

Gentrification, Displacement, and Homelessness in Austin, Texas

by

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**Introduction:**

Austin, Texas is widely considered to be a progressive city, yet still struggles to address the challenge of homelessness within its borders. As of 2021, the city's constituents voted to reinstate a camping ban following a 2019 decision to relax these policies, restricting unhoused individuals from establishing camps in public areas (Aguilera, 2022). However, Austin is not the only major city to undergo this transition. As a recent *LA Times* article reports, cities such as Seattle, Sacramento, and Los Angeles have reversed previous trends of tolerance and have begun to remove encampments and place stricter measures against those sleeping outdoors (Cline, 2022). At the surface, one may question what is prompting these decisions within so many cities that are considered to be more "progressive." However, shifting focus away from policies, questions related to how this affects the unhoused community in these cities emerge. For example, one may ask where these individuals go after such a policy is implemented? Likewise, while this is an example of a more openly visible punitive measure implemented by policymakers, are there more subtle ways in which the unhoused are excluded from public space?

As a major city within the region known as the Sunbelt, Austin has experienced immense growth in its economy in recent years. It is also known for its progressive policies and is often considered a model of an environmentally conscious and sustainable city (Tretter, 2016). Yet, despite this outwardly progressive appearance, its legacy of segregation and institutional racism still influences its politics today, as the following case study explores. Following the implementation of its camping ban, the city continues to struggle to find housing for those without shelter. Considering this history and recent developments, the city is a prime location to utilize for a case study.

This research examines connections between revitalization efforts in Austin and their influence on the movements and experiences of unhoused individuals in the city, including the location of services providing outreach. Findings demonstrate that as a result of these efforts, unhoused individuals generally are being pushed away from downtown to more suburban areas. However, more subtle forms of exclusion within revitalized spaces are also demonstrated, especially those which impact the “feeling” that certain areas conveyed for unhoused Austinites. Finally, the analysis presents evidence that supports the claim that the inequities the city’s history of segregation produced are tied to the present challenges of homelessness.

This research is based upon several key theories and foundational literatures, especially regarding public space and changes within urban economies, which are discussed in a literature review section. The paper then presents background information for the study area, along with a landscape analysis to provide readers with context and insight into the landscape of a gentrifying section of the city. A subsequent discourse analysis serves to demonstrate how homelessness is discussed within Austin society and the media. Finally, the main focus of this research includes sections detailing the themes that emerged during the interview process, as well as a discussion of these themes.

### **Project Description and Research Questions:**

The following research investigates the forces of change occurring in East Austin and their effects on unhoused Austinites. The study also explores ways in which the municipal government is responding to the problem of homelessness. The study is guided by the following research questions:

RQ1: How have unhoused individuals' movements and experiences of space throughout the city changed as a result of initiatives and interventions designed to create a more attractive downtown for middle-class consumers and tourists?

RQ2: In what ways are the unhoused excluded from public space beyond punitive measures, and how do non-punitive forms of exclusion affect this group?

### **Methodology:**

In order to answer these questions and gain the perspectives of unhoused individuals in the Austin area, eight interviews with unhoused and formerly unhoused individuals at a center for homeless outreach were conducted from June 2022-August 2022. The contacts for these interviews were made through Sunrise Community Church prior to weekly volunteer shifts. Participants were asked questions related to their movements around the city, their experiences of urban change over time, and their emotional experiences of space, ie. how certain areas made them feel. To gain additional insight into the strategies the city has utilized to address homelessness, one worker from the center was interviewed as well. This individual spent many years working with the unhoused community in the Austin area. They were asked questions that focused on services provided to the unhoused, along with how the public's perceptions of unhoused individuals have changed. These nine interviews were recorded and later uploaded to Dedoose, an open source qualitative research software. A list of codes was created based on the themes related to the research questions. Additional codes were later added based on emergent themes from the interviews.

Additionally, a landscape analysis and discourse analysis related to ongoing development within the East Austin area were conducted, with a focus on an area stretching from approximately East 5th to East 11th Street. This section of Austin was chosen due to its history as a long-segregated and disinvested area that was home to the majority of the city's people of

color. In more recent years, city and land developers have made efforts to revitalize the area. These topics will be expounded on in further detail in the next sections.

A landscape analysis can be utilized to better understand cultural and social meanings that are conveyed through urban landscapes. As Domosh (1989) demonstrates, a landscape analysis examines multiple layers and contexts of a landscape or specific structure, such as its history and socio-economic functions, in order to better understand how space takes on particular meanings. A landscape analysis can also draw on the lived experiences of those within a landscape, which may or may not resonate with the "official" meanings or intended uses of a space as imagined by architects, designers, or developers, as Lees (2001) shows in her analysis of Vancouver's Public Library that opened in 1995.

Additionally, a discourse analysis was conducted vis-a-vis homelessness in the city. Discourse can be described as underlying patterns of language within a certain social context. A discourse analysis seeks to understand the underlying meanings of written text based on writer's intent and how a reader interprets these words (Shanthi et al, 2022). Furthermore, a discourse analysis can also be a crucial method in revealing structures of power within a society. As Lees (2004) explains, a discourse analysis can be used as a methodology for revealing how a certain issue or topic is discussed in a society, uncovering certain hegemonic beliefs that dominate this society. To better understand current opinions and discussions related to how the city is addressing homelessness, materials such as journalistic coverage and opinion pieces from newspapers and local news networks, such as the *Austin American Statesman*, *Austin Chronicle*, along with other local newspapers, were analyzed. Key phrases, such as "homeless" or "homelessness" were searched in Google and the search features on these publications' websites. Special attention was paid to specific quotations from residents and key stakeholders.

## Conceptual Framework and Literature Review

This project's argument draws upon several key concepts. Foundational to this research are theories related to how public space is created and contested by different classes. Additionally, emphasis will be placed on the way certain behaviors or relationships are promoted or reinforced within public space. Building on these ideas, the next concept that is key to this research relates to urban governance and economic transitions since World War II, as they affected how public space is managed within urban areas. Since the focus of this research is related to revitalization attempts by city authorities and due to the ongoing economic changes within the study area, previous studies related to gentrification were also referenced. A common style of planning that is implemented within these areas is known as New Urbanism, and literature related to it was included in this review as well. Finally, previous case studies related to homelessness in the United States were also referred to provide important context into how unhoused individuals are viewed by society at large, including how this point of view influences the way in which city officials address the problem in their cities.

### *Public Space*

A crucial starting point for this research relates to public space and one's access to it, as this has transformed over time. Geographer Don Mitchell, in his introduction to the idea of the "right to the city," describes how access to public space is not guaranteed and is often struggled for. Drawing from the works of French urbanist Henri Lefebvre, Mitchell asserts that cities are *work*, and space is created by the interactions between individuals living within them (Mitchell, 2003). For Lefebvre, space is not simply an empty container for objects and people to fill up, but

is instead a “social morphology” created by the actual lived experiences of its inhabitants, forming something akin to a “living organism.” In conflict with Lefebvre’s notion of produced space is abstract space, or the space of capitalism. This space “valorizes” certain relationships between individuals in these spaces and enforces certain behaviors (Lefebvre, 1991, pg. 56; 94). Mitchell (2003) points out that American society is dominated by capitalist social relations that are based on the ownership of private property and class position. One’s ability to move between private space and public space is crucial to how people conceptualize and perform public interaction. As a result, citizenship in the United States is often reduced in practice to “...the coming together of owners of private property to create a public” (pg. 132). Since the unhoused do not have private property to retreat to, they are effectively not recognized as legitimate citizens. Mitchell (2003) continues ( pg. 135):

Although homeless people are nearly always visible in public, they are rarely counted as part of the public. Homeless people are in a double bind. For them, socially legitimated private space does not exist, and so they are denied access to public space and public activity by the laws of a capitalist society that is anchored in private property and privacy.

Like Mitchell, others have also raised concerns related to the privatization of public space, limiting access to certain groups of people and eliminating political action from these spaces. Beginning in the 1990s in Los Angeles, Mike Davis noted an increase in security and fortified public spaces for a privileged few, mainly the elite and middle-class consumers. This included a proliferation of anti-homeless architecture and an increase in policing downtown. Today, anti-homeless architecture can be found in countless cities around the world and is

intended to make it difficult for an individual to sit or lie down on a structure for an extended period of time. Davis continues by describing the methods in which officials pursued policies of “containment” of the unhoused to certain neighborhoods in the city for revitalizing downtowns to maintain a more pristine image to outsiders (Davis, 1990, pg. 232). Soon after, Goss (1996), noted an increase in public spaces devoted to consumption that lack the true spontaneity of urban life, known as festival spaces. Among the most well-known examples are Faneuil Hall in Boston and Harborplace in Baltimore, both of which aim to recreate historic marketplaces within their respective downtowns. However, as Goss further emphasizes, these spaces are privately owned and uphold a certain public order, influencing the behaviors of people who use these spaces.

### *Historical Transitions in Urban Governance*

Concerns about public space must be understood within the broader context of profound transformations in urban governance that have occurred in North America and abroad over the past five decades. American cities have undergone dramatic economic and cultural changes since the 1970’s. Tauss (2012) details how in the beginning of the 20th Century, Fordism emerged as the dominant model of production within the cities of the United States, eventually spreading to the rest of the world. The Fordist period can be described as a time in which the state was at the center of implementing and promoting economic and social institutions, as well as an economic model based on mass production and consumption (Peck and Tickell, 2002; Tauss, 2012). Despite an era of massive economic growth following World War II, the late 1960s saw a decline in productivity and profit, resulting in the decline of the Fordist model within American cities (Tauss, 2012).



By the 1970s, the Post-Fordist economic model increasingly relied on mechanized methods of production and the outsourcing of this production to lower-wage countries (Tauss, 2012). The arrival of neoliberalism in the early 1980s ushered in a new political and economic system that focused on expanding markets and a greater emphasis on competition, resulting in a reduction in public services and deindustrialization within cities (Mitchell, 2020; Peck and Tickell, 2002; Tauss, 2012). As a result, cities began to increasingly rely on entrepreneurial strategies to attract capital following deindustrialization. As Harvey (1989, pg. 7) explains, many of these strategies rely on “public-private partnerships” in which local governments must secure external sources of funding or investments. This transition had immense effects on new construction within urban areas, as new projects tend to benefit local jurisdictions and developers, rather than the whole metropolitan area with the goal of upgrading a city’s image (Harvey, 1989). As a result, the image a city presented became increasingly important, as sociologist Sharon Zukin writes (1995, pg. 7):

Building a city depends on how people combine the traditional economic factors of land, labor, and capital. But it also depends on how they manipulate symbolic languages of exclusion and entitlement. The look and feel of cities reflect decisions about what - and who - should be visible and what should not, on concepts of order and disorder, and on uses of aesthetic power.

Both Harvey and Zukin examine the important role of aesthetics in modern urban planning and governance. Today, many cities strive to achieve what Asher Ghertner (2015, pg. 1) dubs the “world class aesthetic,” emulating the images of spaces in cities like New York or London. For example, Asher Ghertner’s (2015) study of urban planning in Delhi revealed that in

lieu of formal planning documents, city officials have increasingly relied on incorporating images of world class cities in new developments, regardless of legality and the resulting displacement of the city's poor residents living in slums. Ghertner notes how in a number of interviews with these residents, many were enthusiastic about these new projects, asserting that aesthetic tastes can become hegemonic norms within a society, despite the detrimental effects these norms may have on certain groups (Ghertner, 2015). However, planners and city officials in the Global South are not the only ones employing these techniques. For example, Grubbauer (2014) describes a parallel process within Vienna, as city officials and real estate developers utilized images of the city's skyscrapers in order to not only promote the city as an economic power, but also facilitate the implementation of new economic policies prioritizing capital accumulation over public ownership. As a result, by tying this new economic order to these images of the city's skyline, city officials, business interests, and developers attempt to legitimize these transitions and make them meaningful to the general public, regardless of whether these changes to the economic order provided tangible benefits to the average person living in the city.

### *Gentrification*

Gentrification is a process originally observed in North America and Western Europe, but which has now expanded globally. The classic definition of gentrification describes the "upgrading" of disinvested neighborhoods in inner cities due to the arrival of "pioneer gentrifiers," resulting in the displacement of its original residents (Lees, et al, 2008, pg. 10). While this topic is vast, the current analysis focuses on how gentrification influences public space within cities. Although early explanations of the process have focused on the role of specific groups, such as artists, in driving gentrification, more recent analyses have focused on

the role of the global economy in the process. Neil Smith, one of the first to conduct research related to the causes of gentrification, theorized four different stages of the process (Lees, et al, 2008). While earlier stages can be represented by these pioneering gentrifiers, since the 1990's, gentrification has been tied to partnerships between local governments and private capital. Under the guise of "urban regeneration," large scale developments have become a crucial component of a city's economy and its ability to compete with other urban economies (Smith, 2002, pg. 443-444).

An important point of this analysis is the influence gentrification has on policing and policy within these neighborhoods. In his observation of New York City during the 1990's, Smith noted an increase in punitive measures against marginalized groups, including the unhoused and people of color, in order to make urban spaces "safer" for the middle class and tourists. He used the word "revanchism" to relate the events unfolding in the city, a term that originally described a political movement from 19<sup>th</sup> Century France. Revanchism was a political movement in reaction to the Second Republic and, in particular, the creation of the Paris Commune by socialists in the city. The revanchists sought to take back the city from those perceived to have stolen it from them and utilized appeals to morality and public order to further this goal (Lees, et al, 2008). Smith drew similar parallels to the political atmosphere in New York City, especially following the murder of Bruce Bailey, an activist involved in low-income tenant organizing, as well as the violent conflict in the Lower East Side of Manhattan between anti-gentrification protestors and police over the closure of Tompkins Square Park. For him, these actions were acts of "revenge" by urban elites against those who they feel "stole" these spaces from them during the Fordist period, as well as a reaction to the economic recession experienced by many in the early 1990s. This was coupled with a decline in liberal urban policy

beginning in the 1980s and a pushback against its ideals, namely the consensus that the government is responsible for ensuring a minimum standard of quality of life for its citizens (Smith, 1998). As a result, state and city funding towards infrastructure improvements and necessities such as healthcare, education, and housing waned. The blame was placed on these marginalized groups, rather than public officials. These actions were bolstered by media depictions of urban neighborhoods as lawless frontiers in need of saving, full of dangerous individuals and urban decay (Lees et al, 2008; Smith, 2002; Smith, 1996). Therefore, Smith emphasizes that gentrification is a spatial representation of revanchism that is promoted by both conservative and liberal policymakers (Lees et al, 2008).

Kukla (2021) describes two distinct patterns of development in gentrifying areas. The first of these is “bottom-up” gentrification (pg. 89) spearheaded by small business owners and residents that move from areas that became too expensive or homogenized. The landscape then takes the form of independent stores and restaurants. On the other hand, “top-down” gentrification (pg. 90) is realized through cities or private developers attempting to revitalize disinvested spaces, often encompassing entire neighborhoods. Chain stores and loft style housing dot the landscape and a new identity and character replace what was there before. While bottom-up gentrification is often viewed as a natural process that occurs with no assistance, Kukla stresses that it is in fact assisted by more top-down methods, including tax policies and underinvestment in older housing. Employing Smith’s theory of revanchism, they see the process as an underlying driver of gentrification. Despite rhetoric espousing the improvements to a neighborhood, revitalization approaches intend to remove people or behaviors that are seen as dangerous and do not promote capitalist expansion. Finally, to again recognize the influence that past economic and political processes have on the present, a crucial point Kukla emphasizes is

that these neighborhoods did not historically decline because of residents, but rather because of systemic disinvestment in poorer neighborhoods (typically inhabited by people of color), resulting in infrastructure decline, a cut-back in social services, and loss employment opportunities. Once far enough deteriorated, original housing is replaced with more expensive units. Older residents then become displaced, and rather than regenerating a neighborhood for its original residents, revanchist practices aim to replace these neighborhoods with a landscape that is more desirable for the middle-class and consumers (Kukla, 2021).

### *New Urbanism*

New Urbanism is a recent movement in urban planning that was founded in 1993 by Andres Duany and Elizabeth Plater-Zyberk. It strives to incorporate walkability within cities and promote a greater sense of community within public spaces. New Urbanist developments attempt to replicate historical city designs of the past as a way to combat urban sprawl and create more compact cities (*Congress for the New Urbanism*; Knaap and Talen, 2005). New Urbanism and “Smart Growth” are often used interchangeably. However, Smart Growth intends to reduce the impact of development on the environment by reducing sprawl and was a guide for planning put forth mainly by those concerned about these effects. Although Smart Growth often incorporates planning ideals like mixed-use construction, walkability, and sense of place, New Urbanism’s principles are more related to the actual physical form of planned spaces. New Urbanism and Smart Growth both emphasize reliance upon the free-market, rather than regulatory actions implemented by the state, though New Urbanism places a greater emphasis on this guidance (Knaap and Talen, 2005; Tretter, 2013).

New Urbanist developments have been praised for their positive effects in terms of the physical activity of its residents (Iravani and Rao, 2019) and as a new form of planning that addresses the shortfalls of conventional methods (Ellis, 2010). However, the practice has received considerable criticism from scholars who have called into question what history is being emulated by these designs and who these spaces are built for. Some have claimed that the New Urbanist movement creates privileged enclaves that cater to the residents of these spaces, not the public as a whole (Grant, 2006), thus questioning the movement's community-building aspirations. New Urbanism has also been tied to gentrification. For example, despite emulating older neighborhoods, case studies have demonstrated the ways in which New Urbanist developments have displaced older residents and have undermined older businesses by replacing them with a "village" style design, erasing much of the culture and heritage New Urbanism contends to preserve (Markley and Madhuri, 2016).

Within Austin, Andrew M. Busch (2015) cited New Urbanism as "the architecture of gentrification and redevelopment." They continue by describing how this style in Austin emerged from two main trends. First, it was prompted by a growing interest in urban spaces and lifestyles after years of disinvestment in urban centers and proliferation of suburbs. Additionally, real estate developers and city officials recognize the potential value that development within the core of the city can create. Others have also raised concerns related to public space and other amenities in and around New Urbanist projects, as they often specifically cater to residents and not the general public and reflect a desire to create an orderly environment similar to the suburbs (Grant, 2006). For Smith (1999), the architecture and design of New Urbanism parallel the rise in revanchist attitudes within urban areas and represent "fantasies" of a bygone world made possible through the control of the landscape. In summary,

It is a revenge hardwired into the institutional control of the landscape and its spatial location. Precisely in its escapism the new urbanism posits geography as the means of revenge. Without the revanchist city, the new urbanism has no rationale; the past it evokes has no future except perhaps for a small elite. It is not a solution to, but an accomplice of, the revanchist city. It expresses revenge in the delicacy of urban design rather than the declamatory rhetoric of Giuliani (pg. 105).

According to researcher David Serrins, New Urbanist style planning is evident in major Texas cities, but is a particular driving force in the plans for Austin. Among some of the most common aspects of New Urbanism that have been incorporated into Austin's city plans include an increase in density, revitalization, mixed use construction and housing, and walkability (Serrins, 2014). In 1999, the Central East Austin Master Plan was created to reverse years of disinvestment in the area through redevelopment. The plan set out to achieve numerous goals that are consistent with New Urbanist ideals, including the preservation of historic landmarks and the character of the area, mixed-use construction, limiting the construction of strip malls, and greater access to public transit (*Austin Revitalization Authority*).

### *Geographies of Homelessness in Urban Settings*

Early studies investigating homelessness in the United States have focused on its causes. For example, Passaro (1996), in her ethnographic study of the unhoused community in New York City, emphasizes the role cultural norms and notions of family had on unhoused individuals, describing how many of the men she interviewed rejected traditional views of family or felt that they did not fit in with traditional notions of masculinity. Additionally, she found that those who followed traditional gender roles or notions of family were more likely to find success

in navigating the process to receive housing assistance. Moving beyond the causes of homelessness, others have researched how cities have managed the problem, primarily focusing on punitive measures of control implemented by policymakers and planners, including the use of hostile architecture and clearing of outdoor encampments (Davis, 1990; DeVerteuil et al, 2009). However, more recent scholarship has called for a more complex understanding of how the movements of unhoused individuals have evolved and how they have adapted to these measures of control, rather than the ways in which these geographies have been destroyed by more punitive measures (DeVerteuil et al, 2009).

Hennigan and Speer (2019) expanded their analysis beyond punitive policies implemented in the cities of Fresno and Phoenix, revealing a connection between more “compassionate” interventions and punitive measures. For example, in Fresno, the researchers found that as a result of pressure from revitalization efforts downtown, nonprofits and shelters played an essential role in promoting the eviction of encampments within this part of the city. In Phoenix, campuses providing services to the unhoused were established outside the city’s downtown in order to remove the unhoused from these areas. The researchers also noted that behavior and reform were also crucial components within these spaces of care, reinforcing the idea that not all unhoused or poor individuals are “deserving” of help. Speer (2017), explored the role of housing and conceptions of home in relation to housing initiatives and encampment clearings. She found that unhoused individuals created their own alternative forms of community and expressions of home, often in contrast to these initiatives. Furthermore, these encampments subverted normative notions of family and home promoted by officials and policies, placing emphasis on community and appropriation of necessities over family and consumerism.



Finally, prior to this analysis and discussion of the history of East Austin, it is important to address the word “homelessness” and its implications. Researchers and advocates have pointed out that the widely used descriptor homeless fails to accurately describe each individual. As Passaro (1996) asserts, the word homelessness implies a lack of social connection. Although unhoused individuals may not have access to more traditional social networks, they do maintain other networks and relationships. “Homeless,” moreover, as a term denoting a state of being if not indeed an essential quality of people who lack formal dwellings, arguably occludes consideration of the systemic forces that differentially shape individual and group life trajectories, exposing lower income people and people of color to heightened risk of losing their dwelling places. Therefore, this research will use the word unhoused as much as possible to highlight the processual nature of and structural dynamics involved in losing one’s dwelling.

### **Case study background: Race and development in East Austin**

Although individuals lived in East Austin by the mid-nineteenth century, the city’s 1928 Master Plan legally established this part of the city as an African American sector. Although Black Austinites lived all throughout the city prior to 1928, they were essentially forced into this section of the city, as the Plan declared that basic amenities, like sewer lines and paved roads, would only be provided for Black residents on the eastern side (Hill, 2012). Despite this form of segregation, Black residents of East Austin formed a thriving community with numerous businesses and institutions during the mid-20<sup>th</sup> Century. According to Busch (2015), by the 1930s, similar forces pushed Mexican Americans into East Austin, where they formed a community located to the south.

Though the residents of East Austin made the most of the resources they had access to, there were still disparities between East Austin and predominantly white West Austin, especially in terms of access to jobs and education (Busch, 2015; 2017). It should also be noted that the political structure of the city disadvantaged those living in the Eastside. Up until 2015, the city government utilized at-large voting (Long, 2016). At large voting practices have been noted to be discriminatory towards low income and communities of color, particularly within cities in comparison to statewide elections, as a city is treated as one district. Alternatively, in multi-member elections, a group that does not have enough voting power to get their candidate elected may be able to make up for this in another district. In at large districts, candidates from these communities who are successful in appealing to white constituents often must do so at the expense of their community's interests (Berry and Dye, 1979). Long (2016, pg. 160) describes a similar situation in Austin in which a "gentleman's agreement" established in the 1970s reserved two seats for an African American and a Latinx candidate, noting that these individuals were chosen due to their alignment with issues that concerned the mostly white business community in the city at the time.

East Austin residents were exposed to more health hazards as a result of hazardous pollution that emanated from the neighborhood's many factories and oil repositories. In the 1960s, East Austin underwent major changes due to urban renewal programs. The agency responsible, known as the Austin Urban Renewal Agency (AURA), deemed many homes in the Eastside as "substandard." Many families were dispossessed due to the resulting projects, including expansions by the University of Texas. By the end of the century, East Austin experienced a drastic rise in poverty and crime (Busch, 2015). However, by the 1990s and early 2000s, the landscape of East Austin changed as developers shifted their focus from the central

city and West Campus area to the East Side, reversing years of disinvestment within the neighborhood. Utilizing Smart Growth as its guide for redevelopment, city officials, developers, and environmental groups collaborated to shift growth away from environmentally sensitive regions in the city's suburbs to downtown (Tretter, 2013). Following the election of Kirk Watson in 1997, Austin's City Council consisted primarily of individuals who were firm advocates for environmental initiatives. As a result, Watson had support for his environmental advocacy and implemented the Smart Growth Initiative (SGI) in 1998. The plan sectioned off the city into three zones to redirect development away from the Edwards Aquifer (Levin, 2019). East Austin became a prime location for redevelopment, especially considering its proximity to the city's core, and fell under two zones: the desired-development zone (DDZ) and the urban desired-development zone (McTarnaghan, 2015; Levin, 2019). Furthermore, the success of the Environmental Justice Movement in the 1990s was responsible for shutting down many of the environmental health hazards that were present in East Austin, creating a more attractive area for development (McTarnaghan, 2015). In the eyes of many, Austin's Smart Growth initiatives were a success and went on to serve as a model for other cities to incorporate sustainability and entrepreneurialism into their plans. In 2012, these initiatives were encoded into the Imagine Austin Plan. Envisioning what the city would look like in 2035, the plan's goals are to create a sustainable, equitable, and diverse city that would be affordable and provide economic opportunities for all (Long, 2016). Yet, as Long (2016), explains, the benefits of the city's initiatives have not been equally distributed, particularly for those living in East Austin.

The members of the community struggled against the resulting gentrification in East Austin. Numerous studies have tied the process to displacement in this section of the city, a theme that continuously emerges throughout this research. As the University of Texas's

*Uprooted Project* details, there are different forms of displacement that communities may experience. For example, the most explicit form is direct displacement, in which residents cannot remain in their neighborhoods due to rising costs. Other factors that manifest in this form include eminent domain or the physical deterioration of homes. Indirect displacement occurs as a result of the people moving in. Older residents and lower-income individuals typically cannot afford the higher-priced vacated buildings. Lower-income residents or individuals with housing vouchers may also be outright excluded as a result of discriminatory policies. Finally, cultural displacement occurs when the character of a neighborhood changes, often due to an influx of shops and restaurants catering to the newcomers (*The Uprooted Project*). In an interview cited by Long (2016, p. 161), Susana Almanza, a founding member of the environmental justice group People Organized in Defense of Earth and her Resources (PODER) stated the following regarding her community's struggle against gentrification and displacement,

We had to protect the health of the people and the health of future generations first, then we'll deal with the gentrification. And we've been dealing with that ever since. And it hasn't been a winning fight. At least with environmental racism, there's environmental laws, there are civil rights laws, there are title VI laws, there are all these tools. But with economic racism, there are no rules.

As residents in East Austin began to experience increasing unaffordability in their neighborhoods (a topic which will be further expounded upon), the previous collaborative efforts to steer growth and development away from the suburbs had severe implications for the unhoused Austinites in the city's downtown. Unfortunately, these individuals stood in the way of developers' and planners' visions for an attractive downtown that would draw in consumers. As

a result, unhoused people increasingly became targets of punitive measures to “clean up” the area (Long, 2016; Tretter, 2013). Gus Bova (2020), a writer for the *Texas Observer* who tracked the history of the city’s policies, confirms how in the 1990s, business interest groups such as the Downtown Austin Alliance (DAA) were invested in renewing the city’s downtown and began lobbying for a camping ban. In 1996, they were successful, as these measures culminated into a law that made it illegal to camp in all public areas (McDaniel, 2021). For a brief period of time beginning in 2019, city voters opted to lift the ban. However, in May of 2021, it was reinstated (Aguilera, 2022).

The previous sections demonstrate how efforts to revitalize downtown and East Austin, as well as the resulting gentrification, were tied to measures meant to expel the unhoused from these areas. While direct and indirect displacement is difficult to see when visiting these neighborhoods, the effects of cultural displacement are more visible, and the following landscape analysis will demonstrate this. Lastly, the city’s history of segregation and continued inequity is crucial to keep in mind when investigating this topic, as it will also be a reoccurring theme throughout the following sections of this research.

## **Landscape Analysis**

The following landscape analysis took place on East 5<sup>th</sup> Street and East 11<sup>th</sup> Street, as well as adjacent streets between 5<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup>. This section of East Austin was identified for serving as the approximate locations of the city’s Mexican American and African American neighborhoods, a history which will be further expanded on below. Additionally, these sections have experienced immense redevelopment in the past 25 years.

The development of East Austin continues today, and one can view the vast changes to central East Austin through tools such as Google Street View, as demonstrated below (Figs. 1-4).



Fig 1. Google Street View of East 11<sup>th</sup> Street from 2007.



Fig. 2. Approximate location of the same Google Street View location on East 11th in 2022,  
where a food truck park and condominiums now stand.



Fig 3. Google Street View of East 5<sup>th</sup> Street in 2007.



Fig. 4. East 5<sup>th</sup> Street today.

One of the prominent features on East 5<sup>th</sup> Street is Plaza Saltillo. Plaza Saltillo and the closely surrounding area was the site of Masontown, one of the city's 13 Freedman's communities established after the Civil War. It spanned from approximately East Third Street to East Sixth Street (*raaisininthesun.org*). It is also part of the East César Chávez neighborhood. As Widner (2018) relates, like other East Austinites, the residents of the area were exposed to a number of environmental hazards, including a railyard that was eventually abandoned in the 1980s. Community members were successful in clearing the area of these hazards, but doing so opened up the area for development. As a result, by the 1990s, newcomers within the tech industry and artists began to move into former warehouses, contributing to the changes to the neighborhood. Seeing the railyard as an opportunity to create a light rail stop in the area, Capital Metro acquired it from the city. However, it was not until 2004 that Capital Metro secured approval for a metro stop that took six years to build. In 1999, a plan for the redevelopment of the neighborhood was adopted by the city, along with a collaborative plan for the Saltillo District

established between developers and the community (Widner, 2018). Susana Almanza was involved as part of the Community Advisory Group and stressed that the project provide ample amounts of affordable housing (*Duke University*). Widner (2018) continues by describing the various changes to plans between Capital Metro and Endeavor Real Estate group, the developer who took on the project in 2014. For example, an initial plan developed between the two groups allotted 25% of the apartments for lower-income residents, with approval by the neighborhood group. Things changed in 2017, when Endeavor and Capital Metro proposed a new change in zoning that would essentially allow for greater density and reduce affordable units, which neighborhood advocates disapproved of, as it went against original plans. In the end, Endeavor had the choice to build an office building and include 141 affordable units out of the 800 total units, while the city would be responsible for 59 additional units that would meet its density bonus criteria. If it did not opt for this plan, it would lose this bonus and have to pay \$600,000 to the city's affordable housing fund. Endeavor opted for the latter and paid an additional \$540,000 to the fund (Widner, 2018). Today, Plaza Saltillo is a mixed-use development that includes a Target, Whole Foods, and a number of restaurants below its apartments. Some examples of what the development and surrounding area are shown below (Figs. 5-7). Note how the style of development is similar to Kukla's (2021) description of top-down gentrification, in which larger retailers or chain stores are involved in the redevelopment of certain neighborhoods.





Fig. 5. Plaza Saltillo



Fig. 6. East 5<sup>th</sup> St



Fig. 7. View of Plaza Saltillo and surrounding landscape.

On East 5<sup>th</sup> Street and scattered throughout the surrounding area, one can find signs pointing out that the area is an important Mexican American Heritage Corridor. East 5th Street and the surrounding area served as the first settlement of Mexican Americans in Austin. The signs indicate a partnership between the city and the Mexic-Arte Museum, along with private entities, to develop the area in a way that creates a specific sense of place that reflects this history (Resolution No. 20110825-067).



Fig. 8. Signs designating the area as an important cultural heritage corridor. Photo by the author.

Although city officials are making attempts to recognize and promote this section of Austin’s history, community activists and long-time residents have voiced their concerns related to the arrival of new stores and luxury apartment buildings into East Austin as far back as the early 2000s. For example, in a 2005 letter to the editor for the *Austin Chronicle*, Ana Villalobos expressed her skepticism surrounding the introduction of new shops and apartments into East Austin and whether they would actually revitalize her community (Villalobos, 2005). “Most of these projects cater to affluent, white, young professionals. The housing units (aka condos and lofts) are overpriced, and the small coffee shops and businesses (art galleries) don’t appeal to us because they were not made to serve us.” In the same article, Susana Almanza, shared a similar opinion (Almanza, 2005). She also expressed the following, “PODER and generations of established Mexican American residents did not ask for development of condos or lofts.”



Along East 5<sup>th</sup> Street and in between East 11<sup>th</sup> street, one of the most notable aspects of the area is the amount of ongoing development and construction, sometimes making it difficult to walk between streets. Many of these projects are intended to be mixed-use, such as the example below (Fig. 9). Advertisements for these places created by developers describe the area as “flourishing” and intend to attract “high quality tenants while increasing economic fruition” (Jackson, 2021). Others, such as Figure 10, intend to “bring the East Side vibe to business.” The advertisement continues by describing the neighborhood as “full of character, history, and trendy new restaurants appearing on the scene all the time, East Austin is the place where top talent thrives” (1300e5thstreet.com).



Fig. 9



Fig. 10. Examples of proposed and existing developments along East 5<sup>th</sup> Street. Images Courtesy of 1300e5thstreet.com.

Such advertisements are especially revealing regarding the type of tenants and workers they are trying to attract to the area. The area's history is only hinted at in these advertisements and is used as a selling point. Note the following advertisement below for Plaza Saltillo, especially the information regarding income (Fig. 11):

## AREA DEMOGRAPHICS

Saltillo offers high visibility from IH-35 and access to a large and diverse market.



Fig. 11. Informational brochure for Plaza Saltillo. Image Courtesy of Endeavor Real Estate

Walking on both East 5<sup>th</sup> Street and East 11<sup>th</sup> Street, I looked for signs of hostile architecture. On East 5<sup>th</sup> Street and neighboring streets specifically, there were very few signs of this, aside from a few benches with multiple armrests that would prevent someone from lying down (see Fig. 12) and a concrete planter with medallion-like decorations (Fig. 13).





Fig. 12. Middle armrest prevents an individual from lying down on the bench.





Fig. 13. Decorative metal prevents someone from lying on the concrete. Photos by the author.

Despite this, there were more subtle signs of exclusion, including numerous security signs on higher-end apartment complexes, offices, and stores. Signs on the adjacent streets to East 5<sup>th</sup> also reminded visitors that loitering in the area was forbidden (Fig. 14-16).



Fig. 14



Fig. 15



Fig. 16. Examples of signs found along East 5<sup>th</sup> and adjacent streets. Photos by the author.

However, as Allen (2006) uncovered in his analysis of Berlin's Potsdamer Platz, power and control within public space are not always displayed in obvious ways, such as through the use of security cameras and signage. Instead, power is conveyed through the experience of a space, reinforcing certain behaviors or a certain "publicness." More specifically, power is conveyed through a *seductive* logic. He further explains (pg. 448),

A seductive presence, in that sense, is apparent from the combination of suggestive practices, experiences and spaces laid out for temptation. In open urban spaces like



Sony's forum, what goes on within it, how people move and interact, is arguably closed down by degree - by a process of inclusion rather than exclusion.

In a similar manner, the open and airy space of this section of East Austin does create an inviting atmosphere for visitors and residents of the numerous apartment complexes that line the street. Additionally, there are many open spaces and enclosed courtyards located just off the sidewalks, many of which are in-between buildings. Therefore, while earlier scholars such as Goss (1996) and Davis (1990) raised concerns about the lack of authentic or spontaneous public space, along with an increase in punitive measures within cities, Allen (2006) theorizes the possibility that there are *multiple* public spaces. Additionally, power and control does not need to be conveyed through force or security measures, as a vast amount of research has focused on, but instead can be enforced through the *feel* of a public space.



Fig. 17. Example of public space on East 5<sup>th</sup> Street.



Fig. 18. Example of open space on adjacent street to East 5<sup>th</sup>. Photos by the author.

However, while this section has focused mostly on the landscape, it should also be noted how gentrification reinforces certain public behaviors. For example, in 2017, residents of an East Austin neighborhood were outraged after a mural honoring famous Black musicians was painted over by new tenants of a building on 12<sup>th</sup> Street. Painting over the mural with white paint, older residents viewed the act as another example of gentrification in their community (Schoenemann, 2017). Recalling Smith's argument regarding the revanchist policies gentrification is tied to, Kukla (2021), describes how public practices and rituals can be viewed as signs of disorder by newer residents, even in neighborhoods that are proud of their diversity and emphasize their previous history within their public space. Indeed, a 2021 article by *Texas Monthly* described

tensions between older East Austin resident car clubs gathering in public and new residents of a luxury apartment complex. While these clubs, which are made up of a majority of Black and Latinx men, have been meeting since the 1990s, some of the mostly white residents of the complex have called the police on these gatherings, with one individual describing them as “scary” (Holley, 2021).

East 11<sup>th</sup> Street and the nearby area was a prominent African American community within East Austin. In an interview for the *Austin Chronicle*, Dr. Charles Urdy, a local resident and leader in the community, recalls the numerous Black owned businesses in the neighborhood he used to frequent and the vibrant community on East 11<sup>th</sup> Street. However, after leaving for a decade and returning in the 1970s, he found the neighborhood had completely changed, as desegregation resulted in many of these businesses losing their customer base to other sections of the city (Bingamon, 2019). As a result, many of these former businesses became empty parcels set to be sold off for development. As reported in the article, by the late 1990’s, Urdy and other members of the community formed the Austin Revitalization Authority (ARA) to reverse the decline the neighborhood had experienced and recreate the once vibrant urban center. In 1999, this vision came to fruition in the East 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> Street Community Redevelopment Plan. East 11<sup>th</sup> Street was envisioned to be a center for shopping and entertainment, while 12<sup>th</sup> Street would encompass small businesses, offices, and single family homes. The city of Austin was able to receive federal funding from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development and instituted an agreement between ARA, the city, and the Urban Renewal Board (URB), aptly named the “Tri-Party Agreement” (Bingamon, 2019). As noted on ARA’s website, the URB was responsible for displacement of residents in East Austin during the 1960s and 1970s in the advancement of urban renewal projects. However, in 1990s, the organization stressed that this



history would not be repeated (*Austin Revitalization Authority*). By the early 2000s, 11<sup>th</sup> Street had been transformed. But development under the direction of these three parties began to slow, and by 2010, the Tri-Party Agreement was abandoned. In the meantime, mostly white, private businesses moved in to East 11<sup>th</sup> Street, overtaking many of the previously Black-owned businesses on the street (Bingamon, 2019).

These developments and businesses are similar to those found in and around East 5<sup>th</sup> Street, especially condominiums and lofts. However, based on my observations, this section of East Austin appears to have more specialty stores and eateries, including a food truck park, a number of boutiques, and coffee shops that are more representative of Kukla's (2021) definition of bottom-up gentrification. Older establishments within this section of Central East Austin are mixed in among the new, such as the historic Victory Grill, one of the places Urdy describes frequenting, shown in the first picture below (Fig. 19). J&J Spirits (Fig. 22), originally J&J Drug, has been in operation in the same building since 1968 (Widner, 2013). Recent construction can be found among the old, including a boutique hotel and loft-style apartments located above shops (Fig. 20-21). Mixed-use developments are also common on East 11<sup>th</sup> Street, such as the one in Fig. 23. An art gallery and boutique clothing stores are located at the bottom, while office spaces encompass the top floors (archello.com).



Fig. 19. Photo of the Victory Grill taken from Google Maps.



Fig. 20. Cat Noir boutique Hotel.



Fig. 21. East 11<sup>th</sup> Street Lofts



Fig. 22. J&J Spirits



Fig. 23. Mixed-use development. Photos by the author.

Artwork and historical markers dot this section of the city, with the most prominent being Dr. Charles Urdy Plaza. The plaza features murals that evoke the history of the neighborhood, as depicted in the image below (Fig. 24). Other murals are depicted as well (Fig. 25), including a mural featuring prominent members and leaders in the community (*Austin Revitalization Authority; Austin Community Foundation*).





Fig. 24. Art installation at Dr. Charles Urdy Plaza.



Fig. 25. Mural found off of East 11<sup>th</sup> Street. Photos by the author.

### **Demographic Changes and Homelessness in East Austin**

While the above images depict what this landscape has transformed into, research has also tracked demographic changes to the area as well. Since the early 2000s, researchers and residents of East Austin have been conscious of the changes going on within this section of the city. A recent collaborative effort by researchers at the University of Texas in 2018 sought to isolate and map out census tracts of neighborhoods in the city that were most vulnerable to gentrification. Their efforts found that vulnerability aligned with what has become known as the “eastern crescent” that encompasses much of Central East Austin. One significant point the researchers identify is that despite the gentrification immediately East of I-35 and Central East Austin, a population of disadvantaged residents remains (Way et al, 2018). A map created by the researchers depicting this region is shown below:

Most Vulnerable Census Tracts (2016)  
Austin, Texas

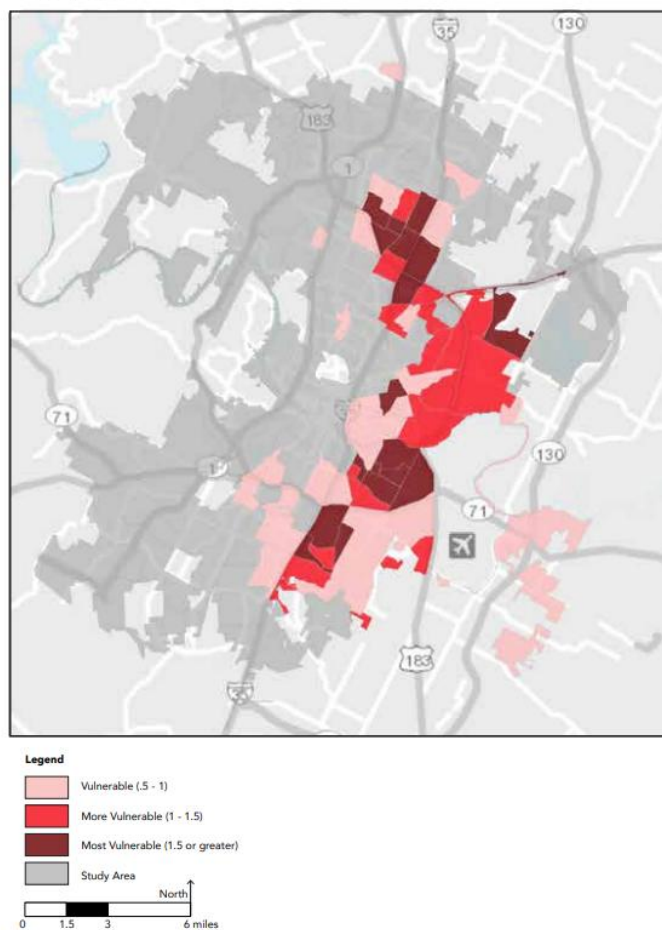


Fig. 26. Map of the “eastern crescent.” Image courtesy of Way et al. 2018.

Additionally, maps were also created of significant demographic changes in the Central East Austin area. This too is shown below (Fig. 27):



Demographic Change Tracts (2000 - 2016)  
Austin, Texas

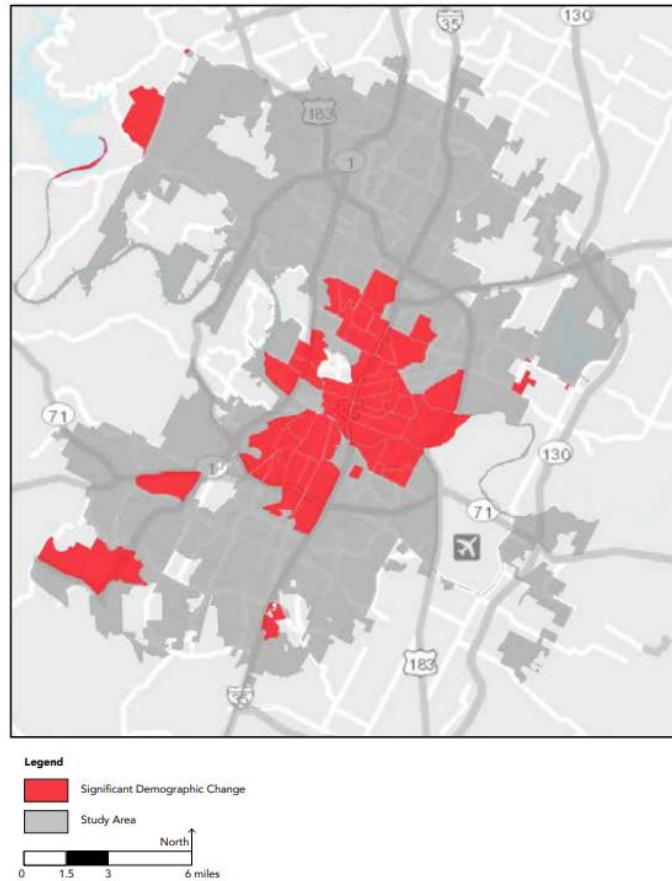


Fig. 27. Map of significant demographic change. Image courtesy of Way et al. 2018.

Dr. Eric Tang, a professor at the University of Texas, conducted extensive interviews with East Austin natives to gain their perspectives on the revitalization in this area. He also came to a shocking discovery when analyzing demographic data from 2000-2010. Typically, cities that experience growth greater than 10% would see proportional growth of their African American populations. Austin is among the ten fastest growing cities in the U.S., yet stands as an outlier. Rather than growth, the city has seen a decline in this population (Tang and Ren, 2014). Tang's

interviews with residents reveal not only the effects of gentrification, but also the resilience of those who remained in the neighborhood. When asked about these changes, 74% viewed them negatively. Although new businesses and restaurants were intended to “enhance” the neighborhood, 93% of interviewees indicated they did not patronize these places due to feeling unwelcome or had no use for the businesses. They again emphasized the drastic change to demographics in the area caused by displacement, with the white population increasing by 442%, while the Black and Latinx population decreased by 66% and 33%, respectively (*The University of Texas at Austin*, 2018).



Fig. 28. Artwork conscious of the changes and ongoing gentrification experienced within Central East Austin was also present, such as the interactive artwork shown above, asking those walking by “What do you miss about East Austin?” Photo by the author.

The gentrification in East Austin is tied to homelessness in the city as well. The local nonprofit HousingWorks also provides information regarding housing affordability and homelessness in Austin. Their most recent analysis of each City Council district was conducted in 2021. They found that the city is experiencing a rapid rise in housing costs. From 2020-2021 the median price of housing rose by 26% from \$424,900 to \$536,311. The average rent has increased by 27% or \$359. Unfortunately, average incomes have not matched this increase at only a rise of 12%, while the rate of poverty only decreased by less than 2%. Furthermore, the study recognized the economic disadvantages the history of racial segregation had on people of color living in Austin, particularly in the majority eastern districts of 1, 2, 3, and 4. Within these districts 48% of renters were putting 30% or more of their income toward housing costs, making them housing cost burdened. On the other hand, in the western districts 6, 8, and 10, less than 39% were considered housing cost burdened. The study also found that 65% of individuals who were experiencing unsheltered homelessness as of 2021 lived in districts 1, 2, 3, and 4 before becoming unhoused (*HousingWorks*, 2022).

The study area falls within both District 1 and District 3. A Map is shown below to give more context. Within District 1, 19% of unsheltered individuals last lived in this district. In District 3, 20% had previously lived in this district. The next highest percentage belonged to District 4 at 14%. Also notable is that District 3 experienced the most significant increases in housing costs and rent since 2020, with houses being sold for \$175,000 more on average and rent increasing by \$361. Finally, although District 1 had the most subsidized affordable housing added to the district, 49% of renters were cost burdened, with another 27% considered extremely cost burdened. For homeowners, 24% were cost burdened, while 10% were extremely cost burdened. Similar trends were found in District 3, with 48% of renters cost burdened and 23%

extremely cost burdened. For homeowners, 24% were also considered cost burdened, with 11% being extremely cost burdened (*HousingWorks*, 2022).

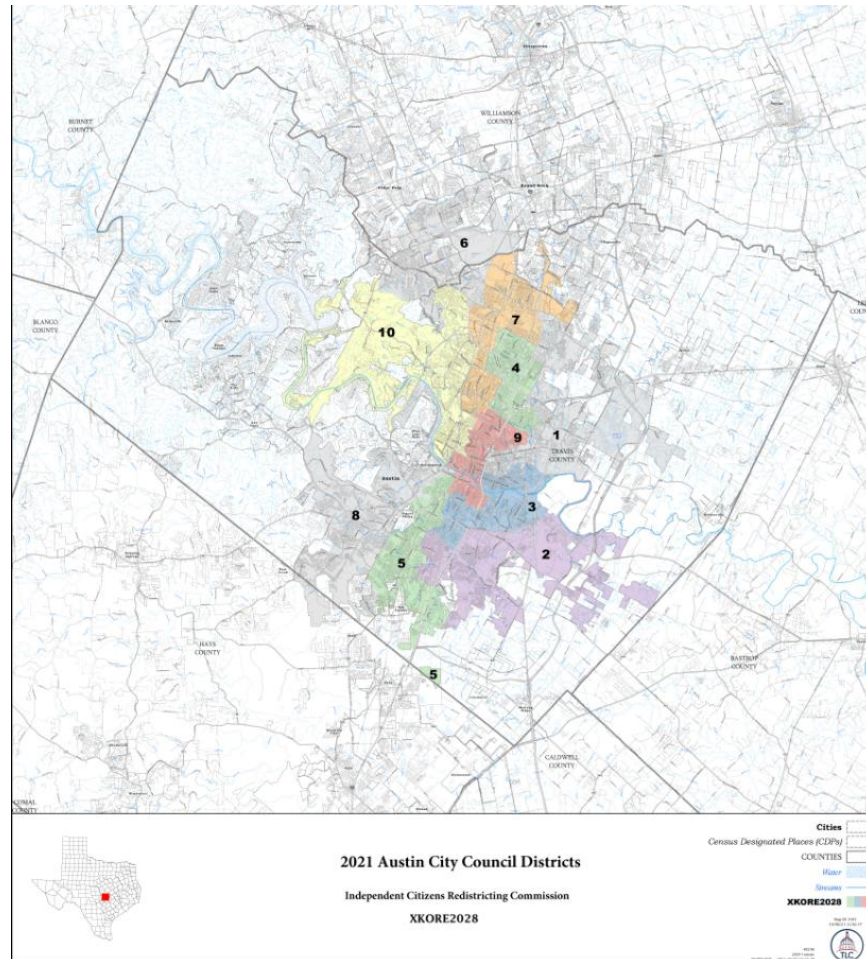


Fig. 29. A map of Austin City Council districts. Map source: *redistrictatx.org*

Clearly, the increase in the costs of housing for homeowners and renters alike has created a significant burden for many Austinites, especially those in Central East Austin. One of the most significant findings from the HousingWorks report is related to the percentage of unhoused people who previously lived in Districts 1 and 3. The gentrification and increasing unaffordability has contributed to the problem of homelessness in the city. Although much

attention has been given to more obvious signs of control within urban space, such as hostile architecture and security cameras, it is important to recognize more subtle ways in which exclusion occurs in urban spaces and how processes like gentrification are tied to homelessness. The following sections will add to this analysis by looking at the ways in which the unhoused are perceived in society and how these perceptions underpin reactions and policies toward them. These sections will be further supplemented by the actual experiences of unhoused individuals in the city.

### **Discourse Analysis**

Regarding the unhoused community in Austin, 2019-2021 contained significant developments. While political discourse surrounding policies related to the unhoused in the city existed well before this time span, these three years were chosen as a specific focus in order to better understand the discussions that were ongoing between the 2019 lifting of camping regulations and the eventual reinstatement of the ban in 2021. Discourse taken from newspaper articles and opinion pieces, along with comments from interviewees and organizations, can illuminate how the problem of homelessness in Austin is being discussed by mainstream local politics from a more critical lens. Likewise, it can also reveal how the unhoused are perceived within the city by housed neighbors. Finally, a particular focus will be reserved for information related to downtown, including discussions of shelters and services within the area.

Debates surrounding how to address the problem began to coalesce prior to the revision of camping ordinances in 2019, which relaxed laws against camping in public and panhandling in public. To summarize some common themes throughout debates surrounding the most recent camping ban, those in favor of these revisions emphasized the cruelty of camping restrictions, as many who receive citations are unable to pay and makes obtaining housing more difficult, as

well as force individuals into dangerous situations. Furthermore, others also spoke of constitutionality of criminalizing camping on public, drawing parallel arguments related to individual's rights to public space (Waller and Park, 2021; Chang et al, 2022). Opponents of this revision cited their own personal experiences downtown and negative encounters with certain unhoused individuals, emphasizing the danger some individuals posed to those walking by on the street. Local businesses and organizations were also opponents of this revision, as the presence of unhoused individuals near the entrances of businesses could potentially discourage customers (Bova, 2020).

In these cases, newspaper reports and similar text conveyed an “othering” of unhoused individuals. Within discussions of discourse, othering relates to strains of discourse that lead to judgements of superiority of in-groups against out-groups, or more plainly speaking, this type of discourse creates a binary of “us” vs. “them” (Dervin, 2015). Furthermore, in their analysis of the visual aspects of homelessness and encounters with the unhoused in urban centers, Gerrard and Farrugia (2015), demonstrate the multiple ways in which normative social relationships under capitalism enforce an othering of the unhoused. As previous expounded on, homelessness subverts the commodification of public spaces and streets. Encounters with the unhoused on the street are underpinned by what they call a “politics of difference” and, as a result, the unhoused are viewed as alien from a city's culture and residents (pg. 2224). Therefore, to a majority of society, homelessness is a striking visual marker of one's failures or laziness, rather than a failure of the current economic system (Gerrard and Farrugia, 2015).

Some extreme examples of this othering can be found in opinion pieces in local newspapers. For example, a 2007 piece in the *Austin Chronicle* urged readers to support a ban on panhandling, blaming the unhoused for ruining their city and makes the claim (one that is often

brought up by those against giving money to unhoused people) that all panhandlers are drug abusers (Zamecki, 2007):

I don't want to infringe on the rights of the homeless or seem cruel toward them; I'm just tired of being their target, just because I'm not also homeless. Austin does not owe the homeless any favors, and our city is not here for them to abuse. Please don't ever give them money, as that only encourages them more and fuels their drug abuse. To the homeless in Austin: Please leave Austin alone. Please stop ruining our city. Please find I-35, and take it north or south; I don't care. Just please leave!

In local politics, this othering also manifests in discussions surrounding crime in the city, with officials often conveying a fear of lawlessness or disorder in the city. Following a 2020 murder of a customer in a local restaurant, Texas Governor Greg Abbott tweeted about the incident before officials confirmed details on whether or not the individual was an unhoused person. He stated the following (Sanders, 2020),

When all facts are revealed I bet you'll learn that the killer was a homeless man with prior arrests. If so Austin's reckless homeless policy puts lives in danger to murders like this. Austin leaders must answer for their perilous policies.

A few days later, Abbott attempted to clarify his previous statement, tweeting the following as well: “I’m not attacking homelessness. I'm criticizing the lawlessness promoted by the City of Austin.” While the individual responsible was unhoused, Lt. Jeff Greenwaldt, who is in charge of the police department's homicide and aggravated assault units, did not find any

reason to believe that the perpetrator was able to commit such a crime as a result of less stricter ordinances (Sanders, 2020). Comments from interview participants in this research convey this stigma and the previous quotes reveal a quick reaction among policymakers to place blame on unhoused individuals for crime, even before official statements are circulated. Corroborating this assertion, D.<sup>1[OBJ]</sup> (Personal Communication. July 28, 2022), described the unhoused as “An okay to discriminate kind of population. People just say you know, why don't they get a job? Why don't they take a shower, or not pee on the concrete?” Furthermore, D. related disturbing accounts of othering by visitors to the city’s entertainment district downtown, most notably on Sixth Street, where there is an increased potential for violence against unhoused individuals.

Some visiting college students during South by Southwest would pay homeless people to fight and they would videotape it. It's disgusting. Yeah. It's like dog fights, you know, get them to buy him a bottle of booze... and it was awful.

Other participants also shared their experience speaking with officials. Juliette described how she needed to present herself as being housed in order for her opinion to be validated. This was extremely hurtful for her, as she felt the experiences and opinions of the unhoused were often dismissed because of one’s status or appearance (Juliette. Personal Communication. June 15, 2022).

They actually would look at me surprised that I’m actually [homeless]. On the one hand, it’s a good thing, an advantage to me to help all of us. But on the other hand, it’s that whole appearances are everything. What if somebody

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<sup>1</sup> Due to this individual’s work and its public nature, I have chosen to only include an initial to indicate their perspectives and quotations.



had something to say, but they were they were homeless like me?

As mentioned earlier, 2019 marked a shift in the city's policies toward the unhoused. Those against the decision, such as the Travis County Republican Chair Matt Mackowiak and bipartisan group Save Austin Now, expressed fear of rising crime rates in Austin not only as a result of the new policy, but also due to cuts in police funding implemented in 2020. While Mackowiak cited an article by the *Statesman* reporting a 10% increase in violent crimes involving an unhoused person since 2019, most of these crimes were committed against another unhoused individual. Austin Police Department Assistant Chief Joseph Chacon refuted these claims. Instead, according to Chacon, violent crimes rarely involve unhoused individuals and instead, gun violence is a major contributing factor, mostly committed by those who are not homeless (Sanders, 2020). Police Chief Brian Manly also asserted that there is not a link between the 2019 revisions and violent crime (Sanders, 2020). One can find numerous negative accounts of interactions with unhoused individuals listed on Save Austin Now's website (*Save Austin Now PAC*). While an individual's experiences should not automatically be dismissed and obviously crime committed by unhoused individuals does occur, it is important to remember that the unhoused, like any other group of individuals, should not be painted with a broad brush. Likewise, numerous reports show that the unhoused are no more likely to be perpetrators of crime than those who are housed (cf. *State of Washington Department of Commerce*). Findings from research conducted in Austin refute the charge that unhoused men in particular are dangerous. Rather, they pose a very small immediate threat to one's safety while on the street and only a "modest" threat to property (Snow et al. 1989, pg. 546).

However, this stigma is ongoing. Although rapid rehousing initiatives with few behavioral restrictions serve as a potential strategy to alleviate the problem and reduce recidivism (*State of Washington Department of Commerce; National Alliance to End Homelessness*, 2022), reports on new proposed shelters or transitional housing often include the reservations of those who will potentially be living nearby. For example, in 2021, the city introduced plans to convert city property to temporary “micro-shelter” encampments, with one being an empty airport car lot in East Austin and the other between Mopac and Brodie Lane in South Austin. Residents near these locations were skeptical of whether this arrangement would be temporary and expressed concerns regarding health and safety (Krinjak, 2021). Others were concerned with the idea of temporary shelters, stating that they would prefer to have affordable housing in its place (Koski, 2021).

Although more affordable housing is certainly an avenue for addressing homelessness, some neighborhood associations have turned down this idea as well. For example, the Hancock Housing Association, a neighborhood located in Central Austin west of I-35, voted against a plan to rezone the neighborhood so that such accommodations could be built. They cited incompatibility with the single-family character of the neighborhood as the reasoning (Lee, 2022). Unfortunately, this is not an isolated incident and single-family owners are a powerful deciding factor in Austin. As reporter Megan Kimble describes in her article on the opposition to mixed-income housing in East Austin, revisions to land development codes could be one avenue for creating more affordable housing. However, Austin’s code has not been updated since 1984, and attempts to do so have been resisted by homeowners (2022).

Acknowledging the power that homeowners and neighborhood associations have in local politics, it is important to recognize the historical significance of homeownership and the transfer

of wealth across generations. As Faber (2020) details, New Deal government programs aiming to increase homeownership, such as The Home Owners Loan Corporation (HOLC), ensured many Americans would be able to pass on the wealth that homeownership affords to later generations. However, the benefits of these programs and loans were not extended to neighborhoods mostly consisting of people of color, a process known as redlining. East Austin's African-American neighborhood was the largest redlined neighborhood in the city. The practice has implications for today's social problems and inequities. Despite efforts to address this wealth gap, the city still remains largely segregated. Likewise, this lack of meaningful action has implications for the ongoing problem of gentrification and displacement in East Austin's Black neighborhoods (Zehr, 2015). As John Henneberger, the co-director of the Texas Low Income Housing Information Service explains regarding the movement of mostly white, younger, and wealthier Austinites into the Eastside (Zehr, 2015):

In many cases, they forge lasting relationships with the existing residents, but the economic disparities make the balance unstable at best, unsustainable at worst. It's always a matter of exploitation if the economic underlying basis of that relationship is so unequal, which it is.

Additionally, community leaders in lower-income neighborhoods have expressed frustration over the lack of response by the city in addressing the lack of housing assistance for unhoused individuals, as many encampments are located in open space within these neighborhoods, rather than wealthier ones. For example, Dr. Fred McGhee, a community activist and anthropologist in the East Austin Montopolis neighborhood, stated the following regarding encampments in the neighborhood's Roy G. Guerrero Colorado River Metro Park (Note that

Pemberton Heights is a wealthier neighborhood of Austin located northwest of downtown)

(Asher, 2022):

The location of this particular encampment, from our community perspective, is the logical consequence of city mismanagement and city officials not wanting to address fundamental questions related to equity in our city. He continued, There's a reason this encampment is not in Pemberton Heights.

Therefore, within Austin and around the country, there is a fear underpinning society's views of the unhoused, resulting in the othering of these individuals. Again, it should be emphasized that this is not an assertion that unhoused individuals do not commit crimes or dismissal of individual's negative encounters. However, it is important to recognize the impact these perceptions have on discussions surrounding homelessness in urban areas, especially how these beliefs translate into policy and action, often in the form of greater punitive measures like the 2021 reinstatement of the camping ban in Austin. As Snow et al. (1989) observed, the stigma attached to homelessness and sensationalized reports of criminal acts by the unhoused can lead to a resistance to policies or facilities that could potentially alleviate their conditions, as well as bolster support for punitive measures. In a way such measures are a "self-fulfilling prophecy" (pg. 546) as they create more dire situations for people, creating the potential for more crime. The following section will detail the experiences of unhoused individuals in Austin and how the process of othering has impacted their lives.

## **Emergent Themes:**

While one can find numerous examples of how East Austin has changed through physical and economic transformations found within the landscape, it is important to recognize how these changes affect individuals, especially those whose opinions are often unheard. The following interviews conducted with unhoused individuals reveal the impact these changes have had on longtime residents, both housed and unhoused. Some common themes emerged while conducting these interviews, which have been broken down into sections. These themes specifically relate to topics such as the culture and demographics of the unhoused community, affordability, outreach and assistance, the camping ban, and movement throughout the city.

## **Unhoused Community**

As a way to introduce these themes, it is important to provide insight into the unhoused community in the U.S. and Texas. According to the National Alliance to End Homelessness's point-in-time count (PIT) conducted in January of 2020, there were 580,466 unhoused people on the streets or in shelters within the United States. A point-in-time count is typically utilized by communities to count the number of unhoused individuals there are on a given night through survey methods. Austin, along with many other communities, had to cancel their counts in 2021 and 2022 due to the pandemic. In terms of risk of becoming unhoused, gender and race are significant factors tied to homelessness. Men experience a much higher risk of homelessness than women. People of color are more at risk to experience homelessness due to historical inequities perpetrated by the government, as well as private institutions. Pacific Islanders and Native Hawaiians have the highest rates of homelessness in the country, while Native Americans and African Americans also experience higher rates. In 2020, 57% of unhoused individuals in the

United States were residents of five states. These were Texas, New York, California, Florida, and Washington (*National Alliance to End Homelessness*). Specifically in Texas, the state's PIT count found that there were 7,054 unhoused people in the state. About half were considered sheltered, while the other half were unsheltered. Approximately 40% of these individuals were Hispanic or Latinx. While the percentage of African Americans living in Texas is only 8%, they made up 22% of the population of unhoused individuals in the state (Paredes, 2022).

Specifically in Austin, the most recent PIT count conducted by the Ending Community Homeless Coalition (ECHO) in 2020 put the number of unhoused individuals at approximately 2,506, with 1,574 on the streets (ECHO, 2020). Unfortunately, the Covid-19 pandemic caused organizers to cancel the 2021 and 2022 counts, as it relies on in-person volunteers (Autullo, 2022). Alternatively, ECHO decided to instead count the number of requests for housing and other assistance, as these requests are recorded in the citywide Homeless Management Information System utilized by service providers. Although potentially more accurate than an in-person count, the method fails to account for those who have not reached out to service providers. Furthermore, peer-reviewed studies on PIT counts have shown that they often undercount populations. The 2021 count utilizing this method found that 3,160 individuals experiencing homelessness, while an update in November of that year found the population to be 3,263 (Weber, 2022). As of July 2022, ECHO found that the number of unhoused residents in Austin or Travis county was estimated at 4,022. This included individuals considered to be unsheltered (those in tents, cars, or places deemed uninhabitable) and sheltered (emergency shelters and other temporary housing situations). When comparing a specific day in January every year since 2019, the number of unhoused people in Austin or Travis County grew by approximately 7.4%. They

also cite U.S. Census Bureau estimates showing that Travis County's population in this timeframe increased by 10.5% (ECHO, 2022).

Anecdotally, other volunteers and unhoused people I spoke to also commented that they felt that the amount of people in line for food and other services had grown. Again, although these comments and data point to an increase in the number of unhoused individuals from previous years, they should be considered carefully, due to the difficult nature of conducting these surveys and differing methods of surveying due to complications like Covid-19. Looking more closely at demographics in Austin, data from ECHO provides a breakdown of the percentage of individuals experiencing homelessness by race and age. Most notable is the disparity between the number of Black unhoused individuals in comparison to white individuals. A 2022 report by ECHO based on self-reporting by clients of service providers in 2021 found that three racial groups comprised 90% of the unhoused individuals reported in the Homeless Response System. Of these individuals, 32% were non-Hispanic Black, 27% were non-Hispanic white, and 32% were Hispanic/Latinx. The Black population in Travis County and Austin is overrepresented in the data when compared to other ethnicities and are over six times more likely to become unhoused in comparison to white individuals (Burrus, 2022). These data speak to the historical inequalities African Americans in Austin have faced due to the segregation and unequal access to resources spoken of in the previous case study section. This history still has an influence on opportunities today and is tied to the problem of homelessness in Austin.

Juliette (Personal Communication. June 15, 2022), who has lived in Austin since 2005, has noticed an increase in adolescents on the streets. She commented on the influence family and parent's lack of attention to their children has on younger individuals, often causing them to leave home. Speaking from her own experience, she had this to say about parenting,



Don't be absent. Be there in their life. Don't let them come out here. Because there's nothing good out here. It's not cool. It's not fun. It's not exciting like some of these kids feel like that I talked to that are out here. It's awesome. It's free. They don't have anybody telling them what to do. They're wrong. You're always going to have people older than you. And in your life, you're always gonna have somebody that's going to tell you what to do. If not, every day, every other day, you know, you're always going to have rules and regulations. Even if you're homeless... I mean, this is the youngest group I've ever seen. But in South Austin there are more teenagers and more 20 somethings than ever. And that kind of hurts, you know? That really hurts because what are we doing? What are we doing in this world?

While past research has overemphasized a belief that life on the streets draws in youth seeking a non-conventional lifestyle and exudes a sense of freedom, more recent scholarship has contested this belief (Karabanow, 2006). Rather, according to researchers and those involved in outreach, understanding youth homelessness as an individual choice is often inaccurate and even insensitive to the factors that cause or even force one to leave home. However, in a study conducted across multiple Canadian cities, a small percentage of youth interviewed did find some liberation from conventional life by being on the streets. Sadly, a high percentage of individuals ended up on the streets to escape abuse, poverty, or family disfunction (Karabanow, 2006). This is not to discredit Juliette's observations, as she herself had observed the role that one's family may have in causing them to become unhoused. Other participants also noted an increase in younger individuals receiving help from homeless services, along with an uptick in women (cf. D. Personal Communication. July 28, 2022).

While some interviewees stated that they mostly kept to themselves, others had lived with groups. For example, Juliette described how, in spite of their situation, the group she formed at Packsaddle Bridge was a cohesive community and watched out for each other. However, in more recent years, Juliette felt that the cohesion of this particular community has broken down, resulting in more arguments and even some instances of gun violence. Yet despite this, she spoke fondly of the community, describing how some of her neighbors dubbed her the “angel of Packsaddle” (Juliette. Personal Communication, June 15, 2022).

They used to call me the angel of Packsaddle because I was doing medical when anybody needed it, taking care of abscesses. I would give a friendly good morning in the morning to anybody that was awake. Just to start their day off right. Put a smile on their face. Sometimes I would treat breakfast and buy a couple of boxes of donuts, a couple gallons of chocolate milk. And just walked down the bridge. Knocking on everybody's tents. Waking them up saying ‘breakfast time’...When I got my first stimulus [check], I knew right off the bat that the money didn’t belong to me. So I did the only thing I could think of and as soon as I cashed it, I went to everybody that was under that bridge, and it didn’t matter what their drug of choice was. I asked how much would they need for that day for them to take a break, take a vacation.

Others, like Sid, also commented on their fondness for the community in Austin and the place he goes to for assistance (Sid. Personal Communication. September 8, 2022): “I like it here. I feel comfortable. I feel at peace. You know, most of the people here I talk to. I feel good. I feel like I'm not alone.”

As Speer (2017) investigated in Fresno, many of the individuals living in encampments there viewed their living spaces as comforting and provided a sense of community, with some

individuals rejecting housing assistance because it did not provide these same feelings. My interviewee involved in outreach noted similar findings, describing how those living in encampments did their best to keep the location clean and comfortable, just as any other individual would do within their home (D. Personal Communication. July 28, 2022).

You know, there's some people who have their little villages, which I think is... Everybody wants community. They want a place to be, and they'll go to a lot of trouble to get a trash can. They'll drag it all the way down to the 7-11 and empty it. You know, they don't want to live in trash, they want to have a place that's not messy and dirty... Some were elaborate, like with fences and gates. It was fairly imaginative. Yeah, but there were just one guy with a tent had put a front door. I mean, literally a wooden door sitting there.

The previous points revealed some important aspects regarding the community of unhoused individuals in Austin. This section was specifically included not just to provide basic demographic information, but also insight into the relationships among members of the community in Austin. The following will dive deeper into housing and rental affordability within Austin, a challenge that many interviewees cited, and an issue increasingly affecting housed residents as well.

### **Affordability**

My first interviewees in the research process, Adelia and Antonio, provided a wealth of information regarding what life as unhoused people in Austin was like. When asked if they wanted to take part in the interview, they felt it would be a great opportunity to speak about their experiences and help change how housed individuals view them. She, like many other residents

in Austin, felt the burden that growing unaffordability in the city has caused (Adelia. Personal Communication. June 13, 2022).

I work 27 years, for what? I'm trying to prove nothing to nobody but live life and try to support, you know, my bills and everything... You know, unless you buy your property, but now these days, they want to take over the properties and build, you know, these other places that are not even called for, there's too many already. You know, they're so expensive to get into. Why make it so expensive? You're supposed to make it go a little bit down at least, you know, make it so it's easy to get into apartments. You have to have a year's worth of work sometimes to be able to get into apartments, or at least three or four pay stubs. That's why I'm homeless coming from Savannah, from Georgia state.

As many individuals both housed and unhoused have expressed, housing and rent prices in Austin have become increasingly unaffordable. For example, a recent article from *KVUE*, a local news outlet, reported that Travis county ranked number three out of 26 of counties in the United States that no longer had a viable affordable housing market (Newland, 2022). As my interviews revealed, the lack of affordable housing options in the city proved to be a major obstacle for some not only when trying to become housed, but also contributed to them becoming unhoused in the first place. Adelia's story was especially representative of this, as she had arrived in Austin ten years ago from Georgia. In her interview, she expressed frustration with her current situation, especially considering she had heard many great things about Austin prior to her decision to move (Adelia. Personal Communication. June 13, 2022).

Like Adelia, many of my other interviewees made a point to emphasize that they had been working prior to becoming unhoused, with some in well-paying industries. Outside economic forces, in combination with growing unaffordability, were also at play. As Thomas

explained, he was originally from Detroit, Michigan and worked as a plastics engineer for a car company until 2002, when he lost his job. Thomas believed that the recession in Michigan was a repercussion of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), which resulted in many manufacturing jobs within the auto industry being moved overseas. Again, like Adelia, he remembers reading about Texas as being “recession proof.” Unfortunately, following his move, he was left with little money and following inclement weather, he found himself homeless. However, he is no longer unhoused and uses his experience to advocate for the community in the city. During the interview, he reflected on his initial impression of Austin and move to the city, along with the changes he’s witnessed since 2010 (Thomas. Personal Communication. September 2, 2022):

I thought, maybe Austin is a small town, I'll go there, I'll just blend in and do my music, kick back... Yeah, I came here for simplified town, and over the past 10 years, have watched it expand at a very rapid rate.

The gentrification and resulting displacement previously described in East Austin has directly contributed to this problem and as a result, is tied to the problem of homelessness in the city. Older residents and business owners have found themselves forced out due to increasing housing and rent prices. For example, Antonio, a lifelong resident of the Eastside who is currently unhoused, recalls a time when most of the businesses in this area were owned by African Americans. However, as more businesses began to move in, especially food trucks, many of these owners were put out of business. For Antonio, the newcomers were essentially selling the same food and products as the previous business owners, but were able to make more money than the older residents (Antonio. Personal Communication, June 13, 2022). In an article

written for the *Texas Observer*, Wilhelmina Delco, a resident of East Austin since 1957 and leader within her community, shared her concerns related to the disappearances of businesses and families being pushed out of East Austin as a result of gentrification. Like Antonio, she too witnessed this transition first hand (Delco, 2019). Although Thomas is white and recognized that he cannot speak for a group or culture he does not belong to, he commented on the gentrification in the city and its connection to the Black unhoused population based on his experience as an advocate (Thomas. Personal Communication. September 2, 2022).

However, is my strongest opinion that through the gentrification process, through I guess in a raw way, you could call it land grabs... A lot of the African American people here in Austin are homeless as a result of, grandma had a farm and it was her dad's farm. The property taxes are due and grandma can't pay it. So many things going on with this one home. It could be a refuge for so many of the family members. But, Grandma can't pay the tax. Then they come along and take it saying, we're gonna build some high rises, we're gonna make it better here. It's like, okay, but you're, you're taking away from other people, you know? Yeah. In my opinion, in the Black community here, Austin has created a lot Black homeless under the guise of gentrification.

These changes are also evident to those who live outside the East Austin community. Based on their experience working with unhoused individuals, the individual I interviewed involved in outreach reiterated unaffordability as being a major obstacle for the unhoused and a primary reason for becoming unhoused (D. Personal Communication. July 28, 2022). They also commented on the changes to East Austin, describing it as being,

[...] all condos and very expensive to live there. It's interesting[...] That happens everywhere. But gentrification

really hit East Austin like a ton of bricks, because even with some of the old cool buildings, you still couldn't buy it for less than a million bucks. But it's expensive and no one can afford to live there. It's close to downtown, which helps.

Clearly, the increasing shortage of affordable housing in Austin has placed a burden on the city's lower-income residents, but in particular, those who are unhoused or at risk to become unhoused. As of 2022, approximately 64% of Americans were living paycheck-to-paycheck at the beginning of the year, with their struggles further exacerbated by inflation ( Dickler, 2022). When asked how the city could improve the situation for not only unhoused individuals, but also lower income residents, many recommended the most straightforward solution of creating more affordable places to live. Likewise, others, such as Brian, recommended Austin follow examples set forth by cities like Indianapolis, which recently secured \$56 million to focus on building affordable housing and combatting displacement (Brian. Personal Communication, July 7, 2022; Pak-Harvey and Cheang, 2022). However, as Busch (2015) reports, most solutions to affordable housing are private and market-based, as very little federally subsidized low-income housing has been created since the 1970s. In Austin, private developers are not able to keep up with this demand. Recalling the previous section regarding economic transitions since the mid-late 20<sup>th</sup> century, he also explains that their goals line up with the market, rather than community interests, and must employ entrepreneurial strategies to attract outside investment, furthering gentrification. In an interview cited by Sanders (2022), the director of the organization Ending Community Homeless Coalition (ECHO) conveyed the challenges of providing affordable housing for individuals exiting homelessness, stating "It's hard to house people in general right now. We're fighting the private rental market just like everyone else is right now." Busch (2015), continues



by offering some potential solutions, including rent stabilization, vouchers, and greater dialogue between older residents, new residents, and city planners. Although the city has made efforts to create more units, it is falling behind on its goal of creating an additional 60,000 functioning units in ten years, from 2018-2028. Their goal to create transitional housing for unhoused residents was at just over 10% as of 2021, falling behind their intended goal as well (Thompson, 2021).

With affordability being such a prevalent problem not only in Austin, but in cities around the country, one may question what policymakers are doing to address the problem, and more specifically, what interventions are being put in place to prevent individuals from becoming unhoused. Therefore, in order to answer these questions, the following section will analyze how the city of Austin is addressing not only the problem of homelessness, but also initiatives to prevent individuals from becoming unhoused.

### **Outreach and Assistance**

Thomas, an advocate for the unhoused community in Austin, sat across from me explaining how the network of nonprofits providing assistance to the unhoused in Austin functioned, feeling that there were some problems with the way assistance was carried out (Thomas. Personal Communication. September 2, 2022):

When I came to Austin and became a client in the homeless services, I began to recognize things that just logically didn't make sense... I started seeing compartmentalization within the organizations, and then even competition among organizations. People call me an idealist. You think things are supposed to work the way they're supposed to work? And I'm like, well, aren't they? You know, and I just saw

things that just didn't logically function or go together, complement each other.

He continued to describe his experience by utilizing a simplified example of someone in need of a peanut butter and jelly sandwich:

You know, I have seen scenarios that would resemble quite often though, you'd be in my client, and all you need is peanut butter jelly sandwich. It sounds like a really simple task. Well, me as a case manager, I've got to spread things out a little bit, because, you know, you gotta have the workflow. So you'll come to me one week, and maybe we'll do an intake process. Oh well, time's up gotta go. You still didn't get your peanut butter jelly sandwich. Well come back next week. But you come back next week, and I'll give you the top slice. And then come back the next week.

Thomas went on to dub this system the “homeless industrial complex” and related some of the limitations nonprofits experience in providing these services, especially regarding budgets and funding. He continues,

You know, all these nonprofits, if they were to end homelessness tomorrow, how many people in these nonprofits would be unemployed. So when it comes down to the living conditions, or the well-being and welfare of the homeless citizens here, it is my opinion and my observation and my own experience, that it's more about keeping the payroll of the organizations going.

As Amara H. Pérez explains in her reflection on nonprofits and their role in social movements, many of these organizations pursue funding from foundations. Although many are committed to social justice, these organizations must show proof of their success through

measurable outcomes and success stories, and nonprofits must follow this model as well.

Therefore, nonprofits are increasingly influenced by this model, steering their priorities and goals.

In some cases, this model also encourages competition among organizations, rather than collaboration towards a common goal (Pérez, 2007).

In Austin, as in many cities since the transition to neoliberal governance, nonprofits have taken on a massive role in providing services to unhoused individuals, rather than the city government itself. For example, the Austin Resource Center for the Homeless (ARCH) an emergency shelter located downtown has been operated by Front Steps, a local nonprofit. My interviewee involved in outreach further emphasized this point, stating that nonprofits, along with religious organizations of all faiths, help address different needs, such as housing, food, and clothing (D. Personal Communication. July 28, 2022). Sunrise Community Church, the location where these interviews were conducted, is one such institution. It is a critical point of contact for those experiencing homelessness and for stakeholders. The organization provides immense support for those experiencing homelessness and is welcoming to individuals from all backgrounds. The church provides an on-site clinic during weekdays, assistance with medication, housing services, and clothing. High quality breakfast and lunches are served from Monday-Friday. Mail services and access to showers are also provided. Finally, as previously mentioned, ECHO is the main organization involved in conducting yearly counts of the unhoused population downtown.

However, as of July 2022, the city ended its contract with Front Steps, to the surprise of many of its employees. Officials cited organizational problems for their reasoning and have instead decided to transfer operations to a California-based organization known as Urban Alchemy (Girtman, 2022). The decision is not without controversy, as Urban Alchemy has very

little experience running shelters and officials had very little time to consider other options (Sanders, 2022).

In terms of housing, the city has made attempts to provide temporary locations for individuals, such as converting hotels into shelters. Earlier this year, city officials announced the City of Austin would be renovating a hotel in North Austin to provide services and housing to individuals experiencing homelessness (Lemons, 2022). However, similar initiatives have not been without controversy. For example, Williamson County went as far as filing a lawsuit against a nonprofit created by the city of Austin over plans to convert a Candlewood Suites into shelter for the unhoused, citing violations against intended land use of the property. Others have also raised concerns about the location regarding access to mental health facilities, public transit, and grocery stores (Rash, 2022). For some, this is not a solution, but rather a temporary fix that simply shuffles the problem to different parts of the city. Additionally, only a limited number of individuals are provided rooms within these hotels (D. Personal Communication. July 28, 2022).

It is also important to address how the 2021 camping ban has affected services and what options are provided to those evicted from encampments. A few months prior to the ban, Austin City Council members, with support from Mayor Steve Adler, created the Housing-Focused Encampment Assistance Link (HEAL) initiative. The goal of this program is to provide individuals living in encampments with connections to shelters and resources for permanent housing. Two hotels were also converted into temporary shelters as part of the program (Clifton, 2022; Higgins, 2022). According to a September 2022 review of the initiative presented by Dianna Grey, the city's homeless strategy officer, 361 individuals have been placed into one of the two bridge shelters since the first encampment relocation in June of 2021. Data comprised for

the two shelters show that 44% of those in these shelters transitioned to housing (*Austin Public Health*, 2022; Herron, 2022).

Back in 1996, Passaro's research emphasized an important component of addressing the problem of homelessness that programs like the HEAL initiative are now dealing with: why do individuals remain unhoused? Thomas again was able to provide insight into the often lengthy process of obtaining housing and the toll it can have on individuals (Thomas. Personal Communication. September 2, 2022):

A lot of individuals that had been camping out during that time, had been through a housing process, had had a case manager, had goals, jump through a bunch of hoops to get into housing and everything. And at that time, you know, a person could be within close proximity of receiving housing. And then one appointment, they'll go see their case manager and oh, we ran out of funding. You know, so a lot of the people who had been camping out in the early years of Austin, and I'll say, you know, after 2010, they've been through the services, and they just gave up hope.

He continued to describe the psychological effects living on the streets has on people, especially in terms of the transition from the streets to a house or apartment.

And you know, there had been occasions where individuals had lived outside for a while, and okay, so it comes, they do get an apartment. There have been individuals who set up tents in their living room, because they've become so undomesticated and used to being outside, it literally feels unsafe for them to just be in a big room. They feel uncomfortable. So they'll set up their tent and live out of that tent, and eventually they might fold it up and put it away. It's a survival mechanism. It's you know... I'll throw in also in case it never comes up from anyone who has been homeless for a duration of time, and is not necessarily quite comfortable with it for safety reasons. And whatever,

when they do become housed it can be up to a month or two months for them to process and cycle through the hyper vigilance and that safety aspect once they move into the apartment.

Additionally, the city has also created sanctioned encampments, such as Camp Esperanza, located on the outskirts of Southeast Austin approximately a two hour walk from downtown. The camp was created in 2019 by Texas Governor Greg Abbott, and as of 2021, housed about 200 individuals (Bova, 2021). When the nonprofit The Other Ones Foundation (TOOF) stepped up in August 2020 to assist residents, they were met with abysmal conditions, including lack of resources for hygiene and sweltering heat. To improve conditions, they began by installing mobile showers, along with establishing a mail service and providing coffee in the mornings as a way to improve morale among those living in the camp. By September, they were collaborating with residents to create more permanent physical shelters. The next year, the organization broke ground on water and electrical infrastructure (Bova, 2021; *The Other Ones Foundation*). Similarly, other nonprofits have created communities for unhoused individuals transitioning out of their situation. For example, the Community First! Village was created by the non-profit Mobile Loaves and Fishes in 2015 and is a 51 acre master planned community that provides permanent housing and support to men and women transitioning out of homelessness. It has expanded its services and housing units since its founding. Located in Northeast Austin, the community features amenities like walking trails, a community garden, art house, and bus stop. The community currently has 500 housing units and 325 residents (*Community First! Village*).

There is no doubt that nonprofits, religious institutions, and volunteers have done immense work for the unhoused community in the city, something I have seen firsthand. Many of the volunteers and nonprofit workers demonstrated patience and compassion for those in need

few could match, preparing high quality meals and assisting them in obtaining daily necessities, including housing. But it is important to remember Hennigan and Speer's (2019) analysis of services and nonprofits in the cities of Fresno and Phoenix. In particular, they caution that the lines between compassion and revanchism can sometimes be blurred. For example, in Fresno, they found punitive measures used to evict encampments sometimes worked in tandem with nonprofits, housing vouchers, and local businesses in an effort to revitalize downtown. Like the Esperanza Encampment, in Phoenix, "human services" campuses that provide necessities for unhoused people were positioned away from downtown in an effort to remove unhoused individuals from revitalized areas.

As demonstrated, the camping ban instituted in 2021 has affected the way in which city outreach services and spaces of care have operated. As a result, the following will analyze how the ban was reinstated, along with its effects on those who were living in camps throughout the city.

### **Camping Ban and the Austin Community**

Camping bans have been enacted in cities across the country. One group responsible for the lobbying of camping bans is a Texas-based think tank known as the Cicero Institute. According to a report by Pew Research, the institute penned a model bill known as the "Reducing Street Homelessness Act," which would make sleeping in public a Class C misdemeanor and punishable with a fine of up to \$5,000 and a month in jail. State funding would be withheld from nonprofits or municipalities that refused to comply with the law, if passed. State sanctioned homeless encampments would also be enforced, with limitations on the period of time residents would be permitted to stay. Texas was the first to sign the bill and advocates assert it was in direct response to Austin's relaxing of camping policies in 2019. According to



the author, the institute's goal is to create "entrepreneurial solutions to public problems" (Hernández, 2022).

Like many other cities around the country, Austin police officers were involved in evicting encampments in phases following the reinstatement of the city's camping ban in May of 2021. The first phase lasted one month. Officers were required to give verbal warnings and provide education and resources. The second phase again lasted one month. At this point, officers were allowed to write citations for individuals who had been previously warned. By phase three, officers could make arrests, but only in situations where the individual refuses to vacate or is in a dangerous situation. The last phase, which began in August of 2021, gave officers the authority to arrest individuals refusing to vacate, regardless of whether or not they were in a dangerous situation (*austintexas.gov*).

The interviewees provided insight into how the ban was supposed to be enacted, and how well these procedures were actually followed. Thomas described how officers would sometimes post signs at encampments warning residents. However, this was not always the case, as those living in the camps would sometimes be notified through word of mouth (Thomas. Personal Communication. September 2, 2022):

Okay, so you got an encampment, and you got one person who's just kind of hanging out, but everybody's gone. So, somebody comes by and gives notice to that person. Then, everybody else comes back. And that person takes off. And it's like, yeah, so communication, really. And so, you know, the next day, people are sleeping in the morning, and all of a sudden, you got DPS out there. And then you got a bunch of state workers who are taking your stuff.

Unfortunately, as Juliette shared, not all law enforcement officials were sympathetic or helpful to those who were violating the camping ban. Likewise, officers were supposed to provide them with alternatives, such as vouchers for motels, but this did not always occur. Following sweeps of encampments, personal belongings were also supposed to be stored in an accessible location for residents. However, this too did not always occur, as one individual reported to service providers that their collection of cowboy hats were taken during an encampment sweep (D. Personal Communication. July 28, 2022). As some news reports also described, officers and others assisting in the eviction of camps could not always provide residents with options to go to for shelter and to be in compliance with the law (Tompkins, 2022). Juliette provided some crucial insight into her experience with the camping ban and its emotional toll. (Juliette. Personal Communication. June 15, 2022).

First of all, how can you tell me I'm public enemy number one or America's most wanted criminal just because I have no home. What gives you the right to leave me a criminal that deserves to go to jail, I think they said a year now. All you're trying to do is live and sleep. Right after a major pandemic that has rendered more and more of even the elite society homeless now. Where's the justice? Where's the truth, you know? The funny thing is, now we have a Homeless Task Force. Basically a SWAT team that comes in and makes sure that you leave whatever camp they're shutting down.

She continued by describing how unhoused people are not unlike those with homes and again, her comments reflect how they are dehumanized by society as a whole. While this quote may appear quite long, the full transcription of her opinion and experience is necessary to fully convey its impact.

I mean, is it that serious? You know, we're human too. We're not animals. We're not society's amusement. We're not unfeeling, uncaring robots. We're human. We were once somebody in society. You never know, we could have been your next door neighbor that you invited over to your nice dinner parties every night. We could have been your doctor, your teacher, your kid's teacher. But once you hit that rock bottom, you're all of a sudden a nobody and forgotten. Why is that? You know, we're human too. We have feelings. All we want is the basic rights everybody else? And why can't we have them? Some of the APD officers will sit there and you think they're joking. But they're not joking when they tell you, you're homeless, you don't have any rights? We're not homeless, we're *houseless*. Home is where your heart is. Home is what you make of it. Anywhere can be a home. Just because we live in tents, or don't even have a tent, just a blanket, on the ground, trying to sleep. You're telling me I'm not allowed that alienable right of life or freedom to just be able to sleep like everybody else. And of course, we're not allowed happiness. We get harassed every day. If not by society, then by the cops.

Juliette's statements regarding society's view of the unhoused and their treatment following the camping ban were powerful reminders of the cruelty and stigma the unhoused face against society. Many of the comments Juliette shared reflect Mitchell's (2003; 2020) analysis of private property and citizenship in American society, especially regarding one's rights in public space being intrinsically tied to ownership of private property. Furthermore, in an increasingly privatized city, one's right to be left alone in public space is also tied to an "ethos of commodification," related to one's ability to spend money in public ( Mitchell, 2020, pg. 115).

Keeping these ideas in mind, Juliette noted an increasingly difficult time in accessing private businesses. Once again, her experiences provide important details regarding how this ethos of commodification Mitchell speaks of affects unhoused folks.

You know, more and more businesses are even shutting us out. Even when we're not stealing from them or anything. We're just going in and use the restroom. Just because they see a backpack on or the way you're dressed with a little bit of dirt on you, automatically, you're labeled as homeless. But here we are in a college city. What about the students that walk into the store with backpacks? But see, society kind of has this built in radar, I guess, to where they know who's a student versus who's homeless. But how's that possible? Because I can go into an establishment with a backpack, dressed nice, and they wouldn't take a second look at me. They wouldn't follow me around their store. They would think nothing of it. But then I go into that same establishment looking a little rough. Happen to be having a bad day. Got a backpack on. I was the same person that walked in there the day before. But now today, you're following me around the store. You're hurrying me up. You're telling me that the bathrooms are out of service. But I just saw customer go in and use it. You're trying to kick me out of your store because you think I'm going to steal something? What? What flipped from day one to day two? I'm still the same person.

While the previous statements are related to private businesses, others expressed similar treatment at public parks (Adelia. Personal Communication. June 13, 2022).

They think they own everything [referring to wealthy people]. We go to the parks and we can't just pull out a tent and just sit around for a couple of hours. We're not going to live there. Of course not. We just want to because I'm allergic to mosquito bites, I'm allergic to a lot of things. He's the same way. We can just sit in a tent and just chill with a fan or like everybody else. They think they own it and they call the police, the police come out they want to harass us. We're not doing anything. We're just sitting there trying to relax.

In the same vein, several interviewees noted changes related to the acceptance of cash at businesses and how their transition to cashless transactions was affecting where they could purchase necessities. This became more noticeable to them in recent years, especially after the Covid-19 pandemic. While many people may view this as a logical consequence of the times, my interviewees were more skeptical, seeing it as an attempt to exclude the unhoused from accessing these businesses and create spaces for only certain individuals (Adelia. Personal Communication. June 13, 2022; Jacob. Personal Communication. June 30, 2022). While it cannot be confirmed whether or not this is the intention of business owners, the perspectives of the interviewees reveals how crucial the availability of cash transactions is for the daily lives of some individuals and how this transaction can provide greater access to establishments.

Finally, it is important to address the trauma many individuals experience as a result of encampment sweeps, along with their efficacy. As previously addressed, many individuals view these spaces as home and they provide not only shelter, but also important social connections. As Chang et al. (2022) describe in their interviews with unhoused individuals in California, when there is no alternative for unhoused individuals, encampments provide a safe space for one to retreat to, just as any other home would. As a result, sweeps create psychological and emotional stress, along with the more explicit loss of personal property. These practices also force some individuals into dangerous places and conditions in order to escape law enforcement. Although there is a need for better oversight and reporting on the effectiveness of sweeps, they found that they mostly resulted in the dispersal of unhoused individuals throughout cities and created a destabilized environment. Finally, in Chico, California, researchers found that the estimates provided by the police department regarding the cost of sweeps in the city were underestimated, as they were potentially costing the city twice as much as official estimates (Wiling et al, 2018).

As demonstrated, the camping ban and increasingly privatized nature of public space has affected unhoused people's access to certain spaces within the city. The following will provide further detail on access to space within the city, but place an emphasis on unhoused people's movement throughout the city and places they can go to access services.

### **Movement and Location of Services**

Some interviewees provided insight into how their movements throughout the city have changed, especially regarding spaces they feel comfortable or uncomfortable in. For example, Jacob was very perceptive of the changes going on within Austin, particularly the East Side. He frequently utilized the city's public transportation and noticed in more recent years that it was increasingly difficult to get to East Austin, as the bus routes were changed. What Jacob may be referring to is a change in Austin's bus routes in 2018. In a map of updated routes across the city, it appears that route 17 no longer goes beyond Shady Lane and does not cross the Colorado River into the city's southern neighborhoods. Likewise, it appears that there are fewer routes servicing neighborhoods east of I-35 in comparison to the city's western neighborhoods.

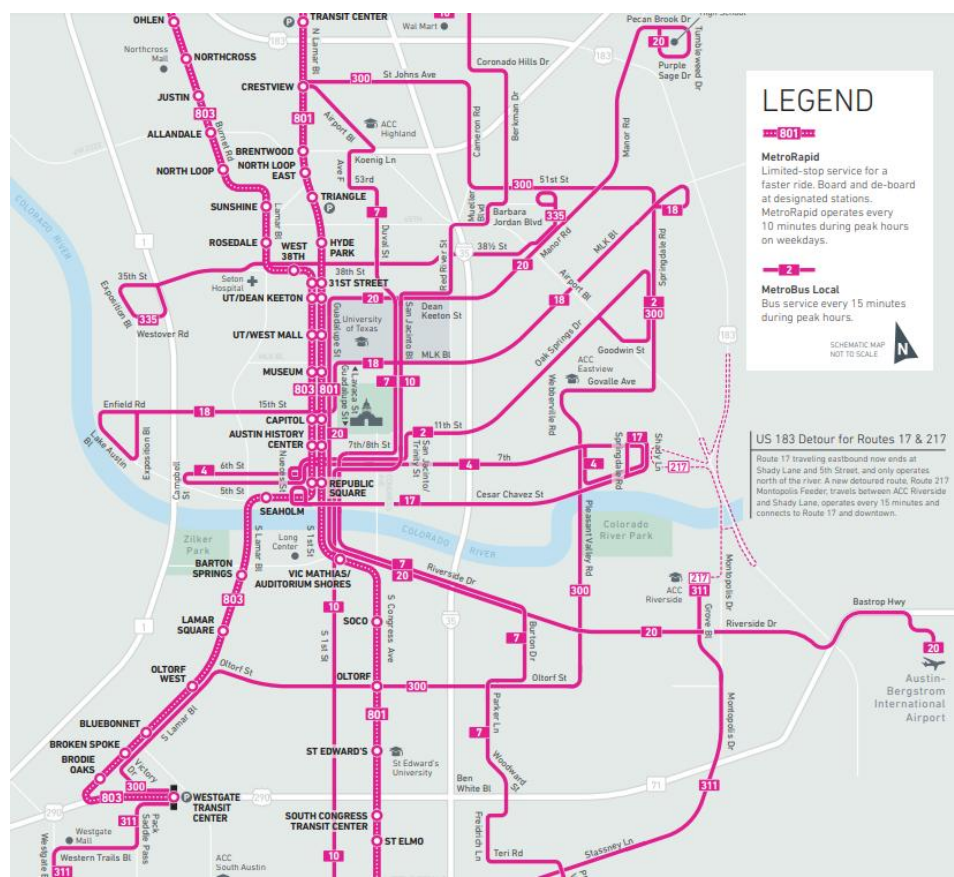


Fig. 30. Capital Metro's 2018 remapping of Austin bus routes. Image Courtesy of Capital Metro.

Jacob also reiterated that in comparison to his arrival to Austin in 2001, the East Side has completely changed, having more high-end businesses and housing. As a result, he tends to avoid the East Side and even feels that he does not belong there, as he thinks he will make residents and patrons of these spaces uncomfortable (Jacob. Personal Communication, June 30, 2022). In his own words, he describes the following,

Well, the bus transportation, Capital Metro... The bus system has changed since when I first arrived here. So I've kind of had to change my routes to get to where I need to go get food or clothing or shower, or whatever. So I've had



to kind of adapt to the bus system today. Because, I noticed the bus stops have changed. So I notice, like, I used to walk into the Angel House, which I don't know if we still call it the Angel House off of Cesar Chavez. Yeah, but it was always easy to go there, then to a library, and then catch the 17 and you would go all the way around towards the four or Montopolis and Riverside. But, everything... It's more inconvenient to go that route towards the east side of Austin, because you see more like...business people. You know, my age, I'm 42. So, for me, I'm very self-conscious or like aware, real sensitive. So if I don't fit in somewhere, I know not to go there.

He continued further to describe his level of comfort being on the East Side and his ability to just “hang out” someplace there, like a corner store.

It's different where you can't do that no more because more people are watching the complex area, the stores, everything's more fancy here. We're not rich here, but it just feels more intimidating. I'm not one of those that wants to break the law, I can't afford to anymore, but the people you know, whenever you get to a certain point where you realize, well I can't keep losing my self-respect, you know? See, you don't want to make it worse for others, you know, if you're just loitering, it's hard now to loiter, or what's the word, hanging out? Yeah, I just killed time there. People don't want to see you standing there and it makes it uncomfortable for others to walk paths through there. So that's what I feel like going to the East Side. Where they're building and constructing suburbs and stuff, or condominiums, it comes to a point where you realize you're not welcome there. But it was more like you don't have no business here. It's not your neighborhood no more or like how gangsters think, like territorial. It's not like that anymore. It's the middle class, they're more aggressive now. They're putting up a fight. I noticed that, though.

When shown pictures of some of the developments within the East 5th Street area, the interviewees had mixed reactions to these places, with some feeling intimidated by them and

others describing them as “beautiful” or being “all for stuff like that” (Juliette. Personal Communication. June 15, 2022; Brian. Personal Communication. July 7, 2022).

Others also commented on their movements throughout the city and the places they called home. Many of my interviewees and individuals I spoke with while volunteering often explained that they try to keep a low profile in order to not attract law enforcement, with some even calling themselves “loners” (Joe. Personal Communication. June 27, 2022; Jacob. Personal Communication, June 30, 2022) Those who have been working with unhoused people for years also noticed a change in the location of the population within the past ten years in the city (D. Personal Communication, July 28, 2022).

Yeah, I loved working at the outreach center when I was there, because it's downtown, and a very vibrant city with a lot of fabulous places to go eat and, you know, and a big homeless population then, but not so much anymore. They'd been kicked out of downtown. Yeah. Out of sight out of mind...But downtown is kind of empty now for homeless people, which is another reason I left that center. There's not much to do, you know, they swept out the ARCH so that there was nobody camped out down there. They all kind of moved out into camps hidden where you don't see them. Before Prop B passed, they were under bridges where you could see them. But now they're back where you can't see them, which is what the city wants. If you can't see them, they don't have to worry about them. Nevertheless, they're there and they come here. We have people that walk seven and eight miles to get to camp way south.

More individuals are utilizing the greenspace throughout the city’s suburbs as a result of the ban and the failure to provide shelter for those evicted from camps, something multiple interviewees could attest to (D. Personal Communication. July 28, 2022; Jacob. Personal Communication. June 30, 2022).

They housed very few people that they kicked out of camps. Very few. So people just move back into the woods. Anytime you see green space and Austin. I mean, I live south not too far from here. Anytime you see a block where there's greenery, and then houses here and houses there. If you look carefully enough, you'll see a temporary camp.

Joe also described a similar problem with encampment clearings and the resulting charges (Joe. Personal Communication. June 27, 2022).

So this is now what's going to happen. It's just going to be a whack a mole. Yeah, all these homeless people. You can't stay here. You can't stay here. You can't stay here. Then I guess people get ticketed, and the tickets build up. They don't do anything about it. I don't think, as long as you're not being real troublesome. Maybe you don't end up in jail. You know, but now you got all these tickets on your record.

Others with first-hand experience described hostility downtown from specific organizations and police, including the Downtown Austin Alliance, a nonprofit that collaborates with businesses and property owners to create a clean and safe downtown (Thomas. Personal Communication. September 2, 2022) .

While the Downtown Austin Alliance does serve a purpose like cleaning the community, their primary operation is eyes, eyes and ears. They're constantly on the radio and someone could be sitting in a park bench, maybe not getting good sleep the night before. Before you know they've got the police on top of them because the Downtown Austin Alliance called them. Okay, let's, for the sake of the conversation, be tolerant to the fact of we can't have people sleeping. You know, that's one aspect of it. However, the demeanors of the individuals involved in the

Downtown Austin Alliance is that of, in my opinion, World War Two Nazi soldiers. They feel like they have a sense of authority.

He also recalled relatively new procedures by police downtown starting around 2011 or 2012, along with the Chief of Police's conduct toward the unhoused during that time.

It seems to be a daily ritual of officers going down Sixth Street where the homeless are maybe sleeping in doorways, and they just do a wakeup call. So they'll drive down park their car, walk maybe a couple blocks, come back in the car, move it up a little bit, and then walk a couple more blocks. They're cordial. However, this behavior is relatively new. Started maybe 2011 or 2012. We got a police chief here, Art Acevedo. He was a complete tyrant. He was intolerant to the homeless. He harassed the homeless, he instructed his staff to harass the homeless, which really serves no purpose.

However, while the focus of this research is geared more towards the city's downtown, others shared experiences closer to the suburbs of the city. Although they mentioned Pleasant Valley, based on their description, I believe they were referring to Sunset Valley in the Southwest suburbs of the city (Joe. Personal Communication. June 27, 2022).

When I got to what is it, Pleasant Valley out here by Brodie lane? When I got here, I noticed a stark difference where there's nobody homeless in this area that you can see. There are homeless people, but they keep that under wraps. I mean, if you're going to be home, I'm in that area now. If you're in this area, you don't want to be seen. You know? The cops tell you, you gotta go. People try to camp and try to sleep underneath the Brodie Underpass. The cops tell them they gotta go. Nobody stays under there. Yeah, you know, try to go down Brodie Lane and the cops are like regularly patrolling that area. You can't sit down on a bench

in those big open areas, where they have the stores like... there's a Best Buy and there's bookstore benches. I was sitting there trying to charge a phone and this cop pulls up and has his lights on just waiting for me to get up and move. He didn't stop me or anything. When I got up and moved, then he left me alone.

Finally, as some of the previous quotations have exposed, the location of shelters and services have sometimes been contested by residents and associations nearby, most notably the ARCH. In 2019, officials raised concern over recent acts of violence outside the center. The president of the Austin Police Association asserted that the shelter needed to be moved, as it was incompatible with the growth of businesses in the area and tourists downtown. The executive director of Front Steps, Greg McCormack agreed, stating that the growth has made it “extremely difficult” to operate the shelter (Claiborne, 2019). As previously mentioned in the discourse analysis, residential neighborhoods and their respective associations can pose as an obstacle to creating other more permanent solutions, like affordable housing.

## **Discussion**

While many often look at the impacts of gentrification on older residents in particular neighborhoods, less commonly investigated is how a changing landscape affects the movements and living spaces of the unhoused in a city. Clearly, gentrification continues to impact older residents in East Austin and even contributed to an increase in unhoused residents from that part of the city through displacement. While the two sections of East Austin did have some noticeable signs of restricted access, there was not a noticeable presence of police in the area during my experiences there. However, as the landscape analysis and some interviewees expressed, there are more subtle ways in which exclusion is maintained, especially through the ambience or as

Jacob described, the “feeling” a certain space conveys. It seems that there is a significant presence of unhoused individuals moving into the suburbs, following the camping ban. In these spaces, they still experience efforts to remove encampments. Unfortunately, there is still an othering of unhoused individuals within Austin that influences policy and how the city and nonprofits can provide services to those in need. More specifically, this discourse influences where these services can be established, including affordable housing. Even more so, this discourse harms those who are unhoused, as revealed in the personal accounts of those experiencing homelessness in Austin. Despite this stigma, those who have not gone through the experience often forget that many unhoused individuals were working full time and led normal lives, just as any other individual. Yet, without taking this into consideration, unhoused individuals must be afforded the same respect regardless of their situation. The interviews provide a complex picture of homelessness in Austin and provide valuable insight into how the city is addressing the issue.

Throughout these interviews, one of the most glaring issues was that of affordability. While the city is creating new affordable housing and housing specifically for unhoused individuals, it is not creating these units fast enough to keep up with the growing demand. Yet, while affordability is an issue that not just affects the unhoused, efforts to create such housing are often blocked by organized efforts, like neighborhood associations.

However, there is much more to the problem than the lack of affordable housing. As Dr. McGhee reiterates, the Imagine Austin Plan failed to address the inequities East Austinites experienced. This also included a failure to protect the cultural heritage of their neighborhoods by declaring the region a Desired Development Zone. He is also critical of neoliberal urban governance and New Urbanism, in part because it takes power out of the hands of those actually

living in these neighborhoods to control how their neighborhoods will grow (McGhee, 2017). Furthermore, he asserts that neutral policies of densification and changes to zoning in order to address the city's history of racism and segregation are short-sighted, as they do not address the role capitalist real estate and private developers play in reproducing these inequities. Instead of policies that favor private real developers and the market, he advocates for policies that put the community at the forefront of planning and development (McGhee, 2020). Finally, although the problem of affordability is often framed as a supply shortage, rather than immediately defaulting to building more housing, the city should take stock in existing affordable housing in the community that can be recycled (McGhee, 2020).

Furthermore, the implementation of the camping ban in 2021 was also an important topic to highlight and goes in hand-in-hand with how the city provides assistance to unhoused residents. Although nonprofits have provided a majority of the resources for unhoused individuals, these interviews reveal some of the inconsistencies in implementing the ban and shortfalls of the nonprofit system. While outside perspectives may view encampments as blights on the landscape or nuisances, many of the spaces provide stability, comfort, and community for those living there when there are few other options for those in need. While this research is not arguing that encampments should be the end goal for unhoused individuals, in a city that has become increasingly unaffordable for many, clearing these encampments creates an immense amount of stress for those living in them and creates further instability.

With these points in mind, an obvious question would be how should things be improved? Among some of the most successful outcomes are through Housing First initiatives. Most notably, Finland instituted a housing program that provides unhoused individuals with shelter without restrictions for behavior. Instead of housing being a reward for those who demonstrate



reform, it is considered a human right and a “prerequisite” for tackling issues such as alcoholism or drug abuse (Shinn and Khadduri, 2020, pg. 76). By U.S. standards defined by the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), Finland has essentially eliminated homelessness in the country, though it uses a much broader definition of homelessness to include situations like temporarily living with friends or family. As a result, by Finnish standards, the country has more than halved its population from over 18,000 in 1987 to less than 5,000 in 2019 (Shinn and Khadduri, 2020). However, similar initiatives are being implemented closer to home, as the city of Houston has also found success in providing immediate housing to individuals on the street with no restrictions on alcohol or drugs. The number of people considered unhoused in the city was reduced by approximately 63% from 2011. Of the 25,000 individuals moved into permanent housing, a majority stayed housed after two years (Kimmelman and Tompkins, 2022). Indeed, in a culture in which one’s access to public space is tied private property and increasingly, the ability to consume, such an initiative will alleviate the suffering life on the streets creates and provide greater stability for individuals struggling with addiction.

One point to be mindful of is that the unhoused community in Austin is diverse and certain individuals did not always share the same opinions. For example, in discussions regarding encampments, some individuals did not like to see them. Living situations were also diverse, as some interviewees had experiences living in encampments, while others tried to keep to themselves. However, despite these differences, these individuals conveyed a fondness for the community they formed and demonstrated a resilience against stigma and increasing hostility by society. It was especially moving to hear how some individuals like Juliette, despite her situation, went out of the way to care for others and help those in need. I was impressed by the assistance provided by the location I volunteered at and am grateful the community there welcomed me

with open arms. Moreover, I am especially grateful for those who took the time to speak with me and were so open about their personal struggles and experiences.

## **Conclusion**

While all of the interviewees shared their experiences being unhoused, they also spoke about important aspects of their lives that truly defined who they are, like their family, friends, religious beliefs, and hobbies. Many emphasized that their situation can happen to anyone. It is not my intent to vilify those who frequent East Austin or move there, but instead prompt readers to think more critically about the way homelessness is tied to historical inequalities and the systems that reinforce them. For example, throughout this research, more housing and densification were often pointed to as solutions to the issue of affordability. However, as researchers like Dr. McGhee have pointed out, greater care must be taken, along with these measures, to acknowledge the influence of these inequities on today's policies and to prevent the displacement of residents already living in these neighborhoods. Finally, while the punitive measures employed by cities are often more visible and make headlines, the previous analysis and experiences of the interviewees show that there are more subtle forms of exclusion found not just within the physical landscape, but also occur as a result of transgressing certain behaviors and ideals that are upheld and promoted within public space.

One of the challenges of this research was crafting questions that would prompt interviewees to provide information that would specifically pertain to the research questions. Although the original intent of this research was to focus specifically on Central East Austin, some interviewees did not spend time in the area, yet were still able to provide valuable insights into other areas of the city and downtown. While unhoused residents had come from different

parts of the city to obtain services, the interviewees were contacted from one specific location due to time constraints and accessibility to clients at other service providers. As a result, there is still much more to be investigated in the city. For example, expanding the interviews to other service providers, policy makers, and police officers could be one avenue for further inquiry. Likewise, visiting encampments and conducting a walking interview of the specific areas of East Austin with unhoused residents could both be future avenues to further enhance this research by incorporating more perspectives. Conducting walking interviews would provide greater insight into these individuals' feelings and thoughts in the moment when actively moving through these spaces. Finally, I hope that this research at least provides a complex view of homelessness in Austin and challenges some commonly held beliefs about unhoused individuals, as the way in which they are viewed by society and how the problem is discussed in the media continues to influence policy.

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