

Asylum Seekers and the Rise in Homelessness

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Abstract

Data from the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) show an unprecedented 43 percent increase in the number of people residing in homeless shelters in the United States between 2022 and 2024, reversing the gradual decline of the preceding sixteen years. Three-quarters of this rise occurred in four localities – New York City, Chicago, Massachusetts, and Denver – where large inflows of new immigrants, many lawfully paroled into the U.S. while seeking asylum, were housed in the homeless shelter system. Using direct estimates from local government sources and indirect methods based on demographic changes, we estimate that new migrant inflows were the primary driver of this dramatic rise, explaining about 59-62 percent of the two-year increase in sheltered homelessness. These estimates challenge narratives that attribute the increase primarily to local economic and housing market conditions and underscore the need to carefully consider population shifts, shelter capacity, and measurement practices when interpreting changes in official homeless counts over time.

Keywords: Homelessness; HUD PIT Count; Immigration

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1. Introduction

Understanding the drivers of homelessness is crucial for developing effective policy responses, but attributing changes in the homeless population size to specific causes remains challenging. Recent trends have added urgency to this task: between 2022 and 2024, the United States experienced an unprecedented 43 percent rise in the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD)'s Point-in-Time (PIT) estimates of sheltered homelessness, a stark reversal of the gradual decline observed over 2007-2022 (Sousa et al. 2024). In contrast, unsheltered homelessness rose by just 17 percent in 2022-2024, continuing a gradual upward trend dating back to 2015.

During this same period, the U.S. also experienced a large increase in new immigrant arrivals, including many individuals fleeing their countries of origin due to violence, political instability, or humanitarian crisis and receiving legal authorization to enter the U.S. while seeking protection through the asylum system (Debusmann 2024, Jordan 2023). The timing and geographic patterns of these arrivals suggest a link to the rise in homelessness. Yet, media reports, policy discussions, and advocacy materials have often attributed the jump in homelessness to domestic housing conditions, such as worsening affordability and the expiration of pandemic-era eviction protections, often ignoring or minimizing the role of migration.¹ Even analyses that acknowledge migration's role have lacked national estimates of its relative importance, preventing a nuanced understanding of this dramatic increase in homelessness.

We address this gap by estimating the share of the 2022-2024 rise in sheltered homelessness that consists of new immigrant arrivals using two complementary approaches. First, we obtain direct estimates from official reports, local asylum seeker tracking systems, and correspondence with relevant agencies in the localities that experienced the largest increases in sheltered homelessness. Second, we obtain indirect estimates by assuming, consistent with historical trends,

¹ For example, HUD's official report on the 2024 PIT estimates states, "Several factors likely contributed to this historically high number. Our worsening national affordable housing crisis, rising inflation, stagnating wages among middle- and lower-income households, and the persisting effects of systemic racism have stretched homelessness services systems to their limits. Additional public health crises, natural disasters that displaced people from their homes, rising numbers of people immigrating to the U.S., and the end to homelessness prevention programs put in place during the COVID-19 pandemic, including the end of the expanded child tax credit, have exacerbated this already stressed system" (Sousa et al. 2024). Headlines from major new outlets such as NPR, USA Today, and the AP emphasized housing affordability as the primary driver of the 2024 spike in homelessness, while stories from other sources such as the New York Times, PBS, and Bloomberg highlighted migration alongside other factors but lacked national estimates of the number of asylum seekers (Capps 2024, Casey 2024, DeParle 2024, Desjardins & Cuevas 2024, Ludden 2024, Thornton 2024).

that the Hispanic share of the sheltered homeless population would have remained stable in the absence of the increase in asylum seekers.

Throughout our analyses, we use the term “asylum seekers” to denote people who legally stipulated that they have fled violence or persecution in their countries of origin and entered the U.S. intending to seek protection through the asylum system. During the study period, these individuals were typically granted permission to reside in the U.S. while their asylum claims were pending. Although the terminology applied to this group varies across reports and data sources, local officials and media reports in our four focal localities consistently described recent migrant arrivals in homeless shelters as asylum seekers or in closely related terms, reflecting broad consensus that this newly arrived group consisted primarily of people lawfully paroled into the U.S. while seeking asylum.

These analyses suggest that asylum seeker inflows were the primary driver of the recent rise in homelessness, explaining about 59-62 percent of the 2022-2024 increase in the sheltered PIT nationally. This effect was highly concentrated, with New York City, Chicago, Denver and Massachusetts together accounting for about three-quarters of the total increase. Increased homeless counts in these localities reflect not only exposure to new migrant inflows but also local policy and measurement choices that shaped shelter capacity and determined whether asylum seekers residing in shelters were classified as homeless in the PIT. More broadly, these findings highlight the need to consider shifts in population, policy, and measurement practices when interpreting changes in PIT homelessness over time.

The results carry important implications for policy and future research. Newly arrived migrants face distinct service needs and vulnerabilities compared to long-established residents who lose housing, highlighting a need for policy responses that address both immediate humanitarian concerns and long-term integration challenges. At the same time, the fiscal pressures of providing temporary housing to asylum seekers have been substantial, raising questions about how responsibility for these costs should be shared across federal, state, and local governments. For example, average per-family shelter costs reached \$137,600 in New York City and \$120,000 in Massachusetts in 2024 (Emanuel 2023; NYC Comptroller 2024, p.11). Moreover, we observe that policy changes implemented after the 2024 PIT count, including new limits on shelter duration and tighter federal restrictions on asylum, are likely to reduce sheltered homeless counts in

subsequent years, though such declines may reflect institutional changes and policy shifts rather than genuine reductions in need.

Several unresolved questions remain. While much of the recent rise in sheltered homelessness consisted of newly arrived migrants, roughly 40 percent remains unexplained. Asylum seekers also appear to have contributed little to the continued rise in unsheltered homelessness, which has followed a steady upward trend since 2015. Our findings point to the need for continued research into other factors driving the rise in homelessness, such as changes in housing costs, the expiration of pandemic-era eviction protections and supportive services, and the evolving interaction between migration and local housing markets.

2. Recent Trends in Homelessness and Asylum Seekers

Between 2022 and 2024, the United States experienced an unprecedented increase in sheltered homelessness. Figure 1 displays the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD)'s Point-in-Time (PIT) estimates, which indicate that sheltered homelessness rose by 43 percent (149,000 people) during this period, a stark reversal from the 12 percent decline observed between 2007 and 2022. While unsheltered homeless estimates also rose during this period, their rise was more gradual (17 percent) and did not mark a significant departure from the preceding years. Because those in homeless shelters make up two-thirds of the overall homeless population, the sheltered homeless increase constituted the vast majority (79 percent) of the overall increase in homelessness during these two years. As detailed in Table 1, the rise was concentrated in just four localities, which together accounted for 75 percent of the total rise. New York City saw the largest increase with 77,352 more sheltered homeless people in 2024 than in 2022 (a 132 percent increase), followed by Chicago with 14,590 (a 559 percent increase), the state of Massachusetts with 13,353 (a 93 percent increase), and metropolitan Denver with 6,556 (136 percent increase).^{2,3}

This dramatic and geographically concentrated rise in homelessness coincided with significant changes in U.S. immigration policies and patterns. While the first Trump administration had enacted a policy of public health border expulsions and frozen processing for many green

² While the largest homeless increase in Massachusetts occurred in the “Balance of State” Continuum of Care (CoC) (a collection of localities largely located in suburban Boston), we examine state-wide estimates for Massachusetts because the state’s centralized shelter placement system distributes asylum seekers across multiple jurisdictions, making state-level analysis more informative than the more localized estimates we emphasize elsewhere.

³ A fifth locality, Hawaii’s Balance of State (which includes all areas except Honolulu city and county) also experienced a substantial rise of 5,236 people (an 834 percent increase), but we do not include Hawaii in our direct estimation efforts because the 2024 PIT report attributes this increase to August 2023 wildfires in Maui.

cards and visas, the Biden administration made efforts to facilitate the entry of asylum seekers and expand legal immigration pathways (Nowrasteh 2021, Jordan 2023, Long 2023). This policy included the introduction of a streamlined system for scheduling asylum appointments, the expansion of humanitarian parole as a pathway to entry, and the reversal of the pandemic-era policy of expelling asylum seekers from the U.S. pending their parole hearings.

The effects of these policies are illustrated in Figure 2, which depicts monthly totals of migrants paroled into the U.S. at the Southwest border pending asylum hearings according to Customs and Border Patrol (CBP) encounters data. The number of people legally paroled into the U.S. rose dramatically from 30,500 in the twelve months preceding the 2021 PIT to approximately 640,000, 1.2 million, and 1.7 million new arrivals preceding the 2022, 2023, and 2024 PIT counting operations, respectively (OHSS 2024). The remainder of this paper investigates the extent to which asylum seekers contributed to the rise in homelessness in the same period.

3. Data and Methods

3.1 Data Sources

We collect information from several sources to assess asylum seekers' contribution to the recent rise in U.S. homelessness. Our primary data on homeless population size and Hispanic ethnicity come from HUD's annual PIT counting operations, which are conducted on a single night each January across nearly 400 U.S. localities. These federally mandated operations vary in local implementation and quality. However, the sheltered homeless estimates, which we examine here, are generally considered reliable and accord closely with other data, in contrast to unsheltered estimates that are usually based upon street canvassing and are more difficult to validate (Meyer et al. 2023). We also incorporate data on asylum claims and border encounters from the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) to assess the plausibility of the timing and magnitude of our results.

3.1 Direct Estimation Method

Our direct method uses local government reports, administrative databases, and correspondence with local officials and homeless services organizations to obtain estimates of asylum seekers residing in homeless shelters on the PIT date. We describe these sources in detail below and discuss potential sources of error in Section 5.1.

New York City. We obtain New York City's direct estimate from a public dashboard called *Accounting for Asylum Seeker Services*, which is maintained by the city's Comptroller's Office

and has provided a daily count of asylum seekers staying in city-funded migrant shelters since July 2022. We take the dashboard’s count on the PIT date as our direct estimate. The Comptroller’s Office defines asylum seekers as “newly arrived migrants who have come to NYC in need of shelter and are seeking asylum or other forms of immigration relief” (Kern et al. 2024, p.13). City officials identify new arrivals as asylum seekers during homeless shelter intake and assign them through a separate placement system, recording their status in administrative databases that are subsequently used to generate the Comptroller’s daily census.

Chicago. Chicago’s Department of Family and Support Services (DFSS) provides direct estimates of homeless asylum seekers in its official 2023 and 2024 PIT reports. The 2023 report refers to this group as “asylum seekers,” while the 2024 report retains the same definition under the relabeled category of “new arrivals” (DFSS 2023, p. 3; DFSS 2024, p. 4).⁴ These counts originate from administrative shelter databases maintained by homeless service providers. During intake for city services, staff members record country of origin and migration status to identify newly arrived households and record this information in the databases (CIRR n.d.). Counts of new arrivals present on the PIT date are then provided to DFSS for the official PIT summary tables.

Denver. We obtain Denver’s direct estimate from the Metro Denver Homeless Initiative (MDHI), the region’s official coordinating body for homeless services, which reported 4,300 sheltered homeless migrants on the date of its 2024 PIT. This count was derived from administrative data collected by intake staff at so-called “Newcomer Shelters.” While not officially labeling these shelters’ residents as asylum seekers, official city documents and statements consistently indicated that the newly arrived migrant population consisted primarily of this population. For example, the shelters were established in late 2022 following a city emergency declaration of a crisis of “migrants seeking shelter and asylum” and formed part of a broader citywide response to the strain on shelter resources due to “asylum seekers entering our communities” (City and County of Denver 2022, 2023). Moreover, the city introduced the “Denver

⁴ The 2023 Chicago PIT report defines “asylum seekers” as “individuals and families who left their home country to seek asylum and/or find better opportunities in the United States (U.S.) and arrived in Chicago in need of resettlement assistance beginning in August 2022.” The 2024 report applies this exact same definition to the “new arrivals” category. The 2024 report further indicates that about 92 percent of new arrivals stated that “seeking asylum in the U.S.” was the leading or second-leading cause of their recent housing loss.

Asylum Seekers Program” in April 2024 to provide targeted support to residents of these shelters (Mathurin 2024).⁵

Massachusetts. We obtain Massachusetts’s direct estimate from the Executive Office of Housing and Livable Communities (HLC), which administers the state’s centralized family shelter placement system. Because this system allocates households to shelters across multiple jurisdictions, we analyze statewide rather than city-level counts. To construct its estimate, HLC analyzed post-PIT survey data on households’ citizenship and immigration status by primary language (English, Spanish, Haitian Creole, and other) and applied the resulting language-specific shares of non-citizen, non-permanent-resident households to the 2024 PIT counts by language group. The estimated number of Haitian Creole-speaking new arrivals was then taken as the number of asylum-seeking households in the 2024 PIT.

The Massachusetts approach was developed to identify Haitian asylum seekers, reflecting state officials’ assessment that the recent rise in family homelessness was driven largely by this group. This assessment is echoed in a July 2023 letter from the Massachusetts congressional delegation to the Secretary of Homeland Security that attributes strain on the state’s shelter system to Haitians admitted under humanitarian parole while fleeing violence and political unrest (MA Congressional Delegation 2023). Local media and nonprofit organizations likewise described these families as asylum seekers (Drysdale 2025; Emanuel 2022; Moller 2024).

3.2 Indirect Estimation Method

We also employ an indirect approach to corroborate our direct results and estimate asylum seeker presence nationwide. Because DHS data indicate that most asylum seekers entering the U.S. during this period identified as Hispanic (with the exception of Haitians in Massachusetts), the indirect method assumes that, absent the rapid increase in immigrants seeking asylum entering shelters, the Hispanic share of the sheltered homeless population would have remained constant at its 2022 level across the U.S., excluding Massachusetts. This assumption is supported by the

⁵ The Denver CoC’s 2024 PIT report, which was intended to describe the long-term U.S. resident homeless population, indicated that there were approximately 2,100 Hispanic and 5,000 non-Hispanic homeless people in non-migrant shelters (MDHI 2024). HUD’s official PIT estimate for Denver, which includes both long-term U.S. resident and recent migrant homeless populations, indicated that there were 2,850 Hispanic and 8,500 non-Hispanic people in both migrant and non-migrant shelters combined (Sousa et. al 2024). The difference between these two sources’ Hispanic counts implies that just 750 of the 4,250 people residing in migrant shelters (18 percent) were Hispanic, contradicting the Denver Office of Newcomer Support’s assessment that over 99 percent of residents in these shelters were from Central or South America. To resolve this inconsistency, we classify all 4,250 of the people in migrant shelters as Hispanic before obtaining our indirect estimates for Denver and nationally.

stability of this share between 2016 and 2022. Figure 3 illustrates the plausibility of this assumption in New York City, Chicago, Denver, and elsewhere besides Massachusetts. We use this assumption to obtain an estimate of the expected Hispanic count in 2024 (absent the asylum seeker shock), $Hisp_{2024}^{exp}$, as:

$$Hisp_{2024}^{exp} = \frac{HispShare_{2022}}{(1-HispShare_{2022})} NonHisp_{2024}^{obs} \quad (1)$$

where $HispShare_{2022}$ represents the Hispanic share of the sheltered population in 2022, and $NonHisp_{2024}^{obs}$ represents the observed non-Hispanic sheltered count in 2024.⁶ The difference between the observed and expected Hispanic counts in 2024 provides our indirect estimate of asylum seekers' contribution to the rise in sheltered homelessness.

We adjust this baseline methodology to account for local features of the ethnicity of asylum seekers. In Chicago, we scale up our indirect estimate by 6.4 percent to account for the city's reported share of non-Hispanic asylum seekers (information not provided in other localities' reports).⁷ In Denver, we reconcile a discrepancy between locally reported PIT estimates of the Hispanic homeless population and those indicated in the national HUD PIT dataset, preferencing the locally reported demographic profile in our indirect estimation methodology, as explained in the notes to Table 1. Finally, we exclude Massachusetts entirely from the indirect estimation because, unlike other localities where most homeless asylum seekers were identified in the PIT as being of "Hispanic/Latino" ethnicity, correspondence with state housing officials indicates that majority of the state's homeless asylum seekers were non-Hispanic individuals from Haiti.⁸ We thus obtain our national indirect estimate based on all localities excluding Massachusetts and add in the state's direct estimate as a final step to accord with the direct estimate.

4. Results

4.1 Direct Estimates

⁶ This equation is derived by rearranging the formal statement of the indirect method's assumption:

$$HispShare_{2022} = \frac{Hisp_{2024}^{exp}}{NonHisp_{2024}^{obs} + Hisp_{2024}^{exp}}$$

⁷ The Chicago PIT report indicates that 94 percent of asylum seekers in its migrant shelter system are Hispanic, so we scale up our indirect estimate there by the inverse of this share.

⁸ HUD's data standards manual defines Hispanic/Latino as "a person of Cuban, Mexican, Puerto Rican, South or Central American, or other Spanish culture of origin," a definition that excludes most Haitians (HUD 2017). In Massachusetts, the number of Haitian Creole-speaking homeless shelter residents far exceeded the number of reported Hispanic/Latino homeless shelter residents, corroborating the limited overlap between these groups.

Table 1 presents local and national direct and indirect estimates of the number of asylum seekers included in the 2024 sheltered PIT. By far the largest estimate is for New York City, where our direct estimate suggests 66,700 sheltered asylum seekers, representing 86.2 percent of the 2022-2024 increase in the city. Chicago's estimate is the second largest, with 13,679 people (93.8 percent of the 2022-2024 increase), followed by Massachusetts with 7,821 people (58.6 percent) and metropolitan Denver with 4,300 people (65.6 percent). Summing across these four localities suggests there were an additional 92,500 asylum seekers residing in shelters on the night of the 2024 PIT count as compared to 2022, accounting for nearly two-thirds (62.2 percent) of the national increase in sheltered homelessness over this period.

4.2 Indirect Estimates

Because the indirect method assumes that the Hispanic share of the homeless population would have remained constant absent the asylum seeker increase, we begin by examining the time pattern of this share since 2016, the first year for which it is reported in the PIT. Figure 3 shows that the Hispanic share of the sheltered PIT population is stable through 2022 in all four localities and nationwide but exhibits a sharp uptick in 2022 through 2024 in New York City, Chicago, Denver, and nationwide, supporting our assumption. In contrast, this share begins to decline in Massachusetts after 2022, consistent with the substantial increase in Haitian asylum seekers there.

Table 1 presents our indirect estimates, accounting for the local adjustments described in section 3.2. We obtain an indirect estimate of 51,099 asylum seekers in New York City (66.1 percent of the 2022-2024 increase), 13,629 in Chicago (93.4 percent), and 4,727 in metropolitan Denver (72.1 percent). Applied nationally, the indirect method implies an estimate of 87,611 additional sheltered asylum seekers on the night of the 2024 PIT, accounting for about 59 percent of the total 2022-2024 increase in sheltered homelessness.

4.3 Comparison of Estimates

The comparisons of direct and indirect methods in Table 1 (and depicted graphically in Appendix Figure A2) reveal substantial similarities across national and locality-specific analyses. At the aggregate level, the direct estimate of asylum seekers within the homeless population slightly exceeds the indirect estimate (92,500 versus 87,611), a discrepancy that may result from the indirect approach's inability to account for non-Hispanic asylum seekers in localities besides Massachusetts (where we account for Haitian asylum seekers) and Chicago (where we scale up

our indirect estimate by the city’s official estimate of the Hispanic share of homeless asylum seekers).

Chicago allows for the most direct comparison of the two methods because the city explicitly documented recent migrant populations in its 2024 PIT report. The consistency of the two methods’ estimates – 13,679 (direct) and 13,629 (indirect) – bolsters our confidence in these approaches. New York City’s estimates, in contrast, are more divergent, with a direct estimate of 66,700 and an indirect estimate of 51,099. This difference may reflect the indirect method’s omission of non-Hispanic asylum seekers, although it could also reflect differences in shelter classification between the Comptroller’s Office, which provides our direct estimate, and HUD.⁹ The two methods yield similar estimates in Denver, although the slightly higher indirect estimate (4,727, compared to 4,300 using the direct method) might suggest that some asylum seekers were not housed in the dedicated migrant shelters from which we obtain our direct estimate.

In summary, these methods place the asylum seekers contribution within a reasonably tight range of estimates, with discrepancies that are consistent with known limitations of our methodologies. These similarities offer support for our assessment that asylum seekers were the primary driver of the recent increase in sheltered homelessness. At the same time, they suggest that only a small fraction of the nearly 3 million people paroled into the U.S. at the southern border between 2022 and 2024 were included in the PIT count, suggesting that the vast majority of asylum seekers secured housing outside the asylum shelter system.

5. Discussion

5.1 Limitations of Direct and Indirect Methods

Several potential sources of error in the direct estimates warrant mention. In some locations, migrant status is recorded during shelter intake, often based on self-identification or staff assessment, introducing the possibility of misclassification. Moreover, the New York City, Chicago, and Denver estimates consist exclusively of people residing in shelters for asylum seekers, omitting anyone residing in homeless shelters not targeted at this population. In Massachusetts, where the methods only identify Haitian Creole-speaking households, asylum

⁹ The NYC Comptroller’s asylum seeker census counts all asylum seekers staying in city-funded shelters, but only around half of those counted in January 2024 (month of the PIT) were staying in shelters managed by the Department of Homeless Services. Across this diverse range of city-funded shelters, there may be asylum seekers who do not meet HUD’s definition of “literally homeless” and are thus excluded from the PIT.

seekers of other national origins would be missed. Moreover, our direct method does not capture homeless asylum seekers outside the four localities analyzed, even though the 2024 PIT report indicates that asylum seekers contributed to increases in thirteen (unspecified) jurisdictions.

The indirect approach also faces limitations. Despite adjusting our estimates for non-Hispanic asylum seekers in Chicago and Massachusetts, we are unable to account for non-Hispanic asylum seekers elsewhere. This omission may be especially relevant in New York City, where media reports suggest a diverse asylum seeker population (Donaldson 2023, de Freytas-Tamura 2023, Sullivan 2023). The lack of demographic information on asylum seekers in New York City and elsewhere means that our indirect methodology may similarly underestimate the total impact of asylum seekers on homeless counts nationwide. The indirect method also rests on the assumption that the Hispanic share of the sheltered homeless population would have remained constant at its 2022 level absent the asylum seeker shock, an assumption that, while supported by the stable pre-trend, is ultimately untestable.¹⁰

5.2 Caveats on Interpretation

For these estimates to indicate the effect of the asylum seeker influx on sheltered homeless numbers, both approaches rely on the further assumption that asylum seekers did not substantially displace other individuals from the shelter system. Such displacement, if present, would lead us to understate the counterfactual level of sheltered homelessness absent the asylum seeker increase. While the evidence suggests no large-scale displacement to unsheltered homelessness (as these numbers show gradual change), some people who otherwise would have entered shelters may have been displaced into doubled-up living situations or other marginal housing.

Finally, while the analysis in this paper focuses on sheltered homelessness, the data suggest little connection between asylum seekers and the 2022-2024 increase in unsheltered homelessness. HUD's unsheltered homeless estimates have been increasing gradually since 2015, with year-to-year increases that ranged from 2 percent (2017-2018) to 9 percent (2018-2019), compared to the

¹⁰ This assumption would be violated if some other shock (e.g., record-high inflation) disproportionately increased the Hispanic sheltered homeless share between the 2022-2023 PIT dates. To align with observed data patterns, however, such a shock would need to (1) affect only *sheltered* homelessness (since the Hispanic share of the *unsheltered* population declined), (2) disproportionately impact Hispanic people in New York City, Chicago, and Denver (where the Hispanic sheltered homeless population increased by about 280 percent, 3780 percent, and 420 percent, respectively), but not in other high-cost cities such as Los Angeles (16 percent increase) or Miami (16 percent increase), and (3) be unprecedented in magnitude over our study period, given the stable pre-trends we observe dating back to 2016.

10 and 7 percent increases in 2022-2023 and 2022-2024, respectively. Moreover, the unsheltered population does not appear to have experienced the same abrupt demographic shift as the sheltered population, with PIT estimates of the Hispanic share displaying a slowly moving long-term trend and recent decline, both nationally and in California, where most of the unsheltered population resides.¹¹

5.3 The Geographic Concentration of Homeless Asylum Seekers

A key question is why only four localities appear to have experienced large increases in homelessness among asylum seekers. For example, despite a six-fold rise in Cuban and Haitian asylum applications in Florida between 2022 and 2024 (from 28,800 to 164,300), the state's homeless population grew by just 20 percent (5,400 people) (Florida DCF, n.d.). Texas, the U.S. entry point for most asylum seekers, saw an even smaller 14 percent (3,600-person) increase.

One potential reason for the disproportionate effect on a handful of cities is Texas Governor Abbott's busing program, which transported tens of thousands of migrants to northern cities. Yet our focal cities saw large proportional increases in sheltered homelessness in 2022-2023, before most bus arrivals, while the program's primary initial destination city, Washington, D.C., saw little change in homelessness (Goodman et al. 2024).¹² Boston was not a destination of this busing program. Thus the busing program appears to explain at most part of the uneven geographic distribution of homeless asylum seekers.

Measurement differences across localities also likely played a role. New York City, Chicago, Denver, and Massachusetts counted residents of newly created migrant shelters in their PIT data, whereas other jurisdictions excluded them. Washington, D.C., for example, housed over 1,000 asylum seekers in city-funded shelters during this period but omitted them from the PIT due to legislation barring migrant shelters from being administered through the city's homeless services program (Olivio & Brice-Saddler 2023, MSSTA 2022). It is not clear whether charity-run

¹¹ Figure A3 displays HUD's estimates of the Hispanic share of unsheltered homeless population over time for the nation, the four focal localities of our sheltered homeless analysis, and California, where most unsheltered homelessness is concentrated. Among these areas, only Chicago shows a notable increase in the Hispanic share of unsheltered homelessness in 2022-2024, but the absolute numbers associated with this increase (96 in 2022 to 315 in 2024) were far too small to meaningfully impact national trends. Indeed, Figure A4 shows that the combined total of unsheltered homeless Hispanic individuals across all four focal localities from our sheltered analysis was approximately 3,000 in 2024, compared to 45,000 in California, where the Hispanic share of the unsheltered homeless population declined between 2022 and 2024.

¹² Appendix Figure A1 indicates cumulative one-year totals of migrants bused to northern cities through this program in the lead-up to each PIT counting operation, based on the reporting of Goodman et al. (2024).

migrant shelters, which media reports suggest were an important source of short-term housing for asylum seekers along the southern border, were classified as homeless shelters in the PIT (Hernández 2024, Sanchez 2024).

Finally, differences in shelter availability and migrant preferences may have contributed to the geographic distribution of homeless asylum seekers. New York and Massachusetts, the two localities with right-to-shelter laws, may have been perceived as more welcoming to new migrant arrivals. Shelter capacity more than doubled in New York City and Denver during this period and increased four-fold in Chicago as city officials expanded temporary housing options explicitly designated for new migrant arrivals (HUD 2024). Border states, by contrast, saw little expansion in shelter beds, with just an 18 percent increase in Texas and a 6 percent decrease in Florida in the same time. In both states, restrictive eligibility rules and state efforts to remove migrants may have limited access to shelters for asylum seekers (Hanks et al. 2023, Pérez 2024). At the same time, the economic constraints faced by asylum seekers, including lengthy processes to obtain work authorization and limited eligibility for safety net programs, may have motivated migrants' preferences for destinations that provided more extensive interim support.

Given the multitude of mechanisms potentially driving the patterns we observe, we caution against interpreting our estimates as the effect of any specific element of the policy environment between 2022 and 2024. This period saw national changes in immigration policy as well as a variety of local responses, and the increase in asylum seekers in homeless shelters did not appear until nearly a year after the initial jump in the number of such individuals paroled into the U.S. Nor can we determine the extent to which right-to-shelter laws or expansions in shelter capacity influenced migrants' destination decisions. In short, the patterns we document appear to have been shaped by an interplay of numerous policy decisions that cannot be cleanly separated in this setting.

6. Conclusions

Our findings underscore the need to consider population changes, local policy responses, and measurement practices when interpreting changes in official homeless counts across places and over time. Nearly two-thirds of the recent rise in sheltered homelessness appears to have been driven by newly arrived immigrants fleeing hardship and entering the U.S. with limited means and barriers to employment. The resulting increase in housing demand interacted with local decisions about shelter capacity and classification to produce dramatic increases in PIT homelessness in New York City, Chicago, Massachusetts, and Denver, which in turn contributed to the reversal of a

sixteen-year national decline. Contrary to popular narratives, domestic economic pressures appear to have been at most a secondary driver of these patterns.

These considerations will likely remain important for interpreting future trends and informing broader efforts to understand and address homelessness. Several factors that drove the 2022-2024 rise in homelessness were subsequently reversed, as all four focal localities implemented new limits on shelter duration and eligibility amid drastic federal policy changes aiming to curb new arrivals and deter shelter use. PIT estimates of sheltered homelessness will likely decline in subsequent years due to these changes. At the same time, these analyses leave roughly 40 percent of the 2022-2024 rise in sheltered homelessness unexplained, and the long-term trend of rising unsheltered homelessness remains poorly understood. Attention to the ways population change, policy design, and data practices interact to shape the measurement and dynamics of homelessness will remain important for advancing understanding of these patterns.

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8. Tables and Figures

Table 1

2022-2024 Change in Sheltered Homeless Point-in-Time (PIT) Estimates by Locality and Direct and Indirect Estimates of Asylum Seekers in 2024 PIT						
Locality ("Continuum of Care", or CoC)	2022-2024 Change	2022-2024 Percent increase	Direct Estimate of Asylum Seekers	Direct Estimate as Share of 2022-2024 Change	Indirect Estimate of Asylum Seekers	Indirect Estimate as Share of 2022-2024 Change
Four Localities with Largest Total 2022-2024 Change						
New York City	77,352	132.49%	66,700	86.23%	51,099	66.06%
Chicago	14,590	558.58%	13,679	93.76%	13,629 ¹	93.41%
Massachusetts	13,353	92.91%	7,821	58.57%	7,821 ²	58.57%
Metropolitan Denver	6,556	136.41%	4,300	65.59%	4,727 ³	72.10%
Top Four Combined	111,851	139.51%	92,500	82.70%	77,149⁴	68.97%
All Other Localities	36,775	13.70%	N/A	N/A	6,120⁵	16.64%
Nationwide	148,626	42.63%	92,500	62.24%	87,611⁶	58.95%

¹ Chicago's indirect estimate is scaled up by a factor of 1/0.94 to account for non-Hispanic asylum seekers.

² Here, we report the direct estimate for Massachusetts rather than obtaining an indirect estimate because most of its homeless asylum seekers were from Haiti and would be missed by our Hispanic-based indirect approach.

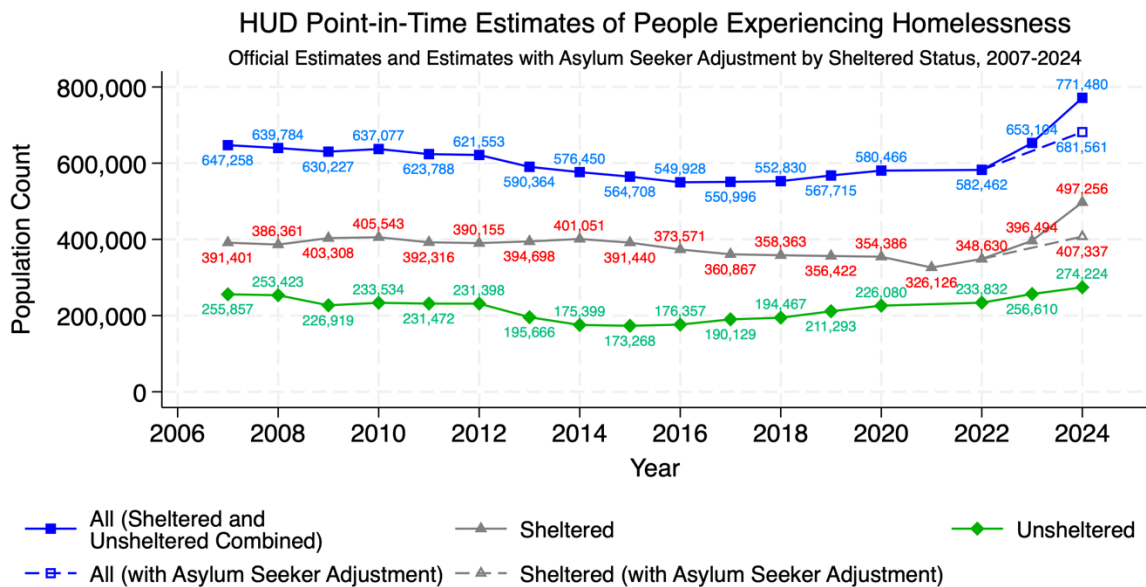
³ We use local PIT estimates of the Hispanic count in Denver to account for a discrepancy that arises between local and national PIT reports of the number of Hispanic people residing in homeless shelters (see Footnote 7 in the text).

⁴ The indirect estimate for "Top Four Combined" does not equal the sum of the preceding four indirect estimates because we estimate Eq. (1) from the text using the combined total Hispanic and non-Hispanic counts in these localities (see Footnote 14 in the text) rather than summing across the individual indirect estimates.

⁵ A fifth locality, Hawaii's Balance of State (which includes all areas except Honolulu city and county) also experienced a substantial rise of 5,236 people (834 percent increase), but we do not include Hawaii in our direct estimation efforts because the 2024 PIT report attributes this increase to August 2023 wildfires in Maui, not asylum seekers.

⁶ We use national Hispanic and non-Hispanic estimates to calculate the expected Hispanic homeless count on the left-hand side of Eq. (1) rather than calculating expected Hispanic homeless counts for each CoC and summing them. These approaches yield different results because taking the average across all CoCs of the ratio on the right-hand side of Eq. (1) does not yield the same result as calculating this ratio using national.

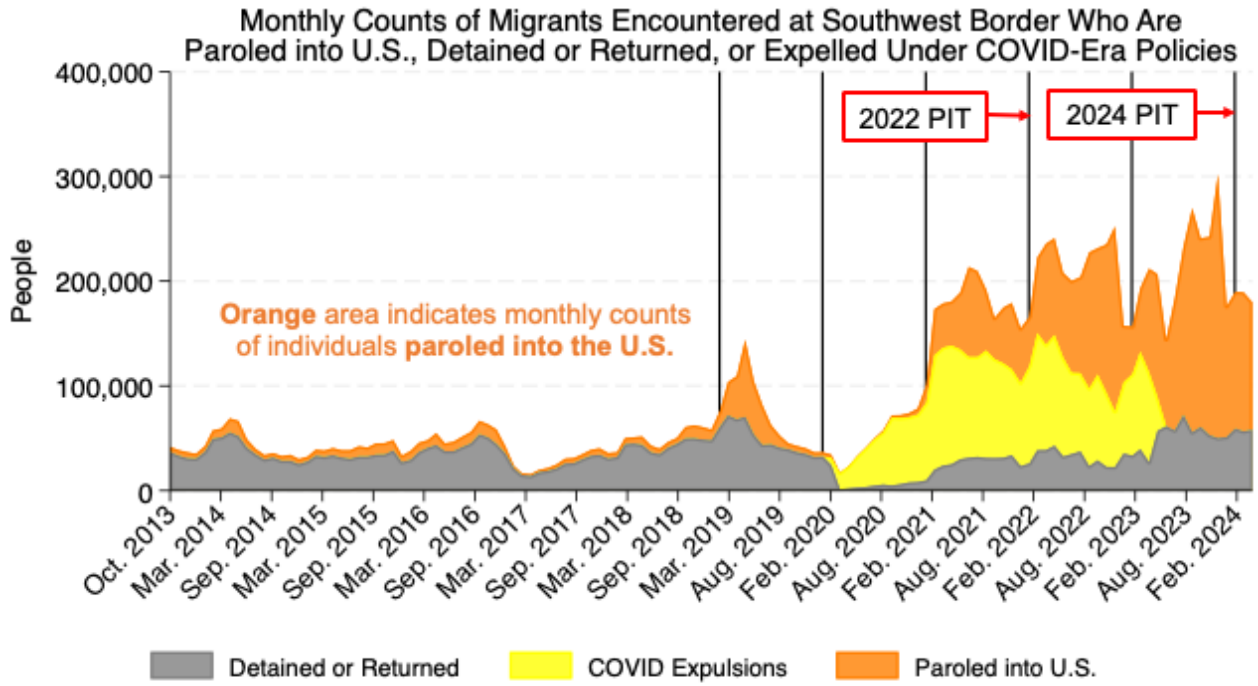
Figure 1



No national unsheltered PIT estimate is available for 2021 due to COVID-19.

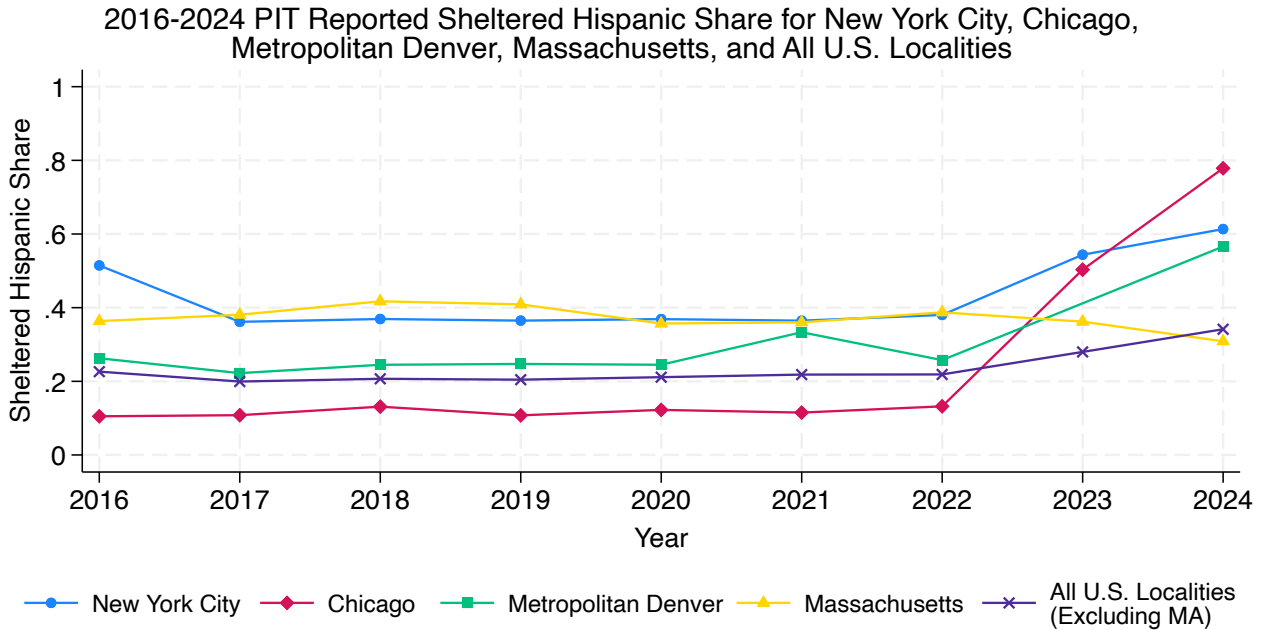
Adjusted estimates scale down 2022-2024 increase in official estimates by a factor of 60.5%, the midpoint of our 59-62% range of this paper's estimates of asylum seekers contribution to the rise in sheltered homelessness.

Figure 2



Vertical black lines denote the dates of the 2019-2024 PIT counts

Figure 3



We use local PIT estimates of the Hispanic count in Denver to account for a discrepancy that arises between local and national PIT reports of the number of Hispanic people residing in homeless shelters. The information needed to resolve this discrepancy is not available in 2023, so we omit this year.

9. Appendix

Figure A1

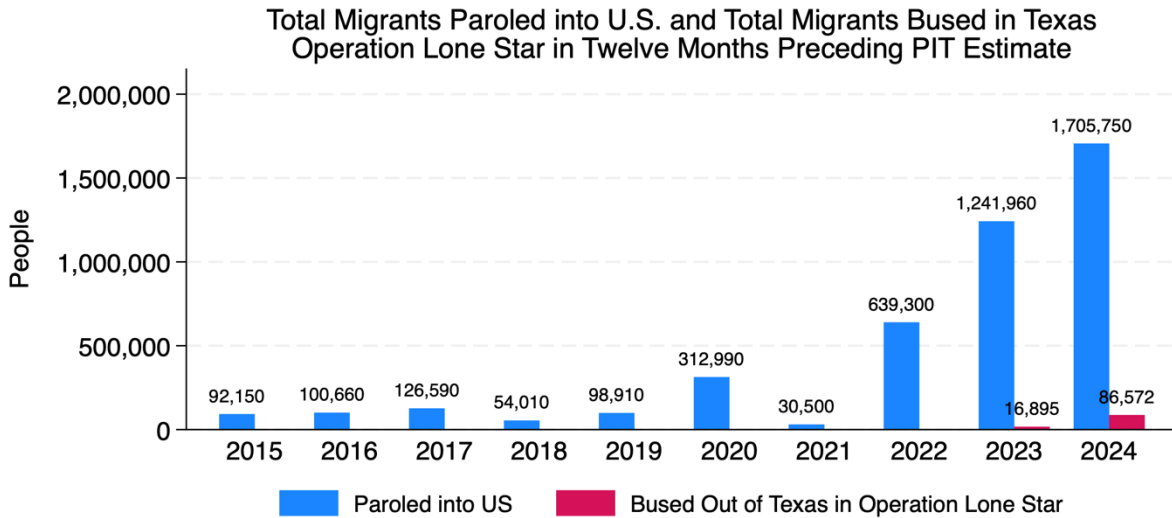
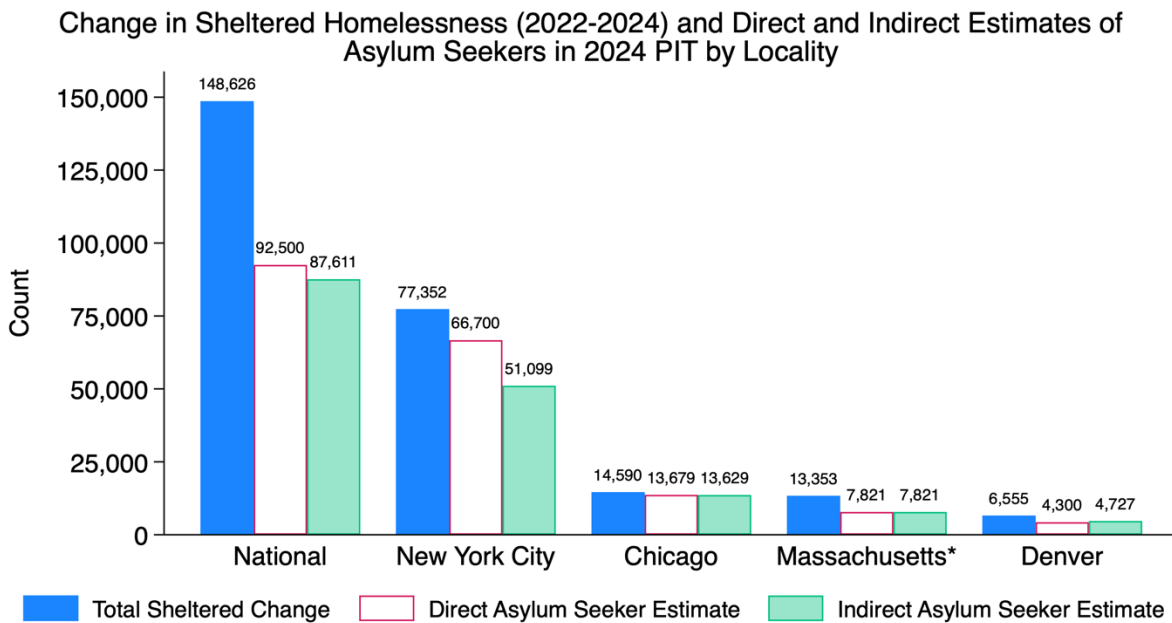


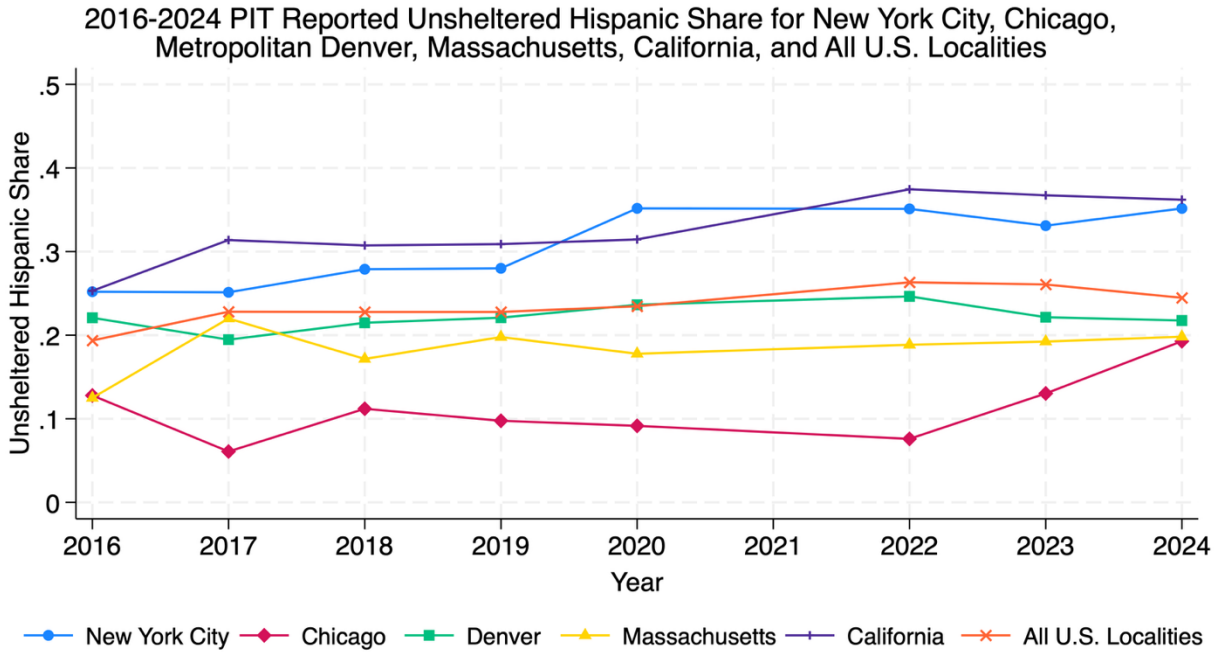
Figure indicates cumulative total arrivals in the twelve months preceding each year's PIT counting operations, which took place in January. Despite substantial asylum seeker arrivals before January 2022, we examine the role of asylum seekers beginning with the 2023 PIT for several reasons. First, compared to cumulative arrivals in the year leading up to January 2022, there were about twice as many arrivals leading up to January 2023 and nearly three times as many leading up to January 2024. Moreover, the sheltered homeless population did not begin to rise until after the 2022 PIT date, and the Hispanic share of shelter residents only began increasing notably in 2023. These patterns suggests that migrants who arrived before the 2022 PIT were primarily housed outside the shelter system, leading us to focus our analysis on the rise in homelessness after this date.

Figure A2



*Our indirect estimation methodology is not appropriate for Massachusetts, where most asylum seekers were non-Hispanic (from Haiti). We set the indirect estimate equal to the direct estimate for Massachusetts.

Figure A3



CoCs were not required to conduct an unsheltered PIT counting operation in 2021 due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Figure A4

