

An Analysis of Veteran Homelessness in King County

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Abstract

Veteran homelessness is an epidemic that exists all throughout America and while many politicians agree on the need for a solution, doing so is much more complicated than it sounds. This report examines many different existing models and programs to envision a solution for homeless veterans in King County. This includes breaking down an array of causes that create homelessness as well as those that perpetuate it. This research combined with a firsthand interview led to the qualitative coding of five key themes, those being: Seattle Culture, Financial barriers, the King County Veterans Seniors and Human Services levy being too big, Band Aid Fixes and the Rhode Island Model. The multitude of causes and the fact that the King County Veterans Seniors and Human Services Levy has existed for 20 years with minimal substantive progress expresses the need for amending existing policy. These being Fix the Seattle culture, Target the economic factors that keep people in homelessness, Target the Levy on Veterans, Work on band aid fixes and finally the Rhode Island Model.

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A Qualitative and Quantitative Analysis of Washington State Veteran Homelessness

Chapter 1: Introduction

There are 32,882 homeless veterans in the US (HUD, 2024), many of whom have PTSD and no shelter. A study from the Department of Veterans Affairs found that anywhere from 48 to 67 percent of homeless veterans have at least one mental health disorder (Henwood, Gabrielian 2023). This is especially striking because the Department estimates that this is double the rate of domiciled veterans (Henwood, Gabrielian, 2023 pp. 21-34). A study from Nichter adds to this saying that, “More than 8-of-10 homeless veterans reported experiencing their first episode of homelessness following military service, with a mean of 10.6 years post-discharge until onset” (Nichter, Tsai, Pietrzak, 2023). This speaks to how homelessness can sometimes occur soon after service.

This issue of homeless veterans is especially concerning considering that many veterans in the 1990s were discharged from their service for being LGBTQ as a result of the Don't Ask Don't Tell policy. It has been estimated that around 35,000 service members have been discharged because of this law (Legal Aid At Work 2023). This fact is particularly damning when considering that those who have been discharged in this way do not receive any VA benefits. These factors push a large burden on both local and federal resources to compensate for both the homeless veterans' problem and discriminatory politics of the past. Given this lack of financial compensation, it is unsurprising that so many people become homeless. This leads to the question: Why are so many veterans homeless in King County and what is King County doing to attempt to mend it?

According to One Night Count there are now over 1,600 homeless veterans in King County which is double since 2022 (One Night Count, 2024), with the Seattle/King County region being second most in the country, just behind Los Angeles County (AHAR to Congress,

2022). Other estimates say that about 11 percent of the homeless population within King County are homeless veterans, with as many as 1,300 homeless veterans on the streets every night (Phan, 2018). The King County/Seattle area is clearly an epicenter of this issue, and thus they have established programs to try to combat it. The central program is the Veterans, Seniors and Human Services Levy (VSHSL), passed in 2006 to help those in need around this issue. The King County website advocates for the levy, saying “The VSHSL provides funding and partners with organizations that offer programs and services to help King County residents achieve housing and financial stability, become more socially connected and engaged, increase health and wellness, and access systems and services that support their individual needs” (King County N.P.). Along with this, King County says that since 2017 the levy has helped over 185,000 veterans, seniors and neighbors in need (King County, 2023). This is clearly something that is at its minimum an attempt to mend the problem. However, the fact remains that King County still has the second highest veteran population and as such there is more work to be done. This both speaks to how big the scope of the problem is as it relates to the number of people on the street, and that there are underlying causes, such as mental health or lack of income for a multitude of reasons, even from the 2010s and 2020s, that are putting more people out there. The homelessness veterans' issue in the United States is caused from a combination of unintended complications from policy that lacks modern considerations such as addiction, mental health issues and anti-gay discrimination from "Don't Ask Don't Tell" all of which has created an epidemic in America.

I aim to identify the causes of the US veteran homelessness crisis and how to solve this problem, particularly from a local and King County lens. One limitation of the literature is that it is impossible to examine all causes of this issue in just one study, no matter how much literature

is looked at. Another issue presented is that since I am only looking at King County for solutions, my specific potential solutions I see in the literature are limited and narrow.

When thinking about why my study is important, one reason is that homelessness is a growing issue across the country and as such it is one that needs to be looked into. By examining how to attack/solve this issue in one of the nation's biggest cities we can better identify how policymakers can look at the issue in its totality. Additionally, my paper will help to tackle issues homeless veterans face every year. One of these being an issue homeless veterans experience near where I live, that being smokey air and too hot temperatures. These issues can exacerbate medical conditions from parts of service. Examples I have seen are veterans who have a weakened heart/lungs and as such the smokey air causes even more harm to them than it would normally. The Washington State Department of Ecology states that "Smoke from wildfires is the largest source of particle pollution in Washington. Breathing in smoke causes wheezing and coughing, heart and lung disease, and death" (Washington State department of Ecology). Although there are not specific numbers available on how many homeless veterans in Washington State suffer from lung and heart issues, for the ones that do what is the largest source of particle pollution in Washington is another way their life is put at risk. Along with this, I have heard about veterans who have damaged skin from fighting in Operation Desert Storm and as such their skin is more vulnerable to the hot sun. Monica Diaz discussed this in 2021 saying "During the historic heat wave, Veterans experiencing homelessness are at increased risk of heat cramps, heat exhaustion, sunstroke, and other serious health problems, especially if they remain unsheltered."(Matthews, 2021). My hope is that this paper helps to provide a blueprint for big cities in dealing with the homeless veterans issue and as such is used to shape potential solutions to the problem.

Objective of the study:

How can local solutions help to tackle a big national issue? The information surrounding this issue is wide and varied in both its scope of causes and potential solutions that have been proposed/implemented. This is why I am focusing on King County in particular as it allows me to focus on the county with the 2nd highest rate of homelessness in the US with a levy that has been seen as effective. Even still with this however the rate of homelessness persists. It is identifying how this occurs on a local level that can allow future researchers and policymakers to attack this problem more proficiently on a federal level.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

There has been much study of different angles surrounding veterans and mental health. Within this, there are discussions of mental health and drug addiction and how the progression or lack thereof of social justice rights has affected the veteran homelessness issue. Along with this there have been definite and clear links between sexual trauma and veteran homelessness as well. Other forms of abuse have also been linked to this issue, particularly as it relates to childhood abuse and it creates a notion that many of these suffer vicious cycles in their lives. With this being said, there have been many programs proposed and implemented on the local and national level to attempt to mend this issue. My review will analyze many of the federal causes of the issue and some attempts at proposed solutions.

Mental Health

Many veterans have had a history of co-occurring mental disorders (COD). One study from BMC Public Health (Ding et al 2018) examined a history of COD in homeless veterans. It found that 76.7% had at least one prior diagnosed mental disorder, including 47.4% with any drug-related disorders. Over one-third (37.2%) reported having COD and that, compared to those with no mental disorder history, those with COD scored significantly lower on Mental

Component Summary Score (MCS) and empowerment scores; those with any prior diagnosed non-drug related mental disorders also scored significantly lower on MCS. No significant differences, however, were found in current mental health status between those with COD and those with mental disorders but not COD (Ding & Kele 2018). This speaks to the multitude of issues veterans face prior to or during homelessness.

In looking at other literature I found studies looking at this mental health link and substance abuse, a 2015 study from the *American Journal on Addictions* found that “Veterans reported higher rates of substance use and mental health problems as a primary cause of homelessness when compared to non-veterans. Homeless veterans were more likely than non-veterans to report current problems with addictions” (Dunneet al, 2015 p.1). With there being a known link between having a mental health issue such as depression and falling into addiction, this is no surprise, but it speaks to the uphill battle one can face as a homeless veteran. Erin Johnson (2015) also examined a link between poor physical health and poor mental health in homeless veterans and found evidence of a link. This is quite concerning as it establishes a clear connection to the fact that veterans can get into substance abuse after their service, either as a result of or as a detriment to their mental health. This creates a vicious cycle where veterans either have mental health issues and as such go into substances, which can exacerbate those problems. Along with this, the inverse can also be true, that these substances can lead to conditions where mental health issues could spring up. These conditions speak to how hard it is for veterans without housing to find a way to live a successful life post service.

Sexual Trauma

There has been much that has been written about homeless veterans and sexual trauma. For example, the *Journal of General Internal Medicine* found that there was a link between military sexual trauma (MST) and mental health disorders. The journal discusses this saying “Of

homeless Veterans in VHA, 39.7 % of females and 3.3 % of males experienced MST. Homeless Veterans who experienced MST demonstrated a significantly higher likelihood of almost all mental health conditions examined as compared to other homeless women and men, including depression, posttraumatic stress disorder, other anxiety disorders, substance use disorders, bipolar disorders, personality disorders, suicide, and, among men only, schizophrenia and psychotic disorders” (Pavao et al., 2013 p. 1). Along with this, some have examined the differences in rates of these issues between male and female service members. One study found that “Among veterans with a positive screen for MST, incidence of homelessness was 1.6% within 30 days, 4.4% within 1 year, and 9.6% within 5 years. The trends were similar for male and female veterans with a positive MST screen but with slightly higher rates for males 30-day”. “2.3%; 1-year: 6.2%; and 5-year: 11.8%) compared with females (30-day: 1.3%; 1-year: 3.9%; and 5-year: 8.9%” (Brignone et al., 2016). This speaks to how the sexual trauma issue can very much increase the likelihood of homelessness very soon after leaving the service, which speaks to a link between homelessness and other problems.

There have also been studies that examine the amount of care for their trauma that homeless veterans can receive, with one journal article arguing that “Presently, there exists a lack of trauma-informed case management services for homeless veterans. Failing to recognize the association between trauma and homelessness may lead to further victimization, exacerbate mental health symptomatology, and hinder a provider's ability to effectively intervene on behalf of homeless veterans” (Dinnen et al., 2014). This encapsulates the problem, as there are clearly major ties to sexual trauma and becoming homeless, and yet on both fronts, the US does not have enough support centers to deal with this urgent problem. This establishes a theme of there being a battle of not only acknowledging the problem of sexual trauma in veterans, but then also trying to get enough government resources to account for this very problem. This issue of government

resources will be a pervasive point throughout this capstone, as it is one thing to acknowledge all the issues homeless veterans face, but it is another to conjure the political will to do something about it.

Gender and the universal issue of homeless veterans

There have also been studies done on the demographics of veterans which could shine a light on who is homeless and who is not potentially. One study found that “Limited demographic data on deidentified individuals were captured at each annual PIT count. In 2022, 33,129 veterans were identified; 88.7% were men; 10.4%, women; and 0.9% transgender, not singularly male or female, or gender questioning” (Toole et al., 2022). This speaks to the fact that finding solutions is so important as it is an issue clearly affecting every type of gender demographic in the country and it is one that casts a very wide net. To me, this establishes a theme: universal programs, such as a stronger social safety net or such as what King County is doing with the Veterans Services Levy, could very well be in the right vein of approach. With nearly 90 percent of homeless veteran's demographics being men, this very well could dictate the solution being catered towards that group. Even with this however, to address all veterans’ needs, an indefinitely flexible solution is needed.

LGBTQ and Homeless Veterans

Another factor that has been discussed when looking at the US veteran homeless population has been the link between identifying as LGBTQ and being a homeless veteran. This is particularly pertinent to our case as I stated because often these veterans who were LGBTQ may very well have been discharged for being so and as such do not qualify for government help in many cases. A study from Hunter Hahn and John Blosnich (2023) found that LGBTQ veterans in 18 states over two years had a higher prevalence of childhood trauma/abuse. Even though this specifically does not touch on homelessness, we have already looked at prior studies that

establish how childhood trauma can help contribute to homelessness and being homeless is an example of poor health. Another example of a study on this community was one done by Sylvia V.Haigh, Christopher M.Halladay and Michael R.Kauth (2024). This study focused on food insecurity and other factors that relate to it, and they found that LGBTQ+ veterans were nearly twice as likely as heterosexual veterans to have experienced recent homelessness or housing instability (Haigh et al. 2024). They discuss in this study how all of these social issues such as mental health, food insecurity, and housing instability often tie together and it is not just one problem.

Childhood Abuse

There has been a fair amount of writing on how childhood abuse can affect those who go into service to become homeless. One study from Jack Tasi and Robert Rosenheck (2012) found that of nearly 1,200 homeless veterans in their study across 19 states, over half of them reported as having an unstable childhood and 40 percent of them reported as experiencing childhood abuse (Tasi & Rosenheck, 2012). This is a study that speaks to how veterans can have causations out of their control and set on the path to homelessness. Another study on the topic by Alison Hamilton, Ines Poza and Donna Washington emphasized the importance of the expansion of trauma-based care for homeless women veterans. As they state that women veterans are four times more likely to be homeless than non-veteran women (Hamilton et al. 2011). Their study found that trauma care should be expanded for homeless veteran women and for homeless veterans in general, arguing that a holistic care approach was a way to address this problem (Hamilton et al. 2011). This establishes and continues the theme of homeless veterans having many ways to experience trauma, both because of service or something else entirely out of their control. It also speaks to how veterans are much more often to be homeless than the general population when veteran women are 4 times more likely to be homeless.

Federal Reforms

Plenty has been penned about the reforms for trying to fix the homelessness veteran issue. One report looked at the impact housing vouchers have had from 2007 to 2017, saying “Our results indicate the HUD-VASH program worked as intended and veterans’ homelessness would have risen substantially over the past decade without the program”(AJPH, 2019). To understand the HUD-VASH program it is a collaboration between Housing and Urban Development (HUD) and the VA. It does this by pairing HUD’s housing choice voucher rental assistance with VA case management and supportive services (VA). This speaks to one reform that could work, another potential solution that has been examined is to work for housing without the support of a voucher program. A 2011 study found that “Participants who obtained independent housing without a voucher worked more days and had higher employment income than those who did use a voucher, but they were less satisfied with their housing. About a third of participants who lived in independent housing without a voucher had others living with them. Homeless veterans with mental illness are able to use employment and shared housing as naturalistic ways to obtain independent housing” (Rosenheck, 2011).

Rhode Island Model

In 2012 Rhode Island adopted the first “Homeless bill of rights” in the United States (Rhode Island Homeless Bill of Rights). These rights as listed on this website are:

- *Right to use and move freely in public spaces, including, but not limited to, public sidewalks, public parks, public transportation and public buildings, in the same manner as any other person.*
- *Right to equal treatment by all state and municipal agencies, including but not limited to, public libraries, police, RIPTA, EMS, city and town halls and the state house.*
- *Right to employment nondiscrimination while seeking or maintaining employment due to the lack of permanent mailing address, mailing address being that of a shelter or social service provider, or because they know or think you to be experiencing homelessness.*
- *Right to emergency medical care free from discrimination. You cannot be denied medical care or emergency services because of your housing status. You have the right to be treated when you seek medical attention.*
- *Right to vote at your local polling place, register to vote, and receive documentation necessary to prove identity for voting without discrimination because of your lack of address.*

- *Right to confidentiality and protection from disclosure of records and information, including but not limited to: shelter sign-in lists, service provider records, waiting lists, and medical records without appropriate legal authority.*
- *Right to a reasonable expectation of privacy (protected from search or seizure) of your personal belongings, such as a backpack or a tent, to the same extent as if you were in a house (Rhode Island 2012).*

To contextualize the effects of a Bill of Rights such as this Jonathan Sheffield wrote that “Discrimination based on housing status is illegal in only three states, Rhode Island, Illinois and Connecticut” (Sheffield, 2014). Puerto Rico also did a similar model in 1988 (Robbins, 2022). This to me is how this idea is effective, by being a small step that establishes a baseline for homeless people and acknowledges they have rights even without shelter. The further idea behind these bills is that homeless people are consistently under more threat than people with a home, both because of things like weather and natural disaster as well as general treatment from other human beings. Other versions of this idea are under consideration in California, Vermont, Missouri, Hawaii, and Oregon (Robbins, 2022). This should be incorporated into combating veteran homelessness as it is a way to ensure that even whilst these veterans are homeless, they have some codified protections that at least symbolizes the state as a concept cares about their lives. Even with this being a step in the right direction there is still much work to do even in states that have this bill. Sara Rankin discussed how the state of Rhode Island should expand their protections in 2025 with homelessness continuing to be a big issue (Rankin, 2025). This is because even though she sees the bill of rights as a good step, she also calls it a “Slight” one compared to what could/should be done. Rankin sees the bill of rights as potentially having many multitudes of effects, arguing that “Homeless bills of rights also present a compelling opportunity to re-examine rights-based theories in the context of social movement scholarship”(Rankin, 2025) and that these new laws present an opportunity for housed Americans to confront our collective biases against the homeless(Rankin, 2025). She also argues

that by reframing this very thinking, it could spark what she calls a “Homeless rights revolution” (Rankin, 2025).

The King County Veterans Seniors and Human Services Levy

The Veterans Seniors and Human Services Levy was first approved in 2005, then renewed in 2011, 2017 and most recently in 2023. A report in 2017 on this history detailed how in 2005 the Veteran Citizen Oversight Board was created along with the Regional Human Services Board, this ran from 2006-2011. In 2011, both these boards were renewed, but in 2017 there was an expansion to help seniors and be the VSHSL we know today. This renewal included “a wide range of regional health and human services and capital facilities for veterans and military servicemembers and their respective families, seniors and their caregivers, and vulnerable populations” (Veterans Seniors and Human Services Levy Governance Plan). The levy passing with these expansions into over 300 programs speaks to both the popularity of the levy and how much King County has ingrained it into its veterans and city help services. This is evidenced by the fact that a 2022 report mentions that the program had funded over 300 programs in 2021 and helped more than 146,000 people in that year alone (King County Evaluation 2022). Along with this, there were also findings in this study that there has been a 69 percent increase from those served by the levy from 2017 to 2021 (King County Evaluation 2022).

When looking at the recent data provided by official evaluations of the Levy, there is plenty to discuss. In 2022 it was found that 43 percent of the people that were helped by the levy were white and 68 percent of these were 55 or older (King County, 2022). When comparing this to the 2023 evaluation, 70 percent of those who were helped by the levy were 55 or older (King County, 2023). This makes sense in the context of the levy being the Veterans Seniors and Human Services Levy, as it is clear that it is, at least by the numbers, prioritizing seniors within

the King County area. Something that stuck out in the 2022 evaluation was that 75 percent were not a veteran or a servicemember, with 21 percent being a veteran or servicemember and 4 percent being family of a veteran or servicemember (King County 2022). When comparing this to 2023, 20 percent helped were a veteran or servicemember and 2 percent were family, with 77 percent not being in either category (King County 2023). This is striking because as I mentioned previously the Veterans Seniors and Human Services Levy is now tied into three hundred programs and when it started in 2005 it was solely focused on veterans. This raises the question in my research of how effective a levy can be when it is focusing on so many that need help. Obviously, there is a concern of a program being spread thin as far as support, financial or otherwise. This is ultimately something that I will get deeper into when discussing findings and evaluations as it relates to King County's plan to implement the levy in 2024 through 2029.

Levy Effectiveness Analysis

In looking at a report from King County discussing the levy in 2022 we should first examine what parameters King County has set and what overall improvements they have found. One such statistic from the 2022 report was that King County built over 1,200 affordable homes in 2022 and among those homes, about a third of them were specifically for populations mentioned in the levy. Along with this, 198 shelter beds were created and the housing stability program within the levy provided 1,500 households financial aid during 2022. When it comes to veterans and the aid they received, the levy helped 90 veterans find aid this year and provided wraparound services to more than 2,000 veterans. It was also found that, since 2018, an average of 278 veterans and 34 family members received counseling each year. Of those who completed six months of this counseling, 79 percent have experienced a reduction in Post Traumatic Stress Disorder symptoms (King County Levy Evaluation 2022).

When looking at how the levy report from 2022 suggests improvement, specifically around veterans, there are a few things that caught my attention. One is that King County believes they should “Modify and Increase Flexibility for Veteran Employment and Training Programs” (Veterans Seniors and Human Services Levy Assessment Report, 2022). They add on this saying they need to make the qualifications for these programs more flexible, specifically for student veterans, as their needs can change drastically over time and as such the program must be ready for that reality. Along with this, the report also discusses that working within their veterans pathfinder program, veterans prefer it when pathfinders help guide into things, such as helping them find services. This method was opposed to the system before where a pathfinder would help identify veterans eligible for services, but not go beyond that. Overall I find these successes and limitations of the program for veterans at this point in time to be fascinating as there are many successes, but as shown there are key simple ways to continue to make the program better on the local level.

Even with the successes and evaluations of the levy there are still many who speak to how financial problems in King County create homelessness. An example of this being that in a 2024 piece from Seattle University, the author Aster Gebregergis stated that “The homelessness crisis in cities like Seattle is severe and needs immediate action. Despite numerous efforts, including the establishment of various outreach programs and shelters, the problem persists. The root causes are multifaceted, encompassing economic factors such as unemployment and underemployment, and the severe lack of affordable housing, compounded by rising rental costs. Social factors like mental health issues, substance abuse, and domestic violence further exacerbate the situation, while systemic issues such as inadequate social safety nets and discrimination contribute to the growing number of homeless individuals” (Gebregergis, 2024). This to me speaks to how multifaceted on an economic level this homelessness crisis is, as so

many things from just the economic sector can create homelessness and we have already covered how many other problems contribute to this issue besides that as well. Along with this in 2023 it was found that the “The median household income in King County was \$122,148 in 2023, which marked an increase of 5,153(4.40%) from \$116,995 in 2020. This income is 155.53% of the U.S. median household income of \$78,538”(Neilsberg, 2023). The fact that the median household income in King County is that much higher than that of the average household income in the US speaks to why there is a homeless crisis in the county today. Even with the successes of the levy, there is still a long way for King County to go in solving the financial element of homelessness.

By examining levy evaluations, I have determined key strengths and weaknesses regarding reports discussing the VSHSL in the last 4 years. One strength being the statistics they have on the levy’s effects. An example of this is from the statistic I have mentioned previously - that was in the 2022 report about how it was found that since 2018 an average of 278 veterans and 34 family members received counseling each year. Of those who completed six months of this counseling, 79 percent have experienced a reduction in Post Traumatic Stress Disorder symptoms (King County Levy evaluation 2022). Numbers like this are common within the reports and they very much provide a benchmark for how the levy has been effective. However, a limitation is the lack of firsthand accounts from veterans who are directly affected by the levy. This to me paints a clear idea of how the levy evaluations are good at giving a wide rundown of its effects but not as good looking at individual cases. Policy recommendations that go off of statistics and not individual cases as well could do more harm than good for homeless veterans. Many of the previous solutions have lacked a personal touch in dealing with veterans affairs, I am filling in this gap by personalizing the issue.

Gaps in Literature and Overall Objectives

When thinking about the gaps in the literature that I have seen writing this section of my report, one that stands out to me is the amount of causes that have been able to have been easily found in my general research. This speaks to how wide ranging the reasons can be for one person to become a homeless veteran, and at the same time, how universal a potential solution must be. This is the major gap I have found, the focus on so many causes, and yet not enough study on solutions. This is the overall objective of my work here, as I am trying to examine the work that King County has done and what has worked and what has not in that scenario, that can potentially be done on the federal level.

When reviewing this topics literature, there is a major theme I have seen. That it is hard to create universal solutions for the issue of veteran homelessness as many different people have different problems than the last one and many of these problems often overlap. This also caused difficulty for me as a researcher in crafting the literature review. This is because, due to the problem overlap, there are plenty of articles that repeat themselves and as such nailing down the core issues and then finding the depth within them is more complicated.

Chapter 3: Methodology

When thinking about my methodology we must first discuss why King County is so important and why it is worth studying. As we have obviously discussed, King County is indeed the second highest county in the rate of veteran homelessness within the United States. Along with this however, King County is my home county and it matters a lot to me in a personal sense. About 16,385 individuals in King County are homeless and over 10 percent of those are estimated to be veterans according to a One Night Count done in King County (One Night Count, 2024). This survey was done using what is known as a Point In Time or PIT count. This is where an organization goes out and counts the amount of homeless people in a given area on a

random night. The method described here is often done/directed by the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD). This stresses the urgency and importance of this issue as it relates to King County particularly and the need to tell their stories. This helps to form the overall dimensions of the case as well. Unfortunately you have a group of homeless veterans who have incredibly important stories to tell, yet at the same time often have gone through something that prevents this story from being told. This is illuminating in my methodology in particular as I am going to combine larger scale studies and data with first person experience, but understanding the reality of the situation when doing this is key.

I did a qualitative coding case study where I interviewed one non profit worker in the homeless field veterans as well as take in data from outside sources. This is effective as Mai S.Linneberg and Steffen Korsgaard wrote that “Qualitative research has gained in importance in the social sciences. General knowledge about qualitative data analysis, how to code qualitative data and decisions concerning related research design in the analytical process are all important for novice researchers.”(Linneberg, Steffen, 2019). The fact that qualitative can be used by novices and yet still be done well is a big part of why I used it. As I am a student who can appear as a novice and get lots of good research done with this method. This added a personal touch once again to my research which made my interview simpler and allowed me to gain more information about my topic. Therefore, the limitation of its usage in educating others on a pressing issue is not as relevant in this circumstance. This allowed me to build a more cohesive narrative and come at the issue from multiple directions.

Data Sources

There are many veterans who suffer from immense trauma, both from their service and potentially from becoming homeless. I focused on seeking out interviews with veterans’ and homelessness service providers in King County. This mainly consisted of going to areas in King County that are veterans care centers and interviewing someone who helps with veterans. The first step of this process was cold emailing many different organizations in King County who

serve veterans for interviews and clarifying what I planned on addressing/collecting data on. This purposive sampling was based on who works with veterans, preferably in King County. The goal was talking to government staffers who help homeless veterans as well as community members who do the same. I asked about many of the experiences some of these homeless veterans have had that the staffers have heard about. Along with this I identified theme of why these veterans become homeless. This methodology worked for my research question as it allowed me to target and try to get answers that are direct, but not in a way that can cause harm to veterans. I interviewed someone who works within the King County Veteran Services Levy.

In order to obtain consent for my interview I filled out the IRB form for their permission. Once someone has agreed to do the interview, I outlined in the IRB that I will ask for consent both over email (and send my consent form), and then before I get into questions during the interview. Upon which I asked for consent once again and mention that they can refuse questions at any time. This clarified the consent twice and helped to ensure my participant knew what they were getting into. I asked 8-12 questions during a given interview, starting off with the most important/broader ones and working down.

Data Analysis

When thinking about how I then used this data, there are a few distinct elements that warrant discussion. The first element here is that I took my data from the in-person interview to build my case from quotes in the interview that build themes from repetition along with the nationally known data from secondary sources I had already collected. This allowed me to examine the problem of veteran homelessness on a national level and then use an interview and other data to help figure out what solutions, present or future, will be conducive to solving the problem. This is in large part by taking elements in each paragraph and using national information and the personal interview information to build a case on each topic. Another

element of my approach with the data was that I looked at the interview transcripts and use these to identify themes from within the responses. This qualitative coding approach allowed me to gather a broad swath of information and as such build my case in a much stronger manner. It also helped me to identify more obscure causes of homelessness, as everyone's story is different. This is more effective than if I just had one type of data and is appropriate to use as this gives me the national picture, combined with individual stories on the ground.

Limitations

When thinking about the limitations of this methodology approach one is that it was hard to directly identify a clear cause and effect relationship for one factor of homelessness. This is because I found many reasons why veterans became homeless, making it difficult to pin it on just one. Another limitation is that my data is King County centric, which means that while my proposed solutions may work in this area, it may be harder to apply in others. One final limitation is that it will be hard on each individual level to identify if the King County Veterans Services Levy is helping or hurting the person I interviewed, since they may very well speak about other problems surrounding the homelessness issue. Even with this however, my results are still to be trusted as I have a combination of scholarly secondary and primary interview sources that build a great study into King County veteran homelessness. This means I used secondary sources to create a swath of data to underscore the veteran homelessness problem, and then use my interview to speak to individual and personal experiences. Along with this there is a limitation in the sense that my research is non-experimental and as such it is purely comparative.

I decided to forgo the option of interviewing veterans directly and instead sought to interview a logistical provider or manager of veterans services. When thinking about why this was a correct and important decision, there are a couple of key reasons. The first is if I was to interview veterans directly, there would be potential logistical issues around the questions I could

ask, particularly those that could trigger PTSD, both around veteran experiences and being homeless. Along with this, veterans have the first hand experience of their own lives, but are not privy to the systemic framework and it's inner workings that is helping to aid them. This means that if I was to interview one veteran they could give me their own personal story, but lack the potential detail required in an account for this report on systemic problems. This very well means that by interviewing a provider, I gained the information I would otherwise have to get from interviewing many more individual veterans. Another potential problem from interviewing someone more detached is that they are not as connected to the care of the veterans/patients themselves. This makes interviewing providers a good middle ground as they both work with the veterans themselves as well as see the current systems that prohibits or allows certain solutions for these veterans and their problems to be reached. This idea came from thinking about the process and trying to identify who would best possess the information I was looking for.

My first and only interview was with someone who has worked with multiple non-profits in the King County area and has worked to ensure veterans succeed for many decades. This made him a very knowledgeable source for the interview. Thus, it was insightful to discuss the nuances of the levy with someone who works within its direct effects and is familiar with other innerworkings of veterans help models from around the country. This interview creates a clear contrast with my research and the levy evaluations, as since they do not have any interviews in their reports, my work has an extra layer of depth and firsthand presence that is not available in other sources. I would say this makes my work a strong continuation of those evaluations, as it is taking the prior research and adding interview layers to it. I was able to expand my policy scope through this interview as it introduced me to the Rhode Island model. This interview provided a personal approach that levy evaluations on their own would not have given me.

Even with this interview being very helpful, there was still a limitation in the fact that I was only able to get one interview. I reached out to 40 or more people/organizations that work with veterans generally and help provides services for homeless veterans in the King County area. Many of these emails were met with no response and the ones that did respond often did so with a rejection of the possibility to interview but they sent along resources such as links to the services they provide. I had one other person besides the interview I did that responded and they sent me a list of dates to schedule an interview. After scheduling an interview they did not show up to the interview and later disclosed that they had a family emergency. Had this been a longer project, I would have easily been able to obtain a second or third interview, however this project being due in the summer coincided with the vacations of many potential interviewees.

Chapter 4: Results

In working within my lit review and my interview it has led me to create a list of 5 themes to solve recommend policy recommendations to solve this homeless veteran crisis. These five are, 1. Fix the Seattle culture 2. Aid in Financial Barriers 3. Stop the levy from being too big 4. Work on band aid fixes 5. Rhode Island model. I have found that what gets people into homelessness is not what keeps them there. These themes create a blend of what I have found in what creates homelessness for people and what can be done to get them out of it. They cover a wide swathe of the issue and present a clear case on what can be done for it.

1. Seattle Culture

When thinking about the discussions I had in my interview, one theme that came up rather consistently was that of the culture within Seattle itself perpetrating homelessness. I asked my interviewee if homeless veterans were more of a Seattle culture issue than a King County or veterans' issue and he said, "Oh 100 percent it is". My interviewee expanded on this idea earlier

when talking about the attempts the VSHSL has made to amend the issue saying that in his view Seattle as a city “Accepts” homelessness. The fact that this levy has been around since 2005, just about 20 years now suggests that Seattle has certainly tried to combat homelessness on the veterans front. However with the levy not being as effective as it could be with King County ranking 2nd most in homelessness it certainly lends credence to the idea that the issue has become a consistent point of politicians trying to solve it for many years. These two ideas in my view are contradicting. The fact that homeless exists in Seattle but the levy exists as well speaks to the idea that Seattle is not ok with homelessness as part of their culture, however not being pro homelessness as a society does not equate to finding an effective policy solution.

When discussing my topic with my interviewee, he argued there needed to be a mindset change in Seattle around homelessness. He talked about there is an issue within the levy that is foundational in the sense of it being unable to utilize a targeted approach. This to me also ties in with the fact that he said later on the interview “if we are going to see true change, we have to see mindset change, identify that key culprit of why they are there in the first place, it’s a foundational issue”. My interviewee also implied that this mindset change starts with the idea of dispelling homelessness as a natural state. What I mean by this is, he wants the city and individuals to stop seeing homelessness as a fact of life and indeed as a solvable problem that is in the grasp of the city and the people affected by it.

2.Financial Barriers

A second theme from my interview was the discussion of financial barriers to shelter that are created within and by King County. When I asked, “What are the barriers to this levy or other potential homeless veterans solutions working in King County?” he said that “The barriers I think often times, are financial barriers, very expensive to live there, if they’re making above median, they don’t qualify and yet they should”. When analyzing this quote, it is interesting to

think about what the exact issue my interviewee was referring to is. He added onto this statement by mentioning how “If someone loses a job we are not there to help until they hit the lowest point” This speaks to the fact that King County is a very expensive place to live and when someone gets fired or something unfortunate happens, one way to improve the levy would be to have that help kick in before a low point. This obviously raises the question of where you could determine this help would come in, whether it be by income bracket or by some metric relating to that median income.

3. Levy Being too Big

A third theme was the idea that the King county VSHSL levy was too big. I asked my interviewee about this saying “How hard was it to get the initial levy to be passed?” He responded saying “Back then it was pretty easy because of the sole veterans, 2005 is right after 2001, people supported, started to go stray when it went into senior living, passed over 60 percent, senior living has made the veteran priority a little astray”. I also asked my interviewee “What other additions to this levy could be done to aid in its success?” He thought for a moment and said, “Oh boy, that’s a great question, I’m not well versed in it enough to tell you, I don’t know”. This hammers in the idea that the levy including over three hundred programs is way too much for even those that work with the levy to know what could potentially be added to aid veterans. Along with this the idea that the levy is more senior focused than veterans focused is supported by the 2022 levy evaluation as in that report 75 percent of levy support went to seniors and only 25 percent went to Veterans or their family members (King County Evaluation, 2022). To round this out, my interviewee said that “Well I don’t know everything that the levy covers, I don’t know how to answer that one.” The fact that someone who works with the levy every week doesn’t know how it could be added to in order to aid veterans or what the levy in it’s current state covers, speaks to how confusing it can be to have three hundred programs in one levy.

4. Band Aid Fixes

A fourth theme that came up in my discussion with my interviewee was the idea that the solutions the levy does have are band aid fixes. I asked, “What has not worked with the Veterans, Seniors and Human services levy?” My interviewee said that “Not a huge fan of paying a lot of money out, those are band aid fixes, if we are going to see true change, we have to see mindset change, identify that key culprit of why they are there in the first place, it’s a foundational issue”. Along with this, my interviewee said that “we don’t help until they hit rock bottom.”. As in my interviewee’s view there are too many solutions that come too late and don’t do enough once they do come. He mentioned how there are programs that pay a lot of money out to allow people to have a place to stay once they are homeless, but this is a very reactive approach. This ties in with my previous research as it shows how King County can have such a big homeless population despite having so many homeless policies in place.

5. Rhode Island Model

My interviewee mentioned how he views King County should take a new approach in combating veteran homelessness. On why King County has many homeless veterans he said “Because we don’t actually treat, I think we have the wrong approach on homelessness, we should look at every homeless person as someone who needs help, we should follow the Rhode Island approach, one chance to get fix, there is too much accepting homelessness as part of Seattle”. The element that I want to focus on however is the Rhode Island model and how he almost views it as the antithesis to the problem of Seattle culture issues. We have already covered how the Rhode Island model includes their homelessness bill of rights, it serves as a very plausible system that could be done in King County to combat their veteran homelessness problem as evidenced by the fact that it is already codified elsewhere. This would allow the county to have anti-discrimination laws for homeless individuals on the books and ensure that those who are

homeless are not only being helped by a levy but by stronger protections as well. Examples of these would include right to move freely in public spaces or the right to receive emergency medical care free from discrimination.

What I learned from my interviewee is that the causes of issues that put people in homelessness are often not the same as the issues that keep people in homelessness. What I mean by this is that there is some overlap between these such as drug addiction or lack of money in individuals pockets, however much of the failing that keeps people in homelessness is a structural one. My interviewee consistently mentioned many of the flaws that come with the current day VSHSL, whether that be that it is too big, the band aid solutions or the pervasiveness of homelessness in Seattle culture. This creates an idea that while people can often times fail to secure housing initially, it is the government failure to secure solutions to then get them out of this problem. With this being said, there are still positives to take away from these current issues. There are long term solutions that have been built into the levy that my interviewee saw as effective. In his view it is imperative that King County builds on these to solve this homelessness crisis.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

Discussion:

Fix the Seattle culture

When thinking about how to address the idea that my interviewee mentioned when it came to homelessness in Seattle being tied to Seattle culture and how that relates to financial barriers in the city, there are a lot of facets to it to dive into. An example these being that in the Aster Gebregeris article referenced earlier, they talked about how much of this crisis is tied to unemployment or underemployment within the county (Gebregeris 2024). This to me nails how

to a certain extent, there are inherent issues that are connected between Seattle's culture of being an expensive city and the homelessness problem. Largely because the solutions that are there with the levy do not go far enough in attacking homelessness before it occurs and the levy is often too spread out to deal with some of these problems laid out in the previous quote. This creates a situation where the levy is an attempt to fix the homelessness problem but other connective issues have helped to make homelessness an everyday experience in Seattle. The levy is an attempt to mend homelessness but the longer homeless stays as an issue that builds a supposed a homeless culture. Creates a defeatist culture where homelessness is just a fact of life and no matter the solutions added, a dent is not made.

Target the economic factors that keep people in homelessness

When looking at financial barriers and the homeless veterans issue in King County there are some facts that paint the issue well. A perfect example is how referenced in the Neilsberg article, King County has a median household income 155 percent higher than the median household income in the US (Neilsberg 2023). The fact that the median household income in King County is that much higher than that of the average household income in the US speaks to why there is a homeless crisis in the county today as it is so incredibly expensive to live in. This also relates back to what my interviewee said about the issues of financials in the county and how this helps to create the homeless population. Whilst I would agree that the supposed "Band aid solutions" are not helping to solve the problem, there does need to be a solid financial solution for veterans in the levy.

Target the Levy on Veterans

When thinking about the theme of the VSHSL being too big. This is something I found interesting in relating to my research. One could very well argue from a non-veterans standpoint that the levy is doing more good for everyone in a purely utilitarian sense because of the fact that

it has expanded to seniors and serves so many of them as opposed to just veterans. While this very well may be true, on the other hand, it has been often claimed, such as by my interviewee that this good work comes at the cost of veterans services themselves. In the simplest of terms, even for a big levy like this, there is only so much money and services and time that can go around and everyone involved in the levy wants a bite at that pie. This creates a situation that is incredibly dire for veterans, they had a sole levy back in 2005, and they should still today, they should not be in a situation where 75 percent of what used to be their levy goes to a whole other group(King County Evaluation, 2022). This is especially the case when veterans are still in an awful spot.

Work on Band Aid Fixes

When examining the issue of band-aid fixes that came up within the interview there is much to say. One element up front is that while I do understand the concern that my interviewee had about the band-aid fixes is that it does not solve the problem long term. I would argue however that as the city transitions from the levy that they have had in some form for 20 years(Veterans Seniors and Human Services Levy Governance Plan). to favor more financial solutions that are proactive, the city would need these band aid fixes for a time while that very transition occurs. This is because we do not want the problem getting worse while the new systems are having infrastructure created. I do also think that the timeline for this transition may take a year or two which makes the current systems even more vital. Overall these systems have their problems but they are one that serve their purpose in creating better solutions.

Adopt The Rhode Island model

The Rhode Island model deeply intrigues me as a potentially effective alternative to the current way King County operates on this issue. I truly appreciate an idea like the Homeless Bill of Rights and setting a benchmark for giving homeless people a ground floor of rights to have on official government documentation similar to what Rhode Island Vermont or Illinois has (Robbins, 2022). When it comes to this in my policy recommendation I will highly recommend and elaborate on why this to me seems effective. One reason however is that it is a simplified way of targeting an issue that as established here and in my literature review, is deeply complex and alarming in its nuances. This paves the road for better solutions and not getting bogged down in the work and overwhelm of the issue.

Policy Recommendations:

Fix The Seattle Culture

Fixing Seattle's culture around homelessness will not be a quick fix and very well may be the hardest fix to perform out of them all. The main reformation and my **1st** policy recommendation is to create structures with the existing or preposed new levy to shift citizens views on homelessness. This would include posters and TV adverts talking about how the county is refocusing their efforts on how to make headway in homeless and advertising how individual citizens can help as well. This can take the issue from one where homeless people are often looked down upon and the city often has a defeatist attitude towards it into one where there is a conjoined effort by the government and citizens to attack the problem. The goal of this policy is to shift the overall attitude of this culture from something people and their governments can become used to occurring to something that is not as much of a fact of life. This is very practical because as we have seen the city clearly wants to solve this problem and so do it's citizens so to me this culture issue is in large part a belief issue. This fix would cut into the cost of things like

band aid fixes because there would be less people to take care of on the streets and thus the taxpayers would benefit.

Target the economic factors that keep people in homelessness

As it relates to crafting policy solutions when it comes to the ideas that have worked from the VSHSL there is a fair bit to dissect. One of these being how my interviewee viewed the overall mindset changes and how they were effective as compared to the other less effective elements in his view that were present within the levy. I personally have a hard time prescribing policy solution as it relates to this as even if long term levy solutions are to be more effective. I disagree with my interviewee's assertion that there is a mindset change needed among individuals who are potentially aided by the levy. As I really think the biggest policy change and my **2nd policy recommendation** is regards to this problem of providing better economic security is to reshape the levy to target economic factors that keep people in homelessness. This is for a couple of different reasons, the first one being that as we have established what keeps people in homelessness often is not what got them there in the first place. So in my view addressing causes of people going into homelessness can somewhat simplify the problem to the best extent possible. This can be aided in part by as mentioned previously by separating the levy into just veterans again as it can allow for more funding to just go to veterans.

Target the Levy on Veterans

When it comes to the idea of the levy being too big and overcomplicated this is frankly something that I agree with. As with what he discussed in my research it has slowly expanded to over 300 programs and no longer is just the veteran's program that it started out as 20 years ago. This has led to ineffective results stemming from the statistic of King County ranking 2nd most in homeless veterans per capita and how 75 percent of the benefits go to seniors now. This to me signals that one of the clear policy recommendations and my **3rd policy recommendation** to

solve this problem is to take the current levy and separate the veterans part of it into it's own separate program again. This is because this will give targeting this specific issue a more clear focus and it will be easier to evaluate what is working and what is not from within a smaller levy. This will also allow the levy to be passed more easily like it was in 2005. As my interviewee noted how much harder it has gotten to pass the levy since it has now gotten much more convoluted/bigger in scope.

Work on band aid fixes

When thinking about how the city can work on it's supposed band aid fixes, I would argue evaluations are the best way to go. I would do this by having my **4th policy recommendation** be the city hire a non-profit that works with homelessness in King County evaluate all of the programs within the VSHSL and see over a length of time such as a year which of these supposed fixes are actually beneficial in the long term. This would allow the city to fairly evaluate all of these programs and better understand the themes within care that can specifically predict what can result in good outcomes for people getting out of or staying out of homelessness most often. This would especially be beneficial if the county follows my recommendation into a solely veterans levy once again. The elements here are tied together because once the county sees what programs work in the long term it can give them ideas of what to use for a solely veterans levy.

Adopt the Rhode Island Model

When looking at the Rhode Island model there is a lot to say about how Washington could take inspiration from this example. The first element of this policy and my **5th recommendation** is that I think Washington could adopt their own homelessness bill of rights. This is, in many ways, just a first step. It does send a strong signifier however that homeless people have protections that are written down in a government document. Along with this, my

interviewee talked about Rhode Island was stricter in the number of opportunities they give homeless people to find in their way out of homelessness, however I could not find any evidence to this fact and in fact found quite the opposite with the bill of rights. I think to a certain extent a policy that is a mix like this where you have the bill of rights that establishes protections and yet is stricter in the number of chances provided is a good policy plan to pursue. Especially because the neighbors of Washington on the Pacific Northwest in California and Oregon have looked at pursuing it as well. I would imagine the bill of rights could be stated in the levy and the Rhode Island plan could be implemented through policies in there as well. This would ensure specific implementation and allow for a multi-faceted plan, along with separating the veterans levy and trying to proactively prevent homelessness as opposed to reactively getting people out of it.

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Appendix 1. This was an email to the general King County Financial Assistance Program for Veterans.

The email said:

Hello Financial Assistance for King County Veterans,

I am Gavin MacMillan, a masters in Policy Studies student at the University of Washington Bothell. I am writing a 50 page report this summer on King County and homeless veterans. I was wondering if I could potentially interview someone from the program to help collect data for my report? It would be very much appreciated.

Thanks so much,

Gavin

Appendix 2. These are the questions I asked my interviewee

1. What has worked with the Veterans, Seniors and Human services levy?
2. What has not worked with the Veterans, Seniors and Human services levy?
3. What are the barriers to this levy or other potential homeless veterans solutions working in King County?
4. What other additions to this levy could be done to aid in its success?
5. How hard was it to get the initial levy to be passed?
6. What other problems persist outside of the success of the levy that are not accounted for as it relates to homelessness in King County
7. Even with the success of the VSHSL King County still has the 2nd homeless veteran population rate in the country, why is that?
8. Would you say it's more a Seattle culture issue as opposed to a king county or veterans issue?

