Housing Insecurities in Champaign County, IL

An overview on insecurities faced by lowest income residents of Champaign County, Illinois

Yasamin Khoshpour
August 12, 2021
Two thousand, six hundred, seventy five (2,675).

This is the total number of vacant housing units available in Champaign County, Illinois, in 2019. That's while in the same year, there were 151 homeless people counted on a given night in this county.

In an ideal world, the above condition sounds like an extremely unfair situation. But in reality, we can’t even imagine such a world clearly, or even anything close to it. For more than a century, homelessness has been a major national issue in the United States. According to HUD, on a given night in January 2019, Seventeen out of every 10,000 people in the country experienced homelessness on a single night. The same study shows several 8 out of every 10,000 people in the state of Illinois. Although there has been a gradual decline in homelessness in most Illinois counties, there is still a lot that needs to be done to end homelessness.
As the 10th most populous county in Illinois, Champaign County is home to so many residents dealing with housing insecurities every day. For instance, the total number of people experiencing homelessness in Champaign county has increased over the past year. According to the National Alliance to End Homelessness 2021 Report, the homeless population trend in Champaign County, which had started to decrease gradually over the past decade, is now off to another increase. An overview of Champaign County housing market trends and demographic composition is presented in the following paragraphs. The main purpose of this story map is to study the relationship between race, job insecurities, and housing problems.

The study is done through two major data sources to gain a more comprehensive picture of the current state of housing insecurities in Champaign county. One is the data analysis on available secondary data. The secondary data is mainly distracted from government data archives such as United States Census Bureau, American Community Server(ACS) that are updated regularly every 5-10 years. The main statistic analysis of this project has been done using the elements of HUD’s Assessment of Fair Housing methodology to analyze Champaign County's demographics, patterns of spatial integration and segregation, and the intersectionality between housing and other needs.

The second source of information is a collection of lived experiences from residents in Champaign County who have previously dealt with housing insecurities or are currently dealing with them. Lived experiences have been interpreted from interviews with residents who once were clients of a local government agency that serves community members with essential social and financial support.

After presenting an estimate on the current state of housing insecurity in Champaign County, the main goal of this story
map is to introduce an organization that is providing lowest-income residents of Champaign County with different social services and to finally suggests a possible synthesis on how is best to approach housing instability at a local level.
Racially or Ethnically Concentrated Areas of Poverty (R/ECAP)

As it was mentioned in the previous paragraphs, main analysis was done using the AFFH data tables. An important attribute in AFFH assessment method is the R/ECAP which is the abbreviation of Racially or Ethnically Concentrated Areas of Poverty. Census tracts which are within a RECAP experience various socio-economic insecurities such as housing problems, cost burdens, unemployment, disability, etc. In Map 1, the areas which are marked with red outline are the concentrated areas of poverty in Champaign county. The poverty rate used to calculate the RECAPs does include the college students. It is important to explore different factors that leads to poverty in these areas. The next slides will demonstrate six major variable that play a role in the racial and ethical poverty status of these areas.

To assist communities in identifying racially or ethnically-concentrated areas of poverty (R/ECAPs), HUD has developed a census tract-based definition of R/ECAPs.

When calculating R/ECAPs both racial and economic statistics of the population living in the area are considered.
**Poverty Rate**

As demonstrated in map 3 all four concentrated areas of poverty have a poverty rate in range of 6% to 12%. This means that in each of these areas up to twelve percent of the population is suffering from poverty.

**Racial Distribution of Population**

In map 4, the racial distribution of each census tract is demonstrated. Black and Hispanic minorities are the dominant race in most of the concentrated areas of poverty. In
other words, R/ECAPs tend to have a smaller number of white residents.

**Number of People Experiencing Severe Cost Burdens**

Map 5 shows the number of people who are experiencing severe housing problems. As anticipated, cost burdens exist more seriously in the concentrated areas of poverty.
**Job Proximity Index**

One important criterion to consider when studying a low-income residence is the unemployment rate which could change under different factors. One factor is the job proximity index. The job proximity index is calculated by dividing the distance of certain employment opportunities to a certain area. Contrary to what is expected, four racially and ethnically concentrated poverty areas have a high job proximity index. This could again be explained by the other variables, such as the racial characteristics of the population. All in all, based on the available data from the US Department of Housing and Urban Development, it is clear that the higher number of black people in an area, the higher chance of the area being a low-income residence.
Population of People with Disabilities

Based on the information on HUD (US department of housing and urban development), Census Bureau, and the bureau of labor statistics, around 20% of the population in Champaign county live below the poverty line, a number that is higher than the national average of 13.1%. This means that there are around 40000 individuals in poverty in Champaign county among which, there are more than 15000 people experience severe cost burdens or housing problems. This can explain the 12000 unemployed people and a rate of 10000 people with disabilities.
As this paper claims, poverty and race are two dominant factors that play a crucial role in segregating the area. In other words, economic and social aspects of the insecurities are often considered to play the most crucial roles. These two aspects explain the importance of introducing Cunningham Township Supervisor's Office (CTSO) as a service provider in Champaign County. Established in the year 1928, CTSO is a governmental organization located in Downtown Urbana, Illinois. This governmental unit is funded by residents of Urbana through monthly tax payments. The main mission of Cunningham Township is to serve the lowest-income residents of Urbana with services for different types of housing, food insecurities.
There are two major programs offered by CTSO, General and Rental assistance. Both programs support low-income Urbana residents who are in the life-threatening circumstance of living without shelter, facing eviction, or exhausted at all other means of support and are left with no options.

Each program participant at Cunningham Township can also benefit from the support of staff members in the process of applying for additional services outside this organization. From SSDI to substance abuse issues and food insecurity. Township does the follow-ups to make sure participants are receiving the support they need.
Rental Assistance Program Client

Ja Nelle D. Pleasure, 42

Ja Nelle is a mother of three, a poet, a recycle/up-cycle artist and a fashion designer who teaches dance. She has recently started working as an IT specialist in the area of cyber security. 2018 brought Ja Nelle and her kids a rough journey to go through. With their house being foreclosed and Ja Nelle’s severe health issues, they found themselves in need of some emergency aid. She is now living in a 3 bedroom house in Champaign, supported by her income and the support of her community.

It was just nice to have someone hold your hand, and say: “It’s gonna be okay; I know you don’t know where exactly you’re going or what you’re
I always try to put myself in other people's shoes and this time the shoe was already put! Accepting help and accepting kindness shouldn't be a hard thing for certain people but for me, it was! And at that time I had to really put my guard down. Because I had three young children. I couldn't sit back and watch them have to suffer because I wasn't strong enough to accept help.
Emergency Shelter Program Client

Lorenzo and Virgina Thadison, 50

Lorenzo and Virginia had to move out of their apartment after the apartment building owner decided to shut it down. They had about two months to search for a new place, but pandemic restrictions had made it difficult to find any. This couple both suffer from some health problems that have made the situation even harder for them. Fortunately, they are now located in an emergency shelter and have been there since three months ago. They are currently enrolled in the general assistant program at Cunningham Township, and they are working hard every day to find an apartment to move into soon.

I had a job; before this situation kicked me up, I
was managing. We all were. And it’s like you wake up one day, and suddenly everything in your life has changed. There were days when we didn’t think we can make it, but Township supervisors helped us keep going. They saved both our lives and our relationship! I don’t know where we would have been if it wasn’t for Township.

Lorenzo and Virginia Thadison, two of the CTSO participants who are currently at an emergency shelter, explain more about their experience before interaction with Cunningham Township:
Virginia:

we don’t take life for granted!

Lorenzo:

Believe me when I tell you, Everybody talks about the second chance, well I’ve had milin of chances. but honestly, people still look back at what you did 20 years ago as opposed to what is going on today in your life. With that saying, just the judging, the judgmental, and you can’t get mad. Because for a lot of people, this is their business, a lot of them don’t wanna take chances not knowing what the outcome is going to be. What if someone starts working for them and one day comes to work and shoots everybody? I stole a car when I was 17 years old, I messed my entire life for it. I haven’t been to take it back until 12 years ago!
**General Assistance Program Client**

*Destoni Cobb, 29*

The mother of six, 29-year-old Destoni, had to leave her home in Atlanta, GA, after losing her job due to the pandemic. She moved to Champaign in November 2020 to stay with her father, but things didn’t work out as expected, and eventually, they had to spend two nights in their car in December. That’s when she was introduced to Cunningham Township by a social worker in the Housing Authority who had randomly seen Destoni and her kids in their car. They spent two months in an emergency shelter, and now they live in their own house in West Champaign.

We were on the verge of homelessness, or better say, we were at the state of homelessness. I had
six little ones behind me, and I used to think that if I give up, who will take care of them? So I prayed, and I just believed that everything was happening for a reason, and I believed that this was the road we had to take to get to where we need to be. It was a challenging journey, but it was worth it. Township made everything easier, and honestly, without their help, I don’t know even if I would have been in my home today.

Sometimes you need a little bit of help to get back and to be okay again. Right now, this is our little home, and we’re starting over. So far, so good!
Disability Assistance Program Client

Turhan Peacock, 61

Turhan Peacock is a U.S. military veteran who has worked as a city council member in Champaign and Urbana for 16 years. Due to a health problem in the year 2016, he was no longer able to continue working. He had to apply for retirement and social security disability earlier than he had planned. However, the process was more challenging than expected, and Mr. Peacock had to take steps he had never thought he would need to take in his life. Although he recalls that period as an episode that floored him down, he believes it made him a better person with more faith in human beings.

There is a particular type of grain that mainly black people use, and it’s expensive to buy at the store. Township plants them in their garden, and they don’t care who goes there and picks them up. That’s how the world is supposed to work. The whole concept is not just the different financial assistance programs. It’s the idea that you have people who care about you, do it without humiliation, judgments, and don’t expect something in return because they believe they’re offering you what you deserve.
Ja Nelle describes her experience with some other agencies as:

I think the fact is that a lot of people probably get treated like that and don’t feel bold enough to say anything because they're there honestly thinking they're gonna get help. And they do get help but they're treated less. You know.. it makes it hard. A lot of people won't speak out. I'm not one of those people who won't speak out because I hate injustice! **If I see injustice I'm the loudest person in the room and you don’t want to be messing with me.**
Organizations like Cunningham Township are of the fortunate privileges for Champaign County since it's one of the few townships in Illinois which have kept its activities and programs going even during the pandemic.

This was what Tomas, former advocacy specialist at Cunningham Township told me when I asked him about his most memorable experience while working at this organization.
Although it is fortunate that organizations like CTSO exist within the community of Champaign County, one side of the government can not be enough to solve the problems. As a local government unit, CTSO has put effort to apply federal funds and community donations, and taxes to serve residents. However, in order to take a more comprehensive step in the process of finding the solution to homelessness, other government units, specifically the federal government need to be more involved in this process.

During the recent pandemic, there have been a number of supportive acts and incentives implemented to help the vulnerable groups of the community survive the crisis. Fortunately, so many of these supportive acts have been helpful in different aspects such as food and housing insecurities. It would make more sense if these acts could come to work even outside a crisis situation. It's not always necessary to wait for the crisis and then think of the extra actions needed to solve the crisis.
This report intends to suggest approaches similar to Equity Planning that have recently captured more attention for urban planners. It seems inevitable that the most functional way to serve the public interest is taking a more precise look at the underlying factors leading to injustice, segregation, and poverty in urban communities. For example, it is not enough to only provide financial aid when there are still social barriers preventing some residents from having secure welfare conditions.

Equity planning suggests that not all instabilities in living conditions happen equally to everyone. There are certain communities that need more attention since for long they have been marginalized, and overlooked. It could be helpful if urban planners put more serious effort to address equity that benefits a wider range of community members from various backgrounds and individualities.