

EVALUATING HOMES FOR THE HOMELESS:
PSYCHOSOCIAL FACTORS OF TINY-HOME VILLAGES

by

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Homelessness in the United States is an issue without a clear solution. Current methods of intervention, ranging from shelters to welfare programs, have not adequately addressed the complexities of this issue. A new form of transitional housing, called “tiny home villages” are aiming to create a better environment for homeless individuals. This research focuses on one such village called Opportunity Village Eugene (OVE). OVE is a “self-governed community”, meaning that a rotating council of villagers oversee the daily functioning of the village. So far, studies done at the village have concluded that OVE is an effective form of transitional housing. However, only recently has qualitative research been done showing the potential issues surrounding self-governance. My current research revolves around three in-depth interviews with former residents. In these interviews, I found three main problems; corrupt governance, criminal activity, and a lack of resources within the village. While all participants also noted certain positive aspects, the interviews were dominated by negativity. In this paper, I theorize these problems to be a result of an incongruence between the formal and informal structure of the village. I also employ Intergroup

Contact Theory and address the psychological features of dysfunction. Finally, I discuss possible solutions and ways to create better interventions in the future.

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Chapter 1: Introduction to Homelessness and Tiny-Home Villages

Homelessness is perhaps one of the most prolific and visually apparent issues in American society. A national point-in-time count from 2018 reports that on a single night, 553,000 people were experiencing homelessness in the United States.

Approximately one third of these individuals were unsheltered, living on the streets or other places “not suitable for human habitation” (US Department of Housing and Urban Development). Severe rates of homelessness have become a constant reality in the US and while the causes of homelessness are debated, the effects are evident.

Links between homelessness and negative personal outcomes are numerous. Physically, individuals and families that are homeless are more prone to sickness and premature death. A study of 1,017 US Health Care for the Homeless users found that homeless individuals have higher rates of many serious conditions including diabetes, AIDS/HIV, tuberculosis, and substance abuse than the general population. Ultimately, only 12% of the general American population reports their health status as fair/poor, compared to 44% of the homeless people at clinics (Zlotnick & Zerger, 2008). This is often due to exposure to infectious diseases and violence, and a lack of healthcare and proper nutrition.

In terms of mental illness, homelessness is a major risk factor for developing emotional disorders and trauma. In a study of 300 randomly selected homeless women, one researcher found that 53% of the respondents could be diagnosed with full-blown cases of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (Smith, 1991). The connection between experiencing homelessness and trauma is relatively clear. Goodman et al. (1991) posit that homelessness produces psychological trauma in three key ways. First, they argue

that the gradual loss of a stable shelter is a stressor severe enough to elicit symptoms of trauma. Here, the authors conceptualize trauma as a severance of secure bonds with others, which damages the individual's sense of safety and trust. If we consider homelessness to be a matter of social disaffiliation, it is easy to see how the conditions of homelessness produce and reproduce this type of trauma. Another source of trauma that the authors cite is the conditions of shelter life. Shelters often separate couples and families, further disrupting one's support system. Shelters can also cause inhabitants to lose faith in their own abilities to care for themselves. Lastly, it is important to note that many people, particularly women, become homeless after experiencing physical or sexual abuse. These are all factors that contribute to homelessness being a risk factor in the development of mental illness.

It is clear that homelessness is strongly associated with physical and psychological harm. A more contested discussion surrounds the root causes of homelessness. Unfortunately, there is a long-standing tendency to blame homeless individuals for their circumstances. Theories such as the "culture of poverty" and the notion of an "underclass" promote the idea that those in severe poverty are fundamentally flawed. Characteristics of the "underclass" include a propensity for crime, antisocial behaviors, and welfare dependency (Eitzen & Eitzen, 2009). This concept, however, is a detrimental generalization that is rooted in American conceptions of egalitarianism. Such a viewpoint is not only inaccurate, but it distracts from the various systemic causes of homelessness.

Some scholars argue that a root cause of homelessness is a lack of a social safety net. The essence of this argument is that when people begin to struggle financially and

personally, there is a severe lack of resources to prevent their situation from worsening. Someone who is spiraling downward will be allowed to continue to do so until they reach “rock bottom”. Government aid such as welfare and healthcare could prevent one from entering into homelessness in the first place.

Others view homelessness less as a matter of inadequate welfare and more as an issue specifically of housing. Often called “housing first” proponents, these individuals argue that a lack of housing is the first and strongest barrier for homelessness people finding and maintaining help. In other words, without a stable home, other aid such as drug/alcohol treatment and welfare will be difficult or impossible to sustain. Declining budgets for subsidized housing and gentrification have jeopardized housing security for a large portion of the population (Eitzen & Eitzen, 2009). An emphasis on the importance of housing has prompted an increase of housing-based interventions for homelessness.

Another way of looking at homelessness is that it is a matter of social disaffiliation. Baum and Burnes (1993) call homelessness a condition of becoming “disengaged” from ordinary society. They assert that while social isolation does not necessarily cause homelessness, it facilitates a downward spiral when it is combined with other stressors such as substance abuse and mental illness. So while issues of inadequate affordable housing and social benefits are certainly relevant, more immediate issues are often preventing people without homes from attempting to access these resources in the first place. Likely, the cause of homelessness is not one of these ideas, but a combination of all of them. A lack of social benefits, affordable housing, and social disaffiliation all work in conjunction to cause and perpetuate this issue.

Conceptualizations of the causes of homelessness has fed into an equally complex discussion of intervention methods. Particularly relevant to this project is the wide range of temporary housing measures. These structures include shelters, tent-cities, affordable housing projects, rest-stops, churches, and more. While these measures help in reducing the number of unsheltered homeless people, there are a great deal of issues with current forms of temporary housing. As mentioned previously, shelters and similar institutions can be traumatic for inhabitants. Often, people are separated from friends or family they arrive with. Additionally, the rules or restrictions of shelters can be harsh or discouraging. Wright (2000), argues that, “Existing shelters can be encouraged to end restrictive shelter practices that treat homeless families and individuals in a degrading fashion, and can be supported to the extent that they have initiated democratic procedures of accountability for their patrons”.

A new form of housing has emerged that aims to combat the restrictive, short-term, and harsh nature of shelters and other housing. “Tiny Home Villages”, also called Micro-Home Communities, are collections of small trailer-like houses built on a plot of land, often including amenities such as communal showers and kitchen. These communities provide homeless individuals a home, community, and freedom from harsh government restrictions. The first village of this kind was built in Portland, Oregon in 2000. Since then, numerous other villages have been built across the country. Each village is unique and has varying levels of success.

This project will focus on a village located in Eugene, Oregon called Opportunity Village Eugene (OVE). OVE grew out of a great need for intervention in the city of Eugene. In Lane County, a 2018 point-in-time count found a total of 1,642

people without homes, 1,135 of whom were unsheltered (www.lanecounty.org/HomelessCount). The number of unsheltered individuals in Eugene is certainly a cause for concern. OVE appears to be a project that begins to address this issue in a way that is beneficial for homeless individuals as well as the surrounding community. This project will use interviews with former residents of OVE to explore how villagers experience life in this community. Ultimately, this information can be used to inform improvements to the village and the creation of better interventions in the future.

Opportunity Village Eugene

Opportunity Village Eugene opened in July of 2013 under the leadership of what is now SquareOne Villages, a local nonprofit organization. The village consists of 30 tiny homes, community showers, restrooms, laundry facilities, a kitchen, and a communal meeting area. Each single-room home is 60-80 square feet in size. They are built primarily of wood, although some have curved plastic or metal roofs. They are unheated and do not have electricity. Since its creation, the village has been home to over 100 individuals.

OVE was started out of a great need for affordable housing in the city of Eugene. In December of 2011, a large Eugene “tent city” was shut down by the city, displacing over 100 unhoused individuals. This fed into the Occupy Eugene movement, in which large groups of protesters camped in central locations to voice their dissatisfaction with government’s response to homelessness, among other concerns. In response to protesters, the city created a task force called the “Homeless Solutions Committee”. This committee made it possible for SquareOne to register as a nonprofit

organization and subsequently begin agreements between the city and the organization. The City of Eugene provided the land to SquareOne at no cost and worked with the organization to meet city housing codes. From there, all materials and services were donated from various people and businesses in the community. Each structure required approximately \$2,000 in materials. Total start-up costs were about \$220,000, which was mostly covered by monetary and service donations. Currently, OVE spends \$3/person/night, \$1 of which is paid by the residents by way of the \$30 monthly rent fee. Operating costs are therefore very minimal (Parker et al., 2015).

OVE is intended to be more than just a collection of structures on an industrial plot of land. At the core of SquareOne's mission is creating a functioning community in which unhoused individuals can gain skills and resources to become housed. An important aspect of this is that the village is "self-governed". While there is a 12-person board that oversees the village and its contracts with the city, on a daily basis the village is managed by a council of villagers. This council consists of 5-7 elected individuals and rotates often. The council ensures that the Village Manual and Community Agreement are being upheld by the residents. All residents are required to attend the weekly meeting and vote on the motions made by the council. Residents are also required to complete 10 hours of volunteer work in the village weekly. These jobs may include cleaning, doing paperwork, or working at the entry station to the village.

In terms of social services, OVE does not have on-site management staff. Rather, they partner with existing service providers to offer resources. For instance, The University of Oregon and Lane Community College, as well as various religious organizations provide help and resources to OVE. Other local organizations regularly

donate food and human services. In 2016, they partnered with Portland State University to sponsor a Masters of Social Work intern, who helps the residents create and follow through with housing related goals.

To become a resident, individuals must fill out an application. Requirements for applicants are minimal. They must be at least 18 years old, unhoused, and willing to comply to the community agreements and interview process. A small group of villagers called the “vetting committee” is in charge of processing applications and making admission decisions. Once admitted, there is no limit to the length of stay, although the average length of stay is less than two years (www.squareonevillages.org/opportunity).

Over time, OVE has garnered a great deal of attention in the press and in academic communities. Many people became interested in whether this village was providing substantial results. In a review done by the University of Oregon Community Planning Workshop in 2015, they provide a very positive assessment of outcomes from OVE. They write, “Rest stops and Opportunity Village residents have more self-confidence, are better able to provide for themselves, and feel as though they’re part of a community”. Additionally, the survey reports, “OVE appears to be successful in transitioning individuals into more permanent housing...of 47 residents that transitioned, 30 found housing. Fourteen moved into rental housing, 13 moved in with family or friends, and others transitioned into Section 8 housing or other transitional housing” (Parker et al., 2015).

This study also attempted to capture how the residents perceive OVE. Based off of surveys collected from 13 OVE residents they conclude, “Residents view the operational structure and rules of Opportunity Village positively” and, “Residents

indicate camp staff are helpful and site rules are effective” (Parker et al., 2015). However, in my opinion, these statements are sweeping and cover up complexities in the data. For instance, a table found in the appendix indicates that 23% of the participants “strongly disagree” with the statement, “The rules and regulations are reasonable and applied fairly to everyone”. Furthermore, 15% of participants strongly disagree with the statement, “I feel like I’m part of a community” (Parker et al., 2015). While these researchers certainly found many positive findings as well, it seems to me that these contradictions are not properly addressed. In the end, this report concludes that OVE “is working” and very few recommendations are made in terms of internal functioning.

In an article written by one of the designers involved with the project, they write, “The village is full of rules, but they are good rules. The villagers seem to need them. People do file unwarranted complaints, but it’s not something the board worries about... Actually, Craig and I agree things are going really well” (Daniell, 2014). The literature on OVE, while very limited, is certainly skewed to the side of positive support for the institution. Many studies or reports seem to mention possible issues but not fully explore how these issues may be affecting the villagers.

However, one recent ethnographic study done at OVE does address the mixed results of self-governance. This research draws from three years of participant observation and 35 semi-structured interviews with residents. One conclusion made in in this paper is that self-governance “takes a limited form” at the village. Contributing to this limitation is, “unrealistic expectations of the residents from the board, lack of buy-in- as well as lack of empowerment and ownership- by residents, and life

circumstances mixed with expectations to transition”. Furthermore, villagers were given the responsibility of enforcing rules and supervising their peers but did not always feel they had the authority to do so (Molinar, 2018). While this is very small snapshot of highly in-depth research, it suffices to say that the relations and dynamics of OVE are more complex than what has been portrayed in previous literature. The very concept of self-governance is murky. And, just as with any form of government, there are bound to be conflicting interpretations of the rules, goals, and standards among the citizens. Therefore, further investigation into unique communities such as OVE is warranted.

Objective

In many ways, OVE appears to be an ideal solution to homelessness that has demonstrated success. The tiny-home model seems to benefit the residents and the city in a sustainable, cost-effective manner. Current research, however, is primarily focused on the concrete metrics of success. In particular, studies emphasize the rate of transition into permanent housing. Of course, it is easy to understand why these types of studies have been done, as they have been crucial in maintaining support from donors and in the city’s decision to extend contracts. For these reasons, such reports are practical and necessary. However, this data is masking deeper narratives. Only recently has substantial qualitative research been published regarding OVE. Thus, the lived experiences of the villagers have been largely overlooked. These experiences bring light to personal and interpersonal struggles that are unrepresented in quantitative data. We can use this information to improve the conditions of the village and create better solutions in the future. My research questions are as follows;

Q1: How do former residents perceive their experience in the village?

Q2: In what ways does the village fail in executing its mission and why? What theories help us understand group dysfunction?

Q3: Do these findings help inform possible improvements to the village? How does this fit into a broader discussion of solutions to homelessness?

Methodology

To answer these questions, I conducted three in-depth interviews with former residents of OVE. I chose to interview former residents rather than current residents because they are able to provide a full retrospective account of their experience. In other words, they have a full narrative surrounding their time there. I chose to do a small number of in-depth interviews rather than a larger sample of shorter interviews because my focus was not on producing generalizable data. My goal was to get detailed personal accounts of how they experienced the village. Further, I wanted to understand the autobiographical context from which the participants were speaking.

To recruit these individuals, I first reached out to a board member of the organization. They provided me with the contact information of a former villager, with whom I conducted my first interview. This individual was then able to connect me with two other former residents. All of the interviews took place at the participants' homes and they were between one hour and an hour and a half in length. The interviews were recorded and transcribed upon completion. I then went through the transcripts and coded various themes I found to be important. These themes feed into my theoretical discussion later on.

It is important to note that this sample is very limited in size and diversity. All participants are female and of a similar age. They are also friends with one another, so

they may be more inclined to share opinions and perspectives. This is a snowball sampling method, which is somewhat vulnerable to bias. Therefore, information from these interviews is not representative of all villagers or all time periods at the village. These interviews should be considered as documentation of personal experiences, not generalizable data. Lastly, the validity of statements cannot be confirmed. All participant names have been changed to ensure confidentiality. Upon review, the IRB granted exemption for this study.

Chapter 2: Results

To begin the results section, I will provide an overview of each interview so as to familiarize the reader with the participants. Next, I will summarize my findings, highlighting the commonalities between the interviews. In the next section, I will use theoretical frameworks to discuss the possible mechanisms behind these results.

Participant 1: Mary

Mary was a founding member at OVE, which means she was among the first group to move in to the village. She played an integral role in building the tiny-homes and establishing the routine functioning of the village. She came to Eugene after fleeing an abusive living situation in Utah. Understandably, she declined to discuss that aspect of her past in any further depth. Upon arriving in Eugene, she spent some time living in a tent which was difficult and very unsafe. She then moved to the Eugene Mission, which was also less than ideal. Needless to say, she was incredibly hopeful and excited to be involved in this unique and promising project. Therefore, she invested a lot of time and effort into building and improving the village.

Unfortunately, Mary made it very clear from the beginning of the interview that the village “broke her heart”. In many ways, the vision of the project fell short. A lack of proper governance overtook the ideals and goals of the village, creating dysfunction among the villagers. The main problem that she spoke of was council being run as a “popularity contest”. In her opinion, people that weren’t in the “in-crowd” were unfairly targeted by council, resulting in some residents being punished or removed from the village. Certain people were very interested in exercising power, and they were

permitted to do so under the instruction of the manual. She remarked that one could “take over the village” by simply putting themselves on every committee. After describing this she questioned, “so is the village really self-governed?”. Essentially, life in the village was constricted by a strict set of rules. Yet, these rules were applied unevenly, creating interpersonal strife. For these reasons, she had a strong desire to leave the village for almost the entirety of the three and a half years she was there. It was this desire to escape, rather than rehabilitative support, that ultimately motivated her to transition into permanent housing.

She now lives in a small home in West Eugene with her husband Ron and her two cats. She is going to school at Lane Community College and she is focusing on studying solutions to homelessness. While the village provided her with a temporary place to stay, her husband, and her cats, she describes the experience as traumatic. In her interview she goes as far to, somewhat jokingly, suggest a support group for “survivors” of the village. At one point in the interview she pulled out a picture from her wallet. It was a photo of her from her first day at Lane Community College, which was about 6 months into her stay at the village. She was showing me this picture to demonstrate the physical toll that the village took on her, and it was remarkable. The woman in the photo was almost unrecognizable as her. It became very clear to me at that point that this was a very stressful and exhausting period in Mary’s life. Despite the pain that OVE caused her, Mary maintains that she is grateful to have been a part of this unique “experiment”. Unfortunately, it seems as though Mary is one of many that had to absorb the growing pains of a novel establishment.

Participant 2: Lisa

Lisa was also among the first group vetted into the village. A former professional baker, Lisa became homeless about a decade ago and found sanctuary at a community of trailers in Alton Baker Park. This community was supported by the nonprofit Saint Vincent DePaul, until it was defunded in 2012 and the residents were forced out. Lisa described enjoying her time in the trailer community. Her and the other residents became friends and they all looked out for one another. It was by no means easy living, but they worked together to make life easier and safer for each other. When Lisa was forced to move, she went to Church of the Resurrection, where she was given a bungalow to live in. On an acre of forested land, the Church was a peaceful place to live. Lisa was able to cook in a full-size kitchen and interact with the wildlife surrounding her. However, the huts were rather small, and Lisa found it very difficult to hold onto her personal belongings. She applied to live in the village and was accepted into the first group.

Like Mary, Lisa spent most of the interview describing dysfunction in the village. When I first began asking questions about the village she remarked, “I’m repressing memories because I did not have a good time there”. In her experience, the governance revolved around a “popularity contest”, in which power-hungry individuals had the opportunity to rule tyrannically. These individuals applied the rules unevenly in order to target enemies and support allies. This often took the form of bullying; which Lisa fell victim to on multiple occasions. She described herself as being one of the “sensitive” residents, which is why she did not enjoy being on council and perhaps why she was an easy target for bullies. She felt particularly targeted during the 2016

Presidential election, during which political differences caused conflict in the village. She was an outspoken supporter of candidate Bernie Sanders, which was in opposition to the group of individuals who supported Donald Trump. On one instance, she recalled coming home to find her yard littered in Trump signs. There were also multiple instances of verbal harassment. Lisa was eventually kicked out of the village. She was hit with numerous incident reports, all of which were given for trivial reasons. For instance, she explained that one resident would wait around and take pictures of her while she was on gate duty. He would get a picture of her looking down or closing her eyes and then use the image as evidence that she was being “inattentive”.

On an even more serious note, Lisa discussed the occurrence of various criminal activities. For instance, she reported that her female friend was drugged by a male villager who had the intent to rape her. This man was removed from the village almost immediately. However, he quickly fought for that decision to be overturned. The board ruled that it was up to the village council to make this decision. The council voted to let him back in, and there was nothing that Lisa could do about it. Her female friend ran off and the man was allowed to stay. Lisa also reported that there was not only drug-use in the village, but drug manufacturing as well. While she did not go into detail about these points, it is clear that there were serious safety concerns in the village that were not being attended to by any authority figure.

When I asked her about the rehabilitative services that were offered, she explained that villagers would “run off” many of the social workers that came to help. She was able to transition into permanent housing, but she feels as though she was only able to do this because of her personal connections and motivation. In other words, she

did not feel as though her transition was largely due to the village. She was able to apply for, and receive Federal disability, which supported her move to a small apartment. She is now in the process of moving to a larger apartment in a better location. She has also made plans to re-start her baking business when she stops receiving disability payments later this year.

Participant 3: Susan

My final interview was with Susan, whose relationship to homelessness is quite different from Mary and Lisa. In May 2013 she was living a comfortable life. Then, within a month, she lost her job, and subsequently her house. Her mother also passed away in the same month. She found herself very suddenly in a position of desperation. She remarked, “if it can happen to me it can happen to anyone”. Without a home and support structure, she and her husband stayed at a shelter for a while, which she described as very restrictive. They applied to live at OVE and were taken in the first group.

At the initial meetings, before OVE was opened, Susan was very excited for a fresh start. Her and the other villagers were optimistic for the future, but it quickly became clear to her that issues were bound to arise. In her view, conflict arose because there was a lack of commonality between the villagers. It seemed as though a group of people were arbitrarily thrown together with little motivation to work as a collective and a severe lack of stable rehabilitative resources. Furthermore, nothing was individualized. Susan explained that the range of needs among villagers was never addressed. Her needs were much different from those who were chronically homeless, yet she was treated just as everyone else. Additionally, she felt as though the board

members were uncomfortable with her acting as an equal to them, as if she wasn't displaying enough gratitude.

Susan described power imbalances in a very similar way as Mary and Lisa. She noted that certain people were particularly interested in taking ultimate power and pushing people out of the village that they disagreed with. She worked long hours at the village doing administrative work and serving on various committees. Before she left, she made an effort to push various initiatives through council, because she knew that after she left there would be a power struggle.

Susan now lives in an apartment complex with her husband. She has a customer service job that she enjoys. Overall, Susan is doing much better than she was before her time at OVE. While she experienced struggles in the village, she maintains that the model has a great deal of potential.

Summary and Main Findings

While there are minor differences in each participant's story, I found the similarities to be striking. They all began at the village with a great deal of hope and excitement. Sadly, this enthusiasm quickly faded as interpersonal issues overtook the goals and principles of the village. The three main issues that I've pinpointed in all of these interviews are corrupt governance, criminal activity, and a lack of resources to aid in self-improvement. On the positive side, all of the participants noted the potential of the tiny-home model and they are all grateful to have transitioned into permanent housing.

In terms of the first issue, corrupt governance, it seems as though council became a “popularity contest” in which power-hungry individuals could amass power, target their enemies, and protect their allies. In the words of one participant, the rules got “gamed”. This meant that well-meaning individuals were, on occasion, disciplined or even removed from the village on unfair grounds. While the village is marketed as “self-governed”, it was far from it. In reality, the council held a great deal of power and there was very little supervision of this power. While motions required a democratic vote, social groups often voted together, effectively skewing the decisions to favor the most populous group. These dynamics had a large effect on the daily life of the villagers.

Similarly, those participating in criminal actions such as drug possession and manufacturing were mostly free to do so. Also, perpetrators of verbal and sexual harassment were not appropriately held responsible for their actions. There are strict rules against all of these actions in the manual, but the enforcement of these rules was dependent on the council and the collective culture. For instance, if the majority of the village and the council felt it was acceptable to use a certain drug, it was unlikely that there would be a penalty for doing so. In the same regard, if an individual was accused of perpetrating sexual violence, but this individual was allied with a majority of the villagers, it was unlikely that said villager would be held responsible.

Next, there is a lack of stable resources to assist one’s transition. Rather than providing a rehabilitative space to transition into permanent housing, the women I spoke with were motivated by a strong desire to get out. To do this, they sought help through resources in the community and relationships they had previously. The village

provided occasional social work, but this help was inconsistent and not individualized. It is my understanding that they have recently improved this aspect of the village by partnering with a University to be assigned a social work intern, who comes regularly. It is unclear if this has proven to be effective.

Another really interesting commonality between the narrators is that they all consistently said that the village is a “good idea”. They support the model but believe the issues were in execution. In the end, the village performed its purpose in the sense that they all transitioned to permanent housing, but the path to get there was certainly rough.

Overall, the former residents I spoke with perceived their experience as socially and physically difficult. They were able to find positives in their experience, but descriptions were dominated by negativity. They all recognize that the village had a lot of potential but, in some ways, that makes it all the more disappointing. Once again, I would like to emphasize that these results are not representative of a population and should therefore not be interpreted as the conclusive answers to these questions. Nonetheless, it is important to discuss the dysfunction that the participants reported. In the next section, I will use theoretical frameworks to break down possible mechanisms behind these issues.

Chapter 3: Theoretical Implications

As seen in the previous section, OVE was unsuccessful in a few key ways.

Namely, corrupt governance, criminal activity and a lack of resources interfered with the efficacy of the village. However, the original structure of OVE as it is laid out in the manual and village agreement protect against all of these issues. This is why, from a surface level, the village appears to be an idealistic situation solution to homelessness. Evidently, there is a structure beyond the formal structure that is augmenting this goal. The informal organization of the village, consisting of group dynamics, culture, and unspoken rules, directly undermines the formal structure. Various theories help explain elements of this informal structure. In this section, I first describe the formal structure of the village, drawing mostly on the village manual. I will then contrast that structure with the informal structure, drawing on literature in the field of social organization. Lastly, I will look at the dynamics using a psychologically-oriented perspective, focusing particularly on issues of emotional contagion and social stress.

The Formal Structure

Given that OVE is heavily marketed as “self-governed”, it may appear to be a minimalist institution that intentionally lacks formal structure. In reality, there are layers of power and authority, which are codified in the village manual. In this section, I will describe the layers of power in terms of ideal functioning. In other words, this section is meant to outline the design of OVE, regardless of how it functioned in practice.

The formal structure of OVE is multi-leveled, with each superordinate level possessing a check on the power of the subordinate level. It is perhaps easiest to

conceptualize these levels as concentric circles rather than a pyramid or chain. At the center is council, who is intended to manage the everyday matters and initiate punitive action. The next circle is the general village, who votes on matters that council proposes. The general village can curtail the power of council by voting down measures. They also have the option to run for a position on council if they are dissatisfied with the work of council. The next level is the executive board. The board does not have a lot of direct contact with the village, but they are there to intervene when issues are severe. They can override a decision made by the council or the general village if they feel it is necessary. The final layer is the City of Eugene. The city is not responsible for any direct monitoring of OVE or its residents. However, OVE is dependent on city approval for the continuation of their project. There is an agreement between OVE and the City of Eugene that must be followed in order to maintain ownership of the land. Thus, there is a hierarchy of oversight that is designed to prevent any individual, or group of individuals, from exercising a disproportionate amount of power.

Among these sub-sections of power, the village council is particularly ordered. The composition, duties, and limitations of council are strictly outlined in the manual. According to the manual, the council consists of 5-7 members, who serve a term of two months. A councilor is permitted to serve up to two consecutive terms but can be removed by a majority vote at the weekly meeting. An individual who wishes to be on council must be nominated by a fellow resident and approved by a majority vote from the village. Elections are staggered so that the entire council doesn't change at once. All decisions and disciplinary action enacted by council is subject to a majority vote in the

weekly meeting. Importantly, villagers who are charged also have the opportunity to appeal a decision. This consists of delivering an argument to the council, and then a final decision being made by a majority vote.

A councilor is not supposed to have more power than any other villager. As described in the manual, the role of council is to respond to incidents using the outlined method of intervention. However, when an incident occurs that is not included in the manual, it is up to the council to determine the appropriate path of action. The basic structure for punishing rule violations is a verbal warning for the first offense, followed by a written warning, 48-hour expulsion from the village, and permanent expulsion from the village with each successive offense. These are accumulated on a three-month rolling basis, meaning that a series of offenses must occur within three months of each other to be treated on this scale. The punishment for substance use is even more severe. Possession of alcohol, marijuana, or marijuana paraphernalia results in 48-hour expulsion. Other illegal drugs or paraphernalia results in permanent expulsion. Punishment for any other items that are connected to drug use are subject to a decision by the council.

It is evident that life under the current manual is intended to be quite ordered. After its initial conception, the village manual has continued to grow over time as issues have arisen. The formal structure, in other words, has become larger and more robust in order to reduce the impact of the informal structure. However, the informal structure is seemingly still quite influential. As I saw in my interviews, the interpretation and application of the manual was variable and inconsistent. The next section will attempt to determine what interfered with the formal order, despite efforts to improve it.

The Informal Structure

When comparing the interview results with the formal structure that was just described, it is clear that there is an incongruence. I argue that this is because the informal social structure of the village overpowers the formal structure. For the purposes of this argument, I am defining informal structure as any social processes or patterned behaviors that are not included in village literature. In this section, I will define and describe negotiated order in the context of the village, provide specific examples of destructive informal processes, and finally, I will employ Intergroup Contact Theory to offer an alternative theoretical framework.

The concept of formal and informal structure may seem abstract, but in fact, these structures exist in nearly every social group or organization. We can find examples of it on any level of interaction, from families, to work places, all the way up to governments and social movements. For instance, there are countless examples of formal and informal structures within the United States Government. The Government operates on strict guidelines, as mandated by the U.S. Constitution and other documents. A specific tenet of our Government is that laws are to be enforced equally. This is formalized in the constitution. However, most people can think of many instances in which the law was not applied equally, especially along racial or gendered lines. Thus, interpersonal dynamics, consisting of prejudice can overtake the formal law. While this is a rather simplistic representation of this concept, what it demonstrates is that the fluid characteristics of a group impact the way in which fixed rules are interpreted and applied.

In this sense, it is the responsibility of the members of an organization to interpret and implement the rules as they see fit. We can therefore conceptualize order as a process of negotiation, as opposed to order being fixed. In other words, the norms of an organization are implicitly decided between members, regardless of the extent to which these norms align with the formal rules. Further, as the composition of the organization changes, so do the norms and unspoken agreements. Consequently, order must constantly be re-negotiated. The ebbs and flows of this process ultimately attack the idea of consistent order.

In regard to negotiation, OVE is a particularly interesting case to examine because the internal state of the organization is constantly shifting in significant ways. The makeup of the general village is constantly changing as people leave or get kicked out and new members arrive. This in turn affects the size and characteristics of friend groups and power alliances. The council undergoes even more change, as councilors serve only two-month terms, all ending at different times. Also, especially in the beginning stages, OVE underwent a lot of physical change as new homes and communal structures were added on. All of these rearrangements forced the residents to redefine authority, and subsequently redefine the rules. These variations, however, are somewhat inherent to the informal structure that we can find in most social organizations, as they are a product of negotiation. In the following paragraphs I will outline specific aspects of negotiation at OVE that were particularly destructive to functional order.

To a degree, every level of OVE is united by a common goal. This goal is generally to help homeless individuals find more stable housing. However, the path to

this goal is largely ambiguous. That is, there is very little dictation of how this goal is going to be accomplished. Specifically, residents were not encouraged to make explicit transition plans or goals. Furthermore, there was little opportunity to build skills and interests that would be helpful in finding a stable job or home. Without a unifying goal that is achievable, the opportunity for conflict, disorder, and unrest becomes greater. Goals and processes give an organization meaning and give the members of an organization a reason to keep contributing. Without these components, it is unclear what will transpire. This idea is expressed by one of my interviewee's when she says,

“The outside circle and the inside circle need to come together again. It's sold as a self-governed, self-efficient transitional village. But that's not what it is. It's a tiny village for homeless people. It is not a self-governed thing. The community and the self-governance really inspired people to move on. Well now that that's not in place, now what's happening?”

By “outside circle” and “inside circle” she is referring to the board and the council or the core group of villagers, respectively. This quote demonstrates that there is a lack of unity in achieving a common goal. The main tenets of the village, namely “community” and “self-governance” are not being upheld at all levels of the village, causing ambiguity in purpose. Strauss et al. describe the negotiated order in a psychiatric hospital, which has a similar ambiguity. They hypothesize that the general goal of the hospital is to treat patients, and this goal serves as symbol under which the hospital can operate. However, this symbol also, “masks a considerable measure of disagreement and discrepant purpose” (Strauss et al., 1963).

As was just mentioned, the idea of “discrepant purpose” is also present at OVE. In other words, the villagers enter the village with varying agendas and varying levels of dedication to the common goal. Importantly, all of the villagers have very different relationships with homelessness and therefore view their time in the village differently. Some residents, like the women that I interviewed, invested a great deal of time into developing and improving the village. They participated in various committees, knew the manual front to back, and held their fellow residents to high expectations. Other villagers, however, seemed to view the village as simply somewhere they could stay free of rent. Even worse, some villagers saw it as an opportunity to control other people and exercise power. One interviewee described this discrepancy in saying,

“And the people at the village didn’t care, they just wanted to get to their next cigarette. People would just be lazy and vote “oh whatever council says”, I trust them, let’s get this over with kind of attitude. They all wanted to go outside and smoke. They were more interested in their cigarettes than they were in where they were living”.

Even if the guidelines were clear as to how the village was going to accomplish a common goal, it would be very difficult to do so when there is such a range in commitment to the ideals of the village. Before entering the village, residents were not required to prove that they were committed to being active members of the community.

Similarly, there is little certainty that the individuals who step into leadership positions are committed to upholding the formal rules and procedures. The members of council, for instance, may be rule-breakers themselves. The enforcement of rules

therefore became highly dependent on the composition of council. An example of this is demonstrated by one participant's description of the alcohol policy. She says,

“So the board says no drinking. But if three fourths of the council say “yeah we’re drinking”, unless the board is coming out at 10pm, what are you going to do at 10pm if that’s what a group of villagers decides that’s what they’re doing? And we often did that”.

This quote shows that rules were applied selectively depending on the will of council. Or, another way of viewing this issue is that the power of council was easily usurped by a consensus among villagers. Another clear example of this is when Lisa described the situation in which her friend was sexually assaulted. The perpetrator of this crime was let back into the village because, in her opinion, the councilors were personally aligned with him. These situations call into question the validity of the authority of council.

The council lacked in validity in the sense that councilors were allowed to act arbitrarily. However, this is not to say that the council lacked power. In many ways, I think the power of council is greatly understated. I think that the label of “self-governance” masked the fact that council controlled very serious matters with very little oversight. When speaking about the council, one interviewee said, “If you’re in with the cool kids you get to stay and if you’re not, you get to live on the streets again”.

Decisions regarding the removal of a resident can be a matter of life or death for that resident. A council made up of essentially self-elected members should not be permitted to make these decisions. Additionally, I believe that even when it became clear that this process is problematic, there was a great deal of hesitation to change it because of an undying commitment to the ideal of self-governance.

Another feature of the informal structure that is worth considering is the existence of social hierarchies that directly conflict with formal hierarchies. This occurs on nearly every level of the organization. For instance, villagers on the council were not necessarily the most knowledgeable or popular residents. Rather, the most influential members may be outside of council, controlling the other villagers through social influence. Further, the most knowledgeable villagers seemingly had a better grasp on the function and dysfunction of the village than the board did. In other words, labeled power does not equal actual power. Friendship groups seemingly became the basis of power.

“Some people got kicked out because council didn’t like them, and I was one of them”

This kind of “elitism” allowed certain gregarious or social people to hold power, while others who were less outgoing were at a distinct disadvantage. Ultimately, the formal allocation of power was arbitrary, and the authority was often invalid. This created an opportunity for informal groupings to take control.

Another way of conceptualizing the internal struggles of OVE is through the use of Contact Theory. Contact theory states that successful intergroup contact relies on four conditions; the groups must be of equal status, they must share a common goal, there must be intergroup cooperation, and their contact must be supported by law or customs (Allport, 1954). Decades of research has generally supported the validity of this theory. For instance, in a meta-analysis of 515 studies, authors found that contact typically reduces prejudice and contact under Allport’s optimal conditions typically leads to greater reduction in prejudice (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006). However, some

scholars view the theory as overly simplistic and have offered alternative perspectives. Some have added additional conditions such as interdependence, a friendly and informal environment, exposure to multiple members of the other group, and social norms that promote equality. Others view these conditions less as independent factors and more as an interrelated bundle (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006). Despite proposed additions to this theory, many of the foundational conditions are still relevant and supported. OVE was lacking many of these characteristics. I will discuss a few of these conditions in more depth, providing evidence from my interviews as to why each was not present.

One condition that was not present at OVE was equal status. Equal status can be defined as all members or groups expecting and perceiving equal treatment. I argue that the organization of OVE was inherently unequal. Villagers on council were elevated above their peers, effectively becoming authority figures. Councilors were expected to discipline those who broke rules, even if they felt uncomfortable doing so. Additionally, as seen previously, there was a great deal of inconsistency in the enforcement of rules. This in turn created conflict and perceptions of inequality. Another level of inequity was between the village and the board. As one participant described, it seemed as though villagers were expected to act as subordinates to the board. Susan, who is outwardly confident in her abilities to act independently, felt as though the board was uncomfortable with her resolution. She explains,

“So I acted like I was on a level with you [the board], I am an equal to you. We are all on an equal level. I felt like some of the board and higher-ups were a bit resentful that I wasn’t thankful enough. That I

wasn't kissing butt enough. That's just the way I felt. I felt like they considered themselves to be a bit better than me."

It is not inherently an issue that the board has higher power than the village. It is a problem, however, if attitudes of personal superiority are being expressed.

Imposing an impression of inferiority onto the villagers is detrimental to group functioning and creates another level of perceived inequality.

Another unfulfilled condition is having a common goal. Having a common goal creates a unifying characteristic and purpose among the members of a group. As discussed earlier in this section, OVE has a common goal, but the path to achieving this goal is ambiguous. Therefore, the goal often got lost and it was difficult for residents to find common ground. All of the women I interviewed reported a lack of commonality among the villagers, below is an example.

"I don't necessarily think that. When you stick a bunch of people in a community together where the only thing they have in common is 'homeless', you're going to have a lot of things where people are going to be butting heads. There's going to be lots of people with nothing in common."

Here, the participant perceives "homelessness" as the only commonality in the village. This erodes feelings of togetherness and subsequently hinders processes of social support and group efficacy.

A similar but related condition is that of interdependence. This is defined as members of a group perceiving that they need their fellow members to

achieve a goal. In other words, this occurs when a group realizes that they must work together to accomplish a shared goal. This fosters productive communication and cooperation. This idea is expressed by a villager when she says,

“I think what makes a community is those same people realizing that they have to spend time together and they have to accomplish something in their time together”.

Members of OVE had individual roles but lacked critical aspects of teamwork and structured activities. Villagers could very easily complete their weekly chores and never contribute to a larger goal of finding permanent housing for themselves and others. In contrast, it is interesting to look at an example of interdependence that one participant described in a different community. Before living at OVE, Susan lived in a small cluster of trailers. When I asked her if she enjoyed her time there she responded in saying,

“Yeah, oh yeah. There was about 6 other people that were parked there with me and every evening we had this ritual where we would all get our containers together and go over to the public bathroom together and fill up our water. Because it was just parking spaces and we had to carry our water but none of us wanted to be alone in a public restroom at night, so we’d all go over together”

Here, it is clear that members of the community are united in a common goal of making life as easy and safe as possible. They had clear and patterned routines which contributed to this goal.

Overall, the informal processes at OVE contributed to an ineffective and destructive environment that undermined the formal structure. The community has a common goal but lacks a clear process of achieving it. Further, council held a disproportionate amount of power, which was applied unevenly and arbitrarily. Similarly, social hierarchies often overpowered formal hierarchies. Lastly, an alternate explanation for this dysfunction is that OVE lacked the critical conditions of contact theory, namely equal status, a common goal, and interdependence.

Other Social Psychological Considerations

In the previous section, I described how elements of the informal structure competed with the formal structure. In addition, I believe it is possible to “zoom in” more on these issues and consider how individual psychological conditions affect the group. One main topic that I will discuss is why and how certain villagers may have adopted a role of excessive power. Secondly, I will focus on the idea of emotional contagion and social stress, which I will contrast with the idea of social support.

The first concept I’m going to examine is the ways in which residents adopted power. All of the villagers come from a marginalized population. When they were homeless, they lost a certain level of control over their conditions. They also became vulnerable to the authority of law enforcement officials. Upon moving into the village, these individuals are suddenly thrust into a position of authority. This shift is understandably quite jarring and resulted in some villagers acting tyrannically. On this topic, one participant said,

“You take marginalized people, you give them a little bit of power, a license to kill, and what do you think is going to happen? Of course it’s going to turn into the Stanford guards and prisoners experiment. That’s what it was pretty much.”

This individual is making a reference to the 1971 Stanford Prison Experiment, in which ordinary college students were put into a simulation of a prison. In short, the participants acting as prison guards eventually became cruel to the participants posing as prisoners, without any real reason to do so. The Stanford Prison Experiment, while thought provoking, has a number of methodological and ethical flaws. Therefore, instead of drawing further connections to this experiment, I think it suffices to say that certain villagers became carried away with their allocation of power and acted in unreasonable ways.

As another example of this circumstance, one participant described that a fellow resident would continually proclaim himself to be a “cop”. In her recollection, this individual would often circle the village repeatedly saying “I’m a cop”. This created a stressful and unpleasant environment for the other villagers. While it is not entirely clear why this villager did this, we can hypothesize. One explanation may be that these individuals felt their actions were necessary in order to fill a prescribed role. In this sense, the “cop” villagers are not inherently evil but are a result of a structure that prescribed harshness. Another explanation is that acting as a cop was an act of retaliation against the treatment they’ve received throughout their lives. After most likely experiencing a lack of control previously, certain villagers seemingly did not know how to properly handle control. It is important to note that they were mostly

allowed to act in this out of control nature. There was very little oversight or correction of their behaviors.

Another topic worth discussing is the dichotomy of social stress and social support. The village is intended to be a supportive community in which individuals with similar struggles can help one another achieve their goals. My initial hypothesis was that living in this community would help residents work through past trauma and buffer them from future trauma. As mentioned earlier, however, it seems as though the village actually became a new source of trauma. In other words, the environment was one of social stress rather than social support.

I argue that social stress was a result of a two main factors. First, unpredictability of living fed into unstable power dynamics in the form of cliques. When I asked one participant about the current state of the village she remarked,

“According to one of my allies, it’s pretty much the same. Cliques. That happened at Dignity Village, but they sorted it out. At OVE it just got so entrenched”

I think the key word in this quote is *entrenched*. Cliques and social hierarchies became part of the culture and functioning of the village. It is difficult for the villagers to relieve stress and work on internal struggles when they must constantly evaluate their standing in the village. Constant change and the threat of exclusion and targeting are conditions that most people would not be productive under. It is especially harmful considering the villagers’ past experiences of trauma and hardship.

Second, negative emotional contagion affected the demeanor of the villagers. Emotional contagion is defined as the transfer of moods among people in a group

(Barsade, 2002). In one laboratory study on emotional contagion, it was found that both positive and negative emotional contagion had a significant influence on individual attitudes and group processes. Further, the group that experienced positive emotional contagion showed improved cooperation, increased perceived performance, and decreased conflict (Barsade, 2002).

At OVE, it seems as though a negative process of contagion was started and perpetuated. One interviewee said, “people are miserable there and it hurts me that people are miserable there”. I believe that all of the destructive informal processes discussed previously feeds into a feeling of inefficacy, which transfers throughout the group. Then, when new members join they are also affected by negative contagion. On a more individual level, participants often described the power-hungry leaders of OVE as “sociopaths”. Whether or not they could actually be diagnosed as such, this is quite a heavy accusation. Individuals displaying this level of aggression and lack of empathy serve as a negative influence on the village. Left unchecked, these attitudes directly and indirectly worsen the conditions of their fellow villagers. Therefore, in terms of negative affect or mental illness, OVE becomes a site of reinforcement rather than improvement.

Chapter 4: Significance and Future Directions

Importance

These findings are important for various reasons. First, the interviews I conducted illuminated problems at OVE that are not immediately apparent in the literature. Understanding these problems is critical to improving the village and creating better solutions in the future.

Furthermore, the structural problems in the village are demonstrative of several theories in the field of social organization and social psychology. Therefore, this data provides an opportunity to understand and apply theory to a unique situation.

Regardless of the possible changes that have been made to OVE since the participants were there, it is interesting and informative to study the conditions that they experienced as a case study of larger phenomenon. In other words, the group dynamics that interviewees described are relevant to the larger field of social psychology. In that sense, the current or future state of the village has no impact on the importance of my findings.

Finally, I believe this data supports the importance of qualitative research. While all of the women that I spoke with are now in permanent housing, they all had to endure a rugged course to get there. Consequences of this included physical, emotional, and social stress and trauma. People deserve to not face the struggles that these women faced. Thus, researchers should attempt to uncover such problems so that they can be avoided in the future.

Possible Improvements

There is no doubt that the creators of OVE had good intentions. The principles and goals of the project are what we need more of when it comes to interventions for homelessness. It is particularly important to restore dignity, safety, and feelings of control among those who have struggled to maintain housing. On paper, OVE appears to do all of these things. As I saw in my interviews, however, it does not work perfectly in actuality. That being said, I do not necessarily think that the flaws of OVE are fundamental to the model. In this section, I will propose possible improvements that could be made at OVE or implemented in a future project. These are all speculative, but perhaps something that could be studied in the future.

First, it is important to note that all of the women I interviewed were among the first residents at the village. It is therefore possible that they endured more problems, as it took time to work through issues that arose and change protocols accordingly. Furthermore, OVE has implemented a few changes since these women were residents. According to SquareOne's website, in 2016 they hired a quarter-time employee to help maintain organization and function. It is possible that this has been beneficial in controlling the power of cliques or power-hungry individuals. It is unclear if this staff member is present enough to fully supervise the village dynamics. SquareOne has also partnered with a University to provide more consistent social work. This quite possibly has helped villagers create and follow-up on clear transition plans. These are both positive additions but there are definitely still other possible improvements.

My first suggestion would be to provide more activities for the villagers. I think that part of the reason for the fighting and misconduct is that there simply isn't anything

else to do. In the words of one interviewee, “think about it, if you’re stuck in a space with 30 people all the time, it gets tense and people argue over the dumbest things”. Left to their own devices on a small enclosure of land, it is easy to see how that could foster a discouraging or negative environment. Given the chance for creative pursuits, the villagers could feel more occupied, more relaxed, and fulfill a greater purpose. For instance, a community in Austin, Texas, called “Community First!” offers an art studio, blacksmith and woodworking shop, community kitchens, and a community market (<https://mlf.org/community-first/>). While it may not be feasible for OVE to provide creative outlets to this extent, I think the idea is very good. It would certainly be possible for OVE to expand their kitchen and garden to encourage greater use. Those who have experienced homelessness have almost certainly faced conditions that are dispiriting. Providing shelter for these individuals is helpful, but it is not necessarily rehabilitative. If residents of OVE had the opportunity to explore their interests and find something that they are passionate about, I think that would have a great rehabilitative effect.

Another possible improvement that could be made is putting a greater focus on mental healthcare. If a “self-governed” community is going to run smoothly, it is vital that the individuals within the community are mentally healthy and motivated to improve. Those who are struggling may find it hard to function in a group. Furthermore, they may worsen the mental condition of those around them. I think it would be hugely helpful to have a counselor visit the village on occasion. A counselor could work with individuals or with the group to teach basic mental illness awareness and tips for self-care. Or, a group counselor could observe the weekly meetings and provide feedback on

the within-group communication. One last suggestion would be to provide better resources for connecting villagers to mental healthcare professionals. This could be as simple as compiling lists of contact information for therapists, counseling centers, or insurance.

Lastly, I think that oversight from the board needs to be more consistent and frequent. A board member should be at the village often to monitor the group dynamics and hold residents accountable. Also, I think that all reports and complaints should be reviewed by a board member to ensure that they are fair and warranted. This way, the board will also be more familiar with patterns of behavior, so they will be able to more fairly assess a situation when something severe happens. If the board is going to have oversight power over the council and village, they should have at least some familiarity with the residents.

The biggest limitation with all of these solutions is finding additional funding. I believe, however, they would all be feasible to some extent with help from the community and donors. Even if these improvements would not be possible at OVE, they could be considered in the creation of future projects.

Future Directions

Despite the ubiquity of homelessness in the United States, there is still a desperate lack of effective solutions. New solutions, including tiny-home communities, are a step in the right direction to providing safe, empowering, and effective transitional care for homeless individuals. However, this research has highlighted potential problems with this model. These insights could be expanded to future research in a couple key ways.

Most importantly, future work with OVE or other villages should include a larger or more diverse sample size. It would be greatly beneficial to randomly select participants, rather than rely on snowball sampling methods. Participants in my study were all acquaintances and shared a lot of the same roles at the village. It would be insightful to hear from villagers who were members of different friend groups or who had varying involvement in the management of the village. Also, all of the women I interviewed were members of the first inducted group. Research that is more representative would include residents from varying points in time, including current residents.

Most importantly, I think it is crucial that future research adopts a comparative approach. That is, tiny-home communities should be compared to other forms of housing. This would situate findings in a broader context and allow us to determine relative effectiveness. If we want to create large-scale effective solutions, I think we need to understand what is and what is not working across all major forms of housing. For instance, OVE offers a lot of positive elements but lacks in certain areas. It is possible that another kind of housing is thriving in the ways that OVE is not but struggling in the ways that they are. Isolating positive characteristics and merging them into new model could potentially be extremely effective.

Ultimately, if significant change is going to occur, there needs to be a society-wide shift in perspective. Specifically, I think there needs to be a shift away from relying on quantitative measures of homelessness. In the discussion of temporary housing, statistics often focus on how many people are kept off the streets. Essentially, this shows how many people have been hidden out of sight from the public. What these

statistics don't show are the experiences of the individuals involved. We have a lot to learn from these stories. An institution that may appear successful on paper can be causing a lot of harm to those involved. Understanding these hidden narratives is key to crafting informed improvements and better future solutions.

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