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Understanding How NIMBY-ism Shapes Portland, Maine's Homeless Policies: A Qualitative Study

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Understanding How NIMBY-ism Shapes Portland, Maine's Homeless Policies: A Qualitative Study

Eleanor Ginder, University of Southern Maine School of Social Work

Abstract

On June 17, 2019, after a prolonged period of community concern, the Portland City Council voted to relocate the city's homeless shelter from the rapidly gentrifying Bayside neighborhood to a wooded area at the city limits. As municipal shelters continue to move away from metropolitan areas, the impact of NIMBY-ism on local and state policies related to homelessness cannot go unnoted. By analyzing publicly available testimony that occurred in the months after the decision to relocate, a variation of NIMBY-ism begins to emerge. This phenomenon, which could be referred to as "neo-NIMBY-ism" is characterized by individuals with lived experience of homelessness and advocates arguing that it is exclusionary policies, rather than homeless individuals, are not welcome in their proverbial backyards.

Introduction

- Nationwide, individuals experiencing homelessness are dealing with city policies that restrict the location of shelters due to rapidly gentrifying metropolitan areas and urban redevelopment. The phenomenon is certainly present in Portland, Maine. After years of contention, the City Council voted for the Oxford Street Shelter (OSS), the area's only municipal shelter, to be shuttered, with a new site built on the city limits.
- Residents of the Bayside neighborhood have complained that the presence of the shelter poses a safety hazard to residents and could lead to divestment (Billings, 2017). Such opposition has the power to directly limit access to services for individuals experiencing homelessness (Oakley, 2002).
- Such anti-homeless sentiment considers the homeless community to be "unsafe" and expects the government to intervene, specifically by removing the homeless community from the gentrified area (Eisenberg, 2017). This phenomenon of exclusion has come to be referred to in the literature as not-in-my-backyard or NIMBY-ism (Oakley, 2002). Thus, it is crucial to understand how NIMBY-ism shapes homeless policies at the city level. Understanding how city policies are constructed based on NIMBY-ism may inform homeless service agencies engagement with local government authorities to enact policies that would benefit those experiencing homelessness.

Research Question

- How does Nimbyism influence local homeless policy?

Methods

Data collection: publicly available testimonies from local residents and businesses

Data analysis: data analysis was guided by grounded theory methods

Results

In analyzing the public testimony, it is clear that NIMBY-ism played a role in the community response to the discussions regarding the relocation of Portland's municipal shelter. The coding process led to the identification of three distinct themes: NIMBY-ism motivated by a double dose of naivete and good intention, issues that were regarded as the direct result of failures on the part of the City of Portland, and what could be considered "neo NIMBY-ism", with community members identifying that the displacement and disenfranchisement of individuals experiencing was not something that they would tolerate in their proverbial backyards. .

Failures by the City of Portland:

- "The thought of capping the beds at 150 people with an overflow open area to accommodate 25 more is ludicrous. Portland voters need to know that in the cold weather, there are 200 to 220 individuals, human beings in need of shelter. The HHS committee will be choosing to leave potentially 60 to 70 breathing humans of varying ages outside to survive in the elements. It's not easy...It wears on you"

Naïve NIMBY-ism:

- "We're making progress, the city is doing all of the right things. I just urge you to do the right thing with the shelter."

Neo-NIMBY-ism:

- "And I think that my, my colleagues and my neighbors have said a lot of really beautiful things in this room and given a lot of really compelling reasons why we shouldn't be rushing this process by caps and restrictions are really really dangerous and they will cause people to die."
- "And I just wanted to say that, beyond everything else that happens to decide on the shelter, how its constructed, how the whatever policies that are developed for the new Homeless Services Center, there will still be folks staying on the peninsula, who will not go out out to Riverside."

Conclusions

- The decision to relocate the Oxford Street Shelter is part of a larger phenomena occurring across the United States, with municipal shelters moving from quickly gentrifying urban neighborhoods, such as Portland's East Bayside Neighborhood to more distant, less sought after locations. The phenomena of Neo NIMBY-ism identified in the testimony of service providers and community members with lived experience of homelessness is worthy of further research, with the potential to inform the literature, particularly when language associated with NIMBY-ism is used to advocate for the inclusion, rather than exclusion, of individuals experiencing homelessness within the communities they call home.

Acknowledgements & Sources

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