

PERSPECTIVES FROM THE NAVIGATION CENTER

Report #2: Encampment Homelessness in San Francisco

This is the **second** in a series of five reports from the San Francisco Controller's Office on the Navigation Center. The first four reports are based on interviews with clients, service providers and stakeholders. The fifth report will summarize the Navigation Center's performance based on quantitative outcomes and interview findings.

What is the Navigation Center?

The Navigation Center, which began operations in March 2015, is a pilot program designed to shelter and rapidly house San Francisco's difficult-to-serve homeless population. These individuals typically have material or psychological barriers to using traditional shelters. The Navigation Center provides these otherwise unsheltered San Franciscans room and board while case managers work to connect them to stable income, public benefits and permanent housing. The Navigation Center campus includes a common courtyard, storage for belongings, meals, showers and laundry, and dormitory accommodations for 75 clients and their pets.



The Navigation Center courtyard at 1950 Mission St.

Overview of Encampment Homelessness in San Francisco

On any given night in San Francisco, an estimated 4,358 individuals are unsheltered. Though the number residing in homeless encampments is unknown, interviewees agreed that encampment visibility and the number of service calls received by the City for illegal encampments have surged recently. Encampments can be found in every City district, but resident characteristics and personal histories often vary by neighborhood.

Cyclical Patterns of Homeless Encampments

We found that homeless encampments follow cyclical, and often predictable, patterns:

1. First, the **geographic location** of an encampment typically balances considerations of *convenience* (how close the location is to services and other daily needs) and *visibility* (how likely the location is to generate complaints to the City).
2. Second, **shelter use decisions** represent choices between best available alternatives. For many, the streets are perceived as better than their only other options (shelters and SROs).
3. Third, romantic couples, close friends, and family members will typically encamp in smaller pairs or groups, but larger **encampment "communities"** are typically less cohesive and more the product of immediate circumstance.

"Encampments are communities of convenience and circumstance."

Working with Encampments: Lessons Learned

Stakeholders and service providers reported that encampment membership at the time of program referral did not seem to have any bearing on case management plans or housing outcomes. Encampment communities tend to dissolve organically upon program admission. However, subtle and sometimes unintentional operational directives from staff downplayed the importance of encampment membership at the Navigation Center, reinforcing this dissolution. For example, encampments usually cannot be accommodated together in the same dorm, and early client requests to encamp on-site were denied. Instead, clients are encouraged to focus on themselves and their individual case plans. This is not an indictment of Navigation Center operations, but it does suggest that encampment membership may be more important than stakeholders have concluded.

"[We want to] show a gentle importance, from day one, of encouraging people to think of themselves as being part of a different community now."

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REPORT #2: ENCAMPMENT HOMELESSNESS IN SAN FRANCISCO

LESSONS LEARNED AT THE NAVIGATION CENTER

Introduction

This report examines encampment homelessness in San Francisco and the lessons Navigation Center stakeholders have learned about working with encamped clients. Encampment homelessness has received very little formal academic study and remains poorly understood. The Navigation Center has been pioneering in its mission to explicitly serve these communities. This report analyzes the behaviors associated with encampment homelessness in the City and evaluates the Navigation Center’s experiences in serving this population to date. Direct quotes from interview participants are in italics.

Research Methodology

Our qualitative research consisted of 20 in-depth, semi-structured interviews with Navigation Center stakeholders and clients. We conducted six interviews with representatives from collaborating City Departments (Human Services Agency, San Francisco Homeless Outreach Team/Department of Public Health, Mayor’s Office of Housing Opportunity, Partnerships, & Engagement (HOPE), Department of Public Works, and SFPD), three interviews with on-site service providers (from Episcopal Community Services and HOPE), and eleven interviews with Navigation Center clients (6 active clients, 5 clients—including one couple—who exited to permanent housing, and 1 client who was asked to leave the program). We analyzed the interviews to identify major themes common to multiple interviews.

Overview of Encampment Homelessness in San Francisco: What Do We Know?

The 2015 San Francisco point-in-time homeless count revealed that on any given night in San Francisco, 4,358 individuals—58% of the City’s homeless population—sleep without adequate shelter.¹ As this count includes individuals sleeping in vehicles, the precise number of San Francisco residents who are literally unsheltered (i.e., with no protection from the elements except perhaps a tent or another makeshift structure) remains unknown. This unsheltered population is the focus of this report. We use the term “unsheltered” to refer to any individual sleeping and living outside in a place not meant for human habitation, while “encampment” is used to describe unsheltered groups of two or more.

Our interviews suggested that encampment homelessness and the Navigation Center’s efforts to address it are critical areas of analysis for two reasons:

¹ *San Francisco Homeless Point-In-Time Count and Survey (2015)*. Applied Survey Research, Watsonville, CA.

- (i) Interviewees from the Department of Public Works (DPW) and San Francisco Police Department (SFPD) reported that encampment-related complaints have surged in recent years, straining their abilities to adequately respond, and
- (ii) Stakeholders have divergent hypotheses and conceptions about this population and its behaviors.

Before City policy makers further grapple with encampment homelessness, a more thorough and nuanced understanding of the population is essential.

Size and Visibility of the Population

Accurate, reliable data on the size of the encampment population in San Francisco are lacking, making any claims about growth in recent years speculative. However, stakeholders interviewed for this report unanimously agreed that there has been a recent uptick in the *visibility* of the encampment problem in San Francisco. Interviews with SFPD and DPW suggested a direct correlation between encampment visibility and the City's ongoing "building boom" near downtown and South of Market: areas previously favored by encampments have either been made inaccessible by new development or have fallen out of favor because of complaints by new developments in adjacent areas. Needing to relocate, encampments have begun regularly forming in areas where San Francisco Homeless Outreach Team (SFHOT) workers had previously never seen them before. Interviewees reported increases in the number of tents and physical structures as well. With increased visibility and more elaborate structures, these encampments have elicited a growing number of complaints; for example, non-emergency homeless related calls (the most common homeless call in the City) increased 66% between 2012-2014, while calls regarding sit/lie law violations were up nearly 64% over the same period.²

Encampment Characteristics

From their conversations and outreach efforts, SFHOT interviewees estimate that a "*surprisingly large number of encampment residents are native to San Francisco*"—upwards of 50%. Especially in and around the Mission, where the majority of Navigation Center referrals have originated, SFHOT interviewees stated that most of the unsheltered appear to be long-term residents of the neighborhood who can no longer afford to live there as a result of the area's recent increases in housing costs³. One possible exception is the Haight/Golden Gate Park area, whose counter-culture continues to attract homeless transition-age youth from around the country.

Once encamped, individuals face and create serious public health and safety hazards stemming from inadequate garbage and human waste disposal and unsanitary drug use practices (one interviewee, a former encampment resident, stated, "*Unfortunately, most homeless people in camps get high*"). Nevertheless, SFHOT interviewees suggested that elaborate and visible encampment-related blight is not characteristic of all encampments; while some accumulate vast amounts of possessions, others try to make as little visible impact on the surrounding neighborhood as possible, in hopes of avoiding eviction.

² *Analysis of call volume increase for 915 (non-emergency homeless) and 919 (sit/lie law) codes; Dankert, D., Driscoll, J., & Torres, N. (October 2015). San Francisco's 9-1-1 Call Volume Increase. Google. Retrieved from: https://docs.google.com/document/d/1b6OT8u01smq0ZV_mtvF1juj9RZT-36rYKtgILcwl3jU/edit*

³ *While this particular claim represents interviewee opinion, academic research does confirm that high housing costs and low housing vacancy rates significantly predict higher rates of homelessness in metro areas nationwide; cf. Quigley, J. M., Raphael, S., & Smolensky, E. (2001). Homeless in America, homeless in California. Review of Economics and Statistics, 83(1), 37-51.*

The Cyclical Patterns of Homeless Encampments

Our interviews with Navigation Center stakeholders revealed that the most obvious areas of disagreement and misunderstanding about encampments fall into three main categories: location decisions, patterns of shelter use (or nonuse), and the nature and strength of encampment community bonds. We discuss each of these themes in turn, explaining how encampments are fundamentally transient entities whose decision-making follows cyclical and somewhat predictable patterns. These analyses draw heavily from interviews with SFHOT representatives, case managers, and Navigation Center clients.

Moving (and Removing) Encampments: Geographic Location Decisions

Homeless encampments of varying size and duration are present in every district in San Francisco. We found that encampment location decisions are driven by residents' attempts to balance two often-competing interests: (i) achieving proximity to services and other daily needs (including sources of drugs), and (ii) navigating disjointed City encampment policies.

First, encampment residents frequently select encampment locations based on their perceived pragmatic value. Perceived pragmatic value, in turn, balances considerations of convenience and visibility. For example, SFHOT interviewees explained (and one client interviewee confirmed) that methadone maintenance patients tend to congregate near Potrero Street because of its proximity to San Francisco General Hospital, where they receive their daily dose of methadone. Encamping directly along Potrero—e.g., next to the hospital—would maximize convenience with respect to proximity; however, it would also expose the encampment to greater visibility amidst the adjacent residential

The geographic location of an encampment typically balances considerations of *convenience* (how close the location is to services and other daily needs) and *visibility* (how likely the location is to generate complaints to the City).

neighborhood, and thus incur a far greater risk of eviction. Setting up an encampment at the intersection of Potrero and Division, on the other hand—with its maze of intersections and freeway overpasses—minimizes the chances that any particular homeowner or business will be directly offended. In other words, the location optimizes the balance of visibility and convenience. This provides some insight into why this and other areas have become so inhabited by homeless San Franciscans.

Second, no area of the city, no matter how hidden, is immune from the City's encampment removal interventions. Therefore, many encampment residents strategically relocate, in a cyclical fashion, to reduce the likelihood of an encampment sweep. SFHOT interviewees explained the following common scenario at the area of Alameda and Harrison:

- One individual pitches a tent on the sidewalk alongside Best Buy, remaining there for three to four days with no intervention from the City.
- Other homeless residents soon take notice that this person has been able to camp unbothered for several days, prompting them to relocate there as well; eight tents, for example, may pop up overnight.
- The visibility of eight tents often crosses the threshold of public acceptability, so a complaint is issued, initiating an intervention for encampment removal.
- After the removal, a week or ten days will often pass before another individual decides to locate there again, beginning the cycle anew.

Indeed, the one representative we interviewed lamented that encampment removals do little but push encampments around the City. Interviewed clients complained vigorously about frequent encampment removals and the inconveniences they caused (i.e., always ensuring one person stays behind to “watch the camp”).

Three of the twelve clients we interviewed for this report confirmed having strategically relocated their encampment position immediately prior to their Navigation Center referral.

Importantly, the emergence of the Navigation Center has altered the calculus of location decisions for some encampment residents, resulting in an **unintended consequence of the referral process: strategic relocation to encampment areas known or rumored to be imminently targeted by SFHOT for a Navigation Center referral.** As a representative from SFHOT explained:

“The Navigation Center—that’s the question we field all day long, every day, every day, every day, constantly constantly constantly...everybody [wants to go to the Navigation Center], because they know there’s a potential for actually getting a key.”

Increasingly, when word circulates that SFHOT will target a particular encampment for referral to the Navigation Center, some residents will relocate there to increase their chances of selection. **Three of the twelve clients we interviewed for this report confirmed having strategically relocated their encampment position immediately prior to their Navigation Center referral.** Therefore, while encampment location decisions are driven chiefly by the need to *reduce* visibility and thereby minimize eviction risk, the emergence of the Navigation Center has motivated some encampment residents to selectively and purposefully *enhance* their visibility in anticipation of a potential referral.

While these descriptions certainly do not explain all encampment behaviors, they do provide important insight into why particular areas of the City continually experience encampment homelessness, even after frequent removals by DPW or other departments.

To Bed or Not to Bed: Shelter Use Decisions

An oft-cited belief about unsheltered homeless individuals is that, because of their various material and psychological barriers to shelter use, they never use shelter. The encampment homeless population is sometimes thought to be distinct and separate from the shelter-using population. While some of our client interviewees confirmed that they would never use traditional shelters again, our research suggests that shelter use decisions are typically more circumstantial and cyclical than this hypothesized “sheltered/unsheltered” dichotomy would suggest.

First, decisions to access shelter are frequently influenced by the circumstances that person finds him or herself in at the time. If an individual is in a relationship, for example, he or she may decline shelters to avoid separation from his or her partner, but should that relationship end, this barrier to shelter would be removed. If an individual is heavily using injection drugs, s/he again may avoid shelters for fear of paraphernalia confiscation; but if that person should enter a period of reduced use or attempted sobriety, this barrier would be removed. Certain life circumstances, then, cause the costs of shelters to outweigh their benefits, but circumstances constantly change. For this very reason, Navigation Center staff lamented the unreasonably long wait times for case management in San Francisco:

“To get an intensive case manager, you should not have to wait three to five months. You can decompensate a lot in three to five months. ... If you are a transient individual and you have found a time in your life where you feel like you are ready to ask for help, but you are told to wait, that moment can escape you and you can wind up somewhere else.”

Second, decisions to access shelter seem highly influenced by an individual’s cyclical weighting of two factors: (i) the perceived shortcomings of shelters (esp. the limited availability of beds and the belief, evident amongst our interviewees, that shelters do not lead to housing), and (ii) a limited tolerance for the difficulties of life on the streets. The weights placed on these two factors vary individually and are always subject to change, but their relative magnitudes at any given time influence whether a client will choose shelters or the streets. SFHOT interviewees explained that some clients they encounter use shelters up until their stay runs out or until the stress of the shelter environment becomes too overwhelming; they then return to the streets, encamping until they get so tired that they feel compelled to access a shelter again, restarting the cycle. By this logic, **shelter use is a systematic and rational decision based on the perceived, immediate costs and benefits of shelter and its alternatives.**

That unsheltered homeless individuals “want to be on the streets” is an oversimplified misconception. Homeless residents simply choose their best available alternative—and for many, the streets are perceived as better (or less bad) than their only other options (shelters and SROs).

This very same logic, in fact, may provide some insight into the problematic “housing shopping phenomenon” described in the first report in this series. For a client focused on avoiding drug use and the lifestyles associated with it, there may be little perceived benefit to a Single Room Occupancy (SRO) hotel in a drug-infested neighborhood; in fact, the streets may actually be preferred, since they incur no monthly rent. One client explained it simply: *“As for a [SRO] hotel? I may as well be on the streets.”* Exiting a client from the Navigation Center to the streets for “housing shopping,” then, may in fact be a far less effective negative incentive than stakeholders assume.

These statements must not be conflated with the misconception, lamented by SFHOT and client interviewees alike, that encampment residents somehow “want to be on the streets.” Homeless residents simply choose the best available alternative that their circumstances afford them. For many, the streets are perceived as better—or, perhaps more accurately, less bad—than their only other options (i.e., shelters and SROs). The Navigation Center, with its lenient rules and real access to housing, is providing residents their first truly attractive alternative for years, underscoring its immense popularity on the streets: *“This place is the biggest thing since Glide started serving breakfast however many decades ago—this is huge. This is really huge. This is a huge beacon of hope.”*

“Communities of Convenience and Circumstance”: Encampment Membership and Community

In planning for the Navigation Center, stakeholders did not initially intend to take in entire encampments. However, the program planners speculated that the community bonds formed in encampments would be an important barrier to shelter use and that the Navigation Center model should therefore accommodate group referrals. The importance of encampment “community bonds,” however, seems subject to the same logic of cycle and circumstance as shelter use and location

decisions. As SFHOT interviewees explained, *“Encampments are communities of convenience and circumstance.”*

Not all encampments seem to fit this mold; some consist of close friends or “chosen family.” This phenomenon appears especially pronounced among youth encampments in the Haight and adjacent areas of Golden Gate Park. But for many encampments, whatever “community” may form among a larger encampment group is often heavily influenced by geographic proximity and cyclical happenstance. SFHOT interviewees explained:

“If you go to the same campgrounds every Memorial Day, for your whole life, there’s other camp groups there that you will get to know because they do the same thing—and so you will encounter each other when you cross paths. You will be ‘community’ for that time. But when it comes time to move off, everyone goes their own way.”

When forced to relocate for the reasons described above, romantic couples, close friends, and family members will typically do so together, in smaller pairs or groups; if others relocate to the same areas they do, a “community” may organically form as a function of geographic proximity. But as soon as another relocation becomes necessary, this community often dissolves.

To some extent, this hypothesis, offered by SFHOT representatives, seems to corroborate the Navigation Center experience. Case managers, operations staff, and the Program Director alike all confirmed that encampment “communities”—even those that self-identify as such during the referral process—often dissolve during the course of their Navigation Center stay. The limited academic research done on encampment homeless communities would predict such an outcome as well; encampment social bonds are, for many, a byproduct of the “moral economies” that arise, out of necessity, within the encampment.⁴ That is, if one person offers another a favor (such as drugs or food), it is expected that this “favor” will be eventually returned—indeed, day-to-day survival *requires* that the favor be returned. But, with basic survival needs being met at the Navigation Center, the moral economies are no longer needed and eventually dissolve. Confirmed one client about the group he was brought in with, *“None of these other street people are gonna help me. They all just leech off me.”*

Working with Encampment Homelessness: Lessons Learned at the Navigation Center

Nevertheless, concluding that “encampment communities don’t matter at the Navigation Center” is at least partially inaccurate. The Navigation Center has been pioneering in admitting entire encampment groups, and interviewees described a number of important lessons learned about working with this population.

Unintended Consequences

Navigation Center interviewees at the program and policy level expressed apprehension about two possible unintended consequences of the Navigation Center: (i) that encampments or individuals who typically encamp would strategically relocate to areas where SFHOT would be making referrals; and (ii) that individuals would leave shelters in hopes of a Navigation Center street referral.

As mentioned above, **some encampments do seem to be relocating to gain a Navigation Center referral.** Interestingly, the effectiveness of this strategy again appears subject to the logics of cycle and circumstance; two individuals reported gaining a referral on the first of the month, when many

⁴ Bourgois, P. I., & Schonberg, J. (2009). *Righteous dopefiend* (Vol. 21). Univ of California Press.

individuals who had been initially targeted for referral were “*off using drugs because it was payday*” [i.e., the monthly issuance of cash benefits]. However, the magnitude of the relocation phenomenon could not be tested with our qualitative research methodology and deserves future attention—especially if some individuals are relocating to San Francisco from other jurisdictions, a concern of one of our interviewees.

The second of these unintended consequences (leaving shelters for a street referral), on the other hand, does not seem to be occurring at this time, at least per stakeholder self-report. Again, thoroughly investigating this hypothesis was beyond the scope of the present methodology. A more systematic evaluation of shelter use history among clients is forthcoming in the Controller’s mid-period report on the Navigation Center, the fifth report in this series.

Program Operations vis-à-vis Homeless Encampments

As reported above, interviewees at the Navigation Center and in HSA unanimously reported that the communities within homeless encampments typically dissolve once the group is admitted to the Navigation Center, suggesting that maintaining an encampment’s community identity is inconsequential for case management. Our findings, however, caution against such a unilateral conclusion; instead, it appears that program operations, both directly and indirectly, have downplayed the importance of encampment communities at the Navigation Center, possibly catalyzing or expediting their dissolution.

While stakeholders were quick to report that “encampments don’t matter” for program outcomes, they also reported subtle clues that would suggest the contrary. For example:

- Towards the beginning of the program, several encampment groups expressed interest in camping in tents together in the program courtyard. These requests were denied. Operations also challenged the idea of housing encampments together even in the dorms, in order “*to show [clients] a gentle importance, from day one, of encouraging people to think of themselves as being part of a different community now.*” As the program has progressed and dorms remain at or near capacity, beds to house entire encampment groups together are usually not available.
- SFHOT reported that they had begun informing clients, during the outreach and referral process, that the majority of Navigation Center exits would be to SROs. Certain clients, they confirmed, actively declined Navigation Center referrals when hearing this information. One case manager, informally interviewed about the subject, confirmed also informing clients, at intake, that an SRO would be the most likely exit destination. The message, then, is that exit destinations mostly accommodate single individuals.

At the Navigation Center, the individual and his or her case management plan—not the encampment community—is of primary importance. Therefore, the oft-cited conclusion that “encampments don’t matter at the Navigation Center” may be overly simplistic.

Though these operational and case management directives are subtle and perhaps unintentional, they nonetheless send a clear message: at the Navigation Center, the individual and his or her case management plan—not the encampment community—is of primary importance. Therefore, the oft-cited conclusion that “encampments don’t matter at the Navigation Center” may be true for some encampments, but is also partially a product of (i) an operational climate that reinforces the priority of the individual over the encampment; and (ii) the self-selection against certain individuals who

decline SROs as an exit option.

To this end, clients tended to place more emphasis than other interviewees on encampment community bonds. Of the nine clients interviewed who were referred to the Navigation Center as part of an encampment, three readily described the importance of having their encampment friends there with them. One client stated that he “does rounds” every night to check on his encampment friends in other dorms; another volunteered that if she could do things over again at the Navigation Center, she would have asked to be housed in the same dorm as her encampment. Therefore, though they are indeed influenced by cycles, circumstance, and the moral economies of street life, **encampment communities do sometimes form strong social bonds, the importance of which have been implicitly downplayed at the Navigation Center.**

Conclusion

These analyses must not be interpreted as an indictment of the Navigation Center for failing to better serve encampments. Operationally, accommodating encampments as a group presents serious complexities. These include logistical constraints, such as the limited availability of dorm space to house encampments together; they also include conflict management implications, since inter-client friction on campus is reportedly far more common *within* encampments than *between* encampments.

However, San Francisco policy makers should recognize the bias inherent in the conclusion that “encampments don’t matter for Navigation Center case management” before allowing it to drive future policy making for the many remaining, yet-to-be-served encampments across the city. We consider the unserved encampment population—and policies suggested by stakeholders to serve it—in the fourth report in this series, entitled “The Future of the Navigation Center - Location, Scale, and Scope.”