“Homeless, Not Helpless”: How Homeless Unions Transform the Local Political Life of the Unhoused

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INTRODUCTION

As homelessness continues to rise across the United States, grassroots advocacy organizations led by unhoused people, often referred to as homeless unions, have grown in number and influence as they seek to organize unhoused people against the structural forces perpetuating homelessness. Yet, the acute marginalization of the unhoused has led scholars to largely dismiss homeless people as agents of change, opting to categorize this population as “disempowered and disenfranchised” without sufficient mobilizing potential (Wagner and Cohen 1991). Yet, instances of homeless unions resisting their exclusion demonstrate the prospects for these groups to serve as a vital source of power-building among the unhoused. This research explores this incongruence in the literature by investigating how homeless unions build power.

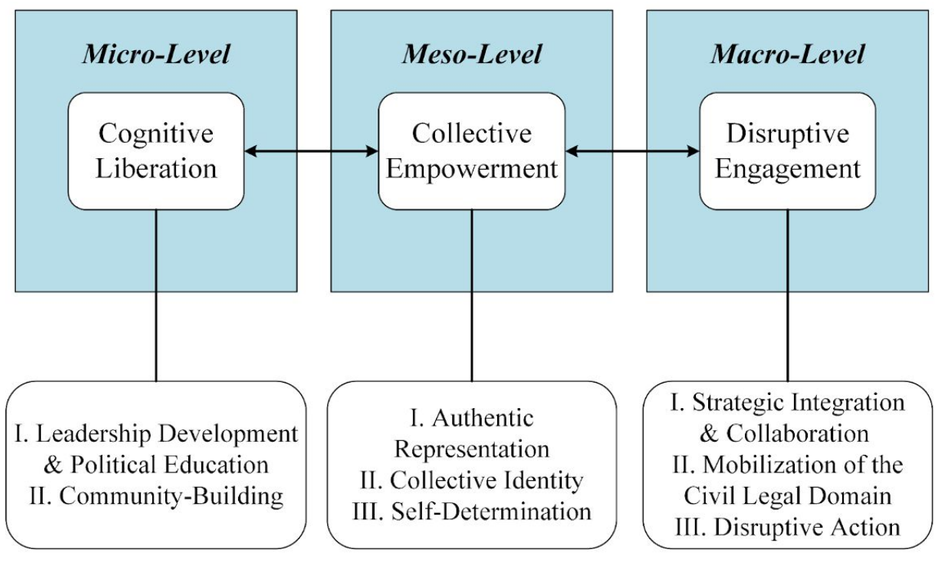
DATA & METHODS

I conducted in-depth interviews and participant observation from June to November 2024 of eleven homeless unions organizing locally across the United States (*see map*). I spoke with fifty-two union members and those involved in their organizational field. I complemented interviews (gathered through a snowball sampling approach) with participant observation, wherein I observed the organizing tactics, activities, and meetings of homeless unions.

Locations of Sampled Homeless Unions

FINDINGS

Homeless unions cultivate meaningful opportunities for homeless people to exercise positive political power, demonstrating the potential for the unhoused to exploit their marginality to seek substantive citizenship. Through their efforts to foster cognitive liberation among their individual members, strengthen their collective capacity to engage in sustained resistance, and leverage direct action in and around the public sphere to legitimize their grievances, homeless unions overcome significant barriers to building power amongst a population thought to be unorganizable. My analysis is structured by how homeless unions organize to build power at the micro (individual), meso (group), and macro (public sphere) levels.



ILLUSTRATIVE QUOTES

Cognitive Liberation

“The whole point of [the homeless union] is to move unhoused people to say, ‘Fuck you guys, we’re not doing this!’”

“That’s the feeling that we [are] able to generate in the homeless union organization. That we can speak for ourselves. We can think for ourselves. We can organize. We can fight for ourselves. We don’t need somebody to come help us."

Collective Empowerment

Disruptive Engagement

“I mean, that’s what we’re trying to do. Put the pressure on. Go to the city council meetings [and] the board of supervisors’ meetings. We go in the streets and yell.”

CONCLUSIONS

- These findings demonstrate the potential for authentic community-led organizations to foster alternative pathways for people experiencing homelessness to engage in the political process.
- The individual and collective benefits of participation in a homeless union suggest approaches to addressing homelessness that build on the togetherness found in the social networks of the unhoused. The solution to homelessness is not to be realized by merely enforcing conformity to the status quo but rather by nurturing opportunities for collectivism, self-determination, and empowerment.
- There is an urgent need to bring the literature on social movements into greater conversation with the literature on homelessness. The historical separation of the two has led scholars to overlook the latent power of homeless people and, thus, the potential for the unhoused to lead a movement for change.

FULL PAPER

REFERENCES