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**Navigating a patchwork maze:
Individuals' experience of administrative burden when
accessing homeless assistance services**

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A Thesis Presented to Faculty of the
Yale School of Public Health

In Candidacy for the
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Abstract

Despite significant efforts to address the issue of homelessness in the United States over the past several decades, over 500,000 individuals still experience homelessness on any given night. A large portion of this persistent and high rate of homelessness can likely be attributed to the shortage of affordable housing options, the eviction crisis, and limited financial support for rental assistance found throughout the country. However, administrative burdens may also contribute to the high rate of homelessness being seen.

Our study explores this question by examining 28 individuals' experience of administrative burden when navigating the landscape of homeless assistance services in New Haven, Connecticut. Our analysis describes the learning, compliance and psychological costs individuals face at the onset of homelessness, when in a temporary living environment (i.e., shelter, unsheltered, hotel), and when trying to transition between living locations. Our findings suggest that the administrative burdens embedded within homeless assistance services may lead to individuals' underutilization of services and experience of homelessness being prolonged. Further, these costs may reinforce existing inequities within society, as they tend to disproportionately impact those in greatest need. We conclude with recommendations to reduce administrative burden within homeless assistance services where possible and make greater investments in homeless assistance and housing resources nationwide.

Keywords: homelessness, housing; social services, administrative burden; qualitative.

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Introduction

Despite significant efforts to address the issue of homelessness in the United States over the past several decades, the Point-In-Time (PIT) count for 2020 estimated that 580,466 individuals were still experiencing homelessness on a given night in January (Henry et al., 2021). This number reflects a 2% increase in individuals experiencing homelessness compared with the previous year, and a gradual increase in the number of individuals experiencing homelessness over the past five years (Henry et al., 2021). A large portion of this persistent and high rate of homelessness can likely be attributed to the shortage of affordable housing options, the eviction crisis, and limited financial support for rental assistance found throughout the country (National Coalition for the Homeless, n.d.). Nevertheless, it also raises questions regarding the efficacy of the homeless assistance services being offered, and whether these services are successfully reaching and meeting the needs of those they intend to.

Substantial investments have been made in various types of homeless assistance services by both the public and private sectors since homelessness began to be viewed as a widespread issue in the US the 1980s (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2018). Services for those experiencing homelessness aim to address not only individuals' need for shelter and housing, but also potential other needs, including those related to health care, mental health, food, and job training (Edwards, 2021). In terms of housing needs, emergency shelters are the primary form of assistance offered when individuals are experiencing what HUD defines as "literal homelessness" (Gilderbloom et al., 2013; HUD Exchange, n.d.). However, numerous programs also exist which aim to help individuals transition to permanent housing as quickly as possible, through providing either physical housing or rental assistance designated for those experiencing homelessness. Among these programs are Permanent Supportive Housing (PSH), Rapid-

Rehousing (RRH), and Transitional Housing (TH) (HUD Exchange, n.d.). Furthermore, since issues such as chronic health problems, mental health issues, and substance use disorders are often factors which both contribute to the onset of homelessness and may be developed or exacerbated as a result of it, many homeless assistance services also target these needs (Stablein et al., 2021; Amore & Howden-Chapman, 2012).

Prior research has examined the challenges individuals may encounter when engaging with various social welfare services and navigating their often-complicated systems and processes (Herd & Moynihan, 2018). These challenges, defined in the literature as “administrative burdens”, are primarily experienced in three ways, through 1) learning costs, 2) compliance costs, and 3) psychological costs. As defined by Moynihan, Herd, & Harvey (2014), learning costs arise from engaging in search processes to collect information about public services and subsequently determining if and how they are relevant to the individual. Compliance costs arise from the labor associated with following administrative rules and requirements, such as from having to complete long and complex forms, provide documentation to prove specific statuses, and attend required appointments. Psychological costs arise from experiences such as being subjected to stigma due to participating in a program with a negative perception, losing power or autonomy in interactions with the state, or experiencing stress due to dealing with administrative processes (Moynihan, Herd & Harvey, 2014).

Research examining the impact of administrative burdens on individuals’ engagement in other social welfare programs such as Medicaid (Herd et al., 2013), rental assistance programs (Keene et al., 2021), the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) (Herd, 2015), and the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC) program (Herd & Moynihan, 2020) has found that burdens reduce the participation of eligible participants in programs, particularly those with greatest need.

Less is known, however, about individuals' experience of administrative burden when navigating homeless assistance services. Homeless assistance services are often scattered and patchwork in nature, making it so individuals must often engage with a number of programs and services as they attempt to exit homelessness and transition to permanent housing. Furthermore, these services are often funded and run by various types of organizations, including non-profits, religious organizations, philanthropies, and local, city and state governments, all of which may have their own eligibility criteria, rules, and requirements for applying and engaging in services. Therefore, it is important to understand how administrative burdens and their associated costs arise in the context of homeless assistance services.

Our study responds to this gap in the literature by exploring the experiences of 28 individuals as they navigate the complex web of homeless assistance and related services in New Haven, Connecticut. Our analysis describes the learning, compliance and psychological costs individuals face at the onset of homelessness, when in a temporary living environment (i.e., shelter, unsheltered, hotel), and when trying to transition between living locations. We conclude with recommendations to reduce the experience of administrative burden within homeless assistance services and discuss the potential benefits this may have for individuals as they attempt to transition from homelessness to stable housing.

Background

Funding and Administration of Homeless Assistance Services

The United States spends billions of dollars each year on services and programs aimed at addressing homelessness (USICH, 2022). This spending originates from all levels of government in addition to a wide range of other sectors. On the federal level, a substantial amount of this funding stems from the Stewart B. McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act of 1987 (MVA)

(Edwards, 2021). The MVA was the first comprehensive piece of federal legislation dedicated specifically to addressing homelessness and remains the only legislation dedicated to this purpose today (Edwards, 2021). Most funds authorized by the MVA go to the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) to be distributed to states and cities as Homeless Assistance Grants. Localities are then able to administer programs aimed at addressing homelessness on the local level. In FY 2022, the federal government appropriated nearly \$8 billion for this purpose (USICH, 2022).

Although federal funding comprises a substantial portion of all funds for homeless assistance services, this funding is often also supplemented by funds generated by state and local governments and by private organizations, such as non-profits, philanthropies, and religious organizations (U.S. Treasury Data Lab, n.d.). For example, in 2019, the cities of New York City and San Francisco spent \$3.2 billion and \$305 million in city funds respectively on efforts to address homelessness in their areas, in addition to the millions of dollars spent in funds received from the federal government (U.S. Treasury Data Lab, n.d.).

These funding streams affect what services homeless assistance programs are able to provide and who may be eligible to receive them. For example, most funding provided by the federal government through Homeless Assistant Grants is administered through two programs, the Emergency Solutions Grant (ESG) program and the Continuum of Care (CoC) program. Both programs have a number of restrictions on how their funds can be used. ESG funds are dedicated to helping those experiencing a housing crisis and/or homelessness to quickly regain stability and may only be used for five main program components: street outreach, emergency shelter, homelessness prevention, rapid re-housing (RRH) assistance, and the Homeless Management Information System (HMIS) (HUD Exchange, n.d.). CoC funds, on the other hand, are dedicated

primarily to promoting communitywide commitment to the goal of ending homelessness through activities such as acquisition of buildings to create new housing, providing rental assistance for PSH, RRH, and TH, and operating programs such as PSH and TH (HUD Exchange, n.d.). To provide alternative services, programs must utilize funding from other sources which do not have such constraints.

Programs' funding streams also affect who may be the recipients of their services. For example, individuals are only able to receive services from a program funded by either the ESG or CoC programs if they meet HUD's definition of homeless (HUD Exchange, n.d.). Generally, this is defined as falling into one of four categories: being 1) literally homeless (i.e., unsheltered, in an emergency shelter, temporary hotel), 2) at imminent risk of homelessness, 3) defined as homeless under other listed federal statutes or experienced persistent instability, or 4) without residence due to fleeing or attempting to flee domestic violence (HUD Exchange, n.d.). Programs must also use alternative sources of funding if they wish to provide services to individuals who fall outside of the eligibility criteria defined within a funding agreement.

These restrictions on types of activities and eligibility requirements ultimately necessitate a number of protocols and processes to ensure compliance with all guidelines. Further, most programs also maintain internal rules individuals must follow once engaged with services. Examples of such rules are curfews, time limits on how long one is able to be engaged with that program, rules regarding drugs and alcohol, and work requirements. Previous research has examined the impact that rules and requirements within other social welfare programs have on both those administering the programs and those engaging with services. For example, in a study examining the impact of SNAP's rules and requirements on program participation, researchers found that confusing eligibility criteria (learning costs), stigma associated with the program

(psychological costs), and cumbersome paperwork involved in applying (compliance costs) all reduced individuals engagement in the program (Herd, 2015). This study and related research raise the possibility that experiences of administrative burden may also impede individuals' participation in homeless assistance services and contribute to the high rate of homelessness and low rate of transitions from homelessness to stable housing seen throughout the US.

In addition, research has also found that administrative burdens often have greater impact on marginalized and vulnerable groups, thus reinforcing existing inequalities within society (Chudnovsky & Peeters, 2020). This further supports the need to examine the experience of administrative burden within homeless assistance services, as those experiencing homelessness are often among the most marginalized and vulnerable.

Provision of Homeless Assistance Services

Homeless assistance services maintain official rules pertaining to eligibility for programs, processes for applying, and terms of engagement. However, these services are in short supply. For instance, in Connecticut in 2021, there was a shortage of around 500 shelter beds necessary to meet the needs of single adults experiencing homelessness throughout the state (National Alliance to End Homelessness, 2021). This gap in amount of available services necessary to meet demand often causes staff working within these organizations to utilize assessment and prioritization tools such as waitlists and screenings, as well as their own discretion, to make choices about who will be able to access resources first, and who is considered to be of the highest need.

Many assessment or prioritization tools are used with the goal of making decisions about service prioritization in a systematic way. However, research has found that many of these tools may be subject to the biases of both those who construct and utilize the tools, thus affecting the decision-making process. For example, a recent study by Cronley (2020) found that while the

Vulnerability Index, Service Prioritization Decision Assistance Tool (VI-SPDAT), a main tool used by providers of homeless services to triage housing decisions, may accurately assess vulnerability among white individuals based on experiences of trauma and abuse, it does not do the same for Black individuals, particularly among women. This may lead homeless service providers to prioritize white individuals above Black individuals when allocating scarce housing resources, as their assessments are falsely indicating higher vulnerability, and thus, a higher need, among white individuals (Cronley, 2020). Additional research has also examined the role service providers play in decision-making about prioritization, finding that providers often exercise considerable discretion when processing applications and offering services (Dickson-Gomez et al., 2007).

That decisions about prioritization are not always being made in an unbiased and systematic way likely impacts individuals' experiences when applying to and accessing homeless assistance services and may further contribute to individuals experience of administrative burden. This highlights a further need to explore the experience of administrative burden from the perspective of those applying for and engaging with homeless assistance services. Our study addresses this need, as our analysis describes the burdens individuals face at the onset of homelessness, when in a temporary living environment (i.e., shelter, unsheltered, hotel), and when trying to transition between living locations.

Methods:

Setting

This study focuses on the experiences of individuals who are navigating the landscape of homeless assistance services in New Haven, Connecticut. Although Connecticut's rate of homelessness has declined since 2012, a significant number of CT residents do not have a place to call home. In 2021, more than 6,000 individuals utilized Connecticut's shelter system, in addition to those who experienced homelessness in unsheltered or other informal locations (Partnership for Strong Communities, 2021). Furthermore, nearly 74,000 2-1-1 calls were made to Connecticut's Coordinated Access Networks (CAN) regarding a need for housing assistance (Partnership for Strong Communities, 2021). While New Haven itself is a smaller city, consisting of about 134,000 residents (United States Census Bureau, n.d.), it maintains one of the highest rates of homelessness within Connecticut. Due to this, it also maintains a vast network of social welfare organizations with which individuals engage.

Specifically, New Haven maintains six emergency homeless shelters which are open year-round, and one shelter program which is open seasonally from November-April (City of New Haven, n.d.). Among these programs, two serve only men, one serves both men and women, one serves single women and families, two serve only families, and one serves only youth (City of New Haven, n.d.). While emergency shelter is often the primary form of assistance offered to individuals experiencing homelessness, many individuals will transition from shelter or unsheltered settings to or from other types of temporary programs, including sober or transitional living houses or recovery programs. New Haven maintains a number of these types of programs, and many also exist in the surrounding areas. In addition to shelter and housing services, a number of programs which focus on addressing individuals' other needs also exist within New Haven,

including those related to physical health, mental health, substance use, job training, finances, and basic needs, such as food pantries and bathroom facilities. All services are run by various organizations and are funded by both private and government dollars.

JustHouHS Study Overview

This study utilizes data collected as part of a mixed-methods longitudinal cohort study of 400 low-income residents of New Haven, CT. This study, called the Justice, Housing and Health Study (JustHouHS), aimed to analyze the intersecting impacts of mass incarceration and housing on health through survey data and qualitative interviews conducted with a subset of JustHouHS participants (N=54). Participants were recruited for the study using a combination of flyers posted throughout New Haven, outreach from service providers, and snowball sampling. Due to the study's focus on the intersection of mass incarceration and health, the sample was stratified to include 200 individuals released from prison or jail in the last year. Qualitative interview participants were purposively selected from the overall sample of survey participants such that half had a recent history of incarceration and half did not. For the qualitative interviews, five rounds of interviews were conducted over the three-year study period, with fifty-one (94 percent) participants completing more than one interview, forty-three (80 percent) completing all four in-person interviews and 39 (72 percent) participating in the May 2020 virtual interviews.

The research was approved by Yale University's Institutional Review Board and all participants provided written consent to participation. Names given for participants in the findings section are pseudonyms chosen by participants themselves.

Sample

We limited our analysis to a subset of 61 interviews conducted with 28 individuals who were actively experiencing homelessness at some point during the study period or in the six months

prior to the study's start. For this study, we define individuals as experiencing homelessness if they were residing in a shelter, an unsheltered location, a hotel or motel temporarily, were staying with friends, family, or other acquaintances due to having nowhere else to go, or were transitioning out of institutions such as prisons, sober houses, or drug treatment programs and discussed impending homelessness after leaving.

Among the 28 individuals included in this analysis, twenty-two were male and six were female. Fifteen individuals identified as African American, five as white, and eight as other. The majority of participants were between the ages of 40-59. With respect to participants' baseline housing status, nine individuals were residing in a shelter or unsheltered location. Two individuals were residing temporarily in a motel. Six individuals were residing in an apartment they were renting. Two individuals were staying with friends, and nine individuals were residing temporarily in places such as sober or halfway houses.

Data Collection

Interviews were conducted with participants between November 2017 and June 2020. All interviews were conducted in a private room at the study office except interviews in the last wave, which were conducted over Zoom due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Interviews were audio recorded and transcribed by a professional transcriptionist and lasted an average of 54 minutes. The same interviewer conducted interviews with each participant across the study waves. Topics asked about in the interviews included current and prior housing, criminal justice involvement at both the individual and community level, economic situation, sexual relationships, condom use, HIV testing, health, relationships with family, friends, and partners, family background, and community connections. All identifying information was removed.

Analysis

The larger JustHouHs qualitative data sample was coded according to a multi-stage coding process described by Deterding and Waters (2021). Researchers first employed index codes to the data to sort it into topical categories (e.g., relationships, employment, housing, homelessness, health) using NVivo software. For this analysis, we extracted and reviewed all excerpts associated with the index code “homelessness” and utilized an open-coding approach to identify major categories within this index code. Although excerpts within the “homelessness” index code also included discussion about homelessness that occurred in the past (prior to six months before the start of the study) and about participants’ friends or family members who may have been experiencing homelessness, these excerpts were removed for the purposes of this study.

Codes generated through the open-coding process were discussed at a number of meetings among analysis team members and refined until all major ideas were captured. Some examples of codes were, “system navigation”, “eligibility for services”, “2-1-1”, “stigma”, “lack of control”, and “shelter rules”. The codes were then applied to the subset of data that had been indexed under the “homelessness” code and met inclusion criteria. As the overall theme of administrative burden emerged from the data, all applicable excerpts were sorted into the three types of administrative burden: learning costs, compliance costs, and psychological costs. Next, analysis team members reviewed all data again, and further organized the data into the structure below. Specifically, we describe the learning, compliance, and psychological costs within three distinct points during the experience of homelessness 1) at the onset of homelessness, 2) when in a temporary location such as a shelter or unsheltered setting, and 3) when trying to move between locations.

In addition to our coding, our analysis utilizes longitudinal matrices that were created to describe participants’ housing status and other project specific domains across time. Both matrices

and the full transcripts of individuals were used to clarify and contextualize excerpts within the “homelessness” index code.

Findings

1. At the onset of homelessness

Learning Costs

One major way individuals experienced burdens was through the learning costs associated with determining what services were available at the onset of homelessness. When experiencing homelessness, individuals often needed to access a number of different services in order to meet their basic needs. This could include shelters, food pantries, libraries, day programs, and treatment programs, among others. These services were located in various locations and run by different organizations, making it difficult to identify all services available. One participant, Bently, described the challenge of learning what services were available after recently becoming homeless. He explained, “Honestly don’t know what I’m gonna do or how I’m gonna do it. I-I wish that I had somewhere set in stone, but I don’t and I’m really not sure like right now what I’m gonna do, ’cause I don’t have any resources and the only resource I have is going – looking on my phone and trying to find a shelter to stay at for a night or two or whatever it is.”

Among those with prior experience navigating the system, the patchwork nature and frequent opening and closing of services still made it difficult for most individuals to maintain accurate information over time. In addition, the resources available changed between towns, forcing individuals to acquire new knowledge of what was available if they moved. For example, Brandon, who had previously resided in a shelter in a town neighboring New Haven, discussed how he believed there was only one shelter in New Haven he could access without waiting to complete a 2-1-1 intake. The interviewer responded asking Brandon if he had gone to the overflow,

another shelter with a subset of walk-in beds, to which he responded, “I never went to no overflow...I don’t even know where it is.” Once individuals were at a shelter or engaged with services, they often had the assistance of a case manager to help identify the services they needed. However, most individuals lacked this type of assistance at the onset of homelessness and were therefore forced to navigate their first steps on their own.

After determining what services were available, participants described further learning costs related understanding the eligibility requirements for emergency services and what they were required to do to access them. While there are a number of shelters and other temporary living programs throughout New Haven and the surrounding area, all have varying rules and eligibility requirements which are not always formalized or readily accessible. As when initially learning about services, those who had previously spent time navigating the system may have acquired this type of information from their own personal experiences. For example, Cora, who had previous experience with the shelter system, described how the process for accessing one of New Haven’s shelters has changed over time, “You know, like Columbus House – before used to- you could stand in line to get a bed. I know now you have to go on 2-1-1 and be placed on a list and you have to do an interview and go with them and do your intake process.” Although Cora knew this from her own personal experience, this information would likely be difficult to obtain for someone like Bently who was newly in need of shelter and had not interacted with the system before. Thus, learning costs tended be more profound for those navigating the system for the first time.

Compliance Costs

After learning about what services were available and what one was required to do to access them, individuals faced compliance costs from having to meet those requirements. For example, when trying to secure a bed at a shelter, individuals often had to call and have an interview with

2-1-1, complete an intake process, and sometimes fulfill other requirements such getting a TB test or meeting with a case manager at a specified time to be able to access a shelter bed. Pete, who was in the process of applying to programs, described some of the challenges he faced complying with requirements to access a transitional living program for homeless individuals actively working on recovery. He stated, "It's like nine months you can stay there rent free. But you have to be referred there. So tomorrow I'm go over to Long Wharf and speak to one of my clinicians and see if they can call the lady up so she can talk to them and send them a referral form. She'll fill it out and send it back, and um, cause' I called the lady personally but I can't do it, she said. I have to have a clinician or a counselor do it."

Completing tasks such as intake meetings, filling out paperwork, and obtaining referrals can be time consuming and confusing. However, for those experiencing homelessness, individuals' ability to complete these tasks was often further complicated by their unstable living situation. Many of these tasks require that people have access to phone, internet, transportation, and have flexibility in their schedule so they can attend appointments at specific times. Kaylee, for example, described her experience of trying to secure a bed at a shelter, "I was told to call back during the evening. So I called back at about quarter to 5:00. I called 2-1-1. They said, "Well, you have to call back after 5:00." Now I have very few minutes on my phone so I was using a friend's phone. It was 4:56 and he's telling me you have to call back after 5:00."

If individuals were unable to complete these required tasks, it could delay or prohibit them from accessing services, sometimes leaving them with nowhere to go. Cora described this occurrence, as she needed to call and complete an intake appointment before being able to access a shelter bed. She stated, "So when it's zero below outside, I don't think I have time to call

somebody and sit here and have an interview with you tonight. If we don't do that interview today or if I don't have a cell phone, I'm gonna be sleeping in zero-degree temperature."

Psychological Costs

At the onset of homelessness, individuals faced tremendous stress from having to figure out what they would do next in terms of their living situations. When first becoming homeless, due to reasons such as eviction, no longer being able to stay with a friend or family member, or transitioning from another location such as jail or prison, individuals often had to figure out a plan for where they would go next under immense time pressure and with the knowledge that if they did not find a place to go, they could end up having to reside outside in an unsheltered location. The events leading individuals to become homeless could often happen abruptly, leaving them with little time to prepare for what they would do next. Harriet, for example, described her experience, "My son just – we went out one day on Sunday and then he just drove up there...He just drove up there and told me, "You gotta get out here. You can't come back home with us." I never went through anything like that before in my life."

Despite already being in a stressful situation, individuals' interactions with the state when first figuring out their next steps brought about additional psychological costs, as the process for figuring out what services were available and how one could access them was often frustrating, confusing, and slow. Pete's experience of having to speak with multiple service providers who were not in communication with one another and were therefore giving him differing information about how to access services highlighted this cost. He described, "So then the woman's, like, "Well, I just gotta tell you, 'cause you really should have been here and da, da, da, and on and on," and I'm, like, "Okay. What are you talking about? I'm letting you know that this woman told me this, this, and this. And this is what happened. You didn't answer the phones, that wasn't in—and

then you don't even know the woman I'm talking about...so because a person didn't get a hold of you that should have been getting a hold of you, and you're not even trying to follow up on it yet, then you're going to tell me I have to go back to the 2-1-1 case again and find out how they get involved. Really?"

For those who ended up in unsheltered locations due to unsuccessful attempts to access shelter services or by choice due to safety or other concerns associated with the shelter environment, these stresses were further compounded by anxieties related to residing outside. Brandon, for example, described this experience, stating, 'When I'm in them streets at night I say, Lord, keep your angels of protection on me. Because I be out. I don't know where to go. Sometimes I just walk all night. That's when you're vulnerable.'

2. While in shelter or in other temporary living situations

Learning Costs

After navigating the rules and processes for entering shelter or other temporary living environments, individuals were then forced to learn about the various rules and requirements that were internal to most programs. Most shelters and other temporary residential programs maintain rules related to drug and alcohol use, curfews, guests, and conduct in the shelter (i.e., no fighting). However, while there are formal rules in place, enforcement is often left to the discretion of staff members, making it so they may be differentially enforced and seem to be arbitrary and opaque. Individuals therefore had to learn which rules were upheld, to what degree they were enforced, and which staff members were more or less likely to enforce them. For example, although many programs had rules about the length of time someone was allowed to stay there, participants described how staff did not always require individuals to oblige by these rules. Kaylee described,

“Well when we initially got there, they said you could stay here for two months, but they don’t put you out... They let you stay there until they find you housing.”

For some, the arbitrariness of some rules was beneficial. In Kaylee's case, it allowed her to have a place to stay for longer than she expected. For others, however, it could have negative effects. Mark, for example, who understood he was eligible for a shelter bed, described the confusing information he was given about when he was going to be able to access a bed in a particular program. He described, “It’s just, uh, for some reason I keep getting these same, “Oh, you can’t stay here now. Or, you can’t stay till the 17th. Or, you can’t come back till the 18th. Or, you can’t”—and I’m, like, what are you talking about?” Ultimately, individuals were best able to acquire knowledge about the rules through trial-and-error and their own personal experiences, rather than in a formalized way.

Compliance Costs

After learning about and gaining an understanding of the rules in place for particular services, individuals faced further costs from having to comply with them. Isaiah, for example, described the burden of having to abide by the shelters’ rules of needing to be out of the shelter from early morning until evening every day. He stated, “When they turn those lights on all I want to do is lay there, and I’m like, okay, I gotta get – I usually lay there for about five minutes and then I get up and start whatever activities I need to do to get ready because they want you off the floor, off the sleeping area by 6:00 am, which is quite early, you understand? I mean there’s nothing going on in New Haven at 6:00 am in the morning.”

Furthermore, some programs required participants to abide by additional rules related to working, paying rent to the program, or contributing part of their salary to a savings account. These rules often added to individuals’ experience of compliance costs, as many of the rules tended to

conflict with one another. For example, when working, many individuals experienced conflicts related to their work hours and shelter curfews, as most walk-in shelters' rules allowed the line for acquiring a bed to begin to form around 4pm or 5pm. Since this was during many people's work hours, this rule ultimately forced many individuals to choose between maintaining their job or acquiring a bed. For those who did keep working, many were left unsheltered or having to find somewhere else to go each night.

At programs where beds were maintained for longer periods of time, participants could ask case managers to make exceptions enabling them to break curfew due to conflicts with their work hours. However, even with these accommodations, individuals often still faced challenges due to the inconsistent enforcement of rules. Pete, for instance, described, "Here I am coming out, sometimes at 1:30 in the morning, getting there, and then being awoken at 5:30 in the morning...then it got to, once it was established with my case manager or worker or whatever, then it was, like, "Okay, let him sleep until—until, like, 10:00 or something thereabout." But it still wasn't enough because I was still woken up with everybody getting up at 5:30 in the morning." If an individual could not comply with all rules of a particular program, they risked being kicked out, often leaving them with no place to go.

Psychological Costs

While in shelter, individuals discussed psychological costs that arose from the stigma associated with needing to access this type of service. Individuals discussed these costs in terms of feeling judged, belittled, or treated poorly by others due to their housing status. Mark, for example, described feeling looked down upon by shelter staff due to his homeless status, stating, "When you're dealing with people, homeless people, it's not like an everyday thing. They have

issues and problems that run a lot deeper than, you know, the everyday and these people have no idea – they-they [shelter staff] come in with the, you know, attitude that you’re less than.”

Many individuals described feelings of shame and embarrassment arising from this stigma, causing them to socially isolate themselves from friends and family to avoid having people find out about their housing status. Kaylee, for example, who had recently had a baby and was living in a shelter, described wanting to delay connecting with other new moms until she had moved out of the shelter. She described, “I have other friends that – you know, I just recently reconnected with a friend that I haven’t spoken to in years, but it’s embarrassing to...I have to call her later on today and just – I can’t.” Many also described wanting to delay beginning new romantic relationships until they had secured stable housing. Josiah, for example, described, “Yeah. It’s not really – I can’t be like, “Hey, you know, um, you’re kind of cute. You want to come into the shelter?””

In addition to experiencing stigma and social isolation, participants also described psychological costs associated with the loss of autonomy, privacy, and stability they experienced while in the shelter setting. Many of the shelters in New Haven are large congregate spaces with up to 75 beds in one room. Individuals residing in shelters were often forced to check-in and out with staff upon entering and leaving and were only able to keep minimal items such as a change of clothes and their phone with them while there. For many, the setup of the shelter caused them to feel as though they were being constantly surveilled, and interactions with staff were felt to be authoritative rather than mutually respectful. Michael, for example, described the way he felt about his interactions with shelter staff, stating, “I don’t need another mom or dad figure. You know what I mean? I don’t need that—people telling me what I can and can’t do. You know? I might as well be back in prison, you know, if that’s the case.”

Furthermore, shelter rules often inhibited individuals from being able to structure their days according to their wants and needs or to take time for themselves to rest and have privacy. Isaiah, for example, described receiving an infraction from the shelter he was staying at due his decision to stay with a friend for one night, “I needed to go and have some personal time. You understand? Which is normal, you know? If you’re around 45, 50 people every day all day long I don’t think that that’s too healthy. You understand? You need time alone, and-and I went and I just – that’s what I do. Every now and then, I take a day.” Individuals described how taking a day to stay with a friend or in another location could allow them to get a good night’s sleep, feel better rested, and be better able to enter back into the shelter thereafter. However, doing so was often against shelter rules, which forced individuals to choose between their mental health and potential consequences of breaking a rule.

The structure and rules of most shelters or other temporary living environments also made it extremely difficult for individuals to ever feel settled or stable in the environment they were in. While some maintained more-permanent beds for weeks or months at a time, individuals discussed knowing that these placements were still temporary, and were left to worry about what would come next as their time in a program neared its end. This lack of a stable foundation made it difficult for individuals to focus their energy on tasks such as finding or maintaining a job or addressing health or mental health issues. Instead, individuals were forced to spend the majority of their time thinking about where and how they would be able to meet their basic needs each day, including using restroom facilities, showers, internet, electricity, and finding enough food. Cora described this experience and the impact it had on her, stating, “Without a foundation to have a peace of mind, a place to have my meds, a place to have my clothes, a place to take a shower, a place that I’m safe from the streets, um, I don’t feel like then – how can I wake up on time, how can I be

somewhere on time, how can I have a job? I don't feel like nothing could happen by me being homeless.”

Over time, this lack of stability and foundation could be mentally exhausting for individuals. Isaiah, for instance, described, “Um... I think being homeless can burn you out, you understand? Because it's not normal to have to live on the streets in the elements, you understand? It's not normal to have to wait until 4:00 and be in a line and go into a shelter. It's not normal for me to have to stand in another line so I can take a shower, you understand? These things are not normal, you know?”

For many individuals, the difficulty in understanding how one could successfully move through the system also brought about psychological costs. When engaged with services, individuals described trying to do all the “right things”, such as following all shelter rules, meeting the requirements of programs, and maintaining relationships with case managers in hopes that doing so would help them to receive housing or housing assistance more quickly. However, the ambiguity related to why some people were able to move through the system more quickly and how the waitlists for housing or housing assistance programs worked made it difficult for individuals to understand why some received vouchers or other forms of assistance before others, and what steps were truly helpful in enabling someone to reach that goal.

This absence of a clear relationship between the effort someone put into obtaining housing and the result of actually obtaining it was often very frustrating for individuals and made it difficult for many to remain hopeful that their time to receive housing assistance would come soon. Cora, for example, described this resulting sense of hopelessness, “So it's like, you know, that [being homeless] doesn't seem very positive motivation for me to every day wake up like, you know

what, you know, I'm – don't have a place to stay, I don't have anything with me. I'm walking around with a bag full of everything I own.”

However, many discussed the need to try and remain optimistic despite feeling this way. Isaiah, for example, described, “So, um, since I've been there...at least five to six people have gotten their vouchers; at least two or three of them have already moved out, so that's pretty good, you understand? If they're moving that rapidly – you understand? – all I have to do is hang in there, do the right thing, come in on time...” While maintaining hope could be critical to ultimately obtaining housing, it could also be extremely psychologically taxing over time.

3. When trying to move between locations or into permanent housing

Learning Costs

When individuals were getting ready to transition from one program to another or into permanent housing, they experienced a number of learning costs related to lacking knowledge about available options, what the eligibility requirements were for each program, and what steps they had to take in order to access a specific service or program. As with accessing this information at the onset of homelessness, obtaining this knowledge when transitioning between programs or into permanent housing was often similarly difficult and confusing due to the patchwork and changing nature of services.

Individuals often relied on their past experiences navigating services in order to know what to do next. Isaiah, for example, who had previously been at a few different programs, described knowing what he had to do to ensure he did not have a gap in his ability to access shelter, stating, “I gotta reach out to 2-1-1 again and tell them, look, my time is almost up at Grand Avenue, can you get me into Columbus House? [The time limit is] three months, but because of the weather they'll take it into consideration and give you an extension because of the weather, but once the

weather breaks you have to be on your game. You have to be able to call out, reach out to 2-1-1, and get into the next shelter.”

However, for those who did not have personal history navigating services, lacking or having incorrect information about eligibility or steps to access services could result in negative consequences for individuals, such as being without shelter for a period of time. For example, although Isaiah had knowledge of what needed to be done to secure another shelter bed when his time at Grand Ave shelter was nearing its end, this was in contrast with his previous experience when navigating the system for the first time. When Isaiah’s time was up at a transitional living facility, he was unable to access services because he didn’t understand what living arrangements made it so someone was considered to be “literally homeless”, and therefore eligible for shelter services. Isaiah described, “I tried to call 2-1-1- they told me because I was in these places I’m not considered homeless so I couldn’t get any assistance at that point in time.” Lacking information on eligibility requirements and what the state defined as homeless caused him to falsely believe he would be able to access a bed at shelter, and subsequently lack a place to go.

Lacking information about what qualified people for certain programs could not only hinder individual’s ability to transition between locations uninterruptedly, but also their ability to participate in other types of programs. For example, similar to Isaiah, Cora described how her confusion about if the residential rehab program she was staying at was included on a “homeless list” impeded her ability to participate in a program which would have allowed her to get an ID for free. She described, “According to DMV they used to have a free ID for people that are qualified on a supposedly homeless list that they have, but I don’t know what-what residential unit they consider that on their list. I don’t know if it’s Columbus House, I don’t know if it’s Martha’s Place. I don’t know what it was, but it was nowhere I was staying.”

Compliance Costs

After learning about available options, eligibility requirements for different programs, and the steps needed to access a specific service or program, individuals faced compliance costs associated with meeting these requirements. This could include filling out paperwork or online applications, ensuring all papers and applications were submitted correctly, obtaining documentation or referrals, meeting with case-managers or other providers, and keeping up with follow-up correspondence.

As with when individuals were applying to programs at the onset of homelessness, failing to comply with all requirements to move to permanent housing or a new program could disrupt shelter access. Cora described this occurrence, stating, “Because of my lady at my outpatient, she wasn’t being very productive and she didn’t make, um, a referral fast enough. I had missed the deadline. I was at the deadline for my discharge from one place, so I was homeless for about 30 days until I even got on the list for the other place, which is gonna take more than 30 days. So now I’m back to staying at people’s houses, doing things I don’t want to do, you know, um, trying my best to maybe offer a \$10.00 here or there.”

As seen with Cora’s experience, compliance with rules and requirements was not only essential on the part of individuals, but for their case managers and other service providers as well. Due to this, many individuals described needing to meet with case managers or other service providers more frequently than what was officially required of them to advocate for themselves, to keep their name top-of-mind, and to continuously follow-up to ensure staff were complying with what needed to be done on their end. Isaiah, for instance, described his approach, stating, “But what I would like to do is get housing at this point in time, and when I leave here [the interview] I’m going to, um, Safe Haven and connect with her [case manager] and see what she

can tell me, you know? Are you – has my name came up in any of your meetings? You know, are y'all doing paperwork on my behalf?"

However, while keeping up with the paperwork and application steps for various government programs is difficult in and of itself, individuals' lack of a permanent address further complicated these challenges. In order to apply for many programs, individuals needed to have access to a permanent address to list on applications and to be able to receive mail at. For housing programs specifically, individuals often received mail pertaining to their status on waitlists and would be required to respond in order to remain on the list. Cora, who had applied to for a Section 8 voucher, discussed the difficulty of doing this while lacking a stable address, describing, "Right now I'm waiting for Section 8 housing. How – that's a very important letter that when I get that I need to be making that appointment. If I have nowhere to mail this very important document, how am I gonna know?"

Some discussed using the address of a friend or family member to receive mail or other documents, as this could provide individuals more assurance that their mail would be sent to a reliable place. However, doing this required that individuals had a trusted individual who would be willing to receive their mail and keep it safe, and that they take time out of their day to pick it up. Brandon, for example, had his mail sent to his sister's house. He explained, "They [housing authority] said the waiting list is a year to two. But they will be writing me within – throughout the year. And they looking for me to respond because if I don't respond I get off the list. So all my mail goes to my sister house. That's a definite. I can always use her address...every day I go there look for the mail."

Psychological Costs

As individuals' time at a shelter neared its end, many experienced stress and frustration when figuring out their next steps. While resources such as case managers or housing navigators were often in place at shelters or other service locations, these resources were not always effective in helping individuals to figure out their future housing situations. This was partially due to a lack of housing options, and also the limited funding and support for social services making it so case managers often had caseloads which were difficult to manage. This left many participants feeling as though they did not have adequate support and needed to figure their next steps out on their own. Ryan, for example, described this sentiment, "So, I been talking with my case manager and he told me that he can help me with housing, with jobs and stuff like that. He never do that. So, I have to do it by my own."

The shortage of affordable housing options and financial assistance (i.e., vouchers) not only made it difficult for case managers to be able to effectively offer support, but also caused participants to feel frustrated and powerless in their ability to actually transition back to permanent housing. Individuals discussed having to simply move from one shelter program to another due to the lack of alternatives, despite taking all the right steps and doing all that was required of them. Cora described this feeling, stating, "I did, you know, whatever was, uh, you know, assigned for the day, little groups or NA, AA, in-house meetings; I did all my paperwork or whatever. I cleaned my room, all my chores. There's always chores and things, you know? That's anywhere you stay in life. So that teaches you discipline and things but, um, after there was no, like, housing... You know, um, as far as, like, they were like, 'You can go to another shelter.'"

Even for those who were able to successfully apply to programs to receive a voucher, many still experienced stress and frustration when trying to use it. For example, when Cora did

eventually make to number two on the waitlist for a housing voucher, she described her frustration from trying to determine if and where she would be able to use it. She stated, “For the housing voucher, so whether – I guess whether they [apartment building] accept me or not I have to write to maybe go somewhere that accepts Section 8. I don't really – I'm still, like, lost about it...the housing, uh, locations that they were sending me to were having a problem with my criminal background, quote/unquote. This is what they told me. So we can't accept you. Your credit – they said, ‘We could always work around that but criminally history we don't want those type of tenants in our building,’ and I guess they had the discretion, but then again, I have rights as a tenant and I have rights, uh, for public housing.”

Discussion

Our analysis illustrates how individuals’ experience of administrative burden negatively impacted their ability to access and engage with homeless assistance services. These burdens, experienced as learning, compliance, and psychological costs, created challenges for individuals at all stages of their engagement with services; at the onset of homelessness, when actively engaged with services, and when trying to transition between locations.

Learning Costs

Individuals experienced learning costs due to the difficulty of learning about available services, eligibility criteria, application processes, and the formal and informal rules in place at the various programs. Many of these learning costs were rooted in the scattered and patchwork nature of homeless assistance services, as this information tended to differ from program to program. Our data suggests that individuals experience of learning costs tended to decrease as they spent more time navigating the system and gained knowledge through trial and error.

Our findings suggest that learning costs may prolong individuals' experience of homelessness. At the onset of homelessness, individuals' uncertainty pertaining to service availability, eligibility, and application processes may have delayed their initial engagement with services. Additionally, once individuals were engaged with services or trying to transition between locations, having to seek out further knowledge regarding rules of new programs caused discontinuities in individuals' access to shelter and support services such as case management, healthcare, or mental health services. This may have further prolonged participants' experiences of homelessness, as a lack of continuous relationship with service providers or access to shelter may have made it more difficult for individuals to move to permanent housing.

Compliance Costs

Compliance costs arose for individuals due to the labor involved in completing tasks necessary to apply to and transition between programs (i.e., providing documentation, completing 2-1-1 assessments, obtaining referrals, completing application forms) and in following rules when engaged with programs, such as meeting curfews, abiding by drug and alcohol policies, and meeting with case managers. Additionally, individuals often had to go beyond what was officially required of them to ensure service providers were also complying with all that was required of them, further adding to individuals' experience of compliance costs.

Complying with all rules and requirements for programs was often extremely challenging for individuals. Previous research has documented how individuals' difficulties complying with the rules and requirements for various social welfare programs impacts program enrollment, and how a reduction in compliance costs for programs such as SNAP (Ratcliffe, McKernan, & Finegold, 2007) and Medicaid (Leininger, 2011) led to increases in program uptake. This suggests that compliance costs may also lead to under-engagement with homeless assistance services, and

that reducing these costs may increase service engagement. In addition, our findings also highlight how compliance costs may be experienced more profoundly for those with the least resources. When experiencing homelessness, individuals often lack consistent access to many of the resources needed to complete required tasks, such as phones, internet, and electricity, and may be disproportionately constrained in terms of their access to transportation and ability to schedule their own time. This, in turn, may make it even more challenging for individuals to complete the already difficult tasks associated with enrolling and engaging with programs, further reducing engagement.

Our findings also shed light on potential unintended consequences of homeless service rules and requirements, particularly with regard to eligibility requirements. For example, some programs require that individuals experience homelessness for a set amount of time before they are able to qualify for housing assistance. While rules such as this are often in place to “confirm” someone’s homeless status, it can result in individuals having to remain homeless for longer than they would have otherwise and to have to document that they have been homeless for the required period of time. Another example pertains to HUD’s definition of homeless. According to their definition, those who are at imminent risk of homelessness are only able to receive services if they can provide documentation to prove their “at risk” status (HUD Exchange, n.d.). Often without such documentation, many individuals are therefore forced to become homeless before they are able to access services. Both examples highlight how processes in place may require individuals’ situations to worsen before it can improve, thus prolonging and exacerbating the negative impacts of homelessness.

Psychological Costs

Individuals experienced psychological costs due to the stigma associated with homeless assistance programs, stress and frustration from navigating and engaging with programs, fear associated with a lack of safety, and the loss of privacy, autonomy, stability individuals faced.

Our data suggest that the stigma experienced from engaging with homeless assistance services may also limit individuals' utilization of services. Research examining the impact of stigma on the uptake of other government programs has found it to reduce engagement (Lasky-Fink & Linos, 2022). For example, in a study examining access to food stamps, researchers found that nearly half of participants who were eligible for food stamps did not apply to the program. They cited reasons such as not wanting to be seen shopping with food stamps, not wanting people to know they needed financial assistance, or not wanting to go to the welfare office as reasons for not applying (Bartlett et al., 2004). Therefore, the stigma and judgment associated with accessing homeless assistance services may be contributing to similar outcomes.

Our study also suggests that the discretionary nature of service provision, coupled with the shortage of both homeless assistance services and permanent housing options, may further contribute to psychological costs by eliciting a sense of powerlessness in individuals. Powerlessness can be defined as the feeling that arises from the general experience of lacking control over a situation, an important context, or a significant aspect of one's life (Goodman et al., 2009). When navigating homeless assistance services, many individuals described that despite following all rules, doing all that was required, and completing all necessary steps to move to permanent housing, they were not able to obtain this desired result for reasons that were typically not clear. This caused many individuals to feel as though their actions did not truly have an impact on their outcomes, ultimately causing them to experience of a sense powerlessness over their

housing situation as a result. This experience of powerlessness may further be connected to individuals' experience of other mental health issues, such as depression, anxiety, and extreme stress, as powerlessness has been found to mediate the relationship between poverty and these outcomes (Goodman et al., 2009).

Policy Recommendations

The results from this study suggest that individuals' experience of administrative burden has negative consequences for engagement in homeless assistance services. To reduce individuals' experience of burden, one step that can be taken is streamlining the processes used to verify applicants' personal information to enroll in services. For example, the Social Security program, which also maintains strict administrative rules and documentation requirements for enrollment, simplified the process for collecting applicants' earnings by enabling the state to use governmental data systems and information technology to collect applicants' information. This not only allowed the state to remove the burden of providing this information from applicants, but also enables the program achieve a near zero error rate (Moynihan, Herd & Harvey, 2014). Providers of homeless assistance services should look for places where this can be done within their application and enrollment processes as well. One possibility is having providers check within HMIS' database to determine if someone has resided at a shelter previously, and if so, exempting them from having to provide documentation to verify their identity again to access services.

Another step that can be taken to reduce individuals' experience of burden is establishing better procedures and coordination for when individuals are transitioning out of institutions such as prisons, jails, inpatient hospitals units, or drug treatment programs, to ensure there is continuity in their access to housing. For example, officials from Salt Lake City developed a dashboard called "Housing Connect" to identify and connect incarcerated individuals who were at risk of

homelessness upon their release from jail with permanent housing when transitioning back to their community (The National Reentry Resource Center, 2022). Establishing similar procedures nationally can help to reduce the burdens individuals face when going through similar transitions, as it absolves individuals from needing to singlehandedly learn about what services are available (learning costs), complete laborious administrative requirements (compliance costs), and experience significant stress related to accomplishing these tasks (psychological costs).

Finally, the results from this study highlight the need for greater investment in affordable housing and rental assistance. Many of the costs individuals' experienced were rooted in homeless assistance services and housing being a scarce resource, and thus, needing to be rationed in a way that was often opaque and confusing. By ensuring all eligible individuals are able to access the resources they need, the state can ultimately serve to reduce the learning, compliance and psychological costs individuals experience as a result of administrative burden.

Limitations and Areas for Future Research

One limitation of this study is that it only captures individuals' experience of navigating the landscape of homeless assistance services in New Haven, CT. While individuals' experiences in New Haven are likely similar to those in other locations, there are undoubtedly differences in the way homeless assistance services are provided across areas. This may cause individuals living in other locations to experience challenges that are different than those in New Haven, or for some of the challenges described in this study to be mitigated. Future work exploring individuals' experience of administrative burden when navigating homeless assistance services in other localities can therefore help to broaden our understanding of this experience.

Furthermore, our study only captures the perspectives of those who personally experienced homelessness at some point during the study period. Although our study chose to focus on

individuals' personal experiences, homelessness has wide-ranging effects and impacts many individuals beyond just those with firsthand experience. Exploring the ways homeless assistance services' administrative burdens may have spillover effects into lives of others, such as friends or family members who are providing informal assistance to individuals experiencing homelessness, should be an avenue for future research as well.

Conclusion

This study responded to a gap in the literature by exploring the experiences of 28 individuals as they navigated the complex web of homeless assistance and related services in New Haven, Connecticut. Our findings reinforce that the learning, compliance, and psychologist costs that arose from homeless assistance services' administrative burdens may lead to individuals' underutilization of services, possibly prolonging their experience of homelessness. Further, our findings highlight how these costs may reinforce existing inequities within society as they tend to disproportionately impact those in greatest need. This study emphasizes the need to reduce burdens where possible, through actions such as streamlining enrollment processes and establishing better coordination to ensure individuals' continuity in access to services. Finally, it also points to the need for greater investment in homeless assistance and housing resources nationwide, so all who require assistance are able to receive it.

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