

A Rapid Assessment of the Response to Homelessness in the University District

“Addressing homelessness is important because it is a bellwether for our society,” writes Seattle University President Stephen V. Sundborg. “It tells us if our education system is working, our criminal justice system is working, our physical and mental health systems are working, and whether we are providing our community members the support and opportunities they need.”¹ Are things working? Why are nearly 100 people sleeping in tents in a church parking lot literally in the shadow of one of the nation's premier universities, as homeless advocates consider where to move this community by mid-November? This week's LO focusing on homelessness in the University District neighborhood forced our group to look at these issues, first by researching neighborhood assessment tools. We surveyed research methods, reviewed social services in the University District, made field observations, interviewed key contacts, and covered the district as a team.

My contacts were religious organizations and groups, shelters, and food pantries. It became clear quickly that religious organizations were leaders. I also chose to focus just on groups based in the district, not those serving the homeless city-wide. Some contacts I identified also were those researched by my colleagues. Brad Cleveland and I shared our contacts initially, which he developed into a spreadsheet sent to everyone. Gita Krishnaswamy and Amy Lee found useful neighborhood assessment tools that were shared with the group.^{2,3} My methodology borrowed from these tools. It also combined traditional news-gathering methods and an adapted rapid rural appraisal system^{4,5} that focused on key contact outreach and interviews.

The University District Neighborhood, Location & Characteristics: For the purposes of this report, the University District is the area north of Portage Bay, east of Interstate-5, south of Ravenna, and inclusive of the University of Washington (UW). Our group used a map generated by the City of Seattle to delineate the area (<http://clerk.ci.seattle.wa.us/~public/nmaps/html/NN-1120S.htm>). Though a Seattle neighborhood, the district's qualities challenge its definition as one. The Congress for a New Urbanism claims neighborhoods should be mixed-used and pedestrian friendly, and have a range of housing prices and parks and open spaces. Physical space should promote daily interactions to strengthen civic ties.⁶

Though the district integrates public transportation and transit corridors, vehicle traffic is a major burden. In 2008, daily vehicle trips on NE 45th Street were exceeding 45,000.⁷ Bicycle corridors are surprisingly few given the student population. The area is urban, with little shared green space outside of the UW campus. I-5 forms a powerful physical, audio, and visual barrier to its west, and the area is crossed by major thoroughfares, including NE 45th and NE 50th streets, Pacific, and Roosevelt. The UW frames the eastern edge. The district includes a blend of commercial, multi-family residential, single-family residential, and residential-commercial zones. The university is the primary employer and land owner, and the region is home to a large student body. However, our team decided not to do a field survey of the University proper, though we acknowledged UW facilities are utilized by the homeless.

Crime also is a problem. The Seattle Police Department reports 24 crimes, from auto theft to forced robbery, occurred in the district Nov. 2-9, 2010, a period overlapping our fieldwork.⁸ As noted in my first post, the district's 2004 community planning process focused on community safety issues and developing programs to fund services for homeless youth.⁹

Homelessness in Seattle and the University

District: The advocacy group Committee to End Homelessness estimates that nearly 9,000 homeless persons live in King County, of which more than half reside in Seattle, according to a recent shelter survey.¹⁰ The committee reports that children 0-17 make up 34% of all individuals living in shelters in King County, while those 18-25 comprise 11% of the shelter population. A full half of the homeless are families with single parents.¹⁰

Though homelessness, particularly among youth, has been a fixture of the district for years, its most visible manifestation today is the Nickelsville tent city encampment in the parking lot of University Congregational United Church of Christ, at NE 45th Street and 15th Avenue NE, across the street from the UW. A permit for the encampment expires Nov. 15. On Nov. 8, Seattle Mayor Mike McGinn announced the city would sanction the development of a permanent tent city in Seattle's SoDo neighborhood at an old factory site—a decision that immediately drew protests from SoDo area businesses, some city leaders, and the homeless alike. One anonymous



Nickelsville, photo by Rudy Owens

homeless resident of Nickelsville told the Seattle Times: "We want to be where people will be able to see us. Then that way they can see that homelessness is not going away." However, the proposed site will not be ready until March 2011.¹¹

Methods to Assess the District. Two techniques shared by Lee and Krishnaswamy provided methods to examine the district's physical space. Caughy et al. (2001) propose a brief observational measure from systematic social observations (SSO) to assess urban neighborhood characteristics. They acknowledge data collection is complex and requires intensive training.² Furr-Holden et al. (2008) present a quantitative tool to let researchers make a baseline assessment of a neighborhood's physical and social environment. Their tool is called the Neighborhood Inventory for Environmental Typology, or the NIffETy method.³ Training procedures also are critical for this method, and the safety of observers. (Please see Lee's day 1 post for a detailed summary of those two systems.)

Cleveland used information shared by Lee and compiled a short survey instrument that allowed some of our group to measure/quantify land uses, physical features, and people during our walk-throughs. (Kate Cole and Erika Fardig had already visited their quadrant before this was shared.) I used Google maps of the district for my field assessment of the area south of NE 45th Street to Portage Bay, and between I-5 and the UW. I relied on my own perceptions of safety and risk.

Summary of Results, Nov. 9, 2010, Foot Survey: Given my quadrant's size, I decided to make four passes, north and south, on two streets zoned single-family residential (9th and 8th avenues NE) and on two with neighborhood-commercial or commercial zoning (Brooklyn Avenue and University Avenue), all between NE 45th and NE 41st streets. I walked between 6-7:30 p.m. I did not quantify the buildings. I looked for signs of physical disorder (vacant lots, trash, graffiti, vandalism, etc.), social disorder indicators (presence of homeless, loitering, intoxicated persons, etc.), and territoriality (crime watch signs, barriers to intruders). I marked on my maps the number of empty lots, parks, green spaces, and toilets.

I found little evidence of social or physical disorder or territoriality, except gated windows on some street-level apartments. There was remarkably little trash. Only two signs of graffiti were visible. I counted eight lots, half for parking and half fenced signaling property slated for development. Lighting was poor on the non-commercial streets. It did not feel safe to be alone, though I saw no criminality. Ninth and 8th avenues had few pedestrians: 6 and 3 respectively. Of these, I guessed all but two were students. Brooklyn Avenue had about 50 pedestrians, given the

presence of restaurants for student clientele. About three-fourths were students. University Avenue had more than 200 pedestrians. It was vibrant, with busy foot traffic and crowded restaurants on a rainy Tuesday school night. All were adults, and three in four students. I saw no children and 2 dogs being walked. Both of commercial streets felt safe because of better lighting and more foot traffic. I did not count the heavy foot traffic on NE 45th Street or NE 41st Street.

I observed no signs of homeless loitering or habitation in the many building garage spaces and driveways. There were no public toilets, except further south on the Burke-Gilman Trail. There was only a single lot-sized city park. There was no other green space. Auto traffic was very heavy. During the 1.5 hours of walking, I counted what I perceived to be 8 homeless men (4 black, 1 Hispanic, 3 white) 1 homeless woman (Hispanic/white). They were seen on University Avenue, 9th Avenue NE, and Brooklyn.

I also walked by the I-5 overpass to see if there were signs of habitation. It was very poorly lit, extremely loud, and very unsafe. The noise created a hostile environment. I did not fully check all the areas under the bridge. I looped my walk down to the Burke-Gilman Trail by the Wall of Death and back up to NE 42nd Street. The trail provided the only open green space in the areas I walked. The trail felt safer than the streets.

Religious Organizations/Groups, Shelters, Food Pantries: The organizations I researched online and contacted by email and phone (except Sojourner Place) include:

Name/Location	Type of Service	Description
Elizabeth Gregory Home 1604 NE 50th St., Seattle, WA 98105	Transitional Housing, Employment Services	Nonprofit serving single homeless women with transitional housing and day center. Can support 9 women up to 6-24 months. Case management, mental health, substance abuse services, job readiness skills, domestic violence support, life skill classes, and family reunification services.
ROOTS (Rising Out of the Shadows) 1415 NE 43rd ST. Seattle, WA 98105	Overnight Shelter, Meals, Hygiene	In its 6th year, ROOTS runs an overnight shelter for 25 youth (ages 18-25) a night, evening and morning meals, hygiene facilities, and the other services. Currently serving 400 youth per year in the district.
Sojourner Place 5071 8th Ave. NE Seattle, WA 98105	Transitional Housing, Shelter, Employment Services	Faith-based (Sisters of Providence) shelter for abused women. Long-term transitional housing, social services, life skills/employment coaching.
Street Youth Ministry 4540 15th Ave. NE Seattle, WA 98105	Shelter, Spiritual, Social Services, Meals, Employment Services	Nonprofit run out of University Presbyterian Church serving homeless youth. Provides food, clothing, shelter, drop-in services, advocacy, employment mentoring, and jobs classes.
University District Food Bank 1413 NE 50th St.	Food/Household Goods	Food bank for more than 1,000 families living in 98102, 98103, 98105, 98107, 98112, 98115, and 98125 zip codes. Located in the basement of the University

Seattle, WA 98105		Christian Church. Supported by in-kind food donations from Northwest Harvest also.
University Lutheran Church 1604 NE 50th St., Seattle, WA 98105	Funding/Logistical Support for Social Services, Spiritual	Supports University District food bank, lunches on Capital Hill, ROOTS shelter services, the Elizabeth Gregory Home (founder), the University Churches Emergency Fund, and other services.
University Presbyterian Church 4540 15th Ave. NE Seattle, WA 98105	Funding/Logistical Support for Social Services, Spiritual	Supports the Street Youth Ministry, University Food Bank, University Churches Emergency Fund, and Nickelsville projects.
University Street Ministry 4740 University Way NE Seattle, WA 98105	Meals, Social Services	Faith-based outreach service providing six meals weekly (Teen Feed) to 40-70 youth in U District religious facilities. Provides mentoring/social services (STOP) and transition coaching (Service Links for Youth).
University Temple United Methodist Church 1415 NE 43rd Street, Seattle WA 98105	Funding/Logistical Support for Social Services, Facility Space for ROOTS, Spiritual	Supports Human Needs Appeal (HNA), a stewardship program backing organizations who support the needy. HNA funds in 2009 went to: Country Doctor Free Teen Clinic, ROOTS, Sanctuary Art Center, University Churches Emergency Fund, University District Street Ministry (Teen Feed, Service Links for Youth).

Street Youth Ministry (SYM) offers a work incentive program serving about 100 youth, ages 18-26, a year. It gives bus tokens and gift cards as rewards for those finding work and staying employed. The group also received a grant to support resume building and online job searching, with iPods given to those completing 6 classes. Elizabeth Gregory Home Sojourner Place provide job-mentoring services in-house. The head of ROOTS noted his group steers youth to the YMCA program called "Working Zone."

In my email to groups/churches about employment services, I also sought opinions regarding: 1): whether district residents and businesses support the social safety nets provided; 2): how supportive the City of Seattle has been to those serving the homeless community in the district. A summary of my findings from the respondents is below:

Stakeholder	Backing from Community?	Support from City of Seattle?	Comments by Stakeholder
-University Lutheran Church -Rev. Ron Moe-Lobeda	Overall yes.	Yes, but just to existing groups older than 4-6 years.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Since first Nickelsville came to district 1.5 years ago, partners are having a conversation on homelessness every month. This includes faith groups, UW, businesses, and residents. For his church's neighbors the use of church buildings to provide housing has been more palatable, rather than people sleeping in alcoves. There is a "cooperative spirit" now. - City has not funded the Elizabeth Gregory Home. City is only supporting groups already "in the system." His

			church is relying on its donor base. - Demand for services "has tripled in recent years [food bank]." Demand has increased since the recession began.
-ROOTS, -Matt Fox, Director of Operations	Yes, broad-based support found, including from business leaders.	Yes, city is among ROOTS' largest funders. City supports Teen Feed also.	-Demand for service has been increasing. In 2009, ROOTS served 443 unduplicated youth, provided 8,600 bed nights, and turned away 1,761 times because of space constraints. As of Oct. 31, 2010, ROOTS counts 6,977 bed nights to 458 unduplicated guests, and turned away 1,771 times for lack of space.
-University Churches Emergency Fund -Jo Ferguson, Ex. Dir.	Some, but not from businesses.	No ("zero help").	-Notes there is lots of "emotional support, not financial support" from anyone but churches, and a bit from individuals, the Lions, and the Masons. There is no business support. -The fund has expanded its mailing list and is working to get grant-ready. They just secured 501c3 status, and will start fund-raising now.
-SYM -Rowena Harper, Ex. Dir..	In-kind donations, volunteers, tolerant attitude.	Not formally, but employee giving from city employees.	-Employment services are costly to maintain. Half their funding comes from community, 30 percent from grants and foundations. -Demand in 2010 has not changed since 2009 for their clientele, need still high with recession.

Though our team developed a systematic way to understand the neighborhood and how it was addressing homelessness, we did not address public-funding issues tied to reduced tax revenues, the contracting economy, local job prospects, cost-benefit analyses of social services, and city politics. Such discussions would be helpful. State worker-training services were not identified as contacts. Had there been more time and resources, substantive communication with the homeless population would have helped. What's more, having lived off and on in Seattle for more than 23 years, I am struck by the stubborn tenacity of homelessness in the district. The creative approaches by the liberal churches in the district represent an adaptive response, but this preliminary investigation cannot conclude if this level of support is sustainable.

Questions:

1. Does anyone in the group have a friend, colleague, or family member who is/was homeless? If yes, how does that shape your views of the issue in this neighborhood?
2. Did anyone uncover research that provides survey data on attitudes in the district (in the last 2-4 years) concerning crime, homelessness, traffic, land use, or related topics?

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