UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA

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Hurry Up and Wait:

The Politics of Homeless Housing Access in Los Angeles

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction

of the requirements for the degree

Doctor of Philosophy in Social Welfare

by

Niamh A. Costello

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

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Doctor of Philosophy in Social Welfare

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Professor Ananya Roy, Chair

Diverse interventions exist to prevent, manage, and resolve homelessness across the US. Central to the resolution of homelessness is the provision of permanent housing opportunities to households experiencing homelessness, and the distribution of these resources is increasingly managed by bureaucratic and complex systems of allocation. My dissertation examines the structures, practises, and consequences of homeless housing allocation. Ethnographically examining the distribution and utilization of housing opportunities via a homeless access centre in South Los Angeles, this dissertation reveals numerous barriers that service engaged unhoused individuals face while trying to access permanent housing. Tracing how unhoused service users' rehousing trajectories are shaped by lengthy wait times interspersed with urgent service demands, this dissertation advances understanding of the temporal management of homelessness. It also details forms of noncompliance, and relates these to accusations of aversion and resistance amongst unhoused individuals to detail the various responses to program requirements and how unhoused service users navigate them.

Along with temporal barriers and perceptions of participants as resistant, this study shows how bureaucratic hurdles, rigid admissibility criteria, and service delivery models that do not accommodate the realities of unhoused individuals' lives make resources functionally inaccessible. Attending to housing allocation as a site of conflict and governance that shape the distribution of key public resources, this dissertation expands conceptions of housing allocation, both by providing a critical examination of the processes it comprises and in detailing the consequences for both homeless service providers and unhoused households.

The dissertation of Niamh A. Costello is approved.

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Introduction

As homelessness continues to proliferate across the United States, so too does the range of interventions deployed to address it. The provision of programs providing housing and services for people experiencing homelessness sits within the domain of public assistance, rather than entitlement programs, and is thus shaped by federal directives yet delivered by a range of state, county, and municipal governments as well as private and non-profit organisations. Increasingly complex and multifaceted, the homeless response system comprising these organizations and systems stands accused of emerging to "extract value from the abandonment of entire populations of people" rather than resolve individual homelessness (Willse, 2015, p. 11). Scholars critical of homelessness and poverty governance argue that rather than resolving homelessness, contemporary service systems manage, discipline, and commodify poverty and fail to permanently resolve homelessness for many individuals and families (Gowan, 2010; Johnsen, Fitzpatrick & Watts, 2014; Willse, 2015). While a range of studies has looked to shelter and rehabilitative programming to pinpoint why this is the case, fewer studies have looked to the ways in which those experiencing homelessness apply for, are allocated, and successfully make use of resources designed to permanently resolve homelessness.

Comprised of three manuscripts, this dissertation ethnographically examines the structures, practises, and consequences of the allocation of permanent housing resources purported to resolve homelessness. I frame these findings as 'The Politics of Homeless Housing Allocation' to reflect my analysis of housing allocation not only as a technical and administrative practise but also as a site of conflict and governance where competing interests, institutional logics, and power dynamics among service providers and participants shape how resources are distributed. Attuned to how policies distribute resources, this study engages with questions of trust in institutions and conceptualizes the process of housing

allocation as one shaped by numerous actors throughout the homeless service pathway. In doing so, I conceptualize the homeless service sector as part of the homeless management industry, a network of institutions and practises that, rather than resolving homelessness, manage it through categorization, surveillance, and resource distribution (Willse, 2015). This framing positions housing allocation within a broader infrastructure of poverty governance sustained by a range of non-profit and for-profit actors and I consider this infrastructure as a state-backed enterprise, given its operation through publicly funded contracts and delegated authority. Following Wolch's (1990) theorization of the "shadow state," I locate this industry within a broader apparatus of privatized public service delivery that blurs the boundaries between state and nonprofit sectors. Within this landscape, frontline workers at contracted agencies are perceived by clients as representatives of the state, consistent with Lipsky's (1980) *street-level bureaucrats* whose discretionary decisions determine how policy is interpreted and enacted in practice. Throughout my fieldwork, I engaged with a diverse range of actors across various public and non-profit agencies within this management industry, and my work reflects the complexities and variations of this multifaceted landscape.

This study speaks to several questions: First, what institutional structures and frontline practices shape who gains access to permanent housing? Second, what logics underpin decisions around housing allocation and how do they shape disparities in housing outcomes? And finally, how do people experiencing homeless navigate conditional and uneven access to housing assistance, and with what consequences? Based on ethnographic fieldwork, this research also contributes empirical insight of the inner workings of the homeless service system in Los Angeles. While Los Angeles is a highly studied site of homelessness in the US, much of the existing research focuses on street-level ethnographies of unsheltered life. In contrast, my research offers rare empirical access to the homeless response system itself. Focussing on overlooked aspects of the poverty and homeless

response system and drawing on fieldwork conducted within housing agencies, service provider meetings, and case conferences, this study captures how housing decisions are made and interpreted and how participants respond to these decisions, or lack of them. Gaining access to the distribution of scarce housing resources provides an intimate view of these lived realities of policy implementation on the ground. (Herring, 2019)

In doing so, this work advances critical scholarship on poverty governance and urban inequality within the realm of homeless response by conceptualizing the allocation of homeless housing as a system of differentiated access shaped by systemic disparities, bureaucratic discretion, and conditional inclusion. Uncovering bureaucratic processes, structural inequalities, and systemic failures within the allocation of these resources, I find that access to homeless housing is not simply a matter of resource availability nor participants' willingness to accept opportunities. Contributing to debates in social welfare, urban studies, and political geography, I show how governance operates not only through exclusion, but through contingent and uneven distributions of care.

Background

Contemporary Homelessness and Poverty Governance

In attending to the delivery of homeless response in Los Angeles, I draw on scholarship framing this response as part of a homeless management industry, a network of organizations, institutions, and technologies more attentive to managing homelessness than resolving it (Willse, 2016). Contemporary scholarship interrogates homeless interventions as forms of governance and attends to how this governance is operationalised. This work foregrounds racial and spatial inequities and raises important critiques of the rise of punitive approaches, like encampment sweeps and anti-homeless ordinances, and interrogates how shelters and services function as mechanisms of control rather than care. This scholarship has tended to

locate interventions deployed to address homelessness within a punitive/compassionate binary, where anti-homeless ordinances, policing of visible poverty, and encampment sweeps are viewed as punitive (Wacquant, 2009), revanchist (Smith, 1996), or neo-liberal paternalist (Soss et al., 2011), while service and shelter provision are regarded as compassionate work in opposition to punitive policy (Cloke et al., 2007; DeVerteuil, 2006; Margier, 2021). These distinctions are often framed as oppositions between street and shelter, indoors and outdoors, and care and control. Increasingly, however, this binary is disrupted by work showing that shelter and services often operate as tandem punitive environments that justify and reproduce homelessness (Dozier, 2019; Stuart, 2016). Moreover, scholars note that experiences of homeless response differ between participants (Johnsen et al., 2005; Johnstone et al., 2016), that intention cannot be equated with outcomes (Margier, 2021) and that service users cannot always distinguish between punitive and compassionate intentions (Mahoney, 2021).

The homeless management industry represents part of the shadow state, a para-apparatus of non-state agencies that deliver essential welfare functions via public contract (Wolch, 1990). In this context, the work of managing homelessness takes place through quasi-public institutions that are formally independent but functionally tied to state priorities. In the case of homeless service delivery, these are primarily non-profit organizations. Wolch argues that the shadow state engenders mutual dependency between voluntary organizations and the state, as the shadow state provides services essential to state legitimisation and state funding becomes a source of legitimisation for non-profit agencies. Through the lens of the Non-Profit Industrial Complex, non-profits, dependent on foundation and public funds, become vehicles for managing social problems rather than disrupting their causes (Gilmore, 2007). As non-profits rely on or collude with the state to their mutual benefit, this dictates what homeless services are available. Munshi and Willse (2007) suggest that working within these settings demands constant negotiation of the burdens of the NPIC and the desire to

undertake transformative work; while those working within the sector are thus found to have a wide understanding of both client and societal needs, Gilmore (2007) argues that staff members become technocrats due to the inflexible requirements of programs. Fairbanks (2009) finds that even in the case of smaller independent shelters, interaction with systems such as welfare payments and building regulation is inevitable. Thus, while many non-profits delivering homeless services state particular ethos and missions, much of the reality of their daily work is shaped by the demands of public contracts for service delivery.

This dissertation thus reflects a distinct moment in homeless response, marked by the simultaneous expansion of homeless services and intensified criminalization, where care is increasingly bureaucratised and often indistinguishable from control. At the centre of homeless response is the service contract, which constrains the scope of interventions to those approved by public bodies and pressures even well-intentioned service providers to reproduce punitive logics and engage in institutional negligence. Understanding homeless response as a means of poverty governance, I argue that homeless management functions less as a pathway to housing than as a mechanism of delay and neglect. Observing services delivered through public contract at a small community-based agency, I find, like Fairbanks, that these agencies are inevitably entangled with bureaucratic systems and controlling practices, irrespective of their intentions. In doing so, this dissertation foregrounds the compromises and contradictions of contracted care in the contemporary homeless management regime, yet rather than looking solely to the domain of frontline work, I take the field site as a focal point through which to examine the structures and institutions shaping the homeless service industry.

Homelessness in Los Angeles

With the largest unsheltered homeless population in the US, Los Angeles is a distinct case in terms of the scale, visibility, and governance structure of homelessness. The visibility of homelessness in Los Angeles shapes the responses prioritised, with a primary focus on bringing those outdoors into at least temporary shelter to reduce unsheltered homelessness. However, this system produces cycles of displacement marked by limited pathways to permanent housing and forms of carceral care. At the centre of homeless response is the Los Angeles Homeless Services Authority (LAHSA), a joint powers authority responsible for coordinating homeless services in LA County. While LAHSA coordinates the region's homeless strategy, administers local and federal funds, commissions services and increasingly directly delivers them, it lacks authority to induce alignment across the various entities involved in addressing homelessness, such as sanitation, policing, and health services.

Moreover, high public and political investment in the issue shapes the priorities addressed and the contours of service delivery. A key public issue in the county, LA frequently introduces new plans, emergency declarations, and funding measures (e.g. Measure H) that often serve more as political performance than transformative efforts. In addition, legal decisions shape the nature of service delivery, with rulings such as Martin v. Boise (2018) and federal lawsuits like *LA Alliance v. City of Los Angeles* compelling the city to shift homelessness strategies. Legal decisions, such as the LA Alliance case, often result in temporary, compliance-oriented responses rather than long-term solutions and detract funding and attention from other solutions.

While the scale and governance of homelessness in Los Angeles are distinct, the bureaucratised contracted system of care is more exemplary of wider trends in homeless governance across US cities. Homeless services are delivered by more than 140 different agencies holding public contracts and these contracts are standardised by type, such as Housing Navigation or Case Management contracts, with client load, milestones, and service

scope laid out (LAHSA, 2024a). An emphasis on meeting quantifiable targets can constrain more relational or long-term approaches. Obtaining these contracts requires agencies meet extensive auditing, reporting, and administrative requirements, with LAHSA accused of gatekeeping and favouring larger, established non-profits as a consequence. Examining homeless response in Los Angeles thus serves to illustrate the limits of increased resources within a system that prioritizes control, visibility, and administrative accountability over systemic change.

Fieldwork and Field Site

The three papers presented here draw on ethnographic fieldwork conducted in Los Angeles between October 2022 and January 2025. Similarly to others who have studied bureaucratic state enterprises and reflecting a relational approach, I positioned this ethnography at a single service site not to isolate a bounded setting but viewing the location as a node through which to trace wider networks of service procedures and institutional logics. I thus conceptualize the site as a relational point within a broader infrastructure, where agency staff and the organisational ethos intersect with city-wide housing programming, national housing policy, and the bureaucratic architecture of homeless management. A relational approach focuses on processes, giving "ontological primacy not to groups or places, but to configurations of relations" (Desmond, 2014, p. 554). Relational ethnography also allows for the encounter of "elusive and emergent" practices and relations (Zell & Curran, 2023), offering a productive avenue for investigation of the daily operations of housing access within the homeless response system.

In his study of bureaucratic practice and structural violence in India, Gupta (2012) suggests that any study of the state is necessarily partial; while I present findings beyond the context of the access centre as a service location and contend that some of these findings

have bearing on wider homeless service delivery, this is not to say that a study anchored elsewhere would not have emerged with a differing view of the various roles of different actors or agencies. Moreover, observing through the lens of a small organisation in a much larger system of homeless response reveals the complex and often contradictory dynamics governing their work. On the one hand, frontline workers navigate impossible contract demands with scarce access to resources, with good intentions constrained by challenging structures. Despite these good intentions, such organizations replicate exclusionary hierarchies, prioritize contract compliance over holistic case progress, and enact punitive logics. As a result, these smaller agencies become actors within a wider governance framework that manages homelessness, often reproducing control through attempts at care. This positioning highlights how small agencies function as crucial nodes within the shadow state wherein ostensibly independent non-profits serve as delegated instruments of state power. At times, I found that these dynamics invited ambivalent sympathies, and I experienced empathy with the exhaustion and constraints of staff, yet disillusionment when contract fulfilment led to participants being denied support. At the same time, I recognize my own entanglement in these systems of governance as a participant observer. Understanding this ambivalence is crucial to unpacking the complex relational infrastructure of homeless management.

Because access to housing is governed not only by formal eligibility criteria but also by interpersonal negotiations, bureaucratic procedures, and frontline discretion, an ethnographic approach allowed me to trace how policies are interpreted, enacted, and contested in real time. This method also enabled close attention to how clients experience the system—including how they navigate uncertainty, express mistrust, and make sense of fairness and exclusion in a context shaped by institutional fragmentation and racialized stratification. I conducted over 200 days of participant observation at a homeless access

centre located in South Los Angeles and off-site at a range of homeless service locations, rental properties, and street outreach locations, as well as virtual participant observation at city-wide forums, trainings, and meetings which I attended either shadowing agency staff, as a volunteer agency representative, or public attendee. While I draw on semi-structured interviews with participants, I prioritized informal conversations; spontaneous, unrecorded dialogue arising in the course of everyday fieldwork interactions (Swain & King, 2022). This choice reflects ethnographic traditions that prioritize immersion, trust-building, and attentiveness to situated meaning over formal elicitation (Behar, 1996). It also accounts for specific dynamics within the context of this research; where participants are embedded in high-stakes bureaucratic systems, recording can create barriers to open dialogue or reproduce dynamics of surveillance (Desmond, 2016).

Securing access to this domain was challenging. Between June and November 2022, I contacted at least 100 non-profit and public agencies in Los Angeles County seeking to meet to discuss my research. Of the dozen or so that responded, I secured meetings with eight organizations, of which three did not immediately decline to have a researcher on site. The agency I ultimately partnered with offered the widest variety of participants, connection with infrastructures of homeless management, and capacity to support observations. Founded and run by a Black-led homeless service organisation with 501c status, the access centre provides a mix of access, housing navigation, and case management services to individuals and families experiencing homelessness.

Operating at the intersection of frontline services and federal and municipal initiatives, an access centre plays a dual role: directly assisting individuals and families in navigating homelessness, while also implementing, adapting, and contesting the policies and approaches handed down from public agencies. After two months in a primarily observational role, I became increasingly involved in the daily workings of the access centre, helping with a

variety of duties. Over the following two years, I participated in most aspects of service provision: enrolling clients, gathering participant documents, completing assessments and surveys, securing match opportunities, corresponding with the city and various housing authorities, accompanying clients to meetings at other agencies and to property viewings, and completing various housing applications with participants. To undertake some of these roles, I completed a range of Los Angeles Homeless Service Authority training and became an authorised user of the Homeless Management Information System. While I do not draw on HMIS data in this study nor document any participant information I encountered in these systems, this access enabled me to more thoroughly participate across a range of roles at the access centre.

Behar (1996) points to the difficulty of observing while participating as an inevitable tension in conducting field work. In many ways, the access centre eased some of the challenges that emerged from this dual role, offering a structured environment, easy access to a notebook or computer to jot notes in a way that did not disrupt what was happening, and an official requirement for staff to document all interactions with participants. These features provided helpful tools in effectively noting the events that occurred on any given day. Embedded at the access centre, I observed and supported participants as the accessed services, sought resources, received housing matches, and attempted to lease apartments. However, I was intentional to maintain distinction and distance between my role and that of the agency staff to ensure approachability with service users. Although I routinely clarified my role as a researcher, participants often perceived me as a volunteer or student, recognizing my lack of formal obligations based on my willingness to help with things staff typically would not.

My positionality also influenced these dynamics; as the only white woman at a site staffed entirely by people of colour and with a British accent, I was frequently asked about

my presence. When I explained my affiliation to UCLA and my research focus, participants generally accepted my role and regarded me as a neutral or harmless presence. However, I found that when I made reference to being a PhD student in Social Work, it became quickly apparent that this led people to assume I was on site as a clinical intern, which necessitated a longer conversation to ensure they understood I was there as a researcher. As such, I often did not specify my field of study unless someone asked. Nevertheless, conducing this work in the field of social welfare required navigating some specific tensions. While I approach this project with a critical lens, as a researcher I became, like the wider social work profession, entangled in both challenging and perpetuating the very systems I was trying to critique. This dual positioning required a sustained reflexivity regarding how I analyse and represent frontline workers and organizations. As a result, I view the staff and sites I study simultaneously as advocates for unhoused individuals and actors within the system reproducing controlling, exclusionary, and punitive practices. Acknowledging this tension is vital in understanding the current limits and possibilities of social work, in addition to situating this research as an effort to engage with these contradictions rather than to idealize or disparage frontline practise.

Ultimately, I managed to retain a position as staff-adjacent, which allowed me to follow the trajectories of participants as they navigated the homeless response system across both the access centre and beyond, including shorter term engagement, more established agency relationships and those newly seeking support. This positioning allowed me to observe the bureaucratic and interpersonal dynamics shaping service provision, including staff decision-making processes, participant strategies for navigating service eligibility criteria, and the administrative hurdles that shaped housing outcomes. I was also able to document patterns of resource scarcity, the discretionary flexibility (or lack thereof) in staff

approaches to policy implementation, and the informal networks participants relied on to access services.

With a small staff ranging between 6 and fifteen members at various points throughout my fieldwork, the centre provided ethnographic access to frontline work as well as management offices and discussions, and these positions allowed me to witness the everyday delivery of services. My position at the access centre in terms of how staff understood my role also varied over time but increasingly tended towards simply being a member of the team. As I cultivated relationships with the operations director and the agency CEO, I was invited to sit in on meetings with the Los Angeles Homeless Service Authority, and senior staff increasingly discussed with me the challenges of delivering services through public contract. The CEO expressed on multiple occasions her frustration that homeless service delivery was increasingly a "business that everyone wants a piece of" and my interest in and understanding of this point of view increased the trust I was extended, leading to further access to city-level platforms, meetings, and trainings that were helpful to my understanding of the wider structures of homeless service delivery.

While a small and in many ways unique community-based organisation, the access centre functions as a nexus within the homeless response system, mediating between unhoused individuals and the bureaucratic structures that determine service access, eligibility, and resource distribution. The ethnographic approaches used and positions obtained thus offer unique insights into the how staff and participants negotiate the practical challenges of securing housing within a resource-scare and procedurally complex system.

Dissertation Outline

This dissertation contains three manuscripts. The first, entitled "Hustling, Hassling, and Performative Compliance: Waiting for Homeless Housing in Los Angeles" examines how

unhoused individuals respond when faced with extensive waiting times for homeless housing opportunities. I first elaborate participant responses such as *performative noncompliance* and *hassling* and outline how these responses represent resistance to the terms of homeless service provision. Second, I outline what these responses show about the temporal and existential implications of waiting for housing for those enduring it. Finally, I outline distinctions between aversion, resistance, and noncompliance within this context and justify the significance of this delineation. Empirically, this paper advances understandings of how unhoused participants respond to waiting and theoretically, findings complicate understandings of unhoused resistance, a phenomenon generally addressed spatially, rather than temporally.

The second paper, "When Homeless Housing Matches Fail: Examining Coordinated Entry Housing Allocation in Los Angeles" explores the experiences of participants who are offered these matches and examine the steps required to successfully utilize them to consider why many individuals who receive a housing match remain unhoused. Situated within the interconnections of national and local allocation systems, I detail the structural barriers, case management issues, and alternate logics that ultimately govern successful utilization of housing opportunities and demonstrate that the offer of a housing match can fail to represent a meaningful pathway out of homelessness. Findings challenge the assumption that receiving a housing match assures homeless resolution. By addressing this gap, the paper advances understanding of matching within the Coordinated Entry and Continuum of Care models and the broader homeless to housing pathway.

Lastly, I examine the efficacy of efforts made to promote resource utilization amongst those who successfully obtain a housing match. Attending specifically to the case of Emergency Housing Vouchers, in the third article, "Homeless Housing Vouchers and the Consumerization of Housing First", I attend to the strategies deployed by both the city and

homeless service agencies to promote successful housing resource uptake. In doing so, I explore the entanglement of homeless housing interventions and the private rental market. Contextualizing these efforts within the Housing First approach deployed at the municipal level, these findings contribute to literature about the consumerization of housing first, detailing how municipal efforts not only resort to but embrace landlord profitability as a mechanism to promote and speed up voucher leasing. Furthermore, examining and elaborating the role of housing readiness within the uptake of housing resources, I detail the requirements that participants themselves self-impose on their housing readiness and detail how this shapes their housing trajectories within a housing first service domain.

Composed as separate manuscripts, each paper includes introductory material, literature reviews, methods, findings, and discussion. However, these pieces are closely connected and each detail a set of procedures and practises within the homeless response system, progressing along the homeless resolution journey and representing some of the overlooked junctures of the homeless to housing pathway. A final conclusion summarises some of the key findings of each article and outlines some of the central theoretical and practical implications of the dissertation that span the three papers.

1.

Hustling, Hassling, and Performing Compliance: Waiting for Homeless Housing in Los Angeles

Abstract

People experiencing homelessness face long waiting times to obtain permanent housing. Drawing on ethnographic study of the housing allocation process for homeless service users in Los Angeles, this paper examines the responses of service participants to lengthy wait times for housing. While scholarship has previously outlined waiting as generative of compliance, I find that participants do not necessarily endure waiting patiently, and that doing so is not always the most effective way for participants to promote housing placement. I thus outline a range of ways in which service users respond to waiting, such as seeking to bypass waiting at all, hustling and hassling staff to progress their case, and performing compliance, and indicate how these responses to waiting can be understood as forms of resistance. Distinguishing between resistance and noncompliance in the homeless service context, I suggest that the term *resistance* in this context warrants greater attention to avoid conflation with the accusations of aversion levied towards people experiencing homelessness and used to justify their displacement from public space. Collectively, findings complicate understandings of resistance and noncompliance amongst those waiting for state services.

Hustling, Hassling, and Performing Compliance: Waiting for Homeless Housing in Los Angeles

Studies of the homeless service industry concur that waiting is an integral part of the journey from homelessness to permanent housing or, in many cases, part of the churning cycle from street to shelter (Nevárez Martínez, 2021; Osborne, 2019; Willse, 2015). Although a varied and often extensive array of available services seek to resolve homelessness, waiting lists for permanent housing are often stagnant, with demand for opportunities far exceeding supply (Mayberry, 2016; Murphy, 2009). Because of this, people experiencing homelessness wait extensive periods of time before accessing housing opportunities. Experiences of waiting for social welfare support have been examined across a range of state services, with different responses identified; on one hand, scholarship suggests that waiting for the state produces subordination and compliance (Auyero, 2012; Edelman, 1977; Goddard & Tavakoli, 2008) while on the other, responses to waiting are described as resistive (Appadurai, 2023; Oldfield & Greyling, 2015). Despite this, we know relatively little about the lived reality of waiting for permanent housing in the homeless service domain and particularly little about those waiting while residing outside of the shelter system.

In this paper, I draw upon ethnographic fieldwork in a Los Angeles homeless access centre to examine how service users respond to extended waiting times for permanent housing. In doing so, I pursue three connected objectives. First, I explore participant responses to waiting for homeless services and housing and consider when these responses represent resistance. Refuting narratives of unhoused aversion to services, I find that participants seek actively to engage with services, but that in doing so they resist, rather than comply with, waiting times of housing allocation. While scholarship has examined homeless resistance, it has predominantly done so spatially (DeVerteuil, Marr, and Snow 2009; Dozier, 2022; Sparks, 2017). DeVerteuil et al. (2009) have called for a more nuanced approach to

resistance amongst the unhoused that better accounts for the variation in homeless experiences; I answer this call by foregrounding unhoused responses to temporal, rather than spatial, management. Drawing on concepts of everyday resistance (Gilliom, 2001; Scott, 1985) and emergent resistance (Hughes, 2020) I build upon a body of scholarship examining homeless resistance and the function of resistive responses to homeless management. Second, I explore the relationships between spatial and temporal mobility in homeless service delivery and examine the consequences of extended waiting for participants. Through this lens, I consider how extended waiting shapes participants' perceptions of services and how existential immobility shapes responses to waiting.

Finally, I scrutinise the relationship between participant responses to waiting and noncompliance with program requirements. Finding that participants can become noncompliant because of their responses to extensive waiting, I suggest that waiting and noncompliance should be analysed concurrently. Noncompliance is of growing relevance in terms of homeless management, because as resistance serves as a justification for punitive policies towards the unhoused in public space (Beckett and Herbert, 2008; Stuart, 2016), noncompliance with service requirements poses a barrier to homeless resolution for service participants (Nevárez Martínez, 2021). Yet though claims of service aversion amongst the unhoused outdoors have been well attended in existing scholarship, the function and consequences of noncompliance for those engaged in services are relatively underexamined. Identifying resistance and noncompliance in service users' responses to waiting, I consider the consequences for participants undertaking or accused of either.

The paper is structured around four sections. First, I bring together scholarship regarding waiting for state services and experiential and resistive responses to waiting to consider how these dynamics apply to the context of homeless service provision. Second, I outline the nature of waiting for homeless services in Los Angeles and detail the research

design. Third, I present findings in two parts, the first of which outlines a range of participant responses to waiting that emerged from analysis of ethnographic data, and the second detailing an illustrative case regarding the relationship between waiting and noncompliance. Finally, I detail what these findings indicate about the resistive potential of responses to waiting, the role of mobility in shaping these responses, and how noncompliance can be established via case staff interpretations of participant responses to waiting.

Literature

Existential Dimensions of Waiting

Much of the conceptual study of waiting has focussed on the topics of passivity, agency, and mobility. Enmeshed with power dynamics, waiting is understood as socially stratified, affecting those in lower social strata more because they are unable to access, by purchase or privilege, alternative services (Schwartz, 1974). Waiting serves as a tool of control, imposed disproportionately upon the poor and marginalized (Appadurai, 2023). Scholarship attending to homeless service provision has focused on the active and demanding components of waiting, where participants are required to partake in recovery practices, bureaucracy, and work programming that occupy substantial portions of participants' time (Nevárez Martínez, 2021; Stuart, 2016; Willse, 2015). While this aligns with discussions of contemporary citizenship that emphasize the need for social welfare recipients to be active participants (Brown, 2003; Ong, 2006), this characterisation overlooks expectations of passive waiting amongst service users.

Scholarship addressing waiting for welfare conceptualises waiting as an active process, attending to cases of individuals standing in line or repeatedly visiting government offices (e.g., Goodsell, 1984; Ozoliņa-Fitzgerald, 2016). Contrastingly, waiting for housing placement is better understood as passive, with participants assigned to a waiting *list.* Bissell

(2007) suggests that waiting is neither an inherently active nor passive process but a dynamic one with both potentials. However, this does not mean that waiting becomes easier to endure. Waiting also serves as a deterrent to service participation altogether; in public healthcare systems, waiting lists can function as a rationing mechanism, dissuading individuals from seeking assistance (Goddard and Tavakoli, 2008). In the case of homeless bureaucracy, complex and illegible information and procedures effectively filter out those who struggle to meet the demands of services (Murphy, 2009). Greater attention to the passive demands of waiting within homeless response is needed to consider how passive expectations and not just bureaucratic requirements shape service participation.

Waiting represents a burden not only because of its relation to social order or through bureaucratic requirements but also because waiting produces a lack of agency and a perceived lack of mobility (Hage, 2009). The extent to which waiting requires active or passive participation shapes perceptions of waiting as productive and representative of movement towards a goal. For example, requiring participation in rituals of housing progress creates the illusion of case progress even when actual opportunities for housing placement are extremely limited (Nevárez Martínez, 2021). Enforced waiting represents a disruption to desires for movement, progress, or stillness across social, temporal, and existential domains. Scholarship in migration studies has extensively detailed the individual and existential harm arising from extended waiting, and Hage outlines ‘existential immobility’, a condition arising when waiting extinguishes aspirations for the future and creates a sense of spatially, socially, or spiritually going nowhere. In an existential sense, mobility and immobility are not necessarily opposite or exclusive experiences, and Hage (2009) outlines through *existential immobility* the uncertainty and despair produced when extensive waiting produces a perceived lack of mobility.

In the context of homelessness, mobility has generally been attended to in spatial dimensions, pertaining to physical movement or the forced relocation of unhoused individuals in public space. Yet scholarship indicates that attention to existential mobility amongst homeless service users is warranted, finding that service users become stuck in circular loops of program requirements, or cycle through various locations or routines of displacement (DeVerteuil, 2003; Nevárez Martínez, 2021). Like waiting for a migration decision, waiting for housing and welfare services can amount to bureaucratic violence through the creation of temporal borders that limit access to services, producing pain, suffering, and premature death (Lems and Tošić, 2019; Norstedt et al., 2022). Similar attention to these temporal and existential dynamics amongst homeless service users is thus warranted, as examining waiting amongst homeless service users illuminates how efficiency in service access and the expectations of those waiting shapes service users' experiences potentially deters participants from waiting altogether, or produces existential immobility, uncertainty, and despair amongst participants.

Waiting, Subordination, and Compliance

Participant responses to waiting can thus be viewed through the lens of resisting temporal control and avoiding existential immobility arising from extensive waiting for crucial services. Previous scholarship situates responses to waiting along a continuum of subordination and compliance. On the one hand, waiting is suggested to generate compliance and the "everyday political domination" of the poor, as long delays demand the poor submit to the state in order to access resources (Auyero, 2012:19). Yet those expected to wait for public services also resist doing so; Borges (2006) details how those waiting for housing plots in Brazil subvert waiting by negotiating eligibility criteria with government officials administrating waiting and access. Crucially, this approach to resisting waiting is necessarily

individualistic or at least not scalable, as participants seek to move themselves to the front of a waiting line rather than transform the system the necessitates waiting altogether. However, as those resisting in extended waiting do not necessarily do so with an awareness of or concern for waiting as political, waiting can produce resistance of varying levels of political expression and with concern to either the individual or the group. Moreover, viewing waiting as evidence of domination and refusal to wait as resistance unduly simplifies the range of responses to waiting and their implications.

First, resistance to waiting need not necessarily directly redress the waiting process itself, and Oldfield and Greyling (2015) note that South African households awaiting public housing navigate a duality as while their claims for state support legitimize their presence, their actions—such as occupying unauthorized spaces—are subversive. Responses to waiting are thus situated along a continuum of compliance and subversion, but as Oldfield and Greyling note, these are not mutually exclusive and those waiting can engage in both subversion and compliance concurrently. Similarly, Thieme, Ference, and van Stepele (2021) employ the conceptual frame of *hustle* to examine everyday responses to uncertainty amongst youth who confront prolonged periods of waithood. This resistance operates aside from the formal process of waiting for state support but, originating from a desire for more a more urgent outcome, hustlers' refusal to participate in the waiting ascribed to them represents a form of individual resistance and impatience. Moreover, while both of these forms represent an impatience and desire to hurry the process of waiting, resistance to waiting can also be a gradual and more methodical practise. Examining patience, Appadurai (2023) argues that waiting can be reclaimed as a means of resistance, exploring waiting as a form of strategic endurance and collective strength within a slow and deliberate practice of organising.

Reflecting wider dynamics of domination, waiting can generate both subordination and compliance amongst those expected to wait. Despite recognition of waiting as a site of

both compliance and resistance, existing literature often dichotomizes these responses. However, participants in homeless services are not exclusively either grateful apolitical recipients or political activists. Examining waiting amongst homeless service users, I address the complexities of patience, compliance, and resistance to capture the intricacies of responses to waiting and their various potentials.

Waiting and Resistance in Homeless Housing Allocation

While conceptualisations of resistance vary in scope, what resistance looks like in the homeless service bureaucracy is generally overshadowed by claims of resistance *to* homeless services. In the case of homeless response, the term resistance is commonly used to indicate an antipathy to accessing or accepting services (an accusation I term aversion to distinguish from forms of participant-initiated resistance). While critiqued by a wide range of evidence, accusations of service aversion towards the visibly unhoused are prevalent in popular discourse and used to allocate blame for houselessness to those experiencing it. Scholarship that has examined resistance amongst the unhoused had tended to focus on resistance to spatial control amongst those living outdoors (e.g. DeVerteuil et al., 2009; Dozier, 2022; Sparks, 2017). DeVerteuil et al. (2009) critique identifications of resistance amongst the unhoused on the grounds that the "romance of resistance" unduly equates adaptive behaviours with "ruptures of society" (634;635).

However, the view that resistance is too readily identified amongst adaptive behaviours employed by poor and marginalised groups is countered by everyday and emergent theorisations of resistance. Everyday understandings of resistance recognise acts that stem from everyday concerns and, through small-scale actions, serve as a safer alternative to "spectacular" forms of resistance, offering greater discretion and posing minimal potential harm to service relationships (Gilliom and Monahan, 2012; Scott, 1985).

Such a framing recognises that intentionality is a poor indicator of resistance, often added only after the fact and by privileged voices (Scott, 1985). An important distinction can be made between acts that impact the state or dominant group obliging the resistance versus those that ultimately impact marginalised groups (Bayat, 2000). While these everyday actions may not always be successful, and may not be expressly political, they nevertheless challenge power relations in meaningful ways. Recognising resistance only in the form of distinct social movements or specific abstract categories thus fails to reflect both the realities of resistance amongst those entangled in the system that they are resisting and the often slow and inadvertent nature of mobilization (Ballard, 2015; Hughes, 2020; Rose, 2002; Sharp et al., 2000). Attending only to predetermined forms of resistance also overlooks emergent forms of resistance, outlined by Hughes (2020) as actions, spaces, and subjects that might not cohere into a resistant form at present but which lay the ground for future claims. These everyday and emergent forms of resistance are not necessarily collective or contentious but akin to what Bayat (2000) terms 'nonmovements', wherein marginalised groups defy restrictions and in doing so challenge state control.

In examining unhoused service participants' responses to waiting, I attend to these forms of everyday and emergent action and consider them in relation to compliance. In the context of waiting for the state, resistance and compliance are typically viewed as opposed. However, as discussed above, these two responses are not necessarily exclusive. Moreover, in the context of homeless response, accusations of *noncompliance* represent an equally important yet neglected consideration. Homeless service participants found noncompliant with conditions of participation risk of losing eligibility for support and housing. Amongst service participants, accusations of aversion and noncompliance have differing outcomes; those accused of aversion might be compelled to enrol in services or shelter (Stuart, 2016), while those accused of noncompliance might be rendered ineligible for services (Nevárez

Martínez, 2021). Yet noncompliance has received comparatively less attention than aversion and the co-existence of these two seemingly contradictory dynamics has not been examined. In wider discourse around waiting for state services, compliance is generally understood as counter to resistance, however, this risks overlooking the specific meaning of noncompliance in potentially punitive and conditional welfare contexts.

Case and Methods

To elaborate the forms and consequences of waiting for homeless services, I draw on ethnographic data collected in Los Angeles between November 2022 and June 2024. My primary field site was a homeless access center based in South Los Angeles run by a community-based, Black-led non-profit agency and located in a community that as of 2014 comprised 68% Latinx and 28% Black residents (Los Angeles Department of Health, 2014). To gain access for ethnographic observation, I contacted a range of homeless service agencies identified via the 2021 Housing Inventory Count published by the Los Angeles Homeless Service Authority (LAHSA). The organization I partnered with offered the greatest connection to infrastructures of homeless management and capacity to support observation of those who responded to my inquiries. The agency receives public and private funding, some of which came through city contracts for service delivery.

Participants at the access centre self-refer to the agency for enrolment into the Coordinated Entry System (CES), a nationally mandated system that allocates federally funded homeless housing placements such as vouchers and permanent supportive units (Ecker et al., 2022). Matching participants as housing resources become available, the CES process is critiqued as lengthy, complex, and racially biased (Cronley, 2020). Although my field site was not a lead agency for CES enrolment and thus not required to do so, like many other agencies they routinely enrolled participants into coordinated entry. For those enrolled

in CES without a further referral, their designation in coordinated entry is ‘access centre’ participant, and compared to case management or housing navigation, this enrolment is a more arms-length client-agency relationship where participants might go weeks or months with no agency contact as they await a housing match. While the CES allocates federally funded housing opportunities, for participants enrolled in housing navigation, non-CES housing pathways include rapid rehousing amongst other programs (LAHSA, 2023a). I observed the delivery of these services through participation in a housing navigation team delivering housing navigation at a local shelter to a cohort of 15 participants. Over 5 months, we visited the shelter for 2-5 hours each week and met with participants to progress their housing case. Crucially, for most of the shelter participants a city-allocated housing match was unlikely within the timeline that housing navigators were expected to move participants on from shelter and so this cohort provided a counter example to access centre participants as staff sought to secure housing outside of CES matching.

Unhoused Angeleno’s seeking housing support are thus predominantly waiting on CES matches, case management and housing navigation access, or progress in securing a non-CES match. Both housing-oriented services, LAHSA contracts state that case management is concerned with “reducing barriers to housing and self-sufficiency” while housing navigation aims to “assist participants in accessing permanent housing” (LAHSA, 2024b). However, it is not necessarily the case that people are allocated to these services based on their level of need, and instead this is something of a lottery based on where and when participants enrol in services. While the range of waiting times for housing via coordinated entry is difficult to determine, recent LAHSA data reports an average throughput to permanent housing of 284 days for adults in interim housing such as shelter (LAHSA, 2024a).

The access centre provided a detailed understanding of waiting amongst homeless service users and served as a point through which to view and interact with a range of systems such as the CES matching process and county-wide procedures which stem from HUD requirements, increasing transferability of findings. Like any homeless service agency, however, the access centre was in some ways unique. A crucial component of this uniqueness was the Black-led nature of the agency. Many staff expressed a frustration with the respect, support, and funding available to Black-led agencies in general, and in particular in relation to the program types that they wished to implement. Some staff viewed Housing First approaches, or aspects of their implementation in Los Angeles, as ineffective in the context of the historically Black and historically disadvantaged neighbourhood and wished to implement alternative programs but could not do so because of the emphasis on Housing First and Harm Reduction approaches attached to available funding. This was sometimes discussed as "the white people" at LAHSA not respecting their expertise and experience. The CEO expressed that they would continue to take on city contracts but that this was often a reluctant undertaking.

Staff willingness to speak candidly about race around me developed over the first few months I was onsite. While I was the only non-Hispanic white person working with staff at any point during my field work, I interpreted that my role as a student and the fact that my British accent identified me as foreign benefitted staff openness around me. Staff seemed to view my foreignness as reasonable grounds for any lack of understanding, and my role as a student conducting research in this field as an indicator that I was amenable to their points of view. Client willingness to speak with me varied, but amongst those who were happy to speak or work with me, many would explain their experiences at often great length, seeming to assume I knew extremely little about the housing process, homelessness in LA, and the US in general. Because of this, they seemed to retain substantial authority and ease of

communication. To ensure informed consent, I communicated my position as a researcher and made information sheets available for clients and staff. To protect the identity of participants, names have been replaced with pseudonyms.

I spent around 1000 hours conducting participant observation at the access centre or off-site with participants or staff, and during this time participated across all aspects of service enrolment and housing placement; enrolling clients, working with them in document gathering, completing assessments and surveys, securing match opportunities, arranging property viewings, accompanying clients to meetings, and completing housing applications. Through participant observation, I developed a position as staff-adjacent, where participants understood that I might also help out with tasks that staff refused to, such as looking up property listings. In addition, I draw on dozens of field interviews and a range of compiled documents alongside field notes as a basis for analysis.

Findings

Resistive Responses to Waiting

Attending specifically to participant's responses to waiting, analysis identified four prevalent responses to waiting for housing outlined below: *bypassing, hustling, hassling,* and *performative compliance*. Not necessarily mutually exclusive, these responses were undertaken across participants waiting for shorter periods of weeks and months, and those faced with protracted waits spanning years. After outlining these responses, I draw on an illustrative case through which I examine the relationship between participant responses to waiting and noncompliance.

Bypassing

Homeless service participants do not always endure waiting patiently and instead challenge waiting times or seek to strategically hasten them. An approach commonly used by newer participants is *bypassing,* undertaking to side-step the waiting process altogether. For participants new to homeless services there is often an adjustment period where they confront, with shock and confusion, that obtaining housing takes an extensive amount of waiting. During this time, participants work hard to bypass the waiting list by disputing the accuracy of procedures outlined, seeking an exception, or emphasizing their vulnerability. These responses seek to circumvent or avoid waiting for housing.

Anthony, a retired man who had had a professional career and little experience of social welfare services, attempted to bypass waiting with particularly unfortunate consequences. After being handed Anthony's file and asked to help him find a rental unit before he was evicted from his current apartment, I outlined to him that affordable units or housing vouchers have wait times of 1-2 years, so we would need to secure a temporary rental in the interim. Nevertheless, when I emailed Anthony lists of rental units to look at, he ignored these and sent numerous emails with links to affordable buildings, asking me to call them. Over an hour-long phone call, and multiple subsequent interactions, I reiterated that securing an affordable or low-income unit before his eviction would be impossible. After a week of these conversations, Anthony inquired about applying for a housing voucher; I explained that housing authorities would not be issuing vouchers for at least some months. Anthony continued to advocate for pathways that avoided an interim unit, and at each juncture, it took days or weeks and hours of conversations to convince Anthony that these options did not align with his eviction timeline. By the time he began to look at rental listings, there were seven days left until the eviction. Unable to secure a rental in time, Anthony became vehicular homeless upon his lock out.

Like Anthony, many participants are reluctant to wait and instead seek to bypass the pool of unhoused Angeleno's waiting for housing. Some participants explained that they did not believe they were being provided the right information, while others hoped that good luck and extensive effort on the part of case staff might produce a more immediate housing option. In Anthony's case, while he certainly seemed to understand what I was telling him, he did not necessarily believe it precluded him from obtaining immediate, affordable housing and he continued to divert from the offered plan. In many instances, attempts to bypass waiting rest on a level of misunderstanding that can take multiple forms. On the one hand, this can be a misunderstanding of the procedures of housing allocation and the availability of units. More frequently though, as in Anthony's case, participants understand in principle that these procedures exist, but hope that staff will, through some kind of extra effort or favour, achieve some sort of exception.

Hustling and Hassling

A second pair of responses participants use to hasten waiting are *hustling* and *hassling*. Access centre participants engaged in hustling when they feared they were being overlooked or forgotten, and this took the form of calling frequently for case updates or visiting the office to remain familiar with staff. Referring to case managers, service users emphasize the importance of "staying on their mind" to achieve progress towards housing and not "getting lost" in someone's case load. In particular, access centre clients frequently asked for updates on their waiting list status, and wanted estimated timelines of how long their waiting time might be (something staff refuse to provide because of the unpredictability of housing matching). Across varying levels of readiness to wait, numerous participants expressed a "need to know" that they are "still on the waiting list" or sought assurance that they "will get

a match eventually". Participants made these efforts despite knowing that these acts are not required and are, at times, discouraged.

Examining *hustle* amongst Kenyan youth, Thieme (2018) suggests that hustling represents a survival strategy in the face of urban precarity, recasting the term to reflect the improvisation, struggle, and solidarity in the responses of those who cannot access formal assistance. As an analytical lens, hustle examines the proactive efforts of individuals navigating systems and obstacles in the absence of institutional support (Thieme et al., 2021). Latoya, an older lady living in her RV, recounted her efforts to seek alternatives both inside and outside of the homeless service sector:

> My voucher [application] hasn't been assigned to anyone. So it's just there in the ozone somewhere. As far as I know. I've called. I call, I call… I'm still trying to put in my own stuff, trying to look for other low income housing because I need a space. And I've actually gone to [other service provider] twice. I've gone to other places now. And I told you, remember, I told you that they say? That [the access centre] is holding my voucher application.

Amongst those waiting on housing allocation, participants hustling were often doing so in service and private domains concurrently, but as Latoya explained, because participant case information is shared across agencies, other service providers can refuse to help those already enrolled elsewhere. For Latoya, hustling arose from a need to resolve her housing insecurity before she could move forward in her life, explaining:

> You're still trying to function out in the world, and, and have some form of life to feel whole again. To heal from whatever you went through. But you're not doing that without properly without your home, because your home is really your sanctuary.

Detailing the extensive efforts she had undertaken to seek wider services both via public and private forms of support over three years of homelessness, Latoya recounted waiting overnight

outside various agencies, frequent calls to different service providers, proactive efforts to pitch alternative solutions to case staff, and her efforts to seek low-cost private rentals independently. I encountered agency participants who undertook similar efforts frequently, hustling to find alternative options or to hurry the waiting process with the access centre specifically.

As an extension of hustling, I outline *hassling* to reflect a sometimes purposefully antagonistic approach to achieving case progress where participants use a wider range of means, including soliciting third party pressure and invoking sheer irritation of staff. While some participants are seeking to remain on the hustling side of this division, others strategically move over to hassling. Participants explain that they wonder if frustrating staff will move their case forward, and efforts to do so include calling advocates to instil fear in staff, emailing and calling repeatedly, and trying to speak to more senior staff. On several occasions, staff recounted stories of participants who had called local political figures or the county board to place pressure on staff, something that staff indicated did not increase a participants progress and rather could lead to staff resentment.

A hustling-hassling distinction is important because hassling poses greater risk to participant-agency relationships. Hassling also poses an increased likelihood of a participant becoming and being noted as non-compliant with their service contract. Highlighting the risk to staff-participant relationships, one participant reported that their case manager had blocked their phone number because they called too much, reflecting "I wasn't trying to be unreasonable, but they didn't call me like they said they would, and I needed to know something was going on." Thus, hustling can also lead to accusations of hassling, as one might be accused of "pushing too hard", something that some participants are acutely aware of. These responses can be distinguished by whether the participant is seeking to work within the program terms; hustling typically respects the procedures of housing navigation, while hassling, a riskier approach, does not.

Performative Compliance

A final response is a deliberate and demonstrated attention to the demands of services that I term *performative compliance*. During an early interaction at the access centre, a participant brought in a copy of his ID to place in his file, and as I took it from him, he asked me for a receipt. Confused, I asked why, and he shrugged, saying: “just to prove that I brought it in”. I subsequently noticed clients asking for receipts or letters verifying that they had been into the office fairly regularly. Similarly, participants would bring large folders of documents to appointments that did not require them and make frequent references to their efforts to remain organised and stay on top of program requirements. When I asked about the careful attention they paid to documents and record keeping, participants explained that they did so to indicate their organisation, to show that they were committed to getting housed, and as a form of insurance in case the agency loses something or does not record their attendance. For other participants this compliance indicated a readiness to complain, as some explained keeping these records in case they needed to protest in some form, such as raising a grievance to a city or county official which, while not reducing waiting time in my observation, could prevent waiting arising from administrative error.

Engaging with these precise and bureaucratic demands is taxing and requires participants to expend energy documenting interactions with service providers. Yet other forms of performative compliance can be a much more profound labour. When I met Crystal, she and her daughter had been waiting for housing for over a year. Initially, they had moved between living in their car and staying with friends. Eventually, Crystal was informed by staff that moving to a shelter would improve their chances at securing permanent housing and so had done so. Although either living situation qualified Crystal as homeless, staff suspected city-operated matching prioritised shelter clients, and this was a sentiment I encountered

widely and something that is confirmed in the context of certain program types by city matching guidance (LAHSA, 2023a). Crystal was profoundly unhappy in the shelter, explaining that her daughter felt unsafe but that she knew she had a better and swifter chance at securing housing if they stayed. Entering a shelter environment does not comply with the terms of a specific program, but rather with a widely understood if not explicit expectation that unhoused people will filter themselves into shelter based on most genuine need. In doing this deliberately, reluctantly, and with the specific intention of reducing her waiting time, Crystal's actions represent both a challenge to the terms of waiting and an effort to comply with expectations that shape housing allocation.

Waiting and Noncompliance

These responses to waiting take place within the context of participants' service relationships and have the potential to inform frontline staff perspectives of participants as active or passive and compliant or noncompliant. During my field work, I was invited to join a housing navigation team supporting a new cohort of participants at a nearby shelter, and throughout the first few weeks, staff appeared frustrated that participants had not pre-emptively begun obtaining required identity documents. One housing navigator (HN) asked a participant "why have you been waiting to get your documents together?" to which the participant replied, "I thought you were going to help me. I was waiting." Staff viewed this waiting as inappropriate inaction and expressed concerns about the readiness and commitment of the shelter cohort. Frontline staffs' ability to code waiting as action or inaction is consequential for clients, as inappropriate action or passivity is a key component in the designation of a participant as noncompliant.

Shelter participants were asked to secure a lease for a private rental unit so they could enrol in a subsidy program. With caseloads of 20 participants, housing navigators often

described being unable to support with all of the tasks their contract required. The aspect most neglected was arranging viewings and transporting clients to them. However, participants found it challenging to arrange viewings, secure transport, and complete or afford rental applications, and returned each week reporting this. Staff viewed this as evidence that participants were "waiting for everything to be done for them", with one staff member noting "if they didn't view the properties, that's on them. We can document it." A common refrain, "document it" reflects an understanding that contractual obligations are met by evidence of attempts to help participants, rather than success in doing so.

Publicly available LAHSA contracts show that shelter operators can, at 30-days' notice, terminate a participant's program enrolment if an individual consistently fails to cooperate with staff in identifying housing options or breaches a term of a participation agreement, which agencies can draft themselves and require participants to sign (LAHSA, 2023b). In addition, a substantial portion of beds in the Los Angeles shelter system are offered for 90-day stays, and shelter operators can elect not to extend a participants' stay without cause. The documentation of participants' ostensible failure to comply can thus be sufficient to exit a participant from shelter or other types of program. Staff across the sector are generally invested in supporting participants to find housing, yet they are often assigned participants who have few options to obtain housing or have a caseload far beyond what is manageable. While in many cases, participant noncompliance goes unnoticed or overlooked, under pressure to progress cases or manage client load, staff might lean on noncompliance as a means to exit clients from programs rather than allow them to linger when staff have no resources to help them. Although I am not suggesting that this is a routine or frequent feature of services, I met with a range of participants who reported that a case manager or housing navigator had exited them from a program or gradually or abruptly ceased contact such that their service participation was impossible.

The consequences of this option became clear a few months later at the shelter when one resident, Samuel, was missing a document he had been asked to obtain from his doctor. Following multiple attempts to motivate Samuel to obtain this document, and a warning that his shelter bed would not be renewed if he failed to do so, shelter and housing navigation staff decided that Samuel was "not invested in his future" and was "too comfortable" waiting in the shelter, which housed residents in a residential building in a quiet neighbourhood. Staff understood that evicting Samuel would likely lead to him being placed in a congregate style shelter and felt that this would compel him to start "taking it seriously". Samuel was evicted from the shelter around three months into the agency contract and went on to find a bed in a congregate shelter where he was incredibly uncomfortable and not supported by housing navigation. Four months later, he left the shelter as he felt unsafe and became almost completely service disconnected, only stopping into drop-in locations to do laundry. No one was helping him find housing, and with a fixed income of $221 a month, he was not going to find it independently.

Discussion

Samuel's situation illustrates how those perceived as averse to the aims of service provision and found noncompliant can be exited from programs because of loose procedures in agency contracts. These findings complement work such as Nevárez Martínez (2021) and Osborne (2019), who find that failure to comply with service conditions carries significant costs for participants and extend understanding by explicitly detailing these consequences in the form of program exit via noncompliance. In drawing on Samuel's example, I do not mean to suggest that this specific set of circumstances frequently occurs. Staff are widely invested in progressing client cases, and at times view exiting a participant in this way to be in a participant's interest by compelling them to be more proactive or redirecting them to a more

suitable or resourced provider. Irrespective, the possibility of these exits is enabled by the structures of homeless service delivery, including the contract terms highlighted above, and the widespread use of the digital homeless management information system where staff make detailed notes that are visible to all participating homeless service agencies but not to participants themselves. While there are possible avenues of appeal or mediation, participants are rarely aware of these. Ultimately, Samuel's case highlights a set of noncompliance procedures that enable client removal should a staff member or agency no longer desire or feel able to work with them and illustrates the potentially harmful consequences of such an outcome.

Significantly, although Samuel and the other shelter residents reported not being able to do what was asked of them, it was staff interpretations of participant waiting that informed the view that participants were not trying and thus noncompliant with the aims of the program. Unlike waiting for welfare, where presence is necessary, absence is typically a condition of waiting for housing allocation, and contacting staff can be frowned upon. Yet too much absence can resort in criticism from staff as indicative of lacking commitment. Both staff and participants have varied expectations of the extent to which participants should be active in the process of securing housing. One participant reported that while their first homeless service provider "did all the work", that generally, "people have the misconception that you can walk in and everything will be handed to you, and it's not like that. They are asking you to be proactive". Because of this variation, participants report having a difficult time gauging the expectations of action and engagement across service providers, staff members, and specific scenarios. This struggle has implications for the relative success of participant responses to waiting, as well as consequences for those whose response is viewed as unduly active or passive and thus rendered noncompliant.

Participant responses to waiting thus take place in a particular context in the homeless service sector where participant passivity and activity can be subject to varying degrees of scrutiny and it is within this context that participant responses to waiting must be understood. I find that unhoused service users do not necessarily endure waiting patiently and resist both waiting and subordination by undertaking forms of resistance such as performative compliance, bypassing, hustling, and hassling. Like Borges (2006), I find that participants seek to negotiate with the terms of service via bypassing but, unlike Borges, I find that participants begin this negotiation with a view to working around these terms, rather than through them. Hustle proves a valuable frame not only for typifying responses to waiting but detailing these efforts as a form of resistance. Drawing on Thieme et al. (2021), I outline hassling as an extension of *hustle* where participants place themselves at greater risk of noncompliance.

Unhoused people living outdoors are found to knowingly perform representations of homeless identities to increase their access to service spaces by emphasizing vulnerability or ensuring that they present as deserving (Cook & Hole, 2020, Marvasti, 2002). While I similarly find that service users take care to evidence their eligibility and deservingness, I also find that, via performative compliance, participants emphasize capability rather than incapacity, alongside their readiness and capability to cause problems for staff or the agency if their case was not progressing. A form of technical compliance with the terms of services, performative compliance allows participants a sense of agency and limits the possibilities for participants to be found noncompliant, even if a participant's efforts of performing compliance are imperfect.

Thieme et al. (2021) point out that hustling is not only pragmatic but a reflection of an identity articulation, where hustling is juxtaposed to idling or loitering. Amongst unhoused service users, the responses to waiting identified reflect not only an attempt to promote

housing access but an effort to retain a sense of existential mobility, as participants seek greater authority or control in their housing case. They do this via maintaining relationships with service providers, indicating presence and capability, and remaining prepared to self-advocate. Participants also seek assurance of progress in terms of movement within the waiting pool for housing. For access centre participants, hustling represents an approach seeking to ensure case progress through case manager interaction and opportunity advancement, while performative compliance indicates their status as a proactive participant rather than an inactive one. In centring notions of capability, proactivity, and mobility, these responses reflect a desire for existential mobility amongst participants as they seek to drive change, make choices, and feel ownership over the future when faced with prolonged waiting.

Crucially, these everyday actions of resistance directly contradict accusations of aversion as participants attempt to increase or hasten their access to services, not avoid them. However, each of the approaches used to confront waiting operates with the aim of getting to the front of a waiting line, not disrupting the line altogether, and as such these responses are neither transformative nor scalable, as any success in obtaining individual progress means that others remain waiting. As Bayat notes, resistance that primarily impacts other marginalised individuals is distinct from that which primarily affects those in power. These forms of resistance pose varying risks and opportunities, and while they can be understood as forms of everyday and emergent resistance, the decentralisation, fragmentation, and lack of oversight in homeless service delivery likely limit the potential of nonmovements as a form of wider or productive resistance.

Conclusion

This study examined unhoused service users' responses to wait times for housing, the relationship between these responses and noncompliance, and the ways in which these responses represent resistance both to expectations of waiting and associated existential immobility. Drawing on data from an access centre, findings represent a range of homeless service users' experiences and program enrolment types. Highlighting contract provisions that enable participant exits via subjective interpretation of client behaviour, these findings have implications to policy regarding participant protection within the homeless response system and indicate that greater attention to accusations of noncompliance, not just aversion, amongst the unhoused is needed. While the access centre location enabled inclusion of participants from a range of residential situations and program enrolment types, the site necessarily excluded participants that gave up on homeless services in response to waiting. While I could see from case files that some participants did not return, if they did not answer calls, I could not conclude whether this was in relation to the waiting time they were confronting.

Moreover, the access centre had a distinct ethos that shaped how services were delivered, meaning that findings here cannot characterize the experiences of participants across all service providers. For many participants, having only an access centre enrolment limited the amount of support they received in obtaining housing resources, yet participants explained that they preferred the agency because of its base in the community and racially diverse staff. As municipalities declare efforts to address inequity in homelessness via service delivery, scholarly and policy attention is needed to waiting as a potentially racialised project. While my findings here do not further suggestions that waiting for homeless services is a racialised undertaking, future research should attend to disparities in funding and resources reported by community-based and Black-led agencies. My findings here suggest two avenues for this exploration, first in the consideration of how to increase the capacity of Black-led

agencies without detriment to their community-based model, and second in the examination of how dominant approaches to homeless service delivery being championed by policy makers reflect or overlook the expertise and perspectives of community-based, Black-led organisations.

Finally, future study should consider whether and how waiting in contemporary homeless service provision can be understood as a denial of social rights. The slim potential of a match for participants with a low priority status prevents their waiting from being understood as a denial of services, yet in reality, few will achieve housing this way. This population is thus largely neglected by the homeless response system and the outcomes of their waiting requires further attention. A key precursor to this exploration is consideration of how to distinguish, both practically and conceptually, between individuals waiting and likely to receive services, and those whose waiting is essentially futile.

2.

When Homeless Housing Matches Fail: Examining Coordinated Entry Housing Allocation in Los Angeles

Abstract

In this article, I examine housing resource allocation to people experiencing homelessness to understand why a substantial portion of resources allocated go unutilized by participants. Drawing on ethnographic observation at a homeless access centre in Los Angeles, I outline the challenges faced by unhoused participants in securing and subsequently utilizing tenant-based vouchers and unit-based matches via coordinated entry, including inadequate and absent case management, ambivalence to resource use at the systemic level, and procedures prioritising efficiency rather than ensuring access. Addressing the increasing interconnection between Coordinated Entry, the national system governing homeless resource access, and Public Housing Agency allocation, findings speak to US housing policy more widely. While coordinated entry was predicated on increasing access to housing, reducing arbitrariness, and preventing discrimination, I find that participants have varying perceptions of the orderliness, fairness, and utility of this process.

When Homeless Housing Matches Fail: Examining Coordinated Entry Housing Allocation in Los Angeles

As homelessness remains a persistent issue across the US, an array of interventions and resources are deployed to address it. Interventions ranging from shelters to transitional programs are criticized for failing to provide direct or successful pathways to housing, instead entrenching individuals experiencing homelessness in cycles of temporary or conditional assistance (Padgett, Henwood & Tsemberis, 2016). These systems are often characterized by restrictive eligibility requirements and bureaucratic hurdles that make securing stable housing difficult (Willse, 2015). Equally, many speculate the extent to which this system actually presents a pathway to permanent housing for most who seek it (Nevárez Martínez, 2021). While much attention is given to the accessibility and effectiveness of various interventions, less scrutiny is directed at how housing itself is allocated. Given that permanent housing is the critical factor in ending homelessness, understanding how it is distributed and who gains access is crucial to assessing the efficacy of homeless resolution pathways.

While some studies have attended to access and priority determination in regards to homeless housing pathways, these pay less attention to resource allocation, and scholarship has not considered the distinction between allocation and utilization of homeless housing resource. Yet the process of resolving homelessness even after being offered a housing resource is multi-stage and lengthy. Being offered a housing resource does not mean that a participant will succeed in using it; 65% of homeless households that received a tenant-based voucher between 2016-2020 were successful in using them to secure housing (Khadduri et al., 2022). For those who do secure a resource, going on to use it remains laborious: analysis of administrative data finds that for homeless households in Los Angeles, an average of 122 days elapse between receiving a housing voucher and leasing a unit, with many households

needing more than 180 days (Khadduri et al., 2022). The journey between receiving a housing resource and ultimately resolving homelessness remains the least well understood stage of the rehousing process despite evidence of substantial barriers that both delay and prohibit housing resource utilization.

Barriers to resource utilisation have been examined in the context of Housing Choice Voucher (HCV) allocation via public housing authorities (PHAs) (e.g. McCabe, 2023; Moore, 2016; Rita et al., 2023). Historically, prioritization and allocation have differed between PHA and CES allocation as HCVs target a wider range of households and do not allocate via CES nor operate a Housing First approach. However, public housing authorities demonstrate a steady shift towards using HCVs primarily or exclusively to support homeless households. Of the 19 PHAs in Los Angeles, most have dedicated a major portion of HCVs to those seeking to leave homelessness, and when doing so they typically rely on coordinated entry to match resources to highest need individuals (Fiore et al., 2024). As such, the barriers to voucher uptake for CES participants have increasing relevance to understanding HCV provision.

In this paper I examine the process of CES housing resource utilisation amongst unhoused individuals who receive them, assessing the barriers that prevent unhoused service participants from making use of housing resources when they are offered one. Drawing on ethnographic data from a homeless access centre, I examine the process of housing resource utilisation for coordinated entry participants, assessing the barriers that prevent unhoused service participants from making use of housing resources when they are offered one. This article makes three key contributions to the prior literature.

Amongst the first studies to qualitatively examine the utilization of housing resources, I outline barriers that arise amongst unhoused individuals receiving a housing resource. While the broad procedures of coordinated entry can be gleaned from both policy documents and existing scholarship, the day-to-day process of obtaining a housing opportunity via CES

remains mostly uncharted. I argue that amongst unhoused service participants, receiving a housing match cannot be equated to homeless resolution, and a tendency within the literature to assume that this is the case overlooks significant further barriers faced by the unhoused as they navigate the homeless response system. I find that barriers preventing housing resource uptake occur both because of the procedures within coordinated entry itself and the operationalisation of CES at the local level. Extending scholarship that has attended to assessment and prioritisation stages of coordinated entry, I delineate the various steps and requirements within the 'housing' stage, finding this juncture to be multi-stage, fragile, and burdensome for participants.

Second, I evaluate the implications of the deliberate overallocation of housing resources. Drawing on Gupta's (2012) articulation of arbitrariness in public service provision and Nevarez Martinz's (2021) theorisation of discretion in homeless service delivery as originating in resource scarcity, I outline overallocation as a source of arbitrariness stemming from scarcity induced urgency. I suggest that while arbitrariness can be identified in the frontline delivery of services, it must equally be recognised in the systems and procedures set in place at the municipal level. Finally, I discuss the implications of these findings for wider housing and social welfare allocation. Arguing that scarcity at the system level reproduces social service failures at the frontline, I detail the experiences and outcomes of these failures and their potentially harmful impacts on participant-social service relationships.

Literature

Allocation of Homeless Housing Resources

In the United States, homeless housing opportunities are allocated through Coordinated Entry Systems (CES), which standardize the process of assessing, prioritizing, and referring individuals and families to housing and services. CES typically includes a common

assessment tool, a centralized participant database, and a standardized referral pathway to match people with appropriate interventions. While federally developed, CES is locally adaptable and aims to address fragmentation, arbitrariness, and discrimination in housing allocation. CES is a core component of the Continuum of Care model (CoC), and both are mandated by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD). The CoC consists of local coalitions of service providers that coordinate housing and service funding at the regional level, with CES serving as the triage system for referrals to the various programs operated.

CoCs thus oversee and commission permanent housing opportunities, which are then allocated through Coordinated Entry. However, nonprofit homeless service providers working under public contracts with CoCs carry out most of the frontline work, including enrolling participants in CES, processing housing matches, and providing supportive services. Prior to the introduction of CES, housing allocation was at the discretion of various service providers, and thus vulnerable to discrimination, arbitrariness, and *cream-skimming*, where providers select participants with less intensive needs because of their higher likelihood of having a better outcome (Byrne et al., 2014; Ecker et al., 2022; Koning & Heinrich, 2010). Participants' likelihood of accessing housing resources could be highly dependent upon where they accessed services even within a single county (Balagot et al., 2019). Allocating housing at the municipal level, CES was introduced to address these inequities, increase efficiency, redress fragmentation, and promote a person-centred orientation (Ecker et al., 2022; HUD, 2015).

The efficiency of CES remains debated. While generally regarded as an improvement over previous systems, critics argue that it has failed to adequately speed up the distribution of housing, enhance equity, or reduce redundancy in application procedures (Ecker et al., 2022; Balagot et al., 2019; Dickson-Gomez et al., 2020). Critiques of coordinated entry also

point to findings of racial bias arising from the use of the Vulnerability Index – Service Prioritization Decision Assistance Tool, an assessment tool selected by many CoCs (Cronley, 2022), as well as the presence of barriers to progress through the system. Studies tracking participant progress through CES indicate that participant progress stalls at various stages, and in a study of 3,000 moderate and high vulnerability CES participants, only 19.2% were designated match ready within the 3-year study period (Balagot et al., 2019). Quantitative analysis shows that CES has not been successful in accelerating access to housing (Dickson-Gomez et al., 2020), yet little research examines how participants navigate the system and the barriers that they encounter. Addressing this gap, I analyse housing resource utilization amongst CES participants to identify systemic obstacles, as called for by scholars including Ecker et al. (2022) and Balagot et al. (2019).

In doing so, I look to the final juncture of CES, where permanent housing opportunities are allocated. Housing allocation both within and outside of CES is typically rendered as a four-stage process made up of access, assessment, priority, and housing (Osborne, 2019; Ecker et al., 2022). Much of this scholarship focuses on the first three stages and supposes that achieving prioritisation or a match is the goal, at which point "housing" is perceived as a fixed final stage associated with guaranteed success. The access stage involves bringing people experiencing homelessness into the service system via emergency shelters, street outreach, or drop-in centres. While CoCs set broad policies on system-wide access, such as outreach coordination and eligibility criteria, local providers function as the formal gateway to CES, enrolling participants and conducting intake. Once enrolled, participants undergo assessment and priority stages, where their vulnerability is evaluated using standardized tools and placed within the queue per their priority status. Again, these assessments are conducted by frontline staff at homeless service agencies; the stage is governed by CoCs who, through establishing coordinated entry procedures, select assessment

and prioritization frameworks used and ensure compliance with HUD guidelines and their own regional priorities. Local providers have limited control in these stages and do not determine housing allocation or priority status directly.

Across these stages, securing a housing opportunity through a CoC pathway involves meeting both explicit and implicit requirements. Assessments look for priority factors such as chronic health concerns, histories of substance use, and length of homelessness. Participants must be able to provide or obtain various documents including identity and income paperwork. If eligible and prioritized, housing then depends on resource availability. However, implicit factors also play a role in determining success within CES. While these stages are governed by CoC and CES procedures and priorities, frontline workers are found to influence assessment and priority scores through how they frame questions, interpret participant answers, or coaching clients to emphasize vulnerabilities (Clarke & Parsell, 2020; Willse, 2015). Individual's familiarity with the system and their ability to advocate for themselves can impact their success (Nevárez Martínez, 2021). Those who are persistent in following up and capable of demonstrating their engagement can be more likely to secure opportunities (Mik-Meyer & Silverman, 2019). Social capital, such as prior relationships with service providers, can further facilitate access to housing via informal guidance, or provision of necessary verifications of eligibility (Rita et al., 2023).

Drawing on Gupta's (2012) articulation of arbitrariness as arising when similarly positioned individuals have different outcomes, Nevárez Martínez (2021) finds that the exercise of discretion amongst frontline homeless service workers leads to arbitrary outcomes, and that the presence of arbitrariness in housing resource access is exacerbated by a 'performative productivity' where frontline staff prioritize actions that look productive. Reflecting Lipsky's (1980) street-level bureaucrats, where discretionary power shapes the implementation of policies and outcomes, Nevárez Martínez (2021) argues that arbitrariness

in homeless service delivery stems from the discretion exercised by frontline workers in response to resource scarcity. However, Lipsky's work on street-level bureaucrats suggests that frontline discretion is shaped by the constraints and expectations imposed by higher-level policies and structures. Thus in looking to the housing juncture of the homeless to housing pathway where these scarce housing resources are allocated, whether arbitrariness is present, and whether it is best or exclusively anchored in the discretionary actions of frontline workers warrant further attention.

Homeless to Housing Pathways and the Relevance of Utilization

In analysing housing resource utilization, I draw on Coordinated Entry context for three key reasons. First, CES is both a widespread and central feature of contemporary homeless service provision, yet one that is overlooked in scholarship, making it a critical context for better understanding housing resource uptake. Second, CES serves as a link between local implementation and national policy frameworks, illustrating how mandates at different levels of service delivery shape participants experiences of housing matching. Finally, existing research regarding homeless housing resources, particularly housing vouchers, conflates CES and Public Housing Authority (PHA) programs and resources. This distinction is analytically significant and consistently overlooked. Addressing this gap clarifies the specific mechanisms through which homeless targeted housing opportunities are distributed.

While the broad procedures of coordinated entry can be gleaned from policy documents and existing scholarship, the day-to-day process of securing housing via CES remains something of a black box. This occurs not only due to a lack of empirical attention but also because the pathway is too narrowly conceptualized. Barriers to housing access have primarily been studied at earlier stages of the housing process. Research highlights gatekeeping (Alden, 2015a) arbitrariness (Martinez, 2021), and challenges in demonstrating

eligibility (Osborne, 2019) as barriers to receiving a housing resource. Studies show that amongst people experiencing homelessness, social, economic, and cultural capital can facilitate access to supportive services (Cook & Hole, 2020; Stablein, 2011). Showing how this individual capital interacts with wider homeless response systems, Rita et al. (2023) find that institutional social capital, such as relationships with social welfare agencies or domestic violence reports, can expedite resource access.

However, barriers to utilization of housing resources after allocation remain understudied. While quantitative analyses show CES has not significantly accelerated housing access (Dickson-Gomez et al., 2020), little is known about the specific barriers participants' face as they move through the system. Scholarship attending to rental market dynamics highlights how discrimination in rental housing creates barrier for voucher recipients (Ellen et al., 2024; Rosen et al., 2021), disproportionately affecting unhoused people of colour (Massey & Lundy, 2001; Turner et al., 2002). Khadduri et al. (2024) suggest that case management support for unhoused voucher holders can mitigate the effects of such rental market barriers.

While barriers to resource utilisation have been examined in the context of Housing Choice Voucher (HCV) allocation by public housing authorities (PHAs) (e.g. McCabe, 2023; Moore, 2016; Rita et al., 2023), the processes of prioritization and allocation have historically differed between PHA and CES. HCVs serve a wider range of households, are not allocated through CES, and do not operate a housing first approach. However, PHAs increasingly use HCVs primarily or exclusively to support homeless households (Fiore et al., 2024). As such, barriers to voucher uptake for CES participants have increasing relevance to understanding HCV provision, making insights into CES utilization transferable to the HCV context. In Los Angeles, most of the 19 PHAs have dedicated a major portion of their HCVs to unhoused households, often relying on CES to allocate these resources (Fiore et al., 2024). As the primary mechanism for allocating homeless housing, coordinated entry translates eligibility

and prioritisation criteria into tangible opportunities. Focussing specifically on housing matching – where participants are allocated a unit-based match or a housing voucher application – I examine this critical yet underexplored stage to provide insight into both this juncture, CES as a whole, and wider systems of welfare allocation such as PHA procedures.

Study Site and Methods

To examine the barriers and logics that shape success in utilizing a housing match, I conducted ethnographic observation at a homeless access centre in Los Angeles. I identified the centre through a list of public contract-holding homeless service agencies and, after extensive outreach in the summer of 2022, secured a meeting with an office manager at the agency. The centre provides a mix of access, housing navigation, and case management services to individuals and families experiencing homelessness, holds public contracts and sub-contracts and is part of the coordinated entry system, utilizing the Los Angeles Homeless Management Information System. Run by a Black-founded and community-based organisation, the access centre is based in a neighbourhood that between 1970 and 2010 shifted from being 80 percent Black/African American to 68 percent Latinx (Pastor et al., 2016). The agency held contracts with the city and sub-contracts with other non-profits agencies, but was smaller than many large-scale agencies that they competed with for these contracts. As an access centre, many participants registered solely with the aim of enrolling in CES to obtain a housing match, while other participants sought a wider range of services and referrals.

Between November 2022 and December 2024, I spent over 1,000 hours across 150 days on site. When I began my field work, it was not clear the extent to which I would shift from observer to participant, and initially staff at the field site sought to shield my from taking on any responsibilities because they conceptualised my role as shadowing staff. Behar

(1996) notes that the anthropological profession is defined by the oxymoron of participant observation, and I found that this blurred boundary between participant and observer required careful navigation. While I could have gained valuable insights through observation alone, the realities of the field site rendered passive observation untenable. The agency operated with limited resources, was consistently over capacity, and required all available hands to support its work. In this context, stepping in to assist was both an ethical and methodological necessity. Consequently, my role evolved to involve significantly more participation than detached observation.

However, my position at the agency never quite aligned with staff, a point I was careful to ensure so as to remain approachable to participants. As I consistently made myself available to help with tasks and explained that this would support my research, I gained increasing responsibilities, although unlike staff, I was always asked if I wanted to take these on, rather than told to. and this was reflected in my experiences, where only through participating did I gain a better sense of the, yet at the same time, in participating I ceased to As I built relationships with participants, I also supported informally with property searches, paperwork, and service navigation. As a white British woman at a field site staffed entirely by people of colour, service users would often ask why I was there despite my sitting behind the desk in the same way that staff did. I introduced myself as a researcher to participants as soon as possible and while I am not sure we always understood this in the same way, I am confident service users understood that I was asking for permission to write about their experiences. I met some participants only fleetingly, and others frequently over my time in the field. In presenting my findings, I draw on cases where I had a sufficient relationship with a participant that I could be sure they understood my role as a researcher.

When sitting at the front desk, I took jottings and wrote more detailed notes on breaks or at the end of the day. I also gathered an extensive amount of literature regarding the

operation of homeless services in Los Angeles, including about HMIS and CES, took trainings in how both of these programs work, and spent time navigating the online platforms that facilitate them. While I do not draw on HMIS/CES data in this study nor document any participant information I encountered in these systems, this access enabled me to understand and write about how staff were using these systems and their operation. During the early phase of my field work, I would notice participants who had a failed match noted on their file. Hoping to better understand how this happened, I shadowed and supported numerous participants as they received housing matches and attempted to secure them, including cases where participants succeeded and failed, and did so with varying levels of agency support. This allowed me to analyse the factors contributing to successful and failed matches, including the role of CES procedures, agency support, and gaps in the process. I also attended meetings and case conferences where staff outlined plans to support match progress, and observed cases where staff were unable to provide participants with the support needed. These experiences allowed me to examine how staff approached problem-solving, triaging, and resource allocation, revealing systemic barriers and inconsistencies in participant support. Collectively, these participant observations permitted my analysis of the mechanisms governing housing resource utilization and to assess how these processes aligned with the goals of efficiency and equity within CES.

Consistent with ethnographic approaches, my analysis was iterative and unfolded throughout the duration of my time in the field. Data analysed comprises field notes, assembled documents, notes and transcripts from field interviews, and recordings of county trainings for homeless service providers. Upon being provided with a volunteer email account at the agency, I gained access to the city-wide training bank for homeless service agencies, meaning I was able to attend on-demand and live trainings to understand how the system of housing matching was intended to work. I contrast this with observations and field interviews

with staff and participants. Triangulating data from these sources, at times I confronted disagreements between staff and clients about how the process of coordinated entry or their specific case proceeded. At each such moment, I sought out additional information to contextualise these points of disagreement, yet some remain unresolvable and rather than viewing this as a failure in data collection, I interpret this as reflecting the chaotic and sometimes incomprehensible nature of homeless service delivery. At any given time, participants were either waiting for a match opportunity or working on an assigned match, but many moved between these statuses throughout our interactions. Sometimes, participants view of where they were in this process did not align with that of staff, and participants in either group could, in the past, have failed to utilize a housing match. Based on ongoing analysis, I asked questions about what helped and hindered match progress and what participants and staff understood as the required steps to secure a match, including participants in each of these stages, and sharing my tentative explanations and eliciting feedback to inform my ultimate findings.

Findings and Discussion

The Matching Mechanism: CES Systems and Procedures

While often referenced in scholarship as a final and swift stage in the rehousing pathway (Moore, 2016; Osborne, 2019; Ecker et al., 2022), I find that "matching" or "housing" is better understood as multi-stage and lengthy. Observing participants navigate this stage, I found that the stages outlined by HUD and mirrored in scholarship do not align with participants' lived experiences. Delineating the housing process as a further set of steps offers insight into securing housing through coordinated entry and highlights the unique barriers encountered at each stage.

In Los Angeles, housing matches are allocated by city employed ‘matchers’, and when a participant receives a match notification, an email is sent to their case manager. To expedite allocation, a single opportunity is offered to multiple participants simultaneously, with a 48-hour response window in which to claim the housing resource on a first-come, first-served basis (LAHSA, 2023). A match notification is effectively an invitation to tentatively apply, and if a client is successful in securing a match, their case manager is connected with the housing authority or property management agency, and a client begins a further formal application, which can be tens of pages long and require extensive background checks and document provision. If successful, a unit-based match then requires a participant to secure a deposit and moving assistance, often via a further set of applications. For a voucher holder, a participant must then navigate securing a rental property on the private market.

In the case of one participant, Marcus, I was forwarded an email from the CES matching team stating that he had received a match opportunity. A case manager had 48 hours to confirm Marcus’s interest, veteran status, and proof of disability. From there, he would be provisionally allocated the opportunity and required to submit a full application. In the Los Angeles CES, resources are ‘overmatched’, meaning that each opportunity is simultaneously offered to 2-3 applicants, and responses are accepted on a first come, first served basis (LAHSA, 2023). Unable to reach Marcus within the 48-hour window, I was advised by staff to confirm his interest anyway and provided evidence of his disability and veteran status. In response, I received a longer list of documents for the application to the low-income housing unit, and gathering these took several weeks, as Marcus’s military discharge papers had been lost in the 1980s. In many instances I observed where paperwork was not on hand, matches would be reallocated; fortunately, the property manager in this case was willing to wait. Once the documents were submitted, Marcus and I viewed the apartment and completed the

application, and we were told we would hear back in about two weeks. Around a month later, Marcus was informed his application was successful and invited to sign a lease. The final step – securing funds to cover a deposit – necessitated a separate application process with the city homeless service authority, which took another month to process. Marcus moved in in January, nearly five months after receiving the match notification in August.

As with Marcus's case, matching is a multi-stage process: receiving a match, securing a provisional match, formally and successfully applying to the match, and, if successful, taking the necessary efforts to secure housing. Conflating these steps unduly simplifies the reality of securing housing within the CES. Crucially, all these steps are tied to coordinated entry and are necessary to access publicly funded housing opportunities, including homeless specific housing vouchers, permanent supportive housing, and low-income housing.

Match Failure by Design

Although Marcus's match was successful, matches frequently fail, and do so due to barriers within the procedures governing housing matching and successful utilisation. While LAHSA does not report match failure rates, typical overmatching rates of 2:1 suggests a high rate of inevitable match failure. For those who secure a voucher, lease up rates are reported at 65% (Fiore et al., 2024), and this does not account for those matched with a voucher who do not secure one. Sometimes, participants are matched with opportunities that they did not qualify for; one participant was matched with a unit for visually impaired individuals. Despite his file indicating blindness, when I called him he explained that he was not blind, and we were unable to determine whether the intake worker had made an administrative error or an incorrect assumption based on the participant wearing glasses.

Match failures also stem from matching procedures. Wilma, a regular at the access centre, stopped by the office to check on her housing status once or twice a month. We

chatted at length on a few occasions, and she would often share that she was "really hoping for something to come up soon." When I was forwarded Wilma's match email, I was eager to share the news, but she did not answer my call. Because the match was unit-based and staff were unsure if Wilma would accept the location, they were unwilling proceed without speaking to her. After multiple unsuccessful attempts to reach her, Wilma came in several weeks later to check on her housing status. As she explained she does not pick up calls from unrecognised numbers, I realised that my phoneline at the office did not call out via the agency's standard number. Wilma was incredibly defeated learning of the missed opportunity, asking "is it too late? Can you call them anyway?" In several instances of trying to secure matches for participants, I responded confirming interest within 48 hours and never heard back, yet on other occasions followed up outside of the 48-hour window successfully. In Wilma's case, the match was no longer available.

These cases highlight the challenge in speeding up housing allocation while reducing arbitrariness in allocation. The 48-hour window aims to minimise vacancies in units and speed up leasing, yet difficulty getting hold of clients is a common and known issue in homeless services. Despite this, CES procedures reward quick responses. Matching procedures, including 48-hour timelines and overmatching, reflect an arbitrariness in this stage of the matching process. While existing scholarship has explored various logics governing housing allocation, my findings show how these priority logics are somewhat disrupted by arbitrariness in match allocation and utilization. Contrary to scholars such as Martinez (2021) and Alden (2015b), who suggest that discretion creates erratic service outcomes, my findings suggest that arbitrariness is embedded in the housing allocation structure itself. This arbitrariness does not necessarily reflect a lack of fairness in the allocation process, but rather an ambivalence at the procedural level to which participants of those offered a match ultimately secure it. However, with matches made across homeless

service agencies with varying levels of staff capacity and resources, this system certainly leaves open the possibility of inequities arising as a result of match failures.

Participant Perceptions of Matching and Uptake

Because coordinated entry matches participants based on specific categoric variables, those whose matches fail will not necessarily be matched again in the immediate future but rather will be matched if and when an opportunity arises that aligns with their specific vulnerabilities. If a match failed at the first stage and a participant was not, they might remain unaware of the missed opportunity. For those who are informed, the process can be traumatic as unhoused clients are hopeful that they have been allocated a housing opportunity, despite staffs' efforts to emphasize the provisional nature of matches. I observed participants express frustration and disappointment about failed matches, and speaking with participants about failed matches was something I approached with caution. While many reported increased scepticism after a match fail, others expressed a recommitment to the process, nevertheless, resigned to "hurry up and wait" for a new match. Others expressed more outspoken frustration, with one participant noting that it was "very frustrating when, you know, you're expecting something to happen and, then it's not happening".

Over time, I became familiar with two participants, Matt and Tina, whose files indicated previous failed unit-based matches. While staff informed me that Matt's match had fallen through after leasing, Tina's pre-dated her enrolment, leaving us unsure what had occurred. When I asked Matt about the failed match, he briefly mentioned that "it did not work out", attributing the issue to property management and then tacitly declining to speak further, changing the topic when I tried. Tina, meanwhile, became agitated and denied ever receiving a match. While I refrained from raising the issue again with Tina, I observed staff do so on two occasions, eliciting similar responses. These cases speak to the point that match

failures are difficult for participants to discuss and can remain a point of stress or agitation long afterward.

When asked about the fairness of match allocation, many participants viewed it as a waiting game and emphasized the necessity of patience and staying on top of agency emails and paperwork requests. Some felt that the system failed to reward commitment, arguing that the most engaged should benefit most. One participant explained: “I did my part, I came in, I’ve turned in my cheque stubs […] Damn it. What about me? […] The part that is very frustrating, is that they are wasting these resources on people who don’t even want it.” Others questioned what they perceived to be the priority logics governing matches, thought their assessments varied. Some believed families, seniors, and veterans deserved more priority, and some suggested groups including immigrants and drug users received undue support.

Participants experience coordinated entry as unfair, confusing, and frustrating. Confusion often stems from the use of a pool system rather, which replaces a traditional waitlist, is harder to explain to participants, and produces outcomes that can seem erratic. Even when participants understand the process, they may disagree with it – such as when a match is rescinded due to a delayed response. These failures illustrate the harm embedded in a system designed to promote equity and transparency. While features such as 48-hour windows aim to speed up housing placement, urgency can be misplaced. A substantial portion of unit-based matches involve buildings under construction. For voucher applicants, data accessed by public records request from LA’s two major housing authorities (the Housing Authority of the City of LA, and the LA County Development Agency) show that processing time for an Emergency Housing Voucher between 2021 and 2023 was 248 days and 163 days, respectively. The normalization of arbitrary practises via standardised procedures and claims of efficiency makes these potentially harmful practises seem routine and necessary.

Overallocation of Housing Resources

As indicated above, housing resources are strategically overallocated to participants. Data accessed via public records request from an LA housing authority shows that of 5138 Emergency Housing Vouchers issued between March 2021 and December 2023, 3284 vouchers were successfully leased within their expiration period. Over issuance shows a willingness to withdraw vouchers from those issued them or to let those who receive one ultimately lose it to expiration. Unit-based matches are also overallocated, both at the initial matching stage and in terms of the number of participants invited to apply. At one point during fieldwork, a new building of low-income housing was made available to CES participants, and a family that the access centre supported were successful in making it through the first matching stage and subsequently invited to formally apply to the building. This involved bringing a range of paperwork to the access centre, for staff to forward over to a second agency managing these applications on behalf of a third agency, who had developed the building. Once the paperwork had been sent and pre-vetted, the household, which comprised Gabriel, Helen, and their two young children, were invited to the building to complete the application and advised that their case manager needed to attend too. The day before this appointment, it became apparent that no-one at the agency was available at the stated time and so staff asked if I would be able to attend. After checking with Gabriel, who I had only briefly met before, it was agreed I would meet them there the next day. When we arrived at the building, we saw clusters of people sitting outside in a courtyard, despite it being sunny and around 85 degrees outside. Asking a few people there, it transpired that applicants were waiting in line based on their arrival time because the team overseeing applications was understaffed. After around two hours waiting outside, Gabriel and I were told that there would not be time to review his application that afternoon and that we should

come back tomorrow; we did, and waited several further hours before working with three separate staff across different stations on the various application documents needed.

For both of these appointments, Gabriel and Helen had taken their daughters out of school, because the apartment building was around 20 miles away from their current living situation. As both Gabriel and Helen were required to be present at the appointment, and they did not know how long it would take, they had not wanted to risk having to leave to do a school pick-up. For several weeks after the appointment, I reached out to our point of contact regarding the application, and received no updates. Through other agencies, I began to learn that the units were being leased, but I could not obtain a decision for Gabriel's case. For weeks, Gabriel and Helen remained in limbo, unclear if their application had been successful. After a month or so, they seemed to conclude it had not been, despite no formal update. I continued to query their case via various avenues, and months later received word via email that their application had not proceeded because the building was fully leased.

Voucher and unit-based applications can fail for reasons unrelated to overallocation; both match types tend to rely on federal funds that do not permit certain criminal records or income levels, for example. In these cases, applications will be unsuccessful. However, overmatching normalizes avoidable match failure by placing qualified applicants in competition for housing resources. The Los Angeles Homeless Service Authority justifies over matching on the basis of efficiency and promoting quick throughput to valuable housing units, and this sentiment was echoed by LAHSA staff I encountered at various meetings and trainings about the issue. Officials suggest that over issuing simply accommodates the rate at which vouchers go unused, and that overmatching ensures that scarce resources are used efficiently. While the scarcity of housing opportunities certainly means that matching should be swift, my observations highlight moments where this process places unnecessary burdens on staff to support these applications, and on participants such as Gabriel and Helen.

Nevárez Martínez (2021) argues that the absence of housing resources prompts staff at homeless service agencies to engage participants in a performative cycle of applications, paperwork, and meetings, and that this *performative productivity* constitutes a form of state violence. Examining the matching process, I find that the availability of housing resources similarly entangles participants in this bureaucratic performance. However, in these moments, this *performative productivity* also extends to agency staff, illustrating that the presence of housing opportunities does not alleviate bureaucratic burdens but instead exacerbates them and widens their reach. This dynamic is embedded in the procedural mechanisms governing housing access and reflects an institutional logic of response to scarcity, wherein the urgency to rehouse individuals takes precedent over participant well-being and staff burden. As a result, the harms produced by this process—both in terms of wasted time and potential adverse outcomes—are at least as profound as those identified by Nevárez Martínez.

Barriers to Resource Utilization: Case Management Commissioning in Crisis

Most match offers consist of either a unit in a low income or supportive building, or a housing voucher with which they must secure a private lease. For those who successfully secure a housing match matches can still fall through, particularly voucher-based matches. While I encountered participants whose matches failed in a range of scenarios, the most frequent was a voucher participant failing to secure a lease before their voucher expired. Landlords and the private rental process profoundly shape voucher holders' housing options (Rosen, 2020; Garboden et al., 2018). While CES participants are supposed to receive case management or housing navigation to navigate rental barriers, many expressed frustration with inadequate support, frequently remarking that "no one is helping" or "I don't know who my case manager is." When asking for support securing a lease, I observed participants were

typically provided links to rental websites or a PDF sheet of listings and told to arrange viewings independently. Amongst those who secured a viewing, many refrained from applying, deterred by income requirements posted on applications or the need to provide five years of address history.

Housing navigation eases the leasing process for all parties as landlords are more receptive to agency calls and appreciate the chance to clarify program requirements with staff. However, participants frequently cite inadequate housing navigation or case management as a major barrier to securing housing. While housing navigators are contractually expected to arrange unit viewings, provide support with applications, and complete requests for tenancy approval, these services are often absence or lacking. Instead, many voucher holders are left trying to lease up independently. Capacity constraints in the homeless service sector are widely reported and frequently result in delayed or suboptimal assistance for clients (Moses, 2023). In cases where voucher participants lack support to secure a lease, the absence of assistance effectively withdraws support at a critical stage of the housing process.

Lack of voucher uptake is cited to justify the over issuance of vouchers, yet participants point to a lack of support with leasing as the reason for voucher expiration. A lack of synchronicity between voucher issuance (managed by housing authorities) and housing navigation commissioning (overseen by LAHSA) results in misalignment in the provision of complementary services. Participants unable to secure a lease risk voucher expiration, and while extensions are possible, they are finite and often require case management advocacy. A disconnect at the commissioning level means that an increase in vouchers does not necessarily lead to an increase in support to use them. Insufficient housing navigation hinders progress for voucher holders, and lack of coordination between voucher

issuance and case management capacity normalises and creates expectations that not all issued vouchers will lead to housing.

Conclusion

This is the first paper to qualitatively examine the final step of housing allocation and the process and barriers facing unhoused individuals who, having received a match, try to secure this housing placement to resolve their homelessness. Outlining the mechanisms of coordinated entry regarding matching, these findings shed light into process of housing allocation and placements to the houseless and detail why participants receiving subsidized housing opportunities remain unable to access them. Barriers to housing resource uptake are not unique to Los Angeles, and extending existing scholarship that has attended to barriers within coordinated entry quantitatively, I confirm suggestions made by Balagot et al., (2019) and Ecker et al., (2022) that barriers are often wedded to procedures and systems of implementation. Like Balagot et al., I conclude that rather than representing an inevitable failure of coordinated entry, these barriers are wedded to the protocol guiding the CES implementation and specifically the matching process, creating arbitrariness in resource utilisation by design and with the aim of greater efficiency. However, I argue that these procedures are in many instances not necessary to ensure efficiency and instead cause substantial harm to participants through the creation of failed matches. Moreover, I find that the case management purportedly available to support participants in utilising a housing resource is lacking and inadequate and this in particular renders those participants without wider resources less likely to succeed in using a match. This arises in part because voucher allocation and case management availability are unsynchronised, while also being shaped by capacity and resources within the homeless service sector more widely. As more federal housing opportunities are allocated via or in line with CES approaches, these findings have

relevance to the utilization of the many housing interventions that are backed by federal funds and programming.

Housing scarcity is a crucial issue preventing successful homeless resolution at scale and cities across the US are faced with the need to support homeless resolution in the context of affordable housing scarcity. Housing scarcity shapes the homeless-to-housing pathway by influencing how agencies allocate resources in response to limited placements. Identifying barriers to successful utilization of housing resources, my findings shows that increasing resource availability alone does not equate to equivalent homeless resolution. Overallocation increases the potential harms caused by the homeless response system, as this scarcity-driven competition creates artificial moments of progress for participants who will ultimately remain unhoused, while also placing additional strain on those already navigating the many demands of the homeless response system. This system exacerbates feelings of frustration and distrust among those seeking assistance, undermining confidence in the response system and, in some cases, deterring individuals from re-engaging with housing services altogether. Overallocation increases the bureaucratic demands on staff and service users, extends the performative requirements of service delivery, and anchors this in the procedures governing housing access in addition to frontline discretion. Illustrating how resource scarcity can drive resource use failure via increased administrative burden, participant distrust, and match withdrawal, these findings have implications to welfare distribution beyond the homeless to housing pathway.

These findings extend understanding of the barriers and burdens of coordinated entry outside of the prioritisation stage and further understanding of the logics that govern homeless resource access. While drawing on data gathered through a single primary field site, the interconnected nature of a single agency via the CES system and standardized public contracts for service delivery mean that this site provided wider insight into the county wide

systems of allocation. In Los Angeles, access and overmatching is governed and overseen by LAHSA, responsible for the administration of the CES, while overallocation of vouchers is the responsibility of the PHAs managing them. A lack of adequate coordination is an evident issue that partially accounts for the barriers to housing matching and uptake. Although the specifics of CES implementation differ across the country, the Continuum of Care model means that the interrelationships between actors overseeing this system in Los Angeles mirror CoC structures elsewhere. Coordinated Entry was introduced to address arbitrariness, discrimination, and information asymmetry in the homeless response system, and ultimately to better manage and oversee the wide range of actors offering housing opportunities within a single Continuum of Care. While in many ways representing an improvement on the disorganised network that preceded it and evidently making the process more centralised and streamlined, issues remain evident. Although Los Angeles is a somewhat unique case in the extent of homeless service operations in a single county, my findings show that this deployment of coordinated entry has not fully addressed the numerous barriers that persist in ensuring efficient and equitable access to housing, and that some of these barriers are a product of the implementation of CES procedures at the local level.

3.

Homeless Housing Vouchers and the Consumerization of Housing First

Abstract

This paper explores the use of housing vouchers as a means to resolve homelessness when deployed within a housing first program philosophy. To do so, I draw on ethnographic research at a homeless access centre in Los Angeles and examine the structural and procedural efforts made to promote Emergency Housing Voucher leasing amongst participants. Exploring efforts made by the city and homeless service agencies to promote leasing, I show that landlord profitability is strategically leveraged to secure leases for participants and spotlight the varying allegiances of frontline staff as they serve as both city officials and informal advisors to landlords. Attending to the views of program participants, I find that some consider themselves unready for housing, complicating prevailing critiques of housing readiness as a top-down filtering mechanism. Contextualizing these findings in the housing first philosophy advocated across the county, I expand understandings of consumerization in Housing First programs beyond caseworker-landlord interactions, contributing to scholarship on Housing First by illustrating how market incentives, frontline mediation, and participant self-perceptions intersect in the administration of housing vouchers.

Homeless Housing Vouchers and the Consumerization of Housing First

Since its inception in the 1970s, the core goal of the Housing Choice Voucher program (formerly Section 8) has been to ensure affordability and access to housing for those with low incomes (Rosen, 2020). Subsidizing rent payments to private landlords for low-income tenants, Housing Choice Vouchers (HCVs) are federally funded but issued locally by Public Housing Authorities (PHAs). Increasingly, however, HCVs are deployed as a homeless targeted resource (Fiore et al., 2024). Unlike vouchers issued by Public Housing Authorities, homeless-targeted HCVs are administrated via a Coordinated Entry System, a federally mandated and locally deployed system governing access to government funded homeless housing resources. Distinct from PHA administration, CES allocation necessarily operates within a housing first framework. An ostensibly progressive approach, housing first programming prioritizes providing permanent housing to homeless individuals without requirements of sobriety or employment. Increasingly characterized as consumerist in nature, however, these approaches are critiqued as primarily serving to convert people experiencing homelessness into transactionable market tenants (Hennigan, 2017; Grainger, 2022; Sparks, 2012).

A key concern in the use of housing vouchers to resolve homelessness is the rate at which allocated vouchers go unused and why this occurs (Fiore et al., 2024). Research of both CES and PHA allocated vouchers show that bureaucracy and discrimination serve as barriers to access and that housing readiness may be emphasized (Grainger, 2022; McCabe, 2023). In PHA voucher allocation, the procedures through which participants secure a voucher and then lease a unit are shown to weed out non housing-ready clients (McCabe, 2023). The equivalent procedures within CES allocation remain understudied, despite data showing that a substantial portion of those who receive a voucher via CES will not use it (Ellen, 2020). In addressing the issue of low voucher uptake amongst homeless households,

case management has been identified as key and examined in relation to voucher based housing first programming (Fiore et al., 2024; Grainger, 2024). Far less attention has been paid to the other tools, structures, and procedures that facilitate leasing for unhoused voucher participants and how these influence the effectiveness of homeless targeted housing vouchers allocated through CES. The procedures supporting voucher holders to secure a lease have important implications to our understanding of vouchers as a productive tool for homeless resolution and the potential of vouchers to address homelessness within a housing first domain.

This paper draws on ethnographic research on homeless housing resource allocation in Los Angeles, focusing on Emergency Housing Vouchers (EHV) to examine the structural and procedural factors shaping voucher leasing with three aims. First, I analyse city-wide efforts to recruit and support landlords renting to voucher holders. While existing scholarship emphasizes caseworker-landlord relationships as primary sites of consumerization in housing first programs (Grainger, 2021), I find that at the city level, landlord profitability is actively leveraged to secure leases, expanding understandings of consumerization in housing first. Next, I explore how case staff and community-based agencies navigate participant-landlord tensions within the leasing context. Speaking to client and market tensions within the administration of housing first, I outline case workers' dual role as city officials and informal advisors to landlords. Finally, I examine the role of housing readiness in EHV uptake. Prior research highlights housing readiness standards as a filtering mechanism in voucher programs (McCabe, 2023), yet little attention has been paid to how participants perceive their own readiness and how this shapes their engagement. Finding that some participants consider themselves unready for housing, I explore the implications of this view within the EHV program and a housing first framework.

Background

Housing First Fidelity and Consumerization

In contrast with 'treatment first' models, which require participants to become self-sufficient prior to housing placement, housing first instead prioritizes immediate housing with optional wraparound services (Tsemberis, 2010). Marking a major shift in US homeless management, housing first departs from prior rehabilitative approaches (Pleace, 2008; Johnson et al., 2012). Though praised as progressive and improving on stair-stepping models, housing first is critiqued as only performatively so, with these critiques pointing to its paternalism (Gowan, 2010; Parsell & Marston, 2016), reliance on rental markets (Hennigan, 2017), and lacking fidelity across diverse contexts (Baker & Evans, 2016). Requiring individuals to manage a conventional rental unit, housing first converts participants into market actors rather than addressing rental market failures (Grainger, 2022; Löfstrand & Juhila, 2012; Sparks, 2012). Grainger (2022) terms this dynamic 'consumerization', a process through which the unhoused are reshaped into transactionable lease holders, and scholars frame this consumerization within neoliberal policies that seek to promote individual responsibility and market-driven solutions (Hennigan, 2017; Baker & Evans, 2016). However, Baker & Evans (2016) caution against oversimplifying the politics of housing first, emphasizing that complex interactions across micro, meso, and macro levels shape the experiences and transformations brought by housing first.

Scholarship maintaining consumerization in housing first has pointed to the competing tensions faced by case workers as they navigate the needs of both participants and landlords. Although participant experiences with case management vary, case workers are found to devote substantial time engaging landlords to secure housing because of affordable housing shortages (Carvalho & Furtado, 2022; Fiore et al., 2024; Watson, Wagner, & Rivers, 2013). Despite evidence that housing counselling can assist voucher holders (Walter and

Wang, 2016; Cunningham et al., 2010), little is known about how housing first programs address these barriers beyond case worker provision**.** Case management represents a range of support types, but the primary function of a caseworker in a housing first intervention is to ensure participants obtain a lease and conform to its requirements, requiring them to balance consideration of landlord and tenant needs (Grainger, 2022). The navigation of these tension for in-place tenants has been fairly well examined, although far less is known about how competing interests between tenants and landlords are broached in the lease-up process. Beyond the case management dynamic, other strategies used by case managers, homeless service agencies, or city housing departments to promote voucher leasing remain underexplored. Examining voucher leasing within housing first policy contexts, I thus consider the strategies used to foster successful leasing at the city, agency, and case level, reflecting Baker and Evans' (2016) micro, macro, and meso levels, to explore how housing first's implementation structures and processes interact, shaping both policy and participant experiences.

Aside from consumerization, a second critique levied at housing first programming is the lack of fidelity retained across various contexts. Typically, housing first approaches feature single-occupancy housing, embrace a harm reduction strategy, and operate such that housing and rehabilitation program components are separate (Padgett et al., 2006; Pearson et al., 2009). Critics argue that deviations weaken program effectiveness (Atherton & McNaughton-Nicholls, 2008; Busch-Geertsema, 2013; Johnsen & Teixeira, 2012; Pleace, 2008). However, implementations vary across local and national contexts, with housing first increasingly employed as a guiding framework, rather than a specific programmatic model. Housing first has thus become understood as both a policy approach and a philosophy underpinning a loose set of programs, interpreted with varying levels of fidelity to the program's earliest iterations (Baker & Evans, 2016).

These two critiques of housing first interventions have rarely been examined concurrently. The absence of any metric or framework through which to distinguish the varying forms of fidelity renders comparisons inconsistent. Consumerist critiques often treat housing first as a fixed program type, overlooking variations in implementation. However, neglecting fidelity when considering consumerization fails to account for diverse realities of housing first in practice and the increasing tendency to implicate housing first as guiding principles rather than a program approach. Although scholarship suggests that housing first is best effective when implemented with fidelity to early iterations, little consideration has been given to the increasingly broad-brush rendering of housing first being deployed across continuums of care in these consumerist analyses.

In Los Angeles, contracted homeless services follow 'housing first principles', and these guidelines are outlined in California Welfare and Institutions Code Section 8255 (2023), including requirements to 'promote accepting applicants regardless of their sobriety' and 'emphasize engagement and problem solving over therapeutic goals'. These guidelines are referenced across LAHSA contracted programming for different service models, reflecting the notion of housing first as a guiding philosophy rather than a specific programmatic model. While I do not seek to outline a framework through which to understand various forms of housing first fidelity, I look to Los Angeles as an illustrative case of housing first being deployed in line with what Baker and Evans (2016) consider a 'guiding philosophy' rather than a programmatic approach. In doing so, I make no assumptions about how programming will reflect fidelity to archetype interventions but look to the ways that the interpretation of housing first shapes or is shaped by the efforts made to support unhoused voucher holders to successfully lease up.

Homeless Targeted Housing Choice Vouchers

To examine the efforts made to support voucher leasing within housing first service domains, I draw on the case of Emergency Housing Vouchers, issued through the American Recovery Plan in 2021. Unlike HCVs, which have rarely been issued in recent years and instead cycle through turnover, EHVs were issued at scale at a single point in time and as such provide a strategic case in the examination of voucher use via CES allocation. Of 70,000 EHVs distributed nationally, Los Angeles received 6806: 1964 to the Los Angeles County Development Agency, 3295 to the Housing Authority of the City of Los Angeles, and the rest to smaller housing authorities (LAHSA, 2021). Although EHVs operate similarly to a Housing Choice Voucher, HCVs typically support low-income renters, with EHVs targeted primarily households experiencing or at risk of homelessness. Allocation of HCVs has historically been managed by local Public Housing Authorities (PHAs), which often employ overallocation, vulnerability-based prioritization, and lottery systems due to high demand (Fiore et al., 2024). Allocation of EHVs, meanwhile, was a combined process overseen by both PHAs and Coordinated Entry Systems (CES). Federally mandated but adapted across regional contexts, Coordinated Entry Systems comprise an intake process and assessment, prioritization, and allocation stages that match unhoused households with resources (Ecker et al., 2022). In Los Angeles, the CES is operated by the Los Angeles Homeless Service Authority (LAHSA), a combined powers authority of the city and county that cites housing first as a 'core system philosophy' (LAHSA, 2020).

I distinguish between vouchers issued solely via PHAs and those issued in collaboration with CES for several reasons. First, access to these waitlists is very different, with access to PHA waiting lists via public application and access to CES via enrollment at a homeless service agency. In addition, the logics used by PHAs and CES prioritization are not identical, although both vary across local contexts and are often accused of inconsistency. Crucially, targeting homeless households and allocated through CES processes, EHVs issued

in Los Angeles operate within a housing first domain. Thus, while I do not seek to speak to CES procedures themselves, which vary across areas and are often found to be employed unreliably, I make the distinction between CES and PHA vouchers to distinguish between homeless targeted vouchers designed to be supported in implementation by the homeless service sector and those issued by PHAs to public waitlists. As PHAs across the US have begun to shift the focus of HCVs towards supporting homeless households, allocating them not within typical PHA procedures but instead through CES (Fiore et al., 2024), having a clearer understanding of the distinctions between these two approaches is essential.

Although demand for vouchers of all types is high, some who receive them do not ultimately use them, with low utilization rates underscored as a poorly understood issue (Ellen, 2020). While access to permanent housing without housing readiness is a core principle of housing first approaches, Oudshoorn et al. (2021) find that some participants in housing first programs prefer to achieve non-housing outcomes prior to securing housing and argue that if intermediate goals are self-imposed by participants, they should not be considered incongruent with housing first. However, few studies have looked to participants' perceptions of their housing readiness and the role this plays in homeless resolution. The interaction of housing first approaches and voucher programming thus warrants further attention, and not just in terms of how housing first orientations shape program design but also with regards to how participants perceive their own readiness for housing.

Despite this potential filtering based on housing readiness, Fiore et al. (2024) found that homeless households use vouchers at higher rates than housed ones, hypothesizing that case management and landlord incentives within homeless-targeted programs improve success. While voucher uptake within housing first contexts has received little scholarly attention outside of case management approaches, McCabe (2023) finds that staff supporting PHA voucher participants mediate access to vouchers through administrative processes that

shape recipients into market ready actors, or else weed out those who fail in doing so, amounting to a housing readiness orientation. Within homeless service delivery more widely, agency and staff capacity constraints and frontline discretion mean that participation can remain filtered based on readiness (Osborne, 2019; Van Den Berk-Clark, 2015). In addition, housing shortages impede leasing; analysing 68 papers on housing first implementation, Carvalho and Furtado (2022) find that over half report difficulty in accessing adequate housing for participants and that this hindered program goals. Vouchers do not alleviate this, as participants encounter landlord reluctance or discrimination, and enforcement of voucher-based discrimination protections is weak (Garbonen et al., 2018; Freeman, 2012). Housing first and voucher based homeless resolution are only sustainable if affordable units are available, and while increasing rent thresholds temporarily expands voucher options, it is not a long-term solution (Oudshoorn, 2022).

Methods & Case: Emergency Housing Vouchers in Los Angeles

To examine the efforts and initiatives promoting successful voucher leasing amongst homeless voucher holders, I draw on ethnographic observation at a homeless access centre that provided housing navigation and case management services to EHV recipients. While referrals to the EHV program could be made by a range of social welfare agencies, the EHV program was facilitated by the Los Angeles Homeless Service Authority and aligned with CES matching prioritisation (LAHSA, 2021). The agency was well-known for its work with EHVs, and I frequently encountered individuals with no prior connection to the agency arriving in search of a voucher, many citing an event they were aware of where there had been long lines of people waiting around the block for a voucher application. Staff provided a more detailed account, aligning with media reports and the official EHV allocation process, that in March of 2022, the agency planned an event to connect unhoused community members with shelter opportunities. Misinformation on social media led to

rumours that vouchers were being distributed on site, prompting hundreds of people to show up the next morning hoping to receive a voucher. A local congress person arriving on the scene to dispel the rumours likely worsened the situation by giving the rumour some legitimacy, and the next working day the office was again faced with hundreds of people. Staff explained to those able to make it through the door that they could only complete a voucher interest form. Despite the initial confusion, many people completed the process and ultimately received EHVs, with the agency ultimately supporting around 200 EHV holding participants.

Between November 2022 and December 2024, I conducted approximately 200 days of participant observation at the access centre and off-site at various service locations. By scrutinising the daily practises of those both responsible for delivering public services and those receiving them, ethnographic study provides insight into the perspectives, experiences, and politics of these service systems (Schatz, 2013). Drawing on a relational ethnographic approach, I examined how EHV leasing is produced by city programs, agency initiatives, and individual efforts. While located in a single site, the access centre represents a field in which various agencies, actors, and their interactions can be observed and contextualised in a larger framework of relations (Desmond, 2014). Thus, to understand the mechanisms by which market incentives, bureaucratic mandates, and participant self-perceptions collide to shape voucher uptake, I focus on the interactions between participants and agency staff, and city bureaucrats and bureaucracy. During my time in the field, I observed and engaged in nearly all aspects of the housing voucher process, including waitlist enrolment, document gathering, assessments, property viewings, client meetings, and housing applications. Positioned as staff-adjacent, participants recognized that while I could assist with tasks staff declined—such as searching for property listings—I lacked the authority and influence of formal staff members, and this generated a level of ease in our interactions, with participants generally

willing to speak with me about their experiences informally and allow me to observe. Rather than treating these actors and initiatives as discrete entities, I evaluate how the relationships between them shape frontline decision-making and housing access.

Throughout my field work, I wrote daily field notes and reviewed these while memo-writing; I quickly noticing how often voucher holders reported difficulty in using the resource. After initial identification, I examined the structures and processes shaping voucher use, documenting variation in their implementation and effects, and comparing participant experiences to the policies and procedures intended to govern the process, triangulating data across multiple sources. Consistent with ethnographic approaches, my analysis was iterative and unfolded throughout my time in the field. Data analyzed comprises field notes, assembled documents, notes and transcripts from field interviews, and public records data from the two housing authorities. Below, I first present orienting findings about voucher utilization drawn from public records data from the two major LA housing authorities. I then examine city-wide efforts to support EHV leasing, following by a closer look at the local and interpersonal approaches at the agency level. Finally, I explore participants' own perceptions of housing first approaches in relation to EHVs and consider what this indicates about their effectiveness.

Findings

Voucher Issuance and Uptake Timelines

Those who ultimately received an EHV had been through multiple steps to obtain one. First, they had to register their interest in the program and if they were not already, enroll in the Los Angeles CES. From those who registered their interest, a portion were invited to apply, and then of those, another portion were successful in receiving a voucher. Households can be unsuccessful in their application for a range of reasons, including earning over the maximum

program income, failing a background check, having ineligible family members, and missing appointments. For those who obtain a voucher, households must navigate leasing a unit, and not all are successful. I obtained data via public records request from the two major Los Angeles public housing authorities, the Housing Authority of the City of LA (HACLA) and the Los Angeles County Development Agency (LACDA) detailing the number of invited applicants, their success rates in obtaining a voucher, leasing a property, and the timelines across these stages.

According to LAHSA updates on the EHV rollout, 1,964 EHVs were allocated to LACDA, and 3,295 to HACLA. Per the public records data, HACLA invited 7,296 households to apply, with 5,138 successful, a rate of around 70%. Of these, 3,286 had secured a lease by June 2024. LACDA invited 2,686 households to apply for a voucher, ultimately issuing 2,143 to successful applicants, a success rate of almost 80%. Although the PHAs began issuing vouchers 2021, the majority were issued between 2022 and 2023. The time between applying and receiving a voucher was often lengthy; for those who received a voucher, the wait time between submitting their application to the PHA and receiving a voucher averaged 222 days with LACDA and 176 days for HACLA applicants. As such, many vouchers were still being issued and leased during my field work, and the remaining findings are based on these observations.

City-wide Landlord Management, Outreach, and Incentives

Amongst the efforts made to support the effectiveness of EHVs were city-led initiatives to make voucher holding tenants more appealing to landlords. This included incentives, landlord outreach, and strategies to bypass landlord concern such as master leasing. For those with EHVs issued by the Housing Authority of the City of Los Angeles (HACLA), landlords were offered several incentives: a $2,500 signing bonus, higher payment standards, reimbursement

for tenant damage up to $5,000, and free property listings. These incentives were not automatically available to those renting with other federal housing vouchers. A tenant's deposit could also be paid by HACLA, at up to two months' rent, and promotional materials emphasized the stability of payments from a housing authority rather than tenant. Aside from these incentives, which were explicitly tied to EHVs, two notable initiatives that sought to increase access to rental leases for voucher holders.

The first of these was the LAHSA master leasing program, where the county and LAHSA secure long-term leases for residential buildings and sublease units to unhoused residents, handling tenant placement, rent collection, and property management. Before the pilot launched in November 2023, I was working on an office computer when the agency CEO, sitting along the desk, motioned for me to come and watch something with her. She explained that it was a live video Q&A about the upcoming master leasing program, which I was not familiar with at the time. LAHSA's Chief Executive Strategist, Kris Freed, explained that the program aimed to increase unit availability and placement speed by allowing LAHSA to bypass background checks or delegate them to homeless service agencies, while appealing to developers by offering a single assured master tenant. I watched as staff from various homeless service agencies asked questions, most of which related to the basic procedures of the program; LAHSA would lease buildings, invite homeless service agencies to register participants for property viewings, at which they would need to immediately decide whether they wanted to apply for a unit, with the goal being to lease all units within two days of these open-house style viewings. Freed emphasized the urgency of this timeline, citing the scale of homelessness in Los Angeles. Watching, I wondered aloud whether such a timeline was workable, and staff around me laughed, agreeing that this was optimistic. Irrespective, the program pilot was deemed successful and LAHSA announced plans for program expansion in early 2024.

While the access center ultimately went on to have little involvement with master leasing, the program serves as an example of the efforts undertaken to increase unit availability to unhoused Angeleno's. A second, more frequently used initiative was the Lease Up program, a partnership between LAHSA, community agencies, and PATH, one of California's largest homeless service providers. The program aimed to expand housing options for people experiencing homelessness by recruiting landlords to relax tenant screening criteria. For participating landlords, the program handled everything from unit listings and tenant identification to inspections and leasing paperwork, while also providing ongoing landlord-tenant mediation and training on leasing to voucher or subsidy holders. Exclusively viewable to homeless service agencies, Lease Up was implemented in 2014, but became an increasingly important resource with the deployment of thousands of EHVs. When I began to conduct observation at the access center, I registered on the platform and often attempted to find participants units through the site. Doing so was a point of consistent frustration, in part because the usability of the site was poor. The below excerpts from my field notes illustrate the growing frustrations I experienced as I navigated the site:

I've been trying to arrange participant viewings through Lease Up now for two weeks and have zero movement on any properties.

I keep doing the seemingly pointless admin work of replying to Lease Up adverts, because we keep being told this is the best way to find units.

The 'arrange viewing' button is essentially futile and the whole process of reaching out directly seems flawed.

The platform's functionality was equally problematic – available properties were limited, hard to view, and often did not meet participants' needs. On multiple occasions, I found fewer than 10 one-bedroom or studio apartments across the county, even though these were the most needed. For months, I found no ADA-accessible units while searching weekly for a participant who used a wheelchair.

If properties could be identified, the process was protracted and cumbersome. In one of my earliest efforts with the platform, I was asked to help Stephanie, a housing navigation participant, identify a few properties to view. I opened Lease Up and asked to Stephanie to choose one or two units. After filtering for South Los Angeles and studio units, four properties remained. Stephanie declined two based on location and hesitated about the other two because they blended living and sleeping areas but agreed to arranging a viewing. On Lease Up, there is a 'Schedule a Viewing' button, but it did not work for either listing, so I wrote out the coordinators' phone numbers and told Stephanie to call. Later that day, she called to say both coordinators told her to have her case manager call, so I called the first coordinator. Not checking what address I was inquiring about, the coordinator said I should email them so they could send over a questionnaire and that if we returned that, they would ask the landlord for a viewing. When I emailed asking for the questionnaire stating the unit address, the coordinator replied that the unit was already leased. I called Stephanie to explain, and she expressed confusion and frustration that the coordinator did not just confirm this during her initial call.

On the two occasions I successfully arranged a viewing for a client, the process was equally multi-step: emailing the coordinator, receiving and completing the questionnaire, and coordinating a viewing involving a client, agency representative, and a Lease Up coordinator. As I primarily worked with participants seeking housing in a small geographic area, I expected to liaise with the same coordinator; however, coordinators did not specialize by neighbourhood. Admittedly, the platform did not promise efficiency, instead promoted on the basis that landlords would be more willing to work with homeless prospective tenants. Reflecting on the program generally, one staff member commented that "the person who knows the client should be the one brokering the relationship with the landlord. Lease Up is taking that away". Within the Lease Up system, a landlord was navigating two agencies

rather than one, and the housing coordinator did not know the tenant, none of which was conducive to a workable leasing process. Over time, staff became frustrated with the limited options and reverted to primarily relying on conventional rental websites.

Efforts to increase the ease of leasing with a voucher are keenly needed, and these efforts address some of the issues around availability and landlord willingness to work with voucher participants. However, they also extend a bureaucratic and multi-stage homeless service sector where steps to resolving homelessness are protracted and complex. Efforts such as master leasing and Lease Up also centralize landlord relations with specific agencies, typically larger ones, or the city itself, and at times then require multi-agency participation in leasing, increasing confusion for landlords and participants. This can have implications for smaller agencies, and for landlords who prefer to work with them.

Housing first is critiqued as a consumerist intervention that does not address problems with the rental market and that serves to increase landlords' profitability (Grainger, 2022; Sparks, 2012). These arguments are based on examination of the case management dynamic, whereby case managers mediate tenant and landlord needs with the aim of maintaining the lease through shaping tenant behaviour. Attending to parallel efforts on the part of homeless service agencies, agency networks, and LAHSA, I find that tenancies are secured, shaped, and supported via programs explicitly designed to make renting to PEH more appealing and lucrative, extending understanding of the consumerist reach of housing first approaches. While Grainger (2024) outlines landlord profitability as an outcome of housing first arising from case management, I find that in the case of EHVs in Los Angeles, the aim of promoting profitability to landlords is a centrally embraced aspect of city homeless policy. Moreover, while previous scholarship suggests that housing first voucher programs seek to convert PEH to market ready tenants and manage tenant-landlord tensions, I find that with specific provisions for paying landlords for property damage, or master leasing to unburden property

owners of tenant management, these programs show instead a willingness and expectation that the housing authority or city will simply offset rather than avoid these costs. With landlord incentives institutionalized at the city level, these approaches align PEH housing outcomes with market profitability.

Agency Based Leasing Efforts

City-wide schemes invariably do not reach all landlords, and at times it falls to participants and agency staff to sell the premise of renting to a voucher holder. These efforts include calling on organic relationships with landlords known to agency staff, as well as reaching out to landlords previous clients have rented from. In their interactions with landlords, agency staff navigate multiple sets of conflicting interests and dual roles, attending to the needs of landlords, clients, and the agency itself, and balancing diligence in following the procedures of voucher leasing with more effective pathways of problem solving. Aside from networking and connection, one of the main roles agency staff provide in supporting leasing is providing assurance to landlords about city information and procedures.

Melanie, an EHV participant in her late 50s, had applied for a unit advertised locally and found the landlord willing to rent accept her voucher. The next steps in this process are for the landlord to apply to the Housing Authority for rental approval. Melanie explained that the landlord had no experience with vouchers and wanted someone to clarify the process. Generally, the staff response would be to provide the housing navigation email and office mainline, but Melanie expressed frustration and urgency, as her voucher was soon to expire. With little else to do in the office that morning I asked Melanie to give me the landlord's phone number, as I did not have a direct line to receive a call, and called him. He explained that he had understood the process from housing authority brochures but wanted to confirm his understanding with someone directly. After we had chatted for a few minutes, I followed

up by sending over the paperwork he needed, and he submitted it to the housing authority within a few days. Scholarship has shown that vouchers appeal to landlords in low-income neighbourhoods because of direct payments and program rent levels. However, landlords must understand the voucher process to proceed in renting to a voucher holder and agency staff can provide assurance and explanations. Staff suggested that local landlords with fewer properties are often those most willing to work with vouchers, but that when doing so they appreciate a one-to-one connection with the person handling their case. This was notable in the frequency with which participants would come in asking for their case manager's information because a landlord had said that they wanted to speak to someone directly. At times, this caused issues because the agency did not give out direct lines or personal emails, and many participants expressed frustration at being unable to provide a name and phone number to a landlord.

Less frequent but more consequential was staff's role in troubleshooting issues that arise through the leasing process. Typically, this looked like some aspect of the process taking significantly longer than it was supposed to. Often, concerns could be resolved simply by staff reassurance that an inspection was forthcoming, paperwork was in the pipeline, or a check was in the mail. However, these matters are out of the agency's control, and often staff would be unsure about how honest to be. At one viewing, I experienced the tension in providing these assurances myself; I had arranged to view a unit with Dominic, a shelter resident that the access centre served through a housing navigation contract. When the landlord asked about the timeline for deposit payment, something I knew was often delayed, it did not seem expedient to point out that deposits sometimes lag for months, and I instead replied that I was not sure but that rental payments start immediately upon contract signing. While Dominic ultimately leased the unit, and his deposit came through swiftly, after this blunder I noticed that when prospective landlords asked staff about the deposit process, their

answers varied. Some might be open about likely delays, taking the tactic that it was better to be honest while assuring that deposit payments arrive eventually, whereas in other instances, staff would explain this as 'we can submit the application for a deposit when we have the lease, and it should take two weeks to process once approved', mirroring the language in the program document but not reflecting the fact that approval was generally the delaying aspect of the process.

At times, retaining these landlord relationships meant working with landlords to address more complex issues that had arisen. One participant, Georgia, had secured an apartment with her EHV and moved in before it became apparent to staff that her deposit had not been paid. While HACLA EHVs come with deposit funding attached, those from other PHAs do not necessarily, and while the agency could support applications to a separate fund to cover deposit, participants themselves must initiate this. Often, they would not know to do this until it came to move-in day and the landlord refused to hand over keys, but this was typically a resolvable issue. Georgia's case was somewhat of an exception because Georgia had been in her unit for three months before this came to staff attention. The landlord had assumed the delay was an administrative one and explained that while they had initially trusted the process, the length of delay was increasingly concerning to them. This situation garnered some difficulty, because as Georgia had been in her unit for more than 90 days, she was not considered at imminent risk of homelessness and no longer qualified for the program that covered deposits. While no one explicitly recommending this strategy, staff explained the situation to the landlord, noting that until he decided to pursue eviction proceedings, Georgia would not qualify for the deposit payment. The landlord subsequently issued a 3-day pay or quit, a written notice stating that if the outstanding deposit balance was not paid within 3 days, Georgia would be required to vacate the property in 30 days' time. With this document, staff applied for and received the deposit payment and Georgia retained her tenancy. While

these exact circumstances were something I encountered on only this occasion, they indicate the work arounds that staff devise to maintain tenancies and landlord relationships.

In working with landlords, staff navigate multiple roles. When Georgia initially sought support with the deposit, staff were reluctant to engage, viewing it as outside of their contractual obligation. It was only when the landlord expressed concern that staff began to intervene. However, I do not interpret this as agency staff prioritizing the landlords needs, but rather their own; if Georgia were to be evicted, they would have to reopen her case. Grainger (2022) and Parsell & Marston (2016) point out that sometimes client and landlord roles conflict and must be balanced. Rather than finding that staff consistently favour the needs of either landlords or participants more when navigating these conflicting interests, I observed that a third factor is implicated in these decisions; the priorities of the staff member addressing the issue, which often reflect their lacking capacity in a sector with high turnover and staff shortages. Moreover, I find that staff navigate a second conflict, namely whether to align with or stand aside from the procedures of housing authorities and LAHSA. Having the flexibility to do either provides staff with a wider range of options when working with landlords, aligning with landlords in frustration at delays while in other instances deferring to PHA procedures to deflect landlords' frustration. Case managers' flexibility to align with or distance themselves from the procedures of voucher leasing serves as a resource in strategically managing landlord relationships, yet this dual positioning could have implications for the effectiveness of voucher leasing. While case managers are negotiating systemic shortcomings in the voucher leasing process, they may equally be reinforcing landlord power while doing so. Ultimately, case managers act as intermediaries not just of landlords and clients but of institutional authority and housing procedures.

Navigating Participants' Own Housing Readiness Perceptions

City-wide and agency-initiated approaches shape the landscape in which voucher holders navigate seeking a rental lease. Despite efforts to support leasing rates, many vouchers remain unused, and housing authorities knowingly over-issue vouchers to reflect this. In the case of EHVs, LACDA predictions on program attrition were inaccurate and in January 2023, LACDA sent an email to notify participants that unused vouchers were being suspended from the end of the month because all 1,964 vouchers had been leased. After push back from supporting agencies and participants, LACDA retracted this suspension and committed to finding slots in other voucher programs to all EHV recipients who secured a lease.

Amongst the justifications for over allocating homeless housing resources is the view that some remain unused because of lack of participant interest. While participants confirmed their desires to obtain secure housing as quickly as possible, many expressed uncertainties about how they could secure housing before they had found stable work, met health needs, and completed various legal, mental health, or substance use programs. In many instances, these commitments and needs were already in conflict. Often, participants expressed confusion about why housing was the first step they were supposed to undertake when many were unemployed or underemployed and did not see any way to financially support the unit they were being encouraged to lease. Frequently, when staff told participants to begin looking for rental units, participants would reply with ‘but I don’t have a job’, and staff efforts to assure participants that this should be a secondary goal could be met with anything from confusion to incredulity.

Several factors rendered the idea of seeking housing before addressing these concerns a point of worry for participants but central was the scarcity and permanence of an EHV. A concern raised by participants was that they were not able to sustain a lease even if they secured one. Voucher household’s rental contribution is calculated at a proportion of their income, meaning that lack of employment should not serve as a deterrent to leasing.

However, this contribution and the additional costs of utilities can be daunting and out of reach to those without a fixed income or work. Lucas, a participant in his early 20s, expressed this to me during a conversation about why he had not used his housing voucher, which had expired and could not be renewed. He explained that he "didn't feel ready to use his voucher" when he got it because he "wasn't in the right place", explaining that he had wanted to wait until he had a stable enough income to afford the cost of utilities alongside rental contributions, and until he felt in good enough mental health. Aside from these financial concerns, the significance of a housing voucher as an opportunity shaped participants' perceptions. With the public waiting list for housing vouchers in Los Angeles closed, housing vouchers are widely viewed as gold dust. This is not to say that many or most participants were reluctant to use their voucher, but the rarity of vouchers contributes to different reactions amongst those who receive them in terms of urgency to use them. Many participants expressed a strong urgency to secure a lease as quickly as possible, some planned to take their time but remained mindful of expiration, and others took the above view where they struggled to understand the use of a voucher without other forms of support or security. For this latter group, the magnitude of the resource and its permanence made them nervous.

Staff response to these feelings tended towards urging participants to use their EHV anyway. One participant, Emma, had been residing in a shelter for over a year and had obtained a voucher around 8 months before being added to the housing navigation roster at the access centre. She explained that she could not find a decent apartment in a neighbourhood that she felt safe in and wanted to hold out until she did because she wanted this to be her permanent home. In response, an agency staff member told her not to think of it this way; "you just need to find a place – any place. You only have to live there for a year, then you can take your time to find somewhere better. Surely any place is better than here?". Staff describe this as 'securing' their voucher, and this practice with EHV holders reflects a

desire to get participants out of shelters or precarious living arrangements and into stable housing, albeit with this shorter-term view of permanence.

While housing first programs necessarily eschew explicit housing readiness criteria, studies shows that agency and staff capacity constraints and frontline discretion mean this is not always the case (Van Den Berk-Clark, 2015). Voucher allocation has been found likewise, with PHA staff attempting to prioritize more housing ready clients (McCabe, 2023). While housing readiness as a determinant of program access or success is inconsistent with a housing first approach, studies shows that agency and staff capacity constraints and frontline discretion mean this is not always the case (Van Den Berk-Clark, 2015). However, little attention has been paid to housing first participants own perceptions of their housing readiness and the role that they expect and prefer this to play in their journey to homeless resolution. While EHVs operated in a housing first domain, I nevertheless found that perceptions of housing readiness continue to shape voucher uptake, and that a sub-group of participants are not necessarily sold on the premise that this form of housing first is a workable approach for them. These participants self-describe as unready for housing on the terms that it is being offered. In drawing attention to this point, I do not mean to suggest that rehabilitative programming would present a superior alternative, nor that these participants simply need to be persuaded to commit to a tenancy. Concerns about not being able to meet the costs of maintain a lease were, in my observation, well founded: throughout my time in the field, I observed at least three cases of voucher tenants evicted for utilities arrears. Further studies confirm that those who obtain housing while not able to meet basic needs are more likely to return to homelessness (Nelson et al., 2015; Marshall et al., 2022). And while housing first approaches promise wrap around service availability, voucher participants do not necessarily remain in a supportive program after leasing, meaning that while they might be referred or connected to such services, their enrolment is not guaranteed and handovers are

not seamless, if occurring at all. The EHV process for many participants thus reflects a housing first approach at the start with no assurance of the follow up required for the approach to be successful.

Conclusion

This paper makes contributions to three literatures. First, I extend understandings of the interplay of housing first and consumerisation, providing a more nuanced account of the efforts undertaken to support leasing within housing first programming (Grainger, 2022; Hennigan, 2017; Parsell and Marston, 2016). Previous scholarship has outlined housing first as consumerist, anchored this in the central role of a market lease, and detailed how participants are formed as market participants through case management. Attending to initiatives like Lease Up and landlord incentives, I spotlight efforts at the administrative level and indicate the extent to which these rely on embracing increased landlord profitability as a means to secure leases. These initiatives reflect an understanding that not all tenants will become market ready, and so instead offer incentives to landlords willing to overlook this, or else make alternative accommodations, such as higher damages deposits, to ensure that landlords do not need to. Thus while at the individual level, scholars such as Grainger (2024) find that mediating landlord and tenant needs can result in forcing tenants to conform to the demands of the rental market, at the city-wide level, efforts instead attempt to compel the market to accommodate the reality of leasing to unhoused tenants.

Second, I extend scholarship addressing the role of case management within housing first by considering case staff-landlord dynamics not just in sitting tenancies but in the process of securing a lease. Previous scholarship has outlined that case staff balance tenant and landlord interests and has suggested that these decisions tend to favour landlord needs, albeit sometimes purportedly in the interest of tenants. I find that in seeking to obtain leases

for participants, staff take on a role as local advisors to landlords and that in doing so, balance efforts to remain candid about the shortcomings of the process while trying not to deter landlords from renting to voucher participants. Observing staff interactions regarding participant leases and leasing, I find that a wider range of interests are considered, and that housing authority procedures and agency interests are also a part of this complex negotiation. I thus situate case workers role in supporting leasing not just in relation to clients and landlords but also in regard to agency interests and the pressure of housing authority procedures within the homeless management bureaucracy.

Finally, I advance understanding of housing readiness in relation to housing first. The continued presence of housing readiness logics in housing allocation has mostly been noted in relation to deliberate or inadvertent filtering on the part of program staff and procedures (Osborne, 2019; McCabe, 2023). I find that in the case of voucher allocation, the inverse can equally be true, with participants encouraged to lease despite their own reservations about their readiness to do so. The housing readiness model requires rehabilitative steps be taken prior to housing placement and while participants are not seeking quite this level of prior intervention, they nevertheless express a desire to address numerous challenges before feeling ready to seek and obtain permanent housing, and the weight of opportunity reflected by a housing voucher adds to this desire to resolve other needs first. Rather than representing a need for case workers to better inspire participants about a housing first approach, I interpret this perception amongst participants as reflecting the limited supports that they are offered upon leasing and their valid concerns that doing so does not offer permanent homelessness resolution.

Some limitations of this study are important to note. First, I draw exclusively on the case of EHVs rather than other types of voucher or resource, because the EHV cohort provided a specific, time-limited program that served as an effective way to examine the

intended questions. Unlike HCVs, EHVs were issued in bulk at a single point in time, which could have had a unique effect on the state of the rental market that case staff and participants were navigating. However, because other vouchers are so limited and scarcely issued, I considered drawing on the EHV case the best way to observe a sizable cohort of homeless voucher holders. Second, these findings represent data gathered from participant observation at one homeless service agency. While findings regarding city-wide efforts are not limited by this, those related to case worker practices could reflect approaches that are unique to this agency. Although I spoke to participants about their experiences across a range of agencies, which seemed similar to those I observed, I did not observe these and so cannot attest to this. Moreover, as a smaller, community-based agency, some practices likely differ to larger ones, such as landlord relations which might, at a larger agency, be more centrally managed and less at the discretion of case staff. However, with 140 homeless agencies of varying sizes operating in Los Angeles alone, these findings nevertheless have important implications.

These findings present several implications and directions for future research. First, while this study extends understanding of how voucher households are supported to lease outside of case manager and landlord dynamic, like much previous scholarship, I focus primarily on the procedural and agency management of these efforts. Future research could attend in greater depth to landlord perspectives and how they consider these efforts to be variously successful. Second, outlining Lease Up as an effort to centralise and manage landlord relations, I illustrate strengths and weaknesses of this approach but ultimately do not find it very effective. Greater examination of cases where centralised management of landlord relations has proven effective could be a useful counterpoint. Finally, I suggest that not all participants brought into housing first programs are sold on the view that they do not need to be housing ready. This has important implications to the efficacy of housing first programs, and the wider service contexts in which they operate. Greater examination is

needed of how participant perceptions of their own readiness shapes their housing journey and possibly causes self-selection into or out of homeless resolution programs.

Conclusion

These articles have traced the process of securing permanent housing through the Los Angeles homeless response system, attending both to the institutions that govern housing access and the lived experiences of those navigating them. Rather than positioning lived experience as separate from institutions and structures, I consider "lived reality" as the site where the effects of governance, policies, and procedures are acutely experience and negotiated. In this sense, lived reality is not merely shaped by institutional logics but becomes a space where those logics are implemented, contested, and sometimes reconfigured. Through ethnographic methods, I examine how broader systems of regulation materialize in the everyday practices, tensions, and compromises of service provision. By foregrounding the micro-level negotiations of service users, these finding reveal how individuals encounter and interpret systemic logics, offering insight into the disjuncture between institutional intention and outcome. This conclusion summarizes the contributions of each paper individually, establishes connections across the three manuscripts, and outlines some of the key implications of these collective findings.

While a range of scholarship has attended to matters of access, assessment, and prioritisation within homeless response (e.g. Balagot et al., 2019; Cronley, 2022; Osborne, 2019), far less consideration has been given to what happens next. My first paper "Hustling, Hassling, and Performing Compliance: Waiting for Homeless Housing in Los Angeles" attends to this juncture in the homeless to housing pathway and provides an empirical account of the lived reality of waiting for permanent housing opportunities. By outlining four responses to prolonged waiting that I term "bypassing", "hustling", "hassling", and "performative compliance," and connecting them to theoretical work from poverty governance and resistance literature, I situate these responses as forms of resistance to the terms of homeless resolution. These findings complicate understandings of unhoused

resistance. I detail how service engaged Angeleno's can face accusations of noncompliance in a way similar to those unengaged can be accused of service aversion. I argue that greater clarity and distinction is needed between resistance, aversion, and noncompliance, and begin to outline a framework for doing so, facilitating greater clarity in future discussions between these accusations levied towards the unhoused and drawing attention to their distinct consequences. In addition, these findings offer insights into the use of temporal forms of control, distinct from the spatial and bureaucratic control more commonly identified in existing scholarship. Detailing prolonged waiting as a means to exercise the temporal control of homeless service participants, I draw on Hage's (2009) existential immobility to suggest that delays produce not only logistical setbacks but also a broader sense of stuckedness, and an inability to move forward in life and plan for a future.

Looking to the next step of the homeless to housing pathway, the second article, *"*When Homeless Housing Matches Fail: Examining Coordinated Entry Housing Allocation in Los Angeles," examines the steps to utilization of homeless housing matches. Examining how and why matches fail, and situating these cases in context through ethnographic study, the paper offers critical insight into the structural barriers of homeless services both within and beyond coordinated entry. Exploring this overlooked step on the homeless to housing pathway, I illustrate that despite assumptions in existing literature, the 'matching' or 'housing' component of this pathway is in fact lengthy and multi-stage. Delineating these stages, the paper advances understanding of the procedures through which homeless housing opportunities are allocated, the barriers to their uptake, and the broader housing pathway.

Concurrently, I argue that receiving a match does not assure homeless resolution by outlining how and why matches fail. Finding arbitrariness within allocation, I draw on Gupta (2012) to anchor this arbitrariness in a systemic ambivalence to who succeeds in using a

housing resource, and argue that this ambivalence is indicated by the use of overmatching. This contrasts to current scholarship which roots arbitrariness in frontline discretion (e.g. Alden, 2015; Nevarez-Martinez 2021). While frontline discretion may be one source of this arbitrariness, it is important to recognise that this arbitrariness is also promoted by procedures such as deliberate overallocation. Deliberate overallocation emerges as a response to scarcity; because there are fewer matches available than needed, matchers intentionally assign the same resources to multiple people in anticipation of attrition or refusal. Instead of mitigating scarcity, this practice creates confusion, inefficiency, and disillusionment. Despite the costs and inefficiencies of overallocation, it remains the norm within allocation procedures because of a scarcity of resources relative to need. These findings speak to wider welfare delivery by outlining the ways that resource scarcity not only leads to service failure but also undermines participant-service provider relationships, revealing how systemic shortfall is managed through practises that defer rather than resolve the issues arising from resource scarcity. While those successful in securing a unit-based match will typically go on to move in, participants who receive a voucher match often secure a voucher yet still do not successfully secure a rental lease. Drawing on the case of Emergency Housing Vouchers, my third article, "Homeless Housing Vouchers and the Consumerization of Housing First", addresses why many voucher holders fail to secure a unit, examining the strategies employed by the city and homeless service agencies to navigate obstacles to successful voucher leasing. I frame these interventions in the context of coordinated entry and housing first service domains in order to distinguish from housing vouchers allocated by the public waiting list and exclusively by public housing authorities. Some of the barriers to successful leasing, such as rental market constraints, are well-known, and in looking to how these are navigated by actors in the homeless response field, analysis *reveals the continued entanglement between homeless* housing interventions and the private rental market and highlights how voucher and housing

first initiatives both rely on and actively reinforce landlord profitability as a means of accelerating leasing.

In addition, I explore how housing readiness concerns continue to shape resource uptake, not through service provider assessments but through self-imposed criteria set by participants themselves. These findings contribute to the literature on the consumerization of housing first by illustrating the extent to which non-profits and city initiatives cater to landlord profitability as a means to secure housing opportunities for participants. These efforts often consequently create pathways to permanent housing that work best for tenants with no eviction history, better credit scores, and stable income – a narrow subset of unhoused service users. Alternately, initiatives simply pay substantially upwards of market rents and offer financial incentives to landlords willing to overlook these attributes, further boosting profitability for landlords. Moreover, I find that despite aiming to avoid requiring participants to be housing ready, housing first interventions may perpetuate participant filtering on this basis anyway, because the magnitude of a housing placement and its associated responsibilities deter participants who are not already connected with sufficient supportive services.

Implications

Collectively, these papers bring into focus a shared set of central concerns: the role of resource scarcity in homeless response, the complex temporality through which services are delivered, and the everyday acts of resistance through which participants contest or navigate the system. Moreover, these findings jointly point to the salience of noncompliance as a feature of homeless service delivery reflecting structural tensions rather than individual failure or aversion. These findings have implications for policy; along with temporal barriers and perceptions of participants as resistant, bureaucratic hurdles, rigid eligibility criteria, and

service delivery models that fail to accommodate the realities of unhoused individuals' lives create obstacles that make existing resources functionally inaccessible for many. In this section, I elaborate on each of these and attend to their scholarly and policy implications.

Resource Scarcity

Within housing first approaches, housing supply is widely recognized as critical to successful housing retention (Padgett, Henwood & Tsemberis 2016; Pleace 2016). Popular and political narratives similarly frame homelessness resolution as a problem of resource scarcity, emphasizing the need to more housing units, shelter beds, and supportive services to reduce high rates of homelessness. Studies of housing first, however, have been critiqued for insufficiently attending to the programs implementation in areas with low rates of affordable housing availability (Grainger, 2022). These resource-focused framings position increased housing availability as the primary solution. However, my findings suggest that when resources become available in LA, an example of a tight rental market, procedural hurdles and structural barriers often render them functionally inaccessible to many in need. This aligns with broader research documenting bureaucratic exclusion in welfare and housing programs (Desmond, 2016; Venkatesh, 2006). Specifically, I identify a cycle of overallocation and underutilization: In the third paper, I outline how an increase in housing vouchers does not necessarily lead to their successful utilization due to absent case management and rental market barriers. In the second paper, I show that many of these barriers arise from *overmatching*, a practice rooted in a systemic aversion to the slow utilization of opportunities. I argue that these barriers emerge not in spite of scarcity but because of it: when resources are limited, procedures prioritize allocation, distributing vouchers beyond what can feasibly be used. This creates a cycle in which resources appear available on paper but go underutilized in practise.

Temporalities

Across these papers, I also find that the homeless service system operates according to a distinct temporality that is both internally contradictory and at odds with the needs of people experiencing homelessness. In the first paper, I find that unhoused participants face prolonged periods of waiting, and that they seek to hurry this process along through various forms of resistance. Yet in the second paper, I identify rapid timelines imposed through the matching system, where an artificial urgency governs housing resource uptake. As outlined in the first paper, these expectations are at odds with the lived reality of homelessness, and this expectation of prolonged waiting and then required urgency can be challenging for participants to navigate, as they become used to the system moving slowly only to then be expected to be immediately available to proceed rapidly at certain junctures. Moreover, in the second paper, I find that ability to navigate rapid response timelines become a determinant of who will be successful in securing a housing match, meaning these temporalities have important consequences for individuals. Finally, in the third paper, I find that some participants do not feel ready for permanent housing via a voucher on the timeline it is being offered to them. While interconnected with the services and supports available, a sense of being rushed into permanent housing nevertheless shapes these perceptions of readiness for participants. Collectively, these findings indicate how unhoused individuals navigate and at time resist institutional timelines. The homeless to housing pathway operates with distinct temporalities, at times necessitating extensive waiting and at other moments requiring a level of urgency that I argue is unnecessary, unconducive to productive outcomes for many participants, and burdensome to staff.

These temporalities are important for several reasons. First, they reveal how institutional timelines often fail to align with the precarious and changeable rhythms of

homelessness. Moreover, they shape how unhoused people experience waiting, uncertainty, and responsiveness in the system, influencing engagement and outcomes. Finally, these temporalities are not neutral, and reflect and reproduce broader power dynamics, determining who is seen as eligible, deserving, and ultimately able to access assistance. In particular, I find several groups who are better suited to this system. First, those more skilled in the nature of service engagement or better resourced and who are thus able to endure prolonged waiting and its administrative burdens fare better in securing access to housing. Relatedly, those more available at short notice are more likely to be successful in securing a match. Finally, those whose vision of their own homeless resolution aligns with that of the homeless to housing trajectory, and particularly a housing first approach, will have an easier time successfully navigating this assistance.

It is important to recognise that despite the difficulties posed by these temporalities, this system may work for many. Scholarship exploring the homeless management industry points to differing experiences within the same service domains that can variously be received as compassionate and controlling (Cloke et al., 2010; Johnsen et al., 2005; Johnstone et al., 2016). Yet homeless response is recognised as often punitive, hostile, and challenging to navigate (Dozier, 2019; Stuart, 2016; Willse, 2016). Most existing research has focused on certain forms of control in this system, such as spatial, bureaucratic, or therapeutic control (e.g. Evans & DeVerteuil, 2016; Lyon-Callo, 2000; Willse, 2016). However, temporal control within homeless management remains underexplored or conflated with bureaucratic control.

Involving structures such as deadlines, waiting periods, and expectations of participants timely availability, temporal control shapes individuals' experiences and opportunities within the homeless management system, compounding the difficulties of an already challenging process. Drawing on Hage's (2009) *existential immobility,* I show that this is not just a logistical concern, as these temporal matters intersect with issues of service

engagement and participant hope. Greater incorporation of temporal considerations into scholarly discussions offers an additional critical lens for understanding homeless response, where time is a structuring force in the governance of poverty and homelessness. Moreover, attending to the contrasting paces of waiting and engagement across service delivery offers insights into how the structures of homeless response not only fail to meet needs, but actively shape exclusion through temporal misalignment. Finally, this lens enables better understanding for the design and implementation of interventions that are temporally responsive.

Noncompliance

Amid these structural barriers and often mismatched temporalities of homeless service systems, noncompliance emerges as a salient expression of the tensions that these barriers and temporalities bring. Within a service domain rife with rigid eligibility criteria, limited resource availability, and prolonged waiting, noncompliance, whether deliberate or otherwise on the part of participants, emerges from misalignments between service models and participant needs. Crucially, I show that the requirements of participants are not always practicable; critiquing the interventions brought in to address lack of leasing amongst voucher holders, in the third paper I find that despite efforts made to broach these barriers, participants can still struggle to complete the homeless housing pathway irrespective of effort invested in the process. By situating noncompliance within these systemic frictions, I argue that behaviours labelled as noncompliant reflect not just struggle with program requirements but may signal resourcefulness, critique, or navigation of constrained choices.

'Noncompliance', which is often framed as a failure to follow case plans outlined by service staff, can signal participants strategic or inadvertent negotiation of program requirements that are misaligned with their needs, experiences, or timelines. This reframing urges a

reconsideration of how accountability, success, and cooperation are defined in service settings.

Resistance

Collectively, these papers also have implications to understandings of unhoused resistance; understanding noncompliance as structurally situated opens space to reconsider how resistance is conceptualized within homeless systems, particularly where refusal or disengagement is cast as a deliberate response to systemic constraints. In popular narratives, 'resistance' to homeless services carries an implied stubbornness, irrationality, or unwillingness to be helped; critical perspectives outline unhoused resistance efforts outside of or in response to displacement, lack of services, and criminalisation (e.g. Dozier 2019; 2022) and view refusals within service domains as a form of agency anchored in lived experience or understanding of the opportunities being offered (e.g. Herring, 2021; Martinez, 2021). Aligning with the latter interpretation, my analysis in the first paper identifies forms of resistance that are anchored in response to the conditions of services available. Rather than an aversion to services, these forms of resistance emerge from a desire to hasten service engagement, reversing the narrative that resistance represents a desire for disengagement. Similarly, lack of progress towards housing amongst service participants has been interpreted as a lack of commitment or deservingness, and evidence of stagnation or disengagement as a form of personal failure (Stuart, 2016; Willse, 2015). In the second paper, I show how housing matches can fail as a product of structural barriers within the service network, providing evidence that match failure does not necessarily represent an aversion to permanent housing. Conceptually, I argue that clearer language is needed to distinguish between forms of service refusal within homeless management, outlining resistance, noncompliance, and aversion as distinct and each reflecting different relationships to service systems, motivations,

and structural constraints. This distinction offers the opportunity to reframe how unhoused service user's choices are interpreted. When refusals are misread as aversion, systems may double down on punitive or coercive strategies, further entrenching distrust and disengagement. By contrast, recognizing resistance as an informed response, and one not necessarily seeking to avert service progress, continues to push attention toward the structural failures of the system rather than the behaviour of individuals.

Collective Implications

Together, these findings speak to a needed shift in how service disengagement or stalled progress are interpreted in practise and within some scholarly literature. While not viewed as reason to refuse services altogether, participant case failure is at times viewed by homeless service staff as the product of individual disengagement and a reason to delay support or prioritize others more "ready" for services. My analysis challenges framings that pathologize non-participation or participatory resistance in homeless services, or view it as divestment from the homeless response system altogether, and instead build on critical perspectives that view refusals or apparent disengagement as situated responses to service conditions and potential forms of resistance from within the service system.

In scholarship, varying levels of success in service progress for unhoused individuals are interpreted as reflective of uneven service distribution (Baker et al., 2020; DeVerteuil et al., 2009; Hennigan & Speer, 2019) as well as indicative of how differences in racial, ethnic, and gender identity shape unhoused experiences (Przybylinski, 2024). Scholarship outlines strategies deployed by homeless service users to survive while homeless, navigate the service domain, and address forms of discrimination present within homeless response (e.g. Cook & Hole, 2020; Mik-Meyer & Silverman, 2019). While these responses have previously been understood as rational strategies within constrained service systems, my findings further

outline the context against which these decisions are being made, highlighting how participants' actions are shaped by scarcity, bureaucratic opacity, and mismatches between service design and lived experiences, particularly in temporal requirements or service participation.

In line with scholarly discussions of resistance that argue that resistance can take many forms, target a range of outcomes, and vary in its level of mobilization (Ballard 2015; Hughes 2020; Rose 2009; Sharp et al. 2000), I find that resistance within homeless management includes both efforts that oppose the services being offered but also deliberate strategies to negotiate the complexities of a bureaucratic system. Crucially, what is interpreted as aversion must be contextualised against the structural barriers and temporal expectations that participants encounter trying to obtain housing withing the homeless response system. Misunderstanding slow or failed housing matches as individual failure risks reinforcing punitive or paternalistic interventions that fail to address systemic barriers at play. Instead, policy design and implementation must both recognise the realities of service user experience and ensure more flexible and participant informed approaches.

Policy Implications

In this section, I outline some recent developments in the homeless policy sphere that developed during or since data collection and consider the implications of my findings in these contexts.

In recent months, LAHSA, the joint powers authority responsible for overseeing the majority of homeless service delivery in the county, has come under increasing scrutiny. Currently, most publicly funded homeless services in Los Angeles are delivered by non-profit agencies holding contracts with LAHSA. An audit of the agency commissioned by U.S. District Judge David O. Carter and released in March 2025 presented a deeply critical insight

into how the agency was spending funds, commissioning services, and overseeing program implementation. The audit reported that prolonged program engagement did not appear to result in higher rates of permanent housing placements, and that siloed and differing matching processes impede uniformity and contribute to potential inequities in resource allocation. My findings offer explanation of these outcomes, showing some of the many ways that these contracted services struggle to present a meaningful pathway to homeless resolution. The recent audit finds that contracted services are under scrutinized, inadequately monitored, and poorly financially managed. In response, the County of Los Angeles plans to bring more of these services under its own domain. Across the papers I present here, I find that staff at the access centre interpret their contracted responsibilities in different ways and do so for various motivations. While my findings do not typify these differing interpretations, they illustrate that contracted services are subject to little oversight. However, that is not to say that more oversight would necessarily render these services more productive. If agencies are increasingly prevented from using discretion, it is possible that increased rigidity will make these pathways to housing even less accessible or navigable for participants.

This dilemma essentially reflects two questions; first, whether services should be contracted out to non-profit agencies at all rather than directly delivered by the city or county, and second, the extent to which services should be standardised and monitored in terms of compliance with a scope of required services. At the access centre, and across my interactions with other staff and agencies in the homeless service space in South LA, there was strong resistance to the suggestion that services should be directly delivered by the city. To some, the idea that the city would simultaneously deliver and commission services represented a conflict of interest. Others felt that services should be delivered by those with local knowledge and expertise. Generally, service providers regarded contracts as unnecessarily inflexible, deeply confusing, and not in line with what they perceived to be best practises.

Ultimately, service providers navigate a tension where they do not have sufficient information or resources to follow the pathways laid out in their contracts, but do not have enough freedom to improvise effectively.

Across the three papers, my findings show various barriers that arise as a result of the way that homeless services are implemented. These various procedural and systematic issues contribute to the slow rates of homeless resolution amongst participants in the homeless response system. These findings speak to the Continuum of Care model and the structuring of homeless services. LAHSA, as the lead agency in Los Angeles CoC, retains responsibility for managing and tracking homeless services within the county. If agencies throughout the city are dissatisfied with the way that services are being contracted, struggle to understand their responsibilities, and cannot navigate the paperwork outlining how they are required to deliver services, this points to issues with the CoC. It remains to be seen whether increased oversight will avoid fragmentation or simply increase it by imposing rigid contracting mechanisms that fail to reflect local needs. Shifting much of the power for commissioning to the county does little to redress power imbalances between central and local providers and does not necessarily increase responsivity to the needs to service providers, all aspects of homeless response equally in need of attention.

This dissertation centres around the question of how unhoused Angeleno's access permanent housing. I find numerous hurdles to successful resource utilisation, and that these barriers stem from various locations; the rental market, agencies contracted to deliver services, staff discretion, and the procedures governing frontline work. With potentially substantial changes afoot in the management of homeless housing in Los Angeles, the question of housing access seems likely to remain firmly mired in internal politics within city decision making and structuring. However, this research points to the importance of attending to the everyday workings of this system at the ground level as a means to understand the

wider dynamics of homeless housing access. Without greater attention and efforts to correct the myriad ways that many participants slip through cracks in the rehousing process, the homeless to housing pathway will continue to fail many of those most in need of its support.

Limitations

While the access centre location enabled inclusion of participants from a range of residential situations and program enrolment types, the site necessarily excluded individuals who disengaged from homeless services entirely – including those who had done so in response to extended waiting periods, match failure, and voucher withdrawal. Although case files documented some departures, the access centre only retained paper files for active participants and there is no way to search by agency in the city-wide database, meaning I had no way to track attrition based on these factors outside of participants who I encountered. However, the partial visibility of disengagement reflects a key insight; that service exits are often shaped by institutional logics, waiting, gatekeeping, and mistrust. In paying ethnographic attention to how disengagement was documented, interpreted, or overlooked, I offer understanding of the structural conditions of how people fall through these cracks.

The ethos and organisational culture of the access centre also shaped both the delivery of services and participants experiences of them. While some practises – such as staff discretion in landlord engagement or sustained personal relationships with clients – may be anchored in this ethos, this should not be taken to suggest that straightforward distinctions can be made between large and small, community-based and corporate, or new and experiences agencies. In practice, homeless service organisations vary widely and such variation does not map cleanly onto size or funding structures. The access centre was likely unique in various ways, and I have tried to articulate these as appropriate and relevant to findings.

Finally, this study was situated in Los Angeles, a particularly high-visibility context for homeless policy. With one of the largest unhoused populations in the US, intense political scrutiny, and a complex landscape of service provision, Los Angeles offers an illuminating context in which to trace housing precarity is managed but at a scale that is mirrored in few other locations. While some findings are grounded in the specificity of this settings, many have applicability beyond Los Angeles via experiences not unique to operations of this scale, such as extended waiting, or else via systems deployed across the US, such as coordinated entry. Other urban contexts, with different housing markets and political investment, may manifest these dynamics differently. However, by tracing how housing allocation is practised and contested within Los Angeles, this study contributes to theorizing this process beyond this context.

Future Research

Showing that housing allocation is not simply about matching relative to needs, but about how people are positioned, trusted, and assessed in relation to the possibility of housing, this research raises important questions, both about homeless housing allocation and other dynamics within homeless response.

Future research should further investigate the temporal dimensions of homeless services as a structuring force that shapes access, engagement, and outcomes. Here, I illustrate how timelines of waiting, rapid action, and perceived readiness influence who succeeds in securing access to housing. Current research has paid some attention to how mismatches between institutional timelines and the lived rhythms of homelessness can undermine access and participants' sense of agency and hope, but further reckoning with temporality as a form of control distinct from spatial and bureaucratic regulation is needed. In particular, future research should explore how extended waiting may operate as a form of

structural neglect, raising questions about how temporal limbo can function as a quiet mode of structural violence.

Moreover, future research should also consider the differing size, ethos, and structures of homeless service agency and how these institutional differences relate to variations in service outcomes and participant experiences. Such comparisons are vital for understanding how organizational difference shapes who receives support, how trust is built, and what forms of discretion or exclusion are normalized within different agencies. These differences can profoundly influence whether services are experienced as tolerable, alienating, or effective.

Finally, this study finds that not all participants fully embrace the Housing First approach that securing housing should supersede resolving other personal challenges. Some continued to view themselves and others as needing to be "housing ready", highlighting a tension between institutional philosophy and participant self-perception. This is not to say that a Housing First paradigm is flawed, but it highlights the importance of how its goals and assumptions are communicated to participants. Future research should explore how service providers engage with participants' own understandings of readiness, and whether the system allows meaningful and productive space for participants to articulate and pursue alternative priorities without being excluded, neglected, or compelled to follow alternate pathways.

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