

**Understanding the Unhoused's Attitudes Towards Large Technological Institutions for
Purpose of Implementing a By-Name Database**

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On my honor as a University Student, I have neither given nor received unauthorized aid on this
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America Needs The By-Name Database

In 1987 America passed the Stewart B. McKinney Act, the first legislation addressed towards mitigating homelessness (National Academies, 2018). Since then, government bodies, such as the US Interagency Council of Homelessness (USICH) and the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), have worked to combat homelessness through developing government programs and granting funding to non-profits (National Academies, 2018). However, in any given local community, the resources allocated to solving homelessness are often mismanaged. For instance, since 1990 the federal government has evaluated the effectiveness of ten social programs, and they have found that nine of them had “weak or no positive effects.” (Stid, 2012, p. 2) There are currently over five hundred thousand unhoused people in America (National Academies, 2018). That is approximately .2% of the population, and as income inequality expands and housing prices increase, this problem has the potential to worsen. Meanwhile, the low percentages of unhoused people in nations, such as Norway, Finland, and Japan, show that a near zero unhoused population is possible (See Fig. 1).

The work of Rosanne Haggerty, as described in the letter “Getting to the Proof Points” (2018), of the non-profit Community Solutions has outlined a way to stabilize this problem. She contends that local communities need a centralized database that she calls the By-Name Database to understand the causes of homelessness in their communities. Furthermore, all organizations who try to prevent or alleviate the consequences of homelessness in a community – housing authorities, hospitals, non-profits, police, etc. – need to be able to add to and access this

information and must be dedicated to working together, using quantitative methods and a centralized strategy, to mitigate homelessness within the local community.

For such an approach to work, however, would require the cooperation of the unhoused population. The effectiveness of the By-Name Database is contingent on a consistent stream of accurate information from the unhoused. This cannot be taken for granted given that members of this population likely have histories that would predispose them to distrusting large technological institutions, such as one that would be required to implement the By-Name Database. The research described here will do several things. It will establish a gap in knowledge within how unhoused people perceive large technological institutions as opposed to normal citizens. It will seek to fill this gap by drawing conclusions from long form interviews of the unhoused population. Ultimately, from this analysis, I will show that the unhoused are more skeptical of large technological institutions than normal citizens, but that this skepticism can be assuaged by showing the unhoused population practical applications of the large technological institutions that can enhance their lives.

Fig. 1 - Unhoused as Percentage of Population By Nation



Caption: This bar graph shows data collected by The Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). It shows that the United States can significantly decrease its homeless population. Source: Chamie.

Specifications and Barriers to Implementing the By-Name Database

A part of America’s problem in addressing homelessness is the lack of data on homeless populations. HUD mandates that cities do an annual point-in-time count. This means that one night every year, every city must do a census for its homeless population, both housed and unhoused. In the podcast “Homelessness is Solvable” (2019) Rosanne Haggerty points out problems with this method of data collection. She says,

“The point-in-time count is at best an estimate. We have found that it is wildly off...

There’s a coverage issue. Typically communities don’t have, in one night, the ability to understand fully what’s going on... and there’s the variability. What’s happening on one day is not what’s happening in a year. A snapshot is the wrong method. You need a video to understand homelessness.”

The “video” Haggerty proposes communities adopt is the By-Name Databases, that is databases where all relevant information on a person experiencing homelessness can be looked up by name.

The causes of homelessness for even an individual are often complicated and interrelated. For instance, a person’s homelessness can be caused by a failure to keep stable employment, but maybe that is partially caused by a drug addiction, which is in turn caused by the person trying to bury a traumatic event in their past. All of these are important causation factors to a person’s homelessness, and different organizations would be involved to address each. Thus, in order for the By-Name database to be effective it needs to have several qualities. First, it needs to be accessible to all groups within the local community who touch upon homelessness. Second, it needs to contain any relevant information that may help resolve a person’s homelessness. This includes medical information, information on mental illness, incarceration history, substance abuse history, what programs the person is enrolled in, and information on familial relationships. Thus, to find trends on a broader, community level, the community needs nuanced information.

A concrete example of the By-Name Database at work is that of Lake County Illinois where Community Solutions helped to implement a By-Name Database that helped eliminate veteran homelessness in the area. Ranney (2021) describes how as the community looked at the By-Name Database, they discovered that “many veterans experiencing homelessness were

staying at the local VA medical center's domiciliary care, which provided medical rehabilitation and treatment, for extended periods of time. The team soon realized that many of those individuals were not moving into permanent housing because they needed to live at the domiciliary to access dental care." (p. 6) Lake County was able to create other avenues for the veterans to receive dental care, and this caused veterans to start moving to more permanent housing. There is always an explanation for homelessness, and often it is one that is unintuitive. Having a By-Name Database allows for a community to untangle and find the root causes.

However, a successful By-Name Database would require consistent information from the unhoused population, and there are significant barriers to obtaining such information. One is that Americans in general have a well documented history of being wary towards broad, sweeping technology that collects personal information. Two is that the unhoused are going to be predisposed to be distrustful of large technological institutions. Consider the federal government's role in creating the homelessness problem, whether that be through deinstitutionalizing the mentally ill, creating the conditions for the steady rent increase over the past forty years, or aiding in the trends of gentrification and destruction of low income housing (Robertson, 1992, 6-8). Furthermore, individual members of the unhoused population have likely interacted with large technological institutions - foster homes, welfare offices, housing authorities, healthcare services - for much of their lives and yet continually find themselves in precarious situations on the fringes of society. Some level of distrust in large technological institutions is inevitable.

To overcome the friction, one might propose that communities set their organizations up so that participants garner assistance only if they agree to contribute to the By-Name Database. After all, most social programs require participants to provide their income, address, and the

names of their family members. The very idea of a welfare state requires extensive information on the nation's population. However, where the By-Name Database is different from other data collecting welfare programs is the level of sensitivity of the information collected. Around 25% of the unhoused have some form of severe mental illness (Baumohl, 1996, pg. 31), more than two fifths went through some interpersonal strife in the year before becoming homeless (Baumohl, 1996, pg. 17), and an unknown number have substance abuse issues or serious past trauma. These are contributing factors to homelessness and collecting information regarding them would be essential to the efficacy of the By-Name Database. Gaining such information while using the withholding of aid as a stick is not a stable long-term strategy. Thus, the remainder of this paper will be dedicated to exploring the question of how to balance individual preferences and privacy and technological efficiency within the context of the By-Name Database and the unhoused population.

Large Technological Institutions: Essential to Society, But Daunting to Individuals

The issue described in the previous section is that of unhoused individuals coming to face large technological institutions. The theme of the individual facing large technological institutions is explored in depth by Emmanuel Mesthene in *Technological Change: Its Impact on Man and Society* (1971). He first outlines the intertwined relationship between technology and large institutions in American society. He says,

“For one thing, the development and application of technology seems increasingly to require large-scale and complex social concentration, whether these be large cities, large corporations, big universities, or big governments.” (65)

Consider, for instance, the automobile. The car would not be nearly as effective without the nation's vast highway infrastructure, which require massive bureaucracies to create and upkeep. In general, technology causes greater complexity and scope within our society. Mesthene goes on to say that a consequence of organizations getting larger is that their decision making can no longer be left to smaller groups, but are instead overseen by larger, centralized institutions. (pg. 65)

For these centralized institutions to make optimal decisions also requires technology, especially information technology. The decisions are often aided by databases. Mesthene outlines the advantages of such databases. They can be used between multiple agencies, help evaluate policy decisions, and are bigger and more robust than traditional filing systems. Mesthene actually goes as far as to argue that these databases are required to navigate the modern world. He quotes Professor Shubik of Yale University who says,

“If we wish to preserve even modified democratic values in a multi-billion-person society, then the computer, mass data processing, and communications are absolute necessities... Using an analogy from the ballet, as the set becomes more complex and the dances more numerous, the choreography required to maintain a given level of coordination becomes far more refined and difficult.” (pg. 86)

Mesthene contends that a Complex, technologically rich society has its benefits. Technology has its place in empowering the individual. With the economic productivity and modern means of communication that technology can afford, the individual can aspire to be more (pg. 85). The problem arises, however, in that technology also requires the creation of large technological institutions, and there is inevitably a power imbalance between large technological institutions and the individual. This can create an antagonistic relationship between the

individual and large technological institutions. Institutions are so large and their operations so complex that individuals can feel they have little hope to understand, influence, or oppose them (pg. 82). Furthermore, when technology is used as a major basis for the decision making process, it actually enables the individual to become more divorced from the decision making process, which is in direct opposition to democratic ideals (pg. 79-80). This is true in the case of the By-Name Database where the goal is to collect information on the unhoused so that centralized decisions can be made on how to address homelessness within a community. Mesthene summarizes it best when he says,

“We are often told, by the pessimistic critics of technology, that today’s individual is alienated by the vast proliferation of technical expertise and complex bureaucracies, by a feeling of impotence in the face of ‘the machine,’ by a decline in personal privacy, and by the loss of an effective voice in the determination of public policy.” (pg. 82)

In general, the duality of large technological institutions - its ability to empower and disempower the individual - is well documented by Mesthene. What is less well researched is what happens when an *unhoused* individual faces large technological institutions. In Mesthene’s framework the individual is a democratic citizen. They have the desire and means to try to impart their will on public decision making. While an unhoused person is a legal, enfranchised citizen, in practice they may not have the desire or means to impart their will on public decision making, because of their concern for their immediate survival. Therefore, it would seem that the power imbalance between large technological institutions and the unhoused individual would be great, and thus the unhoused individual would have a more antagonistic view of large technological institutions. However, the benefit of applying technology in the homelessness crisis - the benefit

of making more informed policy decisions through the By-Name Database - is so great that a solution must be found to assuage this distrust.

To find a solution, we must understand the perspective of the unhoused individual - what they want, what they are wary of, what they can be persuaded by. To this end, I will be analyzing over eight hours of interviews of the unhoused. The questions that I will address include where Mesthene's analysis of the individual facing large technological institutions applies and does not apply to the unhoused individual. I will also be looking at the motivations of the unhoused individual to find a way to set up the By-Name Database system in such a way that the unhoused individual will cooperate.

These interviews are a reliable source of evidence for this task. They were collected from the guests of The Haven - a Charlottesville nonprofit day shelter for those experiencing homelessness. These interviews were not conducted for the purpose of research. They were conducted for the purpose of a media project meant to humanize people experiencing homelessness. If this research project were to be done again, it would be optimal to have the interviews focus more on large technological institutions. However, because the questions asked in the current interviews were directed towards vital issues such as why the guests became homeless and what difficulties they face on a daily basis, the collected interviews are still rich in information that can be used in an academic setting. Furthermore, the interviewees were racially diverse and evenly split in gender, meaning the perspectives found in the interviews will be well rounded.

Interviews Show The Unhoused Are Largely Antagonistic Towards Large Technological Institutions

There is a healthy level of mistrust amongst the unhoused towards large technological institutions. The unhoused see shortcomings in large technological institutions in regards to the institutions' perceived slowness, temperamentality, and tendency to dehumanize the unhoused. One of the most frequently cited grievances of the unhoused is how getting assistance - whether that be housing, food, clothes, welfare - is often a slow, faulty process. William¹, a homeless veteran, said, "I have a housing voucher, and having a housing voucher, you're already on a list. That is the worst part of it, because there's always somebody else ahead of you... They'll get around to you eventually, but there's like a hundred people ahead of you." The slowness with which large technological institutions work is simply accepted as a reality. This aligns with Mesthene's ideas that large systems can leave people feeling impotent. Once an unhoused person's name is on the "list" little else can be done. To make the feeling of impotence worse, interviewees also suggested that the institutions can act on arbitrary reasons that are outside of the unhoused person's control. When asked how The Haven could improve its services, Daniel, an unhoused person with drug abuse history, said that he felt The Haven showed favoritism and preferential treatment. Furthermore, Sarah, an unhoused woman with health complications including a heart condition and blindness, said that she's afraid to advocate for herself and "rock the boat too much" for fear that "they'll take me off the list." The lack of trust towards large technological institutions that are found in these quotes will likely translate to at least an initial lack of trust towards the By-Name Database.

In addition, there is evidence that the unhoused feel dehumanized from their experience with large technological institutions. Several of the interviewees cited frequent incidents in which interacting with employees or representatives of large technological institutions was not a

¹ The names in this paper were changed for the protection of the interviewees.

completely human interaction. Daniel said, “It’s clear that [some social workers] are only there for a job. Those tend to be the less experienced ones. The more experienced ones must’ve stuck around, because they must enjoy the job, and so they treat you more like a human being.” The dehumanization can have a larger psychological effect, though. Jessica, a sexual assault victim, expressed deep disapproval towards a large technological institution in mental healthcare. She said, “[Therapists] tend to irk my nerves, because they try to say they understand where I am coming from, but from my perspective the only thing they know is what they’ve read in a book. They just dig and dig at my past, and there’s a reason I’ve blocked certain things out. I end up cussing them out.”

The sentiments within the above quote from Jessica are a challenge to implementing the By-Name Database. Past trauma and mental health issues are often major reasons for homelessness and need to be documented on some level. Even outside of such sensitive issues, the unhoused are predisposed to leading very private lives. This can be recognized even in cursory interactions with the unhoused. For instance, while approaching people for interviews, more than half of the unhoused people declined. In two instances, the person did not even say anything back. This tight lipped nature makes sense when one considers that privacy can be a means of survival. There’s the case, such as Jennifer’s, where divulging past experience can induce pain. There’s also the case where privacy is a matter of maintaining physical safety. William summarized it best when he said, “Anyone can approach you at any time. You don’t know what to expect. You can’t know who to trust. Your friends might not be your friends. They might just want something.” Some people go to great lengths to keep their privacy. In her interview, Sarah talked about how she makes sure no one knows where she sleeps. She said, “Sometimes I feel people are following me. I walk all the way to Pantops Shopping Center, make

sure no one's following me, and then walk back to my secret spot and swish into that secret spot and don't come out until the morning."

The desire for privacy and the mistrust of large technological institutions are barriers to the By-Name Database, but the feasibility of the By-Name Database is not as bleak as it appears. To start with, the unhoused's relationship with large technological institutions is not wholly negative. Large technological institutions, such as the foster care system, housing authorities, welfare offices, hospitals, the military - have played large roles in the interviewee's lives - both negative *and* positive. For instance, Sarah cited that the reason she was homeless was a failure of Albamarle's health institutions. The nurse that the hospital assigned Sarah to stay with during her heart surgery recovery, was unable to pay rent and so Sarah wound up on the street. However, Sarah also said that her experience with the hospital was largely positive, and that they had taken care of her well. Furthermore, William said he had a largely positive experience with the military, that it gave him opportunity and allowed him to travel the world. Mesthene's theories are again born out in the interviews of the unhoused. Large technological institutions have the capability to dehumanize and take away, but also to give greater opportunity.

In addition, it is clear that each of the interviewees were in need of services that immediately affected their quality of life - housing, food, clothes, money. This provides an avenue with which to pitch the By-Name Database. Concerns over privacy and mistrust of large technological institutions can be overcome if the unhoused are given a compelling reason for how the By-Name Database can improve their lives. Those reasons do exist. For instance, Sarah talked about how the last apartment social services placed her in was far away from the bus stop. As a legally blind person, it was difficult to get to the bus stop to the point that one time she fell off the curve and seriously injured herself. If there was a By-Name Database, the hospital could

have included information on her blindness. Then, the social service agency would have known she was physically impaired and placed her in a more suitable apartment. This is a specific situation in which the By-Name Database could have been useful. Through explaining to the unhoused population how the By-Name Database can improve their lives, there is hope that enough of the unhoused population will cooperate.

Fig. 2 - Summaries of Predicted Attitudes of the Unhoused Towards By-Name Databases

Attitudes Against	Attitudes In Favor
-Large Technological Institutions are often flawed, slow, and dehumanizing	-Large Technological Institutions can enhance people’s productivity and lives
-The By-Name Database would require private information, and the unhoused are generally reticent	-The unhoused care about improving their lives in practical ways, and the By-Name Database is capable of doing that.

Conclusion

The By-Name Database is a large technological institution that is a strong strategy for addressing America’s homelessness problem. It would provide communities with more information to understand their homelessness problem and take effective action. However, as Mesthene outlines, large technological institutions, such as the By-Name Database pose their own problems. Large technological institutions can dehumanize, make people feel impotent, and generally turn people against them. Through the analysis of The Haven interviews this paper outlined the unhoused population’s attitudes towards large technological institutions. A limitation of this study was that the interviews were general in their subject matter and not focused on large technological institutions. If this study were to be redone, I would recommend having the interviews focus on large technological institutions.

Regardless, analyzing the interviews still showed that the unhoused population generally have skeptical attitudes towards large technological institutions. However, we were also able to show that the unhoused population is also able to consider large technological institutions as just a part of life that brings with it both positive and negative outcomes. Furthermore, given that the unhoused population's immediate concern is improving their living conditions, we can still conceive of a way to persuade the unhoused population to add their information to the By-Name Database by showing how it would address those immediate concerns. It is important that we use technology with regard to the homelessness challenge. It is a major untapped advantage to the homelessness crisis, and using it could help hundreds of thousands of people live safer, more prosperous lives.

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