

HEALTH EQUITY

Seminar Series

Cornell Center for Health Equity

Friday, September 8, 2023 | 12:30 PM - 1:30 PM

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TALK TITLE:

"Moving Them Elsewhere": Police as Influencers and Implementers in Homeless Policy"

TALK ABSTRACT:

Policy choices profoundly shape the well-being of America's unhoused population. Fragmented political institutions hinder America's federal, state, and local governments from effectively addressing homelessness. Housing, mental health, and addiction policies can ameliorate the conditions facing homeless people—or exacerbate them. As a consequence, many policymakers and advocates endorse harm-reduction, rather than more punitive approaches to homelessness that have been shown to facilitate cycles of homelessness. Indeed, given their potential to address homelessness, it is unsurprising that the bulk of prior studies have centered on these important health policy areas. While these accounts illuminate important facets of the politics of homelessness, they largely miss a critical government institution whose more hidden policymaking may alter the lives of people experiencing homelessness: the police.

This paper thus explores an additional—and understudied—policy arena that may profoundly shape the well-being of homeless people: the police. We investigate the extent to which policing is a significant approach to homeless. To do so, we employ a multifaceted methodological approach featuring novel elite survey data, national primary data from cities across the country, and quantitative analysis of 311 and policing data. We descriptively explore how involved the police are in making homelessness policy and examine the mechanisms by which this occurs.

Our findings illustrate that, despite scant scholarly and policy attention, policing is an important and understudied approach to homelessness; local governments across the country rely on their police as implementers of both punitive and harm reduction policies. They are driven, at least in part, by citizen complaints. Police are important promulgators of homelessness policy, leading to more punitive state interactions for America's unhoused.

SPEAKER(S):

[Charley E. Willison](#) (PhD, University of Michigan) is an Assistant Professor of Public Health at Cornell University. She is a political scientist studying the relationships between local politics, intergovernmental relations, and public health political decision-making, with a primary focus on homelessness. Dr. Willison's 2021 book, *[Ungoverned and Out of Sight: Public Health and the Political Crisis of Homelessness in the United States](#)* (Oxford University Press) examines why municipalities may use evidence-based approaches to address chronic homelessness in their jurisdictions or not. Her book won the 2022 [Dennis Judd Best Book Award](#), which recognizes the best book on urban politics (domestic or international) published in the previous year. She is currently the co-principal investigator of the Continuums of Care Survey, a national survey of the governance structures responsible for designing and delivering solutions to homelessness in jurisdictions across the U.S., and how these systems respond to ongoing political and policy challenges. She has published multiple peer-reviewed articles and policy briefs on homelessness policy and politics in the U.S. and is actively engaged in research dissemination to policy makers, communities and the public.



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