

Research Statement

My primary research interests are broadly situated in social inequality, issues of poverty, social movements, and social policy in the United States. I have made contributions to subjects that include addressing methodological issues related to “point-in-time” homeless counts, health issues among Hispanic immigrants in low-income housing, public policy, social movements, and activism related to people who experience homelessness. My work entitled *Fitting Stories: Outreach Worker Strategies for Housing Homeless Clients* was accepted by the *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, and *Hispanic and Non-Hispanic Homeless Populations in El Paso, Texas* is used in the new edition of Sage’s Frankfort-Nachmias and Leon-Guerrero’s methods textbook called *Social Statistics for a Diverse Society* (2018). My current research utilizes a mix of qualitative methods focusing on issues of homelessness and social policy.

My interest in the topic of homelessness comes from when I worked with homeless populations as a social service worker for six years in Cincinnati, OH, Covington, KY, and Phoenix, AZ, from 2002-2008. Such experiences has informed my academic work on issues of homelessness in El Paso, TX, from 2012 to 2014, Salt Lake City, UT, from 2015 to 2018, and Boston, MA, since 2018. I have used my insights from the field to formulate hypotheses that have been tested through surveys, homeless censuses, and in-depth grounded ethnographic study.

In 2013, I helped lead a project on homelessness, which replicated Housing and Urban Development’s (HUD) annual Point-in-Time homeless count. The paper, which was published in *Social Currents*, provides methodological contributions to improving HUD’s Point-in-time counts and homelessness research more broadly. By considering what Peter Rossi (1987) called the “marginally” housed population of the homeless we used student researchers to gather data in a hands-on learning environment (please see attached teaching philosophy for more information on “learning by doing”). Surveyors canvased the city in designated areas and also included personal contacts they had with people who were doubled up on couches, a population considered to be homeless under HUD’s definition at the time. Our replication study counted more street-homeless than HUD’s official local census count, and the study provided enough data for three publications.

While I have continuing interest in issues of inequality faced by people who experience homelessness, I have sharpened my current research to examine social service workers who work with homeless populations in Salt Lake City, UT, a city that caught national attention among media sources, such as *Mother Jones* and *The Daily Show*, for its novel homeless services. Salt Lake City also experienced conflict over provision of housing and other services throughout my fieldwork, which impacts the way social service workers are able to do their jobs. Additionally, I was able to conduct this work by seeking out Leon Anderson as my advisor during my doctoral studies. Dr. Anderson is a highly respected scholar among qualitative researchers, specifically in studies on homeless populations, deviance, and identity work.

My current research focuses more directly on social service workers as street-level bureaucrats, which is consistent with the scholarship of Michael Lipsky and Evelyn Brodtkin. Lipsky’s (1980) term “street-level bureaucrat” describes how ground level workers have great discretionary power over the public with whom they interact with because social policies are often ambiguous or subject to different interpretations. Drawing from Lipsky, Brodtkin (2008) maintains that the ambiguities of policy can actually make street-level bureaucrats at the bottom of their employment hierarchy virtual policy makers through their face-to-face interaction with the

public. She emphasizes the need for research on street-level implementation of social services to better inform policy.

By investigating why and how bureaucratic practices develop in specific organizational context, my street-level analysis can inform policy. It has the distinct advantage of moving analysis beyond what Brodtkin calls the “command and control” assumptions of the compliance model to take empirical account of factors that influence routine practice. In short, my current research focuses on how many outreach and case management workers respond to the challenges of providing housing services to the homeless. They do this by: 1) developing what I term “fitting stories” that present their homeless clients as worthy of support within contexts of social services for homeless populations; and 2) “referral management” involving the active negotiation and management that social service workers engage in between housing gatekeepers (e.g., landlords and property managers) on one hand and their homeless clients who either have, or are about to receive, housing services on the other. This research resulted in a book contract with Routledge called *Red Tape Warriors: Housing the Homeless through Aggressive Advocacy* (under contract). While conducting the research, my perseverance in overcoming difficult hurdles of using ethnographic methods and to research a vulnerable and hidden population also resulted in a book chapter in Boeri and Shukla’s (2019) *Ethnography Uncensored*.

Methodology and Theoretical Advancement

While my past research included using SPSS, STATA, and GIS, my current research utilizes a mix of qualitative methods to collect data to develop rich detail on the activities of street-level bureaucrats among homeless services in their interaction with people experiencing homelessness and other agency personnel. I use grounded theory according to Strauss and Corbin (1998) and Charmaz (2001) to analyze the data beginning with an open coding process to identify a wide range of themes related to the challenges that homeless service street-level bureaucrats experience and the ways in which they attempt to meet those challenges. My efforts to connect key themes and categories throughout my research has been an explicit attempt to optimize theoretical refinement and extension of ethnographic data as advocated by Snow, Morrill, and Anderson (2003) in their call for “linking ethnography and theory.”

Future Research

My extensive data sets from research in El Paso, TX and Salt Lake City, UT will allow me to continue to publish articles that deal with social inequality, social policy, and homelessness. Conducting applied and ethnographic research in Salt Lake City made it possible to observe detailed accounts of many cutting-edge issues in this field. I hope to utilize this knowledge by working closely with local social services as a junior faculty member. Given my prior experience working with service providers in various cities across the United States, I have had no problem engaging with local service providers to establish their trust and continue adding to my portfolio of research. I have great confidence in my ability to continue researching local providers in their pursuit of providing aid to their service recipients. I plan to continue presenting my findings at conferences, such as the American Sociological Association’s annual conference. I am also currently seeking funding through HUD for contributing to their methodologies. In my experience with service providers, such research knowledge attainment can result in grant expansion and improvement among social service providers while also improving sociological understanding of homelessness and homeless policy.