

# **Drivers of Unsheltered Homelessness and Conservation along the Jordan River, Salt Lake County**

*A Project Prospectus*  
(Summer 2021)

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## **Introduction and Overview**

This prospectus describes elements of a proposed research project that aims to understand the drivers that lead individuals experiencing homelessness (IEHs) to reside along the Jordan River, as well as to identify mitigation strategies (i.e. access to services and facilities) that will assist in human survivorship and well-being, in addition to supporting conservation of the Jordan River corridor. The Jordan River is an urban waterway, flowing through multiple Utah County and Salt Lake County municipalities, and is managed collaboratively by a variety of public agencies. In addition to serving as an essential outdoor recreational and health resource for local residents (including walking, biking, running, fishing, and boating), the adjacent paved Jordan River Parkway is an extended greenway that contributes substantially to the connectivity of the region, serving as a commuter and transit path for nearby communities. With the Jordan River's proximity to many urban amenities and services, the corridor also has seen use from IEHs. Residing along the river presents safety and conservation concerns for IEHs, other visitors, and the river ecology. IEHs are often associated with outdoor defecation and urination, discarded intravenous needles, and criminal behavior, though there is limited empirical support for these assumptions. Other Jordan River visitors may have increased fear associated with perceptions of homelessness in the area, and may therefore refrain from recreating along the river. Additionally, unsheltered homelessness in public parks and protected areas is often accompanied by a number of undesirable ecological ramifications, including litter, debris, vegetation loss, soil compaction, decreased water quality, and negative impacts on sight and sound. This proposed research seeks to mitigate the impacts of IEHs residing along the Jordan River, and identify mechanisms to support the well-being and conservation of the river and its users.

Homelessness in the Salt Lake Valley has received increased attention in recent years. Collaborative decisions from the State of Utah, municipalities across the Salt Lake Valley, The Jordan River Commission, social services providers, and local residents have charted a future that closed a larger existing temporary homeless shelter in Salt Lake City's Rio Grande district, creating multiple new homeless resource centers throughout the valley. As formal sheltering options have changed for IEHs (including a decrease in the availability of nightly beds) and the onset of COVID-19, there have been notable shifts in the quantity and spatial distribution of IEHs throughout Salt Lake Valley. In particular, with more IEHs residing outdoors, as well as increased abatement strategies within downtown areas, there has been an increase in the number of IEHs and encampments along the Jordan River.

This prospectus describes research questions and methods that can help capture the social and environmental complexities associated with homelessness along the Jordan River corridor. In response to the changes in resource center locations, service areas, service type, and service quality, it is vital to understand the drivers of IEHs residing along the river, as well as their daily lived experiences in order to mitigate the negative ecological effects of unsheltered homelessness.

### Research Questions

While a variety of studies have examined elements of homelessness throughout the Salt Lake Valley, there has yet to be sustained empirical measurement and quantification of homelessness and its social and environmental impacts along the Jordan River. Data collected and analyzed from methods described in this prospectus can provide a comprehensive evaluation of existing levels, distributions, and impacts of homelessness in this area. Specifically, we propose three research questions to drive our project during summer 2021:

1. Where are encampments located on the Jordan River corridor, between 1700 North and 5400 South?
2. Who is inhabiting these encampments, what are their concerns, and what are their needs?
3. Why are people living along the Jordan River choosing to do so?

Embedded within each of these broad research questions are underlying concerns about IEHs' experiences, recreational visitors' experiences, COVID-19, safety, park and river management, water quality, waste management, and environmental conservation, among others. Below, we detail our research approach to consider more specific questions and their associated methods.

### Research Approach

To address the project purpose, the research will address the three research questions using specific methods for incorporating onsite spatial, quantitative, and qualitative data. The use of multiple methods in social science and natural resource management research enhances the strength, reliability, and validity of findings by incorporating diverse approaches to data collection and analysis. The research methods and tools within each component of this proposed research can be amended with conversations with Jordan River Commission members.

Research Question	Method
1. Where are encampments located along the Jordan River, where are they most intense, and what spatial patterns are associated with them?	GPS mapping to spatially quantify the location and intensity of homelessness
2. Who is located along the Jordan River, what is their health, what resources do they need?	Short onsite, in-person surveys (n = 60) to capture demographics, health concerns, and needs of IEHs
3. What are the specific drivers of unsheltered homelessness on the Jordan River? Why are both short-term and long-term encampments located where they are?	In-depth interviews (n = 16) to understand experiences, including why IEHs choose to live along the Jordan River, uses of the river, and identify resources and services that can mitigate the impacts of unsheltered homelessness

**Research Question 1.** *Mapping encampments along the Jordan River.* At multiple times across the study period (June 1 – August 15, 2021), and in collaboration with agencies like The Road Home, VOA Utah, and the Jordan River Nature Center, researchers will canvass the Jordan River Corridor using GPS devices and cameras to determine the specific location and intensity of unsheltered homelessness along the river. These observations are planned for the start (approximately June 5), middle (approximately July 15), and end (approximately August 10) of the summer research period.

**Research Question 2.** *Short survey interviews with individuals residing along the Jordan River.* Short semi-structured survey interviews (n = 60) will be conducted with IEH that reside along the Jordan River. These short interviews are intended to obtain demographic and descriptive information of IEHs that reside along the river. These interviews will collect data in four research categories: 1) Demographic information of IEH that reside along the Jordan River; 2) Resources that IEHs along the river have access to; 3) Conservation of the river; and 4) Recreation and habitation of IEH along the river.

The short survey interviews will support our building of rapport with the community so that we can better secure the necessary in-depth interviews (Research Question 3) for this project. We will schedule in-depth interviews with individuals that we encounter along the river that are willing to participate in longer, more probing discussions.

**Research Question 3.** *In-depth interviews with individuals residing along the Jordan River.* In-depth semi-structured interviews (n = 16) will be conducted with IEH that reside along the Jordan River. These interviews are intended to substantially expand upon the demographic and descriptive data collected with the short surveys. These question, response, and interaction sections are designed to capture experiences of IEHs that reside along the river and gain more detailed information regarding the drivers that led them to reside along the river, resources that they have access to, resources that would be useful to have access to and a deeper understanding of conservation and cleanliness practices. These interview experiences will consist of more open-ended questions, and will likely be approximately one hour in length, and will be conducted either on location at riverside encampments or at another public space of the participant's choosing.

In addition to the data collection methods discussed above, additional tasks focus on *data management, analysis, and presentation*. GPS data will be managed, organized, and visualized using ArcGIS, while survey data will be collected on iPads using Qualtrics software, and converted into a functional database that will allow for descriptive and statistical analyses. This database will be used to create summary descriptive statistics and assist in identifying dominant and emerging themes within the surveys. Various inferential statistics will also be performed to assist in answering the above research questions. Qualitative data from in-depth interviews will be electronically recorded, transcribed, and then analyzed using Nvivo software. Lastly, the results from data analyses will be used to create a final technical report that will provide an understanding of homelessness along the Jordan River, as well as recommendations for mitigation policies intended to support the health and well-being of individuals residing along the river and to support conservation of the Jordan River.

### Project Deliverables

By the end of the summer (September 1, 2021), a number of deliverables will be prepared and available. The primary product of the research project will be a detailed peer-reviewed technical report, with sections for an executive summary, methods, results, interpretation, and recommendations. The technical report will also include:

- Detailed map of Jordan River homeless encampments between approximately 1700 North and 5400 South;
- Summary descriptive and inferential statistics from survey interviews;
- Dominant/emergent themes and representative quotes from in-depth interviews/
- Recommendations for how understanding the Jordan River corridor fits within larger issues of homelessness and social services across the Salt Lake Valley.

In addition to the peer-reviewed technical report, research team members will be available for presentations of findings and recommendations at future Jordan River Commission and/or subgroup meetings. As researchers, we envision ourselves as ongoing collaborators with Jordan River Commission members and initiatives.

### Proposed Budget

Jordan River Homelessness Research 2021	TOTAL
<b>SALARY</b>	
Project coordination, data collection, analysis, and reporting (DeMarco)	\$5,000
Project coordination, data collection, analysis, and reporting (Hardenbrook)	\$5,000
PI project supervision and support (Rose)	\$100
<b>TOTAL SALARY</b>	<b>\$10,100</b>
<b>FRINGE</b>	
Graduate students (8%)	\$800
PI Rose (37%)	\$37
<b>TOTAL FRINGE</b>	<b>\$837</b>
<b>PARTICIPANT COMPENSATION</b>	
\$10 gift cards for 60 survey interviews	\$600
\$25 gift cards for 16 in-depth interviews	\$400
<b>TOTAL PARTICIPANT COMPENSATION</b>	<b>\$1,000</b>
<b>EQUIPMENT AND SUPPLIES</b>	
GPS units, cameras, ArcGIS software	-
Tablets, clipboards, Qualtrics survey software, SPSS	-
Data recorders, Nvivo qualitative analysis software	\$275
Onsite materials for field data collection	\$100
Printing	\$200
<b>TOTAL OTHER</b>	<b>\$575</b>
<b>SUMMARY</b>	
<b>TOTAL DIRECT</b>	<b>\$12,512</b>
Indirect @ 10%	\$1,251
<b>TOTAL COST</b>	<b>\$13,763</b>

## **Research Capacity**

The research team (Rose, DeMarco, and Hardenbrook) has extensive experience working with and researching individuals experiencing both sheltered and unsheltered homelessness. **Dr. Jeff Rose** has coordinated multiple similar studies to those described in this prospectus, focusing on both unsheltered homelessness and outdoor recreation visitor use and natural resources management, and these studies have been published extensively. **Angelina DeMarco** is a fourth year doctoral student in anthropology, whose dissertation research focuses on social networks as risk buffering mechanisms in vulnerable environments, with specific regard to rural impoverished communities and urban homeless populations. **Rebecca Hardenbrook** is a third year doctoral student in mathematics, whose dissertation research focuses on mathematical modelling of Arctic sea ice and local environmental justice concerns. Collectively, we have the capacity, experience, and sensitivities necessary to conduct the research proposed in this prospectus. Specifically, we have used the methods described here (spatial methods, surveys, and interviews) to understand experiences of IEHs in the Salt Lake Valley. For instance, in 2019, we conducted semi-structured interviews with IEHs residing within the homeless resource centers (Geraldine E. King Resource Center and the Men's Resource Center) and unsheltered IEHs residing in Salt Lake City in order to explore the health effects of air pollution that these individuals face. In that project, the team conducted 120 short semi-structured interviews and 18 in-depth interviews over a 4-month time period. The team successfully analyzed the results from the air pollution study and [published](#) the work in the *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*. The research is also being used to inform protection policies regarding air pollution and other environmental hazards that IEHs face.