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# Homelessness in Akron: A Research Documentary

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Running header: HOMELESS IN AKRON

Homelessness in Akron: A Research Video Documentary

Tyler Gunter

Honors Project

School of Communication

The University of Akron

### Description

This Honors Research Project at The University of Akron is one that will serve as a learning experience relative to my Major and will also become a useful tool to show my expertise to potential employers. My project is a filmed and edited mini-documentary on homelessness in the city of Akron. The link to the project can be found on page 15.

Through this project, I am hoping to bring more awareness to the issues of homelessness in Akron, and some of the different services and programs that are assisting those who are in need. I will be doing this by interviewing people who with some of the different services and organizations in the area, interviewing a knowledgeable reporter from the Akron Beacon Journal, and interviewing some of the people who are currently homeless or are using the services provided for the less fortunate in Akron. Then, I will infuse those interviews with B-roll footage, voice overs, and music.

### Literature Review

As part of my literature review, I started a blog on Akron homelessness. This was used for an assignment for one of my courses at The University of Akron during the 2018 Fall semester, but it also doubled as research and information to be used for my literature review. The link to this blog is located on my [website/online portfolio](#).

Due to my Honors Research Project focusing on such a niche area, specifically targeting Akron, Ohio, a lot of my references are from local papers or websites. There are still some national references I was able to find and use. I also did research while interviewing a few different people for this series. This is a summary of the results I found.

I found out that homelessness is an issue all over the world, with over 167,000 families in homeless shelters in the United States just last year (“Estimated Number of”, n.d.). That number may not sound that large, as compared to the overall population of the United States, but that number is only counting each family, not how many people are in the family or how many children are in the family. There are also many homeless individuals who do not have the support of a family with them. Akron has the ACCESS, Inc. as well as the Battered Women’s Shelter, where both organizations specifically help women (and children, if they have any with them) who are struggling with homelessness and poverty.

The U.S. Census showed that the median household income in Akron is around \$35,000, meaning that half of the population in Akron make less than that number (“U.S. Census Bureau”, n.d.). I didn’t realize how much the city struggled with things like jobs, homeless individuals, and low payrolls to citizens until I had done the research myself. Knowing some of this information allows me to ask better questions in my interviews that I will be conducting.

I wondered why homelessness seemed to be a pressing issue that not many people around me were talking about, and it may have something to do with the fact that Akron achieved “functional zero” from the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs in 2017. This means that no veterans are living on the street and that homelessness is rare, brief and non-recurring (“Veteran Homelessness in”, 2017). The Coalition on Homelessness and Housing in Ohio (COHHIO) had a study that found that the homeless community in Akron actually shrunk 20.8% over the course of 5 years (from 2011-2016) (“Ohio Homelessness Population”, n.d.). This prompted me to ask the question of how homelessness is still a thing to Trish Symons, Supervisor of Homeless Services in Akron. She mentioned a few times throughout the interview that they have been receiving less and less funding recently, and that everyone is constantly wanting them to “do

more with less". This seems to be an issue that other government funded programs may also be having, so I know to ask about this in future interviews.

Stephen Koff, a contributor to Cleveland.com, mentioned in his article that numbers can be very deceiving. He showed examples, citing numbers that were reported false at the time. The examples he showed were researchers finding lower amounts of homelessness in Ohio, when in reality, they didn't account for other variables (Koff, 2017). This made sense to me, but also confused me. I really needed to write some good questions to ask the people I would be meeting with over the next few months.

I found an NPR radio segment from back in 2012 where a formerly homeless man named David Pirtle discussed what it was like living in homelessness. Something that really stuck out to me with what he said was that after some time, those who are homeless start to get used to living homeless and they want it to stay that way (NPR, 2012). They start to lose trust in others. A good quote I took from that radio segment was this, "...we're creatures of habit. We get comfortable in the most uncomfortable positions, and that just becomes home... I spent most of my time homeless out on the street" (NPR, 2017). This information helped me gain a new insight on homelessness that I had never thought of before, and it better prepares me for the type of conversations I may have with the homeless population when I go to talk to them and ask for interviews.

Although I was able to find a great deal of information from my blog posting, I also consider the interviews that I have already conducted to be part of my research. The interviews are what I will be using for my project, but it is also where I am asking those questions to find out more about the area, the troubles, and why homelessness persists.

I have also done a fair amount of research with best practices for filming and editing documentaries. I already felt like I knew a good amount, just from personal experience growing up and with ZTV, but I still was able to use a refresher. I was reminded of what constitutes “Fair Use”, which was a good reminder for me, as I have begun to look for music to use in my documentary series (“Documentary Filmmakers’ Statement”, n.d.). This is also the first time I have ever done anything even remotely related to a documentary, so I really needed help learning some good ways to host an interview. I was reminded not to say a word during the interviews, even the little things like agreeing with something that is said or doing a little “yep” while they talk. Although this should be treated like a conversation, I need to remain quiet and not ask any “yes or no” questions (“Top 10 Video”, n.d.).

In Steve Thomas’ magazine article on ethical issues with documentary filmmaking, this made me think a lot more about some of the smaller issues that may come up as I am editing this project. I need to check my own biases and ethical beliefs. Since I am creating this series with multiple interviews with different people, I need to make sure it is clear whose ethics are whose, because some people feel very strongly about certain things (like the tent city dilemma that has been in the news for over a year) while others have differing opinions. I just need to be mindful of that and remember what the purpose of this assignment was, and make sure not to favor one side – or the other – too much (Thomas, n.d.).

In a journal entry in the *Journal of Mass Media Ethics*, Ellen Maccarone talks on more ethical responsibilities of documentary filmmakers – this time, specifically mentioning that they are responsible to prevent harm to the subjects of their film in any way that is made possible to cause harm due to the nature of the film (Maccarone, 2010). She makes notes of three different films that are examples of how to prevent harm to the subjects of a documentary. These are films

I will need to view before finishing my project. She also mentions that knowing what a documentary is and what its purpose is helps with this. She says that documentaries are attempting to tell true stories, while taking on a particular perspective (Maccarone, 2010). They are not objective. This makes it different from something like news reporting. Documentaries pick a side and follow that. This was just general good knowledge for me to have and to read over.

In an article in the May/June 2017 issue of *Quill*, a magazine by the Society of Professional Journalists, professor Richard F. Gaspar wrote on how journalists can use documentaries to have more rewarding and beneficial content. In many ways, I can see how the documentary I am making could also be journalistic, in a sense. He explains three rules that he thinks are important for making documentary films, that are also related to journalism students. Even though that is not what I am going for, these rules still matter. One of these rules is, as he says simply, “Don’t tell me shit I already know”. He says that documentary films need to focus on telling original stories from a unique perspective (Gaspar, 2017).

Another one of his rules is that there is more than one way to tell a story. He claims that stories do not need to be told from begging to end; they just need to be complete. He talks about a few different types of documentary styles, one of which is called “Participatory documentaries” (Gaspar, 2017). Participatory documentaries include the director or journalist in the film. This is what I think I will attempt to do with my series, as I can provide more information and help bridge gaps between scenes with voiceovers or talking roles on camera.

In the *Journal of Media Practice*, from January of 2003, Larry Sider talks on the importance of awareness to sounds used in a film, explaining that sound and image should “dance” together (Sider, 2003). He emphasized that sound should help engage with the picture,

rather than just decorate it. As I have been preparing for this series, sound has been one of the smallest things I have focused on. I know sound during the interviews I have with people needs to be good quality, but music, and sound effects, are all things that I just have not even thought about or thought about how important they would be to this mini-documentary series that I want to produce. This article already has me thinking about taking some microphones and going out and just recording sounds that I can throw in with my B-roll footage. I need to look into music, as well, and find the right pieces of music for each scene that I produce.

All in all, this literature review has helped me feel more comfortable approaching this documentary series with the pre-production and production steps of the process. I will continue watching documentaries on Netflix during my lunch breaks to see if there are any techniques that I really like, and just see some of the different ways that the editors tell the stories that were filmed.

### Goals and Recommendations

The goals that I had set for myself ahead of this project being made was that I wanted to have multiple organizations featured, giving me detailed information about what they do for the homeless community in Akron. I also wanted to be able to provide statistics and sound reason for why this is an issue that I felt needed to be brought to the attention of my peers. I also wanted this to look as professional as possible. I conducted this project without a budget, and I knew that would be a slight challenge. Luckily, I had resources available to me from The University of Akron, from ZTV. I was able to check out cameras, tripods, and microphones to use to conduct my filming. I also relied on help from some of my friends and family members, to assist me with filming. I did give everyone credit, as well as a free meal, for assisting me with my project.



There was not much else that I could offer to them and I hope that they enjoyed the experience of producing a mini-documentary.

I was able to achieve most of the goals that I had set for myself. I severely underestimated the amount of free time that I would have this semester to edit my project, and so it is not the best professional quality that I could have done. I know this, and I hope to refine the project and re-release it during the summer. I was able to film almost everything that I had set out to do – the only things that I did not film, were interviews with homeless individuals. I did not do this because again, I did not have much free time in my schedule. I also was not sure how to go about doing something like this, as I felt it may be a touchy subject for those who are currently homeless to speak on, and I also did not have enough people to go with me and assist me with filming. I did not want to go and do something like this on my own. Besides falling short of those two goals, I am proud of what I was able to accomplish with not being able to work on this full time.

For any future producers who plan on conducting a research documentary, I have many recommendations. The first recommendation that I have is that you take notes while you are filming. Each interview I conducted with someone lasted 15-20 minutes on average, and I attempted to pull about 4-5 minutes from each one. I wish I had taken notes during, or immediately after, each interview, writing specific things that were said that I knew I wanted to feature in the finished product. This would have saved me a great amount of time while in post-production.

Another recommendation that I have for those who attempt to create something like this is that film more B-roll footage than you think that you need, and then *even more*. There were a few times in post-production that I was searching for more video to overlay on top of the

interviews that I did not have. It may also be smart to film some B-roll footage prior to the interviews, and then film more after the interviews, while following the notes that you took on the interview. Someone may have mentioned something during the interview that you really liked, but you did not capture any footage of during your first time filming B-roll.

One final suggestion that I would make is having multiple people with you to help film during the interview process, so that way you can just focus on asking questions and listening to the responses. All the times that I conducted interviews, I usually ran one camera, and microphone, while a partner handled another camera. I had to constantly look back at the camera and listen to the audio to make sure everything continued working. I had questions written up to ask, so I knew what I wanted to talk about, but I could have asked better follow-up questions, taken notes, and been more prepared for post-production if I did not have to worry about looking at the camera and reading the audio levels throughout the interviews.

I did not have a script to follow for this, since it was a research documentary filmed in many parts. I have included a list of the questions below that I asked each interview participants during my time with them.

### Script

Questions for Interviewees:

What is your name, where are you from, how long have you been with this organization?

What interested you in the position within the organization?

What is the main goal of your organization, and what is your main goal within the organization?

What kind of things do you or your organization do to try to reach these goals?

Have you or anyone you've loved been in a situation where you were left homeless or in a very similar situation?

What was a major obstacle(s) you had to overcome within the organization?

What are some struggles or obstacles you have now as an organization?

Are there any heartbreaking experiences or situations you have heard of or experienced first hand?

Are there any success stories or people you have helped that inspire you to keep going and keep doing what you are doing?

How would you suggest is the best way to get the community and students from UA to assist and help with the organization?

If you had a group of college students in front of you, what would you want to tell them about your organization?

What message would you like to send out to the community and the students at UA?

Any final comments you have or would like to make before the interview ends?

Questions for Doug Livingston

Introduce yourself, like → What is your name, where are you from, and where do you work/what do you do?

What interested you in becoming a writer for ABJ?

What are some topics that you cover for your position?

It seems like you have been covering issues with Akron homelessness for some time - do you have an estimate for how long you have covered this topic?

Can you tell us more about what you've been reporting on recently...

Please tell me more about how important it is to have different services/programs to assist the poor and homeless.

Why do you think homelessness has persisted in Akron?

What are some of the biggest issues that you have seen over the years with homelessness in Akron? (is it the government and people fighting about them not doing enough, is it some of the different programs and outreach events, etc...)

Have you had any first-hand experiences with some of the people in the homeless community in Akron? What kind of things do they have to say?

Do you believe that homelessness in Akron is an issue that needs to be talked about more (and given more funding)?

Have you met with or talked to anyone from Akron's homeless shelters, like Haven of Rest, Battered Women's Shelter, Access, Inc. or Continuum of Care? What kind of things are they providing to the community? Are they doing a good job with recruiting?

Do you have any memories or moments of covering news about the homeless community that stand out to you or that you remember? Anything that was important to you or just really stuck out to you? (emotional?)

A lot of students who are my age probably don't know anything about the homeless issues in Akron besides what they see when they get off the highway at the exit ramps...what would you want to tell the young people at UA about the homelessness that they don't see or know about?

Are there any heartbreaking experiences or situations you have heard of or experienced first hand?

Any final comments you have or would like to make before the interview ends?

### Credits

Director	Tyler Gunter
Cinematographers	Tyler Gunter Chad Austin Kerr Gregory White
Editor	Tyler Gunter
Interviewees	Doug Livingston Marj Sovacool Wilford Pabler Kim Polatas Trish Symons Michael Harhager
Photography Courtesy of	Riley Chaney
Stock Footage Courtesy of	<a href="http://www.Pexels.com">www.Pexels.com</a>
Statistics Provided by	U.S. Census Bureau

HUD 2018 Continuum of Care

[www.EndHomelessness.org](http://www.EndHomelessness.org)

Music

“Can’t Stop This Feeling”

Written by Shellback, Max Martin, and Justin Timberlake

Produced by Shellback, Max Martin, and Justin Timberlake

Performed by Justin Timberlake

“Windswept”

Music by Ashamaluevmusic

Music Link: <https://www.ashamaluevmusic.com>

“Motivational Pop Rock”

Music by Ashamaluevmusic

Music Link: <https://www.ashamaluevmusic.com>

“Uplifting Cinematic Piano”

Music by Ashamaluevmusic

Music Link: <https://www.ashamaluevmusic.com>

“Documentary Piano”

Music by Ashamaluevmusic

Music Link: <https://www.ashamaluevmusic.com>

“Inspirational Pop Rock”

Music by Ashamaluevmusic

Music Link: <https://www.ashamaluevmusic.com>

“Epic Inspiration”

Music by Ashamaluevmusic

Music Link: <https://www.ashamaluevmusic.com>

Music from <https://filmmusic.>”

“Music for Manatees” by Kevin Macleod

(<https://incompetech.com>)

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Author Note

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April 26<sup>th</sup>, 2019

Link to Project

<https://youtu.be/5ACS-EmFPBk>



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