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## Using a Simulation of Homelessness in a Human Development and Family Science Course: Student Reflections on Spending a Night in a Car

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**ABSTRACT.** A vehicular homelessness simulation was used as a transformative learning activity in a family crisis course. The 17 students who completed the assignment spent the night in their cars, kept a journal throughout the night, and wrote a reflection paper that addressed what it felt like to be unsheltered, how realistic the experience was, and how the experience impacted their thoughts, feelings, and knowledge about homelessness. Analysis of student journals and reflection papers indicated that spending the night in the car was cold, uncomfortable, exhausting, and anxiety-provoking. Students identified more differences than similarities between the simulation and the experiences of those who are unsheltered, though they all classified the simulation as “eye-opening.” Finally, the simulation increased their awareness of the prevalence, causes, and difficulties associated with being unsheltered and increased their empathy toward those who are unsheltered.

*Keywords:* Simulation, SoTL, pedagogy, homelessness, college students

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### **Using a Simulation of Homelessness in a Human Development and Family Science Course: Student Reflections on Spending a Night in a Car**

The state of being unhoused, as defined by the United Nations Human Rights, refers to “not having stable, safe, and adequate housing, nor the means and ability of obtaining it” (OHCHR, n.d.). According to the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD, 2024), the total number of individuals who are unhoused in the United States increased by 18% from 2023 to 2024, with 771,480 individuals identified during the annual Point-in-Time (PIT) count. Being unhoused is generally categorized as either sheltered or unsheltered, with the latter including individuals “whose primary nighttime location is a public or private place not designated for, or ordinarily used as, a regular sleeping accommodation,” (HUD, 2024, p. x), including vehicles, parks, subways, and on the streets. The 2024 PIT count identified 274,224 individuals as unsheltered, a 6.9% increase from the prior year (HUD, 2024). Given the challenges of locating individuals who are unsheltered during PIT counts, the data are believed to underestimate the true prevalence of unsheltered homelessness (National Law Center on Homelessness & Poverty, 2017; HUD, 2024).

Living in one’s vehicle, known as vehicular homelessness, constitutes a form of being unsheltered (Giamarino, Brozen, & Blumenberg, 2022). Although there is no official count, data indicate the prevalence of vehicular homelessness has increased in the United States (Giamarino et al., 2022; USICH, 2022). According to the data, it is most prevalent in larger metropolitan cities on the West Coast, where 50% or more of those who are unsheltered live in their vehicles (Calhoun et al., 2023; Giamarino et al., 2022; USICH, 2022). Individuals living in their vehicles tend to relocate frequently and deliberately park in areas where they can blend in with other vehicles to avoid detection, resulting in data that underestimates the true prevalence of vehicular homelessness (Garamino et al., 2022; National Law Center on Homelessness, 2017).

Although living in one’s vehicle may provide greater autonomy and security than residing in a shelter or on the streets (Giamarino et al., 2022; USICH, 2022), it presents numerous challenges. Individuals experiencing vehicular homelessness report safety concerns related to break-ins, harassment, and police interactions (Calhoun et al., 2023; National Law Center on Homelessness & Poverty, 2019; Wakin, 2008). Financial strain also arises from vehicle-related expenses, such as fuel and maintenance costs (Calhoun et al., 2023; Homeless Policy Research Institute, 2018). Given that parking or sleeping in vehicles is prohibited in many jurisdictions, individuals must frequently relocate to avoid fines, towing, or loss of their vehicles, which often serve as their primary form of shelter, storage, and transportation (USICH, 2022; Wakin, 2008, 2014). A lack of bathroom and kitchen amenities hinders efforts to maintain personal hygiene and prohibits safe food storage and preparation. Furthermore, cramped living spaces and exposure to extreme weather result in discomfort and involve health risks (Calhoun et al., 2023; Wehman-Brown, 2016).

#### **Teaching about Being Unsheltered**

Human Development and Family Science (HDFS) graduates are likely to encounter individuals and families who are unsheltered at some point in their careers. Thus, it is important to educate them about the issue, as well as encourage exploration of their own perceptions and assumptions, in order to prepare them to meet the needs of those who are unsheltered. According to Ashthroth et al. (2018), “those who have conducted research with the homeless have concluded that professionals need specially tailored education and support to understand and empathize with this population” (p. 490). From a family science perspective, being unhoused is an example of a family crisis that could fit within CFLE Content Area #2: Internal Dynamics of Families (National Council on Family Relations, 2020).

Simulations are common pedagogical tools in college classrooms, with research demonstrating effectiveness in a variety of educational programs, including education, health, and social service fields of study. Simulations appear to be particularly useful in enhancing empathy and awareness among students for specific populations. For example, following simulations, students reported increased empathy for pediatric (Ayed et al., 2021) and aging (Grier et al., 2022) patients, individuals experiencing addiction (Schachman et al., 2024), refugees (Carrick-Hagenbarth & Maton, 2023), and formerly incarcerated individuals (Moak et al., 2020; Swope et al., 2025). In addition, simulations were also shown to increase awareness of the challenges and barriers encountered by the populations represented in the simulations (Carrick-Hagenbarth & Maton, 2023; Geier et al., 2022; Moak et al., 2020).

Instructors representing a variety of disciplines have explored ways in which to not only increase knowledge, but also understanding and empathy, of homelessness among students. Wilson, Bender, and DeChants (2019) used a hackathon activity lasting 7 hours and found that the activity increased social work students' knowledge about causes of homelessness, as well as changed their attitudes about individual fault and society's responsibilities. Other strategies have involved students engaging in civic engagement activities that place them in direct contact with the unsheltered population. For example, McKinney and Snedker (2017) found that students who conducted interviews with individuals who were unsheltered and lived in a temporary university-hosted tent encampment experienced increased empathy and understanding about the causes of being unsheltered over the 13-week period. To date, there are no published studies that focus on the use of a homelessness simulation in human development and family science courses. The most closely related studies focus on poverty simulations utilized in university-level family and resource management classes (Arnett-Hartwick & Davis, 2019; Parks et al., 2023), one of which included some HDFS students in the sample. Each of these studies utilized the Community Action Poverty Simulation (CAPS) developed by the Missouri Association for Community Action (n.d.). During the simulation, students role-played living in poverty, with some students assigned to role-play as homeless adults. Following the CAPS simulations, students in both studies reported increased or newfound empathy toward those living in poverty and increased awareness of the challenges experienced by those living in poverty (Arnett-Hartwick & Davis, 2019; Park et al., 2023). In addition, Parks et al.'s (2023) study, which utilized qualitative analysis of reflection papers, found clear indicators that many students' attitudes changed from personal deficiencies as causes of poverty to recognition of the structural and systemic factors of poverty. However, while the results from Arnett-Hartwick and Davis's (2019) study showed overall positive attitude changes toward those living in poverty, the changes were not statistically significant, and results for some statements reflected worsening attitudes about personal responsibility following the simulation.

In addition to the aforementioned simulations, another way to challenge students' existing beliefs and increase their understanding of homelessness is through a simulation that requires students to temporarily experience being unsheltered. Opportunities for this type of simulation are available throughout the United States through events that require participants to spend the night in an unsheltered environment, such as a car or a cardboard box. However, the effectiveness of this type of simulation is unknown and purely speculative, as we lack research in this area. The current study sought to address this gap in our knowledge.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Mezirow's (1991, 2008) theory of transformative learning provides a framework for understanding the potential impact of an unsheltered simulation on students. Taylor (1998) identified three key components for transformative learning: individual experience, critical reflection, and

dialogue. The first component, individual experience, acknowledges the past experiences and prior beliefs of learners, as well as their experiences in the learning environment. In order to foster transformation, learning activities must serve as disorienting dilemmas (Mezirow, 1991, 2008) that challenge learners to question and critically reflect upon their previous experiences and perspectives regarding the subject matter. In turn, transformational learning occurs when this reflection evolves into dialogue, either internally or with others, that leads to transformation, rather than assimilation, of knowledge, beliefs, and perspectives.

Transformative Learning Theory has served as the basis for the creation and use of simulations with college students. Briese et al. (2020) asserted that the theory is particularly useful to healthcare education due to its focus on simulation and self-reflection, further stating that “The theory helps explain how to foster transformation learning” (p. 64) to meet desired outcomes. It is not surprising, therefore, that the theory is often applied to the use of simulations and other “disorienting” dilemmas in healthcare education, with most published research reflecting this health education focus (e.g., Pan et al., 2025; Revell et al., 2022).

A vehicular homelessness simulation activity, where students spend the night in a car, can serve as an application of Transformative Learning Theory for HDFS students. The simulation itself presents students with a disorienting dilemma that likely challenges their preexisting perspectives and exposes them to an experience that is not part of their daily reality. Transformation in their perspectives may occur both during and after the simulation as they critically reflect upon the fit of their beliefs, assumptions, and stereotypes with their simulation experience. This questioning and revising of their preexisting perspectives may not only shift their beliefs, but the process may also foster empathy toward those who are unhoused and serve as a catalyst for advocacy and social change. Thus, the focus of this study is to explore the critical reflections of students during and following a vehicular homelessness simulation activity in a family science course.

### Methods

This study utilized a qualitative research design to explore the experiences and perceptions of students during and following a vehicular homelessness simulation activity. Qualitative analysis is an appropriate research design as it is “oriented toward exploration, discovery, and inductive logic” (Patton, 2015, p. 121), and provides researchers access to rich descriptions of participants’ experiences with and perceptions of (Patton, 2015) a social phenomenon like vehicular homelessness and, in this case, the simulation activity. Data for the study were obtained from the students’ Night in a Car assignments in an undergraduate family science course. IRB approval was sought and granted for the use of the students’ journals and reflection papers. Consent for use of the data was obtained following the completion of the semester. The following research questions were explored in the study:

RQ1: What was it like being unsheltered during the simulation?

RQ2: How realistic was the simulation experience from the students’ perspective?

RQ3: How did the simulation experience impact students’ thoughts, feelings, and knowledge about homelessness?

### Overview of the Unsheltered (Vehicular Homelessness) Simulation

A local, non-profit, religiously-affiliated organization conducts a “Night in a Car” (<https://nightinacar.org/>) event each year as an organizational fundraiser and educational event. Registered Student Organizations and Greek organizations at the university often participate in the event

as a philanthropic activity. The event is always held during the winter, typically during the first two weeks of February. In 2019, the event was held on the 1st weekend of February when temperatures dipped into the teens during the night. After arriving at the site at 6 pm, participants were educated about the prevalence of homelessness in the community, local services/resources, and food insecurity through panel discussions and interactive activities. At 9 pm, all participants headed to the facility parking lot, where they spent the night in their cars. Participants were awakened by staff knocking on their window at 6 am, at which time everyone gathered inside for breakfast and debriefing.

The 2020 event was again held in February, with temperatures in the 20s and light snow falling throughout the night. The event followed a similar schedule to 2019; however, the educational sessions of 2019 were replaced by a testimonial session, a presentation of the services offered by the organization holding the event, and an “Escape Room” that was constructed in the church gymnasium. Participants were assigned a time during the night to enter the Escape Room simulation, where they were given tasks to complete while rotating through “rooms” that mimicked the four seasons. For example, in the summer room, participants were required to complete a task during intense heat that was simulated with heating devices.

During the night of both years, all the participants’ automobiles were parked in rows in one portion of the lot that was illuminated by security lighting. In addition, security patrolled the area throughout the night to ensure the safety of participants. The instructor participated in the event both years, parking their car in the same section as the students. They were available if any students had questions or concerns, and periodically ventured out of their own car to check on the students during the night. In order to protect their comfort, participants were allowed to enter the facility to warm up, get a snack, and use the restroom. The students were also free to end their participation in the simulation at any time.

### **The Simulation Assignment**

Students enrolled in a family crisis course at a Midwestern public university were required to complete a Choose Your Option assignment. The options included the following: (1) a family stress paper in which they applied family stress theory to a stressor experienced by their family, (2) a movie analysis paper in which they applied family stress theory to the family’s experience in the movie, and (3) a Night in a Car assignment. The Night in a Car assignment required the students to participate in the “Night in a Car” event, keep a journal documenting their feelings and experiences, take a selfie each hour they were awake during the night, and write a reflection paper following the provided guidelines (see Appendix A).

To assist students in choosing between the options, the instructor cautioned against choosing an option that could potentially cause emotional distress for them, emphasizing that the assignment was not meant to induce trauma. Having participated in the “Night in a Car” event in the past, the instructor shared the event schedule with students, provided them with a realistic account of the cold they would experience if they participated in the event, shared the organization’s tips for the experience, and suggested ways in which to protect themselves from the cold during the simulation. Students were allowed to share a car with other students in the class and to invite guests to stay with them. There was no cost associated with participating in the event. Though the event was a fundraiser for a local organization, students were not required to raise funds, though they could if they chose to.

## Participants

Students who completed the Night in a Car assignment were recruited for participation in the study. After grades for all courses were submitted for the semester, the instructor sent an email to students who completed the assignment. Within the email, the instructor provided information about the study and requested the student's permission to use their reflection paper and journal for a research project. Students completed the consent form and returned it to the instructor.

Approximately 25% of students across both semesters opted to complete the Night in a Car assignment. There was no attrition from the start of the simulation experience to the end, with all students who started the simulation completing it. All but one of the students who completed the assignment consented to the use of their assignment for the study, resulting in a sample size of 17 students (2019  $n=10$ ; 2020  $n=7$ ). The students who consented were predominantly upper-division undergraduates ( $n=16$ ), HDFS majors ( $n=16$ ), and female ( $n=15$ ).

## Analysis

Student reflection papers were analyzed through an inductive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) to address the following research questions: (1) What was it like being unsheltered?, (2) How realistic was the experience?, and (3) How did it impact their thoughts, feelings, and knowledge about homelessness? Due to the exploratory nature of this study, the primary investigator open-coded each line of both sets of documents until saturation was reached to generate a coding scheme, which was subsequently used by the primary investigator and another coder to code the documents. Any discrepancies in coding were discussed until agreement was reached in the coding. Overarching themes were then derived from the codes, with quotes chosen to represent the themes in relation to the research questions. In addition, descriptive analysis was performed to calculate the frequency of themes in the journals and reflection papers, as well as the number of students who identified each theme in the journals and reflection papers.

## Results

### Overview of Journal Entries and Reflection Papers

For both years combined, 16 journals and 17 reflection papers were analyzed for this study. Of the students who participated in the simulation and consented to the use of their assignments for the study, one student did not submit a journal. The 16 journals contained 112 journal entries ( $n=64$  in 2019,  $n=48$  in 2020) that were included in the analysis.

### Experience of Being Unsheltered

Analysis of the reflection papers and journals identified four themes that appeared in at least 50% of the reflection papers and five themes that appeared in at least 50% of journals. Specifically, the themes of being cold, uncomfortable, tired/exhausted, and scared/anxious were reported by at least 50% of students in both the journals and papers. All themes, including those that were less common, are listed in Tables 1- 3 along with descriptive statistics for each. Table 1 provides the descriptive statistics for the ten themes found in the reflection papers. The data provides the statistics for each year separately and also combined as a total for both years. Table 2 provides a breakdown of the 13 themes found in the journal entries as combined totals including both years. For the journal entries, the data is further differentiated to examine the percentage of students who reflected on the themes as well as the range of the number of entries that included the theme by each student. Finally, Table 3 provides the data for the

journal entries separated by the year of data collection. Analysis revealed overlap between several of the themes, as themes tended to be intertwined with one another.

**Table 1**

*Reflection Paper Themes*

Theme	Number (%) of Reflection Papers Containing Theme		
	2019 and 2020 ( <i>n</i> =17)	2019 only ( <i>n</i> =10)	2020 only ( <i>n</i> =7)
Cold	16 (94.1%)	10 (100%)	6 (85%)
Uncomfortable	13 (76.5%)	9 (90%)	4 (57.1%)
Tired/Exhausted	12 (70.6%)	7 (70%)	5 (71.4%)
Scared/Anxious	11 (64.7%)	7 (70%)	4 (57.1%)
Frustrated/Irritable	8 (47.1%)	6 (60%)	2 (28.6%)
Depressing/Sad	6 (35.3%)	5 (50%)	1 (14.3%)
Distracted	4 (23.5%)	2 (20%)	2 (28.6%)
Sore	3 (17.6%)	1 (10%)	2 (28.6%)
Sick	2 (11.8%)	1 (10%)	1 (14.3%)
Lonely	3 (17.6%)	1 (10%)	2 (28.6%)

***Cold***

All sixteen of the students who completed a journal described being cold during the simulation in their journal, with entries about being cold ranging from 2 to 7 journal entries per student. All students, except for one from the 2020 cohort, also discussed this theme in the reflection paper.

In response to the cold, students attempted to use blankets and clothing to stay warm, rather than turning on their car for heat during the night. Despite bundling up in multiple layers, they were still cold. One student reflected as follows:

I was wearing two pairs of leggings and socks, a long sleeve t-shirt, a jacket, gloves, a hat, and a scarf...As the time passed, I could not keep my body warm. I could not feel my hands nor feet, and at some point, it was very difficult for me to breathe. (Participant 17, 2020)

Students expected it to be cold and believed they were prepared for the cold. Yet, several were surprised by how cold they became during the night. As one student wrote in their reflection paper:

I didn't know it was even possible to be that cold. I had on my shoes, two pairs of socks and three or four blankets, and I was still so cold that I thought my toes were going to fall off (Participant 9, 2019).

**Table 2***Journal Themes for 2019 and 2020 Combined*

Theme	Total Number (%) of Students Identifying Theme ( <i>n</i> =16*)	Total Number of Journal Entries Containing Theme	% of Journal Entries Containing Theme ( <i>n</i> =112)	Range of Journal Entries Containing Theme Per Student
Cold	16 (100%)	61	54	2 - 7
Uncomfortable	14 (88%)	42	38	0 - 5
Tired/Exhausted	13 (81%)	31	28	0 - 4
Scared/Anxious	8 (50%)	9	8	0 - 2
Sore	8 (50%)	11	10	0 - 2
Grateful	7 (44%)	10	9	0 - 3
Frustrated/Irritable	7 (44%)	8	7	0 - 2
Bored	7 (44%)	17	15	0 - 6
Lonely	4 (25%)	4	4	0 - 1
Depression/Sad	3 (19%)	3	3	0 - 1
Sick	3 (19%)	3	3	0 - 1
Hungry/Thirsty	3 (19%)	7	6	0 - 5
Distracted	2 (13%)	3	3	0 - 2
Guilty	1 (6%)	1	1	0 - 1

\*One student in 2019 cohort did not complete a journal

### ***Uncomfortable***

Thirteen students (76.5%) described the experience as uncomfortable within their reflection paper. In addition, discomfort, specifically due to the temperature and/or sleeping position, was discussed by 88% (*n*=14) of students in their journals, with the number of posts about discomfort ranging from 0 to 5 per student. Aside from the cold, cramped space and uncomfortable car seats played a role in their discomfort. One student, who was one of two people in a car, wrote in their reflection:

One main thing that made it difficult was the space!...It was so cramped, we had little to no room to move or readjust ourselves. With all our blankets, pillows, clothes (in case we needed more layers), food, drinks, backpacks, etc. Needless to say, we had a lot of stuff and it was just the two of us. I cannot even begin to imagine having a full four- to five-person family living in a car. (Participant 2, 2019)

Several students who shared the car with another student or companion were forced to sleep in an upright (seated) position, which they found uncomfortable. One student wrote:

[Name] took the back seat and laid down so she was very comfortable. I think if I was able to lay down, I would have slept more than I did. I found a comfortable position at one point during the night and didn't want to move at all. (Participant 16, 2020)

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Soreness was identified by 50% of students ( $n=8$ ) in the journals, with posts about soreness ranging from 0 to 2 per student. Students attributed the soreness to the cramped space and uncomfortable sleeping positions and, to a lesser extent, the cold temperatures. While soreness appeared in journals, thus reflecting their feelings at the moment they made the journal entry, the theme was discussed by only 3 students (17.6%) in their reflection papers, suggesting that though it was a salient issue during the experience, it was not one they identified in retrospect when they wrote their reflection paper.

### ***Tired/Exhausted***

Within the reflection papers, 12 students (70.6%) described the experience as tiring/exhausting due to their inability to sleep. In addition, 67% ( $n=6$ ) of the students discussed being tired and exhausted in their journals. Their inability to sleep was due to various factors, including the weather, lack of space, disruption to their usual routine, and fears about safety. The impact of cold and discomfort was common and described by one student who wrote, “I was cold and couldn’t fall asleep and stay asleep sleeping in a crowded space that wasn’t very comfortable” (Participant 11, 2019). Fluctuations in body temperature also contributed to sleep difficulty. One student stated, “I found it very hard to sleep because I was so cold and my body temperature was constantly fluctuating” (Participant 12, 2020).

Usual sleep routines were disrupted while sleeping in the car. For example, one student wrote: “I wasn’t in my room where my phone could charge all night and I could be on it. Usually at nighttime, I am on my phone until I want to sleep” (Participant 16, 2020). Another student wrote about how the disrupted sleep routine and subsequent anxiety interfered with their ability to sleep:

I usually sleep with a fan on...but in my car, I didn’t have anywhere to plug it in. I’m not one to sleep in silence because I feel like I begin to hear things that aren’t there. I begin to focus on sounds outside...The point is I do not like to sleep without a fan, so this was difficult (Participant 13, 2020).

In an attempt to get sleep, the students described shifting positions within their car in an attempt to find a comfortable place to sleep, as described by one student in their reflection:

Actually getting quality sleep was next to impossible. My backseat was so small, so I decided to move to the front seat and move it as far back as I could as well as recline it all the way back. Moving to the passenger seat allowed me to get sleep for about an hour to two hours at a time. (Participant 4, 2019)

Even with changing positions and other measures to achieve comfort, students rarely slept more than a few hours at a time. The average number of entries per student was 7. Given that students were in the car for 9 hours and instructed to make a journal entry each hour that they were awake (without setting an alarm to do so), this average indicates that students were awake much of the night, dozing for brief periods of time.

**Table 3***Journal Themes for 2019 and 2020 Separately*

Theme	Number (%) of Students Identifying Theme ( <i>n</i> =9*) 2019	Number (%) of Students Identifying Theme ( <i>n</i> =7) 2020	Total Number of Journal Entries Containing Factor 2019	Total Number of Journal Entries Containing Factor 2020	% Journal Entries Containing Theme ( <i>n</i> =64) 2019	% Journal Entries Containing Theme ( <i>n</i> =48) 2020	Range of Journal Entries Containing Theme Per Student 2019	Range of Journal Entries Containing Theme Per Student 2020
Cold	9 (100%)	7 (100%)	31	30	48%	63%	3 – 5	2 – 7
Uncomfortable	8 (89%)	6 (86%)	17	15	26.6%	31%	0 – 5	0 – 5
Tired/Exhausted	6 (67%)	7 (100%)	10	21	15.6%	44%	0 – 2	1 – 4
Scared/Anxious	4 (44%)	4 (57%)	4	5	6.2%	10%	0 – 1	0 – 2
Grateful	4 (44%)	3 (43%)	4	6	6.2%	13%	0 – 1	0 – 3
Frustrated/ Irritable	3 (33%)	4 (57%)	3	5	4.7%	10%	1 – 2	0 – 2
Sore	3 (33%)	5 (71%)	3	8	4.7%	17%	0 – 1	0 – 2
Lonely	3 (33%)	1 (14%)	3	1	4.7%	2%	0 – 1	0 – 1
Bored	2 (22%)	5 (71%)	3	14	4.7%	29%	0 – 2	0 – 6
Depression/Sad	2 (22%)	1 (14%)	2	1	3.1%	2%	0 - 1	0 - 1
Sick	2 (22%)	1 (14%)	2	1	3.1%	2%	0 – 1	0 – 1
Hungry/Thirsty	1 (11%)	2 (29%)	5	2	7.8%	10%	0 – 5	0 – 1
Distracted	1 (11%)	1 (14%)	1	2	1.6%	2%	0 – 1	0 – 2
Guilty	1 (11%)	0 (0%)	1	0	1.6%	0%	0 - 1	0

\*One student in 2019 cohort did not complete a journal

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### ***Scared/Anxious***

Within the reflection papers, 12 students (70.6%) described feeling fearful or anxious during the simulation. Overall, fear and anxiety appeared in 50% ( $n=8$ ) of the journals, with the number of entries discussing fear and anxiety ranging from 0 to 2 per student. As noted earlier, security patrolled the area, and the lot was well lit. In addition, the instructor also participated in the event and was parked among the students. Despite this, noise, exposure (through car windows), and random lights (likely flashlights of the security personnel and headlights that came on when participants started cars to warm up) were among the factors that contributed to the fear and anxiety reported by the student participants.

The noise of individuals talking in the parking lot on their way into the church was a source of fear for some students. One student described how the noise and a feeling of being “exposed” produced safety concerns for them: “Another difficulty I had was safety. Every little noise I heard startled me a lot, making it even harder to get comfortable because I felt so exposed” (Participant 9, 2019).

While most of the students “roomed” with others during the simulation, some students were alone in their cars, and this isolation contributed to their fear. One such student wrote, “I felt a bit worried for my safety sleeping alone in my car in a parking lot full of strangers” (Participant 4, 2019). Another student stated,

“It also can be very scary. When I was laying in my car I jumped a couple of times when I saw some lights flashing or people talking. You just never know what is going to happen when you are alone in your car.” (Participant 14, 2020)

Furthermore, this fear and anxiety occurred despite the students knowing they were in a safe environment, as evidenced by this excerpt from a journal: “There is an anxious feeling regarding security too. I have checked the locks on my car a few times, and I know there is security for this event, but I still can’t get the thought out of my head to check” (Participant 7, 2019). Similarly, students wrote, “Although I knew my best friend and I were in a safe environment, I still could not get over the paranoia of someone walking over and looking into my car, or worse, trying to break into the car” (Participant 5, 2019), and “It was weird knowing that anyone could walk up to our car at any point. Sleeping with windows all around me was freaking me out a little bit” (Participant 16, 2020). The fear and anxiety were present despite the fact that security was provided by the event sponsors, and the parking lot was well-lit.

### ***Other Themes***

In addition to the aforementioned themes, the themes of frustrated/irritable, depressed/sad, distracted, sick, and lonely appeared in less than 50% of the reflection papers (Table 1), with frustrated/irritable and depressed/sad appearing in at least 33% of the papers. Half of the participants reported feeling sore in their journals. Furthermore, over 40% of participants wrote about feeling grateful, frustrated/irritable, or bored in their journals (Table 2 and 3), while lonely, depressed/sad, sick, hungry, distracted, and guilty were included by 25% or fewer of the participants in their journals.

### **Comparison to Being Unsheltered**

None of the students believed the experience was a true representation of being unsheltered, with some identifying their simulation experience as luxurious. One student wrote the following in their reflection paper, “I believe this experience was privileged homelessness similar to ‘glamping’” (Participant 4, 2019). Regardless of the “luxurious” aspect of the experience in comparison to true unsheltered homelessness, one student recognized that it was a close representation when they wrote,

“So, I don’t really think it was an accurate representation, but I do think for what we got it was pretty eye opening. I think that this was as close as you could simulate it” (Participant 8, 2019).

Within the reflection papers, students were asked how they believed the simulation compared with the experiences of those who are actually unsheltered. (See Table 4) For the most part, students discussed differences rather than similarities in their reflections. However, some did briefly note that, like those who are unsheltered, they were cold and lonely during the simulation. The fact that they slept in a car was another similarity noted by students, while others identified this as a difference, given that not all individuals who are unsheltered have a car to sleep in. The most common differences discussed by the students were their access to a warm building with a restroom, a car with a tank of gas, food, the temporary nature of their unsheltered experience, the security provided by the event, and the space available in their car.

**Table 4**

*Reported Differences between Simulation and Actual Houselessness*

Theme	Total Number (%) of Students Identifying Theme (n=17)	Number (%) of Students Identifying Theme (n=7) 2020 only	Number (%) of Students Identifying Theme (n=10) 2019 only
Access to warm building with restrooms	13 (76.5%)	7 (100%)	6 (60%)
Warmth of car (full tank of gas)	13 (76.5%)	4 (57.1%)	9 (90%)
Access to food	13 (76.5%)	6 (85.7%)	7 (70%)
Access to restroom	11 (64.7%)	6 (85.7%)	5 (50%)
Temporary situation	9 (52.9%)	4 (57.1%)	5 (50%)
Security provided	8 (47.1%)	3 (42.9%)	5 (50%)
Room in car	5 (29.4%)	1 (14.3%)	4 (40%)
Technology available	3 (17.6%)	2 (28.6%)	1 (10%)

### ***Access to Car, Building, Food, & Restroom***

This discussion incorporates four of the most common differences students identified and elaborated upon within their reflection papers. Given that there was overlap in the quotes representing the differences (i.e., warmth was available due to their car and access to the building), the four differences are discussed together.

Over 75% of participants (n=13) identified their access to a warm building and food as a difference between their situation and that of those who are unsheltered. In addition, access to a restroom was noted by a total of 11 students (64.7%). As one student stated, “I imagine most of them don’t have cars to keep them warm. Having the church was another resource that we had that perhaps many homeless people do not have. We were provided snacks, a bathroom, and breakfast” (Participant 15, 2020). Another student wrote, “Besides having the option to go home, I was also able to go inside the church to use the restroom, get a snack, or have a hot beverage to help warm me up” (Participant 4, 2019).

In addition to the shelter provided by the sponsoring organization, thirteen students (76.5%) also discussed their warm car, which often contained a full tank of gas, as another difference between their experience and that of being unsheltered. The car provided shelter, and the full tank of gas allowed them to turn on their car periodically through the night when it became too cold. One student wrote in their reflection paper, “I had a car and a full tank of gas, which is a privilege in and of itself” (Participant 9, 2019). Several noted that this was not realistic for individuals who are unsheltered, who likely could not afford the “luxury” of a car or, if they did have a car, could not afford to use gas to provide warmth.

Despite the cold, participants were encouraged to start their cars as little as possible in order to more accurately simulate the experience of being unsheltered. Journal entries indicated that the students heeded this recommendation and started their cars infrequently during the night. Instead, they relied on multiple layers of clothing and blankets to keep warm.

### ***Temporary Situation***

The fact that the students could go home to their own beds immediately following the event was another difference that contributed to the “luxury” of the experience. Over half of the students (52.9%) discussed the temporary nature of their experience, in that it was only for one night, and they had the option to quit and go home at any time during the night. One student wrote, “After this, I was able to go home and get into bed, where other people do these things on the daily for survival and for family” (Participant 6, 2019). Another wrote, “We were able to leave at 6 am and go sleep in our beds. Most homeless people will have to get up to go about their day and have to return back to their car” (Participant 16, 2020). Aside from the fact that they could go home at the end of the simulation, the students were also able to take breaks from being unsheltered during the simulation. According to one student, “We felt the cold and the discomfort of sleeping in a car in the middle of the night, but we were able to take breaks from it if needed – a luxury the homeless population cannot enjoy” (Participant 5, 2019).

### ***Security Provided***

Though not as common as the aforementioned themes, almost half of the students (47.1%) identified the security provided at the event as a factor that differentiated their experience from that of those who are unsheltered. As one student reflected:

I was also in a protected environment right by a church, with people doing the same exact thing as me, as well as security patrolling throughout the night. I don’t know where people would park overnight, but I am sure it is not nearly as secure as our environment in the church parking lot. (Participant 9, 2019)

Similarly, a student from the 2020 cohort stated:

I also don’t know where they [the unsheltered] would park their car for the night. A lot of parking lots have certain hours that you cannot park your car there. Again, we had the church for this and we were pretty safe because we had so many people around us and others in the church still...If where they can actually park is limited, they may not always have the choice of parking somewhere safe. (Participant 16, 2020)

In addition, another aspect of security, specifically the fact that they were allowed access to legally park in the lot, was noted as a difference by one student who wrote:

Another aspect I thought about was the legality of what we were doing. We could stay in our cars in the church parking lot and were given these amenities to do so. Those that must resort to

sleeping in their vehicles overnight for shelter don't always experience the same welcome from business owners or even law enforcement and could face citations and penalties for trying to survive the night. (Participant 7, 2019)

### ***Room in Car***

Though less common, students (29.4%) noted that their simulation experience likely differed from that of individuals who are unsheltered, and more specifically, those experiencing vehicular homelessness, due to the amount of room they had in their car. While discomfort was a common experience for the students due to the cramped space in their cars, they also realized that their experience of being "cramped" was not the same as that of families who live in cars:

However, homeless people who live out of their cars, have all their belongings with them. So, they might not have the room to put the back seats down and lay down. They also might be living in the car with more than just one person. So they probably wouldn't have the room for all their belongings and another person. (Participant 11, 2019)

In addition, one student also noted that the new, spacious car she borrowed from her mother for the event most likely did not reflect the reality of those who are unsheltered.

### **Impact on Thoughts, Feelings, and Knowledge**

While students did not perceive the simulation as a true representation of being unsheltered, they did perceive it as impactful. Within the reflection papers, 100% of the students described the experience as "eye-opening." To begin, the simulation and educational activities/sessions that were offered during the event helped to drive home the prevalence of being unsheltered in the community. As noted by one student in their reflection paper, "This experience has opened my eyes to how some homeless people live, which is not acceptable. My eyes have been opened to the increasing rate of homeless people and people living in their cars which breaks my heart" (Participant 2, 2019). In addition, students also reported changes in their views about the causes and difficulties of being unsheltered, as well as increases in empathy and advocacy motivation.

### ***Views about "Fault"***

The experience challenged students' pre-existing beliefs about the causes of being unsheltered or, more specifically, who is at fault. In particular, the simulation shifted their assignment of fault from the individual, leading them to recognize that there are factors outside of one's control. For example, one student wrote: "This made me change my mind about thinking that people are responsible for everything that happens to them" (Participant 17, 2020). In particular, the simulation appeared to challenge the belief that being unsheltered results from an individual's failure to work and earn an income. Students reported new awareness about the multiple situations that contribute to being unsheltered, as demonstrated by one student in their reflection:

It provided me with a more accurate perspective of what homelessness and poverty is. It showed me that people do not choose to live in the car just because they did not work hard enough, rather there are multiple factors such as violence, poverty, and/or lack of resources that puts individuals in these predicaments." (Participant 17, 2020)

With this shift in viewpoint, students found themselves questioning societal views and the treatment of the unsheltered population. In turn, their focus shifted to advocating for change. As one student stated, "Society needs to stop thinking about homeless people as a burden and as less of a human and do things that will help them out of their situation" (Participant 15, 2020). Another student echoed

this sentiment and specifically denounced the lack of empathy and understanding in society for individuals who are unsheltered in the following excerpt:

I felt sad for people that are homeless and thought about ways the government or other organizations could combat homelessness in our country. Another thing I learned from sleeping in my car is how the United States does not seem to pay a lot of attention to the homeless population and what they go through. It seems as though people do not understand or care how serious this epidemic is and how it can really negatively affect someone's life in so many ways. (Participant 12, 2020)

### ***Empathy***

The shifts in viewpoints were accompanied by, or perhaps resulted from, an increase in empathy that occurred due to the simulation. One student wrote, "I am embarrassed to say that before this I really didn't have a lot of sympathy for the homeless. I was blessed enough to never have to think about it, but after this, my perspective has changed so much" (Participant 8, 2019). Another student stated, "It gave me a more open perspective on homeless people and a more empathetic eye when I see a homeless person on the street..." (Participant 5, 2019).

### ***Magnitude of Difficulty***

Through the simulation and their reflection on the experience, students came to realize the full scope of the challenges experienced by individuals who are unsheltered. One student summed it up as, "Through my experience I would have to say that being homeless is degrading and epically difficult" (Participant 10, 2019). Another student commented on the fact that being unsheltered isn't a part-time situation, rather it's a 24/7 "battle" that is not limited to certain hours of the day. As one student wrote: "This experience made me realize that the homeless population is living a struggle many will never know, and it does not stop when the sun goes down – it is a constant battle they must face" (Participant 5, 2019).

The simulation also shattered the belief that being unsheltered would not be very difficult. This shift in perspective is reflected by the following comment:

Before the experience I thought to myself that I could probably survive being homeless, but I don't believe that was the case at all anymore. I was able to have an indoor sanctuary where I could go to the bathroom, have a snack, or even warm up. Thinking about how people must huddle under garbage or start fires just to stay warm through the night, I don't think I could make it. (Participant 13, 2020)

For some students, the shift in perspective was related specifically to their beliefs about living in a car. For example, it appears as though some held the viewpoint that living in a car provided some sort of shelter and, therefore, shouldn't be that "bad." One student wrote:

This experience really opened up my eyes to what people go through, and what homelessness means. I hear people say they used to live in their car, and I would always think, 'well, at least they had their car, that probably wasn't that bad.' No, I was very wrong, and I had underestimated how hard it would be to spend even one night in my car. (Participant 9, 2019)

Recognition of the difficulty experienced by those who are unsheltered included acknowledgement that being unhoused is more complicated than simply lacking housing. As one student stated, "Homelessness is so much more than not having a place to lay your head" (Participant 8, 2019).

Rather, students came to realize the multiple challenges that accompany being unsheltered and the impact on well-being and daily functioning. As one student stated in their reflection:

Having the opportunity to be part of the night in the car made me realize that homelessness is much more than a lack of money, but rather it is a complex network of constant challenges that have the potential to negatively impact people's overall well-being. (Participant 17, 2020)

In particular, the students discussed the difficulties individuals who are unsheltered must face in their daily lives. Given the discomfort and exhaustion they experienced during the simulation, it is not surprising that they discussed the struggles associated with sleep deprivation. In particular, students reflected on how difficult it would be to fulfill their responsibilities when they are so exhausted from sleeping in a car. One student wrote, "I could not imagine doing this everyday then have to wake up and try to be functional or do something productive during my day like go to work or school" (Participant 12, 2020). Likewise, another student wrote, "I was exhausted. It would be so hard to do that everyday, and to think that people have to do that with kids as well is heartbreaking" (Participant 8, 2019).

Some students attempted to do homework and related tasks while in their car during the simulation. The content of journals and reflection papers indicates that no one was successful in their attempts. Rather, they realized it was difficult and, in some cases, impossible to do complete tasks related to one's job in such a cold, cramped space with limited lighting. One student reflected on the impact living in a car would have on their ability to fulfill their job responsibilities:

Attempting to complete work in the car made me think about people who would attempt to maintain a job and deal with a lack of residence as well. Homelessness impacts many different individuals in our society, such as a teacher who must grade papers or a case manager who must write case notes in the little time they have while dealing with the additional stress and work that homelessness brings. I doubt I would be able to stay on top of my work at all if I was spending each night in my car. (Participant 7, 2019)

Other students focused on the impact of living in a car on one's academics and education. Prior to the simulation, the idea of trying to complete homework in a car was outside their realm of thought; however, through their attempts to do so during the simulation, they came to recognize the challenges living in a car poses for students.

This experience got me thinking about things I never had before. I understand how hard it is to get things done while living in your car. I've heard stories of high school or college students who live in their car. I couldn't help but think how hard it must be to do homework in the car. I really tried to do it and I couldn't bring myself to focus in such an uncomfortable spot. (Participant 16, 2020).

Through the simulation, students came to realize the "costs" associated with living in a car, many of which were previously discussed. The aforementioned issue of space and discomfort was one of the difficulties students reflected upon from the standpoint of a family versus a single individual. One student wrote:

I was thinking about how hard it would be for a family of four or more to have to live in a car. Before this experience, I always pictured a single person living in their car. I can't even start to imagine how tight they must feel with a whole family in there. (Participant 16, 2020)

Similarly, students acquired a new awareness of the decision-making that must be made about possessions when living in a car due to space limitations. As one student wrote,

We stayed in the car for only one night, so we took what we thought was necessary for those 11 hours. However, this made me think about those who have been evicted from the home. What do they take in such short notice of time? What is going through their minds? Do they take their family pictures or important documents? (Participant 17, 2020)

Another student wrote, “The experience showed me that you have to prioritize what you really need with you to survive. You can’t bring everything” (Participant 14, 2020).

Fear and anxiety were common among the students during the simulation. While students had security and were parked legally during the simulation, they realized this is not the case for families who are living in their cars. As they reflected on their experience, students acknowledged the fear and anxiety parents must feel about their children.

The level of nervousness and anxiety that parents with small children must feel sleeping in their car overnight, not to mention the possibility of law enforcement being less than understanding with their situation. (Participant 7, 2019)

In addition, another student commented that they likely wouldn’t get any sleep if they were a parent due to the constant fear about their children’s safety.

Another challenge identified by students was that of food security. Most, if not all, of the students brought snacks (including pizza) with them to eat during the night. As the night progressed, they came to realize some of the other food-related struggles, other than lack of food, that those living in a car likely encounter. Food storage, in particular, was a focus in this student’s reflection paper, “Another challenge I could see people running into would be keeping food. You have no way to keep things fresh...” (Participant 8, 2019). Specifically, students identified the lack of a refrigerator, microwave, etc., as posing challenges to food security and quality of diet.

### **Discussion**

Students described the simulation as physically and emotionally taxing, reporting feelings of cold, discomfort, exhaustion, and anxiety. Despite multiple layers of clothing and extra blankets, they struggled to maintain warmth throughout the night. The combination of low temperatures, cramped space, and upright sleeping positions resulted in physical discomfort and disrupted sleep. In addition, fear and anxiety were common, with students reporting hypervigilance even though they recognized the parking lot was well-lit and monitored by security. This persistent unease further disrupted sleep and contributed to overall exhaustion. These findings mirror those of previous research on vehicular homelessness in which individuals reported heightened vigilance due to safety concerns (Calhoun, Brisson, Wilson, Bacon, & Cordle, 2023; National Law Center on Homelessness & Poverty, 2019; Wakin, 2008, 2014) and discomfort resulting from extreme weather and cramped space (Calhoun, Brisson, Wilson, Bacon, & Cordle, 2023; Wehman-Brown, 2016).

Despite the similarities between students’ reported feelings during the simulation and the published literature, students did not consider the simulation to be an accurate reflection of the unsheltered experience. While some noted minor similarities, such as exposure to cold and discomfort, most focused on the advantages that differentiated their experience from that of those who are unsheltered. The most frequently identified differences included access to a warm building with food and restrooms, a car with a full tank of gas, the temporary duration of the event, the security provided by the organizers, and the extra space available in their vehicles. Their reflections were insightful and mirrored challenges documented in previous research. In particular, they recognized the prohibitive expense associated with maintaining a full tank of gas for warmth (Calhoun, Brisson, Wilson, Bacon, &

Cordle, 2023; Homeless Policy Research Institute, 2018) and the barriers associated with using public restrooms (National Law Center on Homelessness & Poverty, 2019). In contrast to the safety and legality of the simulation environment, students discussed the challenges those experiencing vehicular homelessness must encounter when trying to find a safe and legal place to park each night (USICH, 2022; Wakin, 2014).

Although students recognized that the Night in a Car simulation did not fully replicate the experience of being unsheltered, all described it as “eye-opening” and impactful, highlighting shifts in thoughts, feelings, and knowledge. Walking in the shoes of an individual who is unsheltered for one night and learning more about homelessness from the educational components of the event resulted in students seeing the issue through a new lens. In particular, the simulation challenged students’ pre-existing beliefs about the causes of homelessness, shifting perceptions of fault from the individual to broader systemic factors such as poverty, violence, and lack of resources. Their reflections indicated the simulation facilitated increased empathy, recognition of the magnitude of challenges experienced by individuals and families who are unsheltered, and a heightened motivation to advocate for change. The simulation also revealed how living in a car impacts responsibilities such as work, school, and parenting. These findings parallel those of previous research that reported increased knowledge, altered attitudes, and greater empathy among college students following simulation experiences (Arnett-Hartwick & Davis, 2019; Ayed et al., 2021; Carrick-Hagenbarth & Maton, 2023; Geier et al., 2022; McKinney & Snedker, 2017; Moak et al., 2020; Parks et al., 2023; Schachman et al., 2024; Wilson, Bender, & DeChants, 2019), thus indicating the “Night in a Car” simulation had similar effects on students. Finally, from a policy perspective, students’ experiences during the night (e.g., fear, cold) and newfound insight into the challenges associated with living in a car provide support for Housing First Policy initiatives that recognize housing is an essential precursor to attending to other needs (National Alliance to End Homelessness, 2022).

### **Limitations and Suggestions**

While the simulation had obvious benefits for students, it was not without limitations. To begin, the Night in a Car assignment was not required; rather, it was one option from which students could choose. The other options involved writing a theory application paper based on a movie or a stressor they had personally experienced in their family. Therefore, the students who chose to complete the Night in a Car assignment may not be representative of the larger student body. Students were not asked to provide reasons for their choice of assignment. While informal conversations indicated avoidance of the cold was one reason, additional reasons are not known. Did those who chose the other options not have access to a car? Did some avoid it because the assignment posed the risk of inducing trauma due to prior experiences? Did students who chose the assignment differ from those who didn’t in their attitudes about homelessness? Incorporating these questions into future research would provide context for the discussion of study findings and be useful in reducing accessibility barriers to the simulation (i.e., lack of a car).

The students who participated in the simulation and study were homogeneous in terms of their observable demographic characteristics. It is possible the sample was more diverse in terms of covert demographics; however, no demographic information was collected due to the small sample size and the desire to protect their identities. Furthermore, the event was held during the winter season for both years of study, with the date determined by the sponsoring organization. While some of the themes, such as anxiety and discomfort, may be consistent across seasons, there would likely be differences in the students’ experiences that would produce varying transformational outcomes. Gathering more detailed demographic information, recruiting a more diverse sample to participate in the simulation, and

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conducting the simulation in other seasons or geographic areas would contribute to a greater understanding of the impact of the simulation on students.

The simulation occurred during the third or fourth week of the semester, with the reflection paper due four weeks after the simulation. The four weeks between the simulation and the assignment deadline pose two potential issues with consistency and memory. While some students may have written their paper immediately or soon after the simulation, others may have waited until closer to the due date, thus creating an inconsistent time frame for reflection before writing the paper. A significant delay may have resulted in students forgetting aspects of the simulation. On the other hand, one could argue that students who waited to write their paper wrote about the most important impacts of the experience, those that remained salient to them weeks after participating in the simulation. An instructor can overcome these issues by setting a due date closer to the simulation, thus decreasing the likelihood of memory issues and ensuring that all students write the paper within a smaller period of time to reduce inconsistency between students.

While not necessarily a limitation of the study, the issue of “person-first” language is one worthy of discussion. As illustrated by quotes used to support the themes, some students failed to use “person-first” language in their journals and reflection papers. On the one hand, their choice of words could reflect pejorative views about being unsheltered. On the other hand, the terminology could be due to the timing of the simulation and assignment due date during the semester, as both preceded the course module on housing insecurity. Therefore, their failure to use “person-first” language may reflect a lack of awareness about the pejorative nature of the terminology. While there is no way to know the rationale behind their choice of terminology, this issue highlights the importance of incorporating “person first” language throughout the HDFS curriculum.

Given the potential for varied emotional responses to the simulation, including the possibility of trauma, the instructor took several steps to mitigate risk and prioritize student well-being. Prior to the event, students were fully informed about the nature of the simulation and advised to select one of the other assignment options if they anticipated the “Night in a Car” event could be trauma-inducing. The instructor explicitly emphasized that participation in the simulation was entirely voluntary and communicated that they were free to leave the event at any time if they felt uncomfortable or unsafe. While some students reported experiencing fear and anxiety in their journals and reflection papers, none left the simulation early, nor did they report lasting fear or trauma. In order to reduce the likelihood of re-traumatization or vicarious trauma, instructors who utilize this simulation are encouraged to implement the aforementioned safeguards and to consider implementing other aspects of trauma-informed pedagogy (e.g., Clark, 2023).

Despite the limitations, the Night in a Car simulation was a valuable learning experience for students. The simulation aligned with key principles of Transformative Learning Theory (Mezirow, 1991, 2008) by providing students with a disorienting dilemma that challenged their pre-existing assumptions about homelessness and requiring them to engage in both self-reflection and dialogue. Although the simulation did not fully replicate the experience of being unsheltered, it exposed students to the discomfort, fear, and additional hardships associated with sleeping in a car, prompting critical reflection on the causes, consequences, and daily realities of being unsheltered. Through the experience, students developed greater empathy, questioned prior assumptions that assigned fault to individuals, and recognized the complexity and magnitude of challenges faced by individuals and families who are unsheltered and, more specifically, experiencing vehicular homelessness.

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**Appendix: Night in a Car Assignment Instructions****If you choose this option, you will do the following:**

1. Register and participate in the [Night in a Car](#) event.
2. Take a selfie every hour that you are awake during your night in the car. (If you fall asleep, you can have someone else who is in your car take a picture of you sleeping.)
3. Record your feelings/thoughts every hour that you are awake during the night. You should have one post for each hour you are awake. How are you feeling? What are you thinking about living in a car? Etc.
4. Prepare a digital journal of the night by integrating your hourly photos (selfies) and reflections into one document.
5. Write a reflection paper – Within the reflection paper, discuss the following:
  - a. What was it like to be unsheltered (living in your car) for one night? Within this, discuss what was difficult about the experience, factors that made it difficult, etc. (You can pull from your digital journal for this section too.)
  - b. To what degree do you think your experience simulates the true experience of being unsheltered? Discuss how it was similar and different.
  - c. What effects did this experience have on your thoughts, feelings, knowledge, etc.?