Identifying the Precipitants of Homeless Protest Across 17 U.S. Cities, 1980 to 1990*

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Abstract

During the 1980s, homeless people formed social movement organizations and mobilized collective action events in cities across the U.S. From the vantage point of social movement theories and scholarship on homelessness, it is surprising that homeless protest was so prevalent in the 1980s. Yet we find evidence of homeless protest events across no fewer than 50 U.S. cities in the 1980–90 period. Drawing on social movement theories about the precipitants of mobilization, we examine the extent to which city-level contextual factors, and their change over time, affect variation in the frequency of homeless mobilization across 17 of these cities. Our findings reveal that a mix of factors congruent with strain and resource mobilization theories helps to account for variation in the frequency of homeless protest across U.S. cities in the 1980s.

During the 1980s, many U.S. cities witnessed the rise of insurgency by homeless people who engaged in protest rallies, marches, housing takeovers, and encampments on government property to express their collective grievances about their dire situation. While many readers will recall national events—such as the

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one in October 1989 when more than 250,000 homeless individuals and their supporters marched on Washington under the banner of "Housing Now!"—local protests were quite widespread, and hundreds of city-level homeless protest events occurred between 1980 and 1990.

That such widespread mobilization occurred among the homeless is somewhat surprising when viewed from the vantage point of the literatures on social movements and homelessness. Indeed, when considered in these terms, almost any mobilization and sustained protest involving the homeless appears to constitute an empirical and theoretical anomaly.

Such pessimism about the prospect of mobilization among those in the lowest reaches of the social structure is grounded in the past 35 years of research that points to four sets of precipitants of movement mobilization and protest: (1) social network linkages, both interpersonal and organizational (Diani 2004; Gould 1991); (2) an indigenous organizational base or a facilitative organizational context (Evans and Boyte 1986; Morris 1981); (3) control of or access to resources (Edwards and McCarthy 2004; McCarthy and Zald 1977); and (4) some degree of social power in the sense of being implicated in the ongoing functioning of the social system rather than constituting a redundant or superfluous population (Jenkins 1985; Oberschall 1973). At first glance the homeless appear deficient on all these accounts and therefore are unlikely candidates for protest mobilization. The homeless not only suffer severe resource deficits materially and socially, but they are more impoverished in both realms than most other marginalized individuals and groups (Burt, Aron, and Lee 2001; Rossi 1989; Shinn and Gillespie 1994). They also rarely have ready access to the kinds of material facilities and resources that most social movement activists and organizers take for granted, such as a meeting space, a telephone, and a few office supplies (Cress and Snow 1996).

In addition to their lack of resources and network ties, three characteristics of the homeless population conjoin to make for an unstable and unreliable adherent pool: the episodic, transitory character of homelessness, with estimates of more than 50% cycling on and off the streets two or more times (Burt, Aron, and Lee 2001; Snow and Shockey 1998; Wong and Piliavin 1997); spatial mobility among the homeless within cities, as they often migrate from one service delivery area or "shadow work" node to another during the course of their daily routines (Lee and Price-Spratlen 2004; Snow and Anderson 1993; Snow and Mulcahy 2001); and the demands of day-to-day survival on the streets (Rosenthal 1994; Snow and Anderson 1993; Wagner 1993; Wright 1997).

Finally, the homeless population has been repeatedly characterized as riddled with a higher incidence of disability (e.g., physical, mental, and substance-related) in comparison to the larger population (Burt, Aron, and Lee 2001; Rossi 1989; Shlay and Rossi 1992; Wright 1989).[1] The conjunction of these factors suggests a resource-poor and unstable adherent pool that, in light of the mentioned correlates of movement mobilization, would appear to be especially difficult to

Table 1. Homeless Protest in 17 Cities, 1980–1990

City	Number of Events	Average Size of Events[a]
Washington, D.C.	83	298.80
New York	55	255.64
Atlanta	39	159.09
Boston	39	119.48
Philadelphia	39	125.79
Los Angeles	38	115.36
St. Louis	36	150.11
San Francisco	30	104.67
Denver	27	101.92
Chicago	22	105.62
New Orleans	23	39.56
Detroit	22	284.87
Tucson	22	115.70
Honolulu	17	65.85
Cleveland	12	100.45
Houston	6	80.00
Minneapolis	6	53.63
Total	516	—

[a] Measured as the number of participants reported by a newspaper at the event in question. Note that data on the number of participants are available only for 312 of 516 events (60%); thus averages computed only on those events for which the number of participants were reported.

mobilize. Thus, if the collective-action problem that movements must solve is basically social, involving "coordinating unorganized, autonomous and dispersed populations into common and sustained action" (Tarrow 1994:9), then the problem would seem to be particularly troublesome with aggregations like the homeless.

Yet, as noted earlier, there has been considerable movement protest activity among the homeless across American cities. This activity can be seen in Table 1, which shows both the number and average size of protest events in 17 large U.S. cities over the 11-year period 1980–90. Here we see that there is considerable variation in their occurrence, ranging from a high of 83 in Washington, D.C., to a low of 6 in Houston and Minneapolis.[2]

It is this variation in the occurrence of homeless protest across these cities during the 1980s that we seek to illuminate by examining the various sets of contextual conditions posited to account for such variation. Little is known about whether city-level conditions account for variation in movement-sponsored homeless protest across cities. To date, research on homeless protest activities has focused primarily on the organizational form of their organizational carriers and sponsors and on their resource needs and benefactors (Cress 1997; Cress and Snow 1996); on the character of the protest activities or forms of "resistance,"

as some scholars have referred to them (Wagner 1993; Wright 1997); and on protest outcomes or consequences (Cress and Snow 2000; Wagner and Cohen 1991). While the issue of underlying contextual conditions or precipitants has not been ignored (Snow et al. 1998; Wright 1997), it has not been examined systematically across cities and over time. We seek here to understand variation in homeless protest across cities over the decade of the 1980s.

Specifically, drawing on data on the 516 homeless protest events in the 17 U.S. cities between 1980 and 1990, shown in Table 1, we seek to identify the conditions that account for variation in the frequency of homeless protest events over this 11-year period. We ask whether the dominant theories of protest mobilization are helpful when we consider groups, such as the homeless, that appear to be unlikely to mobilize. In turn, we use the findings to raise questions about and refine our understanding of the set of factors theorized to account for the emergence of movements and their protest activities more generally. The contribution of our analysis, then, is twofold: It illuminates empirically the extent to which variation in city-level contextual conditions, and their change over time, affect the frequency of homeless protest; and it contributes to our understanding of the extent to which theories about the precipitants of mobilization are general enough to account for mobilization of groups that appear to be unlikely candidates for mobilization.

Theoretical Issues and Orienting Hypotheses

Although the kinds of questions and issues students of social movements address have proliferated in recent decades, few, if any, have generated as much interest as the conditions underlying movement emergence. As Wilson (1973) noted more than 30 years ago in his overview of the study of social movements, "Without doubt, the question most frequently asked about social movements is: Under which typical social conditions do social movements normally arise?" (33). Writing nearly 25 years later, McAdam, McCarthy, and Zald (1996) agreed, asserting, "Understanding the mix of factors that give rise to a movement is the oldest, and arguably the most important, question in the field" (7).

There are currently three leading accounts for the emergence of protest: strain theory, resource mobilization theory, and political opportunity structure theory. We argue that theories should be general enough to apply in a variety of contexts and to a variety of groups and movements. We assess whether these theories can help explain protest by a group that appears unlikely to protest. As such, we first briefly review these theories and suggest orienting hypotheses on homeless protest.

STRAIN THEORY

Strain theory's basic postulate is that dire social conditions (e.g., the lack of affordable housing, widespread unemployment, and a gap between the cost of living and wages) or rapidly changing conditions and trends (e.g., dramatic changes in population, unemployment rates, and the cost of living) have disruptive, disintegrating effects that can render as likely candidates for participation in social movements those individuals or groups most vulnerable to dire or rapidly changing conditions or trends. Hence, the origins and emergence of social movement activity are rooted in these underlying dire social conditions or trends that affect some aggregations of individuals more directly than others.

Although this theory offers one of the oldest and most persistent perspectives on the origins of social movements, dating back to at least the work of Émile Durkheim and even some of the work of Karl Marx, it has not fared well on either theoretical or empirical grounds over the past several decades (McAdam, McCarthy, and Zald 1988; McCarthy and Zald 1977; Tilly, Tilly, and Tilly 1975). Yet critics of the theory are not always clear about the precise target of their critique. Is the target the theory in general or one of its variant themes or arguments? Associated with the strain theory, as it has evolved, are at least four rather different claims or themes: One is the mass society variant that accentuates the disintegration of social ties (Coleman 1971; Kornhauser 1959) and thus approximates Durkheim's formulation. A second is the absolute deprivation thesis that focuses on immiserating life conditions, such as extreme poverty (Marx and Engels 1954; Piven and Cloward 1977; Van Dyke and Soule 2002). A third is the relative deprivation thesis, with its emphasis on the perceived discrepancy between expectation and attainment (Gurr 1970; Seeman 1981). A fourth is the "quotidian disruption" thesis, which highlights the disruption of everyday subsistence and survival routines (Snow et al. 1998; Useem 1998; Walsh 1981).

Each of these variants of strain theory requires somewhat different kinds of data to assess their relevance to the emergence of social movement activity. Indicators, albeit different ones, of structural factors and trends work for the assessment of both the mass society and absolute deprivation theses, whereas subjective, perceptual data is required to provide a fair assessment of the relative deprivation thesis,[3] and the quotidian disruption thesis requires a mixture of local-community and individual data. Because we are examining the relationship between city-level characteristics and the occurrence of protest events, and because the kinds of data we assembled are most appropriate for assessing the absolute deprivation thesis, we focus on this variant of the strain theory, hypothesizing a positive association between local or city-level indicators of absolute deprivation and higher frequency of homeless protest activity.

RESOURCE MOBILIZATION

The central, orienting premise of the resource mobilization theory is that the emergence and persistence of social movement activity is contingent on the availability of resources that can be channeled into movement mobilization and activity (Edwards and McCarthy 2004; McAdam, McCarthy, and Zald 1988; McCarthy and Zald 1977). Although there are other core features of the theory—such as its emphasis on organization and rationality—and there continues to be some ambiguity about the specification of resources,[4] the availability, aggregation, and deployment of resources are regarded as among the most critical determinants of movement emergence. As McCarthy and Zald hypothesized on the link between resource availability and movement emergence, not only is "the absolute and relative amount of resources available to" social movements contingent on "the amount of discretionary resources of mass and elite publics," but "the greater the absolute amount of (those) resources available to the SMS" (social movement sector) within a society, "the greater the likelihood that new SMIs [social movement industries] and SMOs [social movement organizations] will develop" (1977:1224–25). Evidence in support of this general hypothesis comes from a variety of studies. For example, McLaughlin and Marwan's (2000) study of the determinants of the founding of environmental movement organizations between 1895 and 1995 revealed that the founding of the organizations was positively associated with national prosperity and negatively associated with high rates of business failures; Soule et al. (1999) found that protest activity by U.S. feminist groups in the 30 years between 1955 and 1985 increased during prosperous times; and, internationally, Wiest, Smith, and Eterovic (2002) found that citizen participation in transnational social movement organizations, such as Greenpeace, tends to be positively associated with national wealth. Given the congruence between these findings and the resource mobilization theory, we hypothesize that the larger the overall resource pool at the city level, the greater the frequency of homeless protest events.

POLITICAL OPPORTUNITY STRUCTURE

Overlapping with the resource mobilization theory, with its emphasis on the resource context, is the political process model, with its emphasis on the context or structure of political opportunities (Kriesi 1995; McAdam 1996; Tarrow 1994; Tilly 1978). Although there is no single consensual definition of political opportunity structure, Tarrow's conceptualization will suffice: "consistent . . . dimensions of the political environment that provide incentives for people to undertake collective action by affecting their expectations for success or failure" (1994:85). Underlying this and related conceptions are three interrelated observations: that political systems—be they local municipalities or state, regional, or federal governments—can vary considerably in how receptive (open) or unreceptive

(closed) they are to organized protest and challenge; that this variability is signaled by or read from the system's ongoing functioning; and that these signals to or readings by social and political actors either encourage or discourage their mobilization into social movements.

Given these observations, there are a number of issues and questions that have stimulated discussion and calls for empirical inquiry, one of which is especially relevant to our article. It concerns the dimensions of a political system that are most indicative of the context of political opportunity and can thus function to signal something about its receptivity to challenge. In his synthesis of a number of scholarly treatments of this issue, McAdam identified a "highly consensual list of [four] dimensions of political opportunity": (1) system accessibility or the degree to which a political system is open or closed to challenge, (2) the relative stability of the pattern of political alignments within a system, (3) the presence or absence of influential allies, and (4) the repressive capacity of the state or relevant political entity (1996:26–29).

Presumably, the degree of political opportunity within a political entity can be indicated by any one of these dimensions or some combination of two or more. Thus, the structure of political opportunity within a system can be assessed empirically on any one of the above dimensions. Since our data set includes indicators of the first three dimensions—system accessibility, patterns of alignment, and the presence of allies, we assess the impact of those indicators on the frequency of homeless protest events across the 17 cities. We hypothesize that an open or favorable political opportunity structure in a city will be associated with greater frequency of homeless protest activity.

Data, Procedures, and Concrete Hypotheses

SAMPLE SELECTION AND PRIMARY DATA SOURCE

We explore the extent to which the above theoretically derived propositions help to explain variation in the yearly count of homeless protest events across 17 U.S. cities from 1980 to 1990. We focus our analysis on this time period because of its temporal coincidence with both the growth of the homeless population (Burt 1992; Rossi 1989; Wright 1989) and homeless protest (Rosenthal 1996; Wagner 1993; Wright 1997) in the U.S. Our decision to begin our analysis of homeless protest activity with 1980 rather than earlier was based on the observation that homeless protest was almost nonexistent in 1980 and increased in its spread and frequency throughout the 1980s. Taking the 17 cities in our sample, for example, homeless protests events were noted in only two cities in 1980 but in 15 cities in 1987. Similarly, the number of protest events increased correspondingly from only 2 in 1980 to 73 in 1987 to a high of 109 the following year.

Data on these homeless protest events were drawn from the major daily

newspapers in the 17 sampled cities because of the local character of the movement, our interest in accumulating a longitudinal record of the occurrence of homeless protest events, and the failure of local social movement organizations to maintain an ongoing record of their protest activity. Since the preponderance of the country's homeless are concentrated in its largest metropolitan areas and particularly their central cities (Lee and Price-Spratlen 2004), we initially hoped to select a random sample of the country's 50 largest cities and use the indexes to the *New York Times* and *News Bank* to determine the incidence and intensity of homeless collective action across the sampled cities. However, pilot fieldwork in Minneapolis, Philadelphia, and Tucson, including a summer spent working with the National Union of the Homeless in Philadelphia, revealed that accounts of homeless protest were dramatically underreported in these two indexes. Upon discovering this, we checked with the daily newspapers in the country's 50 largest cities to ascertain which ones were indexed through the 1980s and found that 17 dailies, each associated with a different city, met this criterion.

Thus, the 17 cities included in our sample were selected on the basis of two criteria: first, each was one of the 50 largest cities in the U.S. at the time of our research, and second, each had a daily newspaper indexed throughout the 1980s and into the 1990s. The 17 cities are clustered in Table 2 according to population size and region of the country in which they are located. Also indicated is their approximate homeless rate and their exact population rank at the time the research was initiated.

Even though newspapers are typically the only source of temporally comparative data on protest events, recent research has criticized newspapers as a data source. Some of the criticisms take issue with data collection schemes, while others point to potential biases in the selection of events and the description of events that are covered by newspapers (Earl et al. 2004).[5] The most relevant finding for our research is that the use of local rather than national news sources appears to reduce some of the biases noted in the literature, such as the tendency for more "newsworthy" (e.g., larger, more violent) events to be covered (Barranco and Wisler 1999; McCarthy, McPhail, and Smith 1996). To the extent that these findings are accurate, our use of local newspapers may provide a less biased set of events (and a less biased description of these events) than would national newspapers. Nonetheless, using multiple newspapers from different cities could introduce another problem: Each of these 17 newspapers could have a different degree of selection bias or description bias (Earl et al. 2004). In an attempt to control for this possibility (and the possibility that there could be other unmeasured, idiosyncratic factors present in one or more of our cities), dummy variables for each city were included in the models we ran, with Washington, D.C., omitted for comparison. (We describe this procedure in more detail below.)

Table 2. Cities in Sampling Frame by Size, Region, and Homeless Rate

Population (1986)	Region			
	East	Midwest	South	West
>1,000,000	New York (1)[b] Philadelphia (5)[b]	Chicago (3)[d] Detroit (7)[d]	Houston (4)[d]	Los Angeles(2)[d]
500,000–1,000,000	Washington, D.C.(17)[a] Boston (19)[a]	Cleveland (22)[d]	New Orleans(21)[d]	San Francisco(13)[b] Denver (25)[c]
<500,000		St. Louis (26)[b] Minneapolis (46)[b]	Atlanta (31)[a]	Honolulu (37)[c] Tucson (35)[c]

Note: Figures in parentheses indicate where the city ranks, as of 1988, among the 50 largest U.S. cities in terms of population; figures for homeless rate derived from Burt (1992:238–244).

[a]45+ homeless per 10,000
[b]30–45 homeless per 10,000
[c]15–30 homeless per 10,000
[d]<15 homeless per 10,000

Table 3. Grievances/Issues Associated with Homeless Protest Events

Grievances/Issues Articulated by Events	Proportion of Events for Which Issues Were Articulated
1. General plight of homeless	42.4
2. Housing	29.5
3. More shelters/shelter beds	20.8
4. Release HUD housing	12.8
5. Homeless legislation	11.4
6. Antihomeless ordinances	11.0
7. More low-cost housing	5.3
8. Work/jobs/minimum wage	4.0
9. Police harassment/behavior	3.4
10. Welfare	3.0
11. Political representation and participation	1.5
12. Other	2.8

Note: Percentages do not sum to 100 because events often address multiple issues.

DEPENDENT VARIABLE

The dependent variable in our analysis is the yearly count of protest events between 1980 and 1990 in the 17 cities shown in Tables 1 and 2.[6] Fifteen activities were identified in the data set as constituting homeless protest events, with the vast majority (95.2%) of these skewed in the direction of noninstitutional collective action (e.g., public rallies, marches, housing takeovers, blockades, encampments, hunger strikes and fasts, and picketing).[7] It is important to note that some protest events actually consisted of several types of activities, but only the major activity was counted in such cases. For example, a protest event was coded as a single event whether it consisted of a rally in front of a federal building or a series of activities that began with a rally followed by a march to an abandoned house that was then taken over by the homeless (in this case the housing takeover was the major, focal activity of the event). In all, we coded 516 homeless protest events in the 17 cities during the 11-year period from 1980 to 1990.

In the newspaper reports on these 516 events, there were data on organizational involvement for 223 of the events (43% of the events). While this information cannot reliably be included in our regression models below, it is worthy of note that homeless-based social movement organizations (national and local) were reportedly present at more than 75% of these 223 events. Other organizations present at these 223 events included various religious organizations and service providers, but the most common type of organization mentioned at these events were homeless-based social movement organizations, a finding that is consistent with fieldwork on the homeless movement in the U.S. during this same period (Cress 1997; Cress and Snow 1996, 2000; Wright 1997).

All the events shared three features. First, they were collective rather than

Table 4. Targets of Homeless Protest Events

Primary Targets	Proportion of Events
1. Government or government agency	75.3
2. Media	13.8
3. Businesses	4.1
4. Service providers	3.5
5. Other	3.3

individual actions; Table 1 includes a column for the average size of the events in each of the cities. It is not surprising that the average size of the events varied across cities, but they were by no means small events, as the average size ranged from about 40 (New Orleans) to nearly 300 (Washington, D.C.).

Second, they addressed issues directly affecting the homeless. In other words, the events represented the collective expression of shared grievances over various issues related to the presumed causes of homelessness and the factors perceived as affecting the quality of life on the streets. This relationship can be seen in Table 3, which lists the array of issues associated with homeless protest and the proportion of the 516 events for which the issues were articulated. The plurality of protest gatherings (47.6%) expressed concerns about the general problem of housing (rows 2, 4, and 7 in Table 3), 42% focused attention on the general plight of the homeless, and 21% protested the availability of shelters and shelter beds.

Finally, the events were targeted or directed at other parties. This targeting can be seen in Table 4, which shows that the protest gatherings were sharply focused on the targets for their grievances—that is, those organizational entities thought to have the political or resource capability to attend to the issue or grievance. Three-quarters of the targets were governmental, including federal, state, and city governmental entities.[8]

Although the foregoing suggests that the vast majority of homeless protest events are rationalized in terms of the general plight of the homeless and various housing issues and are directed at governmental agencies or agents in hopes of securing relief with respect to these and other concerns indicated in Table 3, there is striking variation in the frequency of homeless protest both across the 17 cities and over the 1980s. It is this variation that we seek to illuminate in this article. We turn now to our specific hypotheses and measurement of our explanatory variables.

SPECIFIC HYPOTHESES AND INDEPENDENT VARIABLES

As noted earlier, we draw on what are generally regarded as the three major theoretical perspectives on movement emergence (strain, resource mobilization, and political opportunity structure) in order to guide our examination of the

broader contextual conditions that account for variation in the frequency of homeless protest events in 17 cities over the 11-year period. We hope to ascertain how well these theories are able to explain protest by a group that seems unlikely to mobilize. To do this, we run a set of three nested models to examine the influence of a number of different factors on the frequency of homeless protest.

In all three of the models presented in Table 5, we include two control variables. First, as a proxy for the overall homeless population in each city, we include a measure of the number of shelter beds (per 10,000 population) available in a city. Because it is not possible to obtain actual rates of homelessness in each of our cities over this entire 11-year period, we follow Burt (1992) and argue that this is a reasonable proxy for the rate of homelessness. Second, we include a measure of the city population size as a control variable. We do so in part because our dependent variable is the count of homeless protest events in a city in a particular year, and in part because larger cities are likely to have more and larger events simply because there are more people therein, all else being equal.

In addition to these control variables, model 1 includes five measures of the absolute deprivation variant of strain theory. The first variable is the ratio of median housing value to per capita income for a city. We use this ratio of median housing valuation to per capita income citywide because it is consistent with what has been argued about one set of structural conditions that breed homelessness: a widening gap between the cost of housing and available income or resources to meet that cost (Hopper and Hamberg 1986; Koegel, Burnam, and Baumohl 1996). Thus, we hypothesize that the higher the ratio of housing costs to income, the greater the prospect of homeless protest.

As a second indicator of strain, we include a measure of the unemployment rate in each city. We presume that when fewer people are gainfully employed, there should be higher rates of homelessness and more intense grievances, and thus greater frequency of protest. In other words, we hypothesize a positive relationship between unemployment and homeless protest.

The next two strain variables we include are the change in the number of manufacturing jobs and the poverty rate in each city. We include the former because the rise in homelessness in the U.S. in the early 1980s appears to have been associated temporally with the acceleration of plant closings and the corresponding loss of manufacturing jobs in the second half of the 1970s and the first half of the 1980s. A study by the U.S. Department of Labor (1985) reports, for example, that nearly 12 million workers lost jobs between 1979 and 1985 because of plant closings and associated employment cutbacks. Given that these closings and cutbacks, often discussed under the rubric of "deindustrialization" (Bluestone and Harrison 1982; Perrucci et al. 1988), have been posited as precipitants of homelessness (Adams 1986; Hopper, Susser, and Conover 1985; Ropers 1988), we hypothesize that a decline in manufacturing jobs should be positively associated with greater frequency of homeless protest. We created a dummy variable which is coded 1 when there was a decline in the number of manufacturing jobs in a city

from previous year, and 0 when the number of manufacturing jobs remained the same or increased.[9] Regarding the poverty rates, we hypothesize that higher rates, indicating greater economic strain, should be associated with greater frequency of protest. Finally, we include the number of families on public assistance (divided by the total number of families in the city). This measure of strain, like poverty rates, should be associated with greater frequency of protest.

In model 2 of Table 5, we include a measure of the overall resource pool within each city. As we noted earlier, according to resource mobilization theory, the amount of resources available to social movements is contingent on the amount of discretionary resources available in a system. Thus, larger resource pools lead to greater prospects for social movement mobilization (Edwards and McCarthy 2004; McCarthy and Zald 1977). Accordingly, we use per capita income as a system-level measure of resources for each of the 17 cities. We hypothesize that higher per capita income should be positively associated with higher rates of protest, since higher income should, all else being equal, increase the size of the resource pool for social causes and movements.

In addition to our measure of the overall resources in the community, we also include a measure of the total transfer payments, per capita, in a city. This measure includes aid to families with dependent children (AFDC), social security, unemployment, and supplemental security income (SSI) payments, and is used as a general indicator of the variation in the amount of income support available to the poor across our 17 cities. Research on the homeless in various cities across the country shows that many homeless people do, in fact, access these programs (Burt, Aron, and Lee 2001; Rossi 1989; Wolch and Dear 1993). Consistent with the resource mobilization approach, we expect a higher dollar volume of transfer payments to be associated with a greater frequency of homeless protest activity.[10]

A final and more direct indicator of a community's resource base for dealing with social issues is the volume of contributions to nonprofit social service agencies, such as the United Way. While numerous community-based organizations provide or facilitate the provision of social services, the United Way serves as a baseline institution for such support in most large communities, including the 17 cities in our sample. Thus, we expect the frequency of homeless protest events to be higher in communities with greater per capita contributions to United Way.

Finally, in model 3 of Table 5, we include measures of the three dimensions of the political opportunity structure discussed above: accessibility or openness, stability or coherence of political alignments, and the presence or absence of elite allies. Considering first the accessibility dimension, and following Eisinger's (1973) assessment of the relationship between the structure of political opportunities in 43 U.S. cities and the occurrence of protest activities in the late 1960s in those cities, and Knoke's (1982) parallel finding that mayor/council governments are more responsive to the demands of citizens, we hypothesize that cities with a

mayor/council form of government should have a greater frequency of protest activity because elected officials are more directly accountable to the electorate than unelected, appointed officials. Also consistent with Eisinger's (1973) research, we hypothesize that the ward form of election should yield more protest because ward-elected officials are directly accountable to even more specific population groups.

Considering the alignment stability dimension, we look at the percentage of the mayoral vote that went to a third party. We assume that an increase in the percentage of votes going to a third party is indicative of some degree of political fractionalization and should thus be positively associated with a greater frequency of homeless protest. We also assume that a smaller margin of victory in a mayoral election indicates some degree of instability in the existing city power structure and therefore ought to be associated with a greater frequency of protest. In other words, the relationship between the margin of victory and the frequency of protest events should be negative, with larger margins of victory being associated with more political stability, and thus a less frequent occurrence of protests.

To assess the third dimension of the political opportunity structure, the presence or absence of elite allies, we look at the strength of the Democratic party in each city. Since Democrats are generally more sympathetic toward, and supportive of, the economically marginal (such as the homeless), we assume that the percentage vote for Democrats in various elections provides an indication of political support and thus allies. To measure this, we collected data on the percentage of registered voters in a city that voted for Democratic political candidates for the presidential, gubernatorial, and senatorial elections in all elections during the 11-year period. Since these elections did not occur yearly, we used linear interpolation to estimate a between-election year figure for Democratic support for each of these elected offices. Finally, we constructed an index of Democratic strength in a city by summing these components.[11] Accordingly, we hypothesize that there should be a positive association between Democratic strength across the cities and the amount of homeless protest activity.

DATA SOURCES FOR INDEPENDENT VARIABLES

Data for the explanatory variables described above come from several sources. The source from which most of our variables were derived is the County Statistics File 4 (COSTAT-4), a public-use compilation of statistical information from numerous governmental sources produced by the U.S. Census Bureau. We extracted annual information for the 17 counties in which the seat of city government or city hall is located for the 17 greater Metropolitan Statistical Areas (MSAs) that are of analytical interest. Many of these include multiple counties; however, given the theoretical importance assigned to protest activity directed at governmental authority and the fact that three-quarters of the protest events were directed at governmental agencies, we consider the county in which the city governmental

authority is located as the most appropriate level of contextual analysis. Yearly values for variables with incomplete reporting were derived through linear interpolation.

The COSTAT-4 file data include (1) income, welfare, housing, and population data (per capita income, poverty rates, total transfer payments, median housing valuation, and total city population) from U.S. Census tabulations; (2) employment data (unemployment rate, number of manufacturing jobs) from the Bureau of Labor Statistics; and (3) voting data (percentage voting for Democratic governor) from the National Election Survey.

In addition to the COSTAT-4 data, we secured for each city United Way contribution data from the national office of the United Way, shelter-bed ratios from estimates generated by the Urban Institute's nationwide assessment of homeless shelter capacity during the time period in question (Burt 1992), and data on city governance structure and politics (mayor/council structure, ward structure, and third-party mayoral candidate) from telephone and field interviews with local officials in each city. Data on the number of families on public assistance come from Kasarda's (1992) Urban Underclass Database.

ANALYTIC PROCEDURES

Since the data on homeless protest events is in the form of yearly counts, we use negative binomial regression, a variant of Poisson regression, which is typically used to analyze event counts (Barron 1992; Land, McCall, and Nagin 1996). We use negative binomial regression (rather than Poisson) to correct for overdispersion in the count of protest events, a condition that occurs when the variance of the count is greater than its mean. Negative binomial regression effectively takes care of the problem of over dispersion by adding a stochastic component to the model (Land, McCall, and Nagin 1996).

As well, since our data structure is a pooled cross-sectional time series, we use the method of General Estimating Equations (GEE) developed by Liang and Zeger (1986) and Zeger and Liang (1986). As noted by recent users of this method (Baron, Hannan, and Burton 2001), this approach generalizes quasi-likelihood estimation (Barron 1992) to the sort of data structure we use. A common problem in this type of data structure is autocorrelation, or the fact that yearly observations for the same city will tend to be correlated. We addressed this problem by using Stata's extension of GEE, XTGEE, which allows a number of choices for the working correlation matrix (Version 7.0 Stata Corp 2001). We experimented with all of the choices and found that the models fit best when we specified first-order serial autocorrelation (ar1). Coefficient estimates were obtained through the XTGEE routine in Stata. Stata calculates the robust standard errors (also referred to as the Huber/White or sandwich estimates), thus allowing for more conservative estimation of these models.

Finally, all models presented below were run including fixed effects for

each city (with Washington, D.C., as the omitted category) to control for any unmeasured, idiosyncratic factors associated with a particular city. Because none of the dummy variables for any city was consistently significant and their removal did not alter the other results, we do not present those results.

Results

Table 5 presents the results of a nested set of models designed to assess our hypotheses. The first model includes our two control variables along with our five indicators of the absolute deprivation variant of strain, the second adds the three resource measures, and the third adds the five political opportunity measures.[12] It is important to note that we ran all the models in Table 5 with and without the inclusion of Washington, D.C., because it had far more homeless-related protest events than any other city (see Table 3). However, the results were essentially the same either way we ran the models, so we include Washington, D.C., in the analyses below.

Turning first to our two control variables, we find that the proxy for the size of the homeless population is positive and significant in the first two models but loses significance in the final model. Our measure of the city population is not significant in any of the three models.

Turning next to our five measures congruent with the absolute deprivation variant of strain theory, we find that the first measure, the ratio of the median housing value to per capita income, is positive and significant in all three models. Even though the magnitude of association is quite low across the models, the finding does lend support to the hypothesis that the wider the gap between housing costs and income, the greater the occurrence of homeless protest, all else being equal. Also positive and significant in the three models is the coefficient on decline in the manufacturing sector, suggesting that homeless protest increases with the elimination of manufacturing jobs. The coefficients for the remaining two measures of strain, the unemployment and poverty rates, are in the predicted direction and are significant in all models, although only at the .10 level in some cases.

Recall from Table 3 that 42.4% of the collective action events protested the general plight of the homeless, and around 48% expressed concern about various housing issues. Given this, the fact that higher ratios of median housing value to per capita income, declines in manufacturing jobs, and higher unemployment and poverty rates are associated with a greater frequency of homeless protest makes sense, as these variables are all consistent with the grievances associated with the actual protest events we coded.

Next, turning to our measures of resources, which are included in models 2 and 3, we find that the coefficients for per capita income and total transfer payments are both positive and significant, suggesting that such resources help

Table 5. Negative Binomial Regression Models Predicting Yearly Counts of Homeless Protest Events in 17 U.S. Cities, 1980–1990

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Rate of homelessness	.05***	.02*	.004
	(.01)	(.01)	(.02)
City population	.26	.17	.06
	(.16)	(.18)	(.22)
Ratio of median housing value to income per capita	.005**	.004*	.004*
	(.001)	(.001)	(.001)
Unemployment rate	.05*	1.39*	1.35†
	(.02)	(.74)	(.74)
Decline in manufacturing	.35*	.38*	.39†
	(.17)	(.18)	(.20)
Poverty rate	.05†	.12**	.10*
	(.03)	(.04)	(.04)
Households on public assistance	−2.46	−1.47	−7.81
	(4.40)	(4.51)	(6.27)
Per capita income		.19*	.15*
		(.04)	(.06)
Total transfer payments		1.06***	.95***
		(.17)	(.18)
United Way contributions		.01	.01
		(.03)	(.05)
Mayor/council			.06
			(.62)
Ward			.11
			(.53)
Third party (mayoral race)			−1.22
			(.80)
Margin of victory (mayor)			.18
			(.54)
Democratic strength			−1.06†
			(.64)
Constant	−5.17*	−11.88***	−7.23†
	(2.67)	(3.30)	(4.24)
χ^2	38.19	97.16	97.51
Model 1 versus model with only controls (5 df)	11.82*		
Model 2 versus model 1 (3 df)		58.97***	
Model 3 versus model 2 (5 df)			.35
($N = 187$)			

Note: Standard errors in parentheses.

† $p < .10$ * $p < .05$ ** $p < .01$ *** $p < .001$

facilitate homeless mobilization by enlarging the resource pool that might be drawn on for the purpose of collective action. We say "might be drawn on" because our data do not allow us to specify a direct link between these resource measures and homeless mobilization. In other words, we do not know whether or how expanding resources at the individual level are funneled to social movement organizations sponsoring and organizing homeless protest. But our findings do allow us to infer such a connection, especially since much theorized research associated with the resource mobilization theory posits and finds a positive and significant relationship between expanding resources and social movement emergence and mobilization (for a summary, see Edwards and McCarthy 2004).

Finally, model 3 adds our five political opportunity structure variables. Looking first at the indicators of system accessibility, we find that neither a mayor/council form of government nor a ward system of election is associated with a greater frequency of protest among the homeless, as neither coefficient is significant, although both coefficients are in the expected positive direction. Turning to our two indicators of the stability of political alignment in a city, we find that the coefficient on the percentage of the vote that went to a third party in the mayoral race is significant but in the direction opposite of what we predicted. Contrary to our hypotheses derived from political opportunity theory, cities in which a lower percentage of the vote went to a third party have a greater frequency of homeless protest. Similarly, the coefficient on the size of the margin of victory in the mayoral election is in the opposite direction of what we hypothesized and fails to attain conventional significance as well. Finally, when we examine the effect of our measure of elite allies, the percentage vote for Democrats in each city, we see that the coefficient is significant (at the .10 level) but in the opposite direction of what we had predicted.

In summary, our results indicate relatively strong support for strain theory and some support for resource mobilization theory. These accounts of the precipitants of mobilization help us to understand variation in the frequency of homeless protest across cities in the 1980s. It is interesting that our results show no support for the political opportunity theory when considering homeless mobilization. Our results are discussed in more detail in the next section.

Discussion

We began this article by seeking to identify whether variation in city-level contextual variables and their change over time affected variation in the frequency of homeless protest across 17 U.S. cities. We also asked whether the dominant theories of mobilization are general enough to account for protest among aggregations of individuals who appear to be unlikely candidates for mobilization. Our analysis indicates that a mix of theoretically relevant factors

can best explain the yearly occurrence of these events. In particular, our analysis reveals that a combination of variables congruent with both strain and resource mobilization theories help to account for variation in the annual occurrence of homeless protest events across these 17 cities.

According to our findings, the existence of various strains that provide the material base for the development of a set of mobilizing grievances increases the frequency of homeless protest. Here our findings revealed that most of our indicators of the absolute deprivation variant of strain theory—ratio of the median housing value to per capita income, unemployment rate, decline in manufacturing jobs, and poverty rate—were significantly and positively associated with the occurrence of protest events across the 17 cities. What makes these findings even more compelling is that they are consonant with what is known about the structural precipitants of homelessness and the plight and needs of the homeless as articulated by the protest events (see Table 3). Regarding structural precipitants, it generally can be argued that homelessness flourishes in "a widening gap for many households between the cost of their subsistence needs and the resources available to meet them" (Hopper and Hamberg 1986:14). The shortfall in affordable housing, as measured in terms of the widening gap between housing values and income, operates at the supply side of this dynamic, with unemployment, a decline in manufacturing jobs, and poverty operating at the resource end of the dynamic by contributing to an absence of resources sufficient to secure housing. Housing shortfalls are consistent with the fact that around two-thirds of the grievances/issues articulated by the homeless protest events were focused on housing-related matters (Table 3). And both the housing and job problems surface as being among the most salient concerns of the homeless when they are asked to list the services that would benefit them the most. As reported by one representative survey of nearly 1,800 homeless men and women in one of the 17 cities, "help finding low-rent housing" and "a full-time job" were named by the homeless as being among the 4 most important desired services, out of more than 20 possibilities (Snow and Shockey 1998). That the concerns of the homeless, expressed both collectively and individually, corresponded with our findings on the five structural indicators of strain provides even greater confidence in those findings, thus suggesting further that a number of strain-related factors were significant contributors to homeless protest in the 1980s. This finding is also consistent with the recent reexamination and reconfiguration of the strain theory on social movements (see Buechler 2004; Snow et al. 1998; Useem 1998; Van Dyke and Soule 2002).

Our findings also suggest that the larger the monetary resource pool, as measured in terms of per capita income and transfer payments, the greater the prospect of homeless protest. Consonant with the resource mobilization theory, this finding suggests that as the resource pool increases, so does the likelihood that some portion of it will be channeled through other organizations to homeless social movement activists and organizations. While this presumed

connection might be established in a more compelling fashion with data that specifies the paths and processes through which monetary resources are funneled to homeless movement organizations, our data do not enable us to pursue that analysis. But it is important to note that this shortcoming hardly differentiates our analysis from most other studies that note empirically the importance of the connection between expanding resource pools and movement mobilization in other contexts (e.g., McLaughlin and Marwan 2000; Soule et al. 1999; Wiest, Smith, and Eterovic 2002). Furthermore, these findings make sense in light of the severe resource deficits suffered by the homeless both individually and collectively and the fact that they are more impoverished on both these measures than most other marginalized individuals and groups (Cress and Snow 1996; Rossi 1989; Shinn and Gillespie 1994). Given the general resource impoverishment among the homeless, it is not surprising that the occurrence of homeless protest activity was greater in cities with larger resource bases or pools.

We also examined five indicators of city political opportunity, but we found that none of these variables attained significance in the direction predicted. This is puzzling for several reasons. First, it has become almost an article of faith over the past several decades that aspects of political opportunity structures constitute at least one set of key determinants of movement emergence and protest activity (McAdam, McCarthy, and Zald 1988, 1996; Tarrow 1994). Second, three of our variables—mayor/council form of government, ward form of election, and percentage of the mayoral vote that went to a third party—are directly reflective of the local political context. And third, these measures are almost identical to those Eisinger (1973) used in what is generally regarded as one of the seminal political opportunity analyses.

These considerations notwithstanding, we suspect the differences might be partly explained by a number of factors. First, Eisinger's (1973) analysis relied on correlations rather than regression models and did not include measures of strain and resources, as we do here. Second, it is possible that large cities were generally more open to protest in the 1980s than during the turbulent 1960s when Eisinger conducted his research, not so much because of more accessible structures or sympathetic political orientations on the part of city authorities but because of the increasing institutionalization and conventionalization of protest (see Della Porta, Fillieule, and Reiter 1998; McCarthy and McPhail 1998). Third, our failure to find support for the explanatory value of the political opportunity structure could result from differences in the type of protest and challenges we investigated. Finally, with respect to the lack of support for the hypothesis that Democratic elite allies facilitate protest, this finding may be better understood when we consider the fact that more than 95% of the protest events we analyze are noninstitutional in nature. Perhaps when protesters have allies in powerful positions, they are better able to use institutional channels and less likely to use noninstitutional channels, thus suggesting that when movements have elite allies, noninstitutional forms of protest decline. It is also worthy of note that

early versions of political opportunity theory (Tilly 1978) argued that protest is stimulated not only by *opportunity*, but also by *threat.* It could be that elite allies do not stimulate protest; instead, the lack of such allies could present a threat, which stimulates protest (Goldstone and Tilly 2001; Van Dyke and Soule 2002). In other words, it could be that non-Democrats in city governments present a distinct threat to homeless interests, a threat that may be best addressed by protest. McAdam (2004), in reflecting on two decades of empirical and theoretical work in this area, agrees that the importance of threat as a stimulant to protest has been eclipsed by opportunity. He notes that for "polities where there is some expectation of state responsiveness and few formal barriers to mobilization, we should expect perceived threats to group interests to serve, along with expanded opportunities, as two distinct precipitants of collective action" (2004:205).

Considered together, then, our findings and the above observations suggest that variation in the yearly occurrence of homeless protest events across our 17 cities is largely the result of a mix of factors congruent with strain and resource explanations of mobilization, with political opportunity variables contributing no significant support.

Having reconciled our significant findings with what we know about the homeless and previous research on homeless protest, and having elaborated how these findings help to account for variation in the rate of homeless protest across cities, we turn to the broader theoretical implications of our findings for understanding the conditions underlying the emergence and occurrence of social movement activity more generally. In particular, three implications are suggested by the findings. The first is that analyses that focus on a mix of theoretically relevant factors are likely to provide greater explanatory yield than those that focus on a single set of theorized conditions. From this vantage point, the question is not so much which theory is more accurate in accounting for the emergence and occurrence of social movement phenomena, but what is the mix of factors that best accounts for the variation observed? In the case of homeless protest in the 1980s, it appears that strain and resource mobilization theories importantly contribute to our understanding of the variation in the frequency of homeless protest.

Second, in light of our findings, it is reasonable to ask about the relationship between sets of explanatory factors and types of movements and their contexts. Regarding the positive and significant association between our strain measures and the occurrence of homeless protest, for example, it might be argued that one or more forms of strain may be of greater relevance to the mobilization of groups or categories whose economic marginality is more acute, or felt more acutely, than their political marginality. Such groups, which include the homeless, are more likely to clamor for sustenance-related interventions and resources than for political rights or identity-related issues. Parenthetically, the fact that many of the movements analyzed over the past 30 years have focused primarily on rights and identities may account in part for the apparent irrelevance of strain theory

in explaining the emergence of these movements.

This suggests, in turn, a third general implication: that there may well be a kind of elective affinity between certain theoretical perspectives and the kinds of events or activities to which they appear to apply. However, this is not to suggest the general explanatory superiority of one theory to another. Rather, we contend that our findings raise questions about the fit between each theory's claims and the types of movements and levels of analysis to which they apply. It may well be that some theories apply more to some kinds of movements or to different aspects of the collective action problem. To date, however, applications and critiques of theoretical perspectives within the social movement arena have, with few exceptions, proceeded as if they apply in the same fashion to all kinds of movements and collective action problems, and this is particularly true of theoretical explanations for movement emergence and the occurrence of protest activity. Our findings, showing variation in the explanatory power of the three theories examined in accounting for the rate of homeless protest events, clearly call into question the presumed generalizability of the theories across social movement activity and collective action problems and thus call for more careful assessment of the actual empirical applicability of those claims by considering the array of scope conditions that apply to each of the theories.

Notes

1. Although reasonable questions have been raised about the assessment and likely overestimation of some disabilities among the homeless (see Snow, Anderson, and Koegel 1994), there is no question that the homeless suffer from a high incidence of disability.

2. Later in the article, we discuss in detail how we chose these cities for study.

3. There are numerous analyses of relative deprivation within the collective-action arena that have attempted to examine its influence by assessing presumed structural indicators (e.g., Snyder and Tilly 1972; Spilerman 1970). But it is questionable whether such analyses provide the best assessment of relative deprivation. Seeman (1981) framed the problem well when he noted that

> the structuralists . . . do not typically derive indices of the *sense* of relative deprivation; they measure structural variables . . . that are taken to be indicators of the individual-level variables at issue. But as we should have guessed, the relationship between subjective evaluations of well being and external objective conditions is itself so filtered through individual circumstances that there is little evidence of a systematic effect of macroenvironmental conditions upon overall sense of well being. In short, it is difficult to get to relative deprivation from economic conditions alone, since structural variables are only weak indicators at best of the personal experience of relative deprivation. (396)

4. Although people, money, and legitimacy are typically mentioned as major resources (Jenkins 1983), there continue to be efforts to clarify conceptually and operationally what constitutes an essential resource and to assess the relative importance of various resources (e.g., see Cress and Snow 1996; Edwards and McCarthy 2004).

5. We should note that we face the same issue that other social scientists face: Are the best data available, however possibly flawed, usable for analysis? Using newspaper data does not deviate markedly from accepted standards in social science. For example, the coverage rate of newspapers is probably higher than the rate of reporting of criminal activity, yet criminologists and sociologists continue to study crime rates because these are the best data available. Or, in survey analysis, acceptable response rates compare favorably to the 78% reporting rate for rallies (Oliver and Myers 1999). Thus, like all data in the social sciences, newspaper data are subject to biases; this does not mean that these data are unusable, however.

6. It is important to note that we did not double-code events. Obviously, large protest events that took place in Washington, D.C., were covered in several of our newspapers, as were a number of other, smaller events in other cities. Thus, when more than one daily paper covered a particular event, we chose to code only the report in the paper from the city in which the event occurred.

7. Protest activities coded are as follows: public meetings, petitions, letter-writing campaigns, public hearings, rallies, marches, takeovers of housing units, takeovers of other facilities, blockades, encampments, hunger strikes or fasting, picketing, lawsuits, lobbying, and press conferences.

8. Within the government, the executive (president, governor, and mayor) and legislative (senate, house, city council) branches were the predominant targets.

9. We also operationalized the decrease in manufacturing jobs as the change in the raw number of manufacturing jobs per city size, but we report the results of the dummy variable because it makes more intuitive sense and is easier to convey.

10. Some readers might contend that transfer payments are a more appropriate indicator of strain than of resources. We argue, contrariwise, that it is not the mere existence of transfer payments that indicates strain, but—per Piven and Cloward (1977) and the previously mentioned quotidian disruption thesis—it is either low or declining transfer payments that are likely to be associated with strain. Here we emphasize a greater dollar volume of transfer payments, arguing that it contributes to the broader resource base and should thus be associated with greater frequency of homeless protest. As well, it is important to note that the cost of living varies across these cities such that these payments buy more (or less) in some of these cities. In an attempt to control for this, we were able to find data on a cost of living index for 14 of the cities, but only for 1985. We created a standardized transfer payment measure by dividing our total transfer payments by the cost of living index (1985 value). The coefficient on this measure, when included in our models, is positive and significant. However, we do not report the measure in this article because we were able to find the cost of living index only for some of our cities, and not for the entire time period. Nonetheless, it is worthy of note that, when standardizing our measure for the cost of living, the effect of transfer payments remains the same.

11. We also included the percentage of the vote for each Democratic candidate separately but, since these are fairly highly correlated (as expected), it made more sense to construct the index to tap the overall Democratic strength in a city.

12. In models not shown, we included various dummy variables for time periods corresponding to changes in the U.S. presidency to measure for possible changes in the national context that might have affected the amount of homeless protest, net of our city-level characteristics. In most models, none of these dummy variables was significant and their removal did not change the overall fit of the models; thus we do not include them in Table 5.

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