

# Housing Insecurity: A Battle Against the Odds

Ashley Duong & Jahaziel Aguilera

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Final Internship Report

As interns of the San Ysidro cohort of the Blum Summer Field Internship, we decided to focus our project on housing insecurity, one of the various areas of concern in the community. Our decision to focus on housing insecurity was born not only from interest in the subject but the development on *Living Rooms at the Border*, the architectural project spearheaded by the Cross-Cultural Border Initiative. While the project focused on supporting and providing communities with more than just living spaces, but rather building cultural centers, our primary area of study and interest was in the issue of a shortage in affordable housing within the area and how the *Living Rooms* (whose design is shown below) could potentially be beneficial in possibly aiding in reducing effects of the housing shortage within the area by providing units at less-than-market prices.



**Pictured above is a model of the Living Rooms**

Our intended goal for our project was to put a spotlight on the issue by producing a narrative containing the voices of those who experience the effects of housing insecurity as well as those who work around or closely with the issue. In deciding to produce this journalistic piece, we hoped to tackle and address two points concerning the issue that we felt we could thoroughly address through our work. The first point we hoped to address was how the issue is often

understood and seen; Housing insecurity, as a concept, is often presented in data and statistics, numbers that come from formulaic analysis, often difficult for regular citizens to understand. The disconnect between the numbers and the reality of those numbers, namely people affected by the issue, prevents consumers of the data from understanding, with any depth, what the information represents beyond the page. Through our piece, we hoped to bridge that gap between the numbers and the human narratives.

Ultimately, our piece was focused on providing a perspective on life at the border, using the issue of housing insecurity as our lense. The second point our project hoped to address was debunking stereotypes and misgivings of life at the border created by rhetoric of current people of power in politic; We hoped to provide a practical and grounded image and depiction of the people who live within the community. Thus, we decided to produce a journalistic piece based on research, documenting, examining and exploring the lives of people at the border through personal narratives, looking at the specific obstacles of people facing housing insecurity at the border, that would not only aid the development of the *Living Rooms* but also give a voice to the people.

To accomplish what we set out to do, most of our summer was spent familiarizing ourselves with the issue of housing insecurity through online research as well as speaking to various people who had first hand knowledge and work very closely with people who deal with the issue intimately. Of the people we spoke to, we were able to gain a wide range of perspectives on the issue. but just through simple observation, we were able to take note about how housing insecurity looks specifically in the community of San Ysidro. For example, visible factors are not as prevalent or noticeable. As compared to Downtown San Diego, people who physically sleep in the street or in tents are much fewer and far in between; most people searching for housing within the city simply do not have the money for rent and either end up living out of their cars, in some cases, motels (for as long as they can afford it), or relying on shelters. In other cases, two-bedroom apartments are overloaded with several families sharing the space, a survival tactic in order to afford the rent.

While initially, our research was based rather solely on *Casa Familiar* and the information provided to us from the non-profit, we were also able to receive input from people not directly associated with *Casa*. The people we started off our interviews with consist of Casa Familiar staff such as a promotora, a case worker, a social services coordinator, and a housing services lead. After compiling notes for those initial three interviews, we proceeded to meet with several San Ysidro community members at *Casa's* event, *Sin Límites*. The public event allowed us to collect even more voices and perspectives on the issue, some from people working through homelessness right at that moment. What follows is the piece that we produced as a result of the information collected and interviews held:

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Attempting to tackle the issue of homelessness and housing insecurity in the city of San Ysidro could potentially be compared to attempting to fight off a swarm of bees: there are just too many things attacking from too many directions to win (if ever or at all). As a part of the San Diego county, the city is no doubt facing issues with rising trends in housing prices seen across the county, however San Ysidro also faces many obstacles and challenges specific to its community as the bordering city to Mexico. Mireya Hernandez, the head of the transitional housing department for *Casa Familiar*, a non-profit based in San Ysidro, understands the frustration of trying to confront the multi-faceted issue through first-hand experience. Having worked in and around the issue for over a decade, she has no shortage of tales of the people she has met who were in desperate need of help as well as those who have abused *Casa's* services.

“I’ve gotten a lot better at being able to tell who actually needs the help and who is lying,” she says as she explains the rigorous vetting process and requirements *Casa* has in order for people to qualify for their transitional housing program. Copies of driver's license and social security cards as well as signed documents sit in a neat manila folder to the left of her desk, which she brings out as physical proof of the lengthy vetting process. The non-profit runs their program out of two units (just several blocks away from the U.S.-Mexico border), where each unit is able to support two families; the program runs for three months and is intended to help

people who are either working or in school by giving them time to save up for a security deposit for an apartment. (But three months is often not enough time; most families end up stacking up with other families going through the program to co-rent an apartment, often way too small for the amount of people it supports.)

Beyond *Casa's* basic rules, Mireya has her own for the partakers of the program as well: "No boyfriends, no parties, no alcohol, the house must be clean," the list goes on.

But the abusers of the program are not the only people that concern Mireya; ultimately, her hope is always to help those in need, but with the mounting housing crisis within the San Diego county, there are limitations to her abilities. Mireya is often forced to refer people to other services when the waiting list for the transitional housing program at *Casa* is too long for some people that she meets. There's a church nearby to her office that has a parking lot meant specifically for homeless people living out of their cars to park. The church hires a security guard that watches the perimeter 24/7 to make sure no one gets robbed; When all else has failed, Mireya points people to that lot. She recalls the case of one family with two children. When the mother suddenly lost her job, the family could no longer afford rent. While they were able to stay off the streets for some time by staying at a motel, eventually costs were too high and the family was forced to live out of their car.

"It's dangerous living out of your car here along the border. When people see you sleeping in your car, you become a target and they will rob you," Mireya explains the significance of having the guard at the church. The people living in this guarded parking lot have access to not only a secured space, but also a bathroom, which is essential.

But Mireya's job is even further complicated by undocumented residents in need. Her capacities at her job require her to reject those cases but Mireya's focus is on getting people off the streets. Often this means making difficult decisions. The most common case she finds is single mothers with children, whose husbands have been deported. They are the most vulnerable and most in need and yet Mireya is often faced with a moral dilemma. Due to policy, she cannot provide transitional housing to undocumented immigrants, however, she does help by referring them to nearby shelters or the previously mentioned church parking lot.

The issue of housing insecurity and homelessness is not foreign to the county of San Diego. As a county, numbers in the homelessness has steadily risen over the past five years, according to data from the *Regional Task Force on the Homeless*. This number parallels the increase in housing prices within the county, which has reached close to \$600,000 in median price (the highest recorded for the county in its history), with an increase of 8.4% in price in just one year. At the moment, San Diego ranks fourth nationwide in rates of homelessness.

For a community like San Ysidro, where the majority of residents make an income that hovers below the poverty line and education levels have stagnated around the completion of secondary school, rising housing prices has lead to devastating effects and consequences. Combined with the added stress of an anti-immigrant presidential administration, dealing with housing insecurity and homelessness has seemed to reach a fever-pitch level of frenzy with angry people from both sides. The mostly-hispanic population, many of whom cross the border each day, are faced with the possibility to losing their residence status if they lose their housing, something many people cannot afford to risk or are currently making attempts to avoid losing.

U.S. residents who currently live in Tijuana (the bordering city from Mexico's side) are now suddenly clamoring to secure housing as close to the border as they possibly can, further exacerbating the already prevalent problem. But the issue cannot simply be pinned on a sudden spike in interest in housing; the fight for affordable housing is long and tenuous.

Government funded housing, often known as Section 8 housing, is notoriously known in the San Ysidro community for having a waitlist time of upwards of 10 years. The one housing development that supports Section 8 housing in the community, known as Villa Nueva, is a large block of apartments with 47 buildings, that sit right next to Customs and Border Protection (CBP). While (supposedly) heavily regulated by the government, stories of illegal renting coming out of Section 8 circulates the community and breeds further fury from residents struggling to find homes in the area. As the rumors go, those who receive Section 8 housing often rent out rooms or spaces within their apartments to other people, at time even undocumented residents. Even *Casa's* social workers have heard of murmurings about Section 8 housing being abused. Ivonne Rojas and Tiernan Seaver, both *Casa* employees that work from

the social services department, echoed similar sentiments when discussing the merits of Section 8: stuff happens, who can stop it?



**Pictured above are the Villa Nueva Apartments in San Ysidro**

“It’s sort of just works that way. I know there are some undocumented people living out of Villa Nueva and CBP is right next door and they do their thing and the people do their thing,” Tiernan explains. “The government is in charge of implementing the rules so there’s nothing we can do; social workers do house visits but we don’t know how those go or how thoroughly they are done.”

When asked about the situation, a member of the community, who claimed to have been living out of her car, went off on a long, indignant rant about the many people she knew to be monetizing off of the plight and struggles of others. “That woman over there,” she said while pointing her finger, “she rents out small spaces in her house. There’s someone living in her bathroom! ... I live out of my car, I’ve had bronchitis and asthma and there’s no help for me; I can’t find a place to stay.”

A resident of Villa Nueva has different insights but agrees with the fact that the way Section 8 is run does not result in maximum efficiency or aid to those who need it. Sandra (her name has been changed for confidentiality), who herself waited on the Section 8 waitlist for (ironically) 8 years, expressed the anger she felt when she saw how the housing was being underutilized. While she herself could not recall any instance in which she witnessed or knew

personally about rooms being illegally rented out to residents, she could attest to the inefficiency of Section 8 as well as its unfairness.

“My friend has 6 children and has been on the waitlist for many years and my next door neighbor is this one, mean old lady. She takes up an entire three-bedroom apartment for herself. That’s not fair. The lady even has a nephew who is homeless and she doesn’t even help him. She shouldn’t have an entire apartment; it’s a waste of space when other people need it more,” Sandra exasperatedly explains.

Sandra’s experience with Section 8 is the exception, not the norm. The very fact that she has received housing means she was one of the lucky ones. She describes her first experience entering the apartments as “walking into a palace.” Formerly stuck in an overpriced one-bedroom with two children and her husband, the apartment she has been afforded at Villa Nueva was a breath of fresh air and relief from her former situation.

While conflicting arguments are made on who deserves housing and how the available housing should be implemented, there is one thing no one disagrees about: the need for more affordable housing. Every person asked about the problem provides the same answer, they just need more. But the government is not equipped to provide more, or so it seems. The solution to the issue seems straightforward and yet is not at all, especially for a community like San Ysidro. But help seems always too slow to come. Despite heavy data on San Diego as a county as well as extensive research done on the northern cities, housing statistics for San Ysidro are spotty and often times inconclusive. If the solution were simply an issue of supply and demand, the crises could be (relatively) easily fixed, but as evidenced by testimonies and statements from community members themselves, the kink in housing insecurity lies in a larger, more institutionalized problem. The argument for more affordable housing can never be negated, but for San Ysidro to move forward without falling into a major housing pit, forces from all sides (non-profits, the government and community) must come together to help remedy the situation.

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## Conclusion & Future Research:

Although our BLUM Field Internship has come to a close, our work in regards to housing insecurity does not stop here. We hope to follow up with Mireya and receive updates on how the transitional housing program at *Casa Familiar* is going. We will do whatever is in our power to help Mireya with the transitional housing program. We also hope to aid Tiernan and Ivonne with the social services site right off West Hall Street if they need any help with finding people housing. We might be able to help by researching nearby shelters or safe areas to inform the people where they can go.

We hope that the research and narratives compiled in this writing piece will be used as a foundation for future research made by next year's interns. The efforts that we made these past eight weeks will allow interns from future iterations of the BLUM Summer Field Internship have something to build off from. Rather than spending too much time on preliminary research steps, our research will help such students know about what the problem is and who they need to speak to in regards to housing insecurity in San Ysidro. We are excited to see how the *Living Rooms* project will help San Ysidro solve its housing insecurity issue in the upcoming months.