

THE PRODUCTION OF VISIBILITY: HOMELESSNESS,
SELF-PRESENTATION AND DISPLACEMENT

by

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People experiencing homelessness (PEH), especially unsheltered homelessness, constantly face the violence of displacement: an action which reproduces the precarity of a population becoming increasingly subject to state violence. Drawing upon the lived experience of PEH in a mid-sized U.S. city with a high rate of unsheltered homelessness, this paper focuses on the relationship between stigma, visibility and state violence. It reinterrogates Erving Goffman's concept of the "backstage" (1959) to detail the ways by which PEH are denied access to the space, resources, and time needed to present themselves in a normative manner. The dissonance with their identity PEH experienced through the loss of a backstage functions as a form of symbolic violence – actions and experiences which reify and internalize social hierarchies. Adding on to this symbolic harm, displacement and enforcement are guided by stigma signs which PEH lack the resources to obfuscate, leading to a discriminatory enforcement of the law that furthers the structural violence of homelessness and seeks to align public space with white, middle-class aesthetics. This paper seeks to highlight how the popular image of PEH is one constructed through structural forces of deprivation and displacement and how this serves to perpetuates homelessness and its stigma.

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Introduction

Rebel, Vanessa, and I sit on a small grassy embankment on the edge of the park near a busy thoroughfare. Cars, bikes, and the occasional motorcycle pass by us, drivers' heads turning and locking onto us as they zoom past. Without warning, a large silver pickup truck emblazoned with police insignias and mounted with sirens breaches the curb and drives onto the green space of the park.

"Oh shit..." mutters Rebel, their previously focused gaze now darting back and forth between the pickup and the two of us. Frazzled, I try to respond:

"We can move somewhere else if you want to, or we can walk and talk..." I say, trying to maintain my composure. Rebel cuts off my prattling:

"I think it's fine as long as it looks like we're like..." she urges us to arrange her food and backpack at the center of our group. Her eyes dart back. "I think we'll be fine."

"Like we're having a picnic!" Vanessa says with a sense of artificial cheerfulness. Rebel smiles slightly, looking down. We continue the interview, her gaze returning intermittently to the truck.

While we talk, the truck drives mere inches between groups of people sitting on large blankets in the center of the park. Small collections of backpacks, totes, and bikes rest beside each group. The truck stops next to each group, the window rolling down and revealing a middle aged, white male officer with a square face and thick sunglasses. As he approaches in the vehicle, people gather their things, consolidating smaller bags into bigger ones and stuffing their blankets on top of it all. I can't distinguish his words, but those who hear them freeze. After visiting each of the groups, he parks his pickup at a vantage point atop a small hill. This spot allows him to see the entire center of the park where people had previously been resting after a

service provider brought breakfast. Within 10 minutes, the previously packed park empties out except for a few stragglers and a stray t-shirt or paper plate. The pickup continues on its way, rejoining the road on the other side, its tire tracks still imprinted in the grass.

Rebel visibly relaxes, her shoulders slumping back, her eyes once again focused on us. My eyes still follow the pickup as it drives away towards the skatepark a few blocks down. Sensing my continued unease, Rebel explains: “When you're in big groups like this...” she says, gesturing to us and the groups now congregated on the streets surrounding the park, “they can't really arrest anybody. They can just tell them to move.”

“How does it feel when they, like, go through the park like that?” I ask.

Rebel responds instantly: “I, it's very like--especially if you're like homeless, like--just seeing a cop is like nerve wracking. When you should, when you see a cop, you should feel safe.”

Unsheltered homelessness, as experienced by Rebel and the other occupants of the park, is distinct from many other experiences of poverty and social suffering in the Global North (as well as the Global South) because it inherently includes constant visibility to both the public and the state. Because people experiencing homelessness (PEH) lack access to the privacy, space, and resources associated with private property in a liberal-democratic state, they have no choice but to reside in public space (Przybylinski 2025). Some PEH have access to temporary shelters or vehicles in which they can sleep, but for those with absolutely no shelter, this visibility is especially challenging. Paired with laws which prohibit basic life processes in public spaces (e.g. sitting, urination and defecation, and most pressingly, sleeping), this creates a legal environment which “annihilate[s] the spaces in which homeless people must live — by seeking, that is, to so regulate the public space of the city such that there literally is no room for homeless people” (Mitchell 1997, 321).

As evidenced by the quick dispersal of the other occupants of the park, being visible in public space makes PEH vulnerable to legal sanctions, especially with the rise of “quality of life ordinances” that empower authorities to ticket or arrest people for inhabiting public space (Giamarino and Loukaitou-Sideris 2024). These tight relationships between visibility, state violence, and homelessness have been part of the history of homelessness as a social phenomenon since its inception, and they profoundly shape the lives of our interlocutors in this study of homelessness, stigma, and survival on the streets of a mid-sized US city.

Literature Review

A Brief History

Broadly speaking, in the US, the legal approach towards homelessness has always been adversarial. Whether this pertains to the anti-vagrancy laws used in the Jim Crow South which sought to exploit the labor of impoverished Black Americans (Guenther 2013), or the practices of spatial sequestration and “rabble management” in urban centers like LA’s Skid Row (Stuart 2016), the legal through-line has consistently been control over public space and control over the visibility of certain bodies within it. While there was a relative relaxation of this criminalization (for White Americans) during the post-New Deal welfare era, the gutting of the welfare state under the Reagan administration in the 1980s drastically changed the context of homelessness in America (Edin and Shaefer 2015). The “new homelessness” that emerged at and after this time differed drastically from the kind of homelessness documented in classic ethnographies like Spradley’s *You Owe Yourself a Drunk: An Ethnography of Urban Nomads* ((1970) 2000). “New homelessness” was, and is, characterized by a massive proliferation and diversification of people experiencing homelessness, alongside parallel proliferation and diversification of its governance. People without housing are no longer primarily older men with countercultural ideologies, but now people who have been forced out of their housing due to racializing forces of gentrification and industrial decline who have found themselves without access to a social safety net which would allow them to remain housed (Shlay and Rossi 1992; Lee et al. 2010). This change has led to homelessness becoming an increasingly visible issue, as the bodies of PEH with nowhere else to go begin to fill public space.

The Clinton administration’s laws regarding welfare and homelessness which emerged in the mid 1990s were the inception of a new approach to managing populations of PEH. These

laws can be understood as part of a larger project which seeks to reform and reintegrate PEH into society – and thus, as critics have argued, reconstruct them as neoliberal subjects (Lyon-Callo 2004; Monahan 2017; Fast 2024). Sociologist Forrest Stuart coined the term “therapeutic policing” to refer to the false equivalency that arises when private social services are integrated into the state’s criminal justice apparatus (2016). Therapeutic policing entails the utilization of legal sanctions to funnel PEH and “deviant” populations into social services which emphasize moral reform in order to reintegrate these populations into normative society such as is seen in neoliberal reforms like community courts and diversion initiatives which seek to force a choice between “making better life choices, or go[ing] to jail,” (Stuart 2016, 256). However, as Stuart describes, therapeutic policing – and the neoliberal paradigm by proxy - is rarely an effective starting point for moral reform and often works antithetically to this goal, furthering the marginality and vulnerability of these populations by integrating them into the criminal justice system (Stuart 2016).

While there have been numerous ethnographic explorations of the “new homelessness” centered around the late 1990s to early 2000s, little anthropological focus has been dedicated to it since. Phillipe Bourgois and Jeff Schonberg’s *Righteous Dopefiend* is an exemplar from the end of this period, noted for its description of the symbolic and structural violence experienced by PEH, as well as its ethnographic detail and depth (2009). Past this work, there are few ethnographic explorations of contemporary homelessness (with a couple of notable exceptions, such as Danya Fast’s *The Best Place* (2024)). Since the early 2000s, homelessness and its governance have changed in meaningful ways which diverge from what was documented in these ethnographies. Beginning in 2020, the US’s rates of unsheltered homelessness has increased more drastically than ever before (de Sousa and Henry 2025). Accompanying this is

the state's increasingly punitive stance towards homelessness, departing from the neoliberal urge to "reform" PEH epitomized in Stuart's description of therapeutic policing (2016). For instance, the US Supreme Court's 2024 verdict in *Grants Pass v. Johnson* revoked status-based protections for people without housing, opening the door for states to ticket or even arrest PEH for sleeping outdoors, even when shelters are full. In the wake of this verdict, the Governor of California – the state with the largest population of PEH - Gavin Newsom called for state-wide sweeps (Hubler 2025). Most recently, President Trump signed an executive order which aims to expand involuntary commitment laws to cover PEH, saying that "shifting homeless individuals into long-term institutional settings for humane treatment through the appropriate use of civil commitment will restore public order" (Trump 2025, 1). The combination of increasing numbers of unsheltered PEH and increased criminalization render contemporary homelessness a distinct phenomenon warranting renewed political and scholarly attention.

Despite the popular and state discourse which promote criminalization, the existing evidence suggests that criminalization is not an effective tool for the social reform these discourses prioritize because criminalization seeks compliance rather than empowerment (Stuart 2016; Herring 2019; Herring et al. 2020). State-driven punitive actions such as sweeps, displacements, and loss of belongings are predictive of worse health, higher crime rates, and higher governmental costs (DuBois et al. 2025). Despite the recent proliferation of supporting evidence for its ill effects (see DuBois et al. 2025), criminalization remains the main method that authorities use to enact social control over PEH. With the broad neoliberal trends of state divestment and siloing, responsibility for the management of homelessness has become increasingly diffuse across bureaucratic structures. Consequently, the authorities tasked with managing and responding to homelessness-related concerns often lack education on the topic and

bear little awareness or accountability for the consequences of their enforcement actions. For instance, parks employees are often responsible for ticketing people like Rebel—a task few, if any, parks employees anticipated as part of their jobs and for which they receive little or no training. This is leading not only to a proliferation of actors who are able to criminalize PEH, but also to a misappropriation of the idea that enforcement is “for their own good” or necessary for the protection of the housed public (Herbert et al. 2025; Weaver et al. 2025). With this lack of training and increased ability to criminalize, the state’s response to homelessness is increasing the vulnerability and visibility of PEH.

The Surveilled Body and Stigma

The discursive construction of homeless criminality has revolved around the visibility of the body from the English enclosures of the 16th century to the US housing crisis in the 21st (Federici 2004). Indeed, as Agamben describes in his analysis of *habeus corpus* in biopolitical governance, “Law needs a body in order to be in force... [and] democracy responds to this desire by compelling law to assume care of this body” (Agamben 1997, 124). Surveillance of the body is necessary for the enactment of law within a liberal democracy: this is a basic tenet of biopolitical governance (Foucault (1976) 1990). In the case of homelessness, however, it is a very specific body which is being surveilled: a body which exists as matter out of place, marked by specific signs legible to a normative gaze; a stigmatized body that is both legally and symbolically open to punishment (Gerrard and Farrugia 2015).

Stigma was operationalized as a mode of social analysis by Erving Goffman in his seminal text *Stigma* (1963). In this text, Goffman describes stigma as a “spoiled identity”: a social marker which justifies social devaluation and signals a divergence from norms and normative embodiments (Goffman 1963). Goffman notes that stigma can impact both individuals

and groups which makes it a mode of interactional social control (1963). The conceptualization of stigma as a form of social control builds upon Goffman's earlier utilization of the "theatrical metaphor" for social interaction which he developed in *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1959). Here, Goffman describes social interaction as a constant performance where one presents oneself in a certain way to be understood and interpreted by the other (1959). In Goffman's terms, our self-presentations are directly tied to others' interpretations of us, and his later work explains how stigma is effectively a mark on that self-presentation that changes others' perception of us (1959; 1963). If one is perceptibly in possession of a stigmatized identity - "discredited" in Goffman's terms- then one has little ability to contest the social devaluation that arises with the markers of this "spoiled identity" (Goffman 1963).

Our interlocutors describe specific stigma signs – markers of a stigmatized identity - which are associated with homelessness in the study setting and used by authorities and housed residents to identify their status. These include the possession of certain items in public, such as backpacks, tents, large amounts of belongings, dirty clothes, etc. These signs are also olfactory: the smell of body odor or urine. They also include behavioral or postural markers associated with deviation from normative social interaction, such as yelling at others, speaking to oneself, sleeping in public, or standing in a bent-over position associated with fentanyl use (Chauhan and Foster 2025).

Most work tying stigma and homelessness, past and present, demonstrates the persistence of homelessness's stigma even among those who express empathy toward PEH. Phelan et al. (1997), for instance, found that while compassion and recognition of structural causes of homelessness were present amongst their respondents, the stigma of homelessness still motivated housed residents' desire for the spatial sequestration and criminalization of PEH (Phelan et al.

1997; Clifford and Piston 2017). More recently, Monahan describes how intensive forms of surveillance are integral to constructing PEH as subjects deserving of stigmatization and how this constant surveillance perpetuates structural and symbolic harms (2017). Building upon this work, Malhotra coins the term “stigmatized surveillance” to refer to the everyday violence that is enacted through constant surveillance and how this reproduces stigma (2022). Within this literature, there is a focus on how surveillance is utilized to enact policies of “spatial cleansing” and sequestration which reproduces the structural and symbolic violence to which PEH and other marginalized urban populations are subject (Wacquant 1996; Amster 2003). Through processes of stigmatized surveillance, PEH are constructed as abject subjects who are deemed incongruous with the spatial and moral order of a neoliberal state (Monahan 2017; Malhotra 2022).

Despite this emerging body of research, the process which precedes and makes possible the ascription of stigma to PEH remains underexamined. While Malhotra’s concept of stigmatized surveillance directs attention towards the disproportionate surveillance which stigmatized bodies are subject to, it does not illuminate how surveillance itself (and the material preconditions needed to make bodies visible) produces stigmatized bodies. Homelessness, and all its negative social and subjective connotations, is a structural problem (Bourgois and Schonberg 2009; Colburn and Aldern 2022). The forms of abjection which characterize homelessness – and the very fact that they can be seen – is not something which emerges inductively from society. Rather, as this paper will elucidate, the visibility of PEH is produced by specific, targeted actions that make possible subsequent forms of social control and structural violence.

This analysis focuses specifically on people experiencing unsheltered homelessness—that is, PEH who either cannot or do not stay in shelters and sleep outdoors or in places not meant for

human habitation, such as vehicles. This focus is important because unsheltered PEH are the fastest-growing group of PEH in the country, and they are the most visible in public space and therefore most subject to the forms of surveillance described above. Returning to Goffman, unsheltered PEH specifically lack what he terms a “backstage.” Goffman describes a backstage as a place where “stage props and items of personal front can be stored in a kind of compact collapsing of whole repertoires of actions and characters... Here costumes and other parts of personal front may be adjusted and scrutinized for flaws.” (1959, 112). For Goffman, the backstage is not just a physical place: it is the semio-material assemblage that supports a subject’s agency in self-presentation and allows for identity work to happen. Access to a backstage space allows people to manage (and in many cases conceal) their stigmatized identities, presenting themselves in a manner which obfuscates the specific stigma signs that a punitive or normalizing gaze would otherwise pick up on (Goffman 1959; 1963). We argue that a lack of access to a backstage—a key challenge for people experiencing unsheltered homelessness—becomes a crucial aspect in the ascription of stigma.

This paper unpacks how unsheltered PEH are made legible as stigmatized targets for state violence and displacement. By analyzing PEH’s lived experience of unsheltered homelessness gleaned through qualitative interviews, this paper explores how the lack of a “backstage” and thereby agency in self-presentation reproduces the stigma of homelessness while simultaneously increasing the visibility of unsheltered PEH, making them subject to further stigmatization and state violence. We conceptualize homelessness not just as a visible problem, but as a problem of visibility; insofar as visibility becomes the mediating factor between PEH’s bodies and state violence. We begin by examining PEH’s felt experience of stigma and visibility, then examine how state violence such as displacement is motivated by the visibility of certain stigma signs.

Thirdly, we apply Goffman's concept of a "backstage" to highlight how reducing the agency of PEH in their self-presentation through displacement further entrenches chronic homelessness.

Methods

As part of a larger research study investigating homelessness and stress, 51 life history interviews were conducted with people who either were actively experiencing unsheltered homelessness, or had experienced it in the past, in the summer of 2024 and 2025. Emails and phone calls were sent to prior study participants and those who responded were offered to schedule an interview. Some participants were also selected at data collection sites for the larger study. These participants had varying experiences with homelessness, including various forms of shelter (e.g. unsheltered, temporary shelters, permanent supportive housing) as well as time spent living without housing, yet all had some experience of unsheltered homelessness.

Semi-structured life history interviews were chosen for this study as they provided an in-depth discussion of participants' life experience and how homelessness and stigma were incorporated into it. Life history interviews allow for interviewees to have some degree of agency in their self-presentation which allows for a deeper understanding of how social structures and experiences come to shape the lived experience of interviewees. While somewhat open ended and variable, these interviews asked questions pertaining to childhood and general life trends but focused predominantly on the specific experiences of homelessness including questions about becoming unhoused, the acquisition of daily necessities, interactions with service providers and the state, community, changes in policy, as well as questions pertaining to stigma and discriminatory treatment.

Interviews were audio-recorded with consent of participants, and verbal consent for interviews was given as approved by the university's IRB. Participants were allowed to choose their pseudonyms, and those who did not had one assigned in an effort to protect anonymity. Interviews took place at numerous locations, including the municipal library, formalized

camping sites, service provision sites, and public parks. These locations were decided upon in conjunction with interviewees and the research team. Interviews lasted from 45 minutes to 2.5 hours, with most approaching 1.5 hours. Participants were compensated with \$30 for their participation in the study.

Interviews were transcribed using the automatic transcription software OtterAI and then manually corrected. Once corrected and anonymized, transcripts were uploaded to the qualitative analysis software Dedoose. Transcripts were initially coded with a priori codes devised by the author, along with additional codes that emerged inductively through the process of data collection and analysis. A second round of coding identified sub-themes within the original coded data, which served as the basis for the results presented here.

Results

Stigma and Visibility

While associated with more general forms of stigma related to impoverishment, the stigma of homelessness is a distinct phenomenon which carries with it specific stigma signs (Phelan et al. 1997). As much of the literature on homelessness has highlighted, the fact that PEH are forced to exist in public space makes their bodies and lives constantly visible, thereby subjecting them to a sort of “stigmatized surveillance” which makes it difficult to avoid stigmatization and labelling (Malhotra 2022).

A common stigma sign discussed by our participants was a particular brand of backpack distributed by a local service provider, as described by Snake: “If you carry one of these free backpacks, you're labeled... you receive a certain noticeable labeling of, you know, you can't walk in here with your backpack type thing...[they assume that] because I have the backpack or I have a suitcase that arbitrarily makes me a thief.” Beyond backpacks, any large collection of personal belongings in public space was often a stigma sign: one which was especially reviled by housed residents, as Brooklyn explains:

[I] left my trailer there, and I come back and they're [a housed resident] outside on the phone with the cops trying to tow my freaking trailer. I'm like, you could have just come out and asked me to move.. [and said] ‘if you don't move, then I'm gonna have a problem, and I'm gonna try to get you towed’.

As has been documented in other research focusing on contemporary homelessness, the close connection between housed resident complaints and police intervention highlights how PEH are subject to surveillance by housed residents as well as the state (Herring 2019).

The gaze of housed residents was viewed as particularly stigmatizing, especially as it related to the labelling of participants as “deviant” or criminal. As Cazer describes, public perceptions of PEH within the study site reinscribed the stigma of homelessness:

There's people taking pictures of homeless people and posting it [online], and then they see it, and then they, they go, ‘this is gross’. And then that person reads that and goes, ‘that's gross’. You know, it is definitely the programming of the media... I have definitely been seeing it a lot more that it's like, ‘just kick them out of town’.

Beyond common narratives of uncleanness – a narrative utilized by the state as well (see Weaver et al. 2025) – criminality and substance use were also commonly ascribed to PEH often without any direct evidence. To housed residents, the stigma signs of homelessness were synonymous with substance use, as Scottie described:

I sit over there, and some guys have been getting high over there [in front of a church] and leaving me the needles. And I walked over there and sat down to smoke, and I went to smoke a joint, and he [a housed resident] rolled up on me and told me, ‘get out of there’. And said something about getting high. I said, ‘man you have the wrong guy’. He said, ‘tell your friends’. I said, ‘they ain't my friends, dude’. I told him, ‘I'm not gonna do that, sure not gonna leave that in front of the church’.

Within the cultural context of the field site, smoking marijuana on the sidewalk is generally accepted and would be unlikely to warrant any attention on its own. Instead, it was Scottie’s appearance and proximity to substance paraphernalia which attracted the ire of this housed resident. Even though Scottie did not engage in the stigmatized behavior of intravenous drug-use, his self-presentation led to stigmatization and the threat of state violence.

While Scottie and over half of our interlocutors did not use substances, a decently-sized minority of people did. Participants shared how specific use practices led to more stigma and further solidified the connection between substance use and homelessness. According to Willow “people just became extremely too comfortable with it [illicit substances] and using it in public. And you know, there's-- that gives us more of a stigma to the homeless and drug users in

general”. There was often little choice but to use substances in public for PEH with substance dependence, but the visibility of this practice reinforced public perception that all PEH were substance users.

As both substance use and homelessness are increasingly criminalized, participants discussed how their self-presentation and constant visibility altered the way they interacted with themselves and others:

It's almost like, like being on probation with everybody. Like you feel like you're being watched... And it kind of dawns on you as a person, making you feel like like, okay, if there's somebody watching me anyway, it's like, it just makes you feel like nobody trusts you. And it makes you like not, not trust anybody else either, because if they don't have that trust for you, then... You don't quite trust them, you know?

As Brittany discussed above, the constant feeling of being surveilled eroded participants’ trust in others, including housed and unhoused peers. Thomas agreed: “You're never really safe. You just try to find a spot when you're on the streets where one way in, one way out. So you keep everything in front of you. And then just go to sleep. [And you’re asking yourself] ‘what's gonna happen, what's gonna happen?’” As these comments demonstrate, the threat or actual experience of constantly being watched compromised people’s ability to feel safe and connected to others.

The constant visibility and stigmatized surveillance of living without housing took a toll on people’s bodies as well as their relationships. “Usually you're pretty much living on the extremes of exhaustion because there's really nowhere to sleep [without threat of displacement] and... there's nowhere anywhere you can be that is legal, legally able to [sleep or rest],” said Smith. This high level of exhaustion further dampened participants’ ability to access services and avoid enforcement, as well as achieve their goals:

[You get] to a point where you're exhausted. You're getting answers from one side answers from another side. And these [fellow PEH] are people that are not educated, and I'm educated and I'm going like, ‘I'm confused by this. I can

understand why everyone is.' There's no good structure or direction. It's more of a, 'Hey we want to help,' but it's not filling in the gaps. A person can't learn if they can't sleep, or take a shower, be fed. It's the little things.

Z further explained the necessity of addressing basic needs and building up PEH's confidence before meaningful change is possible: "Once a person's basic needs have been met," he explained, "then you work on them wanting to do something and be capable or feel confident enough that this is going to go somewhere. Otherwise, they fall back on exactly what they've already been doing." However, meeting these basic needs was often a stigmatizing encounter. Even when PEH were able to access facilities for personal hygiene such as showers, they often did not feel stigma-free. As Brooklyn detailed in her experience of using a public pool's locker-room to shower;

I feel like that's more of a place that I tend to go less often, only because I feel like I get judged more often than not. And that's probably one of the places that you get judged the most, because the caliber of people versus how I feel, I guess, but it could just be me, I don't know... I tend to veer towards the family bathroom, you know, because you can lock the door and yeah, totally different than... yeah.

As highlighted in the experiences of our interlocutors, the constant visibility of living in public space has an intense affective and social impact. Being forced into public space makes PEH subject to the surveillance of anyone else who might be in the area, which makes stigmatization possible and leads to other forms of violence. Further, stigma makes accessing basic needs such as food and hygiene much more difficult, and without these, it becomes difficult to make meaningful change. This situation becomes a catch-22 that reduces PEH's ability to contest the very stigma which precludes them from meeting their needs in the first place.

Aesthetics, Displacement, and Discrimination

State actions surrounding homelessness have become increasingly dependent on the desires of housed residents, making this the organizing principle behind both complaint-oriented policing

and regular patrol and surveillance (Herring 2019; Herbert et al. 2025; Weaver et al. 2025). Displacement serves as a tool by which to move PEH out of public view and therefore address the aesthetic concerns of housed residents (Herbert and Beckett 2010; Herring 2019). “Sweeps” like the one we saw with Rebel at the park are an everyday occurrence for PEH, which are increasingly becoming the paradigm for the state’s response to PEH (Herring et al. 2020). Typically, the quantity and spread of one’s possessions is a key metric used by authorities to determine the scope and severity of punishment. Smith explained:

I've been woken up by EPD like several times downtown. It's been like, 'hey, what's your name? Here's a little ticket for trespassing. You've got to go'. And so that, probably, yeah I really haven't been told by anybody else. Like I said I don't put my stuff out, I don't make a mess, I don't have a tent out or anything. Usually it's just me. Usually it's EPD, they'll say like 'hey, you gotta go'. Or they'll ask you your name and run your name and like give you a ticket for it.

For PEH, pressure to shrink the scope of one’s material life comes from all sides; from a practical lack of storage, but also from a desire to keep as low a profile as possible and remain mobile to avoid law enforcement. This results in a situation where PEH reduce their belongings to only the barest minimum, even when it is directly detrimental to their own health and safety: “I've seen a lot more people just sleeping without tents... especially like near parks and stuff, and with all these new rules, it's way safer if you just don't pitch a tent at all.”(Orchid).

Tents in particular were a target of enforcement, leading to adaptive strategies, as Obey describes: “We'll make sure that two of the [tent] pole, two of the sides are taken down so it's flat, because it's technically not camping.” She continued, describing the other signs legible to the authorities which would motivate displacement: “And the smaller your group is, the less attention is going to be drawn to you. If you are an addict, if you don't use where you're going to be staying, you should be okay.” Similarly, Sam laughingly noted, “I don't think they [state authorities] are looking at those people [laying uncovered in the park] as much as tents”.

Denying PEH access to tents highlighted for some participants the logics behind displacement, as Headdie describes: “[Dispersing encampments] makes sense culturally. I mean, aesthetic has always been more important than people”. Headdie’s comment is reminiscent of what has been noted in the literature as the “spatial cleansing” of visible signs of poverty, which facilitates the maintenance of public space to match wealthy, largely white aesthetics (Amster 2003; Orr et al. 2024). Visible shelter such as tents and cars often became untenable for PEH due to the attention they received from authorities, something which Headdie also described. “A lot of people living in their cars, it's their shelter, their protection, and they're deliberately leaving them unprotected and directly increasing the number of people directly on the street.” Displacement – which is almost always tied to the loss of material possessions (Herring et al. 2020) - forces PEH to be even more visible through loss of possessions. But attempts to avoid displacement *also* revolve around limiting possessions and signs of life—only erecting half a tent, staying in as small a group as possible, not “putting my stuff out,” in the words of Smith.

PEH described how they developed a heightened sensitivity to the stigma signs that police and other authorities looked for to determine whether they were improper occupants of public space. Within their limited sphere of influence, PEH did what they could to adapt their behavior accordingly to, hopefully, avoid enforcement. As Boe describes, such awareness was necessary to avoid stigmatization and labelling by both the police and housed residents:

I don't have a tent. I have the hammocks that were hanging up. Those are my hammocks... It's hard to find a place and not get messed with because it's like because of the stigma that's gonna come with the homelessness and, you know, with the messes and stuff like that you know, like, not all of us are messy like that.

Boe’s use of hammocks (instead of a tent) and self-containment of trash is an example of how PEH might adapt their behavior to evade surveillance, but this was no panacea. As he went on to

explain, these measures only worked some of the time: there was no way for him to reliably distinguish himself as an acceptable occupant of public space in the eyes of the state.

When displacement, or attempts to avoid displacement, require PEH to “move along” (Herring 2019; Herring et al. 2020), PEH literally move through public space and in so doing encounter ever more chances to experience surveillance. With more eyes on displaced PEH and the prevailing norms of NIMBY-ism, there is a higher likelihood that a housed resident will call the police on them. Obey recalled a loud fight between two young people in the park: “And these [housed] people here see it, call the cops, and then it fucks it up for all of us, for people who aren't doing anything wrong.” The heightened visibility of having to move through public space also increased the likelihood they will be stopped by police independent of housed resident complaints, an experience Nicole related:

And they've said to him [her partner], a couple of them recently, that basically ‘you can't be in the park if you look like you're homeless. You gotta pack up your stuff and leave, or we're gonna take you to jail because you look like you're homeless’... I could only guess that's because, like I said, they're trying to, kind of, you know, sweep up the undesirables to make it look like there's no homeless people around.

This profiling based on stigma signs led to discriminatory enforcement of the law:

But it's you know that ‘if you look homeless’ thing, I think that, you know, is the problem. If you look like you have money and you know, are doing pretty much the exact same kinds of things, they don't bother you. But if, you know, you look homeless to the police or the parks people or the city, then you know that's a problem (Nicole).

Nicole continued, discussing both the material and embodied impacts of this discriminatory enforcement: This enforcement was, for Nicole, brutality, making it impossible to even rest on a hot day or sleep without the threat of arrest.

[It's hard to] look homeless without potentially getting arrested, or sit on a curb, you know when it's 90, 100 degrees out for a couple minutes without the threat of being arrested... Even just bare necessities are being, you know, taken away, or

you're, you know, getting thrown in jail literally for sleeping and not being given an option to sleep somewhere, sit down somewhere.

As Nicole described, the discriminatory enforcement of quality-of-life ordinances entrapped PEH in a vicious cycle of losing the very resources necessary to evade enforcement. Without resources to avoid “looking homeless,” she argued, it was impossible to avoid arrest.

Despite possessing an intimate “cop wisdom” of how to avoid enforcement (Stuart 2016), the forced visibility PEH experienced still left them in constant danger of legal violence.

Citations for public urination or defecation were a consistent worry for PEH, as Z explains:

And I've been cited... because I didn't have anywhere to just do number one and I made sure no one was around. It just happened two bicycle cops noticed me. I mean it'll--I'm in a dark spot behind a tree. But they noticed and they biked all the way up to me. They were like ‘you need to stop’. I'm like, ‘have you ever tried to stop? It hurts’. Once I finished, they were like, ‘well, we gotta cite you’. I'm like, ‘There's no bathrooms. There's nowhere to go to the bathroom’.

The simple act of voiding one’s bladder led Z deeper into the legal system with the citation he received. Jake, meanwhile, commented on the way the lack of these basic resources forced him into behaviors he disagreed with.

Yeah because they've, like, basically cut us off from being able to get the necessities, and made it extremely rough on us to be able to try to survive. So we're basically like I said, once again, we're going back to the stealing. We're going back to the, you know, we have to go in stores, shoplifting everything like that. It's all because we are getting everything shut off from us. Like I said, [we need] more understanding people.

Like Z and the citation, Jake has to open himself up to the possibility of an arrest for shoplifting just to obtain food. These two examples show how PEH are forced to make themselves vulnerable to law enforcement and the public to access even the most basic daily necessities such as toileting or food, meaning that even if they could avoid other visible stigma signs, these behaviors would still often identify them as PEH.

Through an enforcement of the law guided by stigma signs which prioritized aesthetics over people, PEH were constantly subject to the worry or actuality of displacement. Participants experienced discrimination and enforcement based upon stigma signs of homelessness and were forced into illegal behaviors due to lacking access to private space and property. As displacement made them more visible – by losing privacy and being forced to move through public space – PEH in our study found it difficult to contest the stigma of homelessness and avoid the enforcement which it motivated, thereby further subjecting them to discrimination and state violence.

The Backstage

As we have seen, stigmatization and state violence toward PEH depends on their being in visible public spaces. Stigma signs of homelessness are utilized by the state, housed residents, and other PEH to identify PEH. Unlike some other stigmatized statuses, the stigma of homelessness is “discreditable,” to use Goffman’s terminology, meaning that the stigma signs of homelessness can technically be concealed (1963). Through careful identity work, a discreditable stigma can - in theory - be concealed and thereby have only an internalized impact on the person possessing the stigma. Such identity work is accomplished through access to a backstage. At its core, a backstage is both the physical place where identity work happens, and the tools one uses to manage and conceal parts of one’s identity.

As Goffman highlights, a backstage is integral to any performance of self as it consists of the requisite resources needed to strategically maximize symbolic capital in social interactions (1959). Backstages typically include things like private space, hygiene facilities, specific clothes, laundry, medications for mental illness, etc.; all things which are routinely denied to PEH through discriminatory enforcement of the law focused on stigma signs visible to both the public

and state. As Mungy described: “Yeah, I lost everything. Everything. I came out here, when I came out of jail I had one pair of shorts and one t-shirt and one pair of socks and one pair of underwear. That's what I came here with”. Losing possessions in this way was a ubiquitous experience, as Smith describes:

Like, every time I fall asleep I feel like everything I own gets stolen from me like, oh, now I have no deodorant or no backpack or no, you know, whatever it is, and so it's really hard to just like get to further up the steps you want to get to when you like are constantly getting restarted.

The constant loss of the materials needed to constitute a backstage made PEH like Smith feel as though they were being repeatedly sent back to the “starting line” in their attempts to find housing or employment, as they were unable to escape the stigma of homelessness.

Because enforcement was contingent upon stigma signs, many PEH went to great lengths to avoid displaying those signs, but this could be an all-consuming effort without a reliable backstage. Brooklyn described being careful with her appearance in an effort not to “look homeless”:

That's why I like to shower every day, and I like to, you know, even though I'm homeless, I don't want to look homeless... because it feels like shit. It just does. It makes you feel like shit... I don't feel even close to 100% when I've just woke up and I'm not ready for the day. And... having to do all the things that it takes to be where I need to be, it's like half the day is over with.

Lacking a backstage, for our participants, exacerbated their experiences of stigmatization and came to be experienced as a form of symbolic violence as it reaffirmed their lack of agency and social devaluation. Participants struggled daily with a desire to conform to social standards of hygiene and self-presentation yet often found themselves unable to do so without access to these constituent elements of a backstage. Brittany described how this lack of ability to conform with cultural norms of presentation was hampering her employment opportunities:

It puts a barrier on jobs because when you're carrying around a backpack or living out of your car and don't have shower access, then it's like people don't want to hire you, and me and my career, personally, being homeless, I don't want to cut hair and be homeless... Because if I can't shower, nobody wants sweaty armpits while they're cutting hair.

Brittany's lack of a backstage denies her the ability to present herself in a manner that would be acceptable to potential employers. Further, Brittany experienced her lack of agency in self-presentation as detrimental to her own self-image and identity.

The symbolic violence of lacking a backstage was exacerbated by their inability to distinguish themselves from undesirable stereotypes of PEH, such as substance users, for instance:

It's frustrating to hear people consistently even classify me in that situation. If I'm sitting in a park, there's one certain park in town that we sit there, and we have at least 10 to 20 people ask us every day: 'do you have any white [methamphetamines]? Do you know where I can get any fatty [fentanyl]? You know where I can get any white? I got \$2 for white, do you have any?' (Sassy).

Several participants described how "homeless" and "drug user" identities were collapsed when they bore the visible signs of homelessness, a misattribution present both in the public and academic perception of PEH (Snow et al. 1994). For participants like these, being unable to access a backstage in which to conduct basic hygiene and grooming activities relegated them to stigmatized social roles that might otherwise allow them to "pass" in public space as a housed citizen enjoying the park.

Discussion/Conclusion

As the lived experience of our interlocutors suggests, lacking a backstage causes significant harm when placed into the broader social context of state violence and stigma toward PEH. Deprived of the material and discursive resources needed to contest the stigma of homelessness while being constantly surveilled and forced to exist exclusively in public space, the PEH in our study experienced the everyday violences of displacement, hunger, and fear. Participants discussed how being visible to the public, police, and other PEH made them feel vulnerable to physical violence while also making them targets of derogatory cultural scripts such as being one of the “druggie homeless”. PEH’s experience with visibility recalls feminist disability scholar Rosemary Garland Thomson’s concept of “misfitting” (2011). The experience of being a “misfit”, argues Garland Thomson, entails a constant dissonance with the built and social environment. One’s subjectivity is experienced as out of place, which is reaffirmed in everyday social and material interactions (Garland Thomson 2011). Constant visibility reminded PEH that their presence in public space ran counter to the spatial and social hegemony which governs it—a profound experience of misfitting.

It should now be obvious that the visibility PEH experienced was not borne of their own desire to be seen. Rather, it was enforced through a discretionary and discriminatory enforcement of the law. Police and park officials engaged in a constant spatial shuffling of PEH, denying them stability. Beyond this, necessary items were lost in each sweep and displacement, further diminishing PEH’s already limited ability to curate their self-presentation. The negative social and health impacts of sweeps are innumerable (See Dubois et al. 2025), yet the experiences of our interlocutors highlight an undertheorized harm. Beyond the physical and material privation imposed through the loss of things like medications, glasses, and other necessary items, repeated

displacements involved the loss of necessary parts of participants' backstage: things like clothes, hygiene items, and access to private space. Constantly losing these items and the (somewhat) private spaces afforded by minimal shelter structures like tents made it nearly impossible to present oneself in any other way than the cultural imaginary of an unhoused substance user (Clifford and Piston 2017; Scott 2021; Kim et al. 2023).

Lacking agency in their self-presentation, PEH had no other choice but to display the stigmatized identity markers of homelessness, and these further subjected them to targeted structural violence at the hands of the state and the public. The violence of displacement was directed towards people who fit the image of being homeless, even if they were not actively camping but were merely sitting in a park on a blanket or tarp, as seen in the opening vignette with Rebel. This analysis thereby moves beyond a merely spatial stigma (e.g. Wacquant 1996; Stuart 2016) and highlights how discrimination is dependent upon the prefiguration of PEH's self-presentation into dissonance with cultural norms of appearance and behavior (Garland Thomson 2011). The dissonance that our interlocutors experienced brings the role of cultural norms in perpetuating homelessness to the forefront, countering the normative, medicalized narratives that align PEH with deviance and individualize blame for homelessness (Lyon-Callo 2000). Rather, the dissonance PEH experience in their self-presentation exposes a larger relationship between stigma and state violence, highlighting how the abjection and visibility of bare life which legitimates state violence (Agamben 1997) is a specious, constructed image, rather than something located in a social or embodied determinism towards deviance, as popular and state discourses often contend.

The persistent stigmatization of PEH has distinctly embodied consequences. Consistently, cross-temporally and cross-culturally, stigmatization has been correlated with

increasingly negative health outcomes (Yang and Kleinman 2008; Hatzenbuehler et al. 2013; Weaver and Trainer 2017). This is due not to any biological reality that differentiates stigmatized populations, but rather due to the social role which stigma plays. Through mechanisms such as limiting access to resources and other necessities as well as increasing biopsychosocial stress (Weaver and Trainer 2017), stigma comes to have a profound and embodied consequence on stigmatized populations.

Of both political and analytic importance is the role of the state in the stigmatization of PEH, largely accomplished through denying PEH a backstage and thus locking them into a situation where they must remain marked by stigma signs. Building on Mbembe's concept of "necropolitics," Hart et al. coin the term "necrogovernance" to highlight the everyday techniques of power which serve to enact the state's necropolitical agenda which seeks to limit the life chances of specific populations deemed "surplus" (Mbembe 2019; Hart et al. 2025). By denying PEH agency in their self-presentation, the state is able to force them into presenting as abject subjects and thereby legible targets for state violence. Much as Przybylinski discusses with the notion of "propertied citizenship", PEH are denied the rights which would otherwise (in theory) protect them from state violence (2025). This is necrogovernance in its essence: the process of making PEH visible serves to expose them to premature death as state violence is contingent upon the visibility of specific markers of stigmatized identity and therefore directly targeted at PEH.

The law must have a body – a visible corpus which can be dissected by a specific, moral gaze – to operate (Agamben 1997). Likewise, PEH must be made visible in order to be disciplined. Yet, as our interlocutors' experiences highlight, this visibility is an externally imposed image of "what a homeless person looks like," rather than any identity of their

choosing. Homelessness appears here not just a visible problem, but a problem of visibility pre-figured by the actions of the state and public which deny PEH the basic human ability to present themselves as they wish and punish them for it.

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