

THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO

**From Arrival to Address: Migrant Housing Following the Implementation of
the One System Initiative in Chicago**

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Abstract

Over 50,000 migrants have arrived in Chicago since 2022. After originally entering the United States through Texas' southern border, governor Greg Abbott began sending buses of migrants to sanctuary cities across the country, including Chicago. With a sudden need to accommodate this large and vulnerable population, Chicago's infrastructure has been tested. The city has spent over \$300 million in housing, free transportation cards, medical attention, and other services to help migrants settle. Due to fiscal constraints and complaints from constituents claiming that the city has favored migrants, Mayor Brandon Johnson began closing shelters. In October 2024, Johnson announced the *One System Initiative* (OSI), which combined the city's homeless and migrant shelter systems. The OSI has also restricted migrants' eligibility to enter Chicago's shelter system. This study examines how the OSI has impacted migrants' housing status, which is measured by participants' relative satisfaction with living conditions, crowdedness of apartments, and ability to pay rent.

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Introduction

Immigration into the United States surged as the COVID-19 pandemic eased. Lockdowns and border closures had slowed migration, but as restrictions lifted, pent-up demand led to a sharp increase of migrants entering the United States.¹ This post-pandemic immigration boom placed acute pressure on the southern border of the United States—particularly in Texas, the largest border state. Greg Abbott, the governor of Texas, staunchly opposed immigration from the southern border, yet found that he could not sidestep the issue without damage to his political reputation. Unwilling to commit Texas state resources in order to create long-term housing for this wave of immigrants, Abbott implemented Operation Lone Star in August of 2022, which sent migrants who had arrived in Texas to sanctuary cities,² including Chicago.

Since the implementation of Operation Lone Star, 50,000 migrants—or New Arrivals—have come to Chicago. Then, in May of 2023, Chicago’s mayoral leadership changed. Former Mayor Lori Lightfoot lost the election for a second term and was succeeded by Mayor Brandon Johnson. Both administrations implemented a wide array of policies in order to ensure the migrant population has had proper access to necessary resources. For example, migrants are eligible for SNAP (food assistance), free public-transit citywide passes, health check-ups, and more.

As the number of migrants in Chicago increased, the city needed additional shelter space. Under both mayoral administrations, the city repurposed several miscellaneous buildings—from former hotels to pharmacies—to accommodate the heightened shelter demand. At its peak, the city was operating 28 temporary shelters to house migrants. Upon exiting the shelter system,

¹ Penn Wharton Budget Model, "The Impact of COVID-19 on Immigration to the United States," October 15, 2024, <https://budgetmodel.wharton.upenn.edu/issues/2024/10/15/the-impact-of-covid-19-on-immigration-to-the-united-states>.

² Sanctuary cities are self-proclaimed cities where migrants are welcomed. All sanctuary cities promise to prevent local police from collaborating with customs agents. Some cities may provide additional infrastructure to support their migrant populations.

migrants have received help finding apartments and rent-aid from nonprofits like Catholic Charities and the Asylum Seeker Emergency Rental Assistance Program (ASERAP).

While the city quickly implemented policies to assist migrants, existing residents of Chicago expressed feeling abandoned—especially those in low-income and Black communities. These concerns emerged following Mayor Lightfoot’s decision to repurpose a building in Woodlawn without the permission of the neighborhood or ward alderwoman.³ Many Chicago residents have shared their frustration with the city’s swift and substantial support to migrants while at the same time, residents’ access to infrastructure has remained stagnant and insufficient.⁴

Inheriting the grievances of Chicagoans who felt slighted, Mayor Johnson moved to ensure that his constituents all received comparable housing resources. His administration thus announced the implementation of the One System Initiative (OSI) on October 21, 2024. Under the new policy, migrants and residents receive access to the same city shelters. However, Johnson concurrently closed 15 of the 28 shelters that had once been open to migrants, leaving limited space to house both groups in the remaining 13 shelters. To make space for both groups, the OSI outlined several restrictions on access for the migrant population. Specifically, migrants may only stay in a shelter for 30 days following their arrival in the US. The city also removed the 30-day extension that had been available through the “Public Benefit enrollment,” whereby migrants were able to petition for an extended stay. Under the OSI, extensions are now only granted for extenuating circumstances and expecting mothers.

³ Sarah Shulte "Brandon Johnson Administration Shuts Down Migrant Shelter at Old Wadsworth School in Woodlawn." *ABC7 Chicago*, May 14, 2024. <https://abc7chicago.com/post/migrants-chicago-brandon-johnson-administration-shuts-down-migrant-shelter-at-old-wadsworth-school-in->

⁴ Chicago Tribune, "Afternoon Briefing: 2 Woodlawn Residents Block Bus as Migrants Begin Moving into Shelter," *Chicago Tribune*, February 2, 2023, <https://deal.town/chicago-tribune/afternoon-briefing-2-woodlawn-residents-block-bus-as-migrants-begin-moving-into-shelter-PKP2CTLLD>.

The effects of the OSI have not yet been studied. Although the city has made data on the migrant shelters publicly available, there is a lack of research analyzing these datasets. Furthermore, at the time of this paper's submission (April 2025), there is no literature providing descriptive accounts of how the OSI has personally impacted migrants. In restricting access to city shelters, the OSI has tremendous implications in migrants' settlement into Chicago. Accordingly, the effects of the OSI warrant investigation. This paper will examine these impacts, particularly in the short-term.

To address the policy and population of interest in a focused manner, this study is guided by the following research question: *How have the regulations stipulated under the One System Initiative impacted the housing outcomes of migrants in Chicago?* Specifically, the regulations under review are the elimination of eligibility for all migrants (except those who arrived in the United States in the last 30 days) and the ending of shelter extensions (except in extenuating circumstances and pregnant women). *Housing outcome* is measured by participants' relative satisfaction with their current living conditions, their ability to pay rent, and the number of residents per household relative to the size of the housing unit.

This study uses a combination of primary interviews and secondary quantitative data obtained through the Chicago Data Portal. Interviews are analyzed to identify patterns across participants, specifically pertaining to housing conditions, opinions about shelters, and preferences between private and shelter housing. The quantitative data is illustrated on scatterplot graphs and analyzed with a sharp regression discontinuity design (RD) to determine the treatment effect of the OSI. The quantitative and qualitative findings are subsequently compared to the citywide data to further determine larger trends in housing outcomes for the migrant population.

This paper will begin with background on the circumstances that have led thousands of South American migrants to Chicago. Specifically, the background section will discuss the effects of Nicolás Maduro’s presidency in Venezuela and the danger of traveling from South America to the United States. The concurrent political climate in Chicago—and the United States more broadly—are discussed in the background as well. The subsequent section will review relevant literature that has been published on homeless shelters in the U.S., international refugee shelters, and migrant housing within the U.S. The literature review section will also address the gaps in the available, up-to-date, research. Potential limitations of the study and its short time span are also discussed in this section. Next, the paper reviews the mixed methods used to collect and analyze data. Namely, this study uses qualitative data collected from interviews with migrants in addition to quantitative data from the Chicago Data Portal. The findings section reports these results. Then, the discussion section analyzes the qualitative and quantitative results in context with one another in addition to the existing literature. To promote more robust findings for future studies, the limitations of this research are outlined in the discussion section. The policy implications section analyzes the shortcomings of current city and federal policies affecting the migrant population. The paper will conclude with closing remarks on the OSI policy and the future of migrants in Chicago.

Background:

The set of circumstances that have led to the arrival of 50,000 migrants in Chicago is long and complex. A complete history on the current backsliding of South American democracies and migration to the United States is beyond the scope of this paper. The background section will therefore provide context for themes that emerged during interviews.

Specifically, this section will discuss the state violence that motivated participants to leave their countries of origin and the specific set of politics and policy that led to their arrival in Chicago. Unprepared for a sudden influx of thousands of migrants, the city of Chicago implemented various forms of infrastructure to best support this transition, which will also be covered in this section.

I. South America

The current wave of migrants who have come to the United States from Venezuela stems from over a decade of democratic decline. Following Nicolás Maduro’s installment as president of Venezuela in 2013, succeeding Hugo Chavez, the economy plummeted. As a petrostate, the Venezuelan GDP relied principally on oil to generate income. This dependence on oil weakened other industries within Venezuela. When the price of oil dramatically fell in 2014—because Maduro had replaced oil executives with loyalists—the Venezuelan economy lacked the infrastructure in other industries to handle a depression. A shortage of goods including food, gasoline, and medicine quickly followed. President Maduro continued nationalizing industries and seizing private businesses to place under state control. He also exercised power over the police and prohibited citizens from protesting. Due to food and job scarcity, gangs like *Tren de Aragua* grew in size.^{5 6} Furthermore, with corruption in virtually all governmental institutions under Maduro including the police, there was little resistance stopping this violence, allowing *Tren de Aragua* to gain more power.⁷

Tren de Aragua threatened citizens at their places of work and eventually their homes.

Due to the combination of growing authoritarianism, economic depression, and extortion from

⁵ *Tren de Aragua* is arguably the most prominent gang from Venezuela. It originated in the Tocarón Prison in the Aragua region of Venezuela. As the economy plummeted, however, the gang expanded outside of the Tocarón prison.

⁶ Venezuela Investigative Unit. *Tren de Aragua: From Prison Gang to Transnational Criminal Enterprise*. (InSight Crime, October 2023), <https://insightcrime.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/Tren-de-Aragua-From-Prison-Gang-to-Transnational-Criminal-Enterprise-InSight-Crime-October-2023-1.pdf>.

⁷ Venezuela Investigative Unit, *Venezuela Security Policy: Combating Gang and Police-Driven Extortion* (InSight Crime, October 18, 2023), <https://insightcrime.org/news/venezuela-security-policy-combating-gang-police-driven-extortion/>.

Tren de Aragua, millions of Venezuelans began to leave the country.⁸ Members of Tren de Aragua followed these mass departures and began establishing roots in neighboring countries—including Colombia, Peru, and Chile—where their fellow Venezuelan citizens had moved.⁹ Indeed, members of the gang likely followed Venezuelan citizens to other countries in order to continue profiting from their extortive threats. As explained by the Venezuela Investigative Unit, “The gang’s arrival in these places was likely opportunistic rather than guided by a strategic masterplan. And the opportunity they were seeking to exploit came in the form of their fellow Venezuelans.”¹⁰ Due to the sustained extortion that persisted after moving out of their country, many Venezuelans migrated further north to Mexico and the United States.

South American migrants who travel north must pass through dangerous stretches of land including the northeast Colombian border and the Darien Gap—a 66 mile stretch of dense jungle that connects northwest Colombia to Panama. The natural elements are not the only reason this journey is extremely dangerous; migrants must also face extortive groups who have set up shop along these paths. In fact, Tren de Aragua has monopolized parts of the Venezuela-Colombia border, advertising smuggling services online. Some members even pose as potential love interests to lure women into sex-trafficking arrangements.¹¹ Similarly, local cartels offer travel services through the Darien, which charge at a minimum \$300 per person, and up to \$1000 for travel by boat.¹² In the Atlantic’s article *70 miles in Hell*, author Caitlin Dickerson describes the conditions she observed when she walked through a few different routes. She noted that children and elderly alike were exposed to treacherous terrain, corpses, sexual assault—at a rate higher

⁸ C. García, *The Venezuelan Exodus: The Need for a Regional Response to an Unprecedented Migration Crisis* (Human Rights Watch, January 24, 2018), <https://www.hrw.org/report/2018/09/03/venezuelan-exodus/need-regional-response-unprecedented-migration-crisis>.

⁹ Venezuela Investigative Unit, *Tren de Aragua: From Prison Gang to Transnational Criminal Enterprise*

¹⁰ Venezuela Investigative Unit, *Tren de Aragua: From Prison Gang to Transnational Criminal Enterprise*

¹¹ *Tren de Aragua: From Prison Gang to Transnational Criminal Enterprise*

¹² C. Dickerson. “Inside the Darién Gap: The World’s Most Dangerous Migration Route.” (*The Atlantic*, August 6, 2024), <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2024/09/darien-gap-route-migrants-panama/679156>.

than any warzone—and illness.¹³ Exposure to these extreme conditions can be highly traumatizing.¹⁴ The sustained level of travel through the Darien Gap, therefore, suggests that individuals are willing to risk their safety and lives to escape life in their home country.

II. Asylum Protections and Work Authorization

Most migrants from South America enter the United States as asylum-seekers and may eventually become asylees. Although the two terms are often conflated, they technically differ: an asylum-seeker has not yet been granted asylum. Contrarily, a refugee receives asylum prior to entering their designated asylum country. Asylum seekers, asylees, and refugees are protected from deportation by the Non-Refoulement Principle under international law.¹⁵

Crucially, though, assumption of such status is conditional on migrants' actions as they make their journey. Hence, not all migrants are legally protected by the Non-Refoulement Principle. Historically, to seek asylum in the United States, migrants must either enter through an official port of entry or surrender to immigration authorities after crossing the border.¹⁶ Migrants who enter the United States through unofficial channels and fail to report to immigration authorities after the fact are ineligible to apply for asylum and, therefore, not covered by the protections of non-refoulement. In addition, refugees and asylum seekers who are convicted of a crime or deemed a national threat lose this protection.¹⁷

Individuals must apply for asylum in the country to which they have migrated. To receive asylum in the United States specifically, an individual must apply their case to the U.S.

¹³ C. Dickerson. "Inside the Darién Gap:]"

¹⁴ D. F. Runde and T. Bryja, "Mind the Darién Gap, Migration Bottleneck of the Americas," *Center for Strategic and International Studies*, May 16, 2024, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/mind-darien-gap-migration-bottleneck-americas>.

¹⁵ Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, *The Principle of Non-Refoulement under International Human Rights Law* (2018), <https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/Documents/Issues/Migration/GlobalCompactMigration/ThePrincipleNon-RefoulementUnderInternationalHumanRightsLaw.pdf>.

¹⁶ International Rescue Committee, "Is It Legal to Cross the US Border to Seek Asylum?" July 1, 2022, <https://www.rescue.org/article/it-legal-cross-us-border-seek-asylum>.

¹⁷ An asylum seeker may appeal the court's decision to deport them. Typically, though, a federal judge would not deport a convicted individual unless the crime put the community in grave danger.

Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) within one year of their most recent arrival.¹⁸

Asylum seekers must have a credible fear of persecution in their country of origin based on race, religion, political affiliation, nationality, or social group. Though a year may seem like enough time to submit an application, barriers such as differing languages, trauma, and a lack of legal aid make such a deadline difficult for many. Indeed, because asylum denial rates for migrants from undemocratic/dangerous countries is often low (12% in 2023 for Venezuelan migrants),¹⁹ the greatest obstacle for most asylum seekers is filing their application before their eligibility expires, rather than a lack of legitimate reason for fleeing.

Asylum status grants individuals access to a number of rights and resources. Specifically, asylees are eligible to become green-card holders and naturalized citizens five years after their initial asylum approval. They are also able to travel internationally with the ability to re-enter the United States.²⁰ Individuals can use their own asylum status to advance the application process for their spouse or children under 21.²¹ Asylees may also apply for welfare benefits including cash through the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) and the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), formerly known as food stamps.²² Being granted asylum greatly assists migrants in the process of settling in.

In order to legally obtain a job, migrants must receive employment authorization through the I-765 form. USCIS also stipulates that a migrant may not apply for this authorization until 150 days after they have submitted their asylum case. Despite the delay, an applicant may in fact

¹⁸ “Most recent arrival” is used as the start date for the asylum clock in the case that asylum-seekers had previously visited the asylum country.

¹⁹ U.S. Department of Justice, Executive Office for Immigration Review, *Asylum Decision Rates by Nationality* (2023), <https://www.justice.gov/eoir/page/file/1107366/dl>.

²⁰ U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, *Guide to Asylum Eligibility and Application Process (D4en)*, U.S. Department of Homeland Security, accessed April 14, 2025, <https://www.uscis.gov/sites/default/files/document/guides/D4en.pdf>.

²¹ U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, *Questions and Answers: Affirmative Asylum Eligibility and Applications*, U.S. Department of Homeland Security, accessed April 14, 2025, <https://www.uscis.gov/humanitarian/refugees-and-asylum/asylum/affirmative-asylum-frequently-asked-questions/questions-and-answers-affirmative-asylum-eligibility-and-applications>

²² Office of Refugee Resettlement, *Asylee Fact Sheet*, U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, accessed April 14, 2025, https://acf.gov/sites/default/files/documents/orr/orr_asylee_fact_sheet.pdf.

hear back on their work authorization prior to their asylum case. Even still, most migrants must wait at least 180 days from the time they submitted their asylum application before they receive their work authorization.²³ This lack of opportunity to obtain a documented job places additional pressure on migrants under a time constraint to leave Chicago shelters. Although individuals may solicit undocumented work, these jobs are unregulated, making employees prone to unethical conditions. Furthermore, working without a permit is illegal; the employer may face federal fines, and the unauthorized worker may face deportation proceedings.²⁴

III. Immigration Politics in the U.S.

Immigration has been central to the collective American identity since the founding of the nation. Although currently a polarizing issue, views on immigration have not always divided along party lines. For example, George H.W. Bush pushed for policy to expand work permits for migrants in the U.S during his presidency. Following Bush's presidency, however, views on immigration became more clearly divided by party. Specifically, 2008 presidential Republican nominee John McCain argued for comprehensive immigration reform, while Democratic nominee Barack Obama championed for an expansion in immigration rights. Since then, the political right has largely supported limiting immigration, while the political left has advocated for open borders and policies that expand rights for undocumented migrants in the country.

The current immigration landscape has developed in response to national politics and policies from the past five years. After taking office in 2017, Republican President Donald Trump dramatically restricted crossings through the southern border. He ended the practice of *Catch and Release* whereby previously, migrants stopped at the border could remain in the

²³ I-765, *Application for Employment Authorization*. USCIS. January 24, 2025. Accessed April 14, 2025. <https://www.uscis.gov/i-765>.

²⁴ U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, *11.8 Penalties for Prohibited Practices*, last modified February 4, 2025, U.S. Department of Homeland Security, <https://www.uscis.gov/i-9-central/form-i-9-resources/handbook-for-employers-m-274/110-unlawful-discrimination-and-penalties-for-prohibited-practices/118-penalties-for-prohibited-practices>.

United States until their court date. Beginning in January 2019, all migrants arriving to the southern border were made to remain in Mexico under Migrant Protection Protocols.²⁵ As a result, over 68,000 migrants were sent to Mexico.²⁶ President Trump also proposed several policies to complicate the process for migrants to obtain legal status in the U.S.—including denying asylum eligibility to asylum-seekers who had surrendered themselves to Homeland Security agents after crossing the border.²⁷ Although not all of his proposed policies passed, Trump significantly reduced the number of entries from migrants into the U.S.

In the following administration (2021-2025), Democratic President Joe Biden expanded immigration policy once again. Biden reversed several of Trump’s policies including Migrant Protection Protocols, refugee caps, and halted construction of the southern border wall. Additionally, President Biden expanded Temporary Protected Status and parole programs for migrants from Venezuela, among other countries. These expansions, along with the backlog that built up during Trump’s first term and the increasing instability in South American countries, contributed to a significant influx of migrants entering the U.S. under President Biden. However, the Biden Administration also saw higher deportations—reaching 740,000 in 2023, which was the highest amount since 2010.²⁸ As his support for immigration became increasingly unpopular, Biden began reversing his policies in the leadup to the 2024 election. Specifically, he signed an order in June 2024 to bar illegal crossings and would lift the policy only if illegal entries remained under 1,500 per day or 2,500 per week.²⁹ Under his leadership, migration first

²⁵ U.S. Department of Homeland Security. "Migrant Protection Protocols." *DHS.gov*, January 24, 2019.

<https://www.dhs.gov/archive/news/2019/01/24/migrant-protection-protocols>.

²⁶ American Immigration Council, "Migrant Protection Protocols," February 12, 2025,

<https://www.americanimmigrationcouncil.org/research/migrant-protection-protocols>.

²⁷ M. Sacchetti and I. Stanley-Becker, "Federal Judge Blocks Trump’s Asylum Ban for Migrants Who Enter Illegally," *The Texas Tribune*, November 20, 2018, <https://www.texastribune.org/2018/11/20/federal-judge-blocks-trumps-asylum-ban-migrants-who-enter-illegally-me/>.

²⁸ S. Frostenson, N. Miroff, and M. Sacchetti, "How Biden and Trump’s Immigration Policies Compare on the Border and Beyond," *The Washington Post*, July 28, 2024, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/immigration/2024/02/11/trump-biden-immigration-border-compared/>.

²⁹ H. Aleaziz, "How Biden’s Asylum Order Works," *The New York Times*, June 4, 2024,

<https://www.nytimes.com/2024/06/04/us/politics/biden-immigration-asylum-order-explainer.html>.

skyrocketed, then dissipated. Accordingly, migrant arrivals to cities like Chicago grew, then decreased as Biden implemented various policies during his presidency.

Contentious conditions arose between state and federal legislatures during Biden's presidency. At the federal level, the Biden administration was implementing liberal immigration policies that opened the border. However, at the local level, conservative politicians had to deal with the large influx of migration. Occupying roughly half of the U.S.-Mexico border with 29 official ports of entry, the state of Texas was particularly impacted by these policies. Texas' Republican Governor Greg Abbott opposed this influx in migration and argued that he should not be liable for the consequences of these policies while sanctuary cities saw no responsibility for their open support. Accordingly, Abbott began sending buses of migrants who arrived in Texas to sanctuary cities, including New York City, Washington D.C., Denver and Chicago.

IV. Chicago as a Sanctuary City

Sanctuary cities are self-proclaimed; it is through local jurisdiction that the title *sanctuary city* is given. Although specific policies and protections vary, sanctuary cities share the common promise of prohibiting local police officers from collaborating with U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement—commonly referred to as *ICE*. Although Chicago had long advertised itself as a sanctuary city, its open proclamation was not actually tested until the summer of 2022³⁰ when migrants began arriving from Texas by bus. One of the city's limiting factors at the outset of welcoming migrants was the lack of shelter space to house them. Like other sanctuary cities, Chicago policymakers began by swiftly repurposing available spaces including police stations and parts of Midway and O'Hare International Airport.³¹ At police stations, migrants were also

³⁰ City of Chicago, *The Welcoming City*, accessed April 14, 2025, <https://www.chicago.gov/city/en/sites/texas-new-arrivals/home.html#:~:text=Since%20August%2031%2C%202022%2C%20the.D.C.%2C%20and%20New%20York%20City>.

³¹ Associated Press, "Migrants Are Now Sleeping at O'Hare as Chicago Faces New Crisis in Sheltering Asylum-Seekers," *AP News*, October 1, 2023, <https://apnews.com/article/migrants-immigration-airports-asylum-chicago-1399cc2447f89fdd3ed7b650ca84bbf5>.

able to receive health screenings and clothing donations from volunteer groups. By the summer of 2022, the city had developed a handful of shelters and was readily moving individuals out of the police stations.

To provide the migrant population with housing and welfare, under such a short timetable, the city invested significant time and resources. Marginalized communities who have historically been overlooked by Chicago politicians—including low-income, Black and Brown neighborhoods—expressed their frustration with the mayor’s willingness to help this new population over long-existing local groups.

Chicago is one of the most racially- and wealth-based segregated cities in the country.^{32 33} As a consequence, city policies that cut resources have historically affected low income and Black and Brown neighborhoods much more than wealthier and White communities. For example, when former Mayor Rahm Emmanuel shut down roughly 50 public schools in 2013, most neighborhoods impacted were in the southern and western parts of Chicago, where residents are predominantly Black and Brown.³⁴

One of the public schools closed in 2013 was Wadsworth Elementary, located in Woodlawn. The community lost an integral part of the community with this school closure. Students needed to travel further to attend their classes, while the building remained vacant for nearly 10 years afterwards. The ward’s alderwoman Jeanette Taylor, along with many other members of the community, advocated to repurpose the former school as a community center in 2022. However, Mayor Lightfoot declared in December of 2022 that the space would be used as a migrant shelter, which then opened in January of 2023. Residents of Woodlawn publicly

³² Othering & Belonging Institute, *The Most and Least Segregated Cities in the U.S.*, University of California, Berkeley, accessed April 14, 2025, <https://belonging.berkeley.edu/most-least-segregated-cities>.

³³ L. Nolan, “A Deepening Divide: Income Inequality Grows Spatially in Chicago,” University of Illinois Chicago, March 11, 2015, accessed April 14, 2025, <https://voorheescenter.uic.edu/news-stories/a-deepening-divide-income-inequality-grows-spatially-in-chicago/>.

³⁴ E. L. Ewing, “Chicago Public School Closures and Racism – An Extract from *Ghosts in the Schoolyard*,” *The Guardian*, December 6, 2018, accessed April 14, 2025, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2018/dec/06/chicago-public-schools-closures-racism-ghosts-in-the-schoolyard-extract>.

protested Lightfoot's decision. In fact, when migrants were moving in, two community members stood in front of a city bus carrying shelter staff in an attempt to block them from entering the former school.³⁵ Constituents who felt they had been deserted by their former mayor nearly ten years prior during the CPS closures were now being made to carry the burden of welcoming migrants into their neighborhood by the current administration. Community members also expressed feeling as though migrants were being prioritized over long-time citizens, which has remained a larger topic of debate. Indeed, Chicago has spent roughly \$300 million on infrastructure for the migrant population, while support for the low income, Black and Brown neighborhoods has remained stagnant.

At its peak, Chicago was operating 28 migrant shelters.³⁶ Some of these shelters were designated for single men or women, while others housed families. Given the large housing demand and lack of affordable housing, Mayor Lightfoot, and later Mayor Johnson, opened these spaces in a variety of building types. Some shelters were opened from former pharmacies and storefronts. Others, like the Wadsworth Shelter, had been former public schools. Under both administrations the city repurposed some actively-operating hotels to serve as shelter space. With such a large variety in the types of buildings functioning as shelters, conditions differed immensely between sites.

The city also developed programs to provide additional assistance for migrants as they settled into the city. Migrants were included in the CityKey program, which granted them access to city services, libraries, public transportation, and prescription drug discounts. Children were

³⁵ Chicago Tribune, "Afternoon Briefing: 2 Woodlawn Residents Block Bus as Migrants Begin Moving into Shelter," *Chicago Tribune*, February 2, 2023,

<https://deal.town/chicago-tribune/afternoon-briefing-2-woodlawn-residents-block-bus-as-migrants-begin-moving-into-shelter-PKP2CTLLD>.

³⁶ Mack Liederman, "City to Close Troubled Pilsen Migrant Shelter, 2 Others as Pace of New Arrivals Slows," *Block Club Chicago*, September 10, 2024, accessed April 14, 2025,

<https://blockclubchicago.org/2024/09/10/city-to-close-troubled-pilsen-migrant-shelter-2-others-as-pace-of-new-arrivals-slows/>.

automatically eligible to enroll in Chicago Public Schools.³⁷ In November 2023, Illinois Governor J.B. Pritzker expanded rent aid to migrants through the Asylum Seeker Emergency Rental Assistance Program (ASERAP). ASERAP provided six months of rental aid to migrants. At a later date, however, the program changed to three months of rent, then eventually was discontinued altogether.³⁸ Non-governmental organizations like Catholic Charities also provided rent aid to migrants.

While rent assistance through ASERAP became less available, the Johnson Administration also announced a combination of policies to begin decreasing the size of the shelter system. Specifically, in November 2023, the Johnson Administration announced that shelter residents would be given a 60-day shelter limit beginning in January 2024.³⁹ City council rationalized this decision as a positive development—a result of the increase in state funding for housing settlement. That is, the city and state claimed to be diverting resources into a long-term solution of resettling migrants into private residences. They explained that this change in policy was in part due to the reduction in migrants arriving to the city. As a result of Biden’s change in immigration policy, fewer immigrants were entering the country and subsequently being bused to Chicago. Eleven months later, in September 2024, the Johnson Administration announced that they would begin closing shelters in the following months.⁴⁰

On October 21, 2024, Mayor Johnson announced the One System Initiative policy. In his press release, he explained that this policy was created to ensure the existing, unhoused population of Chicagoans received the same resources as newly arriving migrants. His decision

³⁷ N. Shukla, “Supporting Migrant Children in Chicago Public Schools,” *Harvard Bloomberg Center for Cities*, February 2, 2024, accessed April 14, 2025, <https://datasmart.hks.harvard.edu/supporting-migrant-children-chicago-public-schools>.

³⁸ Office of J.B. Pritzker, “Press Release,” *Illinois.gov*, November 16, 2023, accessed April 14, 2025, www.illinois.gov/news/press-release.27307.html.

³⁹ Mayor’s Press Office, “City of Chicago Update on Limited Stay Shelter Policy,” *City of Chicago*, March 14, 2024, accessed April 14, 2025, https://www.chicago.gov/city/en/depts/mayor/press_room/press_releases/2024/march/shelter-stay-update.html.

⁴⁰ ABC7 Chicago Digital Team, “City to Close 3 More Shelters for Migrants by End of October,” *ABC7 Chicago*, September 10, 2024, accessed April 14, 2025, <https://abc7chicago.com/post/city-close-3-shelters-chicago-migrants-end-october/15287438/>.

might be attributed to Chicagoan’s tangible concerns about resources for the existing unhoused.

On the FAQ page, the city council explains:

The City has not diverted funding from the homeless shelter system to support the new arrival mission and we are working to enhance and expand services for unhoused Chicagoans. Mayor Johnson’s budget proposal includes \$250 million continue investments in new, long-term homeless solutions, including developing new non-congregate shelter spaces and increasing permanent supportive housing options.⁴¹

Although Johnson’s administration assured constituents that no funding from the former city shelters was diverted towards migrant shelters, calling it a “both/and operation,” his administration proceeded to combine the two systems.⁴² He also explained that he made this decision due to “the sharp decline in migration to Chicago and our current budget realities.”⁴³ To accommodate both groups within the budget previously allocated exclusively to migrants, the Johnson Administration has placed new restrictions on migrant eligibility for shelters. Specifically, migrants are only eligible to stay if they have been in the United States for less than 30 days. They also removed the 30-day extension program, whereby migrants were able to petition for an extended stay.

While the decision to streamline the two systems into one may originate from egalitarian principles, the two groups remain fundamentally unequal. As citizens of the United States, the unhoused population has access to the existing welfare programs. Migrants have access to certain city-provided welfare services, but they remain excluded from some benefits and opportunities due to their non-citizen status. Indeed, migrants are ineligible to work legally until their work authorization has been approved. These applications also cost \$400 each, which may be a large financial burden to new arrivals without a steady income.

⁴¹ City of Chicago, *Frequently Asked Questions: New Arrivals*, accessed April 14, 2025, <https://www.chicago.gov/city/en/sites/texas-new-arrivals/home/faqs.html>.

⁴² Under the new system, migrants and the general unhoused population live in the same shelters.

⁴³ Office of the Mayor, “Mayor Brandon Johnson Announces Equitable Transition to a One System Initiative,” *City of Chicago*, October 21, 2024, accessed April 14, 2025, https://www.chicago.gov/city/en/depts/mayor/press_room/press_releases/2024/october/Equitable-Transition-to-One-System-Initiative.html.

Even within the migrant population, there may be wide variation in housing outcomes due to social connectedness, gender, and family size. Not all migrants arrive in the United States with equal savings and access to resources. Individuals who traveled without their family face different challenges than those with young children. Therefore, even though the Johnson Administration is providing the same housing resources to everyone across both groups, some may face more difficulty upon moving out of shelters and into private residences. For individuals with little social connection, or single parents, their financial stability—and by extension their long-term housing outcome—may remain tumultuous.

Literature Review

Given that the One System Initiative was announced in October 2024, there is not yet a rigorous assessment in the literature of its specific impact. Accordingly, this paper draws upon findings from research in similar contexts—partially from studies conducted on homeless shelters within the United States, and partially from international studies on refugee populations—to offer an evidence-based framework for analyzing the potential effects of the OSI. The literature review also surveys the patterns in housing conditions and outcomes for undocumented immigrants to consider the significance of Chicago’s *sanctuary city* status on rent prices for asylees, given the finding that undocumented immigrants typically pay a premium in housing in the US. While literature on similar populations offer insight to the implications of the OSI, they cannot supplant organic research to determine the housing outcomes for migrants in Chicago. Lastly, this section discusses potential limitations to this study due to the compressed time frame.

In considering the ideal future for shelter policy in Chicago, specifically with a combined population of new migrants and the existing unhoused, it is important to examine previous literature on the impact of shelter closures and openings. Kevin Corinth's paper *Ending Homelessness: More Housing or Fewer Shelters?*⁴⁴ explains the effect of shelters opening on numbers of re-entrances by studying the general unhoused population across major metropolitan cities across the United States.⁴⁵ Corinth's study used panel data (observing the national unhoused population over a period of seven years) to run a linear regression determining the relationship between homelessness and access to shelters. To prevent confusion, individuals were not counted as unhoused when they were actively residing in a shelter. In his work, he found that there were no significant findings to support the view that increasing the amount of shelter space decreased the unhoused population in a given region over a long-term period. While Corinth's contributions to the field are enormously insightful for future shelter policy in large metropolitan areas, his study did not examine the effects of increased housing when migrants were in the same shelter system. Migrants may display different patterns of re-entry/exits than the sampled population, making his findings potentially unreliable in predicting the outcome of increased shelter space in Chicago's current context. Additionally, Corinth's data is exclusively quantitative and thus does not explore how the change in shelter availability impacted the population through a personal perspective.

While Corinth's study describes the inefficacy of increasing the shelter system as a mechanism for decreasing homelessness, Katherine Marçal's study *Understanding Mechanisms Driving Family Homeless Shelter Use*,⁴⁶ contrarily highlights the consequences of insufficient

⁴⁴ Kevin Corinth, *Ending Homelessness: More Housing or Fewer Shelters?* (Washington, DC: American Enterprise Institute, 2015), <https://www.aei.org/research-products/working-paper/ending-homelessness-more-housing-or-fewer-shelters/>.

⁴⁵ The cities included Las Vegas, New York City, Los Angeles, Seattle, San Diego, Washington DC, San Francisco, Chicago, Boston, Phoenix, and Philadelphia. The statewide balance of Texas and Georgia were also observed.

⁴⁶ Katherine E. Marçal et al., "Understanding Mechanisms Driving Family Homeless Shelter Use and Child Mental Health," *Journal of Social Service Research* 47, no. 4 (2021): 473–485, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01488376.2020.1831681>.

resources applied to shelters. Specifically, Marçal found that when the shelters were overcrowded, the system became overwhelmed. Residents delayed their departure dates, which further backed-up the system. Exits were postponed due to limited access to social workers and generally worse baseline well-being, making residents unprepared to leave. Marçal's study took place in a medium sized metropolitan area within the Midwest United States. To analyze the strengths and weaknesses of the current system, researchers asked residents and staff at shelters to participate in group model building, where they recreated a model of the shelter system. This method is qualitative, using the population's first-hand insight to suggest policy solutions. However, Marçal did not include anecdotal feedback within her methods; although participants were drawing from personal experiences to suggest an improved model of the system, they were not sharing the experiences that informed their policy solutions. Pulling from interviews, this paper includes experiences in Chicago shelters to illustrate the personal impacts of the OSI.

The findings from Marçal's paper are not necessarily negative evidence against Corinth's findings; both conclusions may be true. The two studies originate from distinct circumstances. In Marçal's paper, demand for shelter space was high and the system was already overwhelmed. Therefore, the overcrowded nature of the shelters caused high retention as residents awaited meetings with their social workers. Corinth's study, however, investigated the effect of increasing shelter space over seven years. As a result, additional shelter spaces did not necessarily open during a period of overcrowding or remain open to prevent overcrowding. Corinth's population may have already reached a point of diminishing marginal returns, while the marginal product of an additional shelter would have benefited the sample in Marçal's study. Corinth's and Marçal's findings are important to keep in mind as this study begins in a context similar to Marçal's.

Although shelters for unhoused people and refugees may operate in a similar manner, they have distinct differences. There are a number of reasons why an individual may live in a shelter for the former group; therefore the duration of their stay can widely vary. Refugees, however, tend to reside in shelters due to their recent arrival in their asylum country. In *The Impact of Housing on Refugees*,⁴⁷ Brown et al. explain that a lack of understanding of the welfare system in their destination countries can exacerbate vulnerabilities for asylees upon moving out of shelters. Brown et al. used a scoping review to analyze several studies conducted on refugee shelters throughout Europe. In a UK study, they specifically identified that a large stressor for asylees was finding housing against a deadline. This pressure, in combination with the vulnerabilities that come with being an asylee,⁴⁸ caused the population to settle in lower-quality and unsafe housing.⁴⁹ In considering how the One System Initiative places a time constraint on migrants' eligibility to stay in Chicago shelters, it becomes apparent how residents may feel obligated to compromise their housing conditions to follow city regulations. With a limited source of income, Brown et al. elaborate, "the issue of affordability is inherent to issues of security, quality and access."⁵⁰ While the studies that Brown et al. observed focused on refugees settling in Europe, a similar conclusion is subsequently found in Matthew Hall and Emily Greenman's paper *Housing and Neighborhood Quality Among Undocumented Mexican and Central American Immigrants*,⁵¹ which studied migrants in the United States.

Hall and Greenman observed how migrant housing conditions in the United States compared to homes of other residents by racial and socio-economic demographics. To conduct

⁴⁷ Phillip Brown, Sally Gill, and John P. Halsall, "The Impact of Housing on Refugees: An Evidence Synthesis," *Housing Studies* 39, no. 1 (2022): 227–271, <https://doi.org/10.1080/02673037.2022.2045007>.

⁴⁸ Other vulnerabilities include the language barrier in their destination country and the effects of traumatic experiences that have led to their asylum.

⁴⁹ Brown et al. "The Impact of Housing on Refugees: An Evidence Synthesis,"

⁵⁰ Brown et al. "The Impact of Housing on Refugees: An Evidence Synthesis,"

⁵¹ Matthew Hall and Emily Greenman, "Housing and Neighborhood Quality Among Undocumented Mexican and Central American Immigrants," *Social Science Research* 42, no. 6 (2013): 1712–1725, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ssresearch.2013.07.011>.

their research, they used a mix of panel-data and interviews from a nationwide sample. They concluded that generally undocumented immigrants settled for the lowest-quality housing across all the demographics they observed: only 44% of migrants in their sample were satisfied with their neighborhood and the condition of their home. On average, they also lived in the most crowded housing units. Hall and Greenman explained that this disparity in quality may be partially explained by the limitations to finding housing as undocumented residents.

Alternatively, some immigrants may view their residency in the United States as temporary.⁵² Using nationwide data, their paper included immigrants living both in and out of sanctuary cities. Without guaranteed protection preventing police from collaborating with officials from the Department of Homeland Security, migrants may also have been motivated to settle quickly to avoid encounters with immigration officials. Hall and Greenman's findings are useful in considering what may cause migrants specifically to settle in housing that is lower in quality relative to other demographics. In comparing the results Hall and Greenman yielded when using nationwide data to the findings in this paper conducted at the local level, the effect of sanctuary city status on housing results may become more clear.

Sanctuary city status alone does not guarantee housing support or other social infrastructure. Rather, it prevents local law enforcement from collaborating with ICE. In his paper *Seeking sanctuary: Housing undocumented immigrants*,⁵³ Derek Christopher researched the impact of sanctuary city status on the price undocumented migrants paid in rent. Using panel data to run Difference-in-Difference analyses, Christopher determined that, generally, undocumented residents paid a premium in rent relative to their documented neighbors. However, in sanctuary cities, this premium was not as pronounced. In part, the premium was

⁵² Hall and Greenman, "Housing and Neighborhood Quality Among Undocumented Mexican and Central American Immigrants,"

⁵³ Derek Christopher, "Seeking Sanctuary: Housing Undocumented Immigrants," *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management* 42 (2023): 1065–1091, <https://doi.org/10.1002/pam.22494>.

attributed to the fear of deportation. Therefore, in cities that promise not to collaborate with ICE, migrants were less afraid, and thus, less anxious to secure their housing. While Christopher did not observe the role of shelters as a living option, his findings are helpful in considering how migrants may experience paying rent in Chicago following the implementation of the OSI.

The existing literature offers useful insight into how migrants are affected by shelters policies and sanctuary city status. However, many of these contributions to the field lack accounts from the personal perspectives of their populations of interest. Insights from residents inside shelters offer a more comprehensive understanding of how policies inform their attitudes and behavior.

There are several obstacles that make data collection on the migrant shelter population difficult to obtain. To begin, this population is particularly vulnerable: a large majority of the migrants who have come to Chicago from Central and South America do not speak English and many are awaiting to be granted asylum from the department of US Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS). Without asylum status, migrants may be apprehensive to participate in studies. Finally, Chicago prohibits the general public from entering shelters; therefore, a researcher must have an alternative connection to contact residents.

Researchers in the field may argue that six months is an insufficient amount of time to effectively analyze the consequences of the One System Initiative. Certainly, the full effects of the policy may not be fully realized in this paper. However, this limitation may be aided in future with longer-term studies. This paper will contribute insights to the field as the first of its topic, but certainly not the last. Given the lack of existing literature on this specific policy and population, this study serves as a foundational contribution, helping policymakers, advocates, and scholars understand how shelter policies can influence housing outcomes for migrants.

Methodology

Qualitative Data

This study relies on a mix of qualitative and quantitative data to determine how the implementation of the One System Initiative has affected the housing status among the migrant population in Chicago. For the qualitative portion of the data collection, I completed 12 semi-structured interviews with migrants—using a mix of prepared and follow-up questions ([Appendix Figure I](#)). Interviews were conducted entirely in Spanish and typically lasted 30 minutes. Participants were given the option to speak on Zoom or in person. To promote engagement in the research, participants were awarded a \$25 stipend. The University of Chicago’s Institutional Review Board approved this study (IRB24-1906). I completed CITI training to ensure best practices were used and participants were treated with sensitivity regarding past traumas. Informed consent regarding the potential risks of participation were given, and participants were informed they could withdraw consent at any point during the interview.

All but one interview took place between January and March of 2025. To obtain interviews with the population of interest, I drew upon professional relationships. Flyers containing information about the study were posted in community centers ([Appendix Figure II](#)). This study also utilized snowball sampling, where participants were invited to recommend their friends to the study. To prevent repetition in data, however, only one participant per household was eligible for an interview.

To avoid potential adverse consequences, any information that could reveal a participant’s identity—including name of shelter, current address, or place of work—has been

anonimized.⁵⁴ Once data collection was completed, the contact information of all participants was deleted. Files were saved to an encrypted folder on UChicago Box to further prevent any breach of data.

To identify key findings, this study first considers whether there were any patterns between participants' demographics—age, gender, family size, or nationality—and their current living conditions (housing outcome). The quality of living conditions are assessed based on participants' subjective impressions, their current household size relative to the number of rooms in their apartment, and ability to pay rent. Participants were also asked whether they preferred their current housing or the shelter they had last stayed in. The analysis seeks to determine whether there was any correlation between satisfaction with housing, access to work, and experiences in the shelters.

To quantify responses in a measurable manner, answers provided in interviews have been ascribed numerical values (*ex-post*). Specifically, if migrants had received their work authorization or asylum status, they were assigned a 1; those waiting or still ineligible to apply were assigned a 0. Likewise, participants were assigned 1 or 0 for the following variables: shelter type (private (1) or large rooms (0)), shelter satisfaction (1 = yes), apartment satisfaction (if applicable), whether they would move back (1 = yes), whether they felt affected by the OSI (1 = yes), and whether they had previously received access to rent assistance (1 = yes). Due to the small sample size, however, no statistical analyses have been conducted on these results. Instead, they are used to simply describe the participants' experiences.

I analyze rent prices to determine whether migrants are paying more than their neighbors. Given that households vary in size, rent is assessed by price per person. To compare rent prices,

⁵⁴ Specifically, the shelters in which residents stayed were not specified. Additionally, residents were not asked their current neighborhood of residence in order to protect their privacy.

the average rent per person calculated is then compared to the price per person paid by low-income families in Chicago in 2024⁵⁵ ⁵⁶ at the 30% area median income (AMI) threshold.⁵⁷ 83% of participants mentioned that they were responsible for paying utilities. Therefore, they were compared to the table for *Maximum monthly rents when tenants pay for cooking gas and other electric (not heat)*. Again, given the small sample size, these estimates do not serve as conclusive findings on rent premiums that migrants pay, but rather, an anecdotal comparison to the findings from Christopher's paper *Seeking Sanctuary*.

Quantitative Data

I utilize quantitative data from the City of Chicago Data portal⁵⁸ to examine patterns across the city-wide migrant population. The data includes the number of residents staying in shelters, entries into the system, exits from shelters, and extensions granted, among other categories. However, the information is not quite up to date: the most recent data was released December 29, 2024.

The data is published by category in separate files to the city portal. Within each category, the data is split by shelter. To better understand the city-wide trends for migrants in the shelter system, I have aggregated the shelter-level data at the city-level and produced scatterplot graphs of the exits, extensions, resident population, entries, and re-entries into shelters. Some datasets were updated weekly, while others were updated biweekly; the scatterplots depict changes based on the frequency of data entries.

⁵⁵ City of Chicago, Department of Housing, *2024 Income and Rent Limits*, accessed April 14, 2025,

https://www.chicago.gov/content/dam/city/depts/doh/general/Income_and_Rent_Limit_Tables/2024%20Income%20and%20Rent%20Limits.pdf

⁵⁶ Rent limits set by the city are based on an assumed occupancy of 1.5 persons per bedroom. Accordingly, this study uses the same assumption to convert rent prices from a per-person basis to a per-bedroom basis. (City of Chicago, Department of Housing, *2024 Income and Rent Limits*, accessed April 14, 2025)

⁵⁷ 63% of immigrant renters spend more than 30% of their income on housing. Given that this is the closest estimate available to this sample, 30% AMI is the threshold used. (California Immigrant Data Portal. n.d. "Indicator Housing Burden: Access to affordable and quality housing is critical for all Californians." California Immigrant Data Portal. <https://immigrantdataca.org/indicators/housing-burden>.)

⁵⁸ City of Chicago, *City of Chicago | Data Portal*, December 16, 2024, accessed April 14, 2025, <https://data.cityofchicago.org/>.

Given that the OSI was applied across all shelters at the same time, it is not possible to observe a treated and control group to determine the effects of the policy on these various outcomes of interest. Accordingly, this study uses a sharp regression discontinuity (RD) model to evaluate the difference in pre- and post- values for the following variables: the number of extensions granted, the census population inside shelters, and entries into the system, using time as the running variable to determine treatment status. In the model, treatment is defined as the presence of the OSI. Effectively, the RD model captures the change in the aforementioned variables before and after October 21, 2024—the day the OSI was announced. To determine statistical significance, the alpha level was set to 0.05. To supplement the sharp RDs, the study includes graphs that visually depict these estimates through the change in slope of the variable trends pre- and post- OSI. Additionally, to assess whether shelter staff granted extensions at varying rates, the extension rates across all Chicago migrant shelters are compared in a table. In mixing qualitative and quantitative methodology, this study seeks to observe the effects of the OSI from personal perspectives in context with the broader data patterns.

Findings:

Qualitative Findings

Figure 1: Demographics of the Sample (N = 12)

Variable	Average Value
Age	30 years
Time in Chicago	11.73 months
Time since last in shelter	4.2 months
Work authorization	33%
Asylum status	16.5%
Venezuelan	83%
Ecuadorian	8%
Colombian	8%
Satisfaction with apartments	55%
Satisfaction with shelters	55%
Received rental aid (among those living in apartments)	40%
Rent price	\$416.25 per person

Determining Factors:

One of the most significant factors influencing participants' satisfaction with shelters was the type of room they received at the shelter where they had most recently stayed. Participants who had been given a semi-private or private room were much more prone to sharing positive experiences than those who slept in larger rooms. Inside the repurposed hotels, participants explained that their families shared a private room. One interviewee shared that her daughter received her very own room with a television. All participants who had formerly stayed in a semi-private or private room—which typically were in the former hotels—answered that they would return to the shelter if given the option.

Other interviewees offered various reasons for not wanting to return to a city shelter. Food quality was the most frequently expressed grievance by participants; meals were served

cold at some shelters and residents found the dishes unappetizing. Also, residents were ineligible for extra food; if someone missed a mealtime, another resident could not save them a serving. Many interviewees explained that they frequently purchased their own food outside of the shelter—specifically to ensure that their children ate. Upon moving out, participants shared that they were much more content with the food they were able to cook for themselves.

Beyond food quality and cuisine-type, participants expressed unwillingness to return to Chicago shelters due to their lack of privacy inside. In many of the shelters, residents slept on cots in rooms with between 60 and 100 other people. Some of these rooms had partitions separating families. Others, however, were completely open. With several dozens of residents sharing the space, access to bathrooms was also limited. A few participants lamented that this lack of resources led to frequent squabbles. Residents would begin to shout if someone took more than their allotted 10 minutes in the bathroom. One participant shared that she was not even able to shower at her shelter; she had to take a yellow school bus to a separate facility to bathe. Evidently, there was immense variation in shelter quality. Some migrants were subject to particularly adverse conditions, while others expressed feeling like they were on vacation. Perhaps, then, it should not come as a surprise that some individuals prefer their apartments.

Despite large discrepancies in shelter conditions, 50% of all participants answered that they would return to the shelter if given the option.⁵⁹ Although some of these same participants shared that they preferred having their own apartment, they explained that paying rent has become a large financial concern, superseding their preference. Participants unwilling to return to the shelters also conceded that the financial strain of paying rent was one of their greatest concerns.

⁵⁹ Half of this 50% consisted of migrants who had stayed in former hotels; the other half of this 50% had stayed in a large-room shelter.

Participants also compared their living conditions to the elements they experienced prior to arriving in Chicago. In one interview an individual shared how he had spent over a year traveling alone to the United States. During his travels, he frequently slept on the streets and other makeshift accommodations. When asked whether he was satisfied with his current living conditions, he explained that they paled in comparison to his travels; he was happy to be in the United States, regardless of the quality of his housing. Other participants commented that the shelters in Chicago were better than the ones in Texas where they had stayed for a few days after crossing the border. Many participants were satisfied with their current living conditions simply because they were an improvement to their previous accommodations.

Apartments

Apartment conditions also varied tremendously. Some interviewees had their own apartment, where each family member had their own bedroom. Other participants explained that they continue living in overcrowded conditions even after moving out of the shelters. One interviewee lamented that his studio apartment was not enough space for his family of 4. However, he could not afford a larger space as he was already paying \$1100 in rent monthly. More broadly, the average price that participants in this study paid in rent was \$416.25 per person. Using data from the Department of Housing in Chicago, the average rent per person for low-income residents was \$248.73.⁶⁰ Evidently, migrants in this study were paying more for housing than other low-income residents in Chicago.⁶¹

Some participants faced adverse conditions in their new apartments. One interviewee explained she had a delicate floor that she feared could break with one wrong step. After

⁶⁰ Again, this is assuming 1.5 tenants per bedroom, where residents are paying 30% AMI in rent.

⁶¹ Part of this discrepancy in rent prices may be attributed to different neighborhoods that migrants have settled in relative to other low-income residents. However, the exact neighborhoods where participants lived was not collected for this study in order to best protect their identities. As a result, it is not possible to compare the difference in average rent prices by neighborhood for migrants and low-income residents.

informing the landlord, he assured her she was wrong, and at other times said he did not understand her due to the language barrier. The heat had not yet been turned on for the winter, which violates the city code,⁶² and the participant shared that her room felt colder than the temperature outdoors. There were mites inside the couch, which had not gone away despite visits from the exterminator. The ceiling had mold, which was merely painted over to try to prevent inhaling, though it requires a more comprehensive procedure to properly treat. She also reported smelling fumes from the apartment below and the running water in her bathroom was discolored.

Impact of OSI on Migrants:

58% of participants (7 out of 12) within the study shared that they felt directly impacted by the implementation of the OSI. Specifically, 75% (3 out of 4) of participants who had been in Chicago for less than a year expressed feeling affected. The only individual who did not report being impacted had been living at a friend's apartment at the time his interview took place; he was not paying rent and explained that if he were not able to pay for his own rent in the future, he would return to his friend instead of moving into a shelter. Therefore, excluding the individual with a robust support system, the One System Initiative has acutely complicated the ability of recently arrived migrants to settle within their means.

Four participants were actively living in shelters when the OSI policy was announced. Shelter residents were given a deadline at which point they were to move out. Only two of the four within this study, however, actually moved out at their instructed date; the other two individuals received extensions from the staff and have remained in the shelters. The two participants who were able to extend their stay inside the shelter explained that they had

⁶² City of Chicago, *Chicago Heat Ordinance*, accessed April 14, 2025, https://www.chicago.gov/city/en/depts/bldgs/supp_info/chicago-heat-ordinance.html.

relatively straightforward experiences doing so. They each shared that they were approved for an extension after simply explaining that they were not ready to leave on their assigned date. One of these participants was even moved to a better shelter for good behavior after her scheduled departure date. At the new shelter, she shared a room with her child and another mother-and-child pair. The two participants who are currently shelter residents also described their experiences when the unhoused, Chicago-based, population entered the shelter. They reported that there is little interaction between groups, largely due to the language barrier. Although participants did not favor sharing the space with another group, they expressed how important they feel it is that everyone receives access to shelter. Therefore, they still support increased accessibility to shelters for the Chicago population.

Migrants who were already living in private residences explained that they felt impacted by the implementation of the OSI because it eliminated their safety net. Without access to city shelters, migrants face additional pressure to pay their rent in time or else face eviction. While 40% of participants who lived in private housing had previously received rent aid (from either state funding or private nonprofits), these resources have become increasingly difficult to access. Based on the data collected from participants and information published by Governor Pritzker,⁶³ migrants had more success in receiving rent aid (both in duration and frequency) the earlier they arrived. Beyond the diminishing access to rent-aid, migrants have also struggled to pay their rent given the lack of job stability. In fact, only 33% of participants in this study had received work authorization. Others, therefore, have needed to rely on undocumented jobs. These commissions were also the most unreliable and unfair: one participant shared that she regularly received \$80 for 10 hours of work. Others expressed that they had to trek several hours to their jobs, and they were not always commissioned to work when they showed up. Although many shared how they

⁶³ Office of J.B. Pritzker, “Press Release,” November 16, 2023.

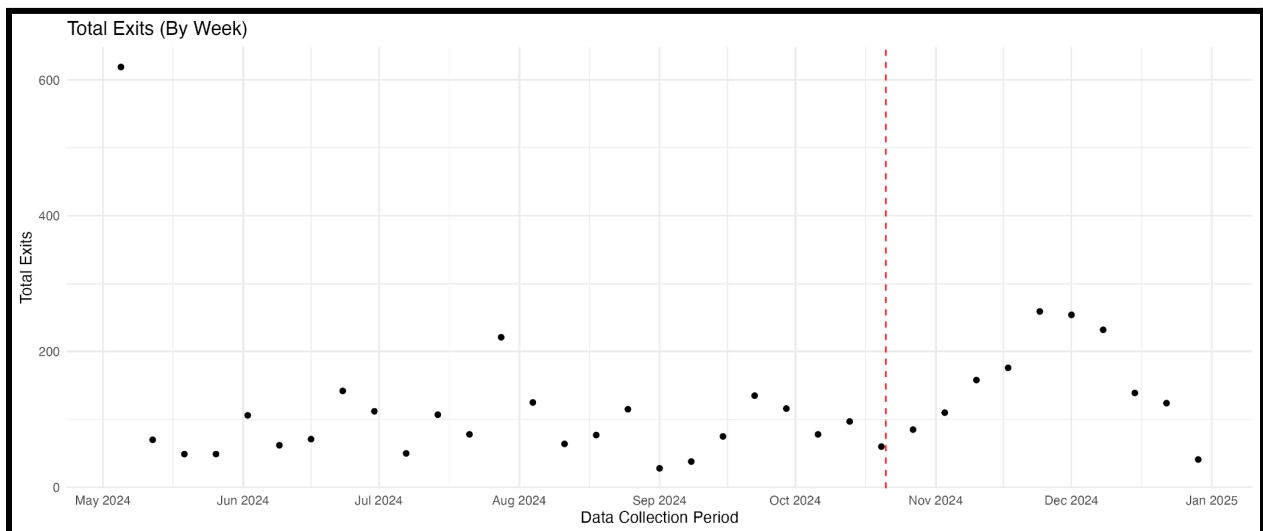
were subject to unfair working conditions, they have continued to work these jobs because they lack alternative opportunities.

When the OSI was announced, none of the participants who were living in a shelter had work authorization. Furthermore, the two interviewees who moved out of the shelters at their scheduled date had yet to receive a permit at the time of the interview; one of them was simply ineligible to apply given that he had not been in the United States for enough time.

There was a diverse array of experiences for migrants both in and out of the shelter system. Some were able to receive hotel-like accommodations, while others had to share their space with 100 others. Likewise, some participants expressed their newfound comfort in apartments, while others had to deal with infestations and inattentive landlords. Despite these differences, nearly all interviewees reported feeling impacted from the OSI. The relatively low rate of work authorization in the sample may have contributed to this finding.

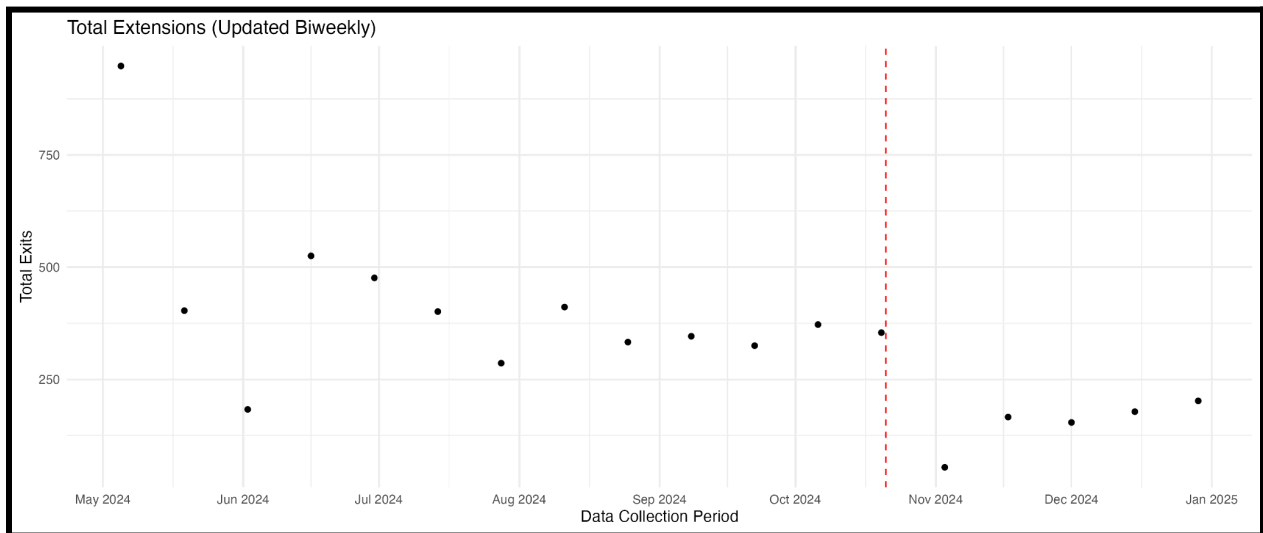
Quantitative Findings

Figure 2: Scatterplot of Shelter Exits by Week



[Figure 2](#) depicts exits across all of the Chicago shelters by week. There is an upward trend in exits between October 27 and December 1, indicating that residents began leaving the shelter at an increased rate immediately after the OSI was announced on October 21. The number of exits reached its highest point since May 5 on November 24, 2024—roughly one month after the policy was originally announced. Towards the end of the year, the number of exits decreased, which may be explained both by fewer entries into the shelter system (see [Figure 10](#)) and the shrinking shelter population size (see [Figure 6](#)). A sharp regression discontinuity would not apply well to this dataset because the treatment effect of the OSI announcement, as measured in exits from shelters, likely took time to realize: families were given more than a week’s notice to leave shelters. Even if treatment caused an increase in exits, observing the difference at the cutoff (October 21) would not show a substantive treatment effect. Likewise, observing the best fit lines of data on both sides of the cutoff would not produce useful information due to the fluctuation in exits.

Figure 3: Scatterplot of Shelter Extensions on Biweekly Basis



[Figure 3](#) depicts the number of extensions across all city shelters on a biweekly basis. The number of extensions granted was already following a slightly negative trend beginning in May. Notably, though, the number of extensions granted drastically fell between October 21 and November 3, 2024. For the biweekly period that ended November 3, 54 extensions were granted, which was an 84.7% decrease from the period ending on October 20, in which 354 extensions were granted. In the following weeks, the number of extensions increased once again. However, the citywide biweekly total never surpassed 250. Indeed, for the rest of the year, the number of extensions remained lower than the historical low observed in early June 2024. What this data does not report is the change in extension requests. Extensions granted may have decreased simply because residents assumed they had to leave or had grown tired of the conditions, even if finding a private apartment would cause significant financial strain. To observe the treatment effect of the OSI announcement on extensions granted, a sharp regression discontinuity design (RDD) was conducted on this dataset.

Regression Discontinuity Design:

$$Y = \beta_0 + \beta_1 x + \varepsilon \text{ (Equation 1)}$$

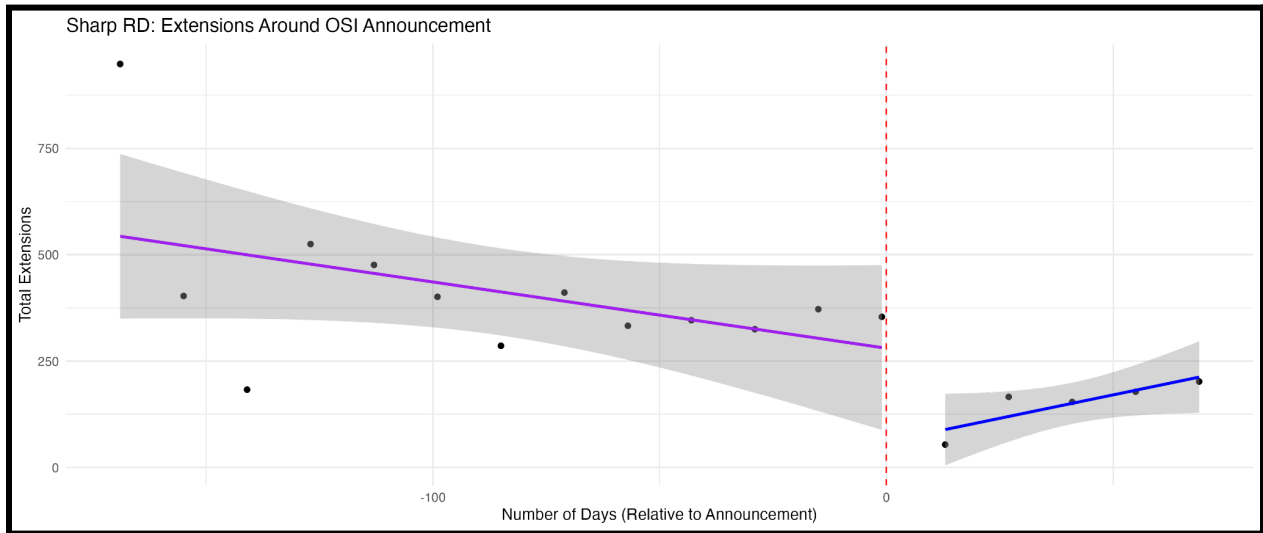
Equation 1 describes the RD model used in this analysis. The outcome of interest, Y , is measuring the number of extensions granted. β_0 describes the intercept, which is the number of extensions when $x = 0$ (May 5, 2024). β_1 describes the treatment effect at the cutoff, which was set to October 21, 2024, and is the coefficient to x , which is time elapsed since May 5. ε represents the error term, which captures all potential sources of unobserved variation not captured by β_1 .

Figure 4: Sharp RD for on Shelter Extensions

Extension Sharp RD Results	
Dependent variable:	
`Count of Extensions`	
`Period End`	-0.049 p = 0.106
I(cuttingoffdate)	
Constant	1,004.384* p = 0.097
Observations	249
R2	0.011
Adjusted R2	0.007
Residual Std. Error	31.012 (df = 247)
F Statistic	2.645 (df = 1; 247)
Note:	*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

Given that the cutoff was determined by a date for this study, the coefficient to “Period End,” serves as the value of interest and is measured in days. The sharp RD was programmed to measure the difference in extensions before and after the cutoff specified within “Period End.” The coefficient on x indicates that the number of extensions decreased by almost .05 per day after the OSI was announced. With a p-value = .105, the model fails to reject the null hypothesis. Therefore, the policy cannot be attributed as the causal factor of this decrease. Still, there was a negative change in extensions from before the cutoff.

Figure 5: Best-Fit Slope of Extensions Pre & Post OSI



Slope before cutoff: -1.55573

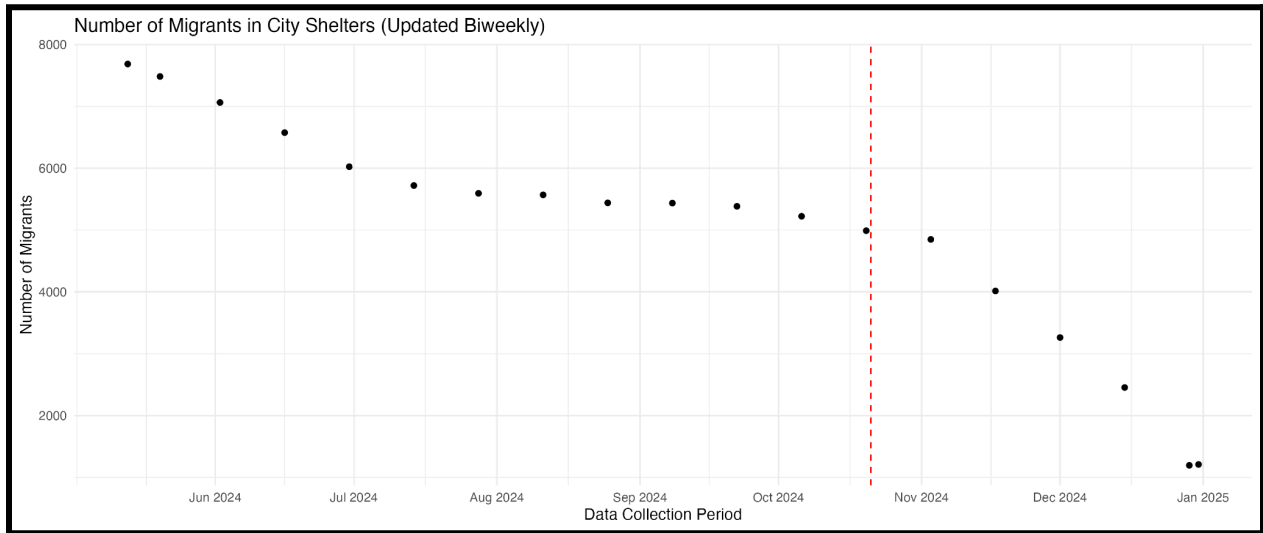
Interpretation: Before the policy was announced, the city was decreasing extensions granted by approximately 1.56 per day.

Slope after cutoff: 2.2

Interpretation: After the policy was announced, the city was increasing the number of extensions granted by approximately 2.2 per day.

As visible in [Figure 5](#), there was a notable change in the raw number of extensions granted following the announcement of the OSI. Following the cutoff, extensions drastically decreased. Even though there was a slight positive trend in the weeks following the cutoff, the number of extensions never returned to the pre-cutoff value.

Figure 6: Census inside Shelters



[Figure 6](#) depicts the number of residents who lived in shelters from May 2024 until the end of the year. Evidently, the number of residents began decreasing, which can in part be attributed to Biden’s change in border policies. However, in the four months before the announcement of the OSI, the population in shelters had plateaued. After the cutoff, the number of residents decreased at a steeper rate—specifically between November 3 and December 29, 2024. Unlike the number of shelter extensions, the census data did not see dramatic change until roughly four weeks after the announcement. Evidently, the OSI—and the deadline departures it imposed—accelerated a trend that had been slowing.

Regression Discontinuity:

$$Y = \beta_0 + \beta_1x + \varepsilon \text{ (Equation 2)}$$

In Equation 2, Y is measuring the number of migrants living in city shelters. β_0 represents the number of residents when $x = 0$, or May 13, 2024. β_1x describes the treatment effect at the cutoff and is the coefficient to x . In order to examine the effects of the OSI on the number of

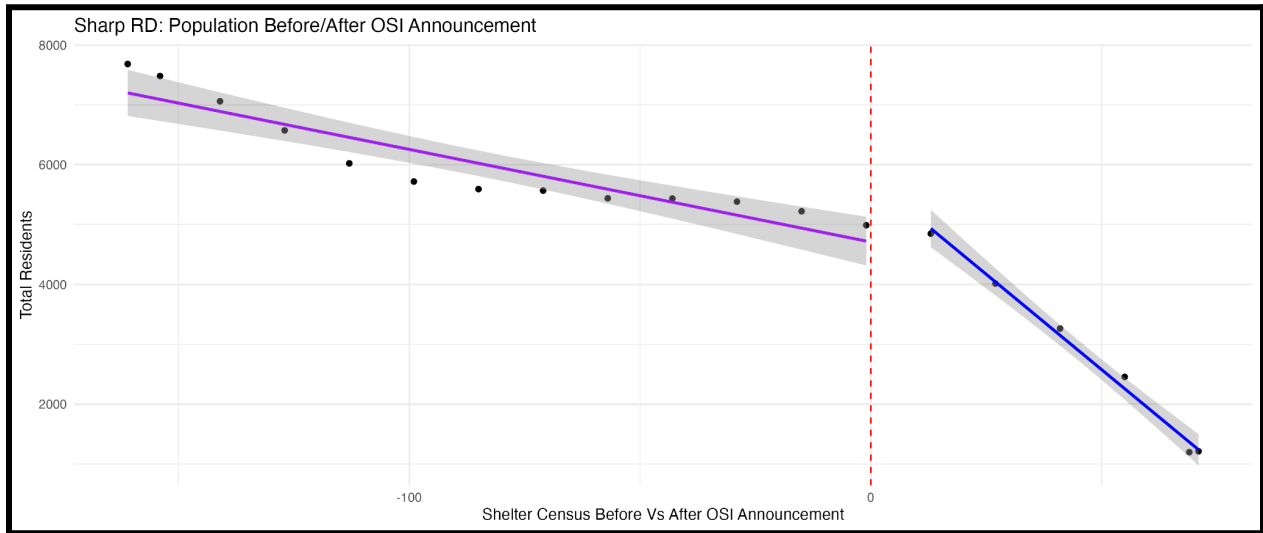
migrants living in city shelters, this regression observes the coefficient to ‘Date,’ which is the variable representing time, and was measured in days. The dates on and after October 21 were set as *treated* to observe the “treatment effect.” ε represents the error term, which captures all potential sources of unobserved variation not captured by β_1 .

Figure 7: Sharp RD for Shelter Census

Census Sharp RD Results	
Dependent variable:	
`Total Staying In Shelter`	
Date	-0.234 p = 0.315
I(cutoffdate)	
Constant	5,036.895 p = 0.278
Observations	255
R2	0.004
Adjusted R2	0.0001
Residual Std. Error	239.920 (df = 253)
F Statistic	1.015 (df = 1; 253)
Note:	*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

The results show that the number of residents in migrant shelters across Chicago decreased by approximately .23 more people per day after the OSI was announced. The p-value of 0.3147 fails to reject the null hypothesis. However, the cutoff yielded a negative output once again.

Figure 8: Best-Fit Slope of Shelter Population Pre & Post OSI



Best-Fit Slope before cutoff = -15.472

Interpretation: The shelter population was decreasing by approximately 15.5 people per day between May 13, 2024 and October 20, 2024.

Best-Fit Slope After cutoff = -48.249

Interpretation: Following the announcement of the OSI, the number of shelter residents decreased by approximately 48.25 people per day

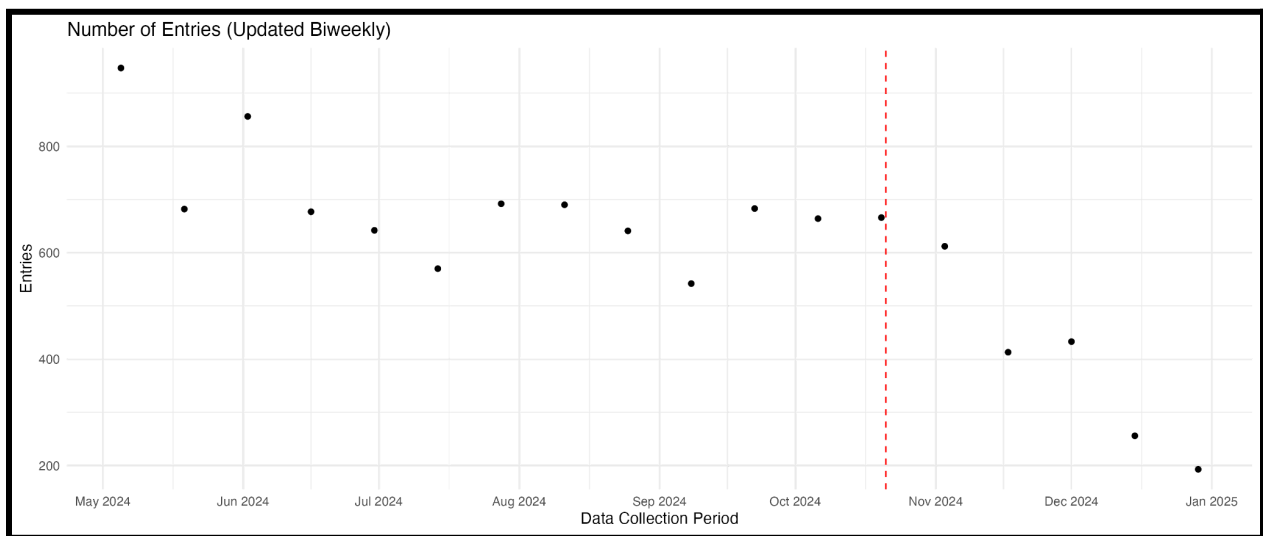
In observing the sharp RDD graph, the number of people exiting the shelter system relative to those entering the system increased following the cutoff. This may be explained by the fact that fewer individuals were entering and the number of residents exiting was increasing as deadlines approached and the year came to an end.

Figure 9: Proportion of Extensions by Shelter

Shelter:	AIC	MWRD	Midway Shelter	Elston Shelter	South DuSable	YWLA	Walnut Shelter	Inn of Chicago	West Lake	Parthenon	Super 8 Hotel	North Western Shelter
Extensions	149	84	174	66	191	27	10	7	15	10	6	15
Population	3830	2601	1999	1959	1875	1369	1104	658	617	439	388	150
Proportion of Extensions	3.89%	3.23%	8.70%	3.37%	10.19%	1.97%	0.91%	1.06%	2.43%	2.28%	1.56%	10.0%

Figure 9 displays the vast discrepancy in extension grants. Walnut Shelter, for example, granted extensions to less than 1% of their residents following the OSI. Contrarily, South DuSable granted extensions to 10.19% of residents.

Figure 10: Number of Entries into Shelter on a Biweekly Basis



Similar to [Figure 6](#), the number of entries into shelters was relatively stable prior to the announcement of the OSI. Therefore, even though the Johnson Administration rationalized closing several shelters because the city was seeing fewer migrants arriving in the city, entrance data suggests a different pattern. Given that this data does not capture entrances in 2023 or the winter of 2024; however, it is not possible to determine the larger trend across the past year and a half. Still, the number of entries began decreasing sharply following the announcement of the OSI.

Regression Discontinuity:

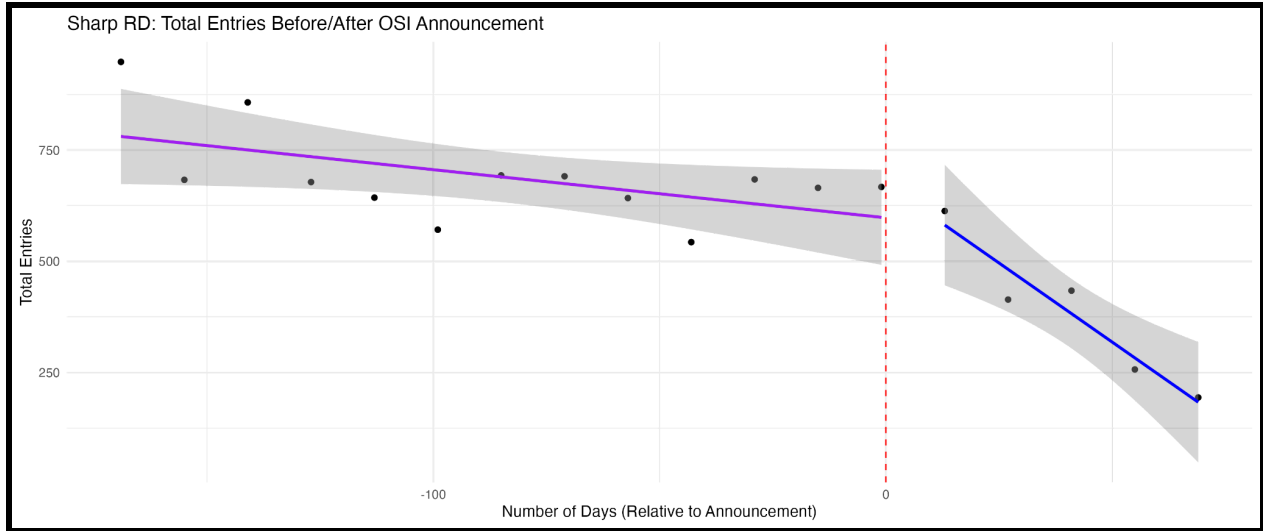
$$Y = \beta_0 + \beta_1x + \varepsilon$$

This sharp regression discontinuity design measures the number of shelter entries before and after the OSI was announced. Accordingly, Y , the outcome of interest, represents total shelter entries. β_0 represents the number of residents entering the shelter system when $x = 0$, or May 5, 2024. β_1x represents the treatment effect at the cutoff. In order to examine the effects of the OSI on the number of migrants living in city shelters, this regression observes the coefficient to “Period End,” using the same cutoff of October 21, 2024. ε represents the error term, which captures all potential sources of unobserved variation not captured by β_1 .

Figure 11: Sharp RD on Shelter Entrances

Shelter Entrances Sharp RD Results	
Dependent variable:	
`Total Intakes`	
`Period End`	0.002 p = 0.968
I(cuttyoffydate)	
Constant	4.469 p = 0.997
Observations	257
R2	0.00001
Adjusted R2	-0.004
Residual Std. Error	47.891 (df = 255)
F Statistic	0.002 (df = 1; 255)
Note:	*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

The findings from [Figure 11](#) show that the number of residents in migrant shelters across Chicago decreased by 0.00189 people per day after the OSI was announced. The p-value is not significant and fails to reject the null hypothesis ($p = .9673$). In observing the graphs, there is not a large difference in entries for October 20 and November 3. Indeed, it took a few weeks before the number of entries dropped significantly. It is therefore not surprising that the treatment effect was not significant.



Intercepts:

Slope before cutoff: -1.081

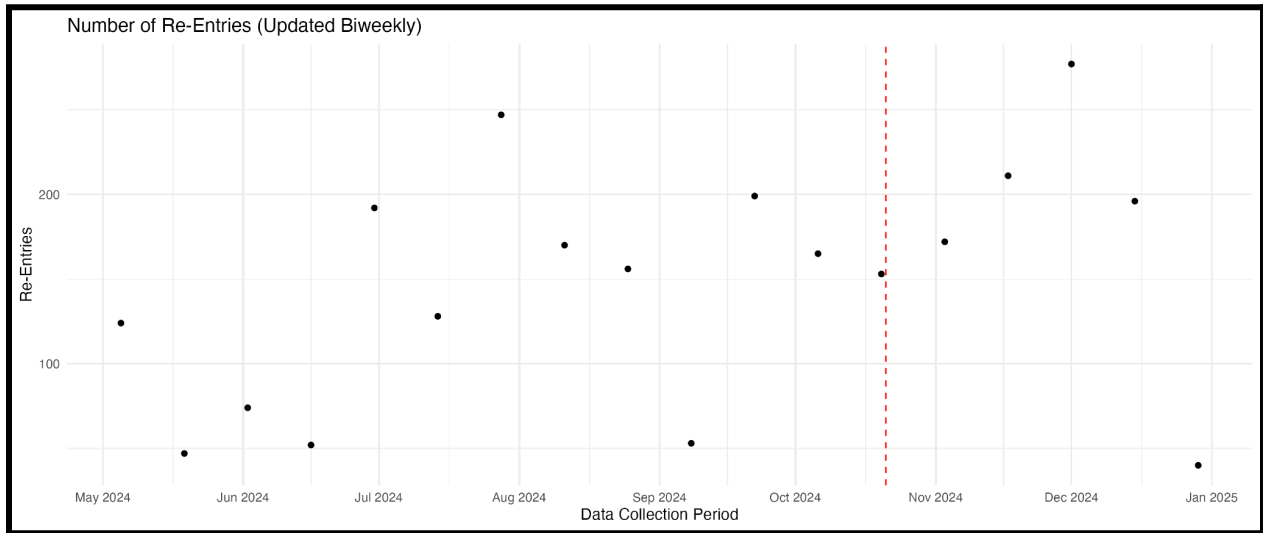
The number of entries into shelters was decreasing by slightly more than 1 person per day between May 5, 2024 and October 20, 2024. Therefore, the number of entries has been generally decreasing since at least May 2024.

Slope after cutoff = -6.026

The number of entries into shelters after October 20, 2024 was decreasing by roughly 6 people per day. Effectively, entries were decreasing more sharply after the cutoff.

Although the findings from the RDD are not significant, the difference in best fit lines before and after the cutoff demonstrate a change in trend: the number of entries decreased more drastically following the cutoff.

Figure 12: Number of Re-Entries into shelters on a biweekly basis



The number of re-entries into shelters, as depicted in [Figure 12](#), had the least consistent trend. Following the announcement of the OSI, the number of re-entries sharply increased between November 3 and December 1, then decreased for the rest of the year. Although no participants in the study re-entered the shelter upon hearing about the OSI, this citywide data suggests that a substantial number of migrants re-entered the shelter system following October 21. It is possible that this influx was reactive to the policy announcement. Alternatively, as residents moved out, they failed to find alternative housing and re-entered shortly after leaving.

Overall, the quantitative findings show pronounced effects on extensions, shelter population, exits, and entries following the announcement of the One System Initiative. Although none of the sharp RDs are statistically significant, the graphs show marked differences in the trends after the cutoff. These findings may lack statistical significance due to the compressed time frame of the data collected. Without data from 2025, the longer-term trends in extensions, population, exits, and entries post OSI remain unobserved. Even lacking statistical significance, these findings are useful in observing change in trends for the migrant population of Chicago. These numbers also do not offer explanations as to why individuals left the shelters, or

whether more residents were requesting extensions; personal accounts from interviews fill some of these gaps. The following section will consider how individual narratives compare to the larger trends in city data.

Discussion

Housing Discrepancies

Interviews made it abundantly clear that there was a large discrepancy in shelter quality. Some participants reported that they had a private room with a television at their shelter, while others explained how they needed to be shuttled on yellow school buses in order to shower. This variance profoundly informed participants' outlooks on the current shelter system: individuals who had lived in semi-private or private rooms held the system in much higher regard. These opinions persisted even when individuals were living in unideal apartment conditions. Interviewees who had shared a room with 100 other people in shelters were more resigned to their apartment conditions. They were more unwilling to move back into the shelter and rationalized that they were better off in their apartments relatively speaking. All individuals who had lived in former hotel type shelters explained that they would move back if given the chance.

Similar to Hall and Greenman's paper on housing, overcrowding was common and approximately 45% of participants were unsatisfied with their apartments in this study. Hall attributed these unsavory conditions to the fact that the families in his study were vulnerable as undocumented migrants and/or were not planning to stay in the United States permanently. Similarly, a few participants without asylum status in this study expressed how their landlords imposed unfair conditions. One migrant explained that his landlord threatened to evict him if he did not pay for the apartment in full, which he could not afford to do. Another participant

recounted that her landlord had refused to fix her broken floor and said he did not understand her due to the language barrier. Evidently, documentation status and the language barrier has made migrants in Chicago vulnerable to mistreatment by landlords. Although it is not possible to draw a causal inference between their non-asylee status and mistreatment from renters, it is evident that these conditions have persisted among migrants in Chicago.

Paying Rent

Participants expressed their difficulties with paying rent. Indeed, on average they were paying \$167.5 more in rent per person compared to low-income Chicago constituents. Therefore, a premium for housing on the migrant population persisted for participants in this study, just as Christopher observed in *Seeking Sanctuary*. Without data from non-sanctuary cities, however, it is not possible to determine whether this premium was discounted in Chicago.

None of the participants were receiving rent aid at the time of their interview, although 40% of the sample had previously received assistance from ASERAP. Thus, participants needed to pay rent in full by themselves. However, only two of the individuals living outside of a shelter had received their work authorization. Many of the other participants worked undocumented jobs. The conditions of these jobs were often unreliable and paid below the minimum wage in Illinois.⁶⁴ Still, participants continued working these positions as they lacked alternative sources of income. Evidently, lacking a work authorization permit does not inhibit work; instead, the work authorization allows migrants to receive market-price wages and serves as a protection from exploitative conditions.

⁶⁴ The minimum wage in Illinois is \$15/hour for individuals over 18 years old (Illinois Department of Labor, *Minimum Wage/Overtime FAQ - FAQs*, accessed April 14, 2025, <https://labor.illinois.gov/faqs/minimum-wage-overtime-faq.html>.)

Impact of the OSI

After the Johnson Administration began enacting restrictions on city shelters, migrants largely moved out. Four participants in this study were actively in the shelter when the OSI was announced. Two of the four participants moved out of the shelter at their assigned date, despite not yet having their work authorization. Both explained that they had not felt ready to leave the shelter and would move back if given the option. In describing their apartments, they each mentioned that they were not satisfied with the conditions, but described how they had needed to find something quickly. One of the participants explained that his family was sharing one bedroom, while two other families occupied the other two bedrooms in the apartment. Pressure to move out at their assigned date did not afford participants the time to find an ideal living situation. In their paper, Brown et al. discussed similar findings for asylees in the UK: the refugees in their study found lower-quality housing relative to other low-income families, often in unsafe neighborhoods.⁶⁵ The deadlines imposed for asylum seekers to leave the shelters can lead to unideal living and working conditions. Conversely, they found that the benefits to an extended shelter stay continued to be realized even after asylees had moved out.

The city-wide patterns in [shelter exits](#) suggest that the two participants who moved out of the shelters at their assigned date were part of the larger trend; the two interviewees who were able to stay in the shelters were more of an exception to the rule. In addition to extensions being fairly uncommon (4.4% of residents received extensions following the OSI), they were not granted equally across shelters. [Figure 9](#) shows these discrepancies; at one extreme, less than 1% of shelter residents at the Walnut Shelter received extensions, while at the other extreme, 10% of residents received extensions at the South DuSable Shelter and the North Western Shelter.

⁶⁵ The refugees in this study needed to move out of the shelters before a 30-day deadline. (Brown et al. "The Impact of Housing on Refugees: An Evidence Synthesis." (P. 28))

Although some variance could be explained by discretion from staff, a 5.6% difference from the mean at the South DuSable and North Western shelter are more likely due to excessive discretion.

Even though shelters did not receive glowing reviews across all interviews, all participants conceded that they had played an important role in their assimilation into Chicago. The shelters provided stable living for new arrivals as they acclimated to the city. Although the city could not realistically could not financially support all of these shelters indefinitely, the drastic reductions in eligibility following the OSI led to negative housing outcomes for participants—particularly for individuals who had not yet received work authorization and lacked a social network.

Limitations:

I. Interviews

Soliciting interviews proved particularly challenging—especially after President Trump’s inauguration on January 20, 2025. Due to Trump’s promise to begin deportations immediately after beginning his second term, migrants were naturally afraid to discuss their asylum status and housing situations to a stranger. As a result, I was only able to find 12 individuals willing to be interviewed. I utilized professional connections and the snowballing method to contact the majority of participants. Connecting to interviewees through the recommendation of other migrants fostered trust among the sample population. Consequently, these methods of solicitation may have led to a bias in data whereby participants belonged to similar communities. All interviewees shared that they were either in the process of seeking asylum and work

authorization permits or had already received approval on their application. Given that migrants must surrender themselves to homeland security officials in order to be eligible for asylum and subsequently work authorization, this commonality indicates that all participants had documentation of entering the country. As a result, the data collected fundamentally lacks the experiences of undocumented migrants.

Many participants who were scheduled for an interview stopped communicating as their date approached. In one instance, I waited for an hour at a scheduled interview, as the participant failed to show up. Given that this interview was scheduled for the day after President Trump's inauguration, their sudden disinterest was very likely due to concern of the potential risks. Other individuals shared that the stipend would help them enormously. Participants who had been reached through the snowball method contacted me asking if they could participate in the "\$25 study." By referring to the study by its stipend, participants indicated their motivation forwardly. This study sought to treat participants with respect and financially reward them accordingly. However, with financial incentives, it became difficult to disentangle willing participants and those compromising their comfort in order to receive extra spending money.

II. Sample Population

The One System Initiative did not solely affect the migrant population, but unhoused constituents, and Chicago residents. In focusing the research question on the impact of the OSI on migrants, this study has excluded a significant portion of the impacted population. While this paper studies the OSI within the context of migrant settlement in Chicago, future research on the city's shelter system would benefit from sampling both migrants and unhoused Chicagoans to provide a more balanced and comprehensive understanding. Likewise, given that some residents

felt overlooked as the city implemented policies to accommodate migrants, their perspectives are important to include in broader analyses of Chicago's policies from 2022 to 2025.

III. Available Data

Data from the City of Chicago Data Portal lacked updates past December 29, 2024. The most recent records of migrant entry and exits from shelters might illustrate the effects of the OSI more profoundly. Another potential shortcoming of the Chicago City Portal is that migrants have been historically underreported in census data. Given that not all individuals surrender themselves to customs agents, there are certain instances in which the city (or country) simply may not know of their arrival. Therefore, individuals who were not processed through the intake landing-zones were excluded from this study.

IV. Duration of Study

This study began in October of 2024 and was completed in April of 2025. With six months of research, the full effects of the OSI may not be fully realized. In due time, families who are unable to pay rent may be evicted and thus need to re-enter the shelter system. Alternatively, as more individuals receive work-authorization, families may be more readily able to support themselves independently and continue to move out of city shelters. Therefore, long-term effects of the OSI on the housing stability of migrants remain to be seen.

Looking to future studies in the field, insights on the longer-term effects of the OSI will need to be observed in research conducted over several months to years. Future studies would also benefit from a higher number of interviews—sampling from a larger array of individuals—in order to determine whether trends in the data persisted. With more time available, a future researcher could also conduct follow-up interviews with participants to better

understand the impact of the One System Initiative on housing stability. Ideally the City of Chicago Data portal would also publish data over a longer period. Although this paper found patterns in the data, the research would undoubtedly benefit from a larger sample and more time.

Policy Implications

Feedback from interviews and findings from citywide data indicate that access to work and shelter have heavily impacted migrants' ability to support themselves. Migrants with work authorization or an extension to stay in shelters (or both) experienced the most stable living conditions, while those who lacked access to these resources felt the impact of the OSI most acutely. It is also worth mentioning that individuals with robust social networks were less impacted by the OSI. Given that Chicago realistically cannot implement policy to provide social support for New Arrivals, their experiences will not be considered in the policy implications.

The move-out deadlines placed an undue burden on migrants. In order to exit shelters in time, participants either had to settle within their means—by living in an overcrowded apartment—or sign a lease that they could not afford sustainably. This outcome is not particularly surprising; in fact, it closely resembles findings produced in Brown et al.'s research. To ameliorate this problem, Brown et al. recommended either putting “An end or extension to the ‘move-on’ period or enhanced support (or ideally both).” Similarly, residents in the Chicago Shelter would benefit from increased access to extensions.

Although extensions were granted to some shelter residents, both quantitative and qualitative data revealed that participants were not given equal opportunity to remain in city shelters past their move-out date. As depicted in [Figure 9](#), staff at the South DuSable and North

Western shelters granted extensions at twice the average rate. Mayor Johnson cited his concern for lack of access to equal resources for Chicagoans as a motivating factor in creating the combined sheltering system. In the same vein, shelter staff did not implement new regulations equally across shelters. The inequalities in extension-grants by shelter are particularly impactful when considering that the frequent alternative outcomes tend to be overcrowding or paying rent beyond what is financially feasible.

Undoubtedly, more extensions would have required more space, and thus more funding. In the months preceding the announcement of the OSI, the Johnson Administration had increased funding for housing settlement resources, directly diverting resources from shelters. Based on patterns from interviews, in which participants resoundingly shared that they faced housing instability after the announcement of the OSI, residents would have likely benefited from sustained shelter funding and the accompanying shelter availability as they await work authorization. Alternatively, if the state had increased funding through ASERAP, once again granting more rental assistance, migrants may have been more easily able to support themselves independently. Given that ASERAP is provided at the state-level, however, this funding would be beyond the provision of the Johnson Administration. Therefore this sustained funding may have been unrealistic, as it would have needed to come from elsewhere in the state budget.

After losing eligibility to remain in city shelter, but before they are able to apply for work authorization, migrants are left to support themselves without the resources necessary to do so. As a result, respondents needed to work undocumented jobs, which yielded lower wages, were sometimes unreliable, and put them at a higher risk of deportation. Furthermore, research suggests that lack of economic opportunity can lead to an increase in petty crime in order for

individuals to support themselves.⁶⁶ Without work authorization or sufficient infrastructure from the city government, migrants are made to support themselves with seldom few legal pathways to do so.

The 150 day wait-time is costly to asylum-seekers, but also financially for the city of Chicago—as it may put a strain on the social programs available. The Johnson Administration does not have the capacity to issue work authorization permits at the local level or to reduce the wait-time; authorization is delegated at the federal level. As a result, Chicago must support New Arrivals through its existing infrastructure. By providing insufficient support—as observed with participants post-OSI—migrants have had to realize the cost of the delays to work-authorization.

New Arrivals would have benefited from more shelter extensions. Indeed, the city may have prematurely moved the funds from shelters to programs assisting migrants in finding private apartments. Given insights from participants, in addition to findings from experts in the field, asylum seekers benefit from additional shelter support and extensions. The benefits to sustained support from the local government continue to be seen by migrants even after they move out of shelters, as found in Brown et. al's study. The limitations of current policies leave migrants with the impossible task of financially supporting themselves without access to legal work opportunities.

⁶⁶ Steven Raphael and Rudolf Winter-Ebmer, "Identifying the Effect of Unemployment on Crime," *The Journal of Law & Economics* 44, no. 1 (2001): 259–83, <https://doi.org/10.1086/320275>.

Conclusion

This paper sought to determine how the implementation of the One System Initiative has impacted the housing outcomes for migrants in Chicago. The research has relied on interviews with migrants who have and continue to live in the shelter system and citywide data. Interviews were assessed for patterns in answers provided by participants and shared qualities that may have led to similar responses. Sharp RDs were conducted on the data published by the city of Chicago to determine whether there were changes in extensions, shelter population and entries at the cutoff date of October 21, 2024. Additionally, extension rates were compared by shelter to assess whether there were discrepancies in implementation of the regulations under the OSI.

Based on the data collected, this study finds that there was tremendous variance in shelter quality. Migrants who had lived in crowded shelters were more unwilling to move back, even if their current living conditions were suboptimal. Former shelter residents who had lived in higher-quality shelters expressed much higher likelihood to return if given the option.

Despite their negative reviews of shelters, many participants shared that they struggled to live in private apartments. Participants reported that they were not yet ready to leave shelters because they lacked sufficient incomes to sustain themselves. Furthermore, rent-aid has become increasingly rare, leaving migrants with fewer resources than they had in previous months. Without guaranteed housing or rental support, the majority (80%) of the sample population who paid rent had to do so without authorization to work in the U.S. As a result, they solicited undocumented jobs, which have been unreliable and pay below market price wages.

Indisputably, both Mayor Lightfoot and Johnson had a tough set of circumstances to handle, all while being observed by other politicians nationally. In quickly approving resources for migrants, the city demonstrated its robust support for the migrant population. However, as the

budget allocation to migrants has slowed, they have been left inadequately supported. The implementation of the One System Initiative has led to migrants living in apartments that are overcrowded, low quality, or too expensive.

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Appendix:

I. Interview Questions

Demographic Information:

Age: _____

Gender: _____

Duration of Time in Chicago: _____

Point of Entry into United States: _____

Work Authorization Status: _____

Asylum Status (optional): _____

Nationality: _____

Do you have children?: _____

Interview Questions (Translated):

Are you currently residing in a shelter?

If yes:

- Is this the first shelter you have stayed in?
 - If no, how does it compare to other shelters?
- How much longer are you entitled to stay?
- Do you know where you will go next?
- How do you like the shelter?
- Are you working right now?
- Would you like to stay in Chicago or move to another city in the United States?
- How have the changes in shelter policies affected you?
- Have you noticed any substantive change inside the shelter during your stay?
- How do you feel about the staff?

If no:

- When were you last in a shelter? For how long?
- How did you find the conditions?
- How do you like your apartment?
- Are you working right now?
- Can you describe your experience in the shelter for me please?
- Do you prefer the location of your current apartment or the shelter where you last resided?
- Which feels safer?
- If you could go back to the shelter right now, would you? / How would you feel about moving back?
- Would you like to stay in Chicago or move to another city in the United States?
- Do you feel affected by the shelter policies?
- Did you ever notice a change in the shelter throughout your stay?
- [If they are comfortable answering] How much is your rent? For how many rooms?

Interview Questions as originally written:

¿Está usted en un refugio ahora?

Si responde *sí*:

- ¿Es el primer refugio en que ha quedado?
 - Si dicen no, ¿cómo se compara con otros refugios?
- ¿Cuánto tiempo más puede quedarse?
- ¿Sabe a dónde irá después?
- ¿Qué le parece el refugio?
- ¿Está trabajando en este momento?
- ¿Le gustaría quedarse en Chicago o mudarse a otra ciudad en los Estados Unidos?
- ¿Cómo le han afectado los cambios en las políticas del refugio?
- ¿Ha notado algún cambio significativo dentro del refugio durante su estadía?
- ¿Qué opina del personal en el refugio?

Si responde *no*:

- ¿Cuándo fue la última vez que estuvo en un refugio? ¿Por cuánto tiempo?
- ¿Cómo encontró las condiciones?
- ¿Qué le parece su apartamento?
- ¿Está trabajando en este momento?
- ¿Me puede describir su experiencia en el refugio por favor?
- ¿Prefiere la ubicación de su apartamento actual o el refugio donde vivió por última vez?
- ¿Cuál le parece más seguro?
- Si pudiera regresar al refugio ahora mismo, ¿lo haría? ¿Cómo se sentiría al regresar?
- ¿Le gustaría quedarse en Chicago o mudarse a otra ciudad en los Estados Unidos?
- ¿Se siente afectado por las políticas del refugio?
- Cuando estaba viviendo en los refugios, ¿tenía que cambiar su ubicación de refugio en un momento? ¿Cómo fue esa experiencia?
- [Si quieren responder] ¿Cuánto paga para su alquiler? ¿Para cuántos cuartos?

Are you a migrant that has lived or currently lives in a Chicago Shelter?

If you are willing to speak with me, I will pay you \$25 for your time

More information

Hi, my name is Julia and I am a student at the University of Chicago writing my thesis about housing policy in Chicago & experiences in the shelters. I would like to interview you to study the effects of the policy changes. All of your responses would be confidential and used exclusively for my studies. I want to improve the shelter system, but I need your help.

Contact me with questions and concerns:
email: jpolsky@uchicago.edu

¿Es usted un migrante que ha vivido/vive ahora en un refugio en Chicago?

Si le apetece hablar conmigo, le pago \$25 por su tiempo.

Más información

Hola, me llamo Julia y soy una estudiante en la Universidad de Chicago escribiendo mi tesis sobre las políticas de Chicago y las experiencias en los refugios. Me gustaría entrevistarles para analizar el efecto de las políticas. Todo de sus respuestas serían confidenciales, usado exclusivamente para mis investigaciones. Quiero mejorar el sistema de los refugios en Chicago, pero necesito su ayuda.

Contáctame con cuestiones y dudas:
email: jpolsky@uchicago.edu