San Francisco’s Chinatown
Resilience in the Face of Poverty and Homelessness

An Analysis with Recommendations
This study was undertaken at
The Elfenworks Foundation, “In Harmony With Hope”

Lead Author:
Blair Vorsatz was the lead researcher and writer for this paper, during his time as an intern at The Elfenworks Foundation. A graduate of Georgetown and currently pursuing graduate studies at Harvard, Blair is also currently serving as an intern on the National Security & International Policy Team for the Center for American Progress in Washington, D.C.

Co-Author:
Lauren Speeth, DBA DMin, is the CEO of The Elfenworks Foundation and the creator of multimedia content – including books, articles, music, and short films – focusing on social entrepreneurship and domestic poverty and inequality.

Contributing Writer:
Katherine Kam is a writer and editor in the San Francisco Bay Area who brings insight, analysis, and strong storytelling to complex issues. During her career in journalism, she has written about health and mental health, medicine, travel, cross-cultural issues, and many other topics.

Cover, Design, and Layout:
Michael Dalling, The Elfenworks Foundation

Photography Credit:
Lauren Speeth

Acknowledgements:
Special Thanks to Kenneth Tam, Executive Director, who shepherded the project, and Marian Brown Sprague, Editor.

The Elfenworks Foundation
20 Park Road Suite D
Burlingame CA 94010

Media Contact
elfenworks@elfenworks.org

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Abstract

San Francisco’s Chinatown is arguably the city’s most socio-economically disadvantaged neighborhood, an island of concentrated poverty in an ethnic immigrant enclave. It is home to more than 15,000 inhabitants, largely foreign-born Chinese immigrants who are as a whole slightly older than the San Francisco average. Chinatown’s poverty rate is almost three times the San Francisco norm, its unemployment rate is over two times the norm, and the majority of its households do not have any English-speaking adults. Although the size of Chinatown’s homeless population is not entirely known, the point-in-time homeless count data suggests that the maximum possible homeless rate is 1.60%. How is it possible that Chinatown’s residents endure the city’s worst socio-economic disadvantage and yet show a reported homeless rate that appears to be close to zero? Chinatown families seem to be coping with an approximate “socio-economic homeless” status by prioritizing very cheap, cramped shelter. Single Room Occupancies, or SROs, allow residents to have shelter by night, but are so small that their occupants often choose to stay outside during the day. This is termed de jure homelessness. While not ideal, this coping strategy seems to be the best of poor choices, providing certain advantages over splitting up a family and the dangers associated with other forms of “shelters,” and especially over de facto homelessness. One of these advantages is the environment of shared cultural identity: cultural comfort and a sense of community.

Chinatown’s story is the American story: an older generation of immigrants sacrifices its own personal comforts, investing instead in their children’s futures. They settle together, in response to a variety of pressures. In so doing, the older generation may retain language and customs, placing itself at a disadvantage as compared to other impoverished groups that have no language or cultural barriers to self-advocacy. The calculated self-sacrifice of SRO residency and local employment, while onerous for parents, may provide (or be expected to provide) a strong platform from which the next generation can ascend socio-economically. In this paper, we examine the current state of the community in San Francisco’s Chinatown, with a specific focus on its residents’ use of the SRO as a coping mechanism for extreme poverty.

Gaining a Sense of the SRO

Single Room Occupancy hotels, or “residential hotels,” have been a mainstay in major cities for centuries. In San Francisco, SROs were once the most prevalent type of housing. The epidemic of homelessness we face now can be traced, in part, to the destruction of many of these units in recent years. Much of this homelessness came under the guise of “blight removal,” through redevelopment agencies, without affordable replacement.

SROs are small: a single unit averages 8’ x 10’ inclusive. An SRO of this size would be roughly equivalent to living in a large walk-in closet or a gardening storage shed. Imagine standing on an HP VantagePoint touch screen whiteboard substitute, stretched flat on the ground, or moving in with a few other people in a space only a touch larger than the average office worker’s 75-square-foot office space in 2011. So, what does it mean when a family resides in such a space? The family would share communal toilets and showers with other residents. Limited or non-existent communal kitchen facilities would impair a family’s ability to economize with healthy, home-cooked meals. And because there is not enough space to stay comfortably inside during the day, families would be given the stigma-bearing label of “de jure homeless.” It is easy to see how an argument could be made that SROs are sub-optimal. But if you had the choice of being warm and safe, indoors, or being truly homeless, which would you choose?
Hidden Chinatown

San Francisco’s Chinatown comprises the 20-square-block area lying between Kearny, Grant, Stockton, and Powell Streets. With a population of 15,000, Chinatown is the most densely populated urban area west of Manhattan. As a whole, its residents are Chinese immigrants who speak limited English, and who either live in poverty or very close to it. Many residents work as unskilled laborers for low wages, and almost all rent their housing. Chinatown’s residents are older and have a lower degree of educational attainment than the San Francisco average. Some residents have lived in Chinatown since migrating to the USA, but not all. Some have chosen to move back and live out their remaining years, and, in a final act of self-sacrifice, to divest their assets to their children. Cantonese is the dominant Chinese dialect of the area, making San Francisco’s Chinatown a preferred first destination for immigrants from southern China.

Chinatown is also one of San Francisco’s most famous tourist attractions. Every year, roughly 2 million visitors stroll through Chinatown to visit the lively restaurants, tea houses, curio shops, and Asian grocery and fish markets. But few are aware of the families that live in the SROs above the storefronts in one of the city’s poorest and densest neighborhoods.

Since many Chinatown residents are newcomers, they speak little or no English. Often, they find work in Chinatown restaurants, where labor laws are frequently ignored, according to the Chinese Progressive Association (CPA), a nonprofit group that advocates on behalf of Chinatown residents. Many workers are subjected to wage theft, including lack of overtime pay. In San Francisco, the minimum wage in 2014 was $10.74, but many workers in Chinatown earned only $5 to $6 per hour. Some workers have also complained that their bosses take their tips. According to the CPA, Chinatown workers are also exploited in other industries, such as retail and construction.

Given such meager wages, Chinatown workers must often live in SROs if they want to remain in the area, although some move to less expensive areas outside the city, such as Concord or Pinole. Moving out of the SROs can be difficult, though, and families might stay for years or even decades.

Some of the SRO buildings are about 100 years old and in poor condition. Landlords are often slow to make repairs, according to the residents of one building, who complained that they have sometimes lacked electricity or running water for two days. Other residents have complained of slow repairs to broken locks on outside doors, which makes it easier for trespassers to enter and rob or burglarize.

Many SROs exist quietly, with no obvious signs outside of the buildings to mark them as residential hotels. On Stockton Street, one of Chinatown’s main arteries, one SRO does identify itself as a hotel, its name featured on a sign above the sidewalk. A walk up the front stairs leads to a long hallway lined with tiny, individual rooms. The rooms are often stuffy, so residents frequently leave their doors open for ventilation.

In one room with the door wide open, a young mother stands, cradling her toddler in her arms. Behind the two, a clutter of belongings fills up almost the entire space: a bunk bed, table, clothes, dishes, and other personal items. The space is so crowded that the room has only about four square feet of clear space near the doorway in which to move—literally no place for the youngster to crawl.

The room also offers no privacy. Along the room’s back wall, a large window opens up, but not to the outside world. Instead, it reveals a small communal kitchen with one stove, enabling families to look into the young mother’s room whenever they cook.
All of the residents on the floor share one toilet and shower. Raising children in an SRO is extremely difficult, given the lack of space for youngsters to play and study, as well as the minimal and often unsanitary kitchen and bath facilities. Without laundry rooms, residents must also hand-wash and hang laundry. For elderly residents, the lack of elevators within the buildings poses significant problems, especially if they have trouble with mobility or carrying heavy items.

While residents can rely on one another for some help, such as hand-me-down clothing or advice on cooking, tensions can also erupt over noise or spending too much time in the bath area while other residents are waiting.

Residents establish routines to adapt to the hardships. They try to stagger their cooking times. They look for ways to escape the confines to walk or exercise or socialize. The SROs are so crowded that mothers must take their children outside to play. Chinatown’s local park, Portsmouth Square, is often called Chinatown’s “living room” because it offers parents, children and the elderly some relief from their cramped quarters. On any given day, old men gather there to talk and play board games, while nearby, children frolic on the playground.

### Chinatown’s History of Discrimination

San Francisco’s Chinatown has been around for almost as long as San Francisco itself, and so has racial discrimination. The area was incorporated in 1847, and the first Chinese immigrants arrived the following year.\textsuperscript{ix} This influx of Chinese was so significant that San Francisco is known as “Old Gold Mountain” (金山:jiùjīnshān) in Chinese. As with other waves of immigrants – the Irish, the Mexicans, and so on – mostly males came to this country to work, where they were both exploited and resented. Many became contract laborers and were willing to work harder and at lower wages than the locals, exerting significant downward pressure on wages and putting many resident laborers out of work; this created a socio-economic basis for ethnic antagonism, leading to resentment, discrimination, and segregation. Anti-miscegenation laws criminalized interracial marriage, and as early as 1852, Governor John Bigler of California demanded Chinese exclusion on the grounds that the Chinese were “nonassimilable.”\textsuperscript{x} In 1854, the California Supreme Court, in Hall v. People, ruled that Chinese testimony against whites was inadmissible in a court of law because "the same rule which would admit them to testify, would admit them to all the equal rights of citizenship, and [then] we might see them at the polls, in the jury box, upon the bench, and in our legislative halls."\textsuperscript{xi} In the years that followed, anti-Chinese sentiments intensified, driving them out of jobs deemed more desirable by the Caucasian majority. In the late 1870s, fears of the “yellow peril” added fuel to the rallying cry of the Workingman’s Party: “the Chinese must go!”\textsuperscript{xii}

Subsequent laws and ordinances only formalized the segregation and discrimination of the Chinese, effectively codifying racism. The Chinese Exclusion Act, passed in 1882 and repeatedly extended, was designed to exclude Chinese immigrants and deny naturalization and democratic rights to those already in the US.\textsuperscript{xiii} Chinese immigrants were effectively cut off from China “like orphans,” yet disenfranchised from the Euro-American mainstream; some oriented their lives towards an eventual return to China,\textsuperscript{xiv} and others worked to create a sense of home in the diaspora, maintaining an emphasis on customs, festivals, language, culture, and, of course, success.\textsuperscript{xv} All of this only reinforced their “nonassimilable” status, as many simply stopped trying to integrate with American society. Chinese seclusion was intensified by further \textit{de jure} oppression, most notably the Anti-Miscegenation Law (1906), the Immigration Act (1907), the Alien Land Laws (1913) and the Alien Act (1924).\textsuperscript{xvi} This medley of laws prohibited interracial Chinese marriages, excluded illiterate Chinese from entering the US, kept Chinese from owning land, and prevented many immigrants’ families, still living in China, from joining them in the
US. California Attorney General Ulysses Webb explained the motivation for this legal restriction: “race undesirability.”xvii This discrimination and de facto second-class citizen classification was not lost on the Chinese. Were it not for the San Francisco fire of 1906, which wiped out all “official” records, the Chinese population would not be what it is today. As Gim Chang, a Chinese resident of San Francisco in the early 20th century, wrote of the time:

"I myself rarely left Chinatown, only when I had to buy American things downtown. The area around Union Square was a dangerous place for us, you see, especially at nighttime before the quake [1906]. Chinese were often attacked by thugs there and all of us had to have a police whistle with us all the time."xviii

While the 1940s marked a turning point in the treatment of the Chinese, improvements had largely halted by the late 1960's. The Magnuson Act of 1943 repealed the Exclusion Act of 1882, allowing 105 immigrants per year, and legislation in 1946, 1953, and 1961 expanded the annual allowed inflow of Chinese.xix In 1963, President Kennedy called the quota system “intolerable,” and took up immigration reform. With the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965, immigration restrictions were ended and Chinese Americans, as well as many other minorities, were returned many of their basic rights. The new wave of immigrants who subsequently entered San Francisco, and the greater Bay Area, included many wealthy Chinese who were escaping political instability or repression. The influx of wealthier Chinese effectively bifurcated San Francisco's Chinese population into two distinct socio-economic classes: the poor working class in the original Stockton Chinatown and the richer middle class of professionals and small business owners who resided in other districts (largely the Clement, Irving, and Noriega Street areas). As Ronald Skeldon describes it, “flight of capital” from China brought many affluent, well-educated, professionally successful Hong Kong immigrants to San Francisco.xx The attribution of the “model minority” stereotype to this segment of the local Chinese population has helped to obscure the socio-economic disadvantage of those who still live in the original Chinatown, those at the very margins who rely on Chinatown's availability of high-density SRO housing, and who find comfort in its cultural familiarities. Consequently, the Chinese were conferred few affirmative action-type advantages following this wave of immigration, leaving many of the poor Chinese immigrants without (or with disproportionately little) government assistance.

**Chinatown’s Linguistic Situation**

The neighborhood is predominantly Chinese, with 84% of the residents being Asian.xxii Seventy-five percent of residents are foreign born, and 84% of Asian-language speaking households live in “linguistic isolation,” meaning that no one over the age of 14 speaks English.xxiii If an immigrant works two jobs, and is raising children, there aren't a lot of hours left in the day to learn English. And, “without a good command of English, they cannot move out of the ethnic economy.”xxiv So long as residents live, work, and purchase entirely within Chinatown, the lack of English proficiency may never be felt as a disadvantage. In fact, it can be a source of advantage to shops within the area. On the downside, linguistic and cultural isolation can hinder self-advocacy efforts, leaving residents with a sense of powerlessness within the greater society. Haines (2001) alludes to the “vicious circle” of social isolation that results from reliance on the enclave community. In Chinatown, there are fewer opportunities for interaction with larger society, but because there are sources of information – television and news – in Chinese, that isolation isn’t complete. What is lacking is the ability to communicate – to bridge the divide between Chinatown and wider society as a whole. Meanwhile, as the older generation remains socially, linguistically, and professionally incapable of leaving Chinatown, it would appear logical to place “their hope...with their children.”xxiv
Chinatown’s Socio-Economic Situation

As shown in Figure 1, below, San Francisco’s Chinatown population is at a socio-economic disadvantage when compared with San Francisco as a whole. Although the city enjoys one of the higher average incomes in the nation, Chinatown itself offers a median household income of only $17,630, 70% below the San Francisco average and yielding a poverty rate of 31%. And the majority of households meet the legal definition of poverty, or else are on the verge of doing so. This can be better seen in Figure 2, which shows that Chinatown’s median family income is only 22% above the federal poverty line and 61% below the Self Sufficiency Standard for a one adult, two-child family, a standard established by the Insight Center for Community Economic Development in 2008. Up to 25% of Chinatown’s households may even live in extreme poverty.

The unemployment rate in Chinatown is 15%. While there exist some other groups who have higher unemployment rates, such as young adult African-American males who lack a high school diploma, it is still three times higher than the rest of the city as a whole. With 60% of its residents lacking a high school diploma, a rate four times the San Francisco average, those jobs that can be had are often unskilled, low-wage jobs. A large senior citizen population (39% of Chinatown residents are over the age of 60) likely exacerbates the economic burdens placed on many households.

Figure 1: Summary of Chinatown Residents’ Socio-Economic State

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Asian/Pacific Islander</th>
<th>Foreign Born</th>
<th>Asian-Speaking Households in &quot;Linguistic Isolation&quot;</th>
<th>Unemployment Rate</th>
<th>Poverty Rate</th>
<th>Median Household Income</th>
<th>Less Than High School Education</th>
<th>Senior Citizens (Aged 60+)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>84%</td>
<td>75%</td>
<td>84%</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>31%</td>
<td>$17,630</td>
<td>60%</td>
<td>39%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 2: Chinatown’s Median Family Income Compared to Income Standards for SF Families

A neighborhood comparison is displayed below in Figure 3. Compared to the other San Francisco neighborhoods, Chinatown has the largest percentage of ethnic Asians and foreign-born residents (immigrants). Its residents have the lowest educational attainment, the largest language barrier, and the lowest median household income. Chinatown boasts San Francisco’s highest poverty rate and the second-highest unemployment rate. It appears to be an overwhelmingly poor neighborhood, as shown by its third-lowest share of single family housing and lowest rate of vehicles per capita, both of which are proxies for neighborhood wealth. At the same time, the San Francisco Bay area is one of the least affordable locations in the country to rent or buy a home. High demand for any housing within
Chinatown, including SRO housing, continues to place upward pressures on all rents. The combination of low income and high rent makes the neighborhood one of the most expensive, in the experience of its residents.

When these statistics are taken in context, one could argue that Chinatown’s residents are the city’s most socio-economically disadvantaged group. How that disadvantage is experienced, given that San Francisco is one of America’s most wealthy communities, and given the conditions from which some have fled to America, has not been the subject of much scientific inquiry.

Chinatown has the largest share of residents in service occupations and the smallest share in managerial/professional occupations. This is often a telling statistic. In the mindset of most Americans, occupation is a source of personal pride, and also serves as a proxy for socio-economic well-being. But what of the mindset of Chinatown residents, many of whom may take pride in self-sacrifice in menial jobs in order to foster the next generation? As far as we can tell, this has not been a subject of much scientific inquiry.
The Question of Homelessness

Unfortunately, we could find no comprehensive information on San Francisco Chinatown’s homeless population; this area is largely an academic vacuum. Failing that, we must begin our analysis on a larger scale with citywide data and moving progressively smaller, later analyzing district data and even the very limited Chinatown data.

City-Level Homeless Estimates

San Francisco’s city-level data clearly highlights the low relative ethnic homeless rate of Asians and Pacific Islanders. In 2013, of the 7,350 homeless persons reported in San Francisco, only 5% (368 people) were labeled as being Asian or Pacific Islander. Given that 34% of the city’s total population (273,780 people) was Asian or Pacific Islander, this ethnic group has an unbelievably low homeless rate, at only 0.13%. As shown below in Table 4, the next lowest ethnic homeless rate is almost four times greater, and the largest is over 26 times greater.

Table 4: San Francisco’s Homeless by Ethnicity

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
<th>Percent of Population</th>
<th>Number of Persons in SF</th>
<th>Share of Homeless Population</th>
<th>Number of Homeless Persons</th>
<th>Ethnic Homeless Rate</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>African American</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>48314</td>
<td>24%</td>
<td>1764</td>
<td>3.65%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian or Pacific Islander</td>
<td>34%</td>
<td>273780</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>368</td>
<td>0.13%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic or Latino</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>128838</td>
<td>26%</td>
<td>1911</td>
<td>1.48%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other/Multi-Ethnic</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>32209</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>1171</td>
<td>3.65%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>42%</td>
<td>338199</td>
<td>29%</td>
<td>2192</td>
<td>0.63%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total*</td>
<td>102%</td>
<td>821340</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>7350</td>
<td>0.89%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Total is greater than 100% for population breakdown because Hispanics can be counted in other races as well.

What is most shocking about the low homeless rate of the Asian/Pacific Islander ethnicity, which is 63% Chinese, is that they have achieved this disproportionately low homeless rate despite consistently having the lowest per capita income across neighborhoods; as shown below in Figure 5, the Asian/Pacific Islander ethnicity has the lowest per capita income in eight out of eleven (73%) of San Francisco’s districts.

Figure 5: Per Capita Income by Ethnicity and Supervisorial District

District-Level Homeless Estimates

Re-examining the homeless numbers on the district level, which does not categorize the data by ethnicity, we find that the district that encompasses Chinatown has a very small homeless count. District 3 consists of Chinatown, Nob Hill, Telegraph Hill, Manilatown, and the Financial District. As shown below in Figure 9...
6, as of 2013, District 3 had only 393 of the city’s 7,350 homeless persons (5.35%); in contrast, it included about 70,000 people (8.7% of city’s population), of which about 34,000 were Asian/Pacific Islander.

On the surface, this would also seem to suggest that Chinatown has a small reported homeless rate.

Figure 6: Homeless Persons by District
Data Sourced from: “Homeless Point-In-Time Count & Survey”

![Homeless Persons by District](image)

**Neighborhood-Level Homeless Estimates**

Chinatown’s residents appear to be economically disadvantaged relative to those in the other sub-areas of District 3 (as shown below in Figure 7), which suggests that the majority of District 3’s homeless residents live in Chinatown. However, that would seem extreme given that Chinatown only accounts for about 21% of District 3’s population.

Figure 7: Comparing Socio-Economic Disadvantage for District 3 Neighborhoods
Data Sourced from: Dan Kelly’s “Demographic and Poverty Trends in San Francisco” and “Homeless Point-In-Time Count & Survey”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Area</th>
<th>Population</th>
<th>Avg Household Size</th>
<th>Median Household Income</th>
<th>Median Household Income as % of General SF Star</th>
<th>Owner Occupied</th>
<th>Renter Occupied</th>
<th>Price to Median Income</th>
<th>Rent to Median Income</th>
<th>Vacant Units for Rent as % of Total Units</th>
<th>Poverty Rate</th>
<th>Unemployment Rate</th>
<th>Spending Allocation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>San Francisco</td>
<td>805,249</td>
<td>2.4</td>
<td>70,117</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>38%</td>
<td>62%</td>
<td>1115%</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>3.6%</td>
<td>11.0%</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chinatown</td>
<td>14,540</td>
<td>2.1</td>
<td>17,630</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>94%</td>
<td>4934%</td>
<td>33%</td>
<td>5.7%</td>
<td>31.0%</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>0.06%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nob Hill</td>
<td>22,860</td>
<td>1.9</td>
<td>53,283</td>
<td>76%</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>85%</td>
<td>1319%</td>
<td>24%</td>
<td>8.5%</td>
<td>13.0%</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>4.36%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Financial District</td>
<td>1,780</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>45,121</td>
<td>64%</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>85%</td>
<td>2984%</td>
<td>27%</td>
<td>13.5%</td>
<td>18.3%</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>0.71%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Telegraph Hill</td>
<td>6,766</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>196,137</td>
<td>80%</td>
<td>84%</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>1583%</td>
<td>29%</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>16.7%</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>0.22%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Figure is based on the San Francisco Department of Human Services 2006 fund allocation. The allocations are divided by zip code, not neighborhood. See Appendix A for specific data.

Furthermore, the age profile of District 3’s homeless population is largely at odds with the age profile of San Francisco’s Asian/Pacific Islander homeless population (shown below in Figure 8). District 3 has 190 homeless adults and 203 homeless youth; in contrast, the entire San Francisco Asian/Pacific Islander homeless population consists of 322 adults and 37 youth.

Consequently, if all of the homeless Asian/Pacific Islanders lived in Chinatown (which seems unlikely), they could not account for more than 237 people. This creates a maximum implied Chinatown homeless rate of 1.60%. For comparison, San Francisco has a homeless rate of 0.91%, which is supported by a median household income three times higher than Chinatown’s, renting costs that consume 36% less of household income than in Chinatown, a
poverty rate that is 64% lower than Chinatown’s, and an unemployment rate that is 53% lower than Chinatown’s. Even in the scenario that the Asian/Pacific Islander homeless population were concentrated in Chinatown, the number of homeless would seem to be unexpectedly low.xxxvii

Figure 8: Homeless Adults & Youth by Ethnicity
Data Sourced from: “Homeless Point-In-Time Count & Survey”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
<th>Number of Homeless Persons</th>
<th>Number of Adults 25+</th>
<th>Number of Youth</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>African American</td>
<td>1764</td>
<td>1609</td>
<td>183</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian/Pacific Islander</td>
<td>368</td>
<td>322</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic or Latino</td>
<td>1911</td>
<td>1931</td>
<td>101</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other/Multi-Ethnic</td>
<td>1176</td>
<td>579</td>
<td>128</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>2132</td>
<td>1738</td>
<td>375</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>7350</td>
<td>6179</td>
<td>823</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Given that this 1.60% homeless rate is a maximum, it may be helpful to calculate a more realistic rate. While the data available for the neighborhoods in District 3 only accounts for about 66% of the District 3 population, dividing up the 393 District 3 homeless persons among the four neighborhoods based on neighborhood poverty may be a useful exercise. As shown below in Figure 9, it would produce a homeless rate for Chinatown of 1.36%. Unfortunately, inconsistent districting makes it impossible to account for all of District 3’s population. This source of uncertainty introduces the potential for error.

Figure 9: Attempting to Estimate Homeless Rates for District 3 Neighborhoods with Limited Data
Data Sourced from: “San Francisco Neighborhoods” and “Homeless Point-In-Time Count & Survey”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Area</th>
<th>Population</th>
<th>Poverty Rate</th>
<th>Number in Poverty</th>
<th>Poverty Weighting</th>
<th>Implied Number of Homeless</th>
<th>Homeless Rate</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>San Francisco</td>
<td>805,240</td>
<td>11.0%</td>
<td>88576</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>198</td>
<td>1.36%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chinatown</td>
<td>14,540</td>
<td>31.0%</td>
<td>4507</td>
<td>50.5%</td>
<td>131</td>
<td>0.57%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nob Hill</td>
<td>22,860</td>
<td>13.0%</td>
<td>2972</td>
<td>33.3%</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>0.79%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Financial District</td>
<td>1,780</td>
<td>18.6%</td>
<td>320</td>
<td>3.6%</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>0.79%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Telegraph Hill</td>
<td>6,766</td>
<td>16.7%</td>
<td>1130</td>
<td>12.7%</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>0.73%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Data Inadequacies
The relevant data is fragmented and provided by several separate organizations; the Local Homeless Coordinating Board.xxxviii arranges for point-in-time homeless counts, the Human Rights Commission⁸ pieces together data from “a range of sources” to create a citywide demographic report, and the San Francisco Planning Department relies primarily on the 2005-09 American Community Survey to create its socio-economic neighborhood profiles. These three local government groups have produced a body of data that, when taken together, is both conflicting and incomplete. In addition, 2010 redistricting has made it even more difficult to compare districts and neighborhoods.

However, the largest inadequacy of them all may be the methodology of the point-in-time homeless counts. As Culhane et al. (1994) highlighted, point-in-time estimates fail to account for the turnover among the homeless; while on any day 0.1% of the population of New York City is homeless, 1% of the population experiences homelessness over the course of a year, with even larger fractions over longer periods.xxxix In addition, HUD’s definition of homelessness is also relatively vague.xl
Furthermore, the point-in-time count methodology may simply be ineffective. While HUD claims these counts “include a complete enumeration of all unsheltered and sheltered homeless persons,” this only requires counting the number of homeless persons occupying “emergency shelters, transitional housing, domestic violence shelters, and institutional housing.”xli Those conducting the count are largely community volunteers and staff from various city departments, having received minimal instruction and directions. The count itself consists of a “visual count” between the hours of 8 PM and midnight on a single day every two years (last conducted January 25, 2013).xlii As Paul Boden, director of the Western Regional Advocacy Project, highlights: “the [homeless] head count...is hit-or-miss. Point-in-time counts are a minimum number. They undercount hidden homeless populations.”xliii To illustrate, HUD reported in 2011 that there were 636,017 homeless persons in the country, while the Department of Education simultaneously reported 1,065,794 homeless children enrolled in schools across the country.xliv The San Francisco homeless count (sheltered and unsheltered) found that youth (age 18 and under) make up only 1% of the homeless population; if HUD’s aggregate homeless estimate is little more than half of the youth figure, then the San Francisco point-in-time estimate may be greatly under-counting the true number of homeless. The San Francisco Local Homeless Coordinating Board’s report even admits its difficulty with the counts: “For a variety of reasons, homeless persons generally do not want to be seen, and make concerted efforts to avoid detection.”xlv

One of the reasons for missed opportunities appears to be of particular relevance to the Chinatown homeless population: “Homeless families with children often seek opportunities to stay on private property, rather than sleep on the streets, in vehicles, or makeshift shelters.”xlvi Also, as Ed Jew, the only Chinese American on then-Mayor Gavin Newsom’s committee to end chronic homelessness, said: “Because of cultural sensitivities, Chinese homeless often do not admit their situation and refuse to go to homeless shelters. As a result, the official estimate of Asian homelessness is probably low.”xlvii

Legal Homelessness

In December 2001, the Board of Supervisors and the mayor expanded the definition of homelessness to include families with children that live in Single Room Occupancies (SROs), as recommended by the SRO Task Force.xlviii With 592 of the 910 San Francisco Unified School District (SFUSD) students living in SROs residing in the Greater Chinatown area, it would seem reasonable to infer that there are at least 592 legally homeless families as well.xlix A 2005 SRO Families United Association investigation supports this, as it “documented 400 families” living in SROs in Chinatown, making it a point to emphasize the incompleteness of its investigation.lix A 2001 SRO Task Force study documented 279 SRO families in Chinatown, and while not quite as large as the 2005 figure (and four years earlier), it similarly adds credibility to the notion that there are a significant number of families living in SROs in Chinatown and that the 2005 figure was not an anomaly.lx Armed with an expanded definition of homelessness, we can ask yet another question: does Chinatown now have a large, yet uncounted “legally homeless” population, making use of SROs to avoid actual homelessness? It may.

The 2013 point-in-time homeless count registered only 30 sheltered homeless adults and no sheltered homeless youth in all of District 3. If none of the previously identified SRO families have been recognized as homeless in the counts, and using the SFUSD students as proxies for homeless families, we might be interested to recalculate, extrapolating a likely “legally homeless” rate for Chinatown. Since 134 of the 145 Greater Chinatown SROs lie within approximately 0.1 miles of the post-2010 re-districted Chinatown, it appears reasonable to also calculate homeless populations and rates under the assumption that all of the SFUSD students are de facto Chinatown residents.lxi Although family size cannot be assumed (but it seems reasonable to assume that children under 18 do not live alone in SROs), we can calculate homeless populations for both two-person and three-person families, in hopes that the two figures may
provide for a realistic range, and that the true average family size may lie somewhere in the middle. Our result, which may be low if family sizes are larger than expected, point to a “legal homelessness” rate of 8.1 – 12.2%, or about twice as high as the recalculated homeless rates for District 6 (which includes the Tenderloin and South of Market) and about eight times as high as the recalculated homeless rates for the aggregate San Francisco area.iii In such a case, the HUD Point-In-Time Homeless Counts would be underestimating the District 3 “legally homeless” population by 301-452%, while underestimating the District 6 “legally homeless” population by only 20-30% and the San Francisco “legally homeless” population in general by only 25-37%.iv

Figure 10: Calculating the “Legal Homelessness” Rates with SRO Inference

The most narrow homeless count was for District 3 (Greater Chinatown and some of the surrounding area), which found only 393 homeless persons. The "poorly housed" estimate assumes that the 592 SFUSD students living in SROs do not live alone, and calculates total "poorly housed" persons for two-person families (the student plus one adult) and three-person families (the student plus two adults). While a crude estimate, it is at least a bit more tangible. Thus, our District 3 estimate’s disaggregation includes 393 persons from the point-in-time homeless count, and either 1184 "poorly housed" persons if each SFUSD student only lives with one adult (two-person families) or 1776 "poorly housed" persons if each SFUSD student lives with two adults (three-person families). For District 6, the disaggregation includes 3257 persons from the homeless count, and either 650 "poorly housed" with two-person families or 975 "poorly housed" with three-person families. For San Francisco, the disaggregation includes 7350 persons from the homeless count, and either 1820 "poorly housed" with two-person families or 2730 "poorly housed" with three-person families.

Additional parameters suggest that even these newer, higher estimates may be missing the mark. As shown below in Figure 11, Chinatown has 3226 family households, only 874 of which have children. With an average family household size of 3.2 people, it would seem likely that the majority of these households, if they resided in SROs, would be legally homeless. It may even be reasonable to expect that many of these family households are residing in SROs; this presumption is supported by the large number of occupied SRO units in proximity of Chinatown and the low incomes of most Chinatown households.

Figure 11: Additional Parameters to Consider for Estimating Chinatown SRO Families

| Data Sourced from: “San Francisco Neighborhoods” (7), Rhorer’s “Fiscal and Policy Implications” (16), “Chinatown Livability Score” (9) |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Total Households | Occupied SRO Units: <0.1 Miles From Chinatown | Family Households | Households with Children | Average Family Household Size | Median SRO Rent | Households with Income <$15,000 | SRO Rent as % of Income | Households with Income $15,000-$49,999 | SRO Rent as % of Income | Households with Income $50,000-$99,999 | SRO Rent as % of Income |
| 6720 | 3924 | 48% | 3226 | 13% | 3.2 | $318 | 38% | 2365 | 25.3% | 17% | 1142 | 15.3% | 24% | 1613 | 7.4% |
Better Counts, More Services?
The underestimation of de jure, or legally homeless populations in the Chinatown/Greater Chinatown area appears disproportionately large relative to that of other areas. Whenever there exist adequate funds and services to effectively uplift the poor when they are identified, then the population is well served by a more accurate count.

The San Francisco Department of Human Services (SFDHS) serves almost 100,000 San Franciscans each year, with the overriding goal of “help[ing] people become socially and economically linked to the resources most members of the community enjoy.” SFDHS provides income assistance, employment preparation/placement, and protective services, acting primarily through several main programs and initiatives: California Work Opportunity and Responsibility to Kids (CalWORKS), Care Not Cash, Cash Assistance Programs for Immigrants (CAPI), Childcare, County Adult Assistance Program (CAAP), Family and Children Services (FCS), Food Stamps, Housing and Homeless Division, In-Home Supportive Services (IHSS), Medi-Cal, and Workforce Development Division. There are 201 San Francisco community-based projects funded by DHS, and while the locations of the agencies simply correspond to their main offices, and not their service provision, examining the distribution of funding appears to highlight the fact that inadequate attention is given to the Chinatown population. While 2006 data is a bit outdated, there is not a more recent comparably comprehensive analysis of SFDHS’s funding allocation. However, the area allocations have likely remained approximately constant, as a re-distribution would likely entail many organizations moving their offices. As shown in Figure 12, the fund allocation to organizations located in the 94108 zip code (which makes up 61% of Chinatown’s population) is disproportionately small relative to the local population, especially in light of their above-average socio-economic disadvantage. Even re-examining the fund allocation by district in Figure 13 (District 3 entails all of Chinatown as well as Nob Hill, Telegraph Hill, Manilatown, and the Financial District), it still appears that Chinatown is relatively underserved.

Figure 12: SFDHS Fund Allocation by Zip Code (2006)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Zip Code</th>
<th>Areas</th>
<th>Population</th>
<th>Percent of SF Population</th>
<th>Allocation</th>
<th>Percent of Total Funds</th>
<th>Allocation Relative to Zip Code Population</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>94104</td>
<td>Financial District</td>
<td>368</td>
<td>0.05%</td>
<td>$1,085,305</td>
<td>0.71%</td>
<td>1547%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>94108</td>
<td>Chinatown</td>
<td>8843</td>
<td>1.10%</td>
<td>$98,317</td>
<td>0.06%</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>94109</td>
<td>Nob Hill, Russian Hill</td>
<td>37182</td>
<td>4.62%</td>
<td>$6,604,529</td>
<td>4.30%</td>
<td>93%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>94111</td>
<td>Embarcadero, Barbary Coast</td>
<td>2811</td>
<td>0.35%</td>
<td>$2,800,303</td>
<td>1.82%</td>
<td>523%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>94133</td>
<td>Telegraph Hill, North Beach, Fisherman's Wharf</td>
<td>15197</td>
<td>1.89%</td>
<td>$334,984</td>
<td>0.22%</td>
<td>12%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Data Sourced from: Human Rights Commission’s “San Francisco Demographic Report”
### Figure 13: SFDHS Fund Allocation by District (2006)
Data Sourced from: Human Rights Commission’s “SF Demographic Report,” and SF Planning Department’s “San Francisco Neighborhoods”
* Adds up to >100% because Zip 91445 is counted in both District 2 and District 5

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>District</th>
<th>Funding Allocation</th>
<th>Percent of Total Funds*</th>
<th>Percent of Population</th>
<th>Allocation Relative to District Population</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>District 1</td>
<td>$1,976,936</td>
<td>1.29%</td>
<td>8.2%</td>
<td>16%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>District 2</td>
<td>$2,566,596</td>
<td>1.67%</td>
<td>7.6%</td>
<td>22%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>District 3</td>
<td>$10,923,438</td>
<td>7.12%</td>
<td>8.8%</td>
<td>80%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>District 4</td>
<td>$1,764,136</td>
<td>1.15%</td>
<td>8.2%</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>District 5</td>
<td>$6,454,618</td>
<td>4.20%</td>
<td>7.6%</td>
<td>55%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>District 6</td>
<td>$79,434,437</td>
<td>51.74%</td>
<td>11.4%</td>
<td>455%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>District 7</td>
<td>$0</td>
<td>0.00%</td>
<td>9.5%</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>District 8</td>
<td>$38,924,916</td>
<td>25.36%</td>
<td>8.6%</td>
<td>295%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>District 9</td>
<td>$5,013,194</td>
<td>3.27%</td>
<td>12.0%</td>
<td>27%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>District 10</td>
<td>$8,176,753</td>
<td>5.33%</td>
<td>9.2%</td>
<td>58%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>District 11</td>
<td>$0</td>
<td>0.00%</td>
<td>8.8%</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>$155,235,024</td>
<td>101.12%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Part of this problem, the seemingly low provision of social services to Chinatown residents, may stem from a lack of awareness or misinformation about the services available, which could suggest to the local government that there is limited need. SRO tenants, who, according to Fribourg (2009), have “historically [been] an “invisible” population, may not be taking full advantage of services for which they are eligible.” Only 63% of San Francisco’s SRO residents are registered for at least one of the ten human service programs available to SRO residents (Figure 14). Given that 45.6% of all SRO residents in San Francisco are ethnically Asian/Pacific Islander and that there are 3024 occupied SRO units (out of a total 14,545; 21%) within 0.1 miles of Chinatown, this information would seem to have significant bearing on the Chinatown population.

### Figure 14: Number of Social Service Programs SF’s SRO Residents Participate In
Data Sourced from: Rhorer’s “Fiscal and Policy Implications”

![Figure 14: Number of Social Service Programs SF’s SRO Residents Participate In](image)

As shown in Figure 15, program usage does not appear predictable or consistent, which reinforces the idea that many SRO residents may not have explicitly selected not to participate in the programs. They may be uninformed or misinformed, or they may wish to avoid the stigma of being labeled as homeless. As further illustration, while all 5,7858 SSI recipients living in SROs are also income-eligible for IHSS, only 1,802 individuals (31.1%) receive it. Similarly, there are 704 school-age children living in SROs who receive free/reduced-price lunches, yet there are only 323 Food Stamps recipients in SROs under the age of 19. Even though some of the children may not be eligible (eg., due to immigration status), it is likely that more than 46% are eligible.
Figure 15: SRO Residents Participation in Social Service Programs
Data Sourced from: Rhorer’s “Fiscal and Policy Implications”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Program Name</th>
<th>Total Number of SRO Participants</th>
<th>% of Participants Only Registered for this Program</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Adult Protective Services (APS)</td>
<td>576</td>
<td>34.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>County Adult Assistance Program (CAAP)</td>
<td>1495</td>
<td>7.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CalWORKs</td>
<td>159</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cash Assistance Program for Immigrants (CAPI)</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Food Stamps</td>
<td>2426</td>
<td>18.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foster Care</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In-Home Supportive Services (IHSS)</td>
<td>2374</td>
<td>11.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medi-Cal</td>
<td>4356</td>
<td>50.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Office on the Aging (OOA)</td>
<td>840</td>
<td>31.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supplemental Security Income (SSI)</td>
<td>5758</td>
<td>54.7%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Of course, there are also those who do not want government assistance, and others who cannot prove that they are eligible. The 2013 Point-In-Time Homeless Count survey found that 30% of those who did not receive government assistance did not want it, 11% did not have identification, and 4% had immigration-related issues (Figure 16); it would seem reasonable to extrapolate these results to the SRO population, given that SRO residency may be only marginally better than homelessness. Brownrigg (2006) adds that there are also others who are simply not attached to any city services; such “off-the-grid” groups include undocumented immigrants, people who have timed out on aid, and those with criminal histories or mental health issues. She also finds that, according to several interviewees, “not all SRO residents are willing to accept services,” citing reasons that include immigration status concerns, fear of the government, and uncertainty about how the system works.

Figure 16: Homeless Persons’ Reasons for Not Receiving Government Assistance
Data Sourced from: Rhorer’s “Fiscal and Policy Implications”

Chinatown’s Residents: Coping With Extreme Poverty
While San Francisco’s Chinatown residents appear disproportionately poor, their penury may be dynamic, not static; as Rose Pak, general consultant to the Chinese Chamber of Commerce, explains: “One wave in, one wave out. [Chinatown] will always be a haven and orientation point of newcomers, because of the language and the availability of community social services.” It may be useful to look at Chinatown as having two “populations,” one that is older and stable, another that is transitioning through, using Chinatown as a stepping-stone. The role that Chinatown plays as entry point and stepping stone may obfuscate the progress that Chinese immigrants are making; if they are able to socio-economically
progress enough to exit Chinatown and a new family of immigrants moves in to take their place, then it will appear as though nothing has changed. About 75% of San Francisco’s 283,000 immigrants (212,250) have arrived since 1980, and 22% (62,260) have arrived in the last 10 years. \textsuperscript{lxxi} The Chinese have increased from a 19% share of immigrants to a 28% share as of 2010, currently accounting for 79,240 of all San Francisco immigrants. \textsuperscript{lxxii} Given that Chinatown is typically the first stop for Chinese immigrants, it would seem reasonable to assume that there has been some degree of turnover, which the Chinese Progressive Association (2005) noted as being “frequent” in Chinatown SROs. \textsuperscript{lxxviii} However, being able to transcend the destitution of Chinatown may take significant time, and as the process unfolds, the poorest still appear to rely on a pattern of mechanical coping and progress.

**Coping Mechanism: SRO Residency**

If the utility of SRO residency did not outweigh the costs, then the population, whatever its size, would not have opted for it. Inexpensive SROs and cultural comfort enable Chinatown’s poorest to make ends meet, to stay off the street, and to fully function in a community that uses their native tongue. However, the accompanying social and linguistic isolation from the wider society deters the older generations from leaving the neighborhood. It is impossible for an outsider to judge whether members of the older generation are happy there. Western standards for wealth may or may not be a good measure for a predominately Asian immigrant population. The cramped, often unsanitary conditions may, in fact, be better than the conditions that the immigrants have left behind. And the personal self-sacrifice that empowers a future generation may provide a sense of dignity and worth of its own. Perhaps the older generation hopes that, by providing their children with an education and the stability of a sheltered home, their children may have the opportunity for upward socio-economic mobility. Living in Chinatown’s SROs may be one part of calculated self-sacrifice. Parents may hope that by sending their children to college, their own hard work will be rewarded with familial success. This can be termed “delayed gratification” – the hope that their children will succeed – and this appears to be the “driving force in their work.”

While the National Housing Institute (2006) highlights that concentrated poverty impedes rather than promotes upward socio-economic mobility, \textsuperscript{lxxix} so does actual homelessness. And many Chinatown residents clearly prefer SRO residency over life on the streets or in shelters. The fact that substantially more Asian/Pacific Islanders (proxy for Chinatown’s residents) choose to live in SROs than any other type of affordable housing (Figure 17) raises questions for future research, including the reasons for this housing preference.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
<th>Public Housing</th>
<th>Section 8</th>
<th>SRO Hotel</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>African American</td>
<td>41.6%</td>
<td>31.8%</td>
<td>18.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian/ Pacific Islander</td>
<td>26.8%</td>
<td>30.0%</td>
<td>45.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>18.6%</td>
<td>28.1%</td>
<td>23.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Latino</td>
<td>10.6%</td>
<td>9.1%</td>
<td>6.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Native American</td>
<td>0.5%</td>
<td>0.7%</td>
<td>0.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>1.9%</td>
<td>0.3%</td>
<td>5.5%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The Section 8 Housing Choice Voucher Program requires that households pay 30% of their income towards rent; however, Chinatown’s median SRO rent is only 21.6% of median household income. \textsuperscript{lxxx} While public housing may be more affordable, charging only 10% of household monthly income, there are only three public housing buildings in proximity of Chinatown, for a total of 520 units. \textsuperscript{lxxi} Due to Chinatown’s large population of immigrants and the prevalence of linguistic isolation, the cultural
comforts of Chinatown likely deter many from leaving the area in search of alternative housing. With 4404 occupied units proximal to Chinatown (Figure 18), it would seem likely that a very substantive portion of Chinatown's 14,450 residents live in SROs. Children and seniors are very common in Chinatown's SROs, and with more than 80% of surveyed Chinatown SRO owners reporting an average stay of over a year, it would seem that these SROs largely serve as permanent family households (Figure 20).

Figure 18: Comparing the SROs of Different San Francisco Neighborhoods

Data Sourced from: Rhorer's "Fiscal and Policy Implications"

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Neighborhood</th>
<th>Mean Rent ($)</th>
<th>Median Rent ($)</th>
<th>Number of Residential Units</th>
<th>Number of Occupied Residential Units</th>
<th>Occupancy Rate</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Chinatown</td>
<td>380</td>
<td>318</td>
<td>5464</td>
<td>4404</td>
<td>80.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tenderloin</td>
<td>724</td>
<td>600</td>
<td>8616</td>
<td>6064</td>
<td>70.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SOMA</td>
<td>517</td>
<td>540</td>
<td>2522</td>
<td>1860</td>
<td>73.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mission</td>
<td>538</td>
<td>600</td>
<td>1764</td>
<td>1246</td>
<td>70.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>881</td>
<td>699</td>
<td>1647</td>
<td>971</td>
<td>59.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overall</td>
<td>589</td>
<td>512</td>
<td>20013</td>
<td>14545</td>
<td>72.7%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 19: Rent as a Percent of Household Income

Data Sourced from: Area Vibes’ “Chinatown Livability Score"
SRO and Crowding

With 75% of Chinatown residents being foreign-born and 66% of households in linguistic isolation, the cultural provisions of Chinatown may be a necessity to many; the subsequent demand for affordable housing within and proximal to Chinatown has made SROs a very attractive option, producing overcrowding by U.S. standards. Both HUD and the San Francisco Planning Department define “overcrowding” as more than one occupant per room and “severe overcrowding” as more than 1.5 occupants per room.\textsuperscript{lxii} As shown in Figure 21, 27% of Asian households were “overcrowded” as of 2000; with more than half of Chinatown’s housing stock in SROs and an average household size of 2.1, it would seem reasonable to expect that there are many foreign-born households living in SROs in Chinatown. The Citywide Families in SROs Collaborative performed a study of San Francisco’s SROs in 2001, finding that 62% of SRO families (279 families), averaging 3.4 people each, reside in Chinatown. The average SRO family has lived in their 10 x 10 room for more than four years, and after rent and food costs, has $290 left per month to make ends meet.\textsuperscript{lxiii} With the average market rate one-bedroom apartment in the Chinatown/North Beach area going for about $1600 per month, over 300% more expensive than the average Chinatown SRO rent, upward mobility is not an option for many.\textsuperscript{lxiv} The result is that most of the housing demand is directed towards SROs and other forms of affordable housing; the subsequent supply shortage and excess demand create the the overcrowding problem.
The supply/demand imbalance of Chinatown SROs appears to have necessitated the choice of SRO for those wishing to remain within the community borders. The demand for housing and the potential for gentrification (and higher rents) may make residents feel that any complaints would be futile; as one resident said: “It’s no use.”\lxxv SROs make up about half of Chinatown’s housing stock, and there are simply few alternatives. Chinatown SROs have limited or no vacancy, District 8 Housing waitlists are long (and the rent is likely more expensive), and public housing options are too limited. The Chinese Progressive Association (2005) found that language barriers, inadequate public transportation, and low incomes have forced many Chinatown immigrants to “put up with Chinatown’s poor housing conditions.”\lxxvi A 2005 survey of Chinatown SRO tenants highlights the prevalence of housing, health, and fire code violations; 87% of tenants surveyed reported one code violation and 62% reported multiple code violations.\lxxvii Despite this, only 28% of tenants had complained to their landlord about a problem, and only 11% complained to a government agency or community organization about their housing problems.\lxxviii Four of the five most reported problems were violations of the Health Code: Insect and Rodent Infestation, Unsanitary Conditions, Noise Disturbances, and Second Hand Smoke Exposure.\lxxix Health repercussions have been significant; in a study of families living in Chinatown SROs, 79% reported breathing and respiratory problems, which are the result of a combination of heavy smoking and overcrowding.\lxxxi If SROs are a necessity, can they be made safer and cleaner? At present, the only advocates for SROs are busy fighting against gentrification. For the time being, it would appear that the work of improving conditions within SROs will remain of secondary importance.

### SRO as Coping Mechanism

The median SRO rent ($318/month) is 38% below that of the aggregate SRO profile ($512/month), and yet the share of households that pay 30% or more of income as rent is larger than that of San Francisco as a whole (Figure 19). These relatively cheap rents may be influenced by widespread long-term stay discounts (Figure 18). The bottom line is clear: the residents of Chinatown’s SROs would have difficulty supporting much higher rents elsewhere.

In a perfect world, our poorer neighbors would be identified and provided access to affordable housing and jobs that pay a living wage. However, the world is far from perfect, and labeling SRO residents as “homeless,” despite the fact that they have predictable and tangible shelter, could lead to a casual attitude about the value that the SROs actually provide. There is a very big difference between having predictable shelter in an SRO and living with the uncertainty of homelessness. The value of the SRO as a coping mechanism is real, and while SRO residency is certainly not the best-case solution for homelessness, it is certainly more desirable than living on the streets or in other shelters. If policy makers fail to recognize the distinction between SRO housing and homelessness, there exists the very real threat of harm. In a city...
with limited land, pressures for development abound. If SROs are seen as having no value, then it would follow that their absence should cause no harm. A developer who follows such logic could argue for replacing them with condominiums for the privileged few.

**Coping Mechanism: Acceptance of Hardship**

As Rev. Norman Fong, an advocate for Chinese tenants, explains: “Now, as back then [when his father suffered through the anti-Chinese laws of decades past], the Chinese believe if you just put up with it [difficulties, oppression, poor working/living conditions, etc.], you will win. Don’t cause trouble, and you will persevere.”

This view seems to resonate with those enduring Chinatown’s socio-economic hardships; one SRO resident discussed her family during an interview, explaining that they “try to make the best of it.”

According to Lisa Moy, project coordinator for the SRO Families United Collaborative: “A lot of people coming from overseas don’t know that they have rights, don’t know that it is not right for them to live in such [poor] conditions...Instead, they believe that they are lucky to have a roof over their head.”

Consequently, a combination of planned to toleration and legal ignorance may allow Chinatown’s residents to endure these hardships, but it may also facilitate their continuation.

Chinatown’s working conditions are harsh by U.S. standards. In the experience of its residents, however, they may be on par or superior to those they left behind. With little alternative, workers will accept what they can get. A 2010 survey of 433 Chinatown restaurant workers found that 95% received less than a living wage, 50% were earning less than minimum wage, and 31% never even received full payment.

Dick Lee Pastry, a San Francisco Chinatown restaurant, is a perfect case study for such labor exploitation. The restaurant paid $525,000 in back wages and penalties in 2013 after forcing employees to work 11-14 hour days, six days a week, often for no more than $1,100 a month; this amounted to less than $4 an hour.

A 2010 survey also found that only 3% of the 433 Chinatown restaurant workers received health insurance from their employer, 25% reported a significant level of psychological stress, and 95% of the surveyed workers did not speak English well. The survey also found that work-related injury rates were high, with 48% of workers reporting work-related burns, 40% reporting cuts, and 17% reporting falls in the previous year; this may have even been the fault of the restaurants, as “observations documented a high frequency of occupational hazards, a lack of protective safety equipment...[and] a substantial lack of compliance with local and state employer labor law notification requirements.”

Yet despite such terrible pay, working conditions, and general employer unconcern, the multi-faceted issue of poor working conditions went largely unnoticed to those outside Chinatown prior to the 2010 study, which was externally spearheaded by the Chinese Progressive Association (CPA) and the Labor Occupational Health Program. Because the severity of worker exploitation was externally discovered, not internally revealed, the Chinatown restaurant workers’ plight could have continued unnoticed for quite some time if the study had not been performed. One worker explains the lack of complaints as stemming from workers’ fear of losing their jobs: “If you want to complain, I’ll just fire you!”

Dr. Ling-Chi Wang, professor emeritus at UC Berkeley and founder of Chinese for Affirmative Action, elaborates: “Most of the residents are not in Chinatown by choice but [out of] necessity. It’s a transition from China. They come to work, eventually save money and move, or so they hope.”

As Shaw San Lui of the Chinese Progressive Association said: “This is the first time it is coming into public light how bad [workers’ rights abuses are].” Only following the report’s release has the issue been “put...on the front burner for the Board of Supervisors.”

This endurance of hardship essentially equates to toleration, and appears to be taken as such. It is possible that a similar lack of resistance to exposing poor housing conditions may allow Chinatown SROs to remain of poor quality; from 1998-2002, there were a total of 208 cases of housing discrimination complaints filed by renters in San Francisco, yet none were by Asians.
If anything, the quiet acceptance and endurance of such hardship may only serve to reinforce the “model minority” stereotype of Asian Americans. As Chang (1993) explains: “Asian Americans are portrayed as hardworking, intelligent, and successful,” which allows society to “justify ignoring the unique discrimination faced by Asian Americans...[and] permits the general public, government officials, and the judiciary to ignore or marginalize the contemporary needs of Asian Americans.”

As the Japanese Americans Citizen League (2008) was quick to point out, more Asian Americans are enrolled in community colleges than in public or private universities, and national SAT scores, which are highest for the Asian ethnic group, are not high across the board, but rather, correlated with the income and education level of the student’s family. Chang (1993) and JACL (2008) both highlight the dangers of the “model minority” stereotype; the stereotype suggests that a racial minority may be naturally more equipped for success, which could disincentivize targeted outreach or social spending. The lumping together of Asians into one group can be misleading, in itself, and all this taken together helps to hide the severity of the hardship endured by many in Chinatown.

Education: Hoping for the Next Generation’s Success

Chinatown’s immigrants, often socio-economically disadvantaged and immobile, appear to have accepted lives of enduring hardship; yet while they may have given up hope for themselves, they have not given up hope for their children. As PBS’s Susan Han candidly explains: “The Chinese value education as a stepping stone to success, and [their] children...are under a lot of pressure to excel in school.” Huang (2012) argues that this belief has Confucian roots: “Education is associated with a person’s class. In old Chinese society (770 BC – 1910’s), success [was] defined by class, [and] scholars [were of the] highest class.” The broader push for Asian or Chinese immigrant children to excel in school is complemented by the children’s reciprocal desire to excel and succeed. Higher educational attainment seems to result from such parental prodding. Kao (1995) and Zhou (2000) support this view, arguing that Asian immigrant parents assume a strong role in their children’s education by encouraging high aspirations and promoting academic achievement. Louie (2004) conducts interviews with second-generation Chinese (American-born children of Chinese immigrants), noting three general themes:

1) Chinese culture’s emphasis on education has led to a prevalence of immigrant optimism (the belief that education, especially in the US, can contribute to upward mobility). The belief that higher educational achievement is needed to offset potential discrimination (immigrant pessimism) also appears to incentivize educational achievement;

2) Despite similar parental expectations for children’s educations across socio-economic classes, middle-class children often receive more direct parental involvement than working-class children, who often feel that they must rely on their own abilities;

3) Children of all classes feel a similar sense of reciprocal duty to their parents, which is only augmented by their perception of their parents’ sacrifice, as migration often costs them their language fluency, culture, and status. Fulgni (2006) supports the connection between family obligation and education, finding that a stronger sense of familial obligation is linked with a higher value of education. Fulgni also finds that Chinese immigrants (first, second, and third generations) all place a higher value on family obligation than do European immigrants of any generation, implying that they also place a higher value on education.
Evidence for a Reliance on Education

Second-generation immigrants, as a whole, are often an embodiment of an intergenerational transfer of hope, seeking the education that may allow them to realize their parents’ hope for future upward socio-economic mobility. As Cruz (2009) highlights through regression analysis (not controlled for race), first-generation and second-generation immigrant youth complete more schooling, on average, than their third-generation counterparts (0.91 and 0.71 years more, respectively). Often, education is seen as a means for attaining a better life.

While poverty and limited English in the household both serve to mitigate this effect to some extent, the optimist theory of immigration appears to have anecdotal support; recent immigrants appear to have greater faith in the use of education to achieve upward mobility than those of more established racial/ethnic minority peers in the second or third generation. Paul, the son of a Chinatown contractor and a seamstress, explained that he “force[s himself] to study [because] it’s something that’s required.” Louie’s (2004) interviews found that some children strive for educational achievement because of their parents’ sacrifice; according to one: “My dad threw [it] all away, came here, started at the bottom of the totem pole, [and] sacrificed almost everything for myself and my brother. I think that’s one of the reasons why I feel that I kind of owe a lot to them, [why] I work my butt off in school.” Others believe that educational success is needed to overcome racial discrimination: “Being Chinese will never be a plus, it will always be something against you. My father wanted us to be smarter; your acceptance is through merit. You’ll make it in because you have the criteria, not because you’re what they’re looking for.”

Local education data suggests that these outlooks, whether filial or pessimistic, have succeeded in motivating Chinatown’s immigrant youth. San Francisco Unified School District’s Asian student population (2011: 37% of the total SFUSD population is Asian, and 25% of the total is Chinese) has consistently had the highest graduation rates and the lowest dropout rates, as shown below in Figure 22. The 2011-12 5.4% Asian student dropout rate provides for a sharp contrast with the 60% of Chinatown residents who have had less than a high school education (Figure 1). The Chinatown population’s low educational attainment is likely skewed downward by the significant middle- and old-age populations and large proportion of immigrants; 70% of Chinatown residents are older than 35, and 75% are foreign-born. It would seem that Chinatown’s youth are breaking the trend of the older Chinatown residents, as current graduation rates approach 90%, approximately 1.5x the graduation rate of the general Chinatown population. Furthermore, they may even be receiving a higher quality of education than their peers; the percentage of SFUSD children in Chinatown SROs with special education status is not only substantially lower than that of children in SROs in other neighborhoods, but also much lower than that of the overall SFUSD (Figure 23). Consequently, the SFUSD Asian youth are not simply “going through the motions” so that they can graduate, but actually excelling. It would seem that Chinatown’s youth and their parents have the same view of education that Huang (2012) found to hold across most Asian groups: “[Chinese society] believe[s] that educational success leads to a better life, including higher social status, getting a good job, [and having] a better marriage and relationships.”
The Shortcomings of This “Coping”

While some assert that the Chinatown residents’ method of “coping” with poverty may be effective and may even allow for long-term familial socio-economic transcendence, others point out that SRO utilization and self-sacrifice can be counter-productive for the adult immigrant resident in the short-term. The Brookings Institute (2010) finds that concentrated poverty results in higher crime rates, underperforming public schools, poor housing and health conditions, and limited access to private services and job opportunities. Rachel Drews (2006) adds both support and expansion, finding that living in concentrated poverty can make it more difficult to achieve upward socio-economic mobility because of the “mismatch between where people live and where [good] jobs are available.” This suggests that moving to a less impoverished area can improve opportunities for all generations: job opportunities for the adults, education quality for the children, and living conditions and social service support for the entire family.
Gennetian and Sanbonmatsu (2013) examine some of the less-obvious problems created by living in concentrated poverty, finding that living in areas of poverty concentration – areas such as Chinatown – has a negative effect on markers of mental and physical health. Consequently, whether leaving Chinatown would promote advantages or reduce disadvantages, escaping from concentrated poverty is clearly indicative of progress. However, whether or not leaving SROs constitutes such an escape, at present, is still open to debate.
Conclusions and Recommendations

Who can imagine a San Francisco without a Chinatown? San Francisco is very much enriched by the presence of the cultural heritage that Chinatown offers residents and many visitors. At the same time, San Francisco’s Chinatown, with its predominantly Chinese immigrant population, is arguably the most socio-economically disadvantaged neighborhood in San Francisco. Yet even with high poverty and unemployment, its residents manage one of the lowest rates of measured homelessness. While not ideal by Western standards, one main coping mechanism that has worked to keep true homelessness down is SRO residency. We offer the following suggestions, for whoever might be interested, to assist our neighbors in San Francisco’s Chinatown:

1. **Empower the Residents**
   Chinatown’s residents are at a linguistic and cultural disadvantage when compared to other minority groups. Provide adult learners with ESL (English as a Second Language) education, to break down the language barriers, and provide training in civics for self-advocacy. Realizing that adult workers have difficulty making time for such classes without mind-numbing tradeoffs, provide incentives, such as paying-per-attendance. Such a combination of training has the potential to help the residents of Chinatown grow comfortable with the greater environment, not only offering them job opportunities outside the boundaries of Chinatown, but also affording them a greater voice within our legal framework. Residents could then more effectively advocate for cleaner, safer SROs, as well as safer, more equitable working conditions.

2. **Build Bridges**
   Although America provides a wealth of opportunity to immigrants, we have not yet transcended the issue of race. Any efforts that will promote greater understanding between the greater population and the ethnic Chinese community would be useful. Such efforts could include information about the poverty within Chinatown. Few people are aware that Chinatown is one of San Francisco’s poorest neighborhoods, and even fewer know about the terrible working and living conditions that many of the neighborhood’s residents are forced to endure. Dispelling the “model minority” myth, reducing interracial discomfort, and revealing Chinatown for the reality beneath its tourist attraction surface could attract greater support for the needs of Chinatown’s residents.

3. **Capture Better Data**
   The analysis in this paper was hindered by limited and conflicting data. We would have found better data in the following areas to be quite useful: 1) Accurate counts of families living in SROs in Chinatown; 2) Clarity in data regarding utilization rates of social services by Chinatown residents relative to residents of other neighborhoods; and 3) Modified point-in-time homeless counts offering two counts for each district: the truly homeless (*de facto*) and the legally homeless (*de jure*). Such a modification would avoid undercounting SROs’ “poorly housed” populations, but in such a way as to mitigate the unintended consequence of conflating SRO life with true homelessness.

4. **Perform Scholarly Research**
   Poor residents have to make intelligent decisions with extremely limited resources. They are very aware of their plight, and they are doing the best they can, given the choices available. By researching what they, themselves, feel would be helpful, researchers will be in a better position to make recommendations for change. In addition, sociological studies could shine a light on the Chinatown community, also aiding in mutual understanding. They would also help policy makers...
in crafting solutions that would really work. Since many other communities of concentrated poverty face similar problems, research on issues affecting Chinatown’s residents may provide greater insight. Questions of concern include: Are there in fact, two communities – one transitioning through, another permanent – in Chinatown? If so, in what way does each community experience socio-economic mobility? In what unique ways do Chinatown’s residents cope with deep poverty? What are the motivations and choices of members of the community?

In presenting a brief history of Chinatown’s SROs and analyzing the available data, along with a few suggestions, we hope to spark greater interest in – and support of – one of San Francisco’s historic neighborhoods, and the residents who live within its borders.
ENDNOTES

1 This size was suggested by the Central City SRO Collaboration, http://www.ccsro.org/pages/history.htm and accessed September 29, 2013.


vii Ibid.


x Ibid.

xi Ibid.


xiii Ibid.

xiv Immigrants’ intent to return to China was so culturally ingrained that the Chinese phrase “fallen leaves return to their roots” ( 落叶归根: luòyè-ɡuīɡēn) was commonly ascribed to those in their community.


xvi Ibid.

xvii Ibid.

xviii OcC.

xix OcC.


xxii Ibid.

San Francisco Neighborhoods: Socio-Economic Profiles


"2013 San Francisco Homeless Point-In Time Count & Survey.


2013 San Francisco Homeless Point-In Time Count & Survey. Note: The street count is complemented by a shelter and institution count, which includes homeless in emergency shelters and transitional housing programs, and incorporates persons self-identifying as homeless that were staying at other facilities.


Rhorer, Trent. Note: The “Chinatown” referred to in the Fribourg (2009) paper is based on the pre-2010 re-districting area, which includes the current Chinatown area, as well as parts of the Financial District, North Beach, and Russian Hill. This “Chinatown” has a total neighborhood population of 41,566, compared with the 14,850 of the post-2010 re-districting Chinatown.


Ibid.

San Francisco Neighborhoods: Socio-Economic Profiles AND ALSO #11.

#11


Ibid.


Gaydos, Megan, et al.


Louie, Vivian.

Ibid.


Huang, Grace.


Drew, Rachel.