Implementing By-Name Databases to Resolve Homelessness in Charlottesville Virginia

Comparing Causes of Charlottesville Homelessness Found in Interviews to Established Causes in Literature

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By
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On my honor as a University student, I have neither given nor received unauthorized aid on this assignment as defined by the Honor Guidelines for Thesis-Related Assignments.

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Homelessness in the United States and Current Practices to Address It

In 1987 America passed the Stewart B. McKinney Act, the first legislation addressed towards mitigating homelessness (National Academies, 2018). Since then, government bodies, such as the US Interagency Council of Homelessness (USICH) and the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), have worked to combat homelessness through developing government programs and granting funding to non-profits (National Academies, 2018). However, in any given local community, the resources allocated to solving homelessness are often mismanaged. For instance, since 1990 the federal government has evaluated the effectiveness of ten social programs, and they have found that nine of them had "weak or no positive effects" (Stid, 2012, p. 2). There are currently over five hundred thousand people experiencing homelessness in America (National Academies, 2018). As income inequality expand and housing prices increase, this problem has the potential to worsen.

The work of Rosanne Haggerty, as described in the letter "Getting to the Proof Points" (2018), of the non-profit Community Solutions has outlined a way to stabilize this problem. She contends that local communities need a centralized database to understand the causes of homelessness in their communities. A version of this database implemented for Charlottesville Virginia will be the technical portion of this project. Furthermore, all organizations who touch upon homelessness in a community – housing authorities, hospitals, non-profits, police, etc. – need to be able to add to and access this information and must be dedicated to working together, using methods and logic that are supported quantitatively, to mitigate homelessness within the local community.

In order for such a database to be successful, however, communities need to understand the causes of homelessness. This will inform the type of information that is stored in this

database. A significant amount of research has been done on this question, and while the causes of homelessness in a community will likely follow general trends, they will still vary from place to place. One way to understand the causes of homelessness in a specific community is through interviews. Long form interviews provide nuanced qualitative information that surveys or questionnaires are not suited for. Thus, for the STS portion of my research I will be analyzing long form interviews of people experiencing homelessness within the Charlottesville community to extract the cause of their homelessness and compare these causes to the established literature. This analysis will provide an example of how to understand homelessness within a community so that the community can then know what information is relevant for the By-Name database, an information technology solution to help address homelessness.

Explanation of the By-Name Database

A part of America's problem in addressing homelessness is the lack of information on homeless populations. HUD mandates that cities do an annual point in time census. The census alone is inadequate information for a community to address homelessness as it gives little information on the causes, and so the community is unable to make an informed decision on where to shift resources (Community Solutions, 2018, pg. 9). Rosanne Haggerty proposes that community adopt By-Name databases, that is databases where all relevant information on a person experiencing homelessness can be looked up by name.

In order for this database to be effective it needs to have several qualities. First, it needs to be assessable to all groups within the local community who touch upon homelessness. Second, it needs to contain any relevant information that may help resolve a person's homelessness. This includes medical information, information on mental illness, incarceration history, substance abuse history, what programs the person is enrolled in, and information on familial relationships.

Homelessness is complicated and caused by interrelated factors. Each situation is unique to the individual, and so to resolve it, the community needs information pertaining to each individual.

Creating a database with such information does create conflicts, though. Primarily, the person experiencing homelessness may not want to divulge this sensitive information. This is why it is an essential requirement that this database is secure. Having the assurance that this database is secure will go a long way in making it trustworthy for people to provide their personal information. There will inevitably be people who refuse to add their information. However, with proper education of the benefits of this database, this group may be minimized. A complete database allows for communities to better understand the issues that are causing homelessness in their community and to shift resources to address these issues.

A concrete example is that of Lake County Illinois where Community Solutions helped to implement a By-Name database that helped eliminate veteran homelessness in the area. Ranney (2021) describes how as the community looked at the By-Name database, they discovered that "many veterans experiencing homelessness were staying at the local VA medical center's domiciliary care, which provided medical rehabilitation and treatment, for extended periods of time. The team soon realized that many of those individuals were not moving into permanent housing because they needed to live at the domiciliary to access dental care." (p. 6) Lake County was able to create other avenues for the veterans to receive dental care, and this caused veterans to start moving to more permanent housing. There is always an explanation for homelessness, and often it is one that is unintuitive. Having a By-Name database allows for a community to untangle and find the root causes.

Comparing Causes of Homelessness in Charlottesville to the Established Literature

For the STS portion of my thesis project, I will be investigating the causes of homeless using recorded interviews collected from guests of The Haven – a Charlottesville nonprofit day shelter for those experiencing homelessness. I will compare the causes found in these interviews to causes described in established literature to demonstrate the nuances that arise when investigating homelessness in a specific city. These interviews were not conducted for the purpose of research. They were conducted for the purpose of a media project meant to humanize people experiencing homelessness. However, because the questions were directed towards vital issues such as why the guests became homeless and what difficulties they face on a daily basis, the interviews are still rich in information that can be used in an academic setting. In total there are over eight hours of interview material. The interviews were conducted in a private setting and lasted around one hour each. The group of interviewees was racially diverse and evenly split in terms of gender.

The best established literature to compare these Haven interviews to is research that was interview based. One such study is Hanna Thomas's et. al "Understanding Rapid Re-housing: Findings from Initial Interviews with Rapid Re-housing Participants" (2019). This study summarized the qualitative trends found in thirty interviews of those experiencing homelessness. Similar to the Haven interviews, Thomas's interviews were orally conducted in private settings. Thomas characterizes the causes of homelessness in stratified groups. Figure 1 depicts these groups with the most inner circle ("Trigger") being the most direct cause of homelessness and outer circles ("Childhood challenges") being factors that lead up to the homelessness.

Figure 1

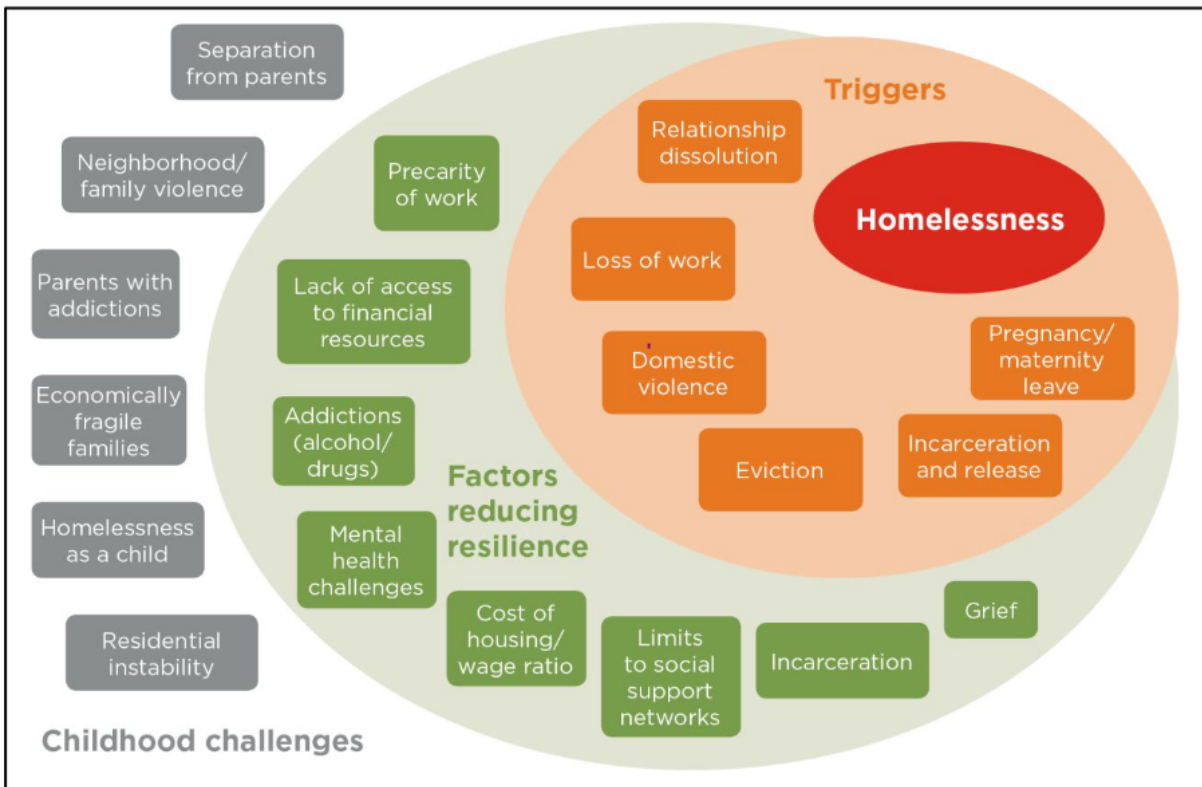Thomas's Breakdown of Stratification of Homelessness (pg. 7)

Figure 2 summarizes how frequently each trigger event caused homelessness for interviewees in Thomas's studies. A cursory analysis shows a similar breakdown in trigger events for The Haven interviews (Figure 3). More analysis, including transcribing the audio interviews to text and reading them, will be done as the bulk of this project and will likely uncover nuances within the Charlottesville homeless population that are not reflected in the established literature. If Charlottesville were to set up a By-Name database, it would be essential that the information contained in that database reflect these nuances.
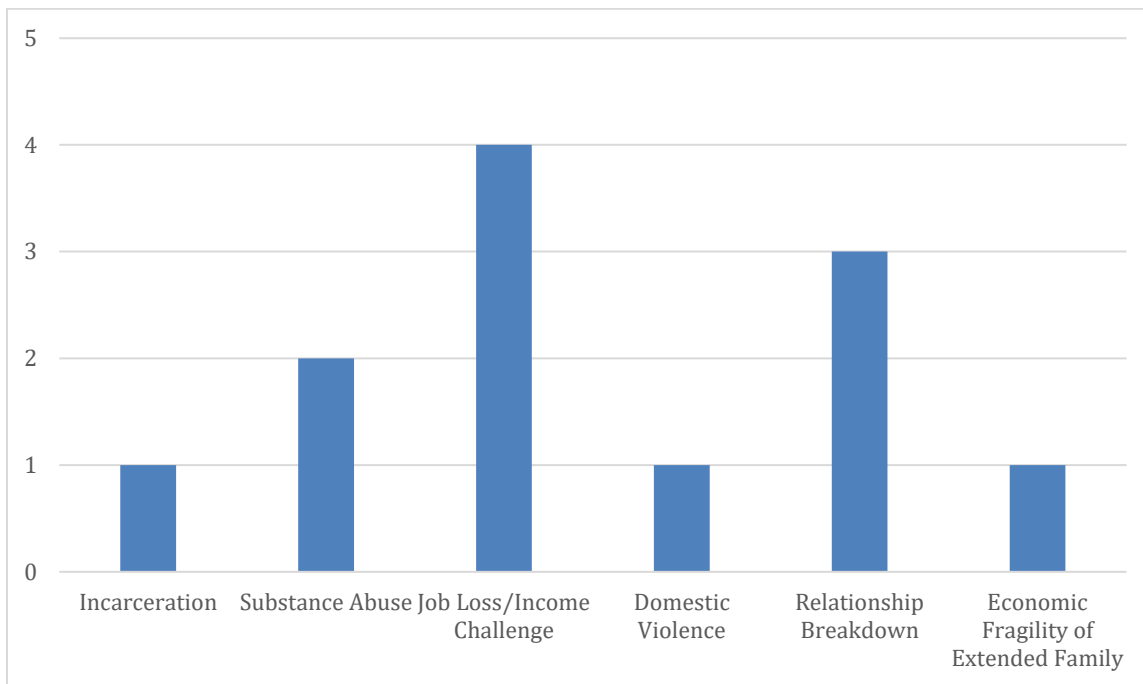
Figure 2

Thomas's Breakdown of Frequency For Each Trigger of Homelessness (Pg. 12)

Figure 3

Haven Interview Breakdown of Frequency for Each Trigger of Homelessness (Created by Author)

Intended Outcomes of the Project

There are over five hundred thousand people experiencing homelessness in America, and with problems, such as income inequality and gentrification, this population could easily increase (National Academies, 2018). The By-Name database will allow for communities to identify trends within the homeless population. The By-Name database, and generally understanding the problem of homelessness in a quantitative, detailed manner, is important to solving homelessness. Only once a community identifies a problem can it be solved. However, setting up the database and knowing the relevant information to include requires an understanding of the causes of homelessness specific to a local community. The STS portion of my research will highlight how nuanced and unique the problem of homelessness can be in a community. For both the technical and STS portion, this project will be focusing on Charlottesville Virginia. However, the research will be done in a way that the lessons can be applied to the country as a whole.

Homelessness is a solvable problem in America. Other developed countries, such as Japan, Canada, Denmark and many others, have homeless populations fractions of the size of America (even considering the respective population of each country) (Salhani, 2016). I intend to have my research show that the By-Name database can set American on the path towards resolving homelessness that it can and should be on.

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