

# **Homelessness and Milwaukee's Tent City: Policy, Advocacy, and Social Issues**

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# Introduction and Significance of Study

- Tent city was an informal establishment underneath the I-794 bypass south of downtown Milwaukee in 2018 and 2019
- Divergent approaches to how the tent city should be approached
  - Focusing on getting residents into transitional housing and off the streets or support the establishment by providing clothing, food, toiletry donations
- Was a highly covered news story
  - Received lots of donations and support from local charities and philanthropists such as StreetLife Communities, Street Angels, Milwaukee Rescue Mission
- Evicted dozens of residents two years in a row
  - Some were placed in transitional housing, not all were assisted

# Research Questions, Problems, and Interpretive Framework

- How do different interpretations and approaches to advocacy work towards homeless residents impact developments like the tent city in Milwaukee and what are their policy implications?
- Using an interpretive framework centered around divergent approaches to advocacy work
  - Advocacy for policy, advocacy for residents, advocacy for philanthropy



# Description of Setting and Context of Study

- Spatial boundaries are the City of Milwaukee
  - Located underneath freeway on highly desirable patch of land for investment and beautification
- Severe lack of safe and affordable housing, both permanent and transitional
- Number of homeless people in Milwaukee went up from 2018 to 2019
  - 871 to 885
- Wisconsin state government has changed from strongly Democratic to heavily Republican
  - Lack of support for homeless residents
  - Less than one-tenth the funding of surrounding Midwest states towards homelessness
  - Dubbed the tent city “Walkerville” after anti-Scott Walker signs put up after changes to FoodShare Program work requirements and other social welfare changes

# Methodology

- Different actors contributing to the tent city
  - Residents
  - Advocacy organizations
  - City government
  - County government
    - MMSD
    - Housing First program



# Literature Review

- Advocacy framework
- Policing the homeless framework
- Right to the City framework

# Analysis of Findings and Discussion

- Different approaches to advocacy
- Chronic homelessness in Milwaukee cannot be fixed at the city level alone
- Charitable efforts and independent philanthropy can deter individuals from seeking more permanent help and initiatives like Housing First
- Residential growth was greater than placement rate
- Nearby shelters had too many restrictions for many residents to be eligible for
- Not enough funding to open warming rooms at higher temperatures

# Conclusion and Policy Implications

- Reduced funding by Wisconsin led to a severe lack of funding for homelessness support in Milwaukee County
- Homeless shelters do not meet the need of residents
- Advocacy in the form of philanthropy and meal, clothing, and supply donations have helped sustain Milwaukee's tent city, but do nothing to help residents transition into permanent housing
- Policy changes could include statewide development of a Housing First program with increased funding for Milwaukee County
  - More inclusive homeless shelters
  - Assistance in transition to permanent housing (subsidies, more employment assistance, child care options)