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**HOMEKEY: A SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGICAL ANALYSIS OF  
“POLICY WINDOWS” TO ADDRESS HOMELESSNESS**

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

in

PSYCHOLOGY

with an emphasis in POLITICS

by

Emily A. Hentschke

September 2023

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## **Abstract**

Homekey:

A Social Psychological Analysis of “Policy Windows” to Address Homelessness

Emily A. Hentschke

Homelessness is of great and growing concern to Californians, yet social and political barriers often prevent meaningful policy interventions from being adopted (Baldassare et al., 2022; Roman & Carver, 2021). However, during the COVID-19 pandemic, localities across California made an unprecedented, innovative investment in housing via Homekey, a policy to rapidly expand housing for people experiencing homelessness (HCD, 2021; Reid et al., 2022). Drawing on Kingdon’s (1995) multiple streams framework, this study examined how the problem, policy, and political streams associated with anti-homeless policy converged during the COVID-19 pandemic to create a political window for Homekey’s adoption (Kingdon, 1995). Although the multiple stream framework is widely used in policy research, it is rarely employed in social psychological analyses of social and economic policies. Likewise, social psychological theories can deepen analyses of policy streams. This study addressed these gaps by examining how system-justifying attitudes, beliefs, and narratives about poverty and homelessness inform policy windows (Appelbaum et al., 2003; Bullock, 2013; 2017; 2019; Jost et al., 2015; Kay et al., 2009; Reppond & Bullock, 2018; Wagaman et al., 2018). Semi-structured interviews were conducted with local stakeholders (i.e., individuals responsible for that area’s Homekey program) at two timepoints. Wave 1 interviews occurred in fall 2020 and included

localities that applied for Homekey ( $n=10$ ) and localities that were unable to apply ( $n=8$ ). Wave 2 data collection took place in winter 2023 and included follow-up interviews with localities who applied for Homekey at Wave 1 ( $n=9$ ) and a new sample of localities who applied for Round 2 but not Round 1 ( $n=9$ ). The goals of the study were to: (1) examine how attitudes, beliefs, and narratives about homelessness and poverty influence political and public support; (2) investigate how policy entrepreneurs subvert and overcome psychological barriers to create political windows; (3) document social, economic, political, and community factors influencing local government readiness to invest in housing for people experiencing homelessness; and (4) consider Homekey's influence on political and public support for future anti-homelessness policies. Reflexive thematic analysis was employed to identify factors in each stream that contributed to opening a policy window for Homekey. In the problem stream, stereotypes and NIMBYism threatened support for Homekey, while framing homelessness as a local issue that warranted policy action beyond enforcement fostered community support. In the policy stream, Homekey's streamlined, flexible approach enhanced its technical feasibility, especially among communities whose values aligned with affordable housing. In the political stream, policy entrepreneurs mitigated backlash by demonstrating accountability, highlighting policy successes, and strategic community engagement. Political will was bolstered by the state's investment and support. These findings deepen our understanding of the relationship between ideology and political action and illuminate how local governments can overcome barriers to adopting programs such as Homekey.

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## **Chapter 1. Introduction**

As an urgent global health crisis, the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated existing social, racial, and economic inequities and heightened awareness of them (British Academy, 2021). The pandemic also catalyzed collaboration across government agencies, spurring the prioritization of social and economic goals and redesigning policies and institutions (Amri & Logan, 2021; Baxter et al., 2021; Parsell et al., 2020). The founder of Community Solutions, a nonprofit dedicated to reducing homelessness, summarized the paradoxical tragedy and opportunity of the pandemic:

COVID-19 has revealed, for all to see, the breakdowns that the existence of homelessness was warning us about all along. Now that we are facing a national project of building new public health infrastructure and evolving institutions and governance models to handle the current and looming crisis, we can make eliminating homelessness an explicit goal of this project and a measure of whether it's succeeding. (Haggerty, 2020, para. 3)

While the pandemic was uniquely perilous for people experiencing homelessness, it brought unprecedented innovation and investment to housing policy (Baxter et al., 2021; Curwen et al., 2020; Nouri et al., 2022; Parsell et al., 2020). Through the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act (CARES Act) and the American Rescue Plan (ARP), the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban

Development (HUD) allocated \$14 billion in emergency housing vouchers and grants for people experiencing homelessness (HUD, 2020, 2021). During the pandemic, the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) also reimbursed states, cities, and counties for millions of dollars they invested from their budgets to shelter people experiencing homelessness (FEMA, 2021). The National Alliance to End Homelessness and its partner organizations consider these pandemic-related investments “once-in-a-lifetime” and “an opportunity to design homelessness out of existence” (Community Solutions, 2021; Haggerty, 2020, par. 2; Roman & Carver, 2021).

This significant investment is indicative of the government’s capacity to meaningfully address homelessness, illuminating avenues for long-term policy solutions (Baxter et al., 2021; O’Sullivan et al., 2021). However, both cautious optimism and warranted skepticism have emerged regarding whether these pandemic responses will translate to sustained political and public commitment to reducing homelessness (Curwen et al., 2020; Lee et al., 2021; Parsell et al., 2020). To understand the factors that facilitated investment in addressing homelessness and to explore the potential for lasting change, this study examined California’s response through Homekey, a \$3.4 billion effort to rapidly acquire and convert motels, hotels, residential facilities, commercial properties, and apartments into homes for people experiencing homelessness. Since its inception in 2020, Homekey has funded over

12,774 housing units through 210 projects across the state (Office of Governor Gavin Newsom, 2023).

In this study, I draw on Kingdon's (1995) Multiple Streams framework to examine factors influencing Homekey's adoption and the potential for future policy change. Political scientist John Kingdon (1995) conceptualized the Multiple Streams framework to explain the complexities of federal government agenda-setting, and it has since been utilized to examine the factors that influence policy change at all levels of government (Henstra, 2010; Liu et al., 2010; Macnaughton et al., 2013; Pavlakis & Duffield, 2017; Schneider & Teske, 1992). Kingdon (1995) identified three streams of the policy-making process: (1) the problem stream (i.e., how an issue is framed, understood, and prioritized); (2) the policy stream (i.e., the policy idea, how it aligns with the values and practices of the institution, and its feasibility); and (3) and the politics stream (i.e., policymakers' response to public opinion, the effects of lobbying, and the values and priorities of elected officials; Henstra, 2010). Policy change occurs when these three streams converge to create a "policy window" or an opportunity for political action that "policy entrepreneurs" capitalize on (Kingdon, 1995).

Drawing on Kingdon's (1995) multiple streams framework, the current study examined how the problem, policy, and political streams around anti-homeless policy converged during the COVID-19 pandemic to create a policy window for Homekey (Kingdon, 1995). Applying a social psychological lens, I highlight how system-

justifying attitudes, beliefs, and narratives about homelessness and poverty are the undercurrent of these policy streams (Appelbaum et al., 2003; Bullock, 2013, 2017, 2019; Jost et al., 2015; Kay et al., 2009; Reppond & Bullock, 2018; Wagaman et al., 2018). I also consider how local government policy entrepreneurs subvert and overcome psychological barriers to advocate for policies such as Homekey.

This research examined the following four questions: (1) How do attitudes, beliefs, and narratives about homelessness and poverty influence political and public support for Homekey? (2) How did policy entrepreneurs at the state and local levels create political windows for Homekey? (3) What social, economic, political, and community factors influence local government readiness to invest in housing projects for people experiencing homelessness? (4) Has Homekey shaped political and public support for future anti-homelessness policies? How? The study's overarching goal was to identify insights for "opening" policy windows that can alleviate homelessness post-pandemic.

## **Chapter 2. Homekey Context: Crises Within Crises**

Due to high costs and low supply, California is in the midst of a longstanding and intensifying housing crisis (McGhee et al., 2021; Walters, 2021). Housing expenses financially strain half of California adults and two-thirds of renters (Baldassare et al., 2019). California has a shortage of more than 1.4 million affordable and available rental homes for low-income families, with most residents regarding

housing affordability and homelessness a significant concern (Baldassare et al., 2023; Levin & Botts, 2020; Thomas, 2022). Increasing income inequality in California is correlated with higher rates of homelessness in the state. The COVID-19 pandemic and climate change-driven natural disasters have intensified the interconnected housing and homelessness crises. What follows is an overview of these crises and how they informed the development of Homekey.

### **Homelessness in California**

California accounts for 12% of the population of the United States, yet in 2022, it was home to 30% (171,521) of people experiencing homelessness nationwide (de Sousa et al., 2022). California has the highest rate of unsheltered individuals, meaning their primary nighttime location is a place not ordinarily used for sleeping (e.g., streets, vehicles, or parks; de Sousa et al., 2022). Two out of three people experiencing homelessness in California are unsheltered (115,491), accounting for more than half of unsheltered people in the country, a number nine times higher than the state with the next highest number of unsheltered people (de Sousa et al., 2022). Between 2007 and 2020, the population of people experiencing homelessness in California increased by 23% (de Sousa et al., 2022). These figures illustrate the depth of the homelessness crisis in California and underscore the need for policy intervention.

These compounding crises disproportionately affect communities of color and Indigenous populations (de Sousa et al., 2022; Kushel et al., 2023). Although just 6% of California residents identify as Black or African American, and just over 1% identify as American Indian or Alaska Native, they account for 30% and 4% of the unhoused population, respectively (Levin et al., 2022). The legacy of structural racism in education, housing, employment, and the justice system contributes to these disparities. A disproportionate number of African Americans are incarcerated, and over the last decade, the state of California has reduced its prison population without providing housing and supportive services after release (Cimini, 2019).

Homelessness is also a social crisis. Unhoused individuals are among the most stigmatized and dehumanized groups in the United States and are frequently excluded from public spaces (Bullock et al., 2017; Harris & Fiske, 2006; Phelan et al., 1997; Toolis & Hammack, 2015). People experiencing homelessness are stereotyped as dangerous, mentally ill, incompetent, lazy, and substance abusers, contributing to social exclusion (Fiske, 2012; Guzewicz & Takooshian, 1991; Phelan et al., 1997; Reppond & Bullock, 2018; Truong, 2012). Derogation, discrimination, and harassment of people experiencing homelessness are common (Guzewicz & Takooshian, 1991; Milburn et al., 2006). According to the National Coalition for the Homeless (2016), unhoused individuals experience bias-motivated hate crimes at a rate three times higher than all other FBI-protected classes combined. Homelessness



is an economic, racial, and social crisis intensified by public health and climate emergencies.

### ***Homelessness and the COVID-19 Crisis***

People experiencing homelessness are particularly vulnerable to COVID-19 due to high rates of chronic illness, communal camping and shelter sites, inability to isolate themselves, and the pandemic-related closure of community resources that provide basic needs assistance (Nouri et al., 2022). At the start of the pandemic, experts projected that unhoused individuals with COVID-19 in the United States would experience twice the hospitalization rate and two to three times the mortality rate of the housed population (Culhane et al., 2020). Unhoused people of color experience even greater risk, with people of color experiencing a disproportionate vulnerability to COVID-19 due to an overrepresentation in essential jobs and disparities in underlying conditions and healthcare access (Magesh et al., 2021; Kellum, 2020).

Although symptom screening, masking, and regular testing reduce the risk of infection, research shows that these efforts are unlikely to prevent an outbreak in homeless shelters, leading health experts to recommend non-congregate housing arrangements for people experiencing homelessness (Chapman et al., 2021). The pandemic also made it even more difficult for unhoused individuals to meet their basic needs. Early in the pandemic, the National Alliance to End Homelessness

(2020) surveyed homeless service providers, finding that many shelters, food resources, and community resources (e.g., libraries, parks, and schools) reduced offerings or closed entirely.

Although many services have reopened or grown more robust as the pandemic has subsided, the economic repercussions are widespread and lasting. From 2020 to 2021, California's homeless population in shelters rose by 7% (47,888 to 51,429; de Sousa et al., 2022). This increase is likely a combination of previously unhoused people becoming sheltered from initiatives such as Homekey and people who have recently become unhoused from economic disruptions (Cuellar Mejia et al., 2022). Economists projected that the pandemic could potentially cause chronic homelessness to increase by as much as 49% in the United States and 68% in California over a four year period (Fleming et al., 2021). Fortunately, federal emergency policy responses (e.g., Eviction moratoria, Emergency Rental Assistance, and housing vouchers) staved off such drastic escalation; between 2020 and 2022 homelessness increased by less than 1% nationwide and by 6% in California (de Sousa et al., 2022; National Alliance to End Homelessness, 2023). However, homelessness is anticipated to peak in 2023, with an additional 131,400 people becoming unhoused in California due to the economic consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic and the end of relief programs (Fleming et al., 2021).

### *Homelessness and Climate Change Crises*

Climate change-related hazard events (e.g., wildfires, floods, droughts, and severe storms; Lee et al., 2021) also intensified the precarity of homelessness in California. According to the World Meteorological Organization, climate-related weather disasters have increased by a factor of five in the past five years (2021). Both the COVID-19 pandemic and climate change increase homelessness via job loss, evictions, and declining affordable housing inventory. They also pose a significant risk to the health and well-being of unhoused individuals (Lee et al., 2021). As Margot Kushel, Director of the University of California-San Francisco's Benioff Homelessness and Housing Initiative, concludes, "I think if coronavirus and homelessness was a crisis within a crisis, you add wildfires to that, and it's a crisis within a crisis within a crisis" (Karlis, 2020).

Following the Camp Fire that raged through Paradise, CA, many low-income residents remained displaced, living in vehicles, staying with friends or family, utilizing shelters, or living on the streets (Chase & Hansen, 2021). Two months after the fire, home prices rose 58% in neighboring counties, and the homeless population increased by 16% (Bernstein, 2020). The impact of climate-related disasters on housing is particularly notable. Between 2016-2022, wildfires destroyed nearly 40,000 structures in California (CalFire, 2022). The pandemic compounded with

climate-related disasters has made experiencing homelessness more likely and exiting it more difficult.

### **Homelessness Crisis Responses**

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, national and local governments around the world rapidly allocated funds and reinvented processes to house and support people experiencing homelessness (Baxter et al., 2021; Benavides & Nukpezah, 2020; Colburn & Aldern, 2022; Curwen et al., 2020; Nouri et al., 2022; Parsell et al., 2020). Some attribute these investments to efforts to protect housed communities from COVID-19 rather than genuine concern for the unhoused (Nouri et al., 2022; Parsell et al., 2020), while others see it as an empathetic public paradigm shift toward addressing inequalities (Amri & Logan, 2021). While the motivation for these efforts is unclear and likely multifaceted, their innovation and impact are undeniable.

Local governments across the United States housed people in RVs, hotel rooms, dorm rooms, convention centers, gyms, and libraries (Benavides & Nukpezah, 2020). In their review of local government responses to homelessness in Canada during the COVID-19 pandemic, Oudshoorn and colleagues (2021) identified a range of strategies, including increasing shelter capacity and utilization (e.g., repurposing public and private spaces, expanding hours, and creating new buildings or tents), increasing housing capacity, amending shelter protocols (e.g., enhanced cleaning,

sanitation, and health care access, and loosening policies on evictions), homeless prevention, increasing system capacity (e.g., redeploying staff, increasing grants and funding), transportation (e.g., creating shelter shuttles and waiving public transportation fees), and improving communication and coordination across sectors. Compounding crises finally resulted in homelessness receiving the attention and resources it warrants (Reid et al., 2022). I next discuss this emergency response in California through Homekey.

### **Homekey: Crisis Response or Meaningful Shift?**

Common barriers to adopting initiatives for reducing homelessness include insufficient funds, a lack of coordination amongst government agencies, established policies that criminalize and perpetuate rather than alleviate homelessness, and a lack of affordable housing (Colburn & Aldern, 2022; Roman & Carver, 2021). Fueled by federal investments, Homekey overcame these barriers, becoming an effective model for addressing homelessness through innovation and collaboration across state departments, local governments, and nonprofit organizations (Reid et al., 2022). California Governor Gavin Newsom (Democrat) introduced Homekey as a momentous opportunity claiming, “We are on the precipice of the most meaningful expansion of homeless housing in decades” (2020, para 6). I provide an overview of the transformative nature of Homekey, beginning with its predecessor, Project Roomkey.

### ***Project Roomkey***

Through Project Roomkey, California was the first state to leverage pandemic FEMA funds to provide shelter for high-risk, homeless residents to isolate and quarantine (Office of Governor Gavin Newsom, 2023). Project Roomkey launched in April 2020 and served more than 42,000 individuals experiencing homelessness, providing shelter in over 16,000 hotel and motel rooms across 55 counties and three tribal nation areas (California Department of Social Services, 2021). The California Department of Social Services (CDSS) partnered with counties to identify hotels and motels, negotiate lease agreements, manage FEMA reimbursement, and navigate wrap-around service provision (California Health Care Foundation; CHCF, 2020).

With varying levels of scale and permanency, states such as Montana, Washington, Minnesota, Vermont, Texas, and New York, also utilized motels to house people experiencing homelessness during the COVID-19 pandemic (Brey, 2022). Compared to congregate shelters, these initiatives limited the spread of COVID-19, diverted patients from hospitals and promoted increased feelings of safety and stability, improved health and well-being, fostered positive interactions with social services, and allowed for future planning (Colburn & Fyall, 2020; Fuchs et al., 2021; Padgett et al., 2022; Robinson et al., 2022).

Previously unhoused adults placed in New York motels reflected positively about having a safe, dignified living space (Aponte, 2021). As one respondent shared,

“living in the hotel has been a real confidence boost. It’s been the first and only bit of stability since I became homeless. I can finally be a regular person again” (Aponte, 2021, para. 12). Others shared how living in the hotel alleviated their stress and provided the space to pursue education, meet health needs, access social services, and advance career goals:

So it’s weird — this pandemic has taken so many people’s lives. It’s been horrible. It’s been deadly. But in a crazy way, it saved some lives, too. It saved my life: I’m living in a clean hotel room, I have my health in order, I can shower, I’m clean. Through this campaign, I got a housing voucher for the first time in my life, and cash assistance, too (Aponte, 2021, para. 26).

While viewed favorably, Project Roomkey was not exempt from criticism. Officials in some cities did not permit Roomkey hotels in their jurisdiction. One city cited concern that operating a hotel as a shelter could cause “irreparable harm” to the community (Shuster, 2020). In other cities, residents protested Roomkey hotels due to perceived safety, security, property value, and lifestyle concerns, while activists criticized the program for not housing people quickly enough (Associated Press, 2020; Matthew, 2020; Rojas & Hagen, 2020; Singgih, 2020).

Other critiques include that it is a temporary rather than long-term solution. Designed as a rapid emergency response for the most vulnerable, Roomkey only housed 10% of California’s unsheltered population and was intended to be temporary

(McConville, 2020). As of June 2021, 33,141 people exited Roomkey, with 29% moving to congregate shelters and institutional settings, 20% moving to permanent housing, and 10% to temporary housing (CDSS, 2021). Unfortunately, 16% of Roomkey participants became unsheltered; it is unknown where 25% of participants moved to after the program (CDSS, 2021). The ethics and efficacy of temporarily housing people without permanent housing solutions are a concern worldwide (Baldassari & Solomon, 2020; Oudshoorn et al., 2021). California responded to this challenge with Homekey.

### ***Homekey Round 1***

In 2020, the California Department of Housing and Community Development (HCD) made \$800 million available to local public agencies via Homekey to purchase and rehabilitate housing (e.g., hotels, motels, vacant apartment buildings) and convert them to long-term housing for people experiencing homelessness (HCD, 2021). Purchasing properties leased through Project Roomkey was recommended but not required (HCD, 2021). All California cities, counties, and local public entities (i.e., housing authorities or federally recognized tribal governments) could apply (California Department of Housing and Community Development, 2020). Requiring a local government to be the applicant encouraged collaborative public partnerships with nonprofits and developers (Reid et al., 2022).



Federal Fiscal Recovery Funds made California's unprecedented investments in Homekey possible (Brey, 2022; Lazere, 2021). On average, states invested 14% of their Federal Fiscal Recovery Funds in human services, whereas California allocated 36% of its funds to human services, mainly to Homekey (Lazere, 2021).

**Homekey Round 1 Application Process.** Homekey is not only noteworthy for its significant financial investment in housing. Its expedited timeline, level of staff support, and explicit equity focus were unprecedented. The Notice of Funding Availability (NOFA) was made available on July 16, 2020, and applications were due on a rolling basis by September 29, 2020. To make this possible, the department trained and re-directed staff to provide application support, created regulatory exemptions, and streamlined the grantmaking and approval processes (HCD, 2021; Reid et al., 2022).

The application required significant planning and coordination, including the vision of the project, project team, and developer, the identification of a suitable site (as well as an affordable development vision, appraisal, physical needs assessment, environmental site assessment, and commitment for insurance), proposed timeline and financing plan, and a five-year commitment to provide operating funds. Lastly, an applicant's governing body, typically a city council or county board of supervisors, needed to approve an authorizing resolution. Recognizing the difficulty of completing the application process in two months, HCD required applicants to engage in a

pre-application consultation call for support. Projects were evaluated based on their ability to expend funds within the timeframe, the development team's capacity and experience, the project's ability to address inequities, and site selection. HCD allocated additional points for proximity to essential services and transportation.

Homekey was also unique in its explicit focus on equity, with one of the criteria for application approval being "A demonstration of how the project will address racial equity, other systemic inequities, state and federal accessibility requirements, and serve members of the target population" (HCD, 2021, p. 12). Projects varied in terms of their target populations. Former foster youth, LGBTQ+ youth, essential farmworkers, Native American communities, women and children escaping unsafe housing situations, people with disabilities, and people experiencing racial and economic disparities were all housed through Homekey (HCD, 2021).

**Homekey Round 1 Results.** Grants were awarded one month after the application closed, and the deadline for spending federal relief funds to acquire and convert properties was three months (HCD, 2021). Typically, it takes three to five years to create permanent supportive housing; however, Homekey achieved this in six months (Reid et al., 2022). Homekey provided funds to 51 jurisdictions across the state to acquire 120 properties and house 8,264 individuals (HCD, 2021; Reid et al., 2022). It allowed jurisdictions to create innovative housing solutions that best-met community needs, ranging from an 8-bedroom Cabin in the mountains to a 232-room

hotel on the coast (Reid et al., 2022). In celebrating Homekey's success, Governor Gavin Newsom shared, "In a matter of months and in the midst of a pandemic... California created over 6,000 new units, on time and under budget" (HCD, 2021, p.6).

### ***Homekey Rounds 2 and 3***

Despite reports of Homekey's positive effects, California still faces significant challenges related to housing and homelessness. Amidst inflation and the tapering of federal COVID relief rental protection funds, between 2020 and 2022, homelessness in California increased by 6.2% to 171,521 people (de Sousa et al., 2022; Paluch & Herrera, 2023). In a public opinion poll, two in three responding Californians believed that homelessness had increased in their community (Baldassare et al., 2023). This was the case regardless of political affiliation or region of the state (Baldassare et al., 2023).

Building on the program's success and responding to rising need, Governor Newsom expanded Homekey through a second round of grants in 2022, totaling a \$3.75 billion investment (Office of Governor Gavin Newsom, 2022). Applications closed on May 2, 2022, and as of November 11, 2022, the second round of Homekey had awarded funds to 116 projects in 60 jurisdictions, creating 6,863 new homes (California Department of Housing and Community Development, 2022). The third round of Homekey was announced in March of 2023, allocating an additional \$736

million in funding (Office of Governor Gavin Newsom, 2023). This newest round of Homekey further deepened the state's investment in rapidly expanding housing for people experiencing homelessness (HCD, 2023).

The study investigated factors contributing to pursuing Homekey housing in California localities and explored how support for this program and similar initiatives can be sustained and expanded.

### **Chapter 3. Leveraging Social Psychology to Examine Homekey via a Multiple Streams Framework**

At the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, myriad critical issues required state and local government attention, ranging from public health and safety (e.g., contagion mitigation, supporting healthcare workers, ensuring health equity) to economic support and stability (e.g., small business loans, unemployment, rental protections, school meals). How did people experiencing homelessness emerge as a priority for unprecedented investment and action? While a large body of research documents barriers to institutional change, Homekey provides an opportunity to better understand policy enactment (Goldfinch & Hart, 2003). I leverage Multiple Streams Analysis (MSA) to examine the factors that made Homekey possible.

Political scientist John Kingdon developed Multiple Streams Analysis (MSA) by examining why policymakers prioritize some issues over others and how agendas develop and shift (Kingdon, 1995). Studying agenda-setting illuminates how governments with limited budgets and capacity establish priorities in the face of an

endless set of public problems (Liu et al., 2010). To understand the perspectives of diverse actors in the policy community, Kingdon (1995) conducted 247 interviews with people close to federal government decision-making regarding health and transportation, including congressional staff, upper-level civil servants, presidential staff, bureau and department appointees, lobbyists, journalists, and consultants. Drawing from these interviews, government documents, and academic research, Kingdon (1995) examined contributing factors to how particular issues grew and faded in prominence over time.

Kingdon identified three process streams that influence government agenda-setting: (1) the problem stream or problem recognition (e.g., issues that receive attention, issues that are eclipsed by others); (2) the policy stream or the formation and refining of policy proposals (e.g., ideas and solutions that move forward, proposals that are abandoned), and (3) the politics stream (e.g., public opinion, interest group campaigns, administration shifts; Kingdon, 1995). Although operating independently, these streams also intersect and influence each other, functioning as an impetus or constraint for policy change (Kingdon, 1995). For example, an administration can prioritize housing and homelessness, and the policy community can make sound proposals. However, a political shift, such as changing public attitudes in an election year, could prevent these issues from making the agenda. “Policy entrepreneurs” are stakeholders who link problems with policy

solutions and political opportunities to create a policy window, a space for agenda and policy change (Béland & Howlett, 2016; Kingdon, 1995). A policy window opens when a problem is recognized, a solution is selected, and a political shift facilitates policy change without activating too many potential constraints (Kingdon, 1995). Policy windows are critical moments when streams converge to create opportunities for change (Kingdon, 1995).

Since Kingdon's initial scholarship, MSA has been widely adopted. Meta-analyses document MSA has been utilized in more than 65 countries and 22 policy areas, with the most prominent policy domains being health, environment, governance, education, and welfare (Jones et al., 2016; Rawat & Morris, 2016). MSA is most commonly utilized to examine agenda setting at the national or federal level but has also been used to help understand regional, state, and local policymaking (Jones et al., 2016; Liu et al., 2010; Rawat & Morris, 2016).

This study applied MSA to a policy domain in which it has been less utilized, housing and homelessness. To illustrate my approach, I outline each of Kingdon's streams, integrating a social psychological lens, to build a foundation for examining political windows for Homekey at the local level. I discuss these streams and the social psychological factors that inform them separately; however, they intersect and influence each other in many ways. I begin with an overview of the problem stream and how policymakers frame the issue.

## **The “Problem” Stream**

The problem stream consists of social, economic, and political issues that require government action (Béland & Howlett, 2016). Policymakers have long recognized that homelessness is a significant concern in the United States. Legislators monitor homelessness rates, demographics, and experiences through the Point-in-Time (PIT) Count, an annual national survey of unhoused individuals since 2005 (de Sousa et al., 2022). Unfortunately, problem awareness alone is insufficient to make it a policy priority. How problems are defined and conceptualized influences the attention given to an issue and proposed solutions. MSA conceptualizes this as the “problem stream” (Kingdon, 1995).

A “focusing event,” such as a crisis, disaster, personal experience of a decision-maker, or a powerful symbol, brings issues to the forefront (Kingdon, 1995). Focusing events such as the COVID-19 pandemic can direct attention to a longstanding problem such as homelessness (Amari & Logan, 2021; Kingdon, 1995). Once an issue captures policymakers’ attention, how they frame “the problem” informs its prioritization and their proposed and supported solutions. Research examining framing offers insight into how homelessness is typically construed and can inform the study of Homeykey’s “problem stream.”

### ***Framing the Problem***

Framing is “the process by which a source defines the essential problem underlying a particular social or political issue and outlines considerations purportedly relevant to that issue” (Nelson et al., 1997, p. 222). Frames influence attitudes toward and responses to social issues (Entman, 1993). Political elites construct policy frames; this framing is communicated through media and shared through public discourse (Druckman & Nelson, 2003; Nelson & Kinder, 1996; Nelson et al., 1997).

Although media control over political agendas may be minimal, media plays a decisive role in reinforcing policy frames to the public (Iyengar, 1990; Kingdon, 1995; Liu et al., 2010). Policy attitudes are group-centric, meaning they are powerfully shaped by beliefs about the perceived beneficiaries of programs and policies (Nelson & Kinder, 1996). Mainstream media communicates stereotypes and myths about poverty, further contributing to the justification of economic stratification (Bowen & Capozziello, 2022; Bullock, 2013; Bullock et al., 2001; Cassiman, 2007; Kendall, 2011; Lens, 2002; Limbert & Bullock, 2009; Misra et al., 2003; Piven & Cloward, 1979; Rose & Baumgartner, 2013). This framing, which perpetuates classist stereotypes portraying unhoused people as criminals, addicts, mentally ill, dirty, and lazy, neglects positive characteristics of unhoused individuals



and structural causes of homelessness (Conrad-Pérez et al., 2021; Reppond & Bullock, 2018; Truong, 2012).

Dominant media framing of poverty and homelessness is classist and racist (Bullock, 2013). Media portrayals of poverty overrepresent African Americans (Gilens, 2003; Misra et al., 2003; van Doorn, 2015). Media representations of African Americans experiencing poverty elicit more individualistic attributions and concerns with dependency than depictions of White people (Iyengar, 1990; Misra et al., 2003). The socioeconomic effects of the COVID-19 pandemic heightened awareness of racial disparities, and many relief policies were framed as advancing racial equity (Franks et al., 2022). Experiments with a predominately White sample found that framing the COVID-19 pandemic as disproportionately impacting Black Americans instead of all U.S. residents activated anti-Black racial bias, reducing support for labor and health-related COVID mitigation policies (Franks et al., 2022). It is likely that racism also influenced Homekey's framing.

Political elites may negatively frame social groups to bolster support for restrictive policies (Erler, 2012). A study of policy frames regarding homelessness in San Francisco found that although the majority of decision-makers endorsed progressive, humanizing frames, a conservative minority swayed policy with their outsized financial and political support (Noy, 2009). Conservative political forces successfully framed homelessness as resulting from individual failings (e.g.,

substance abuse, mental illness, lifestyle choices) and as harmful to the city (Noy, 2009). Nearly a decade later another analysis of media framing in San Francisco found further evidence of the dominance of individualistic frames (Reppond & Bullock, 2018). The media depicted homelessness as a problem for the city rather than a concern of equity or poverty and portrayed unhoused people as “deviant” and harmful (Reppond & Bullock, 2018). These frames increased support for a policy that reduced cash aid to unhoused individuals in favor of a more individualistic, paternalistic programming (e.g., funding for substance abuse programs, shelters, and food provision; Reppond & Bullock, 2018).

Persuasive narratives about social issues is a key factor that can open a policy window (Dudley, 2013). Definitions of “problems” are subjective and often value-laden. How homelessness is framed and conceptualized informs understandings of “the problem” and influences beliefs about solutions (Nelson et al., 2021). The study examined how the problem Homekey addresses - homelessness - was framed at the state and local levels and the potential consequences of these frames.

### **Policy Stream**

The policy stream consists of potential solutions put forth by activists and experts (Kingdon, 1995). During policy-making, stakeholders evaluate policy recommendations to determine whether they adequately address “the problem” (Amri & Logan, 2021). For example, social workers, housing activists, police officers, local

government officials, and health researchers offered diverse proposals for responding to homelessness during the COVID-19 pandemic. Stakeholders assess various options for action (and inaction) during the policy stream (Béland & Howlett, 2016).

For local policymakers, compatibility with state and federal agendas is crucial (Liu et al., 2010). State and federal administrations have institutional resources, decision-making powers, and command of public attention to support and inform local agenda-setting efforts (Kingdon, 1995). The state of California made clear through significant financial investment and media attention that Homekey was central to its housing agenda which likely influenced local governments' consideration of the policy (National Core, 2021).

Another essential aspect of the policy stream is technical feasibility or the specific details of the proposal, including budget, timeline, regulations, and practical considerations. Budgetary concerns are among the most critical factors influencing local government agenda-setting (Liu et al., 2010). The six-month timeline and collaborative processes required for Homekey Round 1 challenged the technical feasibility of the program. For some localities, this was too daunting to take on, yet others successfully navigated these logistics (HCD, 2021).

An important aspect of the policy stream that influences perceived feasibility is "value acceptability." Value acceptability refers to a proposal's alignment with the mainstream values of a policy community (Kingdon, 1995). Local government

officials rank value acceptability as one of the most critical considerations in implementing a policy proposal (Liu et al., 2010). In localities that proposed and implemented Homekey projects, persuasive framing and alignment with local values may have facilitated a policy window. I review salient community values regarding housing and the ideologies and neoliberal beliefs that uphold them.

### ***Value Acceptability***

The values associated with a problem affect how it is defined and what solutions are considered (Kingdon, 1995). Value framing associates moral and cultural values with political agendas and policy proposals (Shen & Edwards, 2005). Individual beliefs and frames influence how we respond to social problems (Bullock & Fernald, 2005; Chong & Druckman, 2007; Nelson et al., 1997; Shen & Edwards, 2005). Rather than introducing new information or changing beliefs, value framing aims to activate existing beliefs and connect them with the intended message (Chong & Druckman, 2007; Nelson et al., 1997).

In their meta-analysis of public opinion research examining affordable housing, Belden and colleagues (2004) documented that values that tend to be associated with affordable housing policy include fairness, opportunity, responsibility to others, societal protection, and aesthetic improvement (Belden et al., 2002). Depending on goals and beliefs, these values can be leveraged to advocate for or against affordable housing and homelessness services. Restrictive homeless

ordinances and policies are often framed as aligning with these “community values” (Lyon-Callo, 2001).

Americans generally endorse affordable housing policies, emphasizing fairness and housing as a basic need (Belden et al., 2004). However, this broad support does not translate to support for local affordable housing initiatives because, in this case, the concern is more specific and personal (Belden et al., 2004). To achieve local affordable housing, communications must appeal to a community’s unique personal security and self-interest values (Belden et al., 2004). Policies that align with values of societal protection, aesthetic improvement, and civic responsibility are more likely to receive support (Belden et al., 2002).

**Societal Protection and Aesthetic Improvement.** The location of the proposed housing is a crucial technical aspect of Homekey that stakeholders must address during the policy stream. Unhoused communities are excluded from public spaces and frequently displaced as a means of social control (Snow & Mulcahy, 2001; Toolis & Hammack, 2015). Racism influences and intensifies this exclusion. People experiencing homelessness in California are disproportionately Black, and physical spaces associated with Black Americans are stereotyped as being dirty and prone to crime (Bonam et al., 2016; Levin et al., 2022). These racist and classist stereotypes about unhoused people shape policy and space allocation.

According to Belden and colleagues (2004), communities value fairness and meeting basic needs until affordable housing is proposed near them. This tendency is

referred to as “not in my backyard” (NIMBY) or the rejection of housing and other initiatives driven by discrimination, fear of loss of property value, quality of life, health effects, or government mismanagement (Pol et al., 2006). In an ethnographic study of a progressive city’s obstruction of a new homeless shelter, Lyon-Callo (2001) found that stereotypes of unhoused people as mentally ill, deviant outsiders fueled this opposition. As one city council representative remarked:

It is common-sensical to say that it's going to be not so pleasant to have facilities in your neighborhood where people are under a lot of stress. Whether the stress is because of their alcohol dependency or drug dependency or just downright bad luck or ill health or whatever...those are not your ideal neighbors. (Lyon-Callo, 2001, p.192)

As this comment illustrates, NIMBYism reduces support for housing initiatives for low-income, unhoused groups and permeates the problem. Similarly, in a survey of Californians, 90% of participants identified homelessness as a significant problem in their community but only 56% supported opening a transitional housing facility in their neighborhood (Adams et al., 2023). Understanding how Homekey may have leveraged social protection and aesthetic improvement values could provide insights for subverting NIMBYism.

**Social Responsibility to the “Deserving.”** Belden and colleagues (2002, 2004) found that social responsibility for helping others aligns with affordable

housing support. However, stereotypes and other beliefs inform who is considered “deserving” of assistance (Bullock, 2013; Katz, 2013). Perceptions of deservingness associate material success with virtue, glorifying the rich and stigmatizing people experiencing poverty (Katz, 2013). “Deservingness” is rooted in meritocratic, individualistic, neoliberal beliefs and aligned with policies that encourage work and morality. As one organizer against homeless shelters summarized, “So much money was being put into this, what we considered an inadequate and inappropriate response to the plight of homelessness... it’s simply charity and I’m opposed to charity” (Lyon-Callo, 2001, p.195).

Judgments of “undeservingness” are often rooted in hostile classism (i.e., stereotyping low income groups as incompetent, irresponsible, and needing control), whereas “deservingness” can be associated with benevolent classism (i.e., stereotyping poor people as friendly, modest, and needing paternalistic assistance; Jordan et al., 2021). Perceiving people who are unhoused as “undeserving” is associated with punitive and regulatory homelessness policies (Adams et al., 2023). To counteract this, housing activists often use frames that emphasize the deservingness of unhoused people (Rosenthal, 2000). Examining how policy entrepreneurs framed the Homekey policy and its values provides insight into the policy window. Homekey violates traditional values of social responsibility by providing housing assistance with little to no strings attached, making its framing

particularly important to understand. Nevertheless, political dynamics are essential to agenda-setting regardless of how a problem and a solution are framed.

### **Politics Stream**

Political climates can encourage or discourage the adoption of evidence-based solutions (Nelson et al., 2021). The politics stream is concerned with navigating the political climate, including policymakers' responses to public opinion and the values and priorities of elected officials (Henstra, 2010). The public mood, campaigns and election considerations, partisan distributions, and administration changes influence the political stream (Kingdon, 1995). Central to the current study is understanding how policymakers and public beliefs about poverty and homelessness inform local government agenda-setting.

In interviews with decision-makers at the local policy level, Liu and colleagues (2010) found that local governments have greater proximity to and more interaction with their constituents than state or national politicians, making public opinion and consensus-building imperative. Dissenting public opinion is a significant concern. As Kingdon (1995, p. 65) summarizes, "public opinion may sometimes direct government to do something but it more often constrains government from doing something." Often, public pressure is diffuse, having a general perspective or concern about an issue without specific "asks" (Kingdon, 1995). These attitudes contribute to opposing policy solutions and may be rooted in system -justifying



beliefs. Considering how system-justifying beliefs inform public opinion and shape the political stream is crucial. I focus on attitudes about homelessness, including meritocracy and individualism, neoliberalism, attributions for poverty and homelessness, and a belief in a just world.

### ***System-Justifying Beliefs***

Beliefs are among the most significant factors influencing policy support (Bartels, 2005; Jost et al., 2004; Kluegel & Smith, 2017; Lau & Heldman, 2009; Macdonald, 2020; Sears et al., 1980). Jost and Banaji (1994) refer to beliefs that legitimize and maintain existing social structures as system-justifying beliefs. Regardless of political affiliation or identity, people are motivated to perceive the social, economic, and institutional structures that affect their lives as fair and legitimate (Jost & Hunyady, 2005). System-justifying beliefs discourage support for policies that challenge existing structures by reducing the emotional distress and moral outrage associated with institutional and social change (Jost & Hunyady, 2005). People are more likely to defend the status quo when they perceive system change as more difficult, as for entrenched issues such as homelessness (Kay et al., 2009; Laurin et al., 2013).

### ***Meritocracy and Individualism***

Meritocratic beliefs are the foundation of the “American Dream” and emphasize that anyone can improve their socioeconomic status regardless of their

identity or economic situation, through hard work and perseverance (Bullock, 2013). Relatedly, individualism is a network of beliefs “emphasizing independence, the pursuit of self-fulfillment, and individual responsibility for achievement” (Bullock, 2008, p. 53). Meritocracy and individualism are central to U.S. political ideology and identity, emphasizing self-reliance and rejection of government interventions (Bazzi et al., 2020; Bullock, 2013, 2017). Having evolved from the U.S.’s Protestant heritage, these ideologies position higher-income groups as morally superior to low-income groups (Uhlmann et al., 2009). Both meritocracy and individualism contribute to stereotypes of unhoused people as immoral and socially deviant.

### ***Neoliberalism***

Related to conservatism and laissez-faire capitalism, neoliberalism posits that market forces are better suited to solve economic and social problems than government intervention (Azevedo et al., 2019). Neoliberal ideology supports policies that value “self-reliance,” glorify work, and transfer social obligation from the state to individuals (Bullock et al., 2019). Thus, neoliberalism opposes large-scale government programs providing housing with minimal requirements. Neoliberal ideology has driven policy and services that are temporary, cost-effective, and ignore structural causes of homelessness (Johnstone et al., 2017). Neoliberal ideology could undermine Homekey by seeking to protect economic structures and limit government intervention to maintain an unequal status quo.

### *Attributions for Poverty and Homelessness*

Attributions for poverty and homelessness also influence public opinion. Research reveals three commonly held attributions for poverty: individualistic, structural, and fatalistic (Bullock et al., 2003; Hunt & Bullock, 2016; Kluegel & Smith, 2017). Individualistic attributions focus on personal responsibility (e.g., laziness, lack of interest in self-improvement), structural attributions emphasize the social and economic factors that contribute to poverty (e.g., a weak job market, lack of affordable housing), and fatalistic explanations explain poverty in terms of circumstances beyond individual control (e.g., disability, bad luck; Bullock et al., 2003; Hunt & Bullock, 2016; Kluegel & Smith, 2017).

Compared to poverty, homelessness is more likely to be viewed as a structural problem; however, individualistic attributions, including substance abuse, laziness, and mental health disorders, are still prevalent (Lee et al., 1990; Pruitt et al., 2020; Truong, 2012; Tsai et al., 2017). A recent survey of community member perceptions of homelessness in San Diego, California, found that participants endorsed individualistic attributions (i.e., drug and alcohol abuse and mental illness) more than structural causes (i.e., inability to find affordable housing; Adams et al., 2023). Three out of four participants reported that a preference for living on the street was occasionally or frequently a cause of homelessness (Adams et al., 2023). However, in subsequent focus groups, structural causes of homelessness were frequently discussed

with one participant sharing, “we have a lot of broken systems and that this doesn’t mean that the people themselves are broken” (Adams et al., p. 7). While most participants endorsed structural and individual causes of homelessness, they often overestimated individual attributions (e.g., substance abuse and mental illness) and underestimated structural attributions (e.g., lack of affordable housing; Adams et al., 2023).

Political conservatives and higher income groups tend to endorse individualistic attributions for economic inequality more strongly than structural explanations (Kluegel & Smith, 2017; Pew Research Center, 2020). Structural attributions contribute to support for progressive policies because they “challenge the legitimacy of institutions by situating class as the result of privilege, discrimination, and unfair (dis)advantage” (Appelbaum, 2001; Bullock et al., 2003; Bullock, 2013, p. 54). Attributions for homelessness can influence public willingness to support policy change.

### ***Belief in a Just World***

Belief in a just world posits that the world is a fair place where people get what they deserve (Lerner & Miller, 1978). This system-justifying belief protects individuals from feeling threatened by inequality and injustice because suffering is assumed to be the victim’s fault (Lerner & Simmons, 1966). As Rubin and Peplau (1975) observe, the need for a “just world (often) leads not to justice but to

justification” (p.84). Distancing from people experiencing poverty is common, and belief in a just world furthers outgroup dehumanization and indifference to their suffering (Aguilar et al., 2008; Lott, 2002). Belief in a just world correlates with the increased stigmatization of homelessness and perceptions that homelessness results from moral failings (Smith & Stathi, 2021; Guzewicz & Takooshian, 1991).

Collectively, system-justifying beliefs inform political and public attitudes toward homelessness. Despite awareness of structural causes of homelessness (Lee et al., 1990; Pruitt et al., 2020; Tsai et al., 2017), meritocracy, individualism, and belief in a just world dampen public and political support for system change because unhoused people should be able to “pull themselves up by their bootstraps.” To generate support for Homekey, policy entrepreneurs must challenge, overcome, or subvert system-justifying beliefs potentially through framing in the problem and policy streams.

### **The Current Study**

Legitimizing ideologies could have blocked the political, policy, or problem streams, dooming housing responses to the COVID-19 pandemic. Nevertheless, a policy window for Homekey opened. Examining Homekey through a multiple streams lens can help identify the factors that converged to open this policy window and illuminate how policy entrepreneurs can leverage social psychological insights to build support for reducing homelessness. Homekey could become a meaningful

policy shift in addressing homelessness rather than a crisis response if the window is kept open.

This qualitative study applied a social psychologically oriented multiple streams approach to examine factors that facilitated Homekey policy windows in localities across California. My research examined the following four questions: (1) How do attitudes, beliefs, and narratives about homelessness and poverty influence political and public support for Homekey? (2) How did policy entrepreneurs at the state and local levels create political windows for Homekey? (3) What social, economic, political, and community factors influence local government readiness to invest in housing projects for people experiencing homelessness? (4) How has Homekey shaped political and public support for future anti-homelessness policies? Two waves of interviews with policy entrepreneurs in local California jurisdictions were conducted to identify the mechanisms contributing to Homekey's adoption. Additionally, factors inhibiting and, in some cases, preventing Homekey were explored. Consistent with qualitative public policy evaluations, the complexity and diversity of policy attitudes were embraced to provide a deeper understanding of their role in policy implementation and success (Ford & Goger, 2021; Maxwell, 2020).

#### **Chapter 4. Method**

This study was conducted in partnership with the California Department of Housing and Community Development (HCD). Data was collected in two waves

(e.g., Fall 2020 and Winter 2023) and included three different interview populations: (1) localities who applied for the first round of Homekey; (2) localities who were unable to apply for the first round of Homekey; and (3) localities who were unable to apply in the first round, but applied in the second one..

When Homekey began in the Summer of 2020, I collaborated with HCD to collect a first wave of data with two distinct groups: (1) localities that submitted a Homekey application and (2) localities who made efforts to apply but were ultimately unable to complete the process. When the program expanded and continued into Round 2, I collaborated again with HCD and collected a second wave of data which included the following two groups: (1) Homekey applicants from the first wave to follow-up and learn about their experience sand (2) new localities who did not apply for the first Homekey round but applied for the second round.

### **Participant Localities**

Participants in this study are staff members of local governments or nonprofit organizations who were involved in their jurisdiction's Homekey application and project. More specifically, all participants held positions related to housing and homelessness in cities, counties, housing authorities, regional planning agencies, housing commissions, and homeless services agencies. Participants' job titles included executive director, deputy city manager, associate planner, deputy health services director, and deputy housing director. Length of time engaging in housing

and homelessness work ranged from several decades to several months. Seven of the interviews included multiple participants representing each jurisdiction. HCD assisted in recruitment and provided contact information and applicant status for localities. While some participants shared their perspectives on housing and homelessness, the interviews were primarily focused on local elected officials' and community members' perspectives. Complete demographic information about participants was not collected due to the political sensitivity of the study and confidentiality considerations.

Across the two waves of data collection, interviews were conducted with representatives of 27 localities. Participants represented Homekey projects from localities that included cities/towns ( $n=15$ ), counties ( $n=6$ ), housing authorities/commissions ( $n=4$ ), a regional planning agency ( $n=1$ ), and a tribal housing authority ( $n=1$ ). Homekey funds are allocated based on eight regions. All major California regions participated in each wave of data collection: Bay Area ( $n=6$ ), Sacramento Area ( $n=4$ ), Southern California ( $n=4$ ), San Joaquin Valley ( $n=3$ ), Los Angeles Area ( $n=3$ ), San Diego Area ( $n=2$ ), Central Coast ( $n=2$ ), and other areas (i.e., Balance of State;  $n=3$ ).

Reflecting California's dominant party affiliation, most participant localities were in counties in which a majority of registered voters affiliate with the Democratic Party. One-third of participant localities ( $n=9$ ) were in counties with a strong Democratic majority (i.e., counties in which there are over 30% more registered



Democrats than Republicans), 30% of localities ( $n=8$ ) were in counties with a moderate Democratic Majority (i.e., counties in which there 30%-15% more registered Democrats than Republicans), 26% of localities ( $n=7$ ) were in counties with a slight Democratic majority (i.e., counties in which there between 0-15% more registered Democrats than Republicans), and 11% of localities ( $n=3$ ) were in counties with a slight Republican majority (i.e., counties in which there are between 0-15% more registered Republicans than Democrats).

Participant localities were recruited from varying jurisdiction types (e.g., urban, suburban, and rural), population densities, and concentrations of homelessness to capture the state's diversity of strengths, challenges, and opportunities. The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) geographically divides the country into Continuums of Care (CoCs), regional representative bodies responsible for administering programs and funding to reduce and prevent homelessness. Participants in the current study represented half of all California CoCs or 22 of 44. Homekey jurisdictions in the current study were part of CoCs that are geographically classified as major cities (CoCs that represent the 50 most populous cities in the United States,  $n=10$ ), largely suburban (CoCs that represent largely suburban areas;  $n=10$ ), largely rural (CoCs that represent largely remote and distant towns;  $n=4$ ), and other largely urban (CoCs that represent cities;  $n=3$ ; de Sousa et al., 2022).

Continuums of Care (CoCs) collect an annual Point-In-Time (PIT) Count of homelessness in their region. Comparing the 2020 and 2022 PITs and consistent with state trends, most participant localities experienced an increase in their CoC population of people experiencing homelessness ( $n=22$ ), whereas a few experienced a decrease in their CoC's count of people experiencing homelessness ( $n=5$ ; Colletti, 2022). Overall, California's population of people experiencing homelessness increased by 6.2% between 2020 and 2022 (de Sousa et al., 2022). In California, the rate of homelessness per 10,000 residents is 40.9 (National Alliance to End Homelessness, 2022). About half of the participant localities had above-average rates of homelessness ( $n=13$ ; homelessness rates ranging from 41-130 per 10,000 residents), and about half had below-average rates of homelessness ( $n=14$ ; homelessness rates ranging from 12-40 per 10,000 residents).

### ***Wave 1 Participants: Homekey Round 1***

Wave 1 of data collection was completed in Fall 2020 during the first round of Homekey after applications were submitted and while grants were being awarded. Participants included local representatives who applied for Homekey Round 1 ( $n=10$ , see Table 1 for participant and locality characteristics). All participants who applied for the first round of Homekey were awarded funding, with awards ranging from \$1.8 million to \$128.8 million. Participant localities received funding for one project ( $n=7$ ), two projects ( $n=2$ ), or more than ten projects ( $n=1$ ). Collectively, these

applicants created 1,851 homes, with localities creating less than 50 doors ( $n=4$ ), 100-300 doors ( $n=4$ ), and 300+ doors ( $n=2$ ).

Wave 1 of data collection also included localities that began an application process for Homekey Round 1 but were ultimately unable to apply ( $n=8$ , see Table 2 for participant and locality characteristics). These localities all submitted an intake form to HCD indicating their interest in Homekey, most completed a technical assistance call, and some partially submitted their application before withdrawing.

### ***Wave 2 Participants: Homekey Round 2***

Wave 2 participants were interviewed during Winter of 2023. This timeframe mirrors the first data collection wave as applications were submitted for Homekey Round 2, and grants were awarded. Wave 2 participants included follow-up interviews with localities who applied for Homekey at time point 1 ( $n=9$ , see Table 3 for participant and locality characteristics). Only one locality from the first wave of data collection did not participate in the second wave. In four localities, different staff members participated in the second wave compared to the first due to staffing changes. Of the original ten participant localities who applied for Homekey Round 1, four also received funding for Homekey Round 2.

The second wave of data collection also included localities that applied for Round 2 but not Round 1 ( $n=9$ , see Table 4 for participant and locality characteristics). Homekey Round 2 awards for these first-time applicants ranged from

\$4.6 million to \$38.8 million. Participant localities received funding for one project ( $n=5$ ) or two projects ( $n=4$ ). Collectively, these localities created 573 homes, with localities creating less than 50 doors ( $n=4$ ), 50-100 doors ( $n=2$ ), and 100+ doors ( $n=3$ ).

## **Materials**

The semi-structured interview protocol for both time points was developed in partnership with HCD staff. Questions were tailored to each time point and varied depending on the participant group being interviewed. All materials and amendments were reviewed and approved by the Institutional Review Board at the University of California, Santa Cruz.

### ***First Time Point, Fall 2020***

Wave 1 interviews focused on challenges and opportunities related to Homekey and the process of applying for Homekey funds.

**Homekey Round 1 Applicant Protocol.** Interviews with jurisdictions that applied for Homekey focused on how localities overcame challenges and gained support for their project (see Appendix A). The first set of questions probed participants about their specific roles and responsibilities related to housing and homelessness in their locality. These questions established local context regarding characteristics and experiences of unhoused community members, key stakeholders and decision-makers, and existing policies and programs around housing and

homelessness. Sample questions included the following: Given your knowledge of local climate, culture, and resources, what is it like for people experiencing homelessness in your locality? What do you perceive as the gap between available resources and need? In general, how do housed residents perceive homelessness in your community? Before the COVID-19 pandemic, were there any successful local housing/homelessness programs and policies? If yes, what were they? Were there any that were unsuccessful?

The second set of questions focused on Homekey. These questions explored localities' experiences with Project Roomkey and the challenges and opportunities in preparing their Homekey application. Example questions included the following: Did Roomkey inform your locality's decision to participate in Homekey? In what ways? How did you decide on the partnerships for your application, and how are those working? What is the biggest challenge you expect to face in moving forward with Homekey?

The third set of questions examined the impact of political and public attitudes, beliefs, and narratives about homelessness and localities' efforts to shape narratives about homelessness. These questions included the following: Is there political and public support for Homekey? Are there opponents to Homekey? Who? How did you respond to this opposition? Can you identify any factors that were important to get people on board? This section also explored the role of the

COVID-19 pandemic in influencing attitudes and beliefs about homelessness with the question, do you think the COVID-19 pandemic has increased or decreased support for addressing homelessness in your locality? How?

The interviews concluded with participants' reflections regarding their overall assessment of Roomkey and Homekey's potential effects. Sample questions included the following: How do you think Project Roomkey and Homekey might influence – for better or worse - other opportunities for addressing homelessness in your locality? The state and the Governor significantly invested in and promoted Homekey. What, if any, effects, do you think this will have on addressing homelessness in your locality?

**Homekey Round 1 Non-Applicant Protocol.** Interviews with non-applicant jurisdictions who made efforts to apply to Homekey but were unable to complete the process centered on obstacles and opposition to the project (see Appendix B). The first set of questions was the same as the applicant protocol to establish local context. Similar to the applicant protocol, the second section focused on Homekey but also included questions probing the following: What challenges prevented your locality from applying for Homekey funds? Are there key players whose support could have helped make your application possible? What would need to happen for housing programs like Homekey to be implemented in your community? The third section (i.e., political and public attitudes towards Homelessness and support for Homekey) and the fourth section (i.e., overall reflections) mirrored the applicant protocol.

### ***Second Time Point, Winter 2023***

Building on Time 1 interviews, the second round of data collection delved deeper into the multiple streams contributing to the Homekey policy window in localities.

**Homekey Round 1 Applicant Follow-Up Protocol.** Interviews with the Round 1 applicants in the first wave of data collection focused on the application process. In contrast, second wave follow-up questions sought to understand the implementation and impact of the locality's project. Questions in the first section focused on understanding how their project progressed (see Appendix C). Example questions included the following: What would you consider the project's successes? Have you noticed any effects on homelessness rates or experiences of unhoused folks in your community since Homekey? Are you applying for the second round of Homekey funds as well? Is there any other context that shaped Homekey and experiences of homelessness in your locality since we last spoke (national disasters, policy changes, local events, political shifts, etc.)?

The second set of questions centered on policy entrepreneurs and the characteristics and power dynamics of individuals who were crucial to advancing Homekey in their locality. Example questions included the following: Can you tell me about the key players who made the project possible? What made these people

particularly effective champions for this project? Were you able to get everyone on the same page about this project? How?

The third question set explored the policy stream, seeking to understand aspects of the Homekey policy that were appealing to localities. Example questions included the following: How did the Homekey policy align with your jurisdiction's existing goals and values? What aspects of the policy itself influenced your jurisdiction's decision to participate? The state made Homekey one of the cornerstones of their COVID-19 agenda publicly and financially, did this influence your locality's interest in the policy? How? How did you communicate the value of Homekey to elected officials and community members?

The fourth set of questions attended to the problem stream, exploring how Homekey's framing and the issues the locality's project was designed to address. Example questions included the following: What problems do you think Homekey was intended to address? In your experience, how were these target issues similar or different from other statewide policies or initiatives around housing or homelessness? What issues do you see Homekey addressing in your community?

The fifth round of questions explored the political stream, examining the role of political and public support or dissent for Homekey and the influence of Homekey on the political climate around homelessness. Sample questions included the following: Do you think Homekey has swayed the local housed community or



perceptions of homelessness in your community? To what extent are there efforts in your locality to dispel stereotypes about homelessness or disseminate facts about effective solutions to homelessness to garner public support? Has Homekey impacted how decision-makers in your community think about policy solutions to homelessness? If so, how? Was there any public, political, or business community backlash or opposition to the project?

The interviews concluded with reflections regarding participants' assessment of the Homekey policy window. Sample questions included the following: How do you think Homekey might influence – for better or worse - other opportunities for addressing homelessness throughout the state? What do you think are the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on homelessness policies and programs and the support for them? Do you believe Homekey was a once-in-a-lifetime policy opportunity or the new housing and homelessness policy standard?

### **Applicants Who did not Apply for Round 1, but Applied for Round 2**

**Protocol.** Questions for participants who did not apply for the first round of Homekey centered on how they overcame obstacles to enact the project (see Appendix D). The first set of questions explored the social and political context, using the same questions as the beginning section for the first time point. The only additional questions are: Can you walk me through the obstacles that prevented your jurisdiction from applying in Round 1? How did you overcome or address these challenges in

order to apply for Round 2? The remainder of the protocol mirrored the questions about the political streams in the Round 1 follow-up protocol.

### **Procedure**

Staff members at HCD provided the names and contact information for potential participants. Potential participants were emailed an overview of the project and invited to schedule an interview. Efforts were made to recruit participants from all geographic regions representing a diversity of localities and Homekey Projects. After interviews were scheduled, participants were emailed an informed consent form to review and sign via DocuSign. All interviews were conducted via Zoom and lasted approximately 60-90 minutes.

I conducted all of the interviews. As a middle class, White female who has not experienced homelessness, my race and class privilege has protected me from personally experiencing poverty and homelessness, or the negative repercussions of the system-justifying ideologies I study and the policies they uphold. I am a California resident and have visited all eight of the Homekey regions and lived in three, providing practical demographic and environmental context about the regions. Although liberal-leaning, I have lived in conservative communities for most of my life. These experiences inform my understanding of the complex interplay between progressive state policies and local conservatism. I also have experience working

with nonprofit organizations focused on homelessness which contributes to my ability to connect with interviewees about the challenges and opportunities of this work.

All interviews were conducted during the participants' workday. I established rapport with participants by thanking them for their time and respecting it. Perhaps more importantly, when participants discussed elected officials, political dynamics, and experiences with state departments they relied on for funding, I emphasized that their confidentiality would be upheld. I started each interview by discussing the goals and purpose of the research, reviewed pertinent information from the consent form, and allotted time for their questions. I then asked for permission to record the discussion. Next, I gave an overview of the topics to be discussed throughout the interview and allowed for more questions before beginning. After the interview, participants were thanked for their time and encouraged to share any relevant documents or reports regarding their Homekey project. Participants were told that a report of findings would be shared when the study is completed.

### **Analysis**

Six undergraduate students assisted with transcribing and analyzing the interviews. Wave 1 interviews were transcribed by research assistants or Landmark Associates, a professional transcription service. For Wave 2, interviews were transcribed using Sonix, an automated transcription service and research assistants reviewed the transcripts for accuracy.

This analysis was guided by a critical constructionist epistemology that considers meaning-making inherently contextual, political, and influenced by positionality (e.g., social class, race, gender). Consistent with Maxwell's (2020) best practices for qualitative inquiry in policy studies, this analysis seeks transferability rather than external validity. While external validity ensures that findings can be extended to similar contexts, transferability "involves developing a theory of the processes that led to particular outcomes and how these processes might operate in a different context" (Maxwell, 2020, p. 182). In this study, I seek to develop a transferable theory of how a policy window allowed Homekey to be enacted in specific local contexts and gain insights into how these mechanisms could operate in different contexts.

Reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2019, 2020) was employed to conduct a Multiple Streams Analysis (MSA). Reflexive thematic analysis is an approach to identifying patterns and a compelling interpretation of qualitative data (Braun et al., 2019). Using reflexive thematic analysis, I generated themes related to each policy stream to identify aspects that contributed to the policy window for Homekey. My analysis included two interconnected stages: analytic coding and theme identification to identify "meaning-based patterns" across participants (Braun et al., 2019; Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2019, 2020). All coding was conducted via MaxQDA, a qualitative analysis software system. Two researchers,

which included an undergraduate research assistant and myself, coded each interview. Rather than seeking coding reliability, in accordance with reflexive thematic analysis principles, research team subjectivity and contextual knowledge were acknowledged throughout coding and theme generation (Braun et al., 2019; Braun & Clarke, 2020). In reflexive thematic analysis the goal of coding and theme development is:

To provide a coherent and compelling interpretation of the data, grounded in the data. The researcher is a storyteller, actively engaged in interpreting data through the lens of their own cultural membership and social positionings, their theoretical assumptions and ideological commitments, as well as their scholarly knowledge (Braun et al., 2019, p. 848-849).

Coding was iterative with inductive, deductive, semantic, and latent codes evolving through engagement with the data and team reflection (Braun et al., 2019). Codes centered interactions between system-justifying ideologies, policy and issue frames, and aspects of the multiple streams framework. Parent codes were organized by each level of the policy stream (e.g., political, problem, policy) and relevant MSA constructs (e.g., policy windows and policy entrepreneurs). Subcodes contained political factors (e.g., elected official and public influence, budget considerations, dynamics between cities and counties, business and nonprofit organizations influence, the role of state government, elections and administration shifts) and social psychological factors (e.g., policy frames, issue frames, stereotypes about

homelessness, racism, attributions for homelessness, individualism and meritocracy, neoliberalism, and belief in a just world) that influenced each stream. Efforts were made to acknowledge the local contexts while establishing statewide patterns and themes to generate transferable insights (Maxwell, 2020). This analysis yielded essential factors that contribute to policy windows for addressing homelessness.

### **Chapter 5. “A Perfect Storm”: The Homekey Policy Window**

Despite homelessness policy’s contentious history, policy windows opened for Homekey in 70 communities across California. Participants described Homekey as resulting from a political, social, and policy climate that fostered “a political moment” where there was “momentum” and “a unified desire” to meaningfully address homelessness in their communities. Alex, a second round Homekey applicant from a strongly Democratic-leaning, urban city with a high rate of homelessness commented on the many converging factors that created “a perfect storm” for Homekey:

It was almost like there's this moment in time. For all the things that COVID took, there was this opportunity that came from COVID and testing through Roomkey what was possible and using some of those spaces that weren't being used and then this transition into Homekey. It made things possible that people had been talking about, but it was always a back-burner project and it was never going to go to the front burner without this perfect storm of COVID impacting... vacant rooms, more funding available and then political will. That early part of COVID really brought into very sharp relief how many people were on the street when they were the only people who were out and

so it was also helpful in that perfect storm... And it was great to have the state play that role...this gave us a chance as a smaller city to get in the mix.

As this quote illustrates, “the perfect storm” of the COVID-19 pandemic ushered in political and public support for transformational housing policy. Participants shared a myriad of factors associated with Kingdon’s problem, policy, and political streams that “opened” the window for Homekey. While many influences shaped policy windows in local jurisdictions, this analysis focuses on the most salient social psychological and political factors. I first discuss the problem stream.

### **The Problem Stream**

How jurisdictions frame, understand, and prioritize homelessness has critical policy implications (Horsell, 2017; Nelson et al., 2021). As illustrated by Brian, a second round applicant from a small suburban city, conflicting understandings of homelessness among local stakeholders stymies policy solutions:

It was actually homelessness-related meetings where I was sitting there thinking all these people are super well-intentioned, but... just speak different languages. You have engineers with a very distinct perspective, you have police with a distinct perspective, you have nonprofit people and church people with a different perspective... I remember one meeting in particular feeling like we were talking past each other, you know, And it wasn't that anyone was heated or mean, it was just a lack of understanding of where people are coming from. So, that persists and it's a hard problem to tackle.

Homelessness is a multidimensional issue with intersecting causes resulting in complex, contradictory understandings of homelessness that restricts policy support. As Alex, a second round applicant from a small urban city explained, “There's so many conversations about homelessness that are complex and nuanced... it's hard for people to hold two things being true at the same time... yes, that person did something that startled you... And yes, that person deserves to get housed.”

Similarly, Sanda, a participant from a county in which business opposition prevented their application from moving forward recounted her dismay at diverging perceptions of homelessness, “It sometimes surprises me how unconcerned and angry individuals can get about homelessness and how ‘othered’ homeless individuals can be, it's sort of on an individual by individual basis, based on your values and how you see the world.” Despite these challenges, communities across the state acknowledged complexities and converged around a shared understanding of homelessness, allowing for Homekey.

In the problem stream, two interconnected counter-narratives about homelessness were identified: (1) “They are our people:” homelessness as an exigent problem in my backyard (2) “We can’t arrest our way out of homelessness:” homelessness is not solely an enforcement issue. These narratives reinforced each other to redefine homelessness and reimagine policy solutions in localities.

***“They are our People:” Homelessness as an Exigent Problem in My Backyard***

Ownership of an issue is central to the problem stream. Whether homelessness is considered a local community focus or a problem for “someone else” to address



influenced support for Homekey. Local accountability for homelessness is related to “not in my backyard” or NIMBYism. Rooted in classist and racist stereotypes, NIMBYism is a pervasive barrier to affordable housing and homeless services (Hart Shegos, 2006; Lyon-Callo, 2001; Pol et al., 2006). It often manifests as fears of declining property values, reduced neighborhood safety and aesthetics, crime and drug use, and concerns about perpetuating “dependence” (Hart Shegos, 2006). NIMBYism is grounded, in part, on the belief that providing services and developing affordable housing units will attract “undesirable” outsiders to the community. Brian, a second round applicant from a suburban city in a strongly Democratic-leaning region aptly described this challenge which was shared by many participants:

There's a little bit of resentment in the area... a flavor of comment that we hear a lot is, ‘we provide all the housing and services and we do a good job and then we get everyone else's homeless, they bus them in and they come in.’

Resentment toward “everyone else’s homeless” underscores that people receiving services are not perceived as community members and that homelessness is not regarded as a local issue.

For some localities, NIMBYism fully blocked submission of their Homekey application. In one urban, moderately Democratic-leaning county, local business owners near the proposed Homekey site successfully lobbied the county board of supervisors to vote against the project because they believed it would harm their businesses. Clara, another participant in a predominantly urban, slightly Democratic-leaning county who could not apply for Homekey shared, “I had to meet

with the sheriff out there because he felt that building those units would invite homelessness, [it would] be imported. He thought it would increase the calls for service ... It's a huge challenge, NIMBYism in our county.”

To varying degrees all localities identified NIMBYism as a source of opposition, however, localities also noted beneficial shifts in public and political perceptions of homelessness that advanced their Homekey projects. Increasingly, many California communities appear to be considering homelessness as a pressing issue in their “backyard” that requires ownership. In a recent statewide survey, 96% of Californians considered homelessness an important issue in their region; this concern was at a record high, increasing 10% in the last four years (Thomas, 2023). As a Joshua, a participant from a suburban city in a moderately Democratic-leaning region summarized, “We've come around to recognize that homelessness is primarily a local issue... They are our people, they're not somebody else's people coming into our city... they're still our people and we need to do something about it.”

Acknowledging that homelessness is a local issue that requires a local response fostered public and political support for Homekey. I outline three factors that supported this narrative shift and contributed to Homekey's policy window: (1) the COVID-19 pandemic as a “focusing event” for homelessness; (2) a visual increase in homelessness; (3) and longstanding community education efforts.

**COVID as a “Focusing Event” for Homelessness.** In the problem stream, issues often move to the forefront or are reprioritized due to a “focusing event” (Kingdon, 1995). The COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent recession can be

considered focusing events because they increased likelihood of experiencing homelessness, the risks associated with homelessness, and awareness of homelessness (Amari & Logan, 2021; Lee et al., 2021; Oudshoorn et al., 2021). Participants in this study consistently identified the COVID-19 pandemic as increasing local public and political support for homeless services via heightened community concern and empathy for unhoused residents in their localities.

In the first round of interviews, which were conducted during the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic, this support was attributed to structural sources of economic precarity and the public health concerns of people experiencing homelessness. Miranda, a first round applicant from a suburban city in a slightly Republican-leaning region describes how the COVID-19 pandemic highlighted vulnerabilities and motivated investment in addressing homelessness:

COVID is like a highlighter. It highlights how vulnerable everyone already was. If you were vulnerable before, you're even more vulnerable, and so I think everyone is like, 'Oh wow, it's a terrible time to have people be homeless' and I'm like, 'Well sure. It was always terrible.' Now everyone agrees. In general, I've gotten so much more support... Everyone sees the urgency, and they see the value. I don't think that goes away with COVID. It's been a little magnifying lens on the problem and also offered a solution that made a lot of sense. Everyone's like, 'We've been talking about this for years, buying a motel and having homeless housing.' I was like, 'Great. Let's do it. Let's actually make that happen.'

Similar to this localities' experience, many respondents reported that previously proposed homelessness policies and programs received greater prioritization early in the COVID-19 pandemic. A locality that was unable to apply for Homekey in the first round subsequently passed a previously opposed safe parking program with unanimous political support, Brooke observed, "I really feel like the pandemic has made it easier for the community to talk more openly about homelessness and housing and just be really clear that if you're against this like, *really?*" Building on momentum from the adoption of the safe parking program, this locality ultimately enacted a Homekey project in the second funding round.

The COVID-19 pandemic illuminated the failures of workplace and government systems to protect families against economic precarity (Andrade et al., 2022; Rodrigues et al., 2023). Interviewees described these experiences of hardship as fostering greater community empathy for people experiencing homelessness. Brooke representing a small, strongly Democratic-leaning urban city shared:

The pandemic has been so hard for everybody and I think that to the degree that people are able to soften their hearts and recognize that 'Wow! My hardship is completely different from the hardship that somebody who is living on the street is enduring and while it's not the same I recognize the stress of that'.

The shared hardship created by the COVID-19 pandemic fostered empathy and focused attention to inequities. Indeed, research documents that capacity for perspective-taking and emotional empathy increased in response to the COVID-19

pandemic (Baiano et al., 2022). Many localities, including this first round applicant from a small, rural, moderately Democratic-leaning city, validate this finding, “Oh, (COVID) definitely increased the support of just seeing how dire a situation is and how this is something that affects all of us.”

A study examining beliefs about economic justice during the COVID-19 pandemic found that a sense of shared humanity and awareness of class privilege increased during this time period, contributing to greater support for policies that support socioeconomic equality (Uluğ et al., 2022). Similar effects have been documented during other economic and social crises. In a content analysis of newspaper articles about the “Great Recession” of 2008, framing of poverty as a societal rather than an individual failure increased and the middle class was depicted as the new face of poverty (Erler, 2012). People experiencing poverty due to the recession were described as blameless and deserving of services (Erler, 2012). Concerns about formerly middle class families losing their jobs and homes during the COVID-19 pandemic could contribute to heightened support for anti-homelessness policies.

A “structural compassion,” or a shared sentiment that acknowledges pervasive prejudice and systemic determinants of inequality, is essential to a critically inclusive policy response to homelessness (Horsell, 2017). Interviews indicate the COVID-19 pandemic facilitated a “structural compassion” that ignited attention, empathy, and motivation to house people experiencing homelessness. Overall, widespread hardship

during the COVID-19 pandemic facilitated a structural understanding and concern for homelessness, facilitating a policy window for Homekey.

**Prevalence of Visible Homelessness.** The sheer prevalence of visible homelessness is a second factor that facilitated the recognition of homelessness as a local issue warranting action. Homelessness in California is increasing due to the economic effects of the recession and high living costs (de Sousa et al., 2022; Fleming et al., 2021). Interviewees noted visible homelessness as a chief complaint among their constituents. In communities across the state, participants echoed that homelessness is “one of the most visible things people complain about” and that their “homeless issue got to a point where we couldn't ignore it.” A shared sentiment across participants was that the magnitude of homelessness became so untenable that residents could no longer deny that it was a local matter, as summarized by Melissa from a large urban city in a strongly Democratic-leaning region:

Homelessness has become so much a part of everyone's reality that it's unavoidable. I think that has really changed people's minds about what they're comfortable with and what they're willing to do in their own neighborhoods to make an improvement. The message is delivered as you drive or walk your own neighborhood, you don't need a public service announcement about it... With every household feeling impacted by the housing crisis, everyone seeing folks unhoused in their own neighborhoods... I've worked in this city over 25 years. I have never seen more willingness of a community to accept homeless housing just because they recognize that the only way to get folks off the

street and they'd rather see them housed than on the street in their neighborhoods. The fact that it is just in everyone's face right now that we haven't seen as much NIMBYism as we have in past decades and past years of trying to build even just affordable housing in neighborhoods.

Across the state, interviewees observed that homelessness had now reached a threshold that was impossible to ignore or consider as being “someone else’s issue.”

Research examining public attitudes indicates that communities with higher rates of homelessness are more likely to support the rights of unhoused populations and perceive affordable housing and cash assistance programs as being effective (Lee et al., 2004; Tsai et al., 2019). Additionally, interpersonal contact with people experiencing homelessness is correlated with empathy, compassion, and structural attributions (Lee et al., 2004; Smith et al., 2023; Tsai et al., 2017, 2019). Even unfavorable contact, such as being panhandled or witnessing negative behaviors, has been shown to increase willingness to invest in addressing homelessness (e.g., pay more taxes, volunteer, support affordable housing in one’s neighborhood; Lee et al., 2004). Whether mediated by empathy or concerns about community burden, contact increases support for policies that address homelessness.

Personal experiences of and exposure to housing precarity (e.g., being behind on rent, doubling up, living in substandard housing) are also associated with increased sympathy and endorsement of structural attributions for homelessness (Smith et al., 2023). These findings help explain the reported increase in community

empathy and willingness to accept Homekey projects, given the housing crisis in California and the rise in housing precarity during the COVID-19 pandemic.

**Longstanding Community Education Efforts.** Outreach regarding the realities of local homelessness has further shifted narratives. A large-scale study of homelessness in California found that 90% of respondents had experienced housing loss in California, and 75% lived in the same county where they lost housing (Kushel et al., 2023). Most interviewees acknowledged this reality and rejected stereotypes about unhoused people being “bused in” to the state or California cities being “magnets for homelessness.” These myths were widely recognized as limiting support for housing programs. Many localities reported engaging in education efforts well before Homekey, both at the individual and community levels, to combat these stereotypes.

In some localities, nonprofit organizations and homeless advocacy groups challenged these misconceptions and worked to raise awareness of local homeless prevalence rates and causes. Meredith, a nonprofit partner from a rural, moderately Democratic-leaning area considered narrative change as central to her work:

People want ‘them’ [unhoused] to be away and so one of the most important parts of my job is to help people understand that people who are homeless doesn't just mean people who have severe mental health issues who stand in the middle of the street talking to themselves. It's families. It's your grandmother. It's your aunt. It's the student sitting next to your child in school.



In one rural city in a slightly Democratic-leaning county, Holly, an interviewee employed at a nonprofit organization had been working to reframe homelessness as a local humanitarian issue. She discussed how this reframing may have contributed to her localities' Homekey window:

When we started our work in [city] we found it was a much bigger community mountain to climb. You would hear a lot of pushback, a lot of, 'They're all drug addicts. They're choosing this life.' It's been several years of pounding the message that these are people born and raised here. In our point-in-time count, 74% were identified from this community. These are your—people you went to high school with. Just that message of, 'These are people. This is not a homeless crisis. It's a humanitarian crisis.'

In this city, which did not have any homeless services before Homekey, the interviewee attributed political support for Homekey to educational outreach about the realities of their unhoused population.

While most localities believed their point-in-time counts underrepresented the prevalence of homelessness, they were grateful to leverage this information for educational outreach. Prior to Homekey, Samantha, a suburban city second round applicant in a slightly Democratic-leaning county implemented a local data dashboard to counter stereotypes:

We have live surveys that are heat maps that shows where your concentration of homelessness is, how that adjusts, police response or case management response...And so we got very real time data that supports the moves and

efforts were were making. It was also a way to get rid of some of the false narratives of ‘people are driving them in or they're busing them in from somewhere’. They're not, 90% of them are our people. They didn't leave here. They're here...Being able to tell that story in a very visual way that also helps.

Harnessing data to debunk stereotypes about “transient” unhoused people likely created an opening for the Homekey policy window.

In summary, localities identified the COVID-19 pandemic, untenable rates of homelessness, and longstanding educational efforts as factors that supported a new narrative of homelessness as an exigent local issue. Communities throughout California seized this shift to enact Homekey projects, as explained by Julie, a first round applicant from a suburban city in a slightly Democratic-leaning county:

Even with us buying a motel for the Homekey funds, it was like, look guys, we either buy this place and have a place for them to go or they are going to stay in the back of your building, in your parking lot, on our beaches, and in our parks because contrary to what everybody believes - that they are just randomly from somewhere else - these are [City] residents. These are people that grew up here or they have a family member that have been here for years. They're not just some wanderer from across the country that just ended up here. These are residents, they're not going to leave, they are going to stay here.

Collectively, these factors facilitated narrative shifts that challenged stereotypes, redefined homelessness, and widened a policy window for Homekey.

These findings suggest that perceiving unhoused residents as community members supported the Homekey policy window and has important implications for future housing initiatives. In some localities this understanding resulted in a preference for exclusively housing community members. When asked about political support for Homekey, Melissa, an applicant from a large urban city shared that districts are more supportive when people within their immediate vicinity are prioritized:

I think their desire has been for us to try to place locally. So I think that's kind of the biggest shift, is trying to ensure that with these properties, we're finding ways to get folks who may be in local shelters or local homeless communities to move directly into the housing and not pulling from the larger city.

If affordable housing policy is able to uphold this preference for hyperlocalization it could support keeping the policy window open.

***“We can’t arrest our way out of homelessness:” Homelessness is not solely an enforcement issue***

The second narrative shift shaping the homelessness problem stream in California is the realization that “we can’t arrest our way out of homelessness.” Historically, many communities have approached homelessness primarily as an enforcement issue under the auspice of community safety and well-being (Colburn & Aldern, 2022; Shinn & Khadduri, 2020). As summarized by Corinne, a second round applicant in a large urban, strongly Democratic-leaning county, stereotypes about

unhoused people as dangerous and immoral shape public understanding regardless of reality:

Unfortunately, there's not a lot of compassion. Probably similar to what you see in other communities, people feel particularly threatened by seeing people on the streets. It's not really founded in reality, if you actually look at crime statistics or rates of violent incidences, it's actually not homeless people or it's not happening in encampments, but it doesn't stop people from feeling like they're dangerous or feeling like they're a threat to them.

These beliefs inform and are reinforced by local practices and ordinances (e.g., citations, encampment sweeps, hostile architecture) that criminalize and regulate homelessness, furthering the exclusion and dehumanization of unhoused people (Bullock et al., 2017; Herring et al., 2020; Toolis & Hammack, 2015).

In a survey of U.S. mayors, 78% of respondents reported that law enforcement influences local homelessness policy (Einstein & Willison, 2022). In line with these findings, many interviewees regarded law enforcement as a stakeholder in addressing homelessness in their communities, and in some cases their homeless services divisions were under the jurisdiction of their local police. This is most common in smaller cities, including this suburban city located in a strongly Democratic-leaning county, in which only one staff member was assigned to all housing projects and law enforcement managed homelessness:

We're one of the many cities where this, in my personal opinion, is unfortunately often seen as a law enforcement issue. I think substantively a lot

of the policies we've put in place are really good...but we made the decision to put this outreach team in the police department and put...sworn officers out there ... .So they carry a lot of weight. I think a lot of their hearts [are] in the right place and in my mind, it's hard to fault a long-time police chief or officer for viewing it as sort of a combat enforcement situation rather than a social services situation...They're pretty progressive on stuff but they're still cops and they still have a certain point of view. - *Brian, second round applicant*

Organizing local homelessness responses through a criminal justice framework treats homelessness as an enforcement rather than social services issue, further criminalizing homelessness.

For some localities, Homekey's incongruence with their enforcement approach was a barrier. Joshua, a participant representing a suburban city in a moderately Democratic-leaning county shared that anticipated pushback about "concentrating homelessness" prevented their Homekey application due to concerns about cleanliness and crime:

We've been trying to clean up our city and clean up our image, and hold things to a higher standard... If we created an overnight shelter that concentrates a lot of those impacts into that one location, I think there would be a lot of concerns from our residents about whether that's a step backwards for us.

This city had one homelessness outreach social worker on staff, with most of their homelessness budget going to law enforcement. Ultimately, their city council decided against pursuing Homekey because they were already "doing enough" for

homelessness. This illustrates the consequences of treating homelessness as an enforcement and safety issue rather than a matter of housing and social services.

Many localities with successful applications included enforcement elements into their proposals (e.g., security, fences) to quell community concerns and protect Homekey residents. However, dominant narratives associating homelessness with crime and NIMBYism persisted. When asked about opposition to their Homekey project, Mark, an applicant from a large urban, slightly Democratic-leaning county shared:

The typical ones [stereotypes] of ‘Oh, it's gonna bring trash and crime, and [bring] all that to the area,’ even though we had all these plans in place to have 24-hour staffing and nighttime security...It was pretty much the classic kind of opposition that I think most people have when you ask them, ‘Can I put a bunch of homeless people in near where you work or live?’ Most people say, ‘No, I don't want that.’

This example underscores the pervasiveness of stereotypes about homelessness and the preference for enforcement or relocation despite concrete strategies for addressing concerns.

Despite the tendency to frame and respond to homelessness as an enforcement issue, localities reported increasingly prioritizing a housing and social services approach. I review three factors that influenced this shift: (1) the landmark *Martin v. City of Boise* case; (2) a public opinion boiling point; and (3) the perception of homelessness as a “racially neutral issue.”

**The Landmark Martin v. City of Boise Case.** In 2018, the Martin v. City of Boise case ruled that it was unconstitutional to criminalize homelessness in localities without sufficient shelter space. The plaintiffs, unhoused residents Janet Bell and Craig Fox, challenged city ordinances that made it a crime to camp in public places and that classified sleeping in public as disorderly conduct (Boeckel, 2021; Martin v. Boise, 2018). Evoking the Eighth Amendment, protecting against cruel and unusual punishment, the court determined that if shelter is unavailable, someone cannot be cited for sleeping or camping (Boeckel, 2021; Martin v. Boise, 2018). The Supreme Court has since declined to review the case, upholding the ruling (Boeckel, 2021).

This landmark ruling forced many jurisdictions that approach homelessness through a law enforcement lens to strengthen their housing and social services. One moderately Democratic-leaning county, containing conservative cities, shared how the Boise ruling affected their interactions with cities and law enforcement:

The recent Boise case really had an impact in our county on how we address homelessness... It's spurred a lot more discussion at a local and law-enforcement level. We certainly have always but much more so recently worked very, very closely with our sheriff's department and also our police departments...to...address the fact that we can't arrest our way out of homelessness. - *Dana, non-applicant*

Despite the Boise ruling creating space to consider alternatives to enforcement, political and public opposition prevailed, preventing this county from completing a Homekey application. This outcome demonstrates the difficulty of advancing housing

initiatives in communities that treat homelessness as an enforcement issue. In considering lessons learned, Dana shared the importance of challenging dominant narratives via discussions about the purpose and effectiveness of housing programs:

We are certainly talking more with our developers about what that can look like moving forward to help encourage our cities and our other communities. What do wraparound services look like? What does housing for the homeless look like? It's not a flop house. It's not just a place people can go and just be out of control and crazy. At the same time, it is not a jail either. No, we aren't locking people down and [doing] mandatory drug-testing. Yes, they can come and walk outside. Really, finding that balance is something we haven't implemented, but we certainly learned from our Homekey application that we need to work with our developers to make sure we're messaging that.

In communities in which Landmark *Martin v. City of Boise* Case was the impetus for re-evaluating their approach to homelessness, it will likely take time for narrative change to take effect.

Rather than trying to change beliefs about homelessness, some community stakeholders, especially those in more conservative-leaning localities, portrayed Homekey as their only legal option for addressing homelessness in the wake of the Boise ruling. *Martin*, a suburban city applicant in a moderately Democratic-leaning county cited the legal precedent to gain Homekey support from their city council:

The game changer was the *Martin v. Boise* case, and so we bring that up to our council. It's like, 'We're providing that type of social service now, whether



you like it or not, because if a resident calls and says, I can't have this encampment right out in front of my house, we have to provide shelter for us to take action.'

This city also communicated the same message to their housed residents:

A lot of them [residents] think, 'Oh, you're going to build this facility, they will come.' You build it, they will come... We have to tell the community, 'Hey, there's no way that we can clear people off the streets unless we have a place for them to go.' It's a solution to what they're seeing and what they're being impacted with. And it's also going to be a decent place where they can get the services they need. So, we actually didn't really have that NIMBYism. I think the site was good, too, because it's adjacent to the river and had a little buffer for some other residential areas. It's in our downtown area, but it's kind of tucked away. Not a lot of people know where it's at. So we actually had property owners that wrote and supported the project because they know they see the homeless in their neighborhood.

Some residents acknowledged homelessness as a local issue and were supportive of housing initiatives, while others would not accept Homekey unless they knew enforcement was no longer an option. This example illustrates that localities can create housing despite oppositional narratives.

**A Public Opinion Boiling Point.** The untenable presence of visual homelessness fostered a narrative shift. Not only did it force communities to

recognize homelessness as a local concern requiring attention, it also fostered acknowledgment that an enforcement approach was insufficient.

In many communities frustration with the correlates of homelessness (e.g., encampments, waste, panhandling) was described as reaching a boiling point, compelling localities to consider policies that address the structural causes of homelessness. When asked about housed residents' perceptions of homelessness, common responses included, “Very much a nuisance. It's a threat. People get super irritated because of a combination of the trash and just the visual impact of it” and “People are frustrated... They feel afraid, and I think that there is a definite and documented desire for us to do more.” Frustration with insufficient government responses to homelessness was also prevalent.

Interviewees shared how dissatisfaction with policy failures facilitated support for alternative strategies.. However, this support was not instant or universal. Holly, a first round applicant from a suburban city that previously did not have any homelessness services described the initial attempts from law enforcement to subvert the Boise ruling:

The city would actually—with law enforcement - encourage movement out of their town. They would make it as difficult to be unhoused in that community as possible... When the Boise ruling came, they all started struggling with how they were policing and moving people along. Now they can't do it... They publicly say ‘We're coming in, and we're helping.’ Then, we're seeing the actuality is that they're trying to figure out a way around Boise.

Subsequently, in her follow-up interview, Holly reflected on growing local recognition of the shortcomings of an enforcement approach and their shift to focusing on services after Homekey:

Years ago [our city] was very, very known for basically trying to run everybody out of town. Ticket, ticket, ticket - that heavy-handed. And there has been a shift to 'we need to figure out services.' It doesn't make sense to just ticket because that costs the city more, costs the department more. It does no good.

Anti-homeless laws perpetuate poverty and homelessness, create spatial churn, and damage the well-being of unhoused people (Herring et al., 2020). The realization that criminalizing homelessness is more expensive and less effective transformed some localities' approaches.

In an urban city in a strongly Democratic-leaning county that “for a long time has policed the community in such a way that made it actually really uncomfortable for people to be unhoused,” rejection of the status quo of enforcement was attributed to an increase in younger, progressive voters, who were frustrated with a lack of structural solutions:

You have new tech jobs and you have younger families, you also have people who... are more politically progressive and...have a different...understanding of the homelessness crisis as a failure of multiple systems and...how people arrived on the street...I feel like there's more acceptance. Within the community [there is also] a push to build more affordable housing and to do

more programming for folks who are unhoused.... It's a mixed bag. You have folks who are very used to different way of living like 20 years ago and then you have folks who are like 'look this is reality now and this is how we have to embrace the problem.' - *Brooke, non-applicant*

Millennials and Generation Z are more likely to identify as progressive, are supportive of governmental interventions for social problems than previous generations, and are more likely to attribute poverty to structural causes (Pew Research Center, 2018). This demographic shift has long-term implications for addressing the structural causes of homelessness. Whether spurred by the Boise ruling or fueled by frustration with policy shortcomings, these findings document a shift away from treating homelessness primarily as an enforcement issue and this supported Homekey's policy window.

**Homelessness as a “Racially Neutral” Issue.** In California and nationally, homelessness disproportionately affects communities of color, yet homelessness is often treated as a race neutral issue (de Sousa et al., 2022; Edwards, 2021; Kushel et al., 2023; Olivet et al., 2021). Nevertheless, race neutral framing is frequently deployed to gain support for housing initiatives. To distance homeless policy from racist stereotypes about poverty (e.g., “welfare queen”), anti-homelessness advocates in the 1980s employed colorblind framing, asserting that anyone can experience homelessness. (Edwards, 2021). Ultimately, that California localities did not frame Homekey as a racial equity program may have benefitted opening the policy window by shifting away from an enforcement focus. African Americans are more likely to be

stereotyped as criminal or deviant than European Americans, contributing to punitive policing and policy sanctions (Craven et al., 2022; James et al., 2022; Johnson, 2008; Schram et al., 2009). Racial equity was not identified by interviewees asked about the issues they perceived Homekey addressed. Although most participants discussed housing as a racial justice issue, the role of race in shaping public perceptions of homelessness was minimized. Some respondents speculated that racial bias influenced policy support, but race was not considered as being a central factor influencing public and political attitudes toward homelessness.

Despite the disproportionate impact on Black and Indigenous communities, the predominately White majority of their visible unhoused population was identified as informing public perceptions. When asked if whether race influenced public support for Homekey, Mark, an urban county representative stated:

I don't think so. The most common homeless person in (city) is a young White male, at least the ones that are unsheltered. Although African Americans are disproportionately represented within the homeless population of our county overall, African-Americans represent 10% of the population, so if they're at 15% homeless, they still don't feel like...I don't think race is a factor.

Honestly, the biggest nuisance for most people is the trash and the carts and the junk that's right in my neighborhood is what people see or right at my shopping center that I go to. So then they become uncomfortable with that because they fear it. Maybe underlying some people is race, but I don't think it's the primary factor or is a big factor.

Homelessness is so dehumanized that it may eclipse racial bias. In many communities, frustration with trash and encampments dominated complaints about homelessness rather than concern about the well-being of unhoused people.

Even large, diverse, urban cities did not consider race a significant factor:

I don't know how it (race) would influence perceptions of homelessness. What people need to do is make the leap of logic between the fact that if you are seeing...a lot of Black and brown folks who are on the street versus their percentage of the population... there's a systemic problem...Systemic racism...the most obvious manifestation of that. I would hope that as people look around, maybe those are things they start to think about. Unfortunately, I don't think a lot of folks think about that. I don't know if it makes them any less uncomfortable with homelessness...In general nobody likes to drive down their local street and see tents everywhere. Nobody likes to take their kids for a walk in their neighborhood and pass by homeless encampments. At the end of the day, the fact that it's so prevalent is starting to shift people's ideas about what needs to be done and who needs to do it. So, that's been the biggest thing.

As this Melissa observed, systemic racism is often unacknowledged. A Pew Research survey poll found that 52% of Black Americans considered racism in our laws to be a more significant obstacle for Black people than racism by individual people, compared to only 25% of Latnix, 23% of Asians, and 18% of White participants (Schaeffer & Edwards, 2022).

Corinne, a participant from an urban locality highlighted racial wealth disparities in her region and the discrepancy between who publicly voices opinions about housing and who is served by the housing programs. Nevertheless, she was hesitant to identify racial disparities and felt ill-equipped to engage conversations about race. When asked about the role of race in shaping conversations around affordable housing, she responded:

It's hard to say without asking people what their motives are. And I don't know if people would be really honest about it. We don't come from a culture of being comfortable to talk about those things. Or if we do, it's not in the right way? None of us have the tools to accurately have these kinds of hard conversations.

Although many localities endorsed Homekey's equity goals, local stakeholders did not frame Homekey as a policy advancing racial equity. This "racially neutral" understanding of homelessness could have benefitted Homekey. However, obscuring inequities could be detrimental to future racial justice initiatives.

While communities reported moving beyond enforcement, this shift may not endure. Some localities created housing solely to have legal compliance to return to enforcement. For example, Jodi, a representative from a locality which did not apply for Homekey due to limited staff capacity shared, "Once we get a sanctioned camp location, we can focus on the enforcement side of getting folks out of the parks and waterways because we've established a site. You can't just kick people out without somewhere for them to go." Additionally, time consuming and expensive housing

programs could erode support. Shaun, a second round applicant from a small, suburban locality noted, “More people are clamoring towards enforcement because they're getting a little bit tired of seeing all this money go out and the problem worsening.”

Demonstrating individual and community effects of Homekey and other housing programs is essential to ensuring that the programs that serve people who are unhoused focuses on housing rather than enforcement. In follow-up interviews with several first round applicants, participants described their Homekey projects as garnering support from police officers who were previously opponents. Colette shared, “The police were ecstatic...They were nervous. Very, very nervous initially but their data show that calls...came down.” In another large, urban, strongly Democratic-leaning county, Lorri reported that a police officer was part of a stakeholders tour of a housing site “the police officer was like, 'wait, this is a Homekey project. I can't believe it. I really wondered who bought it because it's gotten so much better.” Disseminating these outcomes to law enforcement and community stakeholders is crucial for keeping Homekey’s policy window open.

### ***Narrative Shifts in the Problem Stream Support the Homekey Policy Window***

Prioritization of policy solutions is shaped by how local stakeholders understand the “problem” (Horsell, 2017; Kingdon, 1995; Nelson et al., 2021). Truly addressing homelessness requires an acknowledgement of homelessness as a structural, human rights issue (Colburn & Aldern, 2022). While dehumanization and stereotypes were prevalent in all localities, two narrative shifts emerged in the



problem stream that challenged limiting beliefs about homelessness. The Homekey problem stream was influenced by the consideration of homelessness as a local concern requiring policy intervention and the understanding that action must go beyond enforcement. My findings suggest these narratives reinforced each other to encourage local investment in social services and housing for unhoused neighbors, opening the policy window for Homekey.

### **The Policy Stream**

Even if community stakeholders have a shared understanding and prioritize a “problem,” enacting an appropriate policy response is another hurdle. For example, Anne, a non-applicant from a moderately Democratic-leaning suburban city had political support and empathy for the problem:

Our board of supervisors have been extremely supportive...The city has also been supportive...I think there is a lot of support. It's not just a county issue, it's not just a city issue, it's a community-wide issue, and we need to lend a hand to those in need. We don't see them as ‘others’ or ‘nuisance’...They are human beings that need the help, and as a county, as a community, as a service provider, as a public servant, it's our obligation to provide services.

However, this locality did not apply due to practical limitations that made it impossible to meet Homekey’s policy timeline and requirements.

The California Department of Housing and Community Development (HCD) designed Homekey during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, employing unique

policy features to respond quickly and maximize federal funding. Across localities there was appreciation for Homekey's expediency and impact. For instance, Holly observed, "If you look at projects that have the longest term impact for the efficiency of the dollars, Homekey projects really are...the best use of taxpayer dollars, to get people housed and get them in shelters and services," and Natalie noted, "They gave us the opportunity to add housing to the community that literally would not have happened if it weren't for the pandemic and if it weren't for Homekey. And, it happened quickly versus years of work." Yet, the tight timeline and long term financial commitment posed by Homekey challenged many localities. I outline two aspects of the policy stream that supported Homekey's policy window: (1) streamlined state support coupled with local flexibility enhanced technical feasibility; and (2) value acceptability fostered capacity for Homekey.

***"There is this magic:" Streamlined state support coupled with local flexibility enhanced technical feasibility***

At the local government level, an essential component of the policy stream is an initiative's technical feasibility, or its logistics and the practicality (Kingdon, 1995; Liu et al., 2010). For many cities and counties, Homekey was either their first or their most significant investment in affordable housing. Homekey pushed the boundaries of local government, making streamlined, flexible policy features and significant state investment crucial. Miranda, a first round applicant from a rural, slightly Republican-leaning region likened these policy features to "magic:"

There is this magic that can happen where the state steps in and takes a stance and says, ‘Look, we're gonna provide the full force of the state's technical assistance resources,’ which they did. ‘We're going to empower HCD staff to cut through red tape,’ which they did, and they were very good at it... There's something valuable for small communities where we're like ‘Nobody knows what we're doing’ to then have access to the state and have the state's authority... It really made people listen. It made people learn. It made people take it seriously... Overall, an incredibly effective program.

I review three factors that contributed to this policy “magic” and Homekey’s technical feasibility: (1) state support and technical assistance; (2) streamlined application requirements; (3) flexibility for local governments.

**State support and technical assistance.** To enhance Homekey’s technical feasibility, HCD provided dedicated staff support. HCD reallocated many of its staff to conduct “pre-application consultations” (i.e., required, individually tailored meetings with potential applicants to review Homekey requirements and procedures) and to serve as “Homekey ambassadors” (i.e., a single point of contact who offered guidance throughout application and acquisition; HCD, 2021). Participants praised HCD staff as “gems,” “essential,” “exceptional,” “outstanding,” “lovely to work with,” “willing to assist,” “very strong,” “fabulous,” “good stewards and shepherds of the project,” “absolutely great,” and “very helpful.” Localities praised Homekey

ambassadors’ “calmness and dedication” and “flexibility and responsiveness.” They also appreciated that ambassadors “communicated guidelines clearly,” and worked as quickly as they could. Many participants praised this novel, necessary level of support. Kay, a first round applicant from a major city with many Homekey projects lauded this unprecedented level of support:

I definitely love the way that the state staffs it, that's been really helpful...  
They are very conversational about the program, the awards, how it's run...  
So the fact that it feels collaborative is unique. I have never seen another program more collaborative between the state and the municipalities.

That city went on to apply again in the second round and, in the follow-up interview, Melissa continued to acknowledge the collaboration and investment from the state:

I'm glad that the state and the political leadership at the state is willing to put so much energy and resources behind this. We feel really supported. It's a wonderful model for how the state can establish and run great programs, and be so collaborative about it. I hope there will be many, many, many more homekey rounds until we can shut the door on the need for it.

Applicants underscored the benefit of heavy staff support in establishing Homekey as a viable, longstanding policy.

Empowering staff members to provide flexible, collaborative, dedicated support was perceived as a paradigm shift away from formerly punitive and rigid application procedures. When asked about technical assistance provided by HCD, Mark, a first and second round applicant representing a large, slightly

Republican-leaning county shared, “Throughout Homekey it's been about ‘how can we get this done,’ and ‘how can we overcome these problems’, not the typical [HCD] method which is, ‘This is our rule.’ ... It's been very refreshing seeing that different side.” This shift was especially beneficial for smaller jurisdictions who had been previously dissuaded from working with the state, Shaun, a second round applicant from a small city commented:

The application process, by far, was the best that I've ever seen from an HCD program. I think that the staff...somehow somebody said, ‘You know what? Make this work.’ Let's be honest, HCD is punitive about everything. I don't think it's HCD's fault. I think it's the legislature that is making everything punitive, and it really has put a bad taste in local cities' mouths when it comes to working with the state...Homekey was the opposite.

Support from the state not only facilitated the policy window for Homekey but potentially also repaired relations facilitating future collaborations between the state and local municipalities.

**Streamlined application.** Other features of Homekey policy that facilitated its technical feasibility were the streamlined application process and regulatory exemptions. California Assembly Bill No. 83 (2019-2020 Reg. Sess.) created the statutory basis for Homekey, allowing HCD to adopt guidelines for fund expenditures. This allowed Homekey to bypass conditional use permits, create exemptions from the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA), and implement

by-right development language to allow for higher-density housing without public feedback (HCD, 2021; Reid et al., 2022).

Interviewees described these exemptions as simplifying the application process; “I thought that the entire process was pretty streamlined and easy to follow...We are going three or four times as fast as we normally would;” and “One of the things I thought was great from the guidelines on Homekey was the exemption from CEQA because that takes an enormous amount of time.” Participants appreciated the “eliminated bureaucracy” and believed HCD “expedited the process significantly.” These exemptions also bypassed required community meetings, reducing opportunities for opposition (Reid et al., 2022).

Many participants recommended extending Homekey’s streamlined process to future housing programs. Lorri, a first and second round applicant from a strongly Democratic-leaning urban county shared, “The application was far less onerous than the typical housing development application or acquisition application... there was just less red tape...If we could always acquire buildings that way, we would be acquiring more buildings.” A first round applicant from a suburban city echoed these sentiments:

What they just did with Homekey...they need to do that on more things. They need to get out of the business of regulating every single part of this and trust communities to deliver. The burdens that are placed through all the formalities of these programs and policies and processes just waste money and time and cause very, very detrimental delays to every single thing we are trying to do.

This was a much smoother process. I think that the state is seeing that there's an opportunity to simplify and that is what we need to do.

Similar to the staffing investment, applicants regarded this policy feature as strengthening their trust in the state.

Streamlining also saved money. Typically the state awards housing grants as reimbursements, requiring documentation of spending to receive these funds. With Homekey, localities were provided with funding upfront, resulting in significant cost savings:

We're saving a ton of money by HCD saying, 'Here's the money.' ... The idea that that money is available now, and we don't have to get construction loans, and all of the expenses related to that -the legal cost, bank cost, all of that stuff is...less than it normally is. I think our total legal fees for Homekey for 150 units is going to be maybe \$10,000. If you did a 150-unit project through the traditional method, we're talking \$150,000 in legal fees minimum...Making this...relatively simple was a huge difference. If we could clone this and replicate it, not just for acquisition but even new construction, it would be amazing. - *Mark, First and second round applicant from a large urban county*

Bypassing normal regulatory processes allowed time and money saving, making Homekey possible and affordable for many localities.

**Flexibility for local governments.** The third factor that enhanced technical feasibility was flexibility to meet local government needs. Homekey allowed local

jurisdictions to create projects that best suited their needs and communities (HCD, 2021; Reid et al., 2022). Projects ranged from an 8-room cabin to a 232-unit hotel, with some communities creating permanent supportive housing and others developing interim options depending on gaps in their local housing markets (Reid et al., 2022).

Homekey policy was unique in that cities were permitted to apply for funds directly. Housing and homelessness funding streams typically allocate funds through regional Continuums of Care (CoCs) or to counties. Allowing cities to apply directly saved localities' time and reduced bureaucratic hurdles, as described by Eric, a small suburban city applicant, "It's much easier for me to go directly after the funds and not have to deal with another third party, Continuum of Care." Direct applications allowed smaller cities the rare opportunity to advocate for themselves. Alex, an applicant from a small city in a large CoC with high rates of homelessness, summarized it this way:

Huge...that can't be understated...It lets us show what we we can do and what we're going to address. A city like us with our population and our and our homeless count frankly, isn't going to get much out of the CoC. We're not. If ineligible to apply for Homekey funds, this locality would not have the budget to develop housing for people experiencing homelessness.

Compared to most federal programs which are prescriptive about whom to serve, Homekey also allowed applicants to define their target populations. Localities developed Homekey projects to benefit former foster youth, LGTBQ youth, farmworkers, seniors, families, veterans, people with disabilities and health



conditions, and Native Americans (HCD, 2021). This suburban city chose to design its Homekey project for unhoused people with substance use issues, filling a gap in their service provision:

That's what we felt this community needed. And this was the first time... any other COC or HUD dollar was 'we're going to tell you exactly who you need to serve and that's it.' There's really no discussion. Here it was the upfront discussion of 'This is what we want to do,' and then the state saying, 'Okay, let's partner and let's see what happens.' That was amazing. That's the game changer. To continue to allow cities to be able to make some of their own priorities, make that be at the forefront of their homeless programs... Giving cities that autonomy is definitely what I love. - *Gabriel, first round applicant*

Homekey's flexible approach allowed for unprecedented local innovation and investment.

To make Homekey technically feasible for cities, counties, housing authorities, and tribal jurisdictions of all sizes across California, HCD implemented flexible policy features. The current analysis makes clear that individualized support from HCD staff, streamlined application requirements, and flexibility for local governments facilitated Homekey's policy window.

***“It's in line with the city's commitment:” Value acceptability facilitates the capacity for Homekey***

Value acceptability, or the alignment of an initiative or proposal with the policy values of stakeholders, is central to the policy stream (Kingdon, 1995). Value

acceptability is among the most influential elements in local policy-making (Liu et al., 2010). Policies that conflict with local dominant policy ideology are less likely to be considered. As such, it is likely that communities with values that aligned with affordable housing were more likely to apply for Homekey.

Many interviewees described Homekey as aligning with and solidifying their affordable housing plans. Colette described Homekey as “wonderful fate, kismet... an opportunity for us to get what we needed much quicker than what we were already on the timeline to do.” Other jurisdictions were already considering or engaging in motel reuse, Ellen shared, “We started pivoting to the idea of purchasing hotels, even prior to the Homekey NOFA [Notice of Funding Availability] coming out. It was the Homekey NOFA that really bridged that gap and made that possible.” Aligning with the Homekey policy, these localities valued creating housing for people experiencing homelessness.

Despite limited resources, many smaller localities were able to successfully apply for Homekey aided by value alignment, while localities that not already have a commitment to housing people experiencing homelessness and a supportive infrastructure in place could not make Homekey’s tight timeline. Jodi, a rural non-applicant shared:

There just isn't the capacity to do all this planning that needs to happen... We had nothing ready to go. By the time we got everybody in the room to even talk about it, the deadline was done... There was just no time and no room for

anybody that had to start it from scratch to do that. We ultimately had to pull back from applying.

While there are always bureaucratic and practical barriers to addressing homelessness locally (e.g., budget cuts, natural disasters, staff shortages), if a policy area does not align with core values, it will not be prioritized or granted the necessary resources to build capacity (Kingdon, 1995; Liu et al., 2010).

Localities that had not previously incorporated affordable housing into their community values could not initiate this work within Homekey's timeframe. Absence of value framing regarding affordable housing prevented localities from across the state from applying regarding of their political orientation, including this rural, moderately Democratic-leaning county:

We did not have time to go out to the community and talk to the neighbors and the stakeholders and the surrounding area around the hotel... We did want to... We placed an item on the agenda and it got pulled because we just didn't have time. We were...try[ing] to get it into our resolution but we had to pull it because we just did not have time to talk to everyone that we needed to talk to. - *Christopher, non-applicant*

Because this locality had not previously prioritized housing for people experiencing homelessness, they lacked the necessary support for Homekey. As Corinne, a second round applicant shared, "I just don't know how other cities who have not made funding homelessness a priority are able to get Homekey done."

Despite many first round non-applicants citing time and capacity as barriers to Homekey, the longer ramp-up for Round 2 was still insufficient to support some applications. Only one non-applicant from the first time point had a successful Homekey application in the second round. Value alignment was the differentiating factor allowing this city to overcome capacity barriers that others could not. During the first round, this city was already conducting a motel reuse pilot to demonstrate its value. With more time to garner support and build capacity, they were able to apply in Round 2. This example illustrates that policy entrepreneurs can build capacity when the values of a policy community align with an initiative or proposal. I review two core value areas central to Homekey's success in the policy stream: (1) alignment with societal protection and aesthetic improvement values; and (2) alignment with social responsibility to the "deserving."

**Alignment with societal protection and aesthetic improvement values.**

Societal protection and aesthetic improvement are two local values that influence support for affordable housing (Belden et al., 2002, 2004). These values are often cited as a rationale for NIMBYism and punitive anti-homelessness policies (Lyon-Callo, 2001; Pol et al., 2006). Jodi, a non-applicant from a small rural, slightly Republican-leaning city shared how the Homekey policy clashed with their local policy values:

They're definitely more on the enforcement side. The general public doesn't really understand how policy-making really works. They just want the police to go in there and get them [unhoused people] out of the parks. But it's much

more complicated... They're [community members] not realistic solutions driven, they're much more emotionally driven. They'd like us to give them all a bus ticket and ship them out, they don't care where. Just get them out of my community. There's a lot of NIMBYism in this community.

In this case and others similar to it, community values emphasizing enforcement eclipsed Homekey.

Localities that acted on Homekey considered the policy compatible with societal protection and aesthetic improvement. Given that most Homekey projects involved renovating motels, many respondents described how improving blighted areas aligned with these values:

That particular one [Homekey site] was at a motel that is just a complete disaster. It is horribly managed and is an eyesore... It can't be worse than it is now. All of the business owners and people around that motel were actually very supportive. We had no opposition because we told them... 'We're gonna make the place look better. We're gonna have nighttime security so that we don't have random people wandering onto the site. We're gonna professionally manage it. We're gonna have somebody out there picking up trash every day because that's what we do on all of our sites'... It was very well supported.

*-Mark, first round applicant, large urban, slightly Democratic-leaning county*

Many localities incorporated fences, aesthetic improvements, and security measures in their proposal to align with societal protection values to best serve the community

and the Homekey residents. Affordable housing projects that emphasize benefits to the entire community are more likely to be supported (Belden et al., 2004).

Occasionally community members made recommendations for their local Homekey project to reinforce these values. Alex, an interviewee from a small urban city in a strongly-Democratic leaning area provided this feedback about her Homekey project:

The other part is people get punitive or parental sometimes in the process where they want to say, ‘There can't be any drugs. There has to be a curfew.’ You don't say that for your own apartment building. People in your building are maybe using substances. People in your building come and go when they please. These are adults. Can we have a conversation where you're not trying to be punitive because they're staying in this space?

Classist stereotypes about deviance and immorality of people experiencing homelessness fuel these restrictive attitudes (Conrad-Pérez et al., 2021; Lyon-Callo, 2001; Reppond & Bullock, 2018; Truong, 2012). Fortunately, many policy entrepreneurs, including this participant, were skilled at emphasizing other community values such as fairness, opportunity, and social responsibility to gain support and mitigate projects from becoming too paternalistic or punitive (Belden et al., 2004).

**Alignment of social responsibility with “deservingness.”** Policy entrepreneurs leveraged their communities’ commitment to social responsibility to enact Homekey. Despite punitive and paternalistic attitudes in her locality, Alex

explained how her city's social responsibility values aligned with Homekey, facilitating a policy window:

One of our core values is respect and support for people, and we are a city that ...tries to live up to our core values. This is just another step in another addition to a continuum of services that we invest in... And we want to have an option for people to get off the streets more immediately and stay in a community that they feel comfortable in while they work toward their more stable, more permanent housing. But I think it's in line with the city's commitment to its homeless initiative that it created and then has built a division to support that kind of work as well...Everybody's excited... it's not at all out of character for the city to take on this kind of project.

As this remark demonstrates, when unhoused people are considered part of the community, social responsibility values can supersede societal protection concerns. This value alignment intersects with narratives in the problem stream, notably acknowledging homelessness as a local community issue and supporting solutions beyond enforcement.

Classist and racist stereotypes and meritocratic beliefs influence perceived “deservingness,” influencing who communities believe they are responsible for and the service provided (Bullock, 2013; Katz, 2013). An experiment investigating support for homeless policy found that perceived deservingness influenced support even more than the cost savings of a program (Doberstein & Smith, 2019). These findings build on a body of research demonstrating the impact of perceived

“deservingness” on antipoverty policies (Appelbaum et al., 2003; Feather, 2015; Gross & Wronski, 2021).

Some policy entrepreneurs, whether implicitly or explicitly, designed their Homekey projects to emphasize the deservingness of program clients. One rural, slightly Democratic-leaning city designed its Homekey site as “workforce housing.” Meeting community need, Jeff believed the design bolstered public support, “You label it workforce, like ‘Oh that’s people who *work* in the community where you *live*’... It’s serving the same sector - it changes their perspective and how they look at it.” Other Homekey projects served veterans, college students, seniors, people with disabilities, and transition-aged youth; groups often considered deserving due to their “blameless” employment status (Katz, 2013) and system-justifying ideologies (e.g., meritocracy, individualism, and the Protestant work ethic).

Policy communities that deem people experiencing homelessness as “undeserving” are less receptive to policies such as Homekey. Policy entrepreneurs created a Homekey project in a small, rural, slightly Republican jurisdiction despite a hostile local government. In their first interview, Miranda shared how she had attributed housing barriers to limited government capacity but then came to recognize how much NIMBYism played a role, “I used to think it was just a capacity issue. The more I’m in this county, I’m like there is active bad will, people who just [want to] get people out of here.” Despite establishing two Homekey projects, ongoing opposition may force these sites to close. During the follow-up interview for this locality, Natalie shared that local elected officials “don’t want to provide any permanent



housing...they would rather just put a band-aid on things for years and hope people move on.” Explaining the County Board of Supervisors' argument against permanent housing, she stated, “People need to get a job and they need to work hard for themselves” and “everybody has to contribute in society.” This devaluation of people experiencing homelessness is rooted in neoliberal meritocratic beliefs about “deservingness” and illustrates how a lack of value acceptability can erode housing programs even after a policy is enacted.

### ***Technical Feasibility and Value Acceptability in the Policy Stream Supported Homekey’s Policy Window***

Design features influence local willingness to prioritize a policy (Kingdon, 1995). Given Homekey’s unprecedented timeframe and investment, technical feasibility of the policy was particularly important to local governments. Policy elements such as intensive financial and staff support, a streamlined application process, and local flexibility, enhanced Homekey’s technical feasibility. Additionally, value acceptability, or the policy’s alignment with local values, is essential. Communities with existing commitments to addressing homelessness regarded Homekey as aligning with their values of aesthetic improvement, societal protection, and social responsibility. Ultimately, these localities were most likely to successfully implement Homekey programs.

### **The Politics Stream**

The United States has sufficient resources and evidence-based knowledge to address homelessness, but political will is lacking (Shinn & Khadduri, 2020).

Homelessness is a “political lightning rod,” making local politics particularly contentious (Colburn & Aldern, 2022, p.178). Elected officials’ values and priorities, public opinion, and intergovernmental political dynamics all inform the political stream (Henstra, 2010; Kingdon, 1995). As an unprecedented state policy that leverages emergency federal dollars and requires local elected officials’ prioritization of a controversial policy area, political dynamics were integral to Homekey’s adoption.

Political pressure affected Homekey applicants. Sophia, a first round applicant from this small, moderately Democratic-leaning suburban city explained the hesitation to enact bold policies such as Homekey this way, “Cities have a lot on the line, reputation and politicians. We don’t want to make our councils look bad... Why isn’t the government more innovative? It comes back to risk... Innovation is risky.” For some local governments, this risk did not pay off. Sandra, a participant from an urban, moderately Democratic-leaning county described how local political dynamics and campaign contributions prevented her Homekey application:

Certainly, all levels of government, lots of stuff is driven by campaign contributions. Some people's voices speak louder than others. For example, through the Homekey program... we were going...to provide veterans housing... We took that request to our county board of supervisors. The people who own and manage where this hotel is located have a lot of influence so even though we had the veteran resource center on our side, formerly homeless and homeless veterans advocating for the project, the big

money people, who are more likely to make substantial campaign contributions, didn't want it there. So, we weren't even able to submit an application to the state on behalf of the county...It was a huge loss and I just think that's an example of money and politics and money and influence.

This was not the only locality in which elected officials rejected Homekey to avoid political risk, yet other city councils and county boards of supervisors across California signed off on their local Homekey projects.

I review two themes that widened Homekey's political stream: (1) successfully managing backlash through intentional public engagement; and (2) political will that was bolstered by state investment.

***“Gain the respect and trust of the community:” Managing backlash through intentional public engagement***

In local governments, the close proximity of elected officials and constituents intensifies the need for public support and makes opposition particularly damaging (Kingdon, 1995; Liu et al., 2010). In a large-scale survey of U.S. mayors, 73% of respondents felt that they were held accountable for addressing homelessness, and identified public opposition as one of the most prominent barriers to doing so (Einstein & Willison, 2022). Whether opposed to or supportive of housing programs and homeless policy, public engagement tends to be often passionate. Participants reported experiencing fierce opposition (e.g., tense city council meetings, scathing op-eds, threats, and angry phone calls) as well as robust support (e.g., supportive letters, productive conversations, donations, and unopposed proposals). As Brooke

surmised, “[constituents] can overwhelm you with the sheer number of calls and emails.”

Policy backlash, whether in the form of oppositional attitudes or mobilization against a line of policy development, limits policy enactment, entrenchment, and expansion (Patashnik, 2019). Policy backlash against Homekey included protests, lawsuits, petitions, and oppositional community organizing (Bay City News, 2023; Chow & Nelson, 2023; Conley, 2022; Martinez, 2023; San Francisco Examiner Editorial Board, 2021; Sprague, 2023; Torrea, 2022; Vives, 2023). Backlash against policies such as Homekey that serve marginalized communities can be particularly impactful because there is often less capacity and social capital to form counter coalitions (Patashnik, 2019).

System-justifying beliefs motivate backlash against equality-promoting policies by activating the desire to uphold the status quo and maintain perceived safety and stability (Liaquat et al., 2023). By serving a population that is stereotyped as threatening and deviant, Homekey created uncertainty, heightening the potential for backlash (Liaquat et al., 2023). Nevertheless, in some localities, policy entrepreneurs fostered responsive, intentional public engagement to mitigate opposition. I highlight three successful public engagement strategies that lessened backlash: (1) reducing uncertainty through accountability and accessibility; (2) leveraging counter-stereotypic examples of affordable housing; and (3) strategically engaging the public.

### **Reducing uncertainty through accountability and accessibility.**

Throughout different stages of policy enactment, system justification varies in intensity to motivate backlash (Friesen et al., 2019; Liaquat et al., 2023). In the “pre-decision phase,” when a policy is being introduced and negotiated, opposition fueled by system justification is the strongest, with efforts made to preserve the status quo against the unknown (Friesen et al., 2019). Mitigating these forces requires policy leaders to alleviate uncertainty during the early planning and consensus-building phase (Liaquat et al., 2023). In Homekey’s case, some policy entrepreneurs worked to reduce uncertainty via accountability and accessibility.

Successful Homekey applicants engaged with the community via one-on-one conversations, social media, newspaper articles, and, most commonly, town hall meetings. Indeed, local government leaders overwhelmingly cite consensus and coalition building as the most important factors in advancing their policy agendas (Liu et al., 2010). Dedicating ample time to listen, receive feedback, answer questions, and address community concerns reduced opposition to Homekey. Shaun, this small, suburban, second round applicant representing a strongly Democratic-leaning city invested significant time in building relationships to alleviate uncertainty:

We did about seven large community meetings throughout the whole process. Our goal was, number one, to make sure that the neighbors were comfortable. And trust me, there were plenty of uncomfortable meetings for us. We did it in a private environment because something that I really value in these

conversations is that we need to allow people to be honest... When you come to city council, for people that maybe are opposed to it, they're afraid to actually say what they have to say because there's a hesitancy to share because of being judged by others as being not supportive of something that we all collectively agree is a good idea. So, we did these private meetings and I think that really helped because we allowed people to say what they needed to say and sometimes that's more important than having them do it in a council chamber... We got a lot of feedback that way, but we also were able to build more relationships.

This community's hesitations about the project were mitigated by creating space for city staff to hear and address their constituents' concerns.

Many Homekey policy entrepreneurs gained public support during the planning phase by emphasizing their accessibility and accountability to the public. Melissa, a first and second round applicant from a large, strongly Democratic-leaning urban city explained how she ensured successful projects:

We feel that it is our challenge to gain the respect and trust of the community because, at the end of the day, we're the long-term neighbor... We want to make sure that they know who we are and they know who they can call. I think a lot of it is making yourselves available, every phone call we pick up, every letter and email we respond to. We don't let any of it sit... We try to do that relationship-building and let them know how we've operated in other communities..to defuse situations as best we can... We make sure that every

community leader...has direct numbers and we say if anything is going on, anything makes you uncomfortable, you need to call. And then they know if they don't get an answer, they have my number. I think it's just putting a human face on who this is and who's participating and who's going to be serving this community and letting them know that we're not just plopping in, throwing down a building, and walking away.

Several interviewees reported giving community members their direct phone line to use in case of any concerns. Knowing whom to call and a high level of commitment can alleviate distrust.

Applicants also built trust by validating and addressing community concerns with transparent answers as illustrated by Alex, a second round applicant from a small, urban, strongly Democratic-leaning city:

We've tried to really understand what the impacts [of homelessness] have been for residents and businesses and try to address them ... You can't pretend it hasn't been an issue for people or that they haven't had bad experiences because they have... We...live in a small community. We are out there with folks. If we're blowing smoke, they're going to know that we're doing that. We want the program to be a success. We don't want to sell something that it's not... We had to be forthright in the process and say this is what is going to be, this is what it's going to look like, this is what it's not going to be.

Likewise, Brian, a second round applicant from a small suburban city in a moderately Democratic-leaning area was direct and honest with constituents, using “the ‘show

the mess' communication strategy" to show "that even if things are not perfect...you demonstrate that the government is working on stuff and hopefully doing good things." These examples illustrate that honestly communicating policy expectations can reduce the uncertainty that fuels backlash.

**Leveraging counter-stereotypic examples of affordable housing.** To dampen system-justification motivated backlash, leaders must demonstrate how policies reduce "threats" that are rooted in bias (Liaquat et al., 2023). Negative stereotypes and narratives about homelessness spread further in this era of digital misinformation, deepening this challenge (Kim et al., 2021; Liaquat et al., 2023). Meritocratic beliefs and individualistic attributions legitimize narratives associating homelessness with moral failing, rejection of hard work, and dependence (Bazzi et al., 2020; Bullock, 2013; Bullock & Reppond, 2017; Uhlmann et al., 2009). Applicants challenged these beliefs by leveraging examples of policy results from affordable housing to demonstrate how Homekey can promote social order and community safety.

Effectively and efficiently developing and managing housing initiatives can alleviate community concerns (Liaquat et al., 2023). Many respondents described how successfully managing affordable housing projects alleviated community concerns:

We just try to let folks know we're in the community. We have a vested interest in making sure this runs well. We're not just in front of you today, we're making a commitment that this is going to be an asset that we're in



charge of for decades...Now we own 30 assets throughout the county. I love being in community meetings, showing where our developments are in relation to where people live because they're like, 'Oh, I didn't even know that was affordable housing.' Like, 'Yeah, we're in your community already.' So that can be pretty powerful. - *Corinne, a second round applicant in a large urban, strongly Democratic-leaning county*

Demonstrating that existing affordable housing sites blend into the community helped generate support for Homekey.

Additionally, Roomkey and previous Homekey developments allowed applicants to showcase examples of successful programs serving unhoused communities. As James shared, "I think had it not been a Roomkey Project location before, there might have been some more concern." Miranda, a first round applicant in a suburban city in a slightly Republican-leaning region described the influence of stable housing on residents:

Roomkey has been super helpful, generally, just to show we can do this. It's effective... We've now been able to see people who were just in a stagnant or declining state... Now this person is healthy, taking care of themselves, eating well. They are connected to income, and they're about to sign a lease on their own house... I think for communities like ours, it's a great opportunity to just show this is what housing looks like. This is effective and feels better and is producing great outcomes.

Counter-stereotypic examples of individual level effects challenged system-justifying beliefs about meritocracy and individualism, demonstrating that social support assistance programs do not encourage dependency.

Nevertheless, perceived threats to community safety fueled public opposition to Homekey (Bay City News, 2023; Chow & Nelson, 2023; Conley, 2022; Martinez, 2023; San Francisco Examiner Editorial Board, 2021; Torrea, 2022; Vives, 2023). Stereotypes about unhoused people as dangerous contributes to social exclusion and control (Fiske, 2012; Guzewicz & Takooshian, 1991; Phelan et al., 1997; Snow & Mulcahy, 2001; Toolis & Hammack, 2015; Truong, 2012). Homekey threatened this deeply entrenched exclusion by incorporating unhoused people into communities and neighborhoods. To manage these concerns, policy entrepreneurs provided communities with examples of safe and successful affordable housing. In her follow-up interview, Lorri, a first round applicant from a large, strongly Democratic-leaning county described how their Homekey project challenged stereotypes:

The levels of crime around these particular properties that we purchased has gone down and the neighbors are appreciative. Our supervisors are able to hold it up as, 'This can improve the neighborhood. People can get better and people can find housing and keep housing.' So that part has been really positive.

Their county board of supervisors leveraged these powerful outcomes to challenge stereotypes and create housing.

Once governments enact policies, they become the new status quo and are bolstered and protected by system justification (Friesen et al., 2019). In this slightly Democratic-leaning suburban city, longstanding successful housing programs influenced community support for policies such as Homekey:

We're getting less of... 'this just can't fly'... Neighbors are starting to say, 'What's your plan?' as opposed to, 'Don't you dare.' It took us a long time to build those relationships in the community and show them the evidence of what successful programs look like. - *Samantha, second round applicant*

If communities can continue building on Homekey's policy successes, they can contain backlash and keep the homelessness policy window open.

**Strategically (dis)engaging the public.** Accountability, accessibility, and policy success can help reduce system justification backlash but conservatism and economic inequality make this difficult work. Corinne, a second round applicant in a strongly Democratic-leaning, highly economically unequal county described her unsuccessful efforts to challenge anti-homeless stereotypes:

We have been doing community outreach on a project-by-project basis and trying to change the narrative as much as possible...to explain over the last several years thousands of homeless units have been built and the vast majority of them run quietly, smoothly, and perfectly...Sometimes it's just educating if they're open to it, right? It's educating people and letting them give you the opportunity to show them what these [units] can operate like when they're well funded and well managed...The problem is a lot of people

won't even let you get past that point which is why streamlining [Homekey's ability to bypass normative community feedback] is really important.

Those who benefit from an unequal economic system are motivated to defend it, weakening support for progressive policies such as Homekey (Kay et al., 2009; Rodriguez-Bailon et al., 2017). A study examining factors influencing responses to inequality found that participants higher in economic system justification were less likely to feel negative emotions upon viewing people experiencing homelessness (Goudarzi et al., 2020).

Homekey's streamlined exemptions reduced community feedback requirements, increasing the feasibility of the policy in politically contentious communities. This politically diverse city located a slightly Democratic-leaning county also credited Homekey's streamlined process:

We did not go out and do large-scale community involvement just because I hate to say it; we were afraid to go out and rustle up the neighborhood and see what happens... We made a decision we're going to do what's required and not much more than that. If you have much more specific policies for community outreach and involvement, we would have done what we have to do as far as educating people, but I'm not sure that we would have the same outcome.

*-James, second round applicant*

Community backlash could have prevented their Homekey project if given the opportunity.

Political polarization complicates policy consensus building (Jost et al., 2022; Liaquat et al., 2023). As a progressive policy endorsed by a Democratic governor, Homekey's political dynamics could intensify backlash among conservative constituents. Due to potential backlash, this first and second round applicant from a slightly Republican-leaning county declined Governor Newsoms' offer to hold a press conference at their Homekey site and did not contact the media or advertise the award. In the initial interview, Mark shared his philosophy on publicity and engagement regarding housing for people experiencing homelessness:

Our team had decided a long time ago that it is not our responsibility to...advertise...that some housing we're building or acquiring is going to be serving people who have experienced homelessness. Nobody asks for our permission to put anything next to us. They don't say, 'Is it okay if we have seniors live next door? Is it okay if we put this office next door?' To the extent there isn't a requirement...we aren't going out there and publicizing it. We've just been proceeding with 'let's get it done' because we operate at these facilities professionally in a way that people would not know that formerly homeless people live there. That's been our approach, and so far it's worked.

Establishing a policy climate that treats people experiencing homelessness similar to any other groups who need housing assistance reduces opportunities for public opposition as does successful administration.

In his follow-up interview, Mark discussed the importance of celebrating success at the conclusion of a project rather than soliciting feedback at the beginning:

We invite them [the public] to the grand opening and let them see what we've done. Our goal in all of our projects has been to be low-key at the start, not over-promise, and not create a bunch of coverage or anything about what we're going to do. Our only strategy has been 'here's what we've done.' We just think that that's a better strategy for us locally. We're...doing something really good for the community, and if you make a big deal about it when you're just announcing it ...somebody else may have a different view. They may think what you're doing is actually a bad thing. And then you end up creating this negative vibe about a project that's completely unnecessary. So we just show, 'Hey, here's what we did.' Once we show what we've done and show how we can operate it, we have very little complaints.

Policy entrepreneurs who were strategic and selective in their community engagement facilitated Homekey's policy window in localities by reducing a potentially detrimental backlash. Moreover, efforts to build respect and trust with the community through accessibility, accountability, and successful examples of affordable housing helped make Homekey politically feasible. With the public wielding considerable power, intentional community engagement is crucial (Liu et al., 2010).

***“Sometimes you just have to show leadership and courage:” Political will was bolstered by state investment***

Lack of political will to invest in housing programs has further exacerbated homelessness and the housing crisis (Colburn & Aldern, 2022). Budget concerns significantly shape local policy priorities and agendas (Liu et al., 2010). U.S. mayors

cited funding as the most significant barrier to addressing homelessness in their cities (Einstein & Willison, 2022). Homekey provided capital funds to acquire and convert properties and a limited operating budget, and localities must provide ongoing financing to maintain and operate the projects. Funding concerns were a significant barrier to Homekey, however as this participant from a suburban, moderately Democratic-leaning city outlines, funding can also justify lack of will:

Politically, it's acceptable to say we can't do anything...because we don't have any money. We all know that when you really want to do something, you make it happen. You pull in multiple funding sources, and that's why... political will is probably the most important element that you'll need...because the funding, you can always find it...What makes it? To me, it's will. When I want to do something, believe me, I find a way. -*Sophia, first round applicant*

Although securing funding is a valid hurdle, policy entrepreneurs across the state made the financial commitment to take advantage of Homekey. As motel reuse and affordable housing for people experiencing homelessness was new for many localities, courageous leadership was essential. For some localities, existing political will supported their applications and for others, bold leadership from the state facilitated political support within and across jurisdictions.

**Existing political will supported Homekey applications.** Given that homelessness is a prominent political issue across California, many elected officials were already committed to addressing homelessness in their localities. In 2016, the

League of California Cities and the California State Association of Counties formed a Joint Homelessness Taskforce to collaborate on local policy responses to homelessness (Institute for Local Government, 2016). Homelessness has also become a key issue in political campaigns and platforms as Melissa observed, “In this particular election we were very focused on housing, and homelessness as a number one priority. And the mayor has agreed to make that her number one priority.”

As discussed in the problem stream, homelessness has become too big of an issue for policymakers to ignore. Ellen, a first round applicant from an urban, moderately Democratic-leaning county discussed how elected officials in her area are seeking policy solutions:

Frankly, the need is so high, you can't have a conversation in this community right now without anybody saying ‘yes’ and ‘yes’ and this too, and that too. And, Homekey and prevention and crisis response... We have a lot of political will, which helps a lot, especially when you're going to your partners at the county and asking them for millions and millions of dollars so that we can turn around and ask the state for millions and millions too. Political will helped move those conversations forward.

In several jurisdictions across the state, elected officials approved Homekey projects easily and unanimously. Alex, a second round applicant from an urban city in a strongly Democratic-leaning jurisdiction shared:

Our council has been unanimously supportive of this [Homekey] and speaking out and participating in community engagement around this project even when



they were running for reelection or other things were at stake. [They] have been adamant in their support for this project moving forward.

Given that homelessness is a major concern among Californians constituents, candidates running for local office must demonstrate commitment to this issue.

Public opinion influences political will. After budgetary considerations, local government stakeholders consider feedback to be one of the most influential factors in shifting policy attention (Liu et al., 2010). James, a second round applicant describes how public attitudes toward Homekey can require political courage:

It does take courage to stand up and vote to support an application to go in for a [Homekey] project...If you've got a very contentious area, this can be very difficult. It will be very hard on elected officials to try to balance this greater community need that we have. Like we need to do this for all these very important reasons versus, 'Hey, not in my backyard, I don't want to see it. I don't want to have crime.' All these things that might come up. I can see where that'd be a very difficult situation to be in.

In some jurisdictions, public support was overwhelmingly positive. In one large, strongly Democratic-leaning urban county, Lorri reported, "there were actually some neighbors who complained that we weren't doing a project in their city... There were three people who were unhappy and 70 who wanted to testify in support." In more contentious meetings, some elected officials publicly advocated for Homekey. In another large, strongly Democratic-leaning urban county, Corinne shared:

I've actually been in the best situation when I've hosted community meetings that are contentious. The council person has kicked them off to say 'I'm supporting this project. I live here too, and here is why' and then help answer some of the Q & A. That requires a lot of bravery because these are people who they live near and are reliant on votes for. That has been wonderful to have that kind of support.

Across the state, many interviewees characterized elected officials as prioritizing and supporting Homekey.

**Investment from the state created a snowball effect of political will.**

Governor Gavin Newsom has invested significantly in reducing homelessness, making it one of his top priorities. His predecessor Jerry Brown never used the word "homeless" in any of his speeches between 2011-2018, whereas Governor Newsom dedicated his entire 2020 State of the State address to the issue (Levin & Rosenhall, 2020). Governor Newsom has also prioritized Homekey by allocating funds, announcing awards, and visiting Homekey sites. When asked about the Governor's investment, Miranda, a first round applicant from a rural, slightly Republican-leaning city shared:

I think it's been hugely effective. Our local leaders don't really talk about homelessness as a top-of-the-ticket item. This has a little bit forced them too. It's now mentioned at city council meetings. People talk about affordable housing and homelessness, not just for workers and families. They see homelessness as a byproduct of not having affordable housing.

When polled, local government actors identified compatibility with state and federal priorities as the most important factor influencing a policy proposal's survival and success (Liu et al., 2010).

Historically, policy progress has been hindered by tension regarding which levels of government and which agencies are responsible for homelessness (Colburn & Aldern, 2022). Ellen, a first round applicant from an urban, moderately Democratic-leaning county, underscores the importance of political will and cohesion across governments:

It's a combination of the leadership in our area fully supporting and backing, and wanting to make a difference in this arena is critical to our success... Our county supervisor who covers our city—it's his district—has been incredibly impactful on moving forward and progressing the relationship between the city and the county and in marshaling resources. Political support at a county level that makes a huge difference. When your city, and your county are out of step, that can make it very hard to get projects off the ground.

Conflict among cities and between counties and cities regarding homelessness hindered or prevented some Homekey projects.

The force of political will, investment, and directive for all localities to invest in housing from the state compelled action across jurisdictions. In the first round interview, Julie from a suburban, slightly Democratic-leaning city described how political support was impeded by concerns that affordable housing would attract homeless people to the area. However, in the follow-up interview, her colleague Eric

shared how the surrounding jurisdiction's involvement in Homekey reduced public and political concerns:

Homekey pushed all the communities around us to do it. So now [name of city] is not the only one doing it. Our surrounding cities have access to funds and they are also doing different programs so that the residents don't feel like their tax dollars are paying for the whole region's homelessness.

Political will at the state level snowballed, encouraging local governments to prioritize and invest in homelessness.

### ***Strategic Public Engagement and State-Supported Political Will Supported Homekey's Policy Window***

Political dynamics, values and priorities of elected officials, and public opinion all contributed to opening Homekey's policy window. With homelessness among the state's most pressing issues, elected officials across levels of government rowed in the same direction in the Homekey political stream. Policy entrepreneurs mitigated public backlash from dampening this political will via accountability, accessibility, counter-stereotypic examples, and strategic (dis)engagement. Collectively, these factors made Homekey politically feasible.

### **Homekey Policy Window Summary**

Findings from this study illuminated how the Homekey policy window was facilitated by narrative-challenging counter-currents in the problem stream; innovative, flexible, and dedicated state support in the policy stream; and intentional public engagement and political will across governments in the politics stream.

The problem stream consists of public and political understandings of homelessness and its prioritization. Fueled by classist and racist stereotypes, homelessness has been treated as a problem that requires criminal surveillance and enforcement rather than investment (Colburn & Aldern, 2022; Hart Shegos, 2006; Lyon-Callo, 2001; Pol et al., 2006). Two interconnected counternarratives in the problem stream challenged limiting stereotypes and facilitated a shift towards understanding and prioritizing homelessness as a local concern necessitating structural policy intervention beyond enforcement. Viewing homelessness through this lens compelled local governments to take ownership of the issue and opened the window for social service and structural change.

The Homekey policy itself includes features that made it more technically feasible than traditional funding streams. Intensive application assistance, streamlined requirements, and flexibility to meet local needs made it possible for local governments to apply for and invest in Homekey (HCD, 2021; Reid et al., 2022). In particular, the policy stream widened in communities with an existing commitment to addressing homelessness, and whose values aligned with Homekey. Technical feasibility and value acceptability are crucial factors in the policy stream, that the Homekey policy made possible (Liu et al., 2010)

Lastly, local policy entrepreneurs who managed public attitudes through accountability and accessibility, leveraging counter-stereotypic examples of affordable housing, and intentional community (dis)engagement facilitated the policy window. These efforts reduced potential backlash (Friesen et al., 2019; Liaquat et al.,

2023). Although elected officials in some localities already supported Homekey, political investment from the state helped build political will within and across jurisdictions. It may have taken the “perfect storm” to align the problem, policy, and political streams to create a Homekey policy window, but hopefully, Homekey has set a policy precedent and permanently altered the political landscape for housing politics in California.

### **Chapter 6. Discussion: Keeping the Window Open**

Amid a global pandemic, the state of California implemented a historic policy, partnering with jurisdictions to create an unprecedented new supply of housing for people experiencing homelessness. This study provides insight into the social psychological and political factors that contributed to Homekey’s policy window in local governments. Interviewing localities that did not apply for Homekey’s first round and those who only applied in the second round illuminated barriers to the program’s adoption and how local governments may overcome them. Following up with applicants from Homekey’s first round two years later, deepened our understanding of the policy’s implementation and impact.

Now in its third round, Homekey has arguably transformed how local communities address homelessness. The COVID-19 pandemic served as a focusing event, increasing the prioritization of homelessness and revealing previous policy shortcomings. Participants believed the COVID-19 pandemic allowed resources to be “marshaled and focused,” created “the opportunity to break the things that needed to be broken,” and fostered “more straightforward and problem-solving conversations.”

Homekey encouraged cities and counties to take an active role in creating affordable housing to address structural causes of homelessness. However, it remains to be seen if this new approach will have a long term influence on interventions, investments, and political commitment to addressing homelessness (Lee et al., 2021).

Despite alleviating poverty for millions of individuals and families, other transformative pandemic-era policy expansions have been sunsetted, including progressive changes to the Child Tax Credit, unemployment programs, and Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (Gwyn, 2022; McCammon et al., 2022; Rosenbaum et al., 2023). These reversals have been implemented despite ongoing hardship and dissatisfaction with our current economic system. For example, in 2022, major labor strike activity increased by 50% (Poydock et al., 2023). In some cases, equitable policies and innovations spurred by the COVID-19 pandemic remain. California has expanded paid family leave for caregiving, established universal school meals, and launched guaranteed income pilots across the state (Kuang 2022, 2023; Namkung, 2022). Although Homekey's lasting effects are uncertain, it has established a foundation for keeping the homelessness policy window open amid a growing crisis. Documenting and communicating Homekey's effects as well as housing initiatives is crucial.

Despite the waning of the COVID-19 pandemic, the homelessness crisis continues (de Sousa et al., 2022; Fleming et al., 2021). Californians ranked homelessness as one of the top issues for the governor and legislature to address, and 7 in 10 consider homelessness a big problem in their area (Baldassare et al., 2023). As

James, a second round applicant observed, there is every reason to believe interest in Homekey will continue:

Unfortunately, I think the need is going to be there. So as long as the state provides funding for this [Homekey], I think there will be plenty of interest in doing it. You know, in a perfect situation, eventually, you get to a point where you don't need them, but that's going to happen soon.

Many participants echoed the sentiment that until homelessness is significantly reduced, they will pursue Homekey funds.

Participants were hopeful that if Homekey projects are well-executed and their success widely communicated, state and local housing assistance will continue for people experiencing homelessness. As Alex, a second round applicant explained, “We all have to do what we said we were going to do...and we have to do it well...We have to be really good so other people can come behind us.” When asked what would be necessary to keep the policy window open, many interviewees, such as Mark and Brian, identified the necessity of demonstrating the policy’s effect, “We have to show that they work... that's incumbent upon all of us because it's harder to kill a program if it actually is effective. It's showing it works:”

Smart people at HCD and the governor's office on the politics side need to figure out a way to continue to communicate that...both these Homekey investments in the right here and now are desperately needed but also show the ongoing impact of these projects... That's a challenge to keep that in the political consciousness and keep people interested.



Messaging about impact while drawing attention to current needs are challenging but imperative.

Policy entrepreneurs must continue to be accessible and accountable to the public, outlining Homekey's achievements and how much more is needed. This was a successful tactic for Samantha, a second round applicant from a slightly

Democratic-leaning suburban city:

Maintain the communication. 'Great! We're not in a pandemic anymore but here's all the things that we did do, and here's the next step'... Always have that next step and...open, transparent communication. That's what we're going to do locally and that's what works for our jurisdiction.

Direct, honest communication will be increasingly necessary as homelessness continues despite housing investments. Amid significant funding, there is public and political frustration with continued homelessness (Hart, 2023; Watt, 2023). After providing \$15.3 billion of unprecedented support through various housing and homelessness programs, Governor Newsom demanded, "I want to see unprecedented progress" (Hart, 2023, para. 36). Melissa, from a large urban, strongly

Democratic-leaning city that invested heavily in Homekey and underscores the importance of ensuring and communicating successes quickly, "I definitely think people are frustrated with the numbers... I think that there is a willingness to give the city a year or two to try to make things feel different." Unfortunately, Homekey housing has been unable to keep up with demand. I outline policies to accompany Homekey and to help keep the policy window open.

## **Policy Implications and Recommendations**

Homekey provided resources to quickly implement a solution to one of the greatest problems facing state and local communities. Applicants appreciated its innovation, streamlining, upfront funding, and flexibility to meet local needs. Insufficient operating funds and time constraints were consistently identified as policy weaknesses, yet applicants encouraged the continuation and expansion of Homekey. Participants shared valuable recommendations and feedback for the Homekey policy itself which has been given to HCD. Additionally, my findings illuminate broader policy implications that can be applied to Homekey and future housing policies. Four key areas of focus include:

- *Federal housing guarantee:* While food and medical benefits are provided to eligible U.S. citizens, federal housing resources often employ waitlists and lottery systems (Acosta & Garland, 2021). A major expansion of federal housing vouchers is needed (Shinn & Khadduri, 2020). As Jason Elliott, Governor Newsom’s Senior Counselor on Homelessness observed:

The federal government needs to get in the game and do what it used to do, which is provide housing as a guarantee. Food stamps are a guarantee. Health care is a guarantee. Public education is a guarantee. Housing? 25% chance. Spin the wheel. (Watt, 2023, para. 29)

Participants echoed how crucial federal housing vouchers were to fund the operating costs of their Homekey projects. Many Homekey applicants shared that an increase in federal housing vouchers would allow them to invest more in affordable housing programs such as Homekey.

- *Continued investment in homelessness prevention:* While continued affordable housing development is needed, programs such as Homekey are insufficient to fully address need. Cash and rental assistance programs should be enhanced and strengthened to prevent evictions. Despite being a multifaceted issue, in a study of unhoused Californians, 70% of respondents reported that an additional \$300-\$500 a month could have sustained their housing, 82% reported that a one-time payment of \$5,000-\$10,000 could have prevented their homelessness; and 90% believed that a Housing Choice Voucher could have changed their situation (Kushel et al., 2023). In addition to their Homekey projects, one applicant county is piloting a housing instability prevention program and is overwhelmed with referrals. Social scientists and advocates have long been calling for more resources to prevent homelessness upstream (O'Reagan et al., 2021; Shinn & Khadduri, 2020).
- *Prioritize non-congregate housing:* In follow-up interviews with first round applicants, many interviewees espoused the value of non-congregate interim housing over congregate shelters. Advocates believed non-congregate

settings, like the ones Homekey created, allowed residents to heal and transition to permanent housing (Colburn & Fyall, 2020; Robinson et al., 2022). Seeing the positive individual outcomes associated with Homekey housing inspired one locality to transition away from congregate shelters and convert a warehouse to a non-congregate shelter with private pods:

Our congregate facilities, at least the ones that the county operates, were all converted to non-congregate...That's been working really well and we've had so many more people wanting to come into those spaces because we're able to now...give them a better sense of privacy. ...We have many providers who are looking to figure out how they can make sure that they're creating as many non-congregate type spaces as possible. - *Colette, First round applicant, suburban, strongly Democratic-leaning county*

Funding streams to incentivize and support localities converting shelters into non-congregate spaces would complement Homekey, providing another rapid housing response.

- *Document and communicate policy successes:* Homekey's individual and community-level benefits need to be documented and widely disseminated. Policy entrepreneurs must be armed with evidence and success stories when engaging with the public and elected officials. Yet, it is important to note that

many experts are aware of effective policies and “until we solve the fundamental problems of political will, resource commitment, and a lack of understanding of the issue as structural in nature, homelessness will persist” (Colburn & Aldern, 2022, p. 168). Communicating policy-specific evidence in digestible and generalizable ways can challenge individualistic attributions for homelessness and advocate for increased homelessness resources.

Collectively, if granted appropriate resources, these policy responses can alleviate homelessness in California and across the United States. Amid climate change and the lasting economic consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic, major investments in reducing homelessness are imperative (Lee et al., 2021).

### **Research Limitations and Future Directions**

This study was conducted in a partnership with the California Department of Housing and Community Development (HCD). HCD is committed to using research findings to advance and strengthen equitable housing policy, and our partnership enhanced this study. HCD staff were incredibly generous with their time and expertise and were instrumental to recruitment and protocol development. Interviewees were motivated to participate in this research due to their gratitude for HCD and desire to provide feedback about Homekey. My affiliation with HCD provided credibility and helped establish rapport quickly, encouraging interviewees to use technical policy language. Although I pledged confidentiality, my partnership with HCD may have

influenced participant disclosure. Interviews were conducted via Zoom during participants' work day. While interviewees provided valuable, candid insights, speaking at their workplace may have influenced the information they shared, especially regarding topics related to elected officials and political dynamics. Most participants spoke openly, but some were more guarded and seemed reluctant to critique their locality. Others confirmed and reiterated the importance of the confidentiality of these interviews. Because participants represented or partnered with local governments, concerns about inflaming political backlash is understandable. Different and/or additional information may have been obtained if participants were paid for their time via research funds or if an option to be interviewed outside of work hours was provided.

A shortcoming of the study is that demographic information was not collected from interviewees, limiting context about participants' experiences and beliefs. Social psychologists can enrich the multiple streams framework by examining ideologies, identities, and experiences that motivate policy entrepreneurs' political action around homelessness. Further research exploring roles and collaboration between Homekey policy entrepreneurs at all levels (e.g., HCD leadership and staff, local elected officials and government staff, nonprofit advocates, and affordable housing developers) could deepen understanding of social change agents (Petridou & Mintrom, 2021).

Homekey is a historic policy worthy of continued study. Building on work documenting the successes and challenges of the policy's implementation can provide valuable insight (HCD, 2021; Reid et al., 2022). This study employed interviews but ethnographic analyses and case studies within local Homekey jurisdictions could provide more in depth information. Examining the history of housing and homeless policy, media coverage, political dynamics, attitudes toward homelessness and Homekey, community outcomes, and experiences of Homekey residents within a regional context can provide new insights into challenges and opportunities to alleviate homelessness.

Social scientists can make important contributions to understanding and interrupting damaging stereotypes and narratives about homelessness and advocating for evidence-based policy that includes the perspectives of unhoused people in its development (Nelson et al., 2021). Continued research on framing affordable housing programs and interventions to challenge stereotypical narratives about poverty and homelessness is needed. Additionally, examining homelessness policy, political dynamics, and public attitudes through a racial justice lens is critical. Racial privilege and stereotypes affect housing attitudes and political will, yet more work is needed to examine their nuanced effect on homelessness housing (Edwards, 2021; Flournoy, 2021; Yantis & Bonam, 2021).

Another direction for future research is to examine Homekey's longitudinal and holistic effects. Understanding the experiences and recommendations of Homekey site residents is a critical next step. Participants shared powerful stories about Homekey residents moving to permanent housing, achieving sobriety, reconnecting with family, securing employment, stabilizing health, and gaining confidence, community, and independence. For example, in a follow-up interview, Meredith, a first round applicant highlighted the successes:

People who haven't been housed in 20 years; they're still there and they're doing so well...The stories are beautiful. We've had people with severe medical problems - for the first time, they have a place to be so they can get medical care, and they get services, and they get to heal... We had this one resident who called me and said, 'Is it okay if I have my family over to visit?' I said, 'Of course it is.' She called the week later in tears and said, 'For the first time in 18 years, I've been able to have my family to my house.' Isn't that beautiful?

Interdisciplinary research must explore and communicate the short and long-term effects of Homekey housing on residents' health and well being, belongingness and sense of community, security and stability, goal setting achievement, family and social relationships, and ability to meet their basic needs.



Research partnerships with local nonprofit organizations and government agencies provide beneficial community-engaged scholarship and service opportunities. Participants shared how local homelessness data provides valuable insights and is more persuasive to elected officials and the greater community. As local policy entrepreneurs and service providers often lack the capacity to conduct needs assessments and program evaluations, social scientists can support these crucial efforts.

## **Conclusion**

As Shinn and Khadduri (2020) assert, “Homelessness is a choice, not a choice by people sleeping on the streets but a choice by the rest of us to look the other way” (p. 176). Because Governor Newsom chose to implement Homekey and policy entrepreneurs in 70 jurisdictions across the state chose to respond, nearly 13,000 households in California now have an affordable home. However, decades of policy choices have resulted in 171,521 people experiencing homelessness in California (Colburn & Aldern, 2022; de Sousa et al., 2022; Shinn & Khadduri, 2020). Policy experts have identified structural strategies for reducing and preventing homelessness and the required resources, yet governments at all levels need to choose to commit to them (Colburn & Aldern, 2022; O’Reagan et al., 2021; Shinn & Khadduri, 2020).

Policy choices are influenced by attitudes and beliefs about poverty and homelessness. This study advances our understanding of how system-justifying attitudes and beliefs hinder political will and legitimize economic inequality (Bullock,

2013; Friesen et al., 2019; Jost et al., 2004; Kay et al., 2009; Laurin et al., 2013; Liaquat et al., 2023; Rodriguez-Bailon et al., 2017). Classist and racist stereotypes, narratives, and frames about homelessness were found in the Homekey problem stream, policy stream, and politics stream, underscoring their pernicious effects. However, there was also evidence of policy entrepreneurs acknowledging, reframing, and challenging these narratives via public engagement and their commitment to structural policy change. Without their many contributions, the Homekey policy window would not have opened.

Applying a social psychological lens to the multiple streams framework strengthens our understanding of the relationship between ideology and political action. This study demonstrates the power of qualitative, social psychological scholarship to inform our understanding of policy decisions and impacts. Social science research has much to offer the housing and homelessness field (Nelson et al., 2021; O'Sullivan et al., 2021). Additionally, qualitative research is underutilized but is crucial to designing and assessing housing policy (Maxwell, 2020). Collectively, this study documents the role of attitudes and beliefs about homelessness on public support and political will, illuminating the need for research and advocacy that advances narrative change and equitable policy.

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**Table 1.***Interview Wave 1: Round 1 Applicant Participant and Locality Characteristics*

ID	Participant Pseudonym	Participant Affiliation	Locality Political Leaning	Locality Category
R1 1	Meredith	Nonprofit Organization	Moderate Democratic	Rural
R1 2	Miranda	Nonprofit Organization	Slight Republican	Suburban
R1 3	Ellen	County Housing Office	Moderate Democratic	Urban
	Valerie	County Housing Office		
	Matthew	County Housing Office		
R1 4	Mark	County Housing Office	Slight Republican	Urban
R1 5	Julie	City Manager's Office	Slight Democratic	Suburban
R1 6	Kay	City Housing Office	Strong Democratic	Urban
R1 7	Colette	County Health Services	Strong Democratic	Suburban
R1 8	Sophia	City Community Services	Moderate Democratic	Suburban
R1 9	Holly	Nonprofit Organization	Slight Democratic	Suburban
R1 10	Lorri	County Homeless Services	Strong Democratic	Urban

**Table 2***Interview Wave 1: Round 1 Non-Applicant Participant and Locality Characteristics*

ID	Participant Pseudonym	Participant Affiliation	Locality Political Leaning	Locality Category
NA 1	Brooke	City Manager's Office	Strong Democratic	Urban
NA 2	Joshua	City Manager's Office	Moderate Democratic	Suburban
NA 3	Dana	County Health Services	Moderately Democratic	Urban
	Luke	County Health Services		
NA 4	Clara	County Health Services	Moderately Democratic	Suburban
NA 5	Sandra	County Housing Office	Slight Democratic	Urban
NA 6	Jodi	City Manager's Office	Slight Republican	Rural
NA 7	Christopher	County Health Services	Moderate Democratic	Rural
NA 8	Anne	City Housing and Community Services	Moderately Democratic	Suburban

**Table 3***Interview Wave 2: Round 1 Applicant Follow-Up Participant and Locality**Characteristics*

ID	Participant Pseudonym	Participant Affiliation	Locality Political Leaning	Locality Category
R1 1	Meredith	Nonprofit Organization	Moderate Democratic	Rural
R1 2	Natalie	Nonprofit Organization	Slight Republican	Suburban
R1 3	Ellen	County Housing Office	Moderate Democratic	Urban
	Valerie	County Housing Office		
	Rebecca	County Housing Office		
R1 4	Mark	County Housing Office	Slight Republican	Urban
R1 5	Eric	City Manager's Office	Slight Democratic	Suburban
	Gabriel	Nonprofit Organization		
	Daniel	Nonprofit Organization		
R1 6	Melissa	City Housing Office	Strong Democratic	Urban
R1 7	Colette	County Health Services	Strong Democratic	Suburban
R1 9	Holly	Nonprofit Organization	Slight Democratic	Suburban
R1 10	Lorri	County Homeless Services	Strong Democratic	Urban

**Table 4***Interview Wave 2: Round 2 Applicant Participant and Locality Characteristics*

ID	Participant Pseudonym	Participant Affiliation	Locality Political Leaning	Locality Category
R2 1	Nora	City Housing and Community Services	Strong Democratic	Suburban
R2 2	Shaun	City Housing Office	Strong Democratic	Suburban
	Marie	City Housing Office		
R2 3	Samantha	City Community Development	Slight Democratic	Urban
	Avery	City Community Development		
R2 4	Brian	City Manager's Office	Strong Democratic	Suburban
R2 5	Jeff	City Community Development	Slight Democratic	Rural
R2 6	Corinne	County Housing Office	Strong Democratic	Urban
	Diana	County Housing Office		
R2 7	Martin	City Development Office	Slight Democratic	Suburban
R2 8	Alex	City Human Services	Strong Democratic	Urban
R2 9	James	City Development Office	Slight Democratic	Suburban
	Morgan	City Development Office		

**Appendix A.**  
**Wave 1: Interview Protocol Homekey Round 1 Applicants**

**Overview of Role and Homelessness in Locality**

The goal of these interviews is to understand the challenges and opportunities related to housing projects like Homekey. We are particularly interested in hearing about successful strategies, obstacles you overcame, crucial partnerships, opposition faced, and lessons learned as you prepared your Homekey application. There will be time to address these points throughout. There are three sections of the interview and I want to be respectful of your time, so I will let you know how much time I hope to spend on each section. First, I'd like to ask some questions about homelessness and housing in your locality more broadly. I am really interested in your expertise on homelessness and housing initiatives in your community and am hoping to spend about 15 minutes in this section.

1. First can you tell me a bit about your role with (name of locality) as it relates to housing and homelessness?
  - a. How long have you worked in this capacity?
  
2. I reviewed the Point in Time Count for your CoC. Do you believe that this accurately reflects homelessness in your locality? Why or why not?
  - a. Are there any consistently hard to reach populations?
  - b. Are there any factors that contribute homelessness that are unique to (name of locality) compared to the rest of the state?
  
3. Given your knowledge of local climate, culture and resources, what is it like for people experiencing homelessness in (name of locality)? What do you perceive as the gap between available resources and need?
  
4. In general, how do housed residents of (name of locality) perceive homelessness in your community?
  - a. Are there housing programs and/or homeless policies that residents of (name of locality) generally support? Similarly, are there programs/policies that are opposed?

5. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, were there any local housing/homelessness programs and/or policies that were successful? If yes, what were they? Unsuccessful?
6. In (name of locality), who are the key stakeholders and decision makers influencing how homelessness and housing are addressed?
  - a. More broadly, where do you think responsibility for addressing homelessness in (name of locality) lies (e.g., federally, at the state level, local level, private corporations, or nonprofits)?

### **Reactions to Homekey**

Next are some questions about your experiences preparing your project for a Homekey application, I would like to spend 20 minutes in this section.

7. Project Roomkey was a predecessor to Homekey, temporarily housing people experiencing homelessness in response to COVID-19. Did your county participate in Project Roomkey?
  - a. Did Roomkey inform your locality's decision to participate in Homekey? In what ways?
8. Can you walk me through your process for preparing for Homekey thus far?
  - a. Can you tell me a bit about your experience with Technical Assistance and Pre-application process with HCD?
9. How did you decide on the partnerships for your application?
  - a. How have those partnerships been working?
10. What is the biggest challenge you have faced and/or expect to face in moving forward with Homekey?
11. Homekey applications will be evaluated based on how well they “address racial equity, other systemic inequities, state and federal accessibility requirements, and serve members of the Target Population.”



- a. Does this focus align with the current priorities of your locality? Was your locality already working toward these goals or has Homekey's focus encouraged greater attention to these issues?
- b. Do you have thoughts or feedback regarding these criteria?

12. Is there political and public support for Homekey?

- a. Were there departments or government agencies that have been particularly helpful?
- b. Were there any businesses or community partners that have been particularly helpful?
- c. Why do you think this is the case?
- d. Can you identify any factors that were important to getting people on board?
- e. Are there opponents to Homekey? Who? How did you respond to this opposition?
- f. Are you working to get people on board with Homekey? How?

13. Regardless of whether your Homekey project is funded, is your project something you would have support for locally to make happen?

14. What do you wish you would have known at the beginning phases of preparing your project for Homekey?

15. If your project is funded, what next steps need to be taken to ensure the success of addressing homelessness in your community?

### **Overall Reflections**

I have a few final questions regarding your overall assessment of the potential effects of Roomkey and Homekey [TIME UPDATE]

16. Do you think the COVID-19 pandemic has increased or decreased support for addressing homelessness in (name of locality)? How?

17. How do you think Project Roomkey and Homekey might influence – for better or worse - other opportunities for addressing homelessness in (name of locality)?

18. Are there any documents or reports relevant to our discussion today that you could share with me?

19. Is there anything else you would like to share with me?

### **Interview Debrief**

Thank you so much for taking the time to share your insights with me today! We are hopeful that these interviews can help inform future policy related to housing and homelessness. I will share a final report of the findings with you.

## **Appendix B.**

### **Wave 1: Interview Protocol Homekey Round 1 Non-applicants**

#### **Overview of Role and Homelessness in Locality**

The goal of these interviews is to understand the challenges and opportunities related to housing projects like Homekey. We are particularly interested in hearing about successful strategies, obstacles you overcame, crucial partnerships, opposition faced, and lessons learned as you prepared your Homekey application. There will be time to address these points throughout. There are three sections of the interview and I want to be respectful of your time, so I will let you know how much time I hope to spend on each section.

First, I'd like to ask some questions about homelessness and housing in your locality more broadly. I am really interested in your expertise on homelessness and housing initiatives in your community and we have about 15 minutes for this section

1. First can you tell me a bit about your role with (name of locality) as it relates to housing and homelessness?

a. How long have you worked in this capacity?

2. I reviewed the Point in Time Count for your CoC. Do you believe that this accurately reflects homelessness in your locality? Why or why not?

a. Are there any consistently hard to reach populations?

b. Are there any factors that contribute to homelessness in are that are unique to (name of locality) compared to the rest of the state?

3. Given your knowledge of local climate, culture and resources, what is it like for people experiencing homelessness in (name of locality)?

4. In general, how do housed residents of (name of locality) perceive homelessness in your community?

a. Are there housing programs and/or homeless policies that residents of (name of locality) generally support? Similarly, are there programs/policies that are opposed?

5. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, were there any local housing/homelessness programs and/or policies that were successful? If yes, what were they? Unsuccessful?
6. In (name of locality), who are the key stakeholders and decision makers influencing how homelessness and housing are addressed?
  - a. More broadly, where do you think responsibility for addressing homelessness in (name of locality) lies (e.g., federally, at the state level, local level, private corporations, or nonprofits)?

### **Reactions to Homekey**

Next are some questions about your experiences considering a project for a Homekey application. We have about 20 minutes for this section.

7. Project Roomkey was a predecessor to Homekey, temporarily housing people experiencing homelessness in response to COVID-19. Did your county participate in Project Roomkey?
  - a. Did Roomkey inform your locality's decision to not participate in Homekey? In what ways?
8. Can you walk me through your locality's experience considering a project for Homekey?
  - a. Did you have any Technical Assistance or Pre-application conversations with HCD?
    - i. *If yes* Did these conversations influence your decision about whether to move forward with a proposal? How?
    - ii. *If no* Was there something HCD could have done to support your potential project in moving forward? What?
9. What were the challenges that prevented your locality from applying for Homekey funds?
10. Was there political and public support for a Homekey project? Please describe.
  - a. Are there departments, community partners, or businesses that have been particularly helpful? How?

- b. Are there opponents to Homekey? Who? (*departments, community partners, government agencies or businesses*) How did you respond to this opposition?
- c. Are there key players whose support could have helped make your application possible?

11. Homekey applications will be evaluated based on how well they “address racial equity, other systemic inequities, state and federal accessibility requirements, and serve members of the Target Population.”

- a. Does this focus align with the current priorities of your locality? Was your locality already working toward these goals or has Homekey’s focus encouraged greater attention to these issues?
- b. Do you have thoughts or feedback regarding these criteria?

12. What do you wish you would have known at the beginning phases of preparing your project for Homekey?

13. What would need to happen for housing programs like Homekey to be implemented in (name of locality)?

14. Are there other long-term solutions for addressing homelessness being explored in your locality?

### **Overall Reflections**

I have a few final questions regarding your overall assessment of the potential effects of Roomkey and Homekey. [TIME UPDATE]

15. Do you think the COVID-19 pandemic has increased or decreased support for addressing homelessness in (name of locality)? How?

16. How do you think Project Roomkey and Homekey might influence – for better or worse - other opportunities for addressing homelessness in (name of locality)?

17. Are there any documents or reports relevant to our discussion today that you could share with me?

18. Is there anything else you would like to share with me?

**Interview Debrief**

Thank you so much for taking the time to share your insights with me today! We are hopeful that these interviews can help inform future policy related to housing and homelessness. I will share a final reports of the findings with you

## **Appendix C.**

### **Wave 2: Interview Protocol Follow-Up with Homekey Round 1 Applicants**

#### **Update on Homekey**

The goal of these interviews is to understand challenges and opportunities related to housing projects like Homekey. We are particularly interested in hearing about successful strategies, obstacles you overcame, crucial partnerships, opposition faced, and lessons learned as you navigated your Homekey project. First, I'd like to get caught up on what has happened with your Homekey project since we last spoke.

1. The last time we spoke was fall 2020 when funds were being allocated. Can you please fill me in on the big picture of how the project took shape once you received the funds?
2. How many people have you been able to house with your Homekey Project?
  - a. How was the process of getting those people into housing?
  - b. Do you have a sense of how the experience has been for those who have been placed in Homekey housing?
3. What would you consider to be the successes of the project?
  - a. Have you noticed any impact on homelessness rates or experiences of unhoused folks in your community since Homekey?
4. Are you applying for the second round of Homekey funds as well?
  - a. If yes, what was it about the first round that was the biggest factor that influenced your decision to apply again?
  - b. If no, why not?
5. Is there any other context that shaped Homekey and experiences of homelessness in your locality since we last spoke (national disasters, policy changes, local events, political shifts, etc.)?

#### **Policy Entrepreneurs**

5. Can you tell me about the key players who made the project possible?
  - a. What made these people particularly good champions for this project?
  - b. Were you able to get everyone on the same page about this project? How?
  - c. Were there any other secrets to success or aspects that helped make this project possible?

### **Policy Stream**

6. How did the Homekey policy align with your jurisdiction's existing goals and values?
7. What aspects of the policy itself influenced your jurisdiction's decision to participate?
8. The state made Homekey one of the cornerstones of their COVID-19 agenda publicly and financially, did this influence your locality's interest in the policy? How?
9. How did you communicate the value of Homekey to elected officials and community members?

### **Problem Stream**

10. What problems do you think Homekey was designed to address?
  - a. In your experience how were these target issues similar or different to other statewide policies or initiatives around housing or homelessness?
11. What issues do you see Homekey addressing in your community?

### **Political Stream**

12. What were some of the challenges you faced in taking Homekey from an idea to reality?
  - a. Was there any public, political, or business community backlash or opposition to the project?
  - b. Did you have to make adaptations to your original plan to be able to enact Homekey?
  - c. What could have helped alleviate or prevent some of these challenges?



13. What role do you think public beliefs about homelessness have in influencing policymaking in your jurisdiction?
  - a. Do you think race plays a factor in these beliefs or levels of policy support?
  - b. To what extent are there efforts in your locality to dispel stereotypes about homelessness or disseminate facts about effective solutions to homelessness to garner public support?
    - i. If yes, what have you found to be successful?
    - ii. If no, is this something that your community has considered?
  - c. Do you think Homekey has impacted the local housed community in any way? Or perceptions of homelessness in your community?
14. What role do you think elected officials' beliefs about homelessness have in influencing policymaking in your jurisdiction?
  - a. Has Homekey impacted how decision-makers in your community are thinking about policy solutions to homelessness? If so, how?
15. What do you think are the next steps needed in your locality to address homelessness?
  - a. Do you have the political and public support for these next steps?

### **Overall Reflections**

16. How do you think Homekey might influence – for better or worse - other opportunities for addressing homelessness throughout the state?
17. What do you think are the effects of the pandemic on homelessness policies and programs and the support for them?
18. Do you believe Homekey was a once-in-a-lifetime policy opportunity or the new housing and homelessness policy standard?
19. Are there any documents or reports relevant to our discussion today that you could share with me?
20. Is there anything else you would like to share with me?

### **Interview Debrief**

Thank you so much for taking the time to share your insights with me today! We are hopeful that these interviews can help inform future policy related to housing and homelessness. I will share a final reports of the findings with you.

**Appendix D.**  
**Wave 2: Interview Protocol with Jurisdictions that did not Apply for Round 1,  
but Applied for Round 2**

**Overview of Role and Homelessness in Locality**

The goal of these interviews is to understand the challenges and opportunities related to housing projects like Homekey. We are particularly interested in hearing about successful strategies, obstacles you overcame, crucial partnerships, opposition faced, and lessons learned as you prepared your Homekey application. There will be time to address these points throughout. There are three sections of the interview and I want to be respectful of your time, so I will let you know how much time I hope to spend on each section.

First, I'd like to ask some questions about homelessness and housing in your locality more broadly. I am really interested in your expertise on homelessness and housing initiatives in your community and we have about 15 minutes for this section

1. First can you tell me a bit about your role with (name of locality) as it relates to housing and homelessness?
  - a. How long have you worked in this capacity?
  
2. Given your knowledge of local climate, culture and resources, what is it like for people experiencing homelessness in (name of locality)?
  
3. In general, how do housed residents of (name of locality) perceive homelessness in your community?
  - a. Are there housing programs and/or homeless policies that residents of (name of locality) generally support? Similarly, are there programs/policies that are opposed?
  
6. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, were there any local housing/homelessness programs and/or policies that were successful? If yes, what were they? Unsuccessful?

7. Can you walk me through the obstacles that prevented your jurisdiction from applying in round 1?

a. How did you overcome or address these challenges in order to apply for Round 2?

8. In (name of locality), who are the key stakeholders and decision makers influencing how homelessness and housing are addressed?

### **Policy Entrepreneurs**

9. Can you tell me about the key players who made the project possible in Round 2?

a. What made these people particularly good champions for this project?

b. Were you able to get everyone on the same page about this project? How?

c. Were there any other secrets to success or aspects that helped make this project possible?

### **Policy Stream**

10. How did the Homekey policy align with your jurisdiction's existing goals and values?

11. What aspects of the policy itself influenced your jurisdiction's decision to participate?

12. The state made Homekey one of the cornerstones of their COVID-19 agenda publicly and financially, did this influence your locality's interest in the policy? How?

13. How did you communicate the value of Homekey to elected officials and community members?

### **Problem Stream**

14. What problems do you think Homekey was designed to address?

a. In your experience how were these target issues similar or different to other statewide policies or initiatives around housing or homelessness?

15. What issues do you see Homekey addressing in your community?

## **Political Stream**

16. What were some of the challenges you faced in taking Homekey from an idea to reality?
- a. Was there any public, political, or business community backlash or opposition to the project?
  - b. Did you have to make adaptations to your original plan to be able to enact Homekey?
  - c. What could have helped alleviate or prevent some of these challenges?
17. What role do you think public beliefs about homelessness have in influencing policymaking in your jurisdiction?
- a. Do you think race plays a factor in these beliefs or levels of policy support?
  - b. To what extent are there efforts in your locality to dispel stereotypes about homelessness or disseminate facts about effective solutions to homelessness to garner public support?
    - i. If yes, what have you found to be successful?
    - ii. If no, is this something that your community has considered?
  - c. Do you think Homekey has impacted the local housed community in any way? Or perceptions of homelessness in your community?
18. What role do you think elected officials' beliefs about homelessness have in influencing policymaking in your jurisdiction?
- a. Has Homekey impacted how decision-makers in your community are thinking about policy solutions to homelessness? If so, how?
19. What do you think are the next steps needed in your locality to address homelessness?
- a. Do you have the political and public support for these next steps?

## **Overall Reflections**

20. How do you think Homekey might influence – for better or worse - other opportunities for addressing homelessness throughout the state?
21. What do you think are the effects of the pandemic on homelessness policies and programs and the support for them?
22. Do you believe Homekey was a once-in-a-lifetime policy opportunity or the new housing and homelessness policy standard?

23. Are there any documents or reports relevant to our discussion today that you could share with me?

24. Is there anything else you would like to share with me?

**Interview Debrief**

Thank you so much for taking the time to share your insights with me today! We are hopeful that these interviews can help inform future policy related to housing and homelessness. I will share a final reports of the findings with you