

Complaint-Oriented “Services”: Shelters as Tools for Criminalizing Homelessness

By
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This article argues that the expansion of shelter and welfare provisions for the homeless can lead to increased criminalization of homeless people in public spaces. First, I document how repression of people experiencing homelessness by the police in San Francisco neighborhoods increased immediately after the opening of new shelters. Second, I reveal how shelter beds are used as a privileged tool of the police to arrest, cite, and confiscate property of the unhoused, albeit in the guise of sanitary and public health initiatives. I conclude by considering how shelters increasingly function as complaint-oriented “services,” aimed at addressing the interests of residents, businesses, and politicians, rather than the needs of those unhoused.

Keywords: homelessness; policing; social welfare; poverty governance; San Francisco

In January 2018, Leilani Farha, the United Nations Special Rapporteur on Adequate Housing and Human Rights, visited San Francisco. Although she was deeply concerned about the homelessness she saw, the true American exceptionalism Farha found was not its condition of homelessness but rather its criminalized treatment of the homeless by police officers and sanitation workers: “There’s a cruelty here that I don’t think I’ve seen. Sweeping people off the streets . . . whether they live in tents on sidewalks or in their cars, is cruel and inhumane treatment” (Gee 2018).

The same month of Farha’s visit, San Francisco Mayor London Breed celebrated the city’s compassion and leadership in providing homeless

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services. At the Mayor’s Martin Luther King Day Address, the director of the HSH (San Francisco Department of Homelessness and Supportive Housing) exclaimed, “This year’s record funding level recognizes the great work that our city and nonprofit partners are engaged in and a welcome investment in our work on helping our homeless.” Indeed, San Francisco has more supportive housing units dedicated to addressing homelessness and has invested more money into homeless services per capita than any other major U.S. city (HSH 2017). In the past decade alone, the city has invested more than \$1.5 billion into serving its homeless population, built or leased twenty-seven hundred units of long-term supportive housing, and created more than five hundred new shelter beds (HSH 2017).

This simultaneous existence of interventions designed to help the unhoused within shelter alongside efforts to criminalize their existence in public space, exemplified in San Francisco, is a hallmark of contemporary homeless policy across the United States. With the rise in “advanced homelessness” (Marcuse 1988) during the late 1970s and early 1980s, the United States responded in two ways. First, federal and local governments invested billions in opening and operating emergency shelters across the country. Between 1984 and 1988, more than thirty-five hundred new homeless shelters opened (Jencks 1995, 15). Simultaneously, cities began passing anti-homeless ordinances—such as bans on camping, sleeping, sitting, and feeding the poor—effectively criminalizing homelessness (Ortiz, Dick, and Rankin 2015). While there have been significant developments in promoting permanent supportive housing and increased resistance to criminalization, shelters continue to open across the country (Henry et al. 2018), and anti-homeless ordinances have increased more over the past five years as of this writing than during any earlier period in U.S. history (NLCHP [National Law Center on Homelessness and Poverty] 2019). In sum, criminalization on the streets and temporary aid through shelter remain the primary treatments through which the unhoused are managed in the American metropolis and have increased in lockstep.

Shelter development and the rise of anti-homeless laws have been well documented by social scientists. However, the scholarship is much less clear about the relationship *between* the growth and policies of *homeless services in shelter* and the growth and policies of *homeless criminalization on the streets*. Social scientists studying homelessness in public space have asserted the dominance of a *punitive* and *exclusionary* approach marked by the surge of anti-homeless laws and associated practices of banishment (Beckett and Herbert 2009) that have become defining features of the “carceral” (Davis 2006), “revanchist” (Smith 1996), and “postjustice” (Mitchell 2003) city. Much of this scholarship situates

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these exclusionary policing policies within a broader “punitive turn” marked by the decline of a rehabilitative ideal within criminal justice systems (Wacquant 2009; Garland 2001) and by declining welfare expenditures within U.S. society more generally (Beckett and Western 2001).

Scholars studying shelters have challenged these punitive characterizations by spotlighting the rise of homeless services as a “counterweight to the current understandings of homelessness that narrowly focus on anti-homeless ordinances and expulsion from public spaces” (DeVerteuil 2006, 118). Cloke, Johnsen, and May (2007, 390) argue that shelters and other spaces of care emerge “in the interstices of revanchist space to provide comforts and care to the excluded, including the homeless.” Resisting the punitive framework, these authors urge us to better examine shelters and the various institutions where “proactive interest of one person in the well-being of another” are enacted (Conradson 2003, 508). In contrast to criminalized public spaces, shelters are portrayed as examples of *accommodative* and *seclusionary* approaches to homelessness. They are variably rendered as sites of medicalization (Lyon-Callos 2008), social welfare responses of charity (Cloke, May, and Johnsen 2011), industries providing enrichment for their managers (Willse 2015), and warehousing (Hopper 2003, 85) where homeless people are to be monitored at best and abandoned at worst (Gounis 1992). Although many of these accounts acknowledge the increasingly punitive approach to homelessness on the streets, they provide little empirical evidence or theoretical explanation of how, why, or if the more accommodating developments they are studying within the shelter impact processes of punishment on the streets. In short, both sets of scholars studying the seclusion of homelessness indoors and exclusion of homelessness outdoors have left the dynamics between the welfare policies of shelter and the criminal justice policies of the street largely unexamined.

Among the exceptions to this divided analysis between the street and shelter is Teresa Gowan’s (2010) study of San Francisco’s regulation of homelessness at the turn of the millennium. Her ethnographic work on homeless recyclers documents how a number of her research companions viewed medicalized shelters “as intimately connected and mutually dependent . . . and used over and over again to justify police clearances” (2010, 205). She also documents how a decade of welfare and criminal justice policies were rolled out in tandem, underlined by a hybridized discourse of “sick” and “sin” talk among city officials that cast the homeless as in need of policing to be corralled into shelters for their own good.

More recently, Forrest Stuart’s study of L.A.’s Skid Row (2016) discusses how the development of a new megashelter and a jail-diversion program, rerouting those arrested from jail into shelter, were central to the intensified policing of the neighborhood’s Safe Cities Initiative. According to Stuart, the new shelter and its policies gave rise to a form of “therapeutic policing” that “operates as a form of outreach social work that aims to transform and reintegrate residents as productive, self-governing citizens” (2016, 15). Stuart claims that under this new paradigm, punitive measures such as citation, arrest, and incarceration shifted from serving punitive *ends* in and of themselves to *means* working toward therapeutic ends (2016, 15).

The San Francisco case presented here offers an alternative analysis: that shelters are not simply welfare *ends* in and of themselves but, rather, essential *means* toward increasing police repression. By adding ethnographic observations within the bureaucratic field and examination of emails and internal agency reports nearly two decades later, my study identifies both the logics and practices linking the city’s shelter and policing policies that Gowan’s research companions surmised. It is also one of the first empirical studies examining the impacts on shelter and the criminalization of homelessness in the wake of the Ninth Circuit Court decision of *Martin v. City of Boise* (2018), which ruled that it is a form of cruel and unusual punishment to enforce anti-homeless laws when adequate shelter is not made available.

This article explains three ways the expansion of shelter supports and directs the increased criminalization of homelessness in public space. First, I document how police repression increases immediately following the opening of new shelters in the neighborhoods in which they open. Second, I consider how shelter placements shifted from social workers to police officers as tools for the police to arrest, cite, and confiscate property of the unhoused. Third, I disclose how these methods of increased criminalization were shrouded in discourses and practices of sanitization. The article concludes by considering how shelters are regearred toward criminalization as they increasingly function as complaint-oriented “services,” aimed at serving the interests of residents, businesses, and politicians rather than the needs of the unhoused.

Methods

To examine the dynamic relationship between street and shelter, I draw on ethnographic observations, administrative data, and two surveys that examine homelessness in both public spaces and shelters in the city of San Francisco. The study was carried out between fall 2014 and spring 2020. On one hand, I completed an ethnography of the field of homeless management that encompasses agencies and organizations involved in regulating homelessness. This included a year of embedded observations on ride-alongs with police officers addressing homelessness, public health workers on street outreach, and sanitation workers clearing encampments; sitting in office hours with shelter social workers; and working at the Mayor’s Office of Homelessness. It also draws on observations from my involvement in community associations, including six years working as an organizer in the city’s homeless advocacy group and participating in more than one hundred public forums including district police meetings, homeowner and merchant association meetings, and hearings at city hall.

These observations from above are paired with an ethnography from below. Over the course of another year, I spent nine months living on the streets, in the shelters, and in daily/weekly “welfare hotels” alongside those experiencing homelessness. This immersion included 57 nights sleeping out on sidewalks, in parks, and beneath underpasses; 96 nights among hundreds of other men in shelters;

and 76 nights in daily or weekly hotels with the marginally housed or more often people just taking a break from the street. I followed those entering into, living within, and being evicted from homeless housing programs that I could not ethically reside in, which was also the case for the new models of shelter at the center of this article. It was during these two intensive years of fieldwork that the city opened its first Navigation Center that features prominently in this article. Four subsequent years of less intensive fieldwork involved continued outreach, organizing, and following the trajectories of a core group of research companions as they navigated their way in and out of homelessness, through the streets, shelters, and homeless housing programs. Over these years, I attended more than forty public forums, association meetings, and city hall hearings, while serving as a key organizer with the Coalition on Homelessness' Human Rights Workgroup.

Together, these methods offer a uniquely relational approach to the dynamics between street and shelter that studies "fields rather than places, boundaries rather than bounded groups, processes rather than processed people" (Desmond 2014, 547) and is particularly useful in addressing the three key elements highlighted in this special issue. First, by taking on observations along the opposing perspectives of homeless individuals and the bureaucrats who manage them, my approach triangulates the structural and individual factors that compel or repel individuals experiencing homelessness between street and shelter. Second, the observations across the interrelated institutions of street and shelter allowed me to trace the *trajectories of homelessness*.

Third, and most central to this article, my multiple positions across the state provided novel insights into the causes, practices, and consequences of *policies* aimed at homelessness missed in previous studies. The article uniquely traces the temporal dynamics of a policy evolution that spanned five years, during which policies of punishment and care, between street and shelter, interacted in dynamic ways that gradually ratcheted up the weaponization of shelter toward punitive ends. The three ways shelter became utilized to increase criminalization (covered in the empirical sections) did not occur simultaneously; nor are they merely additive. They are rather dynamic and interrelated, which I was able to track in a stepwise fashion through my multiyear empirical study.

In addition to the ethnographic observations, the article draws heavily on nine public record acts requests across city agencies that provided thousands of emails of city officials as well as internal memos and reports involving shelters and camp clearances. Scrutinizing these records allowed me both to confirm and challenge "hearsay" and reports I had heard from officials and those on the streets about agency actions and motives and to contextualize the observations made in the field (see Luby 2018). Last, the article draws on two community-based studies that I supervised in collaboration with other scholars and the San Francisco Coalition on Homelessness. One, which focused on the criminalization of homelessness, surveyed 351 homeless individuals and included forty-three in-depth interviews (Herring and Yarbrough 2015). Another was a broad needs-based assessment for shelter, supportive housing, and behavioral health services that surveyed 584 homeless individuals and included twenty-five focus groups (Chang et al. 2020).

Case and Setting: Shelter Expansion in the Post–*Martin v. Boise* Era

Scarcity and fluidity

In San Francisco, 9,784 people experiencing homelessness were tallied in the city’s 2019 single-night count. However, the city has only thirty-four hundred available shelter beds (ASR [Applied Survey Research] 2019). On a typical day in 2019, there were more than twelve hundred people on San Francisco’s single adult shelter waitlist for a shelter bed. Reaching the top of the list typically takes between one to two months. Once a bed is obtained, the person will have to exit after 90 days, get back on the list, and wait for another one to two months, even though the average length of homelessness for those in the city is now more than one year. Without a guaranteed bed, one can always seek a single-night bed but will have to wait, typically between four to eight hours, and the effort does not always pay off.

This bed scarcity structures the subsequent policies discussed in this article and also explains the fluidity of those experiencing homelessness in moving between shelter and the street. In a survey of 316 San Franciscans who were currently experiencing homelessness on the streets or in their vehicles, we found that 15 percent had been sheltered at some point in the last month (Chang et al. 2020). Nearly 40 percent had utilized shelter in the past year, and 81 percent of those unsheltered had either used or tried to access shelter in the past. In contrast to U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD)–mandated homeless counts that portray a static perception of sheltered and unsheltered homelessness, the reality is that there is a high rate of churn between street and shelter.

A new model of shelter

While San Francisco may be a typical case in its scarcity of shelter, it is a strategic case in other regards. After a decade of shelter ambivalence in the city and the United States more broadly, during which no new shelters were developed as the city focused exclusively on permanent supportive housing, San Francisco opened up six new “navigation center” shelters while I was in the field. The first opened during my initial year of fieldwork in 2015. Five more have subsequently opened. The model pioneered in San Francisco has since been replicated in more than a dozen U.S. and Canadian cities.

As the name suggests, these shelters are not meant to simply provide a short-term bed for persons in a temporary crisis as in traditional shelters but to navigate those whom policy-makers commonly labeled “the hardest to house” into supportive housing. Compared to the existing shelters, residents slept in more spacious dorms with fewer people, were guaranteed a bed in perpetuity without requirement, and benefitted from a far lower client to social worker ratio dedicated to moving them into housing. Other perks included free laundry, Wi-Fi, 24-hour showers, high-quality food available at all hours, and a private storage unit, which were all lacking in the existing shelters.

Furthermore, the location of the navigation centers diverged from the norm. Nearly all of the city's existing shelters were concentrated within the city's Tenderloin and 5th Street districts, along with much of the city's other social services and charities for the down and out, in what scholars have described as "social service ghettos" (Wolch and Dear 1994) or "recovery districts" (Fairbanks 2009). By contrast, the new shelters have been sited within the rapidly gentrifying areas of the city's Dogpatch, Mission, and Market Street neighborhoods that host a disproportionate number of homeless encampments. They are all temporary with projected lifespans of one to four years.

Whereas traditional city shelters prioritized those willing and able to participate in workfare and rehabilitation, the new shelters hold inverse logics of deservingness and inclusion. Beds are instead strictly reserved for those living on the streets and integrate "low-barrier" rule matrices to accommodate their needs, with no accompanying programmatic requirements. The navigation centers allow people to enter with what providers call the "Three Ps": "partners," "property," and "pets," all of which are prohibited in the other gender segregated shelters. The new shelters are open 24 hours a day without curfews, while others require residents to exit between 6 a.m. and 7 a.m. and return between 7 p.m. and 8 p.m. each day. Finally, unlike traditional shelters that require clients to request a bed and wait, the new shelters recruit through referrals provided directly by city outreach workers and police officers to those residing in public space. As I argue, these new developments in shelter provision are critical components in growing efforts to criminalize homelessness and reshape the regulation of homelessness in public space.

Implications of Martin v. Boise

Another development during my fieldwork that increased the potency of shelter as a tool for criminalization was ironically a ruling by one of the United States' highest courts against the criminalization of homelessness. In 2014, an unhoused plaintiff charged the city of Boise, Idaho, for violating their Eighth Amendment protection against cruel and unusual punishment by outlawing sleeping or camping in public, even while the city failed to offer sufficient shelter. The court ruled in favor of the houseless plaintiff and held that "so long as there is a greater number of people experiencing homelessness in [a jurisdiction] than the number of available beds [in shelters]," the jurisdiction cannot prosecute them for "involuntarily sitting, lying, and sleeping in public" (*Martin v. City of Boise* 2018). In 2018, the decision was upheld by the Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals in San Francisco.

Yet the ruling remains narrow. *Martin* is not a mandate for cities to solve or even improve homelessness; nor does it "allow anyone who wishes to sit, lie, or sleep on the streets . . . at any time and at any place." It simply states that for an officer to cite or arrest someone, the specific individual must first be offered a form of "adequate shelter." This new legal landscape has had two important implications for shelters. First, police have been granted greater power over shelter resources due to the new legal requirement that shelter must be offered prior to

punishment. Second, criminalization is increasingly carried out under the guise of public health and sanitation operations, with shelters playing an important supporting role to skirt new limitations and reframe punishment as compassion.

NIMBY Bargains: Police Crackdowns in Areas with New Shelters

As has historically been the case, NIMBY (not in my backyard) opposition to homeless shelters was ever-present for each of the new navigation center shelters that opened in San Francisco. However, this opposition was blunted by a number of novel features of the new shelters: temporary lifespans and an investment in pleasing aesthetics soothed fears of falling in property valuations, 24-hour access prevented clients from congregating outside, and fewer beds lightened the impact of more residents in the area. The new shelters also came with novel guarantees from officials of reductions in tents on the sidewalk within the specific districts the shelters would be placed and extra security and sanitation for the surrounding blocks. (See Finnigan, this volume, for research on tent encampments in nearby Oakland.) For the unhoused residing in each of the districts with new shelters, navigation centers patched up the social safety net for those lucky enough to get inside, but also cast a wider penal net for the far greater number of those who were not invited in.

When the first navigation center in San Francisco’s Mission District opened in 2015, there was no explicit strategy of policing tied to the new shelter. Officials won over community support purely on the argument that increased and targeted service provision would result in a reduction of tents on nearby sidewalks. At a community meeting that I attended in the courtyard of the proposed shelter site months before the new shelter’s opening, an official of the Mayor’s Office of Homelessness explained,

Your neighborhood has been ground-zero of homeless encampments and has suffered a disproportionate burden of the homeless crisis. We’ve heard your complaints and understand you’re fed up with the encampments, the needles, and the feces. The Navigation Centre is designed to address those concerns, by removing encampments and bringing people indoors where they can get the services they need.

To assure that the navigation center would benefit the Mission neighborhood directly, referrals were limited almost exclusively to those sleeping in public space within the district boundaries. Through this place-based criterion of eligibility city officials avoided a common point of community resistance: that a new shelter would result in an influx of homeless persons from other parts of the city. Instead, the navigation center would simply be bringing inside those who were already camping outside within the neighborhood. In the quote above, the official makes the neighborhood’s selection to host the city’s first navigation center sound more akin to winning a desired public utility rather than being dealt a dumpsite for a citywide negative externality, as shelters are often portrayed.

At another community meeting held in the lead up to the navigation center opening, a local merchant expressed worries that the shelter would bring more crime. The police lieutenant at the meeting, one of the most ardent supporters of the new shelter, did not respond with guarantees of more policing, but rather expressed his hope that the shelter would lead to a reduced need for police:

Look, right now I've got my officers responding to over five thousand homeless complaints each month. Most of these calls are just for people camping, sleeping, and blocking sidewalks. We are duty-bound to respond to those calls, but they get in the way of us working on real crime. No, we can't promise there will be zero crime around the navigation center, but compared to the situation on the streets now, having 24-hour security and a place for people inside, off the streets, and out of your way, sounds a lot better.

Unfortunately, after the first few months it became clear that the navigation center was not resulting in fewer encampments; nor did it reduce the policing of homelessness. Instead, the number of camps increased, as did complaints and policing (DEM [San Francisco Department of Emergency Management] 2018). This was not due to the shelter's failure of meeting the needs of the unhoused but, rather, to its success in doing so.

In the first weeks after the navigation center's opening, the individuals I was spending time with on the streets were skeptical. When I asked Amos, an African American man in his early 40s who had been living on the streets for the past three years, if he would consider going in, he told me, "Every mayor brands their shelter something different—'multi-service center,' 'winter shelter,' 'transitional shelter,' they're all the same! Folks out here won't take the bait." A few weeks later a different attitude prevailed. Entire camps had entered together in groups as large as fifteen. They reported back that conditions were far more humane than the other city shelters. Most of all, some had already received housing and others would soon. In the following months, I was asked constantly by those living outside how to get in. Although most who asked had little or no interest in entering traditional shelters, the promise of superior conditions and eventually housing, unique to the navigation center, won over many of the shelter system's harshest critics, including Amos who, eight months after decrying the new shelter, got in and eventually entered supportive housing.

Six months after its opening, the new navigation center seemed to have exceeded all expectations of city officials and homeless people alike in creating an attractive model of shelter that assisted those deemed "chronically homeless" and the most durably "shelter resistant." At the same time, the new navigation center had done nothing to curb visible homelessness in the district that officials had promised. Homelessness remained steady across the city (ASR 2019), and the calls for homeless complaints reported to 911 increased (DEM 2018). Despite the positive housing and service outcomes being meticulously tracked by the city controller's office, the general sentiment was one of false promise and failed policy. In spring 2016, just over a year after the first navigation center's opening, at a community forum about a new street cleaning initiative, a merchant on 23rd Street told the city's spokespersons,

You told us all last year that if we supported this navigation center, we'd see less people living on our sidewalks. Well it's been a year and everyone in this room can tell you that things aren't any better. We need much more serious action on this issue!

In response to these growing complaints of encampments in the Mission, the Mayor's Office coordinated the rollout of a pilot policing and sanitation initiative that became operationally and politically synced with the new shelter in the district. At the inception of the initiative, I was working in the Mayor's Office of Homelessness. During the weekly “encampment workgroup” meeting with officials from eight city departments, it was quickly agreed that rather than an explicit and publicized “zero-tolerance” policing campaign against homelessness, which had occurred just months before in the nearby Haight-Ashbury, a response should be coordinated and service-led. The initiative was named the Mission District Outreach Project. At the front of the public-facing initiative was a new camp resolution team of public health outreach workers, which, for weeks leading up to an eviction, worked with entire camps to find navigation center placements. Referrals no longer would be based on Department of Public Health needs assessments, or the local community health center, but reserved strictly for camp resolutions. Simultaneously an increased number of police officers and sanitation workers were assigned solely to address encampments in the Mission. As the new resolution teams captured front-page headlines and became hailed as a national best practice for linking the chronically homeless into shelter, police and sanitation teams doubled down on their daily sweeps.

The highly publicized resolutions, which overshadowed the intensified sweeps, crystallized on one of my ride-alongs with the Department of Public Works “alley crews.” The crews comprised eight to twelve sanitation workers accompanied by a police patrol team and were dedicated to addressing homeless camps eight hours a day, five days a week. The first six hours of the shift that morning, starting just after 4 a.m., were spent waking up at least thirty people surviving under tents, tarps, and in cardboard condos, and forcing them to pack up and move along (see Herring 2019). No social workers were on hand, no offers of services were extended. We then concluded that day's shift at a clearance under the new camp resolution team. A TV news documentary crew filmed the four social workers helping five people camped out on the plaza pack their belongings into trucks to be taken to the navigation center, where all had been given spots and accepted offers. As twenty to forty of San Francisco's unhoused got golden tickets into navigation centers each month and captured the media limelight, hundreds of others in the neighborhood faced intensified sweeps incurring citations, move-along orders, and widespread destruction of property in the shadow of the more publicized aid.

This intensified policing and sanitation was in large part spurred by the perceived failure of the navigation center's social policy and designed to shore up support for expanding navigation centers across the city. The policing not only had devastating physical, mental, and financial effects on the houseless (see Herring 2019; Herring, Yarbrough, and Alatorre 2020), but heightened conflict in the bureaucratic field and inflamed social conflicts among the unhoused. First,

conflicts grew between police and social workers. Social workers I followed became increasingly frustrated in losing contact with clients who had been waiting for navigation center beds but had been evicted from the areas by police and sanitation. Not wanting to be seen as working in complicity with police sweeps, a number of times social workers I was with would avoid and delay outreach in places where the police were present. Among the unhoused, old-timers in the neighborhood were frustrated by the number of newcomers who were getting navigation center placements while intensifying police pressure on everyone else in the district. Ben, whom I had come to know in 2014, had not only been recycling and living outside in the Mission the two years prior to the opening of the navigation center but, before becoming homeless, had been renting in the neighborhood for more than a decade. Frustrated with his inability to get a bed, he complained to me,

How am I supposed to get into the navigation center? I know dozens of folks who I'd never seen in this neighborhood get inside and get beds, and I've been here for ages. Now we've got all these new people camping out. They've got no respect for us who've been here before—lots of meth, they make way too much noise, hoarding all sorts of crap—just look at that couple across the street. [He points to a disheveled camp that has three bikes in various stages of deconstruction.] They just moved there yesterday. . . . Now they're gonna bring the heat on me [police pressure]. And I bet they'll get navigation center beds! They love getting in the most fucked up folks out here. I'm just not fucked up enough . . . I think I've moved more in the past two months than I have in the past two years.

As Ben's sentiments reflect, the new shelter was a source of resentment and division among the houseless. Frustration over the criterion of selection was compounded by the fact that the new shelters that the old-timers wanted to enter, but could not, resulted in increased policing, which in turn converted every new homeless person on the block into a threat of visibility, complaints, and, eventually, eviction. Soon after this conversation, Ben relocated his camp to the Bayview neighborhood. Rather than contributing to ending Ben's homelessness, the reactionary policing that followed the navigation center's opening resulted instead in displacement from his longtime neighborhood.

Three years after the first navigation center opened, increased policing was no longer a reactionary afterthought to fulfill public officials' bargain of reducing visible poverty. Instead, it was an upfront condition of the community contract. In 2019, as the city prepared to open its fifth navigation center in the affluent Embarcadero neighborhood—where the least expensive condo starts at more than \$1 million—organized residents and businesses raised more than \$176,000 through a grassroots GoFundMe campaign titled Safer Embarcadero to purchase legal services in opposition to the shelter. The effort was unsuccessful at stopping the shelter, but locals were successful at pressuring the city to commit increased sanitation services and four additional officers dedicated to policing a designated "safe zone" within a four-block radius surrounding the shelter. Although large factions of the police had become increasingly resistant to using police resources to address homelessness, the mayor, HSH, and Department of Public Works (i.e.,

political, welfare, and sanitation interests) demanded the policing. At the time of the Embarcadero shelter’s opening, I asked the former director of the HSH and mastermind behind the city’s first navigation center, whom I had worked under three years prior, about this pairing of policing and shelter. He described the bargain in no uncertain terms:

I know you’d like to see more services and less policing, but you just can’t have both in this case. If you want more navigation centers, that requires political will, and that political will requires you to show people that they work: they see less tents, less poop, they come to realize all their fears about increased crime and drugs was a mistake. You can’t be a purist on this.

Placing Shelter in the Hands of the Police

The second stage of retooling shelters toward serving the punitive ends of enforcing anti-homeless laws in public space occurred three years after the opening of the first navigation center. In July 2018, the U.S. Ninth Circuit Court upheld the *Martin v. Boise* decision, ruling that police cannot enforce laws prohibiting homelessness in public space unless shelter is available. This created a legal dilemma for the police. How are they able to enforce anti-homeless laws when there is a month-long waitlist for shelters and high demand for referrals into the new navigation shelters? At the same time, due to growing political pressure, the homeless outreach team (HOT) located in the Department of Public Health was now being pressed to “resolve” camps at a much faster rate that greatly exceeded the expansion of shelter.

To overcome these two challenges of regulating homelessness in public space, officials found a fix through regressive policy adjustments to shelters. First, control over shelter entry was expanded. Although shelter beds had been tied to sanitation and policing efforts in the past, referrals had remained in the hands of the Department of Public Health, and their criteria of medical and mental health concerns still shaped many placements. However, to comply with *Martin v. Boise*, police officers were now given referral power to shelter beds as well. Citing *Martin v. Boise* at a Police Commission meeting that I was also presenting at, an SFPD commander explained,

Just to be clear, we are following the Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals case where we are making sure that there is a shelter for any individual who wants it, prior to enforcement. If a person is in an encampment, they will be asked if they want shelter, we don’t issue a citation. We connect them with the navigation center. We have a bed waiting for them. . . . If we fail to convince them, then, the officer has the option of issuing a citation, seizing the tent, and making a court case out of it.

Second, changes to navigation center entry were accompanied by changes to shelter conditions. Because the new shelters were popular, there was intense competition for a bed, and once in, many homeless wanted to stay until they stabilized or accessed housing. The desirability of shelter and the longer-length

stays required for rehousing people directly contradicted the high turnover essential to the enforcement of anti-homeless laws. As reported by city officials at a Police Commission meeting, between 2017 and 2019, the number of police and sanitation workers dedicated to addressing encampments rose by more than 100 percent, while the total number of the city's shelter beds increased by less than 5 percent.

To resolve these dilemmas, shelter conditions were strategically degraded. Rather than developing the necessary shelter to resolve encampments, the HSH and Department of Human Services simply reduced time limits and tightened rules for the navigation centers. Whereas the first navigation centers had no time limits on stays, most navigation center beds had now become limited to 30-, 7-, or even 1-night stays. In 2015, 95 of the original navigation center's 100 beds were set aside to lead clients into housing; by 2018, only 38 of the 349 beds spread out across the city's four centers were designated for "pathways to housing." The other 90 percent were emergency short-term stays (HSH 2018a). Ten beds by this time were also set aside for those taking a night or two preparing for subsidized bus trips out of town through the city's homeward bound program. No longer aimed at navigating people into permanent supportive housing and resolving homelessness, the city's navigation centers now function as emergency triage centers, aimed at navigating people into other shelters or out of the city with bus tickets.

Yet little evidence exists that the new shelters are even meeting these far more modest goals. Most persons now entering the navigation centers are retuning back to the streets, with even more refusing to enter at all. Although the HSH had reported shelter exit outcomes for the navigation center in weekly reports and a live dashboard during its first two years, it eventually stopped tracking exit outcomes altogether during this policy evolution. In our most recent survey of 583 currently unhoused San Franciscans, 23 percent ($n = 153$) had reported being in a navigation center at some time despite only 12 percent ($n = 70$) reporting that they currently resided in one (Chang et al. 2020). As one of my research companions who entered a navigation center with a 30-day bed limit after the policy change said, "It's just a pit-stop. You know, a break from the street. It gave me a chance to relax and take my mind off taking care of the camp all the time."

However, most beds reserved for police referrals were for only a week or less. Rather than a break from the street, these extremely short stays were seen by most homeless people I knew as a disruption designed to dispossess them of their belongings. The catch was that to enter the shelter, you would have to surrender your tent and most of your property, save a backpack. After one to seven nights, you would be without shelter again. Although police do not record rates of shelter denial, data in an internal memo of the HSH indicated that over a month of camp clearances in a targeted area affected at least 150 people, yet only eight (less than 5 percent) accepted a seven-day shelter offer (HSH 2018b).

Shortly after police started using shelter as a threat to take people's property in 2018, I met with Chanelle and Julie, a couple whom I had been camping near two years earlier. Discussing the new police protocol of giving people the choice

between having their tent confiscated or taking a shelter bed, Chanelle said, “If they say that I’d be like, take me to jail, let’s do this.” Julie chimed in that “one night is a joke. We’re just going to be back out the next day, right? At least in jail, there I’d at least have three meals a day and an actual bed instead of a fucking mat.” In contrast to the “therapeutic policing” aimed at rehabilitation, as described in Stuart’s ethnography of L.A.’s Skid Row (2016), most offers of shelter were understood as a mere legal requirement, threat, or tool to move people along or dispossess them of tents and property.

Sanitizing Criminalization

The modifications to shelter entry and conditions, as well as the changes in policing that led to them, occurred within a broader bureaucratic innovation critical to explaining how such regressive policies advanced in a seemingly progressive city rich in social service investment. The surge in officers dedicated to homelessness, aggressive tactics toward property destruction, and new referral powers of police officers all occurred under directives of the city’s Healthy Streets Operation Center (HSOC) that launched in 2018. In public presentations to the board of supervisors, local homeless coordinating board, and police commission, HSOC officials portrayed the new interdepartmental initiative as increasing coordination among disparate agencies led by health and human services. As a Department of Public Works official explained at one of these hearings that I attended at city hall in 2018, “The primary objective of HSOC is to ensure unity of effort among City departments addressing homelessness and street behaviors across San Francisco. The Center coordinates and supports efforts to offer services and resources to residents that may be unsheltered or engaged in unhealthy street behavior.” The presentation time was primarily filled by agency heads from the departments of public health, homelessness, and sanitation rather than police.

Officials presented the bureaucratic reorganization as a shift in homeless response away from the punitive hand of the state to a more caring, assistive one. However, internal policy memos and data acquired through public record act requests revealed that the gravity of power shifted in the opposite direction. According to its organizational chart, a San Francisco Police Department commander is in charge of the center and “responsible for coordinating the efforts of each of the agencies” (HSOC 2018). At this time, two social workers whom I first met on ride-alongs three years earlier quit over the growing destruction of property and regressive policing that they felt increasingly complicit in. When I met them during the opening of the first navigation center in 2015, they were frustrated at police interfering in their outreach. Now they felt resources such as shelter placements formerly dedicated to their mission had been hijacked by police and sanitation. Three years later, with the implementation of HSOC, one HOT team worker asked me during an encampment clearance,

Tell me Chris? Who's running this show? Whose tool are we? Are we being used by the police? Or is this Muhammad [the director of public works] using the health department to sweep up his mess? I'm not bringing inside the cases that need the most attention. It's like I'm part of the mayor's personal clean-up squad.

In a parallel shift described earlier, the new shelters had become a resource utilized for addressing resident and business complaints rather than servicing the needs of those experiencing homelessness.

As police commanders took the lead directing the HSOC, newly hired police patrols were assigned to escort Department of Public Works street crews. The result was that complaints made through the city's 311 customer service line requesting street cleanings increasingly included a police response (HSOC 2018). Although outcomes of housing placements and services were not included in HSOC's weekly reports, the key metric that became the center's north star was a tent count. This metric became a regular talking point of Mayor London Breed, who announced just four months after taking office that there had been a 34 percent reduction in tents during her tenure (Office of the Mayor 2018). This broader bureaucratic reorganization that increased the police's role in managing homelessness on the streets of San Francisco explicitly sought to reduce visible poverty, weaponizing the shelter as a tool for criminalizing homelessness in public space under the guise of sanitation and public health.

Conclusion: Complaint-Oriented “Services” and the Weaponization of Shelter

Although shelters mitigate the exposure to policing for those who reside within them, they can also stoke the intensity of punishment experienced by those who remain in public space. This article has outlined the evolution of shelter policy that occurred over five years of fieldwork in San Francisco, demonstrating three practices through which shelters became increasingly weaponized against the unhoused in public space. First, police patrols were increased in the blocks surrounding the new shelters to create the illusion of a social policy success, reducing visible poverty and overcoming NIMBY resistance. Second, shelter quality and services were strategically downgraded, and referrals were handed to police so that officers and sanitation workers could more easily confiscate tents and enforce anti-homeless laws in the wake of the *Martin v. Boise* rulings. Third, the article describes how these punitive efforts were portrayed by officials as initiatives of sanitation and public health. Collectively, these shifts in homeless policy reveal how shelters increasingly shifted from addressing the needs of homeless individuals to addressing the complaints of residents, businesses, and politicians.

My research also discloses the impacts that this policy transformation had on street-level bureaucrats and the unhoused. In the early phase of the shelter's transformation when police were assigned to break up camps around the navigation center, social workers were frustrated by police disrupting their outreach efforts. In the later phase, when social workers were increasingly used to address

camp cleanups and referrals shifted from their jurisdiction into the hands of police, they faced further challenges in fulfilling their public health mission. Likewise, nearly all of the police officers I observed and spoke with expressed a similar vocational drift as shelters were retooled toward criminalization. They too believed social workers, *not* police officers, should be the first responders to homelessness.

For the unhoused, as navigation center beds were converted from pathways to housing to short-term offers designed to dismantle camps, the pervasive penalty of move-along orders, citations, and property confiscation increased, inflicting material, physical, and psychological damage (see Herring 2019; Herring, Yarbrough, and Alatorre 2020). Not only did the conditions for those in public space worsen, but so did the conditions for those utilizing the shelters: stays were shortened, services watered down, and pathways to housing reduced. Whereas those on the streets were flocking to enter the first navigation center and reported satisfaction with the services received, years later most no longer found these shelters adequate and refused to enter altogether.

While this punitive transformation of shelter was palpable to the unhoused, it went largely unnoticed in the public eye. By reframing the criminalization of homelessness as public health and sanitation initiatives and reducing the concentration and number of tents in the most populated areas of the city, officials were largely successful in portraying their policies as effective, even while the number of unsheltered homeless in San Francisco rose significantly (19 percent) for the first time in over a decade (ASR 2019). However, intimate ethnographic observations—working in the halls of power with agency officials and advocates and engaging street-level bureaucrats and the unhoused, paired with the scrutiny of hundreds of internal agency reports and emails—reveal a different story. New shelters that initially met the needs of the unhoused with unparalleled success increasingly became weaponized against them to serve housed residents, business owners, and politicians looking to erase them from public view.

Theoretical implications

These findings complicate existing frameworks for understanding poverty governance. In contrast to existing scholarship on policing social marginality that interprets the growing punitiveness toward the unhoused occurring despite of or in parallel to the growth of shelter, the findings here instead point to their symbiotic relationship, presenting a case through which increased welfare provision comes to support the intensified punishment of the poor. Building on previous scholarship on shelters that long recognized the mechanisms of surveillance, control, and punishment working within their confines, this article has added an analysis not only of its role in emboldening punitive efforts outside its walls, but also of how policies of criminal justice in public space reshape access, regulation, and conditions of welfare within shelter.

In contrast to the models of “therapeutic policing” and “coercive care” found by Stuart (2016) in Los Angeles, where policing is conceived to work as a stick pushing the unhoused toward the carrot of shelter for their own good, my case

study reaches different conclusions. Rather than hardening conditions on the street to push those into shelter, in San Francisco shelters were expanded and their conditions hardened to disperse and dispossess the unhoused in public space, rather than contain them indoors. While politicians and agency officials maintained the rhetoric of “therapeutic policing” and “coercive care,” by telling the public that policing was necessary so people would accept shelter, and some officers envisioned their role in a social outreach function, the on-the-ground logics, practices, and outcomes largely contradicted these theories of policing marginality. This divergent finding points not only to the need for future studies in different urban contexts to consider how shelter may perpetuate or escalate the criminalization of homelessness, but also to the ways that institutions of welfare may similarly support institutions of criminal justice in other settings. Examples include the effects of implementing jail diversion programs or various brands of community courts on policing certain populations, expanded mental health care provision in clinics and jails on involuntarily conservatorship, or the role of refugee camps on the border policing of migrants.

The article also holds implications for theorizing urban governance. In a previous article (Herring 2019), I elaborated on a policing approach of *complaint-oriented policing*. In that article, I describe how policing homelessness increasingly became aimed at areas with the complaints initiated by 911 and 311 calls, community organizations such as business improvement districts, and government agencies beyond the police department, such as those of sanitation and public health. In a similar vein, we may interpret the policy evolution of shelter depicted here as a shift toward *complaint-oriented services*. Although the first navigation center was focused on the needs of unhoused clients and referrals were in the hands of public health outreach workers, over time the new shelters, like policing efforts, became focused on clearing areas of 311 and 911 complaints. In turn, their administrative metrics of success became tied to reductions in tents and quicker response times to servicing complaints.

By similarly situating shelter within a broader bureaucratic field of urban government, we come to see it as a contested resource used by agencies looking to accomplish disparate organizational goals beyond welfare and by politicians seeking political capital through the creation of distinctive initiatives and reductions in visible poverty. Far from a predesigned masterplan or top-down agency directive, the policy drift outlined here was instead an outcome of sequential struggles between agency officials and politicians, ultimately bent on addressing the growing demands of residents and businesses in a rapidly gentrifying city to deal with homelessness. However, due to the fiscal cost and political challenges of resolving homelessness through social services, and to the legal mandate and resource investment buttressing the criminal justice system, the police yet again became the dominant “service providers” of last resort.

Policy implications

My findings carry a number of policy implications, both ameliorative and structural. Most directly, this analysis provides a sociological indictment against

the punitive edge of San Francisco’s navigation centers and Healthy Streets Operation Center, which have been hailed as best practice models by policy-makers, service providers, and journalists alike and continue to be replicated in counties throughout the nation. The pairing of shelter programs with policing and sanitation programs is not only widespread in progressive cities but also stood at the center of the Trump administration’s homeless strategy in our post-*Martin v. Boise* era, which is especially popular in conservative cities (see Rankin 2020). Although many of the low-barrier reforms of navigation centers documented in the earlier part of this article proved significant improvements for the unhoused, they were gradually undermined by policing and camp clearances. And while interagency collaboration involving public health and human services agencies in camp clearances may sound like an improvement, if led by police or sanitation departments such collaborative efforts may simply hide and in turn exacerbate the criminalization of homelessness. Such efforts can also lower the vocational morale of police officers and social workers alike.

The findings of this article and previous research (Herring 2019; Herring, Yarbrough, and Alatorre 2020) suggest that policy-makers should expand shelter while rolling back rather than rolling out policing. Sanitation and public health initiatives should utilize metrics that assess outcomes for the health and sanitation of the unhoused, such as increased access to trash removal, toilets, and showers, instead of relying solely on metrics that assess outcomes for its housed residents and business owners such as tent counts. Lawmakers, judges, and journalists should not simply take officials at their word that shelter or services are offered to the unhoused during camp clearances in compliance with *Martin v. Boise*. Rather, they should scrutinize service accessibility, adequacy, length of provision, and outcomes. Finally, advocates and service providers should closely monitor changes in policing that follow the increased service provisions that they fight for, so gains in service provision are not eroded by increases in penal repression that lengthen homelessness and deepen poverty.

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