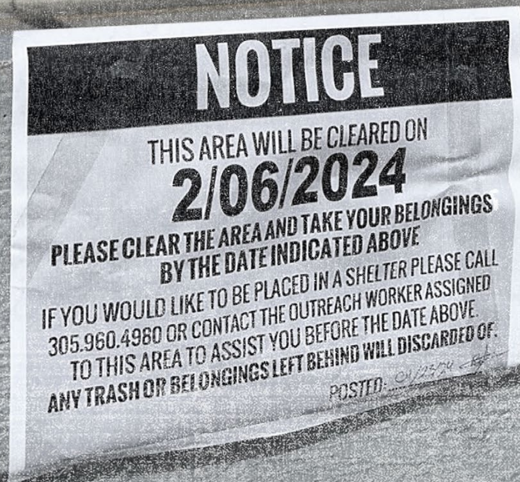
GREEN SCHOOL

POLICY REPORT

HOUSING FIRST AS AN ALTERNATIVE TO CRIMINALIZATION:

Preliminary Findings from Interviews with Unhoused and Formerly Unhoused People in Miami-Dade County



Matthew D. Marr, PhD
Department of Global & Sociocultural Studies,
Florida International University

Melissa Hurtado Nuez, MA
Department of Sociology, Rice University

FIU | Steven J. Green School of International & Public Affairs
FLORIDA INTERNATIONAL UNIVERSITY

Abstract ... 1

Purpose of the Study ... 2

Research Methods ... 4

Findings ... 6

Discussion: Enhanced Housing First Interrupts Shelter Disengagement ... 8

Conclusion: Equitable, Expedient, Durable Pathways? ... 10

Appendix 1. Research Methods ... 12

Appendix 2. Findings ... 16

Sources Cited ... 29

This study is being funded by the National Alliance to End Homelessness.

Thank you to the FIU Václav Havel Program for Human Rights & Democracy for its support to produce this report.

Copyright © 2025 by the Steven J. Green School of International and Public Affairs. Florida International University, Miami, Florida. All rights reserved.

Abstract

The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) recently awarded the Miami-Dade County Homeless Trust an increased number of housing vouchers that subsidize rents, increased funding for specialized street outreach and long-term case management, and increased technical assistance to address unsheltered homelessness. These resources have enabled some social service providers to implement a housing-first approach that recognizes housing as a human right and emphasizes rapid placement in housing and connection with voluntary supportive services. This contrasts with approaches that focus on "housing readiness" before placement and rely on long shelter stays due to a scarcity of housing. These additional federal resources have come at a time when state and local anti-camping ordinances are ramping up the criminalization of homelessness. Drawing on interviews with 20 individuals who have experienced unsheltered homelessness in Miami-Dade County in 2023 and 2024, this report compares experiences of a *housing-first* approach that has greater fidelity to the original concept with a de facto, status quo *police-shelter-wait first* approach driven by a scarcity of housing resources.

We find that those who were able to access the housing-first approach experienced this assistance as creating transformative pathways to housing that greatly improved their physical and mental health and ability to plan for the future. They attributed their successful moves into housing to the outreach workers who listened, cared, and followed through and who treated them equitably in a nondiscriminatory and nonjudgmental manner. Some highlighted the empathy, knowledge, and skills of outreach workers with lived experience of homelessness. In contrast, our interviewees described shelters as characterized by poor sanitary conditions, frequent conflicts among residents and staff, and racial and ethnic bias; they also reported that, while in shelters, they received little help in securing more permanent housing. As a result, many did not see staying in shelters as beneficial to them. We argue that this is disengagement from a flawed shelter system, not "service resistance." Yet, when they were living on the streets, criminalization measures forced them to make themselves invisible, complicating their access to assistance and producing negative consequences for their health. Thus, we recommend more investment in and expansion of the housing-first approach and less investment in criminalization and coercion into shelters with poor conditions. Conditions in shelters need to be improved substantially for them to serve effectively as a short-term refuge before housing.

Purpose of the Study

This report presents preliminary findings from one component of a larger study examining how a combination of *flexible housing vouchers and specialized street outreach and case management* can forge pathways from unsheltered homelessness to housing in equitable, expeditious, and durable ways. These vouchers and enhanced services were made available to the Miami-Dade County Homeless Trust[1] by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) in the fall of 2023 through a Special Notice of Funding Opportunity (SNOFO). Housing vouchers from HUD are crucial in helping people exit homelessness because they allow eligible users to pay no more than one-third of their income for rent, with HUD paying the balance (100% of rent if recipients have no income) to landlords. The Homeless Trust has used this influx of resources to address unsheltered homelessness in Miami-Dade County through a **housing-first approach** that aims to place people in housing with voluntary supportive services quickly, without requiring "housing readiness" or relying heavily on shelters (Hanks 2023). This assistance includes "stability vouchers" that are more flexible than traditional vouchers: local housing authorities issuing them have agreed to reduce bureaucratic hurdles, such as certain document requirements, to increase their accessibility and expediency. Some of the special funding has been used to expand specialized street outreach that includes innovative approaches like peer-led, trauma-informed, culturally sensitive, housing-focused, and professionally trained outreach workers and service-rich case management after housing.

Additionally, resources have been mobilized to flexibly cover costs such as rental deposits (sometimes giving double deposits to incentivize landlords), furniture and basic household necessities like cleaning supplies, and utility payments. HUD has also provided the Homeless Trust and service providers with technical assistance. These resources have enabled the Homeless Trust to implement at a small scale a housing-first approach to unsheltered homelessness that has more fidelity to the original concept, which is rooted in the recognition of housing as a human right,[2] than the status-quo approach, which is impeded by a lack of housing resources and relies heavily on shelters.

1 The Miami-Dade County Homeless Trust is a part of the Miami-Dade County government and is responsible for coordinating the county's "Continuum of Care," a system of housing, shelter, and services to address homelessness, largely funded by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development.

2 The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights has recognized access to adequate housing as a foundational human right in order for people to live in security, peace, and dignity.

> *“I didn’t have any kind of good feeling in myself until these guys started. I started seeing evidence of them helping me, and that’s what kept me going.”*
>
> *Jaime, who moved into housing after 20 years of homelessness and incarceration*

These efforts are being undertaken at the same time that recent judicial decisions and legislation have increased criminalization of homelessness. Over the course of 2023 and 2024, the U.S. Supreme Court has ruled that localities can arrest and fine people for sleeping in public spaces, even when shelter is not available (the *Grants Pass* decision); the State of Florida has passed a statewide ban on sleeping in public spaces (HB 1365); and local municipalities such as the City of Miami Beach and the City of Miami have implemented their own public camping bans and ramped up arrests of people living unsheltered (Rivero 2024). These decisions and ordinances, along with their disproportionate negative impacts on Black Americans, have led the University of Miami Law School Human Rights Clinic to issue complaints to the UN Special Rapporteurs on the Right to Adequate Housing, on Extreme Poverty and Human Rights, and on Contemporary Forms of Racism. Thus, the current policy environment calls for better understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of two approaches—a housing-first approach using flexible vouchers and specialized street outreach and case management versus a de facto **police-shelter-wait first** approach that emphasizes criminalization of street homelessness and using outreach to coerce the unhoused into shelters.

This report aims to contribute to a dialogue about the best strategies to address homelessness by focusing on **the experiences and perspectives of individuals enduring and trying to get out of unsheltered homelessness** in Miami-Dade County. We do so by analyzing the experiences of people who have engaged with both approaches mentioned earlier. The larger study, titled “Equitable Pathways: A Mixed Methods Participatory Study of Street Outreach Innovations in Miami Dade County,” is being led by researchers at Florida International University (Matthew D. Marr, PhD, primary investigator and Qing Lai, PhD, co-primary investigator). It is being conducted in collaboration with the Miami-Dade County Homeless Trust, the county’s Continuum of Care (CoC) coordinating body, and in consultation with the National Alliance to End Homelessness (NAEH), which is funding the study, and the Miami Coalition to Advance Racial Equity (MCARE), a nonprofit organization that advocates for the unhoused from a racial equity perspective. However, the FIU researchers are responsible for the study’s methods, analysis, and interpretation of findings.

To state our conclusion up front, **our findings call for more investment in the housing-first approach and less investment in policies that advance criminalization and coercing people into shelters. Shelter conditions need to be improved substantially so they can more effectively play a brief, interim role in a housing-first approach.**

Research Methods

In this report, we analyze data from initial in-depth interviews with 20 people who experienced unsheltered homelessness in Miami-Dade County during 2023 and 2024. We recruited our interviewees through two of three specialized outreach teams that we observed between the fall of 2023 and summer of 2024, as well as independently from these organizations. To capture a diversity of experiences of the housing-first approach and to compare them with experiences with the police-shelter-wait first approach, our sample includes three groups with different statuses at the time of our first interviews: (1) nine interviewees were **recently housed with a voucher and specialized outreach**; (2) five interviewees were still **unhoused but had a voucher and were receiving specialized outreach**; and (3) six interviewees were **unhoused without vouchers and specialized outreach**. The first two groups are beneficiaries of the housing-first approach, but have also experienced the police-shelter-wait approach, which the third group is relying on for aid.

This report only analyzes this interview data, but it is part of a larger longitudinal study in Miami-Dade County that includes interviews with people trying to move from being unsheltered to housed, participant observation and interviews with innovative street outreach teams, PhotoVoice[3] with people living unsheltered and recently housed through the housing-first approach, and quantitative analysis of Homeless Management Information System (HMIS) data. Where appropriate, we refer to interviews and observations with specialized street outreach staff and pilot interviews held with 10 additional people living unsheltered in Miami-Dade County in 2021 and 2022.

Please find a detailed explanation of our research methods in Appendix 1.

3 In the PhotoVoice portion of the project, persons in various stages of moving from being unsheltered to housed through the housing-first approach will be given cameras to document their experiences and perspectives, engage in workshops and group discussions about the photographs, and create an exhibition to promote public dialogue about effective ways to address homelessness.

“My life changed drastically. My kids are happier. I’m less stressed, less worried. I have more options for what I want to do with myself. … My health is much better. No depression … My kids are healthier and not being sick anymore.”

Ingrid, who moved into housing after three years of homelessness

Findings

Effectiveness of Housing First

Transformative Pathways

Our recently housed interviewees described their moves into housing with a voucher, supported by specialized outreach and intensive case management, as **transformative pathways** that improved their physical and mental health and their abilities to plan for the future and nurture their families. Despite these transformational impacts, many interviewees still faced substantial challenges given low or no income, chronic physical and mental health issues, and having to live in unsafe neighborhoods. However, they described feeling confident that they could cope with these challenges because of their ongoing contact with outreach workers and the case management provided by the specialized outreach team.

Key Factors Driving the Effectiveness of Innovative Outreach Teams

Interviewees who obtained vouchers praised the many ways in which specialized outreach teams helped them. They described these outreach workers using approaches characterized by **listening, caring, and following through**; providing **equitable treatment**; and being f**air, nonjudgmental, and nondiscriminatory**. Interviewees described the specialized outreach workers as "doing everything": obtaining documentation like birth certificates and IDs, submitting applications for benefits and vouchers, finding short-term housing and treatment when appropriate, advocating on their behalf to various bureaucracies, finding rental housing and resources to cover housing costs, securing furniture and other household items, helping during the move-in process, coordinating service providers, and providing food and transportation. These traits and practices of specialized outreach help build trust, bolster confidence, and overcome barriers, especially bureaucratic delays (e.g., inspections) with the housing authority. Many felt emotionally supported by the specialized outreach team and referred to them as being like friends, siblings, parents, or "family." Some interviewees noted that those caseworkers on the specialized outreach teams who had experienced addiction and homelessness were particularly effective: their lived expertise gave them more empathy and knowledge about and connections to resources.

Ineffectiveness of Shelterization and Criminalization

Poor Conditions in the Shelter System

In contrast to the transformative pathways described by those who had been housed with vouchers using a housing-first approach, our interviewees described many problems that they had experienced when trying

> ***"(The shelter is) not a place to be. And too much sickness. And you know, you have to be very careful. Sometimes the food is horrible. And there is fighting among the residents, even with the staff and security."***
>
> *Cecile, who had a voucher but had been staying in a shelter amid decades of intermittent homelessness*

to use shelters to exit homelessness. Although a few did describe positive experiences in shelters, many more of our interviewees who had stayed in shelters at some point described *poor conditions in the shelter system*: **unsanitary and unsafe congregate dorms, unreasonable rules and unfair staff, and lack of support in finding housing**. In contrast to the nondiscriminatory and fair nature of specialized outreach teams, some interviewees described the shelter system as riven by **bias and tensions**. Most described feeling like they were not treated fairly because they were homeless. Some felt that the shelter system was racially and ethnically biased and that it was difficult to live in congregate settings with people of different backgrounds.

Criminalization and Suffering on the Streets

Because of these conditions, many interviewees had largely disengaged from shelters only to face increased **criminalization and suffering on the streets**. They described being the targets of move-along orders, ticketing, sweeps, and arrests. Some feared that this criminalization would continue to intensify, given the recent passage of state and local legislation outlawing sleeping in public spaces. The interviewees had to move constantly and use other tactics to make themselves invisible to police and residents who might complain. This caused sleep deprivation, anxiety, vulnerability to theft and police-led sweeps, and other detrimental impacts on their health. Their frequent moves and vulnerability to losing property, especially their phones and documentation, complicated their ability to communicate with outreach workers and access aid. Being arrested created additional barriers to getting housed, as their criminal records came up in background checks by landlords. Given the harshness of living unsheltered, some interviewees expressed a desire to stay in a shelter, despite the poor conditions. Some said that their faith in specialized outreach teams to secure vouchers and housing helped them endure a brief stay in shelter before being housed.

Please find a detailed presentation of our findings in Appendix 2.

Discussion

Enhanced Housing First Interrupts Shelter Disengagement

In a pilot study for our current project, we developed a grounded model of shelter disengagement based on interviews with 10 people living on the streets of Miami-Dade County in 2021 and 2022 (see page 9). The additional 20 interviews presented in this report support and elaborate this model. **In contrast to stereotypes of "shelter resistance" that blame people living unsheltered for their predicament and depict them as appropriate targets for criminalization, our model emphasizes a process of disengagement from a problematic shelter system.** This model shows that those who are unsheltered often live in a context of multiple traumas: usually, homelessness co-occurs with experiences of violence, the death of close relatives, arrests, accidents, involuntary hospitalization, and so on. Most (nearly every member of our two samples) try out shelters, seeking relief from the harshness of living unsheltered. However, because of the poor conditions in the shelter system, many leave and return to unsheltered homelessness, losing trust and disengaging from the system. While living unsheltered, they are exposed to criminalization and attempt to make themselves invisible by constantly moving around. This complicates access to social services and produces sleep deprivation, deteriorating health, and other forms of suffering, pushing them toward expedited death: people living unsheltered have life expectancies that are roughly 20 years shorter than the housed population (Funk et al. 2022).

However, the experiences of our nine interviewees who exited homelessness using flexible vouchers and innovative outreach suggest that this process of disengagement can be interrupted by the housing-first approach (see page 9). Our findings also show this interruption has tremendous positive impacts on the recipients of this aid. Additionally, the perspectives of our 14 interviewees who had vouchers (including five who were unhoused at the time of their first interviews) suggest that issuing a voucher and providing the support of a specialized outreach team can also interrupt the process of disengagement from shelters in some cases. This suggests that more people would enter shelters if there were a guarantee that they would be able to access housing soon, enabling shelters to function as an interim refuge. In addition, improvements in shelter conditions—making them low barrier, more accommodating to individual needs, safer, more trauma informed, more sanitary, and with non-congregate sleeping arrangements—are necessary. Coerced shelterization without the support of housing vouchers and specialized outreach will likely result in continued disengagement from the shelter system and the related negative consequences.

A Grounded Model of Shelter Disengagement (Not "Shelter Resistance")

CONTEXT OF HOMELESSNESS	NEGATIVE EXPERIENCES IN SHELTERS	DISENGAGEMENT FROM SHELTERS	EXPEDITED DEATH ON THE STREETS
(intersecting trauma, institutional dumping, etc.)	*(poor conditions, staff/ resident conflict, does not lead to housing, etc.)*	*(distrust in system, alienation, etc.)*	*(criminalization, invisiblization, loss of property, deterioration of health, etc.)*

VOUCHER

HOUSING FIRST

Interrupts the process of disengagement

Outreach and case management characterized by listening, caring, following through, and providing equitable treatment.

Housing First improves physical and mental health, sense of security, and ability to plan for the future.

Conclusion

Equitable, Expedient, Durable Pathways?

Our findings show that the housing-first approach, when enabled by crucial resources like flexible vouchers and specialized outreach, can be more effective in housing the unsheltered than the police-shelter-wait first approach. We conclude by exploring the extent to which the housing-first approach, enabled by additional resources, is creating pathways to housing that are expedient, equitable, and durable.

Expedient

Moves into housing generally took around four months from the time the outreach worker began the process of securing a voucher: it took around two months to obtain the voucher and then around two more months to find housing and move in. Some moves were achieved in around three months, and some took much longer. The move into housing took up to 18 months for those who were engaged with specialized outreach teams before a voucher became available. Many delays in housing were caused by bureaucratic mishaps with the housing authorities that led to delayed housing inspections and approvals. The Housing Trust's efforts to address these delays, such as obtaining the ability to conduct inspections on behalf of housing authorities, show promise in speeding up the housing placement and move-in process.

Some interviewees who moved into housing described the process as "fast." Although four months from beginning the application process to obtaining housing may seem fast to someone used to dealing with the existing aid system, four months of unsheltered homelessness can be extremely traumatic and detrimental to one's health. A few unsheltered interviewees without vouchers who had been in contact with a specialized outreach team worker mentioned difficulties communicating with them because these workers were busy trying to assist many people. This suggests a need for both more flexible vouchers and more specialized outreach workers to better meet demand in an expedient fashion.

Equitable

Overall, interviewees described being treated fairly and in a nondiscriminatory and nonjudgmental manner by the specialized outreach and case management teams throughout the process of securing a voucher and moving into housing. This contrasted with their descriptions of unfair treatment based on their homeless status, race, and ethnicity by some shelter staff, police, security, hospitals, status-quo (not specialized or housing focused) outreach, and the public. Spanish–English bilingual outreach staff provided important cultural competencies. Some interviewees noted that outreach workers with lived experience not only had empathy and treated them fairly but also had specific

> *“(Being unsheltered means) constantly moving. Moving somewhere on the bridge or somewhere where it say no trespassing. So really, we be walking all the time at night trying to find a spot just to close your eyes.”*
>
> *James, who had a voucher but was staying in a hotel amid decades of intermittent homelessness*

knowledge about how to access resources. This contrasted with formerly homeless staff of shelters and status-quo outreach teams, who were described as abusive of their power. These findings suggest a need for additional training for frontline staff to enable them to be more trauma informed. Given that some interviewees described outreach worker competencies in general terms like being “fair” and “nonjudgmental,” in subsequent interviews and observation with innovative outreach staff and people living unsheltered, we will ask more directly about the role of cultural competencies derived from social similarity and lived expertise in effective outreach work.

Our nonrandom sampling resulted in an over-representation of both Hispanic White females in the group receiving the enhanced housing-first approach and of African American males in the group living unsheltered without vouchers. This could be due to convenience sampling, especially given our research team’s capacity to interview Spanish speakers and women. However, this tendency suggests that the Housing Trust should monitor the distribution of vouchers and other housing outcomes for any biases by race/ethnicity, gender, or other demographic characteristics. Our ongoing analysis of local HMIS data will assess the extent to which there are differences by race/ethnicity, gender, age, and disability status in access to vouchers, the successful use of vouchers, the length of time to housing, and housing retention.

Durable

Because our housed interviewees had only been in housing for a few weeks or a few months at the time of our initial interviews, a more robust assessment of the durability of their housing placements will have to wait until we have conducted follow-up interviews in 2025 and analyzed HMIS data. Yet, even after a brief housing stay, the interviewees described an improved ability to plan for the future, including pursuing education and employment. This suggests some impact of the housing-first approach on stability. However, some recently housed interviewees, especially those with active substance abuse disorders and lengthy, multiple experiences of homelessness, appeared to be vulnerable to returns to homelessness. Some had no income, were food insecure, lacked basic household items like furniture, and had recent negative interactions with police and landlords. But these interviewees had confidence that case managers and specialized outreach workers would help them navigate these issues. It is important to note that case management after housing was conducted by staff of the outreach organization; often, the same outreach workers who helped people secure vouchers and find housing continued to work with them after being housed. Our follow-up interviews, observation, and analysis of HMIS data will help us understand the extent to which, and how, specialized outreach and case management teams are able to address these vulnerabilities and help keep people in long-term housing.

Appendices

APPENDIX 1. RESEARCH METHODS

In-Depth Longitudinal Interviews

To understand individual trajectories from unsheltered homelessness to housing and experiences of innovative street outreach, in the spring and summer of 2024 we conducted in-depth interviews with 20 people who were unsheltered or had recent experience with unsheltered homelessness in Miami-Dade County. We sampled people based on their housing and voucher status. All interviewees with vouchers obtained them through one of the specialized outreach teams. Our sample can be divided into three groups based on their housing status and housing voucher possession at the first interview: (1) nine interviewees were **recently housed with a voucher and specialized outreach**, (2) five interviewees were **unhoused with a voucher and specialized outreach,** and (3) six interviewees were **unhoused without vouchers and specialized outreach**. We plan to add more interviewees in each category and conduct follow-up interviews around one year after our initial interviews to understand their longer-term housing trajectories. This will help us assess the extent to which the housing-first program is creating pathways from unsheltered homelessness to housing that are expedient, equitable, and durable.

We recruited interviewees through two of three specialized street outreach teams whom we observed, as well as independently of the outreach teams.[4] Table 1 describes some of the characteristics of the outreach teams. Two organizations were selected because they received recent funding from HUD through the SNOFO to enhance their outreach efforts. The other organization did not receive this funding but was selected because of its high level of involvement in street outreach in downtown Miami, including helping individuals apply for and use newly available vouchers. In addition to having access to flexible housing vouchers that were burdened with less bureaucratic red tape, each specialized outreach team is using some combination of innovative capacities and practices—staff with lived expertise of homelessness and substance misuse, staff with other cultural competencies like Spanish-language ability and co-ethnicity, staff with specific professional experience such as being a real estate agent or a licensed counselor, intensive technical assistance, a highly assertive approach combined with private funding, and case management after housing.

Thus, these three outreach teams can be considered specialized, innovative, or more housing focused than existing outreach teams that work closely with municipal police departments and primarily control the flow of people into limited shelter spaces and facilitate sweeps. Throughout this report, we refer to “specialized,” “innovative,” “enhanced,” or “housing focused” outreach teams to distinguish them from “status quo” outreach. The specialized teams do offer shelter when it is available,

4 One of the organizations that we observed temporarily stopped their outreach activities due to administrative changes. They have since restarted outreach and we plan to recruit interviewees among their clients.

including as interim shelter for those who receive the flexible vouchers, as well as ahead of sweeps by police. However, they have a wider set of tools to house people than status quo outreach teams, especially access to newly available vouchers. In addition, when choosing which unhoused candidates to assist in applying for the vouchers, specialized outreach staff often prioritize people who have had difficulty obtaining housing through the shelter system. We observed outreach activities of each of these three organizations at least 15 times, resulting in more than 100 hours of observation and producing over 100,000 words of field notes for subsequent analysis.

Ten interviewees were introduced to us by Organization 1, and six were introduced to us by Organization 3. We were unable to be introduced to interviewees by Organization 2 because administrative issues required them to temporarily stop outreach. To help ensure we included people with diverse experiences with street outreach, we recruited the other four interviewees during observation in public spaces like a library and in street outreach, mutual aid, and large group feedings not directly integrated into the local Continuum of Care. We plan to continue our observation and interviewing with the three outreach teams, as well as expand observation and interviewing to another specialized SNOFO-funded outreach team, to better understand how different approaches to street outreach shape pathways directly from unsheltered homelessness to housing. The analysis presented in this paper compares interviewee experiences with the housing-first approach with the existing police-shelter-wait first approach. Comparison between the specialized outreach teams and elaboration on their characteristics and coordination will be conducted later.

The PI, Matthew Marr, and project graduate assistant, Melissa Hurtado Nuez, conducted participant observation and interviews between the fall of 2024 and summer of 2025. Marr is a White male professor in his 50s from California who does not speak Spanish; his social status thus generally differs from people living unsheltered, as well as some outreach workers. However, he has more than 30 years of experience volunteering in and researching organizations addressing homelessness, including street outreach; this experience can facilitate management of social differences and building trust. Hurtado is a Hispanic White, Cuban American female in her 20s from Miami who is a native speaker of Spanish. Her language abilities and cultural background were essential in understanding interactions in Spanish during observation and interviews, both linguistically and culturally. She was also better able to interact with women, especially those who were unsheltered, who may have been distrustful or hesitant to talk to a male researcher. We hope to recruit research assistants of more diverse backgrounds, especially those who are African American/Black and those with lived experience of homelessness. In

addition, our PhotoVoice project to be conducted in 2025 will provide a more direct and valid source to understand the subjective experiences of people attempting to move from being unsheltered to housed.

Our sample is small and was not collected randomly, so we cannot generalize our findings statistically to the unsheltered population of Miami-Dade County. Instead, we purposively chose our interviewees to explore a diversity of experiences of trying to move from being unsheltered into housing amid a variety of forms of equity and inequity. We included various demographic groups based on race/ethnicity, gender, and age. Thus, our small sample broadly reflects the demographic makeup of people experiencing unsheltered homelessness in Miami-Dade County, with some important caveats.

Our interviewees were nearly half non-Hispanic Black/African American (9 of 20) and half Hispanic White (10 of 20), with one non-Hispanic White interviewee. Hispanic interviewees varied in terms of national origin and immigrant status: nearly half were Cuban American, and only two were not native born. Three interviews were conducted predominantly in Spanish, but two of these interviewees mixed English into the conversation. In subsequent sampling, we will need to recruit Hispanic Black and more immigrant interviewees to understand their experiences, especially given the demographic and cultural context of Miami. In terms of gender, 11 interviewees were female and nine were male. Three of the women (all three were housed at the time of the interview) had children with whom they were living. We will need to recruit gender-nonconforming people and people who identify as LBGTQ to understand their experiences and perspectives. We will also need to recruit more men, given that they make up most people living unsheltered. Our interviewees ranged in age from 30 to 65 years of age. We had only one interviewee in their 60s, so we should recruit more in that age group, given national and local increases in elderly homelessness.

Table 2 shows some characteristics of the three groups of interviewees. In our sample, Hispanic women were the largest group among those housed with a voucher (seven of nine interviewees). Black men were the largest group among those unhoused without a voucher (five of six interviewees). This tendency could be caused by our purposive sampling of Spanish-speakers and women. But this higher prevalence of Hispanic women among the housed in our sample could also reflect racial and gender biases in housing and service delivery, which administrators should monitor. Our analysis of statistically representative HMIS data in the future will further examine these possibilities. In addition, in our next wave of data collection, we will aim to recruit more men who have been housed or have vouchers, as well as more women living unsheltered.

Interviews lasted around 90 minutes on average and covered topics such as family background, early education and employment, experiences with homelessness, attempts to access aid, policing and sweeps, interactions with outreach, accessing and using vouchers, moving into housing, and plans for the future. With permission and after obtaining informed consent, we conducted recorded interviews in interviewees' apartments, street outreach offices, and a library, as well as on the sidewalk. Interviewees received $100 in appreciation for their time and sharing their views and experiences. Contact information was collected so that we may conduct follow-up interviews approximately one year after the first interview to understand their longer-term trajectories.

Data Analysis

We analyzed verbatim interview transcriptions using NVIVO, a qualitative data analysis application. We coded data by focusing on topics such as impacts of moving into housing, relationships with street outreach workers, barriers to housing and strategies to address them, experiences with shelters and police, and plans for the future. Given our interest in expedient, equitable, and durable pathways, we made a special effort to code data about the time it took to access services and housing; experiences of discrimination by race/ethnicity, gender, or other statuses; and feelings of security and ability to plan for the future. In Appendix 2, we present examples of interviewees' experiences in these areas. We also provide details on what drove interviewees to lose their housing and their struggles to access aid as important context for understanding their perspectives about their experiences with the local system addressing homelessness.

Table 1. Characteristics of Specialized Street Outreach Organizations Observed

	SNOFO Funding	Number of Outreach Staff	Innovations	Staff Race and Ethnicity	Staff Spanish-Language Ability	CoC Integration	Vouchers	Geographic Focus
Org 1	Yes	More than 10	Lived experience, real estate agent, technical assistance	Hispanic White, Black/ African American, Anglo, Hispanic Black	Highly competent	High	Assign	Miami-Dade County
Org 2	Yes	5 or less	Lived experience	Anglo and Hispanic White	Competent	Low	Have not assigned	South Miami, Coral Gables, Pinecrest
Org 3	No	5 or less	Highly assertive, private funding	Hispanic White	Predominant	High	Does not assign, works with other orgs	Downtown Miami

Table 2. Interviewee Groups and Characteristics

Housing and Voucher Status	Interviewees	Unsheltered	Black or African American	Women
Housed with a Voucher	9	0	1	7
Unhoused with a Voucher	5	2	3	3
Unhoused without a Voucher	6	4	5	1

APPENDIX 2. FINDINGS

Effectiveness of Housing First

The nine interviewees who had recently moved into housing with a voucher and specialized street outreach overwhelmingly described their experiences in positive terms. They saw the housing-first approach as being different from the status quo outreach and shelter system, describing dramatic improvements in their lives after moving into housing. They also attributed their ability to move into housing to the effectiveness of the specialized outreach teams. They did also describe vulnerabilities like having no income, relying on food donations, and ongoing mental health and legal issues, but they felt that the case management connected with the outreach team was providing them with strong support. The five interviewees who were still unhoused but had been issued vouchers with the assistance of enhanced street outreach also described this assistance in positive terms and felt confident their lives would improve soon after moving into housing. These experiences of voucher holders contrasted with their own experiences of the existing shelter system, as well as the experiences of the six interviewees who were unhoused and did not have vouchers. We focus on these issues in the second half of this appendix.

Transformative Pathways from Unsheltered to Housing

Of the nine interviewees in our sample who have been housed with vouchers, seven had been directly placed in housing from an unsheltered situation, including a car, hotel, shared housing, abandoned homes, and tents or cardboard on the streets. Only two moved into housing directly from a shelter, but those stays were brief—a few days for one person, and about two months for the other—and both said that they were only able to endure staying in a shelter because they felt confident that they would be getting a voucher and housing soon. Most of these interviewees described the process of accessing housing as "fast." But interviewees reported a range of time spans that it took to access a voucher and housing—from about three months to a year and a half—with most saying that it took about two months to get the voucher and about another two months to find and move into housing. Most delays were due to bureaucratic issues in obtaining identification and documentation and the housing authority taking weeks or months to inspect units or failing to process required documents in a timely manner.

All nine interviewees who were recently housed described their move into housing as a transformative process that dramatically improved their lives. They highlighted immediate improvements in mental and physical health and, even though they still faced difficulties, enhanced feelings of security and an ability to make plans for the future. Interviewees with children noted an improved capacity to parent and nurture their children, including providing proper nutrition and engaging in educational activities.

Sophia,[5] a Hispanic White woman in her early 30s, was pregnant and living with her partner and their 2-year-old child in her car in South Miami Dade. With the help of a specialized outreach team, they were able to use a voucher to move into a three-bedroom apartment in South Miami Dade. A former waitress, Sophia's housing insecurity escalated with her loss of a job during the COVID-19 pandemic and being kicked out of an efficiency apartment she rented informally. She moved in with her partner, but they became homeless with their 2-year-old child when they had to suddenly move out of his parents' rented home after it was foreclosed on. At that time, Sophia worked for Verizon as a salesperson, but without sufficient income for rent, she and her partner decided to live in their car so she could continue working and he could take care of their toddler. Using the Homeless Helpline, Sophia tried getting into a women's shelter in the City of Miami, but the shelter was too far from her job and required her to separate from her partner. Without income to maintain the car, he would then have to sleep on the streets. She also contacted a shelter in South Miami Dade that would allow her partner

5 All names of interviewees in this report are pseudonyms to preserve anonymity.

to stay in a men's dorm, but the shelter required paperwork documenting the foreclosure, which they did not have.

After they began living in their car, Sophia was given Organization 1's card by a sibling. She called and the outreach team came to visit her family in a parking lot. The specialized outreach team began pursuing a housing voucher for Sophia and her family; about three-and-a-half months after initial contact, they were issued a voucher. Sophia searched Facebook Marketplace and found a landlord who would take a Section 8 voucher. She gave the landlord's information to an outreach worker who gave it to the real estate agent on the specialized outreach team. The agent worked with the landlord to get the apartment approved by the local housing authority. Sophia initially planned to move in at the end of the month that she got her voucher, but the housing authority was slow to inspect the apartment and then failed to submit paperwork. So, for the following month, even while more than eight months pregnant, Sophia commuted to work from her car until she began having what she thought were labor pains and took leave from her job. She went to the hospital but was told that she was having false labor pains and was discharged back to her car. Two weeks later, when she and her family were still sleeping in her car, she had pains again and was able to check herself into the hospital. Despite very little prenatal care and the stresses of living in a car, her baby was born healthy. She was discharged three days later. Fortunately, after Sophia followed up with the housing authority multiple times during this time of crisis, her apartment had passed inspection, and she and her family of four were then able to move in.

We interviewed Sophia two months after she and her family moved into housing. When asked about what had changed for her, she said the following:

> "Things, life has changed drastically. Honestly, I'm able to have peace of mind. I'm able to wake up in my own space and not have to worry about, 'What are we gonna eat today? Or, where we're gonna sleep? Or, what are we gonna do now?' I'm only able to buy a little bit of groceries because we're still not working. So, as long as we have food and the house is warm, and we got beds to sleep on, and the kids are comfortable. And (Organization 1) has helped me tremendously with bringing us beds and a crib for the baby and baby clothes and everything that we need. We don't have this lavish life. But I wake up every day, and I'm happy with my kids. I'm able to engage in educational things with my son now."

Although Sophia acknowledged that her family still has limited means, she was effusive about the improvements in health, mental health, and nurturing that her family experienced after moving into housing with a voucher.

When asked directly about her physical and mental health, Sophia reiterated the transformational impact of her housing and the outreach team's help in obtaining it.

> "I feel like mentally I'm in a way more positive space; you know, mentally I'm able to see that things have drastically changed for me. So, I feel physically and mentally more open, healthy, happy. I have nothing but good emotions right now. I feel great. I feel confident. I feel physically able, and proud and happy to be where I am right now. I feel super grateful. And I feel like I would have never been able to accomplish this if it wasn't for (Organization 1)."

Sophia also noted that, even before finding and moving into an apartment, securing the housing voucher had an immediate positive impact on her mental health.

> "It became a little bit more comfortable, because I knew that we were going to be getting housing, so I wasn't so stressed. My mind was more at ease. So, I was able to feel a little bit better. I didn't mind sleeping in the car anymore. I didn't mind doing these things, because I knew that there was going to be a change of situation and things were going to work out in our favor."

Sophia also pointed out that having the voucher enabled her to tap into assistance from friends who let her family stay with them periodically because they knew that Sophia's family would not be dependent on them for the long term.

In a similar fashion, Ingrid, an African American mother of three in her early 30s, described the voucher and wraparound services provided by the outreach team as rescuing her family from a long period of instability and homelessness. After losing her job as a patient care technician during the COVID-19 pandemic, she fell behind on

her bills. Then, when she and her children were hospitalized with COVID, they were kicked out of their apartment. Subsequently, she and her three children spent about three years staying in cars, parks, shelters, and hotels in and around downtown Miami. She met outreach workers from Organization 1 at a library, and two months later they were able to secure her housing voucher. Within another two months, the specialized outreach team found her an apartment, got her furniture, and helped her move in. They also covered her light bill and water bill in her first month. Since moving in three weeks before our interview, her case manager, also part of the specialized outreach team, had been visiting her family regularly and bringing them groceries. Here is how Ingrid described her family's move into housing.

> "My life changed drastically. My kids are happier. I'm less stressed, less worried. I have more options for what I want to do with myself. My oldest daughter, she's 13. She's happy with the school she's at now because she didn't really like where she was at before. Everybody's happy and smiles. ... My health is much better. No depression, no anxiety, no worrying, no what's going to happen the next day with my kids? I'm just relieved and happy, and my kids are better. My kids are healthier and not being sick anymore, as much. I'm healthier."

Ingrid also said that she felt secure because her case manager from Organization 1 visited her weekly and always responded to her inquiries.

A housing voucher and specialized outreach was also transformational for Jaime, a Hispanic White man in his late 30s who had spent the previous 20 years of his life moving between the streets, shelters, jail, and prison. Shelter stays never led to housing, so he usually fended for himself on the streets of downtown Miami. One morning in the fall of 2023, he was approached by an outreach worker from a specialized outreach team outside Government Center. They talked about getting housing, and he was skeptical at first because he had numerous conversations with "status quo" outreach workers in the past that did not lead to housing.

Jaime's cynicism changed when the outreach worker from Organization 1 reached out to him again two weeks later, and he began to feel that this outreach worker was different. Although he did not like shelters given his past negative experiences, he decided to try a downtown shelter one more time because of the trust he had in the outreach worker. About two months after contact with the specialized outreach worker, Jamie was issued a housing voucher. Shelter staff initially helped him look for housing, but he felt that they were steering him toward apartments in dangerous neighborhoods where landlords give kickbacks for introductions to renters. Instead, he was able to find an available apartment through his brother who worked in property maintenance. Two months after obtaining his voucher, he moved into a two-bedroom apartment. Noting the difference between the specialized outreach team and shelter staff, Jaime said, "The only people that I actually found that really are true to their word are these guys (Organization 1). You know, (the shelter), I've been there over 26 times, and I've never gotten any help from them at all."

Jaime had been living in his apartment in Little Havana for three months when we met for an interview. He said that his life had improved since he moved into housing, but it was taking time to adjust. He said, "It's not the best of places, but I'm very happy. I've never had my own place to stay. I've lived on the streets my whole life. It's hard to get used to it and adjusted to it, but I make it through." Although his rent was covered by his housing voucher, his only income was from occasional maintenance work for his landlord, and he was relying on food banks. Jaime still struggled with mental health and physical ailments, but he had medical care at a free clinic. In addition, he was living in the neighborhood where he grew up, and his brother visited and helped him frequently. He began going to a church and was befriended by the pastor. Organization 1 provided him with all the furniture in his apartment. Now that his housing was finally stable, he had signed up for night school to get his GED and hoped to do vocational training in plumbing and refrigerator repair.

Like Jaime, some interviewees, although describing their move into housing as a major positive change, were still grappling with health, mental health, legal, and other issues. Fortunately, they had access to the specialized street outreach and case management teams to help them address these issues and remain in housing. Nelson, a 51-year-old Hispanic White male with multiple felonies and an active substance misuse problem, praised Organization 3's help in securing him a voucher and finding housing. He

had been homeless in Miami for more than three years after being released from jail in Broward County. He had entered a shelter program in downtown Miami and felt like he was thriving, but he did not receive much help with securing housing. Then, after six months in the program, his girlfriend was kicked out of the shelter for disciplinary reasons, and he left with her to help her survive on the streets. He did not like going back to the shelter but maintained contact with his caseworker there. Nelson and his girlfriend both were using drugs, and he was jailed for possession and domestic violence charges that his girlfriend later dropped. He would lose his belongings, including personal documents, when jailed. Staff from Organization 3 encountered him on the streets of Overtown and began working with his caseworker at the shelter to secure a voucher for him. Innovative outreach staff micromanaged him throughout the application process for the voucher, helping him reobtain documents and rescheduling meetings that he missed. He estimated that it took about one year from his first encounter with Organization 3 until he was able to move into housing.

When asked about how he felt in his new apartment two months after leaving the streets, Nelson said the following:

> "It feels good. Just me in my house, what I always wanted, to have my own place. I love to be in my house. I'm alone. I got my own TV. I can take a shower when I want. I got a lot of love and respect from the two young ladies (outreach workers from Organization 3). Thanks to them, I'm where I'm at today."

Although he recognized that his situation had improved after moving into housing, he still had many physical and mental health, as well as legal, issues. Nelson was suffering from depression, diabetes, and high blood pressure. He did not like taking medicine and did not have health insurance. So, at the time of our interview his maladies were going untreated. He had no furniture in his apartment in Little Havana but said that he did not want any. He felt that his neighborhood was unsafe and that the police were targeting his building because there was active substance misuse among residents.

Many of his friends from the streets of Overtown were also housed in his building, and they formed a community that he called the "17th Street Family." His landlord had complained to him because of the noise coming from the frequent visitors to his apartment. A few days prior to our interview, Nelson and two of his neighbors were arrested and jailed for possession. Yet he was confident that the charges would be dropped and that the specialized outreach workers, whom he could reach directly by phone, would help him resolve any issues with his landlord.

Overall, the nine interviewees who were housed described profound transformations made possible by the flexible vouchers and specialized outreach and case management. Many interviewees, however, reported having limited resources and some behavioral health issues that might hinder their ability to remain in housing. Some also complained about the poor quality of their housing and unsafe neighborhoods. However, they described feeling a sense of security that their ongoing connections with case management and the outreach teams would help them address problems associated with these issues. It is important to note that case management after the interviewees were housed was conducted by the staff of the specialized outreach organization, and often the same outreach workers who helped people secure vouchers and find housing continued to follow up with them after being housed.

Factors That Enable Transformative Pathways

In this section, we present interviewees' perceptions about the qualities of the specialized outreach teams that made them effective in securing vouchers and helping them remain in housing. They were effusive in their praise of outreach workers as reliable, caring, fair, and emotionally supportive. They described these outreach workers as "doing everything," including obtaining documentation like birth certificates and IDs, submitting applications for benefits and vouchers, finding short-term housing and treatment when appropriate, following up with various bureaucracies, finding rental housing and resources to cover housing costs, securing furniture and other household items, helping during the move-in process, coordinating various service providers, and providing food and transportation. They praised the extra effort of these outreach workers, saying things like "she goes out of her way" and "she goes all out." Many housed interviewees said they did not want to be a

burden on outreach and case management staff. However, they did feel they could reach out to them whenever they needed, which was often, especially while they were trying to obtain a voucher and move into housing. Some described staff as friends or like siblings, parents, and family. In the next two subsections, we describe how our interviewees spoke about an effective approach that combines listening, caring, and follow through with equitable treatment and sometimes lived expertise.

Listening, Caring, and Following Through

Many of our interviewees who moved into housing described the members of the specialized outreach teams as starkly different from existing shelter and other outreach staff because the team members' interactions combined sincere listening, caring, and follow through.

Ana, a Hispanic woman in her late 40s, described an outreach worker and a real estate agent on Organization 1's outreach team as being indispensable to her move into housing after three years of continuous unsheltered and sheltered homelessness. She noted that these outreach team members were easy to talk to, helpful, and reliable. Ana became homeless after losing her job in wedding planning at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic; then her husband's addiction worsened, and they were evicted from their apartment. They lived on the streets of Little Havana for a year. Another year's stay in a South Miami-Dade shelter did not lead to housing, and she was discharged after a conflict with staff over her work schedule. She separated from her husband and stayed with her dog in an encampment by a lake until it was swept by police. Then, she stayed in "bandos" (abandoned houses) while trying to dodge homeowner's associations and police. After returning to the encampment by the lake, an outreach worker from Organization 1 met her there in the spring of 2023 and began trying to get Ana a voucher. Ana said the following about the outreach worker:

> "Connie [the outreach worker] was the one that found me at the lake, and I hit it off with her. She tried to push my [voucher] application fast, which she did. … She made me feel confident that it will happen. She did tell me it's not gonna happen overnight. 'It's gonna take some time.' She did mentally prepare me for that. But I'm persistent. Once you tell me I can do something, I'm gonna be persistent and call you and hassle you until I get what I need or what I want."

Like many other interviewees who moved into housing, Ana described how her outreach worker helped her maintain confidence throughout the process of applying for a voucher and searching for housing. Ana was appreciative that her outreach worker was frank about the time and effort that it would take and realized the need for her to be proactive.

Ana frequently checked in with her outreach worker, who helped her apply for and obtain her housing voucher in December 2023. The outreach worker put Ana in touch with a real estate agent on the outreach team, whom Ana quickly called, and they both began looking for units. Ana struggled to find landlords who would accept Section 8. The agent was able to find landlords who would, but Ana's application was rejected twice—once because of an arrest when she was 18 and once because of her recent eviction. The agent eventually found an amicable landlord with an available unit in Liberty City. However, the inspection by the housing authority was delayed, and in the meantime the landlord rented the unit out to someone else. Fortunately, the landlord had another smaller unit in the same building available, and after it cleared inspection, Ana moved in with her dog in April 2024. Her outreach worker found her a couch, a bed, a cooking set, and cleaning supplies. The program covered her move in-costs and utilities.

Sophia, the Hispanic woman in her early 30s who was housed with her family in South Miami-Dade immediately after giving birth, described the outreach team as helping her obtain many material and practical resources while also providing crucial emotional and motivational support. She pointed out how their caring approach of listening to her needs and following through transformed her trajectory through homelessness:

> "Honestly, once I got in contact with (Organization 1), I just felt like everything just worked in my favor. They were so welcoming. There were so nice. They were open to helping and hearing me and listening to my story and caring."

During the months it took to secure a voucher and housing, Sophia became depressed and distressed. She would then call an outreach worker who would console and encourage her. She said that this emotional support enabled her to cope with the uncertainties of living in her car pregnant with her partner and toddler.

Maria, a Hispanic White woman in her mid-30s, who had been unhoused with her daughter, also described the enhanced outreach team as combining a caring approach with follow through. Like some other interviewees, she lost her housing after becoming ill with COVID and losing her job. For about three years, she moved in and out of homelessness, sometimes living in a car or shelters with her daughter. Shelter stays were generally unpleasant and did not lead to housing. This changed when a specialized outreach team began working with her on obtaining a voucher. Here is how she described the team's help when we interviewed her one month after moving into a two-bedroom apartment in South Miami-Dade:

> "Yeah, they (the specialized outreach team) guided me through everything—when they first did the paperwork for the Section 8 and when I got the voucher. Once I got the voucher, they saw the amount, they saw how many rooms. So then, they helped me with that to get the housing. And then after I moved in, they helped me with furniture and stuff because they knew I had nothing."

She describes the team as being "extremely responsive" and continuing to help her after her move into housing. Here is how she juxtaposed the caring and responsive approach of enhanced outreach with her experiences with shelters: "If it wasn't for (Organization 1), I don't know where I would be because there is no help out here. When I tell you I have been to every shelter, it's just like they don't care. It's like you're just another number in there."

Jaime, the White Hispanic male in his mid-30s who had spent two decades on the streets, also praised the follow through of the specialized outreach team. Jaime reached out to his outreach worker daily, sometimes multiple times per day. He said that by being responsive they were able to build trust with him: "I didn't have any kind of good feeling in myself until these guys started. I started seeing evidence of them helping me, and that's what kept me going." Although some interviewees noted that sometimes outreach workers were not immediately responsive, they understood that the team was helping many people, and they felt that if they kept following up, a team member would respond.

Equal Treatment

Every interviewee who worked with specialized outreach described staff as being fair, nondiscriminatory, and nonjudgmental. This equal treatment is important in working with people living unsheltered, who often feel like society sees them as responsible for their situation because of poor decision making and a lack of responsibility. Some interviewees pointed to the lived experience of some outreach workers as contributing to an empathetic and fair approach.

Sophia, the White Hispanic mother who had been housed immediately after giving birth, described outreach staff as being nonjudgmental. Here is how Sophia responded when we asked her about who was helpful to her family in their move into housing:

> "Michael, KC, Connie [outreach workers]. All three have been really awesome since from the beginning. They were super welcoming. And they made me feel really comfortable, like there was a light in the end of the tunnel. Because I was really in a dark place mentally at the end of my pregnancy. It took a really big toll on me. I was really depressed and really sad to be putting my two-year-old through that. They were so polite and nice, not judging me for being homeless or not being able to provide for my family."

Jaime, the Hispanic male in his late 30s who spent two decades on the streets of downtown Miami, said the following about what he thought was different about the specialized outreach team: "I was actually treated like a human being and not just a specimen or a subject."

A few interviewees specifically noted the lived experience of specialized outreach team workers as key to their effectiveness. Kathy, a White woman in her early 30s, had been unhoused for three years with her partner Doug, an African American man in his mid-40s. They were living on the streets of South Miami-Dade at the time of our interview. They had tried shelters, but their stays did not lead to housing, and their health was deteriorating due to active opioid addictions and the harshness of living outdoors.

Kathy had limited mobility due to a car accident and used a shopping cart in lieu of a walker. An outreach worker met Kathy and Doug at a needle exchange about a year and a half before our first interview. About a year after that initial meeting, the outreach worker began helping them get birth certificates and the IDs required for the voucher application; they had lost all their belongings due to theft and sweeps. Because Kathy was dependent on Doug due to her disabilities, the couple planned to begin outpatient treatment for their addictions after getting housed together. They obtained the voucher one week prior to our interview and described their outreach worker as key to their progress. They were hoping for a future in which they would lead "normal lives."

Doug described the outreach worker as like a "mother figure." Kathy was emphatic about her outreach worker's abilities to navigate various systems to help them, attributing it to the caseworker's lived experience of addiction and her son's addiction and homelessness that resulted in his death on the streets. Kathy said,

> "It's a lot easier to relate to somebody when you've been there, through it, or a family member has been through it. They seem to work a little bit better, when you can relate a lot better with that person. Things just go a lot smoother. Connie has a lot of connections and plugs with people. That's because of what she's been through and the help that she's gotten. All that plays a role. She keeps in touch with people and knows how to get things done. That didn't come from phone calls made overnight. No. That's because of what she's been through and where she's at now."

During our observation, we were able to accompany the outreach worker and Doug as they obtained his driver's license. The outreach worker described the tactics she used to secure documents, like finding the correct bureaucratic office to get Doug's out-of-state birth certificate and going to a DMV in the Florida Keys instead of Miami-Dade County to get his ID quicker. When Doug successfully got his ID, the outreach worker joked that she knew how to be persistent and effective in getting what she needs because of her experiences of addiction.

Alongside this praise of specialized outreach staff's lived expertise, it is important to note that some interviewees said that some shelters and status quo outreach staff who are formerly homeless were not effective. They described such staff as manipulating their power and lacking professionalism and supervision.

One interviewee complimented the spiritual orientation and practices of Organization 3, whose staff and volunteers are overwhelmingly Spanish–English bilingual and Catholic: this reveals another dimension of cultural competency in addition to language ability. Angelica, a Hispanic immigrant in her early 50s with lifelong mental health issues, had been living on the streets of downtown Miami for two years. The team encountered her on a weekly Friday night outreach and began working with her on obtaining a voucher. They worked with a local housing provider, and after about 10 months, Angelica obtained a voucher. Two months later she was able to move into housing, receiving furniture, food, and a bus pass from the outreach team. When asked about the outreach team, she replied in Spanish,

> "I really applaud those people who do it from the heart, because you cannot buy what they do. I am in love with those people. I really thank them a lot because they don't abandon you. They give you hope. They show up on the street. They are the ones who see you, cry with you, pray with you. ... They are like shepherds, really. And me, that moves me a lot, the great humanity they have."

In this case, we see that the outreach workers from Organization 3 appeal to some people living unsheltered because of their shared spiritual orientation and dedication.

Ineffectiveness of Shelterization and Criminalization

In contrast to the transformative nature of the specialized outreach team interventions, our interviewees, both those who were housed with vouchers and those who were not, described the many problems they faced when trying to use shelters to exit homelessness. A few interviewees described shelters in a positive light: one man said a shelter saved him from death on the streets. But even this interviewee was not able to secure housing through the shelter. Nearly all our interviewees found the shelters to be hard to access because shelter beds were rarely available. Robert, a Black man in his late fifties staying on the streets with his

partner, said, “I can call them [the Homeless Helpline] all day. Nothing happening.”

Poor Conditions in the Shelter System

Most of our interviewees had stayed at a shelter at some point, even though beds were rarely available. When asked about their experiences in shelters, many described unhealthy and unsafe environments and problems with the congregate living arrangements. Several interviewees said that they caught colds, the flu, or COVID due to poor ventilation. Many had conflicts with other residents and unhelpful staff, felt constrained by inflexible rules, and found the food to be of poor quality and quantity. Many also said that they felt that they did not receive help finding housing despite lengthy stays, some were terminated for rule violations that they thought were unfair, and many left the shelter to return to the streets.

Cecile, an African American woman in her late 50s, was staying in a shelter in South Miami-Dade when we conducted our first interview. She could not wait to move out of the shelter into housing using her voucher, which she had received three days prior with help from the specialized outreach team. After decades of domestic violence, substance abuse, and cycling in and out of homelessness, she connected with Organization 1, which placed her in substance abuse treatment. She was proud that she completed the treatment program and stayed for six months instead of just the required three, describing the program as “really helpful” because of its professional therapists and counselors and an environment that was “a fellowship like a church.” After that, the specialized outreach team suggested she stay in the shelter while they secured her voucher and searched for housing. However, she found the shelter environment extremely unpleasant. When asked how it was staying at the shelter, where she had been for the past five months, she let out a sigh and said, “It’s not a place to be. And too much sickness. And you know, you have to be very careful. Sometimes the food is horrible. And there is fighting among the residents, even with the staff and security. All of them are young. So, they bump heads. I’m so glad I’m gone [soon].”

When asked about the details of any conflicts she had with staff, Cecile explained that her daughter and grandchildren were abruptly kicked out of the shelter a few days prior to the interview. A staff person accused her daughter of threatening violence. Cecile and her daughter vehemently denied the accusation, but staff still terminated the stay of the young family. Cecile told us, “I was upset about my daughter. She got put out for something and they kicked my daughter out at 11 o’clock at night with her children. And they wait until that time at night to kick her out! With her children! On the street! They had nowhere to go! And I do not like that. So, I feel the (shelter) need to be investigated. That is all I got to say.”

Cecile became emotional, tense, and agitated when talking about the incident and thanked the interviewer for moving on to another topic. But later in the interview she talked about the anxiety she was experiencing trying to scrape together resources to pay for a place to stay for her daughter and grandchildren until they could find alternative housing. They had rented a U-Haul van so Cecile could store their belongings, drive them to and from a motel or another shelter, and help take care of the children during the day. They were hoping they could find a spot for the young family in a shelter in Broward County. She noted that the specialized outreach staff understood her problems with the shelter in South Miami-Dade and that they were providing her emotional support and working hard to find her housing quickly, which helped her endure her own shelter stay.

Bias and Tensions in Shelters

Most interviewees described the shelter system as unfair in general, saying that it did not lead to housing or that they were treated in a disrespectful manner because they were homeless. This perspective is reflected in the earlier comments by Maria, Ana, Jamie, Angelica, and others who felt unseen and unheard by shelter staff. Some spoke in general about the difficulty of living with strangers and people of different backgrounds. Only a few explicitly mentioned racial bias or tensions, always prefacing this by stating that they themselves were not racist or that they have friends of all races and ethnicities. Notably, African American male interviewees tended to be vocal about what they felt as racial bias and favoritism toward Hispanics by shelter staff.

Darren, an African American in his late 40s living on the streets without a voucher when we interviewed him, said the

following when asked if he thought the shelter system was "racially competent": "I believe it's probably the opposite. You know what I mean? Well, that could be a dualistic question. In the sense, they are of their people. … (Interviewer: Do you think there is Hispanic favoritism?) Of course, yeah."

Darren, an artist and intellectual, offered a thought-provoking answer suggesting that ethnic groups would naturally help their own. But rather than providing a specific example of Hispanic favoritism, he went on to give examples of favoritism in the shelter system toward people with substance abuse problems, a bias he saw as rooted in stereotypes of people experiencing homelessness as addicts. He felt that he had followed protocols with one shelter but that he was "bounced around" because whomever he asked about getting into a shelter told him to go talk to someone else. He participated in an art class in a day program in one shelter and saw staff setting up cots in the art room for cold weather expansion. But he was puzzled about why he could not get access to a cot despite trying to for more than a month.

Robert, a Black man in his late 50s, felt that there was a clear racial bias in the shelter system and gave examples from his experiences. He and his partner, who is also Black, were sleeping on the streets of downtown Miami at the time of our first interview. They had been in contact with one of the enhanced street outreach teams but had not begun applying for a housing voucher, likely because of limited availability. They started living on the streets when their landlord raised their rent but would not repair their rat- and roach-infested rooming house. After a few weeks of calling the Homeless Helpline and asking police and city (not specialized) outreach for shelter, they were finally placed into a shelter in downtown Miami when the number of beds was increased because of cold weather. When asked if he felt like he had experienced any discrimination in the shelter, he described the following incident:

> "Some of the things you asked for in [the shelter], you can't get it. But let a Hispanic person walk up there and ask that question, they'll get it. Just like one day, staff was giving away big blocks of soap. I like the big blocks of soap. But he gave it to the guys who was already in to [the shelter] before I got there. I said, 'Come on, man. That's a bunch of baloney. They're Hispanic, bro. I'm sitting here watching. You didn't give one brother one of those soap bags. I don't like racism, and I don't want it 'round me. I can't associate with you.' So that was my bottom line with him."

Things did not go well for Robert and his partner in the shelter. They immediately got sick, which he attributed to poor ventilation in the dorm rooms. The shelter had a clinic, but he was told by a nurse to go buy his medicine over the counter at a drug store. His partner caught pneumonia, and when her blood pressure increased, he was told by shelter staff that he should take her to Jackson Hospital emergency room by trolley. He said that the first time he had seen his partner cry during their 23-year relationship was when they were waiting at the trolley stop. She was hospitalized for four days, but after discharge shelter staff would not let her rest in bed during the day, counter to her doctor's recommendation. So, Robert decided that they would fend for themselves on the streets again.

Robert felt that the entire shelter system was plagued with biases against Black men and women. He said the following about a different shelter in downtown Miami:

> "I've been to [the shelter drop-in center]. They say, go find a (status quo outreach worker). They say they have beds. You go to the corner, and you wait for beds. You be out there four o'clock [a.m.] on that corner waiting because the cops tell you to be there by five. Staff person come by with the list. Latino guy comes by about 6:30. He comes by, when he just waking up. You have females' names already on the list who ain't even out there. You have guys' names on the list who ain't even out here. Then by time two people come around to pick everyone up, you done signed your name, you and your girl is way down here waiting [on the list].
>
> "And then it's an overnight thing. You go in that morning, and you come out the next morning. And then you gotta try it all over again. That's stupid. I know a guy that has been doing it for like a year. They say after you do it so many times, they place you in a bed, a permanent bed. He don't even have a permanent bed yet. But I done seen people do that and get a permanent bed. But it's not me and it's not this color. Explain that to me. Only way you get in (the shelter) if you a brother or a sister, you know somebody who works there. It's not easy for a colored (*sic*) man to just walk in."

Despite his negative experiences with shelters, Robert was still trying to get into one, given his partner's poor health condition and the harshness of living on the streets.

Some interviewees made general comments about problems living with strangers, including theft and fights. Some mentioned the difficulty of living with people of "different backgrounds" in a congregate arrangement with limited resources. A few Hispanic White interviewees made comments, some veiled and some overt (when speaking in Spanish), about disliking shelters because of the high prevalence of Black clients.

Criminalization of Homelessness and Suffering on the Streets

Our interviewees had varying and complex views toward police and private security while they were unsheltered. Most interviewees expressed that they "respect the law," that their treatment by the police varied by officer, and that some were helpful. Most of this help involved getting into shelters (and hotels for families) or being provided with food and clothing. However, many described negative interactions with the police in which they felt harassed, intimidated, threatened, and surveilled. Most interviewees described being moved by police and private security, and some had belongings thrown away during sweeps of encampments by police and cleaning crews. Some were ticketed when sleeping in cars, and others had been arrested for trespassing and possession of drugs. One interviewee described being beaten up by a police officer during his more than two decades in and out of unsheltered homelessness.

Move-Along Orders, Ticketing, Sweeps, and Arrests

Although they noted that some officers could be helpful and sympathetic, many characterized their interactions with police as negative. Kathy, the White woman in her early 30s, and her partner Doug, a Black man in his mid-40s, said that one officer had been kind to them, but most were not. The two were living on the sidewalks behind a strip mall and adjacent to a residential area in South Miami-Dade. Nearby businesses complained about them regularly to the police, and they had been warned not to trespass. Kathy said the following:

> "The one officer did offer help and asked if we wanted to go to a shelter. All the other ones have just been real aggravating. You know, [sighs] it's one thing to know that I am addicted. At the same time, we're still human beings. We're not animals. We fell into a situation and we're trying to get out of it. We don't need someone to bring us down even more. Some officers care and some officers don't."

After being warned not to go onto the strip mall property, Doug used the mall's bicycle pump to inflate a tire and was arrested for trespassing. He spent three days in jail and was released back to the streets. Here is how he described their situation at the time of our interview:

> "The police tell us to move all the time. We get caught on this street right here laying on the sidewalk, we'll go to jail for that now. So, we find like places like over on the corner there. We sleep there at night. We try to leave early in the morning before the business open up so they won't call the cops. … There are no spots to put a tent. Everywhere you go they don't want you there. You gotta move. Three years we've been out here we haven't had a tent, not one time… If you abandon a cart full of stuff, they will throw it away. But they'll tell you to come move it yourself. Or, 'If you don't move it, we'll take you to jail. We'll give you a chance to move your own stuff.'"

Sophia, the Hispanic White woman in her 30s who was living in her car with her family, described how an officer decided to ticket them instead of offering help:

> "We got a ticket one time. An officer came and gave us a ticket for parking our car. It was in a park that was closed. … I guess it was someone having a bad day or something. Because you would think like, they see me pregnant, they see the baby, we're sleeping, you know, they wouldn't [give a ticket]. But no. … There was a couple of times that security at a park right there next to the city hall would come say, 'Oh, you can't park here.'"

When interviewees with children were unable to find a shelter bed or left because of negative experiences, a car became their final refuge. However, policing of people sleeping in cars rendered that resource vulnerable, because unpaid tickets can lead to impounding of the car. Ingrid, the African

American mother of three, described constantly driving around at night to avoid being discovered by police and to find places where they could park and sleep without being ticketed. She still accrued tickets, and her car was eventually impounded, leaving her and her children to sleep in a park until they could find shelter.

Our interviewees noted that there were specific municipalities and areas that were more heavily policed, especially the City of Miami Beach and downtown Miami. Kevin, an African American man in his late 50s, described being told to move by police officers in the City of Miami Beach. Originally from Tennessee, he had come to South Florida to help with the clean-up and recovery from Hurricane Andrew in the early 1990s. When he had a falling-out with his partner in the mid-2010s, he decided to go to Miami to start a new life. He had no place to stay on arrival, so he went to sleep on the beach, only to have his possessions stolen. He lived unsheltered in Miami Beach for several months before getting into a shelter downtown. He was then able to get into a shared living arrangement but returned to Tennessee for his father's funeral. He thought his family would help him by providing funds for him to return to Miami, but they did not and he got stuck there and lost his room in Miami. A few years later, he left Tennessee because of racism and went to Tampa to work day-labor jobs. He was homeless there and felt harassed by the police. So, he saved some money and returned to Miami Beach in the spring of 2024, where he thought he could survive. But he found that the city had become more inhospitable to the unhoused. He said the following:

> "When I first came (back) down here, that's the first place I went is to the beach. But it's changed so much. The police is so rough out there now. … The police did say som'n to me a couple of times. But it is mostly the people that live there. They'll call the police on you if you sittin' somewhere too long, like on the sidewalk or curb. They'll call the police on me. So, I decided to come back over here (to the city of Miami) and try to get into (the shelter) again. But, she (a staff person) told me to go to the police (to get in). I didn't really like it."

Kevin wanted to avoid interactions with Miami Beach police, so he decided to stay on the streets of the city of Miami. He was contemplating going into a shelter, but given his negative experiences with police in general, he was hesitant to interact with an officer.

Some of our interviewees who had lived in tents on the streets described being swept up by municipal crews made up of police officers and clean-up crews. Some described cooperating with the police, whom they said gave them a chance to move their own property. But some also described being mistreated and having important belongings thrown away. Jamie, the Hispanic White man in his late 30s who spent more than two decades on the streets, said that he had been swept up numerous times by the City of Miami's Homeless Engagement and Assistance Team (HEAT).

> "I had a tent thrown away twice. The big white truck and then the (status quo outreach) in the back and the police up front. It's discrimination. I already have nothing. Why would you take the little bit of things I do have?"
>
> (Interviewer: "When you had your stuff thrown away, did they offer you shelter beforehand?")
>
> "No, the police got there with the (status quo outreach) and told us, 'Everybody up, get up and walk that way.' We walked that way. Next, they're throwing all this stuff away. So, I went to interact with them and they said, 'Listen, you get stupid with us, you're going to jail. This stuff is going in the trash. It's all trash.' They may be trash to you, but it's not to me. They threw all my medicine away. They threw my phone away. They threw some clothes away, food that I had, my brand-new tent. They cut the tents with razors and then they throw them away, you know."

During his lengthy time on the streets of downtown Miami, Jaime said that he also had his possessions thrown away by city outreach workers independently of the sweeps. Other interviewees said that, because the sweeps were often unpredictable, they were required to constantly stay vigilant.

Our interviews were conducted in the spring and summer of 2023 before implementation of Florida's anti-camping law (HB 1365); however, some of our interviewees had heard about it and were clearly experiencing anxiety about how it would affect them. Here, Robert, the African American in his late 50s who was sleeping on the streets with his partner, describes why they stopped sleeping near Government Center:

> "Because they put signs up saying that you can't sleep there. You can't walk there, something, skateboard, or whatever. And I'm like, what is all these notices going up because none of these things ever went to law. There's something that Ron DeSantis made up or these peoples in here making up because nobody can ever run you off a public property. Even if you're sleeping and out of their way, they have a 20-feet walking zone. That's clear. So, who could run you off that property? So, you taking a risk of going to jail and if I go to jail, I will sue. But I don't want to go to jail because of my old lady. That's my priority. …There's like over 700 people living here around the Homeless Trust, and they tell the police to run us. For what?"

Although Robert may not have had a fully accurate perception of what governments can legally do to control access to public space, he did clearly understand that he was increasingly at risk of arrest due to recent legislation. He also felt that the same agency that is responsible for providing aid (the Homeless Trust) enabled heavy policing of people living unsheltered. Kevin, the African American man in his late 40s living on the streets of downtown Miami, expressed a similar fear of HB 1365, feeling that it was going to unleash a literal "war on the homeless." Both Robert and Kevin felt so insecure that they contemplated a near future in which they would need to physically defend themselves from police. So, rather than stay where community groups and specialized outreach could provide aid to people living unsheltered, they moved away from the area to be less visible and susceptible to arrest.

Invisibilization and Suffering

Amid this increasingly unfriendly environment on the streets and with limited options for shelter that had already failed them, our interviewees tried to make themselves invisible from authorities and citizens who might complain about their presence. Interviewees with children anxiously avoided being discovered by police or anyone who might report them to the Department of Family Services (DFS) because they feared their children being taken away. This pressure caused our interviewees to have to move and be on watch constantly while unsheltered, which resulted in sleep deprivation, deteriorating health, and vulnerability to theft. These effects are evident in the experiences of Kathy, Doug, Irene, Ingrid, and Kevin. In this section we present more cases of invisibilization.

James, an African American man in his mid-60s who had a voucher but was yet to be housed at the time of our first interview, described the difficulty of finding a place to rest given the intense policing of homelessness in Miami: "It's constantly moving. Moving somewhere on the bridge or somewhere where it say no trespassing. So really, we be walking all the time at night trying to find a spot just to close your eyes."

Jaime, the Hispanic man in his late 30s who had spent two decades on and off the streets, kept on the move to avoid being noticed by residents, who would call police. His experiences with the City of Miami Beach are like those of Kevin described earlier. Here Jaime reflects on his time on the streets before he moved into housing:

> "I moved around a lot. One day I'll be downtown, or the next I'll be in Little Havana, or I might be in Brickell. You stay in one spot, you know, people start noticing you. … I've stayed in Miami Beach a few times. That is the worst place to ever stay as far as the police go. Yeah, you definitely going to jail. And if you're lucky, you won't get a whooping."

Many interviewees described how this constant moving resulted in sleep deprivation and other negative impacts to their health. Robert, the African American man in his late 50s who described how he and his partner had to change where they slept because of increased policing of public space, went on to describe how this affected their ability to sleep:

> "I go out to go to sleep, it's stress again because you never know if the police is gonna come by and say, 'You have to move.' 'What you mean, move, Officer?' That is what I am gonna tell 'em. 'You really want me to get up off this ground at 10 o'clock at night?' Now, [in a new location] I'm not around a lot of people. I'm away from everybody. Although we have people walking forward and backward down the street. Pretend this is the street. I'm way over there."

Robert estimated that he got about three hours of sleep per day. He sometimes slept in the library, but he noted that security had become stricter and would wake him up. Robert had chronic back pain that made it difficult for him to

sit for long periods of time. Constantly walking to find food caused additional knee and foot pain: "I've been having a lot of joint problems in my knees, and my feet are in bad shape now since I've been down here. So, I'm having a hard time because I've been doing so much walking and walking chasing down food."

Darren, the African American man in his late 40s who was living on the streets of downtown at the time of our interview, described how the constant need to move causes sleep deprivation and thus more vulnerability to thieves on the streets:

> "I stayed up. You're in survival mode. When you sleep, (thieves) go through your bag, especially if you've been up two, three days. It's just not, 'I'm going to lay down.' Some people have a system, but when you haven't eat and you're hungry, and you've been riding a Metrorail all day, it's a challenge. So, [when] we do finally get some sleep, it's like you're gone. That's when we're taken advantage of."

In addition to losing property during sweeps, our interviewees talked about having property stolen while living unsheltered. Most disruptive were when phones and documents were stolen or thrown away, complicating communication with social service organizations. In our observation, specialized outreach staff were frustrated when city and county crews engaged in sweeps because of the direct negative impacts on the unhoused and because they would disperse their clients and make them more difficult to find. In some cases, loss of documents and communication difficulties prolonged progress toward housing placement. This happened with Doug and Kathy, who on multiple occasions had phones and identification stolen or thrown away in sweeps.

Many interviewees noted how their constant movement and instability on the street negatively affected their ability to maintain their health. Sophia and many others noted negative mental health impacts of constantly trying to find a place to be. Others, like Robert and his partner and Kevin, described leg, knee, and back pain and other forms of worsening physical health on the streets caused by constantly moving around. Charlotte, a Hispanic woman in her mid-50s who had a voucher but was couch hopping at the time of our interview, had one leg and a toe on the other foot amputated due to diabetes and the unsanitary conditions of living unsheltered. She had a substance misuse disorder and had been intermittently in jail, prison, and homeless for around 20 years. When asked about what led to the amputations, she said, "It was because of diabetes and not being clean. They got infected. My leg got infected. Living out of a car, you can only be so clean."

Sources Cited

Funk, A. M., Greene, R. N., Dill, K., and Valvassori, P. (2022). “The Impact of Homelessness on Mortality of Individuals Living in the United States: A Systematic Review of the Literature.” *Journal of Health Care for the Poor and Underserved* 33 (1), 457-477. https://doi.org/10.1353/hpu.2022.0035

Hanks, Doug. 2023. “Miami’s Homeless Crisis Worsens, but There’s a Wave of Money Coming to Help.” *Miami Herald*, February 3, 2023. https://www.miamiherald.com/news/local/community/miami-dade/article271943747.html

Rivero, Daniel. 2024. “Arrests of Miami-Dade’s Homeless Residents Skyrocket since New Law.” *WLRN Public Media,* September 2024. https://www.wlrn.org/government-politics/2024-09-12/miami-homeless-jail

FLORIDA INTERNATIONAL UNIVERSITY

Florida International University (FIU) is a top public university that drives real talent and innovation in Miami and globally. Very high research (R1) activity and high social mobility come together at FIU to uplift and accelerate student success in a global city by focusing in the areas of environment, health and innovation. Today, FIU has two campuses and multiple centers. FIU serves a diverse student body of more than 56,000 and 300,000 Panther alumni. FIU is ranked No. 4 Best Public University by the *Wall Street Journal*, and *U.S. News & World Report* places dozens of FIU programs among the best in the nation, including international business at No. 2. *Washington Monthly* magazine ranks FIU among the top 20 public universities contributing to the public good, and Degree Choices places it among the top 10 in the nation on return on investment.

STEVEN J. GREEN SCHOOL OF INTERNATIONAL & PUBLIC AFFAIRS

The Steven J. Green School of International & Public Affairs educates the leaders and changemakers of tomorrow through innovative teaching and research that advances global understanding, contributes to policy solutions, and promotes international dialogue. One of the leading schools of its kind in the world, the Green School is a full member of the prestigious Association of Professional Schools of International Affairs (APSIA), one of only 25 in the U.S. and 40 in the world. The school, which offers programs at the bachelor's, master's and doctoral levels, encompasses eight departments that bridge the social sciences and humanities, and is home to some of the university's most prominent international centers, institutes, and programs.

MATTHEW MARR

Matthew Marr is an associate professor of sociology in the Department of Global & Sociocultural Studies and the Asian Studies Program at Florida International University's Steven J. Green School of International & Public Affairs. His research focuses on homelessness in the U.S and Japan, exploring how urban marginality is shaped by social conditions operating at multiple levels, from the global to the individual. He is originally from Long Beach, California. You can contact him at mmarr@fiu.edu.

MELISSA HURTADO NUEZ

Melissa Hurtado Nuez is a doctoral student and graduate research assistant in the Department of Sociology at Rice University. Melissa is a 2024 BRIDGS Emergent Scholar Fellow and a Trainee with the Firearm Injury and Policy Research Program. Her research interests include gun culture, immigration, and health. She is originally from Havana, Cuba.

Steven J. Green
School of International
& Public Affairs

Steven J. Green School of International & Public Affairs
Florida International University
11200 SW 8th Street, Miami, Florida 33199

green.fiu.edu