Neighborhoods of Refuge: Faculty-Student-Community Research on Homelessness

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In 2018-2019, FIU and MDC faculty and students embarked on a community research project with staff and clients of Camillus House. The project combined GIS mapping and qualitative research methods (PhotoVoice and interviews) to explore the role of neighborhoods in addressing homelessness.

We coordinated diverse groups of people all with limited time and other resources. In particular, some of the participants in our PhotoVoice project lost housing, family members, and pets, and had health challenges during our project. Although sustaining engagement in the project was sometimes challenging, we were able to build camaraderie with the group, which was evident in a moving opening exhibit. The leader of Camillus House's Art Therapy program, a client himself, introduced us to the participants and helped lead our PhotoVoice sessions. This encouraged the participants to openly discuss with us their feelings and thoughts about their photographs.

Most of the student researchers had good relationships with faculty from previous courses. Students volunteered as research assistants, but a generous grant from the FIU-MDC Humanities Edge program enabled them to be compensated for their work. Eight students conducted qualitative interviews, transcribed interviews, analyzed data, wrote up findings, presented findings at a symposium, as well as participated in PhotoVoice workshops, curated exhibitions, and created a website showcasing the research.

We support the goals of public humanities by integrating a local community into research. Our work is designed to provide insight on homelessness to the broader community so it can be used to advocate for sound policy addressing homelessness. Our research supports the creation of more permanent supportive housing throughout the Miami-Dade metropolitan region, including downtown. However, wherever it is built, the neighborhood needs adequate social infrastructure such as well-networked social service organizations to serve as a neighborhood of refuge.