HOMELESSNESS
IN SALT LAKE CITY, UTAH

OXFORD MAP THE SYSTEM 2021 | SOCIAL RESET

**UTAH VALLEY
UNIVERSITY**

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"SOLVING" HOMELESSNESS

In 2015, The Washington Post published an article called, "The surprisingly simple way Utah solved chronic homelessness and saved millions. (1)" A few months later, the director of Utah's Homeless Task Force told the world that the state of Utah had "reduced chronic homelessness by 91 percent over the last ten years. (2)" Utah's success was attributed to its embrace of the "housing first" approach.

The reality was much more complicated. Utah's strategy to combat homelessness was shifting rapidly toward enforcement, even as officials were praised for their successes with the housing first approach. Nine months later, Utah rolled out a new $67 million initiative to combat homelessness: Operation Rio Grande (3).

Named after the Rio Grande neighborhood of Salt Lake City, the operation made 5,000 arrests in 14 months, resulting in only 550 people successfully employed or situated in permanent housing (4-5). Almost 80 percent of the budget for Rio Grande went to policing, court costs, or jail fees (6). Part of the discrepancy between the numbers reported under the housing first approach and those reported under Operation Rio Grande has since been explained by methodological differences in how chronic homelessness was counted, but even after correcting these differences, the systems that create obstacles for Utah's homelessness response are numerous and multifaceted (7).

METHODOLOGY & POSITIONALITY

To examine these complexities, we utilize a systems-mapping approach combined with an equity-centered research methodology that focuses on examining historical context and power dynamics to deconstruct homelessness in Salt Lake City. We find that Utah's history of Indigenous land seizure from eight federally recognized Native tribes by both Mexican and Mormon settlers is inseparable from the current state-sanctioned violence against the unhoused population.

Additionally, While our team is composed of a diverse compilation of differing gender, sexual, racial, and ethnic identities, all of us speak from privilege as individuals who have never personally experienced homelessness. Consequently, we understand the necessity to utilize equity-centered research methodology to prevent further harm to these vulnerable communities, by centering their experiences and placing them as a stakeholder in the current Utah housing crisis. We acknowledge this as one of the first steps, since these individuals are not regularly consulted in creating a solution. In addition to the use of secondary research, our research methods include first-hand quotes from informal and journalistic interviews with unhoused individuals, as well as the opinions of other important multi-sectoral sectoral stakeholders whom our team formally interviewed.

As residents of Utah, we chose Salt Lake City as a geographical boundary for our systems mapping because the vast majority of available data about homelessness in the state centers on Salt Lake City. The area contains the largest concentration of unhoused individuals. Consequently, most of the public disourse in Utah surrounding homelessness focuses on Salt Lake City.

BACKGROUND ON THE REGION

Utah state history is taught as beginning with Mormon leader Brigham Young's famous words, "This is the place," upon arriving in what would become the Salt Lake Valley (8). In reality, the land had a long history of violent conflict between settler groups and Indigenous tribes (9).

Mormons (today formally known as members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints) colonized the area, operating as a theocracy for nearly fifty years before joining the United States in 1896 (10). Salt Lake City's theocratic founding still influences many facets of life, from the words Utahns use to the size of Salt Lake's massive city blocks (11-12). Despite formal separation of church and state, the Mormon Church is still an important stakeholder in Salt Lake City's homelessness crisis.

The church is the largest landowner in Salt Lake City, with assets allegedly over $100 billion dollars, and membership that makes up nearly half the county (13-14).

Similarly, Salt Lake City's history of land seizure emphasizes the idea that land ownership is ultimately a social construct. Violent seizure of land and resources leads to a colonial state, where newly constructed land boundaries and properties are reinforced and protected through a violent police state. Hundreds of years after the events in Utah's history that led to its eventual statehood, Salt Lake City continues to experience a police state that drives folks out of encampments, sacks their resources, and arrests those who help them move their belongings.

Salt Lake City's violent history, coupled with its theocratic founding underlies nearly every portion of our systems mapping.

ROOT CAUSES

Conservative Ideology and American Individualism

Historically, policymakers ascribed homelessness purely to individual factors (15). Conservative ideologies tend to yield privatization of social welfare initiatives, and a focus on this individualistic perspective. The "Not-in-my-backyard" (NIMBY) mindset is also a major reason housing the unhoused is so challenging (16).

Plans to build any resource shelters consistently receive vocal push-back from residents (17). The prevalence of NIMBY attitudes, coupled with the "bootstrap ideology" inherent in American individualism puts this population into a state of limbo without an easy or sustainable exit (18).

Another mindset our mapping found to be prevalent can be traced to Salt Lake City's theocratic founding: the so-called "prosperity doctrine." The second chapter of the religion's foundational text, The Book of Mormon, asserts, "inasmuch as ye shall keep my commandments, ye shall prosper" and the phrase "prosper in the land" is used 21 times in the text (19-20). Today, Salt Lake City's government practices separation of church and state, and less than half of Salt Lake Valley residents are Mormon, but the cultural impact of the prosperity doctrine is clear: those who fail to "prosper" have failed to "keep the commandments [of the Lord]. (21-22)"

Criminal Justice System

For decades, anti-homeless city ordinances have criminalized homelessness (23-25). In Salt Lake City, sweeps of homeless camps result in many arrests and few individuals end up connected with resources or housing (26). Anti-camping laws and police enforcement result in cyclical migration of unhoused individuals without any meaningful increase in public order outside of localized areas (27). Many arrested for low-level crimes are not offered treatment options and find themselves cycling between court, jail, and encampments. Police intervention can result in physical and psychological harm (28).

Stigmatization of Marginalized Communities

In 2020, 35 percent of the unhoused adult population in Utah were dealing with mental illness, and 36 percent were experiencing substance abuse disorders (29). Unhoused individuals without health insurance have a harder time accessing healthcare resources, adding health concerns to an already complicated living situation. Research suggests that even healthcare workers working directly with the unhoused are not free of bias, and that deconstructing stereotypes are difficult (30). Media representations of unhoused individuals continually reemphasize stereotypes about individual factors while neglecting deeper structural issues (31).

A 2020 report showed that 23 percent of Utah's homeless population are survivors of domestic abuse (32). To protect their confidentiality, women in domestic abuse shelters are not counted as homeless even when many have no home to which they can safely return (33). Consequently, survivors lack visibility, which impacts resources. A disproportionate percentage of Utah homeless youth are LGBTQ+ youth. A 2013 survey found that about 40 percent of unhoused youth identified as LGBTQ+ (34). Many gay and queer youth become unhoused due to abuse or exclusion at home, and have a higher risk of mortality in non-LGBTQ-friendly communities (35-36) .

PATTERNS
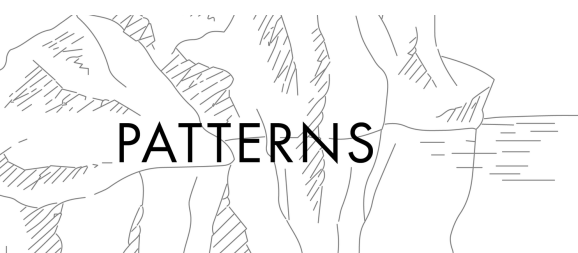
20% SUFFER CHRONIC SUBSTANCE ABUSE
13% VICTIMS OF DOMESTIC VIOLENCE
31% SEVERELY MENTALLY ILL
80% OF EVICTIONS OCCUR IN MAJORITY BIPOC REGIONS
ARRESTS OF 5,000 UNHOUSED PEOPLE IN 14 MONTHS (DURING OPERATION RIO GRANDE)
REGULAR POLICE SWEEPS OVER LAST 5 YEARS

Unaffordable Housing and Evictions

In 2021, Salt Lake City was named the least affordable metropolitan housing market in America, where wage growth fell behind the price of housing more than in any other large metropolitan market in the United States (37). This affordable housing crisis, exacerbated by the global COVID-19 pandemic, excludes many from gaining permanent housing and leads to evictions (38). After even one eviction, prospective renters are far less likely to be approved to rent again (39). In 2020, BIPOC families in Salt Lake City were evicted more often than white families (40-41) . These evictions represent structural socioeconomic and racial inequities that perpetuate homelessness and poverty (42).

2020 Eviction Rate

0.00%   6.98%
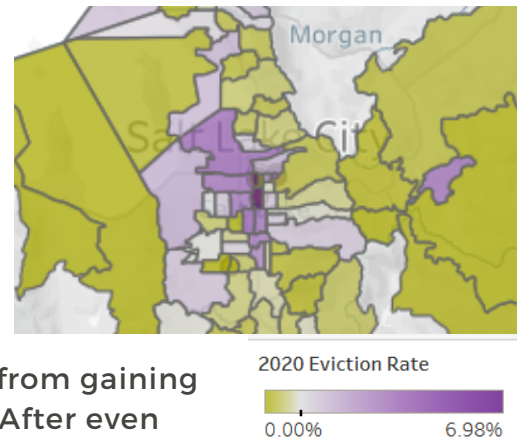
EXISTING INTERVENTIONS

Affordable Housing

Policymakers implemented a "housing first" approach in 2005, promising to immediately house unhoused individuals in affordable units to tackle chronic homelessness, which worked well until it was replaced in 2015 by Operation Rio Grande. Today, Salt Lake has three permanent supportive housing developments, though they struggle to maintain funding for case managers (43-44).

Resource Centers

After failing to maintain long-term homeless shelters, Salt Lake turned to "resource centers" that provide short-term access to resting spots, food, and water (45). Three resource shelters have been built, but the "housing first" model has lost momentum, leaving the unhoused without a permanent solution.

SYSTEM STRUCTURE

LEAST AFFORDABLE HOUSING MARKET IN USA
CRIMINAL JUSTICE SYSTEM
TENUOUS GOVERNMENTAL FUNDING
CAPITALISM
RELIGIOUS CULTURE

Philanthropy

Salt Lake relies on semi-regular philanthropic donations from powerful entities within the state, most visibly from the Mormon church, which recently donated $10 million to the local organization Shelter the Homeless (46). However, large donors do not effectively coordinate to strategically address the issue and measure progress. The Gardner Policy Institute recommends forming a formal Philanthropic Consortium to help bridge communication gaps between the city's homelessness council and funding sources. They suggest this improve impact tracking and focus initiative priorities (47).

Police Sweeps

For decades, Salt Lake has employed police sweeps of homeless encampments when the health department declares them hazardous, or a "nuisance" to housed individuals (48). During a sweep, individuals are arrested, belongings that cannot be carried are confiscated, and unhoused individuals are newly displaced (49).

In December 2020, police and protestors clashed in downtown Salt Lake during a sweep of encampments in the area (50).

Government Committees

Utah's Lieutenant Governor heads the Homeless Coordinating Committee, first established in 1986 (51). However, the committee has failed to lead a comprehensive and consistent strategy toward solving the problem. The Lieutenant Governor is also responsible for many other initiatives. For years, there was no single leader directing the homelessness response. In March 2021, Utah's Governor signed a bill to restructure the governance structure and appoint a homelessness coordinator and a "Homelessness Council. (52-53)" As of May 2021, a new coordinator has been appointed but not seated, and will meet by November 2021.

MENTAL MODELS
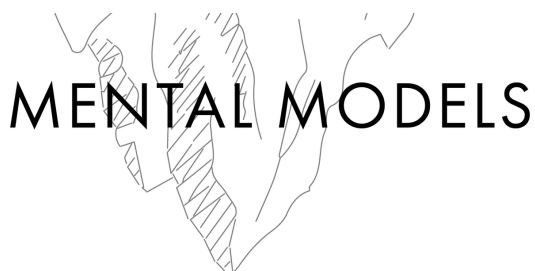
PROSPERITY GOSPEL
"LAW AND ORDER" POLITICS
RELIGIOUS PERFECTIONISM
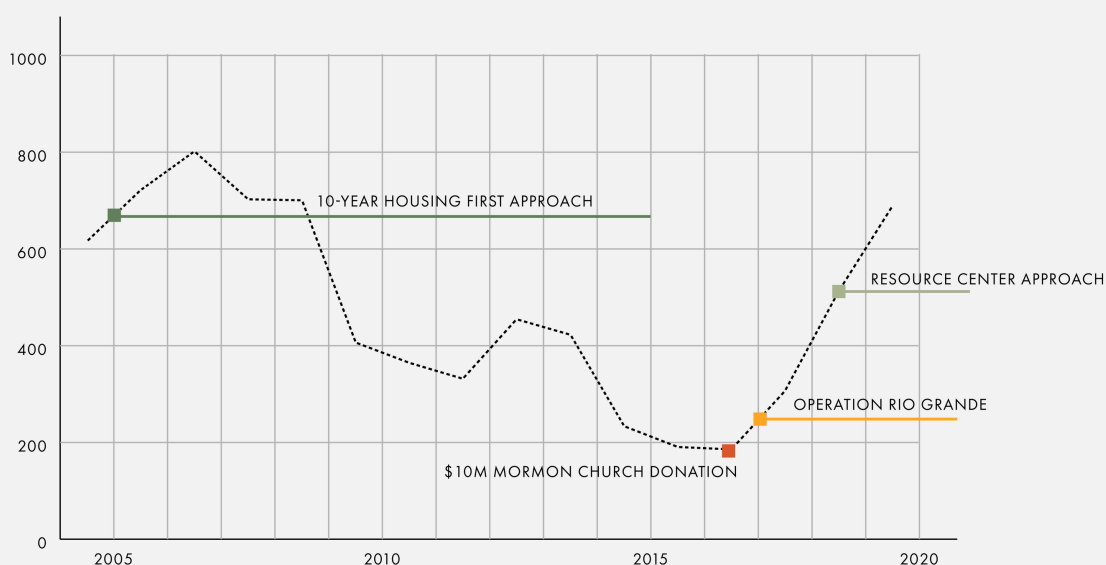WHITE SUPREMACY
NOT IN MY BACKYARD (NIMBY)

AMERICAN INDIVIDUALISM
BOOTSTRAP IDEOLOGY
CONSERVATIVISM
COLONIALIZATION

GAPS

In November 2020, at the request of the Utah Legislature, the Gardner Policy Institute issued a report to identify gaps in Utah's response to the homelessness crisis (54). The report opens with the warning, "we face the risk of backsliding if we don't make smart decisions moving forward. Utah is at a critical juncture." This warning does not come as a surprise. Salt Lake County's chronic homeless population has grown rapidly for the last four years in a row, with 2020 figures surpassing the 2005 count (55).

HOMELESSNESS IN SALT LAKE CITY
TIMELINE OF EVENTS & CHRONICALLY HOMELESS POPULATION GROWTH

10-YEAR HOUSING FIRST APPROACH

RESOURCE CENTER APPROACH

OPERATION RIO GRANDE

$10M MORMON CHURCH DONATION

Inconsistent and Unrepresentative Leadership

Governor Spencer Cox, who took office in 2021, called the existing governance structure responsible for addressing Utah's homelessness "a ship with 12 steering wheels. (56)" Incomplete data, communication gaps, and inefficient decision-making frameworks erased the progress made from 2005 to 2015. The Gardner report's first suggestion: restructure top-level governance (57). Our systems map corroborates the findings of that report: without a council and coordinator, the Lieutenant Governor's office is stretched too thin to devote sufficient time and resources to combat homelessness.

Unclear Funding Strategy

The state does not have cogent funding strategies. A 2017 legislative audit showed "no statewide homelessness budget that provides clear and transparent funding amounts or sources. (58)" The most recent bill gives a one-time appropriation of $41,395,700 to combat homelessness in fiscal year 2022, but guarantees no funds for programs extending beyond that date.

Per the Gardner report, "Few people understand Utah's complex decision-making framework. Relationships at all levels – state, local, service provider, philanthropic community – need to be clarified, strengthened, and communicated." This lack of organization creates bottlenecks and adds uncertainty to the process, adversely affecting the ability of service providers to help unhoused individuals.

Lack of Diverse Representation in Narrative Shaping

In Utah, many marginalized populations remain unrepresented in the legislature and homelessness steering committees. The Office for Multicultural Affairs, created by Utah's Governor in 2012 only recently began to explore how disparities in housing in certain areas of Salt Lake affect its BIPOC population (59). Without data, these populations remain invisible and policy decisions are made without proper consideration. Those struggling with homelessness have very little sway in terms of how policy is implemented. The new state structure does include one seat on a committee that will be filled by someone that was formerly homeless (58).

Ineffective, Enforcement-heavy Methods

Utah's past success in reducing homelessness in the shows the problem is not intractable. Salt Lake City's backslide to pre-2005 levels of chronic homelessness occurred simultaneously with Operation Rio Grande. The Salt Lake Tribune calculated $8 out of every $10 from Operation Rio Grande went to court costs or policing and jailing the unhoused. The ACLU called Operation Rio Grande's approach "heavy-handed" and calculated that the crackdown resulted in "13 arrests for every person placed in a new treatment program." Shortly after his appointment as Utah's first homeless coordinator, Wayne Niederhauser affirmed, "law enforcement has to play a big role for us to be successful. (59)" Despite these claims, the enforcement-heavy approach of Operation Rio Grande seems particularly ill-suited meet the diverse needs of a population that struggles with mental illness and substance abuse.

GAPS

INCONSISTENT & UNREPRESENTATIVE LEADERSHIP

LACK OF DIVERSE REPRESENTATION IN NARRATIVE SHAPING

UNCLEAR FUNDING STRATEGY

INEFFECTIVE, ENFORCEMENT-HEAVY METHODS

LEVERS OF CHANGE

Create Homelessness Council, Ensure Diverse Representation

Seven years after the end of Utah's 10-year housing first plan, Utah is finally creating a council whose sole prerogative is to address homelessness. Utah's governor recently signed a bill to restructure the governance structure and appoint a homelessness coordinator. This includes the creation of a "Homelessness Council." Wayne Niederhauser, Utah's former Senate President, is the new coordinator. Though simple, merely having a homelessness coordinator and council directly responsible for addressing Utah's homelessness crisis is a crucial precursor to all other levers of change. Despite the potential for immediate improvement, our system map shows that the makeup of the council is just as important as its existence.

Organize Funding

One of the first tasks for the homelessness council should be to create a philanthropic consortium and to develop a coordinated funding model. Addressing the lack of organization in how governmental funding and private-sector donations are spent is low-hanging fruit that can help to slow the trend of increased homelessness over the last four years. The mere creation of a homelessness council gives local individuals and organizations clarified leadership.

Shift Public Opinion

Our systems map suggests that organizational changes can return Salt Lake City to pre-Operation Rio Grande numbers. However, after these initial changes are made, the path forward becomes less clear. Our analysis suggests that political, religious, and societal ideologies common to Utah are a major impediment to lasting success. The small-government, low-tax ideology guiding Utah's government, coupled with the "law-and-order" mentality under-girding crackdowns like Operation Rio Grande are at odds with the kind of sustained funding needed for a long-term solution to the homelessness crisis in Salt Lake City.

Programs that mitigate homelessness is not a high fiscal priority for the majority of Utah's electorate. To this end, there are two precursors that may shift public opinion. First, improved data and communication will underlie any successful effort to humanize the homelessness crisis Second, the Mormon Church's position as both the largest holder of Salt Lake City real estate and the organization with the greatest ability to sway public opinion in Utah places it in a prime position to improve the effort. Shifting public opinion is a slow process, but ultimately the most important lever of change to solve homelessness in Salt Lake City.

Implement Evidence-based Methods of Community Care, City Planning

If public opinion shifts to the degree that Utah's legislature becomes willing to fund a non-enforcement heavy response, Salt Lake City will have a myriad of evidence-based solutions to choose from. One such solution is that of "rapid re-housing." These programs are not only cheaper than shelter or halfway home style interventions, but rapid re-housing also has been demonstrated to be effective in getting people experiencing homelessness into permanent housing and keeping them there (60). Another solution policymakers could invest in is public housing and vouchers programs. These programs provide dignified and safe affordable housing for low-income people and play a critical role in reducing homelessness (61). Finally, policymakers should look to best practices in city planning to address homelessness before it starts. Although both public housing and housing vouchers are proven to end homelessness, only one in four households that are eligible for such assistance receive it.

LEVERS OF CHANGE
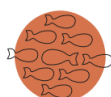
CREATE HOMELESSNESS COUNCIL AND ENSURE DIVERSE & APPROPRIATE REPRESENTATION

SHIFT PUBLIC OPINION

ORGANIZE FUNDING

IMPLEMENT EVIDENCE-BASED METHODS OF COMMUNITY CARE & CITY PLANNING

KEY INSIGHTS AND LESSONS LEARNED

Utilizing systems mapping to understand homelessness in Salt Lake City taught our team that problems are more complicated than they originally appear, however, they are not unknowable. Through a multitude of perspectives, we learned that solutions that stop short of humanizing and including the unhoused will only continue to perpetuate homelessness. Our systems analysis also granted insight into the vital importance of examining our challenge's overlapping contexts, perspectives, and power dynamics, in order to develop both the micro and macro understandings necessary to eventually solve it.

Salt Lake City's previous successes show homelessness is not unsolvable. A consistent, well-funded, non-punitive effort to house the unhoused made progress before and our mapping shows it can again. Our analysis stops short of suggesting how Salt Lake City should allocate funds, and instead focuses on how Salt Lake City can first ensure leadership funding is guaranteed, and second, ensure funds are spent helping the unhoused instead of arresting them. Salt Lake City has a long way to go before it will be held up as an example again, but we are hopeful it can employ strategic, evidence-based solutions to tell the world that we "solved homelessness" — this time for good.