

Evaluating Hygienic Concerns and Public Restroom Access in Over the Rhine in collaboration with Our Daily Bread

Introduction and Overview:

A key social determinant of health that is affecting Over-the-Rhine (OTR) region of Cincinnati is access to public restrooms, especially affecting the unhoused population. Limited restroom availability has led to increased public urination and defecation in the area, raising public health concerns. Inadequate hygiene increases the risk of dermatologic infections (e.g., tinea pedis, seborrheic dermatitis, epidemic typhus) and contributed to outbreaks like the 2017 hepatitis A outbreak in San Diego. Restricted restroom access is also linked to increased anxiety and decreased mental well-being [1–3].

Our Daily Bread (ODB), a longstanding OTR community partner, identified restroom access as a major unmet need. ODB has provided meals and social services for over 40 years. In collaboration with ODB, we conducted a patron survey (n=52) on February 9, 2025, to assess restroom access.

Data Analysis and Community:

Sixty-one percent of patrons reported difficulty finding a public restroom, with 20% using open areas as toilets. While many used the public library's facilities, patrons cited safety, cleanliness, privacy, and stocking as barriers. Nearly half urinated only 2–3 times daily, well below the national average of 6–7 [4], reflecting restricted hydration behaviors. Sixty-two percent had trouble finding accessible restrooms outside business hours. Patrons felt significantly less safe at night (42%) than during the day (60%), and mornings were the most challenging time to find open facilities. Over a quarter spent more than an hour locating restrooms at night. These findings highlight significant health and dignity concerns. Patrons claimed the lack of cleanliness and sanitary items available in public restrooms are their main frustrations.

Policy Analysis:

Current city policy includes provisions that require equitable access to restrooms that currently exist but does not guarantee geographic availability or extended hours [5]. Previous efforts to expand restroom access stalled due to cost [6]. Policy options include: modifying the Cincinnati Code of Ordinances Chapter 886 Section 886-03 to mandate that restrooms have extended hours for the evenings and weekends; modifying Section 886-05 to penalize businesses for not allowing locals to use restrooms; or creating a new policy to ensure that there is a bathroom per a specific square footage of area in OTR.

Advocacy Strategy:

A meta-analysis of urban hygiene initiatives found that successful programs emphasize frequent cleaning, maintenance, and design that deters misuse while enhancing existing infrastructure. Portable latrines were largely ineffective due to poor upkeep in high-traffic areas. By contrast, the Portland Loo model provides privacy, discourages drug use with blue lighting, and is cost-efficient when multiple units share maintenance resources [7].

Many cities have partnered with nonprofits or used public funds to reduce costs; for example, Denver leveraged federal COVID-19 relief funds before transitioning to city funding [7]. Cincinnati already has a Portland Loo near the Bengals Stadium, offering a safe restroom option for pedestrians [8]. The estimated installation cost is \$133,000 per unit, including handwashing stations [7]. Access to well-maintained restrooms helped resolve San Diego County's 2021 shigella outbreak [9], whereas King County's 2020 outbreak led to 73 hospitalizations and \$2.3 million in health care costs [7].

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