



Homelessness in Southern California: Street-level encounters with the state and the structural violence of performative productivity

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Abstract

For the unhoused, the criminalization of their existence amplifies their entanglement with the state. Drawing on interviews and over 200 hours of ethnographic observations in Southern California, US, this paper focuses on everyday interactions between street-level bureaucrats and unhoused residents to examine when and how discretion is exercised and how unhoused residents experience these actions. It elucidates the ‘performative productivity’ employed by street-level bureaucrats to perpetuate ‘the myth’ that housing is available and that the central reason we still have homelessness is that unhoused individuals are service resistant. Performative productivity is a set of practices employed by actors including frontline government workers, non-profit workers, and interfaith and other volunteers as the terms of service. They include setting up meetings, filling out countless forms that require invasive sharing of information, signing up for waitlists that go nowhere, and surrendering rights and often accepting an externally imposed moralistic framework. If a person wants any services at all the terms are non-negotiable, thus compelling the unhoused to participate in the performance or risk loss of eligibility for any housing and non-housing services they have been able to attain, as minuscule or limited as these may be. I contend that this is tantamount to state violence. To make salient this point, I include a series of vignettes that present the street-level presence of the state in the lives of unhoused individuals and places it in a global context to highlight the ways in which the system is arbitrary, unhelpful, and potentially fatal.

Keywords

Homelessness, structural violence, state, poverty, performative productivity



Introduction

The bureaucratic state is ever-present in the lives of unhoused¹ individuals. In fact, it is difficult for them to escape the constant watchful eye of the state. In many ways, the state is much more present in their lives than in the lives of any other segment of the population. Ananya Roy has used the term ‘propertied citizenship’ to characterize this dynamic. Citing Supreme Court Justice Anthony Kennedy, Roy explains: ‘[p]roperty gives you the ability to resist the demands of the state, which is always going to try to control your life’ (Roy, 2003, p. 464; for a more robust discussion of property in relation to homelessness, see Roy, 2003; Baron 2004a, 2004b, 2006; Blomley, 2009). In other words, the state dictates if, when, and where a unhoused person can rest, eat, sleep, use the restroom, or wash up. In Akhil Gupta’s (1995) words, the state is ‘implicated in the minute texture of everyday life’ (p. 375). For the unhoused, the criminalization of their existence amplifies their entanglement with the state. For these reasons, this study focused on everyday interactions between street-level bureaucrats and unhoused residents to examine when and how discretion was exercised and how unhoused residents experienced these actions.

As the housing crisis worsens, more and more people end up in precarious housing arrangements thus prompting local government intervention from frontline street-level bureaucrats like police, social workers, public health workers, and code enforcement. These bureaucrats have limited resources and are often embedded in political contexts that are not conducive to reducing homelessness. In this context, this study also examined how street-level bureaucrats inflict structural, state-sanctioned violence and on the ways unhoused people experience this violence. These street-level bureaucrats perpetuate the myths that (1) housing is available for all and (2) we still have homelessness only because the unhoused refuse to accept these opportunities. These misperceptions are constantly reinforced by the *performative productivity* imposed by street-level bureaucrats and others embedded in Beach City’s system of homelessness assistance. These frontline government workers, non-profit workers, and interfaith and other volunteers all participate in maintaining this system. Further, these actors set forth the conditions through which services are made available. *Performative productivity* refers to the set of structurally violent practices that these actors require of unhoused people as the terms of service. These practices include scheduling meetings, filling out countless forms that require invasive divulging of private information, signing up for waitlists that go nowhere, and surrendering their rights and often accepting an externally imposed moralistic framework. The terms are non-negotiable, compelling the unhoused to either participate in the manner mandated of them or risk losing eligibility for any housing and non-housing services. Drawing on interviews and over 200 hours of ethnographic observations, I contend that this performative productivity is tantamount to structural violence on behalf of the state. While these frameworks are commonplace in global discourses of poverty, in the United States many of these issues have remained unexplored.

¹ In the United States narratives about homelessness are beginning to change in many realms. The use of the term ‘homeless’ is now considered dehumanizing by many academics and activists because it blames the individual for their condition. In this paper the term unhoused is used in its place and homeless/homelessness, when used, is only used as an adjective.

This study analyzes the structural and material position of the poor in the United States and places it within a global context.

I now turn to the key sets of theory around everyday encounters with the state and key related dimensions of structural violence and systemic poverty that both frame and help make sense of my research. The subsequent section outlines my research questions and methodology, clarifying how I am approaching the state to better understand experiences of homelessness. This is followed by a series of vignettes showing the street-level presence of the state in the lives of unhoused individuals, and the penultimate section of the paper reflects on the findings. The conclusion discusses the insights that tie this work to work that elucidates similar phenomenon in the Global South.

Street-Level Encounters with the State

Contemporary scholars have compared ‘the state’ to a fantasy or myth (Ismail, 2006). Taussig (1992) compares the state to a ‘Godlike metaphysical entity.’ Mitchell (1999) identifies the seeming paradox that the state appears to exist as both ‘material force’ and ‘ideological construct’ (p. 76). Abrams (1988) describes the difference as two objects of analysis: the ‘state-system’ and the ‘state-idea.’ As such, Abrams suggests that the state can be both institutionalized practice and a symbolic ideology. Mitchell (1999), however, does not believe that we can separate the material from the ideological or reality from illusion (p. 77). In his perspective, Abrams’ ‘state-idea’ and ‘state-system’ should be conceived as two parts of the same process. He argues that the state is a set of processes that turn mundane everyday practices into abstract ideas and thoughts (Mitchell, 2006, p. 170).

To avoid the slippery nature of the concept, scholars have focused on the institutionalized microlevel practices of government (Migdal, 2001; Ismail, 2006; Gupta, 2012). Migdal (2001) focuses on the differing environments or a hierarchy in which state actors operate. He proposes that there is a four-level organizational arrangement. The four levels are the trenches, dispersed field offices, central agency offices, and commanding heights. Of these, the one with most analytical utility for this study is ‘the trenches.’ In a manner similar to street-level bureaucrats, the trenches consist of individuals that bridge the state and society; they exist in the middle and are tasked with applying state rules and regulations.

Likewise, Ismail (2006) proposes the analytical utility of the everyday state. Everyday state theory proposes that ‘the everyday practices of government and rule that are deployed at the microlevel of everyday life’ (p. xxxiii) keep us from mystifying the state and obscuring state power. In their everyday interactions with government, individuals become subjects and develop understandings and feelings about government (Ismail, 2011b). Thus, the everyday state focuses on the relation between the government and citizens (Ismail, 2006; Ismail, 2011a; Ismail, 2011b). In this way, it is similar to anthropological treatment of everyday state-citizen encounters (Auyero, 2010). In this tradition, the state is not conceived as a superior entity; rather, it is a collection of multiple actors and their encounters with citizens. Nugent (2008) describes these interactions as a collection of sites, processes, and institutions (p. 198),

while Painter describes them as spatialized social practices that ensure compliance through things like consent or coercion (Painter, 1995, p. 34). These conceptualizations focus on relationships between a multisided state that is entrenched in social practices and processes and individuals and how subjects make sense of them. While street-level bureaucratic theory is useful due to its treatment of discretion of those tasked with enforcing the will of the state at the most basic level, the everyday state provides a focus on its treatment of the interactions of the representatives of the state and citizens in what Ismail (2006) calls quotidian practices (p. xxxiii). By focusing on such quotidian practices and how citizens negotiate their relations with local officials and representatives of the state, we gain insight into how individuals relate to what is done in the name of the state (Ismail, 2011a, p. 846).

In her study of informal settlements in Cairo, Ismail (2011b) found that individuals often felt humiliated in their interactions with government agents and agencies. Ismail argues that the understandings and feelings that citizens form about the government based on their interactions with it explain everyday happenings on ‘the street, in public and in private offices, in schools and homes’ (Ismail, 2011a, p. 851). Similarly, Gupta (1995) explores the extent to which the state is implicated in ‘the mixture of everyday life’ (p. 375). In his ethnography of a small North Indian village, Gupta discerns how the discourses of corruption in local bureaucracies in postcolonial India function and how the state is constructed and imagined through this discursive process. Gupta challenges traditional state theory by showing how state rule manifests itself through unequal spatial forms of everyday mundane practices (Gupta, 1992; Ferguson & Gupta, 2002; Sharma & Gupta, 2006; Gupta & Sivaramakrishnan, 2010).

Gupta conceptualizes a new theory of the state by rethinking Foucault’s theory of biopower and Agamben’s theory of sovereign power and bare life and applying it to context of extreme poverty in India. In his view, Foucault’s theory alone is insufficient because it promotes a passive relationship to death. Foucault argued that the sovereign (e.g., Kings) had previously followed a rule by which they ‘made die and let live,’ but the modern western sovereign state shifted toward a ‘make live and let die’ system (Foucault, 2007). Gupta offers that poverty in India requires a thanatopolitical theory that shows an active killing of subjects by a sovereign power. This is more in line with Giorgio Agamben’s theory of sovereignty and bare life, in which Agamben argues that the sovereign power can actively kill people by creating exceptions (Agamben, 1998). These exceptions create an individual that Agamben calls *homo sacer*, someone that is inside and outside the law simultaneously. *Homo sacer* can be killed without violating any laws and without affecting the legitimacy of the sovereign to kill them (Agamben, 1998, p. 8). Gupta argues that the extremely poor in India exemplify *homo sacer* ‘in that their death is not recognized as a violation in any respect: not a violation of a norm, a rule, a law, a constitutional principle, not even perhaps of the idea of justice’ (Gupta, 2012, p. 17). He poses the critical question, ‘[d]oes not providing food, clothing, shelter, and healthcare to someone who is obviously in dire need represent killing?’ (p. 17). Gupta notes that nobody is ever punished for the deaths resulting from extreme poverty, an observation that applies to the situation of the extremely poor in the United States—especially the unsheltered unhoused. Death rates in Orange County have set records: 330

unhoused individuals died on the street in 2020 compared to 200 in 2019 (Brazil, 2021). Nobody is ever held accountable because these deaths are not seen as outside the norm. They are seen as collateral damage—the direct result of the housing crisis. Poverty should be understood as an intentional act of violence in this context, given that these deaths are preventable. However, like Foucault, Agamben’s analytical framework only gets us so far in understanding the violence that the poor experience. Gupta points out that Agamben’s exclusions and state of emergency exemplifies someone who is not involved in the process. Gupta argues that in India, the poor actively participate in the democratic process, but they encounter arbitrariness in the processes that are supposed to help them. This production of arbitrariness comes from bureaucratic processes that perpetuate systematic violence against those in poverty. For Gupta, the only way to understand this is to focus on the everyday practices of the state. In this framework, the state is willfully killing its subjects by normalizing poverty and including poor people in bureaucratic processes rather than excluding them. Gupta focuses on writing as a key feature of the work that bureaucrats perform in order to further the idea of cohesive state power. In this way, these ‘mundane’ state practices systematically create exclusions ‘through “normal” bureaucratic procedures in ways that depoliticize killing the poor’ (Gupta, 2012, p. 279).

Structural Violence

Closely related to Gupta’s theory of state power is the concept of structural violence. Structural violence, which first appeared in peace studies in the late 1960s (Galtung, 1969), is the mechanism through which the state perpetrates violence against the poor. It refers to sets of social constructs and structures within institutions that keep individuals from living healthy lives in which their basic needs are met. In his seminal article, Galtung (1969) analogizes and describes structural violence as ‘built into structure. Thus, when one husband beats his wife there is a clear case of personal violence, but when one million husbands keep one million wives in ignorance there is structural violence’ (p. 171). While structural violence—which is harder to see—is not the same as physical violence, they are not unrelated. Gilligan (1996) argues that it is irrelevant which type of violence is more dangerous or lethal because they are intimately related to each other. One usually follows or reinforces the other. Military and armed forces often fortify structural violence and systematically confine individuals to cycles of poverty and vulnerability.

Behavioral and physical violence often cause bodily harm; however, we do not often think about the bodily harm caused by inequality. While some economists suggest that poverty is the result of market forces, scholars of structural violence suggest that poverty and hunger are a hallmark of structural violence (Bornstein, 2005). This framework identifies a perpetrator and victim and places responsibility where it is appropriate (Bornstein, 2005). While structural violence is often obscured by the lack of a direct perpetrator, scholars like Farmer suggest an explicit rationale behind the systemic distribution of structural violence (Farmer, 2005). Farmer extends Galtung’s concept of structural violence, attributing these violent acts to human agency predicated on unequal power structures that unequally distribute resources. This system exploits some and rewards others, resulting in advantages

for some and constant disadvantages for others. These disadvantages are also affected by one's social standing and dimensions like race, gender, and disability. In the United States, race is a clear example of how social standing is institutionalized and results in skewed life outcomes (Bonilla-Silva, 2006). These social structures often obscure structural violence. According to Scheper-Hughes and Bourgois (2004), structural violence is 'everyday violence [or] part of the normative fabric of social and political life. Structural violence is generally invisible because it is part of the routine grounds of everyday life' (p. 4). Issues like race, gender, and class come up frequently in the study of structural violence and social positions that make individuals vulnerable to human rights abuses (Ho, 2007).

Poverty as Structural Violence

Structural violence scholars' discussions about life chances and outcomes are not completely dissimilar to Amartya Sen's (1985) conceptualization of poverty as 'unfreedoms.' Sen's capabilities approach states that poverty is the absence of basic capabilities or 'freedoms' to avoid such perils as hunger and disease (Sen, 1985). Gupta (2012) makes explicit these connections. He suggests that poverty represents a structural barrier to the basic freedoms described by Sen. These barriers to basic freedoms increase the inaccessibility of other freedoms, making the poor disproportionately vulnerable to additional violence. In this way, poverty compounds the constant inability to access adequate shelter, food, healthcare, and water, along with other basic necessities of life.

Poverty in the United States

Deep and extreme poverty is increasing in the United States. Brady and Parolin (2020) recently found significant increases in both deep (increase between 48% to 93%) and extreme poverty (increases between 54% to 111%) (p. 2337). They contend that when homelessness is added, deep poverty increases 7% to 8% and extreme poverty increases 19% to 23% (p. 2337). While there is intense debate about extreme and deep poverty, there seems to be agreement that it exists and that is substantial, at least in the sense that any amount of extreme poverty is too much. However, there is a wide variation in the estimates of these numbers (Jencks, 2016; Parolin & Brady, 2019). For example, according to Shaefer and Edin's influential 2013 study, approximately 1.65 million households and 3.55 million children were living in extreme poverty in any given month in the United States. They assert that this type of extreme poverty has risen sharply since 1996 because of welfare reform and that means-tested assistance programs intended to help prevent such hardships for families have failed (Shaefer & Edin, 2013). Shaefer and Edin use the World Bank metric of global poverty, which is \$2 a day. Following Shaefer and Edin, a string of studies had similar findings (Chandy & Smith, 2014; Fox et al., 2015). The debate continued with Deaton's (2018) finding that an estimated 3.2 to 5.3 million Americans live on less than \$4 a day. That same year, Philip Alston (2018)—the United Nations Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights—estimated that 18.5 million Americans live in deep poverty. In response, the

Heritage Foundation authored a report contesting these numbers and estimating that only about 0.5% of the U.S. population lives in deep poverty (Hall & Rector, 2018).

The variability in the figures that scholars report is striking. Furthermore, the omission of the unhoused from the discussions of extreme poverty is problematic. This is a shortcoming of this research, and scholars like Brady and Parolin (2020) acknowledge that because of this their estimates of individuals in extreme poverty are probably undercounted. Similar to how we have a wide range of varying estimates of individuals experiencing extreme and deep poverty, we do not have exact numbers of individuals experiencing homelessness in the United States. Estimates from the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) point-in-time (PIT) count indicate there were approximately 580,466 unhoused individuals in 2020 (Henry et al., 2021). However, estimates from the National Center for Homeless Education show that for school years 2016–2017 through 2018–2019, the number of unhoused school-aged children enrolled in school was 1,387,573 (NCHE, 2021), meaning that the total number of unhoused individuals is higher than that captured by HUD in the point-in-time count. The reason for the discrepancy is likely the different methodologies and definitions of homelessness. The HUD point-in-time count produces a one-night snapshot of homelessness in the country. HUD coordinates with local organizations that are members of the Continuum of Care (CoC) to count everyone on the street on one night in late January every year (Henry et al., 2021).

The 2020 HUD PIT estimated that California had 161,548 persons experiencing homelessness (Henry et al., 2021) while the NCHE estimated that there were 271,528 unhoused children enrolled in school in the 2018–2019 school year (NCHE, 2021). At a local level, the biennial point-in-time count by Orange County showed that between 2013 and 2019 the number of the unsheltered population in the county went from 4,251 to 6,860 (Kurteff Schatz et al., 2015; Orange County Homeless Management Information System, 2019). In 2019, the point-in-time count showed an increase of over 2,000 individuals since the last count in 2017. The count reported 2,899 sheltered unhoused individuals and 3,961 unsheltered unhoused people.

Ethnographer Vincent Lyon-Callo (2001) suggests the possibility of framing homelessness in relation to the material and historical conditions that contribute to increased social inequality. He suggests this approach because he believes that as the wealth gap has increased, homelessness has become a routine everyday feature of life for the extremely poor in the United States. Lyon-Callo (2001) directly calls out the structural inequalities that produce these outcomes and argues that the way that we govern homelessness and work towards managing it, through temporary sheltering or increased criminalization of behaviors linked to homelessness, does little to decrease it. The managerial approach he describes focuses on ‘diagnosing, detecting, and treating’ the perceived deficits ‘within the bodies of homeless people’ and does not address the structural transformations that society has undergone in the last decades (Lyon-Callo, 2012, p. 216). Lyon-Callo also argues that neoliberal logics such as privatization, marketization, and deregulation drive homelessness services and policy provision, which do nothing to solve or decrease homelessness. In this way, even ‘housing first’ approaches are insufficient. They purport to provide housing under

the assumption that the first step to help the unhoused is to provide them with housing without any conditions, like requirements that they be sober or have a job, but in practice they frame services for the chronically unhoused population as *economic* initiatives rather than social services and reinforce the neoliberal conditions that produced housing insecurity in the first place (Willse, 2010). Like Gupta, Willse invokes Foucault's theory of biopower. He insists that Foucault's theory needs to be reframed because it is not simply a zero-sum game anymore. In a neoliberal context, social service programs serving the chronically unhoused have been turned into productive economic enterprises (2010, p. 179). Thus, it is important to recognize that as we explore issues such as homelessness, researchers should not focus on the impacted community from a framework that advances a deficit perspective that attributes whatever is happening to individual characteristics of members of this community. Consequently, this study employs a 'studying up' perspective to explore how power structures function to perpetuate homelessness. I now unpack how I do this through my research.

Disaggregating the State: Research Question and Methodology

This study follows in the tradition of examining the state ethnographically. This technique disaggregates the monolith that is the state into its component parts by zeroing in on different bureaucracies—in this case, the homelessness social service bureaucracy and the everyday interactions between street-level bureaucrats and unhoused individuals. Specifically, this article explores how unhoused residents experience their everyday interactions with street-level bureaucrats within the homelessness service bureaucracy? As the homelessness crisis in California has increased, so has the role of the government; however, the bulk of the assistance for individuals and families experiencing homelessness has historically been provided by local jurisdictions with federal and state funds (Petek et al., 2020). This means that local governments have significant say over how state and federal funds are used for the needs of the unhoused (Petek et al., 2020). Also, historically, service provision is delivered by frontline government workers directly employed by local city and county departments such as social service and community development departments. As local governments have defunded such departments, cities and counties have moved to a model where they contract with local non-profit service providers to accomplish the same goals. In recent decades, with the neoliberal turn toward contracting and privatization, the role of street-level bureaucrats has been reshaped and the public sector no longer controls policy and service delivery. Policy and service delivery now most often occur as a collaboration between public sector bureaucrats, non-profit and for-profit organizations, and public-private partnerships (Brodkin, 2015).

By breaking up the state into everyday interactions and disaggregating, Gupta wishes to problematize the translocality of the state (Gupta, 1992, p. 77). *Translocal* can be an ambiguous term, however. Peth (2018) defines it as 'a variety of enduring, open, and non-linear processes, which produce close interrelations between different places and people.' This is important because it clearly opens a path for a relationship between the social unit of the extremely poor in India and in the United States. Relatedly, Roy (2003) emphasizes

transnationalism as a way to interrogate these relationships, or what she identifies as ‘the interface of First and Third Worlds’ (p. 463). In this case, transnationalism refers to a network of interconnected identities and capital flows that cross political borders (Roy, 2003; Castells, 1998). It would be easy to make simplistic comparisons of those experiencing extreme poverty in the informal settlements in India and the unhoused in the United States. However, Roy challenges us to ask probing analytical questions whose answers will help dismantle the imperial frontier (Roy, 2003, p. 484). As such, this study contributes to the urban planning literature that takes a ‘thinking/seeing from the south’ perspective (Robinson, 2002; Roy, 2003, 2005; Watson, 2009).

This study seeks to make an impact by focusing on a variety of these street-level actors and, like Gupta, placing special attention on forms, statistics, and other bureaucratic processes to identify how services are structured. Field work occurred during the 10-month period between February and December of 2020. The primary methods used to collect data include in-depth semi-structured interviews (n=60), over 200 hours of participant observation, archival research, and document analysis. While in the field, many interactions between the unhoused and street-level bureaucrats were observed. This includes arrests, searches, medical visits, outreach contacts, and many other interactions. Fieldnotes were completed after every visit to the field and yielded hundreds of pages of field notes. All interviews, fieldnotes, and archival materials were coded using open coding and then a focused coding scheme in order to discern major themes and patterns. To make salient these themes and patterns, the following section includes a series of vignettes that present the street-level presence of the state in the lives of unhoused individuals in Beach City to highlight the ways in which the system is arbitrary, unhelpful, and potentially fatal.

The Devastation of the Unhoused Encountering the State in Beach City: Three Vignettes

The man with the family that cared and a plan in place

I first met Spencer at his usual spot outside the Beach City Senior Center. I was there for a meeting on homelessness that was organized by a group of local activists. The side of the senior center that faces the street has black gates and a big door with a lock on it. I was looking at it confused wondering how to enter the building, I was already five minutes late to the meeting. Spencer was sitting on the corner near a light post, and he said, ‘You have to go through the back where the parking lot is.’ I looked at him and thanked him as I made my way around the building. From that day on, I would come to expect to see Spencer by the senior center. Like Jacob at the Beach or Jimmy in the alley, he had found the spot where he was comfortable and where he wanted to be. The area around the senior center was his home and you could count on him being there. On one of the days that I was out with Felice, a trained social worker and dedicated volunteer in Beach City who has also worked as a street-level bureaucrat for a non-profit with the unhoused, delivering food to some of the unhoused folks that live near a freeway off ramp we met up with Kendra at a fast-food

restaurant parking lot. Kendra works for a small non-profit that helps individuals with many services. During my time in Beach City, I saw Kendra deliver people's mail and help them access their CARES Act² stimulus funds when they did not have identification to cash checks. She would do this by having the individuals sign the check over to the non-profit and then depositing the check. Once it cleared, she gave the cash to the individuals. She started to tell Felice and me that she had been working with Spencer because his health was deteriorating. His dementia was really getting in the way, and he needed to get indoors soon. She was optimistic because she had been in contact with Spencer's sister, and she hoped that they would soon be able to get him into a safe place. One morning a few weeks later, Bertha, the director of the senior center, found Spencer dead outside the building. So, what happened to Spencer between the time that he had been on a path to shelter and when he passed away? Well, he broke his pelvis and was taken to the hospital. He spent several days recovering in the hospital before he was released to a rehabilitative care facility closer to Beach City. He then was allowed to check himself out of this facility even though he suffered from worsening and deteriorating dementia; four days later, he died of hypothermia outside his beloved senior center. When his sister called the facility to check on him and learned that Spencer had been allowed to leave, she contacted Kendra to go check on him. Sure enough, Spencer was at the senior center, but Kendra could not find a place for him to go because there is no shelter in Beach City or any of its surrounding cities. Even though Spencer was not physically or mentally well, there was nowhere for him to go. He would have to stay outside as he had elected to check himself out of the post-surgery rehabilitation facility. In Spencer's case, he and his sister had been meeting with Kendra and others to make sure he was signed up on all of the relevant waiting lists. For months they engaged with the system in order to find a suitable place for him to stay. However, after the meetings and the forms they were all left frustrated and with no option but to let Spencer continue to sleep outside the senior center. This highlights the fact that in some, if not most cases, these street-level bureaucrats are engaging in the process with all of the intentions to help but are unable to move past the performance due to their own lack of power within the system.

At Spencer's vigil, I learned that he had lived in Beach City since the 1960s, and he had owned a thriving landscaping business that he lost after he turned to alcoholism. His nephew sent in a beautiful eulogy, in which he called Spencer his 'crazy uncle' who he loved and would miss. The truly sad part about Spencer's story is that he and his family were doing everything possible to get him housed. Even though his sister had moved away in the 1970s, she was in contact with local non-profits and the city trying to navigate the bureaucracy so that 'he would at least die with dignity in a warm bed, with food' (local newspaper, 2021). They had a plan, and she had convinced Spencer to go along with it. Spencer and his family were actively working on accessing housing and medical care for him. Spencer had even been part of a lawsuit against the city. As he explained, '[i]f there were an indoor shelter with services, I would be very excited to try staying there and hope for help getting into housing I could afford based on my limited income. But, as far as I know, there is no shelter in [Beach

² The Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act of 2020, also known as the CARES Act.

City] that will take me and no housing that I can afford on my limited income.’ Spencer lived on his Social Security check and could only afford a hotel room a few nights a month.

The woman with a place to stay that could be taken away at any time

Teresa is a local unhoused Beach City resident and an elderly and disabled widow. She lost her RV when local law enforcement impounded it, and she could not get it out because she could not provide adequate identification. In her youth, Teresa appeared regularly on TV gameshows and owned a restaurant in her rural Northern California hometown. Now, she lives alone and struggles with alcoholism, but that has not tempered her lively, high-spirited personality.

I first met Teresa when Felice and I took her and Danielle, another local unhoused woman, to lunch at the local Denny’s. It was pouring rain then, and we thought it would be a good way to get out of the rain and wait it out. Teresa wears nice, bright colored skirts and blouses that she tries to keep as clean as possible. She always sports a large hat and bright colored lipstick (even under her COVID-19 facemask). Her beloved dog, Buddy, follows her everywhere.

Teresa has developed a friendship with Jenna, a local woman who is very active in the local Catholic church and cares about helping the unhoused. Jenna has done a lot to support Teresa over the last couple of years, and when the COVID-19 pandemic started, she was very concerned because Teresa is in several high-risk categories. For several weeks, Jenna took some of her personal money and fundraised from individuals in her church and other personal friends to put Teresa up in a hotel. However, this approach quickly proved unsustainable. Jenna and Felice decided to try and get Teresa into Project Roomkey, which was specifically designed to get people like Teresa into hotels during the pandemic. There was only one small problem: there is no Roomkey hotel in Beach City. The closest Roomkey accommodations were a couple cities away, and Teresa was unwilling to go. Like many in her situation, Teresa has grown to love Beach City in the many years that she has lived there and finds the idea of being displaced very emotionally distressing. She has a community of friends and supporters and does not want to go to a place where she will not have any of these things. Jenna and Felice were able to somehow convince one of the organizations that manages Roomkey resources in Orange County to allow Teresa to get into a local Beach City hotel that would be paid for with Roomkey money. Despite this victory, they have been unable to replicate it for other Beach City residents, who get turned down for similar arrangements. Teresa is still in the hotel, but struggles almost every week to get the organization to continue to pay for her hotel. This process is very stressful for her, and although they have threatened to cut off the funding many times, they have continued to pay for it. This stress is also a product from Teresa’s previous experience with engaging with the bureaucracy with little to no success. For example, when Teresa initially became unhoused, she worked with an outreach worker to sign up for a housing voucher. She was placed on a waiting list and proceeded to continue living on the street. Four years later Teresa found out that she had inexplicably been dropped from the list and completed the process to be placed

back on it but ‘was under no delusion that she would ever hear back.’ Jenna and Felice, who would like to help other local unhoused individuals to make similar arrangements, feel like they cannot push too hard because they risk putting Teresa’s funding in jeopardy if they make a big fuss. Teresa confided in me that she feels very guilty that ‘she is very happy’ (because she has the opportunity to be indoors) during a time when many people are suffering because of the pandemic.

The trivial everyday encounter that says a lot about the system

I once donated a pair of shoes to Felice that I was unsure anybody would be able to use because my feet are so small. When she saw them, Felice said, ‘I know exactly who can use these! These will go to Amanda!’ She was right. Amanda and I are similar in age, and we both have similar petite frames. Sure enough, when Amanda tried on the shoes, they fit like a glove. Amanda has been on the street for several years because of an addiction. She lives on the street with her on-and-off boyfriend who people affectionately call ‘Spike.’ Spike and Amanda have a rocky relationship and it is not uncommon to see Amanda limping or with bruises. One time it was so bad that she had a deep cut on her arm. She asked for hydrogen peroxide and a bandage, and fortunately, we had them available. She swore that she would never get back together with Spike. However, they were back together again one week later. The life of unhoused women is complicated. Many stay with abusive partners because they provide them with money or drugs, or simply because they want companionship and, somewhat ironically, because they need protection. When Amanda received her CARES Act money, which came as a result of government action due to the COVID-19 pandemic, she was unable to cash her check because she did not have an ID. She decided to reach out to the local nonprofit that contracts with the city for outreach to the unhoused to see if they could help her with funds to get her birth certificate so that she could get the process to get an ID started. It costs roughly \$28 to request a birth certificate from most California counties (Orange County Birth Records, 2021). The outreach worker told her they did not have funds for that, but they could provide her with a voucher to get her ID from the DMV. Amanda felt disillusioned and found it particularly frustrating to receive a voucher for something that would be very hard for her to get without obtaining her birth certificate first.

Findings and Discussion: Structural Violence at the Hands of the State

These interactions highlight instances when unhoused people directly encountered the state. Based on this study’s conception of the state, residents encounter the state every time they attempt to access a service and every time they are unsuccessful. They also highlight the structural violence experienced by these individuals at the hands of state actors. These interactions ended in death, family separation, stress, and frustration for those needing assistance because of their material conditions as unhoused individuals. In fact, they were met with arbitrary and frustrating outcomes that create a difficult system to navigate for the unhoused and those attempting to help them. Confirming and extending previous studies, I find that (1) neoliberal logics such as privatization, marketization, and deregulation drive

homelessness service and policy provision, which do nothing to reduce homelessness; and (2) in this neoliberal context, the services that are supposed to assist the chronically unhoused have been turned into productive economic enterprises (Lyon-Callo, 2012; Willse, 2010). In addition, in a global context of extreme and deep poverty, the structures in place in the homelessness service delivery network hide and normalize the violence experienced by the unhoused in plain sight (Gupta, 2012). This further marginalizes and victimizes the unhoused and traps them, as long as they survive, in cycles of homelessness that lead anywhere except out of homelessness.

Performative Productivity

While Gupta mentions bureaucratic performance several times in his study, he does not focus on it. In fact, he explicitly calls out the performative aspects of corruption in the bureaucracy in India when he acknowledges that ‘however open the process of giving bribes and however public the transaction, there was nevertheless a performative aspect that had been mastered’ (Gupta, 1995, p. 379). This happens in Beach City, too. Of course, it is a different context, and corruption is not necessarily part of the equation, but there is a performance that has been mastered by all involved in the bureaucratic process. It is a well-choreographed dance featuring getting individuals screened using the Vulnerability Index-Service Prioritization Decision Assistance Tool (VI-SPDAT), an assessment tool used to measure the health and social vulnerabilities and housing needs of unhoused individuals (Brown, Cummings, Lyons, Carrion, and Watson, 2018); getting a vulnerability score; entering them into the Coordinated Entry System (CES) (OC Coordinated Entry System Policies and Procedures, 2019) and the Homeless Management Information System (HMIS) (HUD Exchange, HMIS, 2021); and then often going back on the street because there is no housing match. Every person described in the above vignettes has been engaged by this performance. Ultimately, they (and their family in the case of Spencer) knew that it would be very difficult to get housing, but they understood the penalty of not accessing housing was greater. When Spencer’s sister found out that Spencer had been released from the care facility, Kendra had to warn her that there would be no place for him to go after he had checked himself out, because there is no shelter in Beach City or the surrounding cities. But they both cared deeply about Spencer, so they did what they could. Kimberly, a young mother in a transitional housing facility, told me in despair once, ‘I can’t keep the apartment as neat as they want it. I have two toddlers...if I went to their houses and they had two toddlers, I doubt their house would be as neat as they want mine to be, but I just have to keep doing these checks because if I don’t, they’ll kick us out, and if we get kicked out, I don’t think we can get help in the future.’ In this way, every part of the process is not only about what you are doing at that point but also about services you might be seeking in the future. I am not sure that the system is as coordinated as people imagine it to be, but the perception that it is keeps individuals in a perpetual cycle of meeting requirements that are guided by morality or religiosity (in the cases where folks have sought services from religious organization that get government funding) and that they know will not ultimately change the precarity of their housing situation. In Amanda’s case, the performance culminates when she

is given the DMV voucher that she cannot use because the agencies mandate that outreach staff track the vouchers, the other side of this interaction is also important in highlighting the productive enterprise. The outreach worker who gave Amanda the voucher almost certainly tracked this as ‘client engagement,’ and it appears in the monthly report to the Beach City Council. These reports are part of the nonprofit maintaining their outreach services contract with the city.

This set of practices are employed by these actors as the terms of service. They include setting up meetings, filling out countless forms that require invasive sharing of information, signing up for waitlists, surrendering their rights, and often accepting an externally imposed moralistic framework that requires sobriety and/or employment. If a person wants any services at all, the terms are non-negotiable, thus compelling the unhoused to participate in the performance or risk losing eligibility for non-housing services, as minuscule or limited as these may be. This may not be a problem if it resulted in real change for those experiencing homelessness. However, as it stands, the practice simply serves to foot the bill of the productive economic enterprises that are the nonprofits contracted to administer the assessments.

These performances are intertwined with the structural violence of extreme and deep poverty. As Gupta (2012) points out, poverty becomes structural violence when some are precluded from fulfilling their basic needs and achieving their full capabilities, especially in a context where others are allowed to do so and flourish. The particularly cruel component of performative productivity is that it places a huge burden on the unhoused because of their poverty and yields little if any returns on their investment. The unhoused are investing their time but also having to navigate things like long public transportation trips (in the cases that this is available) and having to look for rides that are hard to come by, all while navigating mental health issues, addictions, or disabilities. All of these are compounded by extreme poverty and collectively make them vulnerable to additional violence from anti-homeless individuals, other unhoused individuals, and law enforcement. In this way, poverty produces a constant inability to access adequate shelter, food, healthcare, water, as well as personal safety and other necessities of life.

Arbitrariness

Even though Teresa is an incredibly nice and deserving woman, there is no reason why she is able to be in a hotel in Beach City under Project Roomkey when nobody else has qualified for that. Teresa was lucky that Jenna and Felice were able to find someone with the authority to say yes on the phone one day, perhaps because they were in a good mood that day. Their inability to replicate this success showcases how discretion can lead to disparate outcomes. Teresa’s story amplifies what Gupta classifies as arbitrariness, which arises when some individuals have different outcomes than others who are similarly positioned. So, while poverty is a structural issue that affects millions of people and inflicts systematic violence at the aggregate, at the individual level there is a degree of arbitrariness that creates selected outcomes that are inconsistent with the overall system.

Those at the street-level have an impact on the lives of the unhoused. In many instances, they have the flexibility to make decisions that can greatly change an individual's life. In Teresa's case, bureaucratic discretion had a profoundly positive impact on her life. She has experienced more security during a time when the unhoused community felt particularly unsafe because of the pandemic. This arbitrariness also creates mistrust in the system from those that attempt to engage and cannot replicate a positive outcome without any clear understanding of why the different outcomes occur.

Conclusion

This study extends Gupta's work in several areas. First, it follows the logic that citizens encounter the state at the local level in everyday mundane interactions with bureaucracy. In particular, this study focuses on the unhoused and how the state is highly present in their lives through their everyday dealings with the homelessness service bureaucracy. Also, this study narrows in on the issue of poverty as structural violence and how the state perpetuates and inflicts this violence. One of Gupta's arguments is that the state uses bureaucratic writing as a way to exploit; rather than focus on the writing, I focus on the activities that accompany the process as performances that align with Gupta's conceptualization of the harms of bureaucratic writing. Taking up Gupta's suggestion that we understand bureaucratic writing as 'a kind of performance' (Gupta, 2012, p. 143), this study applies that analysis to the bureaucratic processes surrounding homelessness. In addition, it affirms Gupta's warning against thinking about literacy as the solution to the issues of structural violence on the poor in India. In fact, this study—in which all the participants are literate (at least in the most basic level of being able to read and write)—shows that the extremely poor are still dealing with similar structural issues in their attempts to navigate bureaucracy.

In addition, like Gupta, I find that arbitrariness is a common result of program implementation. This is something he calls out in his own writing and clarifies the need to theorize about it more fully in different contexts. In his work in India, he encounters corruption and what he calls 'massive misallocation of funds' (Gupta, 2013, p. 688), but he goes on to say that he 'ha[s] not seen any body of work that tries to theorize the kind of arbitrariness that results when one does not confront massive misallocation and corruption, but essentially correct application of bureaucratic procedure that is indifferent to outcomes' (p. 688). While it might not be completely clear whether there is misallocation of funds in the programs administered in Beach City, it is important to note the different contexts. The United States and India are supposed to be different. The Global North is considered developed, modern, and wealthy, while the Global South is perceived to be developing and poor. However, this study observes that similar processes are occurring in regard to the structural and material position of the poor and the way that the poor fare in the system.

Pinpointing a perpetrator of violence creates accountability. Unlike India, the United States has the resources to eradicate poverty but chooses not to do so. Therefore, responsibility lays squarely with the state. Finally, it is important to point out that the unhoused are not completely powerless and resist in many ways—often by refusing to

participate in the performative productivity described in this article. By doing so, they are labeled as ‘service resistant’, but the reality is that most of them did not start refusing services until they attempted to access housing to no avail. The state should recognize the harmful effects of the current system and actively seek to reform in a way that the unhoused are actually able to access the resources needed to survive and thrive.

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