A Modest Proposal for UW

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President, University of Washington
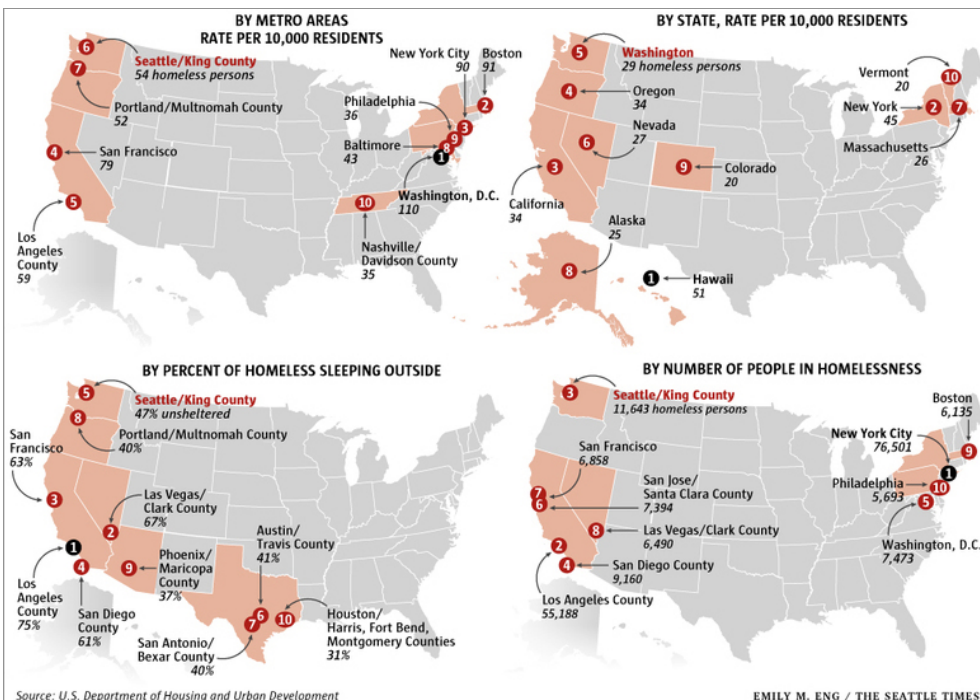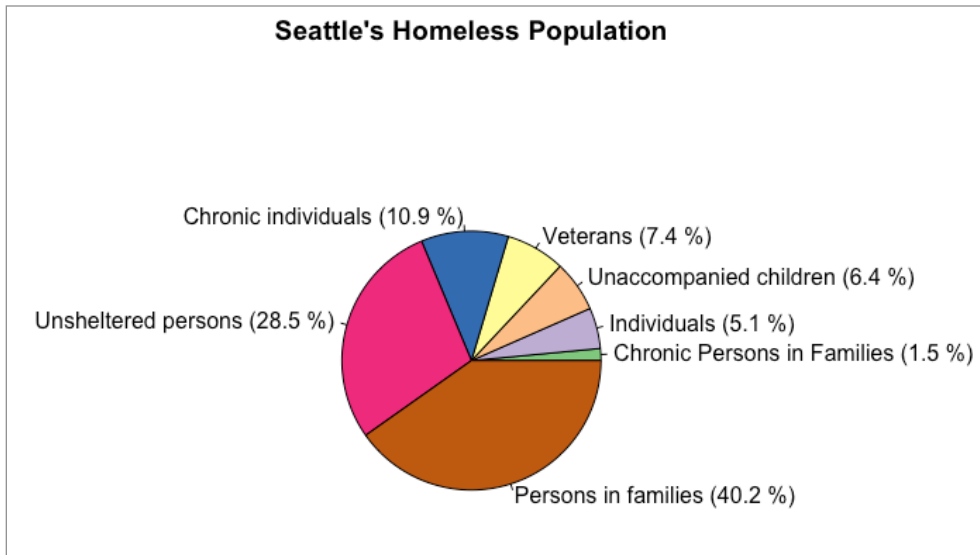
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Dear President Cauce,

I am writing you concerning a major issue in the Seattle metropolitan area: homelessness. As a public, influential figure in the city of Seattle, I am sure you are aware of the magnitude of the issue. However, I will refresh you on the statistics. Across the Seattle metropolitan area, well over ten thousand people currently live without any type of permanent shelter, and this figure shows a clear, positive trend: in just the past ten years, this number has more than doubled. Additionally, a growing percentage of those without a permanent home are unable to even find a homeless shelter to stay in and are left deserted on the streets. I've analyzed datasets [1] [2] provided by the National Alliance to End Homelessness (NAEH) and have produced for you some visualizations about homelessness in Seattle, in order for you to fully understand the issues.

The graph shown below illustrates the breakdown of homelessness in the city of Seattle. As can be clearly seen, over a quarter of homeless people in Seattle are living unsheltered, out on the streets. Even more disturbingly, 6.4 percent of the homeless population (1,136 people of the total 17,760) are unaccompanied children! Let that sink in. Over a thousand people living in this city are children with no caretakers and no permanent residence.

Seattle's Homeless Population

Chronic individuals (10.9 %)

Veterans (7.4 %)

Unaccompanied children (6.4 %)

Individuals (5.1 %)

Chronic Persons in Families (1.5 %)

Unsheltered persons (28.5 %)

Persons in families (40.2 %)

While Seattle's homeless situation is grim on its own, Seattle also has one of the worst homeless crises across the US. I've included this (left) visual provided by the Seattle Times to demonstrate such. As shown, Washington State and Seattle both rank fifth out of every state / major

BY METRO AREAS
RATE PER 10,000 RESIDENTS

Seattle/King County
54 homeless persons

New York City 90 Boston 91

Portland/Multnomah County 52

Philadelphia 36

San Francisco 79

Baltimore 43

Los Angeles County 59

Washington, D.C. 110

California 34

Nashville/Davidson County 35

BY STATE, RATE PER 10,000 RESIDENTS

Washington
29 homeless persons

Oregon 34

Vermont 20

New York 45

Nevada 27

Massachusetts 26

Colorado 20

Alaska 25

Hawaii 51

BY PERCENT OF HOMELESS SLEEPING OUTSIDE

Seattle/King County
47% unsheltered

San Francisco 63%

Portland/Multnomah County 40%

Las Vegas/Clark County 67%

Austin/Travis County 41%

Phoenix/Maricopa County 37%

Los Angeles County 75%

San Diego County 61%

San Antonio/Bexar County 40%

Houston/Harris, Fort Bend, Montgomery Counties 31%

BY NUMBER OF PEOPLE IN HOMELESSNESS

Seattle/King County
11,643 homeless persons

Boston 6,135

New York City 76,501

San Francisco 6,858

San Jose/Santa Clara County 7,394

Philadelphia 5,693

Washington, D.C. 7,473

Las Vegas/Clark County 6,490

San Diego County 9,160

Los Angeles County 55,188

Source: U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development

EMILY M. ENG / THE SEATTLE TIMES

US city in homeless population proportion, and the proportion unsheltered homeless people, respectively. Seattle also ranks third in the nation for sheer homeless population: 11,643 at the time of this article's publishing (it is now estimated by the NAEH to be almost 18 thousand).
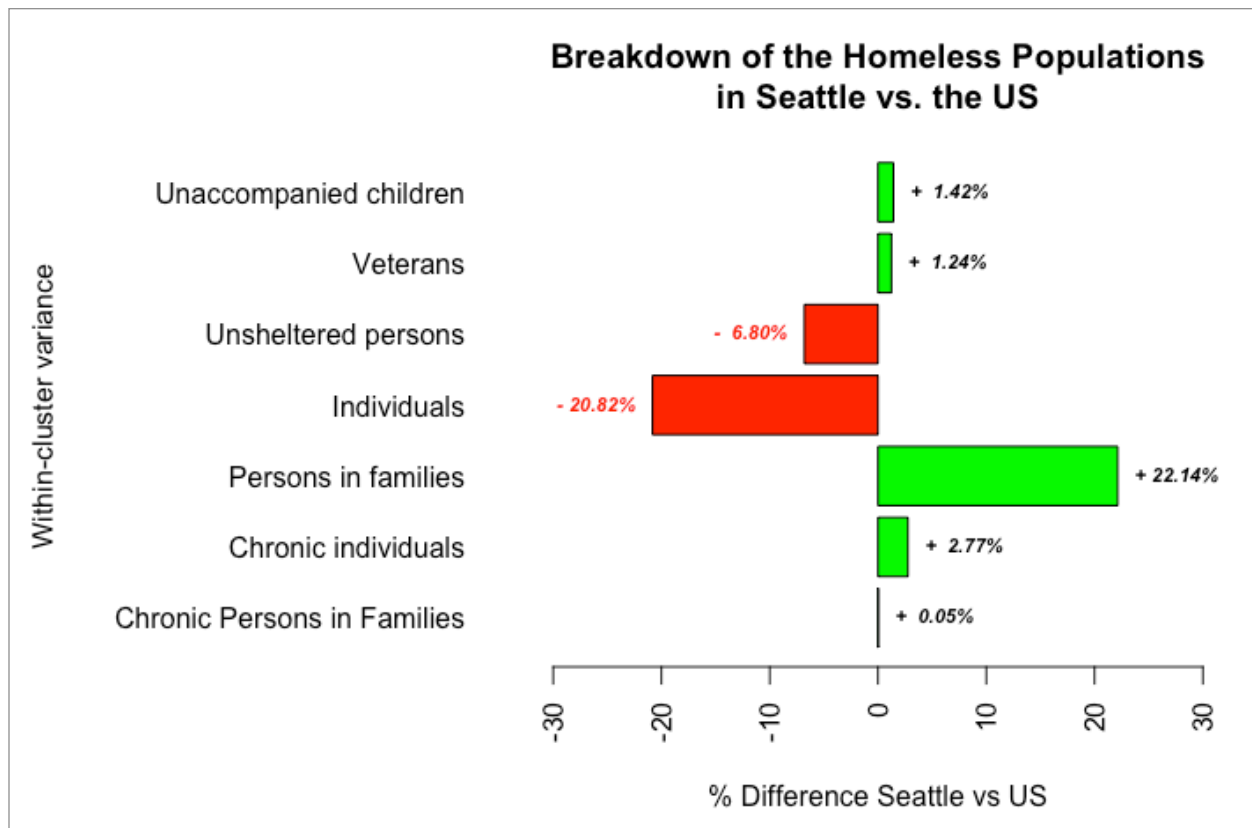
The above visualization was generated from the same NAEH datasets used for the pie chart showing Seattle's homeless population breakdown. This data uncovers another striking feature of Seattle's homeless population when compared that of the US as a whole—Seattle's swings much more towards families and away from individuals, suggesting that families in Seattle have it especially hard when it comes to finding permanent places of residence. This could be due to the cost of supporting a family in such a high-price region, as well as more subtle cultural phenomenons in Seattle families, such as emotional needs of new parents not being met.

Hopefully, the visualizations provided by myself and the Seattle Times have helped you understand the severity of the situation. However, the question on how to address the homeless problem from a purely numbers-based approach (i.e., get people off the streets) is unfortunately a highly politicized issue. Studies [3] [4] from Columbia University show that while people tend to be in favor of the vague idea of programs that support the homeless, they are often opposed to specific measures proposed by city governments, such as allowing homeless people to sleep on benches or in parks. People are confused about ways in which to improve the statistics of homelessness in the city, and for good reason: "getting people off the streets" represents a major moral dilemma for most people who consider all sides of the issue.

Instead of providing another solution to that attempts to improve the statistics of Seattle homelessness on a purely numerical level, I would like to propose to you a solution that can address homeless people on a much more personal level and allow them to improve their own well-being without forcing new laws and restrictions onto them. Due to the nature of my proposed solution I believe that you, as President of the University of Washington, are able to play an extraordinarily powerful role in it. I would like to address the problem through more comprehensive education for University of Washington students. I believe that if you lead an effort to introduce a comprehensive service-learning curriculum with a focus on homelessness at the University of Washington, the Seattle community will be able to greatly improve the relationship between homeless and non-homeless people and meet the higher-level and/or emotional needs of homeless people throughout the city. This could involve mandatory general-ed classes on the issue, as well as a wide range of electives that students are encouraged to take. I come to this conclusion after a full quarter of researching both academic studies and public datasets, as well as volunteering weekly at Seattle's Downtown Urban Rest Stop, a facility that provides shower, hygiene, and laundry services to homeless people.

Through my data analysis, I was able to uncover striking trends in Seattle's homeless population and observe what makes it different from the general US homeless population. The most important takeaway from my own analyses was just how many families are on Seattle's streets compared to the average major US city. Coupled with Seattle's very high general

homelessness statistics, as well as the disturbing amount of unattended children on its streets, I deduced that the solution must afford students the ability to understand the dynamic of a homeless family and be able to address the unique issues one could suffer from compared to individuals. Thus, I feel that a major component of the proposed curriculum should be dedicated to studying family dynamics under stressful conditions such as homelessness.

Through my academic research [3] [4] [5], I studied the relationship between homeless people and non-homeless people. I was able to identify the stigmas held against homeless people by the general population and the emotional effects they have on homeless people. I was also able to identify possible causes for said stigmas, as well as possible solutions for addressing and eliminating them. In short, I found that while people generally feel a sense of compassion towards the homeless and are willing to support programs that will help them, people who have never experienced homelessness for themselves have a very hard time relating to homeless people. This lack of empathy is where the stigmas stem from: often manifesting themselves as blaming homeless people for their own situation because of perceived negative qualities, being unwilling to support current measures to ease homeless people's day-to-day lives for fear of compromising a neighborhood's beauty, or the general view of homeless people as the "other" rather than members of society. This often leaves homeless people feeling depressed, embarrassed, and lacking hope of one day securing a place of residence. The most important takeaway from my academic research was that higher levels of education actually *increased* the perceived distance, so to speak, between non-homeless and homeless people, contributing to more animosity and less empathy from the general population. It's not that educated people dislike or don't care about the homeless, but rather they do not have an adequate understanding of the day-to-day physical and emotional issues faced by these people every single day of their lives. As college educated people generally hold the vast majority of social and cultural influence in major cities like Seattle, a shift in the mindsets of such people can have a dramatic affect on environments in such cities. With well over half of the school's graduates living and working in Seattle [6], changes to its curriculum will have a significant impact on the city's culture. To address current education issues, I propose that the addition of this new service curriculum to the University comes with some reform of current classes taught at the school. Specifically, I feel

that the administration should examine curriculums taught in subjects such as Sociology, English, History, and other social sciences to determine what elements of the curriculum contribute to a misunderstanding issues faced by homeless people, and come up with a variety of possible solutions that could be easily implemented.

The final element that plays into my decision to write you this proposal, President Cauce, are the experiences I had working as a volunteer at Seattle's Downtown Urban Rest Stop. Although much of my experience was doing manual labor such as cleaning showers, the main takeaway I had from the experience was what I learned from having conversations with the people that I met there that understood, firsthand, the experience of being homeless in America. These conversations generally fell into two categories: those with staff members that had been homeless in the past, and those with patrons who had been homeless for a substantial amount of time. Through speaking with many of the patrons, the situation was often grim. A majority of them were addicted to drugs, many of which were heroin. These addictions had wrecked havoc on their physical and emotional health, with some even telling me they were homeless as a result of their addictions. The biggest obstacle they seemed to deal with, surprisingly, was a lack of affordable options for addiction treatment! Many of them were experiencing depression not only because of the effects of the stigmas held against them, but the fear that they would never be able to get off drugs. In fact, the happiest homeless people I spoke to at the facility were generally those experiencing short episodes of homelessness with no drug addictions of any kind. Indeed, staff members I talked to that had been homeless in the past said that one of the most important factors that allowed them to escape from homelessness was the understanding and support of friends and family members in helping them beat their own addictions. I believe that an improved relationship between homeless and non-homeless people will foster these types of interactions that are said to be so valuable for improving homeless people's living situations. Thus, I propose that the curriculum taught at UW's Department of Public Health be enriched with programs that focus on healthy ways to provide homeless people with access to drug addiction treatment. Since such a big part of treatment is understanding what those suffering from addiction are going through, I believe that this program should dedicate much of its focus towards the social aspect of addiction in the context of homelessness in order to allow students to

improve their empathy and understanding towards homeless people's personal situations. In addition to service learning, I feel that having guest lecturers who have overcome addiction and homelessness in the past would be invaluable to these students in giving them a real understanding of what addiction is like from the point of view of the victim.

Throughout this letter, I have shared with you the results of three different ways I have gone about discovering how to improve the social and emotional well-being of homeless people: quantitative analytics on public datasets, research and synthesis of different viewpoints across academia, and reflection on connections I have personally made with those in Seattle's homeless community. Each method revealed different and equally interesting results, and each set of results spoke to specific ways in which our curriculum at the University of Washington could be changed to have a positive impact on this incredibly diverse, kind, and interesting population unique to Seattle. I urge you to consider the points I have made and hope that they will have a lasting affect on the way you consider UW alumni's impact on Seattle's culture. I have built a roadmap for you; one consisting of three distinctly different paths leading to a single destination. Now, it's time for you to build a roadmap for our administration and change the future of Seattle's homeless population.

Yours truly,

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Citations

(1)   data.world/alice-c/homelessness-in-usa/workspace/file?filename=2013+US+State+Statistics.csv

(2)   data.world/alice-c/homelessness-in-usa/workspace/file?filename=State+Homelessness+Breakdown.csv

(3)   Phelan, Jo, et al. "Education, Social Liberalism, and Economic Conservatism: Attitudes Toward Homeless People."
      American Sociological Review, vol. 60, no. 1, 1995, pp. 126–140. JSTOR, JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/2096349.

(4)   Phelan, Jo, et al. "The Stigma of Homelessness: The Impact of the Label 'Homeless' On Attitudes Toward Poor Persons."
      Social Psychology Quarterly, vol. 60, no. 4, 1997, pp. 323–337. JSTOR, JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/2787093.

(5)   Shier, Michael L.; Jones, Marion E.; Graham, John R. "Perspectives of Employed People Experiencing Homeless of Self
      and Being Homeless: Challenging Socially Constructed Perceptions and Stereotypes," Journal of Sociology and Social
      Welfare vol. 37, no. 4 (December 2010): p. 13-38.

(6)   www.linkedin.com/school/university-of-washington/alumni/

R code used to create visualizations

```r
library(dplyr)
library(ggplot2)
library(RColorBrewer)

setwd("/Users/pierce/Desktop/r_eng")

# Import State data
state.data <- data.frame(
  read.csv("data/State-Breakdown.csv"),
  stringsAsFactors = FALSE)

# Analyze dataset to find missing values
ref <- state.data %>%
  filter(State == "Washington") %>%
  rename(Per = !!names(.[7]))
t <- ref %>% filter(Per != "")
rm(t, ref)
ot.amt <- 914
ot.per <- 5.1

# Standardize Washington data
wa.per <- state.data %>%
  rename(Change = !!names(.[6]),
    Per = !!names(.[7])) %>%  # get rid of long colnames
  filter(State == "Washington",
         Per != "") %>%
  select(ID, State, Variable, X2013, Per) %>%
  mutate(ID = c("ci",
                "cf",
                "fa",
                "yo",
                "un",
                "ve"), # standardize ID column
         X2013 = as.numeric(gsub(",","", X2013)),
         Per = as.numeric(gsub("%", "", Per)),
         Variable = sapply(Variable, as.character)
         ) %>%
  replace(., is.na(.), "") %>%
  rbind(list(
    "in", "Washington", "Individuals", ot.amt, ot.per)) %>%
  arrange(ID)
wa.per[7,3] <- "Unaccompanied children"

total <- sum(wa.per$X2013)

# Import National data
na.data <- read.csv("data/National.csv")

suppressWarnings(

# Standardize National data
na.per <- data.frame(sapply(na.data[9,], as.character),
                     stringsAsFactors = FALSE) %>%
  rename(Stat = !!names(.[1])) %>%
  mutate(Stat = as.numeric(gsub("%", "", Stat)),
         Group = rownames(.)) %>%

  # Remove irrelavant rows
  filter(!grepl("Percent", Group)) %>%
  mutate(index = c(1:13)) %>%
  filter(!(index %in% c(1,5,6,7))) %>%

  # Calculate relative percentages
  rbind( as.numeric(.[1,]) -
         as.numeric(.[8,]) -
         as.numeric(.[9,])) %>%
  replace(., is.na(.), "N_VY") %>%
  mutate(Per_1 = 100 * Stat / Stat[Group == "Overall"],
         Per_2 = Per_1 * (Per_1[Group == "Sheltered"] / 100),
         Per_3 = Per_2 * (Per_1[Group == "N_VY"] / 100),
         Per = c(
           Per_1[1],NA,Per_1[3],
           Per_3[4:7],
           Per_2[8:9],NA
         )) %>%

  # Standardize
  filter(!is.na(Per), index != 2) %>%
  mutate(ID = c("un",
                "in",
                "ci",
                "fa",
                "cf",
                "ve",
                "yo")) %>%
  select(ID, Per) %>%
  arrange(ID)
)

# Join the two tables

all <- left_join(wa.per, na.per, by = "ID") %>%
  rename(Per.wa = Per.x,
         Per.us = Per.y) %>%
  mutate(Diff = Per.wa - Per.us) %>%
  select(Variable, Per.wa, Per.us, Diff)

# Create the Bar Graph

par(mar=c(5,14.5,4,0))
g1 <- barplot(all$Diff,
              names.arg = all$Variable,
              col = c("green","green","green",
                      "red","red",
                      "green","green"),
              las=2,
              xlim = c(-35,35),
              horiz = TRUE)
text(x = all$Diff, y = g1,
     label = paste0(
       ifelse(all$Diff > 0, "+ ", "- "),
       format(round(abs(all$Diff), 2),
              nsmall = 2),
       "%"),
     pos = ifelse(all$Diff > 0, 4, 2),
     col = ifelse(all$Diff > 0, "black", "red"),
     cex = .7, font=4
)
title(
  main = paste0(
    "Breakdown of the Homeless Populations\n",
    "in Seattle vs. the US"
  ))
title(xlab="% Difference Seattle vs US",
      line=3.3, font = 4)

# Create the Pie Chart

par(mar=c(0,11,3,13))
slices <- wa.per %>% arrange(Per)
g2 <- pie(slices$Per,
          labels = paste0(
            slices$Variable, " (",
            slices$Per, " %)"),
          main="Seattle's Homeless Population",
          col=brewer.pal(
            n = nrow(slices),
            name = "Accent"))
```