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COLLEGE STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF HOMELESSNESS: DOES CONTACT
MATTER?

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ABSTRACT

Homelessness is a major social issue that is perceived and understood in many different ways by the members of the public. For example, beliefs about how people become homeless differ greatly: some domiciled individuals believe that homelessness is a matter of personal responsibility while others attribute it to structured circumstances. College students are an interesting population to study because their views could influence how homelessness is addressed in the future. These views may be affected by students' contact with or exposure to the issue of homelessness. The contact hypothesis states that the more contact a member of an in-group has with the out-group, the more positive their attitudes toward the out-group become. Contact can occur on multiple dimensions ranging from face-to-face interaction to exposure via the media.

To explore the relationship between contact with homelessness and perceptions of the problem I interviewed 35 college undergraduates. My results suggest that most college students are sympathetic toward the issue of homelessness and believe that it is caused by a combination of structural circumstance and personal responsibility, although they place greater emphasis on circumstance. Contact with the homeless appears to increase respondents' tolerance of and interest in the issue. Those students with more in-depth contact also have more fully developed ideas about possible policy solutions to homelessness.

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Introduction

Public perceptions of social issues can have an important influence on the strategies proposed to solve them. Homelessness is an issue that has evolved in the United States from the tramps of the early 1900s to the new homeless of today. Research has been done soliciting many members of the public about their feelings towards homeless people and their beliefs about the causes of the problem. My thesis aims to examine how the views of college students are shaped by their contact with and exposure to homelessness.

I examine college students because in many ways they represent the future of society. They are enrolled in college to become doctors, lawyers, teachers and business people and to enter countless other professions. Yet college students have a stigma of apathy about them regarding their level of engagement in social issues. I believe that interviewing college students will give an insight into the future of the homelessness issue as well as how invested college students are in making strides to solve the issue.

Most research focuses on two dominant views of the causes of homelessness: the *circumstance* and *personal responsibility* views. The circumstance view acknowledges that many of the causes of homelessness are outside the control of the people they affect. Causes put forth by believers of the circumstance view include lack of affordable housing, economic factors and lack of opportunity. The personal responsibility view treats the causes of homelessness as located within the individual. Substance abuse and laziness are examples of causes put forth by believers in personal responsibility.

The role of person-to-person interaction in the formation of public opinion about homelessness has been documented in previous research by evaluating the contact

hypothesis. The contact hypothesis states that the more contact a person has with an out-group, the less likely they are to harbor stereotypes against that group. I hypothesize that the contact a college student has with homeless individuals or homelessness as an issue should influence their perceptions.

My thesis begins with justification of my target population and chosen methodology. I then review past literature on the topic of homelessness, public perceptions of the issue, and the role of contact in shaping perceptions and policy beliefs. The methodology section discusses participant selection procedures, sample characteristics and the use of qualitative interviews to address my research questions. My results are organized by the prevailing themes present in participants' answers to the interview items.

Why College Students?

College students in many ways represent the future of society. They are educated at renowned universities to become outstanding leaders in their fields. But when it comes to social issues college students of my generation have a reputation for being apathetic. They are among the populations that vote the least in elections and seem to be disengaged when it comes to public policy. Through my study I want to discover what college students think about homelessness as a whole and what solutions to the issue they would support.

Penn State University is nestled in a town in Pennsylvania with a limited homeless population, yet it attracts students from all over the state, country and world. The diversity of the campus means that just because homelessness is not an issue in State College does not mean that Penn State students have not been exposed to it. The

difference in exposure rates to the issue of homelessness is valuable because it insures some familiarity with the issue even among the undergraduate population of a rural university.

The reason I think that research dealing with college students can be insightful is because present research predominantly focuses on domiciled individuals with full-time jobs. A student's perspective may differ because they have not yet entered the workforce full time. Their lack of employment and frequent searching for jobs may make students more aware of the economic climate and cause them to feel sympathetic to the homeless. I also believe that college students' opinions can indicate where the issue of homelessness is likely heading in the future.

Qualitative v. Quantitative

The majority of existing research about perceptions of and contact with homelessness has been done in a quantitative survey format. Surveys consist of closed-ended questions that may not provide the opportunity for a participant to fully express their views about the issue. Another limitation of the survey format is that the respondents' thought process as to why they have selected an answer remains unknown. These problems suggest some practical advantages to my preferred approach of qualitative interviews, including the chance to ask follow-up questions and to understand the logic behind the answers given.

I have found follow-up questions invaluable throughout my research. Being able to ask "Why?" or "Can you elaborate some more?" really adds depth and quality to my data. Asking follow-up questions allowed me to record the participants in as great a detail as possible, as opposed to a survey where an answer must be selected from the options

provided. The open-ended aspect of the qualitative approach also allowed participants to express their opinions in the way that they wished to.

Another advantage to using a qualitative approach is hearing people explain the logic behind their answers to a question. My respondents were able to explain why they believed certain things. Giving them the opportunity to justify their answers provided a greater context for the research. I learned about the different experiences that each respondent had with the issue of homelessness. Understanding a respondent's exposure and range of experiences with homelessness was a true benefit of qualitative research.

Another strength of my research is that it is recent. Many of the studies that exist were carried out in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Conducting my research today gives a fresh perspective on public opinions about homelessness. Also, many things have changed over the past couple of decades, most recently including an economic recession and a housing crisis that have put a greater proportion of Americans at risk of homelessness. The changes that have taken place between the completion of the previous round of research and my own may yield a change in public opinion.

BACKGROUND

Perceptions about the Causes and Composition of Homelessness

Public opinion about the causes of homelessness highlights two major schools of thought. The first is that people are homeless because of reasons pertaining to their *personal responsibility*. These factors include any actions deemed within the individual's control such as substance addiction and work aversion. The second perspective is that homelessness is caused by *circumstantial factors*. These factors are more macro-level or structured such as the condition of the economy and lack of affordable housing or employment.

Some demographic groups are more inclined to favor one school of thought rather than the other. Research has shown that women, the young, liberals and people who see examples of homelessness frequently are more likely to attribute homelessness to structural circumstances. Men, older people, conservatives and people who are less exposed to the homeless are more likely to believe that homelessness is caused by individual actions (Wright, 1998). Undergraduate students come from all different races, genders, socioeconomic statuses and hometowns. The diversity present in the undergraduate population is a reason to expect different beliefs about the causes of homelessness.

These views are important to the future of the issue. If it is the dominant belief that individual decisions lead to homelessness, people are less likely to sympathize with the homeless. People who fall in the personal responsibility camp will be less likely to support hiring homeless individuals as employees or to support affordable housing efforts

because they believe that homeless people are at fault for their own situation. On the other hand, people who believe that homelessness is caused by structural circumstances would be more likely to support reforms that would aid the homeless in becoming permanently housed.

Underlying the personal responsibility perspective is the dominant ideology theory: the idea that in a democratic society, an individual's socioeconomic fate is in their own hands. It is more likely for people of privilege and status to accept this ideology as an explanation of homelessness. Lee, Lewis and Jones (1991) identified two hypotheses when adapting the dominant ideology to the study of homelessness. The incidence hypothesis stated that the majority of Americans would blame homeless individuals for their situation. The antecedent hypothesis acknowledged that there might be variation in causal beliefs especially among people of different social statuses. Lee, Lewis and Jones (1991) surveyed people living in Nashville. The results of their survey showed that the majority of people believed that circumstantial causes were responsible for homelessness.

The incidence and antecedent hypotheses used by Lee et. al inform my research because they serve as a reminder that majority opinions can be very absolute or vary based on the part of the population studied. A person's education level has been connected to their tolerance toward out-groups, with tolerance positively correlating with education. College students are some of the better-educated members of our society, so surveying them could yield interesting results about the future of homelessness as an issue. Since every participant in my study is a college student, I expect to see a high degree of tolerance towards the homeless.

It is also important to assess popular perceptions of the composition of the homeless population held by domiciled people. Many domiciled people are misinformed as to what kind of demographic categories are most represented among the homeless. They may base their compositional views on movies or on people they have seen panhandling but may never know the true make-up of the homeless population.

In the article *The Changing Character of Homelessness in the United States*, by Leland Axelton and Paula Dali go into detail about changes occurring in the homeless population over the last couple of decades. The first change in composition is in regard to gender. Males have historically made up the primary homeless population across the United States. However, in recent years there has been an increase in the number of women and children who have become homeless. Another change occurring in the composition of the homeless is in regard to racial and ethnic backgrounds. Whites have long been the most dominant racial group among the homeless, but in recent years there has been an increase of racial and ethnic minorities including blacks and Hispanics.

A popular stereotype about homeless people is that many of them are homeless based on an untreated mental illness or substance addiction. Research has shown that note that only about one-third of homeless people suffer from these conditions (Lee, 2010). While 33% is a high percentage, that still leaves the majority of the homeless population unaffected by mental illness or addiction. Another misconception has to do with their education. According to most credible studies, nearly all homeless people have some kind of high school experience and over half are high school graduates. These statistics would suggest that lack of education is not a common characteristic among the homeless.

Contact Hypothesis

The contact hypothesis states that interaction between members of an in-group and out-group is likely to erode stereotypes. In this case, interaction between the domiciled and the homeless would decrease the stigma of the latter in the eyes of the former. The contact hypothesis has been used with many social in-groups and out-groups based on gender, age, race and other demographic categories (Pettigrew, 2006). The contact hypothesis has also been applied to the issue of homelessness in recent literature. It is my belief that college students with more exposure to the issue of homelessness will be more sympathetic towards homeless people and interested in the issue.

It is important to define the depth of exposure to an out-group that would be necessary for contact to have its predicted effect. There has been much debate among researchers about what kinds of contact matter. Some argue that face-to-face contact is the only way in which the contact hypothesis would be upheld. Other researchers are advocates of a broader definition that emphasizes multiple forms of exposure. For the purpose of my study I have adopted a broader interpretation of the meaning of contact.

Lee, Farrell and Link (2004) were among the first to utilize a broader definition of contact. They outlined four different ways in which the domiciled are exposed to the issue of homelessness. These types of exposure were: information from third party sources, observation of the out-group, face-to-face interaction and knowing someone with membership in the out-group. Lee and his associates found that all four types of exposure affected the beliefs of those they surveyed but in different ways. Exposure from third party sources was unlikely to change attitudes without some type of discussion following

the exposure. In general however, exposure made people's views of the homeless more sympathetic, consistent with the contact hypothesis.

The important take-away from the study is that contact is multi-dimensional and not limited to face-to-face contact. College students have the ability to be exposed to a variety of social issues in a variety of ways, inside and outside of the classroom. At Penn State, students have access to newspapers and journal articles for free that may contain information about the issue of homelessness. Penn State students also come from various places around the country and the world, where homelessness may be more of a problem than it is locally. Classes, lectures, newspaper articles, television features, blogs and social media could all be ways that college students have contact with the issue of homelessness.

The opportunity to volunteer with homeless service organizations is another way that college students are able to have contact with the homeless, and that contact may work to erode stereotypes. Volunteer opportunities in State College and other communities with agencies that work with the homeless are available for Penn State students to participate in. Students may also volunteer in their hometowns with agencies dealing with homelessness.

The type of contact that volunteering provides can be pervasive. Knecht and Martinez (2009) conducted a pre-test, post-test field experiment in which students participated in a one-day volunteer program that resembled a career fair for the homeless. The fair included booths intended to match homeless individuals with jobs, health care and

housing. During the service experience volunteers were not only able to interact with homeless individuals at different booths but were also able to share a meal with them.

In order to measure attitudes, Knecht and Martinez administered a survey to volunteers two months before their service and an additional survey after the service was completed. They also surveyed members of a control group with no volunteer experience. The researchers were interested in the amount and direction of opinion change that resulted after volunteers had contact. Knecht and Martinez found that negative stereotypes held by volunteers about the homeless were reduced after the volunteers spent some time interacting with homeless individuals. In the open-ended portion of the survey, many volunteers said that they held stereotypes before their interaction but adjusted them as a result of their participation.

One of the issues that Knecht and Martinez identify in their study is selection bias. Selection bias is potentially problematic because volunteers choose to interact with the homeless. By virtue of that choice, they are likely to be more sympathetic to the homelessness issue in the first place. Put differently, attitudes may affect contact rather than vice-versa. Even among the student volunteers, however, contact should only increase their sympathetic attitudes. The lesson that the Knecht and Martinez study provides my research is being aware of selection bias. It is possible that the participants who agreed to be in my study already held positive beliefs about homelessness. People who held negative views may have been less likely to volunteer for the study.

Policy Views

The amount of attention an issue receives from the public is directly related to the attention it receives from social problem solvers such as advocates, lawmakers and service agencies. Homelessness has been a staple of American life for hundreds of years but it only began to receive a great deal of attention from media outlets in the late 1980s. At that time, the attention that homelessness received from the media and the public pushed policy makers to design laws and fund programs to assist the homeless in exiting from their situation. According to Tompsett et. al (2001) public opinion can be affected by many factors including media treatments and the public's perception of the economy.

The media exert a pervasive influence in society through newspapers, television, movies and multiple other outlets. Tompsett et. al argue that the media's influence resides in their ability to frame an issue in a certain way to elicit a desired public reaction. In the early 1980s the media framed homelessness in a very sympathetic light via news articles and documentary films. The media also have the power to insinuate that their position is the position of the majority, making whatever they say important to policy makers who are sensitive to the presumed views of their constituents.

Since the early 1980s the public has become exposed to different social issues in new ways. Print media, television and movies are still prevalent sources of information about social issues but there has been one crucial addition since the time Tompsett et. al completed their study. The internet has become a central news source for many people, especially in my age bracket of interest (18-22 year olds). Not only does the internet provide a place to gather information about homelessness as a social issue, but it allows

individuals the opportunity to interact with the issue through forums and comment sections. It is essential for my study to gauge the amount and nature of exposure to the homelessness issue through media sources.

Another influence on public opinion that is cited by Tompsett et. al is the public's perception of the economy. After the researchers compiled their first round of data in the early 1990s, a time of relative economic prosperity followed. They hypothesized that in prosperous economic times people would be less willing to pledge support to the homelessness issue because they would deem other social issues as more pressing and important. Conversely, in times of economic hardship more attention would be given to the issue of homelessness because the public's concept of the monetary resources dedicated to helping the homeless would diminish. The results of their 2001 follow-up survey supported their hypothesis, as the respondents reported seeing homelessness as less of a problem than it had been at the date of the original survey in 1993. The researchers attributed the change of attitude to the economic gains that occurred during the period between 1993 and 2001.

The effect of the economy on public opinion is important to recognize because currently we are at the end of a recession in the United States. College students on the verge of entering the workforce appreciate the difficulty of finding work in the current economic setting and may feel sympathetic towards members of the homeless community by virtue of their shared unemployment in a harsh economic environment.

Another influence on policy views is the knowledge that the public has of potential programs that could be implemented to help the homeless. Axelton and Dali contend that

effective policies should be structured to address two fundamental aspects of the homeless experience: lack of affordable housing and the structure of the homeless family. The lack of affordable housing cannot be addressed with a blanket-housing program but needs to be adapted to the different needs and situations of homeless people. They advocate for an increased role of the federal government, especially when it comes to the financial investment necessary to make housing affordable.

With respect to the family, it is important to realize that many homeless people come from families that were impoverished to start with. The cycle of poverty and the lack of opportunity to escape it feed the homeless problem. Axelson and Dali say that policies structured around the homeless family should address the needs of female single-parent households. Single mothers with children are the most prevalent family structure on the street so it would make sense to tailor some policies to their needs. The problem is that addressing problems experienced by the family requires a multi-dimensional approach. Families become homeless for a number of reasons including: unemployment, domestic abuse, substance abuse and various other factors that do not have a one-solution-fits-all quality. It is important for the public to understand that the policies created by lawmakers and supported by them need to be multidimensional and address the many causes of homelessness.

Education is another potentially important influence on policy views toward the homelessness issue. College students tend to be some of the more educated and liberal members of society. Phelan et. al (1995) conducted a study to determine if both economic and social factors resulted in the increased liberalism of college students. They developed

a three-model theory about ways students adopt liberal beliefs. The three models were the developmental, socialization and ideological refinement models.

The developmental model states that education helps to expand the frame of reference held by students before their experiences in college. Due to their expanded frame of reference, students are more likely to grow into tolerant people. The socialization model predicts that students will become tolerant to the degree that they believe it will be accepted in their relationships and social circles. The ideological refinement model states that students are only interested in their own interests and would only support and identify with an out-group if the group was striving to attain rights that students felt should be universal.

Phelan et. al (1995) surveyed students based on their beliefs about certain dimensions of the homeless problem. The areas the researchers assessed support for were civil liberties, tolerance and economic aid. Civil liberties dealt with opinions about the rights of homeless people to panhandle and sleep or gather in public. The tolerance scale measured how negatively or positively the students responded to statements about the homeless. These statements included viewing the homeless as being dangerous, lazy and lacking personal responsibility. The economic aid scale was meant to assess the respondents' likelihood of supporting federal aid to help the homelessness. The results of the study found that civil liberties had no relationship to education while tolerance had a positive relationship and economic aid had a negative relationship.

The relationship between education and public opinion is relevant because the students I am interviewing are very educated. Based on the Phelan et. al findings, I can expect to

see some degree of tolerance from participants in the study but I should also not expect that just because students are tolerant that their policy views will be supportive of programs that will aid the homeless. Their policy views may come from various sources such as the media or their educational experiences but overall I expect them to be tolerant.

DATA AND METHODS

Recruitment & Participants

Approval for my project was obtained by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) in the beginning of the Fall 2011 semester. All participants were current undergraduates at the Pennsylvania State University at the time of their interviews. They were recruited through in-person class announcements, electronic mail invitations via organization listservs, and flyers to participate in interviews. Flyers were made and posted in prominent places around campus including the HUB, Thomas Building and Willard Building. Participants were also automatically entered into a random drawing for two gift certificates to a local retail store as an incentive to participate.

In total, 35 undergraduates -15 males and 20 females- responded to my recruitment efforts. The majority of participants were white (n=29), followed by small numbers of Asians (n=3) and Blacks (n=2). Students were from a variety of academic colleges. The variety of majors included sociology, marketing, public relations, economics, biology and engineering. Participants had varying degrees of homelessness contact or exposure, ranging from none to extensive volunteering with a homeless service organization.

Interview Procedure

At the start of the interview, every participant was provided an informed consent form as required by IRB procedure. Participants were given as much time as they needed to read over the descriptions of the study. After participants had completely read the implied consent form, they were given a chance to ask any clarification questions. After questions

were answered and participants understood potential risks, all of which were minimal, the interview proceeded.

The interview consisted of questions meant to assess the ways that contact shaped participants' perceptions and views of homelessness. The first group of questions dealt with students' perceptions of and beliefs about the homeless. Questions included "Describe what comes to mind when you think of homeless people" and "Do you believe that homelessness is the result of individual (bad luck, addiction, laziness) or societal (lack of opportunity, structure of society) factors?" These questions were meant to identify how students viewed homeless people and their pathways into that situation. It was important for these types of questions to be asked because they helped indicate the causes and consequences of homelessness as perceived by students.

The next series of interview questions asked about whether the student had contact with homelessness as an issue and the extent of that contact. Questions included "What kind of contact have you had with the issue of homelessness?" and "Tell me about your most profound contact with homelessness as an issue." I was interested in what ways, if any, participants' contact with homelessness changed their perceptions. To assess the role contact played in changing or forming beliefs, I asked the question "Has your contact with homelessness as an issue changed your beliefs?" This question allowed participants to identify the specific ways in which they thought that contact had affected their views of homelessness.

The final series of questions was geared towards assessing the participants' attitudes about the role of policy in mitigating the issue of homelessness. I was interested in

hearing their opinions on the roles of public figures and the government in dealing with issues regarding homelessness. The questions included “How big of an issue do you feel homelessness is right now? Should it receive more or less attention?” and “Has the homelessness issue become worse, better or stayed the same in recent years? Why do you believe that is?” I was curious if the current economic situation influenced the way students thought about homelessness.

Interviews lasted 30 minutes on average. By using a qualitative approach, I was able to ask follow-up questions and clarify the meaning behind many of the respondents’ answers. The ability to ask follow-ups made the answers to the interview questions more in-depth than they would have been in a simple survey. The follow-ups were especially helpful when I needed clarification about a respondent’s answer or wanted them explain the logic and reasoning behind their answer.

RESULTS

Perceptions of Homelessness

The first question asked in the interview was “What comes to mind when you think of a homeless person?” Many themes emerged from the students’ responses. One of those themes regarded the physical appearance of the homeless. Participants frequently used words such as “dirty” and “unclean” to describe what initially came to mind when they envisioned homeless people. When asked what they meant by dirty, participants tended to describe the clothing they had seen homeless people wearing and physical attributes such as excess facial hair.

I employed some prompts for all of the questions in the interview, but with this particular question I was interested in assessing who the students thought homeless people were demographically. When prompted to speak more about the demographic characteristics of the homeless, the majority of participants mentioned males exclusively. Only two participants mentioned single mothers. One participant said “there are more homeless women and children than you would think”.

When students were prompted to describe the race of the typical homeless individual, a significant misconception became evident. The race that was most commonly identified by participants was overwhelmingly Black (by 27 participants), followed by white (by 8 participants). The emphasis on racial minorities is interesting because whites are the racial group that is most represented in the national homeless population of the United States. However, the minority homeless population is growing, and the frequency of identifying blacks as the most common racial group by the participants may indicate how

visible this change is, especially in the segment of the homeless population on the streets of large cities.

Indeed, when asked about the surroundings and the behavior of the homeless person they were picturing, all participants mentioned an urban setting. Several participants reported that seeing panhandlers had helped in their mental formation of what they believed a homeless person would look like. One participant said that they formed their view from a person they saw standing on the highway with a sign “Please give me food”. When participants described the behavior of homeless people, many of them used words like dangerous, desperate or unfriendly. A male international student from China described his desire “to avoid homeless people” based on his belief that they could be dangerous.

I was also interested in exploring what factors students thought caused homelessness: individual responsibility or structural circumstances. Based on previous research I was expecting more participants to attribute homelessness to circumstance rather than the fault of the individual. I found support for this in the fact that all participants cited some kind of circumstantial factor. The most popular causes of homelessness given were the current economic climate and lack of affordable housing. While students acknowledged that circumstantial causes had a lot to do with homelessness, many also cited reasons related to individual responsibility. The most common individual causes that were cited included bad luck, substance abuse and mental illness. Overall, participants tended to believe that homelessness was due to a combination of individual responsibility and circumstantial factors.

Contact

Participants had differing levels of exposure to homelessness, ranging from indirect (media coverage, observing homeless persons on the street) to direct (volunteering on a long-term basis with a homeless population). The pattern I noticed is that the more contact or exposure a participant had, the more sympathetic their attitudes tended to be towards the homeless. More contact also made students more understanding about the multi-dimensional aspect of the homelessness issue.

Very few participants had limited contact with the homeless (n=5). Limited contact included observing homeless people either through the media or in person but never interacting with them. For example, one participant, a 21 year-old female from rural Pennsylvania, had only witnessed homelessness while on vacation in New York and while studying abroad in Mexico. She mentioned that her most meaningful contact with the issue was that she observed a homeless child begging in the streets during her time in Mexico. Her contact was minimal aside from trips to those two locations. When asked if contact had affected her beliefs, she said

“The main source of my beliefs have been what my parents think. My dad has always thought homelessness was caused by things within an individual’s control. Seeing homeless people struggling has challenged that belief but not necessarily changed it for me.”

Her opinion suggests that limited contact may not be sufficient to change beliefs. This was similar for all of the participants who had limited contact. Isolated instances of

contact, while thought provoking at the time, did not help sustain a long-term interest in homelessness as an issue.

Some participants (n=10) had a moderate level of exposure to homelessness. This included reading about the issue in depth, attending a panel or meeting consisting of homeless speakers, sharing conversations, and volunteering on a one-day basis with homeless people. These participants differed from those with limited contact in terms of the seriousness with which they viewed homelessness as an issue. A male international student from China, whose view of the homeless was primarily constructed through media depictions, described an interaction he had on a bus ride with someone who was homeless.

“I sat on the bus and had a conversation with a homeless person and I was surprised by how warm the man was. He asked me about China and if I was enjoying my stay in the U.S. That conversation showed me that homeless people are not as scary as I thought they were”

I also interviewed a 20 year old female elementary education student who attended a panel of homeless people speaking about their pathways into homelessness. She said that she came away from that event better educated about the causes of homelessness and more aware of the variety of different routes that lead to becoming homeless. When asked why that was, she said:

“The stories were so personal and relatable. They taught me that you can’t take for granted that everything in life will remain stable. It really can happen to anyone”

In sum, those with moderate contact seemed to be most affected when they interacted personally with someone who was homeless.

A majority of the participants I interviewed had some type of in-depth experience with the homeless (n=20). These in-depth experiences included volunteer programs that lasted longer than one day, knowing someone who was homeless, and in one instance an internship with a homelessness agency.

One female participant cited a service trip she took shortly after Hurricane Katrina. On this service trip she interacted with families who had lost their homes in Mississippi as a result of the hurricane while she helped rebuild their houses. She described how hard it was to hear the stories from survivors of the hurricane regarding their experiences with homelessness. When asked what made volunteering in Mississippi profound, she answered that it was a reminder that the people affected the most by the hurricane are still there and still in need of help, even though the media spotlight has left that area. Through this experience she saw homelessness from a new angle, as the result of something outside of anyone's control.

Another female participant cited an experience she had with an acquaintance of her family dealing with homelessness. Her mother had a friend who suffered a sudden divorce. As a result of the divorce the friend lost everything, including her home. The friend spent a lot of time surfing from couch to couch and drawing on her support network. Having known someone personally who was experiencing homelessness on such an intimate level had encouraged my interview respondent to think more about the causes of homelessness and the struggles that homeless people face.

One female participant talked about an unpaid internship she had at a homeless agency in Washington D.C. The contact she had as an intern involved being part of an outreach team that served breakfast to homeless people Monday through Friday. During her shifts serving breakfast she was able to converse with many homeless individuals and expand her view of the homeless problem. When asked about the most meaningful contact she had with the issue during her time in Washington she described serving breakfast on a hot summer day:

“The most shocking experience I had was we were serving breakfast to a group of homeless people in a parking lot. An older woman was in line and her hands were shaking so much that she couldn’t hold her water without spilling. So I walked with her and helped her. The whole time I was helping her I was wondering why no one else was offering to help her.”

This participant said that her beliefs about homelessness did not change based on contact, but her motivation to help educate others has grown as a result of her experiences as an intern. It was common for those with in-depth contact with homelessness to have more knowledge concerning its causes and consequences. They were passionate about the issue and held favorable attitudes towards the homeless.

In general, I found that the interviews supported the contact hypothesis: the more contact participants had with homelessness, the more sympathetic they were to the plight of homeless people. Not only were these participants more sympathetic but they also seemed to be better educated about the multi-dimensional aspect of the homeless experience. They understood that it was not caused by one specific thing and had no one-

size-fits-all solution. They also seemed to have a sustainable interest in the issue, whereas those with limited contact tended to not really care all that much about the issue after their initial contact was over.

Policy Views

Policy views also were influenced by the amount of contact that a participant had with the issue of homelessness. When asked how big of an issue homelessness was, those with less contact more often answered that they were unsure of how large of an issue homelessness was on the national scale. Those with moderate to extensive contact tended to regard homelessness as a major issue that deserved more attention. The answers to this question suggest that the deeper the contact, the more important it makes the issue of homelessness seem.

When asked if homelessness was an issue that had gotten better, worse or stayed the same, participants either responded that the situation had grown worse or that they had no idea. The main reasons given for the worsening of the situation were the economic recession and the instability of the housing market. Economic recession was an answer given by many participants, who explained that the loss of jobs has increased the number of at risk of becoming homeless people. In fact, respondents often cited unemployment when asked what about the economic recession was so instrumental in making the problem worse.

Contact also seemed to influence the way that participants felt the problem should be dealt with. Those with little to moderate contact had no concrete ideas about how to address the problem. They believed that homelessness should be addressed but gave

vague answers such as “The government should help” or “Something should be done”. When asked how the government should help, the typical answer was “I have no idea”. Those respondents with less pervasive contact, while recognizing that homelessness was an issue, lacked the education, familiarity and experiences to provide potentially viable solutions.

On the other hand, those with in-depth contact talked about improving over-crowded shelters and providing job training to adult homeless people. In many cases participants cited their own personal experiences as a basis for what could be done to help alleviate the homeless problem. For example, one male participant who volunteered at a soup kitchen in Philadelphia felt that making that service more accessible would help, but that the soup kitchen should also be made “more multi-dimensional by providing job training or housing assistance.”

The sample was heavily identified as liberal or democrat (n=17) followed by no affiliation (n=10) and conservative and republican (n=8). The political affiliation of the sample may have caused more liberal solutions to the problem to be given, including assistance from the government and the emphasis on society’s responsibility to help the homeless. Conservatives and Republicans interviewed were more likely to suggest improvements to resources that were already in existence such as soup kitchens and similar agencies. Existing research has indicated that students are very liberal in regards to social issues especially compared to people who are older than college-aged. My findings are consistent with the conclusion that students tend to be more sympathetic toward homelessness, and this sympathy is amplified if they have in-depth contact or exposure to the issue.

CONCLUSION

In my own study, I hypothesized that students would be more likely to attribute the causes of homelessness to structural circumstances rather than personal responsibility. Previous research has indicated that college students tend to be more sympathetic towards out-groups. This sympathy is thought to be a consequence of students' age and education. I also evaluated the applicability of the contact hypothesis, which states that the more contact an in-group has with an out-group the less likely the in-group is to hold stereotypes about the out-group. Students have the opportunity to encounter homelessness in the classroom and through extracurricular activities, such as volunteering.

The results of my interviews largely conform to expectations. When asked about the causes of homelessness, students most commonly cited structural circumstances. These circumstances included economic climate, lack of affordable housing, natural disaster and bad luck. No one interviewed cited personal responsibility as the sole cause of homelessness. However, a number of participants believed that homelessness is caused by a combination of circumstantial and personal factors. In some cases the root causes of homelessness were seen as circumstantial, but respondents acknowledged that initial situation could be aggravated by conditions within an individual's responsibility. These conditions included addiction and mental illness. Overall, however, structural circumstances were believed by participants' to be the leading cause of homelessness as identified by participants.

Participants varied in the depth of their experiences with homelessness. Some had just observed it from afar while others had spent significant time volunteering and working with the homeless population. The contact that participants had with the homeless seemed to educate them on the multi-dimensional nature of homelessness. They identified multiple pathways and causes of homelessness. Participants with less salient contact experiences were not as likely to recognize the multi-dimensional nature. Participants that had more contact with homeless people tended to be more sympathetic had a deeper understanding of homelessness, and expressed better developed ideas for policies to address the problem. These participants often cited experiences with homeless people as influencing their views. This suggests support for the contact hypothesis in diminishing stereotypes of the out-group if the in-group has meaningful contact with them.

One potential problem with my study is the presence of selection bias. It is possible that some participants in the study participated because they already had an interest in homelessness and were sympathetic to the issue. In fact, many participants had significant contact with homelessness. On the other hand, there may have been students who were not sympathetic to the issue of homelessness and therefore decided not to participate in my study. It would help to expand this study to see if the feelings of sympathy are present in the majority of students, not just the 35 who agreed to be interviewed.

Overall, I found support for my research questions. Contact, in this sample, seemed to be related to the views of the students. The more in-depth the contact, the more sympathetic participants' perceptions and beliefs were. Contact also indicated a certain

level of familiarity with the issue of homelessness. Policy views and perceptions of the causes of homelessness had a sympathetic tone to them. This was expected because both college education and young age have been shown to correlate positively with favorable attitudes towards homelessness. There are some improvements that could be made to my study, mainly to reduce the possible influence of selection bias. However, the results I have presented do seem reasonable, and they set the stage for further study of how college students' perceptions of homelessness are shaped by their contact with the issue.

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