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Ross E. Mitchell

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Ross E. Mitchell*

Los Angeles Homeless Services Authority

Data Analytics Department

Los Angeles, CA 90017, USA

RossE.MitchellPhD@gmail.com

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Current mailing address: Ross E. Mitchell, 1140 Cove Rd #101, Annapolis, MD 21403.

Abstract

This study highlights how better demographic measurement more accurately informs public policymakers. In this era of renewed and more vigorous efforts to clear people experiencing unsheltered homelessness (unsheltered PEH) from city sidewalks, parks, and elsewhere, elected officials and other stakeholders need to clearly understand the dynamics of their unsheltered PEH populations. To advance understanding, this study investigated in-migration of unsheltered PEH in conjunction with the Los Angeles Continuum of Care's 2024 HUD-mandated Point-in-Time count. In response to the measurement work of Mitchell (2024), the Los Angeles Homeless Services Authority's 2024 Demographic Survey of unsheltered PEH instrument included a new item distinguishing between perceptions of a place where one has *lived* versus *stayed*, which revealed whether in-migration of individuals and families coming to the area immediately experienced homelessness or became unhoused after relocation. This analysis of over one-thousand survey participants self-identified as having migrated into Los Angeles County (a quarter of the total sample of unsheltered PEH) also explored whether there were associations with first-time homelessness or with being accompanied by household members. Responses to this complex survey were analyzed using Stata 17 MP. Key findings include that most survey participants reported either arriving homeless and unsheltered or first staying in either their own or a friend's or family member's home. More than half of all in-migration was initially to housed situations (more so for first-time homelessness), *not* into homelessness. Lone adults were more likely to experience homelessness immediately while accompanied adults were most likely to first stay in someone else's home.

Key words: *homeless population, migration, unsheltered homelessness, survey measurement*

Did They Start Out Homeless? Arrival Situations of Persons Experiencing Unsheltered Homelessness in Los Angeles County

"Did they start out homeless?" This question, answered herein, is about the situations people currently experiencing unsheltered homelessness[1] (unsheltered PEH) were in when they found their first place to stay in the County of Los Angeles (L.A. County), California, USA, after relocating from outside the county, state, or country. This study highlights how better demographic measurement more accurately informs public policymakers. Following the recent *City of Grants Pass v. Johnson* (2024) decision by the U.S. Supreme Court, we are entering an era of renewed and more vigorous efforts to clear people experiencing unsheltered homelessness (unsheltered PEH) from city sidewalks, parks, and elsewhere. Though politically popular, elected officials, service providers, and other stakeholders need to know whether these efforts are wise or wasteful. This study adds to our understanding of the population dynamics of unsheltered PEH in L.A. County and, hopefully, provides a clearer picture of the scale and character of the challenges ahead.

The data used to answer this question were obtained for the Los Angeles Continuum of Care (LA CoC), which includes the City of Los Angeles and nearly all of L.A. County.[2] The LA CoC is one of the nation's largest continuums of care, second only to the New York City CoC (NYC CoC) in total population of persons experiencing homelessness (PEH) (see U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development [HUD], 2023a). Important to this study, the LA CoC has far and away the largest population of *unsheltered* PEH—almost seven times that of the Seattle/King County CoC, the next closest CoC, and almost thirteen times that of the NYC CoC (HUD, 2023a). Consequently, there is no better, single place in which to study the in-migration of people currently experiencing unsheltered homelessness.

However, studying in-migration using survey-based methods is not simple, though it is the necessary means when seeking to understand both how and *how many* people come to experience unsheltered homelessness. Survey measurement requires clear concepts and attention to detail. As found by Mitchell (2024), knowing where unsheltered PEH first *stayed* is critical to understanding the in-migration of PEH and their trajectories into unsheltered homelessness. Unfortunately, previous inquiries have been about where unsheltered PEH were last stably housed—where they last *lived*—which means different things to different people who are now homeless: a) where they last lived in a place of their own (in contrast to someone else's home); b) where they last lived in a place they called home; or c) where they were before becoming unhoused (i.e., prior to experiencing homelessness) (see Mitchell, 2024). In contrast, where one first stayed is clearly, commonly, and singularly understood (J. Groccia, personal communication, August 12, 2024; Mitchell, 2024)—formally, this latter inquiry has the desirable property of construct invariance while the former does not (Mitchell, 2024). Consequently, interpreting population estimates for (the numbers of) unsheltered PEH who have migrated depends on precisely what they were asked. As found in this study, close attention and careful distinction are required. Otherwise, those addressing homelessness (e.g., elected office holders, program administrators, service providers, and other stakeholders) may misunderstand the nature and scale of in-migration by PEH.

To take on the problem of misunderstood (or misleading) numbers, this study benefited from the incorporation of Mitchell's (2024) work into the 2024 Demographic Survey of unsheltered PEH (Henwood, Hickey et al., 2024). The Demographic Survey is a facet of the LA CoC's annual Greater Los Angeles Homeless Count (GLAHC) and is administered by the Los Angeles Homeless Services Authority's (LAHSA's) contract agent in conjunction with the

HUD-mandated Point-in-Time (PIT) Count (see Henwood, Hickey et al., 2024). The Demographic Survey provides information about the attributes, characteristics, and experiences of unsheltered PEH that are not collected during the visual enumeration made by thousands of volunteers across L.A. County on the designated nights of the PIT Count. The survey makes it possible to estimate unsheltered PEH numbers by age, gender, race/ethnicity, veteran status, disability status, and so forth per HUD. Further, because LAHSA's Demographic Survey includes inquiries beyond the scope of the HUD mandate, researchers have been able to turn to it for unique and more refined insights about unsheltered homelessness experiences (e.g., see Barboza-Salerno et al., 2023; Chinchilla & Gabrielian, 2021; Giamarino et al., 2022, Henwood, Dzubur et al., 2020; Nicholas et al., 2021).

The particular interests of L.A. County and City officials are reflected in supplemental survey items, and it is largely from these items that the key data were obtained for this study. For some years now, County officials have been seeking insights into how many unsheltered PEH were not originally residing in L.A. County prior to experiencing homelessness. Unsheltered homelessness had been increasing rapidly and eventually reached "crisis" proportion in California (e.g., Blasi, 2021; Cole et al., 2021; Kushel et al., 2023; Winegarden et al., 2021), with L.A. County being the most heavily impacted region in the state (e.g., Adarkar et al., 2023; Hess et al., 2021; Kuhn et al., 2022; von Wachter et al., 2020). To understand the shocking size and continued growth of their population of PEH, County officials not only wanted origin stories; they wanted numbers of unsheltered PEH from outside of L.A. County.

This need for numbers is central to the broader importance of this study. As summarized by Erkkilä, Peters, and Piironen (2016),

> Numbers expose problems, help to [establish] new domains of decision making, and make complex issues commensurable, giving them a common form. Numbers … help to politicize issues, carry policy ideas from one context to another, and serve as backbones of decision making in politics, administration and jurisprudence. (p. 319)

Or, as stated by Rose (1991), "our images of political life are shaped by the realities of our society that statistics appear to disclose" (p. 675). But this study is not an exercise in generating numbers for their own sake. It provides numbers that more accurately shape how we understand social issues, like homelessness, affecting how we search for solutions to societal problems. As shown herein, this study's results reshape the reality of an important problem previously exposed by earlier Demographic Survey work (e.g., Cox et al., 2017; Henwood, Hickey et al., 2023; Henwood, Kaileh, Kwack et al., 2022; Henwood, Kaileh, Wilson et al., 2019, 2020; Henwood, Lahey et al., 2018). Namely, a noteworthy share of unsheltered PEH had clearly come from elsewhere; they were not all L.A. County residents who had lost housing and then found themselves in situations of homelessness. However, previous in-migration statistics provided an incomplete understanding of PEH population dynamics and fed into the politics of freeriding (i.e., decrying that people were coming into Los Angeles from other jurisdictions to take advantage of the benefits offered by the county). And because the meaning of previous numbers was ambiguous, there were few constraints on their interpretations.

The single-item measure (of *where last lived*) from the last several years both identified and created problems. Though efforts were consistent with others needing to overcome the inadequacies of basic demographic data from the HUD-mandated PIT Count (e.g., Aykanian, 2023; Funk et al., 2022; Metraux et al., 2016; Nicholas et al., 2021), the first steps taken to address the County's interest in PEH migration included unexamined assumptions. Namely, the

where last lived (hereafter, *place before homeless*) item was assumed to be sufficient for estimating the number of people migrating into L.A. County *immediately* experiencing homelessness. Unfortunately, the item was not sufficient.

The ambiguity identified, as well as the importance of establishing the scale and character of PEH migration, is why the present study was necessary. Prior to the 2024 Demographic Survey, no one knew whether those who last lived outside of L.A. County were homeless when they first arrived. Self-reported in-migration[3] by unsheltered PEH required better measurement (Mitchell, 2024). No one could confidently establish the scale of in-migration or, as also addressed by Mitchell (2024), whether in-migration was motivated by benefit-seeking and the desire to freeride in greater Los Angeles.

This study examined whether the recent addition of an item to LAHSA's Demographic Survey (see Henwood, Hickey et al., 2024; Mitchell, 2024) inquiring about where respondents first *stayed* would provide a substantively different understanding of in-migration by unsheltered PEH, which it did. Further, an exploration of whether any differences were associated with first-time versus repeated homelessness and whether respondents were experiencing homelessness as lone adults or as someone accompanied by others (one or more adults and/or children) was undertaken. What follows here are key working definitions for, the design of, and results from a descriptive, cross-sectional survey study capturing indicators of in-migration by unsheltered PEH in the LA CoC.[4] This study provides the first description of and associations with the situations in which respondents first stayed and makes available more meaningful numbers with which to create a clearer image of the various trajectories into unsheltered homelessness taken by those who perceive they were last stably housed outside of L.A. County.

Working Definition of Homelessness

Among various definitions available (see Sullivan, 2023), HUD-defined homelessness is used here. HUD specifies that staying in habitable conditions that are "temporary living arrangements [that include] congregate shelters, transitional housing, and … safe haven" (24 CFR 578.3) constitutes sheltered homelessness. The HUD definition of sheltered homelessness is narrow and requires experiencing conditions that do *not* include doubling up, couch surfing, or paying to stay in hotels, motels, hostels, and such.[5] These latter conditions, as well as having one's own home (house or apartment), sharing a home with someone else, or living in an institutional setting (e.g., prison, jail, hospital, rehabilitation center, foster home, group home, and so forth), are considered by HUD to be housed situations and not situations of homelessness.

This study focuses on the in-migration of currently unsheltered PEH, which is commonly understood across all definitions. Unsheltered homelessness is tied to the HUD definition of *habitability*, which requires that a dwelling include "a toilet, shower, kitchen, sleeping and living space, or has those but is not connected to water, sewer and utilities, or a septic system, well and generator, unless it is on a campus maintained by an organization, such as a governmental entity, nonprofit, or religious organization, where toilets, showers, and communal food preparation or food service areas are provided" (HUD, 2023b, p. 28). Unsheltered homelessness is literal homelessness—not living in a place fit for human habitation—such as sleeping on trains or busses or in their stations; in cars, vans, RVs, tents, or makeshift shelters; or outside on sidewalks, benches, alley ways, beaches, and so forth.

The HUD definition provides three key distinctions: a) unsheltered homelessness, b) sheltered homelessness, and c) housed situations. To operationalize this definition, however, required Mitchell's (2024) distinction between *living* and *staying* somewhere. As previously

noted, inquiries about where someone has been or is staying (sleeping/spending the night) are construct invariant. Unsheltered PEH perceived the places where they slept between when they were last stably housed and their current unsheltered homelessness as where they *stayed*, not where they *lived*. (Retrospectively, it was all unstable.) Therefore, with the addition of the *where first stayed* item as a follow-up to the *place before homeless* item, it is possible to determine whether the in-migration of those currently experiencing unsheltered homelessness was directly to a situation of unsheltered homelessness (arriving homeless) or to different situations altogether. This study provides an estimate of the extent to which in-migration was to unsheltered or other situations (i.e., sheltered homelessness—also arriving homeless—or one of various housed living situations, which are all housed per HUD but not by other definitions; see Sullivan, 2023). Finally, within this definitional framework, the study explores whether in-migration trajectories may be patterned differently depending on whether this is an individual's or a household's (family's) first experience of homelessness.

Study Design and Methods

This study is an original analysis of the individual-level data collected for and provided to LAHSA by Henwood, Hickey et al. (2024) from the Demographic Survey of unsheltered PEH facet of the 2024 GLAHC. A fully detailed description of the survey methods can be found in Henwood, Hickey et al. (2024), so only brief summaries of key elements are provided here.

Population and Sample

The intended population of survey respondents was the set of all persons experiencing unsheltered homelessness in the LA CoC.[6] The sample was obtained by means of a complex design: a two-stage, stratified random sample of unsheltered PEH found outside (e.g., on the street, sidewalk, or public spaces like parks, beaches, plazas, promenades, and eating areas) or in

improvised dwellings (i.e., cars, vans, RVs, tents, or makeshift shelters).[7] Targeted sample sizes were numbers sufficient to obtain no more than 5% error for each of several large geographic units identified within the LA CoC.

A total of 6,329 adults (individuals and heads of households) were identified for participation; 4,517 consented to participate; and 4,081 unique individuals were found to be eligible (i.e., were experiencing unsheltered homelessness per HUD's definition) *and* responded to one or more items following eligibility determination. Of those eligible, 1,072 identified themselves as having lost housing outside of L.A. County and were potential respondents to the *where first stayed* item.

Data Collection

The survey instrument presented items required for HUD reporting before presenting supplemental items specific to County interests. All but seven survey interviews were conducted using a tablet computer (Qualtrics instrument) rather than a paper form.[8] Though most were done face to face, some interviews were done by telephone, particularly with some families (and with some transition age youth). Once returning from the field, if not already uploaded through a wireless internet connection, responses were uploaded to the Qualtrics server (database) or, in the case of paper form surveys, hand entered using the Qualtrics instrument.

Data Management

Data were first "cleaned," then coding and calculation procedures were undertaken prior to analysis. Specific to this study, locations selected for the *where first stayed* item (see Henwood, Hickey et al., 2024, Appendix A, p. 10, item no. 46) responses were recoded into a new variable, which classified (aggregated) these locations as situations of unsheltered homelessness, sheltered homelessness, or being housed (subdivided into own home, other's

home, hotel/motel, or institutional setting) per their HUD definitions. Also, the *household composition* item (item no. 21) responses were recoded into a new variable by classifying the household of the interviewed adult as either a household of one (a lone adult) or a household of two or more persons (the interviewed adult with one or more persons regardless of whether those persons were adults or children).

The *place before homeless* item (item no. 45) remained coded consistent with its response categories for where last lived in a) L.A. County, b) a different Southern California county, c) a different California county outside of Southern California, d) a state other than California, or e) a place outside of the USA when last stably housed (see Table 1 for further details). The *first-time homeless* item (item no. 13) also remained consistently coded as Yes or No to whether this was the respondent's first time homeless.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using Stata 17.0, MP-Parallel Edition (StataCorp, 2021). Unweighted and weighted univariate frequencies (`tabulate`) and proportions (`proportion`), and bivariate odds (`tabodds`), proportions (`proportion`), and cross-tabulations (`tabulate`) were estimated. Weighted estimates utilized final analytical weights, which included adjustments for sample design. Jackknife replicate weights were used for complex survey (`svy jackknife`) analyses with and without subpopulation estimates (`subpop()`; for approach taken, see West et al., 2008). Estimates of proportions included jackknife standard errors and Clopper-Pearson (`exact`) 95% confidence intervals (CIs) to evaluate uncertainty (see next paragraph). Cross-tabulations included design-based corrected (*F*) tests of independence.

Where necessary, some estimates were suppressed due to their high estimation uncertainty per the reporting standards of the National Center for Health Statistics (Parker et al.,

2017) and indicated by either using special symbols in tables or displaying bars with no color and dotted (rather than solid) lines with their 95% CIs but *not* their point estimates. Criteria for suppression included having subgroups with fewer than 30 valid responses,[9] having an absolute uncertainty (95% CI) for a proportion greater than 0.30, and having a relative uncertainty (95% CI divided by the point estimate) greater than 1.30 (for full details, see Parker et al., 2017).

Detailed analyses were largely limited to the subset of data from eligible respondents for which no respondent had missing (whether inadvertently omitted, or for which the response was "Refused," "Declined" or "Don't Know") data for the *place before homeless* and *first-time homeless* items. This subset included 1,044 persons (25.58% of the subset) who responded to the *where first stayed* item, 358 (8.77%) who had missing values for the *where first stayed* item but neither missing for the *place before homeless* nor *first-time homeless* items, and 2,697 (65.65%) who became homeless in L.A. County, so they had no response to the *where first stayed* item because it was a contingent-response item. Seventy-one percent (71.18%) of the subset with non-missing data lived in L.A. County before becoming homeless and 28.82% in-migrated.

Results

This study reports results from respondents to the *place before homeless* and *first-time homeless* items, which was nearly all (92% of) eligible respondents. See Henwood, Hickey et al. (2024, Appendix K) for a broad summary description of the survey sample.

Where Lived Before Losing Stable Housing

As described in the Data Analysis subsection above, 71.2% of those unsheltered PEH who responded to the *place before homeless* item identified as living in L.A. County before becoming homeless. Focusing on the remaining 28.8% (weighted: 25.3%) of unsheltered PEH who responded to the *place before homeless* follow-up item (see Table 1), *where first stayed*, 7%

immigrated from outside the USA (international migrants) while over half (55%, weighted: 54%) were in-migrants from outside of California (interstate migrants). The remaining 38% (weighted: 40%) were in-migrants from California counties outside of L.A. County (intercounty migrants). Weighted percentages shift a little because international, interstate, and more distal (outside of Southern California) intercounty migrants were more likely to be sampled in high-density locations while more proximal (Southern California) intercounty migrants were not.

[Table 1 about here]

Whether First Time Homeless

Continuing with the in-migrant subpopulation of unsheltered PEH, as shown in Table 2, over half (61%) reported experiencing homelessness for the first time. The remaining 39% had experienced homelessness one or more times prior to their current episode. Sample-design weighting had essentially no effect on the estimates.

[Table 2 about here]

However, first-time homelessness is more prevalent among the non-migrant subpopulation. First-time homelessness was reported more often among non-migrant unsheltered PEH; 71% (weighted: 70%) percent reported experiencing homelessness for the first time (see Table 3). The sample-design-based adjusted odds of in-migrants reporting first-time homelessness is 1.5 times *lower* than for non-migrants ($F_{(1,378)} = 7.629$, $p = 0.006$).

[Table 3 about here]

Whether Accompanied by Family Members

After applying the final analytical weights (see Table 4), only 26% of in-migrant unsheltered PEH reported their *household composition* as living with others. Nearly three-quarters (74%) were lone adults. Not shown in Table 4, these unweighted and weighted response

percentages were nearly identical for non-migrant unsheltered PEH (i.e., less than 1 percentage point of difference), which contrasts with what was observed for the *first-time homeless* item and is why there is no separate table for non-migrant lone or accompanied adults.

[Table 4 about here]

Where First Stayed When Came to L.A. Area

Looking at the adjusted (weighted) results shown in Table 5, fewer than 40% of in-migrant unsheltered PEH reported first staying in a situation of unsheltered homelessness and only 4% first stayed in a shelter. Well over half (57%) first stayed in a situation defined as housed per HUD. Not shown in Table 5, among those first housed, over half (55%; weighted: 58%) first stayed in someone else's home—one-third of all in-migrants—and a third (33%; weighted: 32%) were first in their own home (apartment/house)—one-sixth of all in-migrants. Looking at the response frequencies, overwhelmingly (over 90% of), those who were first unhoused were unsheltered (*not* sheltered); similarly, just under 90% of those first housed stayed in either their own or someone else's home (neither an institutional setting nor a hotel/motel).

[Table 5 about here]

When comparing those experiencing homelessness for the first time and those who had been homeless at least once before their current episode (see Figure 1), there are a few differences in *where first stayed* for in-migrant unsheltered PEH. Those experiencing homelessness for the first time were more likely to have first stayed in their own home when they first came (or, possibly, came back; see Mitchell, 2024; Mulder et al., 2020; Spring, Gillespie et al., 2024; Spring, Mulder et al., 2021) to L.A. County (22% vs. 13%). Those who had been homeless previously were more likely to have found themselves in an unsheltered homelessness situation when they came (or, possibly, came back) to L.A. County (43% vs. 38%).

[Figure 1 about here]

Regardless of prior episodes of homelessness, large and effectively equal shares of in-migrant unsheltered PEH first stayed in someone else's home before finding themselves in their current situation of unsheltered homelessness (see Figure 1). Together, having been housed in one's home or someone else's included a majority of those in-migrant unsheltered PEH experiencing first-time homelessness (54%) and a plurality of those experiencing at least their second episode of homelessness (47%). Very few (about 3%) first stayed in a shelter prior to their current experience of unsheltered homelessness, and the shares were similarly small for those who first stayed in a hotel/motel or an institutional setting (see Figure 1).

As shown in Figure 2, when comparing those who were experiencing homelessness as a lone adult and those who were accompanied by at least one other person (adult[s] or child[ren]) at the time they were interviewed, there are differences in where in-migrant unsheltered PEH first stayed. Those experiencing unsheltered homelessness as a lone adult were both more likely to have first stayed in an unsheltered homelessness situation (42% vs. 34%) and have first stayed in their own home (20% vs. 15%). Those accompanied by at least one other person were more likely to have been housed in someone else's home (44% vs. 29%). Otherwise, there is insufficient statistical support to conclude that being accompanied by others was associated with where the interviewed adult had first stayed.[10]

[Figure 2 about here]

Discussion

This section reviews the extent to which the primary and secondary objectives were met and briefly discusses implications for future work.

Attainment of Objectives

The primary objective focused on whether the *where first stayed* item would provide a new understanding of in-migration by unsheltered PEH. Indeed, fewer than half (43%) of those currently experiencing unsheltered homelessness were initially unhoused. Instead of 25% of (1 of every 4) unsheltered PEH migrating directly into homelessness from their *place before homeless*, improved measurement provided by the *where first stayed* item makes clear that only 11% (1 of every 9) did so. This dramatically reshapes our image (shifts perception).

If this year's proportion of initially housed and now unsheltered PEH was similar in previous years, that would suggest that the numbers for previous years' in-migration of homeless persons may have been less than half what was assumed from the *place before homeless* item responses alone. Moreover, in conjunction with Mitchell's (2024) findings that hardly any in-migrant unsheltered PEH interviewed spoke in terms of pursuing public benefits, not only are there fewer people migrating directly into homelessness in L.A. County than may have been inferred previously, with few exceptions, they do not come with the intent of freeriding.

The secondary objective was to explore differences in unsheltered PEH in-migration associated with first-time versus repeated homelessness and with homelessness experienced as a lone adult versus as an accompanied adult. Three findings are clear. First, unsheltered PEH experiencing first-time homelessness more often in-migrated to a housed situation (55%) than those experiencing at least their second episode of homelessness (47%). Second, lone adults were more likely to in-migrate directly to a situation of homelessness (45% vs. 37%). Third, accompanied adults were more likely to in-migrate to a housed situation (59% vs. 49%), particularly one in which they shared someone else's home (44% vs. 29%).

Consistent with the literature (e.g., Colburn & Aldern, 2022), those experiencing homelessness for the first time were almost twice as often initially in their own home compared with those reporting previous homelessness experiences (22% vs. 13%; or ~1 in 5 vs. ~1 in 8). That is, both precarious housing (staying in a hotel/motel or in someone else's home—doubling up or couch-surfing) and immediate homelessness were greater with repeated homelessness. The potential for housing precarity was also greater for accompanied adults than lone adults, which is largely because accompanied adults were more likely to share a home with someone else (44% vs. 29%) than first stay in their own home (15% vs. 20%). So, though 57% of in-migrant, currently unsheltered PEH were initially housed per HUD, 2 of every 3 (68%) of those housed were almost certainly precariously housed.

Definitional Differences

These numbers are not the last word, however, because differences in the definition of homelessness matters. The HUD definition used in this study is very narrow and sharply reduces the number of individuals considered homeless (see Sullivan, 2023). A broader definition of homelessness would make precarious circumstances like staying in hotels/motels and doubling up or couch surfing qualify as situations of homelessness. That would make the proportion of in-migrating, currently unsheltered PEH qualifying as initially homeless at the time of coming to greater L.A. *much higher*. In other words, if having one's own home or apartment were the sole condition defining housed situations, only 18% (fewer than 1 of every 5) of those currently unsheltered would have been counted as housed on arrival in L.A. However, many people in greater L.A. share homes to make housing affordable, so a more detailed study than this one is necessary to determine whether in-migrant, and now currently unsheltered PEH initially staying in someone else's home were there solely at the grace and generosity of their resident host or

were able to make meaningful contributions to the household economy. Making this distinction would identify where between the conventionally housed endpoints (i.e., from 18% in own home/apartment to 51% in own *or* someone else's home/apartment) we should place the proportion of in-migrants truly housed when first arriving in greater L.A.

Key Limitation

When it comes to identifying the odds for experiencing homelessness, this study was unable to assess whether the non-migrant subpopulation of unsheltered PEH was similarly housed prior to their current (first or subsequent) experience of unsheltered homelessness. That is, unlike for the in-migrant subpopulation, unless this transition occurred in the past 30 days, there was no inquiry into whether non-migrant unsheltered PEH had been living in their own home, someone else's home, a hotel/motel, an institutional setting, or a shelter prior to their current experience of unsheltered homelessness.

Implications Going Forward

There are two kinds of implications to consider going forward. First, from a policy perspective, believing that unsheltered PEH came to L.A. County expecting to be homeless initially is not supported by the numbers. More than half started out housed. Further, if Mitchell's (2024) findings hold up, few seek a free ride (or better benefits) by coming to greater Los Angeles; instead, they come for the same reasons everyone else does (jobs, family, and/or its warmth and attractions). So, public policymakers confront two classes of in-migrants: a) those who discover what resident Angelenos contend with already, namely, too little affordable housing (see Wachtel, 2024); and b) those seeing L.A. as an attractive place to be. For the first class, taking advantage of the *Grants Pass* decision by clearing encampments of people struggling to find affordable housing seems unwise since it does nothing to address the root

cause of their housing problem. For the second class of in-migrants, additional evidence is considered below to determine if sweeps may be a more wasteful than wise means when attempting to solve communities' most visible housing concerns.

Second, from a demographic perspective, research is needed to help contextualize the in-migration of those currently experiencing unsheltered homelessness: How does it compare to those in similar circumstances who find housing and remain housed (regardless of how precariously their housing situation is or becomes)? Relatedly, we need to juxtapose in-migration with out-migration: How many precariously housed and unhoused Angelenos go elsewhere and do not remain in greater L.A.? Presently, no one knows how many PEH leave and either remain homeless or find housing after leaving the county.

Policy: Wise or Wasted Efforts

Because policymakers may still wonder whether enforcing anti-camping laws creates a sufficient disincentive for unsheltered PEH to migrate into or remain in their communities, some recently released findings about encampment clearance must be consulted. Kuhn et al. (2023) found that fewer than half of the small fraction (13%) of their study respondents receiving shelter or housing offers during L.A. area sweeps remained housed for a month before becoming unhoused again. Ward et al. (2024) found that "substantial encampment resolution activities" resulted in temporary declines lasting no more than about three months. Moreover, in one part of greater L.A. (Venice), unsheltered homelessness substantially worsened (i.e., shifted from improvised dwellings, like vehicles and tents, to nothing at all) following sweeps. All this while the vast majority were actively looking for housing. With little immediately available housing accompanying these police actions, encampment clearances are an ineffective means for permanently removing unsheltered PEH from their improvised dwelling places.

Clearly, there is a need for municipalities to acknowledge that above all, “homelessness is a housing problem” (Colburn & Aldern, 2022). Specific to this study, more than half of those who are unsheltered were first housed when they migrated to (or back to) L.A. County. They were unable to find stable, affordable housing for themselves and subsequently ended up “on the street.” For those who started out homeless, they were in the same predicament—there is too little affordable housing in L.A. County. And even if there were substantially more temporary housing (shelters), so unsheltered PEH could be brought inside, the affordable housing problem remains. Further, nearly a third of those *not* experiencing homelessness in L.A. County who made a move in the last year did so because increasing rental costs forced them to seek more affordable housing (Wachtel, 2024). Getting *and* keeping people off the streets, out of our parks, and off our beaches, requires more affordable permanent housing.

Demography: In-Migration Writ Large

Since many unsheltered PEH have experienced homelessness more than once, and some have been homeless for a long time regardless of whether they are migrants, it would be helpful to know whether in-migrant PEH, by virtue of having left behind connections and being less familiar with how to navigate the challenges of L.A. County, are at greater risk of repeated homelessness than non-migrant PEH, which is one possible interpretation of the significant difference in repeated homelessness for in-migrant unsheltered PEH. However, some non-trivial proportion of in-migrant unsheltered PEH were at one time residents of the county (see Mitchell, 2024)—these migrants were replants rather than transplants. So, like the work of Mulder and colleagues (Mulder et al., 2020; Spring, Gillespie et al., 2024; Spring, Mulder et al., 2021), we need to improve our understanding of the circumstances of their return (e.g., lost employment or became homeless in previous location, had mental health or substance use challenges, returned to

friends or family with limited resources or patience, etc.). A more comprehensive study of place-based identity and social resources among those migrating to the county regardless of their housed status is needed to complement the current line of inquiry.

Demography: What About Out-Migration?

As raised previously by Mitchell (2024), questions remain for the Los Angeles CoC: "Does everyone who comes to or crosses the line into homelessness, remain in Greater Los Angeles? If not, how does out-migration compare to in-migration? Are in-migration and out-migration balanced?" (p. 34). This study improves our understanding of in-migration but does nothing to help determine the extent to which unsheltered homelessness is a net-zero (or net negative) phenomenon rather than one appearing to be net positive from in-migration. There are no out-migration numbers to complete a basic demographic description of homelessness.

Summation

"Did they start out homeless?" No, by the HUD definition, the majority of in-migrant unsheltered PEH did not start out homeless. By distinguishing survey respondents' perceptions of where they *lived* versus *stayed*, this study demonstrated that prior years' findings from the Demographic Survey may have overestimated the number of in-migrant unsheltered PEH moving directly into homelessness. For 2024, the *place before homeless* indicator alone—without the *where first stayed* item—would have suggested that all, rather than fewer than half, of those who came to L.A. County in-migrated directly to homelessness per HUD. However, by the broadest definition of homelessness, which includes those first staying in precariously housed situations (someone else's home, hotels/motels, or institutions), the *place before homeless* indicator would still overestimate immediate homelessness by 22% (rather than 133%).

Further, though perhaps not surprisingly, this study established that those experiencing first-time homelessness were more likely to have been housed initially. Also, lone adults were more likely to migrate directly into homelessness than those accompanied by others. Accompanied adults were most likely to share someone else's home initially (i.e. be housed but more precariously housed).

These improved in-migration numbers disclose a clearer though still incomplete image of the demography of homelessness in Greater L.A. Nonetheless, in conjunction with Mitchell's (2024) work, freeriding should not be a top concern when it comes to managing unsheltered homelessness. Continued and extended efforts to create affordable permanent housing, as well as temporary housing, need to remain at the top of the homelessness and housing policy agenda.

Endnotes

[1] Defined more precisely further along in this paper, persons experiencing unsheltered homelessness are those people sleeping outside on sidewalks, benches, beaches, and so forth; in improvised dwellings: cars, vans, RVs, tents, or makeshift shelters; or on busses or trains, or in their stations, abandoned buildings, or other structures not intended for human habitation.

[2] The County of Los Angeles has four Continuums of Care: Glendale, Long Beach, Los Angeles, and Pasadena. In 2023, only 5.21% of unsheltered PEH in L.A. County were in the Glendale, Long Beach, and Pasadena CoCs (2,874). The other 94.79% were in the LA CoC (52,307).

[3] *Intracounty mobility*, which may have a bearing on service access, delivery, and continuity, is almost always movement within the same Continuum of Care (administrative jurisdiction) and, therefore, is not considered domestic migration when it comes to PEH and is not addressed here.

[4] The indicators were items among the "Residence" items block of the Demographic Survey instrument, which pertain to "where [the person] lived before [they] lost stable housing" (see Henwood, Hickey et al., 2024, Appendix A, pp. 10–11, item nos. 43–49).

[5] When "paid for by charitable organizations or by federal, state, or local government programs for low-income individuals" [24 CRF 578.3], these paid accommodations are considered a condition of sheltered homelessness.

[6] The Demographic Survey was administered to unsheltered PEH between December 7, 2023, and March 13, 2024.

[7] First, census tracts were randomly sampled following stratification by whether tracts were a) in each of the CoC's eight Service Planning Areas and each of the fifteen L.A. City Council Districts and were b) likely to be "hotspots" (places with very high probability or certainty of finding PEH) distinguished by i) age group (adults or transition age youth), ii) family status

(individuals or families), and iii) focus on improvised dwellings (persons or improvised dwellings). The second stage was opportunity (ideally, full coverage) sampling of PEH within the selected tracts. However, respondents were, in the end, considered to be sampled at random from the tract. A few attributes of non-respondents were recorded, so there could be adjustment for non-response.

[8] Survey teams recruited potential interviewees by speaking directly to individuals or gently announcing to PEH inside their dwellings that they were conducting a survey and offering gift cards as participation incentives. Eligibility screening occurred prior to survey data collection (survey team observations of and eligibility screening responses from PEH were also recorded). To be eligible, interviewees had to be experiencing unsheltered homelessness at the time of screening. All recruitment occurred while in the field (i.e., "on the streets," in safe parking sites, or through connections to homeless services centers).

[9] To fully comply with Parker et al. (2017), suppression would be required for all estimates with *effective* sample sizes (N_{eff}) of fewer than 30 respondents. However, most estimates have a small N_{eff}, so suppression is only for observed sample sizes (N_{obs}) of fewer than 30.

[10] However, the results strongly suggest that lone adults were more likely to have first stayed in an institutional setting when they first came (or, possibly, came back) to L.A. County. The highly uncertain yet statistically significant (95% confidence level) unweighted odds for being a lone adult who first stayed in an institutional setting is 4.6 (CI: 1.7–12.1).

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Table 1. Frequency of responses to the *place before homeless* item from those who migrated to L.A. County.

Place lived before homeless?	Frequency	Unweighted Percent of Total	Weighted Percentage‡
Other Southern California county*	236	22.61%	25.26% (19.26%–32.04%)
California county outside So. Cal.	160	15.33%	14.36% (10.71%–18.69%)
Other state in the USA	575	55.08%	53.55% (48.28%–58.78%)
Other country (outside USA)	73	6.99%	6.83% (4.03%–10.70%)
Total	1,044	100.00%	100.00%

* The other Southern California counties are Imperial, San Diego, Riverside, Orange, San Bernardino, Kern, Ventura, Santa Barbara, and San Luis Obispo Counties.

‡ Clopper-Pearson (exact) 95% CIs are in parentheses.

Table 2. Frequency of responses to the *first-time homeless* item from those who migrated to L.A. County.

Is this your first time homeless?	Frequency	Unweighted Percent of Total	Weighted Percentage‡
Yes	639	61.21%	61.32% (55.52%–66.89%)
No	405	38.79%	38.68% (33.11%–44.48%)
Total	1,044	100.00%	100.00%

‡ Clopper-Pearson (exact) 95% CIs are in parentheses.

Table 3. Frequency of responses to the *first-time homeless* item from those who did not migrate into (i.e., residents of) L.A. County.

Is this your first time homeless?	Frequency	Unweighted Percent of Total	Weighted Percentage[‡]
Yes	1,907	71.18%	70.45% (66.32%–74.35%)
No	772	28.82%	29.55% (25.65%–33.68%)
Total	2,697	100.00%	100.00%

[‡] Clopper-Pearson (exact) 95% CIs are in parentheses.

Table 4. Frequency of responses to the *household composition* item from those who migrated to L.A. County.

Any family members living with you?	Frequency	Unweighted Percent of Total	Weighted Percentage‡
Yes, accompanied by 1+ persons	287	27.49%	26.36% (20.77%–32.57%)
No, lone adult	757	72.51%	73.64% (67.43%–79.23%)
Total	1,044	100.00%	100.00%

‡ Clopper-Pearson (exact) 95% CIs are in parentheses.

Table 5. Frequency of responses to the *where first stayed* item from those who migrated to L.A. County.

Where did you first stay when you came to the L.A. area?	Frequency	Unweighted Percent of Total	Weighted Percentage‡
Unsheltered homelessness situation	455	43.58%	39.82% (34.16%–45.69%)
Sheltered homelessness situation	41	3.93%	† (2%–6%)
Housed situation*	548	52.49%	57.00% (51.05%–62.82%)
Hotel/Motel	39	3.74%	† (2%–5%)
Institutional setting	28	2.68%	† (1%–4%)
Someone else's home	299	28.64%	33.19% (25.98%–41.05%)
Own home	182	17.43%	18.27% (13.55%–23.81%)
Total*	1,044	100.00%	100.00%

* The total frequency is the sum of the frequencies for unsheltered homelessness, sheltered homelessness, and housed situations. The frequencies for hotel/motel, institutional setting, someone else's home, and own home subcategories are subtotals; however, the percentages are of the total (i.e., the four housed situations subtotal unweighted percentages sum to 52.49%).

† Estimates suppressed per National Center for Health Statistics reporting standards (see Parker et al., 2017). (Institutional setting is too imprecise, but other low precision estimates suppressed to prevent determination by subtraction, and confidence intervals rounded to prevent precise determination by interval splitting.)

‡ Clopper-Pearson (exact) 95% CIs are in parentheses.

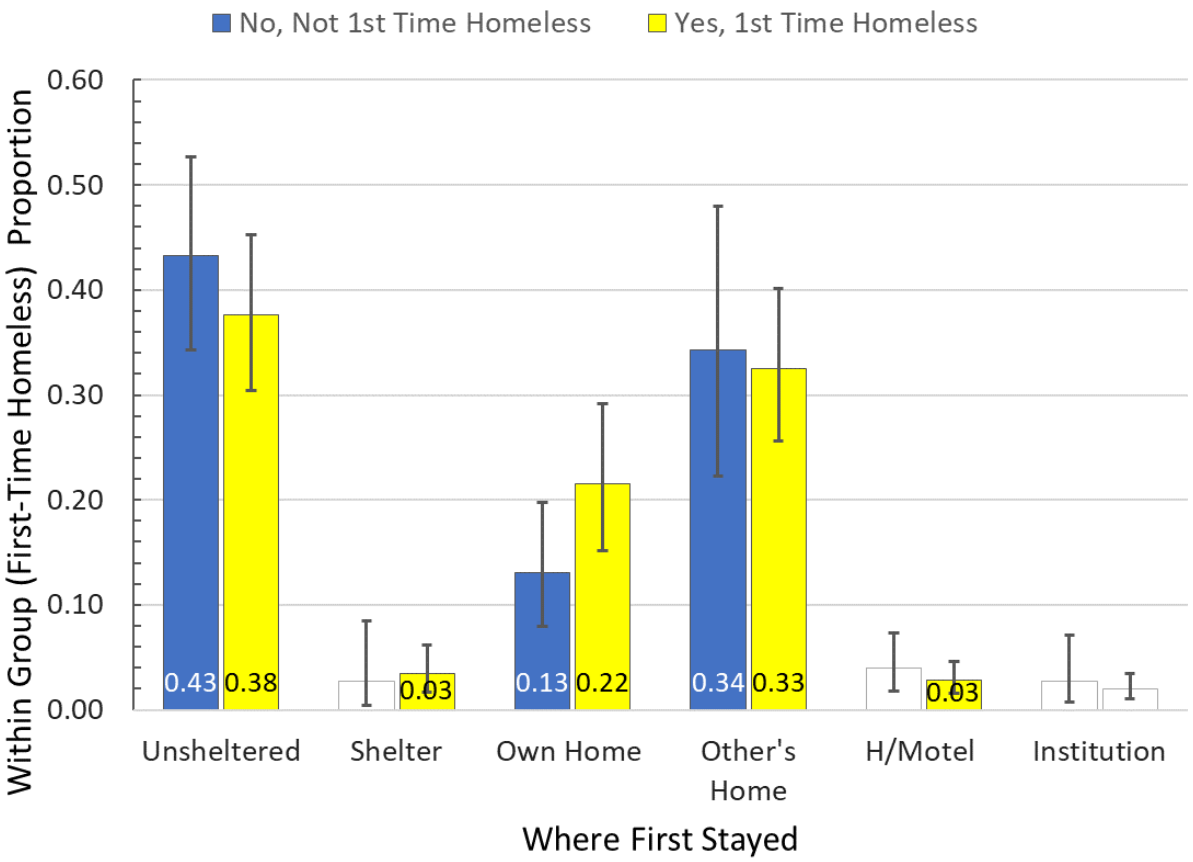


Figure 1. *Proportion of responses from those who migrated to L.A. County for each* first time homeless *item response category by each* where-first-stayed *item response category.*

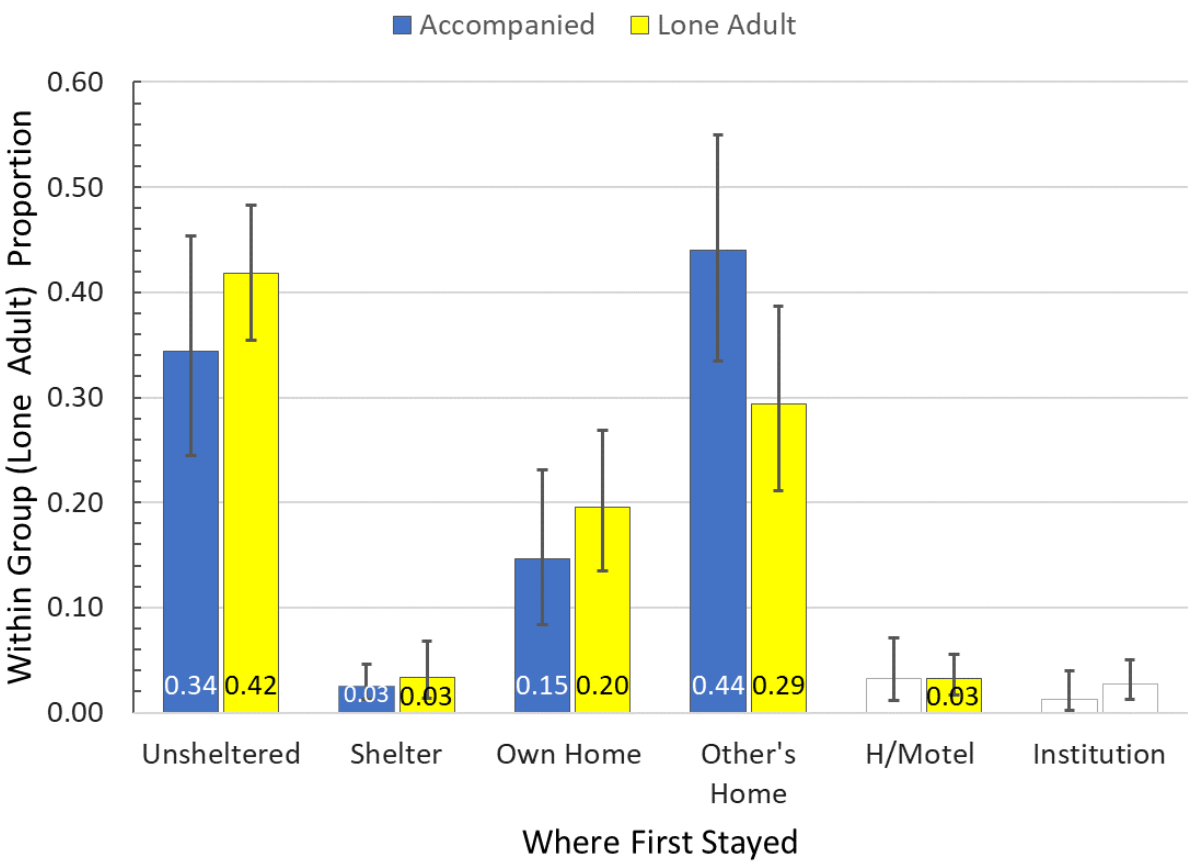


Figure 2. *Proportion of responses from those who migrated to L.A. County for each* household composition *item response category by each* where-first-stayed *item response category.*