

EXPLORING HOMELESSNESS AND HOUSING INSECURITY IN CHELSEA, MA



METROBRIDGE



ABOUT THIS REPORT

This report is a compilation of the work completed by Boston University graduate students in the Sociological Research Methods course instructed by Assistant Professor Jessica Simes during the Fall 2018 semester.

The content was compiled and edited by Stuti Das, PhD candidate in Sociology, and reviewed by Emily Robbins, MetroBridge Program Manager and Associate Professor David Glick, MetroBridge Faculty Director. This report was designed by Fatima Blanca Munoz, Program Manager at the Initiative on Cities.



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ABOUT BU METROBRIDGE

MetroBridge empowers students across Boston University to tackle urban issues, and at the same time, helps city leaders confront key challenges. MetroBridge connects with local governments to understand their priorities, and then collaborates with Boston University faculty to translate each city's unique needs into course projects. Students in undergraduate and graduate classes engage in city projects as class assignments while working directly with local government leaders during the semester. The goal of MetroBridge is to mutually benefit both the Boston University community and local governments by expanding access to experiential learning and by providing tailored support to under-resourced cities. MetroBridge is funded by the College of Arts and Sciences and housed at Boston University's Initiative on Cities.



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INTRODUCTION

The MetroBridge program embeds real-world projects from local governments into courses across Boston University (BU). During the Fall of 2018, graduate students in the Sociological Research Methods class undertook an investigation into homelessness and housing insecurity for the City of Chelsea. This report is a compilation of the most significant information and recommendations from the students' work.

The Sociological Research Methods course covers the fundamentals of social science research design and introduces graduate students to a comprehensive array of research methods used by sociologists. An emphasis is placed on principles that are applicable in all kinds of research, from surveys to field study, from intensive interviews to historical analysis. The focus of this study is the issue of homelessness and housing insecurity in Chelsea, a city just north of Boston. The City of Chelsea asked BU students to study:

- Who are the homeless in Chelsea and how are they faring?
- How do different community members perceive and deal with homelessness?
- What types of eservices could be needed to serve homeless populations?

The sociology students responded to this research question by: conducting in-person interviews with individuals from social service organizations, housing development agencies, local government, and Chelsea residents; completing ethnographies of various locations in the city, including the downtown corridor and a Zoning Board of Appeals meeting; and compiling literature reviews on various aspects of homelessness.

This report first outlines the key takeaways from the interview process. These interviews revealed information about both the respondents' views on the factors contributing to homelessness and also their suggested solutions for addressing the issue in Chelsea. The contributing factors identified were: housing affordability; gentrification; substance abuse; and socioeconomic and immigration status. The responses also highlighted an underlying tension about housing affordability between homeowners and renters in the city. The proposed solutions to homelessness included: developing a better way to quantify homelessness in the city; creating more housing that is affordable; empowering tenants to understand their rights; and offering wider access to substance abuse treatments. At the end of this section are proposed solutions from the students participating in the study, which include encouraging a more democratic public input process on housing project proposals.

The report then provides highlights of the literature reviews conducted by the students, which covers the following topics: conceptual debates on homelessness; structural causes and consequences of the absence of affordable housing; gentrification and displacement; and U.S. and international comparisons on homelessness.

Lastly, the report provides a summary of the ethnographies conducted by the students of the Chelsea Public Library, Bellingham Square, Iglesia La Luz de Cristo, a Zoning Board of Appeals meeting, and a convening of Healthy Chelsea coalition.



SUMMARY OF INTERVIEWS

This section reports the key findings of the two dozen interviews carried out by the students between October and November 2018. Every group conducted at least five semi-structured interviews, each ranging between 30 and 60 minutes in duration, either face-to-face or by phone. A combination of purposive sampling of key stakeholders and convenience sampling of residents and other community members was used in the selection of respondents who included government officials, service providers, Chelsea residents (homeowners as well as renters), and individuals who had experienced or are currently experiencing homelessness themselves.

CONFLICTING VIEWS ON THE EXTENT OF HOMELESSNESS IN CHELSEA

A close reading of the emergent narratives in the interview process suggests that perceptions of homelessness are complicated in Chelsea. The absence of widespread street homelessness is misleading: while it might appear as if there are not many homeless people in the city, that is definitely not the case. With overcrowded housing units and a considerable number of couch surfers, the problem of homelessness is certainly present, although apparently relatively invisible.

No real consensus exists on the actual number of homeless people and the extent of homelessness in the city of Chelsea. Although respondents agreed that the problem of homelessness exists in Chelsea, they differed from one another in their beliefs about the extent of the problem. For example, one of the respondents, a government official, pointed to a decrease in the number of homeless people in Chelsea over the past couple of years mainly due to efforts by governmental and non-governmental advocacy organizations.

Another respondent, also a government official, was of the view that the number of homeless in the area fluctuates widely. According to him, one of the reasons why the homeless come to Chelsea is due to the presence of a large drug treatment center in the city. On the other hand, many of the respondents believed that the actual number of homeless people is more than the official figure which only accounts for “the couple of folks living under the bridge,” bypassing the number of people who are the “invisible”

homeless, since they are not necessarily out on the streets.

Researchers had the opportunity to speak with individuals who have experienced homelessness themselves, and they pointed to a range of places where they have slept: abandoned cars; parks; police stations; fire departments; hospitals; makeshift residence under the bridge (which was later torn down by the police); shacks; ATM machine booths; stairwells; and abandoned garages. Because there are no shelters in Chelsea, individuals are often transported outside the city for shelter. One of them explained that like many people he knows, if he goes to a shelter outside the city, he has no means of getting back because he cannot afford the bus fare.

Interview respondents identified the following as contributing to undercounting: the inability of officials responsible for counting to effectively locate those who are street homeless; the issue of doubling up with family or friends, or couch surfing (wherein people pay money to temporarily stay with other people) and this group's exclusion from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development's (HUD's) official definition of homelessness; and the political pressure to minimize this and related issues.

According to some of the respondents who are service providers, deriving a more accurate estimate of the city's homeless population would require careful consideration of two main data points: the HUD "point-in-time" count, and also the school system's record of student addresses. During a recent point-in-time count, there was only one homeless individual identified in Chelsea, which respondents believe undercounts the actual number of homeless individuals in the city. The respondents explained how taking a count of the homeless population during winter (which HUD mandates) yields potentially inaccurate results since many homeless individuals adopt a strategy called "snowbriety," where they take formal steps to get clean and enter into rehabilitation during the winter, only to leave once the weather warms up. Similarly, schools could act as an important source of information on homeless families. For example, the number of students without an address in the Chelsea Public Schools system was 92 in 2014, and jumped to 300 in 2018. While there are many reasons why a student's file is missing a home address, respondents said this data point could provide policymakers in Chelsea with a more accurate picture of the extent of homelessness in the city.

EXPLORING THE FACTORS CONTRIBUTING TO HOMELESSNESS OR HOUSING INSECURITY

During the interview process, the respondents pointed towards a number of factors they believe contribute to the problem of homelessness in Chelsea. These influences include: housing affordability and gentrification; an informal housing economy wherein illegal subletting is not discouraged; substance abuse; and individuals' socioeconomic position, including immigration status. These factors are described in more detail below.

Housing Affordability

Interview respondents explained the problem of homelessness in Chelsea started worsening after the economic downturn of 2008. As one of the respondents explained, "So first there was the slump, and houses started going out at very low prices, but then the recovery process began, and real estate prices shot up. Rents went real[ly] high, and that pushed a lot of people out of their homes."

One of the chief causes of homelessness in Chelsea is the city's rental housing market, which is viewed as being exorbitantly expensive. While this could be attributed primarily to Chelsea's proximity to the city of Boston, a major business, industrial, and educational hub, there is more to this issue. As one of the respondents pointed out, there have also been recent improvements in transportation networks connecting Chelsea to Boston, a development that has resulted in the construction of many luxury apartments in the area. The interviewee said, "Affordable housing is being replaced by condominiums for two, three or a maximum of four families. This leaves tenants in a very precarious position. In recent years, we have been hearing instances of harassment from landlords. Since they now have the luxury of finding someone who is willing to pay more, for them [they say to current tenants] either pay or be prepared to receive an eviction date."

The situation is further complicated by the exceedingly high demand for affordable housing in the city. However, much of the so-called affordable housing being built in the city is still priced well out of reach of people receiving Supplemental Security Income (SSI) or earning at or below minimum wage. This is because Chelsea's Area Median Income (AMI), which is used to determine eligibility for federally-assisted housing

programs, is reportedly “inflated” because the calculation is not just for the city, but includes Boston and Cambridge where the median incomes are higher as well. Where low-income housing does exist, such as the Chelsea Housing Authority, there is often a very long waiting list.

Gentrification

Gentrification—and its impacts to the housing market and rental housing structures—is also perceived to be contributing to the city’s homelessness problem. Respondents explained that around ten years ago when the city was embroiled in numerous instances of corruption and crime, gentrifying Chelsea was seen by the local government as the only way to revive the reputation of the city.

This effort resulted in a greater focus on beautification. For instance, while Chelsea had just one hotel three years ago, now it has four—and three within blocks of each other. These hotels also attract considerable business mainly due to their proximity to Boston Logan International Airport, and also because of the presence of a Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) building. In fact, according to one interviewee, the FBI reportedly paid the Affordable Housing Trust Fund Board one million dollars not to build affordable housing in its vicinity. [The researcher did not verify the validity of this statement.]

Informal Housing Economy and Absentee Landlords

One strategy that people often adopt to cope with the steep rent structures is participating in an informal housing economy, respondents explained. For example, to be able to pay their rent, renters often resort to re-renting rooms in their apartments illegally. As one of the respondents noted, absentee landlords have significantly contributed to this type of homelessness by encouraging illegal subletting: “Absentee landlords often lead to illegal subletting. So you have four, five and even six member families living in an arrangement without any living room, porch, or even a closet. Often the families residing don’t even have their own set of keys, and so they don’t have access to a kitchen or the bathroom for most part of the day. And then there are people who are taking advantage of this situation and making \$600 off a porch.” One service provider described a family of seven living on a third-floor porch that they had closed in; they were heating it with electric heaters and using a bucket for a toilet.

Substance Abuse

Many respondents viewed the problem of homelessness as closely linked to other problems like substance abuse, alcoholism, and the opioid crisis. As one person

explained, “This has got nothing to do with your race or class. Many people here have the problem of substance abuse. And many of them come from wealthy families. But because of their addiction they are abandoned by the families. So they become homeless.”

Socioeconomic and Immigration Status

The cost of housing in Chelsea has risen so dramatically that people who rent, particularly lower-income individuals and families, are regularly priced out of their homes. In addition to increasing rents for preexisting structures, the new housing developments in Chelsea are also extremely expensive. With more and more luxury units being built, far too few of the units have remained market rate or even affordable at all to the majority of existing Chelsea residents.

Additionally, Chelsea residents who are undocumented immigrants face particular challenges in securing housing that is affordable. These populations are typically lower-income and ineligible for federal housing subsidies from HUD. These residents are also usually fearful of revealing their personal identities, which further perpetuates isolation. Multiple stakeholders including community organizers and residents mentioned how the issue of being scared to access housing assistance or resources has become all the more salient since the Trump administration announced potential complications in green card applications for immigrants who have used public assistance programs in the past. This situation is being further compounded by landlords who capitalize on this fear and violate housing regulations, as undocumented individuals remain reluctant to report issues out of fear of deportation or eviction. For immigrants to the city, the lack of adequate affordable housing creates a scenario that necessitates the deployment of carefully planned survival strategies. The first strategy involves lowering one’s living standards. As a result, many people live with their parents or have roommates. One of the respondents narrated how she has been forced to shift residence and resort to living with her relatives because of the escalating rent structures. For her, moving out of Chelsea does not appear to be a viable option either because, as she says, “The farther you are from Boston, the fewer jobs you find. If you are young, okay, but if you are old as I am, it is hard. All this just make the poor poorest.”

Lack of Inclusive Public Input on Affordable Housing Proposals

While there have been recent proposals for affordable housing projects in Chelsea, these efforts are not always met with community support. However, respondents believe this lack of support stems from the fact that the public feedback process is not

inclusive of all voices throughout the community. The interview process revealed a perception among many respondents that the lack of broad participation in public hearings on affordable housing proposals is one of the biggest factors deterring the approval of future affordable housing projects.

The reason behind this lack of engagement is reportedly rooted in a mistrust of the government among lower-income groups and migrant populations. The City of Chelsea had previously experienced the problem of corruption, making it harder for some resident to place their trust in local government and believe in the goodwill of the projects initiated by the City. In addition, mistrust also stems from the history of discrimination that Latinos have experienced in Chelsea. Moreover, perceptions of what counts as “affordable housing” differs across population groups in the city, and this too poses an obstacle towards gaining public support for the implementation of affordable housing projects.

Federal Funding for Affordable Housing

Lastly, the absence of adequate federal funding towards affordable housing projects is another factor. An employee of an organization that is in the business of building affordable housing units noted, “One of the main issues that we have been facing as an organization that builds affordable housing is the lack of adequate federal funding. The price of land being too high, building affordable housing does not seem to be a viable business model. We would be happy to build more affordable housing, but there aren’t enough resources to do that. Moreover, there is widespread resistance to the idea from existing and potential homeowners. Most people don’t want many poor people around them.”

COMPLICATED VIEWS ON GENTRIFICATION AND HOUSING AFFORDABILITY

One observation to be made from looking at the interview responses as a whole is that there are differing viewpoints on the issue of gentrification and rising home prices (and accompanying housing insecurity) in Chelsea. These clashing opinions reveal an underlying tension between renters and homeowners. One observation to be made from looking at the interview responses as a whole is that there are differing viewpoints on the issue of gentrification and rising home prices (and accompanying housing insecurity)

in Chelsea. These clashing opinions reveal an underlying tension between renters and homeowners.

Respondents who owned homes expressed happiness and pride at the ongoing gentrification processes and viewed the consequences as both ineludible and desirable, and in the best interest of the city's future: "good people are coming." Two of the respondents recollected how growing up in Chelsea was not easy because the atmosphere was "heavy" on the streets and in school, and expressed satisfaction that at present Chelsea is "way more organized, safer, and cleaner."

This sentiment couples with feelings of indignation towards federally subsidized transitional or low-income housing "in their backyard." The general perception is that affordable housing is aesthetically disruptive and reinforces negative stereotypes about the neighborhood that, in turn, creates barriers for commerce to flourish.

In this context, some lower-income residents who have been nurturing hopes of owning property in the future, in articulating their opposition to affordable housing, took care to set themselves apart from those who would need subsidized affordable housing, generally, "single mothers," "homeless," and "unemployed." They want the city to focus on projects that expand access to home ownership, and not on the creation of new affordable units, since they view a greater prevalence of affordable housing as limiting the top value their own property could potentially fetch in the future.

PROPOSED SOLUTIONS TO ADDRESSING HOMELESSNESS IN CHELSEA

An analysis of respondents' views on potential solutions to the problem of homelessness in Chelsea reveals a wide-ranging variation. While there are some who believe that the problem of homelessness can only be addressed by solving those problems that are contributing to it such as the opioid crisis and unemployment, there are others who are of the opinion that homelessness itself is the problem that needs to be addressed through affordable housing. However, given the widespread resistance to the idea of affordable housing, the interview study revealed the need to direct attention towards community engagement and mobilization for legislative reforms to address issues such as illegal subletting. More information is provided below on the proposed solutions discussed during the interview process:

DEVELOPING A BETTER WAY TO MEASURE HOMELESSNESS IN CHELSEA

As stated earlier, there is a need to better quantify the extent of homelessness in the city. Respondents suggested that the HUD point-in-time survey may not provide an accurate picture of the extent of homelessness, and recommended the need for alternative data collection methods, including a review of school district data to find students who are listed as not having a home address.

CREATING AND PRESERVING HOUSING IN CHELSEA THAT IS AFFORDABLE

On the subject of resolving the problem of homelessness, the issue of affordable housing emerged as a highly contentious one with respondents expressing views both in favor of and against such a measure. Respondents that are in favor of creating more affordable housing suggested the following solutions, keeping in mind that community involvement is a must:

- Stopping new housing developments that are not affordable
- Incentivizing landlords to keep rents affordable, fining or penalizing absentee landlords, and using this new revenue to create or sustain affordable housing

- Addressing the issue of vacancy by providing assistance to elderly homeowners who remain apprehensive of leasing out their apartments fearing that they would not be able to manage their tenants
Advocating for and implementing rent control

ADDRESSING THE ILLEGAL RENTAL MARKET

Another important solution raised during the interview process is mobilizing and empowering tenants, as well as maintaining vigilance towards malpractices such as illegal subletting.

PROVIDING SUBSTANCE ABUSE TREATMENT AND PREVENTION

Many interviewees viewed the problem of homelessness as closely linked to other problems like substance use or alcoholism. Therefore, the need for more comprehensive solutions which include treatment and rehabilitation measures, in addition to providing housing assistance, were foregrounded in many of the responses.

ADDITIONAL THOUGHTS FROM STUDENT PRESENTATIONS

During the final class presentations, the students and the city engaged in a conversation about their research and observations. Several additional ideas and solutions the City of Chelsea might consider exploring came out of this dialogue, as compiled by the MetroBridge Program Manager:

- Expand the number of voices that are heard during the public review process for new housing projects that are affordable, because the most vulnerable voices (e.g. undocumented immigrants) are not being heard
- Address the widespread apprehension that creating affordable housing and increasing density will lead to parking and traffic issues, and that all affordable housing is “low income housing”

- Look to the homelessness study conducted by Revere in 2014 as a model for data collection
- Explore the demand for and feasibility of creating a homeless shelter in Chelsea
- Consider training residents and social service providers on legal rights and the appropriate procedures for when Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) visits their home, in order to reduce fear and empower individuals
- Investigate best practices for providing services to undocumented individuals (e.g., not putting down names on paper) so residents are not discouraged from seeking housing support or other services

LITERATURE REVIEW SUMMARY

The literature review assignment required students to examine the research literature on housing/homelessness in conjunction with one of the following topics: conceptual debates on housing, homelessness, housing insecurity, shelter; race, ethnicity, immigration; public health; direct service delivery; program evaluation; urban/suburban/rural; poverty; inequality/stratification; residential segregation; public policy; or a topic relevant to sociology. This section presents the results of a systematic search of the literature, and a survey of critical findings in the aforementioned areas.

CONCEPTUAL DEBATES ON HOMELESSNESS

According to Dowling and Fitzpatrick (2012), while homelessness can be used to define people who sleep rough or in homeless shelters, the definition of homelessness needs to be more inclusive by covering people who “do not have a legal right to occupy ‘reasonable’ accommodation” or who do not have a permanent residency and stay with their friends or families. In a discussion on the definition of homelessness, scholars like Watson (1984) assert the need for rethinking or abandoning the term homelessness because of its ambiguity. From her standpoint, the different meanings attributed to the concept of “home” make it difficult to formulate a definition of homelessness.

The cultural definition of homelessness propounded by MacKenzie (2012) describes homelessness in terms of living conditions below the minimum cultural standards of the society. Also, MacKenzie highlights that the official definitions of homelessness provided by bodies such as the European Federation of National Organizations working with the Homeless (FEANTSA) cover not only “rooflessness”, but also “houselessness,” “insecure housing,” and “inadequate housing.” While discussing the universality of the conceptualizations of homelessness, Dowling and Fitzpatrick (2012) mention an important point. They highlight that if the broader definitions of homelessness—like the one provided by FEANTSA—were taken into account for developing countries, most of the people living there would be viewed as homeless.

STRUCTURAL CAUSES AND CONSEQUENCES OF THE ABSENCE OF AFFORDABLE HOUSING

Three major inter-related structural causes and macro changes—namely changes in policies, land rent increases, and the process of gentrification—have been indicated in literature as the reasons behind the lack of adequate affordable housing in the US. Additionally, public opinion can positively or negatively impact the implementation of affordable housing projects. As empirical findings suggest, residents tend to harbor a “not in my backyard” attitude when an affordable housing project is proposed in their neighborhood.

These diverse causes of the lack of affordable housing help us to explore its consequences in a number of ways. Literature points to both macro and micro level consequences. Most importantly, the lack of affordable housing implies concentration of poverty and affluence in separate districts. Foregrounding the fact that concentration of poverty is highly correlated with the concentration of racial and ethnic minorities, researchers have demonstrated that one major consequence of the lack of adequate affordable housing is social segregation on the basis of race and class inequalities (Bobo & Zubrinsky, 1996; Clark, 1992; Massey, 1996; Bratt, 2002).

GENTRIFICATION AND DISPLACEMENT

Recent research indicates that the relationship between gentrification and displacement may not be clear cut. Macrolevel quantitative approaches have generally found that gentrification may not cause or is only minimally related to displacement. In comparing national data on gentrifying neighborhoods with that of non-gentrifying neighborhoods, Freeman (2005) finds that gentrification broadly does have a positive relationship with mobility and displacement, but only modestly so, even for low-income residents. Rather, he suggests that gentrification may limit intra-neighborhood mobility, that when low-income residents move, they may be forced to move out of the neighborhood rather than within it. In addition, the characteristics of the in-movers might be more related to the changing face of the neighborhood, rather than displacement.

Micro- and neighborhood-level research, which is often qualitative, describes a more ominous relationship between gentrification and displacement. For instance, an unequal playing field between higher classes and lower-positioned Latinos in Chicago provided “the group with options, mobility, and ability to profit from rent manipulation.” (Betancur, 2011). An ethnography of Polish immigrants in gentrifying Brooklyn demonstrates that the “cost of gentrification for longtime residents extends beyond loss of housing to include loss of ‘enclave’” (Stabrowski, 2014), and the social support and networks that come with it. In a historically low-income black neighborhood in Washington, D.C., residents described losing a sense of community as gentrifiers moved into positions of power and remade the neighborhood to reflect their own tastes. The cultural and political displacement is attributed to civic withdrawal among long-term black residents, even though housing subsidies provided support for longtime residents to stay in their homes (Hyra, 2015).

What explains the difference in gentrification outcomes expressed by microlevel and macrolevel researchers? In a review of gentrification debates, Brown-Saracino (2017) finds that macrolevel studies tend to see the effects on longstanding residents as more moderate and highlight the selectivity of gentrification. On the contrary, qualitative microlevel research and media representations of the potentially harmful effects of gentrification, especially displacement, offer an on-the-ground approach that tends to paint a picture of gentrification as constantly advancing and problematic to longtime residents.

IMMIGRATION AND HOMELESSNESS: U.S. AND INTERNATIONAL COMPARISONS

There is a dearth of studies dedicated to the exploration of immigrant homelessness in the United States. Undocumented immigrants in particular pose a specific challenge both because there is no data on the undocumented homeless since they stay away from traditional accommodations out of fear of being ousted and because they are prohibited from Federal programs due to the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 (Gomez, 2017). Consequently, ethnicities which are heavily migrant in their demographics are traditionally underrepresented in homelessness samples. This is the case with Latinx and Asian populations. The nature of

housing precarity among these populations has much in common with that among African American and Native American communities.

Literature on America's northern neighbor, Canada has paid more attention to the intersections of migration and homelessness. There exists literature looking at homeownership and housing precarity for immigrants, for instance, the housing experiences of immigrant households living in the suburbs in the York Region of Canada (Presto et al. 2009). In Canada homelessness is a rising risk for many immigrants. In the York region, a high proportion of newcomers were at risk of homelessness during their first years of residence in Canada. In this regard, while renters were more vulnerable than homeowners, the latter paid 30% more in housing costs. A second line of research explores the current situation of migrant homelessness in the city of Montreal (Germain, 2009). Although prior studies had highlighted that as many as one-fifth of the people in shelters in Montreal were migrants, this analysis foregrounds the precarious living conditions many immigrants find themselves in, contextualizing the problem within the broader context of Montreal's changing housing market characterized by overall higher vacancy rates and deteriorating housing accessibility. The links between homelessness and immigration in Europe both in terms of policy planning as well as the academic understanding of the issue have been explored in literature. There is a general consensus that homelessness is on a rise in Europe, and it is seen as the consequence of increasing migration to Europe during the last couple of decades. Themes explored in literature include exclusion and discrimination produced by immigration laws resulting in a crisis of affordable housing, causes of migrant homelessness, self-representation of the migrant homeless, subjective experiences of the homeless, and migrant women and homelessness.

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APPENDIX: ETHNOGRAPHY HIGHLIGHTS

This section reports a brief compilation of the findings of the ethnographic studies conducted by the students. The aim of this assignment was to enable them to gain experience with the ethnographic fieldwork tradition. Students were required to choose a setting in Chelsea they were interested in learning more about (for instance, a public square, a residential area, a public meeting, or a community gathering), and carry out an “intense observation” or participant observation of the same with the purpose of uncovering and recording the unspoken commonsense assumptions of the group that they were studying. Additionally, they were encouraged to practice reflexivity, that is, reflect on their own actions and evaluate their impact on the environment. The final submission was a narrative of their experiences in the field.

THE CHELSEA PUBLIC LIBRARY

A public library is one of the few spaces where everyone is allowed to congregate and make use of the services offered, regardless of immigrant, housing, residence or income status. The assumption behind this ethnographic study was that the researchers would encounter a diverse set of community members accessing the library space for observably different purposes.



Three different usage types of the public library space were observed, namely, (a) as a collaborative study space; (b) as an individual/ solo reading/ study space; and (c) as a social space. Users were found to constitute a heterogeneous group in terms of their age, gender, and racial composition. There were children as young as 3 or 4 years old, and also elderly individuals presumably around 70 to 75 years of age. Racially, a majority of the

users appeared to belong to the Hispanic/ Latino(a) group followed by White Americans. Black or Afro-American users were scarcely observed. In terms of gender, no stark imbalance was noted: there were both men and women, and both men and women accompanied the children who frequented the library.

THE STREETS OF CHELSEA – BELLINGHAM SQUARE

City streets can offer insights into the nature of daily interactions between the old and the new, the locals and newcomers, as well as between the poor and the rich. The bulk of observation conducted by the two researchers for the purpose of this study was confined to Broadway Street close to Bellingham Square, a central place in Chelsea, where a number of local stores, restaurants, markets, the Chelsea Public Library, and the Bus Stop are located.

Economic life in Chelsea is not dominated by big chains, but mostly by local restaurants, shops and stores—often with neglected, dusty vitrines, lending the impression that they lack a dynamic customer flow. Most of the restaurants and coffee shops did not appear fancy or luxurious, giving rise to assumptions about the low purchasing power and income level of the neighborhood.

Within these spaces, the workforce was mostly comprised of people of color (majority were Latinos, followed by Asians). As such, Spanish was found to play quite an important role in the daily economic transactions in Chelsea. Even chain stores such as Dunkin' Donuts and McDonald's were being run bilingually with employees continuously switching between English and Spanish depending on the customer.

The buildings lining the streets of Chelsea appeared better maintained in comparison to the neglected look of the stores. In fact, the buildings located between City Hall and the office of the Neighborhood Developers looked aesthetically pleasing to the researcher. But a few steps onward, on the other end of the bridge, the researchers encountered a completely different face of the city. Most people the researchers had previously spoken to had warned them of the lack of safety and the presence of gangs in this part of the city.

The researchers did not encounter any homeless individuals on Broadway Street. Furthermore, although the issue of white, higher-income individuals moving into Chelsea was a recurrent theme in many of the conversations the researchers had with existing Chelsea residents, nobody fitting this description was observed. One explanation for this could be that the cold weather conditions might have prompted those who were better off economically to resort to traveling in cars or cabs, instead of walking, or taking public transport which, in turn, made them less visible on the streets.

PROJECT SELAH AT THE IGLESIA LA LUZ DE CRISTO (CHURCH OF THE LIGHT OF CHRIST)

Through Project Selah, the Church of the Light of Christ provides free breakfast and lunch services from 9 am to 12 noon from Monday to Friday. The program launched over a year ago, and operates out of a large auditorium room in the basement of the church, which is located on Broadway Street, a crucial artery of the city.

As one enters, there is a sign-up sheet. The food and two volunteers are to the right, and the tables are located at the center of the auditorium. The number of people who come to get food there normally fluctuates between 5 and 15 depending on the time, but most of them are regulars who usually sit at the five available tables laid out for the purpose, mostly by groups of friends. During the period of observation, the majority of people who came in during lunchtime were White. There were four copies of the Bible kept on one of the tables, highlighting the religious nature of the setting.

The researcher encountered and interacted with two Salvadoran men who have had problems with alcoholism and had briefly experienced homeless in the past. They told the researcher, “La policia no respeta!” (The police do not respect us!). Their main complaint was that they could not buy alcohol in Chelsea stores, as the city had posted their pictures at every liquor store and restaurant that sold drinks. One of them had been caught drinking “under the bridge” while the other had been reported to the police by the owner of a liquor shop where he had gone to get beer for himself and a friend of his. To them, it was ironic that the state of Massachusetts had just legalized marijuana and yet they could not get a beer. While they acknowledged the presence of Latino officers in the Chelsea police force, they emphatically stated that “Los que Mandan son blancos” (Those in charge are white).

A large part of their resentment towards the police also appeared to arise from the perceived close association between police and immigration officials. Both men narrated stories of their deported friends, some of whom had small children left behind with single mothers. They viewed the church as a space that enabled the police to gather information about undocumented immigrants. Both men foregrounded the issue of the recently constituted association between the church, the police department, and the Community Action Programs, Inter City, Inc. (CAPIC). This association, according to them, had a negative effect on the attendance of undocumented migrants.

They also appeared to share a complicated relationship with CAPIC. Prior to CAPIC's involvement in the program through provision of volunteers, the church used to provide beds in the stage area of the auditorium, especially during the cold months. However, since CAPIC got involved that has stopped. The men were also suspicious of CAPIC giving out information to the police. However, both of them admitted to having received help from this organization. While the two men respected the pastor, they were also suspicious of his involvement with the police.

ZONING BOARD OF APPEALS MEETING

The Zoning Board of Appeals meeting was held on November 13, 2018 in the Chelsea Senior Center from 6 pm to 7:30 pm. There were six board members and close to twenty-five community members or petitioners. Most of the petitioners had last names that sounded Hispanic or Italian to the researcher.

The requests brought to the committee ranged from the opening of a restaurant by a renowned chef in an existing commercial property that does “not meet current minimum requirements for number of off-street parking spaces” to demolishing an existing fast-food restaurant to rebuild the same one with fewer parking spaces, the construction of new residences on empty lots, converting a one family-structure to a two-family residence “that does not meet current minimum zoning requirements for lot area, open space, and number of off-street parking spaces,” and a “special permit to enclose an existing grade level garage space within a residence in order to expand living space.”

When professionals accompanied the petitioners—which occurred in all but two cases—they would introduce the petitioner and their relationship to the larger community and the project to be completed. The professionals invariably described the petitioners as Chelsea residents (not, for example, distant property owners), using words such as “community members.” Their community ties were highlighted.

The Board asked different questions throughout the process, which appeared to indicate issues considered important to the Board and perhaps the neighborhood at large. Most often, the questions centered around issues of parking and the ability of cars to move around the property. There were also questions on aesthetic aspects or neighborhood “character” maintenance.

There were occasional comments. The first case for which the researcher heard comments was regarding the demolition and rebuilding of a fast-food restaurant. The second case concerned a special permit to “enclose an existing grade level garage space within a residence in order to expand living space.” This case was granted a continuance

be discussed at a further meeting.

HEALTHY CHELSEA MEETING

After conducting a community health assessment in 2009, the MGH Center for Community Health Improvement identified obesity as a major health concern in Chelsea. With more than half of its student population overweight or obese, the city's community health indicators revealed the need for prioritizing healthy living and obesity prevention. In response to this concern and community needs, Healthy Chelsea was formed as a coalition of allies and partners. Healthy Chelsea aims to evaluate and come up with solutions to tackle social and environmental factors that affect the prevalence of high obesity in Chelsea.

The coalition of Healthy Chelsea comprises of 75 members including community leaders, residents, and representatives from the local and state governments, community organizations, healthcare centers, public schools and local businesses. The initiative has four current priorities: 1) to ensure that schools add physical activities in the elementary classrooms; 2) to make sure that school lunches serve healthy food items; 3) to form a close partnership with the Planning and Development Department of the city to bring about infrastructure changes that will encourage residents and their children to get outside more; and 4) to collaborate with the Board of Health to pass and implement regulations with respect to the presence of artificial trans-fat in prepared foods served at food service establishments.

Community partners represented in the meeting attended by the researchers included MGH community health staff, public school teachers, neighborhood developers, community organizers and residents of Chelsea. The researchers found it particularly interesting to listen to one community organizer at Chelsea Collaborative, who spoke about sponsoring Encore Resort's info sessions and career fair. As a new casino in town, the corporation had more than 4,500 job openings. Although the organizer mentioned that she and her organization were against the idea of having a casino and resort in Chelsea, she encouraged residents to take advantage of the situation and apply for the newly available job openings.

The issue of integrating hope and concerns into community work and communications was discussed in the context of the Chelsea Ending Hunger project, as was the role of social workers in addressing food insecurity and hunger issues in Chelsea, and interviewing food providers to build a network. Others emphasized the need to keep up a positive spirit in the challenging task of fundraising, rephrasing problems in the community by starting with positivity and strengths, and focusing on science and data.

One neighborhood developer expressed concerns about how as housing costs keep going up, low-income residents have to start sacrificing the quality and quantity of their food to meet their total cost of living. This sad reality resonated among multiple community organizers when they talked about the challenges they faced when working with residents.