The rise of the tent ward: Homeless camps in the era of mass incarceration

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ABSTRACT

In the era of mass incarceration, services for the homeless often involve mechanisms of confinement and discipline. Over the past decade, homeless communities in cities across the US have developed large-scale encampments in which residents survive outside the purview of official homelessness management systems. Most cities have responded by evicting campers and destroying their tents and shanties. Yet some local governments have instead legalized encampments, while imposing varying degrees of spatial control and surveillance on camp residents. In so doing, they have created unique new spaces for managing homelessness. This article terms these spaces "tent wards" to reflect their dualistic functions of both care and custody. Based on secondary sources and ethnographic research from 2013, I analyze nearly a dozen tent wards in cities across the US, and engage a more in-depth study of the development of such spaces in Fresno, California. I argue that the rise of tent wards calls attention to the need for a renewed focus on the relationship between incarceration and welfare in the US, and the ways in which a diverse range of spaces function together to isolate and discipline entire segments of the population.

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Introduction

For over a decade, anti-homeless policing and inadequate shelter in cities across the United States have driven homeless people into encampments located in marginal urban spaces. By 2014, there were an estimated one hundred homeless encampments in the US, ranging in size from a dozen to hundreds of people living collectively (Hunter, Linden-Retek, Shebaya, & Halpert, 2014). For years, local governments largely responded by evicting campers and destroying their tents and shanties. Yet many cities have also sanctioned homeless encampments and engaged a range of tactics to render them more easily governable. These tactics—most notably the use of rigid discipline and spatial containment—resemble the mode through which carceral institutions govern criminalized populations. I describe these encampments as "tent wards" to reflect how incarceration becomes enmeshed with the provision of care and shelter. These spaces are not simply a cost-effective form of shelter: they are a new node in a wider network of quasi-carceral spaces that govern homeless mobility. I argue that this phenomenon sheds light on how weak service infrastructures enable the diffusion of carceral space across a range of institutional sites, and more broadly how the spatial management of poor and homeless people—in jails, camps, and shelters—undermines structural efforts to address poverty and housing inequality.

This project emerged out of 24 interviews conducted in 2013 in Fresno, California, at a time when the city was home to some of the largest and most visible tent cities in the nation. Nine of the people interviewed were officials involved in homelessness management, eight were current or former residents of homeless encampments, and seven were activists involved in a local campaign for the right to camp. Participants were identified using snowball sampling, and represented a wide range of backgrounds and experiences. Many participants elected to remain anonymous and are identified here using pseudonyms. Research also involved analysis of two local media sources—the *Fresno Bee* and *Community Alliance Newspaper*—as well as policy reports, legal documents, and digital sources depicting homeless activism and evictions in Fresno. Further, this article draws on three months of ethnographic observations in local shelters and encampments in the summer of 2013, immediately prior to the destruction of all Fresno tent cities. Beyond Fresno, I analyze news articles and policy reports on homeless encampments in cities across the nation. I focus on the period leading up to 2013, as it reflects an era in which cities sought to contain and govern the growing phenomenon of homeless encampments. In the following sections, I provide a brief history of

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the carceral aspects of homelessness management in the US and an overview of tent ward spaces in cities across the nation. I then turn to an analysis of how officials sought to create tent wards in Fresno, and how homeless Fresnans resisted.

Managing homelessness in the era of mass incarceration

Mass incarceration in the US today is fundamentally tied to the long history of US poverty management. Piven and Cloward (1971) famously argued that the welfare state functions to regulate the poor by expanding and contracting according to economic shifts. During times of high unemployment, welfare institutions absorb the unemployed to maintain order and pacify civil unrest. In times of low unemployment, degrading welfare conditions ensure that people continue to engage in waged labor. Wacquant (2009) argues that in the contemporary era, welfare has increasingly been replaced by explicitly punitive institutions—jails and prisons—which similarly function to regulate labor. The present era of "new punitiveness" has been marked by an explosion in the prison population over the past several decades, coupled with the shrinking of the welfare state. As Gilmore (2007) argues, this carceral boom is grounded in the economic impetus to warehouse poor people of color who have been excluded from labor markets.

The prison has long been understood as belonging to a broad continuum of institutions that supervise, confine, and normalize residents. Foucault (1995, p. 231) argued that the prison represents the most "complete and austere" institution of control, as techniques of spatial surveillance and punishment are enacted at a range of intensities across a network of different sites. Thus, the prison is a model that influences a variety of "quasicarceral spaces" (Moran, Turner, & Schliehe, 2017, p. 14). Based on this understanding, geographers have highlighted the diffuse nature of carceral space itself (Brown, 2014; Gill, 2013; Moran, 2015). Indeed, entire neighborhoods can become carceral when residents are subjected to intense and targeted policing (Davis, 1990; Peck & Theodore, 2008). Simon (2007) argues that across the US, mechanisms of authority that emerged in prison systems are increasingly employed in other venues, including workplaces, families, and schools. Perhaps because of its pervasiveness, the boundaries and characteristics of carceral space remain difficult to pin down. Moran et al. (2017) point to three "conditions" of carcerality—intent, detriment, and spatiality—which together frame incarceration as the use of space to intentionally impose harm. Drawing on this understanding, I examine "quasi-carceral" sites as employing less severe iterations of the same techniques employed by prisons—surveillance, exclusion, forced mobility, and confinement, for example—to strategically manage space to the detriment of targeted groups of people.

In the contemporary era, the nexus between homelessness and incarceration has been well documented. Based on extensive survey data, Geller and Curtis (2011) found that recently incarcerated men are at much higher risk of housing insecurity and homelessness. Homeless people, in turn, are jailed anywhere from 8 to 40 times more often than the general population, overwhelmingly on charges of petty public order offenses (Metraux, Caterina, & Cho, 2008). Thus, incarceration and homelessness mutually reinforce each other, producing a racialized cycle of exclusion and punishment (Gowan, 2002). Metraux et al. (2008) argue that carceral institutions themselves have come to function as sites for the management of homelessness. Indeed, in 2008 over 350,000 people lived in shelters (HUD, 2009) while nearly 2.5 million people were incarcerated, nine percent of whom were previously homeless (Sabol, West, & Cooper, 2009; Greenberg & Rosenheck, 2008). Together, this data suggests that carceral institutions rival homeless shelters as primary sites of homelessness management.

Homeless shelters themselves have a long history of regulating poverty through punitive mechanisms. The contemporary shelter traces its origins to colonial-era poorhouses that historically regulated and confined poor and marginalized populations (Irwin, 1985). Indeed, in their earliest iterations, the poorhouse and the jail were often the same institution. Chapman, Carey, and Ben-Moshe (2014) argue that early sites of confinement shared overlapping functions and objectives, such that poorhouses, jails, and even hospitals often served to house as well as punish poor people who were sick, homeless, or disabled. By the 18th century, reform movements spawned the proliferation of institutions differentiated by population. In the contemporary era, homeless shelters often involve residents' collective loss of self-determination, tightly scheduled daily routines, and rules against which privileges or punishments are defined (DeWard & Moe, 2010; Dordick, 1996; Stark, 1994). In a 1982 survey, New York City shelter residents rated prisons superior to shelters as a form of housing (Crystal & Goldstein, 1982). DeWard and Moe (2010) describe a "prisonlike" women's shelter in which purchasing outside food or failing to obtain a job were justifications for being kicked out.

Although shelters are fundamentally distinct from jails and prisons in that residents are free to leave, this freedom must be examined in the context of anti-homeless policing. For decades, homeless people in the US have been subject to the perpetual threat of arrest for life-sustaining activities like sitting, sleeping, and urinating (Amster, 2008; Davis, 1990; Mitchell, 1997). Beckett and Herbert (2010) argue that in effectively banishing homeless people from public space, anti-homeless policing functions as a carceral mechanism that enforces spatial mobility rather than confinement. Stuart (2014) notes that anti-homeless policing also engages discourses of recovery and treatment, and functions to shepherd people into shelter spaces as well as jails. In recent years, the criminalization of US homelessness has only continued to worsen, with cities across the nation ramping up anti-homeless policing and passing more severe restrictions (NLCHP, 2014). Thus, the freedom to live in public is increasingly tenuous, which in turn imbues shelters with a more austere quality.

Yet in the various institutional spaces of homelessness, punitive logics are never all-encompassing. Indeed, homeless management in the US is largely turning towards a model of permanent supportive housing that promises to provide housing vouchers without attached disciplinary requirements. Further, a growing body of literature in geography examines how care and compassion are integral to the nature of homelessness management (see generally DeVerteuil, 2006; DeVerteuil, May, & Von Mahs, 2009). In cities across the US, service workers motivated by deep commitments to compassion and social justice intervene on behalf of people struggling with the loss of housing. Further, as people are able to navigate services according to their own needs and desires, they can avoid becoming fully subject to the disciplinary demands of any single shelter. Such realities make for a complex, nuanced landscape of homelessness that is simultaneously confining and open, punitive and caring. Thus, in the case of homelessness, quasi-carceral spaces are not permanent, fixed, or austere, but involve a constant cycling through a diffuse range of both therapeutic and disciplinary institutions. As I show in the following section, the space of the tent ward reveals the interplay between these contradictory logics, as welfare and incarceration become deeply enmeshed in sanctioned encampments across the US.

The rise of the tent ward

Prior to the 2008 housing crisis, the contemporary phenomenon of tent cities emerged as a result of anti-homeless policing combined with an inadequate and disciplinary shelter system (Herring