

EXPERIENCING HOMELESSNESS

*Understanding the motivations and intentions of people in Austin
who voted for Proposition B in comparison to those of people
experiencing homelessness.*



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Texas Immersive: Audience Development

INTRODUCTION

Causes of Homelessness

Homelessness happens due to factors at multiple levels of society – at the structural, institutional, relationship, and individual levels.¹ For example, structural factors include gentrification; Austin is one of the fastest-growing cities in the country, drawing huge numbers of educated and affluent new residents each year. Unfortunately, this inflow of people drives up rent prices across the city, squeezing out low-income residents who can't pay the increasing cost of living. Because of Austin's historically racist housing policy, these residents are disproportionately minorities. As a result, we have a shortage of affordable housing that disproportionately affects low-income minority residents.

Institutional factors that contribute to homelessness include schools, jails, hospitals, foster care, and the military. We often discharge residents from these facilities without ensuring that they have stable housing. Stigmas associated with these institutions also come with additional barriers to entry that make it more difficult to find and keep jobs, rebuild social networks, and have stable families, and more.

Finally, relationship breakdowns, such as the death of a family member, a breakup, or disownment from one's family, can mean the end of one's financial support and social support. This, in combination with individual factors, such as one's own vulnerabilities (disability, mental health, substance abuse, etc) can contribute to one's susceptibility to homelessness.

Homelessness in Austin

As of 2022, the most recent Point in Time Count, required by the US Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) estimated that there are 2,506 people experiencing homelessness (PEH) on any given night in Austin, TX.² However, both the definition used by HUD to define homelessness and the methodologies of the counts have several limitations.³ They don't include individuals who are: hospitalized or institutionalized, in jail, living with family or friends, or people not engaged in traditional homelessness services. Thus, this count is a severe underestimate. Instead, the National Consultants quoted Austin's homeless population to be about 10,000 out of the 1 million Travis County residents, so ~1% of the population.⁴

Austin has recognized homelessness as an issue since the 1960s, ever since then, Austin has been cycling through action plans and task forces to address the problem.⁵ In the 1990s, Austin started passing ordinances that made sitting and lying, begging, and camping illegal, which worsened the “us vs. them” mentality that already existed.⁶ Since that time, Austin has devoted more attention to homelessness through the Austin Resource Center for the Homeless (ARCH), opened in 2004, and The Ending Community Homelessness Coalition (ECHO), which has been operating since 2009 as the lead agency in charge of coordinating the city's efforts to address homelessness.⁷ Although homeless advocates have been vocal against ordinances and active in policy making, so far none of Austin's plans to address homelessness have proven to be sustainable.

Most recently, on May 1, 2021, Austin voters approved Proposition B, once again making it a criminal offense (Class C misdemeanor punishable by a fine) for anyone to sit, lie down, or camp in public areas and prohibiting solicitation of money or other things of value at specific hours and locations.⁸ In a hotly contested debate involving the city's homelessness crisis, 57% of voters said they were in favor of reinstating criminal penalties for camping in public spaces and 42% said they were not.⁹ While this was largely a reaction to the increased number of unsheltered people living and camping in Austin downtown during the COVID-19 pandemic, it is interesting to see the citizens of Austin vote to revert to the outdated policies of the 1990s. The question now is why did 57% of voters believe so strongly in this proposal? How do they perceive the homeless, and how can we change those perceptions? In this qualitative report, we conduct an analysis of our audiences to understand motivations and intentions of people in Austin who voted for Proposition B in comparison to those of people experiencing homelessness with the hopes of bridging the gap between the two communities.

AUDIENCE

When designing an experience focused on promoting nonprofit work, there are two distinct audiences that must be considered. The first audience is made up of those who benefit from the mission; in this case, this includes people experiencing homelessness. The second audience involves the people we wish to advertise the mission to: those who hold negative stereotypes of homelessness.

We use insights from those experiencing homelessness gained through interviews to design an experience that tells their stories authentically. Subsequently, the experience is intended for those who may not understand the complexities of homelessness to educate communities, raise awareness about the issue, and encourage compassion. More specifically, the target audience is those who may hold negative stereotypes or biases towards homeless people. The approval of Proposition B¹⁰, online netnographic observations of online conversation on Nextdoor (see Appendix 2), Reddit, and Facebook, and interviews with homeless people all revealed a generally negative perception of the homeless population in Austin. Therefore, our interactive experience will tell the stories of homeless people we interviewed living on the streets of Austin in an effort to challenge these negative perceptions and promote compassion, sensitivity, and acceptance.

EMPATHY MAP:



Martha - (Part of Homeless Community)

Martha is 35 years old. She had a medical emergency that took her out of the workforce for a year; she lost her job and accrued significant debt. She does not have any family or support system and was not able to find a new job, so she has been homeless for 7 years.

Seeing	Hearing	Feeling
People ignore her on the streets.	The homeless should work harder.	Emotional: fear, anger, frustration, isolation, judgment, and hopelessness.
People look at her with disdain.	They are all lazy.	Physiological: hunger, thirst, pain, and dissociation.
People do not make eye contact with her.	They are drug addicts.	

Saying	Doing
“I work as hard as anyone else, I just do not have the resources that others have access to. I want to work.”	Walking to shelters and finding organizations that give out free food and water. Asking for Money on the streets.



Ezra - (Not Part of Homeless Community)

Ezra is 28. He just moved to Austin and lives in a new high-rise apartment in Downtown. He works at a tech-startup and has a large social network in Austin that encompasses family and old friends. He owns a car that allows him to move around the city with ease.

Seeing	Hearing	Feeling
He sees more homeless appear on the streets near him. More trash on the street. More tents on his street.	The homeless are unpredictable. If they worked harder they would be off the streets. Some homeless people yelling at each other.	Emotional: scared, disgust, sad, apprehensive, guilty, and unsafe. Physiological: full, hydrated, pain-free, and clean.

Saying	Doing
“I want to help out the homeless. I think that they deserve access to basic human needs. I think that they are structurally limited but I feel scared to go around them because they are unpredictable.”	Voted for Proposition B which bans street camping. He makes sure to lock the doors and installs a door video monitor.

ANALYSIS

In our analysis of archived data, we found that voters in favor of Proposition B largely feared for their own safety (see Appendix 2). This led both conservative and liberal constituents to vote for Prop B. For many liberals, the safety concerns led them to vote conservatively for the very first time. On the other hand, other proponents of the proposal perceived the homeless to be “lazy,” “unproductive,” “insane,” and “degenerate” members of society. Overall, PEH were discussed with disgust and distaste. Rather than recognizing the myriad of factors that can contribute to homelessness¹¹, as discussed previously, many participants of these forums and those that voted for Proposition B were of the belief that the burden of homelessness was the sole burden and responsibility of those experiencing it. In other words, a PEH was individually responsible for their own fate, and their inability to escape homelessness was their own fault.

We found that PEH face significant judgment and stigma from the people that they interact with; for example, people assume that all PEH are drug addicts, alcoholics, lazy, etc. This judgment/stigma is often paired with fear. As a result of this fear, PEH experience people locking their car doors when they approach, ignoring them and avoiding eye contact, and crossing the street when nearing. These dehumanizing actions propagate a vicious cycle of mental health concerns with PEH.

What is more unfortunate is that much of this stigma is rooted in falsities. Our interviews demonstrated that PEH are highly motivated to work and often have valuable skill-sets to offer society. The modes of task, discovery, and

aspiration were highly concentrated in our interviews. One woman, for example, had attended Northwestern University and worked at A&M as an IT specialist for 25 years. Another interviewee cited Maslow's hierarchy of needs as a colloquial reference; and although he had dropped out of high school, he had still managed to get his GED and then had even received a computer science certificate and associates of business while serving time in jail. All they seem to want is a chance to prove themselves so they can support themselves. However, at every turn, they are encountering structural barriers that prevent them from re-entering society. Examples of these that were mentioned in our interviews include: being unable to get a job after prison, lack of livable wage, inflation, and no transportation combined with poor public transportation options.

On top of those two obstacles, there is an overall lack of psychological and financial resources for PEH in Austin. First of all, there simply aren't enough beds.¹² In fact, after the passing of Proposition B, it only made it more difficult to access the resources that do exist – when people can't live in or near downtown, it is more and more difficult for them to find places to shower, get food, engage socially with the Austin community, and/or find reliable public transportation. Instead, they are forced to relocate to isolated encampment sites like Esperanza at the outskirts of the city.¹³ There, there are ~170 mini homes for residents. However, due to limited funding, the homes are built out of uninsulated plastic which overheats in the Texas summer and have no running water. It's not near any bus routes - one resident cited having to travel two and a half hours to his job; and while people donate food, there's no kitchen - so if they miss the food

delivery they're unable to eat until the next day. These inhumane living conditions are demoralizing.

This combination of judgment/fear, constant rejection from structural barriers, and lack of government resources feeds into "hopelessness." One man specifically reported being suicidal purely because he felt like he was constantly set up to fail and that no one was willing to give him a second chance. After trying to understand what this community "wants," we found that they want to be treated with empathy and as humans. They want the opportunity to have basic human things like being able to shower and make eggs in the morning before going off to work at a full-time job. However, it was repeatedly emphasized that the only way for a person to fully empathize with a PEH is to experience the same adversities themselves.

DEMO ANALYSIS

People experiencing homelessness only want to be treated with empathy and humanity. However, there appears to be a consensus in our interviews that those who voted for Prop B will not truly understand the struggles of being homeless or even have empathy towards those experiencing homelessness without "living a day" in their shoes. Considering our audience's needs/wants, we feel it is essential to design an interactive activity where people can simulate the adversity, isolation, fear, and hopelessness felt by the homeless. One experience we can draw inspiration from is the virtual reality experience *Our America* by Bryant Young. In *Our America*, the audience experiences in the first person view a simulation of being a black man who gets pulled over by a white police officer

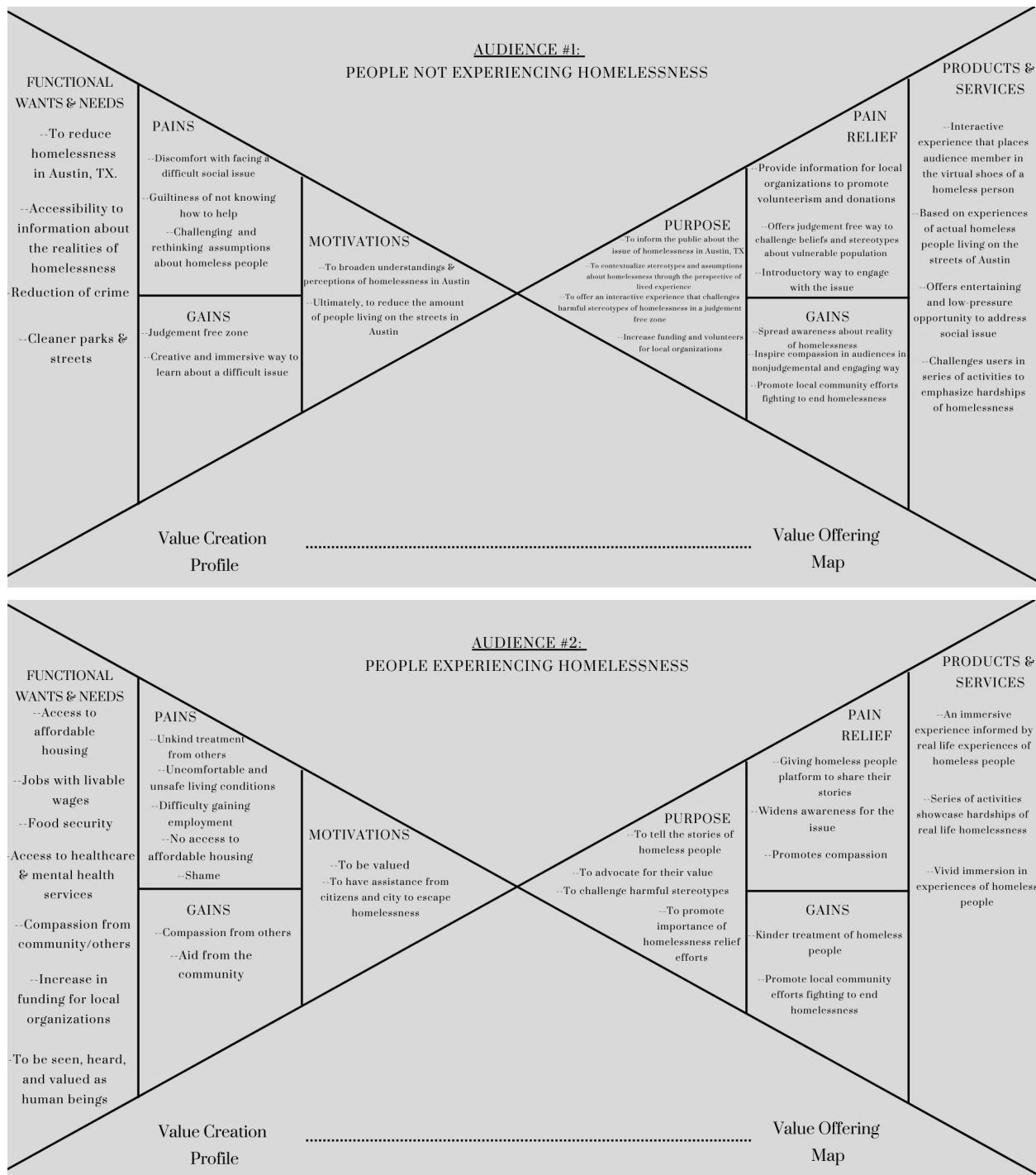
while driving his son to school, and has to make the correct choices in order to survive. While this simulation is nowhere near the actual experience of being black in America, the audience can at least get a small taste of the fear and paranoia. Similarly, a virtual reality experience that simulates the experience of being homeless in America may accomplish a similar result.

Another demo that we might pull inspiration from is Spatial. Thus far, we have considered using Spatial to build an environment resembling an encampment site. While this would allow people to visually identify with the space that the homeless live in, it would not fully encapsulate the experience.

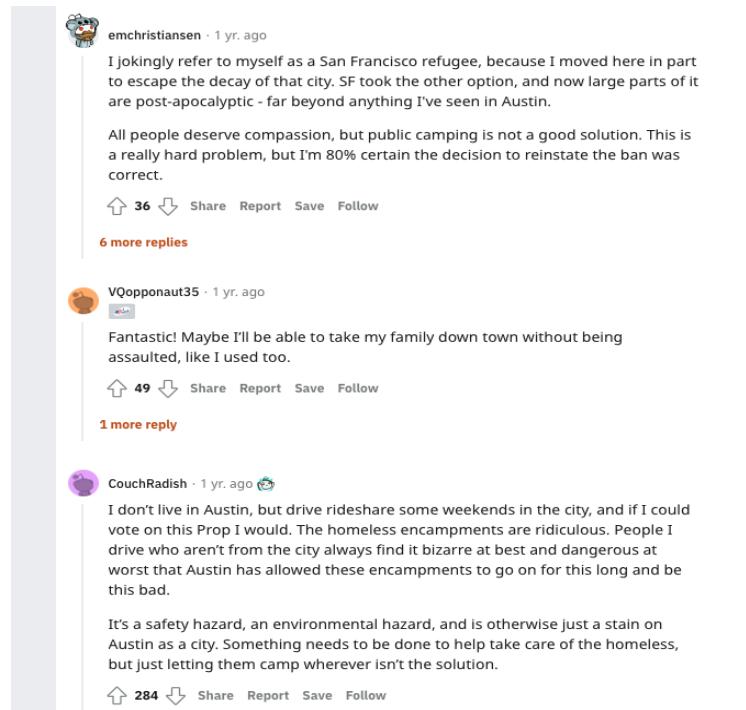
What if they were forced to get rid of their cell phone and have no communication to the outside world? What if they were compelled to reside outside in the Texas summer heat for a few hours? What if they tried to get a job with no access to showers, clean clothes, food, water, printers, etc? In order to build such an experience, we hope to draw on the live action game experience with *Dr. Crumb's Experience for Disobedient Pets*. In that simulation, we were asked to work together to accomplish tasks and were set up to succeed. But what if a user was asked to get a job and met the same obstacles as someone experiencing homelessness: no clothes, no resume, constant rejection, etc. Experiencing the frustration of trying to complete these small tasks might help them understand the larger picture: these are people, humans, looking to work hard for a second chance but are repeatedly being set up to fail.

APPENDICES

Appendix 1: Value Maps



Appendix 2: Archived Data



emchristiansen · 1 yr. ago

I jokingly refer to myself as a San Francisco refugee, because I moved here in part to escape the decay of that city. SF took the other option, and now large parts of it are post-apocalyptic - far beyond anything I've seen in Austin.

All people deserve compassion, but public camping is not a good solution. This is a really hard problem, but I'm 80% certain the decision to reinstate the ban was correct.

36 Share Report Save Follow

6 more replies

VQopponaut35 · 1 yr. ago

Fantastic! Maybe I'll be able to take my family down town without being assaulted, like I used too.

49 Share Report Save Follow

1 more reply

CouchRadish · 1 yr. ago

I don't live in Austin, but drive rideshare some weekends in the city, and if I could vote on this Prop I would. The homeless encampments are ridiculous. People I drive who aren't from the city always find it bizarre at best and dangerous at worst that Austin has allowed these encampments to go on for this long and be this bad.

It's a safety hazard, an environmental hazard, and is otherwise just a stain on Austin as a city. Something needs to be done to help take care of the homeless, but just letting them camp wherever isn't the solution.

284 Share Report Save Follow

Reddit: https://www.reddit.com/r/Austin/comments/n2vdkr/prop_b_63_of_austin_early_voters_in_favor_of/



Dewey Coffman Author

2022-10-04 Still there today, they were mad I took a photo and chased after me yelling threats



Like Reply Share 5d

Bill Courtney

So I want to bring my bike to Austin to ride the trails ... but is this homeless camping problem a big red flag?

Like Reply Share 1h

Dewey Coffman Author

These guys are gone today.

Like Reply Share 4d

Steven Whitehorse

The lazy need to go to work.

Be a productive member of society or don't be in it.

Like Reply Share 5d

Write a comment

Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/groups/357515399653021>



Ben W. • Austin, TX

...

Beverly Shaw that may be, but we cannot avoid addressing problems simply by declaring: that is not the only problem!

The core of the homeless question is: what is a city for? What is a city park for? What are the sidewalks for? Are they for the hundreds of thousands of people who rightly live and work in the city, who use them as a path to travel or a place for respite? Are they for the insane, the addicted, the degenerate to privatize, to occupy, to seize, wheresoever they may choose to place their tent?

These places in a city have proper purposes, and we disrespect ourselves by being so weak-willed and weak-minded as to allow those purposes to be subverted.

Let us minister to the homeless, but not by shirking our responsibility to maintain this beautiful city. (edited)

2w [Like](#) [Reply](#) [Share](#)



Beverly Shaw • Hancock

...

Ben I never said anything about parks should house the homeless. I said not every ill in the city should be blamed on the homeless like people peeing on buildings or throwing trash on the ground. There are plenty of people who know better and can do better but just don't care

19 Sep [Like](#) [Reply](#) [Share](#)



Mando Ponce • Austin, TX

...

Beverly Shaw ill take peeing and trash vs drugs and violence. You're complaining about something so small

19 Sep [Like](#) [Reply](#) [Share](#)

Nextdoor : https://nextdoor.com/p/WD3zh6bsPydP/c/830845369?init_source=search&query=homeless

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