

Racial Perceptions of Homelessness: A Chicago-based Study Investigating Racial Bias

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Abstract

The relationship between homelessness and racism has not been clearly explored in the research to date. The present study seeks to understand how the race of the homeless individual affects the perception of that individual by others. White and African-American participants were selected at random and asked to fill out a questionnaire based on a case vignette that described either a white or black homeless male. The data was compared in regard to social distance, perceived dangerousness, support for economic aid and blame across racial groups. The only relationship yielding a significant result was the relationship between race and economic aid. African Americans had an increased propensity to support economic aid across all racial categories of homeless individuals.

Introduction

Homelessness has been a fact of American life throughout this country's history, and a problem of epidemic proportions for decades. Over the years, however, the perception of homelessness has changed. From the moralistic view of the "worthy" versus the "unworthy" poor, to the romanticized "tramp" representation of the homeless, to skid row, both the population of people that are homeless and the way they are perceived by society as a whole has changed according to prevailing societal trends (Hopper & Baumohl, 1996). During the 1980's, the problem of homelessness became popularized through media coverage. Currently, Americans perceive the homeless as consisting primarily of non-white males (Link, Phelan, Stueve, Moore, Bresnahan, & Struening, 1996). Indeed, the population of homeless individuals has grown to include a disproportionate number of African Americans (Hopper & Milburn, 1996).

Researchers have insisted for years that homelessness has to be seen as a social circumstance in addition to a personal characteristic (Erikson, 1995; Link, et al., 1996). Therefore, when studying homelessness it is important to include questions about prevailing socioeconomic tides rather than about the personalities of the people caught in these

tides (Erikson, 1996). Erikson (1996) describes the homeless as being "swept away from the settled shore by a cruel and unrelenting undertow" (p. vii). He uses this metaphor as a means of asking two questions: What is the nature of homelessness? What can be done to reverse it?

This study aims to continue this trend of examining homelessness as a social phenomenon by exploring the role of racism in homelessness. We will specifically be focusing on how individuals feel about a homeless person of their own and of a different racial category. We hope to discover some of the contributing factors to the public's perceptions of homelessness, which can lead us to begin to answer the first question Erikson posits about the nature of homelessness.

Despite the fact that homelessness is recognized as a significant problem in America, it is interesting to note that few studies have been devoted to homelessness among ethnic groups (Julia & Hartnett, 1999). In fact, while attempting to collect articles for this study's literature review, it was difficult to find studies dedicated specifically to the relationship between race and homelessness. The fact that there are a disproportionate number of homeless African Americans, however, leads us to think that one contributing factor to the social phenomenon of homelessness is socialized, or institutionalized racism. For this reason, we hope to shed light on the extent to which institutionalized racism, as a social circumstance, affects public attitudes towards the population of homeless people today.

Public attitudes toward homelessness are important to study because they may have dire consequences for the homeless. The public's understanding about homelessness shapes the public response to the problem on both an individual and collective basis. For example, if people believe that people who are homeless are lazy and do not want to work, then they are going to be less likely to volunteer and give donations to a homeless shelter. Further, public attitudes about homeless people have important policy implications in that attitudes shape the way individuals vote and public policies are made (Link, et al., 1996). If the public has negative opinions about the homeless, then

they may be less likely to support policies that can positively effect the homeless. By examining the public's understanding of homelessness and extrapolating whether racial differences shape this understanding, we can begin to pinpoint the policy implications derived from the public's attitudes. In addition, through examining the nature of the relationship between homelessness and racism, we can begin to answer Erikson's (1996) second question: What can be done to reverse it?

The Public Perception of Homelessness

The public perception of the homeless has changed over the years. Feagin (1975) found that when respondents in his 1970's studies evaluated the causes of homelessness and poverty, they blamed the person's behavioral characteristics (such as a lack of thrift and proper money management, and a lack of effort on the homeless person's part to change his/her situation) more than they blamed economic and social factors such as low wages, scarcity of jobs, poor schools and racial discrimination. This perceptual bias continued into the middle of the 1980's. Kluegal and Smith (1986) performed a study in which the results almost identically replicated Faegin's study. Their research found that people thought that it was the homeless persons' fault that they were in their current situation.

Research from the early 1990's reveals a changing public perception of the homeless. People's perceptions were still not uniformly positive, but the level of compassion expressed was quite high and the likelihood of people blaming the homeless person for his or her situation was surprisingly low (Phelan, Link, Moore, & Stueve, 1997). Lee, Jones, and Lewis (1990) found that three-fifths of their respondents attributed homelessness to structural forces rather than personal choice. It seemed that the public began to see homelessness as something that occurred because of an outside source, rather than because of something that the homeless person did. In 1995, The Gallup Organization conducted a survey regarding American's understanding of, and attitudes toward, the homeless. It was found that three-fourths of the people surveyed thought that unemployment was a characteristic of homelessness. A majority of the respondents also thought that job loss and lack of affordable housing were the major causes of homelessness. Similar results were also found by Link and his colleagues (1996). They discovered that people

believed structural factors concerning housing, the economic system, and a lack of government aid were major causes of homelessness.

Still, both studies found that a large majority of the people surveyed felt that drug and alcohol abuse were problems that contributed to homelessness (Gallup Organization, 1990; Link et al., 1996). In addition, 35.1% of respondents in the Gallup Organization survey (1995) believed that the homeless were mentally ill. The Gallup Organization (1995) also found that the "average" homeless person was characterized as an unmarried male between the ages of 18 to 55. Further, when asked about minority groups the public viewed the problem as affecting racial minorities (Link et al., 1996). These results suggest that the American public believes that the causes of homelessness are complex and due to a combination of both structural forces and individual factors.

Since it seems there is a widespread public perception that people are homeless at least in part because of external and structural factors, how does the public feel toward the homeless? In the 1996 study done by Link and his colleagues, a vast majority of the people surveyed expressed feelings of sadness and compassion for homeless people (85.8%). They said that they felt angry that so many people were homeless in a country as rich as America. But the research also suggested that despite their compassion for the homeless, people still had a hard time experiencing empathy for them. Sixty-two percent of those surveyed said that it was hard to imagine what homeless people do with all of their free time, and thirty-seven percent said that they thought homelessness frees a person from worries that other people have about jobs and families. This suggests that people's feelings toward homelessness are very complex. People may say that they are compassionate, but may still have a lack of empathy. One reason people said that they have a hard time being empathetic towards homeless people is because they feel repelled when they see homeless people in such destitute and disorderly conditions (Link, et al., 1996).

Homeless people are stigmatized more severely than other poor people (Link et al., 1996). This is due, in part, to the fact that many homeless people live in public spaces, which makes homelessness more visible and the homeless more disruptive than other citizens. Homeless people may have difficul-

ties involving cleaning and grooming themselves. As a result, they may be aesthetically unappealing (Phelan et al., 1997). In addition, people associate the homeless with alcohol and drug abuse (Link et al., 1996). When the media portrays the homeless on TV or in newspapers, they portray them in ways that reinforce these stereotypes. People's perceptions of homelessness may be influenced by a small group of homeless people or by the media, so they may overgeneralize their views of homelessness to all persons that are homeless. They may also overestimate the prevalence of certain characteristics such as dirtiness, dangerousness, and alcoholism to the entire homeless population.

Racism and Homelessness

Statistics describing the racial composition of the homeless demonstrate that African Americans are substantially over-represented when compared to their white counterparts. Nationally, African Americans make up approximately 50% of the homeless population (U.S. Conference of Mayors, 2000), yet they only make up 12.3% of the United States population (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000). In the city of Chicago, approximately 79% of the homeless population is comprised of African Americans (U.S. Conference of Mayors, 2000), though African Americans comprise only 36.8% of the city's total population.

African Americans differ from white Americans in their increased likelihood of facing homelessness. They differ in other significant ways as well. Sumerlin and Privette (1993) found that African American and white homeless men differed significantly in a number of categories, including self-actualization, willingness to use services, subjective health ratings, and history of being homeless. In reflecting on the significant differences between African American men and white homeless men, the authors suggest that, "it is possible that the factors contributing to the etiology and continuance of homelessness for black and white men are different" (Sumerlin & Privette, 1993, p. 1046).

Given such differences, it is important to consider the role that race plays in homelessness. Several authors have stated that racial exclusion, inner city isolation, and limited educational and occupational resources may account for the overrepresentation of African Americans among the poverty-stricken and,

in turn, the homeless (Belcher, 1992; Feagin & Feagin, 1999; Hopper & Milburn, 1995). African Americans are predominantly concentrated in cities where many job opportunities have disappeared over the past two decades (Feagin & Feagin, 1999; Hopper & Milburn, 1995). Hopper & Milburn (1995) also point out that inner city neighborhoods face concentrated poverty in addition to commercial investment decline, social service cut backs, and dilapidated sectors of the physical landscape.

Race issues in American society are so deep-seated that it has become almost second nature to some Americans to assume that race determines an individual's abilities and makes a member of one race intrinsically superior to a member of another race. Whites have historically been perceived to be the superior race in the United States, a fact that has produced profoundly different individual and institutional responses to people of color and whites, and harmed those of color by judgments and actions that are directly or indirectly racist.

D'Souza (1995) argues that, in the absence of substantial information about a person's individual attributes, people often use race as "base rate" information from which to make impressions about any given group member. In an attempt to address this issue, as well as the issue of racism, this study will compare how individuals feel about a homeless person of their own and of a different racial category along four axes: blame, willingness to offer economic support, perceived dangerousness, and social distance (Phelan, et al., 1997). Consistent with D'Souza's argument, it is our hypothesis that individuals will be more likely to see the homeless person of their own racial category as an individual, and thus be more compassionate towards him. Similarly, we hypothesize that participants will be more likely to view a homeless person of a different race as part of a homogenous group, and thus be less likely to be compassionate towards him. We anticipate that responses will differ depending upon the person's race, and the race of the homeless person he or she is asked to consider. We hypothesize that individuals will exhibit more social distance from members of a different racial category, will be more likely to blame individuals of a different racial category for their homelessness, will perceive members of another racial category as being more dangerous, and will be less willing to offer economic support to members of a different racial category.

Methodology

This is a descriptive study that explores whether attitudes regarding homeless individuals are influenced by racial differences or similarities. We specifically examined the differences between how white and African American residents of Chicago viewed homeless individuals of their own racial group versus a different racial group. Attitudes towards the homeless were measured according to scales measuring social distance, perceived dangerousness, support for economic aid, and blame as adapted from Phelan, et al. (1997). We received approval for the study from Loyola University Chicago's Institutional Review Board (IRB).

Sample

Seventy-seven people who were selected at random from persons attending events in the City of Chicago were given a questionnaire regarding their attitudes toward the homeless. To recruit participants, we went to various public areas, such as Grant Park concerts, public transportation stations, Daley Plaza, and outdoor events (i.e. races and festivals). To randomly select participants, our research team members approached every seventh person we perceived to be white (of European/Caucasian ancestry) who was sitting down, and every third person we perceived to be African-American. This method was used to attempt to obtain an equal representation of white and African-American participants in view of the fact that there are a greater number of white people in Chicago as a whole (U.S. Conference of Mayors, 2000), as well as at the events we attended. Interviewers later confirmed their perception of the race of potential participants through inviting them to identify their race on the questionnaire.

Forty of the participants identified themselves as African American and thirty-seven of the participants indicated they were white. Each participant was given the same questionnaire, except that half of the questionnaires were about a white homeless person and the other half were about an African-American homeless person. In total, four groups were compared. The first group consisted of African-American participants who answered a questionnaire based on a vignette regarding a white homeless person (N=20). The second group consisted of African-American participants who answered a questionnaire based on a vignette regarding a black person (N=20). The third

group consisted of white participants who answered a questionnaire based on a vignette about a white homeless person (N=18), and the last group consisted of white participants who answered a questionnaire based on a vignette regarding a black homeless person (N=19).

The inclusion/exclusion criteria for our study were as follows. The participants had to be between the ages of 18 and 65. Individuals that were neither African American nor self-identified as "white" were excluded. If the participant stated that they were half white and half African American, we decided to exclude the participant based on their potential inability to closely identify with either race. Individuals who self-identified as Hispanic were also excluded due to the potential confounding variable of Hispanic cultural attitudes towards both race and homelessness. Finally, individuals who had been homeless themselves were excluded.

The Instrument

In understanding the role that race plays in a person's perception of and compassion towards homelessness, we employed a vignette experiment. Two vignettes were adapted from a study by Phelan et al. (1997). They varied only in the specified race of the subject that was used:

James is a 35-year-old, single, black/white man. He is currently homeless and lives in shelters for homeless people. He grew up in a predominantly low-income black/white neighborhood. He quit school before finishing high school in order to get a job at a fast-food restaurant. Since then he has held a number of low paying jobs, but has been unemployed for over a year.

Since 30 to 40 year old men make up the highest percentage of homeless individuals, a 35-year-old man was illustrated in the vignette. About half of the participants received a vignette describing a white man and half received a vignette of a black homeless man. By maintaining consistency in all personal characteristics except race, we were able to attribute any difference in perception exclusively to race. Furthermore, because African American and white participants were randomly assigned vignettes, it was determined that differing responses were the result of

variations in stimulus rather than variations in the respondents' race.

As in the Phelan et al. (1997) study, a set of questions about the homeless individual was used, addressing issues of social distance, perceived dangerousness, support for public assistance, and causal attributions for his condition. There were four questions concerning social distance ($\text{Alpha}=.85$), two questions concerning perceived dangerousness ($\text{Alpha}=.56$), three questions concerning support for economic aid ($\text{Alpha}=.79$), and one question concerning blame.

These included such questions as:

- "How willing would you be to hire James to do odd jobs for you?"
- "Do you think James would be dangerous to be around?"
- "Do you think James deserves help from society?"
- "Do you think that James is to blame for his current situation?"

Respondents were asked to rate their responses on a four-point Likert scale, with one being "definitely willing/definitely yes," and four being, "definitely unwilling/definitely no."

These four measures allowed us to obtain a picture of social rejection and compassion towards the homeless. An understanding of social distance allowed us to see how close people were willing to get to homeless persons, in particular to homeless individuals of a different race. Perceived dangerousness was also integral to our study, as we felt African Americans would generally be seen as more violent than whites. Support for public assistance allowed us to consider whether people were actually willing to use money and tax dollars to assist the homeless. It was hypothesized that the participants would be more willing to support homeless individuals of their own race. The level of blame people placed on the homeless was also measured, which gave an indication of the degree to which surveyed individuals felt the homeless were responsible for their own situations. All of these areas were assessed in relation to the variable of race. Finally, the questionnaire included demographic questions on the respondent's age, gender, race, income level, zip code, and experience with the homeless.

Research Procedures

When collecting data, research team members took turns explaining the project and asking each potential respondent to participate in the study. The first respondent in either racial group on each data collection day was given the vignette describing the white homeless man. The vignettes were then alternated in an effort to ensure that equal numbers of each variation of the vignette were given. Data was collected until a total of 77 completed surveys were obtained from all data groups. According to our exclusion criteria, we expected that 10 surveys would need to be thrown out. In fact, only 5 surveys were not used.

Each research team member was briefed on exactly what to say to each potential participant to ensure consistency. Upon approaching a potential respondent, the research-team member explained the topic of the study and explained that participation included a one-time-only commitment of approximately 10 minutes. Potential respondents were told that the study concerned people's perceptions of homelessness. Race as a subject of inquiry was not mentioned. Each participant was asked to read a consent form separate from the survey. Participants were not asked to give their name on the actual survey. Completed surveys were not examined until the data collection was complete. Confidentiality was ensured by not including the participants name on the survey. Loyola University Chicago School of Social Work pens were given to each participant as a token of our appreciation.

Data Analysis

We broke our sample into four groups according to their race and whether or not they filled out a vignette describing a black or white homeless person. Descriptive statistics were calculated for all demographic variables. We then recoded each scale to compare those who said "definitely willing/definitely yes" to all other response choices. We hypothesized that this subgroup would prove to be significantly different than the respondents as a whole and that they would be more likely to be compassionate. Using Chi square tests we compared across all four scales (social distance, dangerousness, support for economic aid and blame). The groups were then combined by race so we could look at all white respondents versus all African-American respondents. Chi square tests were run again using the

recoded scales on these combined groups. We also divided the sample across race to compare respondents' experience with homelessness so that those that had either volunteered or worked at a homeless shelter or known someone that was homeless, were compared to those that had little or no experience with homelessness. Chi square tests were then run using each of the four scales to compare the experience of each of these groups. Chi square tests were also run for each of the four scales dividing the sample across race so that we compared those with the greatest incomes (in excess of \$75,000) to those with the least income (less than \$18,000).

Results

There were 77 participants in this study. The age range of participants was 18 to 65 years old. The average age of the whole sample was 39 years old. The modal income range was \$35,000-50,000. Females made up 46 of the participants, while 31 were male. There were 40 African-American participants and 37 white participants. The average age of the African-American participants was 45 years old. The modal income range for African Americans was \$35,000-50,000. The average age of the white participants was 33 years old, and the modal income range for this group was \$25,001-35,000.

None of the Chi square tests comparing the four groups or four scales had statistically significant results, nor did any of the Chi square tests based on income or participants' experiences with homeless people. The only tests that obtained statistically significant results were the Chi square tests comparing all African American and white respondents, regardless of vignette. From those results, the scale that was statistically significant involved three questions around the category of "willingness to provide economic aid." In this case, African Americans were more willing than whites to say "definitely yes" to the question of whether James deserves help from society (Chi square = 4.94, $df = 1$, Fisher's Exact Test $p = .037$), whether he should be given government assistance to pay for food, clothing, and housing (Chi square = 5.653, $df = 1$, Fisher's Exact Test $p = .031$), and whether he should be given government assistance for medical care (Chi square = 5.635, $df = 1$, Fisher's Exact Test $p = .023$).

Discussion

The one correlation that proved to be statistically significant was that African-Americans as a group supported economic aid for the homeless individual in the vignette, regardless of race. Other research supports the fact that African-Americans, as a group and regardless of socioeconomic differences, fight against economic disparities. There were no significant differences regarding white respondents' feelings for or against economic aid with regard to either race, suggesting an ambivalence on the part of white Americans regarding economic aid. The difference between the two racial groups may be due to African Americans' historic difficulties in achieving the economic status that most white Americans have achieved. We would argue that they have been more likely to experience economic discrimination from a capitalist system that has created and maintained a stratified economic system, and thus they may feel that all individuals put at a disadvantage by such a system deserve a helping hand in the form of economic aid.

America's historical approach toward public assistance has been based on the deservingness of the poor rather than a general commitment to "assisting the economically disadvantaged" (Rosenheck, Bassuk & Solomon, 2001, p. 20). According to the Chicago Coalition of Homelessness (2001), African American single men make up the highest percentage of the homeless population in Chicago. The high percentage of African American males is consistent with the trend toward targeted funding to specific groups of homeless who are considered the "deserving" poor, for example, children, women, and families (Rosenheck, Bassuk, & Solomon, 2001). The risk and disadvantage to identifying specific subgroups is that programs intended for a special population may "blur awareness of the structural causes of homelessness and may lead policymakers to erroneously explain homelessness as a result of personal or subgroup failings" (Rosenheck et al., 2001, p. 1). The disproportionate number of homeless African American males in Chicago reflects policy efforts made toward specific populations that may have an effect on the public's perception of homelessness in two ways. First, if the tendency towards racial bias in homelessness is accurate, then mainstreamed whites (with no familial history of poverty or discrimination) may be more like-

ly to disregard homeless African Americans as having been the cause of their predicament. Second, as referred to earlier, African Americans with a cultural history of social unrest may be more likely to identify with and empathize with the oppressed.

Public policy is integral to the shifting of these extremes. Policy makers hold an important role in changing American's attitudes towards the homeless and bringing white and black citizens to a position of awareness and action. One suggestion is for the implementation of programs and legislation that address the needs of specific groups, such as African-Americans. Importantly, however, this emphasis on subgroups should be aligned with a goal to improve the conditions of the homeless as a whole.

As previously stated, the remainder of our comparisons of the scales that measured blame, social distance, and perceived dangerousness, were statistically insignificant whether we used mean scores or compared those endorsing the most extreme response to all others. As we were expecting significant differences, it is interesting to consider why we may not have found those results. First, socioeconomic status may be more of a factor in discrimination than race. It may not have mattered whether the individual was African-American or white, and the respondent may simply have categorized all homeless individuals into one group—not differentiating between homeless people based on race. Thus, the distinguishing feature of the race of the homeless man in the vignette may have been overlooked in the respondent's answers to the various scales. This suggests that homelessness itself is a source of fear and blame, regardless of race.

Limitations of the Research

In conducting this study, various threats to internal and external validity were identified. The sample was not "random" in the sense that we could only interview people who agreed to participate. Our selection criteria made it difficult to generalize to the entire Chicago population. Because race was the only controlled variable, there may have been other confounding variables that contributed to the participants' response, such as gender, education level and age.

This research would have a stronger basis if a larger sample size was used. Twenty individuals in each of the four groupings may not have provided a large enough sample to produce significant results. A

more random sample would have also strengthened the validity of our results. While all participants were found in public places, it may have been limiting to only recruit at public functions in downtown Chicago. The sample could have been more diverse if the participants were recruited from a variety of culturally and socio-economically diverse neighborhoods.

There were also some limitations in the instrument used and the method of collecting data. The instrument only had a four-point scale, which minimized the possibility of obtaining significant results, especially when considering the relatively small sample size. The instrument would have been more sensitive if the scale was expanded to include a ten-point range. In addition, the race of the homeless individual in the vignette may not have been apparent to the respondent. As we wanted to ensure that the respondents were unaware of the racial hypotheses involved in this study, we made the racial factor as subtle as possible, simply mentioning it twice as a descriptor in the vignette. However, the respondent may have read over that description and focused more on his/her own conception of what a homeless individual is instead of an image of a white or African-American homeless individual that we intended to be evoked by the vignette.

Since much of this study focused on racial issues, there may have been bias in the fact that all interviewers were white. The race of the researchers may have influenced the responses of the study subjects. To control for this, African-American researchers could have approached the African-American respondents and white-American researchers could have approached the white respondents.

Another factor that must be considered is social desirability. In conducting research on such emotionally and politically charged topics as race and homelessness, it is important to consider that the respondents may have responded based on what they believed was "politically correct," even if the survey was confidential. Thus, what they put on paper may not have accurately reflected what they felt about homelessness. Stating they support economic aid for homelessness, for example, is different than actually being willing to give economic aid.

Despite these limitations, there are some applicable findings that could have implications for policy-making regarding homelessness. Our research suggests

that whites are less inclined to support economic aid for the homeless than are blacks. African-American participants felt more strongly that homeless individuals, in general, should receive economic support, while white Americans were more ambivalent. Additional research could help clarify the relationship between the fact that the majority of policymakers are white Americans and the reality of the current dearth of resources available to the homeless in general. This may be a factor in the answer to Erikson's (1997) second question: "What can be done to reverse homelessness?"

The study of the correlation between race and perceptions of the homeless is an important area of study. However, the researchers found that few studies have addressed this topic. Thus, further research could be conducted using the basic premises of this experiment, and addressing the limitations that have been listed. Further research could include a study with a larger sample and revision of the research instrument to include a greater scale and also more items or questions to deepen the understanding of people's perceptions.

This area of study is particularly important to the field of social work due to the profession's ethical responsibility to be aware of social phenomena and contribute towards reducing the disparities that exist between racial and economic groups. With such knowledge, social workers will be better armed to advocate for perhaps the most disenfranchised population in our nation.

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