

Research Paper

The Management of Parks and Public Spaces in the Context of Unsheltered Homelessness: Perspectives from Three Key Stakeholder Groups

Nicholas Andrew Pitas,^a Jeff Rose,^b Lauren Mullenbach,^c and Aaron Hoyle-Katz^a

^a Department of Recreation, Sport, and Tourism, University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign

^b Department of Parks, Recreation, and Tourism, University of Utah, Salt Lake City, UT

^c Department of Geography and Environmental Sustainability, University of Oklahoma, Norman, OK

Please send correspondence to Nick Pitas, npitas@illinois.edu

Executive Summary

People experiencing homelessness make extensive use of public greenspace, and recent years have seen increased interest in park agency-based strategies to address homelessness and its symptoms. However, there is a relative lack of literature addressing the equitable management of these spaces with consideration for park users experiencing homelessness, and much of the existing work has been conducted from the perspective of a single user group. In this research we triangulate the perspectives of people experiencing homelessness, housed members of the public, and park district employees through a series of focus group interviews. This work provides unique context and multiple angles of approach to a challenging issue as we seek to understand perceptions and priorities within the context of park and public space management. Specifically, we addressed three research questions focused on (a) the current and ideal role of a park and recreation agency in addressing homelessness in the community, (b) the characteristics of positive and negative interactions between agency employees and people experiencing homelessness, and (c) management priorities and challenges in this context. Our results indicate substantial common ground, some ambiguity, and a number of concrete priorities for equitably managing parks and public spaces in this context. All three stakeholder groups agreed that the current agency role was limited in scope, and largely focused on enforcement and quality control over parks and the recreation experience. Whereas park district employees advocated for a more proactive approach to homelessness, people experiencing homelessness and housed members of the community favored maintaining a limited role for the park district. Positive interactions mirrored those between park agency employees and other users, and were characterized by an emphasis on the essential humanity of people experiencing homelessness, and the formation of long-term familiarity and relationships. Negative interactions on the other hand were largely related to enforcement of rules and regulations, and patterns of previous negative interactions. Safety was identified as the top priority by all three user groups, with the public also prioritizing a welcoming and aesthetically pleasing park environment. Key challenges included a lack of resources, and the complexity of the issue of homelessness.

Keywords

Equity, homelessness, parks, public space, management

Introduction

In the United States, people experiencing homelessness (PEH) often make extensive use of parks and other public greenspaces for purposes of leisure, socialization, relaxation, and, occasionally, sleeping and other biophysical functions. Despite this, there is a relative lack of literature that addresses the equitable management of parks and public spaces with consideration for this particular—highly vulnerable and underserved—user group. Recent years have seen increased interest in park agency-based strategies to address the root cause of homelessness and its symptoms, likely in response to increasing rates of unsheltered homelessness and in the number of semi-permanent homeless encampments (Department of Housing and Urban Development [HUD], 2019; 2022; Herring, 2014) and growing public exposure to the phenomenon of homelessness both in-person and via media representation (e.g., Baur & Cerveny, 2019; Cerveny & Baur, 2020; Derrien et al., 2023; Neild & Rose, 2018). This recent work has centered the perspective of a variety of key stakeholder groups, including PEH themselves (e.g., Rose, 2017), other recreational users (e.g., Rose, 2019), and housed members of the public (HMP) (e.g., Mullenbach et al., 2023; Pitas et al., 2023). In this manuscript, we add to this growing body of work by triangulating the perspectives of three key stakeholder groups—PEH, HMP, and park district employees (PDE)—providing unique context and multiple angles of approach to a challenging issue as we seek to understand perceptions and priorities within the context of park and public space management. The results that we present simultaneously indicate much common ground, significant ambiguity, and a number of concrete priorities regarding the role and management of parks and public spaces in this context.

Homelessness in the United States

Homelessness is a widespread and persistent issue in the United States, arising from a variety of intersectional factors at the systemic level (e.g., income inequality, systemic racism, a shortage of affordable housing) and the individual level (e.g., substance abuse, loss of employment). Although multiple factors contribute, and individual context matters, recent research has identified a lack of affordable, attainable housing as the primary driving force behind homelessness (Colburn & Aldern, 2022; Shinn & Khadduri, 2020). As in other industrialized economies, homelessness in the United States is considered an intersectional, or “wicked,” problem with a variety of root causes that exclude the possibility of a single effective solution (Barile et al., 2018; Lee et al., 2010). Unfortunately, the typical response in the United States is uncoordinated, and comprised of one-off or emergency actions that often unintentionally exacerbate the issue and cause substantial personal harm (Orr et al., 2023). As a result of the overlapping risk factors involved, and a largely ineffective public-sphere response, PEH disproportionately experience a series of chronic and acute conditions, as well as premature mortality (Appa et al., 2021; Cawley et al., 2022; Henwood et al., 2013).

Though they declined after the Great Recession, rates of homelessness in the United States rose substantially following the COVID-19 pandemic and the social and economic disruptions it caused. The most recent data provided by HUD in its point-

in-time survey indicated for example that approximately 600,000 people were homeless in January 2022 (HUD, 2022). This represents more than five years of increasing rates of homelessness, and is likely an underestimate of the actual figure by 2.5-10 times (Glynn & Fox, 2019). Of particular interest to park and public space managers, the recent increases in homelessness are largely accounted for by a rise in the number of individuals experiencing unsheltered homelessness, defined as those “whose primary nighttime location is a public or private place not designated for, or ordinarily used as, a regular sleeping accommodation for people (for example, the streets, vehicles, or parks)” (HUD, 2019). Although the total number of PEH fell from approximately 400,000 in 2014 to approximately 350,000 in 2022, the number of people experiencing unsheltered homelessness rose across the same time period from approximately 175,000 to 230,000 (HUD, 2022).

Increases in the number of people experiencing unsheltered homelessness have led to a concomitant increase in homeless encampments—both those sanctioned and managed by municipal governments and nonprofit partners, and their informal counterparts (HUD, 2019; Orr et al., 2023). These group encampments, which may feature long-term occupation by individuals using some sort of physical structure (e.g., tents or lean-tos) are potentially attractive for their proximity to services, relative security, and sense of community (Baur et al., 2015; HUD, 2019). Sanctioned encampments often provide “private tents for residents, provide shared bathroom and dining areas, and offer services” such as housing assistance, health care, and connection to other services in the community (Orr et al., 2023, p. 5). Encampments are often a highly visible manifestation of homelessness in a community, and may crystallize incipient opposition to the presence of PEH, particularly when encampments are in parks and other public greenspaces which are intended to serve recreation and conservation roles.

Homelessness in Public Parks

Parks and other public greenspaces offer attractive locations for many PEH. Urban greenspace offers residents a variety of physical and mental health benefits, which may be of particular value to PEH who experience disproportionate exposure to multiple environmental health risk factors (Browning et al., 2022). Parks are also situated at the intersection of the built, natural, and social environments, and their management may be less rigid than other public spaces (Rose, 2019). This may mean that the presence of PEH in parks is often largely ignored or even tacitly accepted, unlike many other public or private locations.

While popular media coverage is often concerned with impacts to park resources and the recreational experience, research indicates ambivalence to the presence of PEH. For example, Rose (2019) reported that while visitors to City Creek Canyon in Salt Lake City, Utah, were largely aware of the presence of PEH, they did not feel PEH posed a threat, or represented a reason to modify their recreational behavior. Evidence does indicate a variety of potential resource impacts associated by the long-term presence of PEH, however, including soil compaction, vegetation trampling, littering, and impacts to water sources; other park users may also experience highly localized displacement within park environments, as they experience recreation conflict/goal interference (Pitas et al., 2024), and reconfigure their use patterns around popular socializing or camping locations (Baur et al., 2015; Derrien et al., 2023; Neild & Rose, 2018).

As the municipal agencies charged with providing and maintaining these public spaces, park and recreation agencies are often viewed as contributors to community-wide activities to address the issue of homelessness (Baur et al., 2015; Braun, 2017;

NRPA, 2017; Pitas et al., 2023). Members of the public hold largely positive attitudes towards park and recreation agency activities intended to support PEH, particularly those that are viewed as “low impact,” or are service—rather than housing—oriented (e.g., providing access to restrooms, conducting outreach to PEH vs. allowing PEH to camp indefinitely in parks) (Pitas et al., 2023). The relatively high levels of support for these activities mirrors general attitudes towards PEH in American society, which have become increasingly positive over time (Tsai et al., 2017); for example, according to recent data, a majority of Americans feel compassion towards PEH (a general attitude), and support the right of PEH to take shelter in parks overnight (a specific attitude) (Tsai et al., 2019).

The increasingly positive public attitudes toward PEH underscore a contradiction in the management of parks and public greenspaces, as in many ways, agency policies and activities lag behind public opinion. For example, as recently as 2017, almost half of park and recreation professionals viewed PEH as a “nuisance” instead of a valid user group (NRPA, 2017). These general attitudes often manifest at the level of specific policies: a majority of agencies include policies empowering them to clear PEH from parks with no advance warning, and approximately half employ hostile design features (Rosenberger, 2017) to make park environments less welcoming to PEH seeking to sleep on benches or other built features (NRPA, 2017).

Responses to Homelessness

Responses to homelessness in the United States may be categorized in multiple ways. For example, Solari et al. (2020) describe three categories of response: inflow (attempts to prevent homelessness), crisis response (deterrence through criminal prosecution as well as the provision of health services and the construction of shelters), and outflow (attempts to socialize and integrate individuals leaving homelessness). Using this framework, Colburn and Aldern (2022) argue that nearly all municipal responses in the United States fall into the crisis response stage, neglecting systemic responses like housing reform and leaving the root causes of homelessness unaddressed. Many park and recreation agency actions related to PEH may be viewed as part of this crisis response, as parks often provide amenities such as shelter, hygiene facilities, and water, while simultaneously acting as contexts for the further criminalization of homelessness.

Like services provided to PEH in other areas, park and recreation agency actions may also be classified along a spectrum ranging from revanchist (responses that entail “punitive measures intended to surveil, constrain, exclude, and persecute PEH”) to post-revanchist (“more compassionate, ‘kinder and gentler’ responses intended to care for, rehabilitate, civilize, and support PEH”) (Orr et al., 2023, p. 2; Mitchell, 2003; Murphy, 2009). Whereas a revanchist approach has long dominated responses to homelessness in the United States, recent years have seen a switch towards a more compassionate, post-revanchist paradigm, prioritizing care over punishment (Margier, 2021). This shift has come as a result of increasing rates of homelessness, increasing public awareness of issues and causes, and mounting evidence that punitive approaches are largely ineffective and a waste of scarce resources (Orr et al., 2023). Hennigan and Speer (2019), however, argue that the reality is more blurry, with recent responses representing a blended model, combining revanchist and post-revanchist elements.

Study Purpose and Research Questions

Despite increased attention in popular and academic discourse in recent years, there remains significant ambiguity regarding how to best manage parks and public greenspaces for the benefit of this uniquely vulnerable and underserved user group. While some park agencies offer services specifically geared toward PEH, others actively work to discourage PEH use of public parks (NRPA, 2017). Recent legal rulings have added to the confusion; while a 2018 ruling by the Ninth Circuit Court prohibited punishing individuals for sleeping in public places if no viable alternatives are available (Martin et al., 2018), the Supreme Court recently reversed that decision. While the previous lower court decision deemed punishment in those situations to be “cruel and unusual,” the recent 6-3 decision by the Supreme Court empowers municipalities to enforce bans on public sleeping and camping (Ludden, 2024). Increasingly progressive general beliefs about the issue of homelessness and PEH, as well as preferences for park and recreation agency activities in support of this group, provide additional data points indicating that there is a legitimate need for guidance in the establishment of best practices for engagement with, and service towards, PEH in the context of parks and public greenspaces (Derrien et al., 2023).

With this in mind, this project addressed the following research questions:

1. What is the current and ideal role of a public park and recreation agency in addressing the issue of homelessness? What falls outside the scope of a public park and recreation agency?
2. What are the characteristics of positive and negative interactions and engagement between PEH and park and recreation agency staff?
3. What are the key management priorities for public parks and greenspace with regards to PEH as a user group? What challenges exist with regards to management priorities?

Methods

To address these research questions, we employed an inductive qualitative research design, engaging with three key stakeholder groups through a series of community-based in-depth focus group interviews.

Study Setting

Our work was conducted in the context of a small city of approximately 90,000 residents, situated in a largely agricultural, rural Midwest county. City and county residents are highly educated, relatively affluent, and a large land-grant university serves as the largest employer. Parks and recreation services are provided by a tax-supported special district, which manages 62 parks in the county, totaling more than 700 acres. Parks and other public spaces experience significant daytime and overnight use by PEH, particularly closer to the downtown area, which offers formal and informal services, transportation infrastructure, and employment opportunities. PEH have access to some services via a patchwork of public and nonprofit partner organizations, including meal distribution, congregate shelters, medical care, and vocational training. The park district currently has policies in place which do not permit overnight occupation of parks, and allow for periodic abatements of PEH encampments on park district property with limited warning. The current project was undertaken in partnership with the park district, as part of a larger examination of policies towards PEH, with a goal of better serving this user group.

Although scholarship focused on homelessness in general, and in parks and public spaces, has focused on large urban areas, we consciously elected to situate our work in a small city in the Midwest. An overreliance on work situated in major urban areas on the coasts, as well as large urban areas in general, as a means of understanding homelessness is problematic (Hennigan & Speer, 2019). Because homelessness is a phenomenon that involves a marginalized population, and often takes place in marginal spaces, it is important to examine homelessness in marginal urban areas that have largely been underrepresented to this point (Stuart, 2014).

Data Collection

Following a series of informal key-informant interviews with individuals working at other municipal institutions (e.g., the public library, the county-wide forest preserve) and nonprofit organizations (e.g., a church that provides meal services), we collected data through a series of in-depth, in-person focus group interviews with PDE (one focus group, $n = 9$), HMP living within the park district's boundaries (one focus group, $n = 6$), and PEH (two focus groups, $n = 11$). We utilized criterion-based snowball sampling (Palinkas et al., 2013) to identify potential participants across all three key stakeholder groups. Working alongside the park district, we recruited employees from a variety of agency positions ranging from frontline service delivery, special events/programming, maintenance/facilities, mid-level administration, and senior leadership with a goal of identifying a diverse representation of opinions, perspectives, and experiences with PEH. The executive director and a senior administrator from the neighboring district also participated, providing a regional perspective from two deeply intertwined municipalities. In recruiting for our HMP focus group we worked alongside the park district to engage with community members with varying opinions, perspectives, and experiences with both PEH and the services/places managed by the park district. To recruit PEH participants, we worked alongside a local church that provides daily meal distribution adjacent to a downtown park with heavy use by PEH; potential participants were intercepted by the first author, and invited to participate in a focus group at the current time and place. Focus group participants (other than PDE) were eligible to receive a \$50 prepaid credit card as a form of compensation.

Our focus group guide addressed a series of topics, including experiences with homelessness, the causes of homelessness, the current situation in the community, the current/ideal role of the park district in addressing the issue, and management priorities in parks. Focus groups with PDE and HMP were audio recorded and then transcribed verbatim; they lasted approximately 90 minutes each. Focus groups with PEH were not audio recorded, following personal preferences of participants; they lasted approximately 45 minutes each. When audio recording was unavailable, the first author followed suggestions for increasing data quality, including detailed in situ note taking, the use of clarifying questions and probing responses in the moment, and the compiling of responses into a detailed script immediately after the conclusion of the focus group (Rutakumwa et al., 2019). Although audio recording has become nearly universal in many qualitative data collection settings, through the use of the strategies described above, data quality from non-recorded conversations is often of similar quality (Rutakumwa et al., 2019). Unrecorded conversations may also be helpful in establishing a rapport between interviewer and subject and in fostering more natural conversation (Swain & King, 2022), particularly when working with vulnerable populations.

Data Analysis

We analyzed interview transcripts and notes in two levels (Huberman & Miles, 2002). Transcripts were initially examined line by line, separately by each member of the research team, with themes developed inductively from the data through a process of open coding. After this initial open coding, the research team met to debrief and began organizing the initial codes into larger categories. This initial code book was then utilized for a second round of coding, followed by multiple additional meetings, which resulted in the development of a final codebook. We approached analysis of the PEH focus groups in a similar fashion, using the combined in situ and post-focus group notes generated by the first author as the data source and origin of the initial themes. The first author provided a narrative overview of the PEH focus groups, and contextualized the notes and script of the conversations during both the initial and follow-up group meeting.

Credibility, Dependability, Trustworthiness, and Positionality

We made a variety of efforts to improve this project's credibility, dependability, and trustworthiness (Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Lincoln & Guba, 1986). We also worked alongside practitioners from the park district with significant experience in park management and policy formation, and the issue of homelessness in parks; our focus group guide was developed as a collaborative effort involving multiple rounds of feedback from this group. We utilized a rigorous data analysis process described above, which involved multiple levels of coding, an iterative process, and multiple rounds of peer discussion and debriefing among the research team.

The research team consists of individuals with significant experience working in the broader context of public parks, and specifically focusing on the issue of homelessness in those spaces. Despite this expertise, no members of our research team have experienced homelessness directly, and we acknowledge the privileges associated with steady income and reliable housing. Our work on this topic arises from a shared interest in the equitable delivery of public park and recreation services, to all members of the community regardless of individual identity or socioeconomic status. The level of experience interacting directly with PEH varies across members of our team; while the first, third, and fourth authors have engaged with PEH through this and other project work, the second author has previously engaged in extensive, embedded ethnographic work within the homeless community.

Results

In the sections that follow, we provide results related to our three research questions, including responses from park district employees (PDE), people experiencing homelessness (PEH), and housed members of the public (HMP). A summary of results is provided in Table 1.

Research Question 1

Current Role of the Agency in Addressing the Issue of Homelessness

All three stakeholder groups identified the park district's current role in addressing the issue of homelessness as limited in scope. Park district employees viewed their involvement in the issue as confined to enforcement of rules and regulations, education about the issue, and maintenance of park resources and visitor experiences. Similarly, PEH identified the role of the agency as one of maintaining park resources and of

Table 1
Summary of Results Across Groups and Research Questions

| Research Question | Park District Employees (PDE) | People Experiencing Homelessness (PEH) | Housed Members of the Public (HMP) |
|---------------------------|---|--|--|
| 1a) Current Role | Limited; Rules enforcement; Education of public; Quality control | Limited; Quality control; Not park's role | Limited; Not park's role; Stopgap; Complementary |
| 1b) Ideal Role | Expand; More proactive | Maintain status quo | Maintain status quo |
| 2a) Positive Interaction | "Normal"; Relationship based | "Normal"; Relationship based; Caring | NA ¹ |
| 2b) Negative Interaction | Rule compliance; Banned substances; Previous negative interactions | Greater than minimum contact; Targeted for behavior that would be accepted in private space | NA ¹ |
| 3a) Management Priorities | Safety; Trainings on homelessness; Balanced management | Safety; Welcoming space; Aesthetics | Safety; Welcoming space; Aesthetics; Trainings on homelessness |
| 3b) Management Challenges | Lack of resources; Wicked problem; Policy/personal ambiguity | Systems-level approach; | Systems-level approach; Lack of resources |

¹HMP did not comment on interactions between PDE and PEH

overall agency service quality, and identified district employees as caring about the welfare of the PEH in the community. However, both PEH and members of the housed public indicated that directly addressing the issue of homelessness was not the agency's responsibility, noting that "park workers are not the cops" or social workers (PEH), and stating "I don't think it is necessarily the park district's role to address homelessness" (HMP-1). Instead, HMP noted that in many ways the park district was acting as a stop-gap solution, in response to a lack of community capacity to address the issue, and saw the agency occupying a complementary role (e.g., connecting PEH in parks to service providers, reporting issues to service providers): "I would hope that the park district

would have some sort of way to communicate things that they're noticing at the public spaces and parks to the agencies that can help" (HMP-1). Reasons cited by both PEH and HMP for this limited role included a lack of training and resources, and perceived incongruity with the park district's mission.

Ideal Role of the Agency in Addressing the Issue of Homelessness

Whereas PEH and HMP largely advocated for a status quo approach that did little to modify the district's current role, PDE desired to expand their role and become more proactive in their response to the problem: "I think we're very reactive in our current practices. We only react when there's a need, to a call. [it would be great] If we could, you know, be a little bit more proactive" (PDE-1). While there was no appetite for drastically altering the park district's role, PEH did identify multiple complementary roles for the agency, illustrating further agreement with HMP (e.g., helping connect PEH to existing services, being more visible in park spaces).

Research Question 2

Characteristics of Positive Interactions between PEH and Agency Professionals

Both district employees and PEH described the ideal interaction as "normal," with PEH being treated "like anyone else in the park" (PEH), and "like they're just anyone else I've seen out there" (PDE-2). Park district employees further described interactions that were cordial/polite, and described how building lasting relationships and rapport made interactions with PEH more likely to be positive. Similarly, PEH described a desire for PDE to treat them in a caring way: "Ask me how I'm doing... [speak to me] with empathy" (PEH). Housed members of the public did not provide input on this question, as the group did not feel comfortable answering without first-hand experience.

Characteristics of Negative Interactions between PEH and Agency Professionals

For district employees, negative interactions often revolved around issues of enforcement and compliance with rules and regulation, often involving the use of alcohol or other controlled substances, or PEH soliciting other park users for money. Substances were also often identified alongside, or as a contributing factor to, issues of emotional and mental health: "The two most extreme examples I can think of... revolved around three people who I think had serious mental health issues" (PDE-3). District employees also noted that negative interactions involving compliance were often related to previous negative interactions, and that in some instances, a (real or perceived) lack of interest from PEH in receiving assistance was a precursor to negative interactions. Finally, district employees noted that negative interactions included a threshold for action, beyond which they reached out to law enforcement and/or medical services for support: "The threshold goes, staff are in danger, public are in danger, or property is in danger... That's when we call the police" (PDE-4).

PEH noted that in many instances any interaction with district staff "beyond a hello" (PEH) was negative, and expressed a desire to largely be left alone while using parks and public space. Specific characteristics of negative interactions included feeling hassled, being harassed for allegedly breaking a rule or regulation, and perceptions of discrimination towards PEH. With regards to discrimination, respondents described situations wherein they were engaging in activities that would be legal for an HMP (e.g., drinking alcohol or using cannabis), but were criminalized as a result of their status as a PEH.

Research Question 3

Management Priorities for Parks and Public Greenspaces

There was substantial agreement regarding key management priorities for parks and public greenspaces among PEH, PDE, and HMP. All three groups identified safety as the primary consideration: “Safety, obviously, is number one” (PDE-5). Similarly, both PEH and HMP identified the cultivation of a welcoming park atmosphere as a primary consideration. Of particular note, while HMP noted that parks should be welcoming specifically for PEH (e.g., “I feel like they [PEH] should be welcomed in the parks,” [HMP-2]), PEH stressed an equitable approach that focused on making parks welcoming for all user groups because “taxes pay for these parks” (PEH).

As users who spent considerable time in the park environment, PEH noted aesthetic considerations and cleanliness as key management priorities, focused on cultivating a pleasant environment (“It’s my living room... it’s a special spot” [PEH]). Aesthetics and cleanliness were also linked to safety by PEH, who noted that when a park space felt uncared for or was poorly maintained, park users felt “permission” to engage in antisocial behaviors themselves. A final point of congruence between PDE and HMP, involved the need for greater training specifically on the issue of homelessness: “I think there does need to be some base level of training on this” (HMP-1), and “I would like to be able to offer my best advice, but I have no training in that” (PDE-6).

Park district staff also noted the importance of balance in the management of parks and public spaces, involving attention to the needs of multiple stakeholder groups (e.g., PEH, youth sport, special events, etc.), and attendance to multiple (sometimes conflicting) management goals (e.g., safety, creating a welcoming environment). Related closely was the need to effectively manage public perception regarding homelessness. For example, employees often received complaints from members of the public about PEH in parks, and felt compelled or pressured to act as a result, even if the issue was outside of the jurisdiction of the park district:

So we get frequent comments from the public that this [PEH encampments] is happening near our parks. It’s not our space, but there’s just an expectation that their safety is impacted because of XYZ next to them, and we need to do something about that as a park district. (PDE-7)

Challenges to Management of Parks and Public Greenspaces

When identifying management challenges, PEH and HMP adopted a systems-level view, noting that many management priorities were outside of the influence of the park district, and would require cooperation from outside organizations such as the police and social services. In addition, both groups felt that expanding the park district’s role in addressing homelessness would be outside of the mission of the park district: “[The] mission statement is to provide open space and recreational opportunities for the community” (HMP-3). For HMP, as well as PDE, a relative lack of resources was also cited as a challenge. For example, one employee said the following about a previous collaboration between a local not-for-profit, the district, and PEH to pick up trash in park spaces:

It’s on hold. They [partner organization] did it for 2 years, but they reached out this year and said with some changes, they don’t have staff to dedicate to

it... They [PEH] picked up six, seven parks a week. That was great, and we were sad to see it put on hold... (PDE-8)

Park district staff identified several additional barriers to the management of parks and public greenspaces. A significant issue involved the complexity of homelessness, and its status as a wicked problem with no single solution: “Honestly... there’s no solution to the problem” (PDE-8). The ideas of balance and public perception were also identified as challenging in themselves, due to the realities inherent to efforts to satisfy multiple user groups and conflicting priorities. Park district staff also noted issues related to multiple, often overlapping, municipal boundaries. For instance, PEH who were asked to leave a park space due to ongoing problematic behavior would often move to another park, a sidewalk adjacent to the park, a separate public space (often the library), or the adjacent municipality. For example, one district employee noted:

We don’t really have a policy to govern non-park space, so if they’re on the street or across the street, unfortunately we look at that like well it’s not our property. We’ve had situations where we’ve almost pushed them there: like they’re in our park, they’re breaking a rule, hey, if you want to take this across the street we’re not going to say anything. I don’t necessarily think that’s the right way, but also it’s not our property. (PDE-8)

Park district staff also identified ambiguity as a challenge, both between their personal values and park district regulations, as well as between policy and practice. At a personal level, park district staff expressed how the desire to do more to help PEH, and to act in ways that aligned with their personal values, often conflicted with official policy: “I only know the protocols that have been handed down to me, which doesn’t always feel right to me. But you know, it’s just asking would you mind moving somewhere else? That’s what we’ve done. I don’t know that that’s the right thing to do” (PDE-9). District personnel also noted that there was often “a lot of conflict between practice and policy... our training teaches us, ‘everybody’s got to be somewhere.’ But then your policy says you can’t be here” (PDE-1).

Discussion and Management Implications

In the section that follows, we provide a discussion of our results in the context of existing research on the phenomenon of homelessness in parks and public greenspaces, with a particular focus on practical management implications.

Role of the Park District

All three stakeholder groups categorized the current role of the district as a form of crisis response, providing basic services to PEH without working to address the root causes of the issue or address systematic barriers experienced by PEH (Solari et al., 2020). However, PDE advocated for an expansion of their role into inflow (attempts to prevent homelessness) and outflow (attempts to socialize and integrate individuals leaving homelessness) activities, as well as a shift towards a post-revanchist orientation emphasizing a kinder and gentler approach to homelessness (Orr et al., 2023, Mitchell, 2003; Murphy, 2009). Conversely, neither PEH nor HMP articulated support for that expansion, and were more supportive of maintaining the status quo approach. This reluctance on the part of the public matches a larger pattern described by Colburn and

Aldern (2022), wherein community responses to the issue of homelessness are largely restricted to crisis response rather than aimed at systemic issues.

With this in mind, as well as the limited resources and relevant competencies identified by respondents, our work supports a more narrowly defined role for the park district in addressing the issue of homelessness, focused on providing equitable access to these spaces and the benefits they provide. This recommendation is consistent with existing survey research indicating greater support for less intensive/more limited park and recreation agency activities intended to support PEH (Pitas et al., 2023). The reluctance on the part of PEH and HMP to expand the park district's role is echoed in the management priorities, and associated challenges, identified for the management of parks and public greenspaces. Specifically, both PEH and HMP felt that the issue of homelessness was beyond the scope of the park district, both in terms of its mission and the influence it wielded in the community.

Interactions with People Experiencing Homelessness

Our results emphasize the importance of cultivating a sense of normalcy and in affirming the humanity of PEH to positive interactions between PDE and PEH; conversely, negative interactions were described in terms of discrimination, dehumanization, and by feeling of being hassled. This observation aligns with existing work on homelessness (Wen et al., 2007) utilizing the "I-You/I-It" framework developed by Buber (1923/1996). Specifically, Buber contrasts positive "I-You" interactions (those that occur between two human beings) with negative "I-It" interactions (those that occur between an individual and an object); whereas "I-It" interactions are dehumanizing and reduce individuals to objects over which power can be exercised, "I-You" interactions emphasize individuality and human agency. Using this framework to investigate healthcare outcomes among PEH, Wen and colleagues (2007) found that "I-It" encounters precipitated intense emotional responses, disempowered PEH, and created an unwelcoming atmosphere; conversely "I-You" interactions helped PEH feel valued as a patient and person, and empowered to manage their healthcare. Consistent with this work, and the desire to be treated like legitimate park users and community members espoused by PEH in our focus groups, we recommend park district staff approach interactions with PEH using an "I-You" approach.

In facilitating interactions characterized by an "I-You" approach, our results point to the importance of long-term relationship building through repeated contact over an extended period of time. The benefits of this type of relationship building may be the result of multiple concurrent processes. On one hand, drawing from intergroup contact theory (Allport, 1954), the consistent interaction required to build positive relationships with PEH may help ameliorate negative attitudes and biases held by PDE and increase perceptions of PEH as a valid user of agency spaces and services (Mullenbach et al., 2023). Simultaneously, the development of a positive relationship over time with park district staff may increase perceptions among PEH that staff view them as human beings and legitimate users, facilitating a positive, trusting relationship between PEH and PDE. It may be that park district staff are uniquely situated among public employees to develop this type of positive, enduring relationship with PEH. Unlike law enforcement officers, who face increasing demands to manage and remove homeless encampments, park district staff may operate in a regulatory gray zone (Martino et al., 2023), which allows them to maintain flexibility and develop discretionary solutions informed by policy, as well as individual experiences and values.

This may be an area where additional training—during both academic and professional preparation—may be necessary. As noted during the park district focus group, alongside a desire to better serve PEH, PDE reported a perceived lack of knowledge on how best to do so. With this in mind, in addition to more advanced training for individuals who will be directly involved in delivery of services to PEH, we suggest that all PDE receive basic training that covers topics such as the root causes of homelessness, the facilitation of positive “I-You” interactions, and how to foster trusting interpersonal relationships with PEH over time. Other potential training topics may include how to more effectively connect PEH to other service-providers in the community, conflict management, and how to properly respond to mental and physical health crises. Such trainings would not only empower PDE in their response to homelessness, it may also improve the park visitor experience for PEH and HMP, and potentially lead to a more positive attitude toward PEH among PDE and throughout the community.

Management Priorities

PEH placed particular emphasis on the maintenance of the physical and social park environment, including the aesthetics and cleanliness of the area, as well as the overall sense of welcome and belongingness. These priorities may be informed by the role that these spaces play in the lives of many PEH, for whom parks and greenspaces serve as a “living room,” and fulfill a variety of needs that other individuals may satisfy elsewhere. For users without access to an indoor kitchen, dining room, sanitary facilities, and sleeping quarters, parks may serve distinctly different, and significantly more important, functions. Whereas there has been discussion of parks and other public spaces as potential “third places” (Oldenburg & Brissett, 1982; Purnell, 2019), for PEH parks may serve the function of the first and second places (where the individual lives and works, respectively) as well. The prioritization of “housekeeping” activities such as cleaning up, welcoming others, and maintaining aesthetic appeal speaks to the multiple uses and meaning ascribed to these places by PEH over and above other user groups.

Unfortunately, the potential for parks to function as a first or third place for PEH is limited when considering a variety of activities that are illegal in park spaces, but would be legal and socially sanctioned for HMP to engage in at their own living spaces. For example, PEH perceived that in many cases they were being targeted in an unfair fashion for engaging in activities ranging from biophysical functions (e.g., urination/defecation), to everyday social interactions (e.g., arguing), to recreational pursuits (e.g., drinking alcohol, using cannabis), the practice of which HMP largely take for granted. This double standard—the criminalization of otherwise legal and socially sanctioned activities for PEH residing in public space—exemplifies the shortcomings of parks as a first and third place; while they may provide limited shelter and other amenities, parks and public spaces do not afford PEH the opportunity to engage in the full suite of activities and pursuits that are presented to HMP. In this way, not only are the actions of PEH constrained by the financial limitations commonly related to the experience of homelessness, they are also limited as a result of their inability to access private spaces beyond the gaze of others.

In addition to the focus on maintaining the physical and social park environment, PEH (and other user groups) placed a significant value on the maintenance of safety. Safety was explicitly linked to cleanliness and aesthetics, with participants noting that allowing the park to lapse into a state of neglect would provide “permission” for users to mistreat the space. This linkage is consistent with the “broken windows” theory of

urban management (Kelling & Wilson, 1982), which connects the visual evidence of physical and social incivilities in public space to further antisocial behavior, as individuals assume stakeholders are indifferent to the management and fate of the space (Sampson & Groves, 1989). Although PEH were ambivalent about interaction with police in these spaces—citing the potential for their presence to exacerbate existing tension, and perceptions of discriminatory treatment—additional, more visible, patrolling was noted as a potential solution to this issue.

Conclusion

Although recent years have seen a surge in interest in park agency-based actions to address the issue of homelessness, much remains unknown regarding the role that key stakeholders feel these municipal agencies should occupy. While existing work on this topic has addressed the viewpoints of multiple key stakeholder groups separately, in this manuscript we triangulated the perspectives of park district staff, members of the housed public, and people experiencing homelessness within a single community. Our results indicate that rather than broad-based agreement on the current and ideal role of a park agency, significant ambiguity exists alongside some common ground. With this in mind, while this project represents a first attempt to synthesize viewpoints from these key stakeholders, future scholarship should continue to work towards a more nuanced understanding of how these stakeholders—and others—view park agency actions in the context of homelessness.

Disclosure Statement: The authors have no disclosures or competing interests to declare.

Funding: This work was supported by a grant from the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign Campus Research Board (RB #23065).

References

- Allport, G. W. (1954). *The nature of prejudice*. Addison-Wesley.
- Baur, J. W., & Cervený, L. (2019). Social impacts of homelessness and long-term occupancy on national forests and grasslands: A national study of U.S. Forest Service law enforcement officers. *Landscape and Urban Planning*, *184*, 69–77. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.landurbplan.2018.12.006>
- Browning, M. H., Rigolon, A., & McAnirlin, O. (2022). Where greenspace matters most: A systematic review of urbanicity, greenspace, and physical health. *Landscape and Urban Planning*, *217*, 104233. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.landurbplan.2021.104233>
- Buber, M. (1996). *I and thou*. Touchstone.
- Cervený, L. K., & Baur, J. W. (2020). Homelessness and nonrecreational camping on national forests and grasslands in the United States: Law enforcement perspectives and regional trends. *Journal of Forestry*, *118*(2), 139–153. <https://doi.org/10.1093/jofore/fvz065>
- Colburn, G., & Aldern, C. P. (2022). *Homelessness is a housing problem: How structural factors explain U.S. patterns*. University of California Press.
- Department of Housing and Urban Development. (2019). *Unsheltered homelessness and homeless encampments*. <https://www.huduser.gov/portal/sites/default/files/pdf/Unsheltered-Homelessness-and-Homeless-Encampments.pdf>

- Department of Housing and Urban Development. (2022). *The 2022 Annual Homeless Assessment Report (AHAR) to Congress*. <https://www.huduser.gov/portal/datasets/ahar/2022-ahar-part-1-pit-estimates-of-homelessness-in-the-us.html>
- Derrien, M., Cerveny, L., Bratman, G., Levy, C., Frank, P., Serio, N., & Blahna, D. (2023, online first). Unsheltered homelessness in public natural areas across an urban-to-wildland system: Institutional perspectives. *Society & Natural Resources*, 36, 1–23. 10.1080/08941920.2023.2199381.
- Glynn, C., & Fox, E. B. (2019). Dynamics of homelessness in urban America. *Annals of Applied Statistics*, 13(1), 573–605. <https://doi.org/10.1214/18-AOAS1200>
- Guba, E. G., & Lincoln, Y. S. (1994). Competing paradigms in qualitative research. *Handbook of Qualitative Research*, 2(105), 163–194.
- Hennigan, B., & Speer, J. (2019). Compassionate revanchism: The blurry geography of homelessness in the USA. *Urban Studies*, 56(5), 906–921. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0042098018762012>
- Herring, C. (2014). The new logics of homeless seclusion: Homeless encampments in America's west coast cities. *City & Community*, 13(4), 285–309. <https://doi.org/10.1111/cico.12086>
- Huberman, M., & Miles, M. B. (2002). *The qualitative researcher's companion*. Sage.
- Kelling, G. L., & Wilson, J. Q. (1982). Broken windows. *Atlantic Monthly*, 249(3), 29–38.
- Lee, B. A., Tyler, K. A., & Wright, J. D. (2010). The new homelessness revisited. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 36, 501–521. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-soc-070308-115940>
- Lincoln, Y. S., & Guba, E. G. (1986). But is it rigorous? Trustworthiness and authenticity in naturalistic evaluation. *New Directions for Program Evaluation*, 1986(30), 73–84. <https://doi.org/10.1002/ev.1427>
- Ludden, J. (June 28, 2024). *The Supreme Court says cities can punish people for sleeping in public places*. <https://www.npr.org/2024/06/28/nx-s1-4992010/supreme-court-homeless-punish-sleeping-encampments>
- Margier, A. (2021). The compassionate invisibilization of homelessness: Where revanchist and supportive city policies meet. *Urban Geography*, 44(1), 178–197. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02723638.2021.1970915>
- Martino, N., Sanders, C. B., & Dej, E. (2023). The 'regulatory grey zone': bylaw enforcement's governing of homelessness and space. *Policing and Society*, 1–16. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10439463.2023.2263617>
- Mitchell, D. (2003). *The right to the city: Social justice and the fight for public space*. The Guilford Press.
- Mullenbach, L. E., Pitas, N. A., & Hickerson, B. (2023, online first). The role of social contact in public perceptions of homelessness in parks and public spaces. *International Journal of Public Administration*, 1–14. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01900692.2023.2208775>
- Murphy, S. (2009). "Compassionate" strategies of managing homelessness: Post-revanchist geographies in San Francisco. *Antipode*, 41(2), 305–325. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8330.2009.00674.x>
- National Recreation and Park Association. (2017). *Homelessness in parks: A summary of results from an NRPA Membership Survey*. <https://www.nrpa.org/contentassets/f768428a39aa4035ae55b2aaff372617/homelessness-in-parks-survey-report.pdf>

- Neild, M., & Rose, J. (2018). An exploration of unsheltered homelessness management on an urban riparian corridor. *People, Place and Policy Online*, 12(2), 84–98. <https://doi.org/10.3351/ppp.2018.6244452285>
- Oldenburg, R., & Brissett, D. (1982). The third place. *Qualitative Sociology*, 5(4), 265–284.
- Orr, J. N., Németh, J., Rigolon, A., Granja, L. S., & Slabaugh, D. (2023). Beyond revanchism? Learning from sanctioned homeless encampments in the US. *Urban Geography*, 1–27. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02723638.2023.2196141>
- Palinkas, L.A., Horwitz, S.M., Green, C.A., Wisdom, J.P., Duan, N., & Hoagwood, K. (2013). Purposeful sampling for qualitative data collection and analysis in mixed method implementation research. *Administration and Policy in Mental Health and Mental Health Services Research*, 42(5), 1–12. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10488-013-0528-y>
- Pitas, N. A., Mullenbach, L., & Hickerson, B. (2023). Attitudes toward park and recreation agency actions in support of people experiencing homelessness. *Journal of Park and Recreation Administration*, 41(2), 129–139. <https://doi.org/10.18666/JPra-2023-11725>
- Pitas, N. A., Rose, J., Mullenbach, L., & Russell, Z. (2024). Unhoused users in parks and public greenspace: An intergroup conflict approach. *Landscape and Urban Planning*, 249. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.landurbplan.2024.105113>
- Purnell, D. (2019). Public parks: Third places or places eliciting moral panic? *Qualitative Inquiry*, 25(6), 531–534.
- Rose, J. (2017). Cleansing public nature: landscapes of homelessness, health, and displacement. *Journal of Political Ecology*, 24(1), 11–23. <https://doi.org/10.2458/v24i1.20779>
- Rose, J. (2019). Unsheltered homelessness in urban parks: Perspectives on environment, health, and justice in Salt Lake City, Utah. *Environmental Justice*, 12(1), 12–16. <https://doi.org/10.1089/env.2018.0023>
- Rosenberger, R. (2017). *Callous objects: Designs against the homeless*. University of Minnesota Press.
- Rutakumwa, R., Mugisha, J. O., Bernays, S., Kabunga, E., Tumwekwase, G., Mbonye, M., & Seeley, J. (2020). Conducting in-depth interviews with and without voice recorders: a comparative analysis. *Qualitative Research*, 20(5), 565–581. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1468794119884806>
- Sampson, R. J., & Groves, W. B. (1989). Community structure and crime: Testing social-disorganization theory. *American Journal of Sociology*, 94(4), 774–802.
- Shinn, M., & Khadduri, J. (2020). *In the midst of plenty: Homelessness and what to do about it*. John Wiley & Sons.
- Solari, D., DuBois, N., & Morales-Burnett, J. (2020). *Community strategies to understand and reduce veteran inflow into homelessness*. Urban Institute. https://www.urban.org/sites/default/files/publication/103200/community-strategies-to-understand-and-reduce-veteran-inflow-into-homelessness_1.pdf
- Stuart, F. (2014). From ‘rabble management’ to ‘recovery management’: Policing homelessness in marginal urban space. *Urban Studies*, 51(9), 1909–1925. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0042098013499798>
- Swain, J., & King, B. (2022). Using informal conversations in qualitative research. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 21, 1–12. <https://doi.org/10.1177/16094069221085056>

- Tsai, J., Lee, C. Y. S., Byrne, T., Pietrzak, R. H., & Southwick, S. M. (2017). Changes in public attitudes and perceptions about homelessness between 1990 and 2016. *American Journal of Community Psychology*, *60*(3-4), 599–606. <https://doi.org/10.1002/ajcp.12198>
- Tsai, J., Lee, C. Y., Shen, J., Southwick, S. M., & Pietrzak, R. H. (2019). Public exposure and attitudes about homelessness. *Journal of Community Psychology*, *47*(1), 76–92. <https://doi.org/10.1002/jcop.22100>
- Wen, C. K., Hudak, P. L., & Hwang, S. W. (2007). Homeless people's perceptions of welcomeness and unwelcomeness in healthcare encounters. *Journal of General Internal Medicine*, *22*, 1011-1017. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11606-007-0183-7>