# The Intersection of Homeless Shelters and Historic Preservation for Community Engagement
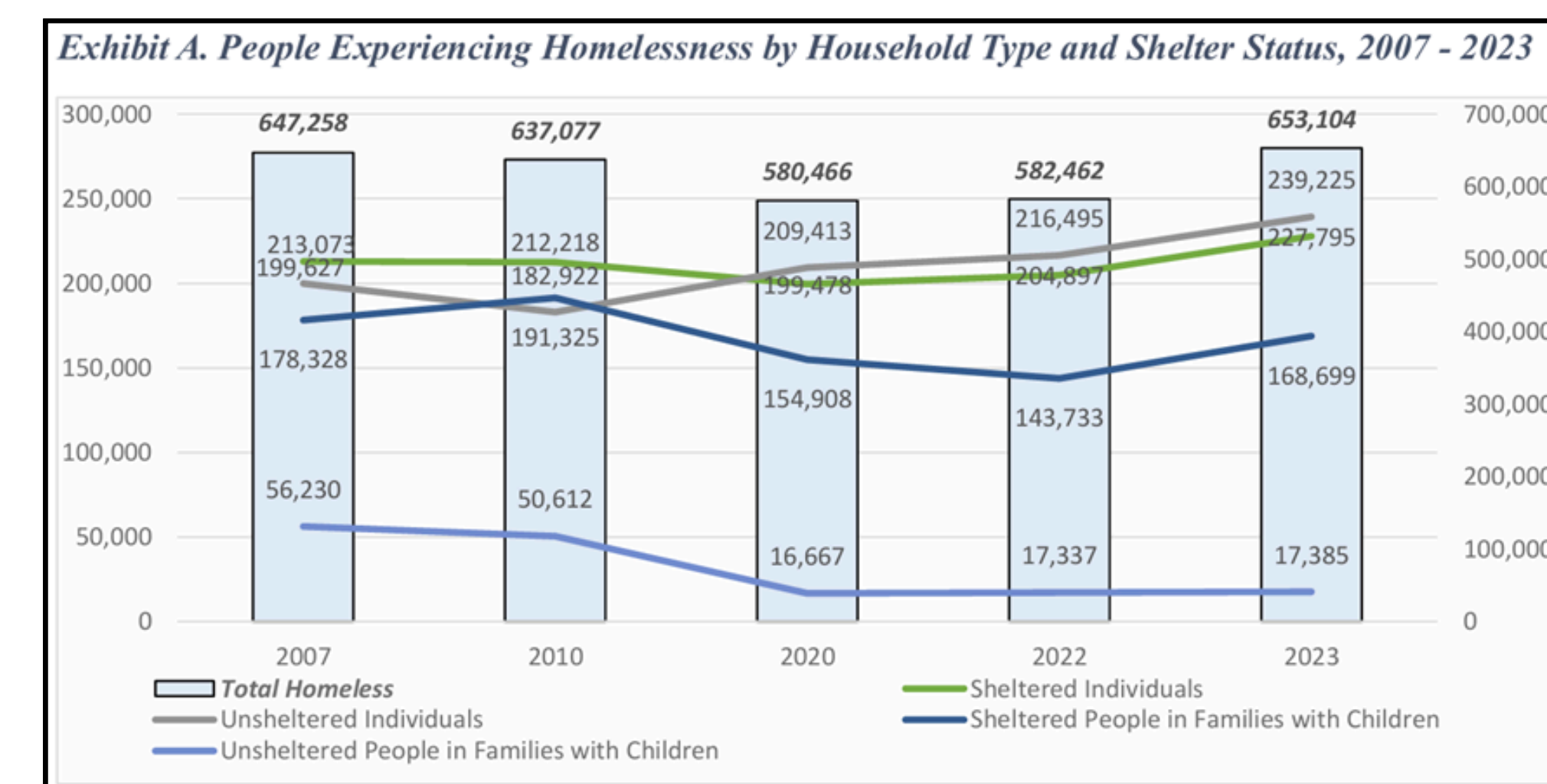
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## ABSTRACT

Due to policy failures, the U.S. faces a **quickly growing homelessness epidemic and housing crisis**, leaving many people without their basic needs met. The issue is then aggravated by the stigma surrounding homeless people, which for many people justifies the decision not to help them. Ending homelessness requires **dedicated policy reform and strategies to close the economic gap** in the U.S., but this cannot be done without **changing public opinion**. So, **existing systems for housing and shelters must be examined to determine their shortcomings** and what must be changed.

## OBJECTIVE

This research is being conducted to determine how **historic preservation and third place theory can impact homeless shelters**. The intended outcome of this research is to **create a homeless shelter with the mission to improve the lives of its tenants and the surrounding area**, which can be supported by historic preservation and third place theory. Thus, this project shall **conduct a comparative research study to analyze the effectiveness of similar projects, determined by their impact on the homeless population**. Ideally, the effect of the study would be **identifying choices made at homeless shelters that helped their tenants in specific ways**, which will inform this project and be reflected in later stages.

## HOMELESSNESS AND THE HOUSING CRISIS

Housing instability and homelessness have existed throughout all of history, with notable spikes around major world events. Unfortunately, homelessness still exists, with an **estimated 653,104 homeless people, as of January 2023** (U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, 2023). *See Figure 1.*



*Figure 1: Department of Housing and Urban Development 2007-2023: Demographics of homelessness and shelter status*
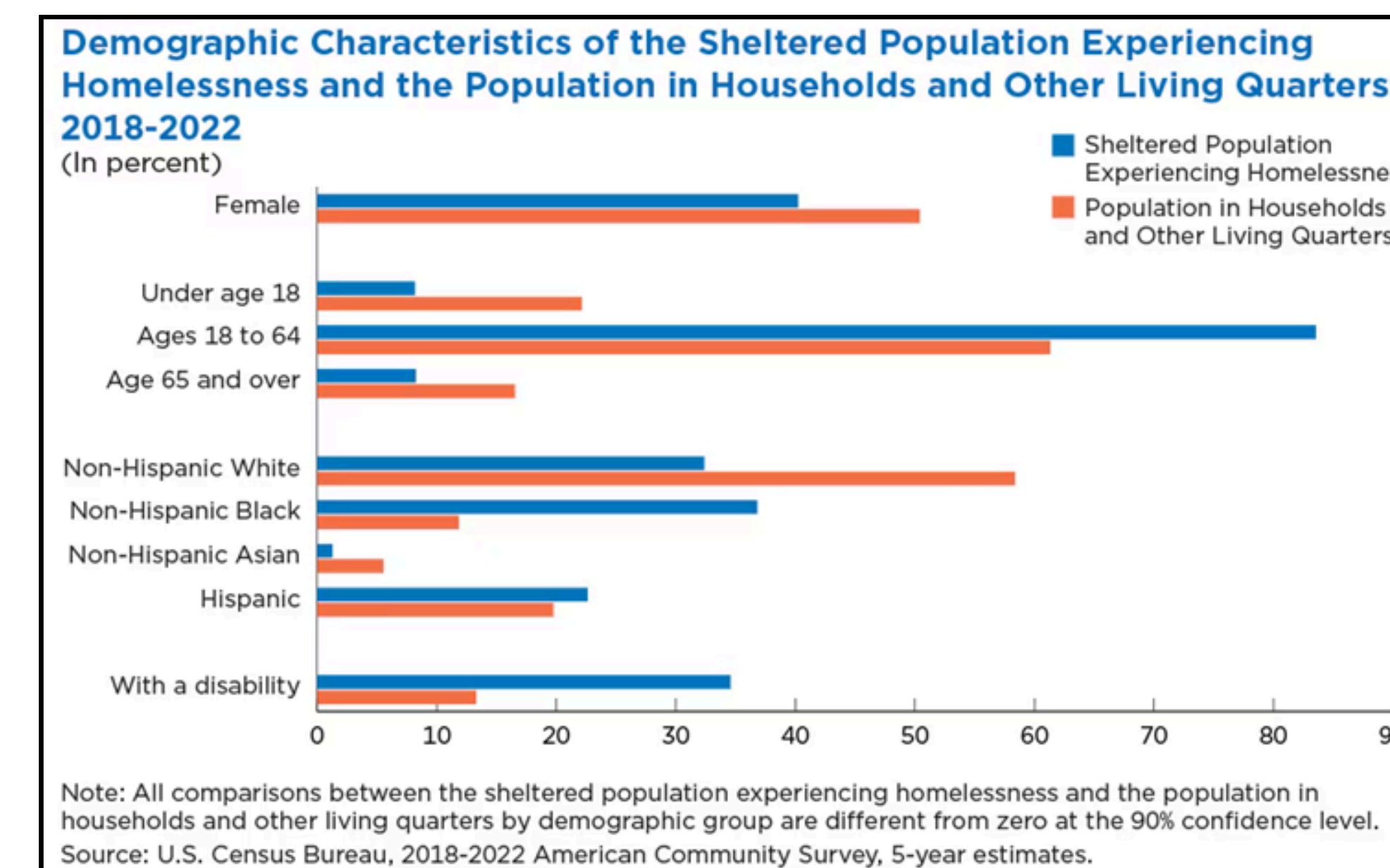
**Modern homelessness is laden with issues**: failed policies, underfunded programs for affordable housing, lack of access to good healthcare, including mental health care, education, and more. These issues have **roots in past and present racism and bigotry**. Through human history, marginalized groups have been directly harmed by the policies and decisions made by their governments, the effects of which have created **staggering economic divides between these groups and those more advantaged, typically white people**. Continued racism and bigotry contributes to the **continued growth of the homeless population** (United States Interagency Council on Homelessness, n.d.). Many people in America live paycheck to paycheck and are at near constant risk of losing their homes, especially in large, overpopulated cities with high rent or mortgage prices.

As investigated by Michele Wakin, the **three main issues that define modern homelessness are criminalization, housing, and welfare** (Wakin, 2022). **Legal measures set to discourage homelessness do not solve the issue** and encourage the public perception of homeless people as criminals, further **encouraging the dehumanizing stigma surrounding them**. This stigma **intersects with other bigoted views** based on race, gender, class, sexuality, etc. and compounds into a largely negative public opinion. **Public opinion shapes public policy and law, which can jeopardize the homeless population, further jeopardizing homeless shelter safety, helpfulness, allocated money and more.**

## HOMELESS SHELTERS

Homelessness can happen to anybody at any time, which is why **homeless shelters and low-income housing** exists. If governments cannot fully solve the issue, they can at least fund part of a solution. Homeless shelters serve as a means to prop people up in times of need, providing safety, security, comfort, and most importantly, shelter.

The US Census Bureau conducted research detailing the **demographics of the sheltered homeless population from 2018-2022**, as shown in *Figure 2*: "40% were female; 8% were under the age of 18; 8% were age 65 or over; 32% were non-Hispanic White; 37% were non-Hispanic Black; and 35% had a disability" (Glassman, 2024).

**These statistics only involve sheltered homeless individuals**, and do not take into account those who **cannot or choose not to stay in a shelter**. Often, homeless shelters **bar entrance** to women with children, anyone with pets, and anyone with a job requiring night shifts (because of shelter curfews), and are generally ill-equipped to handle families.



*Figure 2: US Census Bureau 2018-2022: Sheltered Population Demographics (Glassman, 2024).*

Inside, many **homeless shelters are plagued by major issues**: the general lack of them, privacy, safety and accessibility issues, public opinion of homeless people, and more. **These issues prevent a large portion of the homeless population from getting shelter and aid**.

Regardless of their shortcomings, if planned correctly, homeless shelters can be **opportunities for community engagement, humanization and rehabilitation of the homeless population, and can even produce job opportunities**. To address some of the major issues, this shelter will be **designed with safety, security, and accessibility, biophilia and sustainability, comfort, privacy, and creating a healthy living, learning, and working environment** for the shelter tenants and the public.

## THIRD PLACE THEORY

Third Place Theory was coined by sociologist Ray Oldenberg in the 1980s. **A "third place" is a place outside of home and work where people can go to spend time**. They can be any number of things: bars and restaurants, clubs, libraries, community centers, etc. These provide safety and can help communities prosper. Often, community centers have programs or events targeted towards children, which can be great **educational and socialization experiences.**

Having safe spaces to do hobbies and other work is incredibly important, as not all homes provide good environments to live or work. **Spaces like these are vital for many families, especially those with lower incomes, providing a place of refuge, comfort, and safety to relax and socialize outside of home and work environments.**

## HISTORIC PRESERVATION

**Historic Preservation is an architectural practice in which buildings are reused, updated, or given new life in order to serve a new purpose or to preserve the historic integrity**. It is an art form which can serve as an educational opportunity, like teaching the history of an area, preserving architectural history and detailing, bringing in tourists, aesthetics, and so much more.

As examined by Tatiana Walk-Morris for the American Planning Association Magazine, **historic preservation and zoning reform can play a large part in solving the housing crisis** (Walk-Morris, 2021). Historic preservation projects are provided with **tax credits and write-offs, which can significantly reduce costs**. Recently, there have been creative building solutions for homeless shelters using adaptive reuse and historic preservation, which this author is using during the design process of this project.

## RESULTS

**This research has been conducted to inform the design stages of the author's capstone project.** The eventual homeless shelter will address these issues, while making sure that tenants are as comfortable and safe as possible.

**This project will be a large historic building containing a homeless shelter, as well as co-working spaces, meeting rooms, a kitchen and cafeteria, among other community oriented spaces.** This shelter will **expand upon what is expected of a typical homeless shelter**; it will be a space for community engagement, education, rehabilitation and humanization, and safety. It will serve a larger purpose, helping its community and aiding in the homelessness epidemic.

## REFERENCES

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