Who Gets to Speak: The Role a Media Outlet Plays in Shaping the Narratives About Homelessness in the United States

Jacob Neville

Invisible Histories

Table of Contents

0.1 Abstract

If someone is asked to point to a crisis taking place in the country right now, a common answer would be homelessness. A widely discussed topic that has only become a greater, more visible problem, homelessness in the United States continues to capture the attention of journalists and reporters. As the media attention has increased, certain narratives about homelessness become dominant, shaping the responses to the crisis by local and regional governments. With the media playing a crucial role in how the general public learns about and views homelessness, it is important to examine which voices are included, and which are excluded, during the process of narrative construction regarding the topic. This report examines the content of six different media outlets that have done extensive reporting on homelessness at both local and national levels. The results provide answers to the size of the platform different communities are given by various media outlets to provide their input into the causes, effects, and solutions to homelessness in the United States.

SECTION I: Introduction

1.1 Thesis

Homelessness in the United States has for decades been a popular debate amongst lawmakers, business owners, activists, the media, and most of the general public. A shared sentiment is that homelessness needs to be addressed, but contentious discourse happens when deciding how it should be addressed. Feelings fuel narratives, and narratives fuel policy and financial decisions that impact responses to homelessness. Amongst the many actors, the media plays a crucial role in how the general public understands homelessness in the United States. Media outlets that report on homelessness need to cover not just the visible aspects of homelessness, but also the aspects that often go unnoticed by housed communities. In order for

the housed population to be aware of these lesser known aspects, media outlets should incorporate the voices of those that have historically been silenced when the topic of homelessness is discussed: voices of homeless people themselves. Media outlets that include the voices of people with lived experience of homelessness allow the consumer to be as informed as possible about how people become homeless, and how effective the current methods of addressing homelessness are in solving the issue.

1.2 Background into the Media Outlets

Outsiders: A podcast created in collaboration with KNKX Public Radio and Seattle Time's Project Homeless. Distributed by NPR. This outlet highlights the stories of those living unsheltered in Olympia, WA, how the city and its housed residents responded to the increased presence of homeless people in the city, and the history of homelessness in the city itself. The goal of this podcast is to "get a better understanding of the crisis that is homelessness". Hosted by a reporter with KNKX, they spend one year on the ground in Olympia to answer the questions: *What is it like to live outside for months on end? What is it like when tents come to your neighborhood? What new solutions can city leaders find?* Reporting began in 2019, and the first episode was released in January 2020. The series ran 10 episodes in total, the last one being released in the fall of 2020. The host interviews a wide variety of people, from unhoused and housed residents of Olympia, city government officials, other reporters, and many people in the Olympia community who provide services and shelter to the homeless population. Most interviews take place in the field, with some taking place in the studio. The podcast has stories that are followed throughout the series, as well as stories contained to one episode. One episode reserves space for listener questions to be answered by homeless people themselves. The podcast lasted one season.

Housing Narrative Lab: Founded in 2021, the HNL is a national research and implementation hub that works with journalists and media to elevate the stories of those experiencing homelessness and housing instability. Their mission is to push forward narratives that build

support for finding adequate and safe solutions to the homelessness crisis, while also reframing the narratives that are harmful to homeless communities. HNL creates tools and conducts training based on their narrative research. HNL coaches, trains, and mentors unhoused people to share their stories. Their executive director, Marisol Bello, has moderated webinars with various professionals ranging from professors, journalists, and leaders in the nonprofit sector in discussions about homelessness. The website stores a collection of research that is available for public consumption, and also includes an extensive blog that welcomes guest writers to share their stories and knowledge relating to homelessness. Rooted in equity, their narrative research supports the campaigns and projects of others, all in an effort to mobilize people to take action.

Beyond the Bridge: A Solution to Homelessness: A feature-length documentary created by Don Sawyer and Tim Hashko that takes a comprehensive dive into possible solutions to the homelessness crisis in the US. This is a sequel to the film *Under the Bridge: The Criminalization of Homelessness.* Together, Sawyer and Hashko traveled over 40,000 miles to cities around the country to meet with folks and hear their stories. This travel is well-documented on their website, which contains dozens of interviews and other BTS footage of their journey. Through the documentary and the impact campaign, they search for an answer to the question: how can this country solve homelessness in a comprehensive way? The project is designed to help communities align their efforts towards solving homelessness. The film was completed in 2024, and as of now is only available via in person screenings. Since its completion, the filmmakers have traveled to over a dozen cities, providing a free screening, panel discussion, and Q&A at each stop. They hope that through this nation-wide tour, they begin to shift the discourse on solutions to homelessness. Despite the limited access to the film itself, the creators made sure there is plenty of content that anyone can access: many people they interviewed during their journey share their stories on the film's website, allowing the viewer to get a sense of where the filmmakers went, and who they interacted with.

Seattle Times Project Homeless: An initiative started in 2017 by The Seattle Times that explores and aims to explain the region's homelessness crisis. This project is modeled after other ST initiatives like the Education Lab and Traffic Lab. STPH currently has 3 staff members: 2 reporters and 1 editor, who operate independently of the funders, allowing them to maintain editorial control over the content that is published. Their mission is to "pull back the curtain on the [regional homelessness] response system and see how well it serves the distinct populations of homeless families, youth, veterans, and single adults". Through watchdog reporting and storytelling, STPH uncovers what is working, and what is not working, in the response to homelessness. The initiative is built on in-depth reporting of homelessness in the greater King County area, highlighting stories from those experiencing homelessness, people in government, those who work in non-profits, business owners, and housed citizens. Articles give numbers that illustrate trends, cover legislation that is proposed and passed (or not passed), and provide the amount of money that is being poured into addressing regional homelessness. Reporters follow underlying topics and themes, highlight individual stories, and also take steps back to examine the broader scope of the issue. Since 2017, hundreds of articles have been published under the STPH initiative.

Real Change: A weekly progressive street newspaper that was started in 1994 by Tim Harris after he moved to Seattle. Harris founded Boston's Spare Change News in 1992, before moving to Seattle two later. Real Change began as a monthly paper, then became bi-weekly, before growing into a weekly read in 2005 due to increased interest and sales. According to its website, Real Change exists to "provide opportunity and a voice to low-income and homeless people while taking action for economic, social and racial justice". Via their vendor system, Real Change provides low-barrier work opportunities to essentially anybody. Real Change has an anti-capitalist voice that raises the voices of those who are most affected by how society operates. Articles are written by professional staff and the paper is sold by self-employed vendors, many of whom are homeless. Real Change makes an effort to have the community be

involved as much as possible, leading to the presence of Vendor Committees that advise each department, with vendor leaders serving on the Board of Directors. Articles primarily fall under three categories: news, features, and opinion. There are regular contributors, as well as guests that get the chance to share a story. Oftentimes, Real Change vendors are able to write their own article, and 'Vendor Spotlights' frequent the paper as well. Real Change uplifts the stories that mainstream media does not always give a platform to.

Invisible People: Launched in 2008 by Mark Horvath, Invisible People has gone from an individual social media account to a worldwide media platform that aims to bring everyone together in the fight to end homelessness. Their effort lies in reaching the general public through various types of audio-visual content to change how people perceive the homelessness crisis. Invisible People is dedicated to educating the public through innovative storytelling, news, and advocacy. They partner with major brands on campaigns that provide services to homeless communities. Visual storytelling is their calling card, employing the use of documentaries, first-person interviews, and social-impact films to foster knowledge and empathy. Their website and youtube page are full of individual stories that many can relate to, while also looking at different regions and their relationships with homelessness. While their videos do include a lot of "shock-value" content, they differ from other social media sites in that their work is rooted in humanizing those who are homeless. They work to dismantle harmful stereotypes and narratives that lead to inadequate and destructive policy decisions. The content of Invisible People sparks online discussion among the general public, with the hope being that these discussions will find their way to the desks of those who have the power, but lack the will, to find solutions to homelessness.

1.3 Methodology

In order to better inform how Invisible Histories goes about their work as a media outlet, it is important to research previous work done by others in a similar realm. The initial goal of this report was to find another media outlet (preferably a podcast) that has shared stories about

homeless people and other communities of folks living on the margins. The relationship between the media and marginalized communities is crucial to examine, especially when the reporter is not of that community. Exploitation and misrepresentation by a media outlet is present throughout history, and can lead to more harm than good being brought upon the community that is sharing their stories. The purpose of Invisible Histories is to uplift voices and support them and their communities, making it imperative that they go about their work as informed and as compassionate as possible.

The podcast *Outsiders* was chosen as the subject of this research. Originally, the process was to consume the media, take notes, and then present analysis of and commentary about the media to Invisible Histories. Special attention was paid to who was being interviewed, what topics were being discussed, and broad themes that were present in the content of the podcast. It was realized early on in the process that it was beneficial to the research to increase the scope. It was decided that this type of research would include not just the podcast, but five other media outlets, of various mediums. The next step was identifying other outlets that have shared stories of the homeless population, and examine *how* they have gone about their reporting and documentation. *How are they similar in their approach to reporting on homelessness, and how do they differ?*

The topic of homelessness became the overarching scope of research as it is an underlying factor, or a connection between many other topics.Through reporting on homelessness, many other topics were discussed, thus this report dives into how media outlets tell the stories of people living on the margins of society, a broader theme that includes mental health and substance use. Upon the completion of the search, the participants were broken down into one audio-based (podcast), two video-based (two separate documentary short-form series), and three written-based (two newspapers and one online blog). Once the list of participants was

decided on, the first step was determining how much content would be consumed and analyzed from each outlet. The outcome of this process varied, with the range for how many individual pieces of media were consumed and analyzed from each outlet being 10-20. For *Outsiders*, the podcast was produced for one season, and it contained 10 episodes. While there were a couple bonus episodes available, they were not included in this research. *Beyond the Bridge: A Solution to Homelessness* is a feature length documentary that is not yet available online, so the media consumed was a fixed amount of short, documentary-style videos created and shared by the filmmakers on their website. It was determined that 20 of the 23 available videos would be watched, with the other 3 deemed unrelated to this research project. The website for *Housing Narrative Lab* contained 20 pieces of media, the majority being written articles with a few audio/visual recordings of webinars. The three other outlets each had dozens, sometimes hundreds, of individual pieces of media. 2017 was the year the *Seattle Times Project Homeless* initiative began, so two articles per year from 2017 to 2024 were chosen, resulting in 16 total pieces of media. Each article was labeled under the initiative. For *Real Change*, 16 articles were chosen, with the earliest article being from 2023. 10 of the articles from *Real Change* were published in 2023, and the remaining 6 were published in 2024. Finally, for *Invisible People*, it was decided that a series of their short documentaries would be consumed. From this playlist, 15 individual pieces of media were selected. *Invisible People* holds dozens more videos on their website, all with different style and format than the ones selected for this research. This particular playlist was chosen because it contained a robust selection of media that documented a variety of stories relating to homelessness across the country.

The method of research was two-fold, with both qualitative and quantitative notes. There were two main goals with this method: one, to understand whose voice is being heard via the reporting of these outlets and two, to examine and discuss the themes and topics presented by the media these outlets create. For each piece of media, the number of people whose voices

were heard and notes about the topic(s) and theme(s) were recorded. In order for the voice of an individual to be recorded as “heard”, two qualifications must be met: one, their face and voice are seen and heard (for audio and visual mediums) or what they say is directly quoted (for written mediums), and two, their name is shared by the media outlet. An exception to the latter is sometimes those whose voices were heard preferred to remain anonymous, and their condition of anonymity was made clear by the media outlet. Each person whose voices were heard were placed into one of the following categories based on their background: *lived experience of homelessness, government, non-profit, business, education, media, and housed citizens*. The *lived experience of homelessness* category applies to someone who has history with being homeless, even if at the time of the interview they are housed. The *government* category applies to individuals in all levels of government, including those who were retired at the time of the interview. The *non-profit* category encompasses those in non-governmental, non-profit organizations in a variety of industries, such as housing, social services, and shelters. The *business* category is for individuals who are defined as for-profit business owners or work for a for-profit business. The *education* category encompasses those that work at educational institutions. The *media* category is for individuals who work in the media industry, separate from the participating outlets in this report. Finally, the *housed citizens* category is for individuals whose professions are undefined, are also not defined as people with lived experience of homelessness, or are simply defined as a “housed citizen” by the media outlet who interviewed them.

Individuals were categorized based on how the media outlet presents them via title cards, verbal introductions, or written introductions. Each individual was counted once per media outlet, and was placed in one of the categories. There were multiple instances where an individual could technically be placed into multiple categories. If an individual had lived experience and worked for a non-profit, they were placed in the *lived experience of homelessness* category. If an

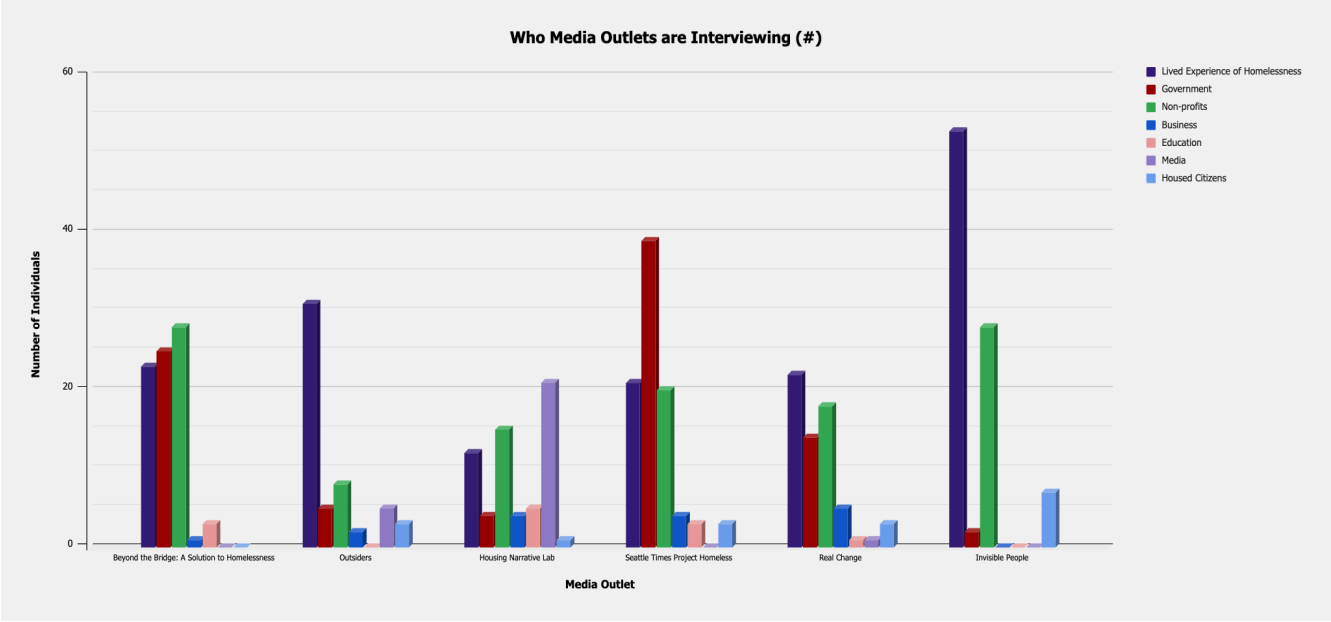
individual had a history of working in both government and non-profit spheres, they were categorized based on their job title as presented by the media outlet (contained in the introduction of the individual). The data was recorded in a spreadsheet that labeled each individual by media outlet and category. Once data was collected from all six media outlets, the next step was determining the sum of how many individuals were interviewed by each outlet. Each total was recorded in the spreadsheet. The next step was calculating the percentages of each category for each media outlet (i.e. X percentage of the total number of people interviewed by *Seattle Times Project Homeless* are the *government* category). The percentages were calculated and recorded in a different table on the same spreadsheet.

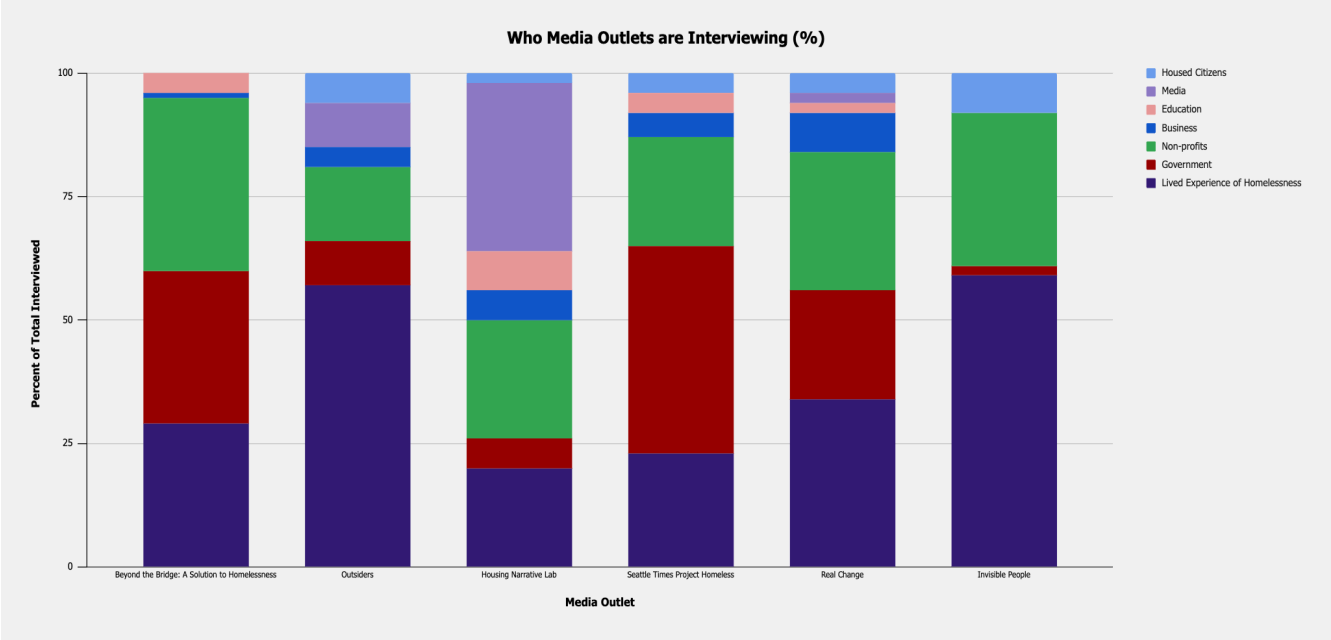
The next step was creating charts that display the data in comparison to each other. The first chart took the total number of individuals interviewed by each media outlet, and defined them by each category. A column chart was used, with each column representing a different category. All six categories were repeatedly displayed for each media outlet, side-by-side in a comparative view. The next chart compared the percentages of total individuals interviewed by each media outlet, broken down into the six categories. This was undertaken using a stacked column chart, with each column adding up to one-hundred percent of the individuals interviewed by an outlet. Each column represented a media outlet, and they were again displayed side-by-side, in a comparative view. Finally, a pie chart was created for each media outlet, again looking at the percentages of total individuals interviewed by each media outlet, broken down into the six categories. This offered an alternative, isolated view of the percentages for each media outlet.

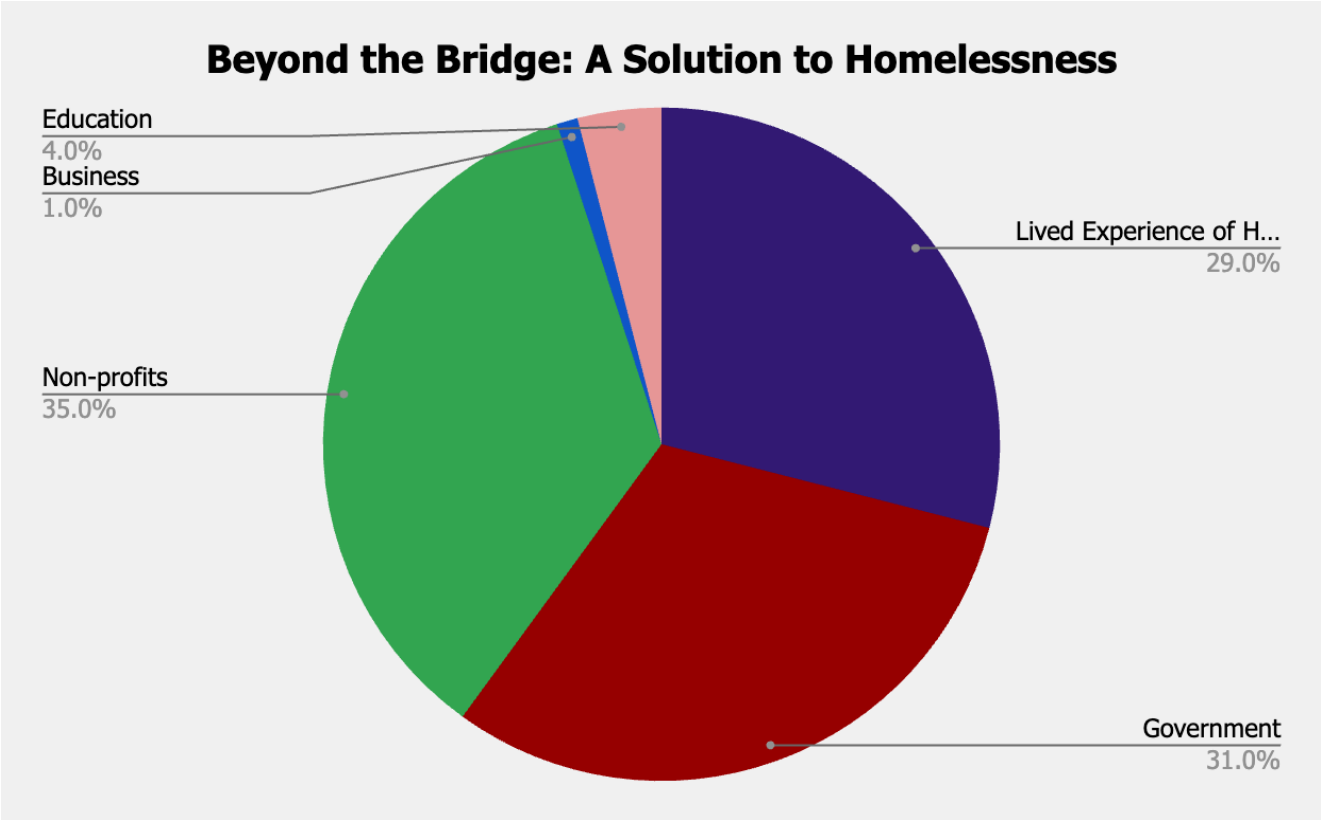
Return to Top

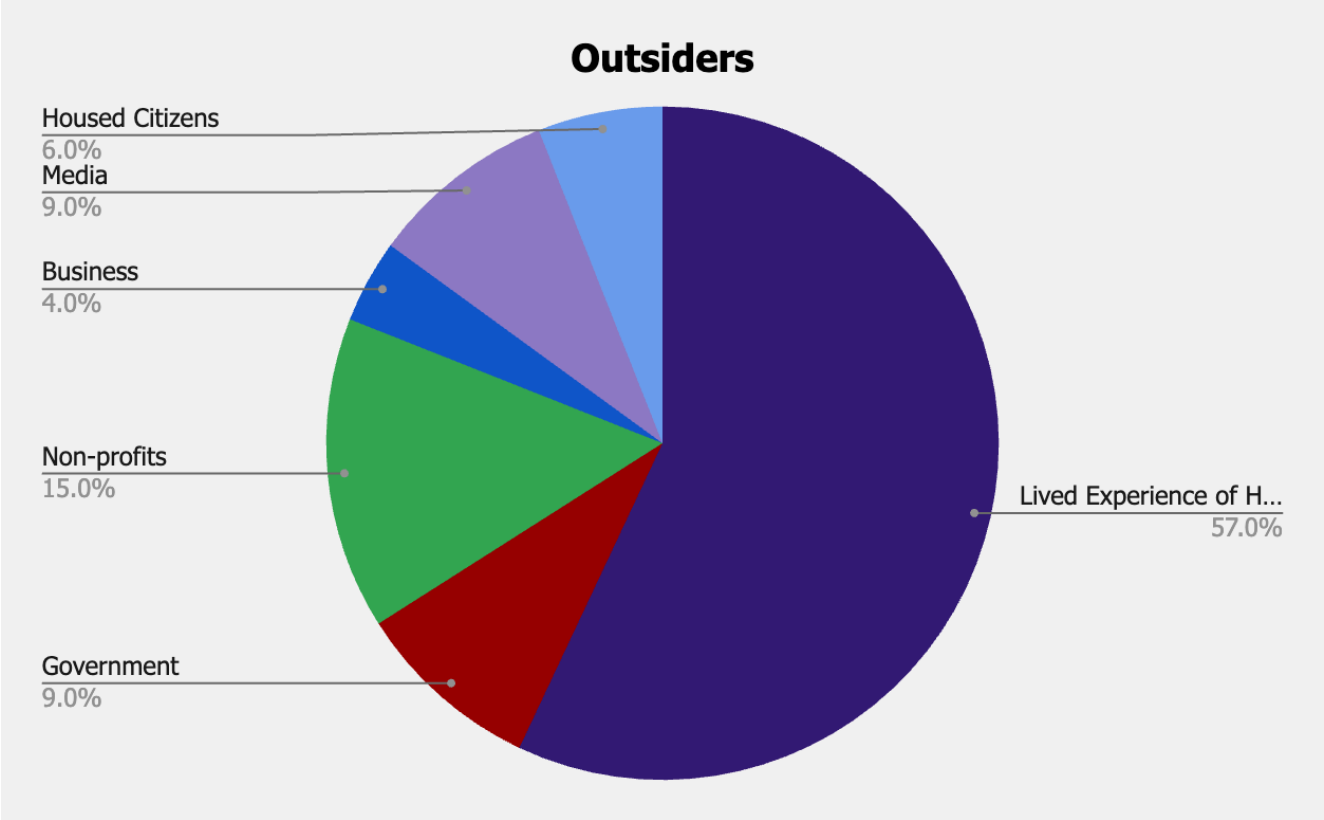
SECTION II: Results & Analysis

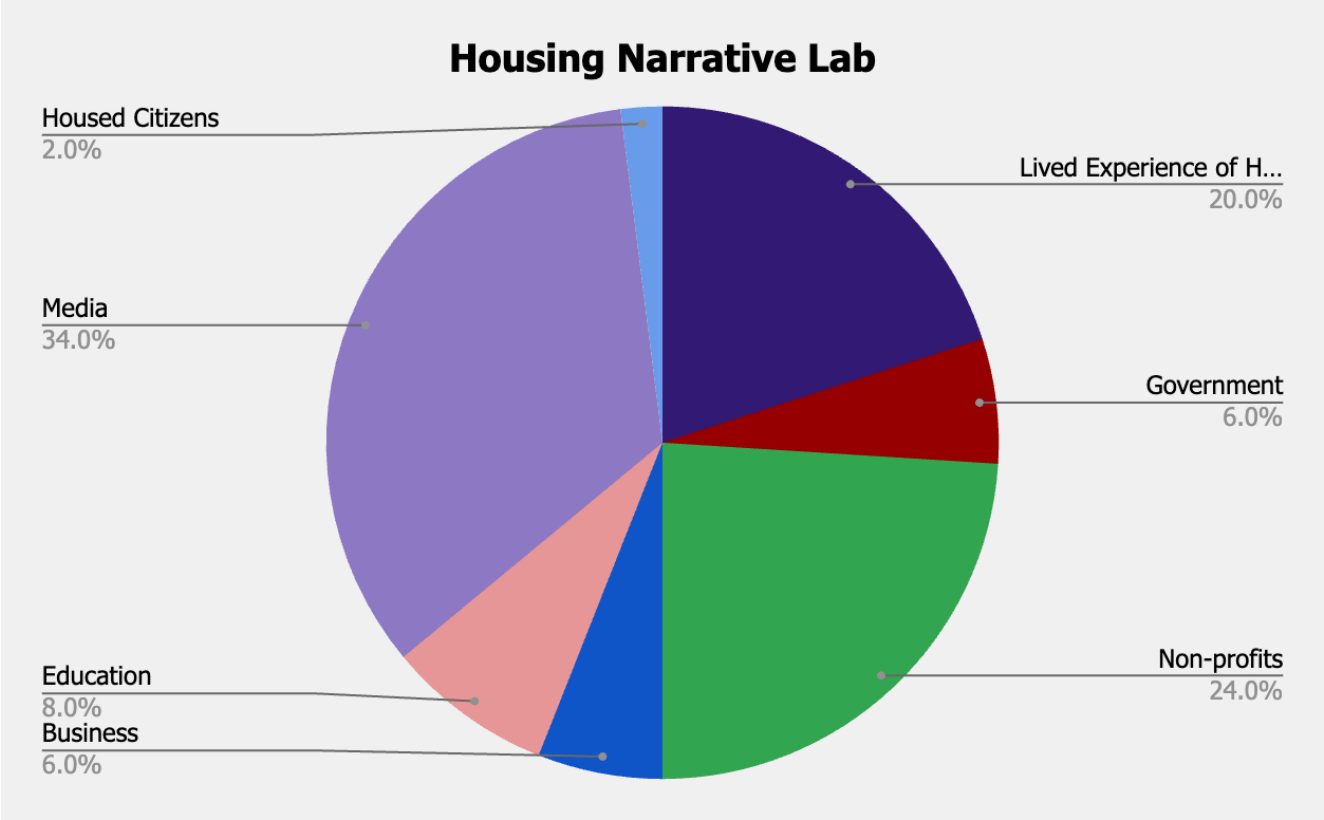
2.1 Charts



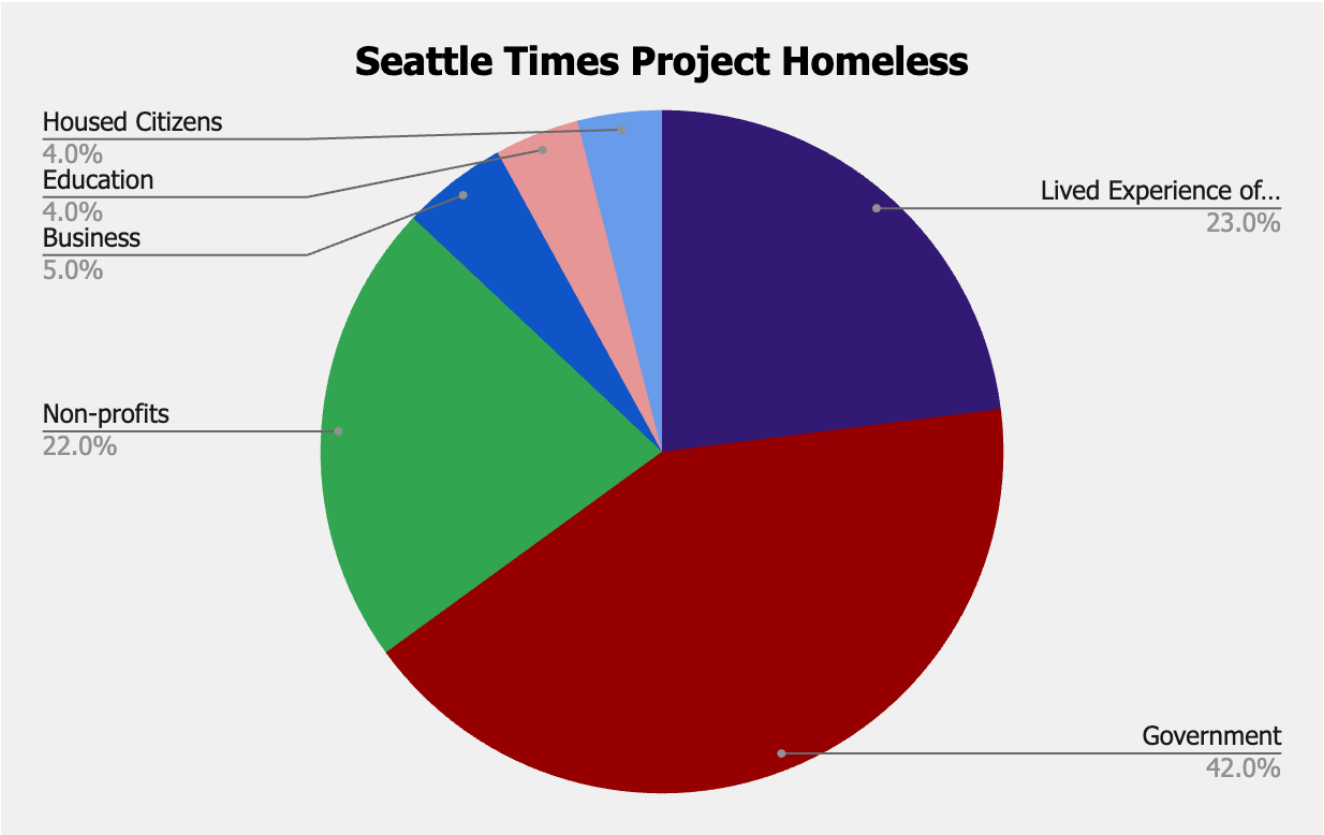



Beyond the Bridge: A Solution to Homelessness
Education
4.0%
Business
1.0%
Lived Experience of H...
29.0%
Non-profits
35.0%
Government
31.0%

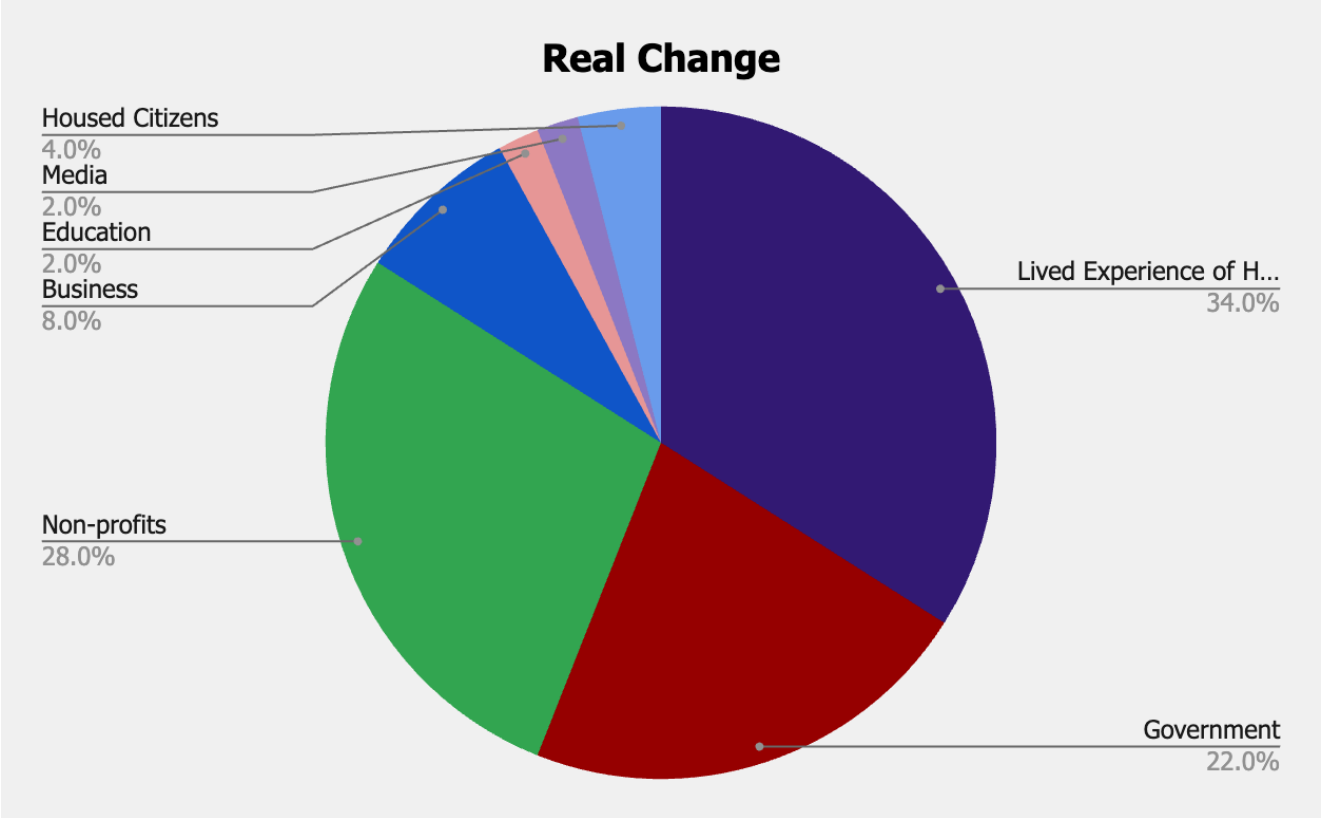

Outsiders
Housed Citizens
6.0%
Media
9.0%
Business
4.0%
Non-profits
15.0%
Lived Experience of H...
57.0%
Government
9.0%

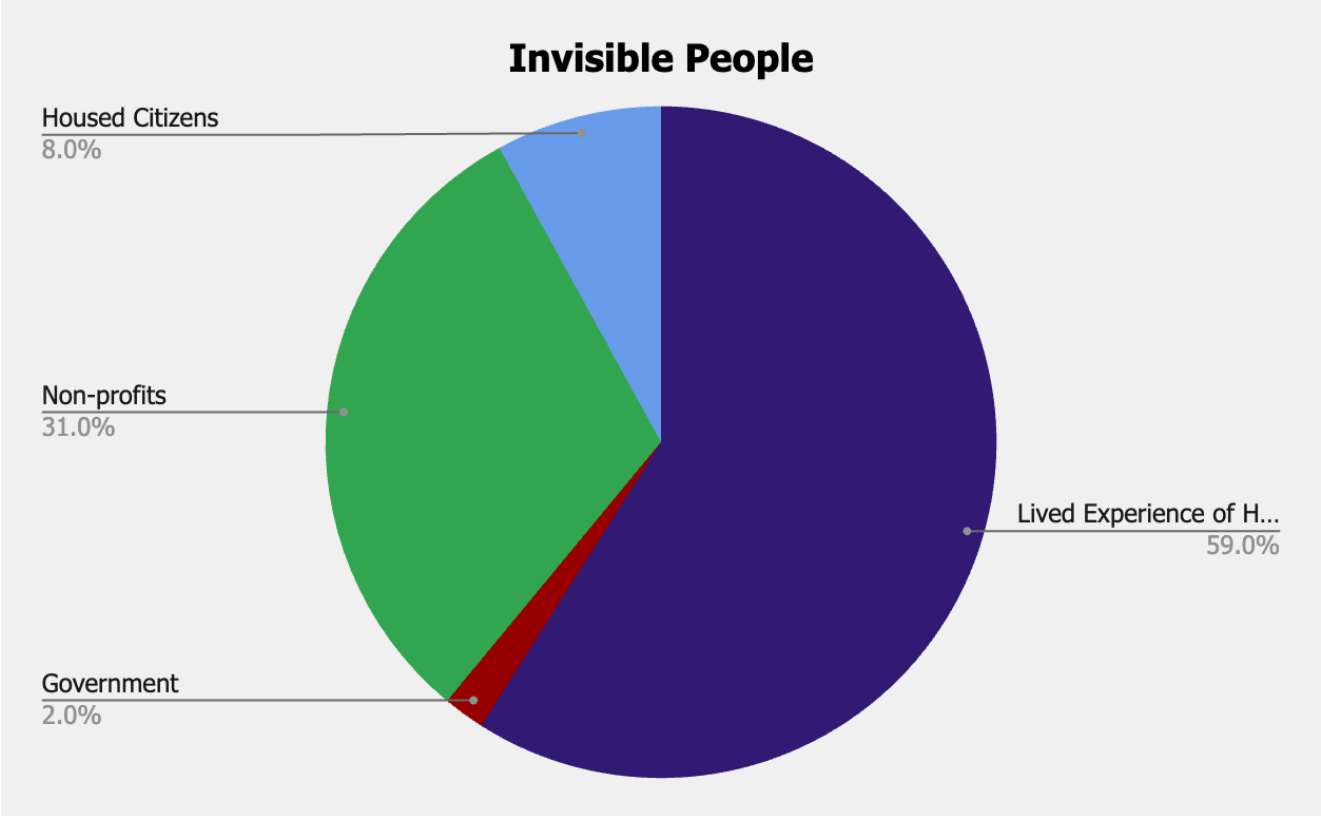


Housing Narrative Lab



Seattle Times Project Homeless


Real Change
Housed Citizens
4.0%
Media
2.0%
Education
2.0%
Business
8.0%
Lived Experience of H...
34.0%
Non-profits
28.0%
Government
22.0%


Invisible People
Housed Citizens
8.0%
Non-profits
31.0%
Lived Experience of H...
59.0%
Government
2.0%

2.2 Analysis of Results

Due to the variance in total people interviewed by each media outlet, this analysis will focus primarily on the data presented in percentages, rather than the raw numbers. The data suggests that each media outlet, when reporting on or documenting homelessness in the United States, made an effort to include a significant number of voices of people with lived experience of homelessness and people who work in the non-profit sector. The percentage of total people interviewed that fell under the “lived experience of homelessness” category did not go below 20% (*Housing Narrative Lab*) for all media outlets, with the highest percentage of people from the “lived experience of homelessness” being 59% (*Invisible People*). For the “non-profits” category, the lowest percentage of total people interviewed was 15% (*Outsiders*) and the highest percentage was 35% (*Beyond the Bridge*). The “government” category occupied the next highest percentage for most, but not all outlets. Despite this, “government” joined “lived experience of homelessness” and “non-profit” as the three categories to have a percentage greater than zero across all six categories. Due to this trend, “lived experience of homelessness”, “non-profit”, and “government” will be referred to as the “big three” categories. “Government” presented a variance similar to “lived experience of homelessness”, ranging from 40% (*Seattle Times Project Homeless*) to 2% (*Invisible People*) of total number of people interviewed. *Housing Narrative Lab* and *Real Change* were the only media outlets to include voices of people from all four of the other categories: business, education, media, and housed citizens. Four of the media outlets included voices of people from at least three of the other four categories, with *Beyond the Bridge* and *Invisible People* including the voices of people from two and one of the other four categories, respectively. The percentages of the four categories for each media outlet, when added together, never exceeded 19% of the total number of people interviewed. The one exception was *Housing Narrative Lab*, who had 50% of the people they interviewed come from the four categories not in the “big three”.

Both Invisible People and Outsiders had the highest percentages of people interviewed who fell under the “lived experience of homelessness” category, at 59% and 57%, respectively. The next highest was 34% (*Real Change*). These statistics align with the methods of reporting done by Invisible People and Outsiders, who spent the majority of their time interviewing people in the field, rather than in a studio. Both of these media outlets made a concerted effort to meet homeless people where they were, and seemed to place a primary focus on those voices for their reporting. This trend also ties into the names of both of these media outlets, as “Outsiders” and “Invisible People” refer directly to people experiencing homelessness. At 29%, *Beyond the Bridge* had a sizable percentage of people interviewed fall under the “lived experience of homelessness” category. What made this outlet stand out from the rest is most of the people they interviewed that fell under the “lived experience of homelessness” category were not homeless at the time of the interview, and rather were people who had found a pathway out of homelessness and into housing. It must be noted that the primary goal of *Beyond the Bridge* was to uncover and discuss solutions to homelessness, and interviewing “success stories” allowed them to understand how individuals were able to find housing.

Seattle Times Project Homeless and *Housing Narrative Lab* had the lowest percentages of total people interviewed fall under the “lived experience of homelessness” category, at 23% and 20%, respectively. The objective of *The Seattle Times* and their initiatives is to provide objective, watchdog reporting on issues. With the Project Homelessness initiative in particular, *The Seattle Times* made sure to include the voices of those with lived experience, without having those voices be the focal point of the narrative. *Housing Narrative Lab* was created to implement research based training and articles into campaigns that inform other media outlets about best practices for reporting on homelessness. With this primary objective, the media they presented to the public did not include similar tactics to the other participating outlets. Instead of doing field interviews, much of their media took the form of discussions in a controlled setting. Even when

interviews were conducted for articles and blog posts, there was not a huge presence of people with lived experience of homelessness. Some of the voices of those with lived experience came from individuals who were presented by the media outlets as “lived experience advisors”. So despite *Housing Narrative Lab* containing the lowest percentage, roughly 1 in 5 of the people whose voices were heard fall under the “lived experience of homelessness” category, and they do have those individuals in advisory roles.

Compared to the “lived experience of homelessness” and “government” categories, “non-profit” contained the least amount of variance. Excluding the percentage for *Outsiders* (15%), the range of percentage of total interviewed for the “non-profit” category was 35% (*Beyond the Bridge*) to 22% (*Seattle Times Project Homeless*). Even with the *Outsiders* percentage included, the range for the “non-profit” category was 20%. Being a category that encompasses voices of people from a wide variety of backgrounds, “non-profit” was able to occupy a significant percentage of the total people interviewed for all outlets. People under the “non-profit” category are individuals who are the most likely to be in direct contact with homeless people. The data suggests that media outlets who report on homelessness value the voices of individuals who work for non-profit organizations that provide services to the homeless population. The media outlets involved in this report all focus on not only the issue of homelessness, but also what is being done to solve the issue. Most housing, health, and legal services for homeless people are provided by non-profit organizations, making individuals from these organizations logical options to be interviewees when outlets seek out information about solutions to the homelessness crisis. The people that work for non-profit organizations often put in a lot of time to get to know individuals within the populations they provide services for. For many of the non-profit organizations that provide services to homeless people, a large amount of their work is spent creating connections with those who lived unhoused. This dynamic could be another reason why media outlets value their voices when reporting on homelessness. For *Seattle Times*

Project Homeless, Real Change, and *Outsiders*, individuals who worked in non-profit organizations were valuable voices to include when examining the homelessness response system in Seattle and the greater King County region. They were able to provide insight into how successful different organizations have been when attempting to work together. For *Beyond the Bridge, Housing Narrative Lab,* and *Invisible People*, the media outlets that report on homelessness around the nation, voices of individuals from non-profit organizations were critical to provide information into various local and regional homelessness response systems. The outlets report on these systems as a way to compare how different areas of the United States address the homelessness crisis.

The “government” category was the third and final category to be represented in each of the six media outlets. *Seattle Times Project Homeless* and *Beyond the Bridge* had the two highest percentages of total interviewed fall under the “government” category, at 42% and 31%, respectively. *Seattle Times Project Homeless* was the only media outlet to have “government” be the leading category by percentage. In fact, the 42% was almost equal to the combined percentage of the “lived experience of homelessness” and “non-profit” categories for *Seattle Times Project Homeless*. Individuals who worked in some form of government were the primary voices in how the Project Homeless initiative reported on homelessness. Focusing on a large metropolitan area (Seattle) and the smaller surrounding cities and towns, the initiative spotlighted the voices of government officials at the city, county, and state levels. With the lack of federal involvement in homelessness response systems, the responsibility has fallen on smaller government entities, leading to a decentralized approach where each entity addresses homelessness in their own unique way. This context is not dissimilar to the non-profit response to homelessness, and *Seattle Times Project Homeless* alludes to this with their interview statistics by having “government” and “non-profit” be the two categories with the greatest percentages. Even so, reporting done under the initiative has focused primarily on the voices of

those who are in position to create policies and allocate government funding related to the homelessness response systems. *Beyond the Bridge* presented two unique cases of how media outlets report on homelessness. Firstly, they focused so much on the voices of people from the "big three" categories that 95% of the total number of people they interviewed fell under one of these categories. The remaining 5% fell under either the "business" or "education" categories. Secondly, a 29 - 31 - 35 split of the 95% meant that *Beyond the Bridge* created the most balanced split of how many people from each of the "big three" categories had their voices heard. Not only did *Beyond the Bridge* focus primarily on the "lived experience of homelessness", "non-profit", and "government" categories, they also valued the voices from these three categories to relatively similar degrees.

Real Change was the third and final media outlet where the "government" category occupied a significant percentage of total number of people interviewed at 22%, or roughly 1 in 5 people. *The Seattle Times* and *Real Change* are both newspapers that report in the same region. A primary difference between their numbers is that *Seattle Times Project Homeless* had a higher percentage of total number of people interviewed fall under "government" than "lived experience of homelessness", with the opposite being the case for *Real Change.* For the other three outlets, the "government" category did not reach 10% of the total people interviewed, with 9% for *Outsiders*, 6% for *Housing Narrative Lab*, and 2% for *Invisible People*. In contrast, *Outsiders* and *Invisible People* had the two highest percentages of total number of people interviewed that fell under the "lived experience of homelessness" category. The narrative history of homelessness in the United States has been propagated by the ruling class, which includes big business owners and governments. While there are many in governments today that are working to solve homelessness, the intention of both *Outsiders* and *Invisible People* was to pull the microphone away from individuals in government, and instead use their platform to spotlight the voices of people with lived experience of homelessness.

Out of all six of the media outlets, *Housing Narrative Lab* presented the greatest outlying statistics of whose voices were heard in the reporting of homelessness. Their numbers for the "big three" categories (lived experience of homelessness: 20%, non-profit: 24%, government: 6%), while on the lower end of the ranges, are not outliers compared to the statistics for the other outlets when each category is looked at in isolation. However, the percentages of the "big three" categories combined equaled 50% of the total number of people interviewed. When that same metric is applied to the other five outlets, the next lowest sum is 81% (*Outsiders*). This is largely due to the emphasis *Housing Narrative Lab* places on a category that no other media outlet places nearly as much emphasis on: media. For *Housing Narrative Lab*, 34% of the total number of people they interviewed qualified for the "media" category, meaning they worked for another media outlet, company, or did freelance media work in some fashion. Only two other media outlets involved in this research recorded a percentage of total number of people interviewed higher than zero for the "media" category: *Outsiders* (9%) and *Real Change* (2%). A majority of the work that *Housing Narrative Lab* does center around helping other media outlets and journalists report on homelessness in a way that uplifts the voices of those experiencing homelessness or housing instability. While they have worked with those in a state of homelessness or housing instability directly, *Housing Narrative Lab* is more commonly providing tools, trainings, and frameworks for how other media outlets should report on homelessness, as a way to shift the dominant narratives surrounding homelessness. *Housing Narrative Lab* often acts as a communal space where individuals from various groups, often in the media industry, engage in discussions about topics surrounding how the media portrays the homelessness crisis, and the people experiencing it directly. It can be inferred that, due to this unique mission, the breakdown of voices that *Housing Narrative Lab* chooses to spotlight is significantly different from other media outlets that report on homelessness. It is worth noting that *Housing Narrative*

Lab contained the highest percentage of the total number of people interviewed that fell under the “education” category, at 8%, which is double the percentage of the next closest outlet.

Return to Top

SECTION III: Discussion

3.1 Key Stories

Jessica (Outsiders)

In the beginning of the first episode, the host meets a woman named Jessica while recording in the field. Living unhoused and by herself in Olympia, Jessica becomes a presence throughout the entirety of the *Outsiders* series. Her voice is heard in almost every episode, often through vox pop-style interviews with the host. *Outsiders* values her story as a real, unfiltered narrative that is constructed over the course of ten episodes as a way to draw the listener in, and keep them engaged through the entirety of the series, not unlike the story arc of a character in a television series.

In the first episode of *Outsiders*, the host travels to Olympia during a time when city officials planned to create what they call a “mitigation site”. Essentially a city-sanctioned encampment, the goal of the mitigation site was to give unhoused residents of Olympia a legal area to live while they embark on the journey of finding housing or another form of permanent shelter. The site was not meant to be a place of permanent residence, and the hope was it would be gone in a year as its residents move on into permanent housing. This is where the podcast begins, and the host travels to the site to interview residents, as well as the city official who created and organized the idea. While the host is on-site, he comes across a woman who eagerly opens up about her situation. That woman is Jessica, and the listener quickly learns a bit about her life as

one of the hundreds of people living unhoused in Olympia back in 2019. In the first few documented interviews, Jessica talks about growing up in Olympia, then the years when she moved away and lived in other areas of the country, before ultimately returning to the state capital to “face and conquer her fears, in order to overcome and move on from them” (*Outsiders, Episode 1*). This statement, provided by Jessica and reiterated by the host during his commentary, is the hook in the narrative of Jessica presented by the podcast. A statement that is pointed yet vague, it causes the listener to continue engaging with the series in order to learn the specifics of Jessica’s background. Over the course of the next nine episodes, and many interviews, the specifics of what fears Jessica is alluding to are revealed.

The introduction to Jessica is marked by her willingness to open up to a random stranger with a recording device, diving into her current situation and backstory knowing that anything she says can be used for the agenda of someone else. Despite this interaction with Jessica, it cannot be assumed that everybody has the same willingness to open up about their lives, especially to a stranger with recording equipment. A lot can be inferred about someone who shows up with such equipment - they want to collect the exact words from a source so what they say can be used in one form or another, such as a podcast. What *Outsiders* chooses to do is to present these exact words emitted from Jessica and present them via her own voice. What makes her story so compelling is that, for the most part, she is the one telling it. The listener is hearing the emotion in her voice, the tone of her voice, and how she is presenting her story. While throughout the series there are times when the host or another voice goes into detail about the story of Jessica, she is the primary storyteller.

As the narrative surrounding Jessica unfolds, and the listener learns more about her life, it is clear that she has not been given a lot of privileges, resulting in a brutal upbringing and her current state of being homeless and using substances. Jessica suffered through such horrific

things as a child that now, as an adult, it can be difficult to remember a lot of the specifics. Her brain has blocked a lot of the memories in an attempt to dissociate from her upbringing. Despite her background, and the pain it causes to think back to that time in her life, Jessica is adamant that she shares her story. In the third episode, the specifics of Jessica's childhood are revealed via a reporter who had interviewed Jessica. Once the listener hears from the reporter, the podcast cuts to an interview with Jessica, who clarifies why she wants her story to go on the public record. For Jessica, sharing her story may shatter the perception others have of her based on her current situation of being homeless. She states, "you cant judge a book by its cover, because everybody comes with a story, and nobody ever stops to think about what their story is" (*Outsiders, Episode 3)*. Jessica points to how society can be quick to judge someone due to their reality of being homeless without understanding, for example, how that person became homeless. For some, homelessness happens via the "one-catastrophe" cycle, where one major event in their life triggers a snowball effect into homelessness. However, for many, it seems like they were always on a path towards instability due to external factors in their early life.

The podcast *Outsiders* builds the narrative of Jessica within the broader scope understanding what it is like to live homeless in Olympia. While they interview many other people with lived experience of homelessness, the story of Jessica is given the most attention to, and is present throughout the entire series. Over the course of roughly a year, the host meets with and interviews her, allowing the audience to ride along with her as she navigates through the highs and lows of being an unhoused resident in Washington's capital city. What makes the story of Jessica so compelling is seeing her effect on other people, such as the host themselves. In the later episodes of the series, the host records themselves spending hours waiting around for Jessica at various times, hoping to see her. They repeatedly talk about wishing to see her, to talk to her, and at times are worried about her. A bond is built between the two, and Jessica

draws empathy and compassion from the host. Her raw, unfiltered way of describing the realities of being homeless engages the listener in from the beginning of the series, and is present until the end of the final episode. The listener is witness to the development of Jessica, almost like she is a character created for a television series. However, no matter how sensationalized her story becomes, everything the listener consumes about Jessica is her reality. Her story could seem almost unnatural because it is so different from the reality of many people, especially housed people, making it easy to forget that it is the story of someone's real life. Finally, while the story of Jessica is unique to her, it is a message that so many other homeless people can resonate with, as many come from backgrounds that are more similar to Jessica's. Boosting the story of Jessica to be a dominant narrative in this series is a way for the podcast to have audience engagement with the entire series, while also building empathy among listeners with people whose stories are not often shared with the public.

Mark Thompson (Beyond the Bridge: A Solution to Homelessness)

The mission of this film and impact campaign is to illustrate and promote a solution to homelessness on a national level. They believe that the Housing First model is the most effective solution, and almost all of the media they have shared beyond the feature length documentary focuses on the successes of Housing First across the country. In the third Behind the Scenes episode, they interview a man named Mark Thompson, from Washington D.C. Thompson was homeless for about 30 years, living in the forest on the outskirts of town. In this video, there are two different interviews with Thompson, a sit-down, formal interview in his home, and a walking, field interview in the areas where he used to live while homeless. *Beyond the Bridge* uses the story of Mark Thompson to build compassion for those who are homeless, while also illustrating the positive effects the Housing First model can have on those who are homeless. This episode achieves these goals by allowing Thompson to share his story as someone who was at rock-bottom mentally for years, before a little compassion and direction

sent his way by one individual gave him the energy and resources to seek housing and a better quality of life.

Thompson begins the story by recounting what his childhood was like. He remembers attending various elementary and middle schools, so many that he began to fall behind. He never made it to high school due to his parents falling ill. Once they were better, he joined the army, where he picked up survival skills that would be beneficial for his years living while homeless. He then goes into his life as a father, raising two kids while the mother went to school. A few years later, Thompson started to use drugs, and he moved back in with his mother, who soon wanted him to leave once his father passed away. From then on, he was homeless. The entire time, Thompson's voice is heard - he is the only person telling his story. This allows the viewer to hear the emotion Thompson is feeling as he recounts his spiral into homelessness. As he talks about living while homeless, and the struggles that came along with that, he starts to get very emotional. An especially emotional scene is watching him read from a journal he kept during the years he was homeless. His voice breaks and his eyes are wet from tears as he reflects on the state of mind he was in during that time. This moment, captured by the filmmakers, allows for the opportunity to connect to Thompson as a human being who has suffered. The viewer is exposed to the types of thoughts a homeless person can have. However, without the ability to hear their story, society would never get a grasp of what the everyday thoughts someone in a situation like Thompson's might have.

By having Mark Thompson share his own story, *Beyond the Bridge* creates a deeper connection between the viewer and the person on screen. This connection is created through a narrative structure that begins with presenting the struggles the character has gone through, before leading into events in the character's life that result in a positive outcome. By having Thompson share stories of his upbringing and life while homeless, the opportunity for empathy on behalf of

the viewer for Thompson arises. The viewer begins to feel a connection to Thompson, which the media outlet then strengthens by alluding to an event that marks a turning point in the character's story. This is no more apparent than when Thompson recounts the chance encounter he has one day that leads him to his current situation of living while housed. He meets a young woman who is advertising a program designed to help veterans get housing. Coincidentally, this woman is his daughter, and when hearing Thompson tell this part of the story, it is clear how this event changed his life. While recounting what happens next, Thompson is full of energy, which is drastically different from how he recounted his 30 or so years living while homeless. Suddenly, there is a huge positive swing in the narrative, and after a few more minutes, the story of Thompson reaches the current day. He is living in an apartment, with his next goal of finding permanent employment. As the mood of Thompson changes, that has an effect on the viewer, who has seen Thompson recount the lowest points in his life. Now, the viewer is immersed in positive energy emitting from Thompson as he recounts his success with finding housing. The filmmakers take one step further by including a part where Thompson relates his story to the story of so many other homeless people. He says that people in a situation similar to him "just need somebody to show a little compassion, and point [them] in the right direction", similar to what happened to him (*Beyond the Bridge, BTS Episode 3*).

Beyond the Bridge emphasizes a two-fold approach to addressing the homelessness crisis in the United States. They share the stories of people with lived experience of homelessness in order for the general public to gain an understanding of what it is really like to be homeless, and they also advocate for the Housing First model through sharing success stories such as the narrative of Mark Thompson.

3.2 Topics & Themes

Narratives are what drive people to think in certain ways, leading them to act on what they believe in. Politicians are elected to office due to the narrative they base their campaign on

being the most popular amongst their constituents. Best-selling authors distribute millions of copies of their book because what they create is sought out by many who want to dive into the story and understand the narrative. A narrative has influence, and can shape the lives of anybody. Narratives are the interpretation of a story. In the history of the United States, certain stories have been given a platform to be shared, while others are silenced. This has allowed certain narratives to become dominant, while others exist unawares to most of the population for decades, even centuries. These dominant narratives shape how the United States functions as a nation. The 'American Dream' is a narrative that implores everybody to chase their dreams, stating that if they work hard enough, they can achieve whatever they set their mind to. This narrative is rooted in a capitalist society where inequality runs rampant. The systems that are the foundation of this country, "prioritize wealth, and safety, and resources for white people while de-prioritizing those things for people of color, especially black people" (*Beyond the Bridge*). The stories that become mainstream and thus shape the narrative of the United States being the 'land of opportunity' are hand picked by those in power. The ruling class in this capitalist system has the ability to choose which stories are shared, and which ones are silenced.

The dominant narratives regarding the homeless population have been curated by the housed population, strictly based on how they view their unhoused counterparts. One of these narratives is the idea that homeless people are homeless because they are lazy and do not want to work. According to this narrative, homeless people are not productive members of society and therefore do not deserve benefits in life that housed citizens receive. This idea drives the lack of action to adequately address a crisis that has only gotten to be a more visible problem as the wealth gap in the United States widens, and many people are slipping through the cracks. However, despite homelessness as an issue becoming more visible, the people who are homeless remain invisible. Rather, their stories remain invisible, and instead the dominant stories about homelessness are created by housed citizens as a way to inform policy decisions

regarding how local and regional governments address the crisis. This narrative structure is narrow-focused, and can be harmful to the very populations it addresses, with the reality being "homelessness is not as linear as what is seen in the public" (*Housing Narrative Lab*). Media outlets that report on homelessness can either feed into the dominant narrative of homelessness by ignoring the stories homeless people tell, or they can counter this dominant narrative by listening to homeless people as a way to bring attention to the reality of homelessness.

The media outlets involved in this research report all include a sizable amount of voices of people with lived experience of homelessness. Understanding what happened to cause someone to become homeless is important because it can allow someone to become informed about their behaviors and condition, rather than assuming that they fit into harmful stereotypes of homeless people. According to a man with lived experience of homelessness, it is rare to "see a story about them [doing] good on the news…it is easier to just villainize us" (*Real Change*). He believes that if the housed population took "the time to come talk to him directly" it would probably "change a lot of people's perceptions about homeless people" (*Real Change*). The housed population can learn a lot about what it is like to be homeless from homeless people themselves. Examples such as the realities of living in an encampment or the fight to maintain a sense of normalcy in day-to-day life. For many with lived experience of homelessness, they implore that "you have to have normalcy when you are homeless" (*Invisible People*). The reality of a life on the street is unknown to the housed population, where many take the idea of living a "normal life" for granted. The behavior of someone could be perfectly rational given their background and current situation. Unfortunately, the dominant narrative surrounding homelessness in the United States falls short of acknowledging the background of a homeless person, and instead will judge that person on their actions and condition in the present, leading to a generalization of why they are homeless. A shift away from this current

dominant narrative towards a new one “requires repeating the [new] central narrative using an array of messages and messengers” (*Housing Narrative Lab*). By giving the homeless population the opportunity to have their voices heard, a larger variety of stories become visible to the general public. This creates a chance for the dominant narrative surrounding homelessness to shift. To some degree, this process has begun, as “the notion of listening to the voices of those who have lived through homelessness, to better come up with solutions and policies, is catching on like wildfire” (*Beyond the Bridge*). However, this can only happen if homeless people are able to also become the messengers, not just the subjects, of the new narrative.

When examining the efforts to address the homelessness crisis in the United States, a major theme that presents itself is homelessness happening to a *place* and it happening to *people*. Which problem is a city, county, or state really trying to solve: the lack of housing and services available for homeless people, or the fact that large areas of commercial and residential development are marked by the presence of homelessness? This central question can often explain the varying actions taken by governments, business owners, non-profit organizations, and advocates. Shelters are a well-documented example of what is being done to address homelessness, and in 2021, the annual cost of the national shelter system was estimated at $10.5 billion. Despite this large number, those that collected this data outline that “the shelters don't think they are the solution, and the people that stay in them actually think they are the problem” (*Beyond the Bridge*). Shelters are supposed to operate as a temporary living space for homeless people. It is a way to get them off the streets, with the hope that they can stabilize their lives enough to transition into permanent housing. Due to a nation-wide shortage of permanent housing, residents of shelters either stay for long periods of time, or return to an unsheltered lifestyle. Shelters across the country are often overcrowded, making it an undesirable living situation, or they are vastly under capacity, causing the shelter system to be

financially inefficient. Living in a shelter often means living under various restrictions with a lack of privacy. For many homeless people, they “will not accept shelter without the ability to bring their “three Ps”: pets, partners, and possessions” (*Real Change*). There is much to be desired with the shelter system, especially taking into consideration the financial resources that are poured into it on a yearly basis. With media outlets making an effort to cover the topic of shelters, the knowledge of how effective they are in combatting homelessness spreads. At the height of the coronavirus pandemic, the Seattle Times published many articles about how the pandemic illuminated the problems with the King County regional homeless response system. The Times highlighted how “coronavirus has most starkly laid bare the inadequacies of large, congregate shelters” (*Seattle Times Project Homeless*). In large cities such as Seattle, the pandemic brought an increase in the amount of homeless people, and shelters quickly became overwhelmed. Despite its large budget, the ineffectiveness of the shelter system was clear, and it garnered more attention as media outlets allocated resources into reporting on how it was operating during the pandemic. Even though it is ineffective, the shelter system is funded like it is the primary solution. This allows policy makers and government officials to point to the amount of money being spent on shelters and say that the crisis of homelessness is being taken seriously. However, with the help of media outlets sharing the stories of those who run shelters, live in shelters, and study the impacts of shelters, the truths behind the shortcomings of the shelter system are becoming more widely known.

The relationship between how effective the shelter system is and the resources that are poured into it highlights the lack of understanding amongst those who make these financial decisions regarding how to address the homelessness crisis. For many cities with large homeless populations, their officials often focus on how to make homelessness less visible. This is due in part to the pressure put on them by housed citizens who, for example, show up to city council meetings and complain about the presence of homeless people in their neighborhoods. In order

to appease their constituents, elected officials succumb to the voices that are loudest, and will enact changes that can be seen as “quick fixes” to the problem. However, these changes do not often solve the problem, and instead can be seen as them “doing whatever they can to hide the problem” (*Beyond the Bridge*). Decisions like allocating more money to shelters or conducting sweeps of encampments are examples of policies that might reduce the amount of people present on the street in the short term, but are not steps towards decreasing the amount of people who are homeless. Homeless people themselves describe these methods as part of “a pass around game. Until you give us a reasonable alternative of where to go, we are not gonna leave, because there is nowhere else to go” (*Invisible People*). Actions taken by government officials in response to what housed populations say about homelessness fail to provide adequate solutions, in part because they stem from the view of homelessness happening to a place, and what can be done to solve that problem.

Another issue that complicates the response to the homelessness crisis is a lack of unity amongst those who work to find solutions. There is not much being done on a federal level, so it is often up to states, counties, and cities to address homelessness. With this decentralized structure, ideas are generated by one government without the knowledge of what another is doing. The homelessness response system in King County, the largest county by population in Washington state, is an example of this structure. Organizations and individuals that work to address homelessness in the region “have identified a troubling lack of central authority for the homeless crisis” (*Seattle Times Project Homeless*). The county ranks among the top three in the United States for the number of homeless people, with the majority residing within Seattle, the largest city in the state. With the growth of Seattle as a major metropolitan city, thousands of people, both housed and homeless, have left the city limits to reside in the surrounding areas of smaller cities and towns. This exodus has forced cities such as Olympia, Auburn, and Burien to face exponential growth in their homeless populations. Without proper methods to care for this

growing population, homelessness has now become a contentious topic in city council meetings, protests, and everyday discourse. Inevitably, the increased presence of homelessness in King County affects everybody, housed and unhoused, yet it is clear that those living without a home are greatly affected, and still are not given a seat at the table where ideas to address the crisis are discussed. For Jessica, a woman living unsheltered in Olympia, she feels like “an outsider who is trying to fit into a place who does not accept me” (*Outsiders*). Despite its efforts to combat an increasing homeless population, Olympia on its own does not have enough resources, which has led to an increase in negative sentiment towards its homeless residents. A similar sentiment is echoed in Auburn, where the feeling is they are dealing with a regional issue at a local level. It has gotten to the point where Auburn essentially rejects homeless people attempting to reside within the city. Regional officials say this decision by Auburn could “funnel people experiencing homelessness into the city of Seattle” and that there needs to be a unified, regional approach to the issue (*Seattle Times Project Homeless*). When the smaller cities feel pressure to deal with an increased homeless population, they are driven to enact policies that reject or criminalize homeless people. This results in a pinball effect where “it seems like the current philosophy is simply to keep removing people without a bigger plan” (Seattle Times Project Homeless). That “bigger plan” is what many people involved in the fight to end homelessness point to when discussing how to address the crisis. There are plenty of local and regional responses taking place, often with great variance, that are characterized as short-term solutions to a long-term problem. Once those responses take place, there is an absence of a next step, something that could be actualized if the scope of the solution was broadened. It can be difficult for local authorities to imagine this next step if they are so focused on the present issue, especially when there are often competing ideas on how to implement solutions.

The question “what can be done” is asked often, and the answer comes in the form of varying

responses from different entities. Governments will provide one answer, while non-profit organizations will highlight a different solution, meanwhile business owners want their word to be considered as well. Amidst the confusion and contradictions, one step is echoed by most groups: there needs to be a centralized authority that can unify all entities that are committed to solving the homelessness crisis. This would take a lot of reorganizing, and a vast amount of financial resources. Media outlets are aware of this as well, and they present this idea through interviews with individuals from different industries. A step that is highlighted by the media is getting more of the general public to understand why there are so many homeless people in the United States. It goes a step further by getting the general public to understand why an individual is homeless. Some outlets, like Invisible People and Real Change, place emphasis on listening to the voices of homeless people to help their housed counterparts gain an understanding of their situation. For organizations that are entrenched in the fight to end homelessness, “having a partnership with local media that is frequently talking to the community can drive the narrative” they want to amplify (*Housing Narrative Lab*). These outlets argue that if more of the general public developed empathy for the homeless population, they would be more energized to find a solution. This could lead to more resources being available for the fight to address the homelessness crisis. When the voices of people experiencing homelessness are given a platform to speak via media outlets like Invisible People, a different narrative is realized, one that implores those with the power to make policy and financial decisions to view homelessness happening to people, rather than place. An increased number of the population would be agitated enough to care about solving homelessness. Couple an increase of people who care about the issue enough to take action with a centralized authority creating an organized, unified response, and concrete steps towards ending homelessness in the United States could become reality.

3.3 Limitations & Further Research

This scope of this report is narrow, due to the limitations placed on the process during the planning stage. One major limitation was the number of media outlets that were chosen to be involved in the research. Examining the work done by six media outlets barely scratched the surface of how many outlets have dedicated themselves to reporting on homelessness in the United States. A lot more work could have been done to identify and include more outlets in this research, especially when it came to including a greater number of outlets using different mediums. With only six outlets, various mediums of media were left out, and comparisons of outlets that used the same medium were either superficial or non-existent. Another major limitation was how many individual pieces of media were consumed from some of the outlets involved in this research. Although it was possible to consume and report on all of the media presented by *Outsiders, Beyond the Bridge,* and *Housing Narrative Lab*, the same could not be said for *Seattle Times Project Homeless, Real Change,* and *Invisible People*. The latter three outlets presented dozens or hundreds of individual pieces of media that could have been included in this research. While this research did include a few media outlets that examine homelessness across the United States, geography bias was present when it came to identifying which media outlets would be chosen for this research. *Invisible Histories*, the media outlet this report was created for, is based in the greater Seattle area, and reports on stories that are local to the Pacific Northwest region. Examining other media outlets that report on homelessness in the same region allows *Invisible Histories* to obtain knowledge about how the issue manifests itself in the region, which can be used to better inform its reporting on the issue. With this context, another limitation of this research is the lack of representation of media outlets from other parts of the United States. Homelessness is present in the majority of the country, and there are undoubtedly local and regional media outlets who have carried out extensive reporting on the issue. Not including more media outlets from other parts of the country limits general conclusions that can be drawn about how media outlets report on homelessness.

Further research is needed to understand what content from interviews with participants is included by media outlets. This process would involve transcribing the voices heard in audio and audio/visual mediums, and then coding and categorizing every quote from each participant. For this research report, qualitative notes were taken about the content, but quantitative data was not recorded. Further research that includes this step would expand conclusions about how media outlets report on homelessness. Rather than just looking at which voices are being represented, as this report does, further research could provide insight into what content is being shared, and by whom. Further research is needed to compare in greater detail how different types of media outlets report on homelessness. This type of research could involve a greater amount of participating media outlets, comparing national-based outlets (that report on homelessness on a national scale) with local-based outlets (that report on homelessness in a smaller, specific area). Finally, further research is needed to look at how different media outlets choose who they interview, and what that decision making process is like. This report has looked at who media outlets interview when reporting on homelessness, but does not examine how those voices are chosen. Research into how decisions are made within the media outlets would allow for greater understanding of the agendas of various outlets, and how those agendas shape how they report on homelessness.

Return to Top

SECTION IV: Conclusion

4.1 Conclusion

The dominant narratives about homelessness in the United States have lasted for decades, and they continue to influence policy and financial decisions made to address the crisis. These

narratives were created by the housed population, and have been reinforced by media outlets that promote them to the general public. In almost all urban areas, the presence of homelessness is felt by the housed population. It is also felt by the homeless population. Their very existence and how they are perceived by their housed counterparts directly impact how effective various homelessness response systems are in solving the issue. This perception greatly influences how lawmakers address the national crisis as agitated citizens make their voices known to their elected officials. Media outlets have the power to either promote these dominant narratives, which have not led to tangible reductions in how many people are homeless in the United States. Media outlets also have the power to promote new narratives, ones that challenge the dominant, existing narratives. New narratives that will bring tangible change to the landscape of homelessness on a national scale. In order for the objective of these new narratives to be successful, historically ignored and silenced voices must be given a chance to be heard. If this is not the case, then the same cycle of events will continue to happen, and homelessness will be ever present throughout the country. By spotlighting a new wave of voices, media outlets can promote narratives that will create opportunities for the public to understand homelessness and the people it impacts. This dynamic has the potential to lead the country towards a future where homelessness affects less individuals, decreasing the impact homelessness has on communities and society as a whole.

4.2 References

Ahmed, N., Coughlin-Bogue, T., Oron, G. (2023 - 2024). *News, Features, & Opinions*. Real Change. https://www.realchangenews.org/

Beekman, D., Brownstone, S., Coleman, V., Davila, V., Greenstone, S., Kim, G., Patrick, A. (2017 - 2024). *Seattle Times Project Homeless.* Seattle Times. https://www.seattletimes.com/seattle-news/homeless/

Horvath, M. (Executive Producer). (2020 - 2025). *Homelessness Documentaries from Invisible People* [YouTube Series]. Invisible People. https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PL51CPD51hq2TQywWX2SNqIv2nkPBLE0gc

Housing Narrative Lab. (2022 - 2025). *Housing Insight Blog*. https://housingnarrativelab.org/blogs/

James, W. (Host). (2019 - 2020). *Outsiders* [Audio Podcast]. NPR. https://www.npr.org/podcasts/795090517/outsiders

Sawyer, D. (Director). (2024). *Beyond the Bridge: A Solution to Homelessness* [Film]. A Bigger Vision Films. https://asolutiontohomelessness.com/