



Homelessness & the Opportunity Center of Palo Alto



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INTRODUCTION

When one thinks of Silicon Valley from an outside perspective, the first things that might come to mind are technology, startups, prosperity, and innovation. One might easily overlook or dismiss the developing issue of homelessness and the struggles of rising rent prices due to such economic growth. Yet, the fact that this issue is so overlooked only further puts it in the dark and delays its resolve. There exists a major and growing issue with the cost of housing in the Bay Area and the places people can go to if they cannot afford rent. Despite the fact that the Bay Area overall provides many well paying jobs and is well known as being a booming area of growth economically, recently, in Silicon Valley the prices for renting have been rising significantly and less affordable solutions are available (Silicon Valley Indicators). The rising rent prices and lack of affordable solutions are due to multiple factors, including: length of time it takes to have an affordable unit approved, strict California building codes and design requirements, workforce and procurement rules, and environmental regulations (Bosselman, 2018). This is coupled with the fact that the longer a building plan takes to get approved, the more expensive it becomes. In Silicon Valley, the total new affordable residential units approved for building have decreased from 32% in 2000, to 7% in 2017 (Silicon Valley Indicators).

DATA AND FINDINGS

Atmosphere



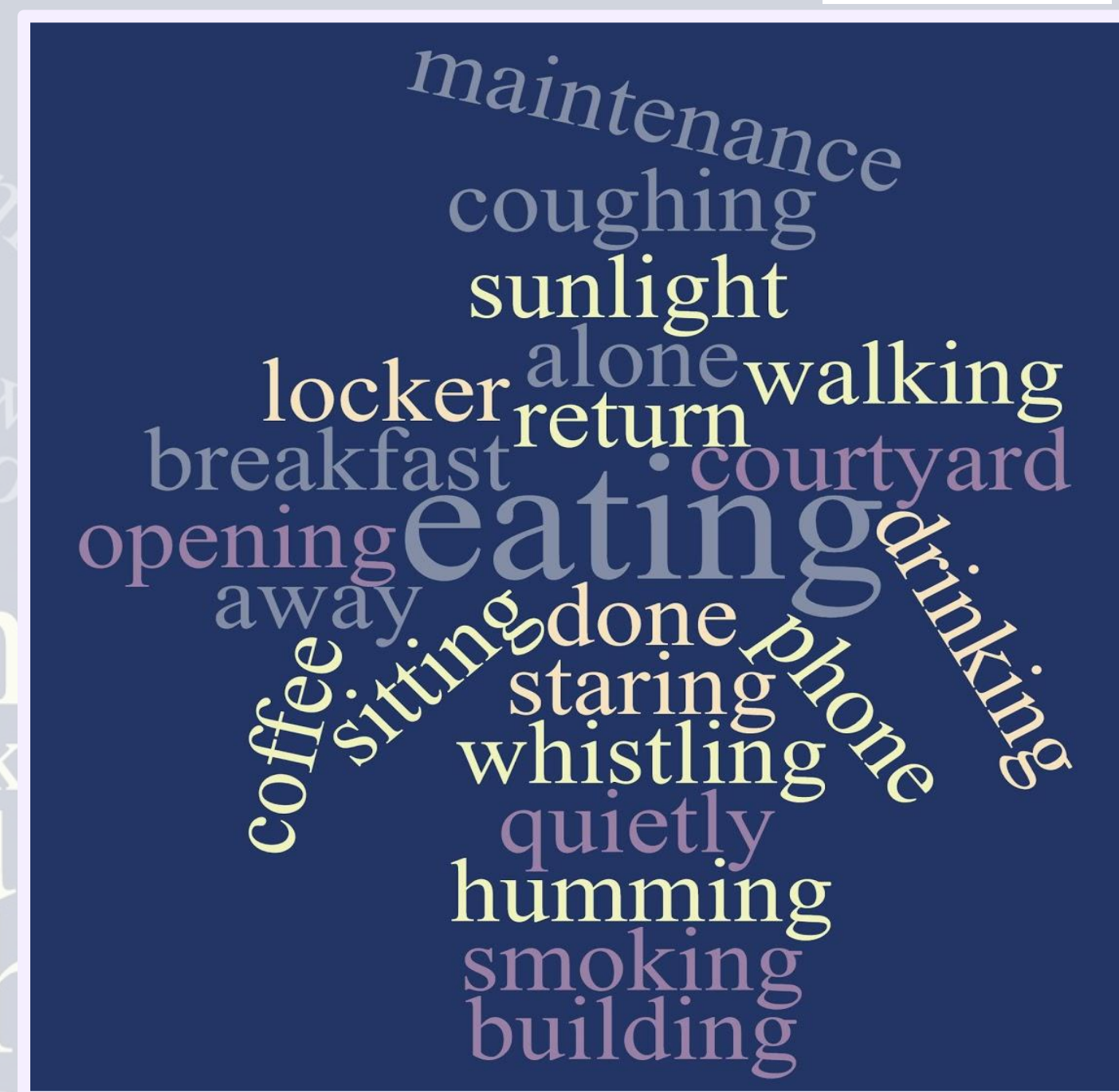
"Here in California... We champion these **progressive values**... but at the same time, we have a **rising homeless rate** that just is **not being addressed adequately.**"

"The OSC is in a unique position to not only work as an **outreach site**... but I feel like we work as sort of like a... hub, where **you can come and have a community**, for the day at least."

"Most of our clients, around 70%... aren't actively working to move into housing, or even transitional housing. But they still come here just because of the **sense of the community**, and I think that's something that all of us work hard for. And I think that's kind of what sets it apart."

"A lot of our clients are dealing with **mental health issues**. That's something that I think goes unstated, especially in cultural portrayals of the homeless... I think a greater **acknowledgement and compassion** of the issue... people just don't want to face it. They don't want to **own up to their privilege.**"

Actions



Objects, Physical Descriptors



Interactions



CONCLUSIONS AND ANALYSIS

Unfortunately, the study proved inconclusive as the onset of the Coronavirus pandemic didn't fail to take its toll on the Bay Area. The data collected was incomplete; thus, no solid, substantiated conclusions can be drawn. If the pandemic hadn't happened, the clothing drive for professional garments would have gone on as planned. The drive in question was planned in response to a recognized need within the community, and an attempt to somewhat assist the issue of the Opportunity Center being treated as a drop-off location for garbage or completely unusable attire. After the drive's completion, some form of interview or anonymous survey would be given to determine the drive's success. Another analysis would be completed months after the drive to assess the longevity of the drive's results. Although insufficient data was collected to determine the success of a clothing drive at the Opportunity Center, other data collecting, including the time taken to complete a session of field notes and an interview at the Opportunity Center, was incredibly eye-opening in and of itself. Many students at Paly are completely unaware of the Opportunity Center's very existence, even with its location right across the street from the Paly students' highly-frequented lunch spot, Town and Country. The Opportunity Center is so close, yet so overshadowed by its cross-the-street neighbor which proves a fitting metaphor for the issue of homelessness in Palo Alto & the Bay Area. Unawareness to (and misinformation about) the issue of homelessness, NIMBYism, insufficient affordable housing and mental health services are some of the many obstacles currently facing the homeless population of the Bay Area.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGIES

Field Notes

On Wednesday, February 5, at 9:24 am, I went to the Opportunity Center, sat down on a bench, and took down every observation and feeling I could see from what was going on in front of me.

Interview

On February 26, I interviewed Alex Mazariegos, who was at the time the Volunteer Coordinator at the Opportunity Center.

IMPLICATIONS AND NEXT STEPS

Throughout the entire Advanced Authentic Research project, my highest priority and greatest interest was to involve myself with people. To humanize an issue I care deeply about, the issue of homelessness- which is so often criminalized and disregarded in everyday discourse. I believe that with this project and this class, I've begun. I've started a lifelong journey. In connecting to people, shedding societally imposed biases or fears, lies the first step in making change. Taking action about things as giant and daunting as homelessness can feel impossible - until you uncover the humanity within it. I think I've decided it's okay to operate on a smaller scale if it means making a significant and positive impact on those few people. Then again, I say I've *begun* in this process because I never actually acted on my desire to make a change. It set a precedence for the kind of work I'd want to do in the future. And as I said previously, undoubtedly opened my eyes to some of the more unspoken truths of Palo Alto, like the apparent lack of awareness of the Opportunity Center, for instance (I can attest to this lack of knowledge because I myself didn't know about the center a year ago). In the future, I hope to continue to do work like this, but to complete the project- or be able to do some kind of good instead of taking in information and giving nothing back but recognition and acknowledgement. I have so much more respect for case managers at places like the Opportunity Center, a new awareness of the myriad of complexities preventing the "issue of homelessness" to be resolved. I do hope that in some small way, for some short amount of time, I was able to do something remotely positive for people dealing with homelessness in some way or another- at least, if nothing else, to shed some light on something that transforms people's lives and is generally dealt with so carelessly.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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