Left out in the Cold: Care, Neglect, and Homelessness in Anchorage, Alaska

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Left out in the Cold:  
Care, Neglect, and Homelessness in Anchorage, Alaska  

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Undergraduate Senior Thesis  
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Abstract

In the Summers of 2022 and 2023, Anchorage, Alaska closed all low-barrier emergency homeless shelters, forcing approximately 250 people to camp, unsheltered, throughout the city. The city’s actions spawned a crisis as people were left without food, water, or medical services, yet also sparked massive volunteer mobilization of mutual aid. This ethnographic study is based on three months of fieldwork grounded in participant observation at 3rd & Ingra, a large homeless encampment on the edge of downtown Anchorage. I studied three groups of people–policymakers, nonprofit employees, and volunteers–in order to understand how each of these groups conceptualizes homelessness and justifies their approach to addressing it.

My thesis explores the entanglement of care and power under neoliberalism; using Anchorage as a case study, I detail the state’s withdrawal from providing social services, and the corresponding responses enacted by nonprofit organizations and volunteers. This project draws attention to the role that biopower plays in state action, and how it serves to individualize and medicalize homelessness. I also discuss how care provided by volunteers helps people survive neglect, and challenges neoliberal rationalities. By investigating care, power, and their entanglement within homelessness management, I illustrate the limits and possibilities of collective survival practices under neoliberalism.
Acknowledgements

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Finally, I extend deep thanks to the people within this thesis. Thank you for welcoming me into your work, your homes, and your trust. Carl, Sam, June, Zara, and Ella– I’ve changed your names, but you know who you are. Take this thesis as an appreciation of everything you’ve built. Your work is building a better world, and I am grateful to be in community with you. Thank you to Mara and Ethan for looking out for me in so many ways. Thank you to many other volunteers, advocates, and institutional players for speaking with me, for candidly sharing your thoughts and opinions, and for giving me insight into your work. Last, thank you to all the people I met while visiting the 3rd & Ingra encampment. Thank you for your kindness, your patience, and your openness to me.

I have been loved up to this moment by so many people. Thank you to everyone that has held me in community. May we continue to be here for each other.
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Introduction

One abrupt summer day in June 2022, Anchorage, Alaska no longer had an emergency homeless shelter. Mayor Dave Bronson closed the Sullivan arena, the city’s only low-barrier shelter, and bussed the people who remained there to Centennial Campground, a forested space for tents on the northeastern margins of Anchorage (Treinen, 2022). At the time, the municipality refused to classify this action as “an official homelessness response”, which limited the possible responses from Anchorage NGOs. There were no medical services at the camp, no food, no staff, and no case management through which people might transition into shelter or housing (Goodykoontz, 2022a).

In the absence of municipal or nonprofit services, Anchorage community members brought anything they could imagine people needing: tents, sleeping bags, long underwear, hot coffee. Sam, a community advocate, estimated that approximately $250,000 of supplies were donated to the camp over three months. Volunteers served hot food, performed wellness checks, and even administered life-saving medications (Goodykoontz, 2022b). In the gap left by the municipal government, community organizers provided whatever care they could.

Still, the lack of official services scared campers and their allies alike. Sam had advocated for people experiencing homelessness for years; people he cared for had been stripped of safety, routine, and security, and he was terrified of what would happen to them. He began to live at the camp, checking on folks he knew, and coordinating donations. According to Sam, none of the campers slept for the first ten nights, out of fear. As the weeks stretched on, community advocates, NGOs, and journalists began to classify Centennial campground as a “crisis”. On the night of July 4th, four black bears entered the camp. They tore into occupied tents, injuring some people and threatening many more. When police and Parks and Recreation arrived, they chased
the bears away with shotguns. In the commotion, no one noticed that a disabled woman had fallen out of her chair and was bleeding from her head, and neither the police nor Parks and Rec were available to help her. A community volunteer called 911, only to find that the gate was locked, and the ambulance could not reach the injured woman (Goodykoontz and Hughes, 2022). Medical services at the camp remained inadequate even after July 4th: community volunteers described administering narcan to people who had overdosed. On July 15th, one woman was found dead (Rockey, 2022).

For every news article, tweet, or heartfelt account of what was happening at Centennial, donations poured in. By July 19th, the city’s nonprofit organizations entered the camp and began providing official support services. Yet, the municipality’s reckless disregard for human life could not be alleviated by well-meaning charity. By the end of the summer, hundreds of people had suffered utterly preventable traumas.

The Centennial Crisis showcased both the horrors of political neglect and the possibilities of volunteer-based care. In the years since, both of these forces have continued along linked but opposite paths, manifesting into Anchorage’s current scheme of homelessness management. I see Anchorage’s municipal homeless response as a neoliberal policy in which the government withdraws from providing social services, and instead emphasizes individualism and personal responsibility. In turn, volunteer action both responds to and proposes an alternative to state withdrawal. Volunteers provide care in ways the state refuses to, and volunteer-care centers the humanity and citizenship of those the state neglects. My thesis explores the tensions and possibilities created by the provision of this care.
Research Questions

This thesis investigates how three groups of people in Anchorage—city policymakers, nonprofit employees, and volunteers—interact with the issue of homelessness. I chart how they talk about homelessness, the policies they enact to manage homeless people, and what this reveals about their feelings and moral commitments towards people experiencing homelessness. In this thesis, I am particularly interested in the issue of care. How does neoliberalism, as a structuring condition, change the ways that these three groups care for people experiencing homelessness? What does care mean and how is it practiced in urban life, specifically in regards to homelessness?

* * *

Key Concepts

Before diving into my research, I would like to define what I mean by “care” and “neoliberalism”. A more in-depth review of these concepts in the context of other scholars’ work will occur in Chapter One.

Care

I define care as a relational practice in which people work to understand and meet each others’ needs. In particular, I draw upon philosopher Virginia Held’s work on care, in which she understands care as “a relation in which carer and cared-for share an interest in their mutual well-being” (Held, 2006, 35). Notably, care happens in relation to others; one cannot simply be caring, one must do care. Therefore, care involves two steps. First, one must build relationships
in which people understand each others’ needs. Then, they must work to meet these needs (Held, 2006, 36).

Hobart and Kneese, in their review of significant literature on care, pay particular attention to how caring relationships are developed and maintained. Caring relationships are “an affective connective tissue between an inner self and an outer world” (2020, 2). While care might involve what philosophers such as Hume and Smith describe as “empathy”, “sympathy”, or “fellow-feeling”, care is the worldly, grounded practice of these concepts (Hobart and Kneese, 2020, 2).

Additionally, because care involves attending to the needs of others, it can be directed towards specific actions and goals. Held argues that care ought to serve as a basis of ethics (2006, 3); Hobart and Kneese argue that care can be mobilized by social movements. When care serves as the basis for liberatory social change, Hobart and Kneese call this phenomenon “radical care” (2020, 1).

Last, Hobart and Kneese reference instances of care that occur between people and their environment, or people and objects (2020, 3). I appreciate these theorists for expanding our understanding of care to include interspecies relationships. However, my discussion of care will remain limited to relationships between people, as this form of care was most relevant within my research.

**Neoliberalism**

Originating in the United States in the 1980s, neoliberalism is a theory of political economic practices that promotes the free-market as the solution to social problems and limits the role of government to providing a “business-friendly” environment (Harvey, 2007, 2).
Neoliberalism is characterized by privatizing and deregulating industries, while cutting government spending on healthcare, education, and social services. Essentially, “the social safety net is reduced to a bare minimum in favour of a system that emphasizes personal responsibility” (Harvey, 2007, 76).

Neoliberalism’s emphasis on personal responsibility affects how people see and imagine the world, including homelessness and how it is understood. Shelter staff, operating under neoliberal discourses, increasingly locate the causes of homelessness in individual pathology (Lyon-Callo, 2004). Teresa Gowan calls this way of understanding homelessness as “sick talk” and/or “sin talk”. Policy makers, non-profit employees, and even people experiencing homelessness often articulate homelessness as a problem within individuals, rather than a phenomenon produced by systems (Gowan, 2010). To summarize, neoliberalism is both an economic theory that guides policy, and a cultural force that shapes public attitudes.

Therefore, when tracing the influence of neoliberalism on homelessness in Anchorage, we must examine both its economic and cultural impacts. We should investigate how neoliberal policies affect rates of homelessness, the types of services available for people experiencing homelessness, and the funding those services receive. In tandem, we should interrogate how people might use neoliberal logics to justify their own actions towards unhoused people, and rationalize their moral responsibilities to others. Last, we must explore how neoliberalism shapes notions of care, who deserves care, and who is expected to provide it.

* * *
Why study housed people to learn about homelessness?

My thesis explicitly focuses on housed people, rather than unhoused people, because I believe that social scientists have not adequately explored how power dynamics between housed and unhoused people shape homelessness management. An in-depth literature review is provided in Chapter One; however, I will briefly summarize by saying that the majority of homelessness research has focused on people experiencing homelessness, and asked questions such as why and how they became unhoused, what structural and/or individual factors make homelessness more likely, and which interventions into homelessness are most effective. The public health field, in particular, trends towards studying the individual pathology of homeless people, and focuses on mental illness and substance abuse as explanatory factors for homelessness. The perception seems to be that understanding homelessness relies on understanding individual homeless people, a move that decenters the role that power plays in maintaining homelessness.

I seek to center power, and therefore, I must study the powerful. Policymakers, nonprofit employees, and community volunteers make decisions that intimately govern the lives of people experiencing homelessness. They shape what resources are available to unhoused people, how the general public sees and understands homelessness, and they produce the public image and material reality of “the city”. People who work in homelessness not only manage homeless people, they produce knowledge and discourse about homelessness itself. For the purpose of this study, I divided people working on homelessness into three groups: community volunteers, nonprofit employees, and policymakers. Each of these groups required a slightly different approach, which I detail in my methodology section.
Notes on my Writing Choices: homeless or unhoused?

In this thesis, I use the words “homeless”, “unhoused”, “unsheltered”, and “people experiencing homelessness” to refer to people who do not have consistent access to a home or apartment in which they can eat, sleep, and rest. In doing so, I draw from Rossi’s definition of homelessness as “not having customary and regular access to a conventional dwelling” (1989, 10). This definition of homelessness allows us to understand how someone might be living out of a car or tent, or in a transitional housing program, or be sleeping on a friend’s couch, and still be homeless. Homelessness, as an experience, extends beyond the unsheltered street homelessness many people picture. However, my definition, and therefore my exploration, of homelessness does not capture folks who might have access to a home, but share that home with many others in a way that their quality of life is lessened. Terms such as “housing insecure” or “underhoused” seek to identify circumstances such as these, and are especially relevant when discussing the challenge of overcrowding in rural Alaska (Chen, 2022). Within the bounds of this thesis, and conditions most relevant to Anchorage, I limit myself to the more conventional understanding of homelessness used by my interlocutors.

My language within this thesis follows two guidelines: first, I mirror the language that my interlocutors used, and second, I attempt to use language that captures the complexity of people’s experiences, and the fullness of their humanity. Therefore, in all quotes, I have preserved the term that the speaker used. Similarly, in interviews, I mirrored the language that my interlocutor used. Nonprofit employees were more likely to say “unhoused”; people camping at 3rd and Ingra consistently referred to themselves as “homeless”; policymakers and community volunteers used a mix of terms. Frequently, volunteers expressed confusion to me about what
term they “were supposed to use”, and shared complex feelings about the importance of language amid the stakes of survival. While I understand critiques that the term “homeless” has negative connotations, I believe that it is primarily how words are used, rather than which words are used, that carries the most weight. I witnessed many people enact compassionate care for people they called “homeless”; in contrast, I witnessed many people use the word “unhoused” while actively worsening conditions for people experiencing homelessness. Using the correct language, while performing systemic violence against the people you refer to, is no justice at all.

In contrast to scholars who replace “homeless” entirely with “unhoused”, I choose to use both terms, alongside the lengthier “people experiencing homelessness”. I find value in “homeless”, because it is the common-sense term used by most people, but also because it was the way that the campers at my fieldsite described themselves. I also use “unhoused”, especially when discussing Indigeneity and homelessness, because I appreciate how the term captures that deep relationships between people and place are not reliant on a physical house (Editorial Council of the Red Nation, 2021). The un-prefix also attempts to capture the violence of removing someone from their house. Last, I use the term “unsheltered” when I refer to a specific experience of homelessness, namely, living without access to indoor shelter. Most of all, I hope that my care for homeless people and my dedication to eradicating homelessness is shown most strongly through my work, not the specific words I use.

***

**Methodology**

On a typical day at the 3rd & Ingra homeless camp, I would park my car in a narrow area designated by the city, then wait—sometimes five minutes, sometimes 40 minutes—until Carl and
Sam showed up with canopy tents, tables, and most importantly, food. They pulled in directly to the center of the encampment, always setting up in the empty, grassy area next to the dumpsters. We were central, visible, yet not too close to any tents.

Folks filtered out of their tents to check us out; some chatted with Carl, Sam, or I; others simply waited. I was “coffee girl”. After we had set up tables, tents, and seats, and while the other members of our team heated up and began portioning the soup, I offered every camper in line a cup of coffee. “Would you like milk and sugar with your coffee?” I poured milk for each camper, but they added their own sugar. On especially good days, we had hot chocolate mix, and I would ask “Latte, mocha, or black coffee?”

Most weeks, we served about 200 bowls of soup, rice, and bread. The soup was always vegetarian, but rich and hearty, with beans and vegetables. Some campers lingered, sitting at folding tables under tented canopies. June, Carl’s wife, set the tables with long rolls of butcher paper, and provided pencils so folks could write messages or draw. Some campers would ask for a second bowl, or a third—“Can I bring a bowl back for my sweetie? She’s watching our tent”. We always said yes, even fashioned makeshift trays out of cardboard boxes.

Time passed quickly, though it was rarely spent efficiently. I often found myself pausing, stepping back, calming my instinct to rearrange the assembly line or direct someone to wipe down a table. From when the food arrived until we’ve packed up and left, I typically spent three hours at the camp.

***
During the summer of 2023, I repeated this routine every Wednesday and Sunday. Through this involvement, I grew to know the people I hereafter refer to as Soup Group. Soup Group can be described as volunteers, mutual aid organizers, or activists, though what they were doing is more complex than any one of those terms. Soup Group consists of 8-12 residents who cook and serve food at large homeless encampments throughout Anchorage, Alaska. Often, they source their ingredients from grocery stores and local bakeries that would otherwise throw out
this food, but diverted food waste is also paired with ingredients that members buy in bulk, or scrap together from their own pantries. Soup Group is led by Carl, a charismatic local artist with a gruff manner, booming voice, and steely gaze. We prepped food at his house, he sourced the majority of ingredients, and the “crew” received updates in chaotic group chats initiated by Carl.

In addition to participant observation with Soup Group, I observed the activities and operations of several different Anchorage-based NGOs. A coalition of nonprofits hosted pop-up supply distribution events at the four largest encampments in Anchorage; each day of the week, they would focus on a different camp, and the schedule repeated weekly. I attended these events less frequently than Soup Group, but occasionally worked alongside non-profit employees to distribute pre-packaged food and clothing. A large portion of my time around these non-profit employees was spent chatting. As a form of informal interview, I asked them about their jobs, what they typically did at these events, and what they liked about the job. One of the nonprofit organizations was a team of medics, and we discussed which issues they treated the most, and their approach to public health and homelessness.

The last group I observed was the Anchorage Assembly. The Assembly is the elected legislative body of Anchorage; it consists of 12 members from 6 districts. Every Tuesday, the Assembly meets on the bottom floor of the public library. These meetings are terribly contentious, last until the middle of the night, and occasionally, people attend assembly meetings fully loaded with semi-automatic firearms as an intimidation tactic. The meetings are nonetheless–somehow–boring. The Assembly also organizes subcommittees and town halls. I watched meetings of the Assembly’s housing and homelessness subcommittee, as well as attended a series of three town halls dedicated to establishing guidelines for a future low-barrier shelter in Anchorage. In each of these meetings, I jotted down impressions and notes, but did not
speak. After some of the meetings, I approached others who had publicly commented, and asked for the contact information so they could act as interlocutors.

In addition to observation, I also interviewed volunteers, non-profit employees, and policy makers. I conducted 10 semi-structured interviews: three were with members of Soup Group, three were with non-profit employees, three were with members of the Anchorage municipal government, and the last interview was with someone who had worked for a non-profit before volunteering with Soup Group. I chose interlocutors who were prominent within their respective communities, and aimed for a diverse breadth of experiences. Interviews took place at my interlocutors’ offices, or at local coffee shops. I took audio recordings of each interview, and jotted notes regarding body language and tone immediately after each interview.

Last, I kept up with conversations on homelessness in our local paper, the Anchorage Daily News (ADN), as well as on twitter. Coverage by ADN structured many of the conversations I had with interlocutors. Frequently, my interlocutors began a conversation by asking me, “Did you read the latest ADN article?” The news changed what we knew about Mayor’s office actions, kept us updated on Assembly politics, and shaped public awareness and opinion. News coverage was a structuring condition, therefore, I included it as part of my ethnographic research.

* * *

A note on Safety

My first draft of this thesis did not include a single word about safety. Nonetheless, it was a constant question: I heard it from Swarthmore’s Departmental Review Committee, from friends and coworkers I told about my research, and frequently, pressingly, from my mother. People
would ask about safety in subtle ways: “Where do you park? How many people do you go with? Do you ever go alone?” My mom asked bluntly, “Is it safe for you to be doing this research?”

These are understandable questions from people who were invested in my well being. However, I write in the context of a hegemonic discourse that already depicts people experiencing homelessness as dangerous and depraved. Portraying unhoused people as violent, criminal, and inherently untrustworthy is part of a process of dehumanization; it reduces people into stereotypes and justifies structural violence. Therefore, I was concerned that addressing issues of safety would play into narratives about white femininity needing to be protected from dangerous, racialized others. As a white and Asian young woman interacting with a population that was disproportionately Alaska Native, Pacific Islander, and Black, I was aware of these narratives, and did not want to reify them.

The majority of the time while doing research, I felt safe. I was always at the 3rd & Ingra camp during the day; when I served food, I was in small groups of other housed people. More importantly, I came to see how being in community—first with Soup Group, then with specific campers—was a form of safety. One day, Carl and Sam were absent, and Zara and I, both young women, were leading food service. Two young men in line started shouting and squaring up, raising their voices, getting ready to shove each other. Zara’s dad, Ben, crossed in front of the food table to stand in front of us. At the same time, a group of unhoused men that I knew well clustered around the fighters, verbally de-escalating the situation, saying “Hey! Stop that.” An older black man, addressing one of the younger black men in the conflict, repeated “Blood, blood” as he gradually worked his way to stand between them. As older men from the camp separated and led the younger men away from the fight, I heard one say “don’t do that shit man, you’re better than that”. As order resumed and I resumed serving food, several people apologized
to me. “Sorry about that”, one man said. “Not your fault”, I replied. Perhaps there were additional stakes to breaking up a fight at the field kitchen–what if the Soup Group was scared away and didn’t return? But I think the fight also shows that campers had self-enforced community norms. Mitigating violence was important to campers in a broader sense. During the above encounter, older men had taken a mentorship role over younger men, challenging them to be their better selves. Everyone was a stakeholder in community safety.

It is also worth mentioning what felt unsafe about 3rd & Ingra. Homelessness, as a structural condition, is dangerous. A 2014 study by National Health Care for the Homeless found that 73% of unhoused people had been attacked within the past year, with injuries ranging from bruising and brain trauma, to bullet and knife wounds (Meinbresse et al., 2014, 126). Folks at 3rd & Ingra had similar experiences– they’d been robbed, beaten up, and shot at (Klecka, 2023). Beyond interpersonal violence in the camp, the physical spaces surrounding the camp were often unsafe. To reach 3rd & Ingra on foot, as nearly every person living in the camp did, one would have to cross a 3-lane highway, waiting for a break in the cars before making a mad dash across. Additionally, partway through my research, the municipality added fencing and opaque mesh netting surrounding the camp. Drivers could no longer see the colorful tents or gathered people from the road, an effort to make homelessness in the city less visible. However, the city did not weigh down the fences with sandbags. In gusts of wind, the mesh became sails; the fences became battering rams. One morning, I arrived at 3rd & Ingra to find that the fence had blown over, crushing tents and trapping people beneath its weight.

Furthermore, violence perpetrated by housed people against unhoused people show how interpersonal and structural violence build upon one another. Between 1999-2017, the National
Coalition for the Homeless documented 1,769 acts of violence against unhoused people, including murders, beatings, and rapes, perpetrated by housed people and “motivated by the perpetrators biases against people experiencing homelessness or by their ability to target homeless people with relative ease” (Leomporra and Hustings, 2018, 4). Furthermore, NCH estimates that “the number of undeclared hate crimes resulting in the death of a homeless person happened at double the rate of other hate crime deaths based on religion, race or disability” (Arya, 2022). I was reminded of one such incident of violence in Anchorage. In 2019, Ron Alleva, a local business owner, directed his employees to spread Zappit 73, a calcium hypochlorite-based pool cleaner, in the area surrounding a downtown soup kitchen and shelter (DeMarban, 2019a). Calcium hypochlorite burns the eyes and skin and irritates the lungs (Axiall, 2016). According to the Anchorage Department of Law, had the substance been ingested, it would have caused “blindness and even death”. In defense of his actions, Ron Alleva claimed he was providing “a public service using ‘bleach’ to clean up an area polluted by homeless people with human feces, vomit, and rotting food” (DeMarban, 2019b). Mr. Alleva understood unhoused people as pollutants, in a moment where he was literally spreading pollutants across the soil. To clean the site, the city removed and replaced 1,400 lbs of contaminated soil. While ultimately no one died or was injured, conversations among housed people seemed unable to fully account for Alleva’s actions as a hateful act of violence. Mr. Alleva was found guilty of four misdemeanors and sentenced to a $6500 fine and 40 hours of community service (DeMarban, 2019b). Chris Constant, an Assembly member, was a particular advocate for leniency, arguing that Alleva made “a mistake”, and that the city shared the blame for not adequately addressing “the homeless problem”. Constant attempted a systemic analysis, saying that “all of us are driving our problems there [homeless camps] and thinking what we’ve done is
good and right” (DeMarban, 2019b). Notably, in that moment, Constant wasn’t using systemic analysis to advocate for the wellbeing of unhoused people, but to diminish the agency of those who harm them. When considering the case of Ron Alleva, or other housed people who commit acts of violence, we must pay attention to how power shapes who can and cannot make systemic arguments, and therefore, who can commit violence in the name of safety.

* * *

Situatedness

This research exposed me to the small-ness of my city. One member of Soup Group was my kindergarten teacher’s husband. When I was five, I’d been to his house for a tea party, and I’d kept up with his wife throughout my education. Other members of Soup Group included my choir teacher at Folk Arts Camp, my mother’s favorite former coworker, and the family friends of my high school friends. I’d met one of my interlocutors on a middle school backpacking trip, and during my summer of research, she and I also worked together at the same restaurant. My old high school debate judge, someone I’d grown to know better through political organizing, was now an employee at one of the most prominent homelessness relief nonprofits in Anchorage. Even when I didn’t know my interlocutors directly, the smallness of Anchorage made being in community with one another easier. I’d read about the work of Sam, one of my interlocutors, in the newspaper, and I recognized his name when he spoke at a town hall. I approached him afterwards and struck up a conversation. I have no doubt that the interconnections, coincidences, and knowledge we all shared as members of the same community built trust, and resulted in a more intimate ethnography. Like any ethnographer, the lines between socialization and
ethnography were blurred. My interlocutors welcomed me into their homes, gave me rides in their cars, and we often grabbed coffee just to chat.

My research was inevitably aided by the fact that many of my interlocutors perceived me as similar to them. Several—but not all—of my interlocutors were college educated, securely housed, and lived middle- to middle-upper class lifestyles. They likely saw my research as fitting into the same patterns of liberal feel-good community engagement that they were engaging in. I explore many of these dynamics in Chapter Four; briefly, they did not imagine me approaching their work through critique. Since many aspects of our identities were similar, they felt that we had shared goals and values when engaging with homelessness. Similarly, while I hope that my elected representatives would meet with any of their constituents, I believe that their perception of me as an educated college student changed the dynamics of our interviews, and the complexity with which they were willing to speak. Additionally, Soup Group perceived me as having certain resources that they could draw upon, such as a car, internet access, and lots of leisure time. Neither Soup Group nor non-profit employees asked me to contribute financially to their work.

When doing fieldwork at the encampment, other aspects of my identity became relevant. I was a housed individual giving away food with other housed people; the specifics of class beyond housed/unhoused did not seem relevant to people living in the camp. At first, I was conscious not to dress in an overly fashionable manner, only to have campers comment on my freshly washed hair, a clear luxury of being housed. In addition, many of the campers reacted to the fact that I was a young woman; the majority of other volunteers in the camp (both Soup Group and non-profit) were middle-aged or older white men. It was easier for me to take on a customer service role, and frequently, campers commented on how friendly my demeanor was. I
was semi-frequently hit on when in the camp, but rarely in any serious manner. Women at the camp clearly felt more comfortable talking to me than they did male volunteers, and men at the camp vocalized that they saw me as sympathetic and a good listener.

Participant observation in the encampments made me a witness to suffering, and it would be dishonest not to name the difficulties of that work. While people experiencing homelessness were not the subjects of my ethnography, I nonetheless grew to know many campers. Over and over again, I saw people I cared for neglected by the municipality and practically left to die. In one field note entry, I write “I don’t know how to survive this and yet not become desensitized to it”. Homelessness has become common-sense within urban life in Anchorage, and therefore, it was all the more important to me that the suffering of people experiencing homelessness, suffering that I was witnessing every week, ceased to become normal to me. When campers told me their life stories, living conditions, or current realities, I wanted to empathize with them the same way I would empathize with a friend. I believe that it is essential to both see and hold the pain of others, but I take seriously the difficulty of that effort. As I write this, a snowstorm is burning Anchorage in 3 feet of snow. I did my ethnography in the summer, where unsheltered living was considerably easier. It isn’t even the depths of winter yet, and 49 people presumed homeless have already died, many from exposure. Ethnography meant that I met wonderful, incredible, complex people who were experiencing homelessness. Leaving Anchorage to go back to college, and to write this ethnography, means I am intensely uncertain on how many of those people are doing now.

My situatedness compels me to do this ethnography. I’ve grown up in Anchorage my whole life. It’s a town that many people complain about, and that many people can’t wait to leave, but to me, it is my home. For all its flaws, neglect, and corruptness, it is my community,
and it is the place that I wish to invest in like no other. Sharing a place is a form of relation; my interlocutors, the campers, and I were in relation with one another because we were neighbors. It is this fact that gathers us and intertwines our lives together.

* * *

**Outline of Analysis**

I argue that in an environment characterized by the withdrawal of the state and increased surveillance by nonprofit organizations, volunteer-based care provides an imaginative challenge to neoliberal rationalities. Mutual aid volunteers perform care in ways that not only critique the neglect of the state, but model the kinds of solidarity between housed and unhoused people that create liberatory futures.

Chapter One contextualizes my analysis within the body of sociological/anthropological literature, identifies key moments in the history of homelessness in the United States, and makes the case for my particular empirical and theoretical contribution. It also details my methodology, provides a brief cultural history of homelessness in Anchorage, Alaska, and introduces my three groups of interlocutors.

In Chapter Two, I use food as an example to compare and contrast the services provided by volunteers as opposed to nonprofit organizations. I draw upon the work of David Boarder Giles and Mary Douglas to discuss why sharing food subverts dominant expectations about the separation of housed and unhoused bodies. I argue that volunteer-provided food is a material articulation of care that challenges neoliberal rationalities.
In Chapter Three, I incorporate Foucault’s theory of biopower to examine how policymakers and nonprofit organizations use data. In particular, I draw attention to how these groups use the language of care to justify data practices that surveil, categorize, and differentiate people experiencing homelessness.

In Chapter Four, I focus on the issue of care, and show how volunteers instrumentalize acts of care to critique the state, specifically state determinations of who is and is not deserving of care. I use the work of Muehlebach and Spade to critique moments when care and services provided by volunteers, nonprofit employees, and policymakers reify inequalities, rather than disrupt them. Then, I draw from Hobart and Kneese to argue why care nonetheless, can and should build a better world. I end the chapter by suggesting several ways in which current mutual aid volunteers in Anchorage could build solidarity and better accomplish the goal of ending homelessness.

Last, in the conclusion I reflect on the ethical commitments involved in this work, and what it might mean to be engaged in ending homelessness, both as a community member and as an anthropologist.
Chapter 1: Words on the Street

Why should anthropologists study homelessness?

Historically, anthropology was concerned with studying cultural “others”--the faraway place, the unfamiliar people--and as a result, was connected to and complicit within the white, western colonial project. However, over time, scholars have worked to shift the field towards more liberatory aims: anthropology is a tool for deepening human understanding, and connecting individual experiences to larger social issues. Likewise, the “subjects” of anthropology have changed: anthropologists understand culture as a negotiated process of meaning-making, and therefore, all groups of people engaged in shared projects have culture. In my own studies, I find anthropology an incredibly useful tool to “make the familiar strange, and the strange familiar”. By applying the lens and tools of anthropology to everyday life, I see how things I take for granted are in fact, the result of dynamic social forces.

Therefore, contemporary anthropologists ought to have a vested interest in studying homelessness not because unhoused people are cultural “others”, but because homelessness is the result of complex social and political forces that ought to be made visible. We cannot accept homelessness as “common-sense” if we want to end homelessness. Therefore, I see anthropology as a method to expose what we take for granted regarding homelessness and homelessness management. As we question, dissect, and analyze the conditions of homelessness, we gain the tools to imagine possible futures in which homelessness is nonexistent.

My approach to studying homelessness draws upon the frameworks of “engaged anthropology”, as well as sociologist W.E.B. DuBois’ “scholarship in service of a mission”. The question is not “whether we can describe the lives of the poor but how we can fight against the misery we see created” (Susser, 1996).
This chapter provides a brief review of sociological and anthropological literature on homelessness, and identifies gaps in our understandings of homelessness. I argue that my work contributes to the conversation by focusing on the dynamics of power enacted by policymakers, nonprofit employees, and volunteers; providing a new empirical example of homelessness within a medium-sized isolated municipality as opposed to a major city; and last by engaging the concept of care within homelessness management.

**Structural vs Individual Causes of Homelessness: Debates in Sociology and Anthropology**

Sociological and anthropological scholarship on homelessness rose alongside dramatic increases in homelessness in the 1980s and 90s. While the number of people experiencing homelessness in the United States was estimated at 250,000-350,000 in 1984, this estimate had risen to 500,000 to 600,000 people by 1987 (Burt, 1992, 3). Landmark sociological studies from Rossi, Burt, and Blau sought to explain the structural causes of homelessness in the United States. These studies attribute increased homelessness to the decline of industrial employment, reduction of social benefits, and the decline of affordable housing (1991, 1992, 1993). Starting in the 1970s, the loss of manufacturing jobs, when paired with lessening government support for those unable to survive off wages, led to an increase in extreme poverty in the United States. Blau further identifies a decline in affordable housing during this time. According to these initial studies of homelessness, people became homeless because they could no longer afford a home (1993).

In contrast to structural explorations of homelessness, Baum and Burnes locate the causes of homelessness in individual pathology. In their 1993 book *A Nation in Denial*, Baum and Burnes show that most homeless adults experience substance abuse and mental illness, and use
these factors to explain homelessness. Baum and Burnes’ work was published at a time in which social welfare reform likewise stressed individual responsibility. From the 1990s onwards, shelters, treatment programs, and many other homelessness management strategies focused on addressing these individual factors, rather than the structural factors raised by earlier scholarship (Gowan, 2010).

One such example of individual pathology scholarship manifesting into public policy is the Continuum of Care. In 1994, HUD and the Interagency Council on the Homeless launched the “continuum of care” (CoC), which encouraged private agencies to alleviate homelessness by addressing mental health, physical health, and substance abuse issues among people experiencing homelessness. CoC grants also emphasized job training and education, arguing that it prepared unhoused people to enter the workforce. While the policy noted a need for affordable housing, widespread attitudes that public housing created dependence stymied housing-first solutions (Lyon-Callo, 2004). In practice, the CoC system received funding for individualized, market-based interventions, therefore, these interventions took the place of systemic government support or change.

One way that ethnographers have intervened in medicalized narratives of homelessness is by studying the role that shelters and staff play in shaping experiences of homelessness. For example, scholars have investigated how shelter residents and staff co-create the social order of shelters. While earlier studies argued that staff action could make a shelter more or less hierarchical (Dordick, 1997; Liebow, 1993), Armaline, Sager, and Stephens argue that the social environment of shelters is “negotiated through client-staff interaction rather than unilaterally imposed” (2005, 2005).
Additionally, studies of the homeless management industry have exposed the way that neoliberal rationalities and the individual pathology approach become common-sense within shelters. Teresa Gowan, in her ethnography of homelessness discourse, describes how nonprofit employees are likely to ascribe the causes of homelessness to mental illness or substance abuse, reducing homelessness to an individual experience with little agency (2010). Lyon-Calvo describes similar attitudes among shelter staff in his own research. As he summarizes, the dominance of this attitude means that the goal of the homelessness management industry “is no longer to make society well through developing collective resistance strategies against social injustice, but rather to ‘normalize’ the homelessness of individual homeless people” (2004, 13). Lyon-Calvo underscores this point by critiquing shelter staff’s disinterest in transforming the cultural and political-economic conditions that produce homelessness. Within the majority of present-day nonprofits, the reality that many people do not have a place to sleep is explained away by mental illness or substance abuse, rather than used to critique poverty itself. Therefore, nonprofit action centers around managing homelessness, rather than ending it.

**Public Reactions to Homelessness**

Alongside research on the causes of homelessness and the role of institutions, scholars have also investigated public reactions to homelessness. Susser (1996) names how people experiencing street homelessness are a highly visible and public sign of increasing poverty, and therefore, they take on additional, symbolic roles in public life. Susser identifies political concern for housing the homeless as stemming from the need to make inequality “invisible, individual, and private” (1996).
Other scholars have investigated the spatiality of homelessness, particularly how housed people see the homeless as incursions of “increasing impoverishment into public space” (Susser 1996). Therefore, sheltering the homeless is not purely motivated by humanitarian concern, but by a vested public interest in making mass poverty invisible (Mitchell, 1992; Mitchell, 1995; Smith, 1996).

Last, scholars have noted how conversations on homelessness frequently echo historical distinctions between the deserving and undeserving poor. Rosner (1982) and Vincent (1993) trace the origins of this distinction, and how it has been used to frame people experiencing poverty and shape debates on what resources they ought to receive. NGOs and policymakers continue to recreate and reinforce categories of deserving and undeserving homeless people.

Post-90s: Interventions: Race, Gender, Class, Disability

In contrast to the attitudes of individual responsibility adopted by the homeless management industry, sociologists and anthropologists have continued to investigate structural forces at work in homelessness. Ethnographers stress that susceptibility to and experience of homelessness is raced, classed, and gendered (Susser 1996). Disability scholars have illustrated the ways in disabled people are vulnerable to homelessness, and during homelessness (Susser 1996). These interventions, while valuable, have remained primarily within the academy and are rarely reflected in state or nonprofit practices.
The Need to Consider Care

As outlined in the introduction, I am compelled by approaches to studying homelessness that focus on the role that institutions and housed people play in shaping homelessness. As described in this chapter, directly drawing attention to the discourse of housed people is a necessary intervention in scholarship on homelessness. However, I believe that care, as a practice towards unhoused people, should be further examined. In order to fully understand how housed people relate to unhoused people, we must bring in the dynamics of care.

Philosophers and anthropologists have studied care as a form of ethics (Held, 2006), a gendered, raced, and classed phenomenon (Noddings, 1984; Federici, 2004), and as a way of being threatened by neoliberal capitalism (Fraser, 2016). Later scholars stress that care is shaped by the conditions under which it is performed. Fraser (2016) discusses how changes in the form of capitalism create changes in how caring labor is performed, and therefore, create generational crises of care. Muehlebach (2012) discusses how state abandonment often leads to an exploitation of volunteer labor, and understands this process as characteristic to care under neoliberalism. In the context of my research, I am particularly interested in the work of Hobart and Kneese, who see care as “an under-examined praxis of radical politics that provides spaces of hope in precarious times” (2020). I want to explore the complexities of care raised by these theorists, examining both its pitfalls and its possibilities in the context of Anchorage.

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What does my work do?

My thesis expands an existing scholarly conversation by considering how specific groups of housed people shape the conditions of homelessness. Centering how policymakers, nonprofit employees, and mutual aid volunteers produce knowledge allows for a more detailed analysis of how power operates in homelessness management. Using Foucault’s theory of biopower, I trace how and why homelessness is managed, but not ended. Additionally, by using Held, Hobart, and Kneese’s frameworks of care and radical care when discussing homelessness, I add to a body of literature that interrogates how care is structured by neoliberal rationalities. Last, I hope that by providing an empirical example of care for people experiencing homelessness, this thesis allows readers to imagine more systemic, more moral, and more caring reactions to homelessness.
Chapter 2: the Abject Economy

It’s July 6th, and a flock of service providers have gathered within the gates of 3rd & Ingra. On the heels of 4th of July weekend, normal distribution schedules have been disrupted. While nonprofits typically distribute food, water, and supplies on Tuesdays, and Soup Group serves food Wednesday and Sunday, both NGOs and volunteers alike are here today.

Soup Group sets up at the usual spot, in the center of camp, near the dumpsters, while the nonprofits set up on the edge of the camp, in an empty space reserved for cars. Soup Group is spatially separate from the NGOs; according to one volunteer, this is by request of the nonprofit organizations. “They don’t want people thinking we’re with them”, he says.

The campers move from tent to tent, and so do I. I introduce myself to each service provider, explain my research, and ask if I can volunteer alongside them– all say yes. The local food bank serves pizza from a tall van; Catholic Social Services hands out individually wrapped bars, crackers, and preserved meat sticks from a tent; and paramedics wait, with gauze, advil, and narcan at the ready. A large tent at the end of the lineup contains large garbage bags full of clothes; I lay them out on folding tables, organize by item, and chat with folks as I help them find their size.

My experiences with Soup Group have accustomed me to long lines; however, the nonprofit employees I work with grow frustrated as lines of people form. One man says “We need to set out cones next time, make more of an organized corral”. The goal seems to be to move a maximum number of people through quickly and efficiently. In contrast to Soup Group, there is little chat, neither between the employees and campers nor between the employees themselves.
A corral, marked by orange traffic cones, would also benefit the outreach worker, who patrols the line with an iPad. He is official, calm, and slightly friendly. While his title is outreach worker, the primary task he is performing today is entering folks into HMIS, the homeless management information system. While being entered into HMIS is not technically a requirement to receive services at the pop-up event, he approaches people before and after they leave the tents, asking “did I catch you yet?”

At one point during the pop-up event, as I am handing out packages of crackers, a man recognizes me from Soup Group. “You switched sides!” he says, half-surprised, half-joking. The differences I perceived between Soup Group and the nonprofits—differences that had been intentionally cultivated by the groups—were clearly perceptible to campers. In fact the groups were understood to be so different that this man talked to me as if they were on opposite sides, rather than working towards the same goal.

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In this chapter, I contrast the actions of Soup Group with typical nonprofit practices. To contextualize how and why food provision became an essential part of homelessness relief, I provide a brief overview of recent homeless policy in Anchorage, and argue that policies in Anchorage reflect a neoliberal economic model that erodes social safety nets and emphasizes personal responsibility. Then, I argue that both Soup Group and nonprofit organizations are attempting to fill in the gaps produced by neoliberalism; however, I understand the care enacted by Soup Group challenges neoliberal rationalities in ways that nonprofits do not.

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A brief history of homelessness in Anchorage

Events of the past five years have made municipal management of homelessness a political flashpoint within Anchorage. By 2019, the city’s largest low-barrier shelter, Brother Francis shelter, operated beyond its capacity every single night. Shelter staff describe guests sleeping mat to mat on the floor, resulting in frequent conflict, physical fights, and an extremely stressful environment for all. While these cramped conditions were neither therapeutic nor safe under any circumstances, the COVID-19 pandemic brought new urgency, as well a flood of federal money, to address shelter challenges. In March 2020, the municipality converted the Sullivan Arena, a hockey rink and events venue, into a 360 bed low-barrier shelter. However, the Sullivan Arena shelter was not universally popular among housed residents of Anchorage. In May 2021, 50.6% of Anchorage voters elected Dave Bronson as mayor. He had campaigned on a platform of reducing city expenditures, including money spent on shelter, and in May 2022, he closed the Sullivan Area. By the summer of 2022, there were no low-barrier shelters in Anchorage. As discussed in the introduction, folks who had been staying at the Sullivan Arena were instructed to go elsewhere, and approximately 200 people were bussed to Centennial campground, an outdoor campground on the periphery of the city.

As detailed previously, Centennial campground mobilized non-profits, churches, and activists alike. In the absence of government services, resources provided by housed residents crucially affected the survival of those camping at Centennial. The Centennial “crisis”, as many of my interlocutors called it, ended when nighttime temperatures dropped below 45 degrees, and the city was legally required to provide emergency shelter to those without housing. In September 2022, the city once again opened the Sullivan Arena as an emergency shelter.
In May 2023, the Sullivan closed as a homeless shelter, supposedly for good. With no other low-barrier shelters available, people who had been staying at the Sullivan primarily moved to three camps: 3rd and Ingra, Davis Park, and Cuddy Park. My fieldwork primarily took place between May and August 2023 at 3rd and Ingra, the largest encampment. Most folks camped in tents or cars. While some folks attempted to build makeshift structures from discarded pallets and tarps, these structures were quickly torn down by the city. At the start of the summer, approximately 60 people camped at 3rd & Ingra, three months later, this number had swelled to approximately 250 people.

As of March 2023, 3,024 people in Anchorage were experiencing homelessness, out of a total municipal population of 288,000. Most people experiencing homelessness in Anchorage are Indigenous (46%) or White (39%); however, there are also significant numbers of Black (16%) and Pacific Islander (9%) people experiencing homelessness. Anchorage has about the same number of homeless people as Houston, TX, despite the fact that Houston’s total population (~2 million) is 7x greater than Anchorage’s population.

A cultural history of Soup Group

Nearly all members of Soup Group have been doing community care work for years, but were drawn together by community need and shared ethics. The stories of two particular members, Carl and Sam, are illustrative. Carl and Sam met during the Centennial Campground crisis, but had been involved with community advocacy in Anchorage for years. Sam is a middle-aged white man who dedicates himself full time to unpaid homeless advocacy. He first became involved in homelessness relief as a mental health advocate. In 2019, statewide budget cuts from Alaska’s governor, Mike Dunleavy, gutted mental health support and homeless shelters
alike. Sam had long understood the intersectionality of his advocacy: decreased community mental health resources often result in increased homelessness; in tandem, chronic homelessness exacerbated mental illness. According to Sam, the Dunleavy budget cuts “halved the capacity of Anchorage’s shelters”.

When Mayor Dave Bronson was elected in 2021 on an anti-homeless, anti-spending platform, Sam feared that the people he advocated for would become even more vulnerable. He began to visit a large homeless encampment—“Snowdump”—more often, bringing a large pot of coffee, a table, and some chairs. Sometimes, folks would sit and chat with him, other times, they simply took the hot coffee. By the time I met Sam, he had grown to know many people camping throughout Anchorage, and had certain folks he would check in on regularly. He built rapport with many people experiencing homelessness, knew their stories, and was trusted by them.

During the Centennial crisis, Sam faced unprecedented challenges as a community advocate. When those who were staying at the Sullivan arena were bussed to Centennial campground, Sam went with them. For the duration of the summer, he lived at the campground. Neither food, water, nor shelter were provided by the municipality. In fact, the mayor’s administration refused to acknowledge Centennial campground as an official homelessness response, resulting in limited mobilization from the city’s non-profits, as they were concerned about liability. Sam became a de-facto camp manager, mental health counselor, and donation coordinator.

The Centennial crisis, and the high level of news coverage it received, mobilized donations from people throughout Anchorage. Sam estimates that he received a quarter million dollars’ worth of donations of food, clothing, and camping supplies.
During this time, Sam and Carl met. Carl, likewise, is white, in his 60s, and works as an artist and musician. Carl described multiple origins of his food redistribution practices. In the 1980s, he, his wife, and some friends would collect outdated produce from a local grocery store and redistribute it to homeless shelters. However, his food provision began again in earnest in Spring 2022, when he started making sandwiches for the Mountain View Community Fridge. The Mountain View Community Fridge, founded by community organizer Ziona Bronlow, is a free fridge and food pantry located in Mountain View, one of Anchorage’s poorest and most food-insecure neighborhoods. One day, while at the fridge, Carl heard that everyone at the Sullivan arena was being relocated. Carl hopped on his scooter with a pan, a propane stove, and 50 bean burritos and soon enough, he was providing hot food at Centennial campground. After asking the municipal administration if he could provide food, he was told, according to his paraphrasing, “there’s nothing we can do to stop you”.

“There were so many unprepared people and it was much more difficult out there. It was so far from a store… I went out there with 50 burritos and pan fried them, and 30 minutes [later] they were gone. It was kind of weird at first, but I came back the next day and just kept coming back every day. June [Carl’s wife] and I did a Sunday and we served probably more like a hundred and we’re kind of getting up into those numbers after a while. So, I stopped taking my scooter and took the car”

Once Carl began cooking at Centennial, he and Sam began to collaborate. Carl would bring and cook the food, and Sam would set tables up for people to sit down and eat. They grew to respect, trust, and consistently collaborate with one another in their shared work.

By the Summer of 2023, when I began my fieldwork, some aspects of Carl and Sam’s work remained the same, but others had changed. Carl still did the cooking, Sam still brought the
tables and chairs. However, the municipality had relocated people from Centennial campground back to the Sullivan arena during the winter of 2022-23, then closed the Sullivan arena once again in Spring 2023. Unhoused people in Anchorage were no longer camping at Centennial campground, but instead in several locations throughout the city. Soup Group focused their efforts at the largest camp, located on the corner of 3rd & Ingra. Additionally, due to publicity gained during the Centennial crisis, as well as their own networking, Carl and Sam had a broad base of people enthusiastic to help with food provision. I met approximately 8-12 people who were consistent volunteers with Soup Group, while additional 10-12 people contributed more occasionally. The group included both women and men; most members of the group were over 30, though some college students were involved. The group changed over time with folks’ commitments and availability. When I asked a member of Soup Group how they became involved, they typically either knew Carl personally, or had learned about Soup Group through his public Facebook posts. Soup Group was bigger and more dynamic than simply describing it as a Carl-led effort would entail; yet, it would be difficult to imagine it without Carl. We cooked at his house, he drove the food and cooking supplies to camp, and he coordinated ingredients and menu. I see this centralization as characteristic of a young group, which may develop a broader leadership structure as more people become involved. In my analysis of Soup Group, I draw from conversations with Carl and Sam; however, as stated earlier, Soup Group’s food events were more dynamic, more generative, and more rhizomatic than any one person could dream of creating. The metaphor of a potluck is fitting: while one person might host, the dishes brought by guests are unpredictable, and the combination of foods on any one plate is a co-production between every cook and eater.
Having provided a brief history of homelessness in Anchorage, and a cultural history of Soup Group, I now examine how the actions of Soup Group intervene in the neoliberal rationalities dominant within Anchorage.

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Unconditional Food, Unconditional Care

In contrast to many nonprofit organizations in Anchorage, Soup Group does not impose eligibility requirements in order to receive care. The majority of Anchorage nonprofits impose conditions upon the people they serve. These range from the explicit sobriety requirements and drug testing of many transitional housing programs, to the implicit requirement of being entered into a digital database in order to receive aid. When I shadowed pop-up events led by several of the city’s leading homelessness relief organizations, these organizations typically asked campers to queue and enter their name, homelessness duration, phone number, and several other pieces of information into the city’s homeless management information system (HMIS). While I did not see anyone turned away for not answering HMIS questions, staff actively patrolled the aid tables with iPads, interviewing campers and entering their information into the system. Therefore, data-gathering was an implicit expectation of campers receiving food, clothing, and medical aid at these pop up events. When campers interacted with non-profit employees, as opposed to Soup Group volunteers, they were significantly less likely to converse, make comments beyond simple logistical questions, or make eye contact.

Nonprofit organizations often have far more stringent conditions on their aid than simply participating in data collection. Within Anchorage, I was aware of homelessness relief programs
that required attendance of church services, participation in job training, and/or regular drug testing. Several scholars have explored how government and nonprofit organizations, in their triaging of who receives care and who does not, reproduce historical distinctions between the “deserving” vs the “undeserving poor” (Rosner, 1982; Vincent, 1993). Dean Spade, writing about charity, shows how these distinctions are tied to discourses of individual moral failing.

“Charity comes with eligibility requirements that relate to these moral frameworks of deservingness, such as sobriety, piety, curfews, participation in job training or parenting courses, cooperation with the police, or identifying the paternity of children” (2020a, 140).

Dean Spade also specifies that “the determination of deservingness and undeservingness is based in cultural archetypes that pathologize Black families, frame poor women as overreproductive, and criminalize poverty” (Spade, 2020a, 140). Narratives that distinguish between who does and does not deserve care almost always link to ideas of individual responsibility, and therefore, are characteristic to care under neoliberalism.

In contrast, Soup Group actively seeks to fight these narratives by providing food to all, and therefore, arguing that all people experiencing homelessness are worthy of care. Someone eating soup from Soup Group does not need to affirm their faith, tell their story, or even give their name. In one conversation with another service provider, I heard Carl say, “We’re not in the business of saying who is or isn’t worthy”. In an interview, when asked about the motivation behind soup group, he said:

“There's no banner. There's no anything except the force of goodwill and the intention of it. And nothing is spoken. Like, how do you say I love you? You know, I make you food,
and that's how I say it…It’s like, at the end of each day, we always say hello to each other…You do things for each other, you know, without being asked to do it”.

Several members of Soup Group expressed an ethic of understanding, empathy, and even unconditional love motivating their care for people experiencing homelessness. Empathy was expressed when members of Soup Group actively imagined the lives of unhoused people they interacted with, and attempted to draw similarities to their own. Ella, a middle-aged black woman volunteer, was frustrated why everyone complained about alcoholism and substance misuse among homeless people, but no one seemed to care why people might be driven to drug use. In Ella’s words,

“Why are they drinking? What trauma are they trying to escape?...When you were 7, 9, 12, you did not say, ‘When I grow up, I’m going to be a homeless person’. Life circumstances have pushed these individuals to where they are now”.

In the same interview, Ella noted that she didn’t see herself as far from homelessness:

“It could be me. My house could burn down tomorrow, and I would be homeless. Or, something catastrophic could happen to me, and I wouldn’t be able to afford to be in my space, and I would be homeless”.

Ella, alongside other people I met through Soup Group, constantly affirmed that people in the 3rd and Ingra camp, and homeless people throughout Anchorage, were “just like us”. Often, members of Soup Group called campers “our neighbors”, and emphasized that we were all part of the same community. In the words of one volunteer:

“I found myself enjoying the company, like any kind of social time I have in a week.

Most of the time is spent serving soup. And I'm not like, “hey, I was fishing” or “blah
blah blah”. I'm usually not talking that much, but I am around this group of folks that are kind of my kin”.

Soup Group counteracts discourses of individual moral failure by mobilizing care regardless of why someone might be homeless. Rather than seeking to investigate why, or change homeless individuals, food provided unconditionally projects the message that care can also be provided unconditionally.

**Refusing the market**

Another difference between Soup Group and Anchorage nonprofit organizations was that Soup Group did not use discourses of efficiency or scarcity when managing financial and human resources. Soup group challenged neoliberal rationalities by embracing a mindset of abundance, rather than scarcity.

Housed residents of Anchorage, upon hearing about Soup Group, often asked me how the group afforded to serve people week after week, month after month. People didn’t understand where the food and money came from, or how such an effort could be sustained on donations alone. First, a portion of the food that Soup Group served is diverted waste- food that would otherwise be thrown away, but was given to the group for free. Second, Soup Group benefits from word-of-mouth community organizing and receives donations of homegrown produce, pre-packed sandwich bags, and home-baked treats from admirers of their work. Last, when needed, the group is financially sustained by Carl, who occasionally receives donations from Anchorage community members. In contrast to the traditional nonprofit model, Carl saw very little separation between his money and money for soup. For months, he bought ingredients out of his own pocket, and when cooking soup or assembling sandwiches at his house, we grabbed
whatever we needed from his fridge. When Carl received a $10,000 artist award from the Rasmussen Foundation (a local philanthropy organization), he used that money to continue making soup. When Carl received donations, he felt like he had full agency to spend the money as he needed.

“I’ve gotten contributions, but nobody’s telling me to do certain things with it. So, I do as I see fit. Sometimes I buy stuff, sometimes I give money away. Sometimes I get a massage, or sometimes I get like whatever. It's a sort of a job.”

Soup Group did not seek any kind of donations that made them beholden to anyone. They did not seek or receive grants, and both food and monetary donations were from other Anchorage community members. Anyone who donated simply trusted that the resources would be used well. The relationship between donors and Soup Group was built on trust, rather than financial accountability.

Soup Group never talked about budgets, never modified any meal to be “cheaper”, never discussed cost-per-meal. This was not because money was unlimited–I got the sense that Carl, Sam, and others, at times, had spent significant portions of their income on the project–but because Soup Group refused to accept scarcity. Instead, members were invested in creating abundance. Conversations centered around how meals could be made more delicious, who else we could mobilize to bring food, how each service could be more, and better. I had never seen anyone in Soup Group prouder than when, at the end of the summer, our service stretched over 6 tables and included 200 sandwiches, two types of Soup, hot buttered and griddled toast, cookies, scones, muffins, coffee, tea, water, and all the loaves of bread one could carry. Soup Group was interested in creating an environment in which non-transactional relationships of generosity and abundance were the norm.
Homelessness is people out of place

In the final section of this chapter, I return to a question I asked at the beginning: what does providing soup do that other forms of care might not? I’ve addressed many aspects of Soup Group’s care, but I’m interested in answering, why soup?

Making soup from otherwise discarded food and serving it to people experiencing homelessness makes strange the way that capitalism’s vast inequality turns both food and people into waste.

First, Soup Group’s actions do this by redefining waste. One way I contributed to Soup Group was by picking up leftover bread at the end of the day from a local bakery. Susitna Bakery is widely known as the best in town, highly expensive, and a premium product. A single loaf of bread is $9, but also some of the best bread I’ve ever tasted. However, in order to maintain their reputation and high quality standard, any day-old bread must be discarded. Every 3-4 days, the bakery would give Soup Group 20-35 loaves of bread. David Giles, in his ethnography of Food Not Bombs, another decentralized operation that turns discarded food into meals for all, describes this kind of relationship as an “abject economy”. An abject economy “is not legible according to the norms of market exchange but also not separable from them…it relies on a principle of surplus and on the capitalist economy itself for its raw materials (just as markets rely on such aftermarket economies to make their surpluses disappear)” (Giles, 2021, 215). Susitna Bakery, in order to maintain the standard of quality needed to sell to its wealthy, upper-class customers, produces vast quantities of food waste. However, in the hands of Soup Group, Susitna Bakery’s bread ceases to be waste. It becomes sandwiches, toast, a valued accompaniment to meals. By operating within an abject economy; Soup Group gives the surplus of Anchorage businesses a second life. Food is discarded as waste; waste is resurrected again as food. Simply
put, the concept of abject economy helps us understand how Soup Group and Susitna rely upon each other.

Soup Group, by serving and eating soup together in the camps, counteracts expectations that the bodily functions of housed and unhoused people remain separate. At public town halls, as well as in private conversations, I frequently heard housed people discuss their discomfort with the bodies of unhoused people. They would complain about homeless people sleeping in public, eating and drinking in public, and simply existing in public space. In these conversations, the problem was not the suffering of people experiencing homelessness, but the discomfort that housed people felt when witnessing visible homelessness. Giles writes that “dominant configurations of privilege, prejudice, and abjection maintain an order that organizes bodies and practices—like eating—and keeps them apart from one another spatially and socially” (Giles, 2021, 216).

Giles also names this spatial separation of housed and unhoused people as a form of “liberal embodiment”, and part of the larger phenomenon of “late liberalism”. First coined by Povinelli, late liberalism is a “set of contemporary biopolitical technologies and discourses by which difference is incorporated into the social contracts of market and state” (Giles 2021, 217). Late liberalism dictates that the bodies of different classes of people can exist in relation to one another only through market relations. Therefore, when complete spatial separation from homeless people becomes impossible—when unsheltered homelessness becomes so prevalent in Anchorage that housed people cannot avoid seeing homeless people—unsheltered people are seen as “out of place”. Following Mary Douglas’s famous saying that dirt is “matter out of place” (1994), the abjection—the dirtiness—of homeless people is produced specifically because their co-existence with housed people is perceived as perpetually out of place. Because housed and
unhoused people do not have market relations with one another, late liberalism marginalizes other ways that housed and unhoused people might relate to one another, such as neighbors, collaborators, or friends.

Soup Group creates situations in which the physical bodies of housed and unhoused people relate to one another differently. NGOs distributed food from behind folding tables and did not provide a place to sit; indicating that campers were expected to eat elsewhere. In contrast, Soup Group set up tables and chairs beside its tents, and frequently, volunteers and campers alike would share a meal at the same table. Giles describes illiberal embodiments as “emerg[ing] from just such everyday moments in which liberal assemblages of embodiment are temporarily suspended or disarmed” (2021, 222). I see sharing food in the same physical space as one such moment. Food and people alike were appreciated for their possibility, rather than their abjection, and soup-ers and campers were able to relate to one another in new ways. Moments like these “attenuate the liberal embodiments of propertied, sheltered citizenship; racialized and socioeconomic segregation; and market-centric consumption…We mustn’t romanticize these moments as resistance, but they nonetheless add up to a distinctive social world, and they matter—both in the sense of being important to participants and making a material difference” (Giles, 2021, 222).

Furthermore, this new way of relating to food waste and people experiencing homelessness changed how members of Soup Group saw their own wealth. The owner of Susitna bakery attended Soup Group lunches occasionally. Once, we struck up a conversation on why he donated bread, and he answered that he had the surplus to give, and somewhat felt like it was his duty. In his answer, he is expressing a distinctly illiberal sentiment: he understood his success as fundamentally connected to the health of his community. His success was not truly individual, it
came with responsibilities to those around him. Likewise, Carl evoked the idea of debt to others when asked why he started Soup Group:

“I really feel–besides joking around about the restaurant, that is a little baby component–it is reparations for me too. I don't have to put a banner on it, but that's just one of my own personal ways to pay reparations due to people who have had the short shift. It furthers my understanding, having some rehearsal, having some actual experience”

The illiberal embodiments of Soup Group resurrect both food and people from waste. They allow people to relate to each other outside of the market. They make strange the vast waste and inequality produced by capitalism, and embody an otherwise, in which relations of neighborship, even for a moment, take precedence.
Chapter 3: Conditional Humanization

On a cool day in the Summer of 2023, June carries an insulated bag full of hot towels and walks the line of people waiting for soup. She offers the damp, hot towels to each person one by one, asking: “Would you like a hot towel for your face and hands?” This is June’s task, June’s passion project, no one else is quite as good as June at figuring out how to keep the towels hot, how to direct people to deposit the towels in a laundry basket instead of the trash. When passing out hot towels, June toes a careful line. How do you encourage people to wash their hands without implying that they are dirty? Luckily, June is a former kindergarten teacher, and experienced at this specific task. She sells campers on the towels—“I bet it’ll feel so good”. She adds sensory details—“they just feel so refreshing”. I never hear her mention germs, dirt, or bacteria to the campers; she never scolds them to wash their hands before eating. The choice is presented freely, without moral weight attached to it. In turn, almost everyone who is offered a towel takes it. I hear one man murmur in response to June, “this is nice”; I see a woman use the washcloth to methodically remove dirt from beneath her nails. Later, Sam and I discuss the hot towel service. “People have pride”, he tells me, “you have to be careful when telling them to wash their hands…because what would it say about me if you told me I was dirty?”. June, Sam, and the other members of Soup Group avoid moralizing individual cleanliness because they see the challenges of keeping clean while experiencing unsheltered homelessness.

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The 3rd and Ingra camp lacked running water, which challenged the campers’ ability to meet the basic necessities of life. People must drink water in order to live, and people need water
to dispose of their body waste and keep their bodies clean. To acquire drinking water, the city expected campers to wait for a city truck once per day, then fill up containers of drinking water from a spigot. The only bathrooms were 3 porta-potties. A few months into the summer, the municipality installed foot-pumped handwashing stations outside the porta-potties, but they frequently ran out of soap and water. In theory, campers could walk to a nearby resource and navigation center to take a shower, but the risk of having one’s belongings stolen while away from the camp made showers a low priority for most. Lack of clean water was an issue throughout the time that I worked at 3rd and Ingra. While municipal employees, nonprofit employees, and Soup Group volunteers aligned on its importance, these groups nonetheless did not provide consistent clean water for the people living in the camp.

When clean water finally arrived, it came with increased police presence. On September 5th, 2023, after I had concluded my fieldwork, the Anchorage Assembly passed AR 2023-296. The resolution reappropriated $220,000 previously earmarked for the construction of a shelter/navigation center to assist with “public health and safety mitigation at large encampments”. While this money would fund water and sanitation, it would also pay overtime for 24/7 police surveillance at the camp. As the Assembly discussed the resolution, one member asked: “how are we balancing the public health side and the public safety side?”, implying that it would be imbalanced to provide public health resources, such as clean water, without increasing policing. Notably, inhabitants of the camp did not feel safer when more police officers were present. When this policymaker referenced “public safety”, he meant the safety and comfort of housed people. Clean water for unhoused people doesn’t necessitate more police. In this chapter, I’m interested in the way that policymakers connect services with surveillance, and why policymakers implement increased policing before they recognize and meet human needs.
This chapter uses Foucault’s concept of biopower to analyze Anchorage’s homeless management strategies. I argue that the state, and nonprofits funded by the state, expect unhoused people to participate in regimes of monitoring and management in order to receive basic services. Therefore, while the state might use the discourse of care when collecting data, homelessness data is better understood as a technology of power. Additionally, I illuminate the ways in which data on race is collected, but rarely engaged critically, and explore how this lack of engagement limits anti-homelessness advocacy. Last, I interrogate the concept of humanization as used by my interlocutors, compare and contrast humanization and care, and discuss the failure of humanization discourse to challenge injustice.

### A Deep Dive into Data

Philosopher Michel Foucault’s concept of biopower allows us to recognize the ways in which power and knowledge are strongly tied in the control, regulation, and management of the health and wellbeing of populations. Foucault originated the concept of biopower in a series of lectures at the Collège de France, and expanded the theory further in his *History of Sexuality* (1990). Foucault defined biopower as exercises of power that “take life under its care” (1976, 245). In contrast to the sovereign’s right to take life or let live, biopower is a more expansive form of state power that seeks to manage life itself. Exercises of biopower do not simply determine whether people live or die; they shape how people live or die. As an example, Foucault discusses the emergence of “public health” as a state responsibility in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. As states became concerned with the quality of life, they took new objects for medical intervention and study. Air became a government matter, as
did water, sewers, living spaces, nutrition, and exercise. New fields such as psychology and criminology emerged, and began to document, systematize, and manage ways of being (1990). Therefore, biopower, as a concept, names all the avenues through which the state intervenes in citizens’ lives. Additionally, later theorists have expanded Foucault’s concept of biopower beyond the state, noting how the state contracts out the management of populations to nonprofit organizations, who do the day-to-day work of enacting biopower (Lawlor, 47). In the context of homelessness, we must pay special attention to how the state controls and seeks to change ways of life it does not deem valuable.

   Biopower is intimately connected to technological expansion; without technologies that enable the state to more effectively know populations, more effective management of populations would not be possible. Population and individual level data are central to the operation of biopower. For example, census data produces knowledge of the population, which the state then acts upon. As Ruppert summarizes, “censuses do not simply involve ‘counting heads’, but are part of a broader configuration of historical practices involved in the constitution and classification of identities as legal and bureaucratic categories that have been fundamental to the multiple operations of the state” (2008, 70; quoting Caplan and Torpey, 2001). The state uses data to create categories and place people within them, exercising data as a technology of power to manage the population. Similarly, the state uses homelessness data to exercise power. In the context of Anchorage, I explore: how is data, as a biopolitical technology, used to manage life for homeless populations, or even enable it at all?

**HMIS**

   The Homeless Management Information System (HMIS) is an example of how data suffuses, mediates, and materially affects the lives of people experiencing homelessness. Over
and over again, when I asked my interlocutors what was going well in Anchorage’s homelessness relief programs, they said data. Municipal and nonprofit employees praised the amount of data collected, as well as the analyses that emerged from the data. As explored in the previous chapter, Soup Group was more critical of data collection, yet nonetheless several volunteers named the strength of Anchorage’s data on homelessness. Municipal and nonprofit employees perceived data as a tool for effectiveness, equity, and accountability; however, in overvaluing the “unbiased” usage of data, they risked equating the production of data to effective homelessness relief.

First, it is necessary to detail and contextualize the Homelessness Management Information System (HMIS) in Anchorage. HMIS is an online database that stores information about people experiencing homelessness. Data is collected on the local level, but aggregated by the state and federal government, and subject to state and federal regulations. Alaska HMIS requires service providers to collect Name, Social Security Number, Date of Birth, Race and Ethnicity, Gender, Veteran Status, the presence or absence of HUD-defined and Alaska Mental Health Trust-defined disabbling conditions, and Alaska Native Regional Corporation Affiliation. Since most service providers wish to be eligible for federal funding from HUD, they collect data according to McKinney Vento Act requirements, which also include Residence Prior to Program Entry, Zip Code of Last Permanent Address, and Program Entry/Exit Date. Additionally, specific programs within a nonprofit, such as a transitional housing or job training program, submit annual progress reports containing program-specific data. If a program wishes to receive federal funding, they must collect additional data on Income and Sources, Health Insurance Coverage, Education, Physical Disability, Developmental Disability, HIV/AIDS, Mental Health, Substance
Abuse, Domestic Violence, Services Received, Destination and Reasons for Leaving. In Alaska, the Institute for Community Alliances (ICA) manages HMIS data on the state level. ICA uses WellSky, a company specializing in healthcare software, to develop user interfaces, store HMIS data, and provide online security. Given the nature of the information collected, HMIS data is subject to HIPAA. While HIPAA typically prevents the disclosure of sensitive health information without patient notice and consent, HUD authorizes the disclosure of HMIS data to direct service providers and their administrators without client consent. Overall, HMIS collects a large volume of data on homeless people, which is then accessible to nonprofit organizations and the state.

**Data as responsibility**

Nonprofit employees and policymakers use data as a framework to analyze the effectiveness of homelessness services; therefore, data mediates what kinds of services are available to people experiencing homelessness. Additionally, nonprofit employees’ and policymakers’ discourse gives data a certain moral importance, and constructs data production as a necessary duty of a responsible nonprofit.

Nonprofit websites, as well as individual employees, emphasized the importance of “data-driven methods to end homelessness”, i.e. programs that consistently produced HMIS data showing they were transitioning people out of homelessness. Similarly, the federal Continuum of Care framework encourages nonprofit organizations to use data to eliminate redundancies and address gaps in services. In this “data-driven” discourse, programs that fail to produce successful data are unlikely to receive funding. For example, in one interview with an Anchorage Assembly member, he praised “pay-for-success programs” in which homelessness relief projects are funded retroactively if they were successful. Under this model, if nonprofits do not produce HMIS data
showing that their programming transitions folks out of homelessness, they are not perceived as
effective, and do not receive funding. Crucially, data does not produce effectiveness, it produces
knowledge of effectiveness, which is then acted upon by NGOs. Discourse on “data” drives
funding, drives nonprofit decisions on what services they will provide, and therefore, nearly all
services available to unhoused people are mediated through the production of data.

Data production was not only seen as a practical necessity; it was valorized by nonprofit
employees and policymakers as an essential, moral responsibility of any program. For example,
nonprofit employees connected data to a politics of accountability. Adam, a data specialist at a
nonprofit organization, expressed the view that data was a way of “telling when you’re wrong,
but also affirming when you’re right, like making sure that we’re on the right path”. All
nonprofit organizations that I observed during my fieldwork participated in HMIS, and increased
participation in HMIS was perceived as a positive development by nonprofit and municipal
employees. In this discourse, the collection of data gains moral worth, and is portrayed as an
essential responsibility of a nonprofit to its clients, its funders, and the public.

The responsibility of data production was also extended to individual citizens, housed
and unhoused. Unhoused people must make contact with a service provider that uses HMIS
every 90 days, otherwise they lose their spot on the waitlist. According to the ACEH
homelessness data dashboard, outflow due to inactivity averages 302 people per month, while
outflow to housing averages 151 people. The ability to access services is coupled with the ability
to be known, and therefore managed, by the state. Notably, the connection between biopower and
citizenship extends to housed residents of Anchorage as well. When asked about the
responsibility of housed residents in relation to homelessness, one elected official answered:
“Each of us, probably as citizens, residents, has to choose what our responsibility is. I don't know that there's any more than that we can expect our neighbors to invest in this... We have data oriented policing. So if you have a place that doesn't get calls because everyone's quit calling, another place in the next month or six months is going to get better police response. Yeah. So in some ways you have a duty to report and engage with that system if you're experiencing trouble.”

Not only did this official affirm the neoliberal rationalities introduced in Chapter Two, he introduced the idea that the primary way that residents of Anchorage should relate to each other is as tools for data collection by the state. He portrays responsibility to others as an individual choice, but moralizes the choice to engage or not engage with the police. To summarize, an emphasis on data-driven funding leads to discourses in which the primary component of responsible citizenship is participation in biopolitical data collection.

404 error: “Data-driven” solutions not found

Despite policymaker rhetoric for “data-driven solutions”, the municipality primarily funded projects that were not successful at transitioning people out of homelessness. For example, emergency shelter was at once the most expensive, most used, and least effective homelessness relief service. In May 2023, there were 3,600 people experiencing homelessness in Anchorage, and they utilized services 41,000 times. Of those services, 60% of service usage was emergency shelter. The percentage of emergency shelter services was even higher during winter months, reaching 80-90% of all services. However, the large, congregate shelters characteristic of Anchorage’s emergency shelter response did not decrease the number of people experiencing homelessness. Adam’s data analysis showed that two out of three individuals who stayed at the
Sullivan arena during the 2022-23 winter season returned to homelessness. Adam elaborated on the challenges of emergency shelter:

“If you are in a building with 400 people who are all scared, tired, and afraid…When your stuff is getting stolen, when people are triggering you and doing drugs in the bathroom, when you're being assaulted, which happens quite frequently– you're not going to be mentally stable. You're not going to make your job interview, you're not gonna be able to make your first months of rent. We are putting all of our money and our resources into something that makes people happy because they don't have to look at people experiencing homelessness”

Adam argued that not only was emergency shelter retraumatizing, but also that the overemphasis on emergency shelter as opposed to other forms of housing was clearly counterproductive.

“Every day that you put someone in an emergency shelter bed and not a transitional housing or a rapid rehousing or a permanent supportive housing facility, you are increasing the likelihood that they remain homeless because they're not getting what they need. Because the longer you stay homeless, the less likely it is that you get housed. So we're putting people into this thing that is at best doing nothing and at worst making things worse for them.”

Therefore, while the Anchorage Assembly, Anchorage Health Department, and nearly every nonprofit used the language of data-driven solutions, they were not, in fact, enacting these solutions. They were responding to political pressure–what solutions were most popular among voters, what solutions could be funded by federal grants. When interrogating what services are provided to homeless people and by whom, the answer is not the result of rational, technocratic processes, but always tied to political power.
The application of homelessness data can further be interrogated through the Coordinated Entry system, the process through which nonprofits in Anchorage determine who is eligible for shelter beds. By mediating the application of biopower through Coordinated Entry, the intensely political nature of who has shelter and who does not is misrepresented as a technical matter. Coordinated Entry is a mass waiting list for shelter beds in Anchorage. HMIS data is used to create a prioritization list. Since there are more people needing shelter than beds available, the Coordinated Entry system determines who gets housing, and who does not. One nonprofit employee described Coordinated Entry as “half-formulaic, half-subjective”. In theory, Coordinated Entry sorts people from most to least vulnerable. As described by my interlocutors, people who have been experiencing homelessness for over a year and have either a physical or mental disability are placed highest on the list. Next, people with disabling conditions who have experienced homelessness for less time are prioritized. Then, people are typically sorted according to how long they have experienced homelessness. However, not all housing programs and shelter providers follow the neat formula outlined above. Housing programs might want to address a specific demographic of people—youth, women, men, survivors of domestic violence. Housing programs might have specific faith practices or job training requirements that appeal to some, but not others. For Coordinated Entry to function as a mass waiting list requires shelter providers to call a centralized manager, share how many beds they have available, then receive that specific number of people. In practice, shelter providers often make their own determinations of who they will and will not provide shelter to.

HMIS and Coordinated Entry provide individual-level data, but ultimately, the decision of who does and does not receive shelter remains in human hands. Coordinated Entry, in the
context of Anchorage’s housing shortage, is an impossible triage. What factors make someone more vulnerable than someone else? Why should vulnerability be the primary criteria for receiving shelter? Who should live and who should die, and how ought the government decide? These are deeply philosophical and socio-political questions; yet, nonprofits mediate them through a mass waiting list as if triage is a technical matter. Whatever prioritization system is used, some people will receive housing while others will not, some people will be at higher risk of dying while others will not. Therefore, the Coordinated Entry system, or any prioritization list, will always be an expression of biopower.

“Objective” data and its fallibility

In this section, I explore the claim that data is “unbiased”, while human judgment is biased. By revealing how current data collection practices serve to medicalize and individualize homelessness, I intervene in this claim, and continue to reveal the operation of biopower within and through data. As a case study, I discuss the failure of nonprofit or municipal actors to contextualize their racial demographic data within broad systemic analyses of injustice. Instead of challenging dominant assumptions about who is homeless and why, the way that NGOs and policymakers use data replicate existing assumptions about homelessness as primarily an individual problem.

Nonprofit and municipal valorization of data is based on the view that data is “unbiased” in a way that human judgment was not. For example, Adam felt that data was a more reliable and equitable way to allocate resources to both homelessness relief programs and homeless people themselves. To quote Adam,
“We're not trying to replace lived experience with data. We're trying to assist lived experience with data. I think we have a lot of human biases. Even if you're not, you know, actively discriminatory or you're, you're a well rounded, very smart well intentioned person, we just have a lot of biases”

Adam’s, and other nonprofit employees’, belief in the effectiveness of data-driven methods, and therefore, their organizations dedication to the collection of this data, hinged on the belief that data was objective, while human judgment was subjective. It is necessary to intervene in this perception because it disguises the operation of power within and through data. As discussed earlier in this chapter, power makes use of knowledge in order to manage populations. Foucault also argues that power also reproduces knowledge by shaping how knowledge is collected and accepted as truth (1990). With this in mind, we should pay special attention to what data is seen as important to collect, and how choices in data collection reinforce dominant perceptions of what causes homelessness, and how it should be addressed.

The HMIS data collection categories reproduce discourse that homelessness is an individual problem. The data dashboard of one Anchorage nonprofit highlights that 36.7% of people within Alaska’s HMIS have an “Alaska Mental Health Trust Condition”. Nonprofits often highlight the prevalence of mental illness among homeless people as a strategy to tap into mental-health funding; however, this move highlights the sickness of unhoused people, decentering both their agency and the role that systemic oppression plays in creating homelessness (Gowan, 2010, 29). The issue lies not in linking homelessness and mental illness; but rather this data individualizes, medicalizes, and pathologizes a social problem. Notably, the way that homelessness is medicalized varies according to race, class, and gender. In his own ethnography of homeless shelters, Lyon-Callo finds that “50 percent of females staying at the
shelter during 1996 were categorized as mentally ill, while 18 percent were diagnosed as abusing drugs and alcohol. The data for males was 27 percent with a perceived mental illness and 56 percent as substance abusers” (2004, 79). Statistics on homelessness shape and are shaped by societal discourses. If individualized explanations for homelessness remain dominant, data will continue to be collected in a way that emphasizes these neoliberal rationalities.

Even when the state or NGOs collect data that could be used in arguments for systemic change, they rarely do so. Data collection practices surrounding race provide a telling example. The municipality of Anchorage, the state of Alaska, and every other entity that collects HMIS data records the racial demographics of people experiencing homelessness. In Anchorage, 46% of unhoused people are American Indian, Alaska Native, or Indigenous; 39% are white; 16% are black; and 8.9% are Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander. These statistics are rarely contextualized in the context of Anchorage’s general racial demographics.

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<td>American Indian, Alaska Native, or Indigenous</td>
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<td>Asian or Asian American</td>
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<td>Black, African American, or African</td>
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<tr>
<td>Hispanic/Latina/e/o</td>
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<td>Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander</td>
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<tr>
<td>White</td>
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As seen in the table above, Alaska Native, Black, and Pacific Islander people experience homelessness at disproportionately higher rates. Discourse on these statistics doesn’t need to reinforce racial stereotypes; instead, we could investigate what factors increase risk of homelessness along racial lines. For example, people of color are more likely to be incarcerated than white people (Alexander, 2010); in turn, formerly incarcerated people are up to ten times more likely to become homeless (Couloute, 2018), as both employment and earnings decrease after incarceration (Garin, 2023). Mass incarceration of black men increases the risk of homelessness for black women and children as incarceration destabilizes family finances while harming eligibility for welfare and public housing. Therefore, investigating the factors that contribute to racial disparities in homelessness leads to an analysis on how racialized policing, mass incarceration, and housing and welfare policy combine to systematically disadvantage minority groups, making poverty and homelessness more likely. Notably, the municipality of Anchorage and Anchorage NGOs do not contextualize HMIS data in this way. Instead, statistics are collected, disseminated, and left alone.

Similarly, statistics on rates of homelessness among Alaska Native people are left without context. Alaska HMIS collects data on Race and Ethnicity, as well as Alaska Native Regional Corporation Affiliation. Alaska Native peoples are 46% of Anchorage’s homeless population, despite only being 7.4% of the general population (AKHMIS, 2024; US Census, 2020). Alaska Native people have been harmed by settler colonialism that dispossessed tribes of their land, destroyed families by sending native children to boarding schools, and continues to devalue indigenous lifeways. Erasure, displacement, and ongoing colonialism are compounded by a high cost of living and substandard housing in rural Alaska (Chen, 2022), where many Alaska Native
people live. Yet during my fieldwork, not one nonprofit organization nor employee acknowledged how settler colonialism might make Alaska Native people more likely to experience poverty and homelessness.

Instead, policymakers, nonprofit employees, and volunteers I spoke to expressed concern that discussing settler colonialism in the context of homelessness would uphold the persistent and racist stereotype that homelessness is “an Alaska Native issue”. To be clear, this stereotype causes deep harm, but avoiding its discussion means avoiding important questions about how colonialism and homelessness are linked. For example, in what ways does anti-Indigeneity contribute to anti-homeless attitudes? In what ways does investment in colonial institutions prevent us from ending homelessness? Last, how has colonialism created a division of power that disenfranchises Alaska Native people on their own land, and entrenches Alaska Native homelessness to this day? These questions demand more than the simple collection of data on Race and Ethnicity; they demand that we do something with this data: namely, face the intersection of racism, settler colonialism, and homelessness with candor and a desire for justice.

I’ve shown how Alaska’s HMIS contains data on Mental Illness, Race and Ethnicity, and Indigeneity in ways that support various theorists’ work on the connections between mass incarceration, colonialism, and homelessness. Crucially, however, nonprofits and policymakers do not draw these connections, and by not doing so, they reinforce the idea that homelessness is an individual problem. In its current form, demographic data on homelessness produces our ideas of “the homeless”, and creates profiles of “the typical homeless person”, upon which the state can act. We must stop imagining data as an “objective” measurement unaffected by power. Instead, we must pay attention to how biopower, through data, constantly produces knowledge, including how we frame the causes of and solutions to homelessness.
What does all this data collection do for people experiencing homelessness? As discussed in the opening vignette, increased management is a precursor to accessing services, whether they are as simple as clean water, or as life-changing as housing. If people must be known by the state to access the basic human necessities of food, water, and shelter, then people must be subject to biopower in order to access humanity. Biopower decides who is human, and who must be managed into human-ness. In the next section, I explicitly interrogate the concept of “humanization” as deployed by volunteers, nonprofit employees, and policymakers, and investigate what is lost in this discourse.

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“More than just a number”: the perils of humanization

When discussing data usage within Anchorage’s homelessness management system, volunteers and nonprofit employees stressed the importance of seeing people “as more than just a number”. Mutual aid volunteers, nonprofit employees, and policy makers all invoked the discourse that homeless people needed to be “humanized”. In this section, I investigate how different groups understand humanization differently, and mobilize its discourse to different ends. Then, I examine what is taken for granted when humanization is centered, and explore where other frameworks such as citizenship or Indigenous sovereignty might lead us instead.

When speaking to the humanity of unhoused people, mutual aid volunteers in Anchorage distinguished between being less than human, and being placed in dehumanizing conditions. Soup Group members repeatedly affirmed that unhoused people were full people deserving of empathy, care, and love. However, volunteers feared that unhoused people were denied this care
from others because they were not seen as fully human by other residents of Anchorage. These fears were well-founded. During a town hall about a proposed cold weather shelter in Anchorage, I witnessed housed residents call homeless people “dirty”, “disgusting”, imply that they were fundamentally “criminal”, or even outright call them “vermin”. As discussed in Chapter Two, the “dirtiness” of unhoused people is partially constructed; in the Mary Douglas sense, they are people out of place.

At the end of a stressful and upsetting hour, Sam stood up and approached the microphone. “I want to remind everyone that our unhoused neighbors are just that—our neighbors. They are people, they are human, and they should be treated as such”. Afterwards, I approached Sam and asked if I could interview him. In our very first conversation, Sam told me that he believed that homelessness was caused by “a lack of understanding of folks who are dehumanized by capitalism and society”. He went on to explain that “blaming someone for being homeless doesn’t take into account their circumstances, what choices they had to make”.

Notably, Sam places the cause of homelessness upon housed people. In Sam’s view, because housed people do not adequately understand the lived experience of unhoused people, they blame individuals for systemic failure and are blind to systemic-level solutions. Additionally, Sam names capitalism as a driving force of dehumanization. Sam’s analysis matches my analysis of neoliberal logics as detailed in Chapter Two. Access to basic human needs—such as food, water, and shelter—is dependent upon one’s ability to labor under capitalism. If someone doesn’t make money, they will struggle to eat, to drink water, or to sleep in a safe space. As discussed by Povinelli and Giles, making nourishment of the body dependent on wage labor is a cultural value; late liberalism has turned it into an economic reality. Because access to food, water, and shelter are fundamental to human life, when these things are denied due to homelessness, the
humanity of that person is denied. To say that capitalism dehumanizes homeless people is to name the reality that plays out before our eyes, every single day.

Despite denouncing the “dehumanization” of homeless people, my interlocutors disagreed on what “humanization” might entail. Some saw the humanization of homeless people as primarily internal work: they wanted people to see and feel differently about unhoused people, but didn’t believe humanization demanded actions beyond the self. Others saw humanization as an active calling: humanization meant alleviating the dehumanizing conditions homeless people face. In this view, passive humanization was not enough. The contrast between these two understandings of humanization was best seen in the contrast between George, a policymaker, and Adam, a data analyst. George, when asked “what responsibility do Anchorage residents have in addressing homelessness”, replied:

“[Anchorage residents’ responsibility] is limited. Every one of us as a resident of this town has our life to live. No one has a right to compel or even try to insist that you are a participant in this. So–it all, to me, resolves back to the point that we need to be human, and treat people like they’re humans”

In this quote, George runs into a contradiction between neoliberal individualism and humanization. In line with neoliberal logics, he understands housed residents as having no responsibilities to participate in homelessness relief efforts. Housed people, despite benefitting within a system of inequality, are not expected to take responsibility for the results of those systems. Therefore, when George ends his statement with a call to “treat people like they’re humans”, it is unclear what real-world action that might demand. George is referring to a kind of humanization based in internal thought and feeling: residents should see homeless people as human, but there is nothing they particularly need to do to treat homeless people as human.
Passive humanization is the logical end point of the neoliberal worldview in which care is good, but no one has a particular responsibility to care for others.

In contrast, Adam encouraged a much more active form of humanization. When asked about community responsibility towards homeless people, he answered:

“I think we all have a duty to help our neighbors personally…I think if you know someone who is about to become unhoused, I think you should, if you can, help them out. Prevent them from getting a notice from their landlord. Or if you can, take one of their pets so that they don't get evicted…If you see someone on the street experiencing homelessness—if you see someone who is clearly shivering, freezing, about to die, you should probably help them. I think you have the duty to do that. You don't have to do a lot, but I think even just acknowledging people experiencing homelessness as human beings by waving to them and saying hi when they wave to you back and not pretending like you don't see them… Give them money”

Like George, Adam ends his statement with the idea that homeless people must be treated as human beings; however, his reference to humanization is paired with specific moral duties he believes all people hold. Therefore, when Adam urges others to treat unhoused people “like human beings”, he evokes a much more active model of humanization, a model in which people are called to alleviate dehumanizing conditions. The difference between passive and active humanization is similar to a distinction that Virginia Held draws in her definition of care. Held argues that one cannot simply be caring, one must do care. Care is “both a practice and a value”, and it involves “attending to and meeting the needs of the particular others for whom we take responsibility” (Held, 2006, 36, 2). Therefore, under Held’s framework, Adam is doing care, while George is not. Both men are invoking the discourse of humanization, but because Adam
links humanization to meeting the needs of others, only Adam’s humanization is caring. The contrast between these two discourses on humanization show how, under neoliberalism, people can claim to recognize others as human, yet nonetheless perpetuate their neglect. In the next section, I explore why humanization does not sufficiently change the material conditions faced by unhoused people.

**Against Humanization**

Despite calls from volunteers, nonprofit employees, and policymakers to “humanize the homeless”, little has changed in the material conditions of homelessness in Anchorage and beyond. Seeing unhoused people as human is important, but insufficient, as humanization discourse hides unequal distributions of rights and power, fails to imagine full belonging within a political community, and erases Indigenous ways of understanding personhood.

Advocating for humanization does not necessarily disrupt inequality. For example, those who seek to humanize unhoused people draw upon the framework of human rights, advocating for access to food, water, and shelter for unhoused people. However, as articulated by David Harvey, ideals of human rights “do not fundamentally challenge hegemonic liberal and neoliberal market logics, or the dominant modes of legality and state action. We live, after all, in a world in which the rights of private property and the profit rate trumps all other notions of rights” (Harvey, 2008, 23). Therefore, while humanization discourse might advocate for food, water, and shelter for unhoused people, it does not challenge housed residents’ perceptions of what they deserve, or what they might owe others. As I witnessed, this results in town hall meetings in which homelessness is seen as a tragedy, but not pressing enough to inconvenience housed people. Anchorage’s housed residents neither wanted to see unhoused people camping in
public parks, nor have a shelter in their neighborhood, nor pay additional taxes to fund emergency shelter. Humanization might entice us to be kinder or more caring towards others, but does not imagine the homeless person becoming equal.

Alternative frameworks, such as citizenship, better account for power differences between housed and unhoused people. For example, for people experiencing homelessness, being recognized as human provides few benefits compared to the material benefits of re-entering society. I connect societal reentry to sociologist T.H Marshall’s concept of citizenship, which is “a status bestowed on those who are full members of a community”. Under this framework, “all who possess the status are equal with respect to the rights and duties with which the status is endowed” (Marshall, 1950, 253). Unhoused people are not only seeking humanization, but citizenship as well. Unfortunately, citizenship is not guaranteed; it is “a process of political belonging” (Rosaldo, 1994; Ong, 1996, quoted in Lazar, 2019). The vast majority of unhoused people in Anchorage are legally citizens; nonetheless, they are not treated as full members of the community. In fact, when nonprofit and municipal programs advertise themselves as pathways out of homelessness, they are offering citizenship on the condition that unhoused people participate in biopolitical processes to remake themselves. The framework of citizenship is more useful than humanization because it allows us to identify instances in which the state might recognize homeless people as human, but deny them equal belonging within a community.

Last, humanization discourse fails to account for Indigenous ways of understanding personhood. Under Indigenous worldview, humans are not elevated above other living and non-living beings. Indigenous people “acknowledge the essential harmony of all things…see all things as being of equal value in the scheme of things, denying the opposition, dualism, and
isolation (separateness) that characterize non-Indian thought” (Nelson and Shilling, 2018, 9). For example, in Alaska, the Tlingit tale of Shanyaak’utlaax̱ describes salmon as relatives, and is used to teach children the necessity of reciprocal human-nature relationships (Goade, 2017). Alaska Native worldviews, and Indigenous worldviews more broadly, understand animals, plants, and all aspects of the natural world as brothers and sisters (Nelson and Shilling, 2018, 9). Therefore, in the context of homelessness, centering “humanization” above all else reifies a white, colonial, and western worldview on the qualities that make living beings valuable. Given the connection between settler colonialism and homelessness, we will not end homelessness unless we account for and repair history, beginning with respecting Indigenous ontologies of personhood.

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By exploring how the language of humanization is mobilized by different groups, we understand how groups might use similar language, but enact vastly different types of care. Held’s work on care ethics allows us to critique how those who humanize unhoused people might nonetheless fail to care for them. Harvey’s work allows us to notice when human rights are squashed beneath the rights of private property, and Ong’s interventions on citizenship encourages us to pay attention to the processes through which homeless people are un/made citizens. Throughout this chapter, it is clear that neoliberal capitalism robs people of both their humanity and their citizenship.

Ultimately, this chapter encourages us to be skeptical of how the language of care might be deployed to materialize biopolitical control. The first sections detail the centrality of HMIS data to homeless services, illuminating how HMIS serves as a tool to characterize, manage, and
remake unhoused subjects in the interests of the state. The final sections critique the language of humanization, and explore how it upholds power dynamics while claiming to disrupt them.

In the next chapter, I shift from language, and examine caring acts and relationships themselves. What kinds of relationships does care produce? How does power shape these relationships? Last, what kinds of relationships are needed to challenge the power dynamics between housed and unhoused people?
Chapter 4: Care and Inequality

This final chapter explores the relationships at the heart of homelessness: relationships between the state and nonprofit organizations, relationships between nonprofit employees and those they serve, and relationships between Soup Group and unhoused people. Previous chapters have provided an introduction to these relationships; in this chapter, I define and discuss the concept of charity, and argue that services for homeless people most often reinforce power differences between housed and unhoused people. Using Soup Group as an example, I explore how mutual aid might challenge inequality, even as volunteers are complicit within it. Last, I argue that radical care work can and does build a better world, but this work can only be done in right relation to one another.

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The Limits of Care

This section revisits how, under neoliberalism, the state withdraws from providing a social safety net, and instead, nonprofit organizations and volunteers are compelled to perform the services of the state. Anchorage is one such case study. Even prior to the closure of municipal shelters during the summers of 2022 and 2023, the municipality contracted out the vast majority of homelessness management services to nonprofit organizations. This process of contracting out social services is a key element of neoliberal governance. During my research, volunteer organizations, including Soup Group and churches, filled in services neither addressed by the municipality nor by nonprofit organizations, but could not meet the full needs of people experiencing homelessness. In this section, I problematize the charity relationships between nonprofit organizations and unhoused people at both practical and theoretical levels, and argue that the charity model reifies inequality.
Two definitions are crucial to this section. First, I define “charity,” as “the provision of support for survival to poor people where that support is governed by rich people and/or government” (Spade, 2020a, 140). Additionally, I make a distinction between “services” and “care”. Care is “a relation in which carer and cared-for share an interest in their mutual well-being” (Held, 2006, 35). It requires an inner self that relates to others, and a government cannot relate to its citizens the way that one person relates to another. Therefore, while governments, and by extension, nonprofit organizations, can provide services, they are not doing care.

In Anchorage, policymakers emphasized the separation between the municipality and Anchorage’s NGOs in order to distance themselves from chronic underfunding of homelessness services. Policymakers saw themselves as the facilitators of homelessness management policy and funding, but not responsible for the day to day provision of services. When asked directly about the responsibilities of the municipality, a city health department official said:

“We want to make sure that nonprofits are supported enough via grant funding, federal funding, or Anchorage Health Department funding so that they have enough resources to provide the boots on the ground. We’re essentially the funding arm…we think nonprofits are the experts, they know how to do good work….I think the role that municipal government plays is for health, life, and safety…but I think mostly we're just the funding arm to support nonprofits to do the work”

Policymakers and nonprofit employees alike saw this division of labor as ideal. The government would provide funding, and nonprofits would enact services. However, nonprofits were frequently expected to provide services for homeless people without adequate funding, and rarely would policymakers or nonprofit employees see the municipality as the cause of this
problem. The contract between nonprofits and the government is decidedly loose: while the municipality expects nonprofits to provide services, the municipality does not provide these organizations with the resources to provide adequate food, water, and shelter, let alone end homelessness.

As nonprofit work is continually underfunded by the municipality, inadequate services become commonplace. Water access within the 3rd & Ingra camp serves as a useful example. As discussed in Chapter Three, the 250 people camping did not have consistent access to potable water. The parks department provided a daily water truck from which folks could fill up containers; however, it was hard to make it to the water truck on time and hard to find containers to store water. As a result, people were often thirsty. Bathroom access at the camp was limited to porta-potties, and portable handwashing stations did not arrive until several months after the camp was inhabited. Nonprofit organizations in Anchorage were aware of this, as they were also aware that the 250 people in the camp had no shelter they could go to. However, while Catholic Social Services, Bean’s Cafe, and other nonprofit organizations brought bottled water, they did not have the resources to ensure consistent drinking water for the camp inhabitants. Drinking water at 3rd & Ingra was not a service that could be effectively contracted out to nonprofit organizations, and therefore, it remained inconsistent throughout my fieldwork.

Likewise, nonprofits were only able to staff and provide services at shelters to the degree that the municipality 1) were willing to provide public buildings for shelter 2) were willing to continue paying nonprofits for their services. When the city closed the Sullivan arena, nonprofits could not quickly or easily replace the shelter that had once been provided there.

By delegating care to nonprofits, the state disguises the chronic underfunding of homelessness relief measures as common-sense. It is taken for granted that nonprofit services are
underfunded. The city directly claims that its role is to be “the funding arm” of homelessness services, and yet, policymakers repeat that there is not enough funding for housing, for shelter, for water.

Because municipal funding to address homelessness is often inadequate, nonprofit organizations must court grants from the state of Alaska, the federal government, or from private foundations. Dean Spade, in his book Mutual Aid, discusses how nonprofits’ reliance on grant funding reinforces existing power relations and blocks their ability to make structural change.

“Charity, aid, relief, and social services are terms that usually refer to rich people or the government making decisions about the provision of some kind of support to poor people—that is, rich people or the government deciding who gets the help, what the limits are to that help, and what strings are attached. You can be sure that help like that is not designed to get to the root causes of poverty and violence. It is designed to help improve the image of the elites who are funding it and put a tiny, inadequate Band-Aid on the massive social wound that their greed creates” (2020b, 21).

The majority of homelessness management organizations are based on a charity model that reinforces the existing power imbalance between those who can give and those in need. Nonprofits, including shelter, transitional housing, and job training programs decide who is and is not eligible for their programming; essentially, they decide who is “deserving” and “undeserving”. If people experiencing homelessness must rely on charity for their basic human needs, then their very humanity lies in the hands of wealthier donors, board members, and grant agencies. Additionally, because charity-based nonprofits glorify the generosity of the wealthy, they depend on the suffering of others. After all, charity would not be so generous if there were not so much poverty. While charity-based nonprofits provide crucial, important relief to people
experiencing homelessness, their funding structures and self-conceptions prevent them from challenging the baseline conditions that cause homelessness.

**Soup Group vs Soup Kitchen: a complicated relationship with power**

Soup Group always insisted they weren’t a church, but people mistook them for one so frequently they had a group discussion about it. “Maybe we need to stop serving on Sundays”, Carl joked. Soup Group volunteers disliked it when people thought they were motivated by religion, specifically Christianity. Carl told me he felt that it corrupted what they were doing—“isn’t the spirit of brotherly love enough?” In January 2024, home from college, I paid Soup Group a visit. They were serving food at a pop-up event in Cuddy Park, the location of another homeless encampment after the municipality abated 3rd & Ingra with bulldozers. It was 2 degrees Fahrenheit, volunteers and campers alike shivering, stuffing hand warmers into our clothes. Soup Group wasn’t the only table at the event: several NGOs were present, as was a group of church ladies handing out sandwiches, pre-packaged snacks, warm clothing, and hand warmers. I went over and introduced myself as an anthropology student; soon, Carl and Sam followed me. As Soup Group and the women from the church chatted, I saw the similarities between them: both groups of volunteers, both providing food, both committed to working outside of formal NGOs systems and their accompanying data collection. If some members of Soup Group felt that the church volunteers ought to be criticized, what critiques needed to be levied towards Soup Group? Under Held’s definition, both groups were doing care–they were working to understand and meet the needs of people they felt responsibility towards. They were in relation with people experiencing homelessness; nonetheless, these relationships were unequal. In this section, I challenge the perception that care is universally benevolent and good.
Instead, using Soup Group as an example, I explore how care, like charity, can reinforce power dynamics rather than challenging them.

Care provided by volunteers might alleviate suffering without adequately criticizing its causes. Anthropologist Andrea Muhlebach, writing about northern Italy in the 2010s, describes how the state valorizes volunteer care in the face of its own withdrawal from social services. In contrast to the popular perception that volunteerism is outside of economic relations, Muhlebach illuminates how neoliberalism, as an economic system, benefits from unpaid volunteers doing social work. To quote Muhlebach, “The rise of voluntarism, in short, has thus allowed for an insertion of the fantasy of gifting into the heart of neoliberal reform. Hyperexploitation is here wedded to intense moralization, non-remuneration to a public fetishization of sacrifice” (2012, 7). Services that were once performed by the state are thought of as gifts, and those doing the gifting are seen as generous, moral, and compassionate. Muhlebach’s work allows us to see that the care provided by Soup Group and by other volunteers is not outside of neoliberalism, but a form of care produced by neoliberalism. Neoliberalism produces economic precarity; precarity produces caring responses. In the face of extreme precarity in Anchorage, volunteers felt that they must care for people experiencing homelessness. The care they provided was not an exception to neoliberal neglect, it was a response to it.

Additionally, the care work performed by Soup Group was exhausting, difficult work, and therefore, it was limited. Soup Group's twice weekly meal service was possible because Carl, Sam, and 2-6 other volunteers spent approximately 6 hours prepping each meal, and 3 hours serving it. They needed to source ingredients, prep, cook, transport, serve, and clean. The work was rewarding, meaningful, beautiful—but it would have been difficult to muster the capacity to do additional meal services. Carl, in an interview, discussed how the ability to take a break made
Soup Group’s work sustainable for him: “if I ever felt saddled, if I was a nonprofit and I told 'em I'd be there on Wednesdays and Sundays, I don't think I would do it”. Therefore, Soup Group’s efforts were limited; they provided supplementary food, but could never replace the state’s duty to feed hungry people. Similarly, Soup Group did not offer to house people within their homes, or let someone sleep on their couch for a night. Even caring people, seeking to meet the needs of people experiencing homelessness, find that there are limits to their time, energy, and money resources. As the state continues to withdraw from providing services, volunteers will find that their efforts are inadequate to meet the needs of people experiencing homelessness.

Last, Soup Group faced complicated relationships with structures and forces they sought to oppose. Soup Group was mostly white, though not entirely, and came from a range of class and educational backgrounds, including folks living on disability, college students, artists, teachers, doctors, and lawyers. As far as I know, no one had lived experience with unsheltered homelessness. In contrast, the people they served were disproportionately Alaska Native and poor. What does it mean for power dynamics to have a group of mostly white middle-ish class people providing care for mostly Indigenous poor people?

A few times, Soup Group volunteers and I discussed the class dynamics of their work. As discussed in Chapter Two, Jacob, the owner of a successful local bakery, felt like he had surplus wealth and a responsibility to redistribute it. In contrast, neither Carl nor Sam were wealthy; they had made little money most of their lives. Still, they had never been homeless. They felt that they still had an ability and a responsibility to redistribute the wealth they had. Another volunteer mentioned earlier, Ella, felt that she had never been that far away from homelessness, and therefore, she wanted to redistribute the resources she had from a place of empathy. While many volunteers vocalized an ethic of wealth redistribution to me, there were aspects of their privilege
that were difficult to redistribute, including their status as housed people. During my time with Soup Group, people experiencing homelessness never truly became part of the group. We sat together and ate together, but at no point did one of the campers actually cross behind the serving table. When unhoused folks wanted to help set up the tables and chairs, or take down the tents, Soup Group volunteers enthusiastically accepted the help, even asked for it, but none of the campers ever sat inside a volunteers’ car, or stepped inside their kitchens. Once, I remember, an unhoused man we had grown to know had a splinter in his eye. An older male volunteer offered to drive him to the hospital, and I remember how generous the gesture felt, how overwhelmed the man with the splintered eye looked. He declined the offer, and another volunteer, trained as an EMT, treated him instead. Soup Group wanted to break down the borders between housed and unhoused people; in the process, they kept encountering them.

In the same way the benefits of being housed could not be fully redistributed, neither could the benefits of settler colonialism. I did not witness any conversations within Soup Group about colonialism, or more specifically, how Soup Group’s presence as settlers on Dena’ina land was implicated in the same history that made homelessness prevalent among Alaska Native people. Soup Group might have avoided discussing colonialism out of a fear that they would reinforce existing racialized narratives regarding homelessness. I, like Soup Group, witnessed constant anti-Indigenous racist violence at town hall meetings. Many people expressing hate towards homeless people did so in explicitly colonial ways, going as far as to say that Alaska Native people experiencing homelessness should “be given one way tickets back to the village”. Harmful narratives about Alaska Native people and unhoused people alike circulated, combined, enacted violence.
However, regardless of the reason why Soup Group did not discuss Indigeneity in the context of homelessness, it served to silence the historical and political context of Alaska Native homelessness. This silencing meant that we could not link colonial history to the colonial present. It meant that Soup Group did not account for their situatedness—the way that their actions mirrored colonial histories of dependence. Klee Benally, a Navajo activist and artist, describes how “settlers have long worked to undermine Indigenous people’s self-sustaining practices by first destroying food systems and then forcing dependency on rations given at forts and missions and, now, by settler nonprofits” (Spade 2020a, 11). Soup Group is not a nonprofit, but they are settlers. Avoiding a discussion of the power dynamics between Soup Group and Indigenous campers meant avoiding important engagement the intersectionality of colonialism and homelessness. For example, in what ways does anti-Indigeneity contribute to anti-homeless attitudes? In what ways does investment in colonial institutions prevent us from ending homelessness? Last, how has colonialism created a division of power that disenfranchises Alaska Native people on their own land, and entrenches Alaska Native homelessness to this day? These questions are vitally important in order to understand homelessness in Alaska, and they demand facing the intersection of settler colonialism and homelessness head-on.

Care can reify inequality even as it seeks to alleviate it. Well-meaning people can fall into dynamics that they oppose, because hegemonic power structures find ways to reassert themselves even in the face of resistance. Nevertheless, resistance continues. In the next section, I explore how volunteers are critical of systems, even as they are complicit within them, and ask: what does their care generate?

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The Possibilities of Care

In this section, I identify moments when volunteers conceptualize their own care in a way that is aware of and critical of power dynamics, and argue that critical-complicit care still mounts serious challenges to systemic injustice. If we believe that power can be challenged, and that resistance to power is a constant process, we must pay attention to how caring subjects constitute themselves in relation to others, and in relation to power.

While earlier in this chapter, I incorporated Muehlebach’s critique that volunteering fails to challenge the neoliberal state’s withdrawal from social services, in Anchorage, volunteers themselves frequently and vocally challenged neoliberal rationalities. For example, Mark, a clergyman I spoke to, did not see providing care and deeply criticizing the state as mutually exclusive—he did both at once, and they strengthened one another. Policymakers, both within Anchorage and beyond it, often portray the church as an alternative to social services. Therefore, it was important that Mark, as the leader of his congregation, opposed this narrative. In his words:

“Even if we tomorrow had a hundred volunteers…there are about 3000 homeless people in Anchorage and they require professional care and systemic change, not just more hands to bring them what they need today…I would love it if volunteerism was providing extra help on top of a system that really assertively prevented homelessness and then lifted people back out of it again”

Even as the leader of volunteers, Mark remained critical of volunteerism, and made efforts to go beyond volunteer aid in his own actions. For example, his church participated in a program in which overflow families from the domestic abuse shelter could sleep in the church. However, he did not see this as an alternative to housing. In addition to providing shelter, he vocally and
publically worked with other organizers to develop an affordable housing complex in Anchorage. Through this example, we can see how volunteer action might serve as an entrance into more radical forms of care.

Soup Group serves as another example of how volunteer action might evolve into radical care. The care provided by these volunteers generated benefits beyond simply mitigating the municipality’s neglect.

First, Soup Group’s actions are a form of mutual aid. Spade defines mutual aid as “survival work…done alongside social movement demands for transformative change” (2020b, 1). In order to end homelessness, people must survive homelessness. At the simplest level, volunteers serving soup at the 3rd & Ingra camp made survival easier for those living there. While charity also provides material benefits to people, mutual aid provides these benefits under the framework of solidarity, rather than charity. Food and water are provided not out of pity, but with the goal of helping people survive current conditions so that they may better fight injustice in the future.

Particularly relevant within the context of Anchorage, mutual aid connects to Indigenous care practices. Klee Benally, quoted by Spade, argues that “mutual aid is an unbroken tradition among Indigenous people across many cycles of colonialism, maintained through traditional teachings that contemporary Indigenous mutual aid projects are working to restore and amplify” (2020b, 11). Indigenous people’s self-sustaining practices were weakened by settler colonization of land, destruction of food systems, and forced dependency. Therefore, when reflecting on what it means to provide care within a community that has a large proportion of Alaska Native people, Indigenous history reminds us both of the dangers of colonial dependence, and the incredible possibilities of Indigenous ways of support and solidarity. The practice of mutual aid is not only
important within present-day Anchorage, but that it is also historically situated as self-sustaining practice within Indigenous communities.

Second, Soup Group, through their actions, argue that homeless people are not only worthy of care, but solidarity as well. As addressed in Chapter Two, the volunteers I met through Soup Group engaged with unhoused people as their fellow neighbors. They engaged in an active practice of community, including learning their names, relationships with other people in the camp, and interests. Carl and June cooked for the camp in the same way they would cook for a dinner party in their own home– they asked if anyone had allergies, they wanted to serve food that was delicious, they wanted to create a moment of joy and community through food. These things ought to be a bare minimum of care towards unhoused people, and yet, within the context of the nonprofit organizations and municipal actors in the camp, Soup Group’s behavior was markedly warmer and more personal. Sam was even more explicit in his care for people in the camp, and insisted that volunteering allowed him to be in solidarity with unhoused people in ways that the state or nonprofits never would be. He knew many people well, and checked in on them regularly. While he vocalized systemic-level critiques of capitalism to me, he also accompanied people through their individual struggles with mental illness and substance misuse. Among systems that demand that homeless people prove themselves worthy before receiving care, it is a meaningful counterexample to see people providing and receiving care, regardless of their housing status.

In this way, Soup Group’s care imagines a different way of being and doing that challenges existing systems. Elizabeth Povinelli calls this idea an “otherwise”. Hobart and Kneese emphasize the importance of imagining otherwise, noting that “it is precisely from this audacity to produce, apply, and effect care despite dark histories and futures that its radical
nature emerges” (2020, 3). Volunteers seeking to end homelessness see suffering every day, and know that suffering will not end quickly, or easily. Nonetheless, they take the strong stance that care is valuable, in the present, and by doing so, present a model for a more caring and just future. Soup Group does not simply draw attention to the municipality’s neglect, they also draw attention to the campers’ deservingness. Volunteers providing care did not absolve the state of its responsibility; instead, their actions demanded more from the state, and from other housed people in Anchorage.

Third, volunteer action democratizes the discourse on care. Volunteer action ensures that the state is not the only provider of care, and therefore, the state does not solely determine who is worthy and unworthy of care. The recent history of Anchorage, including the Centennial campground crisis and the closure of the Sullivan arena, shows that the municipality withdraws from providing care to homeless people. In fact, as argued throughout this thesis, it has become common-sense for the municipality to care inadequately for homeless people. Therefore, it is important that volunteers create an alternative space in which they determine who deserves care, rather than only mediating care through the municipality and nonprofit organizations. Care under neoliberalism is always a form of discourse, always an argument over which people are and are not valuable. It is vitally important to the survival of people experiencing homelessness that affirmation of their humanity does not solely rely on town halls and elections, but can be affirmed through the direct action of their fellow neighbors. Soup Group, through their actions, makes the argument that all residents of Anchorage have a stake in homelessness, and that housed people can and should take active steps to end homelessness. Carl, in particular, emphasized the need for housed people to invest in ending homelessness:
“The people of Anchorage think that if they Pick, Click, and Give, or if they do the canned drive or something, or they spend a day picking up trash, then they checked off the box. And so they see homeless folks, and they’re like, it's not really my problem–things are working out for me. That's essentially the whole problem. The city is unified in this: it's doing a very good job ignoring homeless people and separating their culpability from homelessness.”

Carl ties the stability of housed people to the precariousness of unhoused people, and implicates housed people as complicit within a system that devalues the lives of unhoused people. In later conservations, he reiterated the need for housed people to engage with homelessness more deeply than donating to charities or voting. To Carl, and to the other volunteers in Soup Group, direct action is essential to care. In caring for their unhoused neighbors in direct, personal ways, they could more effectively make statements about the kinds of care that homeless people deserved. To care for people who are disregarded by capitalism is to propose a system of value beyond economics, and a human purpose beyond labor.

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Futures

In the last section of this chapter, I address a few ways in which Soup Group and other groups (volunteer, nonprofit, or otherwise) might modify their actions in order to better center mutual aid, solidarity, and Indigenous sovereignty.
Intersectional organizing

The goal of mutual aid is to survive precarity in order to challenge its baseline conditions. Analyzing the baseline conditions of homelessness reveals deep intersectionality with other issues, and therefore, a pressing need to connect with other groups addressing these issues. Spade notes that “racism, colonialism, immigration enforcement, ableism, police violence, the foster care system, the health care system, transphobia, and more are all causes of homelessness or causes of further harm to homeless people” (2020b, 15). Therefore, while volunteer groups are currently focused on showing solidarity with unhoused people, the mutual aid model suggests that wider political coalitions will be necessary to end homelessness.

Within Alaska, groups working to end homelessness would benefit from increased connection with groups organizing for higher wages, such as unions. Data from the National Low Income Housing Coalition shows that a minimum-wage worker would have to work 74 hours per week in order to afford a 1-bedroom rental home in Alaska. If that person had a family, or needed a 2-bedroom rental home for any other reason, they would need to work 97 hours per week at minimum wage. Taking a closer look at Anchorage itself, the fair market rate, as calculated by HUD, for a two-bedroom in Anchorage is $1352/month, whereas the rent affordable to someone in a minimum wage job is $377/month. Rent affordable to someone who relies on social security, such as someone who is a senior citizen or disabled, is as low as $291/month. A significant number of people in Anchorage simply cannot work the number of hours required in order to afford a place to live. The need for jobs to pay wages that match the cost of living is already an issue around which Alaskan unions organize. Focusing on the discrepancy between wages and housing prices in Alaska, and how this creates homelessness in
Anchorage, could be a powerful form of solidarity between anti-homelessness organizers and unions.

**Indigenous Sovereignty**

Alaska Native peoples are 46% of Anchorage’s homeless population, despite only being 7.4% of the general population. Alaska Native people have been deeply harmed by settler colonialism that dispossessed tribes of their land, destroyed families by sending native children to boarding schools, and continues to devalue indigenous lifeways. The harms of settler colonialism echo in myriad ways, including making Alaska Native people more likely to experience poverty and homelessness, as well as forcing reliance on settler nonprofits and settler volunteer dynamics.

There are no nonprofit or volunteer organizations I know of that center Indigeneity while doing work to end homelessness, despite how generative these connections could be. As discussed earlier in this chapter, mutual aid is an unbroken tradition among Indigenous people (Benally, cited in Spade, 2020b, 11). Urban Natives in Anchorage have many reasons to create alternatives to the nonprofit system. Settler nonprofits, and their data-driven programming to reform their subjects, are part of a colonial history of assimilation. Reliance on settler nonprofits for food, water, and shelter is fundamentally counter to Indigenous sovereignty, and the goals of decolonization. No one should be homeless on stolen land. In addition to all the other ways that mutual aid is crucial to ending homelessness, mutual aid, when led by Indigenous people, is a form of sovereignty. It would be powerful to see mutual aid groups in Anchorage that were led by Native people, and actively engaging with the ties between colonialism and homelessness. It would be powerful to imagine ways of supporting each others’ survival that did not depend on
settler nonprofits, and it would be powerful if settlers worked alongside Indigenous leaders within mutual aid frameworks.

Conclusions

We must be very skeptical of care. As shown in this chapter, as well as Chapter Two, the discourse of care is used to justify increased surveillance of unhoused people, to compel housed people into unpaid labor, and to make up for the violence of poverty and colonialism. In Anchorage, as everywhere, care is “inseparable from systemic inequality and power structures” (Hobart and Kneese, 2020, 2).

In this chapter, I’ve incorporated Muhlebach’s intervention that care often emerges from precarious conditions which we should be criticizing, and that it is weaponized by the state as a bandaid on precarious conditions. However, in conversation with Muehlebach, I’ve also used Spade, Hobart, and Kneese’s work to argue that volunteers’ critical engagement with care might fundamentally change the nature of the care they provide, transforming it into a more radical form.

When Soup Group members wanted to perform care in a more critical way, they did not imagine stopping their services at the camp; instead, they sought to organize against the municipality’s neglect. While the actions of Soup Group emerged under conditions of neoliberal exploitation, members of Soup Group nonetheless tried to act in a way that challenges exploitation and precarity. Volunteer care in Anchorage does not adequately replace state care, and to imagine this as its goal is a fundamental misunderstanding of what care under neoliberalism does. Instead, the mode of care practiced by Soup Group volunteers is an argument
to the state, to other housed people, and to the Anchorage community that unhoused people
deserve care. More broadly, it is an argument against economics as a measure of human worth.
**Conclusion**

“Natalie? Hey!” A camper in line for soup, a boy my age, knew my name. “It’s me, Michael, from Team Toro–do you remember me?”

I did. At our middle school, they split students into teams, with each team sharing a core group of teachers. Once a year, the teams competed in the school’s Wacky Olympics, featuring classic activities such as tug-of-war and pie-eating races. Michael and I were part of the same relay event. In this race, all members of the team began by lying face down on the ground; then, one person–the runner–would jump up, leap over and between their bodies, touch the far wall of the gym, then return and slam themselves back into the ground so the next runner could start.

“What can I get you?” I offered, “Latte, mocha, black coffee?”

“Latte, thanks”

I reached for small talk. “Do you still run?”
“Here and there, wish I did it more, you know.” I handed Michael his coffee. “I’ll let you get back to it,” he said, glancing at the long line behind him. “Take care.”

I never saw him again at 3rd & Ingra, though I often looked for him. He had been friendly, charming, smooth in the situation; I felt unsettled. I felt like the runner, leaping over my teammates’ bodies.

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Soup Group often repeated that unhoused people were our neighbors, that none of us were far from homelessness. When I first read about Soup Group’s work in the news, I thought of it as empathy; now, I recognize it as solidarity. Care in the context of homelessness can take many forms, but at its best, it is grounded in a shared commitment to our collective future. If Michael and I could share a past, we ought to share a future as well.

One of my interlocutors once asked me, at the end of our interview: why are you doing this, other than to get a degree? What do you want the end result of this to be? I answer him directly now: I wrote my thesis about homelessness in Anchorage because I love my hometown, and if I’m dedicating a year of research and writing to anything, I want to make a difference for the people and place I care about. I believe in engaged ethnography—as an anthropology student, my work should better the lives of the people I study. More specifically, I believe that anthropology gives people insight into the conditions that structure their lives, and allow them to be more knowledgeable and thoughtful agents within their communities. This conclusion, or this thesis, could have been a series of policy recommendations: elect Suzanne LaFrance as mayor,
prioritize Housing-First policies, pay everyone a living wage. Many people have written brilliant books about housing and homelessness policy, and I encourage you to read them. However, despite the production of significant social scientific knowledge on how to end homelessness, 3,296 people are still experiencing homelessness within Anchorage (ACEH, 2024). We do not face a shortage of ideas on how to end homelessness, we face structures of power that are incentivized to maintain homelessness as is.

My work seeks to detail these structures of power within Anchorage, and I hope that as a result, readers better navigate care, neglect, and power within their own contexts of homelessness. Neoliberal capitalism has prioritized entrepreneurial freedoms, private property rights, and the individual liberty of the wealthy at the cost of everyone else. In Anchorage, as elsewhere, the state has withdrawn from the provision of social services, leaving nonprofit organizations and volunteers to fill in the gaps. In a city where there is always money for police; in a country where there is always money for war; we are told that there is not enough money to care for people. Neoliberal rationalities, primarily individualism, teach us to believe these lies, and teach housed people that homelessness is not their fight. This thesis details those structures of power, and it details how they fail housed and unhoused people alike. Homelessness, in America, rose 12% in the past year (Freking, 2023). Teresa Gowan writes that “authoritarian medicalization relies on the symbolic separation of the poor from the rest of the population. But such divides are always unstable and tend to break down in times of economic instability” (2010, 289). As rents soar and job instability continues, precarity will likely dominate many of our economic futures. Neoliberal capitalism makes all our lives precarious; perhaps, from our mutual precarity, we will also find solidarity.
In the same way that being critical of the municipality and nonprofits changed the care that Soup Group provided, understanding power structures changes the way we participate within them. We are never outside of power, but we can make our entanglements visible, and act accordingly. We should not allow human suffering to proceed without intervention. I hope that as a result of my work, people unlearn dominant narratives, assert confidently that homelessness can be ended, and enact care in ways that bring that beautiful future closer.

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On August 13th, 2023, a baby was born in the 3rd & Ingra camp. When Sam shared the news in the Soup Group group chat, I replied: “Congratulations and Happy Birthday!” Then, another volunteer asked, “Mom and baby ok?”

During this work, I was constantly confronted with devastation and beauty, often at once. What is the proper response to news that a baby was born in a homeless encampment? What gifts do I bring the baby’s parents, and what could possibly be enough? Is it beautiful to care for each other, or is it devastating that there is no other way to survive?

The question of how to account for both suffering and joy, hope and despair, has followed me in all the liberatory work I do. Anyone doing work that seeks to liberate people from oppression must be acutely aware of power, including the nature of power to appropriate resistance to its own ends. Nonetheless, this thesis is not a story about the totalizing nature of systemic oppression; it is the story of people relating to each other in ways that make a difference.
Care matters. It is imperfect; it is entangled with power; sometimes, it reinforces what it seeks to counter; but as an ethic, it generates new ways of being with and relating to each other. For this reason, care is not a final destination; care is the path we walk towards justice. By tracing instances of care, I’ve also traced instances in which folks intervene in, as Gowan puts it, the “great shedding of our collective responsibility for inequality and social suffering” (2010, 290). Even in its darkest moments, I loved doing this work, because it reminded me that we do not struggle alone. We have the capacity to recognize and meet each others’ needs. We have the capacity to recognize and critique structures of power. We have the capacity to recognize and meet each others’ needs. We have the capacity to recognize and critique structures of power. We have the capacity to pay attention to both care and power. Let us build better worlds; let us build them with our neighbors, and in our backyards.

Figure 2. Soup Group food service at Cuddy Park, January 2024. Photo by author.
Appendix

Lunch at 3rd & Ingra
against Mayor Dave Bronson

On your great green lawn, my friends and I hold a forbidden picnic. The guests arrive already welcome: people unshrouded by jackets, and people wearing week-old-wet socks and people without beds, people holding war-eyed children people, people, people. I repeat what you don’t (must) not say. When my friend Phillip felt ants beneath his skin–you made fun of him. You held sawdust and onion skin dinners for women and children and left him to bum crumbs.

You invented vermin until they crawled up your walls, invented unholy beasts unfit for slaughter and slaughtered them. Phillip and I mix instant coffee and powdered cocoa with disposable spoons.

Here, the men are welcome too, for we have work to do: work to cook and work to clean and work to mend because hope is a discipline too. Phillip’s son, too old for diapers, plays the kettle drum. Do you hear that swell of sound? – you cry-wolf: vermin but I hear crickets, cicadas, peopled and people-song. Tomorrow, when your steel boots march picnic grass, you’ll find ants and footprints. Because we have places to carry people to. When you become ready, I’ll carry you too.
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