Counting on Stability:
The Social Construction of the Los Angeles Homeless Count

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Sociotechnical change stabilizes inherently indeterminate and contingent phenomena as bounded, comprehensible, and absolute. Through an examination of the Los Angeles homeless count, I highlight three simplifications that render homelessness legible: geographic and temporal boundaries, processes of categorization, and the construction of metrics. Considering statistics as sociotechnical constructs underscores the inherent subjectivity, uncertainty, and contingency erased through claims of objectivity.

Keywords: homelessness, statistics, sociotechnical change, objectivity

A hippy van stacked with toilet paper and household items, a tarpaulin structure within a private residence, a well-equipped and expensive motor home, an intoxicated man waiting for a bus with a friend. In January 2023, I volunteered to take part in the Los Angeles homeless[1] count. These were but some of the sights we assessed while counting the number of unsheltered people living outside. We drove past a disheveled man with nice shoes and a backpack. Unsure, I looked over to Ken, a man in his mid-60s who I was volunteering with and our team's designated driver. "Could be, could not be," Ken replied, "but he doesn't have any of the accouterments." Jason, the other volunteer in our group and the person we appointed as the "designated counter," made an executive decision and tapped his phone. "Over 24," his phone chirped back—audible confirmation that the man had been counted as homeless. In one touch of the screen, our hesitancies, deliberations, and alternative explanations were collapsed into an absolute declaration: That man is "homeless." Uncertainty was made certain.

The homeless count (or "the count") is an annual point-in-time estimate of the number of people facing homelessness on any given night within Los Angeles County. The count is administered by the Los Angeles Homeless Services Authority (LAHSA), a "Continuum of Care" community action group tasked with coordinating regional homeless responses both at city and county levels. These numbers include people in homeless shelters at the time of the count and those identified during the count. Volunteers traverse every street and publicly accessible area within the county to enumerate the number of people considered to be experiencing homelessness. As we will see, the count becomes the central lens through which the homeless crisis is made visible and comprehensible to the population and policy makers.

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[1] Advocates encourage using "unhoused" and "houseless" to describe people experiencing housing insecurity. I use the term "homeless" to be consistent with HUD and LAHSA.

In their report on the state of homelessness in Los Angeles, LAHSA estimates that "69,144 people experience homelessness on any given night in LA County" (Los Angeles Homeless Services Authority [LAHSA], 2022b, p. 5). In this article, I interrogate the construction of this number as a stabilized statistical fact for governance. Indeed, the project of statistics is inseparable from the project of statecraft (Scott, 1998). The quantification of populations renders them in a docile form, amenable to calculations and governance (Foucault, 2003). Enumerating homelessness has distinctly biopolitical ends, informing policy decisions and resource allocations to monitor and regulate the population through the lens of normalcy.

However, the enumeration of homelessness is not simply a product of observing the environment but rather the product of the entire "apparatus" that constitutes its existence (Barad, 2007). This includes technologies, policies, ideologies, discourses, architectural forms, philosophical and moral propositions, humans, and nonhumans. Apparatuses are material-discursive arrangements that produce "cuts," defining what comes to matter, and what is excluded from mattering (Barad, 2007). These simplifications enact "a resolution within the phenomenon of the inherent ontological (and semantic) indeterminacy" (Barad, 2007, p. 206). Here, sociotechnical change is enacted as the generation of stability within the sociotechnical system from inherently unpredictable, fluctuating, and unstable phenomena. Drawing on literature from the sociology of science and quantification, here I trace the apparatus of the homeless count and highlight three cuts that construct homelessness as a stabilized and legible phenomenon.

Boundaries

Homelessness can only be measured if it is bounded. Geographic and temporal boundaries are deployed that shape what is seen by the count, thus constituting what "counts" as homelessness. These choices about what to measure, when, where, and how often are political judgments that shape the very construction of the phenomenon (Bowker & Star, 1999). These boundaries construct homelessness as a fixed and stable statistic rather than a fluid construct.

Geographic boundaries were implemented to define areas included in the count and those that were excluded. In 2023, LAHSA surveyed 3,193 census tracts (semipermanent federally defined, geographic statistical subdivisions). We were assigned three and instructed to only count people on the internal side of border streets to avoid double counting. However, we encountered unhoused people crossing border streets, from within our jurisdiction to outside of it. Moreover, some individuals may move throughout districts during the census, making it challenging to achieve precise enumeration. Here, the inherent transience of the population is in friction with the clearly defined conventions of enumeration.

"Zones of exclusion" were also established to shape who should be counted. Volunteers were instructed to only survey public spaces within their designated tracts, such as streets and parks; private spaces, such as schools and abandoned buildings, were off limits. However, unhoused individuals do not face these constraints. For instance, a security guard informed us that when it rains, unsheltered people often seek refuge in a nearby parking garage. Anyone in this structure during the count was rendered invisible, as were people in privately owned or off-street abandoned buildings, dumpsters, or tunnels along our route. Moreover, the count does not capture those in temporary accommodation such as couch-surfing. These boundaries thus

declare homelessness a necessarily public and visible phenomenon, leaving the hidden homeless unaccounted for.

Temporal constraints are also established that shape the count and its findings. The Federal Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) requires all Continuums of Care (regional planning bodies that coordinate homeless services) across the country to conduct a point-in-time count of sheltered and unsheltered homeless persons at least every other year at night within the last 10 days of January (Housing and Urban Development, 2017). This period is chosen to make an often-transient population stable and legible. My site coordinator stipulated that the count takes place at night due to unhoused people being less mobile and more likely to be at their shelters. Due to the perception that people are more likely to utilize homeless shelters during cold weather, the count is conducted in January in the depths of winter. Finally, it is conducted during the last 10 days of the month, as people living in temporary accommodation such as motels may not be able to afford the last few days of the month, when money is often tightest. This period is when movement is considered lowest and visibility is highest.

However, these temporal confines are complicated in Los Angeles. Winters in Southern California remain much warmer than the rest of the country. During our count, temperatures were approximately 13°C/55°F, warm enough for many people to roam the streets. Furthermore, the immense scope of LA County makes it challenging to complete the count in one night; instead, it is conducted over three. The prolonged nature of the count may mean that people traverse districts as they are being counted, potentially counted more than once or not at all. While these temporal boundaries may make some unhoused people visible by the count, they render the mobile illegible and invisible.

Finally, as an annual exercise, the count fails to capture the transient nature of homelessness. The category of "homeless" denotes a range of experiences, financial positions, and sleeping arrangements that are often changing. Throughout the year, people may move in and out of homelessness and transition between shelter types, such as street dwellings, vehicles, and motels. In 2020, LAHSA reported that on average, 207 people "exit homelessness" while 227 people became homeless every day (LAHSA, 2020). Point-in-time counts by their nature neglect that the conditions of people experiencing homelessness are often continent and in flux. Here, sociotechnical change is enacted by stabilizing the inherent fluidity and contingency of homelessness.

Classification

The process of counting homelessness is predicated on the ability to define and identify conditions of homelessness. However, there is no clear definition of what homelessness looks like, nor are the conditions of those experiencing homelessness homogeneous. People experiencing homelessness often experience a range of sleeping arrangements, financial situations, and personal circumstances such as histories of substance abuse, mental illness, incarceration, and domestic violence (Sheeley et al., 2021).

HUD designates that individuals who are living in a place not intended for human habitation must be counted as unsheltered homeless persons. However, this definition provides little information on conditions of homelessness or indicators to consider. The LAHSA (2023) training video for volunteers

clarifies homelessness as those sleeping on the street or in makeshift shelters such as tents, vehicles, and RVs. The video lists signs of homelessness such as "poor hygiene or physical condition" (LAHSA, 2023, 5:58), many layers of clothing, carrying a large backpack, pushing a shopping cart, and having a vehicle with blankets on the windows and many belongings inside. However, the video acknowledges that no single indicator necessarily means that someone is experiencing homelessness. They encourage volunteers to "look at the whole picture" and to use their "best judgment" (LAHSA, 2023, 6:48).

Here, LAHSA explicitly enrolls the experiential knowledge of local volunteers. As Barad (2007) notes, "practices of knowing and being are not isolable; they are mutually implicated. We don't obtain knowledge by standing outside the world; we know because we are of the world" (p. 185). Volunteers bring their own perspectives and personal experiences with homelessness to their counting duties, as evidenced by their motivations for participating in the count. Jason, like myself, had recently moved to LA and was struck by the visibility and magnitude of homelessness. Ken had personally experienced homelessness, having lived in his car ten years prior. We all drew on our personal experiences when deciding when and how to count homelessness, particularly the myriad edge cases we encountered.

During the count, volunteers use an app that facilitates the recording of their findings, which categorizes homeless individuals by age (under 18, 18 to 24, or over 24) and sleeping arrangements by type (car, tent, van/SUV, camper/RV, or makeshift shelter) (LAHSA, 2023). These categories define which individuals and sleeping arrangements are relevant to the construction of homelessness. However, other details about homelessness may be occluded by these categories, and the process of delineating between them can be difficult in practice. For example, halfway through our count, Jason admitted, "I'm just putting 'over 24' for everyone." People were covered in blankets or were rugged in heavy clothing, so making out facial features, let alone age, was challenging. Through the act of counting, the fluidity and indeterminacy of homelessness are flattened into homogenizing categories fit for analysis.

Sociotechnical change is realized by systematically erasing the subjectivities and narratives that shape statistical constructs. Quantification produces a perception of objectivity and validity through "impersonality, discipline, and rules" (Porter, 1996, p. x). However, the count underscores how observers are inextricable from the knowledge they create. Barad (2007) illuminates that "there is no unambiguous way to differentiate between the object and the agencies of observation" (p. 196). Embedded within every statistic of homelessness are subjective experiences, reconciliations, and determinations that then inform public discourse and policy discussions. During our count, Ken reminded us that "we just observe, that's all we do." However, volunteers do not just "observe" but rather *create* the phenomenon of homelessness and are themselves mutually implicated in its construction.

Metrics

Finally, the count is stabilized as a metric to track the management of homelessness. The count is the primary means through which the unhoused crisis is understood and progress evaluated and communicated. Los Angeles Mayor Karen Bass recently announced that the city has rehoused 4,000 unsheltered people within her first 100 days in office (Zahniser, 2023); California Governor Gavin Newsom has pledged to decrease California's unhoused population by 15% in two years (Wiley & Luna, 2023). In

both cases, the count is the centralized reference point for addressing the homeless crisis and communicating progress. Addressing the homeless crisis means decreasing the number of people observed within the count. Despite methodological critiques that the count is unreliable for year-to-year comparability (Flaming & Burns, 2017), former LA mayor Eric Garcetti contends that the count "reinforces truths" that "visible and lasting progress can only come through investments in long-term, affordable, and quality housing solutions" (LAHSA, 2022a, para. 10). Here, the homeless count comes to stand in for the crisis itself as an objective and valid metric for measuring progress.

The count has also become the stable reference point for homelessness for national policies and initiatives. HUD uses the homeless count to allocate funding, with the areas with the largest homeless populations receiving the most funding. Moreover, the city of LA is required to provide shelter or housing for 60% of the unsheltered population in each city council district, with reference to the count (Central City Association of Los Angeles [CCA], 2022). However, this approach overlooks the mobility of the population and assumes that where individuals are observed and recorded during the count is where funding should be allocated. Despite measurements acting as representations of reality, through sociotechnical stabilization, they are treated as the phenomena they represent.

As the count becomes the primary reference point for evaluating homelessness and communicating progress, the conditions of its creation are erased. The negotiations, disagreements, and edge cases that volunteers experienced are omitted, as are the details of boundaries created and areas excluded. Untethered from its context of creation, the number constitutes the phenomenon itself rather than the apparatus that constructed it. Moreover, relying on the count to evaluate policies fails to account for structural conditions of homelessness. Affordable housing will be ineffective at quelling homelessness without also addressing the rising cost of living and stagnant income that contributes to housing insecurity. Furthermore, the homogenizing category of "homeless" also obscures the specific needs and experiences of different subpopulations within the homeless population, such as people of color, domestic violence survivors, LGBTQ+ individuals, and the formerly incarcerated. Nor do these statistics capture the heightened mortality rates of people experiencing homelessness in LA during the COVID-19 pandemic. Statistics will only ever present a partial perspective. Reifying them only neglects these contexts further.

Conclusion

Reflecting on the importance of the count, former mayor Garcetti stated that "these aren't just statistics, these are stories, not numbers but narratives; they're flesh and blood" (Vives, 2022, para. 12). However, it is precisely these narratives and bodies that are excluded from discussions of homelessness. Quantification entails a systematic erasure of both the narratives of the quantified and those producing the quantification (Porter, 1996; Scott, 1998). Statistics produce a "tunnel vision" that illuminates "certain limited aspects of an otherwise far more complex and unwieldy reality" while eliding others (Scott, 1998, p. 11). Such simplifications are necessary to stabilize the phenomena as legible to the state, thus amenable to measurement and control. While statistics may strive for objectivity, an unambiguous account of a phenomenon requires "a description of all relevant features of the experimental arrangement" (Barad, 2007, p. 197). In other words, an "objective" count can only be defined with reference to the bodies that produce it.

My purpose here is not to discredit the count. The count will always be an imperfect metric for measuring the homeless crisis. But as one coordinator explained, "You've got to throw something at the wall and see what sticks." Rather, I consider sociotechnical change through processes of stabilization to underscore the complex apparatus that produces homelessness as a rigid metric. I point toward policies, practices, and people that the count stands in for to highlight the textures of human existence erased through stabilization.

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