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Words Matter, So Does the Context of History: On the Homeless and the Unhoused

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Writing for the *Guardian*, journalist Amanda Abrams asks the oft wondered question, "Is it OK to use the word 'homeless'—or should you say 'unhoused'?"[1] The growing number of elected officials and community workers in cities such as Los Angeles, Seattle, and New York City who are using the word "unhoused" to refer to the homeless suggests that there is indeed something wrong with the word "homeless." Abrams explains how social service providers in Seattle began using the word "unhoused" during the 2000s as a way to disassociate people who lacked a fixed abode from the negative connotations ascribed to the homeless. The semantic distinction between "house" and "home" further advanced this shift given that a person could be unhoused but not necessarily homeless, especially if they considered the city that they lived in their home. Above all, proponents used the word "unhoused" to declare homelessness as fundamentally a housing issue such that the structural vulnerability of cities and not the personal vulnerabilities of the extremely poor is the principal cause of homelessness in America.[2]

As the debate over the terms "homeless" and "unhoused" makes clear, words matter. Rather than simple denotations, words carry a distinct set of meanings along with the contexts that give rise to these meanings. They can shape and even transform one's perception of things. That said, the call to abandon using the word "homeless" seeks to upend how researchers and policy makers since at least the turn of the twentieth century attributed the problem of homelessness to the lifestyle choices of the extremely poor. This established an enduring stigma of the homeless as society's "misfits" whose "deviant" behaviors led to "down and out" lives while boosting the belief that homelessness could be fixed once the personal vulnerabilities of the homeless are fixed. In turn, the term "unhoused" stressed the structural vulnerability of cities such that cities produced homelessness, and it is cities that needed to be fixed in order for homelessness to be fixed.[3] But how did observers of homelessness come to view the structural vulnerability of cities as the core cause of homelessness? And is homelessness in America fundamentally a housing issue such that the homeless are best characterized as unhoused people?

This article breaks with the belief that homelessness is fundamentally a housing issue and underscores the lack of community development for the extremely poor as the main structural vulnerability of cities and the core cause of homelessness in America. It argues that while housing is essential to building sustainable communities for the extremely poor, housing alone

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[1]Amanda Abrams, "Is It OK to Use the Word 'Homeless' – or Should You Say 'Unhoused'?," *The Guardian*, July 20, 2023, https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2023/jul/20/homeless-unhoused-houseless-term-history (accessed July 20, 2023).

[2]Ibid.

[3]See Gregg Colburn and Clayton Page Aldern, *Homelessness Is a Housing Problem: How Structural Factors Explain U.S. Patterns* (Berkeley, CA, 2022).

will not solve the nation's homelessness problem. What is more, this article supports a broader understanding of homelessness where homeless advocacy includes people living without a fixed abode *and* housed residents of the cheapest rental units in urban housing markets such as the single room occupancy (SRO) units of residential hotels. It thus refrains from using the word "unhoused," as this word advances a narrow view of the homeless while failing to get at the root of the homelessness problem. It urges scholars of modern U.S. history to avoid doing so as well.

In what follows, I detail how for most of modern U.S. history, community workers, policy makers, and researchers defined homelessness as housed residents of cheap lodging houses and especially the SRO hotels that lined the streets of Skid Rows. This definition was expanded during the post–World War II period to include the growing number of people living on the streets following the implementation of urban renewal programs that tore apart the nation's homeless districts and demolished housing for the extremely poor. Things came to a head during the 1980s, which saw the Reagan administration task the United States Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) to assess the extent of homelessness in America. When HUD generated the lowest homeless count among published reports, homeless advocates charged HUD with deliberately undercounting the number of homeless people in order to minimize the nation's homelessness problem. A key concern was how the agency restricted the homeless to include only those without a fixed abode, discarding previous definitions that counted as homeless housed residents of SRO hotels. Despite pushback from homeless advocates, HUD's new definition set the terms for current understandings, limiting the homeless to people living without a fixed abode or the unhoused.

Unlike HUD, homeless advocates and researchers of the 1970s and 1980s saw street homelessness as an escalation of the homelessness problem such that residence in SRO hotels became a better option than living without a fixed abode. Having witnessed how post–World War II urban renewal programs exacerbated the homelessness problem, they also reached a common understanding that the core cause of homelessness was not the personal vulnerabilities of the homeless but the structural vulnerability of cities and, in particular, the dismantling of homeless communities. For homeless advocates and researchers, homelessness was a community development issue where housing was a conduit to a network of community-based organizations and businesses to support the homeless. They thus fought to preserve SRO hotels in order to sustain homeless communities as society's best solution to homelessness. This article advances this view and draws on the word "homeless" to carry forward these historical perspectives. It forgoes using the word "unhoused" and anchors our current homelessness crisis to the dismantling of Skid Row communities over housing where homeless advocacy includes residents of the cheapest rental units of urban housing markets and those living without a fixed abode.

Historical Perspectives on Homelessness

Prior to the 1980s, community workers, policy makers, and researchers drew on the description that Alice Willard Solenberger provided in her 1911 study *One Thousand Homeless Men* to identify the homeless population in America. In it, she defined "homeless men" as people who "lived in cheap lodging houses in the congested part of any large city."[4] This definition shaped how community workers, policy makers, and researchers approached the causes and solutions to homelessness. Specifically, researchers investigated factors that caused extreme poverty over being unhoused and stressed in different degrees how individual vulnerabilities and broader structural forces affected the growth of homelessness in America. For instance, in her survey of 1,000 men who were applicants of the Central District of the

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[4]Alice Willard Solenberger, *One Thousand Homeless Men* (New York, 1911), 3.

Chicago Bureau of Charities, Solenberger found 627 men living with a host of physical and mental disorders and disabilities that prevented their ability to be "self-supporting."[5] She also discovered ethnic white immigrants to be a vulnerable class as they faced job discrimination and language barriers.[6] Other determinants included age, education level, and civil status.[7] All told, Solenberger saw personal vulnerabilities as the main hinderance to securing steady employment. While some chose not to work regularly, Solenberger contended that the majority of homeless people were compelled to travel from place to place as seasonal workers due to factors beyond their control. As a result, the homeless emerged as a distinct class of people who not only resided in the cheap lodging houses of urban areas but were unable to sustain a longstanding connection to one place.

Building on Solenberger's research, author Frank Charles Laubach expanded on the causes of homelessness and surveyed 100 men who were itinerant workers on a woodyard that was operated by the Charity Organization Society for New York City for his 1916 study, *Why There Are Vagrants*. While Laubach meticulously catalogued the many physical and mental disabilities and disorders that prevented some men from gaining steady employment, he also took seriously the impact of broader social forces, noting how industrialization during the late nineteenth century caused some to turn to vagrancy after having spent their lives in trades that became out of date. As Laubach observed, "The reasons for vagrancy fall into two general classes: First those bearing upon the character of the individuals themselves, and second, those bearing upon the social conditions in which they live. In other words, the problem presents both individual or personal factors, and social or environmental factors."[8]

Taken together, these early studies laid the foundation of homelessness research and discerned that the main cause of homelessness was not an unwillingness to work. Rather, there were forces, both personal and structural, that made certain populations vulnerable to seasonal work and to residing in cheap lodging houses of American cities.

Still, another view emerged. Sociologist Nels Anderson contended that hobos, unlike other homeless groups, chose the homeless lifestyle, driven foremost by a restless desire to travel and to chart new social norms over idleness or the inability to secure steady employment. Together with other homeless groups, hobos remade the cluster of cheap lodging houses in urban areas into homeless communities. Anderson dubbed these communities Hobohemia and drew on Ernest Burgess's urban land use model to situate Hobohemia within the social fabric of the city.[9] According to Burgess, the city's core consisted of the central business district, followed by a factory zone and a zone of transition that saw a mix of commercial districts and the city's poorest residential areas inhabited by immigrants and African Americans. The final three zones were the residential areas of the working, middle, and upper classes.[10] In this concentric circle schema where socioeconomic levels rose with increased distance from the central business district, Hobohemia was seated in the city's core near the railways. With its cheap hotels, employment offices, and burlesque venues, Hobohemia was the main stem of the homeless community.[11]

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[5]Ibid., 10, 36.

[6]Ibid., 21.

[7]Ibid., 20.

[8]Frank Charles Laubach, "Why There Are Vagrants" (PhD diss., Columbia University, 1916), 10.

[9]Nels Anderson, *The Hobo: The Sociology of the Homeless Man*, Phoenix ed. (Chicago, 1961).

[10]Ernest W. Burgess, "The Growth of the City: An Introduction to a Research Project," in *The City*, eds. Robert E. Park and Ernest W. Burgess (Chicago, 1923), 50–3.

[11]Anderson, *The Hobo*, 3–26. Anderson also detailed an adjacent homeless community. For those wanting to get away from city life or were unable to get a room in the cheap hotels, they retreated to the "jungle" or homeless encampments located near the main stem.

Based on hotel population and census reports, Anderson estimated that the homeless comprised about 1–2.5 percent of Chicago's population.[12] There were also five main homeless types. Whereas seasonal workers made up the largest group, hobos formed a small subset who worked only to "get by," while tramps were migratory nonworkers. Among Hobohemia's stationary vagrants, the home guards fared by taking day assignments, and bums subsisted almost exclusively on begging and thieving.[13] Of these types, Anderson considered hobos a uniquely American phenomenon. They were educated, literate, and sometimes a union member with only a small fraction living with mental disorders and disabilities. Above all, hobos were frontiersman who added wanderlust to the list of factors causing homelessness, which, for Anderson, included unemployment and seasonal work, physical and mental disabilities and disorders, personal crisis, and racial and national discrimination.[14] Notably, Anderson did not view homeless people as hapless victims of the "down and out life" despite their personal vulnerabilities. Instead, he developed a generative view of the homeless as active agents who built communities to accommodate their alternative lifestyles. These communities importantly situated homeless people within a broader social-spatial network, enabling them to forge ties not only with each other but with many places.

Following Anderson's examination of Hobohemia, researchers focused on the spatial dimension of homelessness that tied the study of extreme poverty to urban growth. But while Anderson sought to elevate the perception of homeless people and imbue dignity into the itinerant lifestyle, other scholars were less interested in exploring Hobohemia as a community with its own social mores and hierarchies. Rather, they regarded homeless districts as a manifestation of society's problems.[15] These competing views about the homeless and about homeless communities continued into the decades following World War II. During this time, the moniker "Skid Row" emerged to refer blanketly to homeless districts in American cities. Derived from the term "skid road," Seattle residents used the trail on which logs skidded down to the sawmill to analogize the "down and out" life. As the lumberjacks who worked on these sawmills lived in areas that were akin to the locales where homeless people lived, "skid road" evolved into "Skid Row" to designate homeless districts in American cities.[16]

The decades following World War II also saw the federal government pass several laws to promote urban renewal where cities nationwide could access federal funds for slum clearance. The post–World War II urban renewal programs thus prompted city officials to underwrite research cost and survey blighted areas for purposes of removal. Here, the competing views that scholars had about the homeless and about homeless districts were of great import as they shaped the future of Skid Rows in American cities. For instance, the City of Chicago sponsored a study on its Skid Row that was undertaken by the National Opinion Research Center (NORC), a nonpartisan research center at the University of Chicago. Led by demographer and sociologist Donald Bogue, the study assessed the physical condition of Chicago's Skid Row and the composition of homeless men who lived there.[17] While Bogue first published his findings as a two-part NORC report in 1959, he later drew on these results for a 1963 book-length study.[18] In

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[12]Ibid., 13–4.

[13]Ibid., 87–106.

[14]Anderson, "Introduction to the Phoenix Edition," *The Hobo*, xiv–xxi; Anderson, *The Hobo*, 61–86.

[15]See Robert E. L. Faris and H. Warren Dunham, *Mental Disorders in Urban Areas: An Ecological Study of Schizophrenia and Other Psychoses* (Chicago, 1939).

[16]See Murray Morgan, *Skid Road: An Informal Portrait of Seattle* (New York, 1951); and Samuel E. Wallace, *Skid Row as a Way of Life* (New Jersey, 1965), 18.

[17]John M. Allswang and Patrick Bova, eds., *An Inventory of Studies and Publications in Social Research* (Chicago, 1964), 51.

[18]See Donald J. Bogue, *The Homeless Man on Skid Row, I* (Chicago, 1959); Donald J. Bogue, *The Homeless Man on Skid Row, II: Continuation Studies* (Chicago, 1959); and Donald J. Bogue, *Skid Row in American Cities* (Chicago, 1963).

it, Bogue applied his recommendation to tear down Chicago's Skid Row as the best approach to eliminating homelessness and urban blight to cities nationwide.

According to Bogue, Skid Rows existed for two reasons. The social psychological explanation focused on the personal vulnerabilities of the homeless and established a link between an individual's vulnerabilities and their place of residence. People suffering from economic hardship, poor mental health, poor social adjustment, and poor physical health or disability were most at risk to inhabit Skid Rows in any given city.[19] In the sociological explanation, the perspective shifted from identifying what Bogue saw as the "abnormalities" of individuals to discerning how societal views of the homeless impacted homelessness. In this framework, Skid Rows existed because society had "abandoned all hope" and ceased efforts to rehabilitate the homeless. For this reason, Skid Rows enabled the survival of "familyless victims of society's unresolved social problems" who reached the "terminal phase of their affliction."[20] In Bogue's view, the sociological explanation pinpointed the real reason for Skid Rows' existence, where the path to eliminating Skid Rows relied on society's abiding belief in the rehabilitative potential of Skid Row residents. While he urged society to take responsibility of the homeless, Bogue ultimately saw people experiencing homelessness as the problem that needed to be fixed. Urban renewal did not entail strengthening community-based organizations and businesses or the rehabilitation of the cheap hotels in Skid Rows; rather, it was predicated on the demolition of Skid Rows and the rehabilitation of Skid Row residents.

Amid the push for Skid Row demolition, a rising contingent of scholars stressed the importance of Skid Rows and fought for their preservation. Deeply troubled by predetermined views of Skid Row residents as "no good," "abnormal misfits, and "victims of society," sociologist Samuel E. Wallace sought to upend how this stigmatization turned homeless people into "problems" that required people of sounder judgment to fix. As Wallace detailed in his 1965 study *Skid Row as a Way of Life*, the growing mechanization of agriculture coupled with a decreased reliance on railroads saw a decline of seasonal workers and the rise of long-term residents in Skid Rows during the post–World War II era. Many were pensioners, while some suffered from alcohol abuse disorder.[21] But whether it was personal or structural forces driving this demographic shift, Wallace did not believe that the vulnerabilities of the homeless justified stripping away their agency. Instead of being "familyless victims," Skid Rowers had family that they chose to avoid. Like "bachelorhood" or "living at home with mother," Skid Row men found ways to avoid responsibilities.[22] Wallace urged society to view Skid Row as a community even if it was a community of isolated individuals who cultivated a different sociality from the main of society. The "Skid Row way of life," Wallace contended, was a subculture, shaping how homeless people interacted with each other and with outsiders. Far from being disconnected, Skid Rowers forged their own relationship with society's institutions such as the flophouses, welfare agencies, missions, libraries, banks, barber houses, bars, and workhouses.[23]

Notably, sociologist Ronald C. Vander Kooi drew on this view when assessing the feasibility of Skid Row removal as part of the Los Angeles Downtown redevelopment plan for the Los Angeles Community Redevelopment Agency (CRA).[24] In his 1969 report, Vander Kooi argued

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[19]Bogue, *Skid Row in American Cities*, 402–4.

[20]Ibid., 405–6.

[21]Wallace, *Skid Row as a Way of Life*, 21–4.

[22]Ibid., 127–8.

[23]Ibid., 131–2.

[24]As noted in the 1969 Los Angeles Department of City Planning report, the CRA contracted the consulting firm the Development Research Associates and sociologist Dr. Ronald C. Vander Kooi to examine the viability of Skid Row demolition. The findings of both consulting firms corroborated with those of the Los Angeles Planning Commission, that "Skid Row must be faced and dealt with IN SITU." See Los Angeles Department of City Planning, *Central City East Redevelopment Project Area No. 1* (Los Angeles, 1969), 7–9. For a discussion of Vander Kooi's efforts to prevent the complete splintering of the Skid Row/West Madison Street section in Chicago, see Charles Hoch and Robert A. Slayton, *New Homeless and Old: Community and the Skid Row Hotel* (Philadelphia, 1989), 118–22.

against the demolition of Skid Row, Los Angeles, seeing how this district was composed of a tight-knit community of men who knew each other's names and where the vast majority self-identified as residents and not transients.[25] Vander Kooi also contested the stigma of Skid Row's rialto area as a hotbed of "deviant" activities given the prevalence of sex-related entertainment. Instead, he depicted this area as a safe haven for those who did not conform to the middle-class, suburban lifestyle.[26] Urban renewal, he contended, should not be used to remove legal businesses that some find morally questionable; the demise of Skid Row would not rid society of "misfits." As Vander Kooi saw Skid Row, Los Angeles as a residential community with its own way of life, he advocated for a comprehensive urban renewal plan that took seriously the value of people, where community development was just as important as the economic development of Downtown Los Angeles.[27] Accordingly, this plan included the renovation of the dilapidated Skid Row facilities as a way to strengthen the residential community of the city's core.

While numbers varied from city to city, urban renewal programs backed by federal dollars and academic research did, for the most part, diminish Skid Rows nationwide. But as sociologist Howard Bahr observed, the gradual disappearance of Skid Rows did little to reduce the number of people experiencing homelessness. Instead, it hid the problem by displacing the homeless to other parts of the city.[28] The failure of Skid Row demolition to end homelessness, however, did not alter Bahr's view of Skid Rows, as he persisted in denouncing these locales for keeping the homeless in a condition "characterized by the absence or attenuation of the affiliative bonds that linked settled persons to a network of interconnected social structures."[29] Whereas Skid Rows as a physical place were shrinking, they endured as a psychological delineation that separated homeless people from the rest of society. Disaffiliation rendered the homeless powerless and in need of rehabilitative programs to re-affiliate them back to society.[30]

As the debate over Skid Rows carried on, Vander Kooi maintained that it was not Skid Rows but their destruction that caused disaffiliation among the homeless. Skid Row demolition, moreover, rendered psychiatric and rehabilitation programs useless, as pensioners no longer had a place to return to following the removal of their community and housing.[31] It further amplified the structural vulnerability of cities by ridding urban areas of low-cost, albeit substandard, housing and the attendant social structures that supported the needs of the extremely poor. Vander Kooi thus feared that Skid Row demolition escalated the homelessness problem such that a growing number of homeless people were living on the streets, without a fixed abode or community-based networks to help them get by.

A New Definition of the Homeless

The proving ground for these fears took place during the 1980s as the nation slipped into a major economic recession that saw unemployment rate reach double digits, the highest since the Great Depression.[32] During this time, the nation also witnessed a striking increase in the number of homeless people. While the approximate count in 1950 was 100,000, community

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[25]For a complete discussion of how Vander Kooi curated his research sample and the demographic breakdown of interviewees, see Ronald C. Vander Kooi, *Central City East and Its Fifth Street Skid Row: A Study of Community Social Structure and Feasible Redevelopment* (Los Angeles, 1969), 19–28, 38.

[26]Ibid., 7.

[27]Ibid., 54–7.

[28]Howard M. Bahr, "The Gradual Disappearance of Skid Row," *Societal Problems* 15, no. 1 (Summer 1967): 41–5.

[29]Howard M. Bahr, *Skid Row: An Introduction to Disaffiliation* (New York, 1973), 17.

[30]Ibid., 35.

[31]Ronald Vander Kooi, "The Main Stem: Skid Row Revisited," *Society* (Sept./Oct. 1973): 70–1.

[32]Michael A. Urquhart and Marillyn A. Hewson, "Unemployment Continued to Rise in 1982 as Recession Deepened," *Monthly Labor Review* (February 1983): 3. See also Jon Erickson and Charles Wilhelm, "Introduction," in *Housing the Homeless*, eds. Jon Erickson and Charles Wilhelm (New Brunswick, NJ, 1986), xxiii.

estimates for 1982 reported 2,000,000.[33] Mainstream news outlets and academic research used the expression "new homeless" to highlight the unprecedented rise in the number of homeless women, children, and racial minorities. To quell these concerns, the Reagan administration tasked HUD to assess the extent of homelessness in America. Under the direction of Samuel R. Pierce, the secretary of HUD, and Benjamin F. Bobo, Acting General Deputy Assistant Secretary for Policy and Development and Research of HUD, the 1984 HUD report marked one of the few studies sponsored by the federal government on homelessness in America. Indeed, another twenty-three years would pass before HUD made homelessness an annual count. But in 1984, when HUD first undertook this task, it set new parameters on who counted as homeless and developed a standardized approach to estimate the nation's homeless population. The report's findings were significant, as they guided policy decisions as well as public and private spending on homelessness. Most important, they determined whether federal dollars should be allocated to tackle the nation's homelessness problem.

According to HUD, the homeless specified "people in the 'streets' who, in seeking shelter, have no alternative but to obtain it from a private or public agency." Drawing on this definition, the federal agency provided a set of guidelines to distinguish those who counted as homeless from those who did not.[34] It clarified that in order for individuals living on the streets to count as homeless, their nighttime residence must be in places not designed as a fixed abode. These included a public or private emergency shelter of a variety of forms or in public or private spaces such as streets, parks, bus terminals, and under bridges or aqueducts. The agency also considered homeless those who lacked a nighttime residence but found themselves temporarily in jails or hospitals. HUD excluded from the homeless count people who were living in buildings that were physically inadequate or substandard such as the SRO hotels that lined the streets of Skid Rows and surrounding areas. It further omitted those living in overcrowded conditions, including people who "doubled-up" or were living with relatives or friends, as experiencing homelessness. Finally, HUD did not consider as homeless residents of half-way houses, congregate living facilities, and long-term detoxification centers.[35]

As HUD put forward this new definition, it did not explain why the homeless definition was limited to the unhoused or people living without a fixed abode. In fact, the only evidence that there were other definitions than the one HUD provided was the catalog of living conditions that did not count as homeless and, specifically, those living in substandard places such as residential hotels. Certainly, post–World War II urban renewal programs diminished Skid Rows nationwide such that by the late 1980s, Chicago's Skid Row ceased to exist, having lost 80 percent of its SRO units between 1960 and 1980.[36] But even in its reduced state, the remaining stock of residential hotels housed a considerable number of homeless people. Moreover, homeless advocates since the late 1960s engaged in a protracted struggle to preserve Skid Rows.[37] In San Francisco's Tenderloin District, over 30,000 people live in the remaining 518 SRO buildings, while in Skid Row, Los Angeles, 7,000 units remain.[38] As HUD dispensed with

[33]For the 1982 estimate of homelessness in the United States, see Mary Ellen Hombs and Mitch Snyder, *Homelessness in America: A Forced March to Nowhere* (Washington, DC, 1982), xvi. For the 1950 estimate of homelessness in the United States, see Bogue, *Skid Row in American Cities*, 8.

[34]U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, Office of Policy Development and Research, *A Report to the Secretary on the Homeless and Emergency Shelters* (Washington, DC, 1984), 7.

[35]Ibid., 7–8.

[36]Hoch and Slayton, *New Homeless and Old*, 121–2.

[37]See Paul Groth, *Living Downtown: The History of Residential Hotels in the United States* (Berkeley, CA, 1994), 284–94.

[38]Central City SRO Collaborative, "History of S.R.O. Residential Hotels in San Francisco," Central City SRO Collaborative, accessed Oct. 15, 2024, https://ccsroc.net/s-r-o-hotels-in-san-francisco/; Bernard E. Harcourt, "Policing L.A.'s Skid Row: Crime and Real Estate Redevelopment in Downtown Los Angeles [An Experiment in Real Time]," *The University of Chicago Legal Forum* 2005 (2005): 349.

the historical definition of the homeless and set aside substandard housing as a type of homeless living condition, it restricted a full look at the impact of extreme poverty on housing insecurity while skewing the profile of homelessness in America.

HUD's efforts to advance a new measure of homelessness further led to the creation of a methodological approach to minimize the nation's homeless count. Departing once again from previous frameworks, HUD drew on the homeless count of a single night to represent the nation's homeless population rather than assess an annual total. Notably, HUD acknowledged that the total for any single night will be "less than the number of people who are homeless for any period of time throughout, say, one year."[39] The federal agency also did not conduct its own count but relied on four data sets to generate a numerical range of homelessness for an average night in December 1983 or January 1984: (1) published homeless estimates in various localities; (2) interviews with local experts in a national sample of sixty metropolitan communities; (3) national figure based on extrapolation of estimates provided by shelter operators; and (4) a combination of shelter and street counts based on the 1980 census and local area street count.[40] Subsequent to a review of the four data sets, HUD estimated that the extent of homelessness in America ranged from 250,000 to 350,000 people.[41]

Drawing on this assessment, HUD charged community organizations for grossly overstating the nation's homelessness problem. Prior to the release of HUD's 1984 report, community organizations, the media, and witnesses at congressional hearings most often cited the figure of 2,000,000 as the most reliable approximation of homelessness in America.[42] Generated by homeless advocates Mary Ellen Hombs and Mitch Snyder in a study published by the Washington, DC–based community organization Community for Creative Non-Violence, Hombs and Snyder gathered information from over 100 agencies in twenty-five cities and deduced that about 1 percent of the nation's population or 2.2 million were experiencing homelessness.[43] As HUD clung to the validity of its standardized approach to counting the homeless, it dismissed this alternate assessment method as unsystematic and unreliable.

At the heart of HUD officials' concerns was how popular media attributed the nation's homelessness problem to the economic policies of the Reagan administration. HUD's quest for accuracy was, by its own explanation, intertwined with the desire to substantiate its defense of the Reagan administration and to deflect blame from the administration's economic policies for the rise in extreme poverty. The task of proving that the 1980s economic recession did not affect homelessness in America steered the 1984 report to distill a demographic profile of the nation's homeless population. Like many homelessness studies of the 1980s, the HUD report noted a shift in the makeup of the homeless population and drew on the notion of the "new homeless" to encapsulate these demographic changes.[44] It recited the familiar observation of how the nation's homeless population no longer comprised primarily elderly white men, many of whom were alcohol dependent, but instead represented a racially diverse population with an increase in the number of women and children. Still, what made the 1984 report stand out from other studies was its insistence that the "new homeless" did not chart the descent of the middle class to extreme poverty. As HUD explained,

> . . . several writers have claimed, erroneously, that this group consists of large numbers of formerly middle-class persons who have lost their jobs; while there are some homeless people who have job skills and a recent history of steady employment, more often this

[39]U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, *A Report to the Secretary on the Homeless and Emergency Shelters*, 8.

[40]Ibid., 10–8.

[41]Ibid., 18–9.

[42]Ibid., 8–9.

[43]Hombs and Snyder, *Homelessness in America*, xvi.

[44]See Hoch and Slayton, *New Homeless and Old*.

group consists of those who have had occasional jobs or who have never been able to find employment and have always lived at the margin in terms of economic resources.[45]

HUD further asserted that what clouded the public's perception of the actual homeless composition was the way popular press spread "erroneous claims" through boilerplate portrayals of the homeless. It took issue with articles like the January 1983 *Washington Post* feature, "Hard Times Breed New Homeless," that told a story about James, who, after being laid off from Bethlehem Steel in Pennsylvania, had lost his home and was unable to pay rent on his apartment. Despite having been "self-sustaining," James found himself in a Washington, DC, shelter for homeless men and was among the many formerly employed middle- and working-class people getting his meal in a soup kitchen run by the Community for Creative Non-Violence.[46]

To reveal the purported inaccuracy of these accounts, HUD demarcated the social identities of homeless people in order to identify the cause of homelessness. According to HUD, there were three main homeless types. The first consisted of those living with mental health issues or substance abuse disorder. Following the passage of the 1963 Community Mental Health Act, large numbers of people living with mental illness were released from and no longer admitted to long-stay mental health institutions. HUD noted that while deinstitutionalization provided a more humane community-based system of mental health services, its unintended effect left some homeless and without access to institutional care. The second type included runaways as well as victims and survivors of domestic abuse where personal crises and changing family values accounted for the growth of homeless women and children. Finally, the third category became homeless due to economic forces that were beyond their control such as the former steel worker profiled in the *Washington Post*.[47] For this last group, HUD stressed the need to distinguish between an individual's economic situation and the role that unemployment played in creating homelessness.[48]

As HUD assessed the impact that an individual's economic condition had on creating homelessness, the federal agency repeated its frustration with how news media "focused much attention on those who, in the past, held steady jobs and/or owned homes, but became victims of the 1982–1983 recession."[49] HUD recognized that it was not possible to address this issue definitively without conducting a survey on this matter, but nevertheless relied on the estimates of shelter operatives who reported that over one-half of their January 1984 residents had been unemployed for a long time or had never been employed while another one-third or 35 percent had been jobless for less than nine months. Given that these data showed a significant portion of those experiencing homelessness were indeed recently unemployed, HUD supplied additional information to qualify this finding. The federal agency contended that of the 35 to 40 percent who were recently unemployed, few "fit the media stereotype of middle class or skilled workers who have become homeless recently" and relied on two studies to show how professionals and skilled workers made up only 7 percent and 39 percent, respectively, of those experiencing homelessness in Phoenix and 4 percent and 8 percent, respectively, in Portland.[50] HUD then explained how unemployment benefits, emergency housing assistance, and "doubling-up" with friends and family aided many laid-off workers from being homeless. With these qualifications, HUD restated its determination that the homeless were people already "at the margin" such as

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[45]U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, *A Report to the Secretary on the Homeless and Emergency Shelters*, 22.

[46]Sandra Evans Teeley, "Hard Times Breed New Homeless," *The Washington Post*, Jan. 23, 1983, A-1.

[47]U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, *A Report to the Secretary on the Homeless and Emergency Shelters*, 22.

[48]Ibid., 26.

[49]Ibid., 27.

[50]Ibid. Given that it was unclear which two studies the 1984 HUD report got these statistics from, it is difficult to assess what accounted from the huge discrepancy in the number of professional versus skilled workers experiencing homelessness in Phoenix.

the elderly, the single-parent welfare households, and the occasionally employed males in their early 20s. None fit the middle-class stereotype.[51]

The 1984 study further scaffolded its political agenda within a narrative framework to discern when homelessness should be seen as a routine problem and when it should be considered an urgent matter. As unemployment and its effect on homelessness was the central concern, HUD drew on newly created delineations of "never been employed" and "recently unemployed" to establish the former category as the reference point and the latter, its deviation. Individuals who were never able to hold down a steady job and were experiencing homelessness thus became society's normal everyday homeless. If, however, the recently unemployed middle class made up a significant portion of the homeless population, this change would catapult homelessness into a national priority. Relatedly, the administration's count of 250,000–350,000 homeless people, while concerning, was not by any means at crisis levels. Besides being dramatically lower than the community estimate of 2,000,000, the sum showed that the bulk of the homeless population did not comprise professionals or skilled workers.

HUD's low estimate of the extent of homelessness in America prompted an immediate outcry in Washington, resulting in the House of Representatives Subcommittee on Housing and Community Development of the Committee on Banking, Finance and Urban Affairs to call for a joint session with the Subcommittee on Manpower and Housing of the Committee on Government Operations and question HUD's findings. As Chairman Henry B. Gonzales (D-TX) noted in his opening remarks, the Subcommittee on Housing and Community Development was the first subcommittee of Congress to conduct formal hearings on homelessness. The estimate of 2,000,000, which many homeless advocates regarded as a conservative figure, emerged from its December 1982 hearing and was reaffirmed in its January 1984 hearing. The subcommittee expressed extreme dismay that HUD failed to consult with subcommittee members for its 1984 report, despite directly challenging their findings and undercutting efforts to increase national awareness and acquire federal funds to address the nation's homelessness problem. The Subcommittee on Housing and Community Development thereby requested a joint session with the Subcommittee on Manpower and Housing to rebuke HUD and the Reagan administration for their "callous indifference" toward the homelessness problem and their attempt to make the problem disappear by simply making it "too small to pay any national attention to."[52]

Among the many community organizations that testified before the joint session was the Community for Creative Non-Violence's Mitch Snyder, who generated the 2,000,000 estimate with co-author Mary Ellen Hombs. In his testimony, Snyder found particularly disturbing how the HUD report was promptly accepted as "serious, substantial, and reliable" given that the report was written to reach a "predetermined conclusion: that there were far fewer than two million homeless Americans." The goal was to mute the urgency of the homelessness problem and to justify the Reagan administration's refusal to allocate federal resources to alleviate the plight of homeless people. Snyder dubbed the HUD report a "political document, not a scientific one." The real issue, he contended, was whether the public had the right to expect "minimally accurate and honest information and research from our government."[53]

Noted academics, such as urban planning scholar Chester Hartman; sociologist Richard P. Appelbaum; and anthropologist and co-chair of the Consortium for the Homeless in Phoenix, Arizona, Louisa Stark, submitted similar testimonies that questioned the accuracy of HUD's homeless estimate. Hartman in his statement was emphatic that the sheer act of compiling the

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[51]Ibid.

[52]*HUD Report on Homelessness: Joint Hearing before the Subcommittee on Housing and Community Development of the Committee on Banking, Finance and Urban Affairs and the Subcommittee on Manpower and Housing of the Committee on Government Operations*, House of Representatives, 98th Cong., 2nd sess., May 24, 1984, 1–3 (statement of Henry B. Gonzales, Texas, Chairman of the Subcommittee on Housing and Community Development).

[53]Ibid., 16–23 (statement of Mitch Snyder, Community for Creative Non-Violence).

"guesstimates" of local shelter agencies should not lead anyone to believe that the totals HUD had produced were more reliable than the "unreliable numbers from which the total was derived." He dismissed as "sheer nonsense" HUD's claim that the use of different methods ensured the accuracy of its count, given that the task of "systematically aggregating lots of guess work does not produce reliable numbers, no matter how scientific the procedure with which all these guesses have been collated." He charged HUD with intentionally effecting an undercount as HUD was fully aware that its use of a point prevalence count or the measure of homelessness on a single night would generate a much lower number than the counting of homeless people throughout the entire year.[54] Likewise, Appelbaum critiqued the "operational definition" of the homeless that HUD employed because the exclusion of key groups such as people who "doubled up" with family and friends invariably lowered the homeless count. Appelbaum was also perturbed by HUD's use of the Ranally Metropolitan Areas (RMAs) as the basis of its national homeless projection. As the RMAs were a composite of extremely populous areas, HUD's use of the RMAs had artificially inflated the denominator in order to shrink the proportion of people experiencing homelessness.[55] Finally, Stein, like many local providers nationwide, condemned HUD's lack of transparency in its interview selection process and charged HUD with inaccurate reporting. Together with local providers in the Phoenix area, Stark surveyed agencies that HUD interviewed and found that the numbers that shelter operatives gave HUD did not match up with the numbers reported in its study. Stein testified that the 1984 report contained an undercount of at least 1,000 homeless people in the Phoenix area.[56] Her finding was important as it marred the validity of HUD's claim that the homeless was not composed of recently unemployed workers, as this assertion was based in part on the data gathered from shelter operatives in Phoenix.

Many also expressed deep apprehension over HUD's appraisal of the homelessness problem. As Hartman noted in his testimony, a meaningful assessment rested not in debunking the community estimate with a more accurate count but in analyzing how homelessness changed over time. Given the availability of statistical techniques to assess a high and low figure over a five-year period, he criticized HUD for failing to evaluate whether homelessness had grown in the past five years, and if so, at what rate.[57] For Kim Hopper, research associate at the Community Service Society of New York and board member of the Coalition for the Homeless in New York City, HUD's portrayal of homelessness as a "transient state of emergency" that will soon phase out was intensely problematic. Buttressing this belief was the shelter system and how its length-of-stay restriction made homelessness appear episodic, when once a personal crisis was resolved or new jobs found, the experience of homelessness would end. But unlike the situation twenty or ten years prior, the "distinctive coloring" of the "new homeless," he argued, was the inability of people to find replacement housing once they lost it. This inability "kept people on the streets and kept their numbers growing."[58] Hopper concluded that there were bigger factors at work causing people to live without a fixed abode than unemployment or personal crisis.

While the vast majority of those who appeared before the joint hearing questioned HUD's findings, there were some who spoke in its defense. The most notable of these was the person that HUD tasked to spearhead the national count. Delivering a bland testimony, Benjamin Bobo, together with his team of researchers, made no attempt to address any of the concerns

[54]Ibid., 154–61 (statement of Chester Hartman, Chair, Planners Network and Fellow at the Institute for Policies Studies).

[55]Ibid., 166–79 (statement of Richard B. Appelbaum, Associate Professor of Sociology, University of California at Santa Barbara).

[56]Ibid., 53–6 (statement of Louisa Stark, Co-Chair, Phoenix Consortium for the Homeless, Phoenix, Arizona).

[57]Ibid., 154–61 (statement of Hartman).

[58]Ibid., 38–51 (statement of Kim Hopper, Research Associate, Community Service Society and Board of Directors, Coalition for the Homeless in New York City).

raised. Instead, he merely repeated the report's findings, beginning with a critique of the community estimate of 2,000,000 to restating the methods used to generate the 250,000 to 350,000 homeless estimate:

> Few homeless fit the stereotype of the middle-class or skilled workers who have recently become homeless because of losing their jobs. Most homeless have been living at the margin for some time—such as the single-parent welfare households unable to afford rents or unemployed black males. Over one-half of the homeless have been unemployed for a long time or have never been employed.[59]

As HUD held fast to its homeless count and determination that the homeless did not fit the trope of the recently unemployed middle-class or skilled worker, the agency revealed the politicized origins of the homeless as the unhoused. The impact of politics over methodology when assessing homelessness in America, observed a 1986 Center for Urban Policy Research study, manifested in the immense gap in published estimates, which ranged from 250,000 to 3,000,000. Of these estimates, HUD produced the lowest count.[60] The federal agency, by redefining the homeless as the unhoused and adopting a questionable assessment method, used this low number to curb criticism against the economic policies of the Reagan administration while backing the administration's push to keep homelessness a state and local matter rather than rising to a national crisis requiring federal money.

Skid Row: A Community Based Approach to Homelessness

Among the damaging effects of HUD's preoccupation with shrugging off the federal government's responsibility for homelessness in America was the agency's failure to probe deeply into the causes of and solutions to homelessness. As researchers and community workers continued to deal with the fallout of the HUD report, many steered the conversation back to these concerns. Homeless advocates Kim Hopper and Jill Hamberg, for one, offered a persuasive perspective in their 1984 study, arguing how it was becoming "increasingly apparent that the problem of homelessness has less to do with personal inadequacy than it does with was resource scarcity." As such, it was important to distinguish factors that caused extreme poverty from those that caused the extremely poor to live without a fixed abode.[61] Hopper and Hamberg explained that it was the demolition of SRO hotels in Skid Rows nationwide that forced the extremely poor to live without a fixed abode. However, displacement from Skid Row alone cannot account for the rise in street homelessness. It was the absence of replacement housing coupled with an increased reliance on shelters, which by design provided only temporary housing, that kept people living without a fixed abode in a "captive state."[62] Accordingly, the lack in permanent, low-cost housing constituted the core structural vulnerability of cities, effecting homelessness to take on the "distinctive form of having nowhere to live." This distinctive form was what made the 1980s homeless population "new" or different from past generations and not the growing diversity among homeless people.[63] Street homelessness thus emerged as the utmost symptom of the nation's housing crisis, caused foremost by the lack of permanent, low-cost housing.

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[59]Ibid., 269–79 (statement of Benjamin F. Bobo, Acting General Deputy Assistant Secretary for Policy Development and Research, Department of Housing and Urban Development).

[60]Erickson and Wilhelm, "Introduction," in *Housing the Homeless*, xxvi.

[61]Kim Hopper and Jill Hamberg, *The Making of America's Homeless: From Skid Row to New Poor, 1945–1984* (New York, 1984), 2.

[62]Ibid., 5.

[63]Ibid.

Notably, urban planner Charles Hoch and historian Richard Slayton, despite recognizing how the tearing down of SRO hotels nationwide affected the growth of homelessness, did not view homelessness as fundamentally a housing problem. For them, post–World War II urban renewal programs did not just destroy permanent, low-cost housing while failing to build replacement housing. They also splintered the social network that supported the needs of its extremely poor residents. This was because the tearing down of residential hotels was connected to the removal of Skid Row neighborhoods. Simply building replacement housing in the absence of a comprehensive plan to restore the social structures that allowed for the Skid Row way of life would not eliminate the homelessness problem. Here, the main structural vulnerability of cities was not housing but the absence of communities for the extremely poor, where housing was one key infrastructure. Hoch and Slayton contended that what urban renewal gutted was Skid Row as a community-based approach to addressing the homelessness problem.[64]

Like scholars before, Hoch and Slayton developed this community-based approach in their 1989 study *The New Homeless and Old: Community and the Skid Row Hotel* by reframing narratives that cast Skid Rows as blighted and disconnected places. The authors recounted how the SRO hotel emerged as a "new kind of housing" that filled a niche market following industrialization and its need for transient workers. While different types of buildings were grouped under the "single room occupancy hotel" rubric, these buildings all housed for the lowest cost and provided for the minimal needs a similar type of resident—poor and transient workers. SRO districts formed a unique type of downtown community that retained a "walking city" environment where a diverse set of buildings and activities congregated in the same locale. These districts were almost always located near transportation hubs so that transient workers had easy access to railways.[65] Far from being disaffiliated, the main stem or Skid Row offered an array of services such as cheap restaurants, saloons, secondhand clothing shops, pawnbrokers, bookstores, tobacco shops, and missions. Additional avenues for social gatherings included vaudeville and burlesque houses, dance halls, peep shows, and houses of prostitution.[66]

Certainly, the Skid Row way of life was not perfect. Many of the lodging houses and SRO hotels had fallen into disrepair. Still, Skid Rows sustained a supportive community that enabled above all the extremely poor to live autonomous lives. For Hoch and Slayton, the growth of the unhoused revealed something far more pernicious than how the dismantling of permanent, low-cost housing left many among the extremely poor with nowhere to live; it showed how the lack of communal ties and access to community-based resources was transforming extremely poor people into a dependent population—one susceptible to institutionalization.[67] Whereas Skid Rows allowed earlier generations to avoid dependence on a formal caretaking system, their destruction laid the groundwork for today's homelessness problem and its reliance on a formal caretaking system to address the problem of homelessness.

The main infrastructures of the homeless caretaking system included homeless shelters and treatment centers. Undergirding this system was an individualist approach where the personal needs of the homeless, whether it be unemployment, substance abuse disorder, or living with mental illness, assembled a network of professional caretakers and advocates to address these specialized needs. Without question, the homeless caretaking system worked to mitigate the various structural and personal forces affecting the rise of a vulnerable population. However, it produced an unintended consequence and precipitated the belief that the very needs of the homeless were the causes of homelessness.[68] The task of addressing homelessness, in turn, evolved into a politics of compassion. While this advocacy helped to reframe homeless people as

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[64]See Hoch and Slayton, *New Homeless and Old.*
[65]Ibid., 13.
[66]Ibid., 29.
[67]Ibid., 6–8.
[68]Ibid., 5–7.

a vulnerable population over "misfits" and "bums," the focus on personal vulnerabilities took attention away from the institutional roots of homelessness where urban policy had a direct hand in shaping the living conditions of the extremely poor.[69]

Like Hopper and Hamberg, Hoch and Slayton endeavored to shift attention away from the personal vulnerabilities of the homeless and toward the structural vulnerability of cities as the core cause of homelessness. But unlike Hopper and Hamberg, Hoch and Slayton dug deeper into the historical perspectives on homelessness to highlight how it was the razing of Skid Rows and not low-cost housing that escalated the nation's homelessness problem. Within the context of Skid Rows, the SRO hotels did not just provide housing for the homeless; they functioned as a critical social structure that promoted social bonds among homeless people as well as access to community-based institutions. Skid Row as a community-based approach thus takes seriously the relationship between people, buildings, and community development and how they worked together to address the homelessness problem by preserving the relative autonomy of homeless people while sustaining economically diverse neighborhoods in American cities.

Returning to the question, "Is it OK to use the word 'homeless'—or should you say 'unhoused'?," this article answers, yes, it is OK to use the word "homeless." In fact, the word "homeless" is more politically efficacious than the word "unhoused." As the examination into the politicized origins of the term "unhoused" in this article revealed, government officials during the 1980s had set aside a more expansive understanding of homelessness only to limit the homeless to people living without a fixed abode or the unhoused in order downplay the nation's homelessness problem. Additionally, the word "unhoused," by pinpointing homelessness as fundamentally a housing issue, missed the mark as it failed to consider how post–World War II urban renewal programs targeted the removal of Skid Row communities and not just SRO hotels from cities nationwide. In sum, the term "unhoused" does not go far enough to account for the extent of homelessness in America, nor does it go far enough to address the core vulnerability of cities. By contrast, the word "homeless" advances a broader array of living conditions that count as homeless in order to more fully explore the impact of extreme poverty on housing insecurity. It further carries forward a community-based approach to addressing the problem of homelessness, given that it was the elimination of homeless communities and not housing during the post–World War years that amplified the nation's homelessness problem. For these reasons, this article draws on the word "homeless" to highlight these historical perspectives, taking seriously the social-spatial world of the extremely poor.

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[69]Ibid., 5, 203–7.