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Marginalized: The Missing Public Management Research on Homelessness

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Introduction

Within the same month in 2016, the front page of three major newspapers declared homelessness an emergency: the *San Francisco Chronicle*, *New York Times,* and *Los Angeles Times*. As a societal challenge, homelessness is not limited to the United States, with homeless populations across the largest city in each of the 20 OCED nations (Bainbridge and Carrizales 2017). But homelessness is long-standing issue in American cities with significant human consequences. However, current public management research does not typically include research on public agency response to the needs of the homeless.

This paper uses a case study to explore the disconnect between public management research and those living on the margins of society as homeless. The case study illustrates the potential for multiple streams of research in public management to effectively research the complexities of homelessness. This paper makes the case for public agency responses to the varied dimensions of homelessness to align with public management research, with the potential to expand the scope of public management research to benefit the homeless as a marginalized community.

A case study of homelessness in Los Angeles County is explored to show the potential for well-developed lines of public management research to be applied to the public agency response to homelessness. This paper contributes three components to public management research: one, noting that homelessness is understudied in public management; two, applying current research streams in public management to develop analytic leverage for understanding the public management dimensions of homelessness; and three, exploring the potential for varied streams of public management research to address a marginalized community of vulnerable individuals. Finding a home in public management research for homelessness invites public management research with a goal of reducing "the organization of misery" to apply a phrase from a social determinants of health researcher (Marmot 2015).

The first section reviews the publications on homelessness found in seven journals that publish public-management-related research. The second section applies Kettl's (2006) framework of wicked governance problems to a case study of the County of Los Angeles addressing homelessness. The third

section considers how several streams of public management research could move homelessness to become central to future public management research.

Understudied Issue in Public Management Research

Homelessness is an understudied action arena in public management research. For example, from 2013 to 2016 very little published research appears on homelessness across seven journals ranked highly by impact factor in public management, governance, public administration, and public policy. A snapshot of the articles published in 2013 to 2016 in those seven journals finds only two articles, both by Jennifer Mosely (2012 and 2014), focused specifically on homelessness

The journals were selected for review by impact factor and a specific emphasis on research in public management, public administration, public policy, and public sector governance. This selection strategy was intended to seek variety in the issues or action arenas covered. A measure of the variety of public sector research selected is that the greatest number of articles overlapped on two topics only: education and civic engagement. This research included review of each article, not a limited word search.

Public Administration and Management	Public Policy	Governance
Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory	*Journal of Public Policy and Management*	*Governance: An International Journal of Policy, Administration, and Institutions*
Public Administration Review	*Policy Studies Journal*	
American Review of Public Administration	*Policy Sciences*	

An argument may be made that homelessness is an issue that could be covered in specialized journals. However, the journals surveyed from 2013 to 2016 published types of research that could be

covered in topic-specific journals, including children's protective services, disaster management, immigration, state building, nuclear power, health care, gun control, and poverty response policies, all with two or more articles.

This finding of limited coverage aligns with other studies of published research. For example, in articles from 1999 through 2001, the bulk of research consisted of the study of "cigarette consumption, child support payments, injury rates, and infant birthrate" (Hill and Lynn 2005, 182). More recent research identified eight specific policy domains and one "other" category, but did not identify homelessness. (Pierce *et al*. 2014). For *Public Administration Review*, a highly ranked impact factor journal, a bibliometric review found very few citations from 1990 to 2013 from research in social work (1.45%) (Ni, Sugimoto, and Robbin 2017).

The conventional understanding suggests that the enduring high levels of homelessness result from a combination of political inattention, failure to commit resources, and ineffective models of intervention. The contemporary discussion by elected officials typically fails to recognize the repetition in the calls for focused political attention, increased funding, and community-based models of intervention. Describing three decades as an elected official, former City of Los Angeles Councilman and Los Angeles County Supervisor Ed Edelman described the challenge of public sector responses to homelessness as "getting along with other officials, knowing that you need to get along with those who disagree" (Edelman 2012).

The intractability of reducing homelessness in Los Angeles County over several decades can be tracked across a range of metrics. In terms of human tragedy, the impact can be seen in the *Los Angeles Times* newspaper columnist Steve Lopez's book *The Soloist* (2008) describing the plight of a homeless man and former musician prodigy, Nathaniel Ayers. The dimensions of the problems of homeless men in downtown Los Angeles described by Lopez are remarkably similar to the experiences discussed at a public hearing convened in 1985 by Los Angeles County Supervisor Edelman, although the names have changed. However, from 1985 to 2008 the number of Los Angeles homeless has increased in three decades to an estimated 50,000 individuals. In terms of funding, for example, managers in the State of

Washington's Department of Commerce oversee $45 million dollars of real estate transaction fees distributed across three major programs. San Francisco City/County government annually spends over $240 million in homelessness reduction. In short, homelessness is neither a new responsibility of public managers nor is it an inexpensive public investment.

Case Study Methodology

The case study methodology is favored as an approach seeking to explain the "how" of an issue (Yin 2014, 9). In addition, governance research calls for "richly textured case studies" derived from field research as more appropriate than other methods (Heinrich, Hill, and Lynn 2004, 13). Case studies offer the "historical, descriptive, and institutional orientation" needed as a research strategy (Hill and Lynn 2005, 175). For public management research, case studies can provide an alternative to depending on large data sets and explicit empirical measures that might leave the development of research "crying in the wilderness for a long time" (Rainey and Ryu 2004, 20).

The more than 30-year research agenda of Elinor Ostrom and her colleague developed findings on cooperation to preserve common pool resources across a wide range of countries and contexts, with applicability across varied locations and types of resources (Ostrom 1990), including governance research (Callahan 2007). Other examples of case studies generating insights that can be applied beyond the originating locations and action arenas include the findings of Milward and Provan (2006) on networks from research on four case studies of mental health providers and a 20-year case study to explain complex regulatory enforcement on clean air in the Los Angeles basin to explain complex regulatory enforcement (Mazmanian 2009).

Case Study: County of Los Angeles

This research as a case study of the varied department of the County of Los Angeles outlines the public management complexities of responding to homelessness using the framework of a wicked problem. Kettl's (2006) discussion of the failed response to Hurricane Katrina in the United States provides a framework for illustrating the public agency responses to a wicked problem as a public

management research challenge. Kettl outlines four significant features that characterize wicked problems, which are applied in the following section for describing the case study of Los Angeles homelessness:

1) The problems cross political jurisdictions;
2) A significant cost of failure;
3) An immediate and pressing need; and
4) Currently depleted intellectual capital for generating new solutions.

Crossing Political Jurisdictions

Fragmentation of administrative approaches and public funding has been a long-standing critique of the problem-solving approaches in Los Angeles County. Starting in 1985, the proposed City-County Homeless Task Force was designed to address these cross-jurisdictional issues. However, the responsibility for providing social services, general relief, mental health, and health services are under the jurisdiction of the County of Los Angeles with the concentration of homeless living in the City of Los Angeles.

A snapshot of the complexity of cross-jurisdictional engagement emerges from a 2009 study of the costs of homelessness (Flaming, Matsunaga and Burns 2009, 43). The following city, county, and private service providers expend funds for services to the homeless:

Probation	DPSS General Relief	Health Services – ER
Sheriff mental health jail	DPSS Food Stamps	Health Services – outpatient
Sheriff medical jail	Paramedics	Private hospitals – inpatient
Sheriff general jail	Public Health	Health Services – inpatient
LAHSA homeless	Mental Health	
GR Housing Vouchers	Private hospitals – ER	

An equally complex snapshot develops from a study of the funders across the public, private, and nonprofit sectors contributing to the construction of housing units for the chronically homeless (Burt 2005, 16):

LIHTC	Block Grants	Public Housing Authorities
Redevelopment Agency	Commercial Bank	McKinney-Vento
Housing Finance Agency	Other Local	Other/Other Private
Housing Trust Fund	Mainstream Service Agencies	Federal Home Loan Bank
Community Development	HOME	

Significant cost of failure

One measure of the cost of homelessness is simply financial. A 2009 study of over 10,000 homeless in Los Angeles found "the typical public cost for residents in supportive housing is $605 a month. The typical public cost for similar homeless persons is $2,897, five-times greater than their counterparts that are housed" (Flaming, Matsunaga, and Burns, 2009, 1). The human dimensions are significant, with the high-end estimate of over 96,000 individuals experiencing homelessness in 2009 (Flaming, Matsunaga and Burns 2009, 6).

The number of homeless men, women, and children in Los Angeles County in 1985 was estimated between 25,000 to 50,000. In that year, the Los Angeles County Grand Jury recommended that downtown Los Angeles be formally declared a state and national disaster area to bring additional resources to assist the homeless (Connell 1985b, 29). To address an "appalling" lack of coordination between the City of Los Angeles and County of Los Angeles (Freedman 1988, 2), a joint City-County Task Force was proposed and subsequently formalized as a Joint Powers Agreement, signed by Mayor Tom Bradley (Edelman 2012). Yet, the numbers increased even with this new governance structure.

Pressing need

A notable set of demonstration projects has been developed for the downtown homeless population, including services for the chronically mentally ill. However, these programs have served in the range of 100 participants a year, of a population numbering in the thousands. Additionally, for the Skid Row Collaborative,

three-year outcomes on the benchmarks for reducing chronic homelessness, while better than hotels, are at 60 percent (Burt 2008, 23). After 25 years of significant efforts, a pressing need remains.

There have been successes with some projects. "Federal demonstration projects have contributed solid evidence that PSH with substantial service levels and innovative approaches are very effective strategies to ending the homelessness of people with many disabilities who have not responded to other program structures or who quickly fail in them because they do not receive the types of attention they need" (Burt 2008, 27). The challenge becomes how to develop the intellectual capital needed for scaling up these programs, for greater coordination of efforts across programs, for additional resources, and mechanisms for accountability. Namely, the same challenges identified in 1985.

By 2006, the estimated homeless count ranged from 96,000 to over 150,000 annually (Burt 2008, 6), with a comprehensive program evaluation report concluding that "Los Angeles does not yet have consistent information about the characteristics of people who are homeless or how those characteristics affect the duration of homelessness" (Flaming, Matsunaga, and Burns 2009, 6). Despite over 25 years of efforts to improve coordination, leveraging of resources, and development of strategy, the governance problems endured.

Depleted intellectual capital for generating new solutions

The continued pressing need in not only the downtown area of the City of Los Angeles but extending to the Westside and the City of Santa Monica, led the California Endowment to fund the meeting of judges, legislators, the California Chief Justice, as well as experts from NY and the RAND Corporation to consider developing new approaches to addressing homelessness (Edelman 2012). A study of homelessness notes some positive trends in the demonstration project to reduce homelessness but overall finds "expectations that the agencies offering supportive services will devote local resources to maintaining these services have for the most part not been fulfilled" (Burt 2008, 26). A comprehensive study of the number of homeless and the

duration of homelessness concludes with a description of the leadership failure by stating "Los Angeles needs to get its arms around the homeless population" (Flaming, Matsunaga and Burns 2009, 61).

Applied Public Management Research Avenues

The alignment of the Los Angeles case study with the characteristics of wicked problems in Kettl's framework illustrates the multi-dimensional response needed for effective homelessness reduction strategies. The multiple avenues of problem solving invites research across varied public management research streams. Applying existing public management research streams to the study of homelessness can bring the benefits of public management research to a marginalized population. Wicked problems cannot be solved by one organization, calling for public management study of varied domains and networks addressing wicked problems (Ferlie*et al.* 2011).

A focus of public management on homelessness moves a vulnerable population from the margins of research on public organizations to the varied analytic leverage offered by public management research. The Los Angeles case illustrates the multiple dimensions of public management responses to homeless populations, including but not limited to network management, political management, and the potential for insights from qualitative research methodologies. As an interdisciplinary field, public management research has the potential to deepen the understanding of the public-sector responses to homelessness. The following section outlines the alignment of the varied challenges of public agencies addressing homelessness with public management research.

Political management

The role of politics in public management responses to homelessness is captured in the comment of the longest serving elected official in Los Angeles County history, Supervisor Kenny Hahn, who described the "politicization and jockeying for leadership on the homeless issue [as] 'an ugly thing'" (Connell 1985a,

1). The reality of politics makes homelessness a difficult issue to research. Current efforts are notably remiss in giving credit or acknowledging the efforts of previous political administrations.

This failure to connect with the past is not a surprising feature of politics. Past research on public organizations and elected officials anticipates this current dilemma. March and Olsen (1983) describe the lack of elected official's sustained attention to public management reforms as "the problematics of attention." The public management organizational design challenges are found in the research on the politics of structural choice, which asks if public agencies are designed for success (Moe 1990).

The disconnect of decision-making from the history of an issue has been described as the failure of "thinking in time" (Neustadt and May 1986). The absence of thinking in time results in a failure to identify that the contemporary calls for focused political attention, increased funding, and community-based models of intervention obscures the governance dimension of the challenge to structure cooperation across political jurisdictions. And the political reality of blame avoidance makes it difficult to study governance problems where political leadership does not introduce programs in recognition of negativity bias in public (Nielsen and Baekgaard 2015; Soroka 2014). The Los Angeles case study starts with two elected officials, Mayor of Los Angeles Tom Bradley and Los Angeles County Supervisor Ed Edelman, forging a political alliance to have their respective jurisdictions develop a formal structure for political cooperation. The inherently political nature of addressing homelessness in a jurisdiction, as well as across cities in a region and inter-governmentally, can be researched with well-developed frameworks and findings from political management.

Large Forces Research

Addressing homelessness from a public management perspective would account for what Roberts (2013) terms the large forces of society. Among researchers in public administration, there is a persistent sense of a deficiency in the body of research that has developed in the past 20 years (Peters and Pierre 2016), with a need to consider how public management addresses societal problem solving (Kirlin 1996b; Roberts 2014). This critique of public management finds the field is too narrow and needs to account for more than

metrics (Radin 2006), in addition Roberts (2013) argues that public administration has retreated from addressing the large forces driving societal problems and fails to deal with complex societal issues with significant public sector roles and expenditures, as well as tragic human consequences. Focusing research on the public agency responses to the needs of the homeless would invite public management research to consider the impact of large societal forces.

Network research

The study of networks and collaboration has emerged as a significant field of research over the past 25 years. This research reflects the operational reality that Agranoff (2012) describes: To manage in the public sector is to manage networks. Through the lens of public management research, homelessness could readily be described as public sector networks as well as cross-sectoral networks linking nonprofits and public funding and oversight. Notably, Milward and Provan (2006), as founders of the field of public sector network research, find that "collaborative networks are seen as appropriate devices to tackle public management problems like homelessness, child welfare, and terrorism." Mosely's (2014) research on homelessness from the three-year period of public management research journals used for this paper focused on the collaboration in providing homeless services. Correspondingly, the Los Angeles County case study shows a wide range of public agency and nonprofit collaboration forming a network of service provision.

Leadership

Currently, with much of the public performance management research focused on organizations as the unit of analysis, the leadership roles in responding to homelessness are not often studied. Long-standing researchers in complex governance challenges suggest that leadership research has not been well developed because of the focus on management (Hill and Lynn 2005, 183-184). But there is a recognition of a need for improved modeling and study of leadership in governance research (Ingraham, Sowa, and Moynihan 2004, 168; Rainey and Ryu 2004, 36). The challenges found in the Los Angeles County case study very much fit the definition of public leadership described by Jean Hartley of "mobilizing individuals, organisations and networks to formulate and/or enact purposes, values and actions which aim or claim to create valued

outcomes for the public sphere" (2018, 203).

Civic Engagement

The research on civic engagement invites application to the issue of homelessness given the local nature of homelessness, as well as the fundamental quality of deliberative civic engagement of individuals taking personal ownership of a societal challenge with a commitment to make a difference (Nabatchi 2012, 7). For a marginalized population such as the homeless, researchers note the potential for the study of "collaboration to advance social and economic well-being for vulnerable populations and communities" (Boguslaw, Cronin, and Guananja 2016, 169). In her personal memoir on being homeless, Josephine Ensign describes the need to "create empathy…for positive change for people pushed to the margins" (2016, xvi). Deliberative civic engagement is designed to accomplish that connection and create empathy for individuals in a community who can no longer afford or find a place for home.

Public value

Addressing wicked problems provides an opportunity to create public value (Geuijen *et al.* 2017). Using the Mark Moore (1995) framework of the authorizing environment, the operating capacity and the public value created provides a framework for researching public agency responses aimed at reducing homelessness. The public value framework lends itself to problems that cross the public and nonprofit sectors with a focus on social change (Cels, De Jong, Nauta 2012). Collaboratives that cross the public and nonprofit sectors are a significant feature of the landscape of creating public value (Bryson, Crosby, and Bloomberg, 2015). Research on cross-sectoral partnership creating public value can explain public sector innovation in gradations from incremental to radical (de Lancer Julnes 2016, 17).

The Los Angles case study illustrates the key features of the Moore framework of the authorizing environment of Mayor, Council, and County Board of Supervisors; the operating capacity of the varied public and nonprofit agencies; and the potential public value created measured in the number of homeless served.

The question of the sustainability of creating public value can be applied to programs addressing homelessness. The effectiveness of new initiatives can dissipate, for example, "the impacts of HPRP [Homelessness Prevention and Rapid Re-housing Program] fade out when program benefits end, bringing into question whether homeless prevention can help families achieve self-sufficiency in the long run." (Piña and Pirog 2019, 1).

Emergency response

At various times from 2016 through 2018, the cities of Los Angeles, San Francisco, and New York have declared homelessness a local emergency. Kettl's (2006) framework for wicked problems derives from the failure of emergency response to the Hurricane Katrina crisis. Public management research has readily embraced emergency planning, mitigation, and management (see for example, Comfort, Boin, and Demchak 2010). Specifically, this stream of public management research addresses dynamic forces that drive adaptation and resilience in response to a crisis.

This type of research specifically focuses on the response of public organizations to immediate and pressing needs, where "managers operating in situations of rapid change confront a difficult dilemma" (Comfort, Yeo, and Scheinert 2019, 159). In the Los Angeles case study, the catalyst for forming the City-County Task Force on Homelessness was the perception of urgency and growing magnitude (Edelman 2012). The contemporary pressing human (Ensign 2018) and national crisis of homelessness (National Academies 2018) invite in-depth public management research, applying the frameworks and findings that have been developed in the study of other crisis responses.

Strategic planning

In the public sector Bryson Edwards, and Van Slyke (2017) offer a description that readily accommodates the demands of research in homelessness: "In short, public-sector planning is strategic when given the context participants have a clear recognition of, and desire to stabilize, what should be stabilized,

while maintaining appropriate flexibility in terms of goals, policies, strategies, and processes to manage complexity, take advantage of important opportunities, and advance resilience and sustainability in the face of an uncertain future." The recent work of the National Academies of Science, Engineering and Medicine (2018) searches for evidence of the effectiveness of housing first as a strategy.

Strategy development can be seen as central to the role of the public manager (Moore 1995). In addition, public administration research very much includes design of new systems and institutions as a central focus (Kirlin 1996). The Los Angeles case study can also be seen as a search for strategies that more effectively leverage existing public resources, while mobilizing a wide range of public and nonprofit sector partners. Developing a public management research agenda focused on varied strategies to address homelessness could extend existing research to specifically compare and contrast strategies across varied jurisdictions (Bryson, Edwards, and Van Slyke 2017).

Expanded research methodologies

An emphasis on quantitative methods result in a search for public sector problems with large data sets for analysis. A limit in the typical study of governance is described as the "bright streetlights effect" by two leading researchers Carolyn Hill and Larry Lynn (2005, 188). In this metaphor, governance researchers are likened to the man searching for lost car keys under a streetlight because that is where the light shines in the dark. Likewise, performance management research clusters around data sets in local government and education (O'Toole and Meier 2015), creating the need for future research in performance management to consider contextual variables. Radin (2016) also notes the limiting effect of a drive for big data in program evaluation. Paradoxically, the problems that have the administrative capacity to generate meaningful data sets are often in the public agencies that are well developed in their problem solving, typically not addressing long-dynamics problems in conditions of great uncertainty.

As a field, public management would benefit from an expanded scope of research to include the public organization response to homelessness. Public sector research has a well-developed case study

methodology for deepening the understanding of complex problems, with the potential for "thick descriptions" in case studies to "bridge the gap between practitioners and researchers" (Ospina, Esteve, and Lee 2018, 593). The complexity of public organization responses to homelessness can be disaggregated from complex, wicked problems into constituent parts (Alford and Head 2017, Figure 1). The Los Angeles case study illustrates a range of dynamics of a range of public organizations addressing homelessness. More recent efforts at the federal level disaggregate federal agency responses into a focus on veterans, or a focus on housing first options (National Academics of Medicine, Science and Engineering 2018).

Implications

Generating new intellectual capital

An expanded research framework can anticipate the challenges of sustaining focus, of developing strategy, and of the leadership skills needed to advance public management responses to homelessness This framework can move the research and practice beyond a focus only on structure, whether hierarchical or networked. The challenges of homelessness solutions are not unique to either the policy issues or the geographical setting. An expanded model of research provides the analysis to anticipate leverage points in the public-sector organizational designs that can anticipate the problems of cooperation and tensions that would need to be addressed, as well as identify the mechanisms that can be transferred across varied political jurisdictions.

Generating new intellectual capital addresses the perception of homelessness in Los Angeles County, which has remained consistent over the course of 25 years. What are the problems of coordination of resources, development of strategy, and leveraging of assets that explains the enduring perception? The emerging body of research on governance in the past 20 years promises a framework to systematically study the variables to anticipate and explain the challenges of moving governmental organizations and multiple sectors to deliver services. The shift creates challenges for understanding the coordination of governmental

efforts across the public and nonprofit sectors, the development of inter-organizational networks, the tension between hierarchy directing networks of public programs, and the limits of formal authority.

Addressing the public agency response to homelessness as a question for public management researchers offers the capacity to draw on a wider set of research findings in a multidisciplinary approach. As Elinor Ostrom (2010) noted in her Nobel Prize acceptance speech, bringing together diverse researchers working across their academic disciplines drove the development of common pool resource findings, revealing shared connections across different perspectives on a similar set of problems. Comparing the efforts across local government initiatives provides a research design to search for the contextual variables that explain performance (Meier and O'Toole 2015). These types of research could replenish needed intellectual capital needed to address wicked problems (Kettl 2006). Connecting multiple lines of public management research can develop findings on public sector policy that more effectively addresses homelessness.

Conclusion

This paper illustrates the potential for multiple research approaches in public management to address the needs of a marginalized community that is currently understudied in public management. An expanded research framework may better explain the repeated pattern of recurring failures and the incomplete understanding of past efforts to reduce these problems in Los Angeles. An enhanced framework may also map the organizational challenges, politics, and the difficulty of sustaining focus. An expanded research could address contextual variables and public organizations.

Limits

The research on this case study limits the generalizability of the findings, and it should be considered exploratory. As with any case study research, the findings in individual cases and their specific contexts limit their applicability to a wider set of cases in varied contexts. For the literature review, there is a limit in the choice of the seven top journals in a three-year span, as they are not exhaustive of the wide range of public

administration, public management, public policy, and governance journals. Also, the timeframe may miss a prior or subsequent trend.

Implications

Homelessness has not been episodic or exceptional; rather, homelessness is a predictable feature on the landscape of urban America. The failures of Los Angeles City and County governments over the course of three decades to reduce homelessness (Holland, 2019) suggests a recurring need for research accessible to policy-makers and political leadership.

As significant as the issue of homelessness is for individuals and communities, the absence of sustained public management research on the organizational responses has consequences for other marginalized and disadvantaged communities. At the core of research in the public sector is a belief that understanding can improve performance. Homelessness has challenged public managers for decades without a sustained and deep effort matched by the academic research community that studies public management. The benefits of expanding the range of public management research to include public agency responses to homelessness has implications for expanding public management research on other marginalized communities. This exploratory case study of public agency responses to homelessness, which illustrates the characteristics and properties of deeply studied public management issues, suggests that there could be a set of issues affecting marginalized communities that public management research could study in greater depth.

The absence of research activities on homelessness suggests there is a neglected research agenda for addressing a range of dynamic problems that researchers have largely avoided in public management. The research presented in this paper on homelessness suggests a template for extending research to marginalized communities by demonstrating the magnitude, showing the strong connection of the issue to central features of public management research, and the potential analytic leverage of a public management research agenda. The metaphor of a lack of a home for homelessness research extends to other marginalized, disadvantaged communities. Public management research has the potential to generate the intellectual capital to impact the

human dimensions of public-sector challenges and protect those who are most vulnerable, pushed to society's

margin.

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