Understanding the Homelessness Crisis and Responses in Bloomington, Indiana

Authors

JOSIE MCQUILLAN,
Indiana University School of Medicine (IUSM) medical student, 2023 Hoosier Public Health Corps (HPHC) member

RACHEL DOWNEY,
Hoosier Public Health Corps (HPHC)-Indiana University School of Medicine (IUSM) part-time advisor/intern

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ABSTRACT

This study addresses the complex challenges of homelessness in Bloomington, Indiana. Beacon, Inc., a nonprofit based in Bloomington, plays a pivotal role in providing support to individuals experiencing homelessness in south-central Indiana. Beacon's approach prioritizes immediate and barrier-free access to shelter and housing while eliminating stringent entry requirements. Beacon offers three distinct programs: Friend's Place, an emergency shelter; Rapid Re-Housing, facilitating rapid transitions to stable housing; and Crawford Homes, providing permanent supportive housing.

This research, conducted in partnership with Beacon, employs a mixed-methods approach to examine homelessness in the city of Bloomington. It includes a literature review, quantitative data analysis from nationwide counts and Beacon's programs, and interviews with Beacon staff to gain insights into the housing crisis and its unique dynamics in this community.

The results underscore the impact of Beacon's programs in 2022 on individuals experiencing extreme poverty in Indiana's Region 10, which consists of six south-central counties. Despite the success of these programs, challenges persist for individuals experiencing homelessness, particularly in combating chronic homelessness. Interviews with Beacon staff highlighted additional barriers to housing, including high rent, inflexible landlords, evictions, and entanglement with the criminal justice system.

This study suggests the need for diverse strategies, including expanding Housing First programs and supportive housing models, as well as long-term government housing subsidies for low-income renters. These solutions can reduce reliance on emergency shelters and work to prevent chronic/recurrent homelessness. By employing a mixed-methods research approach, this study offers valuable insights into homelessness and housing assistance programs, providing a foundation for future research aimed at comprehensively addressing homelessness in Bloomington and similar communities.

INTRODUCTION

Homelessness is a pressing and multifaceted issue that deeply affects the community of Bloomington, Indiana, touching the lives of its residents and demanding urgent attention. In 2022, the Point in Time (PIT) count, which is "a nationwide count of sheltered and unsheltered homeless persons on a single date" (HUD, 2022), estimated that 5,449 Hoosiers were experiencing

homelessness (HUD, 2022). Region 10 of Indiana, which includes Bloomington in Monroe County, as well as five other neighboring counties (Lawrence, Morgan, Owen, Greene, and Martin), accounted for 426 individuals experiencing homelessness alone (HUD, 2022).

Notably, Bloomington is a city that has been home to Indiana University (IU), the state's flagship campus, for over 200 years since the institution was first established in 1820 (Indiana University Bloomington, n.d.). As IU's enrollment continues to increase at record pace this past year and the IU student presence in Monroe County grows (Indiana University, 2023), it begs the question of how this affects community members (Smith, 2022) who live in this distinct college town/city and who are experiencing homelessness. Overall, the housing crisis in Bloomington is complex, driven by factors such as rising median rent, a shortage of available low-income housing options, a significant population of college students, and the criminalization of homelessness. These challenges contribute to and perpetuate homelessness within the city, making it imperative to explore the issue comprehensively.

LITERATURE REVIEW

It is essential to situate this study within the broader context of literature on homelessness. The criminalization of homelessness in the United States has been well documented via nationwide studies, as well as specific studies focused on individual U.S. cities (Amster, 2003; Foscarinis, 1996). Many of these studies focus on homelessness within heavy metropolitan areas or the downtowns of major cities (Love & Loh, 2023). However, when considering homelessness strictly within the context of college towns or smaller cities such as Bloomington, there is only preliminary research and data available on the situation in the United States. A recent study from England claims that homelessness is more prevalent in university/college towns within the country (Hurst, 2022). However, in the U.S., research on homelessness in college towns is covered mainly through individual news articles or ethnographies of certain towns or regions (Amster, 2003; Girdwood,

2016; MacMillian, 2013; Malh, 2023) or focuses on disparities evident in adjacent inequalities, such as income inequality in college towns (DePieto, 2022). Within the context of Indiana, literature on this subject reveals several critical insights and highlights the gravity of the issue. Recent studies (HUD, 2022) have indicated a downward trend in homelessness in Indiana since 2007, which is an encouraging development. However, despite this overall trend, it is important to recognize that homelessness remains a pressing concern in specific communities, such as Bloomington. Studies emphasize the importance of examining the local context when addressing homelessness (O'Flaherty, 2019). The unique challenges faced by communities like Bloomington are underscored by localized factors. Specifically, the presence of Indiana University significantly influences housing availability and affordability. The demand for student housing not only raises rent but also reduces the supply of affordable housing units for low-income residents. Moreover, Bloomington's housing crisis is compounded by an anti-homelessness culture at the state and city levels, reflected in various anti-homelessness and municipal laws. For example, in 2020, the Indiana General Assembly sought to restrict panhandling (solicitation or begging) statewide, a move that was later halted by a federal preliminary injunction (ACLU of Indiana, 2020). Additionally, within the past year, the city of Bloomington has upheld comparable anti-homelessness laws by prohibiting tents or homelessness encampments in public parks (Lewis, 2023), contributing to the continued displacement of Bloomington's homeless individuals (Stock, 2023). Such local policies can further marginalize individuals experiencing homelessness, making it crucial to explore compassionate and effective interventions.

While there is a growing body of research on homelessness at the national and state levels, there is a notable scarcity of literature specifically addressing homelessness in Bloomington, Indiana. Only a few studies have explored the issue in this specific location, and these have primarily focused on specific subpopulations or aspects of homelessness. For instance, a recent study conducted in Bloomington examined

homelessness amongst people with companion animals, revealing their high attachment to their pets and the need for more pet-friendly overnight shelters (Kim, 2019).

> Moreover, Bloomington's housing crisis is compounded by an anti-homelessness culture at the state and city levels, reflected in various anti-homelessness and municipal laws.

While this study provides valuable insights, it also highlights the shortage of comprehensive research on homelessness in Bloomington, particularly concerning its broader dynamics and the efficacy of existing interventions.

Several national studies (Culhane, 2017; O'Flaherty, 2019) on homelessness have emphasized the significance of low-barrier and Housing First approaches in effectively addressing homelessness. These models prioritize immediate and barrier-free access to shelter and housing, with the Housing First model gaining recognition for its success in reducing homelessness through the provision of immediate housing without preconditions, followed by the delivery of supportive services. Nonprofits, such as Beacon, Inc., that employ these strategies to assist homeless individuals in college town communities play a crucial role in advocating for the needs of the homeless population in these particular settings.

BEACON, INC.

Beacon, Inc., is a Bloomington-based nonprofit organization dedicated to aiding and empowering people experiencing homelessness. Beyond providing essential assistance programs, the staff and volunteers of Beacon actively engage in hands-on initiatives to understand and address homelessness in Bloomington. One important aspect of Beacon's commitment is its direct involvement in the annual Point in Time (PIT)

count. The PIT count is often completed with the assistance of individuals who routinely serve persons experiencing homelessness, and this is indeed true for Beacon workers and volunteers in Bloomington. This collaborative effort is crucial, as the trust established between service workers and those in crisis through routine interactions is instrumental in encouraging homeless individuals to participate in the count. This trust fosters an environment conducive to collecting accurate and insightful data.

Beacon's approach emphasizes immediate and low-barrier access to shelter and housing, aligning with the previously discussed evidence-based practices. This

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involves eliminating sobriety requirements, income prerequisites, and other policies that hinder entry, retention, or access to opportunities. Beacon offers several impactful programs, including Friend's Place, an emergency shelter (ES); Rapid Re-Housing (RRH), facilitating rapid transitions to stable housing; and Crawford Homes, providing permanent supportive housing (PSH). Friend's Place stands out as the only year-round, non-religious emergency shelter for adults in the Bloomington area, providing 40 safe and sober beds. Rapid Re-Housing offers short-term financial assistance for security deposits, rent, utilities, moving expenses, application fees, etc., as well as providing supportive case management. Crawford Homes offers housing and supportive services for individuals experiencing long-term homelessness due to a disability, providing 110 PSH homes. These programs are

critical components of the multifaceted response to homelessness in Bloomington.

AMERICORPS INVOLVEMENT:

During the summer of 2023, I had the privilege to serve at Beacon's day shelter, known as the Shalom Center, as part of an AmeriCorps program in partnership with the Indiana University School of Medicine (IUSM), called the Hoosier Public Health Corps (HPHC). This experience provided me with a unique opportunity to witness firsthand the challenges faced by individuals experiencing homelessness in Bloomington. It also served as the catalyst for conducting a community-engaged research project to investigate homelessness in Bloomington, with a specific focus on the responses to the city's housing crisis within the context of Beacon's three homelessness assistance programs.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY AND OBJECTIVES:

This study embraces a Community-Engaged Research (CER) approach, in which research is a "true collaborative enterprise between researchers and communities" (Wong-Parodi, 2022). Practically, this approach involves "clarifying research and engagement goals, learning about community context, building trust and relationships, being flexible, and demonstrating long-term commitment" (Wong-Parodi, 2022). This study's foundational framework is based on critical community-based epistemologies. Using this framework yields a methodology that incorporates key principles of reciprocity, relationality, a focus on action, the use of conversational storytelling, and reflective practices (Shah, 2020).

Community-Engaged Research, as implemented in collaboration with Beacon, places Beacon staff in a central role guiding the project's direction. The primary objectives of the study, as established by Beacon staff, involve gaining a profound understanding of homelessness in Bloomington, evaluating the impact of Beacon's programs, identifying challenges faced by individuals experiencing homelessness, exploring effective strategies, and contributing to ongoing efforts

to enhance the well-being of individuals affected by this crisis, while working towards lasting solutions for the community.

The methodology utilizes a mixed-methods research approach, combining quantitative analysis and qualitative interviews. Quantitative data sources include the 2022 Point in Time (PIT) count and Housing Inventory Count (HIC), in addition to de-identified 2022 program data provided by Beacon, Inc., specifically sourced from the Annual Performance Reports of Beacon Crawford Homes (Version 1.2), Friend's Place (Version 1.2), and ESG RRH (Version 1.2). Notably, the active participation of Beacon staff and volunteers in the PIT count data collection further enriches the quantitative data. This study also integrates qualitative data gathered through interviews with three de-identified Beacon staff members. To safeguard participant privacy, roles and responsibilities of the staff members remain unnamed in this study. This multifaceted research approach facilitates a more holistic exploration of homelessness in Bloomington, combining quantitative rigor with qualitative depth to capture the nuances of the challenges faced by individuals experiencing homelessness.

RESULTS

Analysis of the quantitative data reveals the significant impact of Beacon's assistance programs for individuals experiencing homelessness in Region 10. As shown in Table 1, Beacon alone sheltered or housed 88.75 percent of the population experiencing homelessness in Region 10 in 2022.

Furthermore, the quantitative data highlights the value of Beacon offering three distinct assistance programs to meet different needs, as seen in the distribution of active clients in Beacon's programs in Figure 1.

The Friend's Place program had a utilization rate of 74 percent and provided 11,761 bed nights, representing the total number of beds filled each night during the year, in 2022. The Rapid Re-Housing program had a utilization rate of 100 percent, and 52.9 percent of individuals assisted through this program successfully moved into housing in 2022. The Crawford Homes program had a
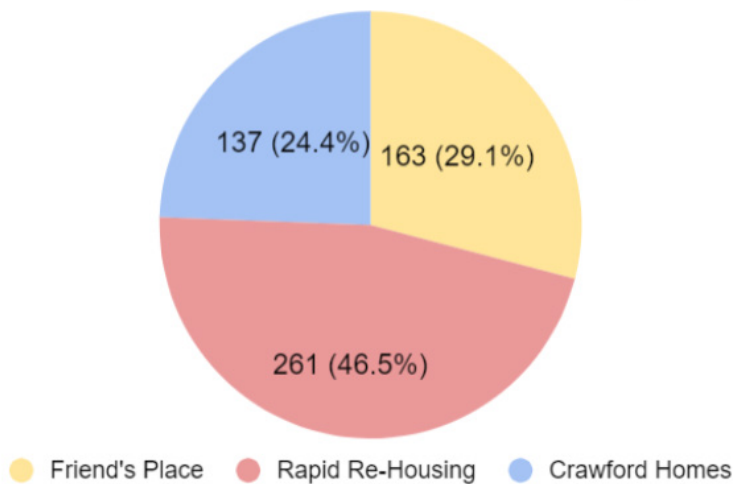
Table 1.
Number of people sheltered (*or moved into housing) by Beacon's three programs in 2022 compared to the PIT's estimated number of unsheltered individuals in Region 10 of Indiana in 2022.

Project Type	Program	People Sheltered*	Percentage Sheltered*	Total Percentage Sheltered* By Beacon
Homeless Housing	ES (Friend's Place)	163	34.0%	
Permanent Housing	RRH	138	28.75%	88.75%
	PSH (Crawford Homes)	125	26.0%	
Unsheltered Estimate in Region 10	*n/a*	*54*	*11.25*	*n/a*
Total	n/a	480	100%	88.75%

Figure 1.
The number and percentage of active clients in each of the three Beacon programs in 2022.

Active Clients across Beacon's Three Programs

137 (24.4%)   163 (29.1%)

261 (46.5%)

● Friend's Place   ● Rapid Re-Housing   ● Crawford Homes

utilization rate of 93 percent, and 91.2 percent of individuals served by this program obtained stable housing, either within Crawford Apartments or in scattered-site apartments throughout the community in 2022. These utilization rates underscore the capacity of Beacon's programs to address homelessness and facilitate housing

stability. Despite the evident benefits of these programs, the data reveals a high prevalence of individuals who are experiencing chronic homelessness. For this study, individuals experiencing chronic homelessness are defined as those with a disabling condition who have either been continuously homeless for at least one year or homeless

at least four times in the past three years (HUD, 2022). In 2022, 27.0 percent of Friend's Place clients and 75.9 percent of Crawford Homes clients met this definition. This identified struggle of long-term and recurring homelessness is informed by the qualitative data found in this study. Interviews with Beacon staff members reveal specific barriers in Bloomington that impede unsheltered individuals from attaining stable housing, as outlined in Figure 2. The high rent and overall cost of living in Bloomington pose considerable challenges for individuals striving to maintain housing stability. A staff member emphasized that "college towns see this a

> The prevalence of high eviction rates further contributes to and perpetuates homelessness, as individuals must restart the difficult process of finding a home.

lot, the cost of living is higher here" and noted that "rent in town keeps going up." These elevated rent costs are, in part, attributed to the presence of Indiana University, which must accommodate a large and growing number of students. Additionally, challenges in working with inflexible local landlords hinder Beacon staff's efforts to help clients secure housing; one staff member explained, "some landlords have refused to work with us." The prevalence of high eviction rates further contributes to and perpetuates homelessness, as individuals must restart the difficult process of finding a home. Furthermore, homelessness itself is criminalized, and any involvement with the criminal justice system poses another barrier to achieving stable and secure housing. A staff member pointed out that "rapid re-housing is only short term [assistance]" and thus any disruptions to one's housing can be exceptionally difficult for individuals to recover from. These factors may, in part, account for the 11.25 percent of individuals in Region 10 who are unsheltered and the elevated prevalence of individuals experiencing chronic homelessness in this area.

Figure 2.
Barriers to permanent, stable housing in Bloomington, as identified by Beacon staff members.

DISCUSSION

The quantitative and qualitative findings from Beacon highlight the complexity of homelessness and the need for diverse approaches. The significant impact of each of the three Beacon programs supports the implementation of multiple forms of low-barrier assistance within a single community. As discussed earlier, Beacon's programs have successfully sheltered or housed a significant percentage of the people experiencing homelessness in Region 10.

The utilization rates reveal a substantial demand for all three of Beacon's programs, underscoring the evident need for these services in the community. The 100 percent utilization rate for Rapid Re-Housing is particularly noteworthy, as it demonstrates the program's capacity to address immediate housing needs effectively. Similarly, the 93 percent utilization rate for Crawford Homes highlights its role in providing stable housing solutions to individuals experiencing long-term homelessness, a persistent issue in Bloomington. These utilization rates align with the broader objectives of addressing homelessness in Bloomington, including reducing primary reliance on emergency

shelters like Friend's Place and breaking the cycle of homelessness. Beacon's programs actively contribute to the overarching goal of offering individuals stable and supportive living environments, thereby working towards a lasting reduction in homelessness in the community.

Additionally, it's crucial to acknowledge the effectiveness of the Housing First model, a cornerstone of Beacon's approach. The Housing First model prioritizes immediate housing, followed by the provision of supportive services. These services encompass a wide range of support, including case management to assist clients in achieving employment, healthcare access, stability, self-sufficiency, and personal goals. Individuals in need are also connected with various community services, such as mental health counseling, substance use disorder treatment, medical care, and legal assistance.

Research has demonstrated that mental health and substance use services, while important, do not affect the stability of housing outcomes for individuals experiencing homelessness (O'Regan, 2021). Thus, immediate and low-barrier housing should be prioritized (O'Regan, 2021). In a randomized controlled trial of a Housing First intervention for adults with mental disorders in Toronto, it was found that the Housing First approach was strongly associated with rapid transitions to sustained housing: 70.4 percent of Housing First participants versus 27.9 percent of treatment-as-usual participants (Lachaud, 2021). Homelessness can be both a cause and consequence of poor mental healthcare, and by overturning conventional prerequisites such as medication adherence, abstinence, and proof of "housing worthiness," Housing First has proven to be effective in assisting individuals experiencing homelessness (Padgett, 2020). The growing evidence demonstrating the effectiveness of the Housing First approach reinforces the importance of ensuring that individuals have rapid access to housing regardless of their sobriety or mental health status and then offering support services on a voluntary basis (Padgett, 2020). This approach contributes to Beacon's effectiveness in addressing homelessness in Bloomington and

maintaining the humanity of the city's homeless individuals.

While the literature suggests that completing a rapid re-housing program is a significant predictor of remaining in permanent housing (Brown, 2018), this project has unveiled a range of external factors that contribute to recurrent and chronic homelessness in Bloomington. These persistent barriers align with findings in the existing literature. For example, research indicates that the absence of income growth during participation in a rapid re-housing program increases the risk of returning to homeless services (Brown, 2017). Additionally, a study of individuals experiencing homelessness who participated in transitional programming revealed that a lack of social support from friends and family was significantly associated with a repeated episode of homelessness within a year of program departure and with a faster time to return to the homeless shelter (Duchesne, 2015). Despite the utilization of transitional programs like Rapid Re-Housing, multiple barriers continue to prevent individuals from attaining permanent housing. While these programs play a vital role in responding to homelessness, there is an identified

> These services encompass a wide range of support, including case management to assist clients in achieving employment, healthcare access, stability, self-sufficiency, and personal goals. Individuals in need are also connected with various community services, such as mental health counseling, substance use disorder treatment, medical care, and legal assistance.

need for larger upstream changes in Bloomington to achieve a lasting reduction in homelessness.

Addressing the multifaceted challenges contributing to chronic homelessness in Bloomington demands a strategic and comprehensive approach. One evidence-based strategy involves the expansion of long-term

federal government housing subsidies, such as Section 8 Housing Choice Vouchers, aimed at assisting low-income renters (Fischer et al., 2019; Garboden et al., 2018). These subsidies have notably demonstrated their effectiveness in Beacon's work, playing a crucial role in providing affordable and stable housing options for individuals and families at risk of homelessness. Such federal policies are significant factors in shaping the availability and accessibility of resources that are vital to effectively combating homelessness at the local level (Fischer et al., 2019). In the context of Bloomington, tackling the complexities of homelessness necessitates more than isolated measures; it calls for comprehensive systemic changes. This involves not only the expansion of federal housing subsidies such as Housing Choice Vouchers, but also policy reforms, community-level initiatives, and holistic housing strategies (Fischer et al., 2019; Garboden et al., 2018). Through the collective implementation of these measures, we can forge lasting solutions and address the root causes of homelessness in our community.

To address these findings and gain a more comprehensive understanding of homelessness in Bloomington, it is essential to acknowledge this study's limitations. A primary constraint is the small sample size, consisting of only three interviewees. This limited sample size implies that there may be factors contributing to Bloomington's housing crisis that were not captured in this research. While this study involved interviews with Beacon staff and analysis of program data, conducting direct interviews with individuals currently experiencing homelessness in Bloomington presents an opportunity to collect valuable narratives and insights not captured in this study's qualitative data. Although interviews with individuals experiencing homelessness would require stringent ethical considerations due to participants' vulnerability, they could also offer valuable insights into this crisis. Future research should aim to delve into the experiences and perspectives of those currently facing homelessness in Bloomington, thus enriching our understanding of homelessness and its complexities in this community. Despite these limitations, this study represents a valuable starting point for comprehending homelessness in Bloomington and identifying potential areas for future research and improvements within the community.

CONCLUSIONS & FUTURE IMPLICATIONS

This study is part of an ongoing effort to better understand the challenges that individuals experiencing homelessness face in securing and maintaining affordable housing in Bloomington, Indiana. It also aims to assess local homelessness response programs and identify persisting barriers. Evidence-based solutions to overcome factors contributing to chronic homelessness in Bloomington may include expanding Housing First programs, implementing more low-barrier supportive housing models, and providing long-term government housing subsidies for low-income renters. These measures can reduce reliance on emergency shelters like Beacon's Friend's Place as the primary solution to homelessness and work toward breaking the cycle of homelessness.

Moreover, this study underscores the value of employing a mixed-methods research approach, combining quantitative and qualitative data, to gain a comprehensive understanding of homelessness within specific communities, such as college towns and cities. Personal narratives from individuals closely connected to homelessness, such as those associated with Beacon, offer valuable insights that complement and inform quantitative data on homelessness and related assistance programs. Future research in this area should delve deeper into specific barriers, such as eviction rates, parole participation, and legal/criminal cases, to better understand their impact on the housing prospects of individuals experiencing homelessness in Bloomington and other college towns/cities.

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