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A House Half-Built: Assessing the Progress of California's Housing Initiatives

In only five years, approximately \$24 billion dollars were spent on state homelessness interventions, but has there been any significant progress found? This brings the question; how effective have California's public service initiatives been in reducing homelessness rates over the past decade? Specifically, between the years of 2015 and 2024, how has variation in administrative capacity among California counties affected the implementation and outcomes of state-funded homelessness initiatives, such as Proposition 2 (No Place Like Home Program)? To address this question, I compare the administrative performance of four large populous counties, Los Angeles, San Francisco, Santa Clara, and San Diego, using a comparative-correlational design linking administrative capacity scores, NPLH project completion rates, and year-over-year changes in chronic and severe mental illness homelessness rates. I found that the level of administrative capacity does have a significant impact on a state's homelessness outcomes; across the four counties measured, they have shown significant reduction or an increase in percentage rates after the implementation of state initiatives, such as Proposition 2.

SIGNIFICANCE

California voters who read through the description of proposition 2 on the ballot were given a bold promise, "20,000 new units of permanent housing" (Wiener 2024). Carolina Reid, whom is a faculty adviser at the UC Berkeley Turner Center for Housing Innovation has noted that the ineffectiveness of an initiative or program aimed at assisting the homelessness crisis is

not the issue, the problem is “how we finance and build affordable housing” (Wiener 2024). In 2024, a statewide audit by the California State Auditor (CSA) delivered the conclusion that the overall state approach to homelessness, which are housing supportive programs, suffer from serious shortcomings (Kendall 2025). The relevant coordinating body, California Interagency Council on Homelessness (Cal ICH), “has not consistently tracked and evaluated” the costs and outcomes of its programs since 2021. More broadly, the CSA found that “despite tens of billions spent, in some reports \$24 billion over a five-year period” the state lacks sufficient data to show whether most of its homelessness interventions actually succeeded (Ohanian 2024). The audit also placed emphasis on the state’s homelessness funding, where it is extremely fragmented, “at least nine state agencies administer 41 different programs — with no single entity responsible for a comprehensive statewide strategy or outcome-tracking” (Ohanian 2024).

Homelessness has become a complex issue written within political agendas for years, especially in California. In January 2024, the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), 771,480 individuals are reported to be experiencing homelessness in the United States. This was the “largest data collection” that has been performed displaying “an overall increase of 19% since 2007” (Walters 2024). In the year 2024 California alone reports that of the nation’s 771,480 people experiencing homelessness, over 187, 000 (24%) were in California” (Cremin 2025). The state, along with New York, has consistently been reported to have significant high rates of homelessness, even with apparent housing initiatives and supportive services to address the issue (HUD 2025). Recently, Governor Gavin Newsom has taken note of the issue that persists within the state, announcing local progress in reducing homelessness (HUD 2025). Recent funding towards Proposition 1 has been recently used in order to expand behavioral health services and provide additional accessible pathways for those

in need of involuntary treatment (Kendall 2025). However, there have also been recent ineffective solutions towards fully assisting those who suffer from chronic homelessness and are experiencing severe mental health issues on California streets (Kendall 2025). For example, the criminalization of encampments in cities and the lack of unification from counties in their response to their own homeless population (Kendall 2025). CalMatters has taken the step to report on the administrative capacity of certain counties such as San Diego, Mendocino, Los Angeles, Santa Cruz, and San Bernardino, where they have reported the “lack of a unified strategy to address street homelessness across the state, even as Gov. Gavin Newsom is pushing for more cohesive rules” (Kendall 2025). With this, it shows there is a large possibility for counties to become more engaged with their administrative actions and have the appropriate capacity to reflect on the realistic measures of a policy.

BACKGROUND

Proposition 2 was signed on July 1, 2016 by Governor Jerry Brown, where in November 2018, California voters approved Proposition 2 with a high approval rate (Legislative Analyst’s Office). Within the key features of Proposition 2, California counties were expected to follow through on the commitment of providing mental health services and assist in the coordination of housing based services. In November of 2018, 63% of voters in California were in favor of the proposition (Wiener 2025). The funding for the NPLH program derives from a broader effort in California in redistributing wealth, as a way to assist in stabilizing the state’s most vulnerable populations. Proposition 2 (No Place Like Home) funds the development and preservation of permanent supportive housing for persons who are in need of mental health services and are at the risk of chronic homelessness (Legislative Analyst’s Office). The No Place Like Home Program offers tenants services such as permanent housing units, holistic support in accessing

behavioral health services, case management, and physical health care/counseling, and financial opportunities for eligible counties. As part of the law, California counties have the requirement to provide those who reside within the units with both mental health and substance use treatment services for a minimum of 20 years (NPLH 2024). One of the key goals with this program was to build capacity at a local level, improving the use of coordinated entry systems and updating local plans for homelessness. The proposition authorizes the state of California to use up to \$2 billion dollars from the Mental Health Services Act to finance the No Place Like Home Program (Legislative Analyst's Office). The No Place Like Home Program is administered through the California Department of Housing and Community Development and the funds were distributed by formula allocation to each county, on the basis of the 2017 homeless point in count (PIT).

However, despite the state's significant financial commitments towards achieving housing stability, California still undergoes a housing affordability crisis, income disparities, and poor administrative performance from local governments, ultimately impacting the goal of decreasing homelessness rates over time (California Budget and Policy Center). In this case, the observational findings collected by the following analysis will come to share necessary policy reform to identify the failures, successes, and structural inequalities that may place a limitation on a progressive impact on California's vulnerable populations. The purpose of this project is to measure the effectiveness of Proposition 2, evaluating its success and their accessibility to services throughout the years that the implementation took effect.

LITERATURE REVIEW

To provide contextual information regarding the proposed proposition, this visual report has been a vital tool for my current research project. The annual reports published by the California Department of Housing and Community Development illustrates the following

supportive housing developments over the fiscal years of 2020-2024, in which projects the temporal scope that my project will be focusing on. The bar graph displaying the NPLH unit pipeline by allocation is useful for my analytical observations regarding the approximate number of projects under construction and the number of projects completed per California county, displaying possible data to measure my independent variable (local program coordination). From this data collected, I can infer that there will be a larger number of projected projects towards addressing chronic homelessness but a decrease in projects actually being completed or housing services receiving further funding from their local government. As a result, there will be an increase in state funding allocations and number of housing programs but an apparent increase in homelessness rates every year even after following the implementation of proposition 2 (Legislative Analyst's Office). With this data in hand, there seems to be a possible correlational analysis performed where I would be comparing homelessness rates per year reported by the HUD Continuum of Care, observing any significant changes after housing service interventions. Santa Clara, San Francisco, Los Angeles, and San Diego seem to have more information on their tenant outcomes and awards summary, which assists in my research project in locating the specific counties that I should be placing my focus on for now (PPIC 2025). In addition, these counties are specifically labeled as alternative process counties. Alternative process counties as defined by the HCD, are counties that account for 5% or more of California's homeless population that have proved to have the capacity to administer funds for permanent housing services (Speer 2017). With this given definition, I can narrow down the counties that have a higher administrative capacity in California and observe their progress and success with the housing services that the No Place Like Home Program.

Rise of Homelessness Trends

To add on to the previous conversation, the Public Policy Institute of California provides a brief overview of the California counties that have been observed to see the largest decreases in homelessness rates in the years 2019-2020, presenting a sample framework to illustrate my visual data model to project the percentage change of homeless rates depending on both the county and their population density. The counties listed on the bar graph presented by the U.S Department Housing and Urban Development are the same counties that are being focused on for this research, giving me an additional observation in the percentage change in homelessness rates before the full implementation of proposition 2 in California counties. So far, they have reported a decrease in homelessness rates in counties such as Los Angeles and Sacramento (approximately a 3.5-4% change), however these percentage changes are fairly small and not a drastic change to fully confirm that state interventions have been as effective as they were promised to (PPIC 2025). Similar to how Cremin has stated within his web article, that California still observes smaller rates of homelessness rates decreasing than any other state in the U.S. This report has directed me to an additional tool to measure my dependent variable which is the Continuums of Care (CoCs) in which they report annual PIT counts that align with California's counties, providing thorough data regarding their severely mentally ill and chronic homeless populations. The website displays percentage changes in total homeless populations for all California counties in the year 2023-2024, so I plan to include this data with the line-based plot that I am currently working on since I will be measuring the approximate percentage changes of homelessness rates before and after the implementation of proposition 2. Here, they address a control variable I was currently taking note of, low-populated counties. The PPIC states that low populated counties have "overall low numbers of people experiencing homelessness than larger CoCs" and it is not entirely due to how a county coordinates or funds

their own programs/services (PPIC 2025). My research will differ from this report because instead of analyzing the total homeless population I am only focusing on 2 specific sections of the homeless population, chronic homelessness and those who are homeless and severely mentally ill.

Selection of California Counties

Since I want to provide a chart regarding the progress of the housing services offered per each county listed, I will mainly rely on Sean Cremin's framework. The chart presents the percentage of exited fellows and the average mean of those who received employment services in areas such as downtown LA, San Fernando Valley, South LA, and Watts. I plan to provide a similar evaluation chart based on descriptive statistics measured using my own data. The purpose of applying this framework is to measure my independent variable (local program coordination) and analyze the effectiveness of the No Place Like Home Program and its offered services. On page 30, there is a visual model presented that shows the total percentage of fellows exiting behavioral health services by region. This was useful in my own analysis of Los Angeles and the services offered towards their own homeless populations. With my own project, I plan to expand on these observations further by including other large populous counties, measuring the effectiveness of each service available and overall local administrative measures. With this information, I can apply the data regarding the Los Angeles section within a chart measuring the required services by the NPLH.

Administrative Capacity Theory

Lucie Cern provides a comparative study regarding how each county has operated policy implementation differently, this includes fund disbursement and program coordination. The decrease in homelessness rates does not only depend on the received state funding but the local

coordination of local agency services and what policymakers define and understand to whom is considered “homeless”. This relates back to my proposed conceptual hypotheses of my project, where I infer that counties are able to effectively allocate funds. Within her written work, she provides a thorough description of a framework regarding successful policy implementation. The introduction to the top-down approach has about six conditions that need to be fulfilled (“clear objectives, casual theory, legal structure of the implementation process, committed officials, supportive interest groups to no undermining of changing socio-economic conditions”). The description that she has provided regarding the conditions for effective policy implementation goes back to the discussion of how although the current governor has provided measures to approach fund allocations and how to implement solutions to their homelessness populations, it is up to the county’s administrative coordination to successfully supervise and assign realistic commitments in order to ethically address the issue. Constructing my theory for this research project, I will incorporate elements from Cern’s policy implementation theory within my conceptual hypotheses and causal mechanism.

Large Gaps in Progress with State Initiatives

Jialu L. Steeler, in a Stanford policy brief, has written that one of the key takeaways states that “to reduce the unsheltered homeless population, more shelter capacity and increased investment” within cost-effective housing programs needs to become a priority for local governments in certain counties (Steeler). From the years 2007-2020, based on State Homelessness PIT counts, California saw the largest increase in rates compared to any other state, reaching approximately 160,000 homeless persons (Steeler). With my research, I plan to expand on the dataset presented by providing the additional rates for the years after 2020, to prove that the increase still keeps on growing despite promised plans to address homelessness on

a larger scale. The brief addresses that those who are already suffering from chronic homelessness experience severe drug addictions and other mental health problems. As a result of this apparent trend, the construction for treatment facilities need to be placed on the agendas for local governments, a required goal that the No Place Like Home Program has proposed (Steeler). From this, I plan to measure the number of projects (health care facilities and substance use services) constructed or who are in construction over time.

THEORY, HYPOTHESIS, AND CASUAL MECHANISM

My theory is that counties that deliver a high percentage of success within their offered housing services directed towards homelessness observe greater progress within their proposed projects. Analyzing data from California's Business, Consumer services, and Housing agency have presented visual progress in decreasing homelessness rates due to proper investments being directed towards permanent supportive housing beds (BCH 2024). The increase in funding and cooperative local agencies within homeless services significantly ties to lower rates in chronic homeless rates.

I hypothesize that California counties with higher levels of administrative capacity (housing, outreach, supportive services) are more likely to see a decrease in homelessness rates following the implementation of state initiatives of Proposition 2 (No Place Like Home) in the years 2020-2024 compared to the years of 2015-2019.

My operational hypothesis is that between 2015 and 2024, counties with higher system performance index scores will demonstrate stronger implementation outcomes of Proposition 2 which is measured through higher percentage rates of completed NPLH housing units and significant declines in chronic and severe mental illness homelessness rates.

The casual mechanism is that the higher level of administrative capacity enables effective coordination, planning, and fund management. Implementation capacity consists of project management and interagency alignment and the stronger this is, there is an increase in the ability to complete NPLH supportive housing units. This in turn, brings a higher percentage of housing production and service delivery (higher percentage of NPLH units completed; expanded permanent supportive housing and mental health services) and enables access to stable housing and treatment support for residents. Improved housing system flows will lead to measurable declines in chronic and SMI homelessness rates.

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODS

My unit of analysis is 4 California counties (Los Angeles, San Francisco, Santa Clara City/San Jose, and San Diego) from 2015-2024. These 4 counties were specifically selected because they are labeled as Alternative Program Counties (APC's), which refers to counties that account for 5% or more of the state's homelessness population and has the capacity to allocate their own funds (HCD 2023). I examined multiple cases over time, specifically the effectiveness of a California proposition over the fiscal years of 2020-2025 and examining apparent differences in homeless rates over the years of 2015-2024.

The independent variable is system performance index scores that operationalizes administrative capacity by county, measured through indicators such as tracking the evaluation of supportive services towards homeless populations from the Legislative Analyst's Office (LAO) & California State Auditor and the number of NPLH units completed by counties according to the annual reports (fiscal years 2020-2024) from the No Place Like Home Program (NPLH). The indicators are broken down into five categories; administrative and internal services, community development, housing assistance, housing investment and finance, and

housing operations and capital fund. I decided to evaluate these specific domains because as I went through each county's website, I observed that these areas were the common titles and sections found within their housing sites.

The dependent variable is homelessness rates, focusing only on the number of those who are chronically homeless or who are severely mentally ill, this will be measured within the years of 2015-2024. Data for my dependent variable is extracted from the HMIS (Homeless Management Tracking) website. I will consider the difference in rate (%) in these homelessness rates (year-over-year) post and pre-implementation of Proposition 2 (No Place Like Home) per county.

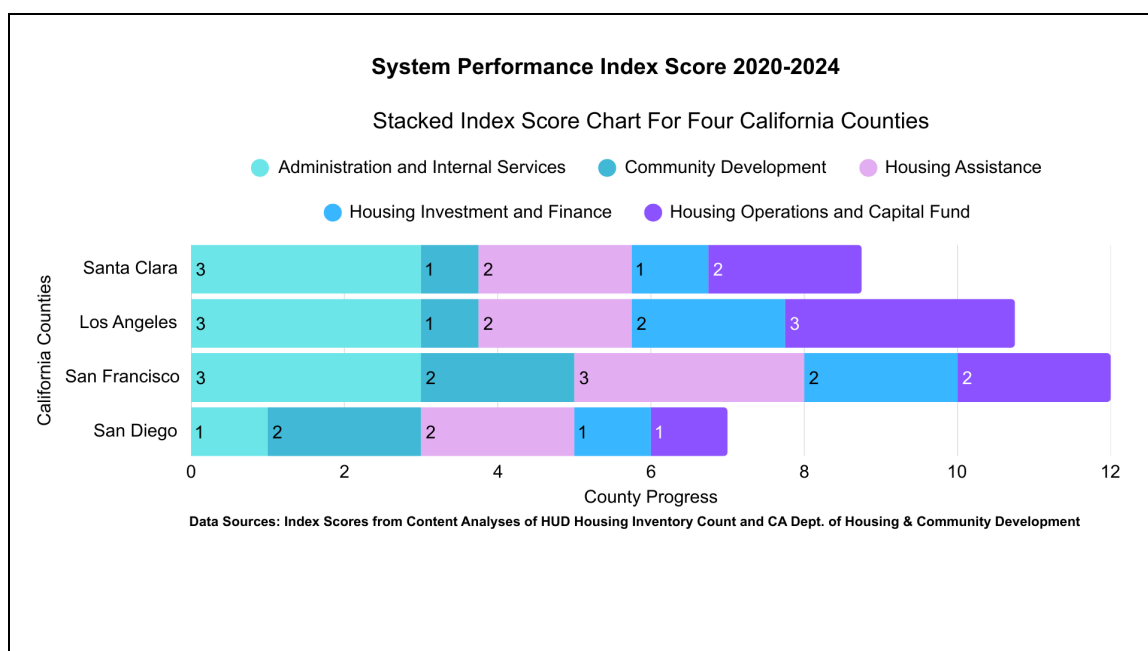
One of the control variables within this study is a geographic factor, population density per county. This may heavily influence the relationship between the percentage of homelessness rates because counties who have lower rates of homelessness may be a result of smaller population numbers and not necessarily due to any intervention of state-level initiatives. To address this, I only placed my focus of analysis on the four counties that are labeled as APC's, that already have sufficient visible data on their level of administrative capacity and whom are classified as large populated counties. The increase in homelessness rates in these counties are also prevalent compared to other counties. Another control variable is an economic factor, median household income. Varying from county to county may influence homelessness rates, housing affordability is scarce within the counties listed, placing more individuals at risk of becoming homeless. Another control variable that I need to mention, is the data not reported in the year 2021, the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic has made it difficult to provide an accurate number of those who are mentally ill and chronically homeless. Looking through the data from 2021 per county, there is only an approximate number of sheltered homelessness rates, which is

not the number I need for this research project. To address this issue, I will make sure to draw a dashed line across the year 2021, and proceed with the annual reports that have sufficient information to assist in testing my hypotheses.

To measure my independent variable, a multidimensional System Performance Index will be displayed, using data from HUD SPMs, HIC, CoC funding reports, NPLH awards, county homelessness budgets, and county-level supportive-housing reports. Indicators were normalized to a 0–100 scale, converted to z-scores, and categorized into terciles (1–3) to provide domain-level capacity scores that are later logged to a stacked bar chart. This index serves as the basis for correlational analysis linking administrative capacity to program implementation and homelessness outcomes. In addition to this, I plan to organize a line chart visualizing average completed NPLH units and projected units to highlight any significant implementation gap across the four counties measured.

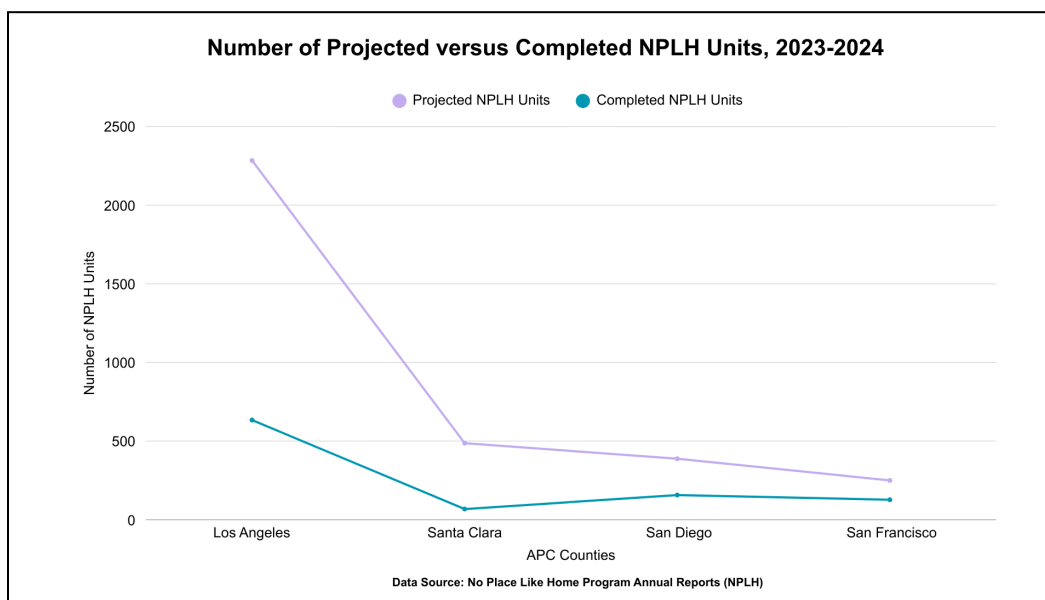
To measure my dependent variable I will construct a year to year percentage bar chart examining the percentage changes among California sub-populations (chronic homelessness, severe mental illness, chronic substance users), in which I will collect the exact rates of each population and calculate its mean average per year. This bar chart is presented to illustrate the progress of the state's efforts in decreasing homelessness outcomes based on the subpopulations that the NPLH program is attempting to assist.

RESULTS

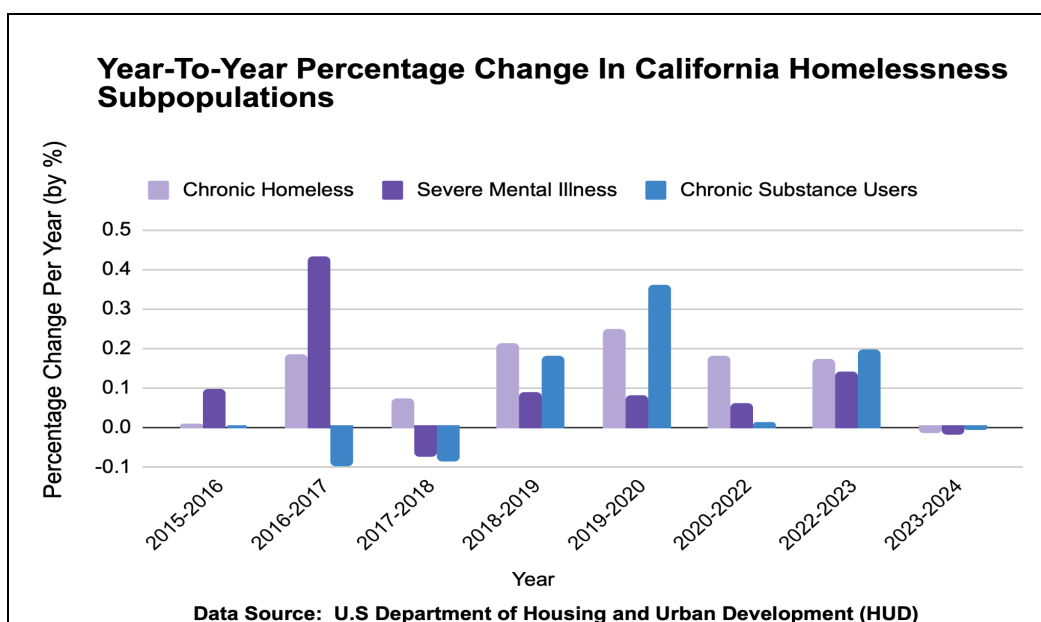


The following stacked bar chart illustrates substantial variation in system performance across the four counties, revealing the uneven administrative and operational capacity that underpins homelessness program implementation in California. Each county was given a score from (0-3) for each of the five categories based on calculated standardized z-scores, where further data derives from HUD System Performance Measures (SPMs) and Continuum of Care (CoC) annual funding reports. With these z-scores, higher values represent higher capacity. The lowest score a county may receive is five and the highest score is fifteen. Collectively, these common patterns reinforce the central argument of this research; disparities in administrative capacity shape each county's ability to effectively implement homelessness initiatives, influencing both the pace of project delivery and the outcomes experienced by local homeless populations. Lower scores appear to be more common in the following categories; Housing Investment and Finance and Community Development. San Diego displays limited capacity, illustrating the lowest cumulative index score where low ratings in administration and housing operations are critical for managing complex, multi-year housing projects, which helps explain

the data on the next following figure, displaying its slower progress in translating NPLH funding into completed units.



The line chart presents the average mean number of projected NPLH units versus completed units/projects, observing the progress of each county from 2023-2024. Across all four California counties, projected NPLH unit counts significantly exceed completed units, which gives an indicator of systemic delays or barriers in the housing development processes. The gap between the count of projections and completion projects shows that the development timeline is longer and more expensive than the initial NPLH guidance had assumed. Los Angeles has projected the largest number of units, however, it has only completed a small fraction of its planned development within the NPLH program. Santa Clara observes one of the largest proportional shortfalls, roughly completing 12% of its projection. Completion percentage rates ranged from 28% to 48%. There is a significant gap observed throughout the year regarding the completion of housing projects. Large implementation gaps are consistent. Overall, even with substantial state funding, counties vary widely in their ability to convert planned projects into operational units.



The bar chart oversees year to year percentage changes for every year starting from 2015 and ending in 2024, only the average percentage rates are presented. Three subpopulations are observed throughout including; chronic homelessness, homelessness peoples with severe mental illness, and chronic substance users. The largest percentage increase overall (+0.43%) observed was severe mental illness rates (SMI) from 2016-17, where this dramatic rise may have signaled insufficient mental health services served prior to the NPLH program implementation. Significant increase in chronic substance users being in 2019-2020 (+0.35%), reflecting gaps in treatment service capacities. Post-pandemic increase in homelessness rates reappeared in 2021-2023, where the role of temporary COVID-19 era programs were temporarily sustaining progress in ameliorating the homelessness crisis. In terms of any noticeable declines of homelessness outcomes, there are minor declines in years 2023-2024, however these decreases are not as significant or sustained. Based on the common upward and downward trends through all the three subpopulations, confirms the instability on homelessness outcomes in California.

IMPLICATIONS AND FINDINGS

The research question posed was how has variation in administrative capacity among California counties affected the implementation and outcomes of state-funded homelessness initiatives, such as Proposition 2 (No Place Like Home Program)? The final findings of this study provide partial but meaningful support for the conceptual hypothesis; that counties with higher administrative capacity levels would implement Proposition 2 more effectively. This effectiveness would be reflected through higher percentages of completed NPLH units rather than projected, and significant declining trends in chronic and severe mental illness homelessness rates.

The results found within my research findings have been generally aligned with these expectations. Counties that scored higher on the System Performance Index chart, such as San Francisco and Los Angeles, demonstrated stronger implementation outcomes and smaller gaps between projected and completed NPLH units. These counties also exhibited more stable year-to-year homelessness trends relative to Santa Clara and San Diego, suggesting that administrative capacity contributes to greater system stability and more consistent policy implementation. However, grouping the collective observations overall, my hypothesis was only partially supported. The reason for this is that even the highest-capacity counties fell far short of their projected housing production, and alongside that, chronic and SMI homelessness did not decline as sharply or consistently as anticipated.

An unexpected key takeaway that I do want to note is the fact that no county, regardless of their capacity levels, came close to meeting its projected/expected NPLH project goals for each year. This suggests that structural barriers outside the scope of administrative capacity, such as lengthy application processes, housing construction delays, and high development costs, may exert a more significant influence on outcomes than originally assumed. In addition, regional

housing markets and economic pressures likely constrained local implementation capacity even when administrative systems functioned well. Another surprising finding is the consistent rise in homelessness trends, even in counties that are labeled with high administrative capacity. This indicates that supportive housing alone cannot overcome factors including rising rents, behavioral health system limitations, and inadequate prevention infrastructure.

Counties that have lower administrative scores still perform relatively well in other domains shown within the system performance chart, such as mental health service priority and delivery, even if they are shown to struggle with housing production. In a similar way, some counties that have strong administrative scores may face structural disadvantages, such as high housing costs, that limit their ability to translate capacity into outcomes. To address one of the confounding issues, the COVID-19 pandemic also may have introduced disruptions in both homelessness trends and housing development timelines, a complicated interference that explains the missing data numbers from 2021 in HUD's database.

With this, the findings offer important policy implications. The state should pair financial investment with targeted support to strengthen local administrative systems, including data coordination, project management, and interagency collaboration. Counties must integrate behavioral health expansion with housing initiatives, as the population targeted by NPLH requires long-term clinical and recovery support for those suffering with severe mental illness and chronic substance use. As a suggestion, state agencies should improve monitoring and evaluation systems to consistently track outcomes, ensuring accountability over time to the public database.

Overall, these findings demonstrate that a county's administrative capacity should be widely considered when observing measurable progress after a policy implementation. With this,

one can imply that the success of statewide homelessness initiatives heavily depends on both capable local governance and the removal of systemic barriers that obstruct the development of permanent supportive housing. Strengthening both domains will be essential for California to achieve meaningful progress in addressing the homelessness crisis.

LIMITATIONS & RESEARCH EXTENSIONS

After compiling and finalizing my research findings, there were a few areas for improvement and limitations that may have affected the results of my research project. One of the limitations for this, was that for some of the websites, counties have not publicly shared their data based on the indicators I was hoping to measure and observe. Official summary reports that would help to evaluate a county's progress were unavailable most of the time. To address this limitation, I had to move on to another indicator where data was available in order to complete my system performance index score chart.

Reflecting back on this research project, I have come to realize that increasing my sample size (number of counties) would have shown more detailed observations and have additional data to work with. If I have included all 58 California counties within my research I might have collected other common trends to report within my findings. Further findings would have displayed an extensive evaluation of each county, carefully analyzing the categories in which it may need work. However, for the time being, only a small n study was conducted for four counties.

In order to fully confirm if there was a significant relationship between homelessness outcomes and a county's administrative capacity, I could have also included a statistical test, a Pearson's r correlation test, where it would measure the fiscal years of 2020-2024. More data

would have been available for me to work with and have included another visual model to assist with my conceptual hypothesis.

For my system performance index scores, I was only able to evaluate five distinct domains, in which for future research purposes can continue to measure other domains that may also have a significant impact on a county's administrative capacity. Expanding on other indicators may dramatically shift the scores presented on the system performance chart. Population density, median household income, and racial/ethnic composition are some of the control variables that I also could have included within this research as they all hold a vital role in shaping the outcome of homelessness rates in each county.

CONCLUSION

California's homelessness initiatives may not produce success in decreasing the homelessness crisis on funding alone. This study demonstrates that administrative capacity shapes whether counties can translate state investments into completed housing units and measurable reductions in chronic and SMI homelessness rates. Strengthening local administrative systems through improved coordination, housing development processes, and accountability structures, appears to be essential and necessary factors towards achieving long-term measurable progress.

Addressing homelessness requires a complex commitment, both sustained budget allocations and strong local administrative capacity to effectively execute the implementation of policies. Advancing accessible affordable housing, prioritizing mental and behavioral health services, and informing residents regarding available programs and resources are pivotal steps to significantly decreasing California's homelessness crisis. Counties should be committed to further improving the accessibility of their programs and support their residents on navigating

complex service systems. The findings of this research highlight the importance of local governance structures, and transforming policy intent into measurable progress that better the conditions of the most vulnerable populations.

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