

Discontent, Demands, and Dehumanization:  
Housed Residents' Relationship to Homelessness in a Liberal City

Lindsey Renee Beach

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Reading Committee:  
Katherine Beckett, Chair  
Kyle Crowder  
Magda Boutros  
Karen Snedker

Program Authorized to Offer Degree:

Department of Sociology

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Lindsey Renee Beach

University of Washington

**Abstract**

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Chair of Supervisory Committee:

Katherine Beckett

Department of Sociology

Housed residents play an important, yet overlooked, role in the social control of homelessness in U.S. cities. Their complaints can instigate police contacts with people experiencing homelessness, encampment sweeps, and shape city budgets. However, little research explores the content of resident complaints, how they understand the problem of homelessness, and the requests they make of the government. Addressing this gap in the literature, I leverage naturally-occurring data to describe the complaints, understandings, and demands housed residents make to a liberal city government—illuminating aspects of the social control pathway linking homeless individuals with the state. I qualitatively analyze 10,588 complaint reports and 151 public comments about homelessness made by Seattle housed residents over a four-year period. I find that housed residents complain most frequently about physical disorder, incivilities, obstructions, and threats to innocent others (children and the environment). Additionally, residents understand homelessness as a problem of public safety and order, structural failures, governance failures,

and as a set of issues that most negatively impact people experiencing homelessness. Residents also demand a variety of responses—direct relief, structural responses, and formal social control, among others. These findings suggest that housed residents have heterogeneous ideas about homelessness, and while many complain about and demand the removal of homeless people in public spaces, many others express frustration with the city’s treatment of unhoused people. To conclude, I discuss how this project relates to social-psychological processes of dehumanization, racialized understandings of property and personhood, as well as the political possibilities that arise from better understanding housed residents’ perspectives on homelessness.

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## **Chapter 1. Introduction**

What if sociologists told stories in reverse? If we undertook the task of reconstructing the world based on the sociological analyses that document it? Would the story include all the important characters? Who would share the spotlight, drive the plot, fade into the background?

In some respects, it would be unfair and counterproductive to ask sociology to recreate the social world as is. The job of curious social scientists is to explore the important, the peculiar, and the necessary to better understand how the world works, and, in our best moments, illuminate how it can change to free more people. But it is also essential to ask who is missing from our analytic stories, as they may hold unseen forms of power or advance the action in important ways.

This project is about housed residents and the poverty governance of homelessness in a major U.S. city. If we were to tell the story of urban homelessness in reverse, based on the sociological literature from the last 50 years, several key actors would drive the narrative. People experiencing homelessness would share equal stage time with social service providers and police officers. The story would explore the reasons people lose their housing in the first place and document how society generates and reacts to undulating waves of homelessness over the decades. It would describe how professionals have approached homelessness as a pathology, crime, or an unlucky break they can cure, manage, or avoid. The final act would likely focus on the people experiencing homelessness, not as anthropological curiosities, but as humans deeply harmed by society's arrangements and choices that leave them unhoused, administrated, and ignored.

The actors—unhoused people and the professionals tasked with overseeing them—are essential to telling the story of urban poverty governance. But our cities are not only composed of shelters, jails, unsanctioned encampments, blocked sidewalks, move-along orders, or intensive case management meetings. They also include homes, businesses, parks, open spaces, and community facilities. Millions of people live in houses and apartments, sharing the city with those who live on the streets, in shelters, and in transitional housing. Housed residents see people asking for spare change next to freeway on-ramps; walk around littered sidewalks; feel pangs of sadness, dismay, and outrage at their neighbors' living conditions; and report visible homelessness to the government so they will do something about it. Cities can become zones of encounter, where people from different classes and housing statuses meet each other, negotiate space, and participate in urban poverty governance (Lawson and Elwood 2014). Many housed residents living in cities with large unhoused populations interface with people experiencing homelessness and their belongings on a regular basis, but their complaints, understandings, and desires go largely unexplored by social scientists. Stories about urban homelessness largely omit the housed residents.

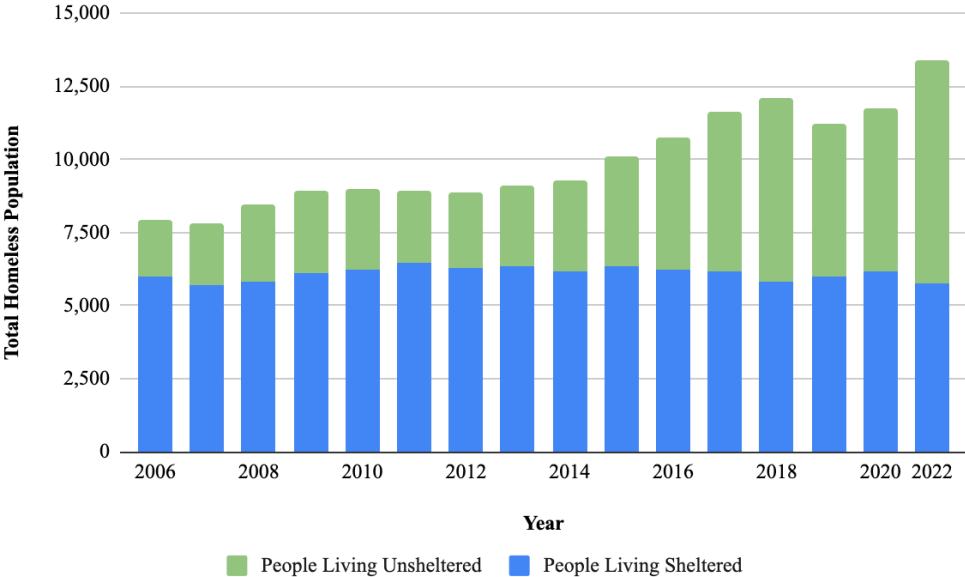
The gap in knowledge is wide and concerning. Criminologists, political scientists, and sociologists research other top political issues, such as perceived increases in crime (Ambrey, Fleming, Manning 2014; Hipp 2013), and argue that public attitudes about crime can incentivize politicians to develop or continue punitive public policies (Enns 2014; Garland 2012; Weaver 2007; Beckett 1999). This project seeks to address this gap by exploring how housed residents understand homelessness. What issues and situations do they find concerning? How do they understand homelessness as a social problem? What do they want the government to do in response? These questions go largely unanswered in previous literature. Additionally, new

evidence and scholarship suggests that housed residents play a central role in the poverty governance of homelessness, generating public discourse, focusing government attention, and demanding material responses. In this project, I seek to build on this work by contextualizing and detailing residents' thinking about homelessness and their demands of local government. I locate this project in Seattle, a city where a growing unhoused homeless community lives alongside politically liberal housed residents.

## HOMELESSNESS IN SEATTLE

Seattle is an appropriate site to explore select public discourses about homelessness in a liberal city. Seattle has a notably large population of homeless people that has steadily grown over the last decade (All Home 2020; see Figure 1 below). Between 2006 and 2020, the total homeless population increased in Seattle by almost 45 percent, from approximately 8,000 people in 2006 to roughly 12,000 people in 2020 (U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development 2021). Per capita, Seattle has the third largest homeless population of major U.S. cities, trailing New York, and San Francisco respectively (U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development 2023:20). However, the homeless population has remained relatively stable during the period explored in this analysis. Between 2017 and 2020, the average total homeless population in Seattle was 11,676 people. There is also a counted increase of 1,617 people experiencing homelessness between 2020 and 2022, suggesting that the homeless population grew due to the Covid-19 pandemic and related structural issues.

**Figure 1.** Seattle Point-in-Time Homeless Count, 2006-2022<sup>1</sup>



*Unsheltered Homelessness*

While the size of the homeless population has been relatively stable for the last several years, recent research suggests that visible homelessness (i.e. unsheltered homelessness) has increased much more significantly during the Covid pandemic (research by K. Snedker, covered by Greenstone 2021). The reasons for the increase have yet to be identified, but one possible cause is the de-concentration of congregant homeless shelters: “Between March and November 2020, the numbers in the county homelessness database of families and individuals enrolled in shelter dropped by roughly 1,400” (Greenstone 2021). Between 2017 and 2022 unsheltered homelessness increased from 47 percent to 57 percent of the total counted homeless population in the city. From a more historical vantage point, the proportion of homeless people living

<sup>1</sup>No Point-in-Time Count was conducted in 2021 due to the COVID-19 pandemic and a federal exemption. Data come from the linked sources found here ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Homelessness\\_in\\_Seattle](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Homelessness_in_Seattle)) and the King County Regional Homelessness Authority’s 2022 Point-in-Time Count (<https://kcrha.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/PIT-2022-Infograph-v7.pdf>).

unsheltered in Seattle has more than doubled, from 25 percent in 2006 to 57 percent in 2022. The size of the unsheltered homelessness population is important because these are the individuals housed residents are most likely to see on a daily basis. Unsheltered homelessness is highly visible, and as a result, housed residents' understandings and responses to homelessness are likely disproportionately influenced by this specific group.

Unsheltered homeless people in Seattle—those who live in tents, parks, and cars<sup>2</sup>—have a unique demographic profile that differs from sheltered homeless people and Seattle's housed residents. As of 2020 (the last year detailed Point in Time Count data is publicly available), 5,578 people were living unsheltered in King County; 67 percent of this unsheltered group live in Seattle (All Home 2020:22). The unsheltered homeless population is 52 percent white and 27 percent American Indian/Alaskan Native. Almost all American Indian/Alaskan Native people experiencing homelessness in Seattle live unsheltered (87%, n=1,529) (All Home 2020:91); this group comprises 1 percent of the total King County population.<sup>3</sup> Homeless women, families with children, and Black adults are more likely to be sheltered than unsheltered.

Some of the most vulnerable segments of the homeless population are also much more likely to be unsheltered. Thirty five percent of unsheltered homeless people are also categorized as chronically homeless,<sup>4</sup> which includes people who have long periods of homelessness and have been diagnosed with substance use disorder, serious mental illness, and/or disability (All

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<sup>2</sup>Unsheltered homelessness is defined as: “Any individual living in a place not meant for human habitation and not in a shelter, transitional housing unit, or safe haven. This includes, but is not limited to, individuals sleeping on the street, public transit, in an unsanctioned encampment, or a vehicle” (All Home 2020:115).

<sup>3</sup><https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/seattlecitywashington,kingcountywashington/INC110222>

<sup>4</sup>HUD Definition of Chronically Homeless: An individual or family who is homeless and resides in a place not meant for human habitation, a safe haven, or in an emergency shelter, and who has been homeless and residing in such a place for at least 1 year or on at least four separate occasions in the last 3 years. The statutory definition also requires that the individual or family has a head of household with a diagnosable substance use disorder, serious mental illness, developmental disability, posttraumatic stress disorder, cognitive impairment resulting from a brain injury, or chronic physical illness or disability. (Federal Register, 2015 - Rules and Regulation)

Home 2020:91). Sixty nine percent of homeless adults fleeing domestic violence (n=167) and 86 percent of homeless adults with HIV/AIDs (n=837) live outside (All Home 2020:98).

Additionally, 77 percent of homeless adults diagnosed with a serious mental illness (n=3,124) and 77 percent of homeless adults diagnosed with substance abuse disorder (n=2,9000) are unsheltered.

Both unsheltered and sheltered Seattle homeless people report relatively the same reasons for becoming homeless; a notable difference between the two groups is that 14 percent of unsheltered people reported alcohol or drug use as being a cause, compared to 7 percent of sheltered people (All Home 2020:100). After becoming homeless, 57 percent of unsheltered people self-report having a psychiatric or emotional condition, 51 percent having PTSD, and 52 percent having drug and alcohol abuse (compared to 51 percent, 42 percent, and 31 percent of the sheltered population, respectively) (All Home 2020:101). Unsheltered individuals are also more likely to report negative life impacts<sup>5</sup> related to psychiatric and emotional conditions, drug and alcohol abuse, intellectual disability, traumatic brain injury, and HIV/AIDs (All Home 2020:102). They also use services less frequently than their sheltered counterparts; 14 percent report using no services at all (All Home 2020:103).

Unsheltered homeless Seattleites differ significantly from those who are sheltered: they experience more significant impairment from health issues like substance abuse disorder, serious mental illness, and disability. They also have more trauma-related issues (like fleeing domestic violence situations or having PTSD). They are also more likely to be male and Native, two demographic groups that invoke fear (Kinsella 2012) and images of alcoholism (Kingfisher 2007). The homeless people housed residents are most likely to see are dealing with complex

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<sup>5</sup>Ability to hold a job, live in stable housing, and take care of themselves

problems, accessing fewer services, and possibly confirming stereotypes about homeless people more generally. Additionally, because serious mental illness and substance abuse disorders can cause people to behave unpredictably in public, unsheltered homeless people may act in ways that are very different and unfamiliar to housed residents.

### *Local Responses to Homelessness*

Local government officials have addressed homelessness in several different ways in the recent past. In the 1980s and 1990s, Seattle officials leveraged federal funding to develop emergency services, chemical dependency programs, and transitional housing efforts (Seattle Municipal Records 2024b). During the same time, the city increased the criminalization of homelessness by passing ordinances against aggressive begging; closing spaces under overpasses and bridges; making public urination, defecation, and liquor consumption illegal; and passing a sit-lie ordinance that made it a criminal offense to sit or lie on downtown sidewalks between 9:00am and 7:00pm (Seattle Municipal Records 2024b). The city also systematically removing problem populations from public space through park exclusion laws (Beckett and Herbert 2009)

More recently, Seattle officials have worked with other local governments, non-profit organizations, service providers, and housing authorities on regional efforts to address homelessness. In 2005, the Committee to End Homelessness in King County launched the Ten-Year Plan to End Homelessness, Mayor Murry declared homelessness a civil emergency in 2015, and in 2019 the regional efforts morphed into a new entity called the King County Regional Homelessness Authority. After local pressure and homeless-led activism, the city also passed legislation to authorize encampment stays on approved church, non-profit, and city properties (Seattle Municipal Archives 2024b). Since 2015, unauthorized encampments have also received

increasing scrutiny and are frequently removed by teams composed of Seattle public works employees, outreach workers, and Seattle police officers (Baker 2016). City government spending on homelessness is significant. A total of \$94.9 million dollars, or 90 percent of the Housing and Human Services budget was allocated to issues related to homelessness.<sup>6</sup>

In addition to Seattle's homeless population and government responses, the city itself presents a unique and interesting context for this work. Most voters in the city vote with the Democratic party in presidential elections,<sup>7</sup> most people living in Seattle identify as white (U.S. Census 2021), and many residents are highly educated (U.S. Census 2021). Seattle also has a national reputation for liberal politics (Balk 2020), with some local officials supporting progressive innovations to the criminal legal system (Choose180 2022; Stuart and Beckett 2021; Public Defender Association 2019). Additionally, there are stark income inequalities between new and legacy residents (Prosperity Now 2021), housing prices are out of reach for many families (Klachkin, Stillo, and Davenport 2021), and job growth is outpacing available housing (DiRaimo 2021). Like many major U.S. cities, Seattle presented a complicated image of liberal ideology, tight housing markets, and high rates of homelessness.

Even though Seattle is unique in some ways, Seattle's housed residents likely relate to the city in ways familiar to scholars of urban governance. City residents are centrally concerned about being able to use their neighborhoods and defending them from threats (Logan and Molotch 1987:99). Neighborhoods are the place where people's affective experience and structural environment combine to "[generate] the actual events of daily life" (Storper and Walker 1983:27). People want to feel safe and happy in their neighborhood and be able to freely access it; in addition, homeowners want to maintain or increase the exchange value of their

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<sup>6</sup><https://www.seattle.gov/Documents/Departments/FinanceDepartment/20proposedbudget/HSD.pdf>

<sup>7</sup><https://kingcounty.gov/depts/elections/elections/past-elections.aspx>

housing investment (Logan and Molotch 1986). Residents' may view the disorder associated with homelessness as a threat to the use value of their neighborhood and exchange value of their home, resulting in higher levels of political participation and mobilization (Michener 2013; Bateson 2012). Residents also look to the government to reduce these fears, seeing it as a "political process through government provision of public safety, sanitation, and social services to manage disorder" (Brown and Zoorbo 2022:682).

## HOMELESSNESS AS A SOCIAL PROBLEM

What kind of problem is homelessness? Regardless of political orientation, social position, or ideological convictions, most people agree that homelessness is a problem and we should take action to address it. In major cities along the U.S. West Coast, homelessness is a top political and social issue demanding increasing attention from politicians, activists, local media, and housed residents. The number of unsheltered and visible homeless people has risen in Seattle (Patrick 2023), Portland (Mulder 2019), and Los Angeles (Ward, Garvey, and Hunter 2022) over the last several years. With public health concerns about the spread of Covid-19 in congregate overnight shelters and the rising cost of housing, experts argue that visible homelessness has grown at an unprecedented rate in the last three years (Multnomah County 2022; Tobias 2022; Brownstone 2021).

The political and social urgency in West Coast cities is acute. Contentious public hearings showcase people's outrage at the perceived government failure (Horcher 2018), blistering social media accounts document the disordered conditions of unsanctioned encampments,<sup>8</sup> and activists organize blockades to disrupt the removal of these camps (Bowman

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<sup>8</sup><https://www.instagram.com/seattle.looks.like.shxt/?hl=en>

2022). Historians note that public concern about homelessness has waxed and waned over the centuries (Ensign 2021; Goluboff 2016; Bogard 2001). In 1889, twenty Seattle property owners petitioned the city to remove “shanties” because the “untidy appearance of said shanties greatly depreciates the rental value and use of the property and buildings” (Seattle Municipal Archive 2024a). Residents petitioned the city to remove Hoovervilles in the 1930s and 1940s, asked the city to enforce anti-vagrancy and loitering laws in the 1960s, and have passed five levies to fund affordable housing from the 1980s on (City of Seattle 2024; Seattle Municipal Archives 2024b). While some of the complaints about visible homelessness morph to the material and social conditions of the day, the underlying concerns remain the same: homelessness negatively impacts the city, government response is inadequate, and homeless people should be helped.

The way concerns are communicated and packaged can vary widely, although there are consistent threads connecting them across time periods. Does homelessness negatively impact the city because it makes commerce more difficult for local business owners, prevents housed residents from accessing public space, and dissuades tourists from visiting? Or is the negative impact caused by punitive responses to homelessness, reactions such as the unnecessary shuttering of public bathrooms or the persistent visible reminder that our society allows deep inequality to metastasize into unsheltered homelessness and the premature death of those who experience it?

This strong response is understandable, as many people also have strong reactions to visible homelessness and poverty. Americans respond more negatively to visible forms of poverty than to other historically marginalized traits like race or gender (Blau 1993). Additionally, Clifford and Piston’s work (2017) emphasizes the role of people’s “behavioral immune systems” that implicitly associates homeless people with “pathogens,” sickness, and

contamination. This disgust response leads people to want to physically distance themselves from homeless individuals out of fear of “infection.” However, Clifford and Piston also find that these same individuals still support giving these individuals help and aid (2017:520). Finally, people may have a fear response to the visible presence of homeless encampments or unhoused people due to concerns about lawlessness, abandonment, or unpredictable behavior (Goldfischer 2020; Kinsella 2012).

Housed residents are voicing many complaints to city governments. Researchers have documented the impact of their demands on housing and zoning policy (Einstein, Glick, Palmer 2020), the allocation and location of shelters (Gibson 2005; Oakley 2002), quality-of-life policing strategies (Hanhardt 2016; Vitale 2008), and the removal of homeless people from public spaces (Herring 2021; Herring 2019b) via trespass ordinances (Beckett and Herbert 2009) and innovative public safety interventions (Stuart and Beckett 2021). The political concerns of these activated citizens, along with their willingness to lobby and petition their government for change, demonstrate the importance of the issue to many housed people. While homelessness is commonly listed as a top political concern in public surveys and demands significant political attention at the local level, very little work has systematically explored housed residents’ understandings of homelessness.

## RESIDENTS AS AGENTS OF SOCIAL CONTROL

Sociologically, individuals who contact the government with their concerns are important to the social control process because they make officials aware of “deviance” in a target population. Citizen notification is one of two ways the state can become aware of legal and social problems—a “reactive mobilization process” (Black 1973:128), making it a major artery for

social control responses. Cohen defines social control as “the organized ways in which society responds to behavior and people it regards as deviant, problematic, worrying, threatening, troublesome, or undesirable in some way or another” (1985:1). While social control and criminological research largely focuses on target populations and state-sanctioned enforcers, recent scholarship (Beck 2020; Herring 2019b; Lanfear, Beach, and Thomas 2018; Desmond and Valdez 2012) and activism highlight the importance of studying and thinking about the people who *initiate* this formal social control.

Broadly, this third group may consist of residents who notify the police about suspicious behavior, neighborhood groups that lobby local government to address disorder, people who have experienced a crime, or exasperated constituents. For example, a local resident may see someone setting up a tent in a nearby abandoned lot. Concerned, they report the situation to the city through the Find It, Fix It phone application and tell their neighbors to make additional reports to increase the urgency. City officials then become aware of the unauthorized camping and may send out a police officer to check the area. Without the notification of the residents, the city and the police may never have become aware of the situation.

Because this group of residents mediates contact between target populations and enforcers, scholarship on their motivations, tactics, and impact can further illuminate the dynamics of urban poverty governance and social control. These individuals play a vital yet undertheorized role in the social control of “problem populations” and in the relationship between the truly advantaged and disadvantaged (Desmond and Western 2018). Resident complaints about homelessness have been increasing. Herring (2019b:778) states that between 2013 and 2017, San Francisco residents’ complaints about homelessness increased by 781 percent, going from 201 to 1,514 reports per week. Seattle residents’ reports have also

skyrocketed in the recent past. In January 2012 the City of Seattle’s Customer Service Bureau received 8 reports of “unauthorized camping”; in January 2019 they received 1,320 “unauthorized camping” complaints, an exponential increase. Corinth and Finely find that, in New York City, people make reports in areas that are “less poor, more white, more expensive, and generally more affluent” than the average neighborhood (2020:634); Goldfischer finds similarly neighborhood with the highest level of complaints are in the most heavily gentrified areas of the city (2020:1560). Oron (2023) finds similar patterning in his map of Seattle unauthorized camping reports—the bulk of complaints were made downtown and in the relatively affluent north end of the city (Balk 2023).

For individuals experiencing homelessness, complaints often result in criminalization, displacement, and property loss leading to a profound sense of social ostracism and instability. Previous scholarship suggests that the volume of complaints does incentivize local governments to remove encampments more quickly (Herring 2019b), causes government official to think about concentrated areas of visible homelessness through the criminological framing of “hotspots” (Goldfischer 2020), and reinforces city leaders’ desire to maintain a “visual landscape conducive to middle-class consumption and leisure” (Speer 2019:575).

Complaints about homelessness can perpetuate cyclical social control processes, as much of urban poverty management is about the shuffling of “bodies in spaces” (Seim 2017). For centuries poor, untethered people have caused communities to shuffle the cost burden of their care (Garland 1985; Rothman 1980; Scull 1977) and criminalize their presence (Beckett and Herbert 2009; Beckett and Herbert 2008; Chambliss 1964). Police officers often do the shuffling (Neocleous 2021; Beckett and Herbert 2009). Homeless people are frequently

identified as a symbol of “social disorder” in broken windows theory,<sup>9</sup> and Beck and Goldstein (2018) argue that postmodern policing practices target neighborhood disorder to protect housing values in housing-market-reliant cities. This shuffling underlines the disposability of homeless people in gentrified urban spaces: “viewed merely as blemishes on an otherwise attractive landscape homeless people are not ascribed the status of moral beings or legal subjects; they are unsightly trash to be removed, objects with limited aesthetic value” (Walby and Lipper 2012:1029).

During these interactions, police often issue move-along orders, threaten citations to coerce compliance, or banish people from returning to a location for an extended period (Beckett and Herbert 2009); Herring and his coauthors (2020; quoted in Herring 2019a:774) describe these forms of policing as pervasive penalty, or “a punitive process of police interactions that fall short of arrest and are pervasive in both their frequency and lingering impact.” The aim of both police and homeless folks is to shuffle in such a way that housed neighbors won’t complain. Homeless people share knowledge amongst themselves about inconspicuous spots to stay and regulate the size of their encampments to avoid detection (Speer and Goldfischer 2020; Herring 2019b; Gowan 2010). Police often acknowledge the futility of their move-along requests and suggest alternative, less intrusive locations for homeless people to relocate (Herring 2019b).

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<sup>9</sup>Kelling and Wilson’s original 1982 Atlantic article, titled “Broken Windows: The Police and Neighborhood Safety,” introduces the association between homelessness and disorder: “This wish to “decriminalize” disreputable behavior that “harms no one”- and thus remove the ultimate sanction the police can employ to maintain neighborhood order—is, we think, a mistake. Arresting a single drunk or a single vagrant who has harmed no identifiable person seems unjust, and in a sense it is. But failing to do anything about a score of drunks or a hundred vagrants may destroy an entire community. A particular rule that seems to make sense in the individual case makes no sense when it is made a universal rule and applied to all cases. It makes no sense because it fails to take into account the connection between one broken window left untended and a thousand broken windows. Of course, agencies other than the police could attend to the problems posed by drunks or the mentally ill, but in most communities especially where the “deinstitutionalization” movement has been strong—they do not” (Kelling and Wilson 1982).

## PROJECT DESCRIPTION

Residents are concerned about homelessness and play a central role in urban poverty governance. Increasing complaints about homelessness shape the distribution of cities' financial resources and social control interventions. Despite the clear importance of this group, very little research explores housed residents' thinking and reactions to homelessness. It is possible that this gap exists because the problem of homelessness is not considered from a relational perspective. Scholars who adopt a relational perspective of poverty emphasize that poverty results from unbalanced power and unequal relationships. While this may feel intuitive, relational poverty frameworks focus less on material affluence or deprivation and emphasize the relational dynamics that facilitate and maintain these outcomes: landlord/tenants (Blomley et al. 2023; Desmond and Valdez 2012), police/suspects (Tyler, Jackson, and Mentovich 2015; Dunham et al. 2005), shelter supervisor/unhoused guest (Willse 2010; Lyon-Callo 2004). Housed Residents are often assumed to be inconsequential in the poverty relationships that undergird homelessness. Scholars often focus their analysis on agents of social control, non-profit workers, or government officials with decision making power. However, local housed residents facilitate and maintain relationships of poverty when they report a person sleeping in a storefront or speak out against a tax increase slated to increase the affordable housing stock. While housed residents may not be perceived as simply being subjected to the social disorder of homelessness, sporadic work on citizen complaints, political activism, and collective efficacy suggests that they play a major, overlooked role in shaping the social control of urban homelessness.

This project is motivated by a desire to better understand how housed residents in Seattle understand homelessness as a social problem. I am particularly interested in how housed residents interface with the local city government to activate the social control process. What

issues and situations do they complain about? How do they understand the city's homelessness problem? What do they ask the government to do about it? These questions shape my project.

While there are many ways to approach these topics, in this project I focus on the concerns, complaints, and claims raised by these groups to the city government. To understand resident perspectives, I leverage data from city council public comment periods and anonymous requests for service (311 reports). These data record instances when residents contact the government about homelessness. Additionally, these data are behavioral rather than hypothetical (i.e. vignette studies) or attitudinal (i.e. focus groups or survey studies), providing a window into how residents interface with government. Public comments require residents to clearly articulate their grievance and request to the government. These detailed comments are rich and lend themselves to qualitative analysis. Similarly, the requests for service are behavioral measures of complaint; they document the issues and situations related to homelessness residents believe to be problematic or concerning. I use frame analysis and a mixed methods approach (open coding and the bag of words model) to identify themes within the data.

In my literature review I summarize different ways people understand homelessness: the key complaints about the issue, attributed causes, and intellectual models. I also explore previous literature on what residents want the government to do in response to homelessness, be it provide more services, remove visible homelessness, or enact forms of coercive care. This review paints housed residents as a group with a diverse set of ideas and orientations to homelessness, but also reveals there is little analytic exploration of the topic.

I then turn to complaints about homelessness. Using data from public, anonymous reports of unauthorized camping, I catalog the issues and situations residents notify the government about—*what* do they identify as the problem. Additionally, I explore how residents communicate

urgency and emotion in their reports. Next, I examine 151 residents' public comments about homelessness made during the public comment period of Seattle City Council meetings. I identify the understanding, beliefs, and responsibilities regarding homelessness among housed residents by open coding these comments. After establishing *what* homelessness-related problems residents identify and *how* they understand homelessness as a social problem, I then ask, how do residents *want* the government to respond to homelessness? What demands do housed individuals make of the city and what solutions do they suggest?

In total, this project seeks to fill an important gap in our story of urban homelessness and poverty governance. Housed residents may recede into the background of literature review and analysis on the social control of homelessness, but they are very present in the everyday policing of inequality and are vocal participants in the public-government conversation about homelessness. My work details *what* residents find upsetting about homelessness, *how* they understand a complex and multifaceted social problem, and how they *want* the government to respond. My hope is this work will extend prior research that shows the consequentiality of resident complaints for urban poverty governance. As detailed below, this scholarship demonstrates the impact of a large, persistent volume of complaints on city government responses to homelessness. However, most of this work has left the content, framing, and substance of the concerns systematically unexplored.

This gap in the literature needs to be addressed for a variety of reasons. During debates on impassioned or controversial topics, scholars can be overly reliant on vague impressions of the discourse; this might be even more true if one disagrees with the discourse on factual or moral grounds. However, evaluating the claims, demands, and discourse of active citizens for what they are (rather than what one might assume them to be) is an initial and necessary step

toward recognizing and understanding the logics propelling these efforts. Naming, describing, and dissecting these discourses in a systematic way allows for a deeper understanding of the role these consequential actors play in urban social control.

In total, I examine 10,588 complaint reports and 151 public comments about homelessness made by Seattle housed residents over a four-year period. To the best of my understanding, this project is the largest systematic study of housed residents' thinking and requests about homelessness done to date. This project confirms previous findings and assumptions in the literature, identifies new discoveries that correct and expand our conceptualization of housed residents' relationship to homelessness, and reveals areas of complexity and dissonance that require nimble thinking. Later in the conclusion, I think through this dissonance using findings from social neuroscience research and the concepts of social death and the white spatial imaginary. These approaches—while operating at very different levels of processing and social relations—are helpful to explain why housed people have divergent and contradictory understanding of homelessness. They also provide openings to help us reimagine responses to homelessness that capitalize on housed residents' shared problems and values, while also treating homeless residents with honor and dignity.

## Chapter 2. Literature Review

Studying resident understandings of homelessness in a liberal city is compelling because it is often a mess of crosscutting concerns, frustrations, and passions. Because Seattle—and other major cities experiencing high levels of homelessness like Portland, San Francisco, and Los Angeles—have politically liberal environments, it might seem reasonable to assume resident attitudes about homelessness neatly align with their political context. If one were to imagine stereotypical liberal responses to homelessness, they might envision strong public support for social services; governments that respond to homelessness as a material and public health problem, rather than a criminal one; an expert-driven approach; and an ample pool of resources available to care professionals who guide and support people experiencing homelessness into a new life.

There are important political differences between people who identify as Democrats and Republicans when it comes to homelessness. Democrats show more compassion towards people experiencing homelessness, believe that structural failures are more likely to cause homelessness, and support increased federal funding to address the problem (Tsai et al. 2019:84). Democrats are also more likely to support legislation to expand social services (Laniyonu and Byerly 2021) and Republicans are more likely to support anti-homeless ballot measures (Amaral 2020). But these differences in individual-level political attitudes do not translate cleanly to poverty governance at the municipal level.

Scholars and critical members of the public observe a gap between assumed liberal values and government responses to homelessness (Westneat 2023; After Echo Park Research

Collective 2022; Cline 2022; Lennard 2022; Herring 2019b; Amster 2003<sup>10</sup> ). Liberal political values include reducing the harm of income and wealth inequality through political avenues and redistributive policies (Treier and Hillygus 2009), as well as a sense that the government should support social difference and civil liberties in the urban environment by addressing social problems (Vitale 2008).

Real friction occurs when liberal housed residents expect the government to ameliorate social ills through aid and redistributive policies, but they witness the failures of these policies in public spaces (i.e. highly visible unsheltered homelessness). In this situation, liberal residents turn to the state's punitive right hand to police marginalized groups and to control their presence in the commons (Bloch and Meyer 2019; Murakawa 2014). Scholars also link this punitive and exclusionary response to how white people relate to and image space (Lipsitz 2011), arguing that this form of 'aversive racism' (Dovidio and Gaertner 2004) "is practiced by political and social liberals for whom overt racism is seen as abhorrent and politically conservative" (Bloch and Meyer 2019:1105). In addition to punitive control, liberal governing also relies on citizens to internalize normative expectations of behavior monitor each other's behavior and navigate precarious market conditions on their own (Foucault's notion of governmentality, as discussed in Dean [1999]). This can lead to an environment marked by insecurity and fear, a "political culture of danger" where citizens feel vulnerable to unregulated others and to the unrelenting demands of capitalism (Lorey 2012:37).

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<sup>10</sup>Amster speculates on why this might be: "Though there is no obvious single reason for this trend, some possible explanations include: (1) "liberal" cities have often been viewed by the homeless as more tolerant and welcoming, thereby increasing the number of homeless in such cities; (2) many of these "liberal" cities are in the "new West," where development schemes are fast being implemented, causing immediate spatial conflicts with homeless populations; and (3) "liberalism" as a socioeconomic philosophy entails the growth of corporate hegemony and managerial values, processes that can contribute to homeless exclusion" (2003:215-6).

Scholars also characterize liberal responses to homelessness as inherently contradictory. Willse (2010) argues neoliberal approaches to housing and chronic homelessness are well intentioned but designed to never solve homelessness. Orr et al. (2023) find that liberal context of a city has little influence over the punitive, controlling, or autonomous nature of the sanctioned encampments they host. And Margier (2023) argues that liberal cities employ “compassionate eviction” practices to remove homeless people from public space, a process that relies on outreach workers to offer shelter to encampment residents as the city cleans up the space. These approaches represent poverty governance that intertwine the caring left hand and punitive right hand of the state (Seim 2017; DeVerteuil 2014).

It is possible this hybrid form of homeless governance reflects the understanding and wishes of housed residents. We are left wondering due to the limited scholarship on the subject. Housed Seattle residents likely interface with the issue of homelessness both on a day-to-day basis, by virtue of sharing space with their unhoused neighbors, and on a more theoretical basis, by engaging with media, conservation, and education. Additionally, these experiences likely build upon and interact with previously held assumptions, stereotypes, and knowledge about homelessness. Housed residents may demand responses from local governments, non-profit organizations, and other responsible parties because homelessness is a social problem that requires action. To better understand how housed residents think about homelessness in Seattle, it is important to consider their reactions to sharing space, articulated understandings of the social problem, and demands of the government as separate and related.

Most Seattle’s housed residents do not belong to social movements related to homelessness. However, I believe that social movement concepts and theoretical approaches can be helpful tools for understanding the constitutive components of residents’ thinking about

homelessness in the city. Additionally, while frame analysis is often used by social movement scholars, other work leverages this method to explore the political context of welfare policy (Steensland 2008; Gamson and Lasch 1983) or media discourse and public opinion (Roberts and Steinkopf 2022; Linström and Marais 2012; Gamson and Modigliani 1989). This thinking is analogous to a social movement frame, where activists and actors identify an issue as a social problem; define its boundaries, causes, and consequences; and then offer possible strategies to remedy it. Frame analysis decomposes an understanding of a social problem into two parts: diagnostic frames, where actors define an issue as a problem, and prognostic frames, where they articulate tactics and solutions for resolving the problem.

For housed residents, the process of defining homelessness as a problem may present several points of contradiction. On the one hand, previous scholarship suggests that many residents complain to their local governments about visible homelessness. As I detail in this chapter, studies show these complaints have increased in recent years and suggest that residents find visible homelessness to be unsightly and inconvenient. On the other hand, Americans express sympathy and compassion for people experiencing homelessness, and believe the government should do more to ameliorate it. Personal grievance may sit uncomfortably next to personal morality. Similarly housed residents may face inner conflicts when making demands of the government: should the government focus on addressing their specific grievances or tackle the more intricate issues of homelessness and social conditions that cause it? Do they believe the government has the capacity and resources to address both? I suspect that residents' personal experiences and abstract understandings of homelessness will both inform their definition of homelessness as a social problem and the solutions they demand.

## DIAGNOSTIC FRAMES

The question—what kind of problem is homelessness—is a diagnostic one. Social movements scholars argue that the definition, or diagnosis, of a problem is the first step in the mobilization process (Cress and Snow 2000). Benford and Snow, two prominent social movement scholars who study how people frame and talk about social problems, summarize this process (2000:616):

“Since social movements seek to remedy or alter some problematic situation or issue, it follows that directed action is contingent on identification of the source(s) of causality, blame, and/or culpable agents. This attributional component of diagnostic framing attends to this function by focusing blame or responsibility. However, consensus regarding the source of the problem does not follow automatically from agreement regarding the nature of the problem.”

In short, in the diagnostic framing process people name an issue as a problem and then attribute responsibility for that problem (Snow, Vliegenthart, and Ketelaars 2018). Additionally, identifying who or what is culpable for a social problem is inherently a political act (Zoller and Casteel 2022). Because interconnected and constitutive factors cause many social problems, by focusing on specific components activists can direct attention and suggest solutions (Zoller 2012; Kirkwood and Brown 1995; Tesh 1994). In the case of homelessness, understanding how people think about the problem is fundamental to later analysis of public activism, policy recommendations, and demands of the government.

There can also be a difference between how people diagnose the *source* or *cause* of a problem and how they characterize the *nature* of a problem (Bedford and Snow 2000). Admittedly, analytically separating the cause and nature of a problem can feel like a distinction without a difference. An example may help. Zoller and Casteel (2022) studied the March for Our Lives social movement and discuss how gun violence has been a difficult problem for movements to diagnose. Nathanson’s scholarship (1999) revealed that there was no public

consensus on whether gun injuries and deaths were caused by guns or shooters. When people identify shooters as the cause of the problem the suggested solution is often better policing (Squires 2012; Nathanson 1999). People may suggest passing additional gun control laws when guns are held responsible (Squires 2012). For these individuals, gun violence is a structural problem with a policy solution; in effect, the problem is material and regulatory in nature, rather than moral failings that require surveillance and enforcement. Others argue that gun violence should be understood as a public health problem—gun violence can spread from person to person like a communicable disease if left unaddressed (Butts et al. 2015) and the scale of violence places the public at increased risk of harm (Bauchner, Rivara, and Bonow 2017). Here, we can see how the literal causes of gun violence—a person possessing and shooting a gun at someone else—can be distinguished from the nature of the problem: lenient regulations, insufficient policing, or a public health emergency.

The causes of homelessness—while important to identify and thoroughly explored in the literature—can differ from how people understand homelessness as a social problem. What type of problem is homelessness? Who should be held responsible for creating and remedying it? The answers to these two questions shape the suggested solutions explored in Chapter 6.

### *The Causes & Nature of Homelessness*

Literature on homelessness categorizes its causes into groups: individual or structural causes, and at times an interaction between the two. Individual explanations often focus on failures or shortcoming that people are thought to have some control over (Parsell 2018); Lyon-Callo has called it “a hypothesis of individualized deviancy” (2004:17). These causes include untreated mental illness (Snow and Anderson 1993), problematic drug and alcohol use (Gowan

2010), and criminal behavior (Fischer et al. 2008). Other explanations focus on personal attributes, like making poor decisions (Loehwing 2010; Fischer et al. 2008) or an individual's relationship to capitalism. Scholars note that some people attribute homelessness to people's unwillingness to work (Mitchell 2020; Loehwing 2010) and their culturally estranged from, or opting out of, capitalism (Mitchell 2020; Bahr 1973).

Structural explanations for homelessness focus on the limited availability and unaffordability of housing (Colburn and Aldern 2022) and the limited social support for the poor, elderly, and disabled (Long, Rio, and Rosen 2007). The evolution in the U.S. housing markets—via the destruction of deeply-affordable single residency apartments (Hoch and Slayton 1989), gentrification (Lee and Farrell 2005) and blight (Rybeck 2020), addressing the lack of low-income housing through neoliberal market “solutions” (Mitchell 2011; Willse 2010), and federal disinvestment in public housing (Western Regional Advocacy Project 2007)—create a structural environment with a dearth of affordable housing. Structural explanations also focus on broad political-economic theories that argue inequality, unemployment, and homelessness are necessary elements of capitalist societies (Mitchell 2020).

Scholars also emphasize the way structural contexts exacerbate individual vulnerabilities. Colburn and Aldern (2022) argue that cities with limited affordable and accessible housing create environments where individual circumstances—such as being low income, having a medical condition, or having an emergency—can quickly result in a person becoming homeless. Additionally, the traumatizing and violent conditions of street life may increase an individual's reliance on drugs or alcohol for self-medication (Nishith et al. 2022). In contrast, scholars also recognize that people have buffering forces in their lives, such as social networks or community support, that might reduce the likelihood of them becoming homeless (Lee, Tyler, and Wright

2010). Finally, relational causes often receive less attention, but factors such as discrimination (Olivet et al. 2018), stigma (Belcher and Deforge 2012), and predatory exchanges (Roark 2017) are also cited as underlying causes of homelessness.

But what do housed residents believe causes homelessness? What is the nature of homelessness, for this group? The most reliable information available to answer this question comes from representative surveys of American adults. Several surveys from social scientists (Tsai. et al. 2019; Toro and McDonnell 1992; Lee, Jones, and Lewis 1990) ask respondents to identify which individual and structural factors cause homelessness. Polling firms, including Gallup (2007), Morning Consult (2023), and YouGov (2022), have completed similar work. Table 1 summarizes these survey results, displaying the top five causes of homelessness, according to housed people.

**Table 1.** Ranked Causes of Homelessness in Six Surveys/Polls of American Residents

<b>Rank</b>	<b>Lee et al. (1990)</b>	<b>Toro &amp; McDonnell (1992)</b>	<b>Gallup (2007)</b>	<b>Tsai et al. (2019)</b>	<b>YouGov (2022)</b>	<b>Morning Consult (2023)</b>
1	Structural forces	Unemployment	Drugs/alcohol	Drugs/alcohol	Drug/alcohol addiction	Drug and alcohol use
2	Mental illness	Eviction/foreclosure	Insufficient income	Mental illness	Mental illness	Poverty
3	Bad luck	Mental illness	Mental illness/PTSD	Physical illness/handicaps	Poverty	High cost of housing
4	Work aversion	Drug/alcohol*	Job loss/unemployment	Shortages of affordable housing	Lack of affordable housing	Mental illness
5	Alcoholism	Family conflict*	Physical disability	Economic system that favors the rich over the poor	Lack of housing supply	Job loss or lack of employment options

\*Equal support

Surveys completed in the 1990s suggest that Americans believe that structural forces (Lee et al. 1990), such as unemployment and eviction/foreclosure (Toro and McDonnell 1992), were the leading causes of homelessness. Mental illness and drug and alcohol use ranked lower on the list, alongside other individual-level factors such as work aversion, family conflict, and bad luck (Toro and McDonnell 1992; Lee et al. 1990). Polling and surveys from the mid-2000s on suggest that individual-level explanations for homelessness supplanted structural causes in the public mind. In all four contemporary studies, residents identify drug and alcohol use as the first

major factor contributing to homelessness. Mental illness also ranks at the top in these studies—as the second factor in two analyses, third and fourth in the other two studies. Similarly, American respondents list physical illness and disability as major causes of homelessness (Tsai et al. 2019; Fannie Mae/Gallup 2007).

Across all studies, a consistent cluster of structural causes emerges. Americans indicate that work-related issues, such as the loss of a job, aversion to work, ongoing unemployment, or the unavailability of work, are key factors they believe cause homelessness. People also consider poverty and insufficient income to be major contributors (Morning Consult 2023; Orth and Bialik 2022). Finally, more recent studies suggest that housing is an emerging issue Americans believe contributes to homelessness (Morning Consult 2023; Orth and Bialik 2022; Tsai et al. 2019).

These causes correspond to several understandings of homelessness—i.e. what *type* of problem it is. These include understandings of homelessness as a medical challenge, a policing problem, and a housing issue. Furthermore, others discuss homelessness as a failure of governance. To be clear, while scholarship explores what housed people think the causes of homelessness are, very little work discusses how residents understand and make sense of the issue as a social problem. This project seeks to fill this gap in the literature. Because no work I have found squarely addresses this question, the following review offers a summary of how scholars, police officers, social workers, and others understand the nature of homelessness.

#### *Medical problem.*

Some think of homelessness a medical problem. This explanation emphasizes that homelessness is driven by individual-level ‘pathologies’—such as mental illness, disability, and substance use—and that experts can cure these conditions (Lyon-Callo 2004; Cress and Snow

2000). Snow and colleagues (1986) suggest a medical understanding of homelessness grew out of the inaccurate assumption that most patients became homeless after deinstitutionalization and the heightened visibility of individuals who are both unsheltered and have a serious mental illness. Three logical conclusions stem from this understanding. The first is that the underlying issues associated with homelessness exist within the bodies or selves of homeless people (Lyon-Callo 2000); these individuals are viewed as suspicious, irresponsible, and unable to self-regulate as a result (Willse 2010:165). Professionals who understand homelessness as a medical problem prioritize detecting, diagnosing, and treating individual-level pathologies through intensive care plans, rehabilitation, and professional treatment programs (Willse 2010; Lyon-Callo 2000). Finally, scholars critique the medicalization of homelessness as individuating systemic inequality, foreclosing the discussion of other causes, and offering impotent solutions to a structural problem (Willse 2010; Kingfisher 2007; Lyon-Callo 2004; Lyon-Callo 2000; Snow et al. 1986). Despite these critiques, recent survey respondents identify mental illness and substance abuse as the top drivers of U.S. homelessness (Morning Consult 2023; Orth and Bialik 2022; Tsai et al. 2019:81), suggesting that many residents understand homelessness to be a fundamentally individual, medical problem.

*Crime problem.*

Many people associate homelessness with criminal behavior (Adams, Carroll, and Gutierrez 2023; Williams 2016; Link et al. 1995), in part due to related assumptions about untreated mental illness and substance abuse causing crime (Link et al. 1995) and the close ties between homelessness, jails, and prisons because of the criminalization of homelessness (Herring, Yarbrough, and Alatorre 2020; Metraux, Caterina, and Cho 2008). Early work on policing homelessness frames the problem as “rabble management,” where officers perceived

their responsibility as keeping the ‘homeless situation’ in check and segregating homeless people to less desirable areas of the city (Bittner 1967), away from businesses and housed residents. Forrest Stuart’s ethnography of Skid Row policing (2014) updates the rabble management hypothesis by emphasizing the work officers do to nudge, help, or coerce homeless individuals into accessing social services. Rather than primarily seeing homelessness as a monolithic problem with negative geographic impacts, officers understand their role as “recovery managers” and homeless people as transformable, neoliberal subjects who benefit from a state with coordinated left and right hands. Hennigan and Speer (2019) and Herring (2021), among others, argue that this form of policing has grown in tandem with shelters and other services, twinning the caring and punitive hands of the state.

Additionally, continued public support for the criminalization of homelessness (Amaral 2021; Rankin 2019) suggests that housed individuals view police and the law as two appropriate responses to homelessness. Scholarship suggests that one underlying motivation for this support is fear of homeless individuals (Toft 2014), although the picture is complex. When asked, respondents signal ambivalence about the perceived dangerousness of homeless people: 63.5 percent agree that unhoused residents are more likely to be violent than other people and 65 percent state that they believe homeless people are no more dangerous than other people (Tsai et al. 2019:82). Although the respondent sample is ambivalent about the dangerousness of homeless people, they nonetheless support (73 percent) barring homeless people from gathering in public spaces, in the interest of public safety (Tsai et al. 2019:82).

#### *Disorder problem.*

Criminality (Wright 1997; Snow and Anderson 1993), disorder (Simon 1996:159), and homelessness have long been associated with each other. In criminological research, disorder

consists of physical markers of deterioration (i.e. graffiti, abandoned buildings and cars, broken windows, and trash) and social disorder (i.e. incivilities such as street harassment, open drug use and intoxication, panhandling, and public fighting) (Sampson and Raudenbush 1999:604). Incivilities constitute “low-level breaches of community standards that signal an erosion of conventionally accepted norms and values” (LaGrange, Ferraro, and Supancic 1992:312). Disorder is central to how the American public thinks about crime and control (Harcourt 2001); it became salient via the broken windows theory (Kelling and Wilson 1982) and quality-of-life policing initiatives (Vitale 2008). As discussed later in this chapter, many of the homelessness-related issues housed residents complain about can be categorized as physical and social disorders.

Many criminologists view the presence of homeless people ‘loitering’ or ‘hanging out’ in public spaces as a sign of incivility or social disorder (Taylor and Covington 1993; Perkins et al. 1993; Lewis and Maxfield 1980). Others blur the lines between physical and social disorder when they discuss homeless people, reflecting the dehumanization of this out-group in broader society: “A regular beggar is like an unrepaired broken window—a sign of the absence of effective social-control mechanisms in that public space.... Passersby, sensing this diminished control, become prone to committing additional, perhaps more serious, criminal acts” (Ellickson 1995:1171, 1182).

Because unsheltered homeless people spend most of their time in public spaces (Mitchell 2003) they are highly visible, making their presence an aesthetic and criminogenic issue. Aesthetically, physical disorder and homeless people are often seen as blemish on the urban landscape, diminishing housed residents’ quality of life and often results in campaigns to “remove ‘unsightly people’ from public view...and to make downtown areas ‘welcoming to all’”

(Foscarinis 1996:55). Broken windows theory is a causal argument that asserts unaddressed disorder and incivility leads to more serious crime (Lanfear, Mastueda, and Beach 2020; Kelling and Wilson 1982). Homeless people are argued to increase the risk of possible future crime due to their presence (see Ellickson [1995] quote above; Foscarinis [1996] discusses the empirical and legal objections to this argument) and incivilities and physical disorders increase fear of crime amongst neighborhood residents (Abdullah et al. 2014; Covington and Taylor 1991).

*Governance problem.*

Visible homelessness—the individuals experiencing homelessness, their belongings, and their dwellings—is often perceived as a failing of local governments to maintain, regulate, or adequately monitor public spaces like parks and sidewalks. “Allocational services – such as the police, fire departments, street maintenance, parks services, and garbage collection” (Laniyonu and Byerly 2021:1171) are government services that maintain public spaces and disproportionately benefit homeowners (Choi et al. 2010). People may perceive visible disorder as evidence that the government is failing at these duties and is incapable of governing homelessness. Disorder can also be a threat to property values (Simon 2010; Skogan 1990), a central complaint of housed residents (Evans 2021; Corder 2010; Dear 1990; Dear 1976).

Governance problems relate to “struggles between the propertied and unpropertied over the use of public space” (DePastino 2003:8)—what housed people believe is their right as citizens and constituents. Scholars forward that urban residents have a ‘right to the city’ that ensures health and rest (Lefebvre 1996); enjoyment, as a reward for waged labor and capitalist consumption (Speer 2019:584); and access to public space by virtue of paying taxes (Blackmar 2006). Visible homelessness challenges these rights by calling into question the police’s ability to control space (Mitchell 1997), increasing residents’ fear (Pospěch 2022; Williams 2016;

Kingfisher 2007), and a perceived loss of public space (Young and Petty 2019; Low and Smith 2006).

More recent arguments suggest that homelessness is a problem of disorganized, cowardly, and ineffective governance, a la arguments from the political right, like Shellenberger's *San Fransicko* (2021), and from the political left, like Marcuse (1988), Willse (2010), and Harris (2017). Shellenberger argues that liberal West Coast cities' approach to homelessness emphasizes personal autonomy, harm reduction, and permanent housing over more effective interventions like involuntary commitment, abstinence, and emergency shelters. He labels this orientation 'pathological altruism,' an approach that, despite good intentions and sincerity, ultimately proves counterproductive for both the city and people experiencing homelessness (Shellenberger 2021:259). Leadership and governance failures compound the harm of pathological altruism: officials kowtow to powerful advocacy groups like the ACLU (Shellenberger 2021:266), there is no clear hierarchy and coordination amongst officials tasked with addressing homelessness (Shellenberger 2021:267), and a lack of accountability for reducing public homelessness and the problems it causes for housed residents (Shellenberger 2021:264).

Arguments from the left understand the state to be uninterested in ending homelessness because neoliberal logics create markets for homeless service provision, social work, and transitional housing programs (Willse 2010). This demand-side critique emphasizes how the state and professionals create categories, such as the 'chronically homeless', that reframe issues of health, housing security, and justice through an economic lens—how much are these people costing taxpayers and the government. Others, like Marcuse (1988) and Harris (1997), argue that the government neutralizes and depoliticizes the issue of homelessness to deny the scale and

urgency of the problem, emphasize individual-level causal explanations, and isolate homeless people from the rest of society. In Marcuse's view, many issues can be traced back to the economic rationales of America's privatized housing market: “When housing is produced for profit, those who cannot provide others with profit get no housing,” (1988:74).

*Housing problem.*

In recent decades, many Americans have come to share Marcuse’s thinking—homelessness is largely an affordable housing problem. The 2008 U.S. housing crisis significantly changed people’s perception of housing as a stable and predictable market commodity (Dwyer et al. 2016). It also caused a deep sense of precarity in Americans, destabilizing their trust in the housing market and highlighting the vulnerability of possibly losing their housing (Madden and Marcuse 2016). Additionally, housing costs have increased significantly across the country, with Washington state median housing prices increasing 174 percent between 2012 and 2022 (Washington State Office of Financial Management 2023). These experiences likely underpin the growing understanding of homelessness as a housing problem. Eighty-two percent of American adults believe that the federal government should prioritize ensuring that everyone has a safe and affordable place to live (Morning Consult 2023). Additionally, respondents believe that inadequate affordable housing (77 percent show support) and high housing costs (66 percent show support) are major causes of homelessness (Morning Consult 2023). Attitudes appear to have shifted significantly on the topic: in a 2000 study only 5 percent of respondents said that increasing low-income housing would be the best solution to homelessness (Brinegar 2000).

### *Complaints about Homelessness*

Complaints about homelessness in urban centers have increased over the last decade. Over this period, major cities like San Francisco, Seattle, Los Angeles, and New York City have adopted digital reporting platforms that allow residents to report non-emergency problems to the city. The relative ease, anonymity, and speed of digital reporting may have created a new avenue through which residents can voice their concerns to the government. The volume of complaints about homelessness is staggering and has been increasing exponentially.

Herring (2019b:778) states that between 2013 and 2017, San Francisco residents' complaints about homelessness increased by 781 percent, going from 201 to 1,514 reports per week. During this period San Francisco's unhoused homeless population increased by 1 percent, or an estimated 38 people (Applied Survey Research 2017:12). The L.A. Times documented a 167 percent increase in 311-reports between 2016 and 2018 (Reyes, Oreskes, and Smith 2019). New Yorkers have also reported homelessness more, with a 62 percent increase in complaints between 2021 and 2022 (Ladyhetz 2023). Seattle residents' reports have also skyrocketed in the recent past. Between 2012 and 2018, "unauthorized camping" reports to the City of Seattle's Customer Service Bureau went from 214 to 14,706, a 6,772 percent exponential increase (additional information available in Chapter 4).

#### *Complaining residents.*

Complaints arise from the contact housed residents have with homeless individuals and their belongings. Encounters can vary in their level of physical proximity, interaction, and pleasantness. In some situations, housed and homeless people directly interact with each other: asking for spare change, requesting someone move out of a doorway, purchasing a street newspaper, exchanging pleasantries, or yelling after a person as they move past on the sidewalk.

Interactions with belongings can look like cleaning up discarded items, navigating through littered environments, or avoiding noxious materials like human waste or needles. Other types of contact happen at greater physical and social distances: homeless people doing private behaviors in a public space (Mitchell 1997), fights between campers, tent groupings and belongings in parks, and public drug use. Close and distant encounters require housed and homeless people to navigate shared space and negotiate dynamics related to power and fear, belonging and disgust. Finally, people typically file complaints when something goes wrong, so they are more likely to report situations marked by anger, hostility, threat, or fear, rather than positive interactions.

Proximity to homeless people can cause housed people to feel fear and disgust responses. Homeless people are feared by housed residents because they are associated with criminal behavior, public drug use, and unpredictable outbursts related to untreated mental illness (Pospěch 2022; Kingfisher 2017; Williams 2016). Kingfisher (2017:99) also finds that residents' fear is gendered and raced—people are more fearful of homeless men of color—a finding that reflects more general patterns in the fear of crime literature (Markowitz and Syverson 2021). In a recent study, Helfgott et al. (2020) found that social disorganization in neighborhoods leads Seattleites to experience an increase in fear of crime, which they speculate is related to high levels of visible homelessness in the city and the assumption that homeless individuals are criminally involved (Archibald 2018; Olsen 2018). Finally, Kingfisher finds that residents not only fear homeless people associated with criminality, but also display fear like “a moral panic related to the potential incursion into and occupation of the downtown core” (2007:99). Within the fear of crime discourse, homeless people are ‘othered’ and masculinized as strong, powerful, and bad, whereas residents are feminized as potential victims that are weak, powerless, and good (Kinsella 2012:122).

It is important to note that scholars distinguish between fear of crime as a psychological response and the risk of experiencing a crime (Walklate 2007), noting that many more people fear crime than become victims of it (Guedes, Domingos, and Cardoso 2018). While this distinction is important, fear of crime can act as a powerful influence in people's everyday lives. Out of fear, people avoid specific areas (Doran and Lees 2005) during certain times of day (Mesch 2010), harden themselves and their homes to prevent victimization (Skogan and Maxfield 1981), and demand the government reduce perceived threats in their environment (Riisman del 2020). Wright also notes that these reactions move beyond fear for self to include "fear for their families, for their children, fear that 'those' people will harm them," leading them to desire living in safe neighborhoods as far removed from potential threats as possible (2000:27).

Other scholars argue that contact with homeless individuals improves housed residents' perceptions. The mechanism underlying the contact hypothesis is that in-group members are forced to confront their stereotypes of out-group members after encountering them, learn about the group, or have habitual interactions, replacing assumptions with new knowledge and experiences (William 1947). A meta-analysis of 500 studies of the contact hypothesis broadly shows broad support for the theory (Pettigrew and Tropp 2006). In survey-based research of a national sample of housed residents, Lee et al. (2004) find that housed residents have increasingly positive attitudes toward homeless people the more they learn about the group, observe them, and interact with them on a day-to-day basis. Their study builds on other similar studies (Link et al. 1995; Lee et al. 1990), to include a measure of context—the size of the local homeless population and the local homelessness rate (Lee et al. 2004:49)—finding that context has "few significant or joint (interactive) effects on public attitudes about homelessness"

(2004:59). In a final caveat they suggest that “heavy exposure” via repeated interactions and observation may have the opposite effect on residents (Lee et al. 2004:59-60).

Contact can also elicit a disgust response. People who are homeless have long been linked with filth, dirt, and disease (Gowan 2000:98); Wright suggests these associations are particularly disturbing because they are “at odds with middle class comportment, evoke fears of 'contamination' and disgust, a reminder of the power of abjection” (2000:27). Recent work by Clifford and Piston (2017) finds that housed residents’ behavioral immune systems implicitly associate homeless people with pathogens, sickness, and contamination. People want to physically distance themselves from homeless individuals out of disgust and a desire to avoid close contact due to potential exposure to biological hazards or infection.

Medical researchers have also explored the relationship between homelessness and disgust, finding that people view homeless people as disgusting and possibly less than human (Harris and Fiske 2006). Social cognition—or the combined cognitive processing of physical and sensory input, alongside an inference of another person’s mind (Tan and Harris 2021:7-8)—provides insight into the relationship between disgust and dehumanization. Housed residents perceive homeless people as an extreme outgroup who lack trustworthiness, morality, and sociability and are incompetent to act with good or ill intentions; disgust toward non-human animals, decaying food, human waste, and death is usually associated with strongly negative reactions (Tan and Harris 2021:11). The combination of strongly negative assessments of homeless people’s physical conditions, sensory impacts on others, and moral incompetence leads to a disgust response that may cause housed residents to react with common disgust responses like strong boundaries, a desire to expel people from shared space, or magical thinking that overrides logic (Beck 2011).

### *Complaint issues.*

What do housed residents complain about? In short, not much work empirically investigates this question. In San Francisco, non-criminal homeless complaints reported to 911 include calls for camping, obstructing the sidewalk, and loitering (Herring 2019b:777). Davidson and Howe (2013:628) argue that San Francisco residents feel as though their neighborhood is ‘under siege’ by people who are homeless, which generates complaints about ‘dealing with’ the consequences of unsheltered homelessness. Their complaints include public urination and defecation, discarded needles, theft, garbage, fighting, public drinking, homeless people sleeping in doorways, violent dogs, and being threatened or verbally abused by homeless youth. Several public-sourced ‘poop maps’ have claimed to document the disordered conditions of downtown streets (Wong 2020; Reality Hop 2019), however there are concerns about their measurement accuracy (Brinklow 2019) and political misinterpretations (see Shellenberger 2021; Bay Area News Group 2018). Davidson and Howe also note that residents complain about the “police failure to respond to complaints about the presence of homeless; and that ‘City Hall has decided the Haight is always going to be funky’,” which “all come across as expressions of perceived loss of control over one’s environment due to the acts of external forces” (2014:630).

A brief but relevant analysis of Portland 311 homelessness-related complaints indicates that the top concerns were drug use, homeless encampments, blocking sidewalks, human waste, and excessive trash (Nuttelman 2019a). Portland residents also expressed concern about the proximity of campers to schools and playgrounds and worry about the safety of property (Nuttelman 2019b). Czech residents express similar concerns about children interacting with homeless people when they are drunk in parks (Pospěch 2022:667). Nuttleman (2019b:2) also notes that some complaints used dehumanizing and derogatory language to describe homeless

individuals, such as “addicts,” “druggies,” “transients,” and “vagrants.” Looking at similar data, Oron (2023) finds that Seattleites’ complaints about homelessness frequently included words such as “park,” “tent,” “illegal,” and “unauthorized.”

Complaints often relate to place and the environment, in that residents complain about homeless people when they are in locations. Corinth and Finley (2020:633) find that people make reports homelessness located on the street or sidewalks, outside of residential buildings and businesses, or near parks and playgrounds. In New York City, the authors find that reports are made in areas that are “less poor, more white, more expensive, and generally more affluent” than the average neighborhood (Corinth and Finley 2020:634); Goldfischer finds similarly that these neighborhoods in the most heavily gentrified areas of the city (2020:1560). In Seattle, the bulk of complaints were made downtown and in the relatively more-affluent north end of the city (Balk 2023; Oron 2023).

While one academic study shows that housed residents do not express concern about the impact of homeless people on water, wildlife, or ecological functioning (Rose 2019:16), anecdotal evidence suggests that Seattle residents are concerned. A community group called the Thornton Creek Alliance argues that homeless encampments can lead to “erosion, destruction of native vegetation, debris accumulation, water quality issues, habitat destruction, public health issues (including hypodermic needles and possibly *E. coli* fecal coliform bacterial contamination of the creek and its tributaries), and discouragement of public use of parks and green spaces” (Werner 2019). Similarly concerned, members of the Carkeek Watershed Community Action Project reached out to City leadership to warn them about “trash, needles and human feces that have been growing in recent days and impacting the environment” (Choe 2020).

Prior research suggests housed residents express concern about a range of issues related

to physical disorder, incivilities, threats to children and the environment, and their overall impression that the government is allowing chaotic environments to continue unabated. People experiencing feelings of frustration, fear, and dehumanization are driving the complaints against those who are homeless, according to these studies. In sum, housed residents find these issues to be problematic and their 311 complaints are evidence that they demand the government address them (White and Trump 2018).

*Complaint outcomes.*

While 311 reports are not initially received by the police (they first go to Customer Service Departments within city governments),<sup>11</sup> many complaints are referred to or routed to police who are then tasked with responding (Baldwin and Hawk 2020; Goldfischer 2020; Herring 2019b). Additionally, reporting from the Willamette Weekly (Shepherd 2019) indicates that roughly half of the 911 calls made in 2018 were about disordered conditions and that Portland residents called about “unwanted persons” every 15 minutes. The staggering number of complaints outlined above (i.e. digital, non-emergency 311 reports) is an *undercount* of the total complaints received by the city.

Complaints can initiate a variety of social control responses from city governments. Herring’s work (2019b) outlines two main responses: police asking homeless individuals to ‘move along’ to a location where residents are less likely to complain or street cleaning crews that remove debris and belongings. Herring notes that police feel deep futility responding to these complaints: 91% of individuals told to move along remain on the streets or in public parks (2019b:785), they believe it takes them away from the legitimate police work of responding to

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<sup>11</sup>The City of Seattle’s Auditor’s Office released a report about trash abatement at homeless encampments, where they provide a flow chart of how 311 reports are processed and dispatched to other departments (page 5, [https://www.seattle.gov/documents/Departments/CityAuditor/auditreports/2019\\_01.pdf](https://www.seattle.gov/documents/Departments/CityAuditor/auditreports/2019_01.pdf)).

serious crime (2019b:787), and they see homelessness as a sanitation, welfare, or medical issue, rather than a criminal one (2019b:787). Additionally, Herring shows that calls and complaints about homelessness increase when shelters open, indicating that demand for police responses does not wane when the supply of temporary shelter increases (Herring 2019b:789). Although police may view responding to homelessness as largely pointless, they still do. Police respond more quickly to complaints made at subway stations and in affluent and centrally located neighborhoods (Corinth and Finely 2020:628). This suggests that police are making discretionary decisions about if and how they will respond to resident complaints.

How do these complaints and interventions impact the homeless people they target? People are criminalized for homelessness through laws and regulations that make ordinary behaviors like sleeping, sitting, or hanging around illegal when performed in public (Ortiz and Dick 2015). Because the criminalization of homelessness makes everyday life and survival difficult for homeless individuals, resident complaints may increase the intensity and inevitability of these police interactions, particularly in affluent areas of the city. Herring calls this experience ‘pervasive penalty,’ “a punitive process of policing through move along orders, citations, and threats of arrest that falls short of booking but is pervasive in its reach across a targeted population and in its depth of lingering impact” (2019b:710). When asked, homeless people say these consistent, low-level interactions with the police “keep them from ever feeling relaxed,” and cause to feel like “nuisances,” “burdens,” “trash,” “the scourge,” “the plague,” “dirt,” “a black mold you can’t get rid of,” “pests,” and “like we’re nothing, zero” (Herring et al. 2020:139-40).

These negative psychological impacts also impact how unhoused people use public space. Stuart (2016) argues that heavily policed populations, like unsheltered homeless people,

become ‘copwise,’ altering their personal presentation, daily habits, and self-regulating amongst the community to reduce the likelihood of low-level police interactions. In total, interactions with the police that do not rise to the level of arrest or jailing still negatively impact people’s sense of self, sense of belonging, and trust in the police (Tyler et al. 2015). These frequent interactions occur simultaneously alongside and compound the disproportionate arrest, jailing, and imprisonment of people experiencing homelessness (Metraux and Culhane 2006; Burt et al. 1999).

In one illustrative example, Wollington and Lewis (2018) report that 54 percent of the individuals arrested by the police in Portland in 2017 were homeless—a group that comprises only 3 percent of Portland’s total population. In studies examining the arrest and incarceration of unhoused people, it is unclear what proportion of these actions are initiated by resident complaints. Additionally, informal interactions often go unrecorded and unmeasured (Herring 2019b), meaning the scope of resident-driven social control is both unexplored in the scholarship and systematically undercounted in police records. Urban policing practices continuously target homeless people for formal and informal social control.

In addition to pervasive penalty and policing, unhoused residents experience property destruction because of complaints made by housed residents. Herring’s 2019 study of complaint-oriented policing shows how sanitation cleanup efforts are similarly disruptive in the lives of homeless people. The sanitation team's work is argued to be a form of criminalization, as they are backed by the threat of police intervention and are punitive in their destruction of personal property (Herring 2019b:778). Being legally barred from returning to a park or public space is another way policing and the legal system interrupts the lives of unsheltered homeless people (Beckett and Herbert 2009). Other work quantitatively explores the relationship between

complaints and encampment cleanups, finding that increased complaint volume (rather than land use or region) quickens the city's responsiveness (Amaral 2020:1540) and twelve "unauthorized camping" complaints can be associated with an encampment sweep (Beach, Lanfear, and Snedker N.d.). The impact of encampment sweeps and cleanups on unhoused residents is profound. Herring (2019b) details how unexpected property loss causes homeless people to lose medication, legal documents, daily necessities, and sentimental belongings. He also argues that the homeless community fears sanitation crews more than the police, as their interventions have materially devastating ramifications on their daily lives.

## PROGNOSTIC FRAMES

If diagnostic frames help people understand the meaning, origin, and contours of a social problem, prognostic frames help organize responses and actions that will address it. Cress and Snow (2000:1071) assert that prognostic framing is an essential part of the social movement process that allows actors to "stipulate specific remedies or goals" and to articulate "the means or tactics for achieving these objectives." Prognostic framing can be helpful for creating a consensus within a group about reasonable responses to social problems and help identify the material, financial, and community resources needed to implement the solutions. Cress and Snow (2000) argue that prognostic framing is the second core task of the framing process and is essential work that helps people develop plans and strategies to turn grievance (i.e. diagnoses) into solution-oriented responses.

Prognostic frames vary. Developed prognostic frames go beyond identifying the general need for action ('someone should do something about this') to specify what the response should be, the implementation process, and who is responsible for completing the work. Cress and Snow

(2000) describe developed prognostic frames as “articulated”; in their research on homeless social movement organizations, they identify group calls for creating permanent housing and building more shelters as articulate prognostic frames that respond to a specific problem with a specific solution. Additionally, Benford and Snow (2000:616) stipulate that the correspondence between a social movement’s diagnostic frames and prognostic frames is an empirical question. Research indicates that diagnostic frames can constrain or define what reasonable responses may be, although more research is needed on the relationship between the two (Nepstad 1997; Gerhards and Rucht 1992; Benford 1987). These observations suggest that diagnostic and prognostic frames should be treated as distinct outcomes and processes, analyzed separately to understand their unique contours and relationally to understand how they are paired and deployed strategically by movement actors.

Prognostic frames also shape the movements, organizations, and individuals who employ them. Social problems exist and are contested in dynamic cultural environments, and frames for addressing them are influenced by media coverage, other social movements, opponents, bystanders, and the people directly impacted (Benford and Snow 2000; Evans 1997; Klandermans 1997). Opposing actors or organizations often prompt the construction of prognostic frames with their plans and solutions. This “counterframing” (Benford 1987:75) can lead people to articulate their own prognostic frames, plans, or solutions more clearly, arguing that their approach is more effective than their opposition’s. Finally, case studies of the framing processes suggest that prognostic frames are one of the main ways social movement organizations distinguish themselves from each other (Benford and Snow 2000).

Social science researchers who study homelessness rarely focus on housed residents. This is not to say the housed are completely excluded from the discussion of urban poverty

management, but they are infrequently the unit of analysis and discussions of their attitudes, motivations, and influence are limited and often speculative. Empirical work on these residents usually comes in three forms: case studies; quantitative studies that explore a different question but include measures, indicators, or outcomes that shed light on housed residents' desires; and public polling used by politicians, governments, and organizations to shape policy proposals.

Although there is scant empirical research on residents' requests of the government, they are frequently invoked in theoretical work. Scholastic discussions about who has a right to the city (Mitchell 2003; Lefebvre 1996), contested urban spaces designed for middle-class leisure and capital investments (Speer 2018; Davis 1990), and the need to maintain clean environments with high quality-of-life standards (Vitale 2008) all invoke housed residents as powerful constituencies that shape urban governance and poverty management. The disparity between theoretical importance (and often, theoretical primacy) and direct empirical evaluation is curious. Invoking housed residents' ire for physical and social disorder, need to feel safe in public spaces, or entitlement towards their "urban playground" may be theoretically useful but it can obfuscate variation in attitudes and desires within this group.

### *Government Responses*

Housed residents are the focus of this study, which examines how they diagnose the problem of homelessness and the actions they propose to address it. Because this work focuses even more specifically on resident-government interactions, I am particularly interested in the prognostic frames housed residents use when discussing homelessness. What types of government responses do housed residents request and offer support for? What nuances do these individuals emphasize in their requests? Are their requests framed in opposition to other types of

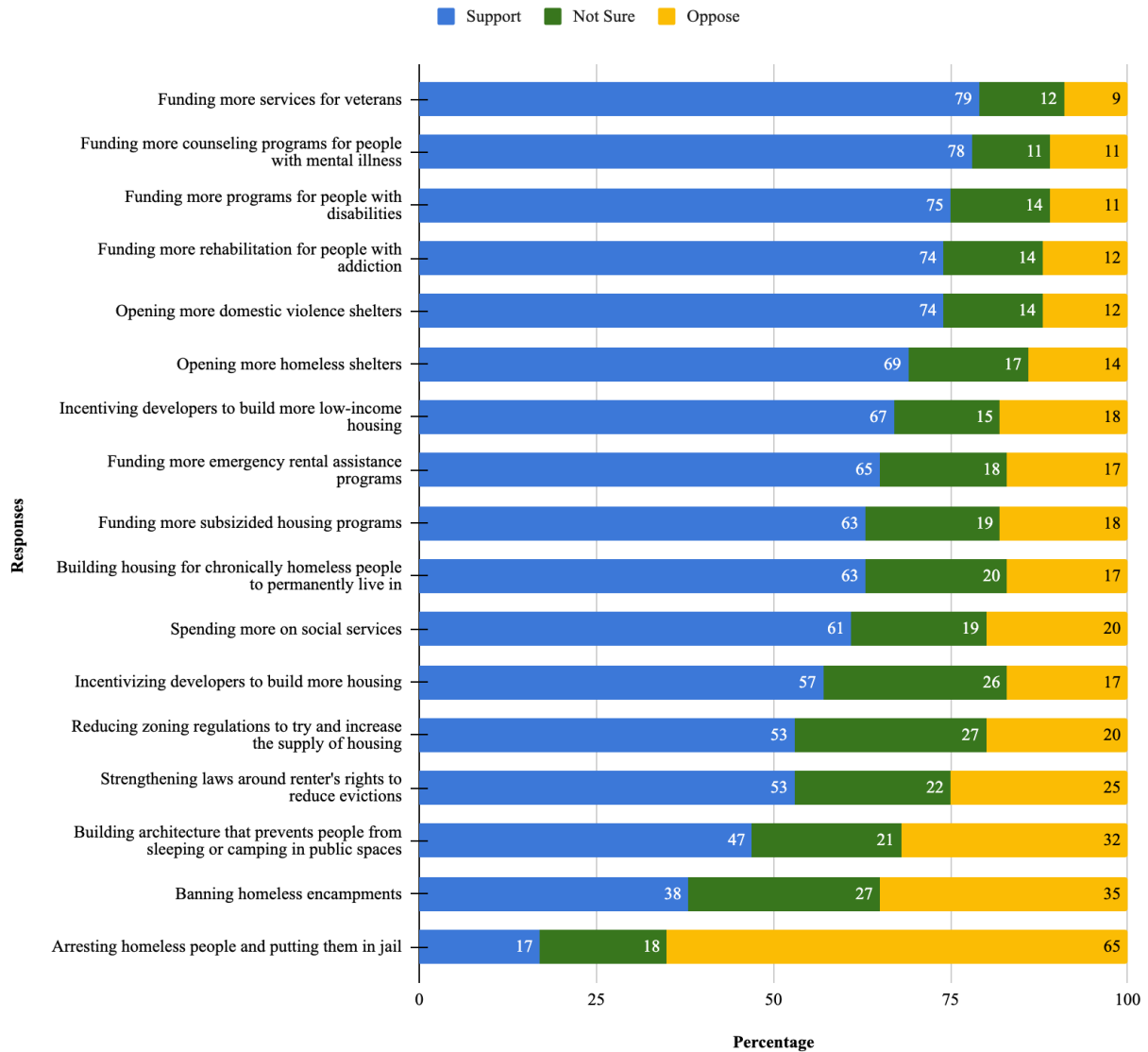
responses (i.e. counterframes)? These questions guide the analyses in Chapter 6 and the results indicate that housed residents feel an urgency for the government to act, want them to do *something*, and have a variety of articulated strategies they offer as possible responses to homelessness.

In the following section, I review empirical and theoretical work that describes how housed residents would like the government to respond to homelessness. As discussed above, the work is disparate and does not constitute a ‘body’ of scholarship in the same way other aspects of homelessness, government interventions, or formal social control requests have garnered. Additionally, related topics, such as how city governments respond to homelessness, the theoretical categories used to understand government responses, or the efficacy of resident requests are ignored to provide a specific and narrow review of what *housed residents* want.

When polled, Americans believe the government should be doing more to address homelessness at the federal, state, and local levels. A recent YouGov poll (2022) asked a representative sample of American adults if they think the federal government, their state government, and their local government should do more to address homelessness in the United State and their community, respectively. Most respondents said the federal government and state/local governments should be doing more to address the issue. Only 11 percent of respondents said the federal government was “doing the right amount” in their response; a higher percentage (17 percent) believed that their local government’s response was adequate. This poll also asked respondents, “Would you support or oppose the government taking the following actions to address homelessness?” (Figure 2 below). As discussed in the literature review below, Americans are generally supportive of expanding services, shelters, and housing for unhoused

people and uncertain about or opposed to punitive responses, such as banning homeless encampments or arresting homeless people and putting them in jail.

**Figure 2.** How Americans Would like the Government to Respond to Homelessness (2022)<sup>12</sup>



<sup>12</sup>Data from a 2022 YouGov Poll ([https://today.yougov.com/politics/articles/42548-american-attitudes-on-homelessness-poll?redirect\\_from=%2Ftopics%2Fpolitics%2Farticles-reports%2F2022%2F05%2F17%2Famerican-attitudes-on-homelessness-poll](https://today.yougov.com/politics/articles/42548-american-attitudes-on-homelessness-poll?redirect_from=%2Ftopics%2Fpolitics%2Farticles-reports%2F2022%2F05%2F17%2Famerican-attitudes-on-homelessness-poll)). Respondents were asked “Would you support or oppose the government taking the following actions to address homelessness?”

While general attitudes about government responses to homelessness are generous and non-punitive, research suggests that people's perspectives are complicated by homelessness occurring in their local context, the proximity of services to their homes, and assumptions about the causes of homelessness and the "deservingness" of unhoused people.

*Raising taxes.*

The desire for the government to do more to address homelessness is reflected in the broader literature. In general, Americans have generous attitudes towards spending on homelessness-related resources, agree to paying increased taxes that would support relief efforts, and endorse building more affordable housing to alleviate tight housing markets. Additionally, these attitudes have remained persistent since the mid-1980s at a national level when social science surveying began asking homelessness-related questions. In a meta-analysis of studies measuring public attitudes about homelessness between 1987 and 1993, Link and colleagues (1995:542) find that 66.5 percent of Americans support increasing spending on homelessness. While more volatile over the period, they also find that 60 percent would be willing to pay more taxes to help homeless people (Link et al. 1995:542). While prior research suggests that many Americans state they are willing to pay more taxes to support people experiencing homelessness (Link et al. 1995; Toro and McDonell 1992; Lee et al. 1990), two local case studies provide important nuance.

The first is a recent study by Laniyonu and Byerly (2021) that examines support for a proposed sales tax that would raise \$3.5 billion dollars to fund homelessness prevention and services in Los Angeles County. The authors explore the relationship between the spatial distribution and intensity of the homeless population in the area with support for the measure.

They find support for the proposed tax increases in locations with higher levels of homelessness, greater contact between homeless and housed individuals, and as the concentration of Democratic voters grows. Counter to assumptions in the wider literature (discussed below), Laniyonu and Byerly (2021) find a positive relationship between property values and support for the measure, as well as a positive relationship between the proportion of homeowners (versus renters) and support for the measure.

This specific case study illuminates several aspects in the relationship between the housed, homeless, and local government. It suggests that the national-level finding may hold true at the local level. Assuming national-level measures of housed residents' sentiments about homelessness would mirror residents' attitudes risks becoming an ecological fallacy. Additionally, a nationally representative sample of adults does not capture the perspectives of housed residents who frequently interact with and see people experiencing homelessness in their neighborhood. Laniyonu and Byerly (2021) show that specific aspects of the geographic context in Los Angeles County—concentrated presence of homeless individuals, political ideology, and homeownership rates—shape fiscal policy and demands of the government at the local level. The authors also note that their findings contradict assumptions in the literature that housed residents may be less likely to support the development of shelters and homelessness services in their neighborhoods (Gibson 2005; Fischel 2001).

The measure raises funds for homelessness prevention and services, but it does not specify their locations. Scholars note that officials intentionally concentrate services for people experiencing homelessness in the Skid Row area of downtown Los Angeles (see Stuart 2014), removing the visible evidence of poverty from wealthier surrounding neighborhoods. Laniyonu and Byerly's findings suggest multiple interpretations: housed, liberal residents are motivated to

care for homeless individuals they have become personally familiar with; they want additional resources for homeless services to remove unhoused people from their shared communities; or some complex mixture of the two. The authors interpret the finding as a way for homeowners to protect their housing values from the negative financial impact of homelessness (Laniyonu and Byerly 2021:1152).

Evidence suggests that Seattle residents have had more mixed reactions to possible tax increases designed to fund homeless services. Although demographic research implies that Seattleites may be more likely to support taxes for homeless relief because the city is highly educated and politically liberal (Tompsett et al. 2006), public opinion polling and recent policy debates suggest that attitudes are more varied. In 2017 opinion polling of likely Seattle voters, EMC researchers asked respondents about the City's spending on homelessness. The results suggest that Seattle voters have split opinions about the amount of spending on homelessness: 35 percent believe the city is spending too little, 12 percent say it's too much, and 31 percent state that it's the right amount. The remaining voters (23 percent) express ambivalence, saying they don't know if the City's spending is appropriate (EMC 2017). The same voters were split in their feelings about the possibility of transferring funds from other city priorities to increase the budget dedicated to homelessness services; however, those who opposed transferring funds felt more strongly in their opposition than those who supported the proposal.

When asked more specifically—would they be willing to support raising sales or property taxes to fund mental health treatment and drug/alcohol treatment—a large majority (74 percent and 70 percent respectively) expressed support. Since 2017, Seattleites' attitudes toward city spending on homelessness have soured. Some residents expressed ardent resistance to taxing Amazon to raise funds for affordable housing and homeless services (KIRO 7 News 2018;

Wilford 2018; Wilson 2018). Some political commentators suggested the city underestimated the level of frustration among residents and business owners who felt that the city had not been using their money to solve a problem that continued to get worse (Lee 2018). Additionally, more recent public opinion polling in 2021 finds that two thirds of voters do not trust the City of Seattle to spend their tax money responsibly and a larger proportion (72 percent) state that the city has enough money to address homelessness, but it needs to be more effective in its response (Seattle Metropolitan Chamber of Commerce 2021).

*Expanding services.*

Studies also find that people's attitudes towards homelessness have become more generous over time, finding increased support for providing services (Tompsett et al. 2006), building affordable housing, shelters, and increasing the minimum wage to reduce homelessness (Tsai et al. 2017). In their 2017 study, Tsai et al. find that the increases are statistically significant when compared to the 1995 baseline study (Link et al. 1995). Additionally, a very recent study found that approximately 75 percent of adults support funding services for homeless individuals experiencing addiction, who are veterans, or who have been diagnosed with a mental illness (Orth and Bialik 2022). Although research on the topic is limited, several studies and papers suggest that people's attitudes about services are shaped by the perceived deservingness of the individuals receiving support, a desire to remove visible homelessness from public spaces, and a desire to maintain space between housed individuals and services for the homeless community.

Scholars have noticed that many Americans understand homelessness to be largely caused by two sets of factors: factors inside of people's control, such as personal decisions, employment, or substance use, and structural factors outside of someone's control, like the

availability of affordable housing, the cost of healthcare treatments, or national economic downturns. People experiencing homelessness are often perceived as deserving of support if they have become homeless due to circumstances outside of their control. For example, if an individual became disabled due to an on-the-job injury, was unable to pay rent, and lost their housing, they may be viewed with compassion and not “blamed” for their lack of housing. People may also be considered deserving of services, aid, or help if they have experienced domestic violence, if they are perceived as vulnerable (mothers, children, elderly individuals, or people with disabilities), or if they are military veterans. On the other hand, people experiencing homelessness can be perceived as undeserving of services. These individuals are seen as directly contributing to their homeless status by making poor decisions, being too lazy to work, or not accepting help from others because of personal preferences. A notable category of homeless individuals often considered “undeserving” are people who experience untreated substance abuse disorder or mental illness. If these individuals are unable or uninterested in receiving help they are particularly viewed as undeserving of additional support.

Several studies find that support for expanding services for homeless individuals, funding mental health and substance abuse services, or building affordable housing for individuals in the homeless community vary depending on the status of the groups receiving the services. Dum, Socia, and Rydberg (2017) find that U.S. adult survey respondents were more likely to support affordable housing for homeless families with children than they were to support affordable housing for homeless individuals experiencing substance use disorder. They also find that respondents were less likely to support helpful housing policies for homeless individuals with criminal legal system involvement than other groups who were not experiencing homelessness. The authors interpreted their findings, saying “In sum, when faced with the choice of addressing

the living conditions for different populations, citizen concerns over social welfare are strongest for nonoffenders, whereas concerns about self-interest become more salient when the welfare of ex-offenders is at stake” (Dum et al. 2017:858). This study suggests a possible conflict between respondents’ values: such as social welfare for people experiencing homelessness and a desire for retribution for people charged with a crime (Garland, Wodahl, and Schuhmann 2013) or the desire to provide social services to the public and a perceived sense of victimization (Baker et al. 2015).

Williams (2016) found similar conflicting patterns when she discussed homelessness with housed residents in Phoenix, Arizona. She finds that resident’s support for assisting homeless women vary based on their perceptions of their worthiness and that residents often feel deeply conflicted about government services. Residents broadly shared that they felt compassionate toward women experiencing homelessness because of their vulnerability and the increased likelihood that they would be caring for children. But, housed residents communicated deep-seeded suspicions about homeless individuals. Residents shared that it was difficult to tell who deserved services and who didn’t, who was “truly homeless” and who might be might by impersonating homeless individuals to access additional resources, and the potential risk of “rewarding” people who display undesirable characteristics, such as laziness or irresponsibility. Williams’ findings suggest that many housed residents have crosscutting impulses when thinking about government assistance for people experiencing homelessness: there is a generalized and normative sense of generosity that is coupled with deeply ingrained values of responsibility, industriousness, and persistence that manifest themselves through suspicion and paranoia towards homeless individuals. Her work reveals how asking general questions about whether the government should expand services for homeless individuals likely masks an incredible tapestry

of conflicting values and contradictory policy prescriptions that may become more pronounced in local contexts or specific policy implementations.

*Temporary shelter.*

Scholars also discuss how housed residents may want additional shelters, sanctioned encampments, and tiny house villages for people experiencing homelessness because they remove the unhoused from public areas or centralize them in remote areas of the city. These arguments are largely theoretical; they outline several possible motivations and rationales for why housed residents support governments developing temporary housing for their homeless neighbors. One common explanation is that residents support shelters because they remove visible homelessness from the center city, an area designated for middle-class leisure, shopping, and investment (Gibson 2004). Government officials cite these resident concerns when redeveloping downtown areas (Speer 2017; Speer 2016), linking policies to manage the visible poverty associated with homelessness to the viability of revitalization campaigns (Hennigan and Speer 2019:911). Hennigan and Speer (2019) argue that the revitalization argument for the removal of homelessness from downtown areas mirrors the function of anti-homeless laws and architecture, but with a more socially acceptable gloss.

Other scholars argue that residents support temporary shelter and encampments because they remove people experiencing homelessness from public view (Orr et al. 2023; Rankin 2021; Speer 2019). Visible homelessness may make individuals uncomfortable because unhoused people attend to their private needs in public spaces, inverting the principles of private property (Mitchell 2011; Gibson 2004). It is also a visible reminder of “misery in the midst of plenty, and represents alienation from home in a home-based society” (Marcuse 1988:78). Herring (2014) and Speer (2018) also argue that sanctioned encampments are located in industrial areas, near

highways, or remote vacant land to invisibilize the repressive functions they serve. Finally, Rankin (2019) argues that housed residents support temporary shelters and housing because it neutralizes possible threats. She cites the ‘transcarceratory approach’ of San Diego during a Hepatitis A outbreak—where the city removed the homeless community from downtown to mass shelters elsewhere—as an effort to reduce the risk to the housed community. She also argues this response follows internment logics to remove a class of people from society to a location controlled by others (Parr and Rankin 2018), to mitigate their perceived risk of future criminal behavior or threats to public health (Rankin 2019).

*NIMBYism.*

Some residents support human service facilities in the abstract, but object to them being in their neighborhood. A recent national poll (Orth and Bialik 2022) shows Americans are in much stronger support for building psychiatric facilities, waste management facilities, homeless shelters, and prisons at the national level than in their local area. The term for this bifurcated impulse is ‘NIMBY’ (not in my backyard) and was originally used to describe activists who opposed the siting of nuclear waste facilities near their homes in the 1970s. It has since been used by social scientists to describe residents who object to human service facilities coming into close proximity (Borell and Westermark 2018). NIMBYism is commonly invoked by scholars to explain how housed residents react to government attempts to respond to homelessness—that services and facilities are absolutely needed, but they belong somewhere other than my neighborhood. Dear and Gleeson (1991) found that these attitudes strengthen the closer residents lived to services. This directly relates to how the government responds to homelessness, as municipalities are responsible for funding these services, overseeing the administration of their work, and determining where they are located through zoning regulations. Residents co-opt

governmental processes, such as petitions to rezone particular areas, public notification and comment periods, and environmental review to voice and advocate for NIMBY concerns (Evans 2021:4; Einstein et al. 2020; Bagley 2019).<sup>13</sup>

A recent study by Adams et al. (2023) explores the reasons why housed residents oppose nearby homeless services, identifying several explanations for the resistance. A key finding of their study dispels the common assumption that NIMBYism is rooted in the economic interests of homeowners, who believe that the value of their home and property may go down if services are nearby. Through surveys and focus groups of housed San Diego residents, Adams et al. (2023:158) find that property values are not a major concern and are not the primary motivation for resisting services. Residents were more concerned about the types of services provided and the possibility that participants would congregate outside the facilities. Many residents are more supportive of facilities when they align with their assumptions about the causes of homelessness—substance abuse, untreated mental health issues, and joblessness. Residents are more supportive of services if they intervene on these problems and focus less on the value of housing people experiencing homelessness.

Residents also opposed homeless drop-in centers because they do not distinguish between the ‘deserving’ and ‘undeserving’ among the homeless community. Because of this lack of distinction in who would receive services, residents expressed concern that the people who use the centers may also hang out around the centers and pose a danger to the community. The services residents supported most were paternalistic and focused on helping unhoused residents make “good” decisions for their lives. In sum, Adams et al. (2023) find that resident support for

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<sup>13</sup>Recently, residents who support building new affordable housing in their neighborhood have claimed the label of “YIMBY”, or ‘yes in my backyard’. Emergent scholarship focuses on these attitudes in the affordable housing context but has yet to explore if and how they may extend to homeless services.

the siting of homeless services depend more on their perception of the services being offered and the deservingness of the recipient than previously assumed reasons like property values.

*Encampment removals.*

Many liberal city governments remove unauthorized homeless encampments from public and private property (Cline 2022; Lennard 2022; Goldfischer 2020; Rankin 2019). While little is known about residents' desire for sweeps, scholars offer several explanations for why city governments rely so heavily on the practice, often citing complaining citizens as the main driver. Goldfischer's work shows that "selective enforcement of the visible 'homeless hotspot' took place in recently-gentrified [neighborhoods], suggesting that the idea of a homeless hotspot itself and the financialized home are co-produced and co-dependent, created through one another" (2020:1550). In addition to gentrified locations being the site of increased sweeps, Gordon and Byron (2021:864-5) find that residents complained through San Francisco's 311 service hundreds of times about the same encampment locations, which the authors suggest could be evidence that the site has been cleared and reconstructed several times over. They also suggest that the high volume of resident complaints about homeless encampments naturalize the expectation that these sites are problematic and a form of disorder the city should be responsible for addressing.

Additionally, Herring (2021) and Margier (2023) both argue that resident complaints about visible homelessness lead to encampment sweeps that are designed to push homeless residents into temporary shelters. Herring frames this mechanism as another form of punishing homelessness because unhoused people are compelled to enter shelter after their temporary residence (i.e. encampment) has been destroyed. Agreeing, Margier offers that sweeps into shelters is a form of "compassionate invisibilization" (2023:192) that quells both the concerns of

frustrated residents who no longer see the encampments and the concerns of advocates who are frustrated with the criminalization of homelessness.

Very little work has directly assessed resident attitudes about encampment sweeps. One survey shows that the visibility of tents and structures may shape resident attitudes towards unsheltered homelessness. Tsai et al. (2019) finds that 70 percent of respondents support the right for homeless people to sleep overnight in public spaces, like parks, buses, or train stations. However, there is a sharp decrease in support—only 49 percent of the same respondents—when they are asked if homeless people should be allowed to set up tents or other temporary shelters in public parks. Similarly, a Seattle Times poll of Seattle residents finds that 53 percent of respondents either strongly agree or agree that there should be a “zero tolerance policy to prohibit camping in parks and public places” (Davila and Coleman 2019:3). A 2022 survey of Seattle voters finds strong opposition to homeless encampments. Pollsters asked respondents if they support or oppose Seattle’s efforts to “continue to close homeless encampments once people have been offered shelter and services, even if it means those who refuse help will be displaced” (Seattle Metropolitan Chamber of Commerce 2022:17). Eighty-two percent of respondents supported the statement, with 64 percent of respondents indicating strong support. Within this group, Republicans, young voters (18- to 29-year olds) and older voters (50- to 64-year olds), as well as homeowners showed the strongest support (Seattle Metropolitan Chamber of Commerce 2022:37). Barnett (2022) suggests that the wording of the question is misleading, as it does not reflect what the city offers during encampment sweeps and incorrectly characterizes why some homeless residents refuse services. Finally, Seattle voters indicated that, out of 13 possible options, “closing encampments in parks, on sidewalks, [and in] public ways” would be the most

effective way to improve the quality of life for people living in Seattle (Seattle Metropolitan Chamber of Commerce 2022:16).

Critics of encampment removal argue that they rarely achieve their expected results and that they are a form of state violence. Herring's work (2019b) shows that sweeps are incredibly destabilizing for homeless people because many of their essential belongings (i.e. prescription medications, legal documents, and survival goods) are disposed of with little warning. Margier (2023) also finds that encampment sweeps are endless and expensive, as they often increase the level of disorder in the city by further aggravating the material deprivation of homelessness and moving people around the city (Herring et al. 2020:145). Local activists also strongly oppose sweeps for financial and moral reasons. Activists have organized to stop sweeps as they are being executed (Horne 2022; Martin 2020; Sundell 2018), offer mutual aid support for people experiencing sweeps (Stop the Sweeps Seattle 2024; Squat!net 2020), and have called for bans on sweeps during the winter and the Covid-19 pandemic (Bray 2023; Kim and Oron 2020; Savransky 2020).

#### *Police intervention.*

Residents also want the police to respond to visible homelessness. Burkhardt and Atkinson's 2022 paper evaluates this issue directly, asking Portland, Oregon residents what they want the police to do when they encounter a person experiencing homelessness. They find that in general, most residents would like the police to do *something* when they interact with a homeless person, as opposed to ignoring the issue (2022:281). In a vignette survey, respondents were more supportive of "helping" homeless people than arresting them when police encountered someone sleeping in a tent in a public park, burning a small campfire, urinating behind a building, panhandling in front a grocery store, and collecting recycling for deposit money. Respondents

did support arresting someone experiencing homelessness if they were pulling back a fence to access a vacant site. The more indicators of homelessness and mental illness included in the vignette, the more respondents supported a helpful, rather than punitive, police response; “a suspect’s substance abuse background had almost no effect on respondent’s preferred police actions” (Burkhardt and Akins 2022:284). Finally, the authors find that people are more likely to support arrest if they also believe homelessness is a problem where they live, a result that echoed in previous work (Lee et al. 2004; Link et al. 1995).

Residents’ desires for police intervention mirror academic understandings of how the police are now governing urban homelessness. Rather than “aggressive patrol” that funnels top-down pressure from police command into high rates of citations and arrest for the general populace (Beckett and Herbert 2009; Moskos 2008; Mitchell 1997), contemporary policing of homelessness is “therapeutic” (Stuart 2014), guiding homeless people from the streets and into services (Herbert, Beckett, and Stuart 2017). This pattern of policing varies across time and space, as policing practices change depending on public demand, department and city leadership, and local political environments (Laufs et al. 2021; Liederbach and Travis 2008; Hassell, Zhao, and Maguire 2003). While Burkhardt and Akins’ study suggests that residents prefer therapeutic policing to aggressive patrolling or the complete absence of police involvement, it is less clear how residents feel (or know) about the tactics employed by the police during these interactions. As many scholars have noted, therapeutic police interactions often include coercive relocation, threats of involuntary commitment, loss of possessions, and an increased feeling of fear and shame (Herring 2021; Rankin 2019; Herring 2019b; Robinson 2019; Stuart 2016; Stuart 2014). Many police interactions with homeless individuals never rise to the level of aggressive patrol or therapeutic policing—they are banal orders to move along to a different area. Herring finds that

“89 percent of dispatches for homeless complaints [in San Francisco] resulted in a move-along order, rather than a citation or arrest” (2019b:784). Officers remarked that these move-along orders were imposed to appease complaining residents, indicating that while residents may express hypothetical support for therapeutic policing; in reality, the nature and volume of their complaints generate *prodding policing* that does little more than churn “space invaders” (Lawson and Elwood 2014:212) around the city.

## CONCLUSION

The meandering nature of this chapter reflects how many scholars treat housed residents. Housed residents are treated like a specter haunting the academic narrative of homelessness. They appeared frequently in the 1990s, as researchers were curious about what they thought caused homelessness and how they felt toward homeless people (Lee et al. 2004; Phelan et al. 1997; Toro and McDonnell 1992; Lee et al. 1990). Other scholars focus on housed residents as annoyed and activated NIMBYs who shape homelessness by excluding the people experiencing it from their neighborhoods (Adams et al. 2023; Evans 2021; Dear and Gleeson 1991). In more recent work, scholars think about the role housed residents play in the exclusion and policing of homeless people in public space (Amaral 2021; Gordon and Byron 2021; Herring 2019b; Rankin 2019; Speer 2019).

While academic work on housed residents does exist, they are rarely treated as essential actors in the larger story. More often, their values and motivations are assumed or ignored. Based on this literature review, it is quite possible housed residents have divergent and heterogeneous ideas about homelessness. But because much of this work has favored understanding certain aspects of homelessness at the expense of understanding housed residents, we are left wondering.

Previous work makes it clear that housed residents are concerned about homelessness and play a role in how the government responds. The remainder of this project takes these concerns and demands seriously, exploring housed residents' complaints and comments to the city government.

### Chapter 3. Data and Methods

Housed residents can act as intermediaries in the social control of urban homelessness. As the previous chapter suggests, the rationales and inconveniences that motivate residents to contact the government vary widely. Additionally, resident instigation of the social control process is one particular (and, I argue, important) aspect of local governments' poverty control efforts, as well as only one aspect of residents' thinking and responses toward homelessness. Research has started to examine housed residents' attitudes about, understandings of, and actions toward urban homelessness (Adams et al. 2023; Burkhardt and Akins 2022; Amaral 2021; Herring 2021; Lanionu and Byerly 2021; Corinth and Finley 2020; Goldfischer 2020; Herring 2019b). Some of this new work uses surveys to measure residents' acceptance of homeless-serving facilities in their neighborhoods (Adams et al. 2023) and desired police interventions with people in the homeless community (Burkhardt and Akins 2022). Others measure public attitudes about proposed increased taxes to fund homeless services (Lanionu and Byerly 2021) and support of proposed legislation to criminalize homelessness (Amaral 2021) through voting data and public comment. Other work leverages large datasets of resident complaints and requests for service (i.e. 311 reports) (Herring 2021; Corinth and Finley 2020; Goldfischer 2020; Herring 2019b).

These studies all capture meaningful and specific aspects of residents' relationship to urban homelessness and their governments. However, data from surveys, election outcomes, and complaint reports do not capture resident's explanations for why they have contacted the government or why they want a specific response to their grievance. To capture these sentiments, it is helpful to look for naturally occurring venues where people are expected to detail their thinking and argue their point. Several researchers have looked to public comment periods at

government meetings (Amaral 2021; Herring 2021; Herring 2019b; Kingfisher 2007) or conducted focus groups (Adams et al. 2023; Gent 2017; Williams 2016) to capture residents' thinking about homelessness in a more contextual and extended way.

Most similarly to this project, Kingfisher (2007) examines public hearings to understand how homeless policy is developed in a small Canadian town. While her work helpfully emphasizes discursive constructions of homelessness and homeless people, it may not be generalizable to more urban, U.S. contexts. She also includes many different interest groups—business owners, social service providers, council members, et cetera—to capture the policy development process. Her methods allow for a contextual, rich analysis of people's attitudes towards homelessness, but her focus on discursive constructions and representations of people who are homeless is distinct from my interest in housed residents' complaints, understandings, and requests related to homelessness.

Similarly, compared to analysis of surveys or 311 reports, focus groups allow residents to explain their thinking. However, these comments are directed to a researcher and not a politician or government official they think is responsible for addressing homelessness. This difference in audience, the intended purpose of the conversation (for research versus government action), and the self-perception that shapes answers in a research setting may skew or restrain study participants.

To address some of these data and analytical limitations, I leverage the richness of familiar data sources—public comments and 311 reports—to explore resident understandings of and complaints about homelessness. As described below, I limit my analysis to only housed residents who have contacted the local government about homelessness. While this is a subpopulation of all Seattleites, it includes all those who contacted the government about

homelessness through specific venues during this period. I also develop a more informed understanding of who participates in these forms of contact, which is critical for generalizing my findings and situating them in the broader conversation about urban poverty governance. Finally, I leverage the complexity and richness of these textual data sources to identify the specific issues and situations residents are complaining about. Rather than only examining longitudinal trends in complaint volume or the geographic distribution of reports, I disaggregate the data to explore their substantive content. I do similar work with the public comment data, leveraging the several years of data to develop a rich and multifaceted appreciation for residents' understanding of homelessness. Rather than asking people what they *want* the government to do about homelessness or what they find troublesome about it, I examine what they have *said, reported,* and *requested*. Here I privilege behavior over intent, articulation over speculation. These data, and my subsequent analysis, capture important aspects of how residents move their government to respond to homelessness.

## DATA SOURCES

### *Seattle City Council Public Comment Periods*

To understand resident perspectives on homelessness, I examine comments made during Seattle City Council public comment periods between 2018 and 2021. At the beginning of most committee meetings, the chair opens the floor for attendees to make two-minute comments on agenda items. These comments are directed to council members on the committee, who are often present in the room. Public comment periods can be very short, with one or two commenters. However, they also may take up most of the meeting time if there is a large group of people who would like to comment. Long public comment periods are rare, but they occur most often when

the Council votes on final proposals. Additionally, the Council will occasionally host public hearings in the community. These hearings are usually held after business hours to accommodate people unable to attend during the day.

Public comment periods often attract concerned residents, community leaders, activists, and business and nonprofit professionals who make an argument to local government officials for something they want or something they want to change. Recent scholarship on homelessness leverages public comment to explore public support for criminalizing homelessness (Amaral 2021), public complaints about visible homelessness (Herring 2021; Herring 2019b), and public attitudes about the causes of homelessness (Kingfisher 2007). Vargas (2019) also shows how interfacing with the city council can be a form of community collective efficacy. Comparatively, in this project I examine more public comments in greater detail, restring my analysis to only focus on housed residents. These residents' public comments about homelessness provide a useful window into how they think about the issue and the poverty governance demands being made of local officials.

The Seattle City Council's self-described purpose is to “[establish] City policy through enactment of ordinances (laws) and adoption of resolutions. The City Council also approves and adopts the City's budget” (City of Seattle 2023b). Through presentations, meetings, community engagement, debate, and other forms of information gathering, Council members learn about issues and then propose legislation to address them. Committees meet frequently over the legislative cycle (mid-December through the end of September); the remainder of the year focuses on budget negotiations. Between the 2018/2019 council year and the 2020/2021 council year, the Seattle City Council formed 28 committees and held over 850 regular meetings that were open to the public.

For the purposes of this project, it is useful to think about three groups of committees. General committees focus on topics directly related to homelessness, such as housing affordability, health and human services, and public safety. Other committees discuss homelessness in conversations about areas under their purview, such as land use, planning, or public utilities. Finally, special committees are formed to focus on legislative projects or more narrow public concerns; some of these special committees focus on homelessness. While the Seattle City Council's website video archive offers a complete corpus of public comment periods at city council meetings,<sup>14</sup> much of this 580-plus hours of public comment is unrelated to homelessness. To focus on meetings with the highest likelihood of public comments about homelessness, I use a multi-stage sampling process to generate the dataset, creating a sample of committee meetings I review for relevant public comments. I describe later in the chapter how I review and code these videos.

*Committee meetings sample.*

In the first meeting sampling stage, I focus on committees whose purview includes homelessness responses and service provisions, under the assumption that these meetings are the most likely to attract people commenting on homelessness in Seattle. These include committees related to human services and housing, as well as special committees on homelessness. For these 196 committee meetings, I review all public comment periods to identify statements related to homelessness (see Table 2 below for specific committee names).

Next, I examine committees less directly related to homelessness. At the beginning of many public comment periods, Seattle City Council members encourage attendees to comment

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<sup>14</sup><http://www.seattlechannel.org/CityCouncil>

only on agenda items. With this in mind, I reviewed the agendas for full council meetings<sup>15</sup> and other committee meetings. In total, three full council meetings had homelessness-related agenda items, which I checked for homelessness-related comments. Finally, I also review two Finance & Neighborhood Committee meetings, the 2018/2019 and 2020/2021 Select Budget Committee meetings (n=16), and three special events,<sup>16</sup> as they had relevant agenda items. In total, 780 council meetings were reviewed for homelessness-related agenda items and 217 council meeting public comment periods are included in the final sample.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>15</sup>Prior to reviewing the meetings, I assumed that full council hearings would attract people motivated to discuss homelessness, as it is one of the only venues to share with all council members at the same time. However, after watching several full committee public comment periods I realized that these meetings focus on regulatory work that did not fall under the umbrella of the other committees and voting on final legislation. Additionally, because these meetings are often long and tedious, the Council President was strict with commenters and required them to make comments only on agenda items.

<sup>16</sup>Councilmember Lewis hosts town hall on homelessness outreach & services (8/19/2020); Online Economic Forum: Realities of Inequities Created & Worsened by COVID (5/19/2020); Councilmember Sawant, Affordable Housing Alliance hold Employee Hours Tax & Affordable Housing Town Hall (3/27/2018)

<sup>17</sup>While it is possible to randomly review meetings held by committees tangentially to homelessness, I decided against it. In prior exploratory research these meetings had very few comments about homelessness. While it is possible that there are comments related to homelessness in the other 392 committee meetings from the 2018-2021 periods, it would require a significant amount of work for what would likely be a relatively small addition to the final dataset.

**TABLE 2.** Seattle City Council Committee Meetings Reviewed for Public Comments Related to Homelessness, 2018-2021

<b>Years</b>	<b>Committee Title</b>	<b>Meetings</b>
2018/2019	Housing, Health, Energy, & Workers’ Rights	46
	Human Services, Equitable Development, & Renter Rights	28
	Progressive Revenue Taskforce on Housing and Homelessness	5
	Select Committee on Citywide Mandatory Housing Affordability	22
	Select Committee on Homelessness & Housing Affordability	12
	Committee meetings with relevant agenda items	11
	Special Events	3
		<i>127</i>
2020/2021	Public Safety and Human Services Committee	28
	Sustainability & Renters’ Rights Committee	13
	Finance & Housing Committee	25
	Select Committee on Homelessness Strategies & Investments	13
	Committee meetings with relevant agenda items	11
		<i>90</i>
	<b>Total</b>	<b>217</b>

I watched the public comment periods for the 217 sampled council meetings related to homelessness. In 44 percent of the reviewed meetings, at least one attendee commented on homelessness (n=95). There was a range of 1 to 20 comments made during these meetings, with an average of 5 homelessness-related statements per comment period. Three meetings had a very high number of comments.<sup>18</sup> In total, 652 comments were made about homelessness across 95 meetings. I transcribed these comments verbatim and in full.

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<sup>18</sup>Progressive Revenue Task Force on Housing and Homelessness 5/2/2018 meeting (41 comments), Human Services, Equitable Development, & Renter Rights 10/17/2019 meeting (37 comments), and Select Committee on Homelessness Strategies & Investments 5/27/2020 meeting (85 comments)

For meetings between January 2018 and early May 2020, video clearly shows public commenters' faces. From these images, I document my perception of people's race and gender. In late May 2020 the Seattle City Council transitioned operations to an online platform due to the Covid-19 pandemic. During this time people made public comments by calling into the meeting over the phone. People frequently state their names at the beginning of their comment, which allowed me to document my perception of their gender. Ambiguous cases were coded as unknown. Finally, some people shared their neighborhood or council district. For comparability, I aggregated all location data to the district level.

*Public comment sample.*

In their introductions, most commenters share biographical information to situate themselves to relationship to the city and to signal their constituency to the council. They often identify the company they work for, the organization they volunteer with, or the neighborhood group they represent. Based on this information, I categorize people into different constituent groups in the data. People currently experiencing homelessness, businesspeople, volunteers, non-profit workers, and community groups generated 67 percent of the comments. I exclude these comments from my final analysis because these individuals likely do not represent the perspectives and interests of housed residents but rather those of the organizations or companies with which they are associated. The final comment sample includes the 33 percent of public comments made by residents. Finally, all included comments describe both a problem directly related to homelessness and make a request of the city government. Of the 215 comments made by residents, 70 percent (151 comments) include both a description of a problem related to homelessness and a request made to the city.

The final sample includes 151 resident comments. Fifty-two percent (n=79 comments) were made by women, 35 percent (n=53) by men, and 13 percent (n=19) were made by residents whose gender is unknown. Race information was collected for 78 cases (51 percent of the total sample); 93 percent of comments were made by white individuals (n=73) and the remaining 7 percent of cases represent comments by Asian residents (n=1), Black residents (n=2), and residents whose race could not be identified (n=2). Approximately half of the residents who commented about homelessness disclosed their location. Twenty percent of residents are from District 7 (Pioneer Square to Magnolia); Districts 2, 3, 4, and 6 each account for approximately 6 percent of resident's reported locations;<sup>19</sup> District 1 and 5 both have lower levels of representation at 2 and 3 percent, respectively.<sup>20</sup> Most comments (41 percent) were made in 2018 (n=62), followed by 26 percent in 2020 (n=39), 25 percent in 2021 (n=37), and 10 percent in 2019 (n=15). Two-thirds of comments were made before the Covid-19 lockdown (n=84).

### *Find It, Fix It Complaint Reports*

The other source of data for this project comes from public service requests about homelessness made to the City of Seattle. Fielding and managing requests for basic services is mundane, yet central, work for city governments. Many cities have created a 311-phone number for people to call with non-emergency needs, requests for service, or to be connected to a specific department. Because 311 contacts represent one form of resident-government interaction, scholars have turned to these data to understand the distribution of goods across

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<sup>19</sup>In 2020, District 2 covers the International District and South Seattle east of I-5; District 3 covers the Central District, Capitol Hill, and Madison Park; District 4 covers the University District, Roosevelt, and Sand Point; District 6 covers Ballard, Greenlake, and Crown Hill

<sup>20</sup>District 1 covers West Seattle and South Seattle west of I-5; District 5 covers North Seattle, north of Greenwood, Crown Hill, and Wedgewood (A map of 2020 Seattle City Council boundaries can be found here: <https://www.theurbanist.org/2022/08/06/breaking-down-the-new-seattle-city-council-map-proposal/>)

different types of neighborhoods (Levine and Gershenson 2014), the distribution of social problems across cities (Minkoff 2016), and residents' sense of custodianship over their neighborhoods (O'Brien 2015). Notably, Herring (2019) uses 311 records as one source of data to quantify the scale of complaints made about visible homelessness in San Francisco. Goldfischer (2020), Corinth and Finely (2020), Gordon and Byron (2021), Amaral (2020), and Brown and Zoorob (2022) have all used 311 data to measure resident complaints about homelessness, the geographic distribution of homeless encampments throughout cities, and political participation in response to homelessness. In contrast to conventional survey measures of collective efficacy that ask respondents how they *would* respond *if* they encountered a specific situation, these data provide evidence for *what* people did when they encountered a specific situation.

*Find It, Fix It phone application.*

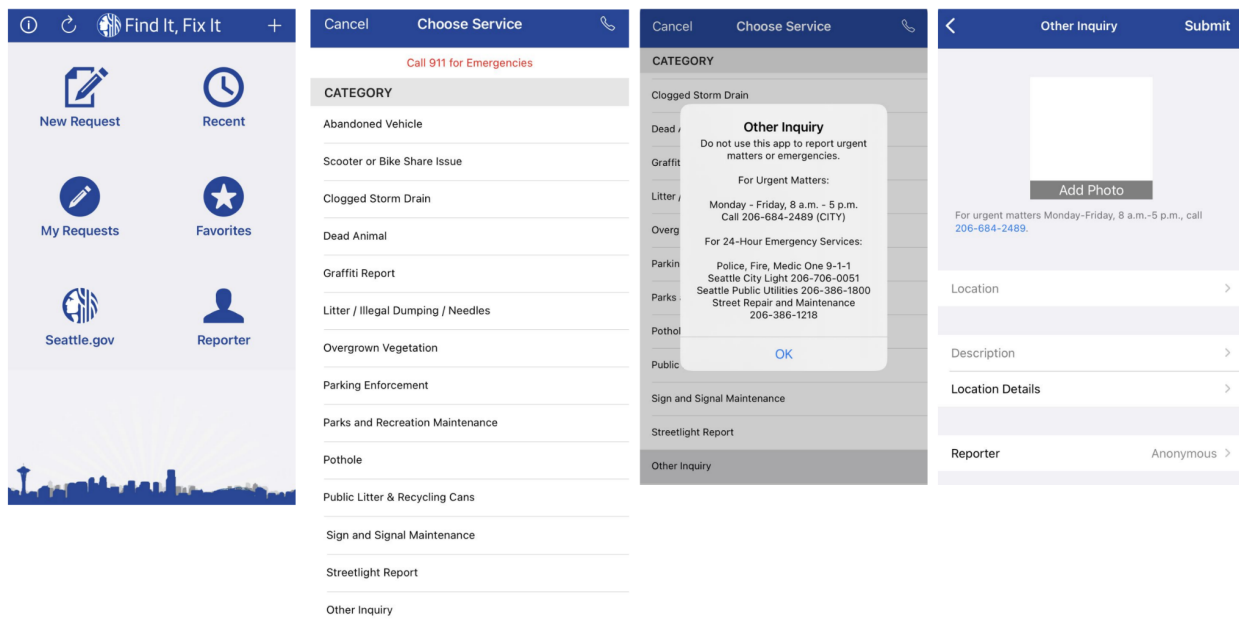
Although Seattle has a non-emergency phone number, in 2013 the City of Seattle developed the Find It, Fix It smartphone application as an easy way for residents to report minor problems to the city. The intention was to develop a digital platform that would function as 311 does in many places: a centralized tool to gather reports of potholes, roadkill, trash, and other public problems and then dispatch reports to the appropriate department for a response. The original reporting categories on Find It, Fix It were intentionally limited to discrete tasks that could be fixed quickly.<sup>21</sup> There is also an "other" category to report problems that fall outside of the existing list (Image 1 shows the user interface for accessing the "other" category.) Seattle was an early adopter of this e-government approach, but other cities like New York, Washington

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<sup>21</sup>Author's personal conversation with a Seattle Public Utilities employee.

D.C., San Francisco, and San Antonio have also developed their own 311 apps to report non-emergency problems.

**Image 1.** Find It, Fix It Phone Application User Interface, 2022



**Image Description:** The user interface for the Seattle City government’s Find It, Fix It smartphone application. Moving from left to right, the four panels show the sequential pages for reporting a new request under the “Other Inquiry” category. Images show the 2022 application.

The app intentionally omits reporting categories related to complex social issues, such as homeless encampments. Seattle Public Utility (SPU) employees shared that this was done intentionally to signal that the purpose of the technology is to streamline actionable requests for service and to convey that the presence of an unhoused person is not a “problem” on par with a broken sidewalk. However, over time people have started using the other category to report issues associated with homelessness – encampments, litter believed to belong to homeless people, areas of the sidewalk blocked by tents, and suspected squatting in abandoned buildings. A 2018 *Atlantic* article summarized the alternative use of the platform succinctly with the title,

“An App for Ejecting the Homeless” (Hawkins 2018). Hawkins argued it is ironic that in Seattle, a city known for technological advancement and wealth, the City’s technology had been co-opted to report and police the poor.

People began using this app in an unintended way and on a large scale for a variety of reasons. When discussing this issue with Seattle Public Utilities staff, they suggested that the responsive nature of the app makes community members feel as though their issues are being taken seriously and are being addressed by the city (the app updates users on the status of their report). Additionally, the city itself started directing residents to use the app to report encampment garbage,<sup>22</sup> possibly creating a tacit endorsement for reporting homelessness-related problems to the city this way. When detailing where they get information about the location and characteristics of an encampment, the City acknowledges that Find It, Fix It and the Customer Service Bureau are both important sources (City of Seattle 2021). Most homelessness-related reports are generated through Find It, Fix It; fewer people contact the Bureau through email, phone calls, community events, or in one-on-one interactions between city employees and residents (the specific composition and trends in reporting are detailed in Chapter 4).

*Find It, Fix It users.*

To understand the implications of this analysis it is important to understand the Find It, Fix It user. Admittedly, this is a hard task. The app itself can be downloaded anonymously<sup>23</sup> and for much of its history did not provide people with the opportunity to share their contact

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<sup>22</sup><https://www.seattle.gov/utilities/protecting-our-environment/safe-and-clean-seattle/encampment-garbage>

<sup>23</sup>While the City does not collect identifying information, such as a person's name or phone number, the specific download of the FIFI app generates a unique identifier. This identifier can be used to determine the frequency of reporting from a specific app (with the reasonable assumption that reports from the same app correspond to one user). It is possible that one user may download another copy of the FIFI app, in which case they would have two unique identifiers associated with them.

information.<sup>24</sup> Because of this anonymity, it is difficult to create a demographic profile of Find It, Fix It users. Seattle Public Utilities leadership report that most users file reports about situations north of the ship canal (an area of Seattle that is whiter and wealthier than its southern neighbors [Balk 2022]) and that the number of users and reports significantly increased year-to-year since the introduction of the application. SPU leadership also commented that app adoption was likely shaped by education levels, with people with only a high school degree or without a high school degree using the application less than those with higher levels of education. Results of the 2018 Technology Access and Adoption Study (City of Seattle IT 2019) suggest this may be due, in part, to differences in the availability of internet and smartphone between the two groups. For individuals with less than a high school degree, 63 percent had access to the internet and 73 percent had access to a smartphone or mobile phone. By contrast, 98 percent of individuals with a bachelor's degree or above had access to the internet and 96 percent had a smart or mobile phone.

Additionally, several features of the app may generate a user base who accesses the platform for disparate reasons. Because the app is anonymous and does not require identifying information to submit a report, individuals who may be less likely to contact the government otherwise may be more inclined to use it than report problems in other ways. The promise of anonymity may also attract people with strong or polarizing views who are more reluctant to share their complaints in a venue where they could be identified. For many users, the application may be appealing because it is easy to access, quick to use, and responsive. Submitting a report is straightforward and requires little information; additionally, users can track the status of their

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<sup>24</sup>The most recent version of the app does give users the option of creating a profile with their first and last name, email address, and/or phone number. Adding this identifying information is not required to use the app or to submit a new report. Additionally, contact information is a recent change to the app and during the time period examined here, the app *did not* formally collect contact information.

reports in the application and receive updates on City responses to their complaints. Finally, while the app is explicitly associated with Seattle city government, it is not directly associated with the police. As a result, users who would like the government to respond to their problem but are reluctant to call the police may use the application as an alternative.

Despite people finding the app easy to use, some have expressed a growing frustration with it. These complaints are often connected to larger grievances about the city's slow response to visible homelessness. Recent reporting documents individuals' frustrations: "Neighbor Lane Imbler-Bremner said he first noticed the RV construction project last week so he used the city's "Find It Fix It" app to report the problem to Seattle City Hall. He said he has not received a response so far" (Choe 2021); "For more than a year, Adam Koch has been reporting a nuisance property overrun with garbage, rats and squatters on the 'Find it, Fix it' app. And for more than a year, he says nothing has changed" (Mutasa 2021). Seattle City Council member Lorena Gonzalez recognized this frustration as well. She said, "When they use the Find it Fix it app, when they email one of us - whether you're in department land or in a councilmember office, or the mayor's office, it just kind of feels like their email goes into a black hole somewhere" (Matusa 2021). It is quite possible that people use the app to give voice to their frustrations with the city. While these reports might not contain actionable requests to the government for services, they may provide another perspective to how frustrated Seattleites think about the city's responsibility and failures.

*Complaint report sample.*

The dataset used in this project covers all requests for service made in the "other" category in 2018 and between January 1<sup>st</sup> and July 9<sup>th</sup>, 2019. In total, 34,840 "other" reports were made to the Seattle Customer Service Bureau through the Find It, Fix It app, email, phone calls,

or other methods during this time. Customer Service Bureau employees categorize the “other” reports with more specific labels, such as unauthorized camping, human services, or criminal activity. Of the 27,244 “other” requests submitted in 2018, 55 percent were categorized by Customer Service Bureau employees as unauthorized camping (n = 14,706). A similar percentage of the other category in 2019 was also labeled unauthorized camping, for a total of approximately 23,500 reports between the two periods. For my analysis, I restrict the sample to only include reports made through the Find It, Fix It app between January 1, 2018 and June 30, 2019 that are labeled as “unauthorized camping,” for a total of 18,872 reports. Data for each report include the following information: day/time of the report, the address of the problem, mobile device ID, location details of the reporter (X, Y coordinates), neighborhood the problem occurred in, and narrative text where the reporter answers the question, “What is the nature of your inquiry?” User answers to this question provide the textual data used for this analysis.

The Find It, Fix It unauthorized camping data was generated through 6,039 unique mobile IDs. A unique mobile ID is generated each time the phone is downloaded by a user. In effect, the mobile ID can be used as a reliable proxy for the number of unique users filing reports through the app. About half of Find It, Fix It users filed one unauthorized encampment report during this period (n=3,293), 17 percent filed two reports (n=1,055), and 23 percent filed between three and ten reports (n=1,411). More frequent users were relatively rare.

Approximately 4 percent of users filed between eleven and fifty reports. Twenty-one people filed more than fifty reports and five super-users filed more than 100 reports. These patterns suggest that most users file reports infrequently and a handful of people are heavy users. While it is not possible to quantitatively evaluate the sensitivity of qualitative insights to outliers, 95 percent of

reports were filed by infrequent to moderate users (i.e. people who filed between 1 and 10 reports during the study period).

## METHODOLOGY

I use qualitative methods to analyze the public comment and complaint data. As outlined above, both data sources capture Seattle residents' sentiments, grievances, and demands related to homelessness. Additionally, both datasets capture comments directed to the elected officials and employees of the City of Seattle. This information is rich in substantive content and context. Rich, textual data lends itself well to qualitative analysis, as these approaches offer researchers a way to lump, splice, and sort information while retaining the broader meaning being conveyed.

Below, I discuss the two analytic approaches I used for this project: frame analysis and the bag of words model for feature extraction in natural language processing. Additionally, I describe how I apply these methods to my datasets, outline the methodological choices I have made, and describe the types of conclusions available through these approaches.

### *Frame Analysis*

Frame analysis is a method used to reveal *how* people who seek change communicate their ideas about social problems. The goal of frame analysis is to determine how and to what effect people combine cultural symbols, stories, and facts to motivate others to agree with them or join their cause. To understand the contributions of frame analysis as a method, it is helpful to define three of its central components: frames, framing, and ideology.

Ryan and Gamson describe frames as “thought organizers” people use to emphasize some events and facts while intentionally understating or ignoring others (2006:13). Oliver and

Johnson (2000:41) describe frames more simply as “mental structures of schemata.” Frames work to “hold things together” and “provide coherence to an array of symbols, images, and arguments, linking them through an underlying organizing idea that suggests what is essential – what consequences and values are at stake” (Ryan and Gamson 2006:14). Social movement researchers highlight the importance of frames for developing a “shared understanding of some problematic condition or situation they define as in need of change, make attributions regarding who or what is to blame, articulate an alternative set of arrangements, and urge others to act in concert to affect change” (Benford and Snow 2000:615). Frames vary by their level of flexibility, inclusivity, interpretive scope, and resonance, as well as how they develop (Benford and Snow 2000:621).

If ‘frames’ are the noun of this method, then ‘framing’ is the verb, or the process by which frames are created, refined, and deployed. Oliver and Johnson (2000:41) describe framing as “a behavior by which people make sense of both daily life and the grievances that confront them.” In their important work on framing, Benford and Snow (2000) helpfully describe the process:

Frame articulation involves the connection and alignment of events and experiences so that they hang together in a relatively unified and compelling fashion. Slices of observed, experienced, and/or recorded “reality” are assembled, collated, and packaged. What gives the resultant collective action frame its novelty is not so much the originality or newness of its ideational elements, but the manner in which they are spliced together and articulated, such that a new angle of vision, vantage point, and/or interpretation is provided.

The frame amplification process involves accenting and highlighting some issues, events, or beliefs as being more salient than others. These punctuated or accented elements may function in service of the articulation process by providing a conceptual handle or peg for linking together various events and issues. (P. 621)

Social movement scholars also think of the framing process as one way individuals and groups try to convince others of the importance of their cause. Research shows that emotion shapes what

people believe is politically possible and desirable (Gould 2004). As a result, “emotions themselves become both the object of framing processes and the means for persuasion” (Maney, Woehrle, and Coy 2005:366) and people take care to “amplify strong emotions whose public expressions are widely permitted (Maney et al. 2005:360).

A final component of frame analysis is ideology. Oliver and Johnson (2000) critique scholars who use frame analysis for conflating frames and ideology in their work and treating them as being one in the same. They define ideology as “a system of meaning that couples assertions and theories about the nature of social life with values and norms relevant to promoting or resisting social change” (2000:43). Whereas frame theory focuses on interactions, shared assumptions, meaning making, and presentation, ideological thinking is broader, more political, and rooted in a normative motivation for social change. Snow and Benford instruct researchers to identify ideology as *content* separate from frames by answering the following questions: How did things get the way they are? (i.e. diagnosis), What should be done and what will the consequences be? (prognosis), and Who should do it and why? (rationale). Ideology is a value schema that tells us what people think is right and wrong, just or unjust, urgent or acceptable.

It is important to identify ideology separately from framing. Gamson and Modigliani demonstrate this practice when they discuss people’s perspectives on nuclear power: “Frames should not be confused with positions for or against some policy measure. While this package is clearly pro-nuclear, there is ample room for disagreement within the overall frame – for example, on what type of reactors should be built” (1989:3). Frame analysis allows for broad characterization of the organizing structures shaping a person’s argument and overall conversations about contested issues. Because framing is a strategy to convince other people, we

can think of it as a tool individuals and groups use to get what they want. Ideology is deeper, more foundational, and, while it can be introduced into a discourse strategically via a frame, understanding its origins is a different, more philosophical task.

*Analyzing public comment data.*

I use frame analysis to identify common themes and concerns in resident comments about homelessness. Frame analysis is a qualitative method used to reveal *how* people who seek change communicate their ideas about social problems. The goal of frame analysis is to determine how and to what effect people combine cultural symbols, stories, and facts to motivate others to agree with them or join their cause. Frame analysis is like qualitative content analysis. It requires “repeated and extensive engagement with a text and looks holistically at the material” (Connolly-Ahern and Broadway 2008:369). Following this method, I approached data analysis inductively. This will be done in a three-step process following Alozie’s model (2005:66): 1) general multiple reading of the articles while taking descriptive notes about the content (i.e. open coding), 2) a second reading to identify recurring themes, frames, values, and topic categories, and 3) an in-depth interpretation of the articles for emergent frames.

In the first round of focused coding, I analyzed public comments line by line to identify key phrases and ideas, emotional states, discursive techniques, and depictions in the data (Gamson and Lasch 1983:407-408). During this stage, my coding was constrained and guided by my research interests—illuminating how housed people understand homelessness as a social problem and the social control responses they expect from the government. In the second rounds of coding, I condensed and categorized the open codes into recurring themes, values, and topics like “public safety” or the idea that some homeless people are “deserving” of help. In this stage, I followed Wimmer and Dominick’s (2006:117-8) constant comparative technique for qualitative

research analysis: “comparative assignment of incidents to categories/frames, elaboration and refinement of categories/frames, identifying relationship and themes among categories/frames, and simplifying and integrating data into a coherent theoretical structure.” In the final coding stage, I identify six problem frames through organizing themes and recurring categories into the more generalizable orientation of idea frames. I applied the primary (i.e. main or most forcefully used) frame to all public comments and secondary (i.e. supplementary) frames when applicable. In total, I completed eight rounds of full coding during these three stages. I include a code tree (Appendix Z) that details the categories, codes, and subcodes associated with each problem frame.

Krippendorff (1967) cautions researchers against assuming the characteristics of individuals generating content (for example, assuming a person who supports welfare benefits is a Democrat). He also suggests that individuals often self-identify as belonging to certain groups or holding certain identities when they generate content, making this pitfall easy to avoid. In the first round of coding, I attempted to record self-identifying characteristics commonly associated with strong opinions about homelessness, such as being a homeowner, politically conservative or progressive, or a long-term Seattle resident. Contrary to Krippendorff’s claim (1967), people did not self-identify in their public comments. To further prevent biased coding based on people’s identities, I added case descriptors (i.e. race, gender, and location) after the coding process was complete.

### *Bag-of-Words Model*

When residents report certain situations, conditions, and behaviors to the City they are communicating that they are problems they believe the government is responsible for. Analyzing

a large corpus of complaints allows me to 1) better understand which situations, conditions, and behaviors associated with homelessness residents view as problematic, and 2) how residents communicate urgency to have the government address their problem promptly. Because the complaints dataset is large (N=18,872), I use the bag of words model to capture the frequency of specific words in the data. Here, I describe important aspects of this methodological approach and adaptations I have made to better suit my research questions and texts.

Complaints range in complexity from brief and factual (“illegal encampment,” “2 green tents,” “unauthorized camping”) to detailed, emotional, and argumentative. This varied complexity means that an approach that captures nuance and context, open coding for qualitative themes, would only usefully apply to the complex complaints, leaving little to be learned from the simplistic ones. However, frequency-focused approaches, like the bag of words method, can create useful metrics through which patterns can be detected across complaints with varying levels of complexity (Grimmer, Roberts, and Stewart 2022). Additionally, the large volume of complaints makes it analytically difficult to read, interpret, and categorize each unit using conventional qualitative methods. For these reasons, I approach complaints as textual data that is best analyzed using natural language processing.

The bag of words (BoW) method is commonly used in natural language processing to describe texts or documents. The goal of this method is to measure the frequency of word occurrences in each “bag.” A bag is the unit of analysis; for instance, a person researching media sentiments may treat each article in their dataset as a “bag.” Because I am interested in characterizing the issues and situations residents complain about (in contrast to seeing how complaint content changes in a temporal period or how complaint content varies between geographic locations), the “bag” of my analysis is the corpus of complaints described earlier in

the chapter. This method also disregards the order of words in a text, as well as grammar (Grimmer et al. 2022). As a result, each word is considered an independent feature of the text. Finally, because the BoW method treats each word as an independent object, it does not capture intent, meaning, or sentiment from the arrangement of words in phrases or sentences (El-Din 2016). In fact, basic BoW approaches remain aggressively agnostic about the meaning of words in the context of a text, while allowing for a quantitative analysis of word frequency within the “bag.”

*Analyzing report data for complaint themes.*

To begin, I randomly sampled 5 percent of the total Find It, Fix It report dataset (without replacement) to generate a subsample of 950 reports. I then read each report, identifying specific words that describe conditions, situations, or behaviors. Then, I categorized the coded words into broad areas. These categories were generated iteratively through a priori themes informed by my qualitative analysis of the Seattle City Council public comment data, which I modified as necessary while reading the subsample of reports. In effect, these categories represent reporters’ general areas of grievance. Saturation was reached after reading 950 complaints, as the same words appeared frequently throughout the subsample and few additional words were added to the categories by the end of the process. Categories and the specific words within each group are included in Appendices A, B, and C.

Next, I use the tidytext package in R to modify the corpus and analyze the word frequency. I follow the process outlined in Chapter 5 (“Bag of Words for Sentiment Analysis”) of *Web Scraping for R* (Prittard 2022). After generating a data frame of word frequencies, I manually analyzed the list for common iterations and misspellings of the words included in Appendix Z to create final frequency measures that capture all instances of the words in the

corpus. Words (and their frequencies) were then sorted into general categories, based largely on the a priori analysis described above. In addition to these general categories I identified relevant sub-themes within the categories. For example, the general category of *physical disorder* consists of words related to the sub-themes of *trash*, *personal belongings/shelters*, *descriptions*, and *other words*.

To make interpretation more intuitive, I move from the unit of analysis being the corpus of words to the unit of analysis being an individual report. I label each report as either belonging/not belonging to categories in the data, depending on the presence or absence of the words most associated with that category. An example here is helpful. After analysis, I break the category of *physical disorder* into four subcategories: *trash*, *personal belongings/shelter*, *descriptions*, and *other* related words. Using the word frequencies generated from the analysis described above, I then code all reports for the presence or absence of the most commonly occurring stem words within the subcategory (i.e. for the subcategory *trash*, I code 0/1 for the words “trash,” “garbage,” “dump,” “litter,” “pile,” “debris,” “rubbish,” “hoard,” and “stuff”). In this example, these 9 stem words (and their iterations) comprise 95 percent of the total word count in the *trash* subcategory. This process allows me to capture most word frequencies and distributions across all reports, while making the data more interpretable for analysis and easier to qualitatively explore.

Finally, I evaluate the qualitative themes within each of the categories that emerge through the bag of words analysis. To do this, I read reports within each category, identifying common themes until saturation. For smaller categories (such as worries about fire or sex crime), I read all reports. For larger categories (like trash or obstruction), I read at least 200 reports, at

which point saturation was achieved. When I discuss my results in Chapter 4, I include quotes from reports to illustrate patterns in the data.

### *Sentiment Analysis*

As discussed in the literature review, people can have strong emotional responses to homelessness. One purpose of complaining is to express negative emotions; the Find It, Fix It reports may provide useful insight into how residents feel about visible homelessness in Seattle. As I explored how to capture resident sentiment in the report data, I came across two methodological problems.

The first is that people have different emotional reactions to the same stimuli. In the case of disgust, researchers understand that “while everyone regularly experiences disgust, some people are dispositionally more *disgust sensitive*—that is, they react more readily and more powerfully to disgust elicitors” (Clifford and Piston 2017:507). To capture this variation, disgust researchers ask respondents to react to different scenarios; because Find It, Fix It reports are fully anonymous it is impossible to measure reporter’s disgust sensitivity. Because people’s reactions to the same stimuli vary, it is methodologically wise not to assume the objects or situations that make people feel disgusted, angry, or frustrated, but look for signifiers of these emotions in the report text.

The second methodological problem is that large language model approaches to sentiment analysis, such as the NRC Word-Emotion Association Lexicon (EmoLex),<sup>25</sup> measure emotions like anger and disgust using crowdsourced lists of words. I ran a sentiment analysis using EmoLex and found that it returned largely invalid results. Many of the words in the lexicon

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<sup>25</sup> <https://saifmohammad.com/WebPages/NRC-Emotion-Lexicon.htm>

are redundant with the main content of the reports—i.e. “homeless,” “garbage,” and “trash” were some of the most frequently occurring words for disgust. As discussed above, it would be a strong assumption to claim that all reporters found these statuses and objects disgusting. Additionally, many widely used words were included in multiple emotional domains, leaving little variation to distinguish between negative emotions like anger, disgust, and fear. And many of the words used to measure positive sentiment (“green,” “public,” “school”) were used to convey a negative sentiment in the data (i.e. “rampant trashing of green space,” “the tenting creates a public hazard,” and “neighborhood kids very scared to walk past to and from school”). While EmoLex and other large language sentiment approaches may be useful to capture emotional reactions to homelessness in general forums like the newspaper or Twitter, I argue that they are both inaccurate and indiscriminate when applied to reports about visible homelessness.

To address these issues, I code for disgust, anger, fear, frustration, and concern for homeless people in the data using the following approach. Rather than assuming something like trash made reporters angry or disgusted, I focus on words and phrases in the text where people explicitly state their emotional reactions. I first culled the list of words from EmoLex to include only descriptions and emotions; their lexicon includes words associated with disgust, anger, and fear. Then, I identified reports that included these words, adding additional words and phrases to the lists that communicated the same emotion. I continued this process until saturation, generating new word/phrase lists for each emotional reaction explored in Chapter 4 (see Appendix B).

As I worked through the word list for anger, I began noticing reports where people were expressing frustration. This reaction was mostly about the Customer Service Bureau closing their previous report without addressing the issue and the ongoing nature of the problems associated

with homelessness. Frustration emerged as a separate (albeit, related) theme from anger, which was sharper, more assertive, and directed at the city for perceived neglect and negligence. I developed a separate measure for frustration. Similarly, some reporters communicated concern for the wellbeing of homeless people. I also coded for this theme.

To be clear, because these measures of emotion were iteratively developed using one data source, they may not be valid to use in another context. It is also important to recognize that these measures are undoubtedly an undercount; the Find It, Fix It reports are complaints after all and it is very likely that people felt these emotions without communicating how they felt using the words included in the modified list. My goal is not to quantify all reporters' emotional reactions, but to reliably characterize the emotions that appear clearly in the data.

## LIMITATIONS

The scope of this project leaves several important questions unexplored. It will be important in future research to establish if and to what extent resident democratic participation shapes city policy on homelessness. Do resident complaints and requests alter the direction of urban poverty governance, or does the volume and tenor of the conversation simply increase or decrease the attention given to the problem? While this project unpacks a hidden and overlooked aspect of the social control process, we know that active citizens are unique in their participation and do not represent all citizens who have opinions about homelessness. Expanding this work to include other groups of housed residents may shed light on other frames or demands excluded from this analysis.

Finally, this work intentionally focuses on residents who are uninvolved in community organizing efforts. While it is a deliberate choice to focus this group specifically, many other

housed residents volunteer their time with social services, charities, and mutual aid efforts, advocate for relief efforts with their religious groups, and work professionally with people experiencing homelessness. These housed individuals also live in neighborhoods, interact with unhoused people in their communities, and interface with the government about homelessness. This project's findings and contributions should be seen as expanding the limited body of sociological research in this area, rather than representing the viewpoint and expectations of all housed residents. Other work will helpfully expand this analysis and illuminate other aspects of housed residents' relationship to homelessness.

## CONCLUSION

The goal of the empirical and analytic approach outlined in this chapter is to accurately measure and characterize how housed residents think about homelessness and what they would like the government to do about it. Care has been taken to identify naturally-occurring data sources—public comments and Find It, Fix It reports—where housed residents air their thoughts and grievances about homelessness to the government. These data capture residents-in-action opposed to reflections on personal beliefs (i.e. answers to survey questions) or imagined future actions that have not yet occurred.

Additionally, frame analysis, the bag of words model, and sentiment analysis are appropriate techniques for teasing out underlying themes and patterns in the data. Frame analysis offers us a way to distinguish between diagnostic frames and prognostic frames, a useful distinction when assessing complex and contradictory social problems like homelessness. Close reading, open coding, and qualitative analysis allow for unexpectant themes to emerge from the data. This openness is important, as there is ample scholarship on homelessness but little direct

work on housed residents' thinking. A more deductive approach may obscure new findings.

Finally, analyzing the content of complaints extends our understanding of these 311 reports. As these data are more frequently used to analyze urban poverty governance and social control, it is vital to develop a richer description of what these reports communicate. From the government's perspective, it is likely not only the volume of complaints that drives their responses, but also the content of the complaints. Until now, this aspect of resident grievance has been ignored by researchers.

## Chapter 4. Complaining about Homelessness

Visible homelessness, by definition, occurs in public spaces. It is also a concept that emphasizes the materiality of homelessness, as it not only encompasses the public presence of people experiencing homelessness but also the physical objects, behaviors, and living arrangements associated with unsheltered homelessness. Previous research shows that housed people have varied reactions to visible homelessness. Blau (1993) finds that Americans respond more negatively to visible forms of poverty than to other traits that have been historically marginalized like race or gender. Additionally, Clifford and Piston's work (2017) emphasizes the role of people's "behavioral immune systems" that implicitly associates homeless people with "pathogens," sickness, and contamination. This disgust response leads people to want to physically distance themselves from homeless individuals out of fear of "infection." Farrell (2005) argues that housed residents perceive visible homelessness as a sign of a growing community problem, but do not blame homeless individuals for perceived declines in their neighborhood. He also finds that exposure to visible homelessness does not increase fear of crime among residents (Farrell 2005). On the other hand, Davidson and Howe (2013:628) argue that San Francisco residents feel as though their neighborhood is "under siege" by people who are homeless, which generates complaints about "dealing with" the consequences of unsheltered homelessness.

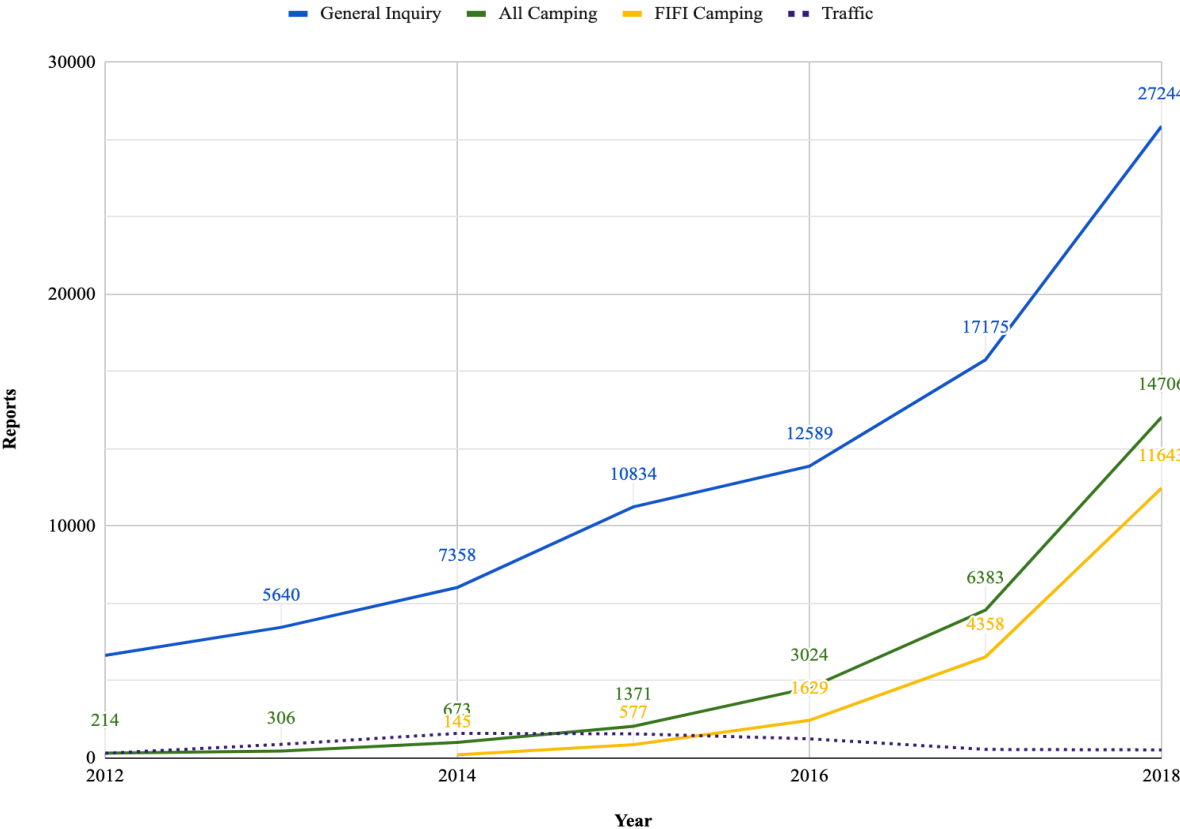
Complaints are a way for people to explain what is happening, release emotions, and invite the involvement of an institution. Complaints can be cathartic, messy, and emotional expressions of grievance. And this emotional expression can be an honest outpouring of how someone is feeling, a rhetorical strategy, or both. As Ahmed says in *Complaint!*, "We can hear something because of its intensity" (2021:17). Complaints—here, Find It, Fix It reports about

unauthorized homelessness—are an ideal source to explore both the identification of a social problem as well as the emotional reactions that underpin housed residents’ thinking about homelessness in a liberal city. One way of understanding what homelessness-related issues housed residents identify as problems is to look at what they report to city authorities. These data provide an unprompted and direct window into resident complaints about homelessness. As described in Chapter 3, Seattle residents report issues they have with homelessness to the City through the Find It, Fix It app. In essence, this is a platform that collects residents’ complaints.

Like other cities, Seattle has seen an exponential increase in homelessness complaints. Because cities have implemented 311 smartphone apps, it is possible that some of this increased reporting is an artifact of new technology rather than a reflection of increased problems with homelessness. To explore this possibility, I compare reports made in several report categories (Figure 3 below). We can see that overall reports in the General Inquiry category (i.e. the ‘other’ option on the app) increases steadily between 2012 and 2016 and then increases significantly between 2016 and 2018. The pattern for All Camping reports (i.e. unauthorized camping reports made to the Customer Service Bureau via any method) parallels the General Inquiry reports, suggesting that technology adoption may be a common factor in both trends. One way of examining this possibility is to include an issue largely unrelated to homelessness to see if it mirrors the Camping lines (suggesting a tech-adoption mechanism) or diverges (suggesting a meaningful difference in complaints between the two categories). Out of the available options, the Traffic category was the least related to unauthorized camping reports. Here, we can see that traffic reports remain low and constant throughout the period. This suggests that the ease and accessibility of the Find It, Fix It app is not the primary explanation for the increase in unauthorized camping complaints; that there is in fact a meaningful increase in homeless

complaints among Seattle residents.

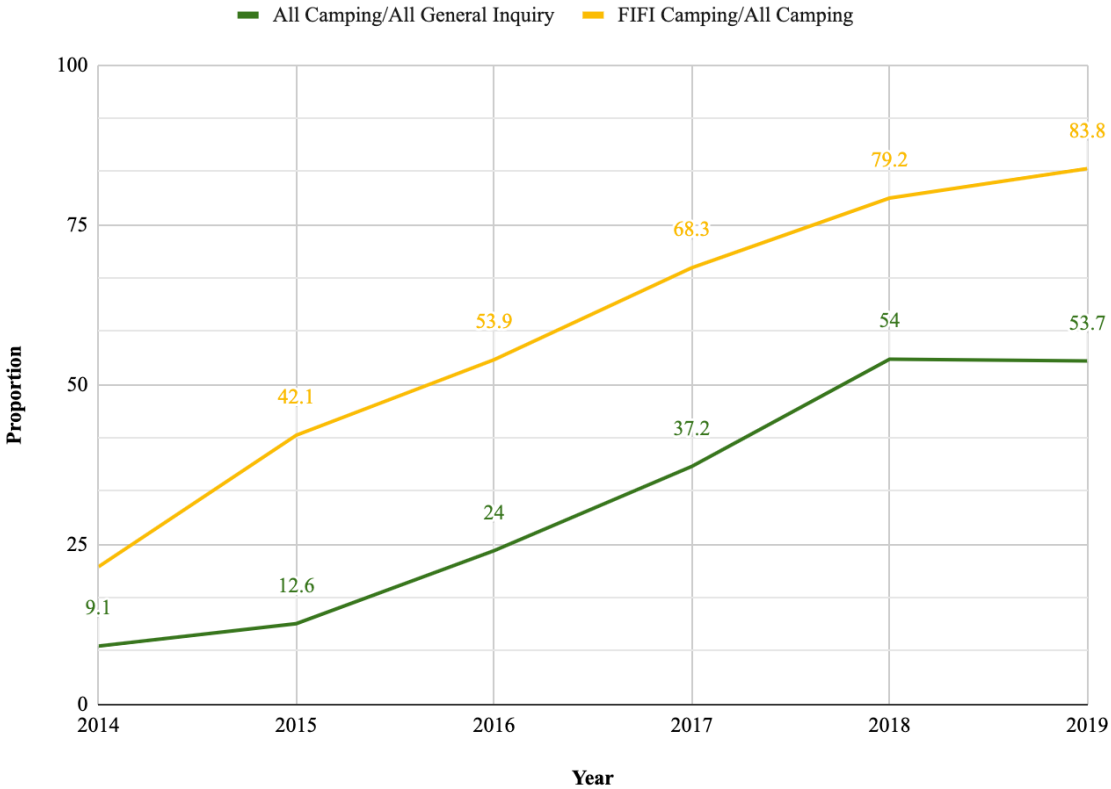
**Figure 3.** Trends in Reports Made to the City of Seattle’s Customer Service Bureau, 2012-2018



We also see that unauthorized camping reports become an increasingly large portion of the General Inquiry category over time, composing 9 percent in 2014 to 54 percent in 2018 and 2019 (Figure 2). Additionally, the Find It, Fix It app became the dominant way Seattle residents file reports to the city during this period. Not only are unauthorized camping reports generating a large volume of complaints for the city to respond to, but residents are also increasingly using the Find It, Fix It app to file these reports. Additionally, 80 percent of unauthorized camping reports were made through the app in 2018 and 2019 (Figure 4). This means exclusively analyzing Find It, Fix It camping reports is a defensible way to understand most homeless

complaints made to the city during this period.

**Figure 4.** Proportionality of Complaint Types in Find It, Fix It Data, 2014-2019



Complaint volume is one important aspect of this story. But complaint volume does not indicate which aspects of visible homelessness residents see as problematic. Of the conditions and circumstances surrounding public living, what topics are raised most frequently? Why are they voicing these complaints, and what about homelessness makes residents upset? This chapter sheds light on how housed residents who are notably bothered think about unsheltered homelessness. Using data on over 18,000 Find It, Fix It reports of unauthorized encampments in the Seattle area made between 2018 and 2019, I identify common complaints and emotional reactions to visible homelessness. I combine Natural Language Processing methods with

qualitative analysis to identify salient themes in the data and characterize people’s emotional responses to various complaints.

I find people who report unauthorized encampments to the City are concerned about the issues of incivility, inconvenience, and threat. Most feel that visible homelessness has coarsened their experience of living in Seattle, presenting them with a litany of visual, olfactory, and physical problems that the city seems unwilling or incapable of adequately addressing. For Find It, Fix It reporters, unsheltered homelessness is a quagmire of social and physical disorder that makes them feel worried for themselves, children, and the environment.

## RESULTS

In the first stage of analysis, I use Natural Language Processing to assess what words appear in the data and to identify patterns, which I then explore qualitatively. After removing stop words,<sup>26</sup> the corpus<sup>27</sup> contained 135,007 words, of which 28,851 were associated with specific complaints related to homelessness. Table 3 displays the count or frequency of specific complaint-related words appearing in the corpus, indicating patterns of use in the reports. Of the issues raised in the reports, words associated with physical disorder account for 43 percent of all complaint-related words. Following physical disorder, words associated with blocking access (16 percent) and drug use were most frequently used, accounting for 75 percent of all categorized words. Other issues commonly associated with homelessness—crime, social disorder, public health concerns, and unpredictable behavior attributed to untreated mental illness—were less frequently included in resident’s reports. Finally, residents noted that visible homelessness

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<sup>26</sup>Stop words are very commonly used words (such as “a”, “the”, “and”) that frequently appear in a corpus but rarely contribute to the overall meaning.

<sup>27</sup>A corpus is a collection of written texts, especially the entire works of a particular author or a body of writing on a particular subject.

negatively impacted vulnerable publics (children, seniors, and disabled people) and the environment.

**Table 3.** Complaint-related Words in FIFI Report Sample, 2018-2019

<b>Complaint Category</b>	<b># of Words</b>	<b>Percent</b>
Physical Disorder (Trash, Human Waste, Needles)	12,249	43.41
Blocking Access (Pedestrian & Car-related)	5,921	20.54
Drugs	3,126	10.91
Vulnerable Groups	1,957	7.50
Crime (Property & Person Crimes)	1,527	5.95
Environment	1,686	5.88
Social Disorder (Nuisance & Interactions)	1,490	5.26
Health	206	0.72
Mental Illness	106	0.37
<b><i>Total Complaint-Related Words</i></b>	<b>28,653</b>	<b>100</b>

For the remainder of the chapter, I explore the meaning and substance of these frequency-based findings in more detail. I also discuss these results using reports as my unit of analysis. Of the 18,872 “unauthorized camping” reports included in the Find It, Fix It sample, 10,588 reports contain at least one complaint-related word (see Appendix A for additional information).

Complaint categories rank in the largely same way for corpus and reports: in both cases physical disorder and obstruction occurred most frequently and health-related issues occurred least frequently. The rankings of drugs, vulnerable groups, crime, social disorder, and environment do vary between the two units, however each category’s frequency in the data is relatively the same in the corpus- and report-based approaches.

It is also important to note that 80 percent of reports containing a complaint-related word (n=10,588) belong to more than one category of complaint (n=8,419). Most people complain about several homelessness-related issues in the same report.<sup>28</sup> As a result, I prioritize discussing the substantive meaning of complaint categories/issues and their relative frequency in the data over more detailed numerical descriptions.

These overlaps are more than a descriptive observation; they are a central feature in the way reporters discuss homelessness-related issues in the data. When people describe problems, they often list several problems, one right after another, in a way that emphasizes the relentless and broad nature of the conditions they are reporting. Some reports focus on a discrete problem, but most discuss issues as though they are a litany, morass, or knot; complex problems that are related by proximity or origin, but regardless of their cause they are all inextricably linked to visible and unaddressed homelessness. In the findings below I discuss important dimensions to each complaint issue. There are unique and important differences in how people talk about violent crime and human waste, for example. However, in the data and throughout my findings, there is much more commonality in how residents describe problems related to visible homelessness, suggesting that visible homelessness is a *sui generis* phenomenon that is best understood as a whole, rather than a sum of its parts.

### *Incivilities*

Of all the issues related to homelessness, people complain about physical disorder the most. In fact, physical disorder—in the form of trash, personal belongings, human waste, and

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<sup>28</sup>Reports with multiple complaint categories: 2 categories (n=3,891; 37 percent of complaint reports); 3 categories (n=2,326; 22 percent); 4 categories (n=1,162; 11 percent); more than 4 complaint categories (n=1,040; 10 percent)

needles—is complained about in 7,393 reports, roughly 70 percent of the reports with a relevant complaint.

**Table 4.** Incivility Issues in FIFI Report Sample, 2018-2019

<b>Complaint Category</b>	<b>Complaint Issue (Subcategory)</b>	<b># of Reports*</b>
<i>Objects</i>	Trash	5,907
	Personal Belongings/Shelter	1,415
	Other Issues/Descriptions	1,433
<i>Social Disorder</i>	Needles	1,118
	Fire	373
	Noise	322
<i>Human Waste</i>	Feces	284
	Urine	155
	General	114
<i>Public Drug Use</i>	—	1,337

\*Most reports contain more than one issue, making the total from this table different from the total number of reports categorized as physical disorder complaints in Table 3.

*Trash.*

Many people reported garbage and trash as their only issue related to unsanctioned encampments and visible homelessness. Commenters often note that trash is in a public place (“tent and garbage in park,” “garbage and litter on shoulder,” “[litter], debris, and personal items stored on sidewalk”). These reports also characterize the volume of trash, describing it as “lots,” “giant piles,” and “huge mounds.” There is a sense from the complaint reports that people see trash as both a location-specific issue (i.e. large amounts in one place) and a wider issue of generalized disorder (i.e. “We have lived in this amazing city for decades and have never seen

such filth and garbage everywhere!”). Others worry that the existing garbage will attract more debris over time: “garbage and stuff just grow and grows”; “The tent needs to move someplace else. It is a magnet for others to pile their junk in the planters next to it, to push shopping carts in the middle of the night for a parking spot next to the tent.” These examples reflect a broader pattern in the data: many reporters not only complain about a specific issue but use their report to warn the city that additional problems are likely to occur if their grievance is not addressed. Reporters also fear that trash will serve as a signal for other homeless people that this site is a location that is good for camping. They argue that “cleaning up the trash [will get] rid of the people attracted to it,” hoping that a thorough cleaning will interrupt the cycle of encampments reappearing at specific locations. Some people distinguish garbage they believe is being created by active homeless encampments from trash that has been abandoned or left behind after an encampment has been moved. “Abandoned” was the most frequently used word associated with physical disorder—it was overwhelmingly used to describe campsites, grocery carts, and vehicles that reporters believed had been left behind by campers who had moved to a different location. In these reports, people are very clear that the trash should be cleaned up quickly, as it is less complicated to address abandoned trash than it is to address the needs and preferences of people who may be living in an encampment.

#### *Belongings and shelter.*

Some reporters distinguish between trash and the personal belongings of people experiencing homelessness; more often, they discuss both in the same complaint. Discussions of belongings largely mirror those of trash—there is too much and it’s in the wrong places—but there are important differences as well. Reports of personal belongings often describe the items as being “messy,” “scattered,” “strewn about,” and “spread out” alongside trash and other objects.

These descriptions suggest that more orderly and contained belongings are less disruptive in public spaces. One reporter communicated this idea saying, “There are several encampments in this area where the campers have always maintained their property. This is a very different encampment; since the residents have moved in, it [has] caused a huge dip in the sanitary conditions of the neighborhood. Please, please do something to help.” Another shared a similar feeling, “I understand the homeless problem is complex, but these are not the homeless residents of our neighborhood (the guy in the green truck is really nice) and they are littering on the parking strip and have multiple bikes laying around.” Reporters also find it objectionable when homeless individuals have too many belongings and when their belongings and living structures appear to become more permanent and substantial. People complain about homeless people’s “stuff,” the fact that they are transporting an “abundance of belongings” in strollers and shopping carts, and when they believe there are too many belongings for the number of people at a campsite. Reporters are more upset when makeshift structures become more permanent or “hardened.” They lament when walls, roofs, and windows are added; when longer-lasting materials, like wood or metal, are used; or when there are signs that a camp is settling in, such as easy chairs, porches, clothing lines, signs, and decorations.

*Social disorder.*

Hypodermic needles (associated with injection drug use) were commonly listed alongside other signs of physical and disorder—approximately 10 percent of the complaint-related reports mentioned them. While needles were usually discussed with little description, some people highlighted how they posed a greater risk than other objects. People expressed worry about stepping on or being stuck with “hepatitis-laden needles.” One person expressed their fear saying, “Needles, stolen property, human waste, trash, cannot use public infrastructure for fear of

mugging or disease from used needles.” In general, people did not seem disproportionately concerned about needles in their reports, communicating that they were *another* element of disorder, chaos, and danger in their city. Fire and noise are two nuisance behaviors occasionally mentioned in the reports. Reporters worried that campfires and cooking fires at encampments would spread to nearby wooded areas and homes or may damage bridges and other infrastructure. They also complained about noises coming from encampments at night, mainly from yelling and fighting, generators, and music.

#### *Human waste.*

People had some of the strongest reactions to human waste. Again, it was most frequently listed as one of the many conditions of disorder associated with visible homelessness, but respondents had a more visceral and disgusted response to it than to other objects or behaviors. Thirty-two percent of reports complaining about human waste also contain disgust-related words (the highest correlation between a complaint and a sentiment in the data). People complained most frequently about the presence of human waste (feces and the smell of urine), toilet paper, materials used as improvised toilets like buckets and jugs, and people urinating/defecating on or near buildings and cars.

There was also concern, anger, and disgust about people relieving themselves in public. Some reporters commented that they have seen the same person repeatedly urinating: “just now perhaps the 100th time I’ve driven by & had to see him urinating!” or “My 7 year old son does not need to walk past a naked man peeing every morning!! This has to go! PLEASE! I beg of you. Why does this go on?” In addition to being upset by the behavior, people complained about seeing homeless people in various stages of undress when they were using the bathroom. One less common but notable pattern is that reporters expressed concern about situations where there

were no toilets, speculating about where campers were using the bathroom. This concern was usually directed at the impacts of public toileting on the surrounding environment: “There is no toilet there. I assume they are eliminating over the hill into the canal” (this pattern is discussed in more detail in the Threat section below).

Reporters were clear: human waste in public spaces is both an incivility and a health hazard. People were incensed that they were seeing waste and expressed anger about the impacts it was having on the city; “Tents, garbage, stolen bikes, grocery carts, human feces, needles etc. This is horrific that our city looks like this at every turn. DO SOMETHING. I am a northwest native and am appalled at what we are allowing. Clean up the filth!!!!” The presence of human waste also reclassified belongings and encampments from possibly being people’s temporary homes into a much more urgent and concerning problem. One reporter expressed this sentiment, saying “It reeks of URINE, FECES, and ROTTING FOOD! This is NOT a home. This is TRASH! Please do something about this and get this man and his trash heap off the street once and for all!” Reporters were also straightforward about their assessments of the risk and threat associated with human waste. They describe it as “an absolute health hazard” and biohazard, source of hepatitis and bacteria, and the potential cause of “outbreak of infectious diseases.”

*Public drug use.*

In reports, public drug use encompasses several areas of complaint—objects and paraphernalia related to drug use, behaviors like smoking or dealing, and users—and it is largely discussed as an incivility. Like other behaviors, such as littering (RCW 70A.200.060)<sup>29</sup> or public urination (Ord. 1389 § 23),<sup>30</sup> public drug use was formally punished during the period covered by this report data. Unlike littering, public urination, or open container violations that can be

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<sup>29</sup><https://app.leg.wa.gov/rcw/default.aspx?cite=70A.200.060>

<sup>30</sup><https://www.codepublishing.com/WA/Pacific/html/Pacific09/Pacific0926.html#9.26.070>

treated as infractions and result in a fee, public drug use, possession, and dealing can carry more serious penalties, such as jail or prison time and can generate a criminal record (Quinton 2023). So, while there are important legal differences between the punishments for physical disorder, low-level social disorder, and drug-related behavior, many people discuss drug use and objects as incivilities that diminish the city. Additionally, drugs and drug-related issues are also discussed in tandem with other incivilities to emphasize the magnitude of the problem.<sup>31</sup> I discuss drug-related complaints that are framed as incivilities in this section and continue to discuss drugs as a threat in following sections.

Approximately 10 percent of complaint-related reports (n=1,337) discuss drugs in some form. Reporters complained about the public nature of drug use and dealing, the inability to use public spaces where drug use was present, and anger at the impunity people were given when they used drugs publicly. Drug use occurring in the open was a problem for people: “Drug dealing in tent. Observed multiple drug deals”; “Junkies just sit on sidewalks and shooting drugs in the open”; “Open drug and alcohol use.” Because public drug use was illegal during this period, it is notable that reporters chose to notify city officials about this behavior through the Find It, Fix It App rather than calling 9-1-1. I offer several possibilities for this choice in the discussion, but reporters closely associate public drug use with public homelessness in their reports. Drug use, objects, and dealing are all behaviors that are associated with the coarsening of public space and unsightly, objectionable behavior.

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<sup>31</sup>This report demonstrates how drugs/drug use are interwoven throughout reports about other incivilities: “Illegal encampment in planter outside of the library for over 6 months has become a hangout for homeless and drug/alcohol abuse and dealing. Meth use rampant - all day and night, lighting up right in front of children watching through the library window. Camping chairs and alcohol block the sidewalk during most days and evenings. Loud music and drunken screaming at night, even on Easter morning. Drug dealers stopping in the middle of the road in front of the tent while rent-lady's friends run to the car window to score.”

Others reported that public drug use reduced their willingness to visit public parks and libraries. People felt that drug use and users dominated and transformed certain spaces: “Drug addicted, mentally ill vagrants have taken over this park. It used to be an amenity. Now it is a blight.” For many reporters, public drug use in parks was incompatible with other uses of the park, such as jogging, using playgrounds, or meeting up with friends. Other reporters listed drinking and drug use alongside other incivilities, saying that the overall environment was no longer a desirable place to go: “Lots of menacing people with garbage, needles, drinking, drugs, looks very dangerous. Will not use the park with them there. Lots of arguing and fighting going on.” Public drug use associated with homelessness was discussed as a bright line for many people, distinguishing usable areas from areas “stolen” by people experiencing unsheltered homelessness.

*Emotional reactions to incivilities.*

Trash, broken furniture, disorganized belongings, needles, fires, noise, human waste, and public drug use are perceived as threatening, disgusting, and infuriating to Find It, Fix It reporters. People frequently make a direct link between disordered conditions and feeling unsafe using public spaces: “The encampment residents have spread trash and belongings along the trail making it uncomfortable and unsafe for users of the trail. I no longer feel safe using the trail by myself”; “Since the picnic tables are in the middle of the park and the homeless people have covered them with their belongings and trash, it feels very unsafe to walk through the park.” Expressions of fear and feeling unsafe are about both specific objects (needles, broken glass, and human waste) that pose a health threat and general environments marked by incivilities. People express a generalized sense of fear for these spaces, saying that they do not feel comfortable using them at night, alone, or with their children. This fear can also lead to frustration: people

express that they are tired and angry that they feel unsafe in their city or neighborhood. One reporter summarized this feeling when they said, “We should be allowed to feel safe in OUR neighborhood. Our children should feel safe, they should be able to walk on the sidewalks, be safe from needles, not deal with human waste, profanity at all hours and so much trash blowing around and being left in our yards.”

People also expressed disgust toward disordered and chaotic conditions. In addition to the specific disgust about human waste and needles discussed above, people also felt disgust about the ramifications of physical disorder. People were concerned about rats being attracted to trash and spoiled food, garbage leaking or spilling out into sensitive environmental areas, and the possibility that housed residents may have to address the problem on their own. They were also disgusted and insulted that they had to look at these conditions daily. People argued that they “shouldn’t have to see” trash, people relieving themselves in public, and public drug use. These conditions were described as a visual nuisance and eyesore. The general feeling was that the city should address these blights and that homeless people “should have to move somewhere else.”

Other reporters expressed disgust towards the people living in these conditions, dehumanizing their shelter sites as “junkie garbage nests,” “hives,” or “colonies.” Reporters extend the disgust they feel toward physical disorder to the people they hold responsible: “Drug vagrants stealing items from around the neighborhood and rapidly accumulating them into their rat nest.”; “There was a pile of homeless people sleeping over a pile of a lot of garbage. They seemed disoriented and for sure high on something.” While the disgust expressed about incivilities was usually related to odors, health concerns, and unsanitary conditions, disgust expressed towards homeless people was less about these disease-related concerns and more contemptuous and vitriolic. These dehumanizing statements are rare in the data, but they

demonstrate how physical disorder can shape people's perception of homeless individuals themselves.

Of the incivilities discussed in this section, public drug use invoked the most anger with reporters. People were incensed that drug users were rarely punished and allowed to use drugs in public with impunity. Reporters believe that this impunity is a sign that the City's soft response to drug use results in increased property crime:

Just want to thank you all again for letting these heroin junkies do whatever they want. One of them broke my mirror while transporting their stolen bike collection. How do I know? Because last night my car was fine. The passenger side door was not facing the street. And the only people who walk there are your precious, misunderstood drug addicts with the carts of stolen goods and stolen bikes.

Reporters were also angry that "drug addicts [are] allowed to camp in Cal Anderson Park when there are shelter beds available" and expressed disbelief that "Seattle would allow this level of dysfunction (theft, vandalism, human waste, drug dealing, needles, assault)." For these reporters, this lax approach results in the loss of public space ("Cal Anderson Park is the public square of Capitol Hill. It is the heart. Don't let two dozen drug addict anarchists and dealers ruin it for the 30,000 people that live in the neighborhood"). Finally, reporters were angry at the City for responses they perceived as favoring the rights of homeless people over housed residents and businesses: "Illegal alcohol and drug use public deification. This is ridiculous how does this group of individuals have more rights than the businesses and the people living in the neighborhood"; "I am also sitting on my balcony watching a drug deal on the hill go down which is also such a lovely way to end my day! drug dealers in Seattle are living their best life!" In general, reporters held negative sentiments toward the material realities of visible homelessness and towards some of the people experiencing homelessness (particularly people who use drugs). People generally felt that the city was being ruined and degraded by public homelessness and

that their lives, as housed residents, were worse off for it. In this section I reviewed the objects and behaviors residents associate with the incivility of visible homelessness. Next, I discuss how residents see incivilities not only as damaging the urban environment but also inconveniencing them in their day-to-day lives.

### *Inconveniences*

The second most frequent complaint in the Find It, Fix It data is obstruction (n=3,362)—moments when residents are unable to do what they want because of some aspect of visible homelessness. This complaint is closely related to the most frequently occurring one—trash—because most of the reports about obstruction are about trash blocking doorways, sidewalks, and parks from public use. People also report that trash and the belongings of people experiencing homelessness prevent them from using parking spots as intended. In general, complaints about obstruction invoke fear, echoing patterns discussed above where people feel unsafe and unable to use public space because of the presence of homeless people and their belongings. Here I explore four main themes related to obstruction.

People complained the most about sidewalks being obstructed for pedestrians. Beyond the physical impediments of getting through a space, people complained that pedestrians and the public had the right to use the sidewalk; visible homelessness was seen as infringing on that right. Reporters communicated this idea by emphasizing that the sidewalk is a public space: “4 tents blocking sidewalk. Cannot use this PUBLIC space.” People also complained that the sidewalk obstructions were a normative and moral violation (“This is WRONG”), calling into question Seattle’s commitment to pedestrian access and its care for disabled citizens. People challenged the legitimacy of blocked sidewalks by discussing how these situations negatively

impacted people in wheelchairs. While some reporters asked about legal statutes (“Does the ADA not apply in Seattle. Disgraceful negligence”), more often people shared personal stories about impacted mobility:

My husband is a disabled veteran and amputee and has to cross the street as they block the whole sidewalk this is unacceptable - shame on the city of Seattle for allowing this to go on, shame on the city for thinking the answer to this crises is allowing this kind of illegal activity to continue unabated, shame on the city for giving more consideration to homeless drug addicts then you do to disabled veterans.

I am a person whom uses a power wheelchair and this homeless camp is blocking the sidewalk to the point I can't get by it. I have to use bicycle lane to get by and this is a busy road and my wheelchair is almost the same size as the bicycle lane and I feel uncomfortable having to use it and I have noticed that drivers are uncomfortable as well.

These stories, while infrequent, are powerful examples of how visible homelessness impacts the lives of disabled people. As explored in the Threat and Discussion sections below, reporters mention vulnerable entities that invoke sympathetic responses to create a sense of injustice and urgency to their complaints. Here, it is not just that the sidewalk is unusable for pedestrians, it is also that the sidewalk blockage makes disabled people particularly vulnerable to harm. The city is not only infringing on the rights of ordinary rights-bearing pedestrians; it is also seen as infringing on vulnerable rights-bearing disabled people.

The other dominant theme related to obstruction was the accessibility of parking spaces and parking lots. Like blocked sidewalks, people complained that trash, broken furniture, and belongings prevented them from using valuable parking spaces (“Tents blocking parking. Unable to exit vehicle on passenger side”; “His pile of items is frequently in the walking path on the sidewalk. It's recently been falling into the street and is creating problems for people that want to park!”). Rather than emphasizing the right to park, reporters framed lost parking opportunities as a valuable resource that was being squandered due to public homelessness: “These are illegal encampments and are taking up valuable, much needed parking!!” People complained about

homeless people camping in parking lots, R.V.s overstaying their legal welcome in street parking, and for creating an environment hostile to parking safely and conveniently.

Reporters mentioned that it was not just the physical impediments to parking that created problems, but the fear and disgust that prevented people from being near homeless people. One reporter complained that a man camping in his neighborhood created a hostile environment (“No one wants to park next to him”) and made the rest of the parking near his home unusable (“here goes the rest of our street parking that is a safe distance from our house”). Another reporter said about someone else: “Most people do not want to have their cars anywhere near this man bc of all the trash items as well as the overwhelming stench of urine.”

A lack of access was also a problem for people who reported that they could not enter their homes. These complaints were mainly about unhoused people sleeping in doorways of apartment buildings. People reported that individuals sleeping in their doorways impacted their ability to take their children to the bus, leave for work on time, walk their dogs, and feel safe coming home at night alone. Others expressed concern that homeless people may come into their buildings: “The neighbor who is directly affected is scared that they will open her gate door that they are blocking and eventually get in.” In general, these complaints were marked with a sense of fear and frustration; they often read as more intimate and desperate than other reports, as people reported feeling trapped and unable to freely come and go from their homes.

Obstructed spaces created a sense of fear for reporters. In addition to the fear expressed when people could not enter or exit their homes, other people discuss how sidewalk obstructions put them at danger by making them walk in the street and by creating an overall environment that feels hostile and unwelcoming to pedestrians. People commonly complained about having to walk in the street because they could not (or would not) walk through trash and encampments on

the sidewalk. Sometimes this is due to a blockage (“Tent blocking sidewalk. Pedestrians have to walk in the street”). Sometimes it is due to perceived risk (“I had to walk in the street with cars coming off ferry because I don’t want infectious disease on my shoes or bottom of my pants.”) Like the rights discourse about disability, reporters highlighted how blocked sidewalks placed wheelchair users and blind/visually impaired people at much higher risk (“There are several people in my building just 2 blocks from the encampment who use sight sticks to navigate, and I imagine this blockage causing issues is somewhat of a regular occurrence.”). People were also upset when their children were unable to use the sidewalks and they had to use their bikes or strollers in the bicycle lane. Reporters were clear: they blamed the city for putting “people in harms way” and saw it as a governmental failure that they were unable to use the sidewalks as public space.

Additionally, blocked access and obstructed spaces made people generally fearful of their surroundings. People expressed that they no longer felt safe walking on sidewalks and down blocks that were obstructed. They expressed their fear as a loss of safety (“no longer feel safe”), meaning that they associated a change in their comfort with the presence of visible homelessness in the area. Others noted that their fear was heightened at night (“It does not feel safe to walk past this tent to and from work in the early hours and late at night”; “I no longer feel safe walking through here in broad daylight one block from a playground and the east precinct.”) Finally, some reporters shared that obstruction was a problem because they felt trapped and unable to avoid going near homeless encampments. These individuals saw encampments as blocking an exit, increasing their vulnerability to the perceived threat of the homeless people they would need to be in closer proximity to as they left the area. One reporter shares this fear, saying “This is a dead end street, the only exit out being past this tent.” In general, obstructed

spaces make people fearful because they are exposed to dangerous conditions (i.e. needing to walk in the street to avoid encampments) and feel unable to navigate public space in a way that reduces their risk exposure.

### *Threats*

Sometimes housed residents feel threatened by homeless people. This theme has already been discussed in this chapter—people avoid needles because of their perceived health risks, navigate into bike lanes to avoid obstructed sidewalks, and experience a general sense of unease due to disordered and chaotic environments. Here, I focus on two aspects of threat more specifically: interactions with homeless people that may cause harm and vulnerable groups that are particularly at risk.

Crime was discussed in Find It, Fix It reports, albeit rarely. Six percent of complaint reports mentioned crime (n=684); approximately one tenth of the number of reports that mentioned physical disorder. People complained about theft most frequently (n=234), followed by trespassing and property destruction. People rarely mentioned serious violent crime, but did report upsetting interactions, like harassment, more frequently. Finally, mentions of sex-related crimes were very rare. Unsurprisingly, mentions of crime were strongly correlated with fear.

### *Theft.*

People mainly complained about theft they associated with homelessness: thefts of bikes, shopping carts, packages, and water and electricity. They discussed it as both a moral problem—people shouldn't steal because it is wrong—and a personal problem—homeless people are stealing from me and my neighbors. Bicycle theft was frequently mentioned when reporters described encampment locations. People noted that multiple bikes were visible at encampments, people

were taking bikes apart to possibly sell their components, and that bikes were likely stolen. To reporters, bicycles are a large and bulky indicator that encampment residents have stolen other people's belongings.

People also complained that packages were being stolen from their porches: “they are causing trouble in the neighborhood and they are stealing packages in front of homes as well, many people have video recordings of them on their camera apps.” While people did complain about package theft, it was rare—only 33 reports included the word ‘package.’ Other residents reported that homeless people had been caught or suspected of using their home’s electricity and water without permission. Find It, Fix It users blamed the city for allowing these behaviors to continue because of their lax enforcement. Furthermore, reporters linked weak theft enforcement to unlikely outcomes: “Theft of hundreds of dollars of shopping carts from Safeway. By not enforcing theft laws, you are complicit with the criminals and raising food prices in Seattle”; “Bike theft: stripped bikes. By not enforcing theft laws, you are enforcing theft, and reducing cycling in Seattle, increasing emissions.” Overall, theft was treated as a relatively low-level, obnoxious behavior that frustrated residents and indicated that the city was insufficiently enforcing the law.

In many of the reports of theft reporters assume that homeless people had been the ones stealing packages and bicycles despite not having (or sharing) direct evidence. This assumption also applies to broader crime trends in the neighborhood. Residents make a direct connection between homeless encampments and perceived theft. In their reports, they argue that theft in their neighborhood increased *after* homeless encampments arrived, implying that homeless encampments are the cause of theft in the area: “Prowling, Trespassing, Threats, and package theft immediately increase when the first tent popped up.”; “Homeless count is growing with

more cars taking up resident parking on 11th Ave SW, and for people who use the park.

Neighborhood is having sudden thefts and it is a park for children, no longer appears safe as this is drawing in additional characters who illegally dump, vandalize and use drugs.”

*Trespassing and property destruction.*

People also report homeless people for trespassing. They assert that trespassing is an incessant problem, an indicator that the government has failed at its efforts to curb troublesome behavior, and an invasion of their personal space and property. Trespassing is closely associated with property destruction in the reports, as well as theft.

Trespassing is complained about as a repeated problematic behavior. Reporters describe the issue as being “constant” and “chronic.” In some reports, people describe the problem as repetitive, indicating that the problem is associated homelessness in a more general sense. Other times, people report that specific individuals repeatedly trespass. In these cases, the complaint seems to be less about homelessness as a social problem and more about the behaviors of certain people. One reporter shares this feeling, saying “My home was burglarized and I keep seeing people from the camp trespassing in my own building. I found one younger male in the hallway 2 days ago and I keep seeing him stealing our mail.” Trespassing is also linked to other issues, like mail theft, vandalism, and car prowling, indicating that people are both concerned with homeless individuals being in the wrong spaces but also a more general sense that they are engaged in multiple forms of crime at the same time. Reporters associated vandalism with trespassing. Reporters notified the city that homeless people were cutting fencing to gain access to unauthorized areas, breaking locks to enter buildings, and clearing areas to make more space for additional tents.

Like bike theft, trespassing in unauthorized areas was a frustrating sign to reporters that the government was unwilling to enforce the law. People were disheartened when they saw people camping in locations where there were No Trespassing signs posted: “This is considered trespassing according to signs yet the city continues to ignore these campers under the 90 viaduct and along Rainier towards Massachusetts.” Others feared that trespassing would lead to an increase in other homeless people camping in the same area. Finally, some reporters blamed the city for not only lax enforcement, but lax maintenance. People expect the government to maintain fencing (“the state has failed to maintain fences put up to keep trespassers out. What's the point of putting up an expensive fence if you don't maintain it???”), locks, and gates to prevent people from trespassing in the first place. In sum, trespassing is seen as both a choice of the homeless individual and a choice by the government.

More directly related to threat, people expressed that trespassing and theft felt like an invasion of their personal space and privacy. In these reports, homeless people were described as proximate to homes, yards, and garages. Reporters communicate a sense of repeated, ongoing unwanted contact with homeless people, saying “They loiter around our homes, use our electricity (we have video of individuals sitting on our front porch plunging into our home electrical outlet) and have been stealing from our homes/cars” and “Stealing things off porch, stealing packages, stealing bikes, stripping cables for copper, trash everywhere.” Unlike other complaints about loss of access to public spaces or the obstruction of sidewalks, commenters use possessive language to communicate that homeless people are trespassing on and stealing private property. Another commenter expresses how these behaviors can create a sense of fear and dismay:

Almost every day last week trespassers were in one of our yards which are gate protected. Please do something. I have gone many years without reporting the few encampments

towards the end of 22nd Ave s because they didn't seem to be bothering anyone but enough is enough and something needs to be done about this two block radius that is packed with tents. I don't feel safe in my own home.

This reporter draws a nuanced argument in their complaint—it is not merely the presence of nearby unsanctioned encampments (they note that they have tolerated other camps for years), but the close proximity of homeless people to their houses, breaching the security of their gates, and the recent increased density of tents. In reports, housed residents communicate how trespass, theft, and property destruction all negatively impact them by creating a sense of fear and a perceived loss of control in their day to day lives. The presence of homeless people is described as persistent, intrusive, and threatening.

*Violence and threatening behavior.*

In addition to property crimes, residents expressed concern about violence at unsanctioned encampments, threats to their physical safety, and worry about interacting with unpredictable people experiencing homelessness. Reporters viewed some encampments as being particularly dangerous and violent. Although rare in the data, people commented that encampment residents were violent towards each other—“yelling and visible fist fights on almost a daily basis”; “Gun shots were fired in the camp last Friday”; “There is constant fighting all day and all night.”—creating an unsafe environment for others in the surrounding area. In these comments, reporters linked the violence to the large size of encampments, drug dealing, and little City enforcement. Additionally, Find It, Fix It users sometimes speculated about greater violence that might be occurring at unsanctioned encampments (for example, “This encampment must be cleaned up immediately to prevent further violence and risk”). These speculations were infrequent but suggest that there is an underlying suspicion that things may be worse than residents can see firsthand, which, according to their reports, is very, very bad.

While reporters were less concerned about personally experiencing serious violence (like being shot), they were worried about harassment, threats, and random assaults when they were near homeless individuals. Reporters describe most of these interactions happening when pedestrians walk past homeless people in public spaces: “Group threatens to assault anyone passing by,” “inhabitants are getting increasingly rowdy and threatening to pedestrians.” These negative interactions compound the inconvenience of obstructed sidewalks and the fear that people experience when they walk through disordered spaces. Additionally, reporters say that these negative interactions make it “unsafe to use the public bus stop across the street,” garden in P-Patches, visit the library with their children, ride their bicycle on public trails, and walk down the sidewalk. Some people also report they were harassed in a homophobic and bigoted way. This was particularly upsetting when it happened in the Capitol Hill area, Seattle’s ‘gayborhood.’

More seriously, people reported instances of assault through the app. Most of these instances were of assaults happening to people the reporter knew and in situations they also shared. People reported that “a 5 year old playing soccer was assaulted by a vagrant” and that “my neighbor was assaulted the other day.” Others mentioned news reports of people (particularly women) being assaulted by homeless people in specific locations. In these reports, people would comment on the conditions of the area and then link it to the situation from the news.<sup>32</sup> Some people reported attempted assault, but it was unclear in the data if they personally were assaulted, witnessed an assault, or had heard an assault happening in that location.

Residents particularly feared assault and harassment when they perceived homeless people to be on drugs. People shared that they were nervous to be in the same space as homeless individuals smoking marijuana or “tweaking”: “People camped out at park, smoking marijuana

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<sup>32</sup> <https://mynorthwest.com/1131563/woman-attacked-running-green-lake/>

and harassing people. Felt very unsafe”; “I also I'm afraid for my life because I park in that parking strip at 6 am and most of the time there are people out there “tweaking” around.” Some people report feeling threatened after being yelled at, accosted, or getting in verbal altercations with homeless people; most of the reports of threats describe the feeling of being threatened and do not provide descriptions of threatening behavior. Beyond feeling unsafe, reporters also suggest that drug use is what causes homeless people to become violent. One person said that they “would have been assaulted” if the people they were walking past were high and that the neighborhood felt “like a zombie apocalypse.” While people reported being harassed and feeling threatened by homeless people throughout the data, perceptions of drug use and unpredictable behavior seem to heighten their fear.

In sum, people report a variety of behavior that may be considered property and person crimes; at the very least, it is unwanted behavior that makes reporters feel threatened. It is understandable there is not a significant number of reports about serious violent and property crime in the data, as people would probably be more likely to report these situations to the police in an emergency. It is also possible that these types of situations are reported through the Find It, Fix It app, but that the Customer Service Bureau employees categorize them under “crime” rather than “unauthorized camping.” Regardless, people do communicate that theft, trespassing, harassment, and assault are all closely associated with people experiencing homelessness and that these witness and suspected behaviors create a sense of fear and threat for housed residents in their daily lives. These fears are particularly pronounced when children, disabled people, and the environment are seen as potential victims.

*Vulnerable groups.*

Find It, Fix It reporters are very concerned that homeless people may harm children, disabled people, and women, as well as the environment. These fears are communicated in complaints about trash, crime, and sidewalk obstruction; they appear frequently and across all categories of complaints. While the groups of people and the environment are two separate and largely unrelated entities, they have underlying similarities in that they are perceived to be vulnerable, defenseless, and powerless to protect themselves from the potential harms associated with homelessness.

Approximately 10 percent of complaint-related reports expressed concern about children's safety (n=1,310). Perceived risks include being near visible homelessness in public spaces, having negative interactions with homeless people, hazardous materials children may encounter, and children witnessing unwelcome and unsettling behaviors. The most commonly occurring threat discussed by reporters was children being near homeless people. This place- and space-based concern was expressed when reporters noted how homeless individuals and their encampments were near playgrounds, schools, daycares, parks, and other places associated with children. Oftentimes the concern was about proximity and not about interaction: "This [encampment] is adjacent to a playground with young children. I am concerned for the safety of these kids." Mentioning this proximity was a way for reporters to communicate a sense of urgency and highlight the importance of their report. This concern also extends to places children need to pass through. As I discussed previously, people report being worried that their children had to walk near homeless encampments to get home or to get to the school bus. The risk of children being in proximity to homelessness was often implied, as demonstrated in this report: "Tent/garbage on planting strip. It's a main route for our children who walk to school." Here (and

in many other reports), the potential harm is left unstated, but it is undesirable for children to be near visible homelessness.

Parents and reporters also expressed concern that children may experience harm from interacting with homeless people or by encountering their hazardous belongings. Some people reported that homeless individuals screamed or yelled at children while they were in parks or as they walked down sidewalks (“Many of the vagrants have been aggressive to the children and their caregivers,” “He has screamed profanities at the children in a frightening way”). Some parents claimed these experiences were spread throughout the city, making it difficult to choose between potentially exposing their child to harassment or using public space. Sometimes no differentiation was made between hazardous materials and ‘hazardous’ people: “This trash and the people protecting it are dangerous for the children playing at the park, daycare who uses the facilities, children walking home from their bus stop alone and other public space users.”

Reporters also expressed worry that children might handle drug paraphernalia left behind in parks, accidentally step on a needle while playing, or somehow become exposed to human waste; for example, “this is unacceptable so close to our vulnerable children who may not know to not pick up a hypodermic needle or walk through human feces. This is unsafe and outright dangerous to our health & well being.” Another reporter was worried that children may be bitten by rats, saying “This area is crawling with rats. They don't even run away from people. Children are living in the area and if someone gets bitten, the city will be [sued].” Many of the complaints reviewed earlier in the chapter were underlined as being particularly dangerous because children may be exposed to them. There was also a sense in these reports that children would be exposed to hostile interactions or hazardous materials during their daily activities; that these risks were unpredictable but also prevalent throughout the city, creating an environment that made parents

and caregivers stressed about the possible risks they may be inadvertently exposing their children to.

People were particularly angry and fearful when they felt their children were witnessing homeless people behave in complex and undesirable ways. Parents expressed frustration after being with their child and witnessing public drug use, public urination, and large homeless encampments. Drug use appears to be particularly salient to parents: “Meth use rampant - all day and night, lighting up right in front of children watching through the library window”; “it’s my opinion but maybe an over-dose? My husband and I had to explain to our 5yr old and 4yr old about the realities of the world”; “Walked my two year old daughter by and saw blood and needles on the sidewalk and street.”

Two rationales for this anger emerge from the data. The first is that reporters believed these behaviors should never happen in public and the fact that children were witnessing them in public made them even more brazen— “All this in front of children!!” The other reason parents and caregivers gave for being angry was that they didn't want their children to be exposed to these behaviors in the first place. They expressed a desire to shield their children from seeing drug use and extreme poverty. They felt their children should not have to see these things in a city environment.

Reporters also express concern about disabled people and women. As discussed previously, concern for disabled people is often raised when discussing mobility and the physical obstruction of sidewalks. Like children, disabled people and ADA access are used rhetorically in complaints to frame the urgency and necessity of addressing the problem being reported. Some reporters talked about specific disabled people they knew being negatively impacted by visible obstructions, however most of the reports were made on behalf of the disabled community more

generally. In contrast, when reporters raised concerns about women it was often about people they had personal relationships with—their wives, mothers, and girlfriends. These reporters worried that their loved ones were at increased risk of assault and discussed how they were fearful of going places alone or at night because of the presence of homeless people.

Reporters frequently expressed concern about the environment (n=1,583). People argue unsheltered homelessness poses a risk to the environment via erosion, pollution, and destruction. Concern for the environment was wide-ranging, encompassing water, soil, vegetation, animals, and the ecosystem. Reporters often noted how human waste was polluting streams and wetlands, habitat for native salmon species, and potentially the water source for the city of Seattle: “Human waste is being dumped close to the stream. The pathogens contaminate ecological systems and also sicken humans and animals.” They also believed that trash, chemicals, and propane tanks may pollute the ground below homeless encampments.

Unsheltered homelessness was also associated with environmental destruction in many reports. People were concerned that homeless individuals were causing erosion of unstable land and mudslides. They also expressed frustration that homeless encampments were damaging trees, ground covering, and other plant life when they were built in green areas. One reporter expressed their frustration, saying “Hillside is eroding and green space being harmed (branches and trees down, trampled, garbage, human waste, etc.)” Finally, reporters expressed frustration that campers were undermining environmental restoration efforts that had been completed at various sites around the city. They expressed dismay that homeless individuals were allowed to live in spaces that had previously been worked on by nonprofit organizations and cities to address previous instances of pollution. For these reporters, the solution was to remove the encampments, as illustrated in this statement: “Extensive restoration and neighborhood safety

work by volunteers has been underway here the past few years, in coordination with Groundswell NW. Please enforce MDAR and do not allow any camping, without delay.” People highlighted the hypocrisy of funding environmental restoration efforts, while at the same time allowing homeless individuals to occupy sensitive spaces. The way to address this hypocrisy, according to one person, was to “Overfill the shelters, enforce the law. Protect public safety and environment.”

*Other threats.*

Outside of these main themes two smaller pockets of reports emerged in the data. Some reporters expressed concern for the people experiencing homelessness. Other reporters used dehumanizing language to describe visible homelessness and homeless people. While these two groups are sporadically represented in the data, they are notable for their intensity and because they are distinct from the more common complaints described above.

People who are concerned about the well-being of homeless individuals used the Find It, Fix It app to notify the city of people they believed to be at great risk. These individuals were often older or had visible signs of mental illness. Reporters expressed concern that they may be at risk of harm from other people or because they were being exposed to extreme cold or extreme heat. When reporters expressed their concern for homeless individuals, they often asked the city to send out someone to do a wellness check. People also expressed concern about homeless individuals living in unsanitary and disordered encampments. These reports were filled with dismay and disbelief that people could live in such conditions. They expressed worry that homeless individuals may become sick or die if they were not removed from the encampments. The final area of concern expressed by reporters was about children living in encampments. While infrequent, these reports read as particularly urgent and upsetting to the individuals filing

them. Some reporters generally asked for the city to intervene and other reporters asked for Child Protective Services to become involved.

Within the group of reporters that show concern for homeless individuals, many of them also desire for these people to be removed from public space. Because Find It, Fix It reports are short it was difficult to tease out the underlying motivation for people's concern: if it was about getting help for the homeless individual, or if getting help for the homeless individual was a way to have them be removed from public space. It is also possible that some reporters have both motivations at the same time.

On the other end of the spectrum are reporters who express hatred towards homeless people. As detailed above, these reporters described the places homeless people lived as nests, dens, hives, colonies—terms all associated with spaces where animals live. People also described the presence of homeless individuals in the city in ways associated with animals or diseases. People described homeless individuals as a cancer that was spreading across the city, an invasion, a plague, and as hoards. Some also describe homeless individuals as non-living beings such as zombies, walking dead, or piles.

Additionally, a small number of reporters made vague threats towards homeless people. While some frustrated residents express their discontent with the city's response to homelessness by saying “we’ll have to clean this up ourselves” or “my neighbors should not have to deal with this,” these threats are qualitatively distinct. In these instances, reporters told the city that they would “take matters into their own hands,” that they had “had enough” and “we're going to do something about it themselves,” and that homeless individuals should be rounded up and expelled from the city. While I did not observe any direct threats of violence towards homeless

individuals in the data, these instances suggest some of the angriest residents may be considering extrajudicial violence.

## DISCUSSION

Residents complain about many aspects of visible homelessness. Many of the issues—trash, human waste, needles, public drug use, et cetera—mirror the complaints other research has sporadically documented (Oron 2023; Pospěch 2022; Herring 2019b; Nuttleman 2019a; Nuttleman 2019b; Davidson and Howe 2018). These complaints mirror the definitions of physical and social disorder provided by criminologists (Sampson and Raudenbush 1999). I also find that residents have strong negative sentiments toward visible homelessness, culminating in a sense of unsafety and fear that limits their use of public space and increases their frustration with the government. Homeless individuals are viewed as threatening for a variety of reasons but are seen as being particularly worrisome for their impact on children and the environment. In sum, visible homelessness is viewed as a pervasive, persistent threat to housed residents, their quality of life, and vulnerable groups.

While most reporters did not state how they felt about the problems they were reporting, those who did were most likely to be fearful, disgusted, angry, and frustrated. These strong emotional reactions provide a window into how house residents view unsheltered homelessness. Previous literature has explored the underlying mechanisms for fear and disgust responses to homeless people (Tan and Harris 2021; Kinsella 2012); in this work I show that physical objects, behaviors, and the presence of homeless individuals should be thought of as constitutive factors that co-create the conditions that elicit these responses. Individuals who were angry and frustrated expressed these emotions as coming from both the conditions they were encountering

and inadequate government responses.

These complaints stem from visible homelessness but extend to government operations and the processing of peoples' complaints. Reporters felt ignored when their previous complaints had been officially closed by the Customer Service Bureau without the issue being resolved on the ground. They also expressed extreme frustration from having to make reports repeatedly about the same issue. These residents feel as though the city's process for handling these complaints are an insult upon the original injury of experiencing visible homelessness in their city. And while residents express anger and frustration towards the city, their strong negative emotions flow back and forth between government responses and the visible homelessness they believe is continuing unabated. For these residents, government failure and invisible homelessness are both unending, cyclical problems that are solvable with enough willpower. The problem is that the city doesn't care about their problems.

Frustration and anger were present throughout the data. However, fear was the dominant emotion expressed in many of the complaints. People felt worried, unsafe, threatened, unprotected from the possible harms homeless individuals may inflict upon them through exposure to hazardous materials, dangerous obstructions, or unpredictable behavior. This fear was directly related to the conditions about which residents complained.

Beyond the emotional tenor of the complaints, the main characteristic of reports is that residents view visible homelessness as a knotted set of issues. In the work above I isolate and describe specific issues appearing throughout the data. While it is important to understand the distinct themes around problems like human waste and crime that are discussed in other parts of the literature, residents largely think about these issues as linked, causally related, and inseparable from each other. Desmond and Western (2018) argue that scholars of poverty often

try to disentangle interrelated problems, resulting in research that unnecessarily fragments the lived realities of poor people into components rather than a whole experience. I argue that residents also think about visible homelessness as a whole experience rather than a sum of its parts. Housed residents would often list several specific issues related to homelessness in their complaints. This format of report appears frequently throughout the data and suggests that residents do not think about these issues independently of each other. The material disorder associated with unsanctioned encampments is seen as an environment where only a criminally oriented person would want to live. People associate drug use with the obstruction of sidewalks and the unwanted behavior of public urination. In the mind of residents, visible homelessness is not only a tent in a park; it is also the human waste, needles, public drug use, yelling, stolen bikes, and obstructed pathways that are almost always linked to people living outside. These connections and conflation mirror recent research by Young and Petty (2019) that find people and local governments are concerned with the “micro-aesthetics” of homelessness, which involves closely monitoring people’s personal belongings, attitudes, postures, and public behavior for signs of threat or disorder. Residents view the disorder and chaos of visible homelessness as a ‘spectacle’ and ‘blemish’ on an otherwise beautiful city (Gerrard and Farrugia 2015).

This quagmire of issues directly leads people to feel fearful in public spaces. Criminologists and scholars research why people are fearful of crime and how the built environment influences this emotional reaction. While the bar for causal analysis is high and this qualitative project does not meet it, if we listen to residents, they tell us that the disorder conditions they associate with homelessness make them fearful. This finding pushes against the ‘contact hypothesis’ which suggests residents’ view homeless people more favorably and less

fearfully after meeting them (Lee et al. 2004). Additionally, my findings directly contradict Farrell's survey-based research that finds a null relationship between resident exposure, in the form of "relatively routine, up-close encounters," and homeless individuals and residents' perception that homeless people are dangerous (2005:1036;1048). Residents in my data routinely report feeling fearful and threatened after interacting with homeless individuals. These differences bely the importance of examining behavioral data (as opposed to survey data, vulnerable to response bias) and focusing on resident populations that have direct and repeated exposure to the homeless community (as opposed to nationally representative samples of residents in areas with very low rates of homelessness). These residents describe a causal relationship between the environment they are seeing, smelling, and hearing to a sense of unsafety and nervousness in public spaces. They experience this fear themselves when they need to walk down the sidewalk and they might get close to a homeless person, and they also express these concerns on behalf of vulnerable others such as children, women, disabled people, and the environment.

This fear directly shapes how people think about and relate to public spaces. Residents articulate that they feel they cannot use public parks, libraries, pathways, sidewalks, and bike trails because homeless people are present in and near those spaces. Many of the residents describe a mutually exclusive relationship to public homelessness: if a homeless person is closely associated with any form of disorder, they do not want to be near them. This conditional sense of fear reflects Kilian's argument that people's perceptions of community and safety is greatly influenced by "who appears in public space," along with their perceived power and dangerousness (1997:118). To be fair, some residents described varying degrees of discomfort being near homeless people. However, many reports made it clear that they felt excluded or

unable to use public spaces because homeless individuals were there. When thinking about asserts a right to the city, who feels comfortable using and asserting a right to public spaces, it is clear that residents feel that they are unfairly losing their access to a city they feel they pay for and they feel they deserve access to.

The sense of loss is directly related to residents feeling as though they are besieged by homelessness. This sense of being under attack or being surrounded permeates the data and describes many of the fears articulated within it; it is also a sentiment shared by residents in San Francisco (Davidson and Howe 2013). Residents feel as though homeless encampments are spreading, uncontrollable, and unregulated. They are particularly incensed when homeless encampments are in residential neighborhoods, implying that they should be in non-residential areas of the city. When residents describe the state of homelessness across the city, homeless people are perceived to be everywhere; there is also a feeling that homeless people are moving from place to place, evading the minimal social control that's being exerted. These assessments lead to the conclusion that the government is so ineffective that homelessness may never be solved. In addition to feeling like homeless people are everywhere in the city and cannot be properly regulated by the government, residents lament that their day-to-day lives are continually interrupted and inconvenienced by visible homelessness. In addition to losing access to public space, residents feel as though going to the grocery store to buy food, entering their homes, parking to run into a business, or taking a walk with their family are all activities that have become difficult and risky because of the presence of homeless people.

The risk that homeless people expose others to is another dominant theme in the data. People express a feeling of risk for themselves, but here I want to talk about the risk they articulate on behalf of others. People are particularly concerned about the harm homeless

individuals may have on children and the environment. Other research also finds that homeless people are considered a threat to children (Pospěch 2022; Nuttleman 2019a) and the environment (Rose 2019; Bonds and Martin 2016). The harm is often implied—many of the times when reporters invoke children or the environment as the potential victim the actual harmful interaction is left unarticulated. Both children and the environment are perceived as innocent and needing a guardian to advocate on their behalf. Many of the reporters who invoke children and the environment as possible victims of homelessness may see themselves as advocates or guardians for the more vulnerable amongst us.

However, children and the environment cannot correct these assumptions. They are foils used to emphasize the stakes of potential harm, but the actual impact of homeless individuals on these two entities is largely unknown and may be unfounded. The combination of the ‘dangerous other’ and the ‘vulnerable other’ is a distilled, concentrated way of expressing the seriousness of this issue for reporters. It is not only that unsheltered homelessness is creating a visual blight in the city or making people's lives inconvenient, the ultimate and underlying fear is that dangerous and unpredictable homeless people pose a real threat to the most vulnerable amongst us. This argument leverages powerless groups to further stigmatize and regulate other powerless groups. Additionally, implying that homeless individuals are causing harm to children and to the environment only increases and reifies perceptions of danger. If homeless people target the most vulnerable amongst us, they are devious in ways that may be threatening to the less vulnerable.

## CONCLUSION

After examining approximately 10,000 reports of visible homelessness in depth, housed residents who share their concerns via the Find It, Fix It app view homeless people and the

material realities of homelessness as serious threats to the urban landscape. It is not only that visible homelessness is unsightly or uncomfortable; these residents see it as an existential threat to living a good life. While some people in the data acknowledge the complexity of homelessness as a social issue and recognize that the government is trying to address the problem, most reporters do not express sympathy towards homeless people and are unimpressed by the government. Reporters want the problem of visible homelessness to go away. And they would like it to go away quickly.

It is clear from the data that these housed residents believe there is little room for homeless people in the public landscape of a modern American city. Housed residents who complain do not want homeless individuals in parks or green spaces or near schools or near their homes or on the sidewalk. Based on survey research, if you asked many of these reporters if they were concerned about issues of homelessness in their city or if they supported funding programs to relieve the material deprivation of homelessness many of them would likely say yes (Laniyonu and Byerly 2021; Link et al. 1995; Toro and McDonell 1992). It is not that people uniformly hold negative, unsympathetic opinions of homelessness and homeless people, but it appears from the data that frequent interactions and exposures to visible homelessness generate strong feelings of fear, disgust, and frustration. It is very possible that abstracted moral thinking about homelessness differs significantly from daily experiences and attitudes.

Now that many of the complaints associated with visible homelessness have been cataloged and explored, we will turn to people's understanding of homelessness as a social problem. This chapter focuses on issues that impact people in their day-to-day lives; problems, inconveniences, incivilities, and threats that people felt were worthy enough to notify the city about. But these complaints may differ in important ways from how people conceptualize

homelessness as a problem in Seattle. We turn to the question of how some Seattle residents understand homelessness in the next chapter.

## Chapter 5. Understanding the Problem of Homelessness

I'm a resident of northeast Seattle, where I have lived for nine years. My wife is a teacher at Bryant Elementary. I'm speaking today for the first time ever at this, because I'm frustrated. I'm frustrated that I continue to see homeless encampments throughout the neighborhood. I'm frustrated that there is a large camp recently at the entrance to the park where my children play. I'm frustrated that when it was moved the park was damaged with garbage everywhere. I'm frustrated that our friends had to call the police to remove a homeless person from their property. I'm frustrated that the police told them there was not much they could do, since the jails were full. I'm also frustrated that my neighbor Kevin is imploring us to speak to you today about his small business which has been consistently vandalized in the last several months. I'm frustrated another neighbor's construction office in Ballard has run-down R.V.s in front of it, which his customers have to walk through to do business with him. I'm frustrated that every time I run on the trail I see the same man sleeping in a sleeping bag on the side of the road. I'm frustrated I see him almost every other day. And most of all, I'm frustrated with our lack of apparent compassion and guts to solve this problem. I'm frustrated that we have a bureaucracy that spends nearly \$100 million dollars in Seattle and \$200 million in King County with basically zero progress in the five years since we all agreed this was an emergency. I want to stop being frustrated.

Seattle Resident, January 27, 2021  
Seattle City Council Public Comment

I'm from Ballard and I'm calling specifically about the Ballard Commons. And I would just like to know when you guys—when it's going to be cleaned up. Because it just seems like it's not. And I'm kind of out of ideas. I'm not a politician. I'm just a person. But I feel like I don't want finger pointing. I don't want, 'Oh it's the mayor's fault or the city council's fault'. I want to know what the plan is to take care of it. Because it's just so awful down there. And I don't want anyone who is homeless to not have a place to go. But I feel like, because Ballard is being passive about it, that nothing's happening. Because I walk a lot and I talk to the business owners. And every time I ask them, "What do you think about this?" "What do you think about the fact that we can't use the spray park and this place is overrun and full of trash?" They all shrug their shoulders and say, "Oh well, I don't really think about it" or "Oh well, it's not my problem." And I wonder if that isn't why it isn't being cleaned up. I wonder if we need a field trip. Maybe we need the mayor and the city council and city leaders to come see it everyday and understand that it hasn't gotten better. It's not changing and I just don't know what it's going to take.

Seattle Resident, July 28, 2021  
Seattle City Council Public Comment

How do these residents understand homelessness? Sidestepping the litany of issues listed here, we can sense a palpable anger and frustration about the conditions associated with homelessness, for both the people who are living unhoused and for the housed residents living in proximity. These residents are also frustrated with the government's response to the problem. Beyond these organizing themes, residents name a variety of problematic issues that go beyond the well-worn stories outlined in Chapter 2. Here, residents are concerned about problems that are often conceptualized as being ideologically exclusive (concern for a homeless man sleeping on the side of a trail, alongside concern about park accessibility and government spending). These comments echo many of the complaints discussed in Chapter 4, but also provide additional context and detail about residents' thinking and understanding of the issue. How do residents develop a working mental model of homelessness that captures their daily experiences, compassion for people who are unhoused, and their assessment of government responses to the problem? As we see above, these concerns often coexist uncomfortably. The stories housed residents tell about homelessness are rarely neat or simple. The additive quality of these comments can make it difficult to summarize how residents think about homelessness and how they understand it as a social problem.

For this project, I am not concerned with how persuasive public comment is to the government officials who hear it (see Appendix D for a detailed literature review on active citizens). Rather, I use public comments to capture how local housed residents understand homelessness as a problem the government should address. Whether or not these comments effectuate this change is a separate, albeit related, question. However, because housed residents' attitudes, framing, and understandings of homelessness are vaguely understood, focusing on this segment of the social control process is important.

In this chapter I embrace this complexity, while also identifying key organizing frames through which housed residents understand the problem of homelessness. I examine 151 homelessness-related comments made by housed residents. These comments were made during the public comment period of Seattle City Council meetings between 2018 and 2021. As I read and re-read these comments, I identified residents' ideas and concerns, ultimately naming six ways residents understand homelessness as a social problem. These diagnostic frames align with several pre-existing understandings of homelessness in the literature, but also diverge in important and surprising ways. Here, I summarize the six diagnostic frames identified in the data and then discuss how these findings relate to and build on our current understandings of homelessness within the housed community.

#### SEATTLE CITY COUNCIL COMMENTER DEMOGRAPHICS

The final sample analyzed in this project focuses on public comments made by residents, where the individual describes a problem directly related to homelessness and makes a request of the city government. Of the 654 public comments made about homelessness in a 4-year period, 33 percent were made by housed residents. This is like the proportion found in Amaral's study (2020) where he includes public comments about homelessness as one of his data sources. The other 65 percent of comments were made by homeless people, businesspeople, volunteers, non-profit workers, and community groups. Contrary to the narrow characterization of a well-educated, white retired homeowner, public commenters who discussed homelessness represented many other constituencies and stakeholder groups. Unlike land use meetings that are disproportionately attended by one impacted group (homeowners) (Einstein et al. 2020), meetings discussing homelessness attracted professionals who were employed in the service field

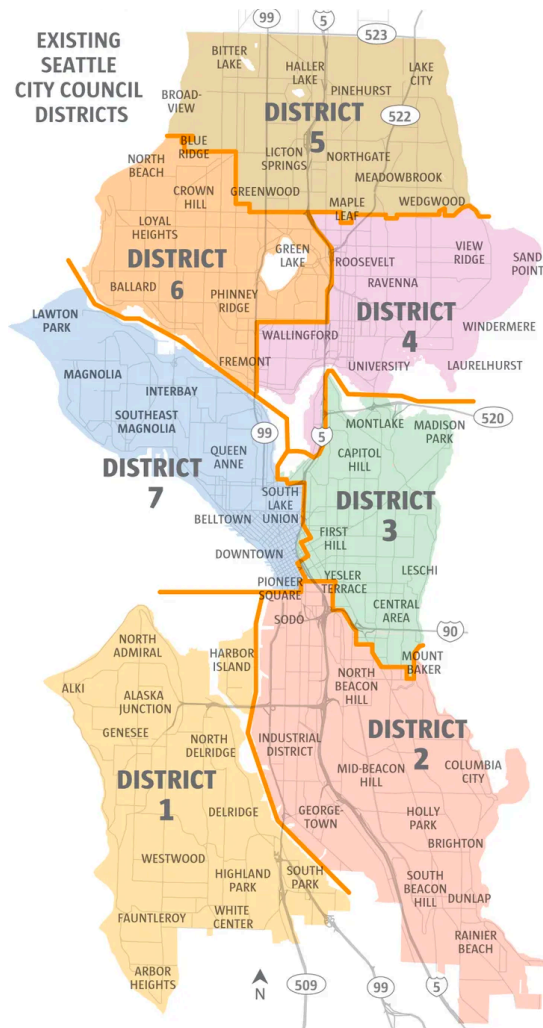
(19 percent of all comments), businesses owners who were impacted by unsheltered homelessness (4 percent), and individuals who were themselves experiencing homelessness (28 percent). Additionally, others were active in their community-based responses to homelessness as volunteers (19 percent) or as members of community organizations (4 percent).

The final sample includes 152 housed resident comments. Fifty-six percent (n=85 comments) were made by women, 37 percent (n=56) by men, and 7 percent (n=11) were made by residents whose gender was not identified. Compared to prior research on public commenters, women are overrepresented in these discussions of homelessness. Race information was collected for individuals who made public comments before Council meetings went online during the Covid-19 pandemic, i.e. 56 percent of the total comment sample. White individuals made 93% of the comments about homelessness (n=80) and the remaining 7 percent of cases represent comments by Black residents (n=2) and residents whose race could not be identified (n=3). This racial patterning mirrors previous research findings that suggests white constituents are more likely to engage local government officials around issues of housing and land use. Additionally, while Seattle is a majority white city (63 percent non-Hispanic white, according to the 2020 U.S. Census), white residents are overrepresented amongst the people who comment to the government about homelessness in this venue.

Approximately half of the residents who commented about homelessness disclosed their location. Twenty percent of residents are from District 7 (Pioneer Square to Magnolia); Districts 2, 4, and 6 each account for approximately 7 percent of resident's reported locations; District 1, 3, and 5 all have lower levels of representation at 2, 5, and 3 percent, respectively. Image 2 below displays the neighborhoods in each Council District. Previous research suggests that making public comments is political behavior akin to voting (Sahn 2023), suggesting that areas

with higher levels of voter turnout may have higher levels of public comment. However, District 7 has one of the lowest voter turnout rates in the city,<sup>33</sup> which suggests voting and commenting on homelessness may activate residents differently. Most comments (41 percent) were made in 2018 (n=61), followed by 26 percent in 2020 (n=39), 25 percent in 2021 (n=37), and 10 percent in 2019 (n=15).

**Image 2.** Map of Seattle City Council Districts and Corresponding Neighborhoods<sup>34</sup>



<sup>33</sup>Voter turnout percentages for the 2019 Primary City Council Election (<https://www.seattle.gov/documents/Departments/EthicsElections/Election%20Reports/2019ElectionReport.pdf>): District 1 (40.4 percent); District 2 (37.8 percent); District 3 (46 percent); District 4 (44 percent); District 5 (40 percent); District 6 (46.1 percent); District 7 (38.5 percent)

<sup>34</sup>Map by Mark Nowlin/The Seattle Times (<https://www.seattletimes.com/seattle-news/politics/new-map-would-redraw-seattles-city-council-districts-with-changes-for-georgetown-magnolia/>)

During data collection, information about homeownership status, renter status, professional employment, and political affiliation were recorded.<sup>35</sup> Contrary to expectation, people rarely discussed whether they owned their home or rented (only 15 out of 151 people; 7 renters and 8 homeowners), their professions, and their political leanings or affiliations. One interpretation of this dearth of identifying information is that commenters do not think these characteristics or statuses would make their argument more convincing or their opinions more credible. Additionally, the lack of political labeling and signaling further supports the argument that local issues, such as homelessness, do not align neatly with national political parties or broader ideological positions, such as liberal or conservative (Marble and Nall 2021).

Commenters at Seattle City Council meetings come from a variety of professional and personal backgrounds and represent neighborhoods across the city. While women are more present in the Seattle sample than previous literature would predict, commenters are predominately white, which mirrors prior work. These individuals comprise one group of constituents—housed residents—who have chosen to interface with the city government about homelessness.

How do these housed residents talk about and understand homelessness? As discussed in the literature review, there are many ways to think about homelessness as a social problem, be it a medical, criminal, governmental, or aesthetic issue. Although previously literature has explored how homelessness is understood by social service professionals, police officers, and homeless individuals themselves, little systematic work has explored house residents' understandings of homelessness.

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<sup>35</sup>Other researchers are able to gather this information about public commenters through administrative data, like voter rolls or homeowner lists. This information is not available for Washington residents.

## RESULTS

Here, I discuss findings from my frame analysis of residents' public comments about homelessness. From my close qualitative reading of 151 comments, six distinct frames emerged (Table 5 below). These frames represent how housed residents make sense of homelessness as a social problem—who or what they believe is responsible for the problem, the implications of homelessness for themselves, others, and the city, and (as I explore in Chapter 6) what they would like the government to do in response. Frames are presented from most to least frequently invoked and cover a broad range of resident perspectives. Additionally, because residents rarely disclosed their political orientation, there are likely perspectives from people who share a common understanding of homelessness but hold contradictory perspectives on other issues (or even specifics about homelessness). The following section summarizes the important components of these frames; I then discuss commonalities across frames and locate my findings in relationship to other homelessness scholarship.

**Table 5.** Primary Frames about Homelessness from Seattle City Council Public Comment Data, 2018-2022

Frame	Frame Elements	# of Commenters (Percent)
Public Safety & Order Problem	Crime, disorder, unsanctioned encampments, fear of crime, lack of enforcement	41 (27%)
Structural Failure	Lack of affordable housing, high property taxes, corporate and landlord responsibility, legacies of historical racism	34 (22.5%)
Financial Mismanagement	Financial mismanagement, hiding mismanagement, failing to spend aggressively	30 (20%)
Program Failure	Program scale, enabling problematic behaviors, programs causing new problems, segregating poor/homeless people from others	20 (13%)
Homelessness Hurts People	Physical vulnerability of homeless people, harmful government interventions, need for empathy from housed residents	19 (12%)
Government Failure	Inadequate responses, policy failures, anger	8 (5%)

*Public Safety and Order Problem*

Public Safety is the most used frame. Out of the 151 comments, 41 people (27 percent) invoked the Public Safety and Order frame as the primary explanation for homelessness. Most comments about public safety discuss issues of crime (i.e., theft, vandalism, robbery, trespassing, assault), social disorder (i.e. yelling, loud noises, harassment, public defecation, public drug use), and physical disorder (i.e. litter, garbage, fires, broken glass, needles). In these comments, residents frequently talk about all three issues simultaneously; there were very few comments where crime and disorder are discussed as separate and distinct problems. One resident

characterized the interconnectedness of these conditions, saying “sprawling garbage strewn campsites have become fixtures in our parks and traffic medians but at the same time there is evidence of property crime, violence, drug addiction, and the degradation of our green spaces.” While this commenter makes a grammatical distinction between the seriousness of garbage and crime, addiction, and environmental damage, they link the harms as characteristic of the larger problem of homelessness.

When discussing homelessness as a public safety problem, residents frequently cited unsanctioned encampments as particularly concentrated sites of disorder and crime. One mother described an encampment in her neighborhood:

I am a mother of two young children. 2.5 and four months old. [starts crying] Excuse me for my emotions, but this has become an increasing problem for my family. We don't have the luxury of having privacy in a safe green space for my children. I just want to tell you a few instances that have occurred recently outside our home. It has been really scary for me as a young mother. These conditions are rapidly deteriorating since the start of the pandemic. Excuse me. They have been there all summer long. I have dealt with loud noises, whether it be music, fights, vulgar language. We have dealt with it all in the past two weeks. The police swarmed this camp, there were four or five police cars, it was 9 o'clock at night there was a woman inside a tent screaming. After the situation was resolved four nights later woken at 3:00am to fights out there. My children are sleeping inside safe from this situation. There have been fires out there that the police responded to. Not only that, but in this general area the amount of needles that my husband and I have found is scary.

Her complaint is echoed by many of the residents who commented about homelessness.

Residents who frame homelessness as a public safety problem characterize encampments as threatening because of the combination of property crime, the unpredictable and disruptive behavior of homelessness individuals, and the unsightly items associated with visible homelessness. Additionally, many residents warned that, if left unchecked, the public safety problems associated with homeless encampments would continue to increase. One resident discussed this possibility, saying

I'm a resident. I live near several parks in the north end [of Seattle]... I, as I said, live near the parks. I visited several times a day. During the pandemic I witnessed firsthand the increased usage of members of the public and members of the public who are without home. I can see several tents from my backyard. It is only increasing. I would encourage you to keep in mind the window phenomenon, that then when there is a cracked window it begets more cracked windows.

Other residents discussed unsanctioned encampments as “hot spots” for organized theft, drug use, and other illegal activity. Encampment locations were also discussed as though they would be permanently disordered, despite the efforts of the city to remove them. Residents comment that even if the sites are cleaned and the homeless residents are relocated or housed, other homeless people would be attracted to the area. They expressed frustration at the cyclical nature of the public safety issues associated with specific locations and the overall magnitude of unsheltered homelessness in the city.

Residents also shared how visible homelessness and unsanctioned encampments made them feel unsafe in their neighborhoods or made them fearful for their vulnerable family members. One son described his concern saying, “My 70-year-old mother-in-law who lives in Chinatown has been mugged and her apartment broken into multiple times. She doesn't feel safe walking around as well as with all her neighbors that don't feel safe with homeless [people] living illegally close by.” This resident did not state that the mugging and burglary were perpetrated by homeless individuals but argued that the crimes and the presence of homeless people living nearby increase his mother’s sense of vulnerability. Being personally victimized and observing unsheltered homelessness were distinct, but additive experiences that increased this person’s fear of crime.

Residents also describe how they avoided visiting certain areas of the city, like downtown or Pioneer Square, chose not to use parks, and had to remain vigilant when out in public or walking down sidewalks where homeless people were spending time. Residents also described

how they felt vulnerable and unsafe working in neighborhoods like Pioneer Square and the International District. Several of these individuals reported that the companies they worked for were apprehensive about locating their businesses in Seattle for safety reasons; their comments affirmed the organizations' original fears.

Finally, residents who framed homelessness as a public safety problem also commented on inadequate enforcement. This complaint is distinct from asking the city to increase police enforcement—these residents argue that one of the reasons homelessness is a problem in the city is because of lax enforcement. Residents argued that local government officials were making the problem worse because they are preventing police officers from doing their job: “When you [the City Council] tell us to call 911 we’re told that the police officers are handcuffed and so your policies and what you are doing in this city has unleashed chaos and crime on law abiding people.” Here, the problem is identified as government officials who prevent police officers from ‘doing their job’; the unstated but underlying problem is also the criminal behavior of homeless people, which negatively impacts housed residents. Residents also express frustration that they are being told by City Council members to contact emergency services (“when you tell us to call 911”) when they encounter a problem related to homelessness, only to have responding police officers say they are unable to adequately respond because of the Council. Some residents felt that problematic behaviors associated with homelessness had been de facto decriminalized. One resident angrily communicated this idea, saying,

Let's talk about repeat offenders. You all have developed the protocol. You legalized narcotics. A person with seven grams or under of heroin is no longer a lawbreaker. Prostitution is legal. Littering is legal. Defecating in public is legal. Drinking in public is legal and it appears by all accounts, you have made drive-by shootings legal or maybe you're just renaming crimes so we [the city of Seattle] don't look so bad. A drive-by shooting is now called an illegal discharge of a firearm? There are no consequences for crime. It will lead to constant lawlessness.

In contrast to the previous commenter, this individual believes that Council or other government officials are changing the legal definitions of some crimes, creating an environment where people continuously cause problems because the behavior is no longer considered criminal.

Other residents expressed frustration that it was unclear which government agencies are responsible during a crisis. One Ballard resident called in to tell a story about his friend, who was assaulted while jogging in a local park. His friend called 9-1-1 to report the incident but no officers were available and “no supportive intervention occurred and no crime report [was] logged.” This resident identified the government’s lack of coordination as the underlying reason for Seattle’s poor public safety:

Despite having a high concentration of low barrier services and some of the slowest police response times in the city, we have no framework for local public safety coordination or accountability. No Navigation Team and no community police team. Nobody knows who the anonymous outreach workers and diversion workers are. How can we pass along critical neighborhood details to service providers or judges and prosecutors? Harm reduction and de-policing has meant a constant stream of missed opportunities and negative community impacts because no one is championing coordination or accountability.

This resident, and the others who emphasized coordination problems, express frustration at the immediate impacts this disorganization has in their lives—not knowing who to call, crimes going unreported, slow police response times—and the missed opportunities to address public safety concerns in a less traditional way. This comment was made in January 2021, more than six months after mass protests about police violence and public calls to rethink policing. From the resident’s perspective, the problem is not the development of these alternative initiatives, but the lack of coordination and accountability to make sure the information is making it to the correct parties and residents’ concerns are being addressed.

The public safety frame emphasizes the potential harm caused by homelessness. It was invoked more frequently by women than men (23 women, 13 men, 5 unknown [callers who did

not appear in person]) and by people living in District 2 (South Seattle) and District 7 (downtown, Queen Anne, and Magnolia). While people who use this frame do discuss the behavior of homeless people seen as unpredictable or threatening, these fears are almost always discussed in tandem with the physical disorder associated with visible homelessness. Residents who invoke the public safety frame emphasize that they feel unsafe because the physical disorder, social disorder, and crime they associate with homelessness is escalating and they believe the government's responses are inadequate and ineffective. For many of these residents, their concerns about homelessness as a public safety issue are communicated with a sense of urgency, frustration, and anger.

### *Structural Failure*

As expected, many residents framed homelessness as a problem caused by structural failures. Thirty-four residents (22.5 percent of the sample) understand homelessness primarily as a structural problem. Two aspects of the structural-failure frame that residents from across the ideological spectrum agreed on are that 1) a lack of affordable housing leads to increased homelessness and 2) increasing property taxes burden homeowners and make them vulnerable to become homeless themselves. Other residents highlighted the importance of corporations and landlords taking responsibility for contributing to the problem at a structural level by increasing revenue for homeless services through corporate taxation or by stabilizing the rental market through restrictions on landlords. Others using this frame linked current homelessness to historical patterns of racial residential segregation. More women than men used this frame (23 women, 9 men, 2 unknown [callers who did not appear in person]) and commenters came from all areas of the city.

There was wide agreement from many commenters that Seattle’s homelessness problem was due to a lack of affordable housing in the area. Even when speakers included other presumed reasons people may experience homelessness in their discussion (untreated mental illness, problematic drug use, etc.), the lack of affordable housing was never debated. For most speakers it was a taken-for-granted assumption that everyone, despite ideological orientation, understood that a lack of affordable housing was a fundamental reason the Seattle area was experiencing high rates of homelessness. One speaker communicated this bluntly, saying “I want to say that the solution to people being homeless starts with housing, it is so obvious. And the solution to this is housing the people can afford.” Another resident echoed this sense of common understanding, saying

I’m not going to talk about why we need more tiny house villages. We have a lot of speakers here who can address that more eloquently than me. And besides, you already know why we do. We need more tiny house villages because we don’t have enough affordable housing. We don’t have enough supportive housing. We don’t have enough workforce housing.

In general, many residents argued that Seattle lacked affordable housing of all kinds—rental units, small houses, accessory dwelling units, starter homes, etc.—and that this dearth was one of the main factors contributing to Seattle’s high rates of homelessness.

Many residents also expressed a sense of precarity around their own housing. These residents stated that their personal vulnerability increases the likelihood that they themselves may become homeless. They also discussed their own sense of precarity as a point of similarity with people currently experiencing homelessness. These statements highlight the idea that structural factors, like increasing housing costs, monthly rents, and property taxes, can cause some people to become homeless regardless of other life circumstances. Three older commenters shared their experiences:

I have lived in Ballard and Phinney since 1980. I own my house. I'm struggling to pay property taxes. But I want to point out that all the problems that people are talking about were not caused by the city council. They were caused by inequality and it's growing at a ripping pace.

Last October I got a bill to raise my property taxes and I couldn't do that because I couldn't pay that and pay my mortgage too. I lost my house and I don't live there anymore. And I've had that house for 28 years. There's got to be a different way for them [the government] to get money to help people instead of just taking our money and not even finding out how many other people have lost houses. A lot of them. That's all I have to say.

And I welcome all of our friends who are currently without permanent housing because I know as a middle class worker in this city I might be homeless myself because that is the way this city is going. Our middle class is not able to afford our houses, our rents. We're not able to afford any of it. All of you here [other meeting attendees] want to live a happy life without being taxed out of everything? Great, me too.

These individuals were commenting at a meeting where the council was hearing community opinions on the proposed employee hours tax that would raise money for homelessness services. All three commenters share how increased property taxes have resulted in them losing their own homes or becoming vulnerable to that possibility. One commenter stated it plainly: "I understand that many of us in Seattle are one emergency away from not being able to afford our rent or our mortgage." These commenters identify increasing property taxes as a structural problem associated with homelessness; one commenter suggests that this cause of homelessness is also underappreciated and goes unrecognized by government officials who are trying to raise money to solve the issue.

Renters also express concern over the increasing cost of housing and the unpredictability of rental increases. One new homeowner reflected on his prior experiences as a renter, saying, "I knew as a renter what all renters know. That fear of getting the envelope at the end of your lease that says your rent is going up by 10 percent, 20 percent, sometimes even 30 percent. And when that happened the recourse that I had was the option to go to another apartment that had

availability nearby.” He, and other residents, discussed housing choices as interconnected to the larger market of available housing in the area. Individual decisions, spurred by outside shocks of increasing rent or property taxes, impact other individuals searching for housing. He continued his thinking, stating “Scarcity of housing was my enemy. Now I think the homelessness issue in Seattle is a housing affordability issue. And a housing affordability issue is a housing scarcity issue because housing is scarce.”

Residents who invoked the Structural Failure frame also blame corporations and landlords for Seattle’s homelessness problem. Residents are frustrated that corporations pay very little in taxes to support the city’s efforts to address homelessness. Following the previous discussion of precarity, residents see the low taxation of corporations and wealthy individuals as unfair, particularly compared to the perceived high level of taxation on people’s homes. One resident expressed this frustration, saying,

The tax burden in this city falls way too heavily on homeowners and small businesses. However, this [employee hours] tax does not tax homeowners and small businesses. It taxes the super-rich in the city. Amazon just received a 790-million-dollar tax cut and people are talking about oh are they going to leave Seattle? They were here before they just received an almost 800-million-dollar tax cut. When we’re thinking about how the housing crisis started here, the developers and the investors and all of their corporate friends have to maximize profit for out of state investors. It’s not the city council regulating those people that has caused the crisis. It is the developers who have an integral duty to themselves and their investors to keep the rents high.

This commenter makes a multi-pronged structural argument about how wealthy individuals and corporations are responsible for homelessness. They attribute homelessness, in part, to the changes brought by corporate investors and developers. Furthermore, they argue that these investments better out-of-state investors rather than the local community. They also communicate that attributing responsibility to corporations is fair, particularly in a taxation environment that disproportionality impacts middle-class homeowners. This sense of fairness

was echoed by others, who critique the regressive tax structure of Washington state and bemoan the failure of trickle-down economic theory: “I support a progressive tax. For a long time we said that public housing was a failed experiment. As if living in a tent under the freeway is a successful experiment. If there is a failed experiment, it is trickle-down economics. [audience claps]... What we get with trickle-down economics is deficits.”

Some residents also expressed frustration with landlords because they contribute to the problem by economically evicting people. Landlords were discussed less frequently than corporations and wealthy individuals, but some residents argued that landlords contributed to the problem of homelessness while evading responsibility for their impact. One commenter asked rhetorically: “I think the question we need to ask ourselves is who do we want to pay for the homelessness crisis? Working people or their landlords? When people are economically evicted, where do they go?” Landlords were seen as having power and resources, but also making decisions with little personal consequence. We see, in the next chapter, that residents want the government to curb landlord power by stabilizing rental regulations in the city.

A final theme discussed in the Structural Failure frame is the historic role of racism in Seattle’s housing and homelessness problem. Residents discussed how historical practices like financial redlining, the racial exclusion caused by single-family zoning, and disinvestment in areas like Chinatown-International District, have contributed to the current landscape of homelessness in the city. Additionally, some commenters argued that the lack of affordable housing and increasing housing and rent costs have a disproportionately negative impact on “people of color, immigrants, and low-income workers [who] are being forced out daily.” While most residents invoked histories of racism when describing current patterns of homelessness, some residents shared that they felt complicit in ongoing discrimination:

Magnolia is a pretty isolated and segregated neighborhood, even for Seattle, and it is time we make amends for the ways we have cut people out. This proposal is a good step towards remedying our cities immorally slow response to the affordable housing crisis. For my neighborhood's culture of exclusivism and elitism.

Racism was most frequently discussed as a macro-level dynamic that shaped neighborhood characters and currently available housing stock, but some commenters also made direct connections to neighborhood-level dynamics playing out today.

Residents who invoke the Structural Failure frame communicate the problem plainly—there isn't enough housing—and assert that the solution is equally as simple—provide more housing. Unlike other residents who focus on technocratic failures, under-utilized programs, or budget allocation, these residents focus on macro-level problems and rarely discuss policy or program specifics. They emphasize how increasing property taxes, variable rent, and legacies of racism all drive homelessness and render currently housed residents vulnerable as well. These structural critiques emphasize shared precarity among Seattle residents—housed and unhoused—and contrast this precarity with corporations and landlords who are often not held accountable for their contributions to the problem.

### *Financial Mismanagement*

Approximately 20 percent of commenters (n=30) believe that homelessness is largely a problem of financial management. There is a general sense, amongst people who use this frame, that the city is mismanaging homeless funds and tax dollars. This critique has two prongs: 1) money is being mismanaged and the city is hiding this mismanagement, and 2) the city is not spending aggressively enough to address the problem of homelessness. These commenters also discussed how financial decisions reflected the moral values of the city and its residents. Women and men were equally likely to invoke the Financial Mismanagement frame (15 women, 13 men, 2 unknown [callers who did not appear in person]).

Many of the residents who understood homelessness as a budgeting failure discussed their concerns related to specific policy issues, such as the employee hours tax proposed in 2018 that would raise money from large corporations to fund homelessness services. In 2020 and 2021, residents argued for reallocating savings from the Seattle Police Department and federal Covid-related American Rescue Plan Act funding into expanding housing and effective programs like Law Enforcement Assisted Diversion (LEAD). People also commented on possible funding cuts for shelters and homeless services, as well as the funding of social control responses such as encampment sweeps and the Navigation Team.

One frequent critique made by residents concerned the city's perceived financial responsibility with funds slated for homeless services. Commenters complained that spending on homelessness was increasing year over year, the proportion of this funding allocated for administrative services was also increasing, and that this trajectory was unsustainable. These complaints were also discussed in tandem with the city's lack of transparency:

Now we had the RV Park in Ballard which ran \$32,000 a month in cost. Now why was that? Where did that money go? What went wrong and we should have a committee and I'd like to be on it to investigate the situation and find out who's been the rat nibbling at the cheese, huh?

These comments often focused on the total spending amount, with some commenters expressing frustration because they did not know where the money was being spent and if it was being used effectively.

Others complained that the city was not spending enough money to adequately address and ameliorate homelessness. Commenters reacted negatively to proposed services cuts, suggesting that sporadic and inadequate funding limited effective programs, making problems associated with homelessness worse. This sentiment was shared by a north-Seattle woman: "The LEAD staff have made it really really clear that their program is effective with a very high rate

of people accepting services of whatever they need from documents and on forward. But their capacity is critically limited. They actually could take on more than they are currently contracted for.” Here, her critique was that an effective program, LEAD, was being limited because of insufficient funding. The problem was not the lack of service utilization by homeless individuals, misplaced organizational goals, or insufficient social control responses, but the limited capacity of an effective program due to underfunding. Some commenters also noted tension between the city’s long-term investment in permanent, affordable housing and their short-term spending on immediate needs and services. Here, the emphasis was placed on the need to fund current services and the necessity of meeting people’s needs now. One frequently used adage used to highlight the urgency of basic services is “without shelter people die.”

The final group of commenters using the Financial Mismanagement frame argued for greatly increasing spending on services and housing, as well as capturing unique pockets of money to fund these increases. These callers drew contrasts between the city’s current budget priorities, like policing, and the possibility of investing in programs that strengthen the community. Many callers used similar wording, suggesting there may have been an organized call-in campaign encouraging people to lobby the council. These comments were like the following statement:

I am also calling to ask the council to follow through on its commitment to transform public safety. Right now with the supplemental budget you are working on you have a super easy way to enact positive changes. At the end of March council central staff estimated SPD will have over \$13 million of salary savings due to high officer attrition. Please invest those savings into Just Care and the community safety grants. JustCare will provide housing and services for many of our most vulnerable unsheltered neighbors, decreasing the need for SPD's presence.

These individuals understand homelessness as a problem that can be solved if the city reallocates significant resources to meet the needs of people who are homeless. Additionally, meeting these

needs through programs like JustCare<sup>36</sup> will decrease the need for policing, creating a virtuous cycle of cost savings. These commenters also intentionally pair this idea with ideas of accountability (“the council following through on its commitments”), optimism, and a sense of possibility.

Commenters using the Financial Mismanagement frame often motivated their critiques or admonishments as a moral issue. Those who believe the council is mismanaging their money moralize the situation by emphasizing that the city is wasting taxpayer dollars. One frustrated resident summarized this feeling, saying,

I feel like the city government doesn't understand and respect taxpayer dollars and doesn't take responsibility for them. And when I say doesn't take responsibility for them, I get emails from council member Herbold and I get emails from other council members and I also get emails from the Mayor's office and I've never once had anyone apologize for these disclosures [of wasted money] and explain what they were going to do in the future to prevent those things before asking for more money.

Here, the moralizing condemns prior financial waste and frames the city government as stewards of public money; the reason waste is immoral is because it was not the government's money to begin with. Additionally, this commenter laments the Council's lack of remorse (“never once had anyone apologize for these disclosures”) and accountability for correcting the mistake in the future. They also preclude the possibility of raising additional tax money in the future, due to the current perception of waste and irresponsibility.

Other commenters emphasize how budget decisions are moral decisions: “our budget is our values.” These commenters are also frustrated and angry, not at perceived waste, but at the

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<sup>36</sup>JustCARE is an organization that describes itself as “a multi-partner response to encampments in three Seattle neighborhoods during COVID” (P.D.A. 2023). The JustCARE approach utilized field teams from the Public Defenders Association and REACH (outreach workers who focus on the homeless community) to “built relationships, organized within the community of unsheltered individuals at a JustCARE site, and assessed each individual's situation and barriers before proposing a placement that could work for them” (P.D.A. 2023). Many of these homeless individuals would then be connected to hotel-based lodging programs that emerged during the pandemic.

council's indifference to homelessness. They are outraged at the callousness of the city. One commenter discussed their frustration in the context of cutting funding for women's shelter, describing the city's response as "indifference," "cowardice," and "unconscionable." She doubled down on these assessments by emphasizing how "these programs aid the city's most vulnerable." She continued by saying, "We have to remember these cuts affect human beings. Slashing their funding is akin to slashing humanity and cutting the only lifeline some have. It is reckless and unacceptable." For these commenters, homelessness is a social problem that requires a moral response through the reallocation of financial resources. In contrast to commenters who emphasize how homelessness is a structural problem that requires system-level interventions, people who invoke the Financial Mismanagement frame focus on the distribution of financial resources within pre-existing systems.

For those who use the Financial Mismanagement frame, money is central to the problem of homelessness. Some understand homelessness to be a social problem that consumes a disproportionately large portion of the budget, much of which is wasted on ineffective efforts or administrative overhead. For others, the problem of homelessness is fundamentally caused by the mismanagement of resources, an underfunding of the necessary services and infrastructures that would allow people to maintain safety and dignity while experiencing homelessness.

### *Program Failure*

For some residents the problem of homelessness is centered around the failures of programming. People who invoke this frame are frustrated by inadequacies in traditional programs designed to serve homeless people. Across a variety of different ideologies, people critique programs for not doing enough. Some people tie this back to issues of budgeting and

others attribute the problem of homelessness to inept management and goals of the programs. Individuals who use the program failure frame are often knowledgeable about the policies or practices they critique, but often do not go into as much detail as you might expect from a program employee. At times people who use this frame suggest their own programs; these suggestions usually involve moving homeless people into inexpensive, secluded locations, such as unused warehouses. The Program Failure frame is used less frequently than other frames (13 percent of the sample; n=20) to describe the primary problems of homelessness. It is used more frequently by women (n=13) than men (n=7); residents from around Seattle all use this frame.

One group of residents who believe program failures are central to the problem of homelessness argue that many programs are not large enough to meet the scope of the problem. For these individuals, it is not that the programs are ineffective or responding to the problem incorrectly, but that their response is too small. This is related to underfunding, but also reflects a belief that services are not scaled to the size of the problem; more money is needed, but this money is only useful if politicians recognize that the need is large and responses should be large as well. One resident expressed this concern, highlighting how size and seasonal limitations blunt the shelter's work:

We have a roving shelter that is among about 5 congregations in my area. They are having to turn away people. This is only a winter shelter so people will have nowhere to go after it closes at the end of March. I think that this has become kind of a game of whack-a-mole. When shelters close, that puts more stress on other shelters. It means more and more turnaways.

This resident also emphasizes the system-wide impact of inadequate services. For these residents, small, sporadic, or otherwise inadequate programming not only negatively impacted the homeless community but also put undue stress on other providers to absorb the additional service provision. Other residents extended this complaint beyond a specific program to the

city's overall programmatic response to homelessness. One individual described the problem, saying "We have 3,500 known homeless on the streets of Seattle. We have seven [city council] districts. That means five hundred units needed per district and you're not supplying them. The City of Seattle has been a day late and a dollar short for too long." Residents emphasize how programs that don't meet the scale of the problem create negative impacts across the city and across time. According to these residents, Seattle has had inadequate homeless programming for a long time, which compounds the homelessness problems experienced across different neighborhoods.

Other residents felt that the programs themselves were making homelessness worse by enabling homeless people to continue harmful behavior or by creating a new set of problems. These individuals believe programs fail the people they intend to serve by making them too comfortable. This type of programming was labeled as enabling by one resident who said, "Seattle needs to take a better look at not spending all her money on enabling. We should be moving people out of homelessness. Homelessness is not a good place to make people comfortable. We should be moving to move people out." This resident communicates that Seattle's homelessness problem is exacerbated by the city-funded programming that does not hold homeless people accountable for their disruptive behavior (primarily related to drug use or perceived crime). One resident invoked her own stigmatized experience with alcoholism to express her concerns about city programming:

I'm a recovering alcoholic and addict and I've been sober for 29 years [audience claps] What I see is that you continue to enable the same behavior. If you don't change [trails off]. If you don't hold people accountable for their behavior, they're not going to change. So I would really like to see you holding these people accountable. Some people want housing and some people really just want to continue to do that. And unless you make it uncomfortable for them they're not going to change.

Another resident echoed this concern, stating

But my initial impression, without having studied this in detail, is that, again, we are throwing more resources into increasing the number of units of affordable housing, which is a worthy objective, but we are not addressing the problems of the homeless. I really feel there should be a forced rehabilitation program where there is housing for all drug users—mandatory, 6 months or a year—to see if we can get them out of that cycle. Merely rehousing drug users in proximity to where they get their drugs and where their social connections are is not helpful. It's a total waste of money.

Residents argue these programs are counterproductive because they offer resources without addressing the core problem associated with homelessness. These residents are not concerned with issues of fairness, i.e. people who use drugs do not deserve housing, but with the potential ineffectiveness of the programming. In their view, the fundamental cause for homelessness is ignored at the detriment of the homeless individuals themselves. This oversight also causes problems for the city (“It’s a total waste of money”). At times, these critiques characterize harm reduction approaches to homelessness as enabling people to continue problematic behaviors. This is in contrast with how harm reduction activists see their work as pragmatic interventions that acknowledge the realities of homelessness while simultaneously reducing its negative impacts.

Similarly, other residents felt that city programming caused new problems. These residents cited City housing development policies contributing to growing homelessness in the city, how programming often worked against the City’s ideological commitments, and how the design of certain programs may cause future problems for the homeless individuals they intended to serve. Discussing the ideological shortcomings of Seattle’s housing policies and programs, one frustrated resident remarked, “Again, you know the city talks a lot about being progressive, about caring, about being open to women, people of color but in fact repeatedly enacts policies that work against those alleged concerns.” The City’s failed programs and policies are not only

inadequate to meet the needs of these groups but make their lives more difficult (‘work against those concerns’): the city is hypocritical, saying one thing and doing another.

Finally, some residents argue that programs can cause new problems by segregating homeless and low-income residents away from others in the city. As one resident put it, “[creating] a ghetto, a socialist communist community, which is permanently poor.” Other residents were less concerned about the geographic segregation of homeless individuals and more concerned about the long-term impacts of program requirements. These residents highlight the long-critiqued problem associated with many social services: people are only eligible for a program if they make less than a certain amount of money, but if their income slightly increases, they become ineligible for the program. One resident communicated this concern, saying, “The permanently poor aspect of this thing is devastating for the families involved. That means that if they work, or otherwise better themselves, they can be evicted.” The concern with programs like this is that they may aggravate the conditions associated with homelessness, causing instability in the lives of those who cycle through them.

For residents who use the Program Failure frame, the City programs’ policies, eligibility criteria, and locating of services are ill considered, hypocritical, and counterproductive; these residents argue that city interventions will likely cause more harm than good for the vulnerable people receiving their services. Other residents are generally supportive of these programs, but point to shortcomings in their scale, geographic coverage, and seasonality. Residents who invoke the Program Failure frame believe that homelessness is aggravated and left unresolved by ill-conceived programs.

## *Homelessness Hurts People*

One frame used by a smaller portion of residents (12 percent, n=19) emphasizes the harm homelessness causes for the people experiencing it. These public comments focus on the physical vulnerability of people experiencing homelessness, the difficulty of their everyday lives, the harm caused by the city's responses to homelessness, and the need for housed people to be more empathetic towards the unhoused. When discussing homelessness, residents who used this frame talked about homelessness in the abstract, as a class or a group of people, rather than recounting individual stories of people experiencing homelessness.

Most such comments discussed the harm caused by the city's encampment sweeps. These comments invoked moral sentiments of humanity and care; they also frequently cited experts who argue that sweeps are counterproductive policy interventions, cause undue harm to homeless people, and are ill-advised during a pandemic. This resident's comment included many of the key components of the Harm frame, as it relates to encampment sweeps:

Instead of investing in resources for your unhoused constituents, the city has poured tens of thousands of dollars into sweeping encampments. Every time this happens our taxpayer dollars are wasted on ruining lives instead of repairing the harm the city caused. Experts have condemned the sweeps and clearly stated that they do nothing to improve the community. People are displaced with no support and nowhere to go. And experts have stated that these sweeps set your unhoused constituents back years. They are violent, inhumane, and a tragic example of the heartlessness of the so-called leaders in the city. When police show up for the sweeps they claim to store belongings but brutalize unhoused people while throwing away what very few belongings they have to their name. SPD has thrown away someone's mother's ashes, a wheelchair, an oxygen tank. They have absolutely no regard for human life or decency. During the heatwave the city swept encampments, while offering no support for heat exhaustion.

Residents opposed to encampment sweeps commented on the wide-ranging harm caused by these interventions. The above commenter emphasizes the harm of property destruction, particularly for those with physical disabilities. Others talk about the burden encampment sweeps add to the already difficult lives of homeless people "who have to fight to survive and they

shouldn't also have to fight the police who, in theory, serve the city." Their lives are made more difficult by having to move unexpectedly and being displaced, without referrals to services.

Many commenters highlight how destabilizing sweeps are for homeless people who have worked to develop their own shelters, as they lose their belongings and the partial protection they may have developed from their temporary residences. Sweeps are frequently characterized as "violent" and "traumatizing." Finally, some commenters discussed how encampment sweeps disrupted volunteer and mutual aid efforts at the sites. According to commenters using the Harm frame, sweeps undermine the self-sufficiency of homeless campers, increase the burdens associated with being homelessness, and undermine non-governmental relief work.

Housed residents also encouraged others to have a more empathetic and compassionate perspective on homelessness. Here, residents framed the problem as a lack of empathy or understanding on behalf of other housed residents in their community. These corrections were often made during contentious meetings, where residents made public comment from opposing political positions or in response to budget cuts residents felt were immoral. In a particularly heated Ballard public meeting about the Amazon head tax one young white man angrily rebuked the crowd, saying

What do you think is harder: living in a house and having a homeless encampment outside your door or living in a tent? Do you think it's harder to see someone's shit on the ground or to not have enough to eat? To have nowhere to go to the bathroom? To get the tent that is your home ripped away by the police?

I'll wait...

Do you think Mike [O'Brien - Seattle City Council Member] is lying when he says there's no shelter beds? You're fucking delusional. Do you think he's lying when he says there's no empty tiny homes? Have you seen any? Do you think he's lying when he says there is no affordable housing? I can sure as hell tell you, there ain't no affordable housing around.

This heated rhetoric vacillates between conditions experienced by homeless people (living outside, limited access to bathroom facilities, food insecurity, having your belongings confiscated by the police) and inconveniences experienced by housed individuals (seeing homeless encampments and feces). The goal of this speaker is to invoke other housed residents to reflect on their complaints and to reconsider their seriousness considering the experiences of homeless individuals. Sometimes these rebukes focused less on the difficult experiences of homelessness and more focused more on housed people's lack of compassion:

I just want to say tonight that I have lived in Seattle all my life and I am so embarrassed to have such rude and heartless neighbors, quite frankly. Everybody's life should be worth the same and someone's status as a property owner does not grant you more protection, or should not grant you more protection, than someone who happens to not live in a home.

Here, the goal is to communicate that the government has an equal responsibility to protect housed and unhoused people. Other residents communicated similar ideas in less acerbic ways. In these comments residents discussed their positive experiences living near homeless communities and tiny house villages. They deliberately called homeless individuals "their neighbors." When discussing the possibility that an affordable housing project, particularly slated for homeless people, might be sited near her home, one commenter emphasized her personal excitement and willingness to contribute to the project:

I live right across the street from Fort Lawton on 36th Avenue. Thank you so much for considering building affordable housing in my backyard. My family would be really excited to welcome new neighbors if this redevelopment proposal is approved... Magnolia is a pretty isolated and segregated neighborhood, even for Seattle, and it is time we make amends for the ways we have cut people out. This proposal is a good step towards remedying our cities immorally slow response to the affordable housing crisis, for my neighborhood's culture of exclusivism and elitism. Please make this redevelopment plan a reality. I would be happy to help in any way I can.

This comment demonstrates a two-pronged approach to increasing the compassion and empathy of other housed residents in the room. She clearly states her geographic relationship to the

project and articulates the need for community-level moral accountability. This individual's comment mirrors others who emphasized their positive experience living next to and becoming personally familiar with homeless neighbors.

In sum, the *Harm* frame emphasizes the experiences of homeless people as the central concern of homelessness more broadly. For residents who employ this frame, the ultimate problems associated with homelessness are the wellbeing of people experiencing it, the city's immoral exacerbation of already difficult circumstances, and the need for other housed residents to appreciate the difficulty of homelessness. These residents invoke moral ideas of care, concern, and indignation; their comments are highly principled and motivated by their concerns for "their homeless neighbors."

### *Government Failure*

Housed residents who use the Government Failure frame assert that government officials and responses cannot adequately address the city's problems. This frame is used by a small portion of commenters (5 percent, n=8), who are mostly male. In the Government Failure frame, residents focus on the shortcomings and failures of previous and current government policies. Sentiments are often expressed with frustration, jadedness, and resentment toward the government. While few commenters invoke this frame, it is distinct in its assertiveness and dismissiveness.

Residents who employ this frame argue that the government fails to respond to emergencies. For these residents the problem of homelessness is rooted in the government's inability or refusal to respond. Residents are angered by the Seattle City government declaring homelessness an emergency in November 2015 and then failing to follow the proclamation with

adequate material responses. One person communicated this, saying, “Over three years ago the mayor declared a state of emergency over our homeless crisis. But since then what has happened? The political establishment has completely failed to address this crisis.” Additionally, residents express frustration over the city “biding its time” through short-term responses, such as encampment sweeps. Some residents argued that not only did these temporary responses sidestep the magnitude of the problem, but they are also counterproductive because they inflamed an already existing crisis.

Other residents argued that the city government was unaware or in denial about the magnitude of the problem. This failure of government understanding left residents feeling that officials lacked an awareness of how persistent the problem of homelessness had become. One resident expressed this frustration, saying:

I wonder if we need a field trip. Maybe we need the mayor and the city council and city leaders to come see it [a park with several homeless encampments] everyday and understand that it hasn't gotten better. It's not changing. And I just don't know what it's going to take... but this is so wrong. And it's been going on so long.

Others expressed similar frustrations, arguing that Council members talked about government responses to homelessness as effective, when in reality they weren't: “Hearing you talk sounds like you've got everything under control and I don't know how you live in this fantasy world.” These residents attributed the city's ineffectiveness to a fear of acting or making unpopular decisions, the passivity of residents in their activism, and an inability to innovate.

Statements that centered on the failure of city government often ended with residents lamenting the lack of improvement or resolution to the problems they associated with homelessness. These residents see the government failing to adequately address the problem, while still allocating significant time and resources to addressing it. This leads to frustrations about the perceived ineffectiveness of the responses: “I see people doing powerpoints and

congratulating one another on a job well done and I think it is time to wake up. We are tired of the same thing over and over.” For these residents, the government has failed at addressing homelessness because their daily experiences with homelessness are largely the same, if not worse.

Finally, some housed commenters went beyond discussing the failure of the government to adequately respond to claiming that the city council was preventing police officers from doing their job. For these residents the city council has not only failed to develop policy responses that meet the emergency but is preventing other departments from responding as well. At a contentious public meeting, one commenter was visibly agitated when she said,

You’ve lost all credibility when you say [audience cheers]—you said two words—you said ‘Call 911’. Do you understand that the police have told us to vote you all out so they can do their jobs [loud audience cheers]? And you’re telling us ‘Call 911.’ You’re smiling [referring to a council member]. You think it's funny?! You think it’s funny the way we’re living?

This exasperated woman (and the other attendees who supported her frustration by cheering her on) blame the city council for ‘the way we’ve been living,’ implying that her neighborhood conditions would improve if police officers were able to respond to homelessness and ‘do their jobs.’

## DISCUSSION

How do residents understand the problem of homelessness? It depends which resident you ask. At the risk of being passé, residents demonstrate many different understandings of homelessness, and these findings highlight the importance of maintaining that variation when we discuss how housed people react to homelessness. Here, I summarize important components of each frame, comment on surprising omissions in the data, and then explore two organizing

themes within the data: who is the victim of homelessness and resident critiques of government functions.

The Public Safety Problems and Structural Failure frames reflect similar understandings of homelessness in the literature. Other scholars note that housed residents are upset and unsettled by unsanctioned homeless encampments (After Echo Park Research Collective 2022; Herring 2021; Goldfischer 2020; Speer 2017; Herring 2014). Many Seattleites share these frustrations and believe the encampments pose a threat to public safety. Their understanding of homelessness as a public safety problem also blurs together physical disorder, social disorder, and crime into a collective experience that is overwhelming and foreboding. These residents expressed frustration that, from their perspective, unchecked homelessness and lax enforcement has prevented them from fully accessing the city. Echoing Davidson and Howe's description of San Franciscans (2014), Seattleites who use the Public Safety Frame believe their city is "under siege" having to deal with homelessness-related problems.

Structural understandings of homelessness are also commonly reported in the literature. However, Seattle residents frequently personalized this macro-level perspective. Their structural criticism focused on inadequate affordable housing and regressive tax policies. Sometimes structural critiques can feel intractable; how do individuals or governments correct for decades of discrimination and harmful public policies? Conversely, Seattle residents identified structural issues that are actionable and well within the power of the government to change. These housed residents also personalized structural problems, highlighting how the lack of affordable housing and high property taxes increase their risk of becoming homeless. Residents who use the Structural Failure frame see homelessness as a problem to which all precarious people are vulnerable.

The Financial Mismanagement, Program Failure, and Government Failure frames all highlight government functioning and how it relates to the problem of homelessness. Each frame emphasizes a unique aspect of bureaucratic management—financial allocation, program administration, and emergency response, and how it either exacerbates problems related to homelessness or does not adequately address the crisis. Each of these three frames contains themes that map onto two opposing ideological perspectives. A more politically conservative resident may argue that homelessness is a problem because the government continues to waste money on ineffective programs, enable homeless individuals to continue problematic behaviors, and fails to recognize the magnitude of the problem. More liberal or progressive residents may also see the government as responsible for homelessness but would call for it to massively increase funding for social services, expand evidence-based programs, and respond to homelessness as the moral crisis it is. In effect, there is widespread support for Housing First and permanent supportive housing efforts.

The final frame—Homelessness Hurts People—emphasizes the harm homelessness causes for homeless individuals themselves. Residents who use this frame try to raise awareness of these harms to local government officials and other housed residents. The goal of this awareness is to increase the empathy housed residents have for their unhoused neighbors and to increase the urgency of the government’s response. These residents see homelessness as a problem that primarily impacts those who are living it; their comments are often made on behalf of people experiencing homelessness.

Some residents invoke more than one frame when they discuss homelessness. Public Safety and Structural Failure are the most used primary frames (27 percent and 22.5 percent of the sample); Financial Mismanagement is used by 20 percent of commenters; and Program

Failure, Homelessness Hurts People, and Government Failure are used by people 13 percent, 12 percent, and 5 percent of the time, respectively. Financial Mismanagement and Government Failure are the most used secondary frames, indicating that residents believe government spending and operations exacerbate the social problem of homelessness in Seattle. Financial Mismanagement is most commonly the secondary frame to Program Failure and Structural Failure, indicating that these many residents view the fiscal dimensions of programming and taxation to be central issues related to homelessness. Government Failure was frequently the secondary frame for people who understand homelessness as a Public Safety Problem, suggesting that issues of enforcement and emergency response are top of mind for many Seattle residents. Because more women than men commented about homelessness in this sample, most frames were used more frequently by women, except for Financial Mismanagement (equally used) and Government Failure (used by more men). Finally, the Covid pandemic shifted the frames residents use to explain homelessness. Before Covid, residents used Structural Failure, Financial Mismanagement, and Program Failure most often. After the pandemic started, residents invoked sharply contrasting frames—Public Safety Problem and Homelessness Hurts People—to communicate their understandings of homelessness. This shift mirrors broader changes in public discourse about policing, housing security, and government responsibility after March 2020.

### *Surprising Omissions*

After reviewing 151 resident comments about homelessness, three themes were noticeably absent in the data: a medicalized frame of the issue, discussions about the causes of homelessness, and the idea that homelessness is a social problem that can be solved rather than

managed. As discussed in the literature review, medical understandings of homelessness are widespread amongst service professionals and the American public. These understandings emphasize the individual nature of homelessness and suggest that homelessness is most effectively addressed by treating personal pathologies. Anecdotally, mental illness and drug use are commonly discussed in news stories about homelessness. However, in this dataset mental illness and drug use were rarely mentioned as the causes of homelessness: 5 commenters discussed both as causes of homelessness, 9 residents talked exclusively about drug use, and 2 only talked about mental illness. Even when these causes were mentioned, they were not the main concern raised and were not present enough across the dataset to constitute a theme. This pattern stands in stark relief to public polling about the causes of homelessness. In all three current public surveys about homelessness (Morning Consult 2023; Bialik and Orth 2022; Tsai et al. 2019), American respondents listed drug and alcohol use as most significant contributor to homelessness; mental illness was the second cause in two surveys (Bialik and Orth 2022; Tsai et al. 2018) and the fourth in the Morning Consult poll (2023). The absence of mental illness and drugs as a central organizing theme in the data is curious.

Additionally, residents rarely discussed why people became homeless in the first place. The two most referenced causes were mental illness and drug use, but as discussed previously, these ideas were also raised infrequently and only used in the Public Safety frame. The other reasons discussed by residents primarily related to housing: increased evictions, being unable to pay rent or a mortgage, lack of available housing, and increasing property taxes. These causes were brought up 22 times. Disability, domestic violence, corporate greed, and the City's development policies were all mentioned once by residents in this forum. It is possible that residents did not feel the need to discuss the causes of homelessness when discussing specific

issues or concerns with the City Council. Only 24 percent of residents cite a cause for homelessness in their comment. This omission is notable because most scholarship that directly measures residents' understandings of homelessness focuses on causes. In practice, when residents discuss homelessness with government representatives, they focus on issues that impact them personally, critiques of programs and services, and encourage the government to do more to address the problem. Asking residents about the causes of homelessness only captures a small portion of their thinking on the topic.

The final omission is the imaginative possibility of ending homelessness. In 2015 Seattle's mayor declared homelessness a crisis. In public comments, residents frequently discussed the failure of this declaration: either the city did not treat the crisis with the urgency it required or the strategies they tried had failed to adequately address the problem. Homelessness was discussed as a crisis or an emergency, but there was no discussion of ending homelessness entirely. Housed residents who addressed the council view homelessness as a set of problems—for themselves and the individuals experiencing homelessness—that should be managed and addressed, but not eliminated transitioning people out of homelessness. As I discuss in the following chapter, residents imagine government responses that are generous, client centered, and evidence based, but do not advocate for abolition of homelessness. It is unclear if more time-sensitive issues take precedent or if these housed residents cannot imagine the possibility.

### *Who is the victim?*

Who is impacted by social problems? Who can claim harm? These questions underpin many of the comments made by residents and help organize the problem frames identified here. When bringing a grievance or complaint to the city, the speaker would often describe who was

being harmed. Housed residents identify three groups as being victimized by homelessness: primarily housed residents, primarily homeless residents, or both groups.

Housed residents often emphasize the harm they personally have experienced because of homelessness. They often tell stories about how they have been personally impacted by homelessness, recounting a loss of access to public parks, increased fear while walking around their neighborhood, being near fighting or aggressive behavior, or having to manage debris from nearby unsanctioned encampments. These stories were told most frequently in the Public Safety Problem frame, where residents highlighted the need for a social control response to these issues.

Additionally, housed residents communicated a sense of victimization when they discussed how the city managed homeless services and finances (Financial Mismanagement and Program Failure frames). These residents felt that they—the taxpayers—were the ultimate victims of mismanaged money; that the city was doing them a double disservice by wasting their resources and not addressing daily incivilities that negatively impacted them. This sense of victimization aligns previous discussion about who has the right to the city (Mitchell 2003). Not do some housed residents view homelessness as denying them a right to access and use the city, they also believe that the government is facilitating and amplifying this loss of access by mismanaging finances that should be used to better the city for its tax-paying residents. These complaints admonish the government to address homelessness primarily because it causes problems for housed residents.

At times, residents acknowledged their concern for homeless individuals prior to naming their personal complaints:

I've had some extremely desperate situations myself and know that we need to work together as a community to help the homeless community. However, turning Seattle into a socialist society is not the answer either.

And we're all compassionate here. We all want to see change for the better, we all want to see progress right. But we all want to see measured outcomes as to how and where our money is going and you mentioned that you could see where our money is going.

I just want to say we all have empathy for the homeless. I don't think anyone out here wants homeless children. It's wrong to tax Amazon. You think that's a thing where you can just grab money.

These linguistic patterns are akin to how people may talk about race and racism. Because being perceived as racist or prejudiced is undesirable, speakers may include neutralizing disclaimers before a negative representation of a group (Augoustinos and Every 2010). Here we see a similar pattern, where concern for homeless individuals or the homeless community is used to soften the ultimate focus on housed individuals and their concerns.

Other residents centered the harm people experience from being unhoused. These individuals emphasize how deadly homelessness is, the difficulty of daily life, and point out the ways that the city government makes the lives of homeless people more challenging. Everyone who used the Homelessness Hurts People frame oriented themselves this way. For these residents, the city further victimizes people experiencing homelessness by underfunding effective services, restricting temporary and affordable housing availability, and by conducting encampment sweeps. For some residents, it was unconscionable that housed residents would feel harmed or victimized by homelessness; many of these residents chided other speakers for their lack of compassion or implored them to empathize with how homeless people might feel. Residents who see the people living homelessness as the group most harmed by it often speak about homelessness with a sense of moral urgency. Finally, some residents communicated that both housed and unhoused people were harmed by homelessness. These residents often used the Structural Failure frame to highlight how current housing availability, tax policy, and low wages left most people vulnerable to homelessness. While these individuals often distinguished that

unhoused people were more directly harmed than housed people by homelessness, homelessness as a status was seen as a social problem that could be experienced by anyone if conditions shifted. Residents coming from this perspective expressed a sense of class solidarity with people currently experiencing homelessness that went beyond being inconvenienced or troubled by the same daily issues but emphasized their similar location within a precarious and unequal society.

### *Critiquing Government Functioning & Poverty Governance*

Residents have a lot to say about how local government functions and how it responds to homelessness. Prior scholarship has documented residents' complaints, fears, and inconveniences associated with homelessness, but little attention has been given to resident attitudes about local governance practices. Residents, across all six problem frames, highlighted their concerns with government functions and how these concerns negatively impact the city's ability to effectively govern the poor. These concerns centered around issues of transparency, accountability, equity, and responsiveness.

Throughout their comments, residents emphasized that the city government was falling short on its duties. On the one hand, this line of critique is understandable because of the venue. People who have grievances about local government are possibly more likely to name these complaints in public comment periods because government officials are there to hear them. On the other, prior research implies that residents are most likely to interface with the government when issues impact them personally; for example, the literature on NIMBYism argues that residents contact the government to lobby against services being sited in their neighborhood. Many of the critiques lodged by Seattle residents include personal problems, but also move

beyond the personal to include dissatisfaction with government operations and local government officials.

Residents complained frequently about a lack of government transparency and responsiveness. Residents expressed frustration that they did not know how much the city was spending on homeless services and that they could not analyze spending in light of program outcomes. This distrust and skepticism underlined other complaints and problems, creating an environment where residents seamlessly move between personal grievance and bureaucratic frustration. Additionally, residents expressed that the city was largely unaccountable to residents because of the lack of information transparency. How could residents know what officials and policies to support if they could not assess their effectiveness?

These frustrations were expressed across problem frames. Within the Structural Failure frame, people expressed resentment that the city continued to raise property taxes, as they felt that this stream of revenue had been maxed out and that the city was not tracking how many people were negatively impacted (i.e. became homeless) from increasing taxation. Additionally, these complaints characterized many of the comments in Budget and Program Failure frames. Residents often had a sense or perception that the city was mismanaging funds by underfunding effective programs or overfunding ineffective programs. At times residents would cite news reports about cost overruns or would mention that non-profit professionals shared that their programs could not expand because of inadequate funding, but this anecdotal evidence was overshadowed by a general sense of skepticism and mistrust of the city by residents.

Residents also felt unheard and uninformed by the government. At public hearings, residents would express annoyance and exasperation because they felt that the government was not listening to their problems. Several commenters mentioned that the tone of public comment

periods was often pitched and angry because people felt unheard. In essence these complaints are not centrally about homelessness or related issues, but about the way the government interacts with its constituents. Tyler's concept of procedural justice (2006) is useful for understanding this position. Tyler asserts that people are more likely to accept a criminal legal outcome if they feel officials hear them, show compassion, explain their decisions, and remain fair and unbiased. He emphasizes that people who feel heard and respected when they interact with officials are more likely to accept outcomes that may otherwise be rejected. It is quite possible that many of the complaints, grievances, and irritations housed residents have about homelessness stem from their perception that the government does not care about their circumstances. Addressing procedural issues and creating environments where people feel heard may reduce the ire some residents feel towards homelessness as a social problem and homeless individuals.

Finally, many residents expressed dissatisfaction with the city's most visible form of poverty governance—unsanctioned encampment sweeps. Complaints orbited around three central issues: the disruption they cause in the lives of homeless residents, their long-term ineffectiveness at curbing visible homelessness in specific locations, and the associated costs. Residents frequently discussed encampment sweeps, which were in a third of the comments. While some residents requested more encampment sweeps in general, or specific cleanup of camps near their homes, many residents critiqued the practice as being disruptive, ineffective, and costly.

Residents who use the Homelessness Hurt People frame frequently commented on how sweeps negatively impacted the homeless people who experienced them. These housed residents oppose encampment sweeps because they further destabilize camp residents and undermine personal and professional efforts to decrease the negative impacts of homelessness. Residents

pointed to sweeps as one way that homelessness was made worse by the city, because the interventions would force homeless residents to rebuild temporary shelters and regain belongings. They also felt that sweeps increased the harm associated with homelessness by making people more vulnerable to wildfire smoke, the Covid virus, and cold temperatures. They also remarked that sweeps would make it difficult for professionals who developed relationships with campers to continue their work and that sweeps disrupted community efforts to provide mutual aid. These critiques closely mirror previous findings, that move along orders and camp clean ups negatively disrupt the lives of homeless residents (Herring 2019b) and that they deepen the poverty associated with homelessness (Herring et al. 2020).

Other residents—some of whom were supportive of encampment sweeps and requested the city increase their frequency—also believed they were ineffective. These residents focus on the aesthetic impacts of encampments and how they block access to amenities, like parks and splash pads. While they argue that encampment sweeps can be useful in the short term to reduce the physical and social disorder associated with the encampments, many complained that other campers would come into the space and reoccupy the area. They see the problems associated with unsanctioned encampments as cyclical, repetitive, and place based. Some of these residents requested that the city pair encampment sweeps with laws that excluded campers from returning in the future (discussed in more detail in Chapter 6). Regardless of whether they want the city to continue sweeping encampments or not for short term relief, they expressed frustration and defeat that encampments continued to consistently reappear.

Both groups expressed disappointment and concern about the cost of ineffective sweeps. Residents who believe sweeps are ineffective, because they destabilize and harm people, expressed dismay that the city would spend a significant amount of money on these actions.

They frequently commented that the money could be diverted to better uses like opening bathrooms, temporary shelters, and permanent affordable housing. They also expressed that it was immoral to spend city resources on these harmful interventions. Other residents expressed frustration that the city was spending money on responses that did not address the root of the problem. According to these individuals, it would be better to invest more resources into involuntary treatment, temporary shelters, or increased police staffing. They do not take the same moral position as other residents but believe that sweeps alone are an ineffective and shortsighted way to manage homelessness.

## CONCLUSION

Returning to the concept of diagnostic frames, these findings show that housed residents understand homelessness in a wide variety of ways. Unsurprisingly, housed residents largely understand homelessness to be a problem of Public Safety and broader social forces, such as tax policy and housing markets. A unique contribution of this work is identifying how much concern and emphasis housed residents place on government operations. These concerned residents view government transparency, accountability, spending, and program administration as all integral and contributing to the social problem of homelessness. Another important set of findings from these data are the things house residents focus less attention on. Contrary to public and scholarly discourse, this group of house residents was not centrally concerned about mental illness, individual pathologies and how they contribute to homelessness, or identifying the fundamental causes of homelessness.

It is possible that the emphasis on public government operations and the de-emphasis on the causes of homelessness reflects the venue these comments are being made in more so than

the interest of the house residents who made them. However, city council members, their staff, and other public officials hear these comments and understand them to be the concerns of the broader public. As such, we should treat these comments as important and informative for understanding how housed residents relate to their government about the issue of homelessness. As we move to chapter 6, we will see how these understandings of homelessness inform how housed residents would like to see the government respond to it. Chapter 6 builds upon this work by examining resonant demands for a response. I also look at how problem frames of homelessness correspond with prognostic frames, that is the ways these problems can be addressed and solved.

## Chapter 6. Responding to Homelessness

Seattleites want the government to respond to homelessness and when they request interventions and responses they expect the city to respond with urgency. Regardless of how residents frame homelessness, most commenters emphasized that the city should respond quickly and to scale to ameliorate the problem, as they define it. In this chapter, I analyze how housed residents would like the government to respond to homelessness. I continue examining the homelessness-related comments made at Seattle City Council meetings between 2018 and 2021. I also incorporate relevant comments from the Find It, Fix It data explored in Chapter 4. Using grounded theory, I code specific requests and then analyze the body of text and codes for recurrent themes (see Chapter 3 for additional details).

Commenters asked for seven types of responses (Table 6 below). Several of the request types reflect common thinking about homelessness. One quarter of commenters asked the city to provide material relief for people experiencing homelessness, by meeting basic needs, stopping the harms associated with sweeps, and reallocating money to homeless services. Twenty-two percent of commenters called for structural responses to homelessness that increased affordable housing, taxed corporations, and prevented vulnerable Seattleites from becoming homeless in the first place. Approximately 20 percent of residents asked the city to regulate visible homeless through formal social control strategies; they requested forced removal via encampment sweeps, increased police involvement, and mandatory mental health and substance abuse treatment.

The final portion of commenters articulated their requests in less conventional ways. Some commenters request that the city reform how they respond to homelessness by gathering more data, informing the public about their plans and progress, and including the residents in the decision-making process. Others approached the city with solutions they pitched as sensible for

addressing the harms of homelessness for housed and homeless people alike (addressing two coexisting problems). Each of these groups account for approximately 14 percent of all commenters during the study period. The final group of residents is small (5 percent) but vocal. They express frustration, exasperation, and anger toward the City Council and their response to homelessness, calling for these officials to resign and revolting from the governance process completely.

**Table 6.** Homelessness Response Categories from Seattle City Council Public Comment Data, 2018-2022

<b>Response Category</b>	<b>Category Elements</b>	<b># of Commenters (Percent)</b>
Relief	Meeting basic needs, stopping sweeps, reallocating money to homeless services	39 (26%)
Structural Responses	Building affordable housing, tax reform, preventing homelessness	32 (22%)
Formal Social Control	Forced removal, police responses, mental health and drug treatment	30 (20%)
Reform	Data collection, government transparency, resident participation	21 (14%)
Addressing Two Coexisting Problems	Solving problems for homeless people and housed people at the same time	19 (13%)
Revolt	Private solutions to homelessness, government dissolution	7 (5%)

Two interesting demographic and temporal patterns emerge from the request data. Women were more likely than men to make requests for material relief and structural intervention, and frame government responses as solving two coexisting problems. Men, on the other hand, were much more likely to angrily reject the process (revolt) than women. However,

men and women requested formal social control through removal of visible homelessness at the same rate. There were no distinguishable geographic patterns of responses based on where residents lived across the city.

Temporally, people requested different types of responses before and after the COVID-19 pandemic. Before the start of the pandemic, people requested structural changes most frequently, followed by reform and relief requests. Formal social control interventions were the fourth most frequently requested response prior to March 2020. After the pandemic began, material relief became the predominant request, followed by formal social control. Also, people were more likely to argue their requests benefit both homeless and housed people (the two coexisting problems category) after the pandemic than before it.

## RESULTS

### *Relief*

The most requested government intervention made by housed residents is for accommodative relief. According to Snow and Cress (1993:1068) accommodative relief “refers to outcomes that help ameliorate the conditions of homelessness. More concretely, accommodative relief is constituted by the provision of the basic necessities that accommodate daily survival on the streets and the creation of restorative facilities that enhance the chances of getting off the streets.” The authors suggest that accommodative relief includes emergency and cold-weather shelters, hygiene services like bathrooms, showers, and laundry facilities, and food provision like soup kitchens and food pantries. Overall, the accommodative relief request is for government resources and fundings be allocated in a way that makes the lives of people experiencing homelessness easier by meeting specific needs for health care, hygiene, safety, and

shelter. In many ways, these requests are made by housed people on *behalf* of, or alongside with, people experiencing homelessness. In contrast to requests for formal social control responses, revolt, or reform, relief requests center and highlight the harm experienced by homeless people, rather than the harm or discomfort of housed people observing homelessness.

In the Seattle City Council comment data, housed residents in Seattle extend their relief requests beyond meeting the basic needs of homeless people. Many also ask the city to stop encampment removals, because they make life for people experiencing homelessness much more difficult. This type of request emphasizes the city's ability to prevent harm and disruption, ultimately making life on the streets easier. Additionally, some residents request accommodative relief at a much larger scale. Unlike structural requests that focus on systems-level changes (described in the next subsection), these asks are still focused on meeting the basic needs of people currently experiencing homelessness. These residents use abolitionist arguments about the allocation of resources, care, and harm prevention to advocate for the redistribution of money and resources from the formal social control functions of the government to the care functions of the government.

*Meet basic needs.*

Residents who came out in person (before the Covid-19 pandemic) or called into online meetings were often motivated to voice their opposition to service cuts. These residents made comments during committee meetings where the council is considering cuts in services. During the observation period, the Council considered cuts to women's shelters, an overnight men's shelter location, and tiny house village funding. Residents requesting relief often communicated an understanding of how homelessness negatively impacts the people who are experiencing it. Their requests were often impassioned and compassionate, centering the basic needs of homeless

individuals and, at times, communicating their willingness to share their own resources. One commenter brought these nuanced observations to the City Council, saying

I live near Licton Springs [Tiny House Village], which has since closed down and now I have people [who] come into my carport to sleep, they use my electricity, they use the washroom. I have no problem with that. These people are desperate, but if they had a place to go it would not be necessary for them to do these things. So you've got to keep those tiny houses going. It is important.

Residents communicated a sense of urgency with their requests, echoing the city's declaration of homelessness as a Civil Emergency in 2015 back to officials: "We've got an emergency. There is a state of emergency going on and we are defunding things that work. That doesn't make any sense to me. So stop defunding these programs." Here, this resident mirrors others who lobby for government relief—they are frustrated by the city's perceived lack of motivation in addressing problems with an appropriate speed and scale, as well as finding the city's approach counterproductive ("defunding things that work").

Other residents see funding basic services as one important component in a larger effort to ameliorate homelessness in the city over a longer period. This orientation was expressed by an individual who said, "And I recognize that it is very difficult to balance funding needs and of course we do need more housing but we don't have it now and we're not going to have it next year. And to look at even one person who is sheltered now and to say, 'Sorry no more shelter for you.' I don't want to see it." For this resident, shelters are an essential service that meet an immediate need *and* they should be a short-term salve while the city invests in long-term solutions like housing.

Housed residents continued to raise concerns about the city's willingness to meet the basic needs of homeless people during the Covid-19 pandemic. One issue that garnered attention from commenters was the closing of public restrooms. The City of Seattle closed many of its public bathroom facilities at the beginning of the pandemic (Land 2020), which commenters

argued disproportionately impacted the homeless community. By July 2021 residents began urging the council to reopen public restrooms for the benefit of both homeless individuals and the public. This commenter's approach encompasses many of the same arguments made by others:

I want to really echo the call to reopen the bathrooms and showers. Because the committee—this committee has been working for months to roll out the new street sinks and to access water and so forth, which is wonderful. But Seattle Parks and [Recreation] Superintendent Jesús [Aguirre] has kept many shower facilities closed. And that doesn't just affect homeless people. It affects those of us who bike around and sometimes need to go to the bathroom in public. Public restrooms are an essential part of a city. We need to reopen the existing buildings that we already have built. Parks is spending money on sweeps instead of on bathrooms and showers. And it's denying access to public space to those who don't have homes nearby. Some of the facilities are open. There's no public health reason for not reopening all of them. Please do not continue to deny people of Seattle, both unsheltered and sheltered, access to basic essential services. And please fund housing. Thank you.

This individual's comment emphasizes the shared need for bathrooms amongst everyone who lives in Seattle. Rather than exclusively focusing on the unmet needs of homeless people or the frustrations of housed people, this commenter makes a more general argument that in a functioning city, the government should be responsible for providing necessities and facilities to all residents regardless of housing status. Like the frustration expressed when the city cuts fundings for programs "that are working," this commenter highlights the wastefulness of underutilizing already existing resources. Presenting the needs of housed and homeless people as the same, albeit with varying levels of necessity, was a strategy some residents employed beyond the issue of public bathrooms. Mirrored needs and linked fate were also discussed in the context of affordable housing, environmental risk exposure, and public safety.

*Stop harm.*

In addition to providing basic services to meet fundamental needs like shelter and hygiene, some residents demand that the city stop making life for homeless people more difficult

than it already is. These residents forcefully express their frustration with the city's encampment removal policies, arguing that they destabilize homeless individuals who are trying to survive on the streets, disrupt the efforts of community organizations providing mutual aid relief, and create an emotionally harmful environment that makes homelessness much more difficult than it already is. One resident expressed these concerns, saying "Sweeps—like everyone said—are traumatic, harmful, disrupt mutual aid, disrupt people's lives, retraumatize people, help people be even more reticent about trusting the government and the people that are trying to help them. And it's just a really bad cycle and they should stop." Here, residents reframe the harm as coming from the government intervention rather than the conditions of homelessness. While commenters recognize that homelessness neighbors may need accommodative relief to help them meet their basic needs, they also emphasize the added trauma and disruption that the city is contributing to the situation. Homeless people need relief *from* the government.

Other commenters argue that not only should the city stop harming homeless people through sweeps, but they should also reallocate that money from encampment removal and invest it in accommodative relief programs, such as tiny house villages. For residents who center the concerns of homeless individuals, this is an obvious substitution. One housed resident communicated these tradeoffs, saying

So there is the urgent need to extend immediate solutions to provide our homeless neighbors with dignity and humanity. Tiny house villages can be that. As a trained professional nurse, now retired, the Navigation Team sweeps are harmful to the health and wellbeing of the most vulnerable of us and wasteful of city resources. I am asking the council to please support up to 40 tiny house villages in the city and use the \$10 million spent on the sweeps instead for tiny house villages.

This resident furthers the critique of sweeps made by the previous commenter—that they are harmful and wasteful—and contrasts the harms of sweeps with the promise of tiny house villages.

She emphasizes that the solutions to homelessness should provide “dignity and humanity,” moving the discussion of accommodative relief beyond physical and bodily needs to include emotional and relational needs. For these commenters, shifting government funds from sweeps to tiny house villages would prevent harm while also providing high-quality services to people experiencing homelessness—a win-win solution.

*Reallocate resources.*

The final theme of *relief* requests encompasses residents calling to significantly expand the scale and scope of city responses. These individuals invoke abolitionist ideals when they lobby the government to invest significant financial resources into accommodative and preventive relief efforts. Like other commenters, these individuals link the needs of housed and homeless people together, asking for community investment that will benefit a large proportion of Seattleites. Commenters raised these ideas and requests in response to two pots of money. The first large sum of money came from the federal government’s American Rescue Plan Act, a significant infusion of money to state and local governments for economic recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic. Callers suggested that this money should go into “social infrastructure,” such as “housing, preparing for the wildfire smoke that we know is coming, transportation, libraries, broadband, supporting BIPOC businesses and youth employment and mental health and universal basic income.” Many of these callers made it clear that this money should not be used to reinforce or expand formal social control tools, such as “policing, prosecuting courts, detentions, jails or technologies for the system.” This money from the federal government was viewed as a way for the city to invest in the built and social environment in ways that would benefit both the homeless community and housed community in Seattle.

Callers exhorted the city to invest in social infrastructure with another large sum of money: savings from the Seattle Police Department. Beginning in summer 2020, Seattle activists began urging the City Council to freeze, reduce, or slash the police department’s budget (Reyna 2021). As the Council and mayor weighed different approaches to reducing the department’s budget, residents requested that the funds be allocated to other services and programs throughout the city. One caller explained the logic of their request, saying “We need to make sure we are literally giving folks the resources they need to really help our community. Please follow through with your commitment to transform public safety and invest SPD’s salary savings into JustCARE and community safety capacity building.” This caller, like many others, asked the city to invest in JustCARE.<sup>37</sup> One caller made an explicit argument that the work JustCARE was doing increased the safety of the neighborhood while also reducing the potential harm caused by police: “I am calling to ask you to follow through on your commitment and transfer all \$50 million in salary savings out of SPD. This money should go to true community programs that provide true communities of health and safety. JustCARE, for example, has a 39 percent reduction in 911 calls in areas around encampments in the communities it serves. That is community safety, that is investing in community safety.” These callers are asking for a complex combination of relief—they seek relief from police interventions, relief that provides “true” health and safety through effective interventions, and relief that creates a social environment better able to support both homeless and housed community members.

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<sup>37</sup>JustCARE is an organization that describes itself as “a multi-partner response to encampments in three Seattle neighborhoods during COVID” (P.D.A. 2023). The JustCARE approach utilized field teams from the Public Defenders Association and REACH (outreach workers who focus on the homeless community) to “built relationships, organized within the community of unsheltered individuals at a JustCARE site, and assessed each individual’s situation and barriers before proposing a placement that could work for them” (P.D.A. 2023). Many of these homeless individuals would then be connected to hotel-based lodging programs that emerged during the pandemic.

In sum, many people want the government to address the material needs of people experiencing homelessness. Some of these commenters focus on basic, direct-care needs like shelter and water while others seek to change the scope and scale of relief by capturing large sums of money. *Relief* commenters see the government as able to reduce the harm caused by homelessness through providing material support, as well as stopping current approaches that destabilize homeless people.

### *Structural Responses*

Approximately one-fifth of all resident commenters requested some form of structural intervention from the city government. Structural requests seek to create change at the systems- or market-level and with the goal of improving social and/or economic conditions for a wide group of citizens. Commenters who request structural changes see how systems and markets have a negative impact on all Seattleites and seek out changes in the fundamental conditions that create these negative impacts. For example, these commenters desire to change tax policies to relieve pressure on middle class homeowners, increase the contributions of major corporations to the public good, and generate more financial resources to invest in long-term responses to homelessness. Similarly, they frequently ask the city to build more housing, think more creatively about housing regulation and supply, and increase the overall availability of affordable housing. From their perspective these changes benefit many people in the city, not only current homeowners experiencing pressure in a tight housing market or precariously housed people who have a difficult time finding a permanent home.

The overall motivation for these requesters is to reduce the risk of becoming homeless in Seattle and limit the negative impacts of homelessness for everyone. Taking this broader, macro

perspective, commenters who request structural changes most frequently discuss the need for more affordable housing, progressive tax reform, and institutional protections that will prevent housed people from becoming homeless.

*Build more housing.*

All commenters who discussed housing agreed that more should be built. Their requests for the types, locations, and funding of housing varied, but the desire for the city to build more affordable housing was unanimous and uncontroversial. Many commenters stated that the dearth of affordable housing in the city was one of the main reasons for Seattle’s high rate of homelessness. For example, one person said, “I want to say that the solution to people being homeless starts with housing. It is so obvious and the solution to outrageous sprint is housing the people can afford.” Beyond the agreement that more affordable housing is needed and that limited housing increased homelessness, commenters varied in their underlying motivations and requests.

Some commenters requested the city site affordable housing in their neighborhoods. One person argued that their neighborhood would be an appropriate place to build affordable housing because of the high risk of displacement they associate with market-rate development: “I support MHA (Mandatory Housing Affordability)<sup>38</sup> in West Seattle and moreover encourage you to reinvest those fees directly into affordable housing in the neighborhoods that are most at risk for displacement. I'm excited by the prospect of more affordability in my neighborhood and I urge you to support MHA and other equitable development strategies that can help our city become

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<sup>38</sup>“Mandatory Housing Affordability (MHA) ensures that new commercial and multifamily residential development contributes to affordable housing” (City of Seattle 2019). “Mandatory Housing Affordability (MHA) is a developer contribution. Developer contributions are either a payment or provided benefit in consideration of a proposed project. The City of Seattle requires MHA developer contributions to mitigate the impacts of new development. To achieve the goal of providing affordable housing in Seattle, development subject to the MHA requirements must contribute to affordable housing as part of most commercial, residential, or live-work projects” (City of Seattle 2023a).

more inclusive and equitable.” After identifying a lack of affordable housing as a problem for both people who are currently housed and vulnerable to displacement, also asserts that increasing affordable housing in vulnerable neighborhoods would “help our city become more inclusive and equitable,” a broader moral aim for those asking for a structural response. Similarly, one commenter from the Magnolia neighborhood argued that increasing the affordable housing in her neighborhood is also the morally correct thing to do. She said, “This proposal is a good step towards remedying our city’s immorally slow response to the affordable housing crisis. For my neighborhood's culture of exclusivism and elitism. Please make this redevelopment plan a reality. I would be happy to help in any way I can.”

Other commenters encouraged the city to increase the *types* of housing being built. One commenter said, “We need more tiny house villages because we don't have enough affordable housing. We don't have enough supportive housing. We don't have enough workforce housing.” Other commenters encouraged the council members to think creatively about developing different types of housing, by transforming unconventional buildings (like commercially zoned stores, industrial-zone warehouses, and abandoned hotels) into livable spaces.

These transformations would require the city to change zoning regulations and include more residential housing in non-residential areas. Many commenters discussed zoning changes as quick, easy, and common-sense ways to create additional housing to reduce homelessness. Finally, commenters identified unique opportunities to develop new housing through pandemic-related dips in the housing market and reallocating money spent on encampment sweeps for new building projects. Both suggestions were presented as being a good use of resources and an opportunity for the city to be nimble in its response to changing economic and social conditions.

*Tax reform.*

Some commenters request tax reform. People who request structural changes broadly support tax money being used to fund services for the homeless community. They support raising taxes with two caveats: they want the scale of the campaign to be large and they want to tax corporations rather than homeowners. Tax-related requests occurred throughout the observation period but were more frequent and impassioned during the debates about the Amazon ‘head tax’ in 2018 and 2019. Legislation was proposed in April 2018 for an employee hours tax, generating an estimated \$75 million dollars to fund homelessness services in the city (Beekman 2018). The April 2018 iteration of the head tax focused on taxing large corporations, such as Amazon, that were accused of contributing to the homelessness crisis by drawing a significant number of new employees to the city who, in turn, placed additional pressure on an already overstressed housing market. As the proposed legislation was being considered by the city, residents weighed in with their suggestions for and opinions of the tax proposal during council meetings and special forums.

While public comment periods focused on the head tax were often contentious, many people supported the city’s efforts. One resident summarized this supportive sentiment, stating “I support a progressive tax. For a long time we said that public housing was a failed experiment. As if living in a tent under the freeway is a successful experiment. If there is a failed experiment it is trickle-down economics [audience claps].” People who supported the ‘head tax’ (and raising additional revenue for homelessness services more generally) expressed hope and optimism that government officials were trying new approaches to resolving the homelessness problem and “doing something” proactive. Other commenters added a moral component to their support: “I strongly believe the employee hours tax that the council has proposed is the best, right, and the

just way to deal with the housing crisis we have and the homelessness that comes as a result.”

For these commenters, the progressive employee hours tax offered a possible solution to homelessness that intervened at a structural level, was large enough to fill the resource gap, and was the right thing to do.

Other commenters extended their normative analysis to class inequality and corporate responsibility. Proponents of the ‘head tax’ frequently emphasized the progressive nature of the legislation, highlighting how it would redistribute the tax burden from being overly dependent on homeowners to placing more responsibility on businesses and large corporations. Some commenters’ support focused specifically on this aspect of the response: “We’re going to stop putting all of our tax burden on the poor and the middle class and that’s what this is and I support the head tax.” Others were more forceful with their arguments, highlighting how the large businesses and wealthy leaders could afford to shoulder more of the tax burden,

So how are we going to solve this problem? We’re going to build some housing and that costs money. So who are going to take the money from? I’ll tell you who. Say we need 5 billion. That’s a pretty conservative estimate. 5 billion is the amount Jeff Bezos made in 10 minutes when Amazon announced they bought Whole Foods. We’re going to tax that motherfucker. [audience boos]

Support for tax reform was very specific—corporations and wealthy individuals should shoulder the burden, rather than homeowners or renters. There was a shared sense that these taxes would be a manageable expense for these entities and that it was the morally correct option.

*Preventive relief.*

The final set of structural requests made by commenters aims to reduce the precarity of housed people and prevent them from becoming homeless themselves. Related to the tax reform requests outlined above, commenters discussed the links between high, increasing property taxes and the stability of their own housing situations. One older woman spoke about her personal

housing vulnerability: “Last October I got a bill to raise my property taxes and I couldn't do that because I couldn't pay that and pay my mortgage too. I lost my house and I don't live there anymore. And I've had that house for 28 years.” She went on to request that the city take an alternative approach to generate funds to address homelessness, other than increasing homeowner’s property taxes. Her body language and tone of voice were resigned when she said, “There's got to be a different way for [the city government] to get money to help people instead of just taking [homeowner’s] money and not even finding out how many other people have lost houses. A lot of them. That's all I have to say.” Here, she identifies how the tax problems of homeowners are linked to and created by the city as it seeks to raise revenue to address homelessness. She is not questioning the city’s need for additional funding nor resisting paying taxes on her home, but she does illuminate the need for a different structural response to the problem. Her contention, which was echoed by other housed residents who shared their sense of housing precarity with the council, is that government’s efforts to ameliorate homelessness should not displace currently housed people from their homes.

Other commenters focused on the precarity of renters navigating a tight housing market. Between 2018 and 2021, several legislative bills were introduced to strengthen renter protections that would require landlords to provide just-cause reasons for evictions, eviction relocation assistance, and notices prior to rent increases. Several commenters linked these legislative efforts to homelessness prevention. One individual said,

I definitely support the bill to close the just cause loopholes. It doesn't even make sense that a landlord has to provide one of the 16 just cause reasons to evict someone if someone is on a month-to-month [lease] but not if they are on a term lease. It seems like an easy fix just to change especially as we know that 9 out of 10 people evicted become homeless.

Another commenter suggested that requiring landlords to provide eviction relocation funds would force them to share in the financial responsibility associated with homelessness:

I want to support the bills put forward by Councilwoman Sawant’s office for eviction relocation assistance and to force landlords to give a six-month notice on rent increases. I think the question we need to ask ourselves is, ‘Who do we want to pay for the homelessness crisis: working people or their landlords?’

### *Formal Social Control*

Seattle residents frequently asked the city to respond to homelessness using formal social control tools - encampment clean ups and forced removal of visible homelessness, police interventions, and mandatory mental illness and substance abuse treatment. Residents who request these responses emphasize how they, their housed neighbors, and businesses are negatively impacted by visible homelessness. The perceived lawlessness that accompanies homelessness—tents blocking sidewalks, visible drug use and intoxication, and public defecation and urination—is said to cause possible harm to housed neighbors and increases their fear of crime. These same sentiments appear through the Find It, Fix It complaints explored in Chapter 4.

Motivating these requests are underlying assumptions that the city is deteriorating or “going to shit,” government officials are too timid to make hard decisions, and that the city continues to invest in ineffective interventions rather than responding to disorder with the forcefulness it requires. Individuals with these motivations emphasize the importance of encampment removal and empowering police. They want the problems they associate with homelessness to go away.

Additionally, formal control responses are discussed as top-down interventions into the crisis that need not rely on the cooperation of the homeless people on the receiving end of the

control relationship. Many people who request formal social control responses assume that homeless individuals are incapable of partnering with the government to ameliorate the situation, resulting in interventions that are done to them and for them. Some residents who call for formal social control responses to visible homelessness argue that it is in the best interest of homeless people, in that these interventions hold people accountable for their harmful behavior (i.e. lawbreaking or deviance) or provide help for individuals who may not choose to change for themselves (i.e. people experiencing untreated mental illness and/or substance use disorder). These residents emphasize mandatory treatment for mental illness and substance use disorder, highlighting how formal social control responses prevent the government from enabling homeless people to continue in harmful patterns.

*Forced removal.*

One of the most frequently requested formal social control responses is the removal of tents and encampments. Residents request that the visible signs of homelessness are removed from where they live and work, places they frequently walk, and nearby parks. When requesting these removals, speakers highlight the chaos and disorder they associated with the encampments, asking the city to address the “mounds of garbage” left by campers, “needles, human feces, and other toxic waste.” These requests often emphasize the risks emanating from unsanctioned encampments and how they pose a problem for both housed and homeless residents in the area. They also highlight how encampments foster and harbor criminal behavior, such as assault, murder, rape, and the illegal trafficking of goods. Additionally, housed residents ask the city to address the disorderly behavior of campers, such as playing loud music at night, fighting, and burning fires in undesignated areas. Many of these complaints echo problems raised in the Find It, Fix It reports discussed in Chapter 4.

Several commenters also noted that encampment clean ups were a temporary and impermanent solution to the problem, as other campers would often come to these cleaned up locations and make a new encampment. These residents request that the city create legal bans on camping in specific areas, such as public parks. One frustrated commenter summarized this litany of problems and requests when she said [requests italicized],

I have lived in the neighborhood for 24 years. I live where University Way passes Ravenna Boulevard at Olga Park. I want to talk about homeless encampments in the parks, particularly that park. I have a proposal. From my kitchen window I can look down on this large homeless encampment. It's more than just tents and sleeping bags. I can see mattresses, cinder blocks, desk chairs. All sorts of junk. This is not a secluded hillside in some remote areas of the park, but a strip of land adjacent to several large apartment buildings and residences. We neighbors have really lost use of the parkland here. The police and fire department can tell you about many problems they have been called to here, as have some of my neighbors who have already spoken. *My proposal is this: I know you're not going to be removing encampments in all parks, but I suggest you declare a non-tolerance zone in the parks 200 feet from any residential building. Tents and other debris in the zone should be removed on a zero-day basis. In other words, a tent goes up overnight and the next morning it is cleared away. Moving the current campers to tiny houses or motels won't solve the problem here because the campers typically leave everything behind and new squatters arrive to take their place. To summarize, I'm asking you to enforce a zero-tolerance, zero-delay, no-camping zone of 200 feet from any residential building. Please give us neighbors back our neighborhood. Thank you.*

This individual gives voice to the concern of other residents in the same area, and echoes many of the same concerns raised by commenters about the Ballard Commons, a large park near a neighborhood business district; downtown Seattle; and the Chinatown/International District area of the city. Chinatown/International District residents also emphasized the importance of encampment removal to “protect residents, business owners, visitors and the elderly population.”

People also expressed their desire for the city to remove encampments by voicing their opinions about two policy issues facing the council. The first issue was the possible defunding of the city’s Navigation Team in 2020. The Navigation Team was “a group of police and Human Services Department outreach workers who removed encampments and offered shelter beds to

their displaced residents” (Barnett 2021). After several years of activist critique and the racial uprisings in summer 2020, the Seattle City Council began debate on defunding the team. Residents who supported the city’s encampment removals also supported continued funding for the Navigation Team, saying they should be “allowed to continue to clean up dangerous, unsanitary encampments to provide health and safety for all of us citizens” and that some would “like to see the Navigation Team stay.”

The second policy issue related to encampment removals was Council Bill 119796. This bill, sponsored by council members Morales, Mosqueda, and Sawant in May 2020, “impose[d] a restriction on funding across multiple departments that comprise the Navigation Team, the city’s direct response to unsanctioned encampments, during the period of the civil emergency”<sup>39</sup> related to the COVID pandemic. In effect, this legislation would follow the guidance of the Centers for Disease Control to largely pause encampment removals while the city had declared a civil emergency. According to the legislation’s text, the CDC recommends pausing encampment removal “in order to prevent transmission of COVID-19 throughout the general population and avoid increasing risks for people experiencing homelessness.”

Many people called in to voice their opposition to the legislation, claiming that, contrary to the CDC’s recommendation, encampments increased the spread of COVID by fostering unsanitary and overcrowded conditions that prevented meaningful social distancing. One commenter shared this perspective, asking “How are people supposed to maintain six feet of distance when only four feet of sidewalk is the standard given in the bill? There is nothing safe about these encampments, neither for the encampments or the passersby. Please allow the

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<sup>39</sup>Seattle City Council Bill 119796 Summary and Fiscal Note:  
<https://seattle.legistar.com/View.ashx?M=F&ID=8452518&GUID=C3CBC528-AFBE-4948-87D5-ED4E8DA18358>

Navigation Team to continue to do their job.” Another commenter summarized a more general concern: that the COVID pandemic would increase the number of people experiencing homelessness and that if the city stopped removing encampments, they would become larger, more disruptive, and more unruly. She shared this concern, saying

I am a resident of District 7. As imposing as today's problems are with encampments and encampment sweeps, the impending economic crisis that faces us will usher in a new era of homelessness that makes our current problem look like a pre-corona walk in the park. We must prepare in earnest now to put a scalable plan in place while numbers are still relatively low. CB 119796 attempts to legitimize four-foot wide sidewalks as magically sufficient to accommodate safe six-foot distancing, when nothing less than 10 feet will do for passageways through and around encampments.

Opposition to CB 119796 was also voiced most frequently by residents from the downtown, Pioneer Square, and Chinatown/International District areas. Many of these residents expressed their opposition to the bill as an extension of their ongoing frustration over unchecked visible homelessness in the areas. A Change.org petition opposing the bill was created by a group called the “Chinatown International District” (2020) and garnered almost 10,000 signatures. Additionally, the Pioneer Square Residents Council (2020) published a blog encouraging residents to make public comment on the bill and provided talking points that emphasize the health risks associated with encampments.

*Police response.*

Some residents expressed desire for the police to be more active in addressing visible homelessness in Seattle. Unlike the specific requests residents included when talking about encampment removals, residents ask the city government to hire more police officers, maintain police funding levels, and remove perceived obstacles for police to “do their jobs.” Several people argued that the city should hire more police officers. They assert that hiring more police would reduce response times: “There is a need for more police in this city [audience claps]. Did

you know that the average police response time to 15th and Market in Ballard is 19 minutes for the most violent of crimes? Focus on the causes and stop trying to use Band-Aids.”

The request to hire more police officers is closely linked to discussions of defunding the police department. Like the discussion of defunding the Navigation Team in summer 2020, activists and community members made pointed demands to significantly reduce funding for the Seattle Police Department. While many public commenters argued for defunding (detailed in the Reform section below), others argued that police are essential for responding to homelessness and that the department should not be defunded. These requests closely associate police funding with crime control and law and order.

One resident articulated this connection, saying “I’m asking you: please do not defund the Seattle Police Department. We need the police on our side. Not only for violent crimes, but also for the crimes that are happening inside of this encampment across the street from the Union Gospel Mission. They are selling alcohol. They are also selling drugs. So please, do not defund the police department.” Here the resident communicates two ideas. The first is an anxiety that calls for defunding the police will alienate and offend officers, making it more difficult to get assistance for addressing homelessness. The commenter then uses the established legitimacy of policing violent crime to bolster her calls for police to respond to the selling of drugs and alcohol in an encampment near her home. Other commenters argue that, rather than saving money, defunding the police is a poor use of resources that may have dire consequences: “We need law and order here and we need it now. Utilize our trained police. Don't replicate it with social workers and bigger budgets. Be smart. Don't make Seattle a laughing example of failure. Keep funding our police. Do not defund.” This commenter reflects the ‘thin blue line’ argument, where

the police are tasked with maintaining social order and preventing society from “failing” and descending into chaos.

Residents also called on council members to “let police do their jobs.” Commenters claim that police are prevented from fulfilling their duties because the council does not support them, the burdensome paperwork associated with filing an arrest, and oversight bodies that are perceived as critical of the police department. Two commenters communicate these ideas:

Why do you not support the police and allow them to curb the illegal activities such as the rapes, the beatings, the death, the open dealing, the open theft and theft operations all throughout our streets, around our schools, and in these encampments? We are also for saving lives but right now they are not allowed to do so.

I know a S.W.A.T. commander. I hear too many times they will not arrest somebody because they face so many responsibilities and internal investigations brought about by the [Department of Justice] thing that occurred a number of years ago—that binds them in red tape—the inability to be effective in their jobs. All they need to do is be effective in their jobs and be allowed to perform their duties. That's it. That's all that needs to happen. Everything I see on the streets will simply disappear. I ask myself, why can I go to Bellevue and not see the same thing? Simply because they are allowed to do their job.

In these requests commenters assert that police could be more effective at addressing problems associated with homelessness if they were given more autonomy and authority to exercise their power. The dearth of specific requests also suggests that these commenters trust the police to know how to appropriately respond to homelessness.

#### *Mental health and drug treatment.*

Some residents point to untreated drug and mental illness as the root cause of homelessness and request formal social control interventions to address the primary and secondary problems.<sup>40</sup> These individuals assume that untreated mental illness and drug addiction

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<sup>40</sup>It is important to note that in Chapter 5 I discuss how mental illness is rarely talked about when people describe homelessness as a social problem. Here, it is important to remember the distinction between the nature of a social problem and the cause of a social problem, as discussed in Chapter 2. There are some housed residents in the sample who discuss mental illness as it relates to homelessness and formal social control. However, it was not a theme discussed frequently enough to describe it as one of the main ways people understood homelessness. Additionally, in my coding, I examine the frame in Chapter 5 separately from the responses in Chapter 6. Enough commenters

are the “root of the majority of homelessness” and that “half of the chronically homeless are mentally ill and/or drug addicted.” For these commenters, addressing these issues should come before the provision of other resources or services. Additionally, these residents believe that homeless people experiencing mental illness or substance abuse problems must be forcefully compelled into treatments and cannot (or will not) choose treatment on their own. One commenter shared this sentiment, saying “I really feel there should be a forced rehabilitation program where there is housing for all drug users, mandatory, 6 months or a year, to see if we can get them out of that cycle.” Here, the commenter pairs compulsory drug rehabilitation with housing for a specific period, arguing that the treatment and stable environment will help people transition out of problematic substance use and homelessness.

Another resident shared a similar desire but suggested that treatment services be offered in local jails: “Seattle City Council and King County Council all must mandate law and order be restored. No diversion programs. They are not working. We need mental health and substance abuse treatment, please. Instead of utilizing extra space at the King County Jail for the homeless, it should've been left a jail with true wraparound services.” This comment encapsulates the complex and, at times, contradictory requests of residents. At the core of the comment is a frustration with the city’s current responses and a desire for what they believe would be more effective interventions. They also communicate a more nuanced critique of a blunt criminalization of homelessness (using extra jail space in the King County Jail for “the homeless”), arguing that carceral settings should be maximized by including wraparound services. Presumably, this individual includes mental health and substance treatment services in these wraparound services, as they mention them earlier in their statement.

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discussed the need for mental health treatment (a response) to make it a finding for this chapter, but did not discuss it frequently enough to be a finding in the previous one.

*Find It, Fix It response requests.*

Most Find It, Fix It requests do not include an explicit ask of the city government. This is likely because a report acts as a request; it may be that explicitly telling the government what to do feels redundant to the reporter. Roughly 1,400 reports include a more detailed request (see Appendix F for additional details). Most of these requests call for either a punitive social control response to homelessness—in the form of increased police patrol or arrests, spatial exclusion, or forced removal of campers—or cleaning up the physical disorder in a public space.

People request increased monitoring of public space through police and Parks Department patrols. Residents motivate these requests by saying patrols will deter current and future criminal activity from the location (“dislodge the chronic drug addict shootup party from this area”), help the city enforce law on the books (“patrol and enforce our laws and get rid of this illegal parking and living arrangements”), and decrease resident’s fear of crime (“please patrol these trails and keep them safe for the public”). Patrolling was also requested as an important complement to encampment sweeps, as many residents believe that leaving recently cleared areas unmonitored will attract new homeless people to the area. Additionally, residents communicated that patrols were a way for the city to take responsibility for maintaining a desirable level of order for housed residents and to “look into [these situations] before [they get] out of control.”

Beyond patrol, a small group of Find It, Fix It reporters want the police and city government to take a much more punitive approach. These residents expressed a desire to arrest people for unauthorized camping, in essence—living in public— (“This is so disgusting Seattle! Also several 4 or so tents kitty corner near southbound I-5 on-ramp. Arrest these people!”; “Such as no camping on public right of ways like this stairway. Please jail these folks who are

flagrantly violating the law”). Others wanted the city to “let the police maintain a functioning public realm” by arresting and jailing people for public drug use, theft, and trespassing. They believed that these responses are both legally valid (“Drugs are illegal, are they not??”) and an equitable application of the law (“the people who did this would be arrested if they weren't “experiencing homelessness,”)”) There is also evidence that residents viewed arrest and jailing as reasonable consequences for refusing services. Two people shared this reasoning saying, “sweep the drug vagrants and put them in treatment, shelters, on a bus out of Seattle or jail” and “Offer services, if decline take to jail, then you [won't] have widespread tents.” Finally, some residents called for imprisonment and expulsion. These rare, but potently angry comments, were communicated with a sense of contempt and disdain: “WTF Seattle. Why protect 200 people at the sacrifice of millions. Fuck them. I wish they'd be out in prison and removed”; “Please move them along I and corral them into a place where they can be forced to rehabilitate or be arrested. If we continue this pathetic light handed approach, they will eventually kill themselves. I don't feel like waiting that long.” In general, when residents call for punitive responses to homelessness in the form of arrest, jailing, imprisonment, and expulsion they also express feelings of disgust, anger, and frustration at the perceived negative impact of homeless people on their neighborhoods, their quality of life, and the city more broadly.

In addition to regulating people through punishment, Find It, Fix It reporters also express a desire for the city to regulate access to space closely and forcefully. People often complained that homeless people were violating the law by camping in prohibited places. This behavior was seen as a brazen form of rule breaking and made many reporters frustrated that campers were flaunting legal restriction in clear view of residents and police officers. Reporters repeatedly asked the city to enforce the law when people were camping in restricted areas (“People

trespassing in front of a literal sign that says no trespassing at any time - ENFORCE THE LAW.”) People were also upset when they felt the city had administratively prioritized an area for cleanup and encampment removal and were not treating the situation with the urgency they believed it needed. One reporter summarized their complaint and request, saying “Please clean up in the park, this is an emphasis zone with no camping allowed.”

People also asked the city to create new restrictions on some public spaces. Like requesting patrol after encampment removals, many commenters asked for ‘No Trespassing’ or ‘No Camping’ signs to be posted in specific areas. They also asked the city to designate areas as emphasis zones, indicating they believed these spaces were particularly important and that the city should be treating them differently. Some of these spaces, like churches, residential areas, greenbelts, and parks, reflect the fear residents feel about homeless people interacting with children and the environment. One person shared their concern, saying “Please post no camping signs and let green belt recover. This can't continue as [an] open heroin den. Not sustainable.” Finally, reporters also asked the city to physically restrict access to some spaces by installing new fencing or repairing fencing that had been damaged.

While Find It, Fix It users asked the city to patrol areas and enforce place-based laws, they most frequently asked the government to clean up spaces. These clean up requests often focused on the physical disorder associated homelessness described in Chapter 4, but also extended to the removal of homeless people as well. Residents strongly assert that trash removal and encampment clean ups are the responsibility of the government, with one reporter writing “Tag it and clean it up. Do your jobs. Enforce laws. Stop wasting my tax money.” and another saying “It's the job of the city to remove illegal encampments. Do your job.” Removing debris was seen as the least the city could do (“At least remove the trash piles please.”) and reporters

expressed frustration when they felt they had to do this work themselves (“We’re picking the needles up feces up every single day [and] the city is not responding”; “No pictures because I am fed up w/ the smell, the stolen bikes & packages & tired of cleaning it up myself!!”). In addition to removing debris, reporters wanted the city to sanitize areas used by homeless people and restore them to their pre-encampment condition.

Reporters also want homeless people to be “cleaned up” and removed. Sometimes these requests rhetorically distinguish homeless people from objects: “Please move the people out and clean up the garbage” or “Request that the police move this person along and have them take their trash with them.” Other reports list people alongside physical objects (“Clean this site including all the stolen property, human waste, syringes and criminals out of the neighborhood and into jail. Fuck this”) or replace people with objects, like tents or encampments, in their statements (“Also this tent is dumping out trash regularly and obstructing street access.”) Reporters are forceful in their desire for the city to remove people and objects from public spaces, at times distinguishing between each category but more often slipping between categories.

### *Reform*

Some commenters want the City Council and local government to change their approach to homelessness. For these commenters the aggrieved party are the housed people whose problems and concerns have gone unheard and unconsidered. Additionally, homelessness is discussed as though it is a symptom of larger government inefficiencies, a sign that the systems and approaches need to be improved. Commenters who call for reform express frustration about being excluded from decision making processes, having an obscured sense of what is being done

to address the problem, and feeling as though their tax money is not being used efficiently. In response to these frustrations, commenters ask the city to develop oversight boards, collect data and follow consultants' directives, and keep constituents informed and involved.

Many of the reform requests employ technocratic solutions, such as collecting data on program performance and giving certain experts, like oversight board members and consultants, more power. Many commenters asked the city to collect and track data on program efficacy and spending. These requests were motivated by housed residents' desire for more insight into where the city was allocating financial resources to address homelessness. One person stated this desire, saying, "I would like to see the city release similar information to the public based on using data. Right? 'Cause, like, every event of you spending money is recorded in a database. The public should be able to see that by line item." This call for transparency links back to commenters' framing of homelessness as a problem of government efficacy and accountability. The underlying assumption in the request for additional data and data transparency is that it will create increased government accountability because the public will be more informed and will then be able to hold officials responsible for their choices. For many commenters, their interest in data collection and transparency is linked to (and possibly superseded by) their suspicion that homelessness-related spending is being wasted on inefficient programs. One commenter expressed their concern, saying

But we all want to see measured outcomes as to how and where our money is going. And you mentioned that *you* could see where our money is going. But we want to see where *our* money is going. We want to see progress. We want to see data points on that progress. Something that not one of you has mentioned or given an answer to, is when you're going to provide us with those data points for progress as we move forward.

Here, the commenter is reasserting that residents are in a position of importance because they generate the tax money used for these programs ("*our* money"). In this arrangement, government

officials use resident-provided funding to make “progress” on homelessness, a problem that is framed as negatively impacting housed residents from the reform perspective.

Other commenters were less concerned about public access to data and requested that experts be given more oversight authority over homelessness programming. One commenter expressed this desire when he requested an investigation on programmatic spending: “I’d like to see a standing committee on the efficiency of some of our programs. Now we had the RV Park in Ballard which ran \$32,000 a month in cost. Now why was that? Where did that money go? What went wrong?” An underlying assumption of reform requests is that the commenter can accurately identify problems, such as overspending or inefficiency, that they believe should be addressed; that their assessment of the problem is accurate enough to invoke the government to act. Other people hoped city officials would take the assessments of consultants more seriously. Expressing frustration with the impressions that the city had hired a consultant and then ignored her findings, one housed resident said, “So please, if you’re not going to listen to your paid consultant that we as taxpayers paid [\$80,000 for], then stop hiring consultants. Don’t act like you want consultants and their opinion if you’re just going to ignore their 80,000 dollars’ worth of recommendations. Read her report.” This commenter’s frustration encapsulates the dual concerns from these residents—the City Council is lax in their responses to homelessness *and* is wasting money on reports and programs that are costly and ineffective.

Finally, commenters who want government programs and responses to be reformed complained about feeling excluded from the process and uninformed about how the city plans to respond to homelessness. These commenters request that the city keep them better informed about how it is responding to homelessness and to make it clear how they can participate in the

process. One commenter's lengthy speech summarized the frustrations of many other residents calling for reform:

I talked to you guys a couple months ago and said, "What is the plan?" Let us know what is going on. I feel like there is a lack of information and I tried emailing and contacting my representatives and just generally the leaders in the city and I can't tell what is going on. I see a lot of criticism in the newspaper and online about why [homelessness] is getting worse. What I would love is if you guys have a plan, and I know that you do, if you would just be more public about it. Be stronger about sending it out. So we the people, who don't want to go into politics but care deeply about the city and all of the stuff going through, if you could just kind of keep us apprised. And I guess, I am just here today to say, if you have a plan, if you have a comprehensive plan or even just the idea of a plan share it with us. Put it in the paper. Put it on social media. If it is out there and I have not seen it, let me know. I just feel like it would be more comforting to know that things are moving and that there is a plan in place. If anyone has a response I would love to hear it.

This commenter encapsulates several aspects of *reform* commenters. She expresses tension she has with the city: she states she knows they have a plan to address homelessness but then goes on to discuss that she is frustrated by the city's lack of communication. Like other reformers, she expresses her interest in being kept apprised of how the city is responding to homelessness, both because she "cares deeply about the city" and because not knowing makes her uncomfortable. She also models the posture of many residents who want reform; they are interested in staying informed, expect the city to communicate regularly about their interventions, and would like to be personally involved in the process, while at the same time maintaining distance ("who don't want to go into politics, but care deeply about the city.") For some reformers, requests pertain to the mezzo-level of government interventions and operational information, orbiting around issues of transparency and efficacy, rather than demanding program-level modifications or more fundamental structural changes.

### *Addressing Two Coexisting Problems*

A final relatively infrequent, but nevertheless important, response category treats the problems housed and homeless people experience with equal weight. These commenters view homelessness as causing two coexisting sets of problems and argue that both sets should be addressed by the government with seriousness and speed. From this perspective, both unsheltered homeless individuals and the housed residents they live by are negatively impacted by homelessness and are constituents deserving of government attention and resources. Requests made by these commenters place equal importance on addressing the immediate material needs of unsheltered homeless people *and* serving housed residents who have an increased fear of crime, experience sadness when they see visible homelessness, and have a perceived inability to use public space. The tone of these requests is pragmatic. They are communicated in a way that emphasizes their commonsense appeal, the urgency of investing in programs and approaches that are currently working, and the ‘two birds, one loaf’ response to coexisting problems associated with homelessness. Practically, these commenters request increased funding and support for effective client-centered programs that also ameliorate visible homelessness, increased access to public parks, and clean up trash and materials associated with unsanctioned encampments.

Commenters who employ the “two coexisting problems” response frame identify how homelessness negatively impacts unhoused people, to show how their suggested responses will address the problems. The first problem they discuss is the overall lack of resources to address the material needs of people experiencing homelessness. These commenters argue that there is not enough affordable housing, emergency shelters, public bathrooms, R.V. safe lots, and other amenities for homeless people to live comfortably in the city. In their estimation, this lack of resources results in unhoused people living in highly visible, temporary shelters in public parks,

greenbelts, and on sidewalks. As a result, these housed residents ask the city to increase the availability of these resources: “I am here today because I want to urge you to accelerate the development of Tiny House Villages as a steppingstone toward more permanent housing for our homeless population,” “I am calling in today to urge the council to increase its investment in shelter for the homeless as well as causes and conditions,” and

We need to find a real permanent and humane solution to our homeless problem. Perhaps, as one person has already mentioned, permanently leasing underutilized hotels and motels. We cannot just continue to put band-aids on this serious situation. For those of us who live and work downtown, as well as those who are homeless.

In these calls for additional housing and support resources, commenters also articulate that services should be responsive to client needs and worries. One commenter summarized this approach when describing her proposed solution to visible homelessness in her neighborhood—a Tiny House village of sheds in a larger, climate-controlled warehouse:

A lot of the people who are down in these camps are not going to go into an office building for a mat on the floor because it does not meet what they need. They can't bring their pets. They can't be with their partners. They're afraid for their own personal safety. They may have emotional or mental health issues... But they have a lockable place where they can go and nobody else can go.

These commenters recognize that one-size-fits-all responses to homelessness will likely be ineffective because they do not acknowledge the reasons why some unhoused people refuse services. For these commenters, client-oriented programs such as LEAD, CoLEAD, and the Navigation Team<sup>41</sup> are much better at addressing homelessness than more traditional approaches.

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<sup>41</sup>The Navigation team has been strongly criticized for its involvement in city-sponsored encampment sweeps and would likely not be characterized as “client-oriented” by many of its critics. However, this group of commenters who want a “two coexisting problems” orientation to responding to homelessness emphasize how Navigation Team members develop relationships with the unhoused people they work with. One commenter characterized the Navigation Team with several anecdotes: “I’m calling from Ballard to speak in support of the Navigation Team, who have been active here for 4 years. When someone unsheltered in Ballard is both suffering and causing harm I can call the sergeant on the Navigation Team and they know that person. I can tell them so and so who is refusing to stay in her fully subsidized apartment, has a bad tooth abscess, and has been harassing small businesses again. Or so and so, who rants about why she left the Whittier Heights Tiny House Village, was just crying on the Burke Gillman with two black eyes and her campmates have turned her situation into a severe environmental hazard even though

At the heart of “two coexisting problems” requests is a desire to alleviate the problems for homeless and housed people. While housed residents offer resource-based suggestions to addressing homelessness (i.e. additional types of housing and accommodations, as well as funding and expanding effective services), many also support encampment sweeps or “relocation” as a way of reducing harm for both groups. One resident described this win-win as benefiting the city as a whole: “I just want to urge you to consider and prioritize relocation of the Olga Camp people, so they can find safe and warm shelter during this time and our families and neighbors need safe places to return to.” This commenter’s concerns emphasize issues of safety and vulnerability. The “Camp Olga people” are described as being physically vulnerable because they are camping outdoors during the winter and housed residents are described as being at risk of harm when they visit the park, presumably because the encampment is in the same space. Many residents echoed frustration with “losing access” to public parks and requested that the city move campers to restore their ability to use the space. Commenters described the need to “keep our parks our parks,” the need for “open spaces to be safe and welcoming now more than ever” (in reference to people using outdoor spaces to reduce risk during the pandemic), and highlighting that Seattle is “a very special place, a beautiful, natural space” that is being negatively impacted by visible homelessness. Parks were described as a public amenity, however the public was implicitly defined as housed residents, as they were the ones being excluded from using the parks when homeless people were present. While the Two Coexisting Problem approach treats the problems of homeless and housed residents with similar urgency it does equivocate as being of the same origin, in contrast to commenters who called for structural

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case workers are regularly coming and going. The Navigation Team balances the public health and safety of the community with the individual situations of people at the most painful fringes of society. Do not further limit the Navigation Team’s work.”

interventions to remedy macro-level social problems impacting all residents. For Two Problem requesters, homeless people have real problems that the city needs to address *and* they are the ones causing problems for housed residents.

Another resident, who lived by the same park, expanded their concerns to the physical disorder associated with the encampment: “I’m asking the city to immediately offer shelter to those that are camping in Olga Park. I also support building more Tiny House Villages. But also clean up the mess left behind and post signage that camping is not allowed in parks, and most importantly, enforce no camping rules going forward. The current approach isn’t serving anyone.” The resident went on to describe themselves as “frustrated” and that they repeatedly reach out to council members to little effect. For this person, sheltering the people living in the park was a useful strategy to stem the physical disorder they associated with the encampment. This response is also reminiscent of formal social control requests and reform requests discussed earlier in the chapter, showing how requesting solutions to two coexisting problems is a strategy meant to convince others to adopt their commonsense, all-of-the-above approach.

### *Revolt*

Finally, some commenters want a revolt. While this was a very small number (5 percent) of people, their requests were distinct from other response types in both tone and implication. Like commenters who requested reforms, people who wanted a revolt viewed taxpayers and constituents as the primary victims of homelessness. However, while reformers demonstrate basic trust in the government when they ask it to be more efficient and transparent, these vocal individuals believe that the government is largely worthless. People who call for revolt want the government to get out of the way so that the community can handle the problem of homelessness

on its own. Revolt looks like eschewing the government's efforts as ineffective, counterproductive, and inept, then demanding bureaucratic government programs step aside so private citizens, organizations, and the police can respond to homelessness more aggressively. On either side of the political divide, commenters are angry, frustrated, and disgusted; they are some of the most impassioned people to address the council.

People who want revolt believe that the government is not fully aware of how dire and troubling homelessness is for housed people. One person accused council members of being delusional in their assessment of the problem: "Hearing you talk sounds like you've got everything under control and I don't know how you live in this fantasy world." This complaint bellies the reason these individuals distrust the government's response to homelessness. They feel that the City Council members do not understand (or do not appreciate) how dire the homelessness situation is for housed residents, underestimate its impact in their day-to-day lives, dismiss their frustrations as overblown or hateful. There is also a sense that the government is dictating many aspects of their constituents' lives. A commenter expressed this impression, saying "[The city government is a] quasi-religious organization that tells us how we're supposed to think, what we're supposed to do with our money, what we can do with our plastic bags. They cannot be trusted and the council will hire the experts to figure out where to get the money and what to do next." For him, top-down governance of homelessness resembled other impositions—like the plastic bag ban implemented in 2011—and was largely a way for the government to generate more revenue through extractive taxation.

At the core, commenters want the City Council to go away. Their main request is for council members to quit or for voters to remove them from office: "I think based on the results, this commission should be dissolved. You guys should just quit." and "It is imperative that

people vote with their conscience. We need to get rid of the council. [room erupts in applause].” Because commenters have a sense that government officials do not have an accurate assessment of the problem nor its impact, feel that their concerns are dismissed, and feel the government’s responses are ineffective, they have little faith that council members would be able to change course. The only useful next step for these commenters is fundamental change in the government—new council members—who would be more aligned with their orientation and in tune with their dissatisfaction. One person summarized the core sentiments of revolters: “We don’t want to be sold. We want change. We’re not satisfied.”

## DISCUSSION

The clear message from these findings is that Seattleites want the government to act. While dominant narratives suggest that house residents primarily want homeless people removed from public spaces and public view, this work indicates that that is one desire amongst many. Housed residents understand the problem of homelessness through many different frames and their prognostic diagnoses match this complexity. This variation may be because homelessness in Seattle is often top of mind, an important political problem, and a daily experience for many house residents. This data also shows that housed people have a desire to meet the material needs of homeless people, as well as address the dysfunctional structures that create homelessness in the first place. Another dominant theme in the data is that Seattleites are dissatisfied with many of the government responses to homelessness. Residents believe that the city should be spending more money to address homelessness, should be more transparent with their plans, should hire more police officers, and should take the concerns of housed residents more seriously.

I would like to highlight three common themes across response types. The first is that Seattle residents were broadly supportive of building more housing and critical of homeless

sweeps. Contrary to the way that housing discussions are portrayed in academic literature as being hostile and technocratic (Einstein et al. 2020), people uniformly support adding affordable housing stock to the Seattle market. In the data it was remarkable how unremarkable this sentiment was. Some people mentioned building housing as an obvious and uncontroversial suggestion; at times it was almost a pat or throw away suggestion. No commenters in the data argued against building affordable housing. It is quite possible residents have more diverse opinions or conflicting ideas when they discuss housing policy in other venues, but in the context of discussing homelessness affordable housing was universally seen as beneficial and necessary.

People across different response types critiqued encampment sweeps. Many commenters expressed moral outrage at sweeps for causing homeless people emotional harm and destabilizing their lives. For these commenters, it was unconscionable that the city was spending taxpayer money to fund these interventions. Others felt that the city should spend its money on programs that provided resources and services for homeless people, rather than funding short term solutions. Finally, people who wanted and supported sweeps still critiqued them. They felt sweeps were an immediate solution to addressing the physical and social disorder associated with homelessness. However, they also complained that they did not curb homelessness in the long run, noting that often new homeless people would reoccupy the location of a previous encampment. Sweeps received no broad support amongst commenters and even those who called for forced removal recognized it as a short term, narrow solution to a long term, complex problem.

The second theme was that Seattle residents felt burdened by the problems of homelessness. These burdens varied. Some people commented that seeing homeless neighbors experiencing harm caused them emotional pain and sadness. These residents experience

homelessness as a moral injury or as a sign that they were complicit in the suffering of others. From a relational poverty perspective, some housed residents see themselves as directly connected to those experiencing homelessness. Other people discussed how Seattle's efforts to raise money through property taxes created a perverse burden on homeowners. These individuals did not reject the need to raise taxes or fund programs, but they did highlight how these expenses disproportionately impacted homeowners who were feeling the weight of caring for their neighbors when they were unable to care for themselves. Other Seattleites felt imposed upon by seeing homeless people in public spaces. They echoed the sentiment of many Find It, Fix It reporters who expressed fear and disgust towards incivilities they associated with homelessness.

Across multiple constituencies and ideological segments of residents there was a general desire for the government to address homelessness to relieve housed residents of the burdens it was causing them. For some residents, particularly those who call for formal social control responses and revolt, the burden of homelessness on house residents is the main problem to be addressed. For others the burden is more emotional and moral—if the city adequately addresses homelessness, they will be able to release the pain of witnessing other people's suffering.

One category of response that deserves more attention is the *formal social control* requests. There are different request patterns between the Seattle City Council data and the Find It, Fix It data. In the Seattle City Council data residents make many different types of requests, many of them asking the city to provide relief or aid to people experiencing homelessness. More punitive or restrictive requests do appear in the Seattle City Council data, but they are one choice among many. The Find It, Fix It data tells a different story. Most Find It, Fix It requests do not include an explicit ask of the city government. This is likely because a report acts as a request; explicitly telling the government what to do may feel redundant to the user. Roughly 1,000

reports include a more detailed request. In these reports residents almost always request that the city clean up physical disorder, activate a police response, remove homeless people from public spaces, patrol spaces like parks, fix broken fencing, or place no trespassing signs in frequented areas. There are also many reporters who express extreme frustration with the city government and its lack of response to visible homelessness. These individuals simply ask the government to *do something*, they leave the particulars ambiguous, but they make it clear that they desire action and urgency.

These differences can be explained in at least three ways. The first possibility is that commenters at the Seattle City Council meetings are not representative of Seattleites in general, whereas Find It, Fix It users are. If this is true, Seattle residents desire more formal social control interventions, sweeps, and the removal of homeless individuals from public spaces. In this interpretation the people who go to Seattle City Council meetings are more idealistic and concerned with the well-being of homeless individuals than the average Seattleite. Second, the Find It, Fix It app itself creates a selection process, whereby users who want social control responses choose to make reports and individuals who want other types of responses to homelessness choose not to use the app at all. If this is correct, the frustration and desire for removal communicated through the Find It, Fix It app are not the universal desires of all Seattle residents. Rather, they are the desires of people who are willing to notify the government about unsheltered homelessness as though it was a problem to be fixed like a pothole.

A third possibility is that setting shapes how residents think about homelessness. Seattle City Council meetings are places where politicians and constituents discuss legislative priorities, budgets, and regulations. While these discussions can have meaningful material and legal consequences, they are ultimately meetings where abstract ideas are discussed and policy

solutions are being debated. Find It, Fix It reports are often made shortly after a person has experienced a situation they perceive as problematic. The city asks reporters to include pictures, the location of the issue, and asks for a detailed description of the problem. These problems are immediate, physical, and urgent, making them qualitatively different from the problems being discussed in the City Council chambers. It is possible that those who asked for responses other than formal social control may desire the same interventions when they are confronted with a concrete homelessness-related problem in their day-to-day lives. But it is likely, and this chapter suggests, that Seattle residents want the government to respond in a wide variety of ways, if they are timely and effective.

## CONCLUSION

Much of the research literature depicts housed residents as desiring punitive and coercive responses to homelessness. They are described as wanting the city to be a middle-class playground (Billingham 2017; Watt 2008), with little regard for people who do not share their social and class status. Some Seattle residents do feel this way: homeless people are seen as a burden and a barrier to living a happy life in the city. But many other Seattleites express deep concern, worry, and moral outrage at the experiences people are forced to endure because of their homeless status. Seattle residents want the government to take care of its people. They want the city to fund programs that work, reduce the likelihood that people will become homeless in the first place, and lighten the load of people currently experiencing homelessness. Many Seattle residents want the city to use its money and bureaucratic capacity to make homelessness less frequent, shorter, and if possible, kinder. Ignoring or dismissing these voices would both mischaracterize the desires of house residents and foreclose the possibility that they may serve an important role in the governance of homelessness more broadly.



## **Chapter 7. Conclusion**

The goal of this project is to understand housed residents' problems with, understandings of, and demand about homelessness. Crucially, I use naturally occurring behavioral data, in the form of complaint reports and public comment, and focus on residents living in a major U.S. city with high rates of homelessness. Rather than assuming how residents think and feel based on academic theory or impressions of media discourse, my work systematically explores their direct communication with city government. Additionally, this project examines these understandings and demands in a relevant social context—other work has evaluated public attitudes about homelessness through national surveys (Tsai. et al. 2019; Toro and McDonnell 1992; Lee et al. 1990) or in smaller cities with smaller homeless populations (Williams 2016; Kingfisher 2007; Brinegar 2000).

In total, I examine 10,588 complaint reports and 151 public comments about homelessness made by Seattle housed residents over a four-year period. To the best of my understanding, this project is the largest systematic study of housed residents' thinking and requests about homelessness done to date. This project confirms previous findings and assumptions in the literature, identifies new discoveries that correct and expand our conceptualization of housed residents' relationship to homelessness, and reveals areas of complexity and dissonance that require nimble thinking. Later in the conclusion, I think through this tension using findings from social neuroscience research and the concepts of social death and the white spatial imaginary. These approaches—while operating at very different levels of processing and social relations—are helpful to explain why housed people have divergent and contradictory understanding of homelessness. They also provide openings to help us reimagine responses to homelessness that capitalize on housed residents' shared problems and values, while also treating homeless residents with honor and dignity.

## CONFIRMING OTHER SCHOLARSHIP

My work resonates with prior work on housed residents' perceptions and concerns regarding visible homelessness, the social understanding of homelessness as a problem, and their demands of the government. Housed residents are depicted in academic literature as actively working to protect their neighborhoods and cities from the blight, criminality, and incivility associated with homelessness (Adams et al. 2023; Evans 2021; Speer 2019). Their central worries are maintaining the exchange value of their homes and the use value of their neighborhoods (Logan and Molotch 1989) by removing homeless people (and their belongings) from public space (Herring 2019b) and protecting themselves from possible harm (Kinsella 2012).

Find It, Fix It reports confirm many of these characterizations. People primarily complain about physical disorder, incivilities, and obstructions in their reports. They argue these homelessness-related problems are pervasive throughout the city, coarsening their daily experiences, and posing a range of threats. In their communications, reporters recognize that visible homelessness, as a social problem, is a combination of intertwined, inseparable, and co-constitutive issues. For example, residents argue that homeless people using illegal drugs in public creates disordered behavior like yelling, littering, and disposing of needles on public sidewalks, creating a disgusting and uncivil environment. Residents fear walking down the sidewalk because they may be stuck with a needle or harassed by an unpredictable person, ultimately becoming frustrated that the government has allowed homelessness to go unabated and negatively impact their lives. I also find that housed residents emotionally react to visible homelessness with strong negative sentiments like disgust, fear, and anger towards unhoused

people, their material presence, and their behavior. They also express anger and frustration toward the city for the perceived failure to address the problem. These findings mirror affective patterns identified and discussed in other studies (Rankin 2019:122; Williams 2016; Davidson and Howe 2014; Michener 2013; Skogan 1990).

Some Seattleites who made public comments to the city council shared these views, but many portrayed more emotionally and ideologically diverse perspectives on the topic. Commenters understand homelessness as a social problem that hurts both unhoused and housed people. These individuals argue that homelessness is a symptom of failures at a variety of levels and locations. Commenters identify homelessness as a structural failure, budgetary and programmatic failure, governance failure that harms housed and homeless people, and a failure to control that primarily harms housed people. These frames mirror structural explanations for homelessness, as well as governance critiques from the political left and political right.

My analysis of Find It, Fix It reports also supports other scholar's findings that housed residents primarily want the problem of homelessness to go away, via forced removal of homeless people, cleanups of unauthorized encampments, and policing interventions to curb illegal and deviant behavior (Margier 2023; Burkhardt and Akins 2022; Gordon and Byron 2021; Herring 2019b). In addition to requesting removal, housed residents in this study also demand the city build more affordable housing, provide additional funding for homeless services, and meet homeless people's basic needs. These requests have been previously reported in public opinion polling (YouGov 2022; Link et al. 1995; Toro and McDonell 1992) and sociological research (Laniyonu and Byerly 2021). Housed residents in this sample communicate a strong desire for formal social control (particularly in Find It, Fix It reports), but also request many

other interventions to address the harms experienced by homeless people and the root causes of homelessness in Seattle.

In general, this project echoes much of the academic literature on housed residents and homelessness. Housed residents are believed to find visible homelessness upsetting, disorderly, and threatening; I find this to be true in almost all the 10,000 Find It, Fix It reports I analyzed. Additionally, there is a strong demand for encampment removal and the sanitation of public space, themes that are repeated throughout homelessness studies (Margier 2023; Gordon and Byron 201; Goldfischer 2020; Herring 2019b). But my work also fleshes out a present, but frequently overshadowed, pattern in the literature: that housed residents' care about and empathize with people experiencing homelessness. I argue that it is reasonable to characterize 311 complaints about homelessness as largely requests for formal social control interventions by the state, but it is unfair to characterize these requests as a monolithic representation of housed residents' thinking about homelessness. In this project, housed residents' understanding of the problem and their requested responses complicate the disorder/control narrative in ways that are important to recognize.

## NEW FINDINGS

This work also reveals several new patterns related to housed residents' perspectives on property values, threats posed by homeless people, mental illness, and frustration with government shortcomings.

Property values are rarely discussed by these housed residents. Four Find It, Fix It reporters express worry and frustration that visible homelessness may negatively impact the exchange value of their homes. But contrary to how housed residents are portrayed in the

literature (Evans 2021; Corder 2010; Dear 1990; Dear 1976), people were much more concerned that homelessness was diminishing the use value of their homes via the disorder present in their neighborhoods. Housed residents also expressed much more concern about how the government was using their property taxes to address homelessness. Rather than expressing anxiety about depreciating house values, residents were frustrated their high property values generated tax revenue that the government misspent. It is possible that Seattle homeowners did not feel temporary homeless encampments would hurt their future housing value in a market that has grown steadily over decades (Washington State Office of Financial Management 2023; Rhodes 2006). Additionally, Seattle has some of the highest property tax rates of all major U.S. cities (Balk 2024) and these are an annual expense for homeowners. In fact, some housed residents expressed their precarity and worry about becoming homeless because of their high property taxes. It is also possible that housed residents are concerned about the impact of homelessness on their property values in the abstract or long term but that other complaints are a material, immediate, and a higher priority.

Seattle housed residents frequently discussed threats to the environment and children in their Find It, Fix It reports (these issues did not appear in the public comment data). As discussed in Chapter 4, these housed residents view homeless people as a threat to both vulnerable entities. Homeless people threaten the environment by introducing toxic chemicals, contaminating soil and water, harming wildlife habits, and destroying areas with loose soil and vegetation. I was only able to find one peer-reviewed article that addressed this issue (Rose 2019),<sup>42</sup> but over 1,000 people mentioned negative environmental impacts in their reports. This concern allows reporters to act as the spokespeople for and guardians of the environment. The environment was

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<sup>42</sup>Rose finds that housed residents are not concerned about homeless people damaging the environment.

also invoked to urge the city to do something. This pattern suggests that housed people may believe the city wants to protect green space and waterways enough that it will evict and exclude homeless people from these locations.

Children were also commonly seen as vulnerable to harm from homeless people. In comparison to the threat posed to the environment, the threat to children was often alluded to rather than explicitly stated. Some reporters did explain the harm homeless people may inflict on children, most commonly scaring them by yelling or leaving needles and drug paraphernalia around places children frequent. More often, the harm was implied. Find It, Fix It reporters mentioned that a homeless person was in a park nearby a playground or that an unauthorized encampment was set up in an area children had to walk through to get to school. Homeless people are seen as threatening because they are near places children may visit. Other people were concerned about children observing troubling behavior like drug use. Like the environment, children were invoked to motivate the city to respond to the request.

Discussions of mental illness are notably absent from public comments and private reports about homelessness. When asked, Americans frequently name mental illness one of the five causes of homelessness (Morning Consult 2023; YouGov 2022; Tsai. et al. 2019; Gallup 2007; Toro and McDonnell 1992; Lee et al. 1990). Two social control frames—medicalization (Lyon-Callo 2004; Cress and Snow 2000) and criminalization (Robinson 2019; Ortiz and Dick 2015)—frequently attribute a person’s inability to maintain stable housing to disordered behaviors stemming from untreated mental illness. The association between mental illness and homelessness is prevalent in media (Shields 2001; Susser et al. 1997), political discourse (Harris 2017; Bogard 2001), and proposed solutions (Talmadge 2022; Romero 2021; Maddux and Rankin 2019).

However, mental illness was rarely discussed in the data. Some Find It, Fix It users report being fearful of people acting erratically in public and occasionally express concern for the wellbeing of people with visible mental illness. But words associated with mental illness (“mental,” “crazy,” “insane,” “unstable”) only appear in 83 reports, or 0.4 percent of the Find It, Fix It reports categorized as unauthorized camping. Similarly, 5 people commented on mental illness being related to homelessness and 6 other people discussed mental health treatment as a response to homelessness in Seattle City Council meetings (7 percent of the total number of comments). In contrast to the dominance of mental illness in the public and academic discourses about homelessness, this pattern is surprising.

Although my data do not provide information to help explain why this may be the case, I offer three possible explanations. These housed Seattle residents may see untreated mental illness as a cause of homelessness but may not consider mental illness a problem the city can solve immediately. Other problems, such as public drug use and trash associated with encampments, may be seen as issues that the city can address quickly using readily available tools like policing or public sanitation services. Housed residents may also feel there is a taboo against complaining about problems they perceive homeless people to have less control over. It is possible that mental illness is thought of as a condition to pity and sympathize, rather than a moral failing like public drug use, trespassing, or theft. It is also possible that the bag of words method is obscuring the total number of complaints related to mental illness in the Find It, Fix It data. Because this method examines words independent of context and meaning, it is unable to capture multi-word descriptions of behavior and appearance where reporters are discussing mental illness. A different qualitative method, like hand coding, is necessary to fully capture this data. This approach may reveal additional complaints about homelessness and mental illness but

would not change the finding from the public comment data. Further research specifically on this pattern will need to be conducted to determine if housed residents' thinking about mental illness diverge in meaningful ways from the public and academic discourse.

Housed residents express deep frustration and disillusionment with government responses to homelessness. Throughout the Find It, Fix It data reporters convey their dissatisfaction with the Customer Service Bureau for closing reports without addressing the problem. Other reporters voiced frustration at the state of visible homelessness in Seattle, the lack of police enforcement, and the government's ineffective responses to homelessness. In both datasets, people talked about the government being unconcerned, unmotivated, and unresponsive about the issues facing house residents. Many of these frustrations focused on government operations, budgeting, and communication. People who wanted the government to be more punitive and those who wanted the government to provide more resources and services for homeless individuals both expressed these grievances. The closest reporters and commenters came to complimenting the city's response to homelessness was to praise specific programs like JustCare and Co-LEAD, specific instances of clearing nearby parks or common spaces, and acknowledging how the complexity and intractability of homelessness makes it a difficult problem for the government to address, even in the best of circumstances. Frustration, punctuated by anger, colored many housed residents' communication to the government. Identifying this pattern in the data clarifies and sharpens our understanding of the conversational tone residents are taking with the government. While literature documents people's frustrations (Margier 2023; Herring 2019b; Speer 2019; Davidson and Howe 2014), less work discusses how deep and pervasive resident frustration is about different issues and across ideological orientations.

For residents in this study, governance failures are an additional cause of homelessness. Much of the academic literature and public discourse attributes homelessness to structural factors, like housing markets and unemployment trends, and individual-level factors related to personal choice and health. This project reveals that many housed residents believe government inefficiencies, misdirection, and neglect also directly contribute to homelessness. While structural explanations emphasize how society makes particular people vulnerable to becoming unhoused through market and economic forces beyond their control, governance explanations emphasize how mezzo-level disorganization entrenches and prolongs homelessness in cities. These individuals see the government failing to enforce the law, appropriately allocate financial resources, maintain orderly public spaces, and invest in programs to preemptively strengthen the community and prevent homelessness. Seattle residents do discuss structural- and individual-level causes for homelessness; however, they place much of the ire and blame for homelessness on city government and policies.

It is possible that government failures are top of mind for people who are reporting issues directly to the government at council meetings or through a 311 platform. Perhaps this pattern only reflects individuals who take the time and effort to complain. However, public polling of Seattle residents' political priorities suggest they see homelessness as a social problem directly attributable to governance (Kunkler 2021; Santos 2020; Kroman 2018). Other polling of Seattle residents finds that they are distrustful and pessimistic about government responses to homelessness (Kim 2023a; Davila and Coleman 2019; Kroman 2018). Based on my qualitative work and recent polling, Seattle residents see the government as the institution responsible for managing and responding to homelessness, but they also believe that the government is creating and enabling homelessness in the city.

Encampment sweeps are also a point of significant frustration in Find It, Fix It reports and public comments. These interventions are frequent and often highly visible across the city (Oron 2023; Lennard 2022; Kim and Oron 2020) and housed residents in this study have a lot to say. Some residents ask for sweeps and encampment cleanups explicitly in their complaints, but even these residents express dissatisfaction with their effectiveness. Individuals who request sweeps find them valuable because they immediately remove homeless individuals from an area and clean spaces that were previously disorganized, obstructed, and creating fear for local housed residents. These short-term benefits were reason enough—sweeps address their immediate problems with a concrete, actionable intervention. But many commenters who request encampment sweeps acknowledge they are an insufficient response to homelessness in the long term. The most exclusionary reporters paired their sweep demands with requests the city post new ‘No Trespassing’ signs in the cleared area, install fencing, and provide patrols. Without these measures, reporters fear homeless people will return and reproduce the disorder. These commenters note that the same sites have been swept repeatedly and that the city is failing to maintain them. Other people were frustrated when homeless campers were removed from the area, but their belongings remained.

As discussed in Chapters 5 and 6, other housed residents were frustrated by the impact encampment sweeps have on homeless people. These residents discuss how sweeps destabilize unhoused people by destroying their belongings, removing their shelter, and continually moving them from place to place. Additionally, housed residents expressed frustration and anger that the city was sweeping encampments when homeless people were vulnerable to very cold weather or the Covid pandemic. Other critics focused on the costs related to sweeps and expressed dismay that the government was spending homelessness-related funding on harmful interventions. They

believe this money can be more effectively spent on programs that prevent people from becoming homeless or services that reduce the material harm homeless people experience.

To be clear, these new findings do not contradict our general understanding of housed residents but do add depth and nuance to the conversation. In contrast to some characterizations of housed residents (Evans 2021; Corder 2010; Dear 1990; Dear 1976), property values were very rarely mentioned. Their concerns appear to be more immediate and fear-based, as opposed to long-term and value related. Housed residents in this project express fear and concern about homeless people in many of the same ways described in the broader literature (see Kinsella 2012). But their worry extends beyond themselves to include children and the environment. These concerns are about their children and specific natural environments; they also extend to more abstract ideas of innocence, like children as a vulnerable class of people and the environment as a defenseless entity. Surprisingly, housed residents in these datasets discuss mental illness less frequently than we may assume based on academic literature and popular discourse. The reasons for this discrepancy are unclear and deserve further exploration in future studies. It is very clear, from this data, that these housed residents are frustrated with the government's response to homelessness. While other work articulates housed peoples' desire for the government to do something about homelessness, this project demonstrates how angry, disappointed, and frustrated Seattle residents are with the city's responses to homelessness. They view these governance failures as some of the core issues perpetuating the problem and extend these critiques to broadly implemented policy responses like encampment sweeps.

## TENSIONS

Housed residents discuss homelessness with clarity and tension. While the previously discussed findings are clear in the data, people also expressed complex, multifaceted perspectives as well. Residents express complicated ideas about whose needs should be a priority to the city (homeless people or housed people) and what homelessness-related issues are most urgent. In the remainder of the conclusion, I explore these points of tension, offering explanations for why housed residents' perspectives on homelessness can feel contradictory and chaotic. This tension also presents opportunities to rethink and reimagine our responses to homelessness.

### *Claiming Harm*

As discussed in Chapter 3, a central tension in resident discourse is who is allowed to be the victim of homelessness. Determining who is the victim is a central struggle in the discourse, as being a victim can entitle you to support, resources, attention, and care. Victims are often treated with sympathy; their hurt is often a wound seen and shared by others. Accessing victimhood is a politically and ethically determined process (Weisstub 1986). Community members frequently portray unhoused people as the 'them', inherently 'bad' criminal people who pose a threat (Grover 2008). In this arrangement, housed residents are correctly cast as the victim, as they are the ones vulnerable to the predatory and unpredictable behavior of the 'feared subject', i.e. homeless people (Lee 2007).

But many housed residents do not feel *seen* in their victimhood. Their complaints and comments cycle through various expressions of invisibility. They do not believe the government sees their problems, the magnitude of their suffering, and the scale of the chaos surrounding

them. From their perspective, homeless people “take advantage of our community to make it work, and continue to victimize us” (“it” being a chosen lifestyle of drug addiction and homelessness). Housed residents feel victimized by homelessness–this is clearly communicated in most Find It, Fix It reports–but do not feel they receive sympathy or restitution from the government in response to their victimhood. This is a particularly frustrating experience for many housed residents because they have become victims in their own homes, in a city they fund and deserve the protection of.

Homeless people are not uniformly considered bad, which presents a challenge to housed understandings of who is and is not allowed to be a victim. These perspectives were widespread in Seattle City Council meetings where residents spoke out against the harm homeless people experience, expressed concern about how the city treated them, and worried about their wellbeing. Their comments made it clear that homeless people were vulnerable and innocent, two key characteristics of the victim image (Green 2007). Homeless people can also be cast as victims of marginalization and violence through structural forces. Research shows that housed residents who employ structural explanations for homelessness are more sympathetic to the people experiencing it (Agans et al. 2011); structural explanations can also layer onto categories of deservingness that cleave homeless people into deserving and undeserving status based on their demographic profiles and social vulnerability. People with a college education, who are white and believe homelessness is a serious and worsening problem, express more sympathy towards homeless people than those who do not share those demographics or beliefs (Agans et al. 2011). These characteristics match many of the demographic and attitudinal profiles of Seattle residents.

Other housed residents in the project present dual or dueling visions of the victim. These residents express tension and dissonance in their complaints and statements, revealing the unsettled nature of the discourse. This strain is demonstrated in three comments:

I want to know what the plan is to take care of it. Because it's just so awful down there. And I don't want anyone who is homeless to not have a place to go. But I feel like, I kind of feel like, because Ballard is being passive about it, that nothing's happening... and there's like, you know, there's also drug deals going on. I know some people are mentally ill. And I'm very sympathetic to that. But this is so wrong. And it's been going on so long. And I just can't believe that there doesn't seem to be anything that's going to change until maybe someone gets killed or raped or something happens to effect change.

Leaving the tent encampments in place no longer seems like a viable option, especially during winter when a pandemic is still raging. And it really is inhumane to let people remain unsheltered. Aside from the health and safety risks to those living in the tents, there are risks to the neighborhood due to the attempted break-ins at nearby apartment buildings, including ours.

There has been a gentleman who has been camping in streetside parking over the last few weeks. It is an unfortunate situation, and I feel badly. We've hoped he would move out of the street parking areas, as there is not enough parking on the block, and we've had an issue with parking tickets. There is plenty of non-parking spaces available on the block. This week, he finally got up and moved, and parking returned to normal. Today, for whatever reason, he has returned, and is now re-setting up his camp. We don't mind if he camps here—I can only imagine how tough things are for him—but his camping in parking spaces is [creating] a situation where we run out of spaces, and are subject to parking tickets. Can an officer ask him to relocate? I feel really awful even asking—poor guy. But he just returned, and the same cycle is going to continue.

These commenters express real concern for both groups. These statements are earnest and show how some housed residents can recognize the harm of homelessness to multiple groups. This complex reaction is compatible with a desire to remove homeless people from public spaces. The desire to make homelessness invisible can share multiple motivations: disgust and frustration from viewing physical disorder, fear of unpredictable others, sadness from seeing people being neglected, and concern for the wellbeing of people experiencing homelessness. Additionally, providing unhoused people with ongoing housing and support services can also invisibilize

homelessness by removing them from homelessness all together.

### *Urgency*

Housed residents in this project believe homelessness is a crisis (sometimes one that is mainly impacting their lives). The urgency is complicated in three ways: differences between the government's capacity and their motivation, differences in urgency between housed residents and the government, and differences in the urgency for immediate and long-term responses to homelessness.

Many of the housed residents studied here believe the city has the financial, organizational, governmental resources needed to meaningfully address homelessness. These residents believe the government can address the problem, but they lack will and bravery:

I'm frustrated with our lack of apparent compassion and guts to solve this problem. I'm frustrated we have a bureaucracy that spends nearly \$100 million dollars in Seattle and \$200 million in King County with basically zero progress in the five years since we all agreed this was an emergency. I want to stop being frustrated. I want us to stop talking about it and start doing something.

These housed residents perceive the city to have adequate resources because of the large budget line dedicated to homelessness services, housing levies, and regional supports. Others feel that the financial resources are there but that the city is not allocating them properly. They are frustrated and confused about the public messaging that homelessness is a crisis (the City of Seattle declared homelessness a civil emergency in 2015), while feeling like the city is not responding like it is a crisis. Housed residents, in this project, do not frequently complain about the amount of money being spent on homelessness or government efforts they consider effective; they are confused and frustrated when they see large amounts of money being spent on the problem and yet still witness visible homelessness in their daily lives. One housed resident

summarized this sentiment, saying “You declared an emergency and then have not done a whole lot about improving the situation.”

Housed residents also express frustration and anger that the city is not responding to homelessness with their same level of urgency. This indignation appears when people talk about how unsheltered homelessness results in the premature death of their unhoused neighbors:

This city is not dealing with homeless as an emergency as declared. Instead, it has bided its time and used sweeps to deny those living outdoors without even a place to lay their head. And the city has greatly contributed to the deaths of 120 people living outdoors in the past year. Don't pass the buck for responsibility to the county government and other levels of government. This is one of the richest cities in the whole world.

For these individuals homelessness requires an urgent and immediate response because it kills people. Others view homelessness as an equally urgent problem, but for different reasons. These housed residents believe that homelessness ruins lives, their lives. Homelessness is an ongoing and dire crisis because of how it shrinks and impacts the use of their homes, nearby parks, sidewalks, and the city in general.

There is also a tension between favoring short-term or long-term responses to homelessness. Long-term, structural interventions still leave unhoused people at risk of death and visible in public spaces, the two essential crises articulated by housed residents. Some Find It, Fix It users demand camps be removed while also asking for a real solution to the problem. Other people ask for long-term investment while demanding the city fund emergency shelters. Some housed residents state they want the city to do both but even in these requests prioritize immediate relief.

I recognize that there's a crisis of homelessness in Seattle and I generally support revenue and services to address that crisis. But whatever we do, it's going to take time. In the meantime we're going to continue to have encampments all over the city. And the impact that those encampments are having on their immediate neighbors is really tangible and problematic.

Others are at their wits end because they feel that their community is continually dealing with consequences of unhoused homelessness, a problem that is too overwhelming for individuals and neighborhood groups to tackle:

Please help. It's not like the neighborhood can band together and do something about it themselves. There's a bureaucratic process that has to take place. Well, here we are, engaging in that process, trying to do something about this encampment before it becomes a bigger and more complicated issue.

Throughout the data, Seattle residents expressed that they were weary and tired from witnessing visible homelessness and voicing their concerns to the government. While there is a shared sense of urgency to “do something” and “do things that work” amongst these housed residents, there is more energy and urgency around problems that can be addressed immediately. There is a recognition that short-term solutions will not solve long-term problems, but people are tired and distrustful that the government can adequately intervene. In sum, residents agree that homelessness is a crisis that requires responses at scale of the problem, but there is conflict about which issues should be addressed with limited time and energy. Add a sense of fatigue and distrust and this shared sense of urgency that becomes entrapped in crosscutting tensions around impact and effectiveness.

## SOCIAL NEUROSCIENCE

To understand this complexity, I turn to social neuroscience.<sup>43</sup> Social neuroscience is a relatively new field that uses brain imaging techniques to understand how people process other’s bodies, behavior, personhood, morality (Tan and Harris 2021:5). This approach allows researchers to examine the neurological mechanisms behind social psychological phenomena

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<sup>43</sup>This section relies heavily on “The Neuroscience Underlying Dehumanised Perceptions of People who are Homeless” by Nuoya Tan and Lsana T. Harris (2021) in *Representing Homelessness*, ed. Owen Clayton.

like disgust, fear, and empathy avoidance by examining brain activity patterns. It is also a useful way to examine issues, like homelessness, that may generate biased responses in self-report data (Tan and Harris 2021:5).

Thinking more about how people think about homeless people is a useful, albeit slightly tangential, effort. The reason it is helpful to contemplate these social-psychological processes is that they allow us to think about the relationships housed residents may make between visible homelessness, affective reactions, understandings of the problem, and the government responses they demand. Dehumanization, as it has previously been discussed in this project, is commonly thought of as highly offensive, degrading, or violent treatment of marginalized or scapegoated groups. While this does occur in the data, it is infrequent. Other forms of dehumanization—the ones discussed over the next few pages and occurring more frequently in the data—are more subtle and implicit (Haslam and Loughnan 2014), shaping housed residents' understandings of homeless people and the policy solutions they believe to be appropriate.

### *Social Cognition and Visible Homelessness*

Understanding homelessness as a social problem is directly related to understanding homeless people as human beings. Understanding homeless people (or other people in general) is a social cognitive process with two components: “processing of a physical form with sensory mechanisms (what someone looks, sounds, and even smells like) and an inference of the person’s mind” (assumptions about their sense of morality, adherence to shared norms, and ability to have complex emotions) (Tan and Harris 2021:7-8). Both the physical and abstract sources of information are influenced by broader social dynamics like cultural similarity (Liew, Shihui, Aziz-Zadeh 2011), shared space and in-person interactions, and collective ideas of morality and

norms (Bar-Tal 1990). Dehumanization of people who are unhoused happens when housed residents “fail to engage in social cognition to such people” (Tan and Harris 2021:8; Harris and Fiske 2015).

Housed residents who live in cities with high rates of homelessness, like Seattle, are exposed to a significant amount of sensory information about homelessness. These sensory experiences are woven throughout resident comments and reports, where they detail how homeless people smell of urine and feces, the messy conditions of their living environments, and the volume of their outbursts and fights. Unlike research subjects in a lab who view images of homeless people or people who live in cities with smaller homeless populations, Seattle residents are engaging in social cognitive processes repeatedly as they see/hear/smell people experiencing homelessness and their surrounding environments at a much larger scale. It is unclear if the volume of sensory input increases or decreases the likelihood that people will dehumanize homeless people, but some studies suggest that the contextual scale of homelessness may impact housed resident’s positive feelings towards homeless people (Farrell 2005) and their fear of crime (Helfgott et al. 2020).

At risk of stating the obvious, dehumanization occurs when we fail to engage in the social cognition required to recognize someone else as a human being. For that to occur, the perceiving person (in our case, the housed resident) needs to see a homeless person as the ‘other’ and as a threat. Othering happens when housed residents compare homeless people to themselves and see major differences in how both groups appear and behave, as well as feeling like homeless people’s behavior is unfamiliar. We perceive people who are similar and familiar as humans, and people who are different and strange with suspicion. Many Find It, Fix It reporters commented on the distinct appearance and behavior of homeless people, calling it strange, weird, volatile,

and antisocial. There is also a moral dimension to dehumanization. To perceive someone else as having a mind, we evaluate their behavior through the norms and morals we hold. If we perceive their choices to be abnormal or immoral, our moral evaluation will prevent us from seeing them as human (Haslam et al. 2012).

Large unsheltered populations provide many opportunities for housed people to observe homeless people in public and to judge their behavior. By definition, unsheltered people live in the public sphere and housed residents can witness many of their daily activities. Idiosyncratic behavior, that may otherwise happen behind closed doors, occurs in the open and may further highlight differences between housed and unhoused people. Housed people undoubtedly dance, fight with other people, and act weird in their own homes but these behaviors are not on display for others to see; as a result, they do not invite comparison. Additionally, unsheltered homeless people are often materially constrained in how they can prepare food, sleep and rest, stay warm, use the bathroom, and entertain themselves. The material difference between being housed and unhoused shapes how people must behave to meet their needs (i.e. building a fire to stay warm or turning on a space heater; preparing food in a kitchen that can be cleaned or preparing food in a temporary space without running water).

Housed residents also frequently report homeless people for immoral or abnormal behavior, such as illegal drug use, public defecation, trespassing, and stealing bikes. In addition to reporting these behaviors, they also characterize them as illegal, brazen, threatening, and rude, indicating that much of public homeless life is not passing housed residents' moral filters. It is impossible to generalize homeless people's motives for engaging in deviant and illegal behavior, but research can help contextualize the illegal behavior of homeless people. Homeless people are more likely to engage in low-level crime than more serious crime (Fischer et al. 2008), a pattern

scholars explain as an adaptive survival strategy (Snow et al. 1989). Many of the behaviors associated with the status of being homeless –sleeping outside, sitting or lying on sidewalks, ‘loitering’, and asking for money—are criminalized (Ortiz and Dick 2015). Public space is also regulated through trespass and banishment restrictions (Goluboff 2016; Beckett and Herbert 2011), rules that often target people experiencing homelessness for being present in the city. These forms of legal regulation are important because research shows law can develop, change, and reinforce collective morality (Robinson and Darley 2007), suggesting that criminalizing homelessness can lead to further dehumanization.

To summarize, housed residents’ perception of homelessness as a social problem is likely informed by the unsheltered homeless people in public spaces. Sensory information—what homelessness looks like, smells like, and sounds like—shapes how housed residents conceptualize the humanity of homeless people. Quick comparisons between housed and homeless people’s behaviors, beliefs, and choices can also lead to dehumanizing homeless people, if housed residents see them as being significantly different, unfamiliar, immoral, and abnormal. The highly visible nature of unsheltered homelessness in Seattle, Portland, and Los Angeles provides housed residents with continual opportunities to observe homeless people, providing evidence of difference that generates repeat cycles of dehumanization. It is not only that housed residents generally dehumanize homeless people in laboratory settings (Harris and Fiske 2009), it is also possible that frequently repeating interactions with a subpopulation of homeless people who have the most complex issues generates significant evidence that homeless people *are* less than human.

## *Responding to Disgust*

Dehumanization shapes people's responses to outgroups. A group's status in society is determined by people's combined perception of their warmth (i.e. good or ill intentions, as well as sociability and trustworthiness) and competence (i.e. an ability to act on good or ill intentions) (Tan and Harris 2022:11). Homeless people generally elicit two types of perception. The first group are perceived as having high warmth but low competence. People feel pity and sympathy toward this group and respond to them with active help and passive harm (Tan and Harris 2021:11). We can see this play out when housed people support domestic violence shelters, food and clothing drives, or give someone asking for money a few dollars. In neurologic studies, most subjects view homeless people as having low warmth and low competency; in fact, "homeless people are usually two standard deviations below the low competence-low warmth quadrant that elicits disgust and contempt, emotions usually reserved for non-human animals, food, body excrement and death (Haidt et al. 1997)" (Tan and Harris 2021:11). People react to the low-low group with active and passive harm. This can include supporting punitive policies like arrest for trespassing and unauthorized camping (Seymour, Singer, and Dolan 2007) or vigilante attacks on homeless people.

Both the high-low and low-low groups elicit passive harm, such as neglect or avoidance. Research studies suggest that this may be due to a process called empathy avoidance. Subjects who were asked to volunteer a significant amount of time to help a homeless person were more likely to avoid empathy inducing stories about homeless people later, whereas subjects who were asked to volunteer a limited and contained amount of time were less likely to avoid the same stimuli (Shaw, Batson, and Todd 1994). Other studies show that increasing a subject's anticipated emotional exhaustion decreases their ability to imagine what daily life might be like

for a person experiencing homelessness, what might motivate them, and how they might feel (Cameron, Harris, and Payne 2016). While some sociologists argue public polling does not support the “compassion fatigue” hypothesis (Link et al. 1995), these psychological studies suggest that emotional and material investments are a limited resource that can shrink over time.

Tan and Harris (2021) argue that imaging someone else as human and having a disgust reaction may be somewhat independent processes. Disgust towards homeless people is related to their perceived moral violations (Haidt et al. 1997; Opatow 1990) and a belief they are personally responsible for becoming and staying unhoused (Krendl, Moran, and Ambady 2013). As an emotional reaction, disgust makes interpersonal interactions with stigmatized group members less rewarding (Harris et al. 2007) and makes people think they are undeserving and unessential (Opatow 1990). Clifford and Piston (2017) further complicate the relationship between emotional reactions to homelessness and preferred social responses, indicating that disgust is not an overriding factor. In their study, they measure participant’s disgust sensitivity in general and toward homelessness. They also ask participants what types of government responses they support. They find that people highly sensitive to disgust are more supportive of exclusionary policies that increase the social distance between themselves and unsheltered homeless people (i.e. bans on sleeping in public and panhandling), but no less supportive of policies that aid homeless people (i.e. increased government aid and support for subsidized housing) (Clifford and Piston 2017:510, 514).

One important conclusion from this work is the possibility that disgust does not foreclose response options. While research shows that disgust increases people’s desire to punish, exclude, and distance themselves from outgroups, disgust does not preclude other types of responses, like aid and assistance. This is an important point of nuance for homelessness scholars. Housed

residents may express anger and disgust towards visible homelessness *and* their policy demands may be diverse and surprising. The seemingly dissonant combination of dehumanization, negative affect, and punitive and supportive reactions to homelessness may be more reflective of complex cognitive processes than hypocrisy. Also, it is inaccurate to assume that affective responses, like disgust, automatically predict harsh policy demands. Later in this chapter, I discuss how understanding the relationship between disgust, dehumanization, and responses provides openings for thinking differently about homelessness.

### *Other Reactions*

It is also important to acknowledge that the housed residents studied in this project think about homelessness and homeless people in ways that complicate some of these psychological findings. In controlled lab settings, participants react to images of or written scenarios about homeless people with disgust and dehumanization. These studies were completed on undergraduate students in New Hampshire, New Jersey, and Kansas (Krendl et al. 2009; Harris and Fiske 2009; Harris and Fiske 2007; Harris and Fiske 2009; Shaw et al. 1994); older adults from a rural New Hampshire community (Krendl et al. 2009); adults from the Boston area (Krendl et al. 2013; Krendl et al. 2009), and adults working on the MTurk platform<sup>44</sup> (Cameron et al. 2016). Seattle residents live in a very different milieu when it comes to homelessness.

In Seattle City Council comments, housed residents see similarities between themselves and people experiencing homelessness. They discuss how both groups need to sleep somewhere,

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<sup>44</sup>“MTurk is a website run by Amazon that works as a readily available marketplace to match “workers” with available work from various “requesters.” Amazon describes MTurk as, “a marketplace for work that requires human intelligence. The Mechanical Turk service gives businesses access to a diverse, on-demand, scalable workforce and gives workers a selection of thousands of tasks to complete whenever it’s convenient.” (<https://www.umass.edu/research/guidance/mturk-guidance>)

stay warm, have a sense of security, and have access to bathrooms. Believing that another is like you is one way to prevent dehumanization. Housed residents also describe homeless people as having complex emotions<sup>45</sup> like gratitude, shame, guilt, and pride. This recognition suggests that some housed residents perceive homeless people to have minds that can make moral choices, experience harm, and engage in analytical thinking; in effect, recognizing complex emotions is an acknowledgement that homeless people are people. Additionally, many housed residents attribute the high rates of homelessness in Seattle to structural failures like the lack of affordable housing, unpredictable rental markets, and the legacy of residential racism. Believing that people are not personally responsible for becoming homeless decreases disgust and makes housed people more willing to help (Krendl et al 2013). The housed people studied in this project also demand a variety of non-punitive, non-exclusionary government responses, like building affordable housing, stopping encampment sweeps, and reallocating significant financial resources to homelessness services. In their comments, they motivate these requests by expressing sympathy, pity, empathy, and concern for homeless people and anxiety, frustration, and righteous indignation toward homelessness as a social problem.

It is clear from the social neuroscience literature that the cognitive pathways underlying disgust and dehumanization are complex and malleable. Levels of disgust sensitivity vary between people and dehumanization is shaped by an individual's sense of morality, awareness and exposure to others, and social context. These housed Seattle residents express disgust, alongside feelings of concern, indignation, anger, and fear. Homelessness creates a strong affective reaction in many housed people. While the disgust and dehumanization pathways

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<sup>45</sup>Complex emotions “are any emotion that is an aggregate of two or more others.” Examples include hate, love, awe, disgust, embarrassment, envy, gratitude, guilt, jealousy, pride, remorse, shame, and worry. (<https://dictionary.apa.org/complex-emotion>)

discussed in this section do not predetermine how people may feel or think about homelessness, they do offer insight into why people's reactions are complex, impassioned, and, at times, seemingly contradictory. But housed residents' social cognition is only one way to understand this complexity. We can also leverage sociological thinking about the law, criminalized populations, and property status to further explore why homelessness in liberal cities can feel like a messy web of complaints, concerns, support, and punishment. Here, we turn to the concepts of social death and the white spatial imaginary.

## SOCIAL DEATH

Patterson (1982) describes social death as the condition of people who are not accepted as fully human by wider society. If dehumanization is a cognitive process where a person is denied their humanity, social death is a relational process marked by domination, suppression, and exclusion. In his work Patterson thinks about social death in the context of slavery, discussing how people become impritable, disposable, and powerless through a series of violent rituals and traditions. Other scholars have extended the concept of social death to include Holocaust and genocide victims, people with dementia, and people on sex offender registries (Megale 2011; Card 2003; Sweeting and Gilhooly 1997). Králová (2015:235) argues that the concept has "three underlying notions: a loss of social identity, a loss of social connectedness and losses associated with disintegration of the body." Social death is helpful for our understanding of how homelessness, particularly unsheltered homelessness, can persist alongside an otherwise functioning society.

In her 2012 book *Social Death: Racialized Rightlessness and the Criminalization of the Unprotected* Cacho explores how the social death of certain racialized, sexualized, and

spatialized groups is maintained and inflamed by the law. In a series of case studies, she demonstrates how the law can be invoked or ignored in ways that protect powerful groups at the expense of the socially dead. She argues “As the foundation of law, certain racialized populations are excluded from its protections and its processes of legitimation, but they are not quite imagined as completely outside of the law because to be outside of the law suggests that eventual inclusion is possible” (2012:5). Racialized others are at once excluded from law’s protection while being subject to its control. This form of legal marginalization benefits markets, culture, and identity formation because it creates a subjugated group that can be exploited for profit, dominated for status, or used as foil for perceived success (Espiritu 2003). Homeless people also occupy this liminal legal space because they are propertyless.

While Cacho focuses on race, sexuality, and spatial differences, property is also a central and fundamental organizing concept in the law. In early American history, only white male property owners were fully recognized citizens (Einstein and Palmer 2021; Lipsitz 1995). Harris (1993) explains how whiteness and property work together to seize resources, maintain hierarchy, and justify violence toward Black and Native Americans. The process of racialization is inseparable from social-property relations—treating some people as though they were property and treating others as impediments to seizing more property. Whiteness becomes legally protected through the protection of property (Harris 1993).

Policing is one way the state protects property (whiteness). In his blistering critique of policing, Neocleous puts it this way: “Marx has put his finger on a core feature of bourgeois ideology: in a capitalist order, security is the supreme right because it is security that guarantees the preservation of property; for this reason, security becomes the key concept underpinning the idea of police” (2021:9). And while crime may specifically threaten someone’s material security

through dispossession, the more omnipresent threat is disorder. Police rarely prevent crime (Bayley 1999). Their task is more often to curb the disorder that prevents people from enjoying their property—the disorder that infringes on their liberty. In addition to protecting the pleasure and freedom of some, police are tasked with protecting the value of property, in ways that maintain market functioning and private ownership rights (Graziani et al. 2022; Beck and Goldstein 2018; Demsetz 1964).

Vagrancy laws are an elegant way to address concerns of racialized threat, vulnerable property owners, and social disorder. They have long been used to regulate the presence of undesirable populations in public space and to limit the responsibility of local government to provide for the poor. Due to their ambiguity and breadth, vagrancy laws provide police with an incredible amount of discretion to regulate public space in ways they believe reduces disorder (Goluboff 2016). Until the 1972 Supreme Court ruling in *Papachristou v City of Jacksonville*, vagrancy was not only an illegal behavior, but also an illegal status. The logic, as explained in a 1955 legal document, is that because vagrants' lifestyles will likely generate crime, their personhood is subject to legal control: "to prevent crimes which may likely flow from a vagrant's mode of life, by cutting out at the roots breeding places of many crimes offensive to the personal well-being of many citizens... Such preventive purpose wholly fails if a law enforcement officer must wait until a crime is committed" (*Corpus Juris Secundum* 1955; quoted in Goluboff 2016). After the Court ruled vagrancy law was too vague to enforce, the core regulatory features persist through trespass admonishment and banishment (Beckett and Herbert 2009) and the criminalization of homeless people. The legacy of vagrancy law generates the conditions through which homeless people are excluded from the law while also being subjected to it.

Being unwelcome in public space is a relational process. To be marked as other and out of place requires someone else to label you as different and unwelcome. It is also a relational process embedded within a geographic context. Lipsitz's concept of the white spatial imaginary (2011) is a useful tool for understanding this process as it relates to homeless people. Lipsitz describes the white spatial imaginary as an orientation to residential environments that protects investment, order, predictability, and purity through segregation, expulsion, and control. These can hurt white residents and benefit Black residents (Lipsitz 2011:28-9); while they are not singularly beneficial to white homeowners, they do shape much of America's urban governance and housing policy.

The desire to exclude homeless people from public space may stem from the white spatial imaginary. I imagine the white spatial imaginary as deep, fundamental orientation to public space and disorder that can lead housed residents to seeing unsheltered homeless people as a direct threat to their neighborhood's order, predictability, and purity. This reaction goes beyond mourning the loss of cities as a playground for the middle class (Billingham 2017; Watt 2008) or profit-generating sites of business. It taps into a suburban sensibility of autonomy, liberty, and the right to live without being infringed upon. Racial residential exclusion, bank redlining, and extrajudicial violence were all tools used to maintain this sensibility in the past. These tools are now largely delegitimized forms of control, but regardless of their status they would not address the problems some housed residents' experience.

Many housed residents want to live in segregated neighborhoods. They want the government to remove unsheltered homeless people from their public spaces. They want the government to site social services, group homes, and shelters in far-away industrial areas (Evans 2021; Parker 2020; Bonds and Martin 2016). They want their pain and complaints to spur the

government into action, protecting property to protect their sense of order and predictability. In these data, many housed people do not dream of ending homelessness for the people living in that reality, they dream of removing homelessness where they live. Demands for removal, observed throughout the data, are demands for class-based segregation.

The legal and political pathways to homeless exclusion are well-worn in major U.S. cities, but they are not the only pathways that exist. There is no collective agreement amongst Seattle residents that the city should be pure, orderly, and predictable. Even more so, there is serious disagreement about the social control methods used to maintain this order and predictability. In this project, we see housed residents talk about homeless people as their neighbors, as fellow citizens they are happy to share the city with. They see themselves in homeless people, because the precarity of housing and living in an expensive city means they could easily become unhoused if *anything* goes wrong. There are also housed residents who see homeless people as human beings—who chafe at the degrading and dehumanizing responses of other housed residents and, at times, the city government.

How does social death and the white spatial imaginary help us understand homelessness in liberal cities? I suspect that many housed residents living in liberal cities, and in Seattle in particular, have suburbanized values. These desires move beyond a need for protection from specific harm homeless people may inflict upon them to deeper desires for order, predictability, and liberty. Both desires result in people calling for unsheltered homeless people to be removed from public spaces. Stated values of tolerance and diversity bow to order. This imaginary—and the complaints that stem from it—may shape much of urban poverty governance in liberal cities.

But this modal reaction is met with resistance for housed residents who imagine the city differently and imagine themselves as vulnerable to homelessness. It is also met with the brutal

reality that some cities turn more housed people into homeless people, than they can turn homeless people into housed people. New “zombies” are being born every day, joining the ranks of the socially excluded and socially dead. An environment marked by differing imaginations, growth of the “problem population,” and government responses unable or unwilling to meaningfully address the problem is a chaotic environment. This chaos leads to patchwork forms of poverty governance that fluctuate alongside the demands of a frustrated and fractured public. It also leads to an unending feeling of defeat—whether you see homelessness as a form of unrelenting human suffering, urban blight, or some combination of the two—it is hard to say that either of these problems are being ameliorated at scale. The housed Seattle residents we learn from in this project feel that failure personally and politically.

## OPENINGS AND OPPORTUNITIES

Are there ways to move beyond where we are now? Can a better understanding of housed residents create new possibilities for how we respond to homelessness? The complexity of this project does not deliver clear policy recommendations, but identifying openings and opportunities can help us respond to homelessness in new ways. Here I discuss five possibilities.

### *Attention*

Many housed residents are paying attention to homelessness in Seattle. Unsheltered homelessness may garner the most attention, but many housed Seattleites also think about sheltered and invisibilized homelessness. On one hand, high volumes of complaints pose logistical and social control problems for cities. On the other, attention and issue engagement are essential for mobilization efforts (Gamson 1992). Anger can be unpleasant, but it is a sign people

are paying attention and feel personally connected to the problem. The Seattle residents studied in this project are not apathetic or ambivalent about homelessness.

It is naive to assume that all forms of engagement, attention, and emotion will translate to collective action or a shared sense of what to do next. People in this dataset shout at each other during public comment periods, accusing one another of caring about one set of problems to the detriment of a different set of problems. In some meetings, if one resident voiced concern about the harm unsheltered homeless people were experiencing, another resident would accuse them of caring more about homeless people than the problems housed residents were facing daily. Ideological and pragmatic differences exist between the housed residents studied here and are clearly present in the public discourse about homelessness.

Despite these differences, many residents had high levels of engagement and emotion when they discussed homelessness. It is important to remember that the residents included in this study were selected because they do not volunteer with relief programs or belong to neighborhood coalitions. Comparatively, they likely spend less of their time responding to homelessness than their more-involved neighbors. Yet they are still invested in how homelessness is managed in their city. This collective attention, emotion, and engagement can be reframed as a resource and asset, rather than merely an obstacle. Americans ignore many social problems. Homelessness does not suffer the same fate.

### *Stories*

Homelessness is both an intimate and distant problem. For housed residents the conditions of unsheltered homelessness are intimate because they see, smell, walk past, and avoid them in their daily lives. Many of the Find It, Fix It requests ask for the city to remove

homeless people and their objects from public space; in effect, make the problem less intimate for housed people. But homelessness is also a problem defined by distance—the desire of some housed people to create more space between themselves and homeless people and the distance between the humanity of the housed and the unhoused. I was struck by the lack of personal familiarity with homeless people in resident’s complaints and comments. In some reports people would put a homeless person’s name in quotation marks, signifying that the label doesn’t really seem appropriate. Other reporters describe the homeless people who had lived in their community for years with general descriptors. It is hard to be in relationship (or understand your relationship to someone else’s poverty) if you do not see the other person as a human.

Through social neuroscience research, we can find several ways to tell stories that humanize homeless people. One element needed to dehumanize another person is to see them as fundamentally dissimilar; it is difficult to imagine the mind of another if you think of them as being too different. Stories that emphasize similarities between housed and unhoused people—our need for protection, love, shelter, rest, entertainment, relief, grace, and forgiveness—may increase our ability to imagine homeless people in a new way. To be sure, there are many demographic and experiential differences between housed and homeless people. The experience of homelessness is traumatizing in ways many housed people will never be able to understand. It is not necessary to pretend both groups are the same but acknowledging that homeless people share similar needs and have complex emotional lives is one way to combat the cognitive failure to recognize another’s mind.

Perceptions of another person's sense of control and agency are two additional factors that contribute to the dehumanization process. People who become homeless for reasons outside of their control are more likely to be viewed positively by housed residents (Krendl et al. 2013).

In cities where available affordable housing is extremely rare and the social safety net is thin, people are vulnerable to becoming homeless if anything goes wrong in their lives (Colburn and Aldern 2022). Structural explanations for homelessness are not incompatible with human stories of struggle and persistence. When fighting for justice alongside marginalized groups, emphasizing the innocence of select group members to highlight the injustice experienced by the group can be counterproductive, as it excludes those who are not innocent (Gilmore 2022). In this case, emphasizing the stories of homeless people who “did everything right” to humanize the collective creates a shadow for those who made mistakes, severed relationships, and continue to participate in harmful behaviors. It is also true that many housed people in Seattle and across the U.S. make the same mistakes currently homeless people have made; the difference is that there was more margin in their lives to protect them from losing their housing.

Another way to increase the likelihood of humanization is to show how homeless people exert control over their own lives. When homeless people are seen as being unable to enact their will, housed residents have a hard time imagining them as having a mind and being a human (Tan and Harris 2021). In Seattle, authorized encampments run by collectives of people experiencing homelessness are great examples of agency. Additionally, telling stories of homeless people caring for children, providing for pets, and working to leave homelessness may increase housed residents’ perception of their agency. More difficult work will be needed to address some of the key aspects of this dehumanization pathway: assumptions that most homeless people are unable to make choices for themselves because of problematic substance use or untreated mental illness.

Admittedly, improving the stories we tell about homelessness is a simple recommendation. The road between sharing better narratives and implementing effective policies

may be long. But for the public to widely support policies that *treat* unhoused people as humans they will need to *see* them as human. Additionally, better stories may make housed residents more resistant to policies that harm homeless people. The most effective way to tell stories about homelessness is for housed people and homeless people to have positive interactions with each other (Kirk et al. 2018). Beyond that, telling personal stories of people experiencing homelessness is more effective than discussing homelessness as a social problem (Polletta and Redman 2020; Slater and Rouner 2002). In the absence of personal interaction, we can tell stories in our classrooms, in personal conversations, and when we lobby the government for social change. A public media campaign could also spread these ideas to a wider audience.

### *Reducing Disgust*

Disgust is a powerful emotion; many people are disgusted by the material realities of homelessness and the behavior of homeless people. To address the root causes of people's disgust for homelessness, we must work through the social cognitive pathways previously described. In the meantime, addressing aspects of homelessness housed residents find upsetting can reduce people's overall exposure to disgust triggers. It is possible that repeated exposure to triggers strengthens the association between homelessness and disgust; curbing these encounters may help de-escalate the anger and disgust some residents feel towards people experiencing homelessness. In this data, strong disgust responses were triggered by witnessing human waste, trash, and public drug use. The visibility of these problems initiates a disgust response in some residents and also makes them angry that the government allows these problems to persist. Creating publicly accessible bathrooms, trash collection services, needle collection bins, and safe injection sites are all ways to reduce the visibility of disgust triggers.

Several of these suggestions have been implemented to various varying degrees and levels of success; Seattle is amid political and legal fights around safe injection sites (Kim 2023b; Rubin 2019), but money has been allocated (Black 2020). While some of these suggestions are politically contentious, it is important to remember that disgust and dehumanization are two separate cognitive processes. People who resist these efforts, claiming they are enabling people to continue problematic behaviors, can simultaneously benefit from the overall reduction of disgust triggers in the public space. Reducing disgust may create breathing room in the public conversation about homelessness, allowing us to address higher-order concerns that are unrelated to biological and subconscious reactions.

Extending this logic, it may also be beneficial to decrease the visibility of unsheltered homelessness. In some ways this is a counterintuitive suggestion, as many invisibilization efforts rely on encampment sweeps that are disruptive, harmful, and ineffective (Goldshear et al. 2023; Chang et al. 2022; Herring 2019b; Rankin 2019; Darrah-Okikea et al. 2018). But reducing the visibility of unsheltered homelessness through less punitive approaches—safe parking lots, increasing the number of tiny house villages, or expanding programs like JustCare and Co-LEAD—may provide benefits to housed and unhoused people. This project suggests that there is an opening in housed residents’ thinking that prioritizes addressing the most visible and disorderly material aspects of homelessness without punishing the people experiencing homelessness.

### *Agreement*

Despite differences in priorities and complaints, housed residents in this project agreed on several policy interventions. These areas of agreement offer political opportunities to

meaningfully address homelessness, share a collective win, and build momentum toward more complicated solutions. Housed residents largely agree that the city should build more affordable housing, using creative approaches; prevent currently housed people from becoming homeless; invest in and expand evidence-based programming; and improve their communication. In this project, housed residents express widespread support for building affordable housing quickly.<sup>46</sup> They also want the city to build housing in new ways: transforming unused buildings, investing in micro-units, and increasing support for auxiliary dwelling units. Seattle residents have also renewed housing levies repeatedly, suggesting that the agreement about the need for affordable housing is paired with a willingness to personally invest in the solution.

Housed residents also express precarity about their own housing situations. It was painful for housed residents to see the city respond to homelessness while feeling like their vulnerability was being ignored. Residents ask the city to provide property tax relief and rental protections. These interventions may prevent currently housed people from becoming homeless, one important way to address the overall size of the homeless population. Homelessness is often a violent and traumatizing experience (Deck and Platt 2015; Meinbresse et al. 2014; Kinsella 2012), creating harms that could be prevented if people remain housed. Keeping people housed not only limits the total size of the homeless population, but also protects people from trauma that may prolong their homelessness.

Residents were supportive of evidence-based programming. There was general agreement that the city should fund programs that work and stop wasting money on the ones that don't.

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<sup>46</sup>It is possible that selection issues impact this finding. I only include public comments that discuss homelessness. Some housing discussions were included in this sample, but some of the more technocratic and detailed comments that are characteristic of housing debates were not as present in this dataset. Other research suggests that conversations about land zoning, building specifications, and the siting of affordable housing projects can be very contentious (Marble and Hall 2021; Scally and Tighe 2015).

‘Effectiveness’ and ‘success’ can be politically influenced framings used to support efforts that align with people’s ideological orientations. However, some housed residents seem desperate to support effective programs; this support suggests that they are more invested in adequately addressing problems related to homelessness than they are to their ideological purity. One shared measure of success may be reducing visible homelessness and exiting people from homelessness through housing. Admittedly, these policy outcomes are extraordinarily difficult to achieve, but many housed residents agree that there should be more investment in programs that address the problems of both unhoused and housed residents.

Housed residents want the city to improve its communication. They are unclear how the city is addressing homelessness, how much money is being spent, and what it is being spent on. Like definitions of effectiveness, transparency demands can be used to undermine policies people find objectionable. But some engaged and relatively informed housed residents stated they were unaware if the city was doing anything to address homelessness. This communication failure contributes to residents’ frustration and the hostile-nature of the discourse. The city needs to rethink how they talk about their homelessness responses with the public.

### *Curbing Counterproductive Interventions*

An effective final opening minimizes harm by halting counterproductive interventions, specifically encampment sweeps. Some residents (particularly Find It, Fix It reporters) demand physical disorder be addressed through removal and encampment sweeps. The core motivation in many of these requests is that the city remove disorder and incivility from public space. This desire appears to be more important than the method used to achieve it; in effect, people are more invested in achieving orderly neighborhoods than they are in encampment sweeps.

Understanding this core motivation provides a useful opening for dismantling destructive, counterproductive policy interventions like encampment sweeps.

Research shows that encampment sweeps destabilize homeless individuals in many ways. Campers' personal belongings, medications, and vital documents are frequently destroyed in these efforts (Herring 2019b). The destruction of these items creates additional barriers for people exiting homelessness, prolonging their time spent unsheltered in public spaces.

Additionally, people feel precarious when their personal belongings are repeatedly destroyed. This can result in a desire to protect the belongings they do have, forgoing appointments, jobs, and healthcare visits because of the risk of losing what they own (Herring 2019b). Herring also suggests that the loss of material belongings leads some unhoused people to theft, out of disillusionment and need. Having belongings destroyed can also psychologically alter how people think about material objects (Jarrett 2013; Pierce, Kostova, and Dirks 2003), creating a feeling of disposability and impermanence that may lead to indiscriminate collecting (Fontenelle et al. 2021; O'Connor 2013). In times of scarcity and insecurity, people seek to acquire material resources that will make their lives more stable and comfortable. Repeated sweeps that destroy people's belongings not only reify barriers to exiting homelessness but may create counterproductive outcomes by altering people's relationships to objects, ultimately increasing the amount of physical disorder visible in public spaces.

Housed residents in this project are also deeply frustrated by incivility. They express fear toward people yelling in public spaces or behaving unpredictably. They are also frustrated by public drug use. It is important to contextualize these behaviors in a landscape marked by dehumanization and social death. When unsheltered people are treated like trash it is not surprising that some respond by disengaging from a society that has rejected them. Incivility is

defined as behavior that violates shared social norms and morality. But a desire to share social norms may be predicated on inclusion. Because homeless people often feel excluded, ignored, and reviled it is unsurprising that some turn to drugs to anesthetize themselves from this treatment. At a policy level it may be impossible to force housed people to engage with their unhoused neighbors with more dignity and respect. However, homeless people report feeling degraded by encampment sweeps (Herring 2019b; Darrah-Okike et al. 2018), a policy the city does have control over.

Finally, encampment sweeps are counterproductive because they increase tensions between housed residents and homeless people. Most people who are swept do not accept emergency shelter or services (Board 2023; Klaeyen 2023). This means they remain unsheltered but need to move somewhere else. This churning of bodies in spaces creates a cycle where homeless people are chased around the city, likely reappearing in other encampments or in locations that had previously been cleared. This cycle means that housed residents across the city are exposed to visible homelessness on a recurring basis, oftentimes in the same locations. Many housed residents expressed frustration that encampment sweeps were ineffective at interrupting this cycle and asked the city to protect areas that had become “homeless hotspots” (Goldfischer 2020). Encampment sweeps are counterproductive. While they immediately address many housed residents’ complaints (i.e. removing disordered conditions from public space), they displace the problem to different locations, delay people’s exit from homelessness, and undermine unhoused people’s relationship with society. As discussed previously, there are ways to ameliorate disorder without further degrading the homeless people who are so often confused with it.

## FINAL THOUGHTS

As I've been working on this project, I've had the opportunity to talk to friends, colleagues, and students about poverty governance and the complaints housed people make about homelessness. In most of these interactions, people are engaged and curious. One person asked me why the city sweeps the same campers over and over. He was confused why they would spend resources on a failed effort that makes life harder for homeless people. Thinking out loud, he suggested the city open a large encampment where people could stay uninterrupted. After finding out that housed residents are concerned about the environmental impact homeless people may have when they relieve themselves outside, another person wondered if the city had ever considered giving homeless people small bags, "like the ones you use to pick up poop when you take your dog out", so they can clean up after themselves.

Both suggestions were sincere. They addressed specific problems and prevented wasting resources, disrupting homeless campers, and pollution. To be honest, it was difficult to hear these suggestions and respond to them as someone who has spent too much time thinking about how they might think about homelessness. My assumption is that if I asked these individuals to share their thoughts about homelessness, they would express concern for the people experiencing it and anger at the conditions that allow it to persist. They would also probably say that something should be done but they do not know what solutions are best.

Neither person said anything explicitly dehumanizing and they showed true concern for homeless people. Dehumanization can range from implicit (Haslam and Loughnan 2014) to blatant (Bruneau et al. 2020) denials of other people's humanity. But unconscious dehumanization of homeless people warps how we think about others and warps how we think about ourselves. How can I dehumanize people when I feel concern, pity, or sympathy for them?

There can be a reasonable, sincere, and unacknowledged gap between how we think about people and how we think we think about people. This gap is likely one reason the politics of homelessness are discordant in liberal cities—dehumanization in any form makes punitive and neglectful policies more palatable. People who are unable to recognize their dehumanization may accept harsh policies without thinking twice about how they understand the homeless people they are impacting.

Dehumanization shrinks our imaginations. And small imaginations accept insufficient responses to incredible human suffering. The suggestion, that homeless people clean up after themselves with doggie bags, solves the problem while completely missing the point. In responses, I mentioned the lack of publicly available bathrooms in the city. How it can be hard for any of us to find a toilet without having to buy a latte at a coffee shop or a candy bar at a gas station. I also mentioned that the city has set up temporary porta-potties in some places. She seemed to accept the redirection, but it's hard to say for sure what her takeaway was. The point could have been made if I would have asked her “How would it make you feel if you had to relieve yourself in public and clean it up like that?” “How would you feel if it was your mom?” “What problems does your solution leave completely unacknowledged and unaddressed?” “In your suggestion, is the homeless person essentially a dog?”

The crux of the problem, the point if you will, is that many people do care, but many of the same people are fearful, disgusted, frustrated, and at a loss about how to address homelessness in their community. When theoretical understandings of structural failures and tight housing markets run up against a person sleeping in the doorway of your condo or tent obstructing the sidewalk on your way to work, your immediate problem may outweigh your abstract understanding. We see this in the meaningful differences between how people talk about

homelessness in the Find It, Fix It app and in the City Council chambers. The housed residents we've come to know in this project share all these complex feelings and realities. They also see homelessness as a problem that the government is responsible for addressing, in ways that remove the immediate issues, address the fundamental causes, or do both.

Another central tension of this project is the harm homelessness inflicts on housed and unhoused Seattle residents. By thinking outside of legal categories, abolitionists acknowledge harm in all its manifestations—the harm that created a wound that led to violence, the harm created by that violence, and the community harm caused by ruptured relationships. In this approach, harm and rupture should be met with honesty, healing, and repair. Abolitionists recognize order (one harm *leading* to another) but believe it is counterproductive to exclusively privilege some harm over others. This understanding of harm is also embedded within a structural critique: institutions and markets harm people, often leading to trauma and insecurity that generates interpersonal harm. Repairing interpersonal ruptures allows us to fight systemic oppression more effectively.

It is possible to simultaneously recognize the harm experienced by housed and homeless people. Indeed, many housed residents' core frustration is that their harm remains invisible to the government. Effective responses to homelessness will consider how homelessness harms housed residents and take these concerns seriously. But there is a meaningful difference between acknowledging harm and enabling dehumanization. Considering disgust and inconvenience as harm risks conflating injury with discomfort. It is important to acknowledge harm with a healthy dose of skepticism, particularly when powerful groups feel injured by less powerful people.

The order and magnitude of harm is also important to acknowledge. While some housed people feel harmed by homelessness, homelessness harms the people living it in devastating and

deadly ways. Additionally, homelessness harms housed people by harming homeless people first. Addressing the original harm, while acknowledging subsequent harms, stems the flow at its source.

Homelessness is a centuries-long problem, but it is also our problem. Ruth Wilson Gilmore suggests not letting this legacy determine how we respond to ongoing oppression: “If unfinished liberation is the still-to-be-achieved work of abolition, then at bottom what is to be abolished isn’t the past or its present ghost, but rather the processes of hierarchy, dispossession, and exclusion that congeal in and as group-differentiated vulnerability to premature death” (2022:475). Here she identifies struggles over prioritization, property, and place as the engines of injustice. Many housed residents seem to believe that winning these struggles will make their pain go away. This will only work if homeless people are inhuman; a form of disorder that cannot be related to but must be managed. If homeless people are human, then housed people must take a different approach: repair our relationship and work to reduce the harm they experience. Anything less risks solving the problem while missing the point.

## Appendices

### APPENDIX A. Categories and Subcategories of Complaint-related Words in Find It, Fix It Unauthorized Encampment Reports (2018-2019)

*Note:* Common iterations and misspellings of words are included in the analysis but not listed here for brevity. Words with asterisks were among the most frequently occurring in the category and were used to generate a binary indicator of a report being in a category or not.

#### Physical Disorder

- Trash - clutter, debris\*, detritus, dump, dumpster, garbage\*, hoard\*, junk, litter\*, messes, pile, rubbish\*, rubble, scrap, stuff, trash\*
- Personal Belongings/Shelters - backpack, bed, bedding, belongings\*, bicycle\*, bike\*, blanket\*, bottle, chairs, compound, cooler, cord, couch, extension, furniture\*, gas, luggage, mattress\*, propane\*, refrigerator, rug, settlement, shack, shed, shanty, slum, stroller, suitcase, table, tarp\*
- Descriptions - abandoned\*, blight, broken\*, derelict, dirty, disarray, discard\*, eyesore, filth\*, rotten, ruined, scattered, smashed, soiled, spoiled, sprawl, squalor, strewn\*, ugly, unsightly
- Other - bag\*, bucket, camouflage, cardboard, cart\*, condoms, glass, mice, nails, pallet\*, rats\*, rodent
- Human Waste - bathroom, biowaste, crap, excrement, feces\*, latrine, pee, poop\*, puke, sewage\*, shit, toilet\*, urinating\*, urine\*, vomit

#### Social Disorder

- Nuisance
  - *Fires* - bonfire, burn, campfire\*, explosion, fire\*, flammable, flame
  - *Noise* - banging, barking, disturbance, drums, hammering, firecracker, fireworks, generator\*, loud\*, music\*, noise\*, party, rowdy, scream\*, shout\*
  - *Smells* - foul\*, odor, reeks, smell\*, stench
  - *General* - growl, leash, nuisance\*, loitering\*
- Interactions
  - *Begging* - beg, panhandle
  - *Behavior* - accost, altercation, bothering, commotion, confrontation, creep, menace\*, lurking, outburst, ruckus, snooping, yell\*, yelping
  - *Crude* - curse, cuss, homophobic, obscene, profanity, slur, swearing, verbally
  - *Description* - abusive, aggressive\*, belligerent, brazen, combative, creepy, flagrant, harassing\*, intimidate\*, menacing, rude, shady, strange, suspicious\*, suspect, tense, threatening\*, weird

#### Blocking Access

- Pedestrian - access\*, block\*, crosswalk, door\*, entrance\*, footpath, impassible, impede, jogger, navigate, obstacle, obstruct\*, passengers, passerby, path\*, pedestrian\*, prevent, sidewalk\*, trail\*, tripping, unusable, vestibule, walkers
- Car-related - drive, drivers, driveway, parking\*

## Crime

- General - crime\*, criminal\*, lawlessness, violation
- Person Crimes
  - *Assault/Harassment* - assault\*, fighting\*, fist, harassment\*, threatened\*
  - *Sex* - indecent, masturbating, nudity, offender, pimp, predator, prostitution\*, sex, sexual\*, solicitation, trafficking\*
  - *Violent* - armed, gun, gunfire, hatchet, knives, machete, murder, shooting\*, stabbed, violence\*, weapon\*
- Property Crimes
  - *Property Destruction* - arson, cut, deface, graffiti, vandalize
  - *Theft* - breaking, burglary, chop\*, package, prowl\*, shoplift, steal\*, stole, theft\*, thieves
  - *Trespassing* - squatter, trespass

## Drugs

- People - addict\*, alcoholic, crackhead, dealer, druggies, junkie\*, tweaker
- Substances/Objects - alcohol\*, booze, cap, crack, drug\*, foil, heroin\*, hypodermic, illicit, intravenous, liquor, marijuana, meth\*, narcotics, needles, opioids, paraphernalia\*, pipe, stash, substance, syringe\*, tinfoil, weed
- Behaviors - consuming, dealing\*, drink\*, drugged, drunk, inject, intoxicated, nod, possession, smoke\*, tweaking

## Environment

- Water - creek, downstream, drainage, groundwater, reservoir, river, stormwater, stream\*, water\*, wetland
- Areas - earth, environment\*, forest, greenbelt, landscape, soil, wooded
- Plants - branches, evergreen, flowers, garden, greenery, landscaping, planting\*, shrubbery, tree\*, vegetation, vine
- Other - eagle, ecology, environmentally, erosion, landslide, leeching, pollution\*, replant, restoration\*, salmon\*, species, wildlife

## Vulnerable Groups

- Children - baby, boy, child\*, childcare, daughter, daycare, elementary\*, family, girl, infant, innocent, kid\*, mother, parent, play\*, playground, preschool, school\*, son, swing, toddler
- Women - pregnant, single, wife, women
- Disability - ADA, amputee, disability\*, elderly, handicap, senior, vulnerable, wheelchair\*

## Health Concerns/Mental Illness

- Health Concerns - ambulance, bleed, blood, chemicals, contamination, death, disease, hepatitis, hygienic, injury, medical, parasites, sanitary\*, toxic\*, unhealthy, unhygienic, unsanitary
- Mental Illness - agitated, crazy\*, distraught, insane\*, mental\*, nuts, PTSD, schizophrenia, unhinged, unpredictable, unregulated, unstable\*, untreated, unwell

## **APPENDIX B.** Sentiment Words and Phrases Appearing in Unauthorized Camping Find It, Fix It Reports (2018-2019)

*Note:* \* indicates the word was included in the EmoLex list for that emotion

**Anger:** !, [presence of capitalized words and phrases], blatant, damn, destroy\*, disgrace\*, “do your job”, “fed up”, fuck, furious\*, horrible\*, kidding, “no justification”, “out of control”, outrageous, “please explain”, proliferate, ridiculous\*, ruining\*, seriously, shitshow, “sick of this”, stupid, WTF

**Disgust:** biohazard, cleanliness, dead, decay, decomposing, dirtier\*, dirty\*, disarray, disease\*, disgusting\*, “don’t want to see”, encroaching, everywhere, eyesore, fester, foul\*, gross\*, “health concern”, hepatitis, infected\*, mess\*, odor, overflowing, reek, rotten, sanitary, sanitation, smell\*, spreading, stench, strewn, toxic\*, ugly\*, unsanitary, unsightly\*

**Fear:** afraid\*, “after dark”, aggressive\*, antisocial\*, brazen, danger\*, emboldened, fear\*, “feel safe”, “feeling safe”, “freaked out”, hazard\*, menace, nervous\*, “not safe”, “poorly lit”, predator, prey, “public safety”, safety, scared, threat\*, uncomfortable, uncontrollably, unease, unnerving, unpredictable, unruly\*, unsafe\*, vulnerable\*, “will get hurt”

**Frustration:** accountability, “been there for”, closed,<sup>47</sup> “deal with”, dismissed, distressing, “do something”, “doesn’t make sense”, enable, enormous, enough, “enough already”, “enough is enough”, “extremely difficult”, fail, “feel helpless”, “fifth report”, “fix this”, “fourth report”, frustrated, frustrating, giant, “given up”, ignored, joke, “last request”, “multiple requests”, “no action”, “no excuse”, “no longer”, “not acceptable”, “not been addressed”, “nothing has been done”, “nothing was done”, “over and over”, overwhelm, powerless, repeatedly, “second report”, “second request”, shame, “still there”, tax, taxes, “third report”, “third request”, “time reporting”, tired, unacceptable, worse

**Concern for Homeless People:** “check on”, concern,<sup>48</sup> inhumane, “needs help”, outreach, “reach out”, “wellness check”, worried<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>47</sup>Reports were coded by hand for “closed”, as the in-text meaning varied across reports

<sup>48</sup> Reports were coded by hand for “concern” and “worried”, as the in-text meaning varied across reports

## APPENDIX C. Response Words and Phrases Appearing in Unauthorized Camping Find It, Fix It Reports (2018-2019)

### Responses

- Formal Social Control - armed guards, arrest, authorities, cops, detain, deterrent, “enforce local law”, “enforce the law”, enforced, handcuff, investigate, jail, law, officer, ordinance, patrol, police, prison, “protect neighborhood”, “protect public safety”, “protect the neighborhood”, SDOT, SPD, ticket, WA-DOT
- Removal - “clean it up”, “clean these up”, “clean this area”, “clean this city”, “clean this site”, “clean up”, “clean up”, cleanup, “clear all encampments”, “clear immediately”, “close off”, decampment, disinfect, evict, “get the homeless out”, “get rid of”, “get these people out”, “haul away”, “hose down”, “install fencing”, “install permanent fencing”, “mend the fence”, “move him”, “move this encampment”, “move this person”, “need to go”, “needs to be moved”, “needs to go”, “no camping allowed”, “no trespassing”, “person be moved”, “pick up the trash”, “place signs”, remove, “remove immediately”, “remove the campers”, “remove them”, “signs be placed”, sweep, “tell them to move”, “tents removed”
- Do Something - action, “action please”, address, “address this”, ASAP, “check the area”, consider, “deal with this”, “demand action”, “do something about”, “do something for”, “do the request”, “do your jobs”, “help us”, “improve quality of life”, “make it stop”, “make this a priority”, managing, “needs attention”, “needs to be fixed”, “permanent solution”, “please act”, “please address”, “please don’t wait”, “please help”, policy, recommended, policy, resolution, respond, suggest, “take care of it”, “take care of our neighborhood”, “take charge”, “to be addressed”

## APPENDIX D. Literature Review of Active Citizens' Government Participation and Impact

People who are willing to engage local governments may believe it is an effective way to make social change (Berner, Amos, and Morse 2011). Additionally, individuals who engage have a baseline of trust in the institutions and perceive the government to be responsive to their needs (Lee and Kim 2017). This participation can be facilitated through organizations associated with a broader social movement or interest groups campaigning for a narrower outcome. Those actively involved with a group tend to have more pessimistic perspectives on the possibility of transformative collective action than people who are marginally associated with an organization (Oliver 1984). Oliver (1984) also finds that people who are the most active in organization are often highly educated, have larger social networks, have a higher interest in local problems and closer ties to their neighborhood. They are also more likely to be homeowners. While it may be easy to assume that people who interact with or lobby governments are well informed and well versed on current issues, work by Ytre-Arne and Moe (2018) challenges this assumption, arguing news consumers are “approximately informed” and “occasionally monitorial” of current events. The bulk of scholarship on citizens' contact with the government emphasizes how social movements and formal organizations motivate and facilitate these contacts. While this work is important, not all people contact the government because of or through these groups. This project focuses on residents outside of organized groups, who contact the government directly.

Much of the previous research on public participation in local governance focuses on public comments about projects with large environmental impacts, such as dams and energy pipelines, and housing development projects. Within these contexts, researchers have identified a demographic profile for the average citizen who is engaged, attending, and commenting in these spaces: he is an older, white man who is highly educated, a longtime homeowner, and a frequent voter (Einstein et al. 2019; Gay 2012; Kang and Kwak 2003; Kittilson 2016; Schlozman, Verba, and Brady 2012). He is usually socioeconomically secure as well (Gilens 2014; Hajnal and Trounstein 2016; Schlozman et al. 2012). Political orientation does not appear to have significant influence over participation; Democrats, Republicans, and Independents participate at roughly the same rates (Einstein et al. 2019; Sahn 2022). Finally, people who hold consistently liberal or conservative views and have partisan antipathy are twice as likely to contact their local government officials than those with less consistent or mixed political views (Dimock 2014). However, it is important to note that housing issues do not cleanly map onto left or right political ideologies (see Marble and Nall 2021).

These individuals are also assumed to have ample free time to attend daytime meetings, i.e. people who are retired (Campbell 2005). They are also assumed to have a vested interest in the issue because they are often homeowners whose property values may be impacted by the government project or legislation (Fischel 2001). Finally, individuals who live in close proximity to the site/issue are assumed to have a stronger interest in the government's work (Wong 2018), and may have developed understandings of complex issues, such as zoning laws or building requirements (Einstein et al. 2019).

This narrow profile does not reflect the broader voting base or the demographics of the surrounding community (Einstein et al. 2019; Sahn 2022; Wong 2018). Additionally, because individuals with these demographic characteristics are known to hold significant social power and wealth, their overrepresented perspectives may be one way that local governments tailor policy decisions, financial allocations, and material resources to benefit vocal homeowners over other constituents. The openness and permeability of public comment periods and democratic structures have perpetuated urban inequality (Einstein, Glick, and Palmer 2020; Lupia and

Norton 2017), delayed or prevented the development of projects that would benefit the public (Einstein et al. 2019, 2020), and weaponized environmental protections and oversight regulations (Bagley 2019).

While the literature offers a general description of which constituents interface with local governments, the impact of their contact is less clear. Many scholars argue that public comment is inconsequential and is little more than political theater (Adams 2004; Checkoway 1981). Yet reviewing the impact of public comment on environmental decisions in several studies, Chess and Purcell (1999) find that public input is most influential in siting dams and pipelines. Public opposition to zoning and redevelopment has also been shown to increase the likelihood that government officials vote down the controversial proposals (Rosener 1982; Steggert 1972). Farkas finds that “although the public has access to the public hearings, their access is controlled and restricted not only during the hearings but in the entire legislative, agenda-setting, and decision-making processes preceding the hearings” (2013:399). On the other hand, some see these venues as important opportunities for affected residents to have a say in local governance, make their concerns known, and offer creative solutions (Fung 2004). More recent work focuses less on the ability of public comment to shape voting decisions and emphasizes how public opposition leads to long reviews, additional investigations or impact studies, and a prolonged review process (Bagley 2019; Klein 2022). Years-long delays can result in projects being canceled, indefinitely interrupted, or inoperable due to turn over in government officials (Irvin and Stansbury 2004).

Recent work that explores how publics interact with local government housing development projects have documented the issues that attendees frequently bring up. Because housing is related to, but distinctly different from, issues of homelessness, briefly recapping these findings allows for the current project to be compared to the most similar work being done on active publics participating at the local government level. In their book *Neighborhood Defenders: Participatory Politics and America's Housing Crisis*, Einstein, Glick, and Palmer (2020) explore the role meeting attendees play in housing development projects across Boston. They identified at least twenty concerns expressed by the commenters. All commenters were concerned about the aesthetics, environmental impacts, and negative traffic and parking implications (Einstein et al. 2020:117). People who supported the projects raised issues of affordability, density, and neighborhood character more than other commenters who were either neutral or opposed to the project. The latter group brought up concerns about potential flooding, privacy, safety, and septic/water impacts. The authors also note that only 10 percent of residents expressed worries that the new construction would decrease the value of their homes (Einstein et al. 2020:118). More abstractly, the authors argue that neighborhood defenders are motivated in their public participation by a perceived threat to their ability to enjoy their homes, disruption of their daily lives, economic concerns about their home values, and a sense that their community is being compromised (Einstein et al. 2020:33).

## **APPENDIX E. Seattle City Council Commenters' Frames about Homelessness, with Codes & Subcodes**

*Description:* The following details the frames residents use to describe homelessness in Seattle. Data from Seattle City Council public comments was open coded, codes were organized into themes, and themes were organized into frames. More details can be found in Chapter 3 (Data and Methods) and Chapter 5 (Understanding the Problem of Homelessness).

*Appendix Note:* The frame is listed in bold, main categories within the frame are underlined, and codes are listed below (subcodes are included after the code in parentheses). Codes are separated by semicolons.

### **Public Safety**

- Causes of Homelessness - drug use; mental illness; service resistance
- Characterizing Homeless People - chronically homeless; dehumanizing homeless people; deserving; grateful; responsible homeless people; undeserving
- Complaints about Homelessness - aesthetics of the city (degrading the cultural vibrancy of a neighborhood, harming the environment, “overrun”, trash); unusable spaces
- Describing the Problem - crisis/emergency; homelessness crisis (safety of homeless people); homelessness is increasing; housing crisis; public health (COVID, human feces, needles, unhealthy encampments, physical disorder); crime (decreasing public safety, violence, aggression, noise), encampments (encampments are getting worse, encampments aren't a solution to homelessness, unsafe encampments); fires; harming public safety (creating chaos/crime, police can't do their jobs, slow police response times); public drug use/dealing; repeat offenders; safety of first responders
- Characterizing Government Response - compassion without accountability (enabling harmful behavior); inaction (all talk, no action; community doing city's job; kicking can down the road; not taking responsibility for the problem); wrong approach (band-aid on a serious problem, hypocritical)
- Complaints about Government/Programs - counterproductive programs; harming businesses (taxes driving away businesses); poor government operations (bureaucracy, ignoring public, lacks transparency); poorly managed money (benefiting nonprofits/nonprofit developers, mismanaged tax money, mismanaged homeless funds)
- Emotions - Anger (revolution); embarrassed; upset; defeated; frustrated)

### **Homelessness Hurts People**

- Causes of Homelessness - increased evictions; lack of housing; service resistance
- Characterizing Homeless People - dehumanizing homeless people; deserving; dignity
- Complaints about Homelessness - aesthetics of the city
- Describing the Problem - crisis/emergency; homelessness crisis (safety of homeless people); public health (COVID, homeless deaths, no response to environmental danger)
- Characterizing Government Response - effective program; full shelters; inaction (city indifference, community doing city's job, delay in doing something, no plan); wrong approach (bare minimum, hypocritical)

- Complaints about Government/Programs -Counterproductive programs; poorly managed money (bad financial priorities, mismanaged tax money)
- Emotions - anger (disgusted); empathy; sad (shame); upset (disheartened; distraught)

### **Financial Mismanagement**

- Causes of Homelessness - mental illness; unable to pay rent/housing
- Characterizing Homeless People - deserving; undeserving
- Complaints about Homelessness - unusable spaces
- Describing the Problem - homelessness crisis; safety of homeless people; homelessness is increasing; housing crisis; public health (homeless deaths, unhealthy encampments); crime; encampments (encampments are getting worse, unsafe encampments)
- Characterizing Government Response - client first; compassion without accountability; effective program; full shelters; inaction (all talk, no action; community doing city's job; delay in doing something; kicking can down the road; not taking responsibility for the problem; starting somewhere; too little, too late); wrong approach (whack-a-mole)
- Complaints about Government/Programs - counterproductive programs (unintended consequence - displaced burden); harming businesses (taxes driving away businesses); poor government operations (ignoring public, lack of leadership, lacks transparency, mismanagement, overhead costs); poorly managed money (bad financial priorities, mismanaged tax money, mismanaged homeless funds, new taxes for the same problem, pro-developer)
- Emotions - anger (hostility); embarrassed; upset (frustrated)

### **Program Failure**

- Causes of Homelessness - disability; drug use
- Characterizing Homeless People - dehumanizing homeless people; deserving; have formed communities; responsible homeless people; undeserving
- Complaints about Homelessness - unusable spaces
- Describing the Problem - crisis/emergency; homelessness crisis (safety of homeless people); homelessness is increasing; public health (COVID, homeless deaths), encampments (encampments are getting worse, unsafe encampments)
- Characterizing Government Response - compassion without accountability (enabling harmful behavior); effective program; inaction (all talk, no action; no plan); wrong approach (hypocritical, pro-growth)

### **Structural Failure**

- Causes of Homelessness - disability; events outside their control; gentrification; increased evictions; increasing property taxes; lack of housing; mental illness; unable to pay rent/housing
- Characterizing Homeless People - deserving; dignity; seniors
- Complaints about Homelessness - aesthetics of the city
- Describing the Problem - crisis/emergency; homelessness crisis (safety of homeless people); housing crisis; public health (COVID, human feces); physical disorder; crime
- Characterizing Government Response - client first; effective program; inaction (all talk, no action; city indifference; delay in doing something; starting somewhere); wrong approach (hypocritical)

- Complaints about Government/Programs - counterproductive programs (unintended consequence - displaced burden); harming businesses (taxes driving away businesses); poor government operations (gatekeeping resources, lacks transparency); poorly managed money (bad financial priorities, mismanaged tax money)
- Emotions - anger (hostility); embarrassed; sad

### **Government Failure**

- Characterizing Homeless People - deserving; undeserving
- Complaints about Homelessness - aesthetics of the city (trash); unusable spaces
- Describing the Problem - public health (COVID, human feces, needles, physical disorder); crime; harming public safety (creating chaos/crime, police can't do their jobs, public drug use/dealing)
- Characterizing Government Response - inaction (all talk, no action; dumping problems on Seattle public; not taking responsibility for the problem)
- Complaints about Government/Programs - counterproductive programs (attracting homeless people to the city), harming businesses (taxes driving away businesses), poor government operations (ignoring public, lack of leadership, lacks transparency); poorly managed money (benefiting nonprofits/nonprofit developers, mismanaged tax money, new taxes for the same problem)
- Emotions - anger (disgusted, revolution); embarrassed

### **APPENDIX F. Seattle City Council Commenters' Requests/Demands about Homelessness, with Codes & Subcodes**

**Relief:** basic needs, access to food and water, health care, hygiene services, jobs, reopen bathrooms, mental health treatment, more housing, oppose sweeps, supporting independence, trash collection, traditional homelessness services, funding non-profits, invest more resources, JustCare, oppose – service cuts, rapid rehousing, resources, safe lots, services, shelters, tiny houses, Navigation team, sweeps/encampment removal, government reforms, listening to communities, zoning, locating services in wealthy neighborhoods, tax reforms, support – Head Tax, true public health, true public safety, alternative to policing homeless people, support – SPD savings to community

**Structural Responses:** basic needs, health care, jobs, more housing, oppose sweeps, supporting independence, keep people in their homes, rent forgiveness, rental assistance, support – close eviction loopholes, support – eviction relocation assistance, traditional homeless services, funding non-profits, invest more resources, rapid rehousing, safe lots, services, tiny houses, sweeps/encampment removal, government reforms, zoning, locating services in wealthy neighborhoods, tax reforms, support – Head tax, tax reform, true public safety, support – SPD savings to community, rethinking housing

**Formal Social Control:** drug treatment, mental health treatment, holding homeless people accountable, Navigation team, police enforcement, hire more cops, protecting housed residents, protecting property, protecting vulnerable residents, sweeps/encampment removal, clean up,

oppose – CB 119796, government reforms, listening to communities, enforce the law, manage the camps

**Reform:** drug treatment, mental health treatment, more housing, traditional homelessness services, invest more resources, holding homeless people accountable, government reforms, accessible processes, accountability, listening to communities, personal sacrifice of council members, transparency, tax reforms, rethinking housing

**Two-coexisting Problems:** basic needs, hygiene services, drug treatment, mental health treatment, more housing, oppose – sweeps, traditional homelessness services CO-LEAD, funding non-profits, hotel vouchers, invest more resources, Just Care, shelters, tiny houses, Navigation team, sweeps/encampment removal, clean up, oppose – CB 119796, government reforms, accountability, community outreach, zoning, rethinking housing

**Revolt:** government reforms, accountability, transparency

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