



Giving Voice to the Unhoused Community: A Photovoice Education Intervention

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Living Unhoused

- **Incidence** of people living unhoused increasing world-wide
- **The US:** homelessness has been increasing since 2017
 - Currently at an all-time high
 - On a single night in 2024, 771,000 people were living unhoused
- **Homelessness increasing among**
 - Families
 - Youths
 - Elders
- **Homelessness more prevalent among**
 - Marginalized populations
 - Including people of color and indigenous people



Health Implications of Living Unhoused

- **Health:** Associated with significant health issues
- **Access:** Unhoused people lack access to
 - Safe spaces, clean water, food, facilities for personal hygiene
 - Health care, medications, medical supplies
 - Equitable care
- **Bias:** among health care providers
 - Unhoused people report feeling less valued than other clients
 - They feel invisible, rushed, judged, stigmatized
 - They describe stereotyping, implicit & explicit bias from providers
 - Subsequently, they seek health care only when necessary
 - Compounded when they belong to other marginalized groups

Photovoice



➤ Telling their own stories

- Unhoused people don't always get to tell their own stories
- Researchers seek out shelter staff, volunteers, social workers
- When unhoused people do get to speak, researchers report
 - They reveal a unique perspective & expert knowledge

➤ Photovoice

- Members of unhoused community take photographs
- Express their perspective of what it's like to live unhouse
- Researchers have used photovoice with other communities
 - Draw attention to a topic or issue
 - Increase understanding and empathy
 - Participants feel validated and satisfied at being heard

Purpose



➤ The purpose of this study

- To give voice to a marginalized community through photovoice
- To obtain a rich description of the lived experiences of those who live unhoused
- To explore homelessness from the perspective of people who live unhoused

Methods



Design and Sample

- Qualitative, descriptive study
- Utilized photovoice & recorded, open-ended interviews
- Recruitment: convenience sample (n=19) from shelter
- Thirteen participants returned with photos for interview
 - 1 participant had unusable film
- Demographics
 - 7 males, ages 33-66 (mean 52); 5 females ages 23-37
 - 5 African American, 7 Caucasian
 - Time spent homeless ranged from 3 months to 20 years

Methods



■ Measures

- Researcher developed
- Demographic tool
- Open-ended interview with prompts

■ Procedure

- Distributed cameras: Participants asked to take photos that illustrated what living unhoused meant to them
- Interviews:
 - Selected favorite photos
 - Explained why these images resonated with them
- Photos & narratives made into posters
 - Used as teaching intervention (reported elsewhere)

Methods



➤ Data Analysis

- Participants identified by numeric code
- Interviews recorded and transcribed verbatim
- Content analysis of themes
- Data coding performed by 3 members of team
- Iterative process to achieve consensus in final themes
- Major themes & sub-themes identified

➤ Trustworthiness

- Bracketing to mitigate researcher bias
- Audit trail
- Member checking immediately after interviews
- Triangulation through iterative review of data

Findings: Demoralized



➤ Sadness

- Homelessness is walking down a path alone. (33 C M)
- The face of homelessness is sadness. (66 C Male)
- When you're homeless and you're walking around, it's kind of depressing. (35 C Male)

➤ Powerlessness

- This place is unsanitary... But they have authority over me. I can't tell them, clean this place up... Having to tolerate this kind of stuff is what homelessness means to me. (59 C Male)

➤ Neglect

- Some debris by the railroad tracks. You see a lot of this when you're homeless. You see a lot of neglected areas (35 C Male)

Findings: Demoralized

➡ Longing for more

- ➡ I was amazed at how this house and the colorful trees made me feel comfortable... If I was able to have a yard... to have a home of my own. It gave me hope and assurance of where I should be. (43 AA Male)

➡ Systemic Injustice

- ➡ Most of the people up there are veterans who came home from the war and didn't have a home anymore. (33 AA Male)
- ➡ When I was younger, me and my mom were homeless and we would sleep in our car. (33 AA Female)
- ➡ Every missile fired, every battleship launched is... a theft from those who hunger and are not fed... The homeless, the people who are hurting; money spent on war [and not them] is a trade off. (66 C Male)

Findings: Demoralized

➡ Unsafe

- ➡ In the shelter, the people were horrible... so we were roaming the streets with no place to go. A lot of people were sleeping under this bridge. (33 AA Female)
- ➡ This is Bloomington Police Department. The cameras would record any problems, any bullying situation, and the cops would come down and talk to us. It was like a space safe. (23 C Female)

➡ Discarded

- ➡ The dumpsters represent how America discards a lot of stuff, including its people. (66 C Male)
- ➡ The people in this building (Woodhill Towers) don't care about homeless people. They run you out. They want to hurt you. (64 C Male)

Findings: Demoralized

➡ Hard on children

- ➡ It's got our diaper bag, our 'stuff to do bag,' my purse. There's a spot for my son to sit. We have to have everything we could possibly need on us at all times. We keep a blanket and umbrella. If it rains, we hold the umbrella on him (3 year old son) so he doesn't get wet... It's a high stress situation. (33 C Female; children 11 and 3)
- ➡ I take my baby here and he won't feel so overwhelmed... It's kind of hard on him in the shelter. He cries and screams a lot. I really don't want him going through this... seeing the bad side of things. (23 AA Female)
- ➡ To be homeless with children can be difficult at times. The women's lounge is a safe, warm environment for kids and parents. (37 AA Female)

Findings: Hopeful



➤ Motivated

- If I was able to have a yard... I'd like to have my own home. Living in the shelter, how congested it is, that motivates me to move forward. Keeps me striving for more. (43 AA Male)

➤ Grateful

- People need to be thankful and appreciate that there's someone to help them when they are struggling. I've had nothing but help, especially from my counsellor. (62 C M)

➤ Community

- Lots of people go to the library... to congregate in the social area. It's their way of keeping together. (37 AA Female)
- We call it 'the square.' People sit and talk. A place that everybody hung out and got caught up. There's a garbage can where a lot of people found a food source. I know that sounds kind of rough, but that's what happens sometimes. (23 C Female)

Findings: Hopeful

➤ Resourceful

- It's all about the person. What they do to access resources to get on their feet. I chose PATH... they help you get whatever resources you need, birth certificate, housing. It's a good resource, right up the street. (37 AA Female)
- Trinity Lutheran Church. You need to have hope. A church is a place of hope. (66 C Male)
- Second 'Pres' church, they have a big lunch for all the homeless and families. They are provided scarves, hats, and a place to go. They have a lot of helpful resources (23 C Female)
- Abundant Life... it's not the greatest support system, but it's something. They provide clothes, food pantries and a place to go for Bible study... You can do laundry and take showers. (23 C Female)

Implications



➤ Research

- Seek to better understand the experience of living unhoused.
- Gimme Shelter event, 2026, to help researchers better understand one night in the life of an unhoused person

➤ Education

- Posters have been used to educate nursing students
- Themes could be used with the posters for further context and deeper understanding of the experience.