FROM THE GROUND UP: CONNECTIONS AND CONTRADICTIONS WITHIN THE UNITED STATES HOUSING MOVEMENT

by

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This thesis investigates why strategic interactions between tenant and unhoused organizations are important, and how this can translate into stronger solidarity networks within the United States housing movement. Because tenants and the unhoused seem to occupy different modes of shelter, they are seen as disparate groups of people. The boundaries demarcating tenancy and homelessness, however, are more obscure than what this assumption suggests. Since working class tenants and their unhoused neighbors are subject to similar experiences of housing precarity, they have a lot to gain from establishing solidarity with each other. Using interviews with organizations from Los Angeles, Portland, and Eugene, I find that tenant and unhoused groups who have a large number of weak ties are more likely to establish relationships with each other. Organizations that share tactical priorities and have similar leadership structures are also better equipped to participate in a shared network. The goal of this thesis is to investigate how tenant and unhoused organizations navigate these collaborative relationships as they respond to the contemporary housing crisis on a local and national scale.

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Introduction

The morning of March 24, 2021 had barely started before dozens of Los Angeles police officers dramatically entered the Echo Park Lake neighborhood. To some homeowners in the area, it was likely just another Wednesday. But for the encampment residents and their activist supporters, that day marked the start of a heightened standoff between those sheltered by the lake and the people that wanted the park cleared.

By the start of 2021, the encampment at Echo Park Lake had transformed from an arena of scattered tents to a mostly autonomous site of refuge for unsheltered residents facing the worst of the pandemic. This encampment connected housed and unhoused comrades in struggle and fostered the development of a robust mutual aid infrastructure supported by local activist groups like Street Watch Los Angeles. So when the park was threatened by eviction that March, members of the LA Tenants Union, Street Watch LA, People's City Council LA, and KTown for All immediately came together in a protracted defense of the encampment and its residents.

Activists from these four organizations joined other community members in protesting the sweep and protected the area from destruction for several days.[1] While doing so, they faced threats and harassment from the Los Angeles Police Department who violently attempted to disperse them.[2] This tense standoff between community members and the police garnered widespread social media attention but ended rather

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[1] Jamie Loftus, "The Fight for Echo Park Lake: Fences and Neighbors," *Knock LA*, March 25, 2021. https://knock-la.com/echo-park-lake-march-24-sweep-fence-mitch-ofarrell/.

[2] Benjamin Oreskes et. al, "Crackdown at Echo Park homeless encampment begins as LAPD moves in, clashes with protestors," *LA Times*, March 24, 2021. https://www.latimes.com/california/story/2021-03-24/protest-echo-park-cleanup-homeless-encampment.

abruptly with the clearing of the encampment and its residents. The kinds of demonstrations that happened at Echo Park Lake are not uncommon around the nation. What is interesting about this specific case, however, is that it yielded positive social network connections and precipitated the development of Unhoused Tenants Against Carceral Housing as an autonomous homeless organizing group.

This thesis project is inspired by the Echo Park Lake defense and other radical organizing efforts occurring across the nation. Organizational relationships between tenants and their unhoused neighbors tend to be characterized by weak ties and complex power dynamics. These connections can be strengthened through the pursuit of shared tactics and goals grounded in mutually dependent success. If constructed strategically, solidarity networks can also generate political and material advantages for both types of organizations. Analyzing the composition of these local networks offers important insights into the direction of the housing justice movement on a national scale. My research aims to achieve a better understanding of how these networks can form in addition to the kinds of organizing strategies they use today.

Background Context

Defining the Housing Movement

For the purposes of this research, I define the housing movement as a collective and combative effort unified around the pursuit, defense, and maintenance of secure and permanent shelter. The pursuit of these goals, however, relates to a larger and more complex political struggle that encompasses a diversity of tactics and goals. The wide breadth of this movement space also means that tenant and homeless organizations can operate within the umbrella of housing politics while holding disparate political aims or strategic directions. Because this research focuses on the composition of housing organizations and the networks they participate in, I will preface my discussion by providing clarity on several ambiguous or contentious terms.

Tenancy and homelessness are two such terms with particularly complicated meanings. Both experiences are similar in that they describe the act of occupying a temporary residential space owned by someone else. The privacy and stability of tenancy, however, is what distinguishes it from homelessness. Federal definitions of homelessness primarily refer to the conditions of individuals who live in shelters or spaces not intended for regular nighttime residence.[3] Because homelessness is an unpredictable and vulnerable ordeal, the terms of tenancy are seen as more secure. Lease agreements contractually obligate tenants to pay rent to their landlord for a mutually established duration of time. When evictions happen, landlords typically

[3] "Mckinney-Vento Act," 2006, Washington, D.C: National Coalition for the Homeless.

identify a violation of this agreement—be it nonpayment of rent or a behavioral infraction.

This assumption of residential stability is accurate for most renters. Tenants who have disposable income to spare after paying their rent, food, utilities, and other basic needs do not worry about eviction and generally never need to. But for many working-class households, housing precarity is a reality that remains alarmingly present in their daily lives. One bounced paycheck, natural disaster, or personal crisis can trigger an eviction that leads them to homelessness. For this reason, the main differences between tenancy and homelessness are mainly visual in nature. Many experiences of housing precarity are hidden from view because homelessness is most commonly understood as unsheltered residence on the street.

The changing terrain of housing politics has paved the way for new characterizations of homelessness to emerge as well. Terms like "unhoused" or "houseless" are becoming more popular among activists, who adopt these descriptors as replacements for the more conventionally used "homeless." The Los Angeles Tenants Union recently suggested an alternative interpretation of tenancy that encompasses anyone and everyone experiencing housing precarity.[4] The utility of this vocabulary is a subject ripe for debate, but that is not the focal point of my project. For the sake of clarity in this thesis, I will be using both homeless and unhoused interchangeably, with the latter primarily used to describe people.

[4] Tracy Jeanne Rosenthal, "101 Notes on the LA Tenants Union (You Can't Do Politics Alone)," in Housing Justice in Unequal Cities, edited by Ananya Roy and Hilary Malson, 51-59, Institute on Inequality and Democracy at the University of California, Los Angeles, 2019.

A Brief History of Tenant and Unhoused Organizing in the United States

The history of tenant and unhoused organizing in the United States is a story about power, violence, and resilience. This narrative of conflict describes how seemingly disparate efforts among tenants and their unhoused neighbors actually operate within the scope of a long and protracted struggle against the production of housing for profit. The origin and development of the American housing movement is rooted in this struggle and its relationship to various surges of tenant and unhoused activism.

My historical analysis of the housing movement begins with the ebb and flow of tenant organizing efforts during the 20th and 21st centuries. The first wave of tenant activism started in the 1920s. This struggle was primarily led by working-class tenants, who mobilized against deteriorating housing and labor conditions induced by the aftermath of World War I, and later, the Great Depression. A Communist-led anti-eviction effort arose from the ashes of this economic disaster, followed by campaigns for tenement repairs, public housing reform, and rent control organized by liberal organizations and other urban activists on the Left. Black and Jewish tenant organizations in New York played an important role in bridging tenant networks beyond the lines of race. The militant tenant organizing efforts seen in the Great Depression peaked soon after and began to fizzle out by the mid-1940s.[5]

Tenant organizing began to pick up speed again during the 1960s, in conjunction with various social movements. Housing advocates found allyship with civil rights

[5] Mark Naison, "From Eviction Resistance to Rent Control: Tenant Activism in the Great Depression," accessed April 10, 2022, http://www.tenant.net/Community/history/hist03a.html.

activists, feminists, and a scattered number of students organizing on university grounds. The momentum gained from this second wave was followed by a brief crescendo of activism that began in the late 1970s and continued through the 1980s. This third wave of tenant organizing was dominated by middle-class renters, who focused more of their attention on operating within the judicial system.[6]

Although the history of homelessness in the United States goes back to the late 19th century,[7] the chronology of homeless organizing is much more recent. Mobilization efforts around urban homelessness rose in tandem with the third wave of tenant activism and were initially led by earnest homeowners who had more time, money, and political capital to leverage on behalf of their unhoused peers. This dependency on housed advocates for support continued until the 1980s, where groups like the National Union of the Homeless took the lead in orienting their work around unhoused activists themselves and their material interests.[8]

Formed in 1983, The National Union of the Homeless demarcated themselves from other housing organizations at the time by explicitly distinguishing the priorities of unhoused people—who were often poor and from communities of color—from those who were not. At its peak, the National Union of the Homeless had 25 local chapters and 35,000 members across the nation and were emphatic that access to housing should not be constrained by perceptions of deservedness. After a brief decline and subsequent

[6] Peter Dreier, "The Status of Tenants in the United States," *Social Problems 30*, no. 2 (1982). https://doi.org/10.2307/800517.
[7] Emily Tumpson Molina, *Housing America: Issues and Debates (The Metropolis and Modern Life*), New York: Routledge, 2017.
[8] Ben Holtzman, "When the Homeless Took Over," *Shelterforce*, October 11, 2019. https://shelterforce.org/2019/10/11/when-the-homeless-took-over/.

organizational hiatus in 1993, the National Union of the Homeless reestablished its network in 2019 and is still active today.

The fourth and most recent wave of tenant organizing intersects more intimately with homeless advocacy as both developed at the start of the 21st century. Like the first wave, much of the work done now seems to be motivated by extreme periods of economic recession—like the 2008 financial crash or COVID-19 pandemic. Threads of third-wave tenant advocacy efforts also seem to inform this organizing effort as activists continue to push for legal reform and better tenant rights.[9] The tactics used in the third wave inform the dominant trajectory of the housing movement today, but smaller and more concentrated surges of tenant and unhoused activism are gaining traction too. For example, notable tenant organizing efforts in the past decade have come from groups like KC Tenants, Stomp Out Slumlords, Houston Tenants Union, Omaha Tenants United, and the Philly Tenants Union. Prominent unhoused organizing wins have also catapulted groups like the Western Regional Advocacy Project in the Bay Area and Picture the Homeless in New York into local and regional acclaim.

[9] Hannah Black, "Tenant Unions for the Future." *Dissent Magazine*, August 13, 2020. https://www.dissentmagazine.org/online_articles/tenant-unions-for-the-future.

Research Design

Theoretical Frameworks

Among academics, debates about housing and homelessness are complex and hold interdisciplinary roots. The results of these intersections culminate in a rich scholastic discourse refined by sociologists, economists, public administrators, and political scientists. My research rests on the foundations of this literature and attempts to bridge these connections through the study of spatial politics, organizational theory, and social networks.

Spatial politics scholars often emphasize the value of analyzing social movements through a lens of geography. Because social movements operate in contested spaces, they have the power to change them or create more space of their own. In his analysis of geography and social movements, Routledge discusses how movements transform physical places into sites of conflict where social structures and resistance efforts intersect.[10] These sites of conflict can scale up or down as movements encounter favorable or hostile political territories.

The study of geography and its relationship to social movements is particularly important in urban settings. Cities are natural incubators of relationships between individuals, organizations, and networks within a movement. Urban environments foster the development of complex ideas and diverse organizational philosophies—both of which are important for local movement building. For example, Nicholls argues that "the practice of mobilizing across issue areas and geographical scales creates

10 Paul Routledge, "Geography and Social Movements," *The Oxford Handbook of Social Movements*, (2014): 427. https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199678402.013.40.

opportunities for militants to learn about other issues and discover how these issues are equally responsible for determining the livelihood conditions of their constituent groups."[11] The production of high-quality resources in densely populated areas makes the prospect of coalition building more accessible to organizations as well. Tenant and homeless organizations situated in the same city may operate in overlapping neighborhoods or have campaigns with shared demands or political targets.

Deeper analysis of social movements and the organizations that comprise them is challenging, if not impossible, when definitions of these groups themselves are unclear. The concept of a social movement organization can be broken down into four different elements: membership, rules, hierarchy, and the act of monitoring and sanctioning.[12] The utility and relevance of these elements to the broader organization changes as political and economic conditions fluctuate over time. While most organizations consist of concrete memberships, rules, hierarchies, and disciplinary practices, fully formed structures are not a prerequisite for successful mobilization. When groups are constructed, however, their long-term viability depends on the balance of these elements in the broader organizational unit. The housing organizations I analyze in this thesis are structured in ways that reflect some, if not all, of the elements described here. My analysis focuses on each group's relationship to two of these elements: membership and hierarchy.

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11 Walter Nicholls, "The Urban Question Revisited: The Importance of Cities for Social Movements," *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research 32*, no. 4 (2008): 848. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2427.2008.00820.x.

12 Frank den Hond, Frank G.A. de Bakker, Nikolai Smith, "Social Movements and Organizational Analysis," *The Oxford Handbook of Social Movements*, (2014): 219. https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199678402.013.41.

Social movements are dynamic in that their form and function are highly sensitive to the political, economic, and sociocultural conditions of the moment. Organizations who enter tentative relationships within a movement space strengthen these networks by producing reciprocal connections in them. Diani and Mische paint a picture of social movements as composed of relational and interactive components in the collective action process. Through network ties, members can develop relationships within and outside their organization through several different avenues: direct relationships, co-membership in different organizations, co-presence at events, and shared projects or practices.[13] The establishment of these ties by means of ideological or tactical proximity also reveal that organizational relationships are just as important as personal ones. Social movements are not just aggregations of individual elements—they are intimate networks unified by shared people, organizations, or interests.

Because social movement networks are relationally oriented, inferences about their size and strength can be gathered from their ability to facilitate strong and weak relationships. Mark Granovetter, who is known for his work in economic sociology and social network theory, provides additional clarity on the importance of weak ties in and between organizations. Granovetter argues that informal or acquaintance-like connections between individual actors adds value to the greater network by reaching people previously inaccessible by formal or more intimate ones. Relationships that resemble this dynamic are important because they help expand the breadth and depth of the social network.[14]

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13 Mario Diani and Ann Mische, "Network Approaches and Social Movements," *The Oxford Handbook of Social Movements*, (2015). https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199678402.013.9.
14 Mark S. Granovetter, "The Strength of Weak Ties," *American Journal of Sociology 78*, no. 6 (1973): xx. http://www.jstor.org/stable/2776392.

Weak ties also play a significant role in the formation of social networks in urban neighborhoods. In his study on the formation and maintenance of neighborhood networks, Hays emphasizes the importance of place-based coalitions in racially and economically segregated communities. He argues that informal interactions between working class residents of a neighborhood are critical in terms of trust-building, and that geographically based neighborhood associations exist as mechanisms for these residents to collectively advocate for their interests.[15]

Social networks operating with robust levels of political and tactical unity can be quite powerful. Achieving this level of unity, however, becomes challenging when participating organizations join the network for different reasons. Political scientist David Siegel stresses the importance of studying network structure because rigid arrangements can constrain organizations that shift their level of involvement in the coalition. His model of social network structure explores how physical size, number of weak ties, and the presence of elites impacts the extent to which organizations actively participate.[16]

Formal and informal organizations are critical to social movements as well and are featured prominently in public administration literature. In their research on collaborative governance, Ansell and Gash find network building is an iterative process that depends on the progressive development of communication, trust, commitment, and

15 Richard Allen Hays, "Neighborhood Networks, Social Capital, and Political Participation: The Relationships Revisited," *Journal of Urban Affairs 37*, no. 2 (2014): xx. https://doi.org/10.1111/juaf.12137.

16 David A. Siegel, "Social Networks and Collective Action," *American Journal of Political Science 53*, no. 1 (2009): 122. http://www.jstor.org/stable/25193871.

mutual understanding.[17] Historically contentious relationships, incentives for stakeholder participation, and power and resource imbalances are several key factors that determine the outcomes of collaborative governance. These three characteristics are particularly important because they appear in my interviews as potential obstacles to network building within the housing movement.

My scholarship presents a deeper understanding of social networks within the housing movement, particularly in terms of their composition and growth. There is a wealth of scholarship on social movements and networks in political science and public administration research, but literature on contemporary connections between homeless and tenant organizing groups is much scarcer. My thesis explores how these networks can form, resolve disputes, and ultimately sustain the accelerating momentum of the housing movement at large.

Case Studies

One does not need to look far to see the housing struggle in action. This thesis is framed around various tenant and unhoused organizing efforts developing in California (Los Angeles) and Oregon (Portland and Eugene). I chose to analyze three West Coast cities due to their geographical proximity and shared policy responses to the national housing crisis in the initial wake of the pandemic. The slow onset of gentrification in each city also means that all three are characterized by skyrocketing costs of living, enclaves of working-class displacement, and an increasingly visible presence of unsheltered homelessness. These trends are important because they show how similar

17 Chris Ansell and Alison Gash, "Collaborative Governance in Theory and Practice," *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory 18,* no. 4 (2008): 551-552. https://doi.org/10.1093/jopart/mum032.

housing dynamics materialize in Los Angeles, Portland, and Eugene, and persist despite variations in city size. Even though there are size and demographic differences that impact the organizing conditions in each location, this project uncovers important organizational trends and potential pathways for solidarity building beyond city limits.

To understand how tenant and homeless organizing efforts developed within each case study, a reasonable comprehension of their material conditions is necessary. As the largest and most populous case study, Los Angeles is home to millions of residents who occupy a complex political and social terrain. The city's dense population, rich cultural history, and reputation as a hub for several major industries create a perfect formula for rapid economic change. The rise of gentrification in Los Angeles during the twentieth century led to the formation of ethnic enclaves, which are primarily composed of working-class immigrants and multi-generational residents of color.[18] Extreme wealth disparities in the city also mean that Los Angeles is a residential setting for many unhoused people. There are several homeless encampments situated around different neighborhoods like Skid Row and Echo Park. Despite these conditions, the city's expansive geography and clustered cultural composition fosters conditions that are favorable for community building and strategic struggle. Several groups have either formed or continued to organize around housing in the past year. These organizations include the Los Angeles Tenants Union, Street Watch LA, Unhoused Tenants Against Carceral Housing, KTown for All, and Defend North East Los Angeles.

18 Michael Liu and Kim Geron, "Changing Neighborhood: Ethnic Enclaves and the Struggle for Social Justice," *Social Justice 35*, no. 2 (2008). http://www.jstor.org/stable/29768486.

The housing crisis in Portland is somewhat similar to Los Angeles, albeit much smaller in scale. Five years ago, Portland was ranked as the fourth fastest gentrifying city in the United States.[19] Pockets of Northeast and Southeast Portland still remain concentrated along lines of poverty and serve as landing zones for recently displaced Black and brown households. Homelessness is a significant problem in Portland as well, and as such, has an observable presence in the city. Networks between unhoused people are limited because, like Los Angeles, most of the encampments are loosely assembled around town. Portland is unique in that it is home to many housing organizations active around the city. Portland Tenants United, Community Alliance of Tenants, Don't Evict PDX, Houseless Radicals Collective, Stop the Sweeps PDX, North Portland Tenants Collective, and Right 2 Survive all operate within this organizing space.

Gentrification is an issue also taking Eugene by storm, but the shape of this phenomenon looks slightly different from the other two cities. Quantifying this process is challenging to do without robust public data, but by and large, the West University and Whiteaker neighborhoods are two areas currently facing rising rents and high turnover rates. Eugene is unique from Portland and Los Angeles in that it is significantly impacted by the presence of higher education institutions. The University of Oregon, Bushnell University, and other local colleges have driven a process commonly known as "studentification." Studentification facilitates an artificial entry of wealth into historic neighborhoods and produces tensions between students and long-term Eugene residents who stay in the area for more than four years. In the past ten

19 Homes & Gardens of the Northwest, "Portland is 4th fastest gentrifying U.S. city, says Realtor.com," *OregonLive*, February 2, 2017. https://www.oregonlive.com/hg/2017/02/portland_gentrification_4_real.html.

years, trendy and expensive apartment complexes—like the 515, 2125, and 959 buildings on Franklin Boulevard—have popped up around West University.

Like the other two case studies, Eugene is a city facing considerable levels of homelessness. As of Summer 2021, most of the people experiencing homelessness were situated in one of two large encampments located in Washington Jefferson Park or 13th Avenue and Chambers Street. Both spaces have been swept since, so those residents have had to relocate to the surrounding area. Some are finding temporary shelter in the West University neighborhood, which poses interesting questions about the relationship between students and their new neighbors. Tenant and unhoused organizing efforts are starting to gain traction in Eugene with groups like the Springfield Eugene Tenants Association, Eugene Housing and Neighborhood Defense, and Stop the Sweeps Eugene mobilizing around housing in the city.

Data and Methodology

This thesis is a qualitative research endeavor. My conclusions are extrapolated from several in-depth interviews I conducted with tenant and unhoused organizers from each city. Beginning in Fall 2021, I reached out to a total of sixteen different tenant and unhoused groups. I received responses from ten and facilitated interviews with one representative from each group that lasted for 60-90 minutes. Because there were representational imbalances between established tenant and unhoused organizations, my goal was to have at least one tenant and unhoused organization in each case study.

After identifying the organizations I wanted to contact, I conducted some preliminary research on the public-facing dimensions of each group. I constructed an informal database of official websites, local news articles, and other sources of public

information scattered on the Internet. For each organization, I searched for points of unity documents, breakdowns of horizontal hierarchies, and high-profile campaigns. In synthesizing my notes, I paid attention to the level of social media activity each group seemed to have and the language they used on these platforms.

My findings from this initial search were inconclusive. Aside from Stop the Sweeps Eugene, every organization had a website that detailed items like mission statements, recent victories, and contact information. All of them have Facebook, Twitter, or Instagram accounts where public communications are posted on a regular basis. There was little consistency, however, in terms of what each organization posted on these platforms. The only trend I saw across all social media accounts was the frequent posting of infographic slides on Instagram. Beyond this, content output seemed to vary per group and largely depended on the types of political campaigns active at that time. I conducted this preliminary research before I began my outreach because I wanted to first understand how these housing advocates characterized their work to the public. This background knowledge allowed me to use the interview time to inquire more about the inner workings of the organization.

My outreach efforts were motivated by a desire to connect with individuals who would be able to share more information about the origins and current workings of their organization. I conducted semi-structured interviews with each housing organization between September 2021 and February 2022. I used a snowball sampling methodology after finding that many organizers in certain cities had contact with organizers from other ones. All but three interviews were conducted over Zoom or phone call, with the remaining ones completed in-person and documented with a tape recorder. During the

informed consent process, I offered each interviewee the option of being identified by their actual name or a pseudonym. Some opted to use an alias, which I have honored in the construction of this written analysis.

Navigating Connections and Contradictions

Driving Questions

While the results from my preliminary research gave me a better understanding of each organization's online presence, I was still left with questions about how these groups engaged with their own membership and each other. These knowledge gaps informed my interview questions, which sought to answer two driving questions: First, do collaborative networks exist between tenant and unhoused groups? And second, what would each population gain from participating in such a relationship?

My anticipated findings were shaped by the first impressions I gathered from the initial research investigation. From this data—which is presented more extensively in the Primary Findings section of this chapter—I determined that each organization in my study mobilized around one of three different aims: principles, people, or community. These aims come from my understanding of each group's mission statement and tactical vision.

In developing the parameters for this framework, I hypothesized that groups who construct group norms around shared principles have an implicit respect for and deference to organizational structure. This orientation often materializes in a strict adherence to structured leadership or points of unity. Alternatively, a focus on people emphasizes the importance of membership and their role in developing the organization's strategic directions. Lastly, organizations that place value on community use extensive outreach efforts to discover and politicize the interests of the people they are attempting to mobilize. This analytic schema contextualized the conversations I had in my interviews and the conclusions I extrapolated from them. I found that identifying

each organization's strategic direction helped me understand their political orientation and interest in collaborative opportunities.

Interview Results

Los Angeles

Due to its population size, complex geography, and diverse residential demographic, Los Angeles is home to a considerable number of housing organizations and smaller neighborhood initiatives. The city's reputation as an urban hub ripe for organizing explains why groups like the LA Tenants Union, Street Watch LA, and Unhoused Tenants Against Carceral Housing have gained traction over the past year.

The LA Tenants Union (LATU) began in 2015 as a community research project organized by a local collective called the School of Echoes. What started as small workshops and pop-up events gradually turned into something bigger once the group realized how much of an issue housing was for their members across the city. The origins of LATU stem from these outreach efforts as organizers progressively met and onboarded more supporters. After about a year, growing numbers of LATU members indicated that there was a need to expand into additional neighborhoods. Organizers began to mobilize local tenant associations from there.

LATU members are driven by a commitment to strengthening tenant power through mutual aid and direct action.[20] The organization itself is structured horizontally, with sixteen different neighborhood-based "locals" that operate fairly autonomously. Because these locals are geographically oriented, they are oftentimes composed of

20 "LA Tenants Union." Accessed March 1, 2022. https://latenantsunion.org/en/.

tenants who live in the same building who organize with each other on their own terms. Since there is no central leadership within the union, independent committees take on long-term projects that exist externally from the locals.

Over the past several years, LATU has experimented with different tactics in their advocacy against landlords. These actions range from social media campaigns to organized rallies at the homes of landlords themselves. Sasha, a LATU member who has been in the organization since 2016, described the kinds of tactics used in her local and their evolution over time. “There has been a pivot from antagonistic activist work to more proactive work,” she says. “It can be really exhausting to critique the status quo all the time when you aren’t also doing anything celebratory or joyful.” Sasha explained to me that most of the organizing done in LATU now revolves around community building. Instead of redirecting tenants to the LA Housing Authority or other government agencies, LATU takes matters into its own hands. Completing household repairs and organizing produce drops are ways for the organization to turn inward and use its own resources to generate better relationships between tenants.

Street Watch Los Angeles (Street Watch) is another housing organization that has gained popularity in recent years. Although their organizing takes on a variety of different forms, Street Watch is best known for their work in spotlighting the predatory relationship between law enforcement and the unhoused. Through livestreamed videos of police antagonism towards unhoused people, Street Watch members expose and politicize these abuses of power to their social media followers. Street Watch began as a project inspired by the LA Community Action Network, who facilitated a cop watch program in the Skid Row neighborhood. Because the purpose of Street Watch is to

monitor cops and other agents of the state, its membership consists of both tenant and unhoused activists.

In addition to law enforcement, another target of these organizers is section 41.18 of the Los Angeles Municipal Code. According to this statute, unhoused folks are prohibited from sitting or sleeping in the street and sidewalk in any way. This anti-camping ordinance not only criminalizes the experience of unsheltered homelessness by making any form of street occupation illegal—it violently disrupts the types of social infrastructure built by unhoused people in encampments as well. I spoke to Kristina, one of the founding members of Street Watch, about the group's response to this legislation. Even though most of the LA city councilmembers are Democrats, Kristina argues that putting pressure on these elections this year is critical. "[City councilmembers] are displacing [unhoused people] from places where they might have had a connection to a caseworker," says Kristina. "We're trying to make sure that as the candidates ramp up their rhetoric of compassion, they will have to show that it's actually going to continue into the next year."

Like LA Tenants Union, Street Watch is fairly decentralized in structure. The organization has ten neighborhood locals that operate independently to monitor the police and other state actors. Their membership consists of about 100-200 active supporters that show up regularly to events, in addition to an estimated total of 5000 people on the official email list. Participation in the organization depends on each

member's immediate availability, so most activities are communicated through organized Signal threads.[21]

The last organization I interviewed from Los Angeles was a group called Unhoused Tenants Against Carceral Housing (UTACH). Formed in May 2021, UTACH's primary mission is to "fundamentally transform Project Roomkey and other forms of carceral shelter—that is, housing options where people are treated as if they are prisoners—offered to homeless people as an alternative to the street."[22]

I connected with a few UTACH organizers in my outreach process but ultimately spoke to Will, an unhoused organizer who got their start in activism through opposition to a program called Project Roomkey. This program was an initiative established in March 2020 as a statewide response to the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic.[23] In theory, Project Roomkey offered unhoused people a clean and safe space to quarantine or recover from COVID-19. In practice, the program sequestered and surveilled its participants through strict curfews and invasive room checks. Before securing a Project Roomkey unit, Will met some Street Watch activists who shared information, developed ideas, and encouraged them to begin strategizing with other participants of the program.

Most of the challenges UTACH experienced during its formative months revolve around various trust barriers related to homelessness. "It's not easy to organize unhoused people on the street, especially people who are there for different reasons,"

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[21] Signal is an encrypted instant messaging service. This mode of communication is supposedly more secure than other messaging platforms and is commonly used by activists in grassroots organizations.
22 "About: UTACH" Accessed March 1, 2022. https://utach.squarespace.com/about.
23 California Department of Social Services. "Project Roomkey/Housing and Homelessness COVID Response." Accessed March 2, 2022. https://www.cdss.ca.gov/inforesources/cdss-programs/housing-programs/project-roomkey.

Will explained. “Some people in Project Roomkey just didn’t want to be bothered. Or at least that’s what it felt like.” Overcoming these barriers is no easy feat. Relationship building takes time, patience, and a lot of political unity. Because UTACH formed last spring in response to Project Roomkey, their goals and demands were explicit. Their organizational structure, however, remains slightly unclear. The impending end of Project Roomkey means that other opportunities for UTACH are on the horizon though. Will views community gardening and other mutual aid projects as mechanisms of solidarity building between UTACH members and beyond.

Portland

As the largest city in Oregon, Portland is home to an eccentric assortment of people, places, and sidewalk bike racks. The eclectic tastes that now characterize Portland’s uniqueness also produce sharp waves of gentrification that lead to the displacement of vulnerable residents in and around historic neighborhoods. I interviewed several organizers from Portland Tenants United, Oregon Community Alliance of Tenants, Don’t Evict PDX, and the Houseless Radicals Collective, who continue to mobilize in response to these changes on a citywide scale.

Portland Tenants United (PTU) began in 2015 as one of the first tenant unions started in the city. Their work mainly focuses on legislative reform and issues pertaining to tenant rights. I interviewed Alli, a PTU member and at-large delegate on the organizing committee, who spoke emphatically about these strategies. “There are a lot of things that serve as barriers to housing access, whether that be credit, past evictions, or criminal history,” she says. “Our advocacy is centered around advocating for tenants who are the most vulnerable and ensuring that they have stable, safe, secure, and

affordable housing." In addition to their support for a Tenant Protection Ordinance, PTU recently developed an informal eviction resistance group for renters facing unlawful termination notices.

PTU divides its organizational labor into two separate channels: a primary organizing committee and several working groups. The committee is composed of at-large delegates like Alli who engage in strategy sessions. Working groups perform the other functions of the organization, from member engagement to legal research and collaborative outreach efforts. In our conversation, Alli defined PTU as a "volunteer-run" organization independent of grant funding from the state.

The Oregon Community Alliance of Tenants (CAT) is another Portland group whose work is motivated by efforts to educate, advocate for, and empower tenants. As an organization that has been around for over 25 years, CAT is most known for their Renters' Rights Hotline and Cancel the Rent Oregon campaign. The latter is an initiative that demands amnesty from all back-rent payments aggregated during the pandemic.

Prior to her involvement in CAT, Kim McCarty worked as a property manager before moving on to nonprofits and then eventually the City of Portland. Now the executive director of CAT, McCarty says that the organization is primarily driven from a standpoint of tenant education. "Most tenants don't understand what their rights are," she says. "It's a huge task to try to bring a higher level of awareness and education to over half the population of Oregon, because almost half of all Oregonians rent." To McCarty, one significant accomplishment for CAT is the passage of Senate Bill 608, which caps rent increases at the annual Consumer Price Index level plus 3%.

Compared to PTU and CAT, Don't Evict PDX (DEP) is a relatively new tenant group in Portland. Their primary goals emphasize the construction of tenant power through the prevention, delay, and harm reduction of evictions. I interviewed two DEP organizers about these goals and their perspectives on the impact of tenant advocacy. I first spoke to Cici, one of DEP's three founders, who shed some insight into the group's current activities and political directions. DEP members participate in a practice called courtwatching, where one or two representatives attend an eviction hearing and document its outcomes.

Through access to a database of eviction cases across the city, DEP also identifies people at risk of—or are already facing—the eviction process and contacts them with additional support in navigating that process. I had a conversation with Oak, another DEP organizer, about this outreach effort. He shared that housing scholars at Portland State University have a big role in supporting this practice, as they share access to the database and compensate DEP organizers for synthesizing it.

At the time I interviewed Cici and Oak, DEP had just gone through an internal restructuring process. These reorganization efforts consisted of the creation of internal documents, community agreements, and structures for conflict resolution. To Cici, DEP has substantively transformed from an affinity group of 6-8 people in 2020 to a rigidly structured organization of 20 people today.

The last group I interviewed from Portland was the Houseless Radicals Collective (HRC). This organization is composed entirely of unhoused activists who believe that unhoused people deserve the autonomy to act according to their own interests. Though the consistency of their organizing activities ebbs and flows, HRC has

successfully hosted a number of mutual aid events that range from meal and material distributions, potlucks, and needle exchanges.

Bernard and Keegan, two of the primary organizers in HRC, spoke to me about how the collective started. Grounded in anarchism and motivated by the summer 2020 uprising, HRC formed as a unit energized by radical political thought. They soon established an encampment in Southeast Portland and began to work with young, queer, and houseless activists in a nearby location. Even so, issues of organizational momentum were challenging to sustain. Sudden, frequent, and irregular sweeps are significant barriers to homeless organizing and hinder the maintenance of stable relationships. “When someone in a housed community is having a problem, the community often comes together and finds a way to help that person deal with it,” says Bernard. “But in order to do that, people have to be able to stay together and form a community. So when you come in and break up camps and make everybody go every which way, that’s not possible.”

Because HRC consists of just Bernard, Keegan, and a few other unhoused organizers at the moment, there is little need for articulation of an organizational structure. Most of the group’s public communications are done through Twitter, and the division of labor is very informal. What makes HRC stand out from the other organizations discussed thus far, however, is their explicit political orientation. Their short-term goals, immediate practices, and overall organizing philosophy are motivated by anarchist ideals.

Eugene

Despite its humble population size, Eugene is a city facing a housing crisis on par with several other major cities in the nation. I spoke to three groups about their work in navigating this crisis, starting first with the Springfield Eugene Tenant Association. I then met with a representative of Eugene Housing and Neighborhood Defense before concluding with Stop the Sweeps Eugene.

The Springfield Eugene Tenant Association (SETA) is a nonprofit primarily focused on educating Lane County renters on tenant rights. SETA is also known for its renter hotline, which offers advice and suggestions to tenants calling about landlord harassment or other general housing issues. The data from this hotline is aggregated in a hotline report published each month.

Beyond the hotline, SETA is composed of a team of volunteers and paid staff that work on fundraising, communications, nominating, and policy research committees. SETA is hierarchically structured with its ten-member Board of Directors at the helm and body of 30 or so volunteers below. The volunteer base is an eclectic composite of University of Oregon undergraduates, law students, and other long-term Eugene residents who contribute a few hours a week to hotline calls.

As one of its founders, Tim Morris has been involved with SETA from the very beginning. Morris now serves as the organization's Executive Director and spoke to me about the challenges SETA encountered before it achieved nonprofit status. "When we come to communities that have been largely ignored or unheard, we approach people who question our motives," he says. Transparency about the renter hotline through

frequent and public data reports seemed to assuage some of these concerns and legitimate SETA's presence in the community at large.

Eugene Housing and Neighborhood Defense (HAND) is another tenant organization whose efforts combat evictions and other exploitative practices by landlords. Grounded in the lived experiences of working-class tenants, HAND has canvassed hundreds of apartment buildings over the past year with the purpose of mobilizing tenants in the same complex or neighborhood. They view landlords, developers, and property management companies as class enemies and identify capitalism as the culprit of worker exploitation.

In learning more about HAND's tactics and strategies, I talked to a tenant organizer named Sage. "Instead of working within the systems that are made to exploit tenants, we organize against those systems," Sage says. "Collective organizing is the only way to build genuine tenant power." Connections to mass contacts across the West University and Whiteaker neighborhoods led HAND to several different conclusions. They found that landlords and property management companies in Eugene have been issuing no-cause evictions, providing shoddy and delayed repairs, engaging in intrusive inspections, withholding deposits, and discriminating against tenants.

Although there are government agencies that offer support for people experiencing sheltered and unsheltered homelessness, Stop the Sweeps Eugene (STS) is the only grassroots organization composed of housed and unhoused activists in the city. I interviewed Loa, who played a critical role in the development of STS's organizational architecture over the past few months. While their main priorities fall under organizing for STS, Loa is a long-term Eugene resident with connections to other

radical groups in town as well. To Loa, the development of new organizational directions contextualizes the displacement of unhoused people by situating these experiences in radical theory. Says Loa: "The way sweeps are carried out [in Eugene] feels very erratic, and if we can have a better understanding of what kind of conditions lead to that decision, we'll be in a better position to be able to actually set up resistance and help instead of acting in response to it all the time." The integration of theory with praxis is also important and appears here in the establishment of points of unity and other structural norms that protect organizers from burnout.

The STS that exists today is the latest iteration of homeless organizing in Eugene, but is by far not the first. While they were active, Stop Death on the Streets built a robust social media following by creating opportunities to agitate and re-politicize the housing movement in Eugene. In June 2021, Stop Death on the Streets officially announced its platform handover to STS and vocalized their support for the new homelessness coalition. Since then, STS participated in local sweep defenses at Washington Jefferson Park as well as the field by 13th Avenue and Chambers Street before both encampments were cleared.

Primary Findings

As I conducted my interviews, I paid close attention to the structural and relational dimensions of each organization. I developed a brief list of organizational characteristics that seemed relevant to the construction of networks between tenants and the unhoused. From this list, I selected five to analyze more thoroughly. The characteristics I chose—advocacy type, leadership structure, strategic direction, common tactics, and existing relationships—illustrate the internal composition of each

organization in addition to the networks they would likely participate in. The results of these observations are shown below.

Table 1: Structural and Relational Breakdown of Case Study Organizations

Organization	*Advocacy Type*	*Leadership Structure*	*Strategic Direction*	*Tactics*	*Existing Relationships*
Portland Tenants United (PTU)	tenant	horizontal	1) people 2) community	electoral campaigns, letter delivery	CAT
Don't Evict PDX (DEP)	tenant	horizontal	1) people 2) community	court watch, canvassing	CAT
Oregon Community Alliance of Tenants (CAT)	tenant	hierarchical	1) people 2) community	electoral campaigns, hotline	PTU DEP
PDX Houseless Radicals Collective (HRC)	unhoused	horizontal	1) people 2) principles	mutual aid, encampment contact	n/a
Eugene Housing and Neighborhood Defense (HAND)	tenant	hierarchical	1) community 2) principles	canvassing, political agitations	STS
Springfield Eugene Tenant Association (SETA)	tenant	hierarchical	1) community 2) people	hotline, electoral campaigns	n/a
Stop the Sweeps Eugene (STS)	unhoused	horizontal	1) community 2) people	mutual aid, encampment contact	HAND
Los Angeles Tenants Union (LATU)	tenant	horizontal	1) community 2) people	mutual aid, political agitations	Street Watch UTACH
Street Watch LA (Street Watch)	unhoused	horizontal	1) community 2) people	encampment contact, electoral campaigns	LATU UTACH
Unhoused Tenants Against Carceral Housing (UTACH)	unhoused	horizontal	1) people 2) community	encampment contact, letter delivery	LATU Street Watch

There are two interesting conclusions present in this breakdown. In terms of leadership structure, seven groups are horizontally organized while three are hierarchical. I classified each organization as horizontally or hierarchically structured by attempting to identify visible cohorts of leaders in each group. CAT and SETA have a Board of Directors because they are both nonprofits. HAND, however, is lead by a

steering committee that provides practical and ideological guidance for members and the broader masses they agitate.

The second and perhaps most important conclusion here is that people and community are the most common strategic directions utilized by organizations in each case study. These labels were harder to measure because principles, people, and community all play a role in the inner workings of each organization, with some elements featuring more prominently in certain organizations than others. These organizational characteristics are important in that they help assess potential network outcomes for tenants and unhoused organizers interested in forming a solidarity network. Further analysis of the similarities and differences between these organizations can clarify the kinds of relationships they could or already have with each other.

Secondary Findings

Because many of these housing organizations developed informally and organically, their initial efforts were mainly driven by the work of a small organizing cohort. These cohorts established the group's governing norms and facilitated the recruitment of additional members. Once an organization expands, however, the trajectory of their work faces a number of different directions. Organizations can continue to develop around the interests of their members (people), focus their attention on the creation of political infrastructure (principles), or serve people external to the core membership (community).

In conducting these interviews, I expected to find that organizations with people and community as their main priorities were more successful in establishing collaborative partnerships. This was largely the case, as relationships that formed

between different organizations were mostly driven by a shared membership base. An example of this is the large overlap of core organizers in both LATU and Street Watch. Although this result was expected, I wondered why only a few organizations positioned principles as a focal point of their work. As the nature of social movement organizing escalates, establishing unity around a framework of principles can be helpful in navigating challenges that arise. Grounding the work one does around shared and concrete values can mitigate the inflation of unnecessary tensions within the group.

In developing this project, I also expected to find that most of the organizations in my case studies would be willing and prepared to participate in solidarity networks. My interviews demonstrated, however, that while an inclination to participate in network building exists, the work that goes into constructing them is harder than it looks. Newer tenant and unhoused organizations are still developing their own structures and priorities, which takes a significant amount of time and human capital. More established organizations have had this time to develop their structures and priorities, but many remain preoccupied with their current campaigns or have little clarity regarding their role in laying the groundwork for a solidarity network. The organizers that I talked with agreed that solidarity between tenants and the unhoused is necessary if the housing movement is to continue progressing, but most of them were unclear about what that relationship would look like in practice.

Mobilizing a Movement

A Case for Network Building

If anything, the rise and spread of COVID-19 over the past three years illuminated the material struggles experienced by many working-class Americans prior to the pandemic. Persistent and sustained shortages in affordable housing underscore this reality and continue to deteriorate marginalized communities who face rising rents, stagnant incomes, and a diminished access to social and financial resources that can help them rise out of poverty.

For this reason, rent-burdened tenants facing eviction after eviction often find themselves trapped in a turbulent state of housing precarity. These patterns parallel the movement of their unhoused neighbors who are displaced just as frequently but through different mechanisms of removal. Despite these shared experiences, networks between tenant and unhoused organizations remain rather scarce. A closer analysis of tenancy and homelessness reveals why this is the case. There are several political, economic, and social factors that distinguish the experiences of tenants from the unhoused at this moment in time.

In terms of formal organizing efforts, mobilizing around tenant issues is generally easier than doing so around homelessness. The exploitative nature of the landlord-tenant relationship clearly defines the former as an enemy to target. Working class tenants often live in dismal conditions and experience a variety of pressing issues from ignored maintenance requests to costly rent increases. These problems are often applicable to tenants across the same apartment complex and operate as a starting point for further unity. Tenants living in the same building as their neighbors also reap the

benefit of informal social connections that could lead to long-term relationships. Neighborhoods that are at risk of gentrification tend to be hot spots for tenants who share a political and economic identity that ties them to the working class.

On the other hand, the factors that make tenant organizing easier pose unique challenges for unhoused organizers mobilizing around adjacent issues. Because homelessness takes on a variety of modes and contexts, some informal housing arrangements are more visible than others. For example, the residential experience of a person living in an encampment on the street is distinct from someone who sleeps at a homeless shelter, in their car, or on a friend's couch. The isolating nature of homelessness contributes to the lack of a shared identity, which then comes with the challenge of finding a focal point for organizing.

Although living in a homeless encampment situates people in close proximity to their neighbors, this is not enough of an impetus to drive solidarity building. Eating, sleeping, and conducting other day-to-day activities in a shared and public space is difficult. Communicating with residents of other encampments around the city is even harder. The temporal nature of homelessness also impairs substantive mobilization efforts because it obstructs the capacity for meaningful long-term organizing. Kuhn and Culhane offer a typology of homelessness that categorizes this experience into three different clusters. Whereas transitional and chronic homelessness are induced by major life changes and widespread systemic failures to keep people housed, episodic homelessness is characterized as a frequent and cyclical type of displacement.[24] People

[24] Randall Kuhn and Dennis P. Culhane, "Applying Cluster Analysis to Test a Typology of Homelessness by Pattern of Shelter Utilization: Results from the Analysis of Administrative Data," *American Journal of Community Psychology 26*, no. 2 (1998): 226. http://dx.doi.org/10.1023/A:1022176402357.

experiencing brief periods of homelessness are housing unstable for shorter periods of time and thus face different obstacles than people who are more permanently homeless.

Another significant obstacle in homeless organizing is the inability to mobilize without having met your basic needs. Prioritizing survival, which is necessary and justified, poses barriers to participating in collective action. The experiences of unhoused people are rendered even more invisible under capitalism because their inability (or refusal) to participate in the labor force inherently contradicts the value their production would bring to society. Hennigan elaborates on this idea by arguing that assumptions of unhoused people as individuals who have been "devalued by, and are value-less to, capital" justify their exclusion from social and political spaces.[25] As a consequence, unhoused people are seen as a population deficient of political power by both the proletariat and the bourgeoisie.

Taken in aggregate, these differences explain why solidarity networks between tenant and homeless communities are difficult to form. From a political economic perspective, tenants and unhoused people have contrasting relationships to capitalism as well as its reproduction of the housing crisis. Because working class tenants share an experience of exploitation at the hands of their employer, they have more opportunities to agitate, mobilize, and develop class consciousness.[26] This sense of place-rootedness—both at home and work—is something that people experiencing unsheltered homelessness seem to lack.

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[25] Brian Hennigan, "From Madonna to Marx: Towards a Re-Theorisation of Homelessness," *Antipode 51*, no. 1 (2019): 150. https://doi.org/10.1111/anti.12410.
[26] Karl Marx, "Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844," in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, edited by Robert C. Tucker, (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1978).

Frantz Fanon provides a different perspective on this dynamic, as he deconstructs this role of the lumpenproletariat within the context of colonialism. Fanon argues that the terrain of colonialism elevates the lumpenproletariat as the agents of revolution because they, unlike the proletariat, have nothing to lose but their chains.[27] The proletariat have the impetus to wage revolution, but are also constrained by some elements of life that they want to hold onto, like their jobs or their homes. My analysis of unhoused people as part of the lumpenproletariat refers more to their structural position in society as opposed to this label being a reflection of their individual character. Although homelessness and colonization are substantively different experiences, analyzing the housing crisis through this lens indicates that unhoused people have just as much, if not more, of a stake in the fight for liberation. The exploitative relationships that produce tenancy and homelessness are mediated by capitalism and must be abolished by its eradication.

As articulated earlier in this thesis, the physical and political consequences of housing precarity impact working-class tenants in ways that are similar to their unhoused neighbors. Unity over these shared experiences of displacement can build solidarity and fortify resistance efforts among both types of residents. Because displacement is a violent process that severs the relationship between people and place,[28] forced removals alienate tenants and unhoused people from the shelters they occupy—whether that be in an apartment unit or encampment.

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27 Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (New York: Grove Press, 1968), 64.
[28] Adam Elliot-Cooper, Phil Hubbard, and Loretta Lees, "Moving Beyond Marcuse: Gentrification, Displacement, and the Violence of Unhoming," *Progress in Human Geography 44*, no. 3 (2019). https://doi.org/10.1177/0309132519830511.

Over the past century, systems of neoliberal power have drastically changed the form and function of housing as a permanent and secure home. Real estate firms are investments that develop at the expense of working people, pushing them out of their neighborhoods to make way for more profit. Under capitalism, everyone—homeowners, tenants, and the unhoused—have an insecure relationship to housing that is either managed, provided, or monitored by the state. Insecure relationships to housing can be a focal point for further solidarity among all types of residents, but especially between working class tenants and their homeless neighbors.

Advantages, Challenges, and Suggestions

Network building is no easy feat, especially for housing organizations encumbered by the issues described in the previous section. But if the housing movement is to grow beyond a local or regional scale, strong systems of theoretical and practical solidarity are necessary. The construction of collaborative and supportive relationships are important because they add value to the larger housing movement and yield several material benefits for tenants and unhoused organizers. This section will discuss three important advantages participants of networks can gain, in addition to potential problems that may compromise the integrity of the coalition.

Organizations that participate in networks will need to establish a base of political or practical unity for the relationship to be successful. Stronger unity between groups facilitates the production of more combative ideas, better focused targets on common adversaries, and reinforces the internal strength of the network in opposition to said antagonists. Returning to the analytic schema presented earlier, tenant and unhoused groups that have similar strategic directions should find that these

connections are easier to build because practical unity already exists. Political unity, in this case meaning organizational cohesion towards revolutionary or reformist ends, is also important for the longevity of a network. Unity over long-term goals is arguably just as important as agreement over immediate ones. Analysis on the compatibility of housing organizations with divergent political aims will follow in a later section.

Another advantage of network building is access to a greater breadth of people, ideas, and resources. LATU and Street Watch often use rapid response networks to alert their members about urgent communications and direct actions. Rapid response networks, of course, are not catch-all solutions to the housing crisis at large. These crowds are temporary and often dissolve just as fast as they form. The use of said networks for rallies, defenses, and mutual aid interventions, however, gives members the opportunity to interact with and participate in different organizational efforts. Especially under dire circumstances, these connections are valuable in that they call upon a wide array of people to mobilize on the street in short notice.

The third advantage of forming solidarity networks connects to something that transcends the local politics in each case study. Despite important differences in both theory and practice, tenant and unhoused organizing efforts ultimately converge toward the same goal: to create a world where everybody is safely and securely housed. This revolutionary transformation of society is possible, of course, but cannot happen overnight. Until we get to that point, solidarity networks offer two avenues of support for tenants and unhoused people as they secure stable housing or get displaced from it. First, mutually dependent relationships between tenant and unhoused organizations can help facilitate this transition process while fighting against broader mechanisms of

exploitation. And second, the development of networks as social infrastructure builds trust between organizers and the masses they agitate, which then creates more organizational legitimacy for each participating member.

Because networks are harder to maintain than build, problems between organizations can arise when political or practical unity does not exist. On one hand, shared values and expectations among an organization's own membership makes the group a more cohesive force in the solidarity network and beyond. Effectively mobilizing against bigger systems is difficult, if not impossible, if there is no unity over what tactics to use or who the key players are in that strategy. Tactical unity first needs to be established between members of the same organization before collaborative relationships can even develop.

On the other hand, while solidarity networks generate positive benefits for their participating organizations, forming relationships just for the sake of expanding organizational numbers is ultimately more harmful than helpful. For example, substantive connections between SETA and HAND are nonexistent. The absence of such a relationship could be the result of a variety of reasons, but is likely grounded in a lack of political and practical unity. SETA focuses its work on policy research, political lobbying, and the hotline. The objective of HAND is to build class consciousness and mobilize working tenants specifically through means of canvassing and political agitation. Whether SETA and HAND have attempted to collaborate yet is unclear. A relationship can still form between the two, but further collaboration must be predicated on some form of unity. If the achievement of shared values and practices does not seem possible, then network formation may not yield fruitful results.

Network development may also be more difficult if organizations have cliquish membership or are alienated from mass outreach efforts to begin with. Since one benefit of network building is a shared membership base, individual organizations must be open to participating in activities external to their own. Insularity within an organization may also form if broad strategic moves come only from the organizers themselves. While network between tenant and unhoused advocates can bring broader organizational numbers, groups that are not open to engagement with people or ideas external to their core membership cannot rely on that coalition to resolve their lack of mass contacts. This is just to say that in addition to the organizations that comprise them, solidarity networks should also have a balance of shared principles, people, and engagement with the surrounding community.

Solidarity Networks in Action

Out of the three case studies, inter-organizational connections are strongest in Los Angeles. Each organization I interviewed had some form of a positive relationship to the other two. Many of the organizers in LATU, Street Watch, and UTACH share feelings of resentment towards city officials, which likely has to do with the massive sweep at Echo Park Lake last summer. In addition to the relationships they have with each other, all three organizations are connected to other groups in the city. Some of these groups do not organize around housing (Ground Game LA and LA Community Action Network), whereas others do (KTown for All and the Services Not Sweeps coalition). The fact that these connections are forming beyond the scope of housing is promising and shows potential for further action across Los Angeles.

The organizational relationships developing in Portland, however, take on an entirely different tone. Tenuous relationships that exist between the main tenant groups in Portland make the prospect of collaboration with each other slightly more challenging. As mentioned in the previous section, grievances against PTU have become so extreme that some of their former organizers split from the group and joined DEP. The fact that these tensions have not been publicly or privately resolved also means that they occupy more attention than necessary. Even if attempts at conflict resolution fail, explicitly demarcated boundaries between groups can clarify the direction of the movement and allow tenant organizations to focus more of their energy on mass work or other collaborative relationships with unhoused organizations. Aside from their grievances with PTU though, DEP organizers have established contact with some members of HRC and the Portland iteration of Stop the Sweeps. These tentative connections have the chance to solidify and turn into rapid response networks if sweeps again begin to increase.

The conditions for network building are perhaps the most complex in Eugene, where homelessness remains a visible problem and city demographics are significantly impacted by students and the universities. Although there are many service providers, government-affiliated programs, and informal mutual aid coalitions in Eugene, established grassroots organizations that focus specifically on housing are few and far between. It was challenging to find significant areas of unity between any of these organizations at face value, as they were all so different in terms of structure, goals, membership, and driving politics. Despite these apparent differences, no tensions have

arisen yet and there seems to be a potential relationship that could develop between HAND and STS, especially as both are faced with evictions and sweeps.

Despite the complex relationships that exist between tenant and unhoused groups, one common thread ties most of them together: people want to build solidarity. These connections take time and are already starting to form, so this next section will discuss what the future of this housing struggle could look like once networks form beyond a local or regional scale.

Before making conclusions about the formation or utility of tenant and homeless solidarity networks, I will synthesize some of the existing connections and contradictions between both groups. A broader view of each case study reveals that the relationships individual organizations have with each other are very much informed by their own internal and external dynamics. This means that there are a multitude of complex relationships that have materialized within organizations, among organizations, and between organizations and the state. Conflict that occurs within organizations can often be attributed to interpersonal disputes among activists. Friction within an organization can stem from personal antagonisms or disunity over desired tactics. Especially in organizations with hierarchical leadership structures, uneven power dynamics that remain unchecked can spiral into bigger problems down the road.

Portland Tenants United is one notable example of this conflicting power dynamic in action. In 2018, PTU founder Margot Black resigned from her post over accusations of white supremacy in the organization.[29] Demands for accountability

[29] Rachel Monahan, "Portland Tenants United Founder Margot Black Resigns Leadership Post After Charges of 'White Supremacy,'" *Willamette Week*, January 9, 2018. https://www.wweek.com/news/city/2018/01/09/portland-tenants-united-founder-margot-black-resigns-post-after-charges-of-white-supremacy/.

surfaced in its wake, with several different organizers coming forward to voice their grievances.[30] Members of Don't Evict PDX corroborate this allegation and claim that previous experiences working with PTU were seeded with racism and transphobia. In a similar vein, organizers with different relationships to race and class will have different perspectives to contribute to the movement. While varied cultural backgrounds and organizing experiences can add a lot of value to the work, too much heterogeneity impacts the ability of the organization to act as a cohesive unit and leads to incongruent conceptions of what struggle should look like.

Another point of contention between housing organizations lies in the material contradictions between tenants and unhoused people themselves. Both are seen as separate struggles, as they occupy different forms of shelter and have different relationships to the agents perpetuating their exploitation. Sasha from LATU describes the challenges of unifying these experiences of housing instability: "It's difficult to get renters to see themselves on that continuum [of precarity]. Even when people come to a radical and political space like a tenants union, they still see their situation as this isolated thing in time, as opposed to a tactic on behalf of their landlord to get them out so they can move richer people in." Compartmentalizing these two struggles reinforces existing tensions between tenant and homeless organizations. The result of this is an insular view of the tenant struggle that validates anti-homeless rhetoric and constrains opportunities for intra-organizational solidarity.

[30] "An Open Letter to the City of Portland: The Time has Come to Hold PTU and Margot Black Accountable," *Medium*, May 17, 2020. https://medium.com/@HoldPTUandMargotBlackAccntable/an-open-letter-to-the-city-of-portland-the-time-has-come-to-hold-ptu-and-margot-black-accountable-38519394aa04.

Characterizing the relationship between organizations and the state necessitates unity among the former on the use of certain tactics in securing wins. Some groups are more inclined to cooperate with elected officials and government agencies, while others draw a hard line. The power dynamics existing within this relationship are particularly acute for homeless organizations. Because groups exclusively composed of unhoused people have limited means of self-sufficiency, coalitions with external benefactors have the benefit of substantive material support. An overreliance on these benefactors, however, could lead to situations that compel organizers to defang their previously militant interests.

Cress and Snow argue that political strategy and organizational viability are critical for organizations who want to engage and collaborate with other groups in social movements. The conditions that seem to induce positive movement outcomes include: viability, disruptive tactics, sympathetic allies, city support, and both diagnostic and prognostic frames. In a different study, the authors also demonstrate that support from external benefactors can contribute to the organizational viability without the need to compromise tactics. They argue that "SMOs that were less preoccupied with resource concerns could concentrate on organizing collective actions that in turn enhanced the prospect of viability."[31] What this suggests is that although material resources are critical elements of broader movement building, they do not necessarily have to come from a government agency. Homeless organizations with minimal social and political capital can instead rely on the solidarity networks they participate in for support.

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[31] Daniel M. Cress, and David A. Snow, "Mobilization at the Margins: Resources, Benefactors, and the Viability of Homeless Social Movement Organizations," *American Sociological Review 61*, no. 6 (1996), 1103. https://doi.org/10.2307/2096310.

On Reformist Politics

As connections, relationships, and coalitions form between housing organizations, additional conflicts beyond the ones I just described will likely unfold. While some organizations are more militant than others, every group in this study engages in what sociologists Tilly and Tarrow call "contentious politics." Contentious politics describes interactions between actors who operate together in coordinating efforts based on their shared interests, with governments only involved "as targets, initiators of claims, or third parties."[32] Some organizations in this study seek positive relationships with local and national governments, while others stand in direct opposition to them. With this in mind, solidarity networks between tenant and unhoused groups should form carefully and intentionally, as differences in political directions can lead to sharp disunity over long-term goals.

I argue that most of this disunity stems from the apparent schism between organizations focused on one of two goals: reform or revolution. This contradiction prompts two important questions: How can organizations meet the needs of their community now, while progressively working towards a revolutionary transformation of society? In doing so, is there value in operating within existing political systems to secure smaller and more immediate wins?

My research indicates that each organization will have a different answer to both of these questions, which speaks to the diversity of organizing strategies among tenant and unhoused groups. Some organizations, like HAND, clearly demarcate their unwillingness to work with "landlords, developers, and other members of the capitalist

[32] Charles Tilly and Sidney Tarrow, *Contentious politics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 7.

class." Other groups like CAT and PTU are more inclined to interact or even collaborate with the state, which presents the need to analyze outcomes and potential impacts on the movement if concessions like these continue.

Several organizations in the three case studies are significant proponents of legislative advocacy. LATU, Street Watch, PTU, CAT, DEP, and SETA integrate some dimension of legislative or policy reform into their organizing. Other organizations, like UTACH, HAND, HRC, and STS orient their work towards solutions that are not dependent on the state. Understanding the core intentions of these organizing efforts sheds some light into what kinds of collaborative relationships can potentially or have already formed between them. Tenant organizations that focus only on political reform will ultimately encounter obstacles that cannot be resolved through candlelit vigils or demands to city council. Meanwhile, groups that are too rigid with their revolutionary politics will alienate potential members who have a rudimentary understanding of their goals. That being said, organizations need not sacrifice combative politics for the construction of community infrastructure. The exploration of militant or underground tactics should not come at the expense of establishing meaningful connections with people who could add a lot of value to the organization.

From Local to National

Because the housing struggle is global in scale, the lessons learned from local networks can shape the direction of national ones. In terms of movement development, tenant organizations are more cohesive than their homeless counterparts and consequently have more national networks to contribute to. Some of the organizations I

interviewed are connected to two different webs of tenant power: the Autonomous Tenants Union Network and the United Neighborhood Defense Movement.

The Autonomous Tenants Union Network aims to establish a collaborative of North American organizations committed to building tenant power. The network is structured like a loose affinity group where commitment is formal in theory but informal in practice. Their monthly meetings are open to the public, which makes it easier for newer tenant organizers or people not directly affiliated with any member group to get involved. In these spaces, tenant organizers come together and publicly share strategies, campaigns, and organizational tactics.

In the case study organizations, LATU and PTU are officially involved in this group and DEP has plans to join soon. A recent virtual webinar hosted by the Autonomous Tenants Union Network last January consisted of a presentation and discussion on how to organize tenants in an apartment building. This meeting covered the basics of starting a tenants union and talked about different tactics used in the Ivy Hill-Alice Tenant Union rent strike. The 24 tenant unions participating in this network will likely be present at the in-person convention hosted in Los Angeles in June 2022.

The other tenant network progressively developing across cities and states is the United Neighborhood Defense Movement. The objective of this group is to build a network of politically activated neighborhoods, as opposed to flexible coalitions of independent tenant unions. Their work is grounded in and fueled by the contributions of working class tenants across a variety of housing struggles. As of right now, the United Neighborhood Defense Movement is composed of a national core supported by local chapters in San Marcos, Austin, and Pittsburgh. Several members of LATU have some

degree of familiarity with the network, and HAND is one of many organizations across the nation featured on their website.

Research Limitations

Most of the limitations in my research stem from difficulties in reaching out to interviewees. I attempted to balance the number of tenant and unhoused groups I connected with, but there were several I was not able to talk to. The organizations I contacted were groups that I considered as leading the tenant or homeless organizing effort in each city, so important insights on newer or less established groups may have been lost.

At the beginning of this thesis, I described the housing movement as a struggle characterized by four different waves. Because this fourth wave of organizing is happening in real time, it would have been advantageous for me to see what other tenant and unhoused groups were working on outside of the West Coast. Due to time constraints, I was unable to make these connections and apply them to my findings.

One argument this thesis makes is that the boundaries supposedly demarcating tenancy and homelessness are unclear when they refer to renters vulnerable to eviction. Solidarity networks between tenant and unhoused organizers can address this seemingly obscure population. My research lays the groundwork for the construction of these relationships by arguing why they should exist. As these networks form and develop, other scholars can fill the gaps left by my research through exploring the future of these coalitions on a more macro-level.

Conclusion

This thesis attempts to identify important focal points of the United States housing movement in addition to the value that solidarity networks bring to that struggle. While it is difficult to predict the exact nature of the housing movement in one, five, or ten years, the momentum fueled by tenant and unhoused organizers mobilizing valiantly across the nation offers a glimmer of hope.

If anything, the severity of the contemporary housing crisis warrants resistance efforts that are just as militant and comparable in scale. Madden and Marcuse argue that the residential is political, which means that housing systems under capitalism are predicated on the outcomes of class and social struggle.[33] The labor movement is one particular struggle that has strong intersections with its housing counterpart. Individuals in the working class are laborers just as much as they are tenants. As solidarity networks and the organizations that make up them continue to grow and strengthen, this could be a direction housing groups would benefit from pursuing.

Because the repercussions of the housing crisis are so extreme, the path forward needs to be shaped by a re-radicalization and reclamation of urban space. The transformation of urban space needs is fundamentally about a struggle over power—the push for radical change cannot be constrained by local governments, even if they claim to have good intentions. As evidenced by the explosion of tenant and unhoused organizing within the past ten years, a new urban movement is possible if we are willing to make it our reality.

[33] David Madden and Peter Marcuse, *In Defense of Housing: The Politics of Crisis* (London: Verso Books, 2016), 8.

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