

Homeless Networks in Downtown Madison, Wisconsin

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ABSTRACT

Many know that Madison, Wisconsin is a homeless-friendly city, but the question remains: does Madison have adequate resources to support its homeless community? Our research focuses specifically on the food and shelter needs of the homeless in downtown Madison. We interviewed homeless individuals to find out what their true needs are and interviewed resource providers to understand what services and resources are available. Our analysis indicates that food resources are nearly sufficient, but shelter for the homeless in downtown Madison is in need of improvement.

INTRODUCTION

The definition of “geography” according to Merriam Webster is “a science that deals with the description, distribution, and interaction of the diverse physical, biological, and cultural features of the earth's surface.” However, many believe that geography is mostly about identifying anything and everything on a world map. This may have something to do with geography, but it is only a small part. Many people also never consider culture to be a part of geography, which is what our research focuses on. In our study, we aim to assess the resources that homeless individuals in Madison, Wisconsin need. There are many organizations that provide resources for the homeless, but are these adequate? In an attempt to answer this question, we interviewed homeless individuals and people that work with the homeless on a regular basis.

Our goal is to examine the needs of the homeless population and the resources available to them. Given our time constraints, we decided to look specifically at the food and shelter needs of the homeless. We discovered what food options they have and what barriers they face in reaching these options. In terms of housing, we identified what housing options homeless people most desire, as well as if these housing options are open to them. It is quite possible that different members of the homeless community have different housing preferences. Finally, and most importantly, we examined whether the people who supply these resources are aware of what the homeless actually need. We assume it is possible and quite probable, that our local government and charity organizations have a different perception of what the homeless need than what the homeless themselves actually desire. By talking with members of the homeless community, we were able to gauge their perception of local resources and examine whether these resources are adequate.

In this paper, we first give a general background of homelessness, including an in-depth look at homelessness in downtown Madison, Wisconsin. We then discuss our research methods and how we conducted our interviews. Next, we give a detailed account of our research, specifically the main points we gathered from interviews. Finally, we draw a conclusion based on our primary research and background information about homelessness. We have also included a section on further research that we can conduct on this topic.

BACKGROUND

Homelessness in America

The city of Madison has a prominent homeless population that has become part of the daily lives of many local residents. The United States Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) defines the homeless as “one without a regular owned residence and whose housing consists of: A supervised publicly or privately operated temporary shelter, an institution that provides a temporary residence for individuals intended to be institutionalized, and/or public or private place not designed for, or ordinarily used as, a regular sleeping accommodation for human beings” (HUD, portal.hud.gov). Official definitions narrow down the picture of those who are in need, but homelessness is a broad term with numerous meanings for unique individuals and social classes.

It is difficult to categorize such a broadly defined population or “sub-society” because the homeless are similar to housed residents in many respects. Traditional ideologies, stereotypes and portrayals of those without a home have changed greatly over time as the negligent treatment and services provided have been drastically altered, even in past decades. During early colonial America, the issue of the “unsettled” was discouraged and ignored by local and federal governments. This continued throughout the Great Depression, which helped create many stereotypes of transients. The reasons for their strife may have gone unnoticed during a time of economic downturn, yet essential services were provided for the extremely poor, a group separate from the homeless (Rossi 1989: 24-56).

Resources for the impoverished were located close to railway stations, far from the booming economic centers within urban areas. The growth and expansion of the city center forced the working class, as well as middle and upper class residents, to move closer to traditional “skid rows,” allowing sheltered social classes to experience the lower income

neighborhoods of the city. In the postwar era, the government gradually subsidized low rent housing, while the private sector gained more responsibility in housing through the funding of emergency shelters run by private organizations (Rossi 1989: 24-81).

Perceptions of Homeless: Reasons for Aversion

Perception of homeless persons has changed over the years as the percentage and types of homelessness have varied due to external factors. For example, the recent economic crisis put many previously vulnerable low-income individuals on the street, while the deinstitutionalization of psychiatric hospitals created many homeless people who, years ago, would have received housing and medical care (Rossi 1989: 24-81). In addition, as developers work to gentrify poor neighborhoods, we see the emergence of low cost, one night or extended stay hotels. One study in Chicago found these hotels, on average, charged an hourly minimum fee, which equates to under ten dollars a day, or approximately two hundred dollars a month (Jencks 1994 63-74). The removal of many of these structures has caused some of those with temporary jobs or other factors contributing to their low income to move to the streets (Rossi 1989: 62-67).

Factors Leading to Homelessness

One study of fifty-one homeless individuals and 1,138 non-homeless individuals in urban areas across the United States found a high proportion of mental and physical hospitalization. Thirty-three percent of the homeless people were mentally ill versus five percent of the non-homeless group. In addition, physical conditions required the hospitalization of twenty percent of the homeless group versus ten percent of the non-homeless group. Researchers also found that the homeless had problems with “utilization patterns and social dysfunction” (Fischer 1989: 519- 524). Regarding social dysfunction, one study found sixty percent of homeless men in

America had spent time in jail (Glasser 1999: 18). Although there seems to be a greater prevalence of incarceration and diagnosable hospitalization among the homeless, it is not necessarily a cause of their living conditions. Long-term living environments, sub-standard social behavior or public records that hold an individual back from maintaining a permanent occupation may have caused many of these factors (Fischer 1989: 519- 524).

Federal Support

The Emergency Jobs Appropriations Act of 1983 (PL 98-8) allocated 100 million dollars for emergency food and shelter through FEMA and, for the first time, included homeless persons in their definition of those requiring support. The Food Security Act of 1985 allocated welfare money while requiring state offices to discover a way to provide food stamps to those without an address, yet little effort was made (Glasser 1999: 44-63). The McKinney Homeless Assistance Act of 1987 (PL 100-77) implemented programs to provide:

“(1) health care; (2) community-based mental health services for homeless individuals who are chronically mentally ill; (3) emergency shelter; (4) transitional housing, especially for the elderly and homeless families with children; (5) community services to provide follow-up and long-term services; (6) job and literacy training; (7) permanent housing for handicapped homeless persons; and (8) grants for groups to renovate, convert, purchase, lease, or construct facilities” (Hombs 1994: 93-97).

These efforts to provide minimal protection and ethical rights for the homeless have established a base for aid, yet local governments are slow to implement.

State Street's Homeless: A Statistical Breakdown

In order to analyze our research accurately, it is vital that we have a running knowledge about homelessness in our sample area. The city of Madison publishes an annual report about homelessness in Dane County that offers some statistics about homelessness in and around the State Street area. A group of outreach workers compiled this data in 2009 from local homeless shelters and programs that worked with individuals, both on the street and in shelters. In total, they contacted 418 individuals who they assume to spend the majority of their time in the State Street area. This is an increase from 170 individuals in 2008. Of the 418 individuals, 202 were single adults and 171 were unaccompanied minors. 232 respondents were male and 186 were female. In addition, of the 418 individuals, eight were between the ages of six and twelve, thirteen were minors with children and there were thirty-two identified families. Finally, reporters found that fifty-five percent of the respondents had some form of mental illness and forty-six percent were reported to have substance abuse problems (Annual Report on Homeless Served in Dane County 2009: 34).

It is important to note, however, that the outreach workers did not conduct this research methodically – it is merely an analysis based off the street work of these seven outreach workers. Therefore, we cannot assume that this data is precise or accurate because it is impossible to know what portion of the actual homeless population the workers sampled and how large the homeless population actually is in downtown Madison. This data is valuable, however, because it provides a degree of insight into the homeless population on State Street. A sample of 418 individuals is large enough, given the size of the geographic sample area, to draw some general conclusions about the homeless population. For example, we can assume from the data that both males and females are prevalent in the State Street homeless population. In addition, it is notable that a large portion of the homeless population is under the age of eighteen and that there are a number

of homeless families in the area. The mental illness and substance abuse data lets us know that these two issues are prevalent in the population.

Madison's Homeless Resources

There are two types of housing options commonly utilized by the homeless: emergency and transitional housing. Emergency shelters provide beds and food for individuals and families on a day-to-day basis. Transitional housing involves temporary housing for homeless individuals who need shelter for longer periods of time (Wallinger 2006: 6). A report published by the city of Madison in 2008 states that the city's 297 emergency shelter beds and sixty-seven overflow emergency shelter beds served 3,894 individuals in 2008 in Dane County. However, the shelter turned away 3,636 individuals, ninety-three percent of whom the shelter turned away due to lack of space (Wallinger et al. 2008: 2). From these statistics, we can draw that shelter workers turned away almost half of all people seeking emergency shelter in Dane County due to lack of space.

Regarding transitional housing, the same report states that 1,120 individuals utilized transitional housing in 2008 in Dane County. 702 of these people were either individuals or couples; 418 of these people were families with children. Of this group, reports show that seventy percent had mental health problems and seventy-two percent had a substance abuse problem (Wallinger et al. 2008: 13-15). These statistics only cover individuals and families who sought temporary housing through emergency shelter programs. The report states that these statistics might be limited because the majority of people seek transitional housing without the aid of a Dane County emergency shelter (Wallinger et al. 2008: 15).

By looking at these statistics, it is clear Dane County has more than enough resources to aid the 418 identified State Street individuals. We must remember, however, that homelessness

extends well beyond State Street and thus, these statistics are not specific to our sample group. Although we cannot draw any conclusions about our sample group's utilization of these resources, we can look at some housing and food options available in downtown Madison as listed in the 2009 Annual Report On Homeless Served in Dane County. For families, the YWCA, Road Home and The Salvation Army operate shelters in and around downtown Madison specifically catering to families. Hope House is a program that offers shelter and resources for women with young children. For single women, The Salvation Army operates a women's shelter. Porchlight Inc. and Port St. Vincent operate a drop-in shelter specifically catering to men. For transitional housing, Safe Haven, operated by Porchlight Inc., is a housing option for the mentally ill and Tellurian operates a similar transitional housing option for individuals with substance abuse issues. Also, the Society of St. Vincent de Paul and The Salvation Army offer a number of different transitional housing options for families and individuals (*Annual Report On Homeless Served in Dane County 2009*: 5). We should note the above-mentioned programs are not the entirety of emergency and transitional housing options in Madison – they are major programs that give a general overview of housing resources in the Madison area (Wallinger et al. 2008: 55-62). See figure 1 for locations.

To give a more in depth view of how a housing program works in Madison, we will look at the 2009 Annual Report for Porchlight Inc. Porchlight operates three drop-in shelters in the downtown Madison area and in 2009, served 1,273 individuals (see figure 1). In terms of transitional housing, Porchlight Inc. offers 240 separate living spaces for families and couples in twenty-three different locations in Madison and around Dane County. They served 414 people, including children, in 2009. Safe Haven, Porchlight's housing option for the mentally ill, served 175 guests in 2009 and aided twenty-two in finding transitional or permanent housing. Porchlight also offers a daytime resource center where they have assisted 282 people in finding

employment and offered some form of financial aid for housing to 1,228 individuals (Porchlight Inc. 2009: 5). Porchlight is, debatably, one of the biggest homeless resources in Madison. These statistics are not representative of all the resource programs in Madison, but are pertinent to our research because Porchlight Inc. is a major resource in the State Street area. Their local headquarters is located a few blocks from State Street and some of their emergency shelters are located in the capital area.

The city does not document specific food options as much as housing options, primarily because most housing shelters offer food options to their occupants. However, there are other food options for the homeless in downtown Madison. Second Harvest and Community Action Coalition in South Central Wisconsin operate and run a variety of food pantries and kitchens in the Madison area. In 2005, they collected 4.6 million pounds of food, available to food pantries around Dane County. They collaborate with a variety of charity and faith based organizations to make these resources available to the community. First United Methodist Church, the location of one of Porchlight's drop-in shelters, partners with United Way of Dane County by supplying the capital area with a food pantry (Cnare 2006: 5). Second Harvest also runs a number of mobile food pantries in the Madison area for the homeless and those living in poverty. The ReachOut program takes a different approach to food needs, by educating homeless people about their food options. Since faith based organizations offer an array of different food options on different days, ReachOut is a resource to help the homeless discover these food options (Wallinger et al. 2008: 6-7).

METHODS

Our Goals

Our goal was to assess the needs of the homeless in Downtown Madison with the resources provided by both public and private organizations. Specifically, given our time constraint, we decided to focus on food and shelter needs. First, we analyzed the needs and wants of the homeless because it is not clear whether they actually need or desire the resources provided to them. We defined homeless needs based on what our homeless interviewees desired as a reasonable food or shelter solution. For example, transitional housing and drop-in housing are two very different shelter solutions that we distinguish.

Second, we looked at what resources are available in downtown Madison. Our map (see figure 1) shows the specific area that we are looking at in Madison and includes all of the locations in downtown Madison that we talk about in this paper. Third, we determined whether these resources are accessible to the homeless population. We defined accessibility based on whether the resource is geographically accessible and if our interviewees, without hesitation, use it. For example, if a homeless man said that he does not like going to drop-in shelters because they are dangerous, then we would not consider this resource accessible.

Finally, we analyzed whether the relationship between the homeless and homeless resources in downtown Madison is viable based on homeless needs, resources available and the accessibility of resources. This research is a narrative – an in-depth look at the issue of homelessness from perspectives we gain from interviews. We did not collect any analytic data; rather, the entirety of our project is composed of interviews and background research. We have assembled what we learned from our interviews in narrative form, and then drew conclusions and possible solutions.

The Importance of Interviewing

There are numerous ways that researchers have studied homeless populations. Many studies have looked at the statistics of the homeless without actually speaking to the homeless directly. Although some previous studies of the homeless appear to produce quantifiable results, bias and poor study organization can limit the strength of data. One study utilized random digit dialing to interview 1507 individuals across the United States, asking if residents were ever homeless (Link et al. 1994: 1907-1909). This experiment's many problems include too large of a study group, interview bias and poor random sampling. To minimize these risks, it was important that we picked out viable subjects and interviewed them based on which questions we believe they would most accurately be able to answer (Gomez and Jones 2010: 195).

The Process of Interviews

On three occasions, we had one group member interview an individual by asking previously planned questions (see appendix 2.1-2.3) while another member took notes. We tried to stick to these questions, but wound up asking additional questions or leaving out certain questions based on specific cases of the individual we were interviewing. We did not audiotape the interviews but transcribed whatever possible. For homeless interviews, we interviewed individuals on State Street and around the capitol square area. We conducted the rest of our interviews over the telephone. We also covered our privacy statement (see appendix 1.1) with everyone we interviewed.

In a study on the experiences of homeless youth, researchers asked homeless children already in a program if they would like to participate. If they agreed, they had to meet certain criteria (Ferguson 2009: 1877). We too, made a point to ask individuals if they would like to participate and made sure they were fully aware of the purpose of our research. We would not

want to put anybody in a situation that would make him or her uncomfortable. Another study on homeless adolescent urban mothers had six different criteria in order to be eligible to participate including an age range and the ability to speak English (Kennedy et al. 2010: 1742). We were open to interview a broad range of people, but our only criteria were that the individual be open and accepting to the idea of interviewing. In addition, we could not afford to be selective on the age of the people we interviewed given our time constraint and limited number of viable subjects, but the majority of the people we interviewed were middle aged and of similar ethnicity.

Interviews -- Homeless

We interviewed individuals who are or have been homeless at some point on State Street and around Madison's capitol building. Interviewing the homeless proved difficult, but we managed to locate a few reliable sources. Based off our previous homeless contacts and individuals we met on the street, we interviewed four single men, one couple and a *Street Pulse* vendor, a newspaper distributed by the homeless. We also interviewed Glenn H. Austin, a homeless specialist who voluntarily lived on the streets as part of his research. Together, these individuals embody the homeless voice in our paper. Specifically regarding our homeless interviews, we found that we had to add additional questions due to an individual's specific experience with a resource. To put it simply, we just chatted with the interviewee for a while, occasionally drawing the conversation back in the direction of our interview questions.

Interviews -- Individuals Who Work With the Homeless

We also interviewed staff at Second Harvest Food Bank of Southern Wisconsin, and Porchlight Inc., two local organizations. Second Harvest Food Bank helps supply pantries and

meal sites in downtown Madison. Porchlight Inc. operates drop-in shelters. Our goal with these interviews was to gain a perspective of homelessness from people who are associated with food and shelter resources. Specifically, we talked to these individuals about claims made during our homeless interviews. Our goal was not only to verify these claims, but also to see if resource staff was aware of how the homeless perceive them.

Map of Madison's Homeless Resources

We created a map of Madison's homeless resources that include every location in downtown Madison that we discuss in our paper (see figure 1). The map also shows additional resources we do not discuss in our paper, but that came up during our research. The goal of this map is to help the reader visualize homelessness in downtown Madison in terms of where resources are located.

Ethical Issues

Ethical concerns are always a priority when interviewing the homeless. We are stepping into their world, bothering them with our questions, and using them for our research. As a result, some of the individuals may feel uncomfortable telling us about their lives. We issued a privacy statement (see appendix 1.1) for this reason. Other previous studies gave their participants money and information on community programs (Richards and Smith 2006: 97). We did not have much to give the people we observed and interviewed, which may have limited the data we acquired. We were only able to ensure confidentiality and give them the opportunity to view our results and final presentation (Gomez and Jones 2010: 203).

RESULTS

Our first interview with fifty-six year old James took place on November 12, 2010 at 12:40 in the afternoon. As a man who lived a semi-transient lifestyle for over two decades, he has traveled to many cities in search of work and housing. Born in Ohio, he previously resided in Alaska, California, Montana, Spain, France, Germany, Italy, Greece, and Egypt, among others, while working temporary jobs. He has decided that Munich had the best resources available for work, food, and shelter until the fall of the Berlin Wall, which caused an influx of workers from the East and a shortage of available jobs. Though he still acknowledges Munich as one of the best cities for low-income individuals, after returning to the United States he has spent time in Berkeley, Madison, and ranches in Montana. After one of our group members met him in Madison last summer, he traveled to California for the winter months and eventually returned to Madison. He believes that Madison is a healthier atmosphere and has more efficient resources than San Francisco, a city well known to be homeless-friendly. Though he enjoyed the atmosphere and treatment of homeless in the San Francisco Bay area, he claims:

“The prevalence of crime, overcrowding, and high population of homeless people creates a poor environment for progress” (James, personal interview, State St. Madison WI, 12 November 2010).

James has spent years in and out of Madison with inconsistent work or pay to supplement his lifestyle. A friend first introduced him to Madison years ago during a stopover on his way to do some ranch work in the western United States. He spent some time temporarily housed in various residences in exchange for work. The Gridiron Bar near Camp Randall Stadium offered him a place to sleep for fifteen dollars a day while he did manual labor for the establishment. More recently, the members of Lothlorien Coop offered him a room in exchange for plumbing and bathroom remodeling services. James, however, spent the majority of the summer of 2009

homeless in Madison and traveled to Berkeley for the winter months. Upon returning to Madison in the spring, he spent some colder nights in city run shelters (see figure 1), but opted for a self-made shelter in local alleyways whenever the weather permitted.

James is currently renting a small apartment on Madison's east side for 250 dollars per month and believes the residence is a great accomplishment. He describes this residence as a tenant building owned and operated by a landlord who regulates his customers to promote a safe environment, without troublesome occupants. His landlord is a man who, despite allowing his occupants a great deal of freedom, does not take nuisance or violence lightly and would have no problem evicting dangerous tenants, which

“Is a great way to weed out bad individuals that would only cause problems for people that want to get out of the shelters” (James, personal interview, State St. Madison WI, 12 November 2010).

James was first able to afford this housing after saving money from temporary occupations. At present, he makes money by searching the downtown Madison area for renovation or cleaning work needed by establishments, such as the Orpheum Theater. His employers pay him in cash and he by no means earns a salary. He spends the money with his own discretion and chooses to invest in housing.

According to James, it seems as though Madison provides adequate food services for the homeless. After paying rent, he has a surplus of ten dollars a day. He can decide to save the money for essentials or spend it on minimal amounts of tobacco, alcohol or other nonessential goods. He spends very little on food items and he does not feel the need to panhandle. He cites the food bank at Luke House, Holy Redeemer Catholic Church, and United Methodist Church (see figure 1) as three primary sources for food in the downtown area. If individuals do not earn over 2,400 dollars per month, the state issues them food stamps. According to James, it appears

that food is readily available to those willing to travel to various churches and other establishments. He stated:

“If one knows the right places, there is no problem getting three hot meals a day. Finding food is definitely not a problem downtown” (James, personal interview, State St. Madison WI, 12 November 2010).

Most of the homeless individuals interviewed, including James, believe that shelters are the primary obstacle for un-housed persons in the area. Temporary shelters usually have a daily limit with the exception of extremely cold nights when the temperature is below twenty degrees Fahrenheit. James cited forty days as a common limit for staying in shelters in downtown Madison. James has turned to the shelters on cold nights for lack of a better option. According to James, even though cold weather exceptions are given, it is still common to find a line of people waiting for the buildings to open. Often, shelters turn away those deserving a place out of the cold due to lack of space in the shelter facilities (James, personal interview, State St. Madison WI, 12 November 2010).

Many of our homeless interviewees cited the housing environment as detrimental to an individual's overall well being. Our correspondents admit that not all homeless in Madison are humble or deserving of monetary aid without first obtaining proper medical help because many have mental and physical disabilities or addictions that inhibit their work abilities and influence their spending. These persons often pose a threat to those wishing to escape a lifestyle of homelessness. We have encountered stories of individuals kept awake at night by belligerent shelter-goers and others who steal any personal goods left unattended. Those wishing to escape the social environment in Madison's shelters believe that work prospects will inherently breed the self-respect needed to function in society by their own means without harming other individuals. Alternately, the shelter system appears to breed a negative environment that is

difficult to escape. James, among others, described the shelter staff as extremely rude and cited that many hope to avoid the detrimental experiences in an attempt to afford their own housing, even if this requires nights spent in alleys (James, personal interview, State St. Madison WI, 12 November 2010).

Paper vendor Brian from *Street Pulse*, an organization aimed at giving a voice to homeless issues, has experienced much of the same. We interviewed Brian at 4:30 in the afternoon on Tuesday November 16, 2010. He is no longer homeless, but he continues to rely on the seventy-five percent profits from newspaper vending as a source of income. He agrees that food services are plentiful in Madison, but food pantries provide:

“...unusable food items since those living on the street have no way to cook food and the only useful things are packaged, ready to eat meals” (Brian, personal interview, State St. Madison WI, 16 November 2010).

Shelters are not open during the day and thus, the un-housed have no access to a kitchen. Unprepared canned or packaged foods only serve the extremely poor who have access to kitchens, while the homeless rely on hot food services (Brian, personal interview, State St. Madison WI, 16 November 2010).

Brian also said he despised shelters to the point where he would work for any means possible to escape the lifestyle. The system only allows nighttime access and limits stays to forty nights per year unless an individual receives an exception. He discussed the many times shelters turned him away without exception due to the large overflow of people waiting for room to open on the coldest nights. If someone is lucky enough to gain access, they must answer to the housing staffs, which are described as:

“Ruthless, power hungry tyrants that treat the homeless as sub-human beings and are unsuited to deal with people who mean no harm and want nothing other than a

place to rest their head” (Brian, personal interview, State St. Madison WI, 16 November 2010).

He agrees with a quote by another semi-homeless man named Lincoln, referring to Luke House (see figure 1), that many of those in charge of shelters are:

“...more caught up in maintaining power than providing the services” (Lincoln, personal interview, State St. Madison WI, 18 November 2010).

The leadership of such organizations would probably disagree with these statements, but an overwhelming majority of the homeless interviewed had the same attitude toward shelter faculty and nearly half swore they would never spend another night in these circumstances. The general trend we discovered was that many homeless individuals view cold alleyways and police harassment as a better option than the hassles of shelter life.

We interviewed another middle-aged couple as they were waiting for food at Holy Redeemer Church on a Friday afternoon. The couple agreed that private organizations provide the majority of their hot meals since the state has reduced their aid. They seemed most troubled by the fact that the approaching cold weather will separate them because, according to the couple, there are three times as many male shelters in the downtown Madison area as female shelters. The man allocated nights in a male shelter, but the woman has run out and must endure the streets until the temperature is below twenty degrees Fahrenheit when she can apply for an extension. The man realizes what is important to him and instead chooses to stay with the woman on doorsteps of businesses just east of the capitol building because, as he stated:

“I’m not going to let the way they run the shelters keep me away from her and since we haven’t had complaints out on Wash, [referring to his night residence on a doorstep on E. Washington Ave.] we can stay together” (Homeless couple, personal interview, Madison WI, 18 November 2010).

They are both grateful for the private, mostly religious organizations for offering food and clothing. They also agreed that an increase in shelter space and improved treatment at shelters would facilitate a better lifestyle for the homeless in downtown Madison (Homeless couple, personal interview, Madison WI, 18 November 2010).

When asked what improvements the city of Madison could make, many responded with sufficient shelter space and higher quality service of trained professionals who are capable of dealing with the homeless. James and another man named Art, fifty-seven, interviewed at 1:45 in the afternoon of November 12, 2010, agree that shelters should give privilege to the elderly. One of our group members has been in contact with Art for nearly eighteen months. He has lived in and out of Madison since the early 1960's and returned some years ago. New circumstances have forced him to live on the streets in Madison. Art has recently adjusted to homeless life, but unlike most of our respondents, he finds it difficult to obtain food services. His main claim is that far too much transportation is required to obtain warm meals. He does not own a bus pass and having many possessions; feels tied to his belongings and cannot venture across the city solely for a free meal. He is aware of food services at Francis Street, State Street, and the Capitol building basement (see figure 1), but he claims the provided services have recently decreased (Art, personal interview, State St. Madison WI, 12 November 2010).

He too does not feel satisfied with the shelter system in the city, claiming that it is not safe and the staff fails to treat the homeless like human beings. He believes, along the lines of Brian, that the verbally abusive nature of shelter staff would be better suited for dealing with a prison population rather than the homeless (Art, personal interview, State St. Madison WI, 12 November 2010). Art would like to see more day shelters with trained staff. He knows of at least one day shelter/hospitality house, but it is too far for him to commute merely for an open kitchen and some company. Art also believes that shelters should grant preference to women,

children, and the elderly. He hopes to find better-trained staff and a twenty-four hour shelter with aid programs to get the homeless off the streets. He believes that many shelters form a mentality of hate and desperation, originating from disgruntled homeless persons or the unhelpful and degrading staff. He also pledges:

“No way in hell will you find me back in the shelter” (Art, personal interview, State St. Madison WI, 12 November 2010).

He instead opts for nights spent on the street while saving up funds for private housing.

We also interviewed Glenn H. Austin, a professional photographer who worked closely with the State Street homeless population for three years. Mr. Austin set out on a project to learn about and document the lives of State Street’s homeless population through photography. The homeless is a group he believes is misunderstood. His work is published on the internet at inside-voices.com. During his time working with the homeless on State Street, Mr. Austin slept in a van for up to four to five days at a time in order to immerse himself in his project. He eventually found himself rescuing and helping the homeless, doing anything from providing them with clothing for court, to driving them to the hospital. During his work with the homeless, Mr. Austin gained a deep understanding of the many causes leading to poverty, as well as how the homeless perceive the various resources available in Madison. His work is valuable to our research because, not only is he a specialist on the topics of poverty and homelessness, he also has a first hand account of what it is like to be homeless (Glenn H. Austin, telephone interview, 18 November 2010).

Mr. Austin shared similar views to the homeless individuals we interviewed about food and housing resources. First, he does not see any major problems with Madison’s food resources. During his time working with the homeless, he found that if an individual needed food, it was not difficult to obtain. Mr. Austin cited a number of different shelters, soup kitchens

and churches around the capital and campus areas that provide regular service. He also noted the extremely generous characteristics of many of State Street's homeless. If one individual locates a valuable resource, he or she is likely to share it with the rest of the community (Glenn H. Austin, telephone interview, 18 November 2010). Places like Concrete Park (see figure 1) are meeting places for the homeless where they share information.

Second, Mr. Austin believes that downtown Madison's housing resources are entirely inadequate. During his work with the homeless, Mr. Austin refrained from staying in a shelter because he did not want to take up a bed that an individual in need could use. However, he did note the many complaints of the homeless regarding local shelters. In his words, obtaining a bed at a shelter is

'Hit or miss. Shelters are normally full, do not accept intoxicated individuals, do not accept individuals after a certain hour and remove individuals who have been staying for too long' (Glenn H. Austin, telephone interview, 18 November 2010).

Additionally, he noted that shelters are often very dangerous places. Violence and theft are prevalent. He says that if an individual wishes to stay in a shelter for a night, he or she must keep a low profile and remain vigilant over their possessions. He noted one particular shelter near Madison's beltline, which will remain unnamed, that many homeless know as a dangerous location. Mr. Austin says that for the elderly, a group deeply in need of shelter, this location is almost entirely out of the question because it is very difficult to reach and, at times, can be extremely violent. Finally, Mr. Austin named one particularly well known downtown shelter, which will also remain unnamed, to be a bad option for the homeless. He says that this group is corporate and fueled by wealthy individuals, thus, is often misguided. Mr. Austin noted that this shelter is notorious for kicking out homeless individuals who are in dire need and cited members

of the staff as being a potential source of this problem (Glenn H. Austin, telephone interview, 18 November 2010).

Our final question for Mr. Austin was what, in his opinion, could city officials do to improve the lives of the homeless in downtown Madison, specifically regarding food and shelter resources. Generally, his response focused on the city limiting the lives of the homeless. He noted that many of the homeless individuals he met had a variety of skills like music performance, making crafts, etc., but they are unable to make a profit from these skills because the city requires them to obtain a peddlers license. Such a license costs several hundred dollars and thus, is not realistic for a majority of the homeless population, specifically those most in need. Mr. Austin also noted that the city has a tendency to enact policies that actually work to accomplish the complete opposite of what the homeless need. He cited a specific piece of legislation in Sun Prairie that banned sleeping in cars. Mr. Austin says that policies like this make it

“Pretty much impossible for homeless people to stop being homeless” (Glenn H. Austin, telephone interview, 18 November 2010).

Specifically regarding shelter, Mr. Austin discussed a community in Peru where homeless individuals could set up shantytowns. Given the many causes of poverty, he believes that

“A large scale fix for poverty is not foreseeable” (Glenn H. Austin, telephone interview, 18 November 2010).

Mr. Austin says that shantytowns, similar to those he discussed in Peru, are a viable option for the homeless that a majority of the population would benefit from. The only problem with such a solution is that the city does not allow individuals to set up semi-permanent housing on public property. He says that homeless individuals frequently attempt to set up similar shelters in wooded areas, but law-enforcement officers usually destroy them after they discover them. Mr.

Austin believes that the city could solve the problem if they were to designate specific areas of land where the homeless can set up shelter without being harassed. He noted that current solutions, like the privately run shelters in downtown Madison, are,

“Expedient – a quick fix to get the homeless off the streets” (Glenn H. Austin, telephone interview, 18 November 2010).

Mr. Austin says that most homeless individuals want a place of their own and do not trust the shelters, so allowing them to set up their own shelters on public land would alleviate this problem.

Finally, he noted that section eight housing, offered by the United States Department of Housing and Urban Development, is also not an ideal solution. Section eight housing has rigorous guidelines, specifically regarding who can reside in federally appointed housing. Mr. Austin notes that because of the generous nature of the homeless, most would have a hard time not allowing others to stay with them. He says that if one individual obtains section eight housing, he or she is likely to invite other people in need to share it with them. The problem with this is that officials often throw out tenants when they discover them to be harboring guests. He cited a housing solution in New York City where the city gives the homeless blocks of apartments and lets them be. He said that this too would be a viable solution (Glenn H. Austin, telephone interview, 18 November 2010).

We also had the opportunity to interview people who work with homeless resources. Dan Stein, President and CEO of Second Harvest Foodbank of Southern Wisconsin, discussed food resources in the downtown area (Dan Stein, telephone interview, 18 November 2010).

According to Dan, Second Harvest does not work directly with the homeless. Instead, it works with meal sites and pantries by providing them with food. He noted several prominent food pantries in the downtown area including Bethel Lutheran Church, Grace Church and United

Methodist Church (see figure 1). Dan also mentioned a meal site located in the Catholic Multicultural Center on campus.

Generally, Mr. Stein agrees with many of our other interviewees that there is a decent amount of food resources in the downtown area. He, however, noted that food pantries might not be best suited to the needs of the homeless. The food pantries Mr. Stein discussed operate by allowing visitors to take whatever they want. He said that many of the packaged and canned goods may not be a viable option for the homeless because,

“[The homeless] cannot store or cook [the food]. It can also be too heavy to carry”

(Dan Stein, telephone interview, 18 November 2010).

This response mirrors the primary complaints of our homeless interviewees. They mostly agreed that food is available, but unprepared foods prove difficult given that the homeless have little, if any, access to a kitchen.

We also interviewed Steven Schooler, the Executive Director of Porchlight Inc. Mr. Schooler discussed some of Porchlight’s operations, specifically the issue with stay limits. He believes that sixty days, Porchlight’s stay limit, is a reasonable number. According to Mr. Schooler, if a shelter allows individuals to stay more than ninety days, then according to law it is no longer a shelter, it is a transitional house. He also believes that cold weather stay extensions work well because they keep the homeless safe during times when conditions are dangerous. Porchlight also offers stay extensions, according to Mr. Schooler, if individuals show that they are actively trying to find a permanent housing solution (Steven Schooler, telephone interview, 8 December 2010).

Mr. Schooler’s reasoning comes from the belief that allowing homeless individuals to stay as long as they wish is not addressing the issue of homelessness in the long run. According to him,

“A big part of the problem is reducing homelessness. Individuals in shelters are not fixing this problem” (Steven Schooler, telephone interview, 8 December 2010).

Instead, Mr. Schooler believes that the focus should be on housing, mental health and substance abuse. In his opinion, improvements in these areas would greatly reduce the stress put on drop-in shelters and help to fix homelessness altogether. He, however, believes that

“[It] isn’t to say that the shelter isn’t important. It is” (Steven Schooler, telephone interview, 8 December 2010).

He says that shelters handle the immediate issues relating to homelessness, like freezing temperatures during the winter, but they do not have a great effect on reducing homelessness in general. Finally, considering homeless complaints about shelter staff conduct, Mr. Schooler said

“The staff aren’t always right. Let’s be clear on that” (Steven Schooler, telephone interview, 8 December 2010).

He said that the sheer number of individuals in need and the issue of intoxication are two factors that are extremely difficult for staff. Mr. Schooler, however, believes that for the most part, the staff does their best to help the individuals. He even noted that the staff could be hesitant to kick inebriated individuals out when it is very cold. He also noted that Porchlight’s drop-in shelter has an eighty-ninety percent approval rating, and that most individuals generally appreciate Porchlight. He said it is common for guests to ask staff to

“Kick out the guests who are complaining” (Steven Schooler, telephone interview, 8 December 2010).

Generally, Mr. Schooler’s opinion of the shelters differed greatly from many of the individuals we talked to. None of our homeless interviewees agreed with shelter stay limits, and most noted that shelters are rather inadequate places to stay. It is important to note, however, that there are

obvious limits to the functionality of shelters. It is an incredibly difficult task to provide for the entire homeless community, so there are bound to be conflicts in the shelter system.

CONCLUSION

After analyzing our interviews with background data on homelessness in Madison, we are prepared to draw three general points.

First, food is not a major problem in Madison's homeless community. The vast majority of homeless individuals we spoke with felt that they can get food when they need to. Dan Stein, the President and CEO of Second Harvest Foodbank of Southern Wisconsin, listed off a number of viable meal sites and pantries in downtown Madison. Our map (see figure 1) indicates a number of other sites in the downtown and capitol area as well.

The food system, however, is not perfect. One individual, Art, specifically said that he has difficulty traveling for food due to his possessions (Art, personal interview, State St. Madison WI, 12 November 2010, see page 22). Our other homeless interviewees, however, do not share this view, and it is possible that his case is special. In addition, we learned from the majority of our interviews that food preparation is a problem. Food from pantries is difficult to prepare without a kitchen, so the majority of homeless individuals rely on warm meals from shelters. Food preparation is possible in day shelter kitchens, but this resources is limited (Brian, personal interview, State St. Madison WI, 16 November 2010, see page 19).

One possible solution for these problems is to offer more meal options in the downtown area. Soup kitchens and similar operations would remove any need to travel for food and would extinguish confusion over where meal sites are located. Another solution is to open up shelter kitchens during the day. This would allow individuals more opportunities to prepare food and would broaden meal options. One final solution involves educating Madison's homeless population about food options. Resource workers could visit popular homeless hangouts, like Concrete Park and the capitol square (see figure 1), and make sure the homeless are aware of local meal sites and areas where public use of appliances, like a microwave, is permitted. Again,

this would remove any confusion over the location of meal sites and help further connect the homeless community to downtown Madison's food resources. Overall, however, the food resource situation in Madison is adequate.

Second, shelter resources, on the other hand, are inadequate in downtown Madison. As mentioned earlier, shelters turned away 3,636 individuals in Dane County in 2008, ninety-three percent of the 3,636 was due to lack of space (Wallinger et al. 2008, see pages 9-10). Our homeless interviewees all cited specific problems with shelters including lack of space, stay limits, dangerous environments and rude staff. Many also added that they now refuse to go to shelters for these reasons. In general, the shelter system does not appear to be effective.

Part of this problem may be that the people in charge of shelters have a different perception of homeless needs than the homeless themselves. Steven Schooler, the Executive Director of Porchlight Inc., made it clear that drop-in shelters are not supposed to be a long-term solution for homelessness; they are a short-term solution for the dangers of sleeping on the street. For this reason, those in charge of the shelter system value long-term solutions, such as

“Housing, mental health solutions and substance abuse solutions” (Steven Schooler, telephone interview, 8 December 2010, see pages 27-28).

Therefore, the fact that focus is not placed entirely on drop-in shelters may contribute to many of the problems indicated by our homeless interviewees. This is not to say, however, that focusing on long-term solutions is a bad option. Actually, long-term solutions are just as important, if not more important than short-term solutions because they attempt to end homelessness altogether rather than merely addressing immediate concerns.

For many of our homeless interviewees, however, improvements in drop-in shelters appear to be a major concern. These individuals were more focused on finding a place to sleep on a cold night than eradicating homelessness. Substance abuse and mental health problems are

certainly barriers to a long-term solution for homelessness and thus, obscure the possibility of ending homelessness for affected individuals. In addition, after speaking with a number of homeless individuals, it appears that many have few major objections to their lifestyles. None of them actually wants to be homeless; they instead want to be self-sufficient, but for whatever reason permanent housing is not a viable option at this point in their lives. Therefore, drop-in shelters offer these individuals a place to sleep at night, while allowing them to be self-sufficient. The policies and environment of the shelters, however, make it difficult for many homeless individuals to live their lives this way.

One solution for the shelter problem is improving the drop-in shelter system based on what the homeless want. This would involve focusing more attention on short-term solutions for the dangers of homelessness rather than focusing on a long-term end to homelessness. Shelters would need to eliminate stay limits and open up more drop-in shelter space. Also, there would need to be a major shift in staff and internal policy to make the shelters safer and help to mend the relationship between the homeless and shelter staff. This solution, however, needs to be investigated further because it could be counter-productive to eradicating homelessness; it may be a solution that would make it easier to stay homeless rather than ending homelessness altogether. Regardless, based on the immediate concerns of the homeless population, this could be a possible solution.

Another possible solution is one indicated by Glenn H. Austin – opening up public space for the homeless. Mr. Austin discussed a community in Peru where officials allowed the homeless to set up community on public land. Mr. Austin also noted that the homeless community would receive a solution like this well (Glenn H. Austin, telephone interview, 18 November 2010, see pages 24-25). This is a viable option because it would allow the homeless to remain self-sufficient by permitting them to solve shelter problems on their own. Mr. Austin

discussed how similar communities have been set up in rural areas, but were destroyed by law-enforcement upon discovery. This solution would involve creating public space for the homeless to build shelters and removing laws that are counter-active to sleeping outdoors. A major barrier to this solution, aside from obvious legal difficulties, is finding an area of land that would be appropriate for this use. Madison's residents will surely be hesitant to allocating land near residential communities. In addition, the city will be hesitant to allocating land in the downtown area, mainly because it would bring down property values. Generally, finding land for a homeless "shanty-town" is not going to be easy and would require a great deal of further work and research.

The final point that we have drawn from our results is that improvements can, and should be implemented for food and shelter resources. Although food options are readily available, opening more meal sites and day-shelter kitchens and informing the homeless community will only benefit the homeless. On the other-hand, the current shelter situation is inadequate and needs to be addressed. This may involve improving drop-in shelters or opening land for the homeless to build their own personal shelters. It may involve a combination of these two solutions.

It is important that we note our research was never intended to find a solution to end homelessness. We instead looked at homeless needs and how they correlate with current and available resources. We found that that some of these resources were lacking in crucial areas. People directly involved with these resources need to discuss what can and should be done to improve the system. This would involve looking at current short-term solutions and weighing them against the importance of ending homelessness in the long-term. The solutions we listed in this paper mostly stem from the views of the homeless and focus little on entirely eradicating

homelessness. Therefore, the causes of homelessness need to be drawn into these solutions in order to not only fulfill homeless needs, but also to investigate a way to end homelessness.

FURTHER RESEARCH

Generally, we would have conducted additional interviews if more time were available. We completed the majority of what we set out to do, which was to discover how/if Madison's food and shelter resources meet the needs of the homeless. However, this is only a limited perspective on the issue of homelessness. At the start of this research project, we were under the assumption that private organizations and the city may project their own ideas about the needs of the homeless. Our goal is not to use an outside perspective of these needs, such as how the city views the needs of the homeless, but instead to interview the homeless specifically about what their needs are and compare this with what is available in downtown Madison. We were able to complete this by talking with the homeless and individuals involved with resources, but more can be done to verify our results.

First, we need to interview more homeless individuals. Although we talked to several people, their views are only a small fraction of the homeless community's voice. More homeless interviews would help to verify our conclusions and possibly discover new information about Madison's resources. Second, interviews with business owners would be valuable. Since some homeless utilize private property for shelter, it is important to understand why certain business owners allow the homeless to utilize their properties while others do not. Many business policies, however, do not allow employees to comment on issues such as homelessness, so this may not be realistic. Third, we need to interview more people involved with homeless resources. We talked to two service providers, a food resource and a shelter resource, but more interviews like this would certainly shed some light on how these resources operate and what Madison can do to make improvements. We also hoped to volunteer at food or shelter service providers in the area. This would have opened doors to gain further interviews with service workers while

possibly allowing us to gain trust in the homeless community. This is one way to gain access to more interviews in future research.

Finally, we would interview politicians, resource providers and homeless specialists about possible solutions. We noted earlier that many of the solutions we came up with require weighing out short-term solutions for immediate concerns with the long-term goal of eradicating homelessness. We could expand our research by investigating the causes of homelessness and drawing these into our solutions. We did not have time to look at the causes of homelessness in-depth, but more research in this area could help us bring short-term and long-term goals together. In addition, talking with politicians and service providers would provide insight into how the city allocates private, state and federal funding in the issue of homelessness. This would help determine whether opening more drop-in shelters and allocating public land to the homeless are actually possible. Again, we would have to weigh these solutions with further research on the causes of homelessness in order to determine whether they would be productive.

Generally, further research on this topic would require additional interviews to broaden responses and help verify our results. We intended to conduct more interviews, but time constraints did not allow for this. Further research would also involve investigating the feasibility of possible solutions. Research on funding and legal policies would help shed light on this. Finally, more research on the causes of homelessness is crucial. Our research could help the homeless, but making it easier to be homeless may turn out to be a temporary solution that merely focuses on the complaints of the homeless rather than one that works to end homelessness; it may be counter-productive. We need to make sure possible solutions will help the homeless, not hinder their well-being.

FIGURE



Figure 1

APPENDIX

1.1 Privacy Statement

This interview is for a research project we are conducting for our Geography 565 course at the University of Wisconsin – Madison. We are looking at the homeless in downtown Madison and the food and shelter resources available to them. Our goal is to examine homeless needs, what resources meet these needs and how accessible these resources are.

Your confidentiality is our chief concern while we conduct our research. We will not be audio taping this interview. Your responses will be used only for this specific research project and will not be made accessible to any other individuals or institutions. Also, you do not have to answer any questions you do not want to.

Finally, we will send you an electronic copy of our final project upon request. You are also invited to attend a public seminar where we will be presenting our research in mid-December. If you, at any time, have questions about the purpose of our research or how your responses will be used, feel free to ask. Thank you for participating in our research project – we truly appreciate your help.

Interview Questions

2.1 The Homeless

- 1) How long have you been living in Madison?
- 2) Can you describe your current living situation?
- 3) How long have you lived this way?
- 4) Have you been homeless in other cities?
- 5) What do you consider daily needs in terms of food and shelter?
- 6) Have you utilized any public or private resources to meet these needs?
- 7) Do you feel there are adequate resources for the homeless in Madison?
- 8) What could be done for improvement?
- 9) Is there anything else you have to say about Madison's relationship with the homeless?

2.2 Street Pulse Worker

- 1) What is your position and what are your responsibilities at Street Pulse?
- 2) How long have you been working with this organization?

- 3) What does Street Pulse accomplish for the homeless?
- 4) Do you feel Street Pulse has changed your lifestyle in any way?
- 5) What do you personally consider daily needs in terms of food and shelter?
- 6) Have you utilized any public or private resources to meet these needs?
- 7) Do you feel there are adequate resources for the homeless in Madison?
- 8) Do you believe the income from Street Pulse is helpful/sufficient?

2.3 Homeless Specialist

- 1) Please describe your work with the homeless.
- 2) What are the food and shelter needs of the homeless in downtown Madison?
- 3) What food options and shelter programs are available to the homeless in downtown Madison, WI
- 4) How do the food options and shelter programs available to homeless people in Madison, WI compare to other medium sized cities?
- 5) In your opinion, are these food and shelter resources accessible to the homeless or are there barriers?
- 6) In your opinion, are Madison's current food and shelter options appealing to the homeless?
- 7) Is there anything else the city, state or private organizations can do to better support the homeless?

2.3 Shelter / Food Pantry Workers

- 1) How long have you been working with the homeless?
- 2) What resources does (*your group*) offer to the homeless?
- 3) What do you think are the primary needs of the homeless in downtown Madison?
- 4) How does (*your group*) address these needs?
- 5) How does an individual qualify to utilize these resources?
- 6) Is there anything else the city, state or private organizations can do to better support the homeless?

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