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Unstable Housing in Rural Communities

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SWK400: Family Systems Theory and Practice

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Abstract

Housing is a crucial part of survival and one's ability to engage in life, but the increasing difficulty in obtaining affordable, quality, safe housing is of great concern. To better understand the housing crisis and be equipped to advocate on behalf of the unhoused, research was conducted on many factors including correlation with the ACES study, the housing crisis in America, the redefinition of housing terms, psychological impact on both adult and children, and the physical impacts of housing insecurity. It becomes evident that housing is a complex, multi-faceted issue. Nonetheless, it is one that requires significant consideration. There are serious and threatening implications for both adults and children who experience housing insecurity. This synthesis of research will be important in educating community members, creating awareness of the issue, and advocating on behalf of those facing homelessness or housing insecurity, as well as planning for future housing projects.

Factors Contributing to Housing Crisis

If it is believed that housing is a human right, attaining that right is almost impossible in the current housing condition. Swope & Hernández states that, “The United States faces an unprecedented and multifaceted housing crisis, and because of this, housing is more unaffordable than ever.” This crisis isn’t a newfound phenomenon. Broken systems have been at play for quite some time. Housing disparities can be traced back to a decades-long legacy of governmental, institutional, and interpersonal discriminatory policies and practices (Swope & Hernández, 2019). Policy band-aids will not be sufficient; solutions must occur at a systemic level.

There have been times in American history that peoples’ right to housing has been supported. One example is the U.S. Housing Act of 1949 and the United Nations’ Universal Declaration of Human Rights (Swope & Hernández, 2019). Unfortunately, these efforts have not been sufficient. The U.S. government has engaged with housing halfheartedly, often ‘viewing housing as a commodity rather than a right’ (Swope & Hernández, 2019). There are significant consequences of the housing crisis, especially when the housing-health connection is acknowledged. Despite this, “insufficient political mobilization has occurred to address shortfall in the provision of adequate, affordable, stable housing” (Swope & Hernández, 2019).

Housing is less affordable today for both homeowners and renters in more than one hundred years, and things are not improving (Dworkin, 2022). “Between 1960 and 2016, median rents rose 61% and median home values increased 112% along with a doubling of the number of renters who are cost burdened” (Swope & Hernández, 2019). Cost burdening happens as a result of outrageously high rent prices. Cost burdens are a direct result of the shortage of affordable and available rental homes, and of low wages (National Low Income Housing Condition, 2022). A

family household is cost-burdened when more than 30% of its income is spent on rent and utilities (National Low Income Housing Condition). Many families live paycheck to paycheck, with most of that precious income going to unreasonable rent cost. “71% of extremely low-income renter households are severely cost-burdened, and they account for 72% of all severely cost-burdened renter households in the U.S” (National Low Income Housing Condition). Many cost-burdened families are left worrying about how to pay for other basic necessities like putting food on the table. When food is put on the table, it is most likely not of high quality because of the cost concerns.

Not only are rental homes nearly impossible to afford, but there is also a shortage of their existence. “The U.S. has a shortage of 7 million rental homes affordable and available to low-income renters, and only 36 affordable and available rental homes exist for every 100 extremely low-income renter households (National Low Income Housing Condition, 2022). One might wonder why this is happening, and the decrease in public housing could be to blame: “Public housing construction halted in the 1970s, leaving the provision of affordable housing to the private market; such units can be difficult for residents to secure, and are often less affordable due to rents being set at the market rate rather than as a percentage of household income and located in high-poverty neighborhoods” (Swope & Hernández, 2019). Not to mention the cost of obtaining and servicing a loan exceeds the profitability of mortgages less than \$150,000, and because of this, the crisis will not end (Dworkin, 2022). No lasting company will seek out business that loses money. It is a vicious cycle with detrimental effects. “Fewer homeowners mean more renters, more renters mean high rents, and higher rents mean more economic homelessness, which is driving the national homelessness number higher every year” (Dworkin, 2022).

A crisis within the housing crisis is the existence of discrimination and structural disadvantages enforced by institutions and individuals for people for marginalized populations. The unequal burden of housing disparities faced by these marginalized populations does not occur spontaneously or naturally; it is systemic. 71% of Whites own homes (Swope & Hernández, 2019). On the other hand, 45% of Hispanics and 41% of Blacks own homes (Swope & Hernández, 2019). The homes of White individuals are also worth more (Swope & Hernández, 2019). It is staggering to recognize that the median wealth of White households today is “8 times more than that of Black households and eight times that of Hispanic households” (Swope & Hernández, 2019).

Historically, full control of residential choices for marginalized groups were denied through economically exclusionary ideologies that promoted “racial covenants, redlining, exclusionary zoning, involuntary displacement policies, and other mechanisms of patterned residential disadvantage” (Swope & Hernández, 2019). The effects of this have been intergenerational, which explains some of the continued issues faced today. “Contemporary policies and practices continue to reinforce housing disparities through shifts in federal housing assistance policies, sub-prime loan targeting, and housing discrimination” (Swope & Hernández, 2019). Because of this, lines of segregation run deeper and deeper with time. Aspiring non-White homeowners are prevented from homeownership while White people can own homes without struggle, reducing the equity of homes in non-White neighborhoods (Swope & Hernández, 2019). There are limited housing options for poor and non-White individuals, and this restricted them to unaffordable and unstable housing (Swope & Hernández, 2019). Generationally, the unequal access to home equity has prevented wealth accumulation across generations (Swope &

Hernández, 2019). It is ironic that the inability to build home equity is both a consequence of structural inequalities and an aid in reproducing the inequality.

Land-use zoning contributes to the inequality. “Minority and low-income neighborhoods have disproportionately been zoned for undesirable uses like heavy commercial and industrial uses, which expose residents to environmental hazards such as air and noise pollution, traffic and the denial of development of waterfronts for communal rather than commercial purposes” (Swope & Hernández, 2019). Even more alarming is how land zoning is used with White or wealthier neighborhoods. These neighborhoods that intend to remain as such were frequently zoned as exclusively single-family or otherwise low-density (Swope & Hernández, 2019). In addition, there are building permit caps or moratoria put in place, which limit and preclude the supply of multi-unit buildings with lower rents that would have been affordable to lower-income people and/or people of color (Swope & Hernández, 2019).

The Latino/Latina population faces unique housing challenges because of the highly heterogeneous nature of the population regarding country of origin, foreign-born status, documentation status (Swope & Hernández, 2019). Every housing situation is unique, thus providing a variety of challenges. Housing challenges will look vastly different in terms of the degree and impact of marginalization, depending on whether the setting is urban or rural (Swope & Hernández, 2019). For example, a large majority of migrant farmworkers are undocumented Mexican immigrants who have little to no protection against wage exploitation (Swope & Hernández, 2019). Therefore, they are often taken advantage of economically which effects the ability to afford housing. Housing is often found on a very tight budget in small or rural communities with limited supply and tenants have little recourse due to their social and economic vulnerability (Swope & Hernández, 2019).

There are significant differences in the income of the average White household and one of people of color. “Black, American Indian and Alaska Native, and Latino households are more likely than White households to be extremely low-income renters (National Low Income Housing Condition, 2022). While 6% of White households are extremely low-income renters, 20% of Black households, 18% of American Indian and Alaska Native households, and 15% of Latino households are extremely low-income renters (National Low Income Housing Condition, 2022). The numbers don’t lie; there is clear systemic disfunction playing a huge part in disparity. This gaping disparity is the result of higher homeownership rates and higher incomes among White households (National Low Income Housing Condition, 2022). Although there are laws in place to prevent discrimination based on income, it still takes place. Housing discrimination based on source of income, though illegal, is rarely enforced and fundamentally threatens housing choice voucher holders, particularly in gentrifying markets and high-opportunity neighborhoods (Swope & Hernández, 2019).

There are significant barriers to all human beings having access to equal housing, and the concern has never been greater. According to research, Americans’ concerns about the availability of affordable housing have outpaced worries about other local issues. “The percentage of adults who say this is a major problem where they live is larger than the shares who say the same about drug addiction (35%), the economic and health impacts of COVID-19 (34% and 26%, respectively) and crime (22%) (Schaeffer, 2022). Safe, quality, affordable housing could be the determining factor between a life of health and success and a life of struggle. The efforts to create change and reform need to be as intense as the present concern.

Demographics

The overall population of Sioux county in the state of Iowa, according to the 2020 census, is 35,872 (Welcome to Iowa, n.d.). With a little over half of the population employed, at 18,830, many people work; however, Sioux county's poverty rate is 5.48% (Sioux County, n.d.). In Sioux county, the median household income is around \$73,000, which is higher than the median income in the rest of the United States. The typical median annual income for the rest of the country tends to be around \$64,000 (Sioux County, n.d.). However, even with the average household income being higher than in other parts of the county, the cost of living is higher. According to the Iowa Association of REALTORS, in August 2022, the average single-family house sale price was \$286,048 with only 26 houses available for consumers (2022). Because of the financial burden, these prices make finding a house difficult for many families.

Many people own houses, with about 80.8% of the population of Sioux county being house owners (Sioux County, n.d.). However, the other 20% of people who rent in Sioux county will spend about \$995 for a one-bedroom apartment, and if the family can afford that price, there are only about 25 apartment options to rent (Zumper, n.d.). Either way, if a person is buying or renting, housing prices can create unstable housing because of the gap between income and housing prices.

Another challenge is the rural area of Sioux County's location. Many people have to travel for work, which can be another financial barrier to the cost of living. The challenges of lack of housing, affordability, and the significant difference between the average cost of living and the average income, can make it hard for people to find housing that is within their means.

Housing is an essential aspect of life that can cause many families to leave the community without affordable options.

Terminology

There are many different types of homelessness, and for each person, it can look very different. Many people only have one idea of what homelessness is. The picture that comes to mind is someone living under a bridge or sleeping on a park bench. However, many different circumstances would qualify under the term homelessness.

Stigmas come with the idea of homelessness, some of which include couch hopping, unstable housing, unhoused, and housing insecurity. Couch hopping is a damaged type of unstable housing that many teens and adolescents participate in. Many people who couch hop put themselves in a vulnerable situation with strangers and other situations that could be harmful. However, Curry et al. (2020) looked at the situation from a strengthened perspective by considering having a host or family take a teen in, which creates more of a long-term situation. However, there are many situations where having a host family is unrealistic. Couch hopping is just one example of how people can be taken advantage of in a vulnerable position.

Because of the abundance of negative connotations, it is imperative to be intentional with the language that is used when talking about this population. Using first-person language is of utmost importance. Instead of saying “homeless person”, one should say a "person that is experiencing homelessness" (2022). Using person-first language helps people see the person, creating more positive attitudes on the subject.

It can be difficult to change the stereotypes and discriminatory behavior shown towards people who are experiencing homelessness. This change can be especially hard in smaller rural

areas because of the unique challenges people face. Rural areas have different resource pools than larger cities. Transportation, shelter, and an abundance of housing are rare. When opportunities become available, people who experience unstable housing may lack the opportunity to apply because of the small-town community environment (Buck-McFadyen, E., 2022). Discriminatory behavior might not allow people experiencing homelessness equal opportunities. Therefore, using person-first language to identify humans instead of their circumstances is so important. In this way, person-first language does not let people be defined by their situation.

Physical Implications of Housing Instability

Homelessness is undoubtedly a problem in the United States of America. What is more misunderstood is the physical health effects of inadequate housing. Physical illnesses that are common to people who have inadequate housing or are homeless include malnutrition, chronic pain, skin diseases, musculoskeletal disorders, and poor dental health. (Onapa 2022). Due to the harsh living conditions like overcrowding and inadequate sleep, homeless people are also susceptible to respiratory disorders such as community-acquired pneumonia (CAP), asthma and chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD), and infectious diseases such as tuberculosis, hepatitis C virus, HIV (human immunodeficiency virus), and AIDS (acquired immune deficiency syndrome). Not only are these diseases more prevalent in the homeless population, the chances of dying younger are four times higher in this population than the general population.

While there is research promoting that children's well-being is greatly improved when they live in stable, high-quality housing, there is little research done on children living in government funded housing. Gensheimer 2022 examines the health of children living in Low-

Income Housing Tax Credit (LIHTC) properties. The study looks at national averages of health care access as well as health status in children in an LIHTC property compared to low-income children not living in an LIHTC property. They found that children living in an LIHTC property were more likely to have had a well-child doctor visit in the last 12 months and a dental appointment in the last 6 months than low-income children not in an LIHTC property. On the flip side, children in an LIHTC property were more likely to chronically miss school and had higher levels of asthma. Additional findings from the study were that there is a shortage of 3.8 million affordable rental properties for low-income families and approximately 2.6 million of low-income families (with children) pay over half of their income on unsafe housing. The idea behind children's health and LIHTC is that providing parents with additional income that otherwise would go towards housing costs, allows them the financial opportunity to seek health promoting purchases. These are things like healthier food (since junk food is the cheapest available in stores), doctor visits, medications, extracurricular activities, and more. While these are all great things, the reality is that the LIHTC is hard for families to qualify for and the properties themselves add to the health problems of low-income families because they are often not in good condition. It was also found that chronic asthma was higher in children living in LIHTC housing than children in other low-income housing situations. This suggests that LIHTC properties need to be assessed more thoroughly.

Another aspect of inadequate housing is the insecurity it brings to families. The population with the highest likelihood of facing housing insecurity is the Latinxs community. In the US, twenty one percent of all rented households with incomes at or below the poverty line are being rented by Latinx families. In comparison, only six percent of white households are extremely low-income renters. In addition, a 2016 study found that 54% of Latinx households

were estimated to be rent burdened which means they are paying more than 30% of their incomes for housing. This percentage is greater than the 43% of the White non-Latinx population who is rent burdened. This number is likely to be low as well because many Latinx families rely on social networks through multi-family living. Meaning that multiple families live in one rental property because they can't financially support themselves. Research suggests that people of Latinx origin are less likely to receive public benefits, like health insurance for example, which only strains their financial situation further. Since they experience lower insurance coverage, they also experience higher rates of chronic illness like obesity and diabetes. (Chinchilla 2022).

In China there are significant implications on physical health for people with low housing satisfaction. (You 2022). This is because low housing satisfaction is often because of poor indoor environments. You stated that, "Migrants living in poor indoor environments may experience overcrowding, poor sanitation, inadequate lighting, noise exposure, inadequate ventilation, narrow stairwells, etc. (Keall et al 2008; Krieger & Higgins, 2002; Lowry, 1989)." All of these things determine the quality of the indoor environment which determines physical health. Poor lighting, narrow staircases, and overcrowded facilities put tenants at a higher risk of injury. Poor sanitation can contribute to infections like trachoma and gastrointestinal infections. Overcrowding is also known to be related with higher influenza rates. Noise exposure is known to affect blood pressure and puts one at risk for heart disease. Inadequate ventilation is associated with respiratory illnesses. Housing that neglects clean and safe outdoor areas create environments where people can't be physically active or enjoy nature which is known to reduce stress which reduces illnesses. Inconvenient transportation means that people must get up earlier to commute, so they lose sleep. Inadequate sleep increases the risk for heart disease, high blood

pressure, and obesity. Other health related concerns are the effects that pest infestations and chemical exposure have on the body.

Psychological Implications of Housing Instability on Adults

Researchers of Migrants in China have found a connection between housing satisfaction and mental health. (You 2022). In China almost all migrants couldn't afford to own their own housing because of the high housing prices, much like what was being seen in the USA. This meant that their only housing options were to live in employer-provided dormitories or rent out their own private housing. The problem was that the apartments and dormitories they were living in are in much poorer condition than the houses available for purchase. When interviewed, more than half of the migrants lived in rental or employer housing for two years or less. Very few migrants lived more than four years in their residence because they were unsatisfied with the conditions. This kind of instability in living arrangements leads to many more problems such as job loss, inability to pay rent, disrepair and inadequate housing conditions, and violent crime. The Joint Center for Housing Studies (2015) suggested that inadequate affordable housing units can result in overall residential instability. Other hidden correlations between housing satisfaction and migrant mental health were also uncovered in this study. Dampness was independently related to mental health since it resulted in anxiety and depression. Overcrowding and noise exposure elevated psychological distress and induced helplessness. Pest infestations negatively impacted mental health with cockroach and mouse infestations showing the greatest signs of depressive symptoms among public housing residents. (You 2022).

Relationships between self-evaluation of apartments, obesity, and self-esteem have been found particularly in women. (Yuval 2022). Obesity and low self-esteem seem to effect one's

evaluation of an apartment. This meant that people who are obese had lower self-esteem, which made them think that they didn't deserve a nicer apartment.

Another population affected by inadequate housing was domestic violence survivors. Stay-at-home orders during the Covid-19 pandemic only made unstable living conditions worse. Three hundred domestic violence survivors were surveyed over two years. They were interviewed once when they initially came to a Domestic Violence agency and then once every 6 months after. Researchers examined survivors' safety, housing stability, and mental health before, during, and after the onset of the pandemic. Other factors they considered were demographic, social, and familial factors that seemed to help the stay-at-home orders or make them worse. While victimization, housing instability and mental health did not worsen for this population as a result of COVID-19, there wasn't improvement in these areas like there was before the pandemic. This is likely because social distancing made it harder to help people in DV situations. Another explanation the study gave for the results is that all the participants had sought help to get out of their DV situation whereas victims still living with their abusers couldn't be interviewed. Domestic violence survivors face more challenging housing situations than the general population because of their need for emergency housing to leave their abusive partner. Not being able to find housing once a survivor decides to leave their abuser only worsens their mental health. This psychological toll of wanting to leave, but not having the financial means or alternative housing to leave an abusive partner is a heavy burden to carry (Chiaromonte 2022).

Psychological Implications of Housing Instability on Children

It is no secret that children experiencing homelessness are among the most invisible and neglected individuals in our society, and despite their ever-growing number, homeless children have no voice and constituency. (Bassuk, et al, 2014). Living as an unhoused child doesn't go without negative effects, especially on psychological well-being. Children without stable and safe housing "experience greater exposure to extreme poverty, household chaos, family instability, and violence than their stably housed peers" (Marcal, 2017). This negative exposure is associated with worse child outcomes on a number of socioemotional indicators such as learned helplessness, psychological distress, behavior problems, and developmental delays (Marcal, 2017). Clinically diagnosable mental health disorders are also not uncommon. Alarmingly, up to two in five children who have experienced being homeless suffer from a clinically diagnosable mental health disorder, which is more than twice the rate among comparable non-homeless children (Marcal, 2017). If this doesn't raise concern, I don't know what will.

It is important to acknowledge the possibility of the child internalizing symptoms in the instance of being unhoused. A child who internalizes symptoms will keep those negative feelings inside. Researchers looked at the interaction between perceived parental control and SLEs (Stressful Life Events) in predicting the child internalizing symptoms. An SLE is any incident that exceeds an individual's personal and social resources, and thus ability to cope (Utržan, et al., 2017). A child facing housing insecurity or homelessness would most definitely fall into this category. Any SLE, whether being homeless or dealing with the death of a loved one, puts tremendous stress and strain on the family (Utržan, et al., 2017). This strain results in a sense of helplessness, which lowers perceived parental control and leads to internalizing symptoms

(Utržan, et al., 2017). As a result, homeless children are four times more likely to be diagnosed with internalizing symptoms, such as anxiety and depression, than their non-homeless peers (Utržan, 2017). Not only this, but families facing housing insecurity are often not emotionally stable and equipped to handle emotional difficulties of the child. Unsustainable rent burden, residential mobility, inadequate and unsafe housing, and literal homelessness make it difficult for families to meet the physical and emotional needs of children and adolescents (Fowler & Farrell, 2017).

The stress and trauma involved with housing insecurity as a child has profound effects. Activation of the stress response is known to, “Produces a wide range of physiological reactions that prepare the body to deal with the threat.” (Bassuk, et al., 2014). This is a normal function of the human body and without it, stressors would be crippling. Nonetheless, toxic stress results when those stress responses remain activated at high levels for significant periods of time without adequate caretaking and supportive relationships to provide calming. This has been shown to impair the development of neural connections, especially in the areas of the brain dedicated to higher-order skills (Bassuk, et al., 2014). High levels of stress are harmful for the average person, but especially for the brain of a child in crucial stages of development. “Early traumatic experiences can have profound effects on the brain architecture of young children that lead to altered brain size and structure leading to impaired cognitive skills, memory, emotional self-regulation, behavioral problems, coping, and social relationships (Bassuk, et al., 2014). It is hard to comprehend that 24% to 40% of homeless school age children have mental health problems requiring clinical evaluation (Bassuk, et al., 2014).

School is a significantly important aspect of a child’s life and ability to be successful in the future. Because children spend a large majority of their time with teachers in the classroom, it

is important to take note of what teachers are noticing. The effects of housing insecurity for children in the classroom are widespread. “An overwhelming sense of displacement and loss of a place that felt like home seemed to underpin children’s experiences, which translated into numerous practical challenges including keeping track of possessions and uniform, limited access to bathroom and laundry facilities, and finding a quiet place to do homework (Digby & Fu, 2017). This shows that children need to feel safe and secure in order to thrive.

Mood and overall demeanor of the child also suffer; teachers noticed changes in a child’s mood as many became depressed or noticeably ‘downbeat’ or sad (Digby & Fu, 2017). Not surprisingly, these mood changes resulted in a loss of confidence and low motivation socially and academically (Digby & Fu, 2017). Housing insecurity is linked to a heightened sense of self-consciousness, especially in areas with “mixed levels of affluence/deprivation as children experiencing homelessness ‘stood out’ more than peers” (Digby & Fu, 2017). The negative effects listed above do not exhaust the list; sadly, there are many more. Overall, teachers and education professionals found that changes in housing circumstances had a clear direct impact on education attainment, in terms of basic attendance and punctuality (Digby & Fu, 2017). And if the child isn’t showing up for school regularly, learning will be increasingly difficult.

Correlation of ACES & Housing Instability

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, ACE, or adverse childhood experiences, is a scoring system that measures the traumatic events in a child’s life from zero to seventeen (2021). It goes into more detail about the different events a child could experience that would cause the child’s ACE score to go up if they would experience. The list of these experiences is any sexual, physical, or emotional abuse, emotional or physical neglect, substance

abuse, parents getting divorced, a family member being incarcerated, and mental health issues (Fast facts, 2022). One of the many risk factors for children with a higher ACE score is unstable housing (Risk and protective, 2021). These traumatic events happen when a child experiences things that could challenge the child's sense of safety and stability. Unstable housing can be classified under the physical neglect category in ACE scoring. *Housing insecurity* is defined as the high cost of living compared to the wages of jobs, leading to "poor housing quality, unstable neighborhoods, overcrowding, or homelessness." (Cutts et al., 2011). Homelessness and poor housing quality can have a negative impact on people of all ages and count towards a person's ACE score. The condition of housing does play a significant role in the health of children and adults living in an unstable housing environment.

Researchers investigated the link between young children under the age of three and the connection that housing insecurity has with the child's overall health. (Cutts et al., 2011) When children are in unstable housing situations, they are a lot more likely to be exposed to violence and other things that impact the child's development. The likelihood of often moving to different homes or shelters became significant. This makes simple things like playing, celebrating birthdays, and having a routine hard for a child to thrive in their living environment. They have fewer opportunities to play with other children, and because in many of the situations the lack of space, many do not have the room to bring personal items like pictures or family memorabilia with them (Murrain, S., & Brady, E., 2022). It is hard for the child's system to regulate their emotions when in a constant state of fight or flight mode.

With the cost of housing in the United States, there is an increase in poor-quality housing and crowding. Crowding can also be an issue with smaller children, leading to many health risks like injuries, higher blood pressure, their ability to cope with stress, and exposure to infectious

diseases (2011). The long-term effects are significant; kids are more likely to experience things like teen pregnancy, poor school performance, and substance abuse, to name a few. Children living in unstable housing are 50% more likely to not graduate from high school and 2.5 times more likely to repeat a grade (Cutts et al., 2011). Having unstable housing affects children for the rest of their lives.

There are long-term effects for populations that are unhoused. Compared to the 5% of American with a severe mental illness, 21% of the homeless population has a severe mental illness (Choi et al., 2021). The significant increase in individuals with mental illness increases the need for people to have more medical attention. Costing the state more money in hospitals, jails, and state-run programs because of the lack of consistent care for people who are experiencing homelessness. Without a place for people to go, they also tend to have longer hospitalizations than the general population. (Choi et al., 2021). Their hospital stays are on average twice as long compared to those with stable housing.

Barriers to Resolving the Social Issue

When thinking about people who are experiencing housing insecurity and/or homelessness, it is important to acknowledge their vulnerability. Without a safe place to call home, there is no sense of stability or security. It is often a day-to-day struggle of survival rather than thriving. The majority of this population is experiencing something called full plate syndrome, when problem after problem is compounded so there is little energy left to confront situations. Housing insecurity doesn't just create problems surrounding housing. There are psychological, mental, emotional, and health problems associated that affect one's ability to engage in life. The energy and will to participate in community organizing will be non-existent

because all mental and emotional energy is being spent worried about what home will look like for the next few days. Humans are not superheroes; only so much can be handled at once. This is why advocacy from others is crucial.

A significant barrier to creating change are the specific regulations and rules in place that unnecessarily raise housing costs (Vankevich, 2019). Some of these regulations that help to cause the lack of affordable housing supply include density limitations, height restrictions, parking requirements, cumbersome building codes, and strict zoning laws (Vankevich, 2019). These zoning laws and regulations ultimately cause the supply of housing units to plummet which results in higher prices (Vankevich, 2019). While some might believe the solution to be a continued investment of money in assistance programs, it would be more sustainable in the long run to reduce these unnecessary rules. For change to happen in this area, federal, state, and local government officials and private sector leaders will need to cooperate and come to a consensus on the best regulatory reform actions to take (Vankevich, 2019). Similar to many social issues, a significant barrier is the partisan disagreement on the right way to move forward.

Another significant barrier includes harmful discriminatory attitudes surrounding density. In an article about housing in Utah, a housing expert argues that the “biggest obstacle to more housing is us” (Herbert, 2022). He encourages people to look inward at their own non-in-my-backyard attitudes. In addressing the land costs, homebuilders, developers, industry experts, policymakers, and academics all agree that density is a solution (Herbert, 2022). Not everyone agrees. A resident in Utah opposed a proposed townhome development and said they didn’t want to “live next to the kind of low-income people who typically reside in high-density housing”, an incredibly prideful and discriminatory way of looking at it (Herbert, 2022). The person also went on to say, “I do not want their delinquent children attending the schools that my children attend. I

do not want to deal with the increase in crime and drug use that inevitably accompanies such high-density housing units" (Herbert, 2022). These attitudes do not just exist in Utah suburbs, it is everywhere. The same thinking can be found in rural Iowa and Sioux County. Instead of seeing low-income families and families of color as worthy and deserving of quality housing, they are seen as disrupting the peace and "norm" of communities. This kind of thinking must change.

Type of Community Project

The type of community project carried out was an awareness campaign. An awareness campaign can be defined as "any time-bound, strategic campaign aimed entirely at increasing public visibility and awareness for your cause" (OneCause Powerful Fundraising Solutions, 2022). This definition describes the housing project, with a goal of increasing the public's awareness of the current housing situation. There are many examples of effective awareness campaigns that brought attention to specific issues; it is a widely used approach and for good reason.

Faith Lodge is a nonprofit organization that has a heart for helping grieving families who have experienced the loss of a child, shown by hosting healing retreats. Because October is Child Loss Awareness Month, this organization wanted to create an awareness campaign to further their mission. A campaign titled "Say Their Name Challenge" was launched, which gave their community a platform to share experiences and have conversations (OneCause Powerful Fundraising Solutions, 2022). The campaign used social media, which allowed it to spread quickly and be noticed by the local news. Because of the efforts and awareness spread, Faith's

Lodge raised over \$30,000 in October (OneCause Powerful Fundraising Solutions, 2022). The result of a powerful awareness campaign was significant funds and the reach of many supporters.

Similar to “*The Truth Behind Our Neighbors’ Door*”, the goal of “Say Their Name Challenge” was to gain support, spread awareness, and create a platform for shared experience and stories. Like this campaign, social media platforms were also used to foster awareness, as well as digital technology in the form of a documentary. The hope is for the documentary to spark conversation and concern. There seems to be a snowball effect when an awareness campaign is effectively implemented and carried out well.

Goals & Objectives

The researchers interviewed many community members who were directly affected by housing issues, or who worked with people who were directly affected by housing issues to assess the community. Of these differing perspectives, these core needs were commonly verbalized amongst all participants: (1) the need for more available housing options, (2) the need for affordable housing options, and (3) the need for clean, safe housing environments. Some challenges that interviewees had faced regarding housing were the long waiting lists to get into rental properties, insufficient funds to pay for the high rent prices, insufficient credit/paperwork to purchase a home, lack of rental properties and houses available, poor conditions of the very few affordable rental properties, as well as landlords who did not keep their properties clean or safe regardless of the high prices their tenants paid to live there. Sioux County Iowa is known for being a religious county as 86.2% of the population is affiliated with a religious group. We came to understand that because of Sioux County's large religious population, this county is overall very caring of others. The researchers wanted to utilize this strength to bring awareness of the

housing issues going on that are “behind closed doors” or otherwise not noticeable to the average community member.

Goal 1: Understand the housing issues in Sioux County, Iowa.

Objective 1: Research statistics of housing issues as well as collect data from sources within Sioux County (such as Promise Community Health’s 2022 PRAPARE summary & data from Community Health Partners).

Objective 2: Conduct interviews with community members who have been directly affected by housing issues or work with people who are experiencing housing issues

Goal 2: Create ways for community members to access the information the researchers found.

Objective 1: The researchers compiled their research along with previous research sources from their Literature Review into a document that was published by the DeWitt Library at Northwestern College in Orange City, Iowa.

Objective 2: The researchers found a videographer to record all the interviews. The videographer then compiled the interviews into a 19-minute documentary that can be found under this You-Tube link. <http://youtu.be/BmgZeZKWkdg> into a documentary that can be accessed via You-Tube.

Objective 3: The researchers hosted an event to premier the documentary. At this documentary the researchers shared a short presentation from their Literature Review. Additionally, the researchers invited 6 qualified community members who have

a lot of knowledge surrounding the housing issues to answer questions on a panel after the film.

Method of Engagement

It is essential to have a plan of engagement when creating a documentary. The first thing that is needed is knowing the needs of the community. Speaking with community members and knowing where to ask will determine the results of the needs seen. Because of this reason, one of the methods that were used to find people and information was the snowball effect. The snowball effect is when a person who fits the criteria is asked if they know anyone else in a similar situation. Once participants were found, they were asked to sign an informed consent by informing the participants of the content of the study. Participants consented to the nature of the study when they explained what their part would consist of. Once people who had shared experiences were found, they were asked to participate in an interview. During the interview, a series of rehearsed questions. Participants were asked whether they feel there is a need for more housing in Sioux County and other relevant questions pertaining to housing. The interviewers were also asked to share stories that they felt applied to this line of questioning.

Another area of the documentary is interviewing local experts. Local experts were allowed to share how they saw the situation from a helping perspective. Promise Community Health Center was able to talk about their clients and how they can help. They also provided information about the number of people in Sioux county facing housing issues and the effects that are seen because of the lack of unstable housing.

One of the reasons for creating a documentary is to educate the local community by showing real people and their stories. With a documentary, people can hear and see the emotions of those struggling with finding stable housing in their community. For change to happen, people need to know about the problem and connect with the people facing this situation. With a documentary, this can happen without violating people's housing and private spaces.

Method of Strategy

Multiple methods of strategy were used to market the premier of the documentary. First, the researchers identified a target audience. The researchers specifically targeted members of the community who were considered “stakeholders” or those who have power. These were city councilmen/women, business owners, the CEO of the hospital, realtors, college professors, the president of Northwestern College, etc. The researchers wanted to create an event that was interesting, so they worked diligently in making captivating posters, emails, newspaper articles, and more to draw attention to the event. The film was titled “The Truth Behind our Neighbors Doors”. This title insinuated that there was something to be learned or that there was something unknown about the community’s “neighbors”. The posters included a picture of a home that was in very poor condition as well as a brief description of the topic of the evening. In the emails and phone calls to stakeholders, the researchers expressed how important their presence at this event was since they held so much prestige and power within the community. The next strategy utilized by the researchers was to include a panel at the premier of the documentary. This was put in place to ensure that audience members would get their questions answered by very qualified individuals. As a team the researchers acknowledged that while they had gained much understanding of this topic, they were not experts which is why we wanted to have a qualified panel. The researchers spent considerable time promoting the event to ensure they could get as

many community members to it as possible. They contacted multiple newspapers to write up a story on our efforts. Only one newspaper actually followed through, but many community members communicated to them that they had seen the story in the paper. Another way the researchers promoted the event was through direct emails, phone calls, and conversations with community members (specifically stakeholders). They also had mini posters created and put into every faculty member's box at Northwestern College. Additionally, they used social media to share the details of the upcoming event through each of their personal social media accounts as well as the two non-profit organization's accounts involved in their project (PIECE & Whispers of Love, Hope, & Joy) using a digital poster. Finally, after the event they encouraged audience members to fill out response cards that asked them their name, contact information, and how they will be getting involved in helping solve the housing issues of Sioux County, Iowa.

Method of Organizing

The community project was constructed with the Consciousness Raising model of organizing in mind. This model “looks at enhancing personal and collective awareness and understanding of an issue through individuals’ personal experiences” (Dewey & Zafar, 2014). The focus of this model is individual experiences, the exact focus and purpose of the documentary. Through the real, lived experiences of people, there is collective awareness raised and as a result, power for change. This model “looks at the root of an issue with a long-term perspective, noting that oppression stems from a greater societal issue” (Dewey & Zafar, 2014). It must be recognized that the housing issue won’t be fixed immediately because of systemic injustices that have existed for a long period of time. The organizing efforts, for now, are focused on awareness and gaining support, with a long-term vision of bringing justice and equality with regard to housing.

The actual event resulting from the awareness campaign and efforts was the showing of a documentary entitled *The Truth Behind Our Neighbors' Door*. The showing took place at Trinity Reformed Church in Orange City, IA on November 17th at 7 PM. Initially, a presentation was given on the research regarding housing needs and disparity. Next, the documentary was shown, followed by a panel of six individuals who were educated on housing, had experiences with housing, and/or have a passion for the issue. The purpose of the panel was to create an opportunity for challenging, yet important questions to be asked and talked about. After the documentary and panel discussion, there was a call to action to involve the community members in taking action. An important aspect for the event was the inclusion of the people who were interviewed for the documentary. Although it is recognized that interviewees may not feel comfortable viewing it in the presence of an audience, all participants were invited to the event out of deep appreciation and respect.

Because the project focused on a sensitive topic and vulnerable population, mitigation measures were important to consider. The first step to ensure safety was the gathering of participants before the event and showing of the film. Before and after the filming process, the participants were debriefed about what their participation included. The participants were able to give feedback during the gathering and provide verbal and signed informed consent. In addition to informed consent, the organizing group offered to blur faces in the video as well as change voices. All decisions were made considering the safety and comfortability of the participants. The overall focus was on respecting the vulnerability of the participants. All filming was done in a private, safe environment.

Theoretical Orientation

The population that is being examined is unstable housing in a rural area. Homelessness looks different depending on the area, and in a rural setting, it has unique challenges. When the term homelessness is used, most people think about people sleeping on park benches and under bridges; however, unstable housing can take on many different looks. Couch surfing and living in overcrowded homes are becoming more common in rural areas. With the lack of affordable housing, people are unable to contribute to their local communities and thrive. Many things also play a role in unstable housing. Buck-McFadyen talks about the link between insecure housing, health problems, food insecurity, and children's ability to meet development stages (2022). In smaller communities, there are fewer formal resources for people to participate in. People must leave the smaller communities and move to larger cities to find the help they need. Education and other basic human needs are becoming increasingly complex with unstable housing.

The Social Ecological Model is one model used to examine the homeless population in a rural setting. Davidson et. (2016) uses the Social Ecological Model to examine the five levels influencing people based on their social environment. The Social-Ecological Model's five levels consider intrapersonal, interpersonal, organizational, community, and public policy. With homelessness, many facets play a role in unstable housing that involve the five levels apart from the SEM. This model looks at all the different resources available to people; for the intrapersonal level, the social worker would assess things like the individual's self-knowledge. The individual's friend groups, family, and peer support system would be assessed for the interpersonal level. The next level, organizational, is taking a closer look at the different organizations in the area, such as churches, stores, and other community resources that the person could utilize. The community would also be looked at and see what it has to offer, things like different social networks that are in the community. Finally, homelessness must be addressed on a local, state, and federal policy

level. In the research that was done, the results of the event were spoken about at City Hall meeting to bring more awareness of the issue of lack of housing. Only so much can be done without the proper legislation to help people facing homelessness. Using the Social Ecological Model helps social workers better understand the complete picture of the needs of the people who are experiencing unstable housing. Understanding what the individual has and does not have allowed social workers to address the root issues instead of the symptoms of homelessness.

Another framework that is important to take into account is Asset Based Community Development. This model looks at the community itself as being its best asset. ABCD does not focus on the community's needs but on the assets, taking in the strengths and working with them (Dewey & Zafar, 2014). ABCD focuses on the positive perspective; the community can then identify the power it possesses instead of what it lacks (Dewey & Zafar, 2014). When the community members come together, they have the power to make the change needed for their community.

Both the Social Ecological Model and Asset Based Community Development Model look at the different ways to empower the community and how everything is involved with one another. Having an understanding of how people are affected by SEM helps people use the resources that are available to them. Pairing that with ABCD allows the community to see their strengths and show that they are the best ones to stand up and make the changes needed.

Results

Through the community organizing efforts, the housing issues in Sioux County, Iowa, were acknowledged and better understood. The organizing project, through means of a documentary and panel discussion, created a way for community members to access relevant

research and personal testimony. 136 people attended the showing of *The Truth Behind Our Neighbors' Door*, many of which were residents of the community and influential leaders. After the event, significant interest was displayed for showing the documentary at various locations like churches and group events. For example, the documentary was shown at a Women in Leadership gathering on Northwestern College's campus.

The employer of one of the documentary's interviewees was in attendance. The employer was able to see the living conditions of his employee. Feeling conviction and empathy, he expressed interest in helping the mother and her living situation. In addition, the community organizers gained the attention of the city council by attending a city council meeting. Of utmost importance is the fact that vulnerable populations were given a platform to express their concern and share their stories.

The documentary interviewees were very pleased with the outcome of the film. Their involvement created an opportunity to start a conversation about unstable housing, and their stories have had a lasting impression on viewers. Attendees were willing to ask questions. Thirty questions were asked by attendees, displaying curiosity and concern for the topic. Some of the questions asked included: "What are the barriers to finding adequate housing?", "Who is most affected by the housing issues?", "Are there any myths regarding housing?", "What is the current trajectory of housing in Sioux County?", "If we meet someone who is experiencing inadequate housing, what is the best way to help them?", and "How can college students with little money get involved in these efforts?"

Framework

Two frameworks were utilized in the community organizing and strategizing. First, the Socio-Ecological Model shows five different levels of involvement of a person and their environment (Brueggemann, 2014). The model details how each level is connected and the need for all levels to be addressed. A community cannot make changes to city policies if the community does not show support for the change. A community cannot support change if individuals and social networks are not invested in making changes. The community organizers focused on all levels of the model to bring the most effective and lasting change to the community.

In the documentary, the community organizers achieved the intrapersonal level by challenging community members' attitudes about homelessness. The community organizers were able to reach the interpersonal level through relationships with friends, family members, and other social networks. These relationships promote awareness of the situation that residents of Sioux County are experiencing.

On an organizational level, the community organizers noticed the overall wealth of the community and how many businesses and churches have influence. With wealth comes positions of power and influence over monetary resources, which can create a disconnect between the wealthy and the marginalized. The marginalized do not have a significant amount of money or influence for their voice to be heard. This is one of the reasons that the community organizers chose to create a documentary, intending to show the gap of understanding between the two groups.

Within Sioux County, church and faith play a significant role in the lives of residents, which heavily impacted the community. On a community level, the organizers knew it was

essential to connect with churches and their leaders. If interest was gained by churches, the people would likely follow in support. The event was not only held at a religious establishment, but two of the panelists were pastors.

On a public policy level, the community organizers attended and spoke at a city hall meeting in Orange City, Iowa. The organizers informed the council about the film's impact on the community, encouraging them to be aware of future opportunities to pass laws and city ordinances that would promote the building of safe and adorable housing. Future action is required on a policy level to create an opportunity in Sioux county for better living conditions.

Second, with the application of the Consciousness Raising model of organizing, personal experience was highlighted through a documentary-style film. Personal and collective awareness was enhanced through the viewer's ability to connect with raw, lived experiences (Dewey & Zafar, 2014). It was even more effective that the interviewees in the film were members of the target community, many of which vulnerable and oppressed populations. Similar to the model, the community organizers recognize that the housing instability will not be resolved overnight. The resolution of systemic dysfunction and disadvantage will take continued organizing efforts.

Analysis of Interventions & Processes

The two goals for the community organizers were to (1) understand the housing issues in Sioux County, Iowa and (2) make the housing issues known to the community. The first goal was accomplished by two objectives which were: (1) collection of housing data, statistics, and research from various sources, and (2) conduction of interviews with community members. The second goal was accomplished by three objectives which were (1) the completion of a literature review to combine all data found in an accessible document, (2) the creation of a documentary

which was compiled of all the interviews conducted, and (3) the hosting of an event to share information and the documentary with the public in a safe setting.

An event doesn't become an event unless effective advertising efforts are carried out. The advertising strategy was adequate and effective. The community organizers used a newspaper article, social media posts, and personal emails, directed at specific influential community members. This type of advertising helps reach many different people groups. The direct emails and phone calls proved to be more effective than solely putting up posters. The community organizers used personal connections in the community to reach specific people, while other tactics helped spread overall awareness.

The organizers presented relevant research before the documentary was shown. The presentation of research provided a build-up for the attendees, preparing their minds for what was about to be seen. The organizers were able to introduce the topic in a way that left out personal emotion and bias, allowing for the intake of reliable and factual information.

The panel discussion was effective in furthering education of the attendees. It provided an opportunity for people to reflect, listen, and curiously ask questions that arose while viewing the documentary. The organizers were diligent in finding qualified and educated leaders/professionals to serve as panelists. These panelists either had personal connection with housing or significant education on the issue. The panel allowed the attendees to witness recognizable community leaders support and acknowledge the issue.

Reflecting on the project outcome, there are strategies that could have proved more effective. The team members recognize having the event on a Thursday night made it difficult for many to attend. Weeknights are busy for families, and there were at least two other events

going on within the community. If done again, the event would most likely take place on a Sunday night.

The team acknowledged that advertising should've begun sooner, at least a month before the event. A local news reporter at the event would've been helpful in attracting more attention to the issue. In addition to advertising sooner, the team could have included more surrounding towns, making the focus on Northwest Iowa. To better record who was in attendance, a sign-in sheet would have been beneficial. Regarding the response cards, the team should've set aside time during the event for the cards to be filled out and collected.

Successes & Failures

The community organizing team had a vision for bringing awareness to the issue and then found a way to make it possible. Each team member provided different skills sets, such as communication, visual arts, advertising, and public speaking. Each team member also provided connections with people from the community, which were necessary in putting on the event. These connections included the church staff, a videographer, a translator, panelists, and a director of audio and visual. The team members were bold in approaching people for help and advice, never shying away from asking questions. The team was courageous in shedding light on an emotional and potentially controversial issue.

The community organizers found that a documentary worked well for an awareness campaign. This style of education was received well by the community because they were visually exposed to the housing issues of Sioux County. Visualization allowed for deeper empathy. Instead of only telling the community what the organizers found, it was shown. Many

people were unaware of the unstable housing situation their neighbors face and needed something like a film to illustrate the need.

The team created response cards for the attendees to fill out after the event, with the intent of every person returning a completed card. The goal of the cards was to provide a measure of interest in continued involvement going forward, as well as feedback about the event. Unfortunately, only six cards were filled out. Because the crowd was larger than expected, nearly half of the audience wasn't provided with a card. The community organizers did not create an additional method for attendees to provide feedback, other than the response cards. Because of this, there was not a concrete way to evaluate the outcome, other than the completed response cards, the number of attendees (136), and continued interest shown.

The organizers measured their success of the project by the effects the video had on the community members. Many conversations were had after the event and there was no negative pushback from community members. Positive remarks included how "great it is that someone is addressing these issues", along with how community members were going to think differently about housing. After the community organizers presented at a city council meeting, council members disclosed how they will be thinking hard about how to solve the issues within the community.

Reflection

The community organizers saw firsthand the power in organizing a group of people for a common cause. The most difficult part is gaining the interest of people, as well as commitment to attending an event. Once people are gathered, there are positive rippling effects from the connections made.

Knowing the right people makes all the difference. Community organizing is not a solo act, and there are many different people and skills needed to turn an idea into a reality. The community organizers learned the importance of networking, being bold in approaching others for help and asking many questions. Other people are the most helpful resource. Having a posture of humility and accepting help will, in the end, make the organizing efforts more successful.

Within a community, there can be an imbalance of power; many community members might feel powerless and unable to speak their minds. Through the short film, people who would not normally have a voice were able to speak and talk about issues often overlooked. This platform provides a chance to be in control and feel empowered to create change (Brueggemann, 2014). Empowering the community to take control through things like education, awareness, and solidarity help in taking back the power once taken away. Empowering community members allows for targeting specific powers, as well as challenging the positions of leaders.

Awareness of the issue is crucial before any change takes place. The community organizers saw the effectiveness of sharing personal stories and targeting the emotions of people, specifically through a documentary. Deep felt emotion moves people to care and act. Although there is a vulnerability in sharing personal experience, it is well worth it. The documentary, also known as an awareness campaign, brought awareness to the housing instability in Sioux County. Without a campaign of awareness, people are left in the dark and unable to pool together resources and strengths. Creating awareness allows for opportunities to have difficult conversations and for the community to empathize with other residents.

Education and awareness go hand in hand. The education piece plays a significant role in getting the community involved with social justice issues like unstable housing. The saying, “You don’t know what you don’t know” applies. People cannot act on an issue in which they are uneducated. The presented research, documentary and panel discussion allowed for statistics and relevant data to be shown and heard.

Community Action Plan

Orange City is just one of the many communities affected by a lack of stable, safe housing. There are many surrounding communities also facing housing instability. A community action intervention plan for the short-term future involves continued showings of the film, with a goal of creating greater awareness. Community members have expressed interest in showing the film in their specific communities. There has been interest in showing the film at a church in Sheldon, as well as a location in Sioux Center. There is a curiosity of people that must be capitalized on.

The continued showings of the documentary could also include further education in what constitutes affordable housing and a livable wage. These are factors of the housing crisis that bring confusion and controversy. The intent of continued showings would be for the community members to take charge in organizing the people. For change to occur, the community members must adopt this issue as their own.

In addition to continued showings of the film, fundraising efforts are needed. This could involve a greater awareness of and participation with the surrounding organizations that provide housing support, like PIECE and Genesis House. More physical housing units are a significant

need, and this requires money. To move the issue from awareness to action, there must be significant philanthropic efforts.

For the housing project to continue, PIECE (Partners in Education, Community Outreach, and Embracing Diversity) needs to raise money to fulfill the dream of having property in the community. Finding creative ways of raising money might be challenging, but it can be done. People could get involved in events like a Walk-a-Thon or a fun run, which allows the whole community to unite and show support for both PIECE and housing needs.

A practical step for the community to take is to continue talking about the housing issues. While it was fantastic to see 136 people at the event, the organizers would like the awareness of these issues to spread throughout the entire Northwest Iowa area. Ways to continue spreading awareness are (1) more public showings of the documentary with group discussion afterward, (2) community members talking to their neighbors – hearing stories is the best way for members of the community to become passionate about finding solutions to the housing crisis, and (3) attend city council meetings – change must happen on a political level which means policy changes and advocacy are crucial. The community organizers provided a basis for beginning conversations and education in Sioux County, but it will be up to the community to implement change.

Appendix

Figure 1

Digital advertising poster in English and Spanish



Figure 2

Newspaper article in The Capital Democrat



Figure 3

Response cards filled out by attendees

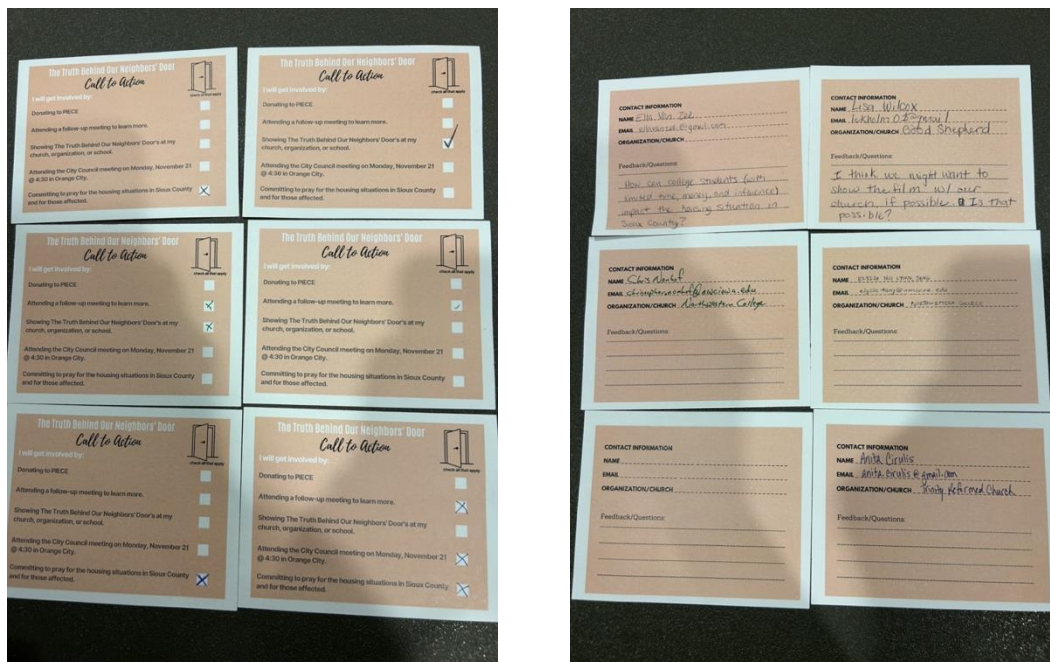


Figure 4

Community organizers presenting research to audience



Figure 5

Audience at the event (136 people in attendance)



Figure 6

Members of community organizing group



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