

Introduction

The village model is an increasingly popular form of alternative shelter being explored by organizations, activists, and municipalities around the country. Portland's Dignity Village is the country's first and longest running village, serving as a touchstone for community dialogue in Oregon around the subject of supporting people experiencing homelessness since 2000. More recently, the region has seen the rapid increase in alternative shelters informed by or following the village model, sparked by a state of emergency declaration on housing and homelessness in Portland in 2015, and further accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic. As the model continues to grow and morph with each iteration, the research team at Portland State University's Homelessness Research and Action Collaborative (HRAC) wanted to know if the village model was working as intended, whom was it serving, and what lessons could be learned to improve future village efforts based on insights from those with personal experience living in, working at, or designing for a village. This document is the outcome of a multi-year research project to answer these questions. There is currently very limited research on villages and much still to be explored, but this effort hopes to make a significant contribution to the understanding of villages by comparing six different villages in the Portland Metro region with varying degrees of infrastructure, management or governance structures, operating support, and origins.

Research Methodology

The work presented in this report relies on the direct input from those with experience designing, supporting, managing, and/or living in or near the villages.

Collectively, our research included interviews and surveys with:

- 42 villagers
- 9 village support staff
- 7 village designers/architects
- 6 village creators/builders
- 16 neighbors of villages
- 2,065 Portlanders who responded to an anonymous survey about homelessness and villages, 436 of whom reported living near a village

All research activities were reviewed and approved by the Institutional Review Board at Portland State University. Below, we outline our specific approach for recruiting and interviewing members of each group and briefly discuss how data were analyzed and incorporated into the report.

Villagers

Beginning in late summer 2020 and lasting through late spring 2021, we attended community meetings, made announcements, and distributed flyers at each of the six villages to recruit villagers to participate in this project. We described the research purpose and process and asked people who were interested to provide us with contact information so we could follow up with them to

schedule interviews. All villagers were invited to participate, with the aim of recruiting at least half of the current village occupants, which we were able to achieve at most sites.

We first administered a survey that included a variety of questions about housing history, pod quality, experiences with others in the village and the broader neighborhood, transportation, health, basic needs, and life satisfaction. We consulted with people with personal and/or professional experience with homelessness and housing when developing the survey; and we also pilot tested it in an earlier study on the experiences of villagers (Leickly, Townley, Ferry, and Petteni, in press). We then completed semi-structured qualitative interviews where villagers could talk more freely about their experiences. Surveys and interviews with villagers were conducted in-person when possible, or over the phone or via video conferencing when not. The interviews were in-depth and extensive, lasting an average of 1.5 to 2 hours with each villager. Villagers were compensated with \$30 for their time.

Village staff, designers, and creators

Village staff, designers, and creators were contacted via phone or email and invited to participate in an interview about their experiences designing, supporting, or working at each village. We sought equal representation across villages (i.e., three to four staff, designers, and/or creators per village). Questions focused on design features of villages, including spatial and site considerations; staffing and governance structures; and villager outcomes, including the number of villagers who have transitioned to perma-

nent housing. Interviews lasted 1 to 3 hours and occurred via phone or video conferencing. Participants were offered \$25 for their time.

Village neighbors

We used a variety of approaches to collect information from neighbors about their attitudes toward and experiences with villages. First, we recruited people living near each of the villages through targeted invitations (e.g., emailing people who have been active in neighborhood association meetings and community conversations about villages) and posts on neighborhood-specific social media (e.g., Neighborhood Facebook and Nextdoor pages). We were especially focused on the following three different groups of neighbors and worked to achieve balance between these perspectives: 1) people who have always been proponents of the village model; 2) people who maintain concerns about some aspects of villages; and 3) people who have changed their mind over time in either direction. Interviews with neighbors occurred via phone or video conferencing and lasted around 1 hour. Individuals received \$25 for their time participating in the interview.

Second, we developed an anonymous online survey assessing neighbors' experiences with, knowledge of, and attitudes toward homelessness and homeless services, including villages. The survey was conducted on Qualtrics, an online survey platform; and anonymized links were distributed via social media (e.g., Facebook and Twitter), neighborhood association list-servs, and electronic newsletters sent by the city and county.

The only requirements for participation were being at least 18 years old and living in the City of Portland. The survey took most respondents 5 to 10 minutes to complete.

Finally, given concerns about property values commonly voiced by neighbors of villages and other programs serving people experiencing homelessness, we consulted with a finance and real estate analyst in order to assess the impact of villages on the prices of single and multi-family properties in the neighborhoods surrounding the villages. CoStar, which has the most comprehensive database of real estate data throughout the US, as well as other databases and geospatial techniques were used to conduct property value analysis.

Key Takeaways

Following data collection, surveys were analyzed using SPSS statistical software, while interviews were professionally transcribed and analyzed using thematic coding techniques. Findings are summarized throughout the document, with the first section summarizing findings from the villager research; and the second section featuring recommendations based on findings from villagers, village staff, and neighbors. We created the how-to-guide to be as usable, concise, and applicable as possible, which meant in some cases needing to exclude some additional data on villager outcomes, neighbor experiences, and contextual factors (e.g., how villages operated during the COVID-19 pandemic). We look forward to continuing to unpack these findings and share them in

scholarly papers and presentations in the future. For now, some key takeaways from our research, which will be described in more detail in the pages to come, include the following:

1. Villagers were largely satisfied or very satisfied with their pod as a place to live (86% expressed being satisfied or very satisfied).
2. Most (69%) were satisfied or very satisfied with their village as a place to live.
3. And most (79%) were satisfied or very satisfied with their neighborhood as a place to live.
4. Food insecurity remains a major problem at villages, with 45% of villagers reporting being food insecure. This suggests that while villages are helping some individuals meet their basic needs for food, there is still a need to ensure that everyone has access to food.
5. Villages have disproportionately served White people (particularly White men) and need to institute more mechanisms to support people of color. This disparity is reflected in our research, with only 17% of the villagers we interviewed identifying as Black, Indigenous, or other People of Color (BIPOC) despite the most recent Point-in-Time count for Multnomah County reporting that 40% of those who were unsheltered were people of color. We also found that BIPOC villagers reported lower levels of belonging and acceptance within their villages compared to White villagers.

6. The feeling of having a voice and influence over the social and physical aspects of the village had major impacts on villager satisfaction, but it was not necessarily contingent upon full self governance. The majority of villagers (69%) said that they should share in decision making at the village, while 26% said that only villagers should determine what happens in the village.

7. Concerns about villages among neighbors diminished over time. That is, most neighbors who reported concerns (e.g., decreased property value, increased crime) when they first learned of villages being located in their neighborhood reported no longer having those concerns after living near the village.

8. Size, cost, infrastructure, and governance structures vary widely across villages, and there is very limited knowledge sharing between villages.

9. The vast majority of stakeholders feel that the ideal number for a village is between 20 and 30 people. This range was offered for a variety of reasons that included community cohesion, impacts on internal work shifts at self-governed villages, staff to villager ratio, and efficiencies and limitations related to the physical infrastructure of a village.

10. Key unexplored opportunities for future villages include: Integrating villages into emergency preparedness plans, designing villages to better support parents, creating a city-level village liaison position, designing villages around activities and interests, and leveraging village investment toward the creation of affordable housing.

Final Note

The design of this document aims to provide an accessible and nuanced picture of villages through a profile of each village, results of surveys with villagers, a how-to-guide of best practices for the creation of future villages, and portraits of stakeholders involved in village efforts. While unable to fully capture the full story of each village or list each stakeholder, it endeavors to respectfully acknowledge the work of countless people engaged in the act of village-making and learn from these efforts. This document is not intended to be read as advocacy for or against the creation of new villages, but aims to provide a critical understanding of the village model toward better outcomes for those deciding to undertake the creation or support of future villages. The solution to homelessness is permanent housing and supportive services. While we collectively strive toward providing permanent housing for all, we hope that this document will contribute to dialogue and efforts aimed at supporting our neighbors experiencing homelessness in the near-term.