag to collect the waste. I will never forget, though, the sight and smell of the waste we did encounter. It was always unpleasant to come across a bottle filled with urine. The experience that I most remember, though, was seeing a gruesome defecation on a path next to the freeway barrier. It made me sick to my stomach not only to see it but to think that this was someone's only option for a place to use the restroom.

Finally, it was more common than not to see drug paraphernalia. Some camps would have a container to discard used needles, but most of the time, these clear syringes with orange caps would cover the floor in a tent or an area outside of it. Sometimes, I would only see one or two here and there in a bush or on the walkway. Although I wore steel-toe hiking boots every day, I was always cautious of where I stepped. Seeing these needles served as a reminder that homelessness is not an isolated issue, and there may be several compounding issues taking place at once.



## **The Process of Clearing an Encampment**

The organization that I worked for, UGM, had a unique relationship with the Navigation Team. We were not contractually partnered with the City of Seattle, and we did not receive city funding. However, we were considered partners and were often included in the direct work and efforts of the Navigation Team. On Wednesday mornings, our team would participate in the morning dispatch meeting hosted by the Navigation Team. The purpose was to go over the sites that were being cleared and discuss the plan, who was camping there, what their specific needs were, and to update the team on shelter availability. They could only do a clearing if there were enough shelter beds open on the day of the sweep.

I remember what it was like to walk into the city building in downtown Seattle every Wednesday morning with the rest of my outreach team. The building was just beginning to buzz with people getting their day started, and it always felt too early. We would ride the elevator up to the room we were meeting in that day, and employees from the Downtown Emergency Service Center (DESC), the Salvation Army, Full Life Care, Mary's Place, and REACH would slowly enter and find a seat around the large rectangle of tables that were pushed together.

After this meeting, the Navigation Team would break up into two or three different crews that were going to encampments in the city. Each group would have a team of police officers, a field coordinator, and a cleaning crew. The outreach workers would divide themselves up too, but they usually seemed to be spread thin. A common complaint I heard from the outreach workers was that it was difficult to make it to every encampment and connect with every person because there were not enough workers to meet the demand. In

July of 2019, two new outreach coordinators were hired specifically by the city to offer more support to the Navigation Team. I imagine that these people are feeling the same way.

Upon arriving at an encampment clearing, the police would go through the camp first to let everyone know that we were there. Because the camp would get notified of the clearing in advance, some of the campers would usually leave behind items they did not want and move on to another location. This was especially the case after the same people kept getting swept multiple times. The remaining campers were given a certain amount of time to pack up their belongings and leave the area. Everyone was offered shelter, and if they were interested, an outreach worker was able to complete their referral and offer transportation to get there.

I will never forget the time we did a clearing near a freeway onramp near the Northgate Mall. Our team helped a few young adults move their belongings bag by bag, bike by bike. Carrying their belongings out of the camp was tedious work. I would start by picking something up near their tent, then I walked across the muddy field with hay laid down to keep it from being so muddy. From here, I crossed the barrier that had been marked off with yellow tape, up the shoulder of the road, past the people protesting the sweeps and the filming news crews, to the maroon "LOVE" van that the Mission uses for outreach, which was parked directly behind a garbage truck being filled by a small excavator on the shoulder of a freeway entrance.

Most clearings felt less chaotic, but it was common to encounter an agitated camper or a concerned advocate. Avoiding the tension, I usually kept my head down and continued to offer another care package filled with snacks, socks, hygiene kits, clothes, and blankets. Even a simple gesture like pouring someone a cup of hot chocolate made me feel helpful. Once campers were up and moving, the outreach workers and Navigation Team would connect with

them regarding shelter and their needs. Then, the team typically stood around and casually talked amongst each other while people packed around them. The cleaning crew worked their way from one end of the encampment to the other picking up trash. If there was an RV, a person from Seattle Public Utilities (SPU) and parking enforcement would be present, or if the encampment was on a Seattle Park property, a representative from the park would be there. When all the campers had moved and all the trash was gone, the team would leave. Campers who were loyal to that site and did not go into a shelter were likely to return after everyone left to set up camp all over again.

## **Part II: Ineffectiveness of the Sweeps**

### **Case Study: Tom and Nicole**

Tom and Nicole immediately caught my attention as they emerged from the darkness of the sidewalk lined with shrubs and made their way across the dimly lit parking lot. I watched curiously as they approached the tables set up with assorted items including clothes, shoes, and hygiene kits. Tom had an athletic build and curly hair that seemed to have a mind of its own, and he was pushing Nicole in a wheelchair. She was very petite and had short, dark hair. Black tattoos covered her face in an elaborate design. One of the volunteers leaned over to me and said in an accusatory tone, "Oh, Tom and Nicole. You have to keep an eye on them, they'll take anything they can get. She lies about how she's pregnant and once got some volunteers to put them up in a motel for a few nights. When that ran out, they called the volunteer demanding more time." This statement made me curious about the two of them. From my perspective, this was a couple who did what they had to get their needs met. Later that evening, I wondered:

What were Tom and Nicole's goals? What were the barriers in the way of reaching those goals?

I was able to find some answers for these questions as I got to know them.

The next time I saw Nicole, she was casually walking toward our outreach team as we approached the first tent in an encampment along a bike trail. She wasn't in her wheelchair this time, and she was barefoot. "Get some shoes on," Richard, an outreach worker, told her in a loving, father-like tone. She was wearing a hospital bracelet and explained that she had been treated for a respiratory issue. Although she was in her late 20's, I was struck by the childlike tendencies Nicole had. She made sure to show us her large stuffed animal that Tom got her before walking back to the van with us to get supplies. When this encampment got cleared a week later, Nicole ensured that this stuffed animal made it with her to the next location, wherever that would be. She and Tom had turned down a shelter referral because there were none available that would allow them to stay together. As we left, they were struggling to maneuver their belongings to a new location, and I wished there was more I could do to help them.

About a month later, I saw Tom and Nicole at an encampment clearing in the green space near the freeway at 6th and Yesler. Nicole was aggressively pacing up and down the sidewalk while Tom continued to rummage through their tent. Most of their belongings had been moved across the street, and she vented: "They rushed us, you know? They come in here and they're just like, 'get out of here'. They keep doing this. They keep moving us around and they don't give us any time to get our stuff, you know? I'm, I'm sick of this." She yelled at Tom a few times, who replied by yelling at her to calm down.

I learned that Nicole had been staying in another shelter away from Tom off and on because some case workers were concerned about domestic violence. During this sweep, though, they decided to accept a referral for the shelter at First Presbyterian where they could stay together. While we waited for the referral to go through, a colleague and I helped Tom and Nicole sort through their belongings to decide what to put in the storage offered by the city and what to keep with them. They had a tent, a few large suitcases, some bags of food, and other miscellaneous items, and they were hesitant to part with any of it. In order to go into the shelter, they could only take a couple of bags with them.

As we waited, I spoke with Nicole about her interest in going to counseling. She was aware that she needed help with her mental health and shared that she and Tom had both taken proactive steps to be seen at a clinic. "Tom was able to get started before me, though. There's something wrong with my paperwork or something like that," Nicole explained. She proceeded to tell me that she was originally from Romania. Her family had been killed when she was young, and she had no choice but to move from the village she grew up in. She explained that the sweeps were especially difficult for her because of this experience.

I drove the Mission van to the shelter while Tom and Nicole expressed their skepticism that they would stay. "Is the staff nice there? Are the people nice there?", Nicole asked. A colleague and I encouraged them to give it a try. When we arrived, we unloaded Tom and Nicole's belongings and drove away as they got ready to head inside. I hoped that they would stay in the shelter together long enough to get connected with services that could set them on a path toward stability. I genuinely believed it was possible for them if they were offered enough consistency and care.

About a week or two later, I happened to bump into Tom and Nicole near Pike Place Market. Tom was pushing Nicole in her wheelchair, and she was carrying a chocolate cake on her lap. It looked like they had just left a foodbank. I could hardly wait to ask them about the shelter, and I was expecting to hear that things were going well there. Instead, I heard that they hadn't even made it through the door that day. As soon as we left, they did too. It was disheartening to not only hear that, but also to hear that they were camping at the same place they had just been swept from.

The last time I saw Tom and Nicole was a couple of months after that when we were back at the same location for another sweep. When our van arrived, Nicole ran to us in hysterics. She was so upset that she could hardly tell us what was wrong. Through the tears, we learned that Tom had hit her with a car battery as they were packing up their belongings. She said he hit her and emotionally abused her often, and she decided to press charges. We stood with her as she gave her report to a police officer and tried to help her stay calm when she attempted to run to Tom who had been taken into custody. It was incredibly heart wrenching to see Nicole experience both abuse and separation from the only support system she had. She decided to accept our offer to try Kent HOPE, the Mission's emergency shelter for women, and she stayed there for a couple of days until reuniting with Tom when he got out of jail. I am not sure where Tom and Nicole are now, but I think about them often.

Getting to know Tom and Nicole put some preconceived notions I had into perspective. When I learned about Nicole's past, I realized that she had experienced unimaginable trauma that, in many ways, caused her to encounter barriers her whole life. The fact that she had survived thus far despite experiencing so much adversity was remarkable. Nicole is one of the

reasons why I believe that people are simply doing the best they can with what they have. When she pretended she was pregnant or threw a fit on the side of the road, she had a reason for doing so. In order for her to be successful and find safety and stability, the counselors, outreach workers, and Navigation Team officers needed to take this into consideration.

Tom and Nicole's story demonstrates the revolving door pattern that many people who are homeless find themselves in as they constantly move from one place to the next. I once heard an outreach worker describe the outcome of sweeping encampments as people becoming more displaced. "It's kind of like moving food around on a plate," she said. The sweeps intensify the complex obstacles that people who are homeless already face without offering meaningful solutions for long-term change. In this section, I will explore how, like Tom and Nicole, many people experience barriers when it comes to shelter options, accessing resources, losing belongings, and being retraumatized because of the sweeps. These barriers make it difficult for people to gain stability, and instead perpetuate dysfunctional patterns.

### **Specific Barriers Caused by Sweeps**

Tom and Nicole's story highlights one of the most significant barriers for people who are living in encampments. The fact is the alternatives to encampments are either not well suited for people, or they are not readily available. A Supreme Court decision recently ruled that people who are camping outside could not be forced to move unless there were alternatives that were available to offer them (Romo and Siegler). The City of Seattle adheres to this rule and only sweeps an encampment if a shelter bed was available for each person at the site. The shelters that the Navigation Team makes referrals to are: City Hall Shelter, Salvation Army William Booth Center, Haddon Hall, First Presbyterian, and Harborview Hall. The team also

refers people to the Navigation Center, a low barrier enhanced shelter, and the 9 tiny house villages throughout the city. The Navigation Center and villages are the most popular options. If people were interested in accepting a referral, this is typically where they wanted to go, and many campers often waited for an opening. Waiting for an opening in an enhanced shelter is common because the availability of basic shelter beds far outnumbers the availability of beds in enhanced shelters and tiny homes. In fact, since 2018 there was only an average of one bed per day open in a tiny house village compared to that of basic shelters which averaged out to almost 19 beds available daily (Simms).

In the field, I would often ask people if they wanted to go into a shelter. The resounding response I received was a definitive no. People who lived in encampments would intentionally avoid specific areas of town where shelters were located. They were fearful of violence or relapsing because of the drug use that the neighborhood was known for. If these were not their concerns, they may have been turned off because the shelter would require them to maintain a certain level of sobriety. Campers also cited that a lot of shelters would not allow their pet or partner to come with them. Other concerns I heard were about getting bed bugs or other guests stealing belongings. There is typically a lack of storage in shelters and campers cited that they would have to carry their belongings around all day. To make matters worse, a lot of shelters required guests to leave early in the morning and stay out all day until the evening.

When I would see people staying in tents or on sidewalks in brutal winter conditions or blistering summer months, I believed that the shelters must really be as bad as people say they are because no person would choose to be in those elements if they had a comfortable and safe place to stay. Emergency shelters are increasingly becoming a place of trauma for people.



A common theme that emerged in a research study done with the homeless population in New York found that avoiding shelter was cited as a means for survival (Wusinich 5). I once got to know a man named Willie who was avoiding the Men's Shelter downtown. When I asked him why, he told me this story:

The staff told me I had to keep my bag in the hot room [a room used for getting rid of bed bugs] overnight. It was late at night and I just wanted to get my stuff out of there, so I went to the room to get my bag. When I got there, the door was busted open and some dude was going through my backpack. I confronted him and I was like, 'Hey man, that's my stuff. C'mon man.' And he started swinging at me. That dude busted my lip up and I got kicked out for fighting. There are just some places that aren't safe and that you have to avoid... You better make sure you're safe when you're down there. Just always watch your back. There's some really messed up dudes, ok?

Willie's story is not the only one I heard like this. Another woman in an encampment told me about a man who broke into her room in the shelter she was staying at. He sexually assaulted her, and the staff allowed him to stay. She was back in an encampment because at least there, she had people she trusted around her to keep her safe.

While many people have negative feelings about shelters, they do serve a significant number of the homeless community. As many as 4,065, or 36% of the homeless population was staying in an emergency shelter on the night of the annual Point in Time count in January, 2019 (AllHome). Shelters are necessary in the landscape of resources that are offered. When people express interest in accepting a shelter referral, though, I often wonder how long they will stay

before the rules become too much or a conflict makes them want to leave. Even if people are staying in a shelter, some still decide to keep a tent elsewhere. The first time I realized this was at a clearing beside the Navigation Center on a long flight of cement stairs. Tents and garbage were strung along the steep hillside that lined the path, and we found one man who was gathering some belongings from his bright yellow tent. When we began to speak with him about shelter, I was floored when he replied, "No, I already have a place here in the Nav, this is just my getaway spot." While I was initially surprised by this, it made sense as I thought about human nature and our desire for autonomy. As a grown adult, it would be difficult to share an entire living space with strangers, no matter how unrestrictive the shelter rules are. Mostly everyone on earth has the desire to live in a place where they can maintain their independence and sense of control, and this is no different for the homeless community.

Another dilemma that the sweeps cause for people is the obstruction of progress that they have made with service providers. Without dependable means of communication, outreach workers and case managers rely on knowing where they might be able to find their clients in order to move them forward in achieving their goals. An example of this becoming an issue happened with a woman named Star. She was difficult to get a hold of, so when we knew where she was staying, it was easier to get in touch with her. There was a time that Star became eligible to sign up for housing, and the case manager was trying to contact her. They always seemed to miss each other, and we would relay messages in an attempt to get them connected. Star frequently lived in places that got swept, and she eventually lost her eligibility

for the housing resource because she did not contact the case manager in time. When a camper moves locations, it may be weeks or months before a service provider hears from them again. This disruption in communication significantly sets a person back in their progress with accessing services.

The sweeps also make it difficult for people to access resources when it moves them out of their current neighborhood and increases the burden of transportation. If a person were to begin utilizing a resource or create a routine and then move to a new location, they have a difficult time making it to the same appointments that were once in proximity to where they lived. A bus ride in Seattle costs \$2.75 one way. While there are some organizations that help people with bus tickets, this method of transportation adds up quickly. One woman experiencing homelessness had to “take a bus, get on two trains, then another bus to get to her assigned women’s shelter in a wheelchair” (Wusinich 4). This explains how burdensome the reality of transportation can be.

The practice of sweeping encampments also creates physical loss. While the city offers storage for some of the camper's belongings after a clearing, people are likely to lose many of their personal items. While the cleaning crews do their best to save important items like ID's, documents, tents, and other valuables, the city cannot store anything that is wet or soiled. When a person who is homeless loses their ID, social security card, or birth certificate, they basically move back to the beginning in terms of the progress they have made. These documents are required for many resources, for accessing government benefits, and for getting

into housing. If campers lose their tent, clothes, food, and blankets, they have to automatically redirect their focus to getting these basic needs items again. Further, campers put a great deal of time into setting up the spaces they live in. I once saw a man create a structure out of wooden pallets that resembled a small home- it even had windows and a fenced-in yard. When these encampments are demolished, people have no choice but to start all over again.

A man interviewed in a documentary about homelessness in Seattle, *Trickle Down Town*, discusses these barriers and how the current system is designed to keep people inside of it:

You feel really nearsighted when you're homeless... It's over-structured almost. How can you expect a grown man who has a job or is trying to better himself- to provide- to be in, have a 6:00pm curfew? You're forced to leave the shelter at 5 in the morning, with all of your stuff, by the way. You sleep here, you move over here to eat, but then you have to go over here to eat, and then you have to go here to eat and then you have to be in at 6. You have no time to work, to do anything. You have no time to look for a job unless you want to starve.... It's all rigged to keep people, most of the homeless people, in a bubble so that they can be watched. That's how I feel. (37:35-38:50)

He has a point. If an encampment were to provide basic needs without the rigid structure of most shelters, and service providers focused more attention on going directly to the people they are working with, campers would not need to spend as much time going to different parts of the city to take care of their needs. They could focus on more medium to long term goals for themselves. Further, if people can stay in the same place, they are more likely to remain

consistent with the services they already utilize. On a theoretical level, Maslow's Hierarchy supports why this would happen. An individual's basic survival needs, such as food and shelter, have to be met before they can move towards feeling a sense of security, developing healthy relationships, and feeling a sense of belonging within society. If people are continually focused on meeting their basic needs for survival, they have little to no capacity to think about the following day, let alone the following month or year.

The most troubling outcome of sweeping encampments is the fact that they can cause anxiety and retraumatize campers. When Nicole shared how she was forced to move away from her home due to a traumatic experience, I was able to see how the sweeps were especially difficult for her mental health. Considering how the experience of trauma is prevalent in the stories of the homeless community, it is very likely that the sweeps retraumatize many people. I remember meeting a woman named Brandy who was distraught on the morning that her camp was being swept. When I spoke with her, she shared that when she was a little girl, her mom came home one day and told her to pack whatever she could into a shoebox because they were leaving her home and never going back. The thought of losing the community she had lived with was too much to handle, and she asked where the other members of the camp had moved. She wanted to stay with them, keep her possessions, and maintain some sense of belonging rather than going into a shelter.

Regardless of how a person becomes homeless, the experience of homelessness itself is a traumatic event. In their exploration of individuals' journeys out of homelessness, Rife and Burnes conclude:

Service providers across the board need to be cognizant that homelessness is indeed traumatic, robbing individuals and families of intellectual, emotional and psychological energy. Every service provider must become steeped in trauma-informed care, and every interaction with a person experiencing homelessness must start from that premise. (168)

Trauma-informed approaches shift the question from "what is wrong with you?" to "what has happened to you?". When people are acting angry, sad, or withdrawn, outreach workers should be trained to consider this question and realize that the person may be feeling triggered by something that has happened in their past. Trauma-informed approaches take these experiences into consideration and develop practices that reduce barriers for people while also being sensitive to what may have happened to them.

In addition to this, outreach workers need to consider that trauma is most likely the root of a mental illness or addiction that someone is struggling with. In his lengthy research with the homeless population in Vancouver, British Columbia, physician Gabor Mate explores how trauma affects the brain, which in turn creates a greater chance for addiction and mental illness. Specifically speaking about addiction, he writes, "The only way they can escape is if their pain is alleviated, their emotions are brought back toward healthy balance, so they have a

chance to think about it” (317). People who are homeless need to be given the space to feel safe enough to process their trauma and heal. Continually moving them from one encampment to the next is the antithesis of their recovery.

Because the homeless community is disproportionately made up of people of color, a specific type of trauma that is important to note here is historical/generational trauma experienced by oppressed people groups. Violence, institutional racism, and discrimination against people of color has resulted in adverse outcomes such as poverty and broken family systems. It is not far reaching to make a correlation between these results of oppression and higher rates of homelessness for members of our community who are not white. While trauma needs to be considered for everyone, a unique lens is needed for these people.

The Native culture is one group of people that demonstrates the importance of acknowledging the lens of historical trauma. Their culture is more collectivist in nature rather than the individualism of mainstream American culture (Hofstede 95). They also show greater reverence to their elders and hold their and regard their traditions with deep sacredness. Because their suffering and oppression are deeply ingrained in the history of America, specific consideration needs to be taken in how Native people experiencing homelessness are approached. As Native people were relocated to reservations, and then back to urban settings again as a result of the Urban Relocation Act in 1956, a deep sense of culture and community was altered or taken away all together (Echohawk). In order for Native people who are experiencing homelessness to find success, restoring them to their cultural practices and community is specifically important.

One way to better serve Native people and other racial groups who are disproportionately experiencing homelessness is by hiring more people with shared experiences and similar ethnic backgrounds. When caseworkers are serving clients with these similarities, Mcbeath, et al. found that caseworkers used more active strategies to get people connected with housing resources. These caseworkers may also be seen as cultural brokers. Ann Fadiman presents this term in *The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down* to explain the role of people who are from a particular culture and use their life experiences to be mediators between this culture and society. In the case of homelessness, cultural brokers are people who have experienced homelessness themselves. They are in a unique position because they can leverage their experience to advocate for change while building trusting connections with clients who might be in situations that are familiar to them. More of these people should be sought out and included in the decision-making process, their voices need to be heard.

Because most of the homeless community has been hurt by the system in one way or another, many people do not trust that service providers will do what they say they're going to do. Smith and Hall discuss the challenge that outreach workers face when they write, "Getting people 'in' and off the street requires the winning of trust and confidence, and the repair of trust in a system that has repeatedly, from the perspective of clients, been a disappointment" (379). Clearing encampments rushes the process of getting people into shelter without taking the time to establish this sacred trust with them. When people have trust in their case managers and outreach workers, they're willing to open up more about what they're facing in terms of their barriers and goals. This trust produces more effective, long term solutions.



## Ineffectiveness for City of Seattle

First and foremost, clearing encampments is not efficiently serving the people who are living there. The sweeping of encampments is also ineffective for the City of Seattle, and it does little to solve the issue of homelessness. This ineffectiveness is primarily seen in the data of the frequency of sweeps in the same locations of the city; campers keep returning to places that are regularly cleared. I remember a time when I noticed a familiar address on the calendar of sites that were scheduled to be swept. I was still fairly new in my position, but I saw the address and thought to myself, “Weren’t we just there?” I asked one of my coworkers who said that the area was cleared at least every other month because people keep returning to that spot. I wondered why we kept asking these people to move if we knew that they would continue coming back. Were we really solving anything, or was this merely a chore for everyone involved? As time went on and I observed my own reactions to the sweeps along with the reactions of other outreach workers, I began to realize that it was the latter.

There are two types of clearings that the city does. The sweeps that I was a part of were larger encampment clearings, however, there are also obstruction clearings. Obstruction clearings take place when there is a structure blocking an area that people need immediate access to, like a sidewalk or a bus stop. They do not require a 72-hour notice, and outreach workers are not present. These clearings can sometimes happen at the same location daily or weekly. I experienced this at a site across the street from my office at the Men’s Shelter in Pioneer Square. After months of the same campers packing up their tents on the sidewalk and moving back as soon as the crew left, the people involved began to joke that these clearings

were merely “trash day”. I have not focused on these clearings throughout this paper because I was not involved in them, and they serve a different purpose than the standard encampment clearings.

Since October 2018, the city has conducted 934 total sweeps, and an average of 85% of these were obstruction clearings (Simms). This means that in a little over a year, the city had done more than 140 encampment clearings. I examined the field journals for the sweeps that the city has conducted from August 2018 through January 2020. The following tables detail the number of sweeps that happened within a half mile radius of a particular neighborhood in Seattle. I broke the tables up into areas south of downtown versus north of downtown to show that the most concentrated locations are in the south end of the city.

<b>South Seattle Neighborhood</b>	<b>Number of Sweeps</b>
SODO	21
Rainier Avenue S and 1-90 Freeway	10
6 <sup>th</sup> and Yesler	7
Dearborn and Jose Rizal	9
Georgetown North	7
Georgetown South	10

When a clearing took place, campers typically found a new location within the same area. This resulted in campers rotating between 2-3 sites depending on which location was being swept. There was one location in the SODO neighborhood that stood out to me, though, because the same exact address was cleared 4 times within a year. People typically choose locations that are hidden from the average passer-by, yet still accessible. Because of this, common areas to see encampments are near freeways or in industrial areas where there are open spaces and few residential homes. This, along with the proximity to resources in the area, could explain why the clearings in the SODO neighborhood, Seattle's industrial district, are more concentrated. Because the sweeps on the north end were not as concentrated, the following table shows sweeps that took place in areas within a broader radius of each other.

<b>North Seattle Neighborhood</b>	<b>Number of Sweeps</b>
Greenlake, near Weedon PI NE and NE 66 <sup>th</sup> St	6
Greenlake, broader area	9
University District, near I-5 Freeway	3
Ballard	5
Queen Anne	7

While there are more sweeps that took place within this time frame, these were the areas with the most frequency in a concentrated area. The conclusion that can be derived from this information is these locations are the most predominant areas that the homeless community keeps coming back to. People who are responsible for making decisions must

consider this data and allow for permanent camps to be put in place here. These are the spots that seem to be the most accessible and preferred by the homeless community, and no matter how many times they are swept, they will continue to return.

By eliminating the sweeps, the city would demonstrate that they are being more responsible and proactive with their resources. In 2019 the total cost to operate the Navigation Team was somewhere around \$8 million, and the team has now expanded to more than 38 people (Howard, et al.). More than 6 of the city's departments are involved, which does not include the additional organizations that the city contracts with to remove waste, pick up trash, and provide outreach. I once marveled at the way one man accumulated enough waste to fill two garbage trucks with all of the things he had accumulated in the matter of a month or two. As a team of more than 10 people stood around watching the garbage trucks get loaded, I wondered how much sweeping this one person was costing the city. The sweeps take a toll on resources, and they also negatively impact the environment.

Instead of managing it proactively, trash and waste are typically addressed when it has gotten out of hand. As I mentioned earlier, the city has picked up thousands of tons of garbage from encampments, and they are responsible for disposing of clothing, food, tents, and other supplies that campers have to replace. Partnering with campers to properly recycle and mitigate trash in the first place is possible. Experts on the topic of environmental justice agree that social justice and human well-being are tied up in how we handle waste and protect the earth from future damage (Clawson, Moe-Lobeda, and Pellow). Providing campers with proper facilities to manage material and human waste is not only a basic human right necessary for

health, it is better for the environment. Instead of continuing to clean these same locations month after month, ineffectively use resources, and perpetuate practices that hurt the environment, a more efficient, cost-effective plan can be put into place that holds these campers responsible for their living space while removing their barriers towards a permanent solution.

### **Importance of Measuring Outcomes**

As I began to realize these insufficiencies in my research, I started to wonder: Why is the city allocating so many resources and attention to sweeping encampments? Do they think more people are getting off the streets this way? If people are being referred to shelters and then leaving after a week or still camping somewhere else, can they really call this a success? These questions reveal the importance of properly measuring outcomes. Countless news articles have stated that the Navigation Team has not been able to adequately measure their outcomes, and Seattle's city auditor, David Jones released an audit report of the Navigation Team in February, 2019 that concluded a more rigorous evaluation plan was necessary for determining the outcomes of the Navigation Team (32-33). This includes an inability to accurately track whether an individual went into shelter and stayed there without returning to an encampment.

Developing an outcome-based evaluation plan would ensure that the sweeps and other strategies the City of Seattle uses are making a real difference in people's lives. The purpose of outcome-based evaluation is to hold decision makers accountable and ensure that their strategies are working. It also helps decision makers effectively allocate resources by giving more to programs that are proven to be successful (Reisman and Clegg). The people who are

responsible for encampment clearings are also responsible for the outcomes and must develop a plan to determine what these exactly are.

While the Navigation Team has been unable to measure outcomes adequately, they have produced some outputs that begin to give an idea of their effectiveness. If the goal of the team is to reduce homelessness in the city of Seattle and the objective is to do this by getting people into shelters, they have been unsuccessful because the rate of shelter referrals is low. In a year span, The Navigation team referred an average of 25.75% of unduplicated contacts to shelter. Of this group, only 7.25% actually made it to the shelter (Simms). This reveals the brutal ineffectiveness of the current system for handling encampments. If the purpose of the Navigation Team is to clear encampments and get people into shelter, and they are only succeeding 7% of the time, something needs to change.

Outcomes also need to be tracked for each unique person rather than generic numbers. While this is challenging, it is necessary for determining what is effective in addressing unique barriers and determining if people are returning to the streets or staying in permanent solutions. The City of Seattle currently utilizes a nation-wide program called the Homeless Management Information System (HMIS) that service providers use to track the services they provide to their clients. Unfortunately, not every organization utilizes this because only the organizations that receive funding from the city are required to use it. An outreach worker I spoke with told me the organizations that do use it are likely to compete with each other over specific clients to be “tiered” under their services. This is because HMIS outcomes dictate funding (Curtis).

Because the underlying goal of all of these organizations is to serve people in need, competition should be discouraged. In *The Art of Leading Collectively*, Petra Kuenkel writes, “Collaboration among different actors is not only paramount, it is also the sole route to successfully addressing the challenges we face” (Kuenkel). Because homelessness is one of the most complex social issues there is, all of the stakeholders involved need to be working together. By requiring every organization to utilize HMIS and finding a different method for determining funding, collaborative efforts would be improved along with better outcome measurements.

### **Part III: Suggestions for Positive Change**

The sweeps can be replaced with three key strategies to produce more effective outcomes for the homeless community. The first is shifting the perspective from which the city is approaching encampments. With this fundamental shift in the way encampments are perceived, the city could add resources and support to the encampments by bringing services directly to the people who are there and prioritize the need to develop more shelter options that the campers actually want. After these proposed strategies, I will address two broader factors that are linked to the success of people who live in encampments.

#### **New Approaches**

In place of sweeping encampments, the City of Seattle should adopt both Asset Based Community Development (ABCD) and Action Research approaches. ABCD shifts the perspective from viewing encampments as problems to a recognition that this community has assets that can be built upon (Wilke). By acknowledging the strengths and power that people who are

homeless already possess, it is possible to build on what they are doing well and use this momentum to bring about effective change.

A community of people living in an encampment near Costco in SODO made me realize that this is possible. When they found out that they were getting swept, they took initiative to stay in their encampment by working with the city to delay the sweep as long as possible. They asked an outreach worker to help advocate with them, and they inquired about how their camp was evaluated, along with specific ways they could improve it. They were proactive about cleaning up their trash and asked for help in doing so. Unfortunately, the camp was still swept eventually, but this demonstrates how campers will cooperate with the city to do what is asked of them in order to avoid getting swept. If trusted with the responsibility to keep their encampment clean and orderly, most campers would do so.

While the research for this thesis was not directly based in action research, I recommend that further research be done from this perspective. Similar to ABCD, action research sees the people who the change is directed at as partners rather than objects of the change. It seeks to learn what people need and what is useful for them; action research believes people hold the answers to solving their own problems. In *Action Research*, Stringer writes that the intent of this approach is “to provide a place for the perspectives of people who have previously been marginalized from opportunities to develop and operate policies, programs, and services-perspectives often concealed by the products of a typical research process” (57-58). These characteristics of action research allow people to feel heard and validated in the process. Everyone involved has a voice that matters equally. Further, action



research seeks to pursue justice and create opportunities for all people. As I have learned in the ICD program, true and lasting social change begins with listening to community members directly invested in the change. Because of this, action research is particularly suited for change within the context of sweeping encampments.

### **Break Down Barriers to Access Resources**

The second strategy is to emphasize the practice of bringing resources directly to people. By breaking down the barriers of transportation and bureaucracy around accessing resources, people would be able to access services with more ease. I was a part of a team that created an outreach event to do this in the Seattle area. Our goal was to bring many resources to a place where the homeless community already gathered regularly. We chose the Outdoor Meal Site where hundreds of people line up to eat breakfast, lunch, and dinner daily. At this space underneath the I-5 freeway, we were able to offer showers with the Mission's mobile shower truck, dental services through another organization, tennis shoes through a partnership with Redeeming Soles, clothes, other basic needs items, a table for art, and a table for games. People were able to take care of some things they needed to do on that night instead of moving all over the city to get their basic needs met.

The Bridge was inspired by a similar outreach event in Portland, Oregon called Because People Matter. The City of Portland allows this group to gather under the Burnside Bridge every Thursday and bring more extensive services including housing case managers, counselors, and hair stylists. When asked about the results, Leslie Snider, the founder and director of Because

People Matter cited that the City of Portland has told them crime goes down in other areas of the city on the nights that they do this outreach. This is just one positive outcome of many. Imagine what people could get accomplished if they had a way to consistently access all of these resources in one place.

An outreach event is just one example of how resources can be brought directly to the homeless community. Other cities have formed outreach groups made up of nurses, housing case managers, and mental health counselors who go to encampments and offer services on the spot. Creative strategies that can bring more services to more people should be encouraged. The tools in Kelley and Kelley's book *Creative Confidence: Unleashing the Creative Potential Within Us All* can be utilized to inspire people to think outside of the box and develop even more solutions. The possibilities are endless.

In general, bringing resources directly to people possibly eliminates more barriers than any other strategy. One research study concludes that people "were most likely to use services that were in convenient locations that fulfilled their needs and where they were treated with respect" (Barlie, et al., 1). Reflecting on Tom and Nicole's story, this proves to be true. They wanted to participate in services, but they faced barriers in doing so. If there was a way for Nicole to get her identification and paperwork taken care of in the same place where she could also go to counseling, she may have received help sooner while accessing even more resources along the way.

## **Replace Unauthorized Encampments with Tiny House Villages**

The final and most crucial strategy is stopping the sweeps and allowing people to stay where they are. Eliminating the sweeps would mean that the city adopts an accommodation approach with all of the encampments in Seattle (Herring). *Tent Cities: An Interim Solution* makes a case from the legal perspective for why encampments are a good temporary option for many people in the homeless community. Loftus-Farren writes, “Instead of evicting tent city residents, governments should change local ordinances, rezone certain lots for camping, and assist tent cities to attain living conditions that satisfy local health and safety codes” (1040-1041). Toward the end of this thesis writing process, the Seattle City Council voted to pass an ordinance that allows up to 40 encampments and tiny house villages in the city at one time. The previous number was set to 4 (Virdone). This ordinance makes it possible for encampments to stay in place after obtaining a permit that is valid for a year, and the goal is to turn more of these encampments into tiny house villages. This is a huge success in improving the situation for people living in encampments, and I implore local Seattle leaders to continue to support this movement. While the city may have to continue doing obstruction clearings, I foresee the number of encampment sweeps decreasing as people are allowed to stay in the same place for a longer period of time.

Along with stopping the sweeps, increasing the momentum of changing these encampments into tiny house villages is necessary. Many of the people I spoke with during my research process concluded that creating more tiny homes was an effective way of addressing

homelessness in Seattle. Ben, an outreach worker with Operation Nightwatch, an organization that serves the unsheltered homeless community in Seattle, said:

We have to look at people getting into housing by taking small baby steps. Taking someone off the street and putting them directly into a permanent house is one giant step. However, having someone move off the streets and into a tiny house is a smaller step. It is easier for them to be successful when we're not expecting so much out of them all at once. (Curtis)

Another man named Joel who was a formerly homeless outreach worker said:

Honestly, tiny homes are a great solution for people. When you know where they are, they aren't moving all over the city and case managers can get more accomplished when they're not looking all over for them all the time. I really think a lot of people would be interested in living in one because they have a place to call their own with a door that locks and a roof over their head. (Verhamme)

Also, the rate of people moving into permanent housing from a tiny house village is 56%, and more than 500 people were housed this way in a 2-year time frame (Virdone). The city council bill written to increase the number of authorized encampments and tiny house villages wrote:

Tiny house villages have proven to be an effective place for homeless individuals and families to find the safety, privacy, and human dignity necessary to get back on their feet and transition to affordable housing. Tiny house villages have operated with a self-management model where residents democratically run their communities; residents

have reported this model has helped them overcome the isolation and alienation of homelessness, and residents have become more successful transitioning into permanent housing. (Virdone)

Replacing the sweeps with this new ordinance along with trash remediation, porta potties, hand washing stations, and sharps containers for used needles shows that it is possible to keep encampments clean and safe without sweeping them. It is more sustainable than picking up heaps of trash and demolishing encampments when cleanliness has gotten out of hand. Along with these proactive strategies, outreach workers could maintain a consistent presence and actively engage with encampments. As a result, they would be able to help more people identify and accomplish their long-term goals. Instead of only showing up to sweep encampments, the city could leverage their unique strengths to create a temporary living space that is positive and safe for people on their way to permanency.

### **Address Crime**

In order to address safety for people within encampments, it is important to acknowledge the reality of crime and violence. The balance between holding people responsible for their actions and showing them compassion is perhaps the most delicate when it comes to acknowledging crime within the homeless community. In *Exclusion and Embrace*, Miroslav Volf writes, “Though some sins have been imputed to [the oppressed], other sins of theirs were real; though they suffered at the hand of others, they also committed sins of their own” (114). While breaking the law may be a result of their trauma or circumstances that have

been largely out of their control, people who have committed violent or serious crimes should be held responsible for their actions. Acknowledging this reality is a necessary component for change that is rooted in true justice.

In my experience, there were times when violent and heinous crimes were committed, and adequate action was not taken. I remember when a man stabbed someone in front of the Men's Shelter and was released from jail the next day. Unfortunately, hearing stories like this is not rare. *Seattle is Dying*, a KOMO news documentary about homelessness in Seattle, addresses this issue. It shared the story of a man with an extensive violent history who was arrested for dealing meth. He was released from jail in less than 24 hours and brutally attacked an elderly woman in her home (30:08-31:00).

My intention in addressing this is not to criminalize homelessness. There are far more good and safe people in encampments than there are dangerous. But, if people have committed serious crimes, they must be held accountable and receive services that will help them safely re-enter society. The man who produced a list of Seattle's top 100 repeat offenders said that if we do not take these people off of the streets and offer them meaningful help, we know that they are going to repeat the same crimes in the same places (*Seattle is Dying*, 8:43-9:10). Addressing crime by holding people accountable is necessary for allowing encampments to stay in place and remain safe for everyone who lives there.

## Restore Relationships

Many people who live below the poverty line do not become homeless. The difference between these people and the people who do become homeless is a security net built with relationships and resources. In *Journeys out of Homelessness*, Rife and Burnes conclude human capital was perhaps the most important factor that made a difference in the lives of all nine of the people they interviewed. They write, “The homelessness of all our contributors was interrupted and altered by one or more caring individuals, people who took time to listen, to understand, to appreciate the gifts that each of our contributors had” (168-169). In order for people who are homeless to gain stability, building social capital is an important factor that must be addressed.

Building social capital begins with acknowledging the homeless community needs to be reconciled back to individual relationships, and to society in general. In *Roadmap to Reconciliation*, Brenda Salter McNeil defines reconciliation as “an ongoing spiritual process involving forgiveness, repentance and justice that restores broken relationships and systems to reflect God’s original intention for all creation to flourish” (22). Regardless of religious belief, this definition acknowledges that reconciliation restores relationships and systems to a place that allows for the well-being of all people. I once heard a man experiencing homelessness describe what it looks like to be reconciled back to society in his own words:

On the street, if someone hits you, you hit back. If you don’t, you look weak and then other people will take advantage of you when they see that weakness. We don’t call the

cops on the streets; we handle our problems ourselves. Organizations like the Mission are a doorway through that world and into the regular world again.

Reconciliation is a two-way street. People who are experiencing homelessness are only one side of the relationship that needs to be restored. The other side is the broader community within society. This may include both individual relationships and systems. In order for people to move out of homelessness, it takes the investment and help of others. In *Reconcile*, Lederach writes that reconciliation is a journey beginning with a quality of presence that turns into compassion (39, 47). I once experienced this kind of life-changing reconciliation through a man named John. I met John at a sweep on an especially cold and wet Seattle day. He was packing up a suitcase filled with miscellaneous cords and wires while explaining how his family paid his phone bill as “shut up money.” The understanding was that as long as they paid the bill, he would leave them alone. Having a phone was important to him because he was able to video call his girlfriend who lived in another state. A couple of people on our outreach team had known John for a while, and they developed a relationship with him. One of them even lovingly referred to him as “grandson.”

About a month after the sweep, they met John at the bus station and bought him a ticket to Ohio, where he was able to live with his girlfriend. The outreach workers stayed in touch with John, and they said he looked better every time they talked to him. John got a job at his girlfriend’s family owned restaurant. He also stopped using drugs and gained back some of the weight he had lost while he was homeless. Because of his relationships with his girlfriend



and the outreach workers who invested in his life, John was able to find a way out of homelessness.

In doing this work, I have heard various members of the community share opinions about homelessness, and I am well aware of how easy it can be to dehumanize people who are unsheltered and write them off. The opposite needs to happen in order for both groups to flourish. In *Unclean*, Richard Beck discusses the meaning of disgust and how, if attached to a person, others are likely to create distance between themselves and the object of disgust (26). Another way of understanding how society might exclude the homeless community is a metaphor presented by The Arbinger Institute in the book *Leadership and Self-Deception*. They share the idea that people approach other people or groups of people from an “in the box” or an “out of the box” perspective. When people are in the box, they only see others as objects (42). This changes when we consider the humanity of others. The Arbinger Institute writes that when we step out of the box toward others, we see their “needs, hopes, and worries as real and legitimate as our own” (148-149).

A person can step out of the box toward the homeless community as they break down perceptions of disgust and move closer to the homeless community. Contact theory, which “suggests that relationships between conflicting groups will improve if they have meaningful contact with one another over an extended period of time,” supports how coming closer in relationship to people who are homeless can make this possible (Salter McNeil 33). Groody writes, “Solidarity with the poor does not mean helping the poor from a privileged position of

economic superiority or even ministerial power. It involves cultivating relationships with the poor that are marked by mutual reciprocity and receptivity” (255). My encouragement to anyone reading this is to let those words soak into your being and influence your actions. Thoughtfully consider how developing relationships with people who are experiencing homelessness could be the extra boost they need to get out of their current situation. One way to begin could be volunteering to serve a meal at a homeless shelter where there might be an opportunity to sit down next to someone and get to know them.

#### **Part IV: Conclusion**

I remember the day that our outreach team got invited to Rose’s housewarming party. I had never met Rose, but everyone I talked to emphasized how big of a deal this was. She had been living in a permanent supportive housing unit for about a month. Before that, she was at the Navigation Center, and before that she had been on the streets for years. The stories I heard about Rose were intense. She had extreme symptoms from mental illness and addiction that resulted in her acting violent and erratic. There was even a time that the police had to put a bag over her head as they arrested her because of how violent she had become. Rose had experienced many sweeps, and our outreach team remembered the way she built large, elaborate structures all by herself.

Not sure what to expect, I felt nervous and extremely privileged to celebrate this momentous occasion. We exited the elevator and walked down the hallway toward Rose’s room where she greeted us at the door beaming with excitement. There was pizza on the

counter of her very own kitchen, and her art pieces covered the walls. The small studio was tight with the three of us from the Union Gospel Mission, a case manager from the Navigation Center who helped her get into the place, her HOST case manager from DESC, and the HOST nurse. As we ate pizza, we talked about how great her place was, and Rose reminisced on what it took to get her there. She was able to talk about her family in Las Vegas in a way that showed emotional awareness. She even had awareness about some of the ways that she coped and said that she was much better off now that she had her own place. As she spoke, the HOST nurse gave her an injection in her arm. I later learned that this was her monthly dose of medication for her mental illness; they had found the right dosage and medicines to use that stabilized her. I walked away from this experience feeling incredibly hopeful. I thought about how it is possible for others with the most seemingly hopeless situations to have an outcome similar to Rose, because she was once in that very position herself.

There is a way to improve the issue of homelessness in Seattle. It is by considering people who are homeless as individuals unique needs, by collaborating with them to find solutions, and by beginning their experience of stability even while they are still on the streets. Eliminating the sweeps and replacing them with permanent encampments and resources is an effective approach that Seattle must move toward because it eliminates barriers and allows people to begin planning for their future.

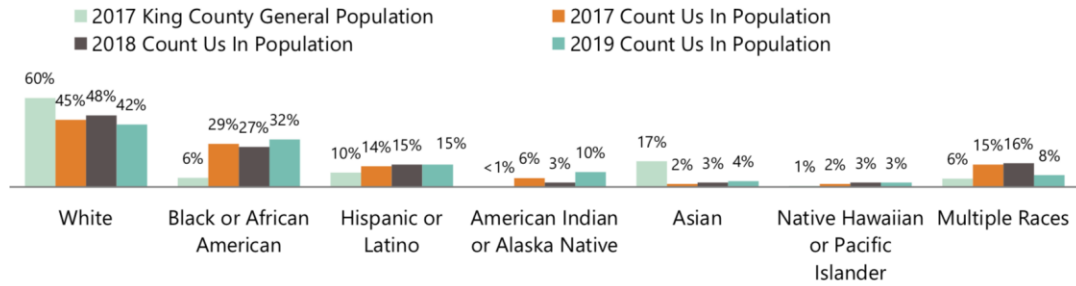
Perhaps the most impactful thing I noticed on the day I visited Rose was the way she had a mini tent pitched above her bed where her head lies at night. When I mentioned it, she said that it was a security blanket for her because a tent had been her safe place for years. It

felt weird not to have one. Then she said, "But they told me I can stay here the rest of my life if I want, isn't that amazing?!" Whenever a person with no roof over their head finally arrives at a permanent place to call home, it is amazing indeed. This is my hope for each person who has been swept on the streets of Seattle. May they find comfort, may they find peace, may they find a home.

## Appendix

### Appendix 1- Demographics of Seattle’s Homeless Population

FIGURE 12. INDIVIDUALS EXPERIENCING HOMELESSNESS, TOTAL COUNT POPULATION BY RACE AND ETHNICITY



2017 n= 11,643; 2018 n= 12,112; 2019 n= 11,199

2017 King County General Population Source: U.S. Census Bureau. (May 2017). American Community Survey 2017 1-Year Estimates, Table DP05: ACS Demographic and Housing Estimates. Retrieved from <http://factfinder2.census.gov>.

Note: HUD gathers data on race and ethnicity through two separate questions, similar to the U.S. Census. For the purposes of this report, race and ethnicity are presented together. Multiple response question. Percentages may not add up to 100.

AllHome, 2018 Point in Time Count Report

Appendix 2- Photos



*Figure 1- An abandoned campsite*



*Figure 2- The scene of a clearing near a freeway on-ramp. Navigation Team officers and field workers can be seen inside the caution tape as the final campers pack their belongings and the camp is cleaned.*



*Figure 3- The innovation of campers on display. Here, campers used pallets and a canopy to create a patio in front of their tent.*





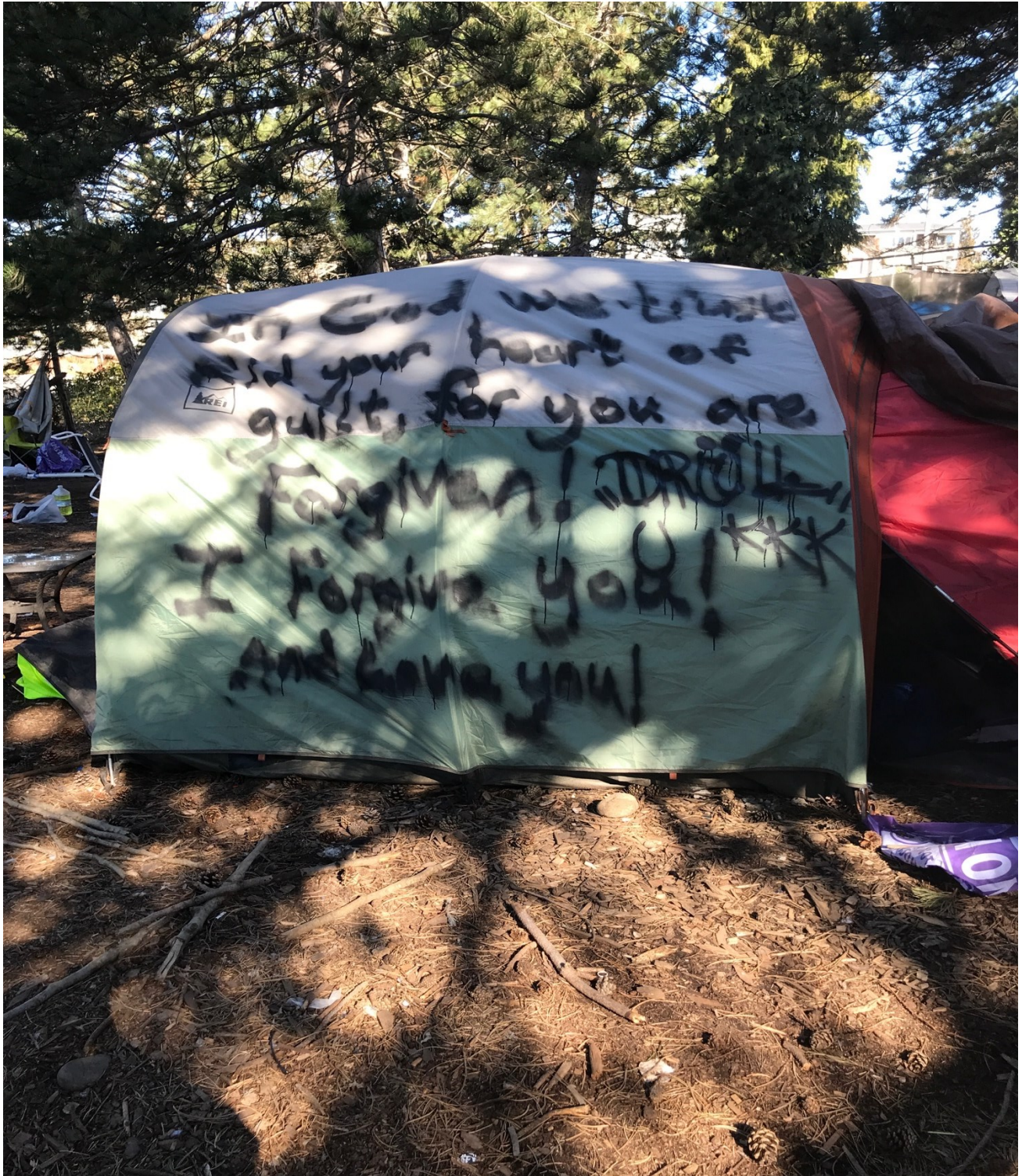
*Figure 4- An encampment across from the Mission in Pioneer Square during the snowstorm in February 2019. Despite the brutal conditions, people chose to stay in their tents.*



*Figure 5-The Mission outreach van at one of the encampment sites, overlooking the Seattle city skyline.*



*Figure 6- A scene from an encampment where a makeshift needle container was crafted with a water jug and some buckets.*



*Figure 7- A tent in one of the encampments that says, "In God we trust, rid your heart of guilt, for you are forgiven! I forgive you! And love you!"*

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