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ASYLUM SEEKERS AND THE RISE IN HOMELESSNESS

Bruce D. Meyer
Angela Wyse
Douglas Williams

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ABSTRACT

Data from the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) indicate 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 over the preceding sixteen years. Three-quarters of this rise was concentrated in four localities – New York City, Chicago, Massachusetts, and Denver – where large inflows of new immigrants seeking asylum were housed in emergency shelters. Using direct estimates from local government sources and indirect methods based on demographic changes, we estimate that asylum seekers accounted for about 60 percent of the two-year rise in sheltered homelessness during this period, challenging media and policy narratives that primarily attribute this rise to local economic conditions and housing affordability.

Bruce D. Meyer
University of Chicago
Harris School of Public Policy
and NBER
bdmeyer@uchicago.edu

Angela Wyse
Dartmouth College
angela.j.wyse@dartmouth.edu

Douglas Williams
University of Chicago
douglasmsw@gmail.com

1. Introduction

Understanding the drivers of homelessness is crucial for developing effective housing and social policies, 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 from the gradual decline observed over 2007-2022 (Sousa et al. 2024). In contrast, unsheltered homeless estimates rose by just 17 percent during these two years, in a steady continuation of a gradually increasing trend dating back to 2015.

During this same period, the U.S. also experienced major shifts in immigration policies, leading to a stark increase in new immigrant arrivals seeking asylum (Debusmann 2024, Jordan 2023). The timing and geographic patterns of these arrivals suggest a link between the rise in sheltered homelessness and legal immigration to the U.S. Yet, media reports, policy discussions, and advocacy campaigns have tended to attribute the rise in homelessness to domestic housing conditions, such as worsening affordability and the expiration of pandemic-era eviction protections, with many accounts omitting asylum seeking or treating it as a secondary factor.[1] Even analyses that acknowledge the role of recent migration patterns have lacked reliable national estimates, preventing a nuanced understanding of the unprecedented rise in homelessness.

We address this gap by providing the first quantitatively rigorous estimate of asylum seekers' contribution to the 2022-2024 rise in sheltered homelessness. Our analysis employs two complementary approaches. First, we obtain direct estimates from official reports, local asylum seeker tracking systems, and correspondence with relevant agencies in the four localities that experienced the largest increases in sheltered homelessness. Second, we obtain indirect estimates by assuming, consistent with historical trends, that the Hispanic share of the sheltered homeless

[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).

population would have remained stable at its 2022 level in the absence of the increase in asylum seekers. The difference between expected and observed homeless counts serves as our indirect estimate of asylum seekers' contribution to the recent rise in homelessness.

Our analyses suggest that the growing presence of asylum seekers residing in homeless shelters explains about 60 percent of the rise in sheltered homelessness between 2022 and 2024. This rise was concentrated in just four localities – New York City, Chicago, metropolitan Denver, and Massachusetts (primarily suburban Boston) – which together accounted for 75 percent of the national increase. While the direct and indirect approaches yield estimates that are largely consistent with one another, strengthening confidence in our conclusions, we acknowledge caveats that may lead us to understate the effect of migration: the direct method is limited to the top four localities, while the indirect method is likely to underestimate non-Hispanic asylum seekers, particularly in New York City.

Taken together, these findings offer several key implications for future research and policy. While our analyses attribute most of the rise in sheltered homelessness to asylum seekers, approximately 40 percent remains unexplained, underscoring the need for research to identify other contributing factors. Notably, our results do not suggest that asylum seekers played a major role in the rise in unsheltered homelessness, a trend that predates the recent shift in immigration patterns. From a policy perspective, our findings highlight the substantial fiscal burden of providing emergency shelter for new immigrant arrivals, a burden that has fallen disproportionately on a small number of localities despite some state and federal support. Additionally, newly arrived homeless migrants likely have distinct service needs and vulnerabilities compared to long-established residents who lose housing. Finally, our analysis suggests that policy shifts that occurred after the 2024 PIT counting operation, including restrictions on asylum pathways and new local limits on shelter stays, are likely to lead to declining sheltered homelessness in subsequent years.

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 increase for those in shelters constituted the vast majority (79 percent) of the overall increase in homelessness during these two years. As detailed in Table 1, this increase 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 (132 percent increase), followed by Chicago with 14,590 (559 percent increase), the state of Massachusetts with 13,353 (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 Trump administration had enacted a policy of public health border expulsions and frozen many green cards and visas, the Biden administration made efforts to facilitate the entry of asylum seekers and expand legal immigration pathways (Jordan 2023, Long 2023, Nowrasteh 2021). 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. pending asylum hearings according to Customs and Border Patrol (CBP) 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 counting operations, respectively (OHSS

[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 (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. The increase in homelessness due to wildfire victims in Hawaii accounts for another 3.5 percent of the 2022-2024 rise in sheltered homelessness. However, this uptick appears to be counterbalanced by a decline of roughly 4,200 people experiencing homelessness in Louisiana between 2022 and 2023, a reduction that the 2023 PIT report attributed to the closing of emergency shelters for victims of 2021's Hurricane Ida.

2024).[4,5] The remainder of this paper investigates the relationship between these migration patterns and the rise in homelessness.

3. Data and Methods

3.1 Data Sources

We triangulate information from several sources to assess the impact of asylum seekers on the recent rise in U.S. homelessness. Our primary data on homeless population size and Hispanic ethnicity come from the HUD annual PIT counts operations, which are conducted on a single night each January across nearly 400 U.S. localities. These federally mandated operations vary in local implementation. However, across jurisdictions 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 volunteer-led street canvassing and are more difficult to validate (Meyer et al. 2023).

To construct direct estimates of asylum seekers experiencing homelessness, we turn to local government reports, administrative databases, and correspondence with local officials and homeless services organizations. These sources include the NYC Comptroller's Office asylum seeker census, Chicago's official PIT reports (which specifically identify counts of recent migrants), Massachusetts Office of Housing and Livable Communities (HLC) data on emergency family shelters, and correspondence with the organization that carried out Denver's 2024 PIT counting operation (the Metro Denver Homeless Initiative, or MDHI), which we corroborate with estimates from the city's dashboard of short-term shelter occupancy for "newcomers" (migrants) maintained by the city's Office of Newcomer and Migrant Support.

[4] Appendix Figure A1 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.

[5] There are two reasons to believe the majority of recent arrivals residing in shelters entered the United States using legitimate immigration pathways. The first is the observation that the sheltered PIT increase corresponds with a surge in the count of people legally paroled into U.S. along the southwest border. The second comes from conversations with the Massachusetts Office of Housing and Livable Communities. They report the vast majority of recent immigrant family shelter residents arrived via plane, meaning they would have presented appropriate documentation at U.S. Customs and Border Protection checkpoints to be granted entry.

To assess the plausibility of the timing, magnitude, and geographic distribution of the asylum seeker increase on homeless counts, we also examine several Department of Homeland Security (DHS) data sources. We obtain data on monthly flows of asylum seekers paroled into the U.S. pending immigration hearings from Customs and Border Patrol (CBP) data on encounters at the southwest U.S. border, and we learn about migrants' intended U.S. destinations and countries of origin to further validate our estimation methodology by examining DHS data on monthly asylum claim filings by regional office and nationality.

3.2 Methodological Approach

We employ two complementary approaches to estimate the asylum seeker impact on the 2022-2024 increase in sheltered homelessness. By using methodologies with different potential sources of error, we strengthen the validity of our findings, while acknowledging limitations of each approach and key caveats in section 5.

Direct Method

We first analyze data from the official reports, local asylum seeker tracking systems, and correspondence with local officials described in Section 3.1 to obtain direct estimates of the asylum seeker share of the 2024 sheltered PIT estimates in New York City, Chicago, Massachusetts, and metropolitan Denver. In Massachusetts, we examine statewide rather than city estimates because the state's centralized shelter placement system distributes asylum seekers across multiple jurisdictions. For Massachusetts, the state housing office provided a direct estimate of the homeless asylum seeker population, which they obtained by first analyzing homeless households' immigration status by primary language (English, Spanish, Haitian Creole, and other) according to surveys conducted after the 2024 PIT and then applying these proportions to the 2024 PIT language distribution to estimate the number of asylum seekers.

Indirect Method

To complement our direct approach, we develop an indirect estimation method to examine asylum seeker presence nationwide and check the validity of the direct estimates. DHS data indicate that most asylum seekers entering the U.S. during this period identified as Hispanic. Media reports and demographic information in the Chicago PIT report reinforce the conclusion that most migrants entering emergency shelter systems were Hispanic, with the notable exception of Massachusetts's large population of homeless Haitian asylum seekers, which we discuss below.

For our indirect estimate, we assume that, absent the asylum seeker surge, the Hispanic share of the sheltered homeless population would have remained constant at its 2022 level, an assumption supported by the stability of this share between 2016 and 2022. Figure 3 illustrates the plausibility of this assumption in New York City, Chicago, Denver, and nationwide (excluding 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:

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

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 make several adjustments to this baseline methodology to account for local features of the ethnicity of asylum seekers, using the limited demographic information available. In Chicago, we scale up our Hispanic-based estimate by 6.4 percent to account for the city's reported share of non-Hispanic asylum seekers (information that is 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.[8]

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, demographic estimates from the state housing office suggest that most

[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 shelter system are Hispanic, so we scale up our indirect estimate there by the inverse of this share.

[8] 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, reclassify all 4,250 of the people in migrant shelters as Hispanic before obtaining our indirect estimates for Denver and nationally.

of the state's homeless asylum seekers were from Haiti and hence would not be captured in our Hispanic-based approach.[9] Instead, we obtain our national indirect estimate based on all localities excluding Massachusetts and add in the state's direct estimate as a final step.

4. Results

4.1 Direct Estimates

Table 1 presents local and national direct and indirect estimates of the number of asylum seekers included in 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 their 2022-2024 increase. 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).[10] 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 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

[9] Sheltered homeless PIT estimates are derived in large part from Homeless Management Information System (HMIS) databases, and HUD's HMIS 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 is likely to exclude most Haitians (HUD 2017). The number of Haitian Creole-speaking homeless shelter residents in Massachusetts far exceeded the number of reported Hispanic/Latino homeless shelter residents, offering further evidence that Haitian asylum seekers were not typically classified as Hispanic/Latino in sheltered PIT estimates.
[10] Massachusetts asylum seeker estimates shared by the state government cover the 2022 PIT date, allowing us to estimate the change in 2022-2024 PIT asylum seeker counts.

percent of the 2022-2024 increase), 13,629 in Chicago (93.4 percent), and 4,727 in metropolitan Denver (72.1 percent).[11] 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.[12]

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 limited focus on Hispanic asylum seekers in localities other than Chicago and Massachusetts.

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.[13] 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 appear to be consistent with known limitations of our

[11] As discussed in section 3.2, Table 1 reports the direct estimate for Massachusetts rather than obtaining an indirect estimate because most of its homeless asylum seekers would be missed by our Hispanic-based indirect approach.
[12] 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 counts. We calculate CoC-level indirect estimates for the top four localities primarily as a check on our direct estimates, not as an intermediate step towards obtaining a nation-wide indirect estimate.
[13] 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.

methodologies. These similarities offer support for our assessment that asylum seekers were the primary driver of the recent increase in sheltered homelessness.

5. Discussion

5.1 Caveats

Both the direct and indirect methods face limitations. The direct method does not account for homeless asylum seekers outside the top four localities, although the 2024 PIT report indicates that asylum seekers contributed to increases in thirteen (unspecified) localities. This limitation suggests the direct estimate of 92,500 asylum seekers may be an underestimate. Moreover, the indirect method, despite accounting for non-Hispanic asylum seekers in Chicago and Massachusetts, does not 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 homelessness counts nationwide.

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 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 steady long-term trend nationally and in California, where most of the unsheltered population resides.[14]

5.2 The Geographic Concentration of Homeless Asylum Seekers

A key question is why these four localities experienced such sharp increases in homeless asylum seekers while others did not. The number of Cuban and Haitian asylum seekers in Florida, for example, grew nearly six-fold from 28,800 to 164,300 in the fiscal years leading up to the 2022 and 2024 PIT counts, yet the state's homeless population grew by just 20 percent, or 5,400 people, over this period (Florida DCF, n.d.). The state of Texas, where most asylum seekers initially arrived in the U.S., experienced an even more modest 14 percent rise in homelessness, from about 24,400 in 2022 to 28,000 in 2024.

One explanation frequently cited in public debate is Texas Governor Greg Abbott's controversial migrant busing program, which transported asylum seekers from the southwest border to Democratic-led northern cities. However, the timing and geographic pattern of the rise in homelessness and this busing program suggest a more nuanced story. Denver, Chicago, and New York City saw substantial increases in sheltered homelessness between 2022 and 2023 (51 percent, 97 percent, and 78 percent, respectively), a period that predated the majority of arrivals through this busing program (Goodman et al. 2024).[15] Moreover, Washington, D.C., the program's primary initial target, experienced only a four percent increase in sheltered homelessness during this period, while Boston saw a significant increase despite not being a busing destination. At the same time, New York City and Chicago ultimately emerged as the primary destinations for the majority of the estimated 86,600 migrants transported in the twelve months between the 2023 and 2024 PIT counting operations, likely contributing significantly to the 2023-2024 increase in these two cities. However, it remains unclear whether these asylum seekers would have independently moved to

[14] 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 actually declined between 2022 and 2024.

[15] 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 journalistic reporting of Goodman et al. (2024).

these cities or been counted in sheltered homeless populations elsewhere in the United States had they not been relocated through the busing program.

Beyond the intentional transportation of asylum seekers to a handful of cities, alternative possible explanations for the geographic concentration of homeless asylum seekers include the role of established migrant networks and varying shelter availability and generosity across localities. New York City, for instance, has a right-to-shelter law and saw shelter costs increased by $940 million between 2022 and 2024. The city's budget office reported that they expected to spend $3.28 billion on asylum seeker services in FY2025, compared to $1.47 billion in FY2023 (NYC Comptroller, n.d., NYC OMB 2024). Anecdotal evidence supports migrants' preference for New York City as a destination over closely comparable neighboring localities, with media reports indicating that most asylum seekers initially bused to New Jersey quickly left the state for New York City (Han 2024, Palin et al. 2024). Still, the geographic concentration of homeless asylum seekers in just four localities and the limited increases in other major immigrant destinations remains a puzzle for future research.

6. Conclusions

This paper provides the first systematic national examination of asylum seekers' contribution to recent trends in homelessness, estimating that new immigrant arrivals accounted for 59-62 percent of the unprecedented 43 percent rise in sheltered homelessness between 2022 and 2024. The increase among those in shelters made up the vast majority (79 percent) of the overall increase in homelessness and was concentrated in four localities: New York City (77,352 increase), Chicago (14,590 increase), Massachusetts (13,353 increase), and metropolitan Denver (6,556 increase). While our study has limitations – such as our direct method's focus on a subset of localities and challenges in estimating non-Hispanic asylum seekers – the consistency between our direct and indirect estimates strengthens confidence in these findings.

The growing presence of homeless asylum seekers created significant fiscal and logistical challenges for these localities. Annual per-family asylum seeker shelter costs averaged $137,600 in New York City and reached as high as $120,000 in Massachusetts, raising questions about how to distribute these responsibilities across local, state, and federal governments (Emanuel 2023; NYC Comptroller 2024, p. 11). Beyond financial concerns, shelter systems have had to rapidly adapt to accommodate asylum seekers, who often require distinct services compared to long-established homeless populations. In response to these and other pressures, policy changes

implemented after the 2024 PIT counting operation are likely to reverse some of the 2022-2024 increase in subsequent years. For example, New York City, Chicago, and Massachusetts introduced new limits on shelter stay durations, while federal immigration policy changes, such as restrictions on asylum, the elimination of conditional parole, and expanded deportations, narrowed pathways for asylum seekers to enter and remain in the United States.

Although asylum seekers have been the predominant driver of the recent rise in sheltered homelessness, our estimates leave about 40 percent of the increase unexplained. Other potential contributors warrant closer examination, including oft-cited factors such as rising housing costs in major cities, the expiration of pandemic-era eviction protections and supportive services, and complex interactions between new immigrant populations and local housing markets. Notably, the 17 percent rise in unsheltered homelessness between 2022 and 2024 appears to continue a gradual upward trend that predates the recent increase in asylum seekers. Thus, while the findings in this paper advance our understanding of the causes of the recent rise in homelessness, they also underscore the considerable gaps that remain.

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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%**	**77,149[4]**	**68.97%**
All Other Localities	**36,775**	**13.70%**	**N/A**	**N/A**	**6,120[5]**	**16.64%**
Nationwide	**148,626**	**42.63%**	**92,500**	**62.24%**	**87,611[6]**	**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] We apply the direct estimate in Boston because a substantial share of its asylum seekers in homeless shelters were not classified as Hispanic, being from
[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 9 in the text).
[4] The indirect estimate for "Top Four Combined" does not equal the sum of the preceding four indirect estimates becuase 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] We do not include non-Honolulu Hawaii in the indirect estimate for "All Other Localities" because its increase is not due to asylum seekers.
[6] As with the indirect estimate for "Top Four Combined," the national estimate does not equal the sum of the two preceding estimates (see Footnote 14).

Figure 1

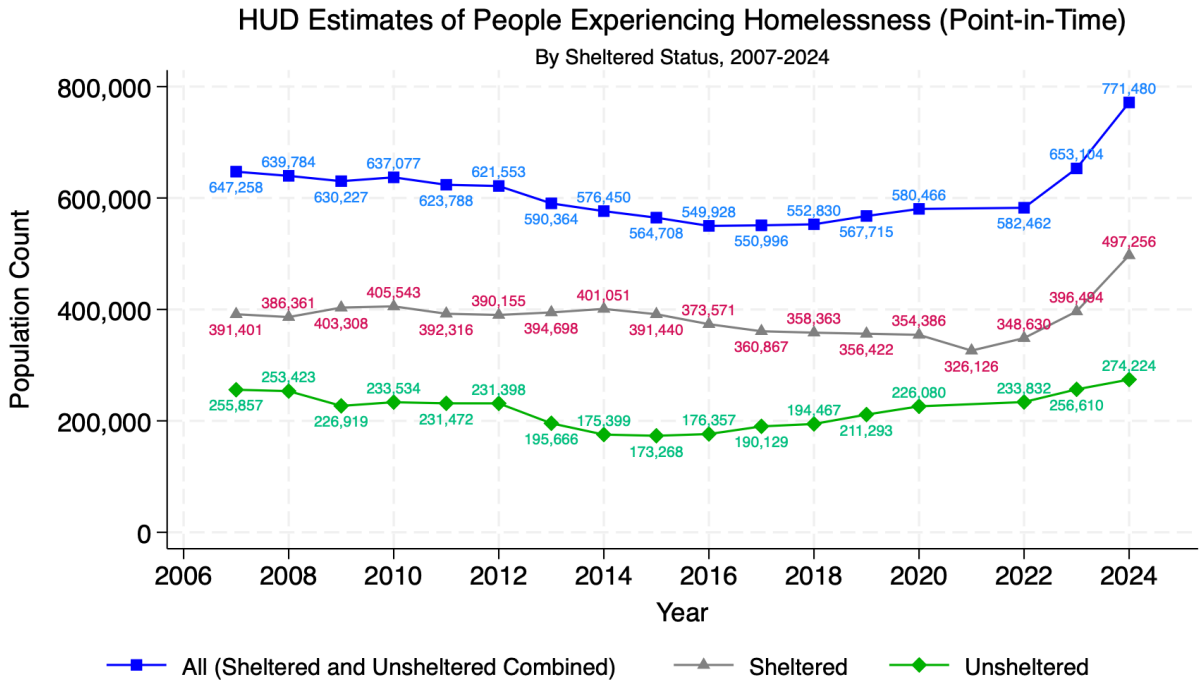
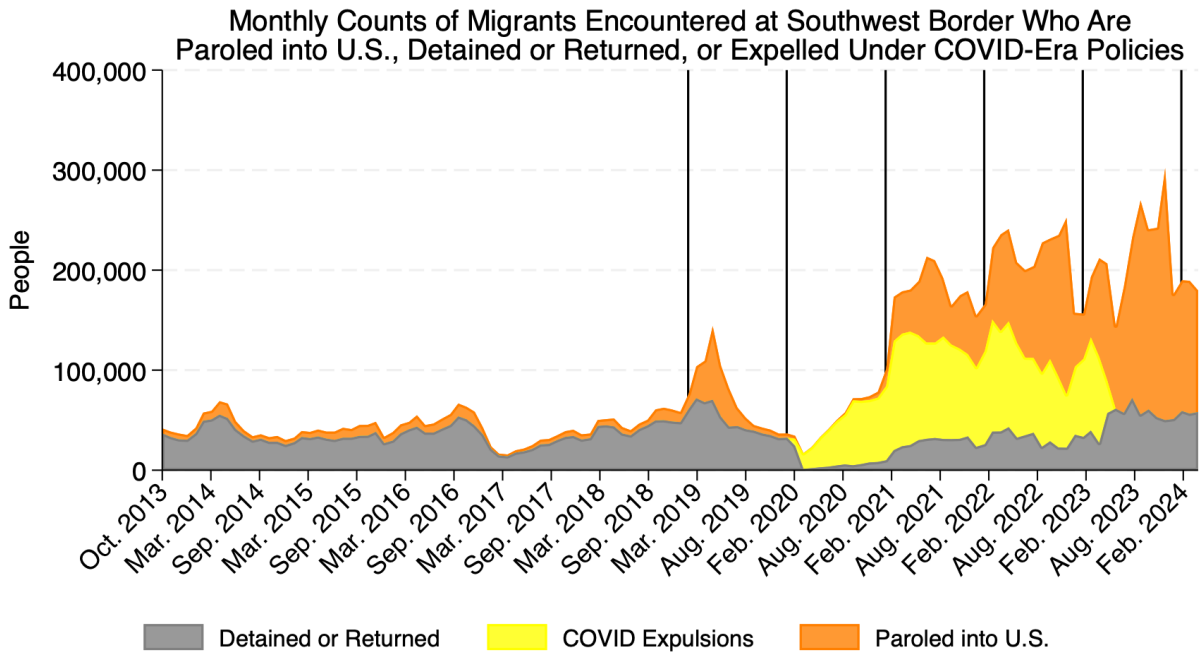
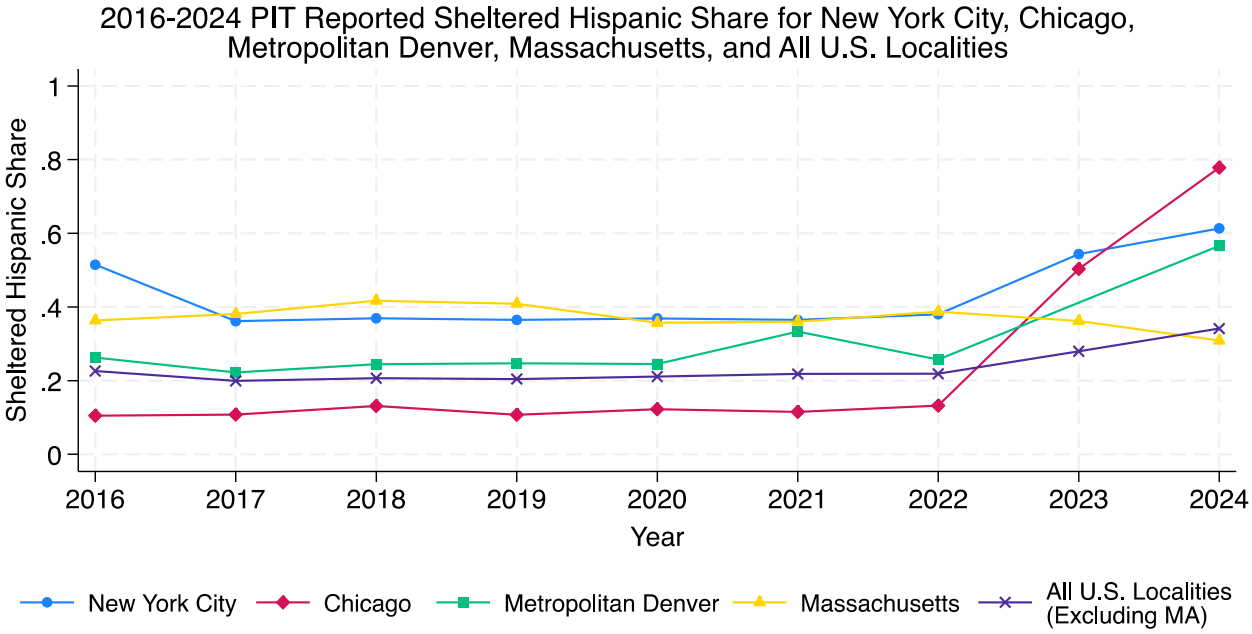


Figure 2



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

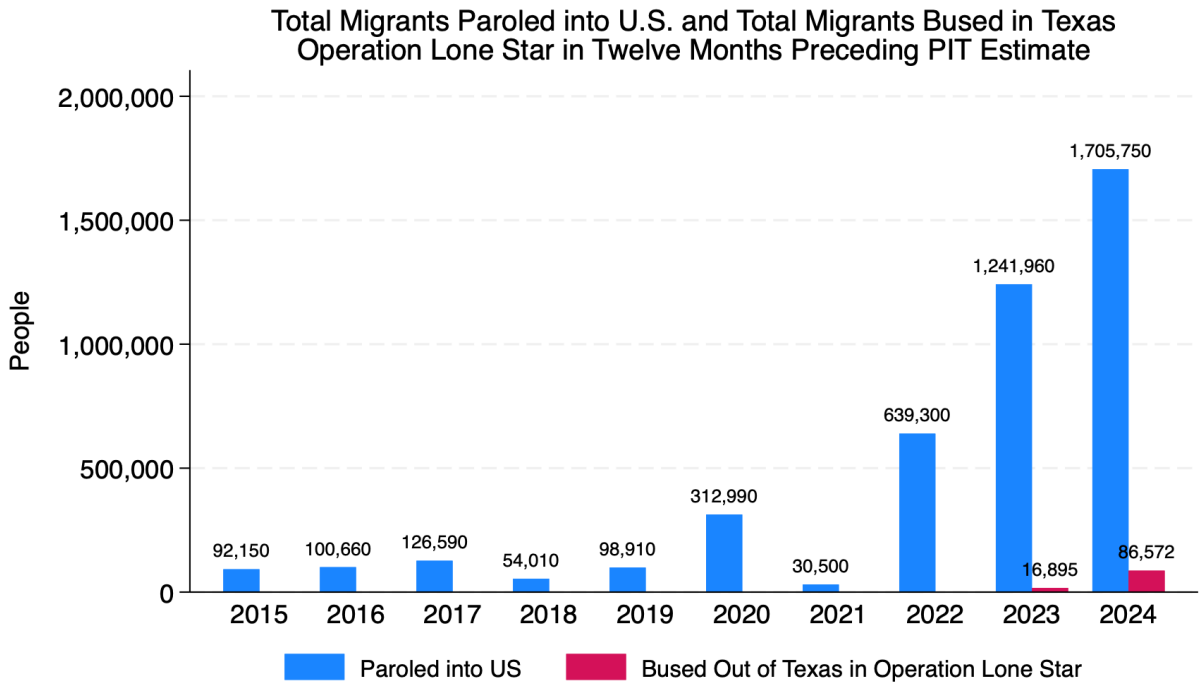
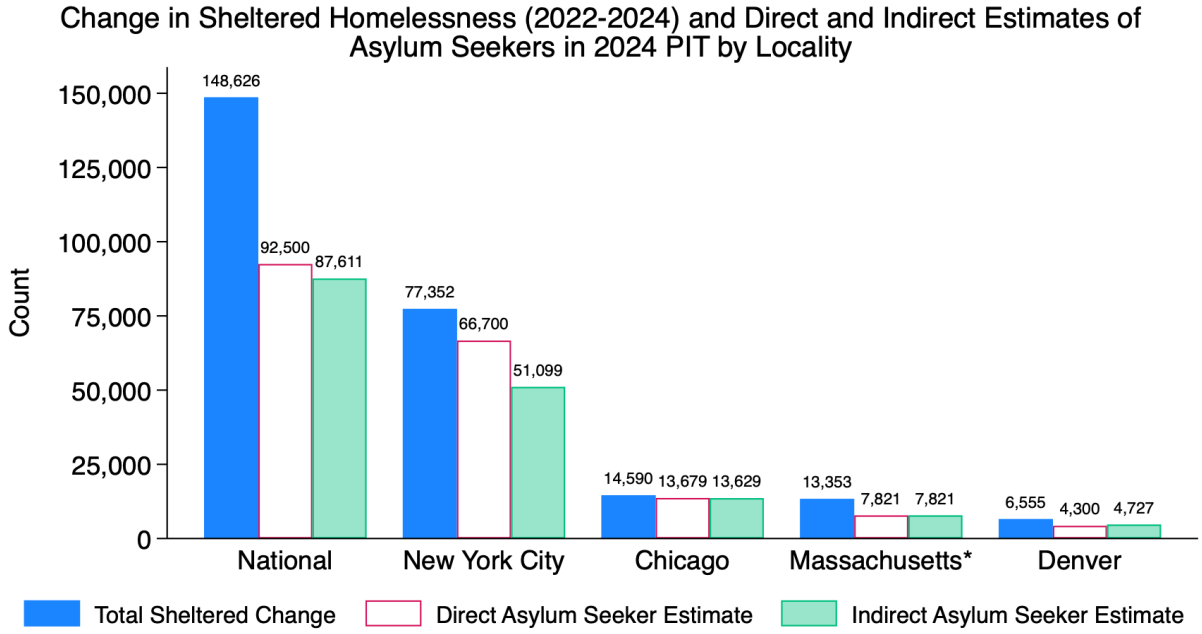
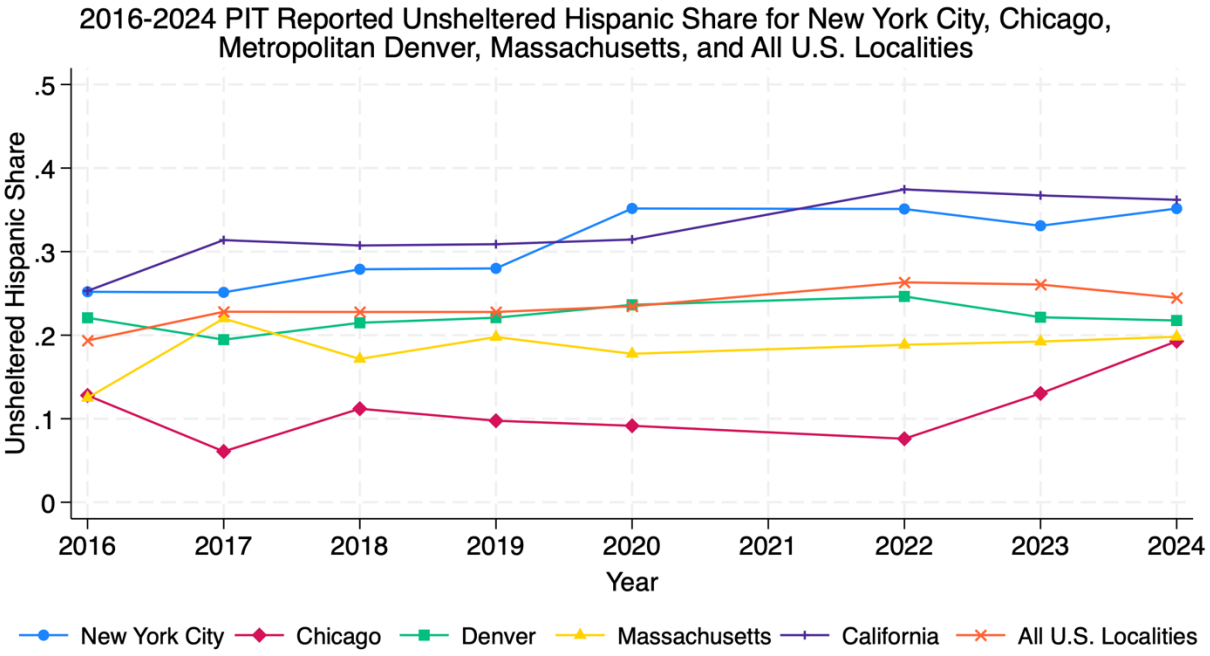


Figure A2



*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 Boston.

Figure A3



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

Figure A4