

Public Perception of Police Responses to Homelessness: Results from a Factorial Survey

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Abstract

Visible homelessness is a complex and enduring issue that remains salient in policymaking and political realms. In response to homeless individuals living their lives in public spaces, many cities have enacted civility codes or laws that address quality of life concerns in an attempt to remove visible signs of homelessness and placate the business community and housed citizens. Homeless advocacy groups have raised concerns about the legality and constitutionality of these laws, regularly challenging them in court and winning. Additionally, public sentiment towards homeless populations has grown more sympathetic in recent years and there are signs that these punitive police responses may not enjoy the public support that governments believe they do. However, despite dwindling public support and concerns of legality, these punitive police responses to homelessness remain. This study aims to evaluate public opinion of how the police respond to visible homelessness and if public opinion is impacted by the race and background of homeless individuals. This research will utilize the Social Construction of Target Populations Framework coupled with multinomial logistic regression to analyze data from an opinion survey conducted in Portland, Oregon on appropriate responses of police officers to a notional homeless man committing various levels of offenses. Results from this paper will provide policy recommendations for policing strategies and local policy recommendations to improve homelessness policies. This research will aid in providing an alternative to punitive policing strategies and address the possibility of rethinking responses to homelessness.

Introduction

Homelessness is a complex and enduring issue that touches all facets of public policy. The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development Point in Time (PIT) count in January 2019 calculated that 567,715 people were experiencing homelessness on any given night in the United States (U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development 2019). This number represents the third consecutive annual increase in the number of people experiencing homelessness as measured by the US Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD). Although the number of people experiencing homelessness was 20 percent lower in 2019 than it was in 2007, a three-year increase is concerning and has spurred policy action across the country. Both the general public and policymakers agree that something must be done to reduce and prevent homelessness, but often they disagree about which policy tools to use.

This paper examines various policy tools that have been developed in reaction to an increase in visible homelessness. Visible homelessness in the US has increased in part due to a lack of affordable housing, a reduction in federally funded public housing and the systematic closing of institutions for the mentally ill (Dear & Wolch 1987; Herbert et al 2018). These causes, along with other structural and individual level causes, have created a large population of individuals and families without homes. As homeless people begin to spend more time in urban public space, there has been a corresponding increase in vocal concerns expressed by the public and business community about how the presence of homeless individuals will influence commercial activity, enjoyment of public space, and tourism (Mitchell 1997; Gibson 2004; Herbert et al 2018).

It is important to understand where public opinion lies on various types of policing strategies, especially in the realm of homeless policy. A better understanding of public opinion

could serve to influence politicians' and policymakers' decisions to enact punitive or restorative policies and could influence the way police choose to respond in certain situations. Police are ultimately political actors who are constantly balancing the demands of multiple groups and interests and it results in a contradictory police response to homelessness, representing both punitive and supportive goals (Herbert et al 2018).

Despite an increase in public sympathy and a more nuanced understanding of the causes of homelessness, there remains a trend toward enacting punitive policies to address visible homelessness (Herring 2014; Fitzpatrick & Myrstol 2011; Amster 2003). To better understand this seeming contradiction and the underlying determinants of public opinion, this essay explores public opinion of various policing strategies and policy tools used with homeless individuals. This paper attempts to answer the question, Do background characteristics and/or race of a homeless person effect public opinion on how the police should respond to and address that homeless person?

One way to understand how the characteristics of a target population influence public opinion of policies directed toward them is by using a public policy framework. Social Construction of Target Population theory examines how various social constructions impact the types of policy design and policy tools used for specific populations. To apply Social Construction of Target Population theory in this essay, I refer to the general homeless population as well as smaller homeless subpopulations with varying backgrounds as the target populations. Social Construction of Target Populations offers a way to compare and contrast the public's preferred policy tools for policing within the context of varying background characteristics of homeless individuals that may be associated with different social constructions and stereotypes. To accomplish this, a survey was conducted of residents in Portland, Oregon to gauge how the

public feels about various common responses from police officers to nuisance crimes and low-level illegal acts disproportionately committed by people experiencing homelessness.

The following section presents a review of the literature on policing homeless populations, public perception of homelessness and stigmatized populations, and the effect of public opinion on public policy followed by an explanation of Social Construction of Target Populations theory. I follow with a discussion of the survey experiment design and sampling, the method of data analysis used, and a discussion of the results. I conclude with potential policy implications of this research, an acknowledgement of the limitations of the study, and potential for future research.

Background and Literature Review

Policing Homeless Populations

When analyzing and examining the different strategies police use towards people experiencing homelessness, there is a noticeable fluctuation between coercive and supportive functions of police officers. Through these constantly changing roles, three overarching and contrasting approaches emerge in the literature: aggressive patrol, therapeutic policing, and officer-involved harm reduction (Herbert et al 2018).

While there is a robust history in the United States of laws designed to exclude specific groups of people, modern anti-homeless laws are narrower in focus (Adcock et al 2016). Punitive approaches and therapeutic policing may be viewed as two sides of the same coin. Punitive approaches to homelessness largely focus on the overt exclusion and banishment of homeless people from public spaces, while therapeutic policing is more subtle and focuses on diversion and coercion of the individual to utilize substance abuse, job training or mental health services to avoid arrest or citation (Stuart 2014; Herbert et al 2018). The last few decades have seen a sharp

rise in both of these policing strategies, with some police departments practicing “coercive benevolence” to guide individuals to programs that will ameliorate their perceived individual shortcomings, coupled with the introduction of anti-homeless laws that target specific behaviors disproportionately displayed by homeless individuals (Herbert et al 2018:1492).

Contemporary urban policy researchers in the United States have focused on the ideas and rise of neoliberal urban governance and the resulting punitive nature of policing when it comes to homeless populations and public disorder (Herbert & Brown 2006; Stuart 2014; Stuart et al 2015; Skolnik 2016; Stuart 2016; Von Mahs 2013). The evolution of aggressive policing tactics against signs of public disorder are at least partially attributed to the introduction of Broken Windows Theory into policing and situational crime prevention. Broken Windows Theory, introduced by James Wilson and George Kelling in the *Atlantic Monthly* (1982), posits that small signs of disorder such as broken windows lead to increased crime if left untreated. This is because criminals are drawn to these neighborhoods which appear less equipped to protect themselves and where their crimes are more likely to go unreported (Kelling & Wilson 1982). By this logic, police can more effectively fight crime by focusing on minor offenses, which eventually lead to major offenses. In their theory, Kelling and Wilson refer to someone panhandling as “the first broken window,” effectively associating the poor and homeless with disorder and crime (Kelling & Wilson 1982). This punitive approach to policing essentially criminalizes behaviors considered disorderly, such as sitting or lying in public places or engaging in panhandling. This approach is fueled in part by the business community who, in an effort to build and maintain a population of high-income earners and prevent the depreciation of the urban core, look to the police to use more punitive policing strategies against the visible homeless population (MacLeod 2002; Vitale 2008; Herbert et al 2018).

Despite numerous challenges to Broken Windows Theory (see Hinkle & Weisburd 2008), cities continue to enforce exclusionary policies that criminalize homelessness. As urban centers promote revitalization and increased business investment, a focus of many cities has been the exclusion of homeless people from prime public places (Beckett & Herbert 2011). In business improvement districts (BIDs), these laws often help to create a space that is technically public but treated more like private space, allowing police officers and business owners greater discretion to exclude or restrict undesirable members of society (Glyman & Rankin 2016). This is often accomplished through the passing of civility codes or quality of life ordinances that criminalize behaviors disproportionately exhibited by homeless people. These laws give police the ability to exclude or expel undesirable populations from these areas, thereby satisfying the desire of the city to preserve the gentrified areas and placating citizens whose fear of crime is triggered with the presence of homeless individuals (Herring 2019). The police in these scenarios commonly view their arrest and citation power as a deterrent from what the larger, housed population views as disorder and bad behavior (Herbert et al 2018). In many cases, citizens and business owners will rely on police officers to address any concerns about crime or disorder, and business improvement districts will often form informal partnerships with police departments to give them additional discretion over how homeless behavior is addressed (Herbert et al 2018).

There are many examples of anti-homeless laws in cities across the United States. Police officers will issue citations or arrest and incarcerate individuals for panhandling, sitting or lying down on sidewalks, public camping, or urinating in public. In some cities enforcement of these ordinances has become so pervasive that nearly three quarters of homeless citizens have been approached by the police in a public place, and over ten percent are approached by police multiple times per week (see Alatorre et al 2017). These policies are not an effective way to

prevent the activities they are meant to target, and these police interactions are not leading to connections with homeless services (Herbert et al 2018). Furthermore, they have been shown to have detrimental effects on the emotional and mental wellbeing of homeless people, further increasing obstacles to work, education, and access to services (Alatorre et al 2017; Darrah-Okike et al 2018). The cumulative effect of these regulations is a criminalization of homelessness—banning necessary behaviors where no legal alternatives exist (Amster 2003; Skolnik 2016). Advocates for the homeless argue that enforcing these laws essentially allows the majority to punish those they see as less desirable, and the message sent by continuing to pass and enforce these types of laws is that the lives of those who cannot obey these laws are worth less than the people who can (Skolnik 2016).

In a time of intense urban regeneration and gentrification many cities continue to face pressure from the business community and private citizens to remove visible signs of disorder and poverty (Beckett & Herbert 2011; Herring 2019). The policy tools of exclusion and banishment are used in response to these pressures because they enable law enforcement to remove a person or people from entire sections of the city. Banishment acts as a policy tool, exerting social control over the undesirable members of society by enabling law enforcement to take actions they otherwise would not be able to take to expel homeless people from these areas, thereby fulfilling the order maintenance role demanded of them by urban residents (Beckett & Herbert 2011). Banishment is mostly used to manage people and situations that may disturb the public but do not endanger them; the public often initiates calls to police homeless people in public spaces and police are left to shuffle the bureaucratic burden of enforcing quality of life laws aimed at the homeless (Beckett & Herbert 2011; Herring 2019).

Quality of life laws, banishment, and exclusion zones represent a trend in US cities of using the criminal justice system and law enforcement to solve social problems that are rooted in poverty (Beckett & Herbert 2011). These laws continue to be challenged throughout the country, however, as evidenced by recent court cases. For instance, in 2019 the Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals upheld the decision that absolute bans of sleeping and camping outside on public property in the absence of other legal alternatives violates the eighth amendment rights of homeless people (*Martin v. City of Boise* 920 F.3d. 584, 2019). Similarly, in 2015 the United States District Court for the District of Colorado found an ordinance against panhandling in the city of Grand Junction an unconstitutional violation of free speech (*Browne, et al. v. City of Grand Junction, Colorado* 136 F. Supp. 3d 1276, 2015). Despite questionable legality and constant challenges to the legitimacy of punitive policing strategies, however, new quality of life ordinances and banishment laws continue to be implemented across the country.

A large body of research exists on the exclusion of homeless people from public spaces, but less work has been done to understand how homeless people are policed in the marginalized spaces to which they have been relegated (Stuart 2014). Ethnographic studies in LA's Skid Row, Washington DC, Seattle, and other cities with large populations of homeless residents have revealed a different type of policing in marginal spaces that can be categorized as therapeutic policing or recovery management strategies. These studies suggest that not only must we look at the homeless population as a heterogenous group with varying needs and circumstances, we must also view law enforcement's management and interaction with homeless people through the same lens of complexity (DeVerteuil et al 2009).

The concepts of therapeutic policing and recovery management encompass police tactics designed to coerce homeless people to seek services and utilize shelters. Often, these strategies

take the form of enforcing quality of life laws and redirecting police efforts to areas with high concentrations of homeless individuals as a way to direct them to social service organizations focused on recovery and job training assistance (Stuart 2014). In this way, police begin to take on a paternal, disciplinary role in the management of recovery, utilizing civility codes and quality of life laws to guide the homeless into shelter programs and remedy the assumed individual circumstances which brought them there in the first place (Stuart 2014).

The police enforce recovery management in two ways: First, police partner with local shelters and recovery associations to create diversion programs which combine the threat of legal punishment with the incentive of rehabilitation; Second, through police interventions officers make an attempt at behavior modification by nudging homeless people toward self-improvement (Herbert et al 2018). The belief is that if they can make the unwanted behavior of homeless individuals less convenient, they will change their behavior and start to live productive, sober lives. One means to accomplish this is by selectively enforcing civility codes and quality of life laws to force people to move constantly and prevent them from setting up camp (Herbert et al 2018). Police feel they are doing the right thing by providing an additional push into recovery programs, but the homeless population has developed informal networks and systems to avoid the police sweeps and being forced into a shelter program (Stuart 2016).

Recovery management programs and therapeutic policing have mixed results. First, they are often underfunded and are not generally effective, and crime rates continue to mirror those found in areas that do not use the same model (Blasi 2007; Blasi & Stuart 2008). Second, under a therapeutic policing model, officers may be more willing to conduct stops, issue citations and make arrests for low level illegal activities than they would be otherwise (Herbert et al 2018). Finally, the second- and third-order effects of move along orders, citations, and threats of arrest

are that they deprive the homeless of property, create additional barriers to homeless services and employment, and increase their vulnerability to experiencing violence and crime (Herring 2019).

The third method of policing used with homeless individuals is officer-led harm reduction. Police departments are often used as the managers of social marginality, but police do not have the appropriate resources or legal mandates to make changes to the underlying causes of structural inequality. Officer-involved diversion and harm reduction offers a possible police response that alternatively addresses structural dynamics in a way that could result in some improvements in the quality of life of the homeless population (Herbert et al 2018). Especially in cities with large populations of homeless individuals, the police often have an impossible-to-achieve mandate to be responsible for both reducing crime through law enforcement while also providing services (Manning 1997). To fulfill this mandate police officers often partner informally with outreach workers as a workaround to satisfy the demand placed upon them to be frontline mental health workers and service providers (Simpson 2015). This results in positive effects on the officers' increased knowledge through these partnerships and a greater understanding of the community policing needs with respect to homeless individuals with mental illness (Simpson 2015). Officer-led harm reduction encourages the police to better understand the underlying motivations of criminal behavior and to partner with social workers who have the ability to guide homeless individuals towards helpful services, while moving away from the emphasis on coercion and deterrence (Herbert et al 2018).

After all of this, the question we must ask is this: how there can be public support for both punitive and supportive policies for homeless people? Although evidence suggests a more liberal and sympathetic public attitude towards those living in poverty and experiencing homelessness, this is the same public who initiates complaints to the police of visible

homelessness and supports policies that serve to exclude the homeless from public spaces (Clifford & Piston 2016; Herring 2018).

Public Perception of Homelessness and Stigmatized Populations

More frequently, people consider homelessness to be caused by structural rather than individual factors, and those who believe in structural causes are more likely to support government aid policies (Lee et al 1992; Link et al 1995; Tsai 2017; Tsai 2019; Tompsett et al 2006). Federal and state governments also spend substantial funds on aid and housing programs for homeless populations. However, punitive policies also garner large amounts of public support, so the question becomes how the public can favor both policy solutions. Researchers argue the answer comes down to the power of stigma and disgust (Clifford & Piston 2016; Belcher and DeForge 2012).

Though one cannot generalize the entire homeless population, those with a mental illness and individuals who abuse substances make up the most noticeable group of people experiencing homelessness, which leads to negative stereotypes, social stigma and negative public perception (Brinegar 2000; Belcher & DeForge 2012). These negative stereotypes are compounded by a less sympathetic attitude toward homeless people in the US than other western nations, possibly a reflection of the differences in social welfare policies (Toro et al 2007). As members of the population are stigmatized, this limits their access to needed services, reduces public support for policies that favor them, and lead to punitive measures as policymakers attempt to develop social policy to respond to public anxiety and negative perceptions (Belcher & DeForge 2012).

Lee et al (1992) find that causal beliefs surrounding homelessness affect the types of policies that people are willing to support. The stigma of homelessness is strong, especially when compounded with stigmatized subpopulations among the homeless such as ex-offenders, those

who abuse illegal substances and those with mental illness (Phelan et al 1997; Snow et al 1994; Dum et al 2017). Studies have shown that stigma attached to a specific demographic such as people who are homeless, ex-offenders, or those with a history of substance abuse have an effect on the types of policies targeting these populations that the public will support (Phelan et al 1997; Dum et al 2017). Even when the public attitude toward stigmatized populations is sympathetic, the public is very unlikely to support policy solutions that are perceived to directly impact their neighborhoods and way of life (Benedict et al 1988; Phelan et al 1997; Dum et al 2017). Clifford and Piston (2016) find a strong tie between support for counterproductive, and at times contradictory, homeless policies and a person's disposition towards feeling disgust, concluding they have a subconscious reaction to the homeless population as a potential source of pathogens. There are additional attributes of the homeless population that may lead to stigma, exclusion and avoidance besides poverty, including their visibility, disruptiveness, and unkempt appearance, as well as the association of homelessness with mental illness and substance abuse (Phelan et al 1997). Research has yet to fully explore the role of race and gender in the stigmatization of homeless persons but for African American males in particular, the racial and gender beliefs of the public may amplify the exclusion they face (Markowitz & Syverson 2019).

The perceived reasons behind stigma-inducing qualities or actions also impact the public's responses to stigmatized individuals. When the public believes these characteristics are caused by factors beyond a person's control, such as a mental illness, they are seen as less worthy of blame than when the stigmatizing trait or behavior is believed to be caused by individual factors under their control (Lee et al 1992). Environmental causes are associated with less blame and more sympathy, while individual factors such as drug use increase discriminatory

responses and support for coercive treatments or punishments (Markowitz & Syverson 2019; Markowitz & Watson 2015; Corrigan et al 2003).

The general population in the US more so than other Western nations perceives the average homeless person as has a criminal record, uses illegal drugs and is homeless at least partially due to personal failings, although the general public does appear to be growing more sympathetic and these perceptions can be affected by personal experiences with homelessness (Toro et al 2007; Tsai et al 2019). Others find the perception and opinions towards those who are homeless are related to the level of contact and types of experience members of the general population have with the homeless population, and their level of knowledge of homelessness (Lee et al 2004; Knecht & Martinez 2009).

Stigma is a powerful influence on public support and continues to complicate the homeless policy process (Belcher & DeForge 2012). Stigma results in punitive and exclusionary policy responses to the homeless population, and these policies criminalize the activities they may rely upon in order to survive. This negatively impacts their health and well-being; it aggravates the problems they face on a daily basis and makes it even more difficult to find reliable housing (Gowan 2010; Herring & Lutz 2015; Stuart 2016; Markowitz & Syverson 2019).

Effect of Public Opinion on Public Policy

The political science and policy fields are full of research on the impact of public opinion on politics and policymaking. In a democratic society, it is largely agreed that public policy should be strongly influenced by public opinion (Burstein 2010). The quality of a democratic government is often judged by the responsiveness of its policymakers to the opinions and preferences of the general public (Erikson et al 1993). By this logic, public opinion research

should provide a better understanding of policymaking and policy design. However, the research is conflicting on how much influence public opinion actually has over policy. When it comes to criminal justice and policing policy, however, there is growing empirical evidence showing a connection between how punitive the public is and the implementation of punitive policies, and evidence that policymakers are sensitive to public opinion on criminal justice (Thielo et al 2015; Pickett et al 2013; Brace and Boyea 2008; Canes-Wrone & Shotts 2004; Enns 2016).

Many social scientists do find evidence that public opinion has a significant impact on public policy. Erikson, MacKuen and Stimson (2002) find a nearly one-to-one ratio of the translation of public opinion into policy. Through a thorough review of the literature, Burstein (2003) concludes that public opinion has a significant impact on policy, that the impact of public opinion changes with the saliency of the issue, that the impact is sustained despite the activity of political organizations and elites, and that this impact remains consistent over time. Others find there is minimal effect of public opinion on public policymaking, especially on issues of foreign, defense and economic policy (Domhoff 2002). Still others find that the answer is not black and white, it is conditional, and is better measured in terms of “large effects” and “small effects” (Manza and Cook 2002a; 2002b). Ultimately, the connection between opinion and policy is critical to policy success because public opinion can restrain and influence policymakers even if the relationship may not necessarily be causal (Shapiro 2011). Especially when it comes to police reform and implementing new policing strategies, it may be difficult for police departments to maintain legitimacy and citizen cooperation without support from the public (Moule et al 2019).

Theoretical Framework

The research question explored in this essay requires a theoretical framework that can both explain the rationale behind policy design and the types of policy tools used by elected officials, as well as offer an understanding of the public's willingness to support or accept those policies. It is also necessary to understand how the characteristics and construction of a specific group in society can affect policy design and public support, especially when examining vulnerable and marginalized populations. Based on these criteria, the Social Construction of Target Populations was chosen to analyze this research question. This theory is useful to explain why some target populations are the recipients of beneficial policies while others are the recipients of punishment and helps to further understand how social constructions impact the way the public views and accepts these policies.

Anne Schneider and Helen Ingram developed the Social Construction of Target Population policy framework as a way to understand how the perceptions, stigma, stereotypes and ideas surrounding a target group impact the types of policy directed at them. These social constructions, combined with the amount of power wielded by the target population, create four categories in which groups can fall: Advantaged; Contenders; Dependent; and Deviants (Schneider & Ingram 1993). Advantaged groups are both positively constructed and wield large amounts of power; Contenders are powerful, yet they have a more negative construction; Dependents have a positive social construction, but they are powerless; and Deviants are both powerless and are negatively constructed (Schneider & Ingram 1993). Ingram and Schneider's theory suggests that the social construction of target populations has a strong influence on policymakers and shapes policy design. Elected officials are pressured to provide benefits to the

advantaged groups and direct punitive policies towards negatively constructed groups (Schneider & Ingram 1993).

In order to use this framework, first there must first be an understanding of the definition of target populations and social constructions. Target populations are simply the group of people chosen as the recipient of the benefits or sanctions of a specific policy. Target populations are chosen based upon the fact that policy is designed to achieve certain goals by changing the behavior of people (Schneider & Ingram 1991). Schneider and Ingram define social construction of a target population as, “(1) the recognition of the shared characteristics that distinguish a target population as socially meaningful, and (2) the attribution of specific, valence-oriented values, symbols, and images to the characteristics. Social constructions are stereotypes about particular groups of people that have been created by politics, culture, socialization, history, the media, literature, religion, and the like” (Schneider & Ingram 1993:335).

Social constructions of target populations not only impact public opinion, they also affect policy design and agendas. Politicians and policymakers develop an understanding of target populations based on their own internal stereotypes as well as the ones they believe are held by their constituents (Schneider & Ingram 1993). Social construction theory argues that elements of policy design, especially policy tools and the rationales behind policies, will be dependent upon the social construction and corresponding power of the target population (Schneider & Ingram 1993). Elected officials are often weighing the importance of two goals as they develop policy: their goal of reelection, and their goal of satisfying the will of the public. Creating beneficial policy for advantaged groups is an attractive option for politicians, especially if these advantaged groups can aid in his or her reelection. Conversely, it can be difficult for public officials to develop beneficial policies for negatively constructed groups, such as criminals, because the

public usually feels these populations deserve punitive action, and part of the social construction of these groups is that they respond primarily to punishment (Schneider & Ingram 1993).

Ultimately, politicians are motivated sometimes by their own self-interest, producing policies benefiting powerful groups but sometimes by public will, developing policies that serve general interests (Kelman 1987). Finally, social constructions are important to an understanding of the politics of punishment, as punishment policies alienate their target populations and do not appear to accomplish any positive purposes (Schneider & Ingram 1993).

The homeless as a target population

The homeless as a target population has a negative social construction often seen as deviant criminals, substance abusers, or helpless dependents who cannot take care of themselves (Cronley 2010). These social constructions and stereotypes are so deeply embedded in the minds of the public and policymakers that they “serve to marginalize [homeless populations] in the formation of policies that directly affect their lives” (Sparks 2012:1511). Although research has shown a recent shift in public perception of the causes of homelessness and an increased willingness to help this target population, there is still a tendency for the public to attribute homelessness to individual causes and for cities to institute punitive and exclusionary policies against homeless populations (Stuart 2015; Mitchell 1997; Von Mahs 2013). Negative social construction, paired with neoliberal ideals of reduction of social welfare spending and individual responsibility, may partially explain why there are so many punitive policies directed towards the homeless population despite the public’s desire to help (Herbert & Brown 2006; Stuart 2014). While it is easy to imagine the hyper punitive neoliberal state wielding social control over the undesirables in society, some scholars argue that this is an overly simplistic argument. Homeless policies and practices differ from city to city, and there is a difference in the way the population

is treated across different subgroups. “The homeless man” is a stereotypical representation of homeless people as a group, but there is significant heterogeneity across the population and as a result, the treatment and policy tools used against homeless subpopulations differ greatly (DeVerteuil et al 2009).

Cities have instituted punitive and exclusionary policies against homeless populations in an effort to drive them out of potentially lucrative areas of the city, deliver benefits to businesses and bring economic investment back into urban cores (Mitchell 1997; Vitale 2008). Because of their social constructions as a dependent or deviant population homeless people are often perceived as incapable of improving their situation themselves, thereby requiring paternalistic treatment and disciplinary government interventions which also provide access to services in order to remedy their individual shortcomings (Stuart 2014).

This study focuses on deeper background characteristics of a homeless person through the use of common subpopulations within the larger homeless population. The characters within the vignettes in the survey represent populations commonly deemed deserving or undeserving by the general public including substance users, veterans and people with a mental illness. The theoretical assumption is that each of these target populations has their own social construction separate from and beyond that of the greater homeless population, and that these constructions will either negatively or positively impact public opinion on policing policies. The dominant policy tools for deviant populations tend to be coercive, forceful and involve sanctions. The dominant policy tools for dependent populations will usually create mechanisms that require them to rely on government agencies to help them because they are not considered self-reliant, while policy tools directed at advantaged populations focus on capacity building and self-help mechanisms (Schneider & Ingram 1993).

Hypothesis

The enforcement of punitive laws and coercive policing strategies varies across cities, indicating there may be differing levels of motivation and political will to exclude the homeless from public spaces (Adcock et al 2016). Based on the extant literature, I hypothesize that public opinion on the suggested police response to the offenses presented will vary based on the homeless person's race as well as the social construction and stigma associated with each of the different background characteristics. I expect the social construction of each homeless subpopulation to impact the public's determination of perceived deservingness and undeservingness, thereby affecting their choice of the helpful, neutral or punitive response. I expect survey participants to suggest more punitive responses for the control group and the substance abuse group, while I expect more helpful or neutral responses to the veteran and person with a mental illness. I expect the public to respond in more a helpful or neutral manner to veterans because in the United States veterans are a powerful interest group, constructed as a deserving and less blameworthy population, and many citizens feel a sense of indebtedness to them for their military service (Ortiz 2010). Similarly, the character with an undiagnosed mental illness may be seen as more deserving as they are not personally responsible for their condition. I expect the public response to be more punitive towards the control group and the character with a history of substance abuse because of the perception that these individuals are responsible for their own problems, therefore categorizing them as undeserving of help or deserving of punishment. I hypothesize that race will have a lesser effect for the veteran and the character with a mental illness than it will for the control group and the character with a history of substance abuse. This is based on research that indicates a black homeless person is not necessarily seen as more blameworthy than a white homeless person, however black people

experiencing homelessness may face additional discrimination, in part, due to concerns of dangerousness. (Markowitz & Syverson 2019)

Methods

Survey Design

The research involved an internet-based survey conducted in Portland, Oregon by Dr. Brett Burkhardt and Dr. Scott Akins of Oregon State University that asked participants to respond to a variety of questions related to their perceptions of the criminal justice system, perceptions of race and diversity, and demographics. Survey experiments are useful because they combine the qualities of random controlled experiments and large-scale population surveys (Mutz 2011). Part of a larger research effort, the portion of the survey used for this essay employed one survey experiment. Similar to a random controlled experiment, survey respondents were randomly assigned to various treatment or control conditions. Random assignment of the respondents increased internal validity because confounding factors were distributed equally across conditions, thereby mitigating the risk of a spurious relationship. And because this survey was administered to a large sample of respondents, external validity was increased and the results were not limited to a small sample of select respondents in a laboratory or other controlled environment.

To answer the research question, a 2x4 factorial experiment was used to assess the impact of different background characteristics of a notional homeless individual on respondents' beliefs about the way police should respond when they are caught committing various offenses. The experimental manipulations occur in a vignette, which describes a hypothetical homeless male. There are two sets of experimental manipulations: First, the man is described as being white or black. Rather than stating this explicitly, the researchers use raced names to imply the person's

race. These names (Jamal Washington and Jake Larson) were selected on the basis of recent research that has validated the racialized nature of specific names (Gaddis 2017). Second, the homeless man is described as having one of four background characteristics: no additional background (control group), a history of substance abuse, a combat veteran, or an untreated mental illness. With a 2x4 design, these two dimensions yielded 8 possible scenarios into which respondents were randomly assigned. After a respondent viewed the vignette description of the homeless man, he or she was then told that the homeless person has been seen doing various illegal activities. These activities range from low-level nuisance activities such as panhandling and digging for cans, to more serious infractions such as trespassing and threatening to fight another person. For each offense, the respondent was asked whether police should arrest, help, or ignore the homeless person.

The researchers elected to utilize a sample that most accurately reflected the population of Portland. To achieve a sample that closely resembled the city's population, the survey utilized a quota system. The target sample was the adult (18+) population in the city limits of Portland, Oregon. The goal was to restrict the sample to residents of Portland using two methods. First, the researchers invited survey takers who listed a zip code within Portland city limits. Second, the survey contained a screener question asking respondents to identify the county in which they reside. Respondents had six possible responses: the three counties that contain Portland city (Multnomah, Washington, and Clackamas), two counties that do not contain Portland (Marion and Yamhill), and an "Other" option. Respondents who selected a Portland county were allowed to continue; those who did not were screened out. The survey also used screener questions related to age, race, and education to reflect demographic characteristics of the city of Portland. The survey was administered by the survey firm Qualtrics, recruiting participants who were

enrolled in panels of respondents maintained by third-party firms with which Qualtrics contracts. Responses were gathered from 11 March 2019 until 14 May 2019 and the final sample included 1,257 respondents. The median time to complete the survey was approximately eight minutes.

Table 1: Portland Demographic Characteristics

Variable	Categories	% in city
Age	18 < age < 40	45%
	Age ≥ 40	55%
Race	White	77%
	Not white	23%
Education	Less than 4-year college degree	50%
	4-year college degree or above	50%

Data Analysis

The primary data analysis of the survey results consisted of a multinomial logistic regression analysis comparing the likelihood of a respondent endorsing each of the three police responses across treatment groups. Multinomial Logistic Regression (MNL) is the most commonly used nominal regression model and is used in cases where the dependent variable is on a nominal scale (Long & Freese 2014). To use MNL, the data must be case-specific, meaning that each independent variable has one value per individual. MNL was chosen for the clarity of interpretation of the data and the variety of ways the data can be presented. To make the logistic regression results more intuitive, I chose to interpret the coefficients using relative risk ratios (RRR) and predicted probabilities instead of logistic odds (log odds).

The relative risk is a ratio of two probabilities, unlike odds ratios which are a ratio of two odds. Relative risk ratios, when used in multinomial logistic regression analysis, specify how the risk of the outcome falling in a comparison group compared to the risk of the outcome falling in the reference group changes with the independent variables. For interpretation purposes, that means a RRR greater than 1 signifies the risk of the outcome falling in the comparison group

relative to the risk of the outcome falling in the base group *increases* as the variable increases—the comparison outcome is more likely than the base outcome. A RRR of less than 1 means that the risk of the outcome falling in the comparison group relative to the risk of the outcome falling in the base group *decreases* as the variable increases. In general, if the RRR is less than 1, the outcome is more likely to be the base group. In the analysis of this data, I used “Help” as the base outcome so the results below can all be interpreted as a comparison to the respondent’s choice for police to help the notional homeless man in the vignette.

In addition to relative risk ratios, I also use predicted probabilities to display the results in a more straightforward way. The predicted probabilities represent the probability that a respondent will choose an outcome based upon the variables they were presented in the experimental vignette while holding all other variables at their means. For example, a predicted probability of .5 indicates a 50% chance (or a probability of 0.5) the ‘average’ respondent will choose outcome “X” given the vignette they were presented. I use this to demonstrate the likelihood that a survey respondent will select a specific outcome (arrest, help, ignore) for each of the eight acts they were presented with given the race and background condition of the homeless character they were randomly assigned to.

The final specification of the model included the experimental variables from the vignettes as well as a number of independent variables that reflect characteristics of the respondents. From the vignettes, I include a variable for the race of the notional homeless man, the background condition, as well as an interaction term for the two. Based upon the above literature review and evidence that shows how public opinion is affected by their own experiences (Lee et al 2004), I chose to include the demographic variables of age, education, and political conservatism. I also included independent variables for respondents’ own experiences

with homelessness, mental illness, law enforcement, and the military. This was based upon research that has shown contact with highly stigmatized groups and homeless individuals affect public attitudes in a favorable way (Lee et al 2004). In terms of the vignettes, in addition to experimental variables representing the race of the homeless character and his background condition, I also included an interaction term to analyze the effect of the interaction of the race and background condition of the homeless character. The final unrestricted model used for each multinomial logistic regression was the following:

$$Act(X) = cons + characterrace + vig_condition + characterrace\#vig_condition + white_r + education + age + conservatism + millnessfam + subabusefam + exphomeless + lawenforcementfam + USmilexp$$

Where *characterrace* indicates the race of the notional homeless man; *vig_condition* represents the background characteristic presented in the experimental vignette;

characterrace#vig_condition represents the interaction of race and background condition;

white_r indicates whether the survey respondent identified as white; *education* reflects the level of education completed by the survey respondent; *age* indicates the age group of the respondent;

conservatism represents where on the political spectrum the respondent falls (1=extremely liberal, 5=extremely conservative);

millnessfam indicates if the respondent has experience with mental illness in their family;

subabusefam indicates whether the respondent has experience with substance abuse in their family;

exphomeless indicates whether the respondent has firsthand experience with homelessness;

lawenforcementfam represents whether the respondent has members of law enforcement in their family; and

USmilexp indicates if the respondent has served in the military or has family who have served in the military.

Results

The quota system applied during the survey successfully yielded a sample representative of the City of Portland. Of the 1,257 respondents, approximately 77% of the respondents were

white, which is consistent with the population of Portland. Almost 57% of the respondents had earned at least an Associate’s Degree, and 47% had a Bachelor’s Degree or more (compare with Table 1 in the sample discussion above). The age breakdowns are consistent with the demographic makeup of Portland, and approximately 55% of respondents identified themselves as either “very liberal” or “somewhat liberal.” Only 16.4% of respondents identified as “somewhat conservative” or “conservatism.” Of note, no employment, gender, income, or race/ethnicity data beyond “white” or “not white” was collected during this survey.

Table 2: Population Sample Summary

		<i>N</i>	<i>N%</i>
Race			
	White	970	77.29
	Nonwhite	285	22.71
Education			
	Less than high school	25	1.99
	High School Grad/GED	183	14.56
	Some College	333	26.49
	2 Year Degree	124	9.86
	4 Year Degree	405	32.22
	Post-bachelor’s Degree	187	14.88
Age Range			
	Under 18	1	0.08
	18-29	280	22.28
	30-39	287	22.83
	40-49	276	21.96
	50-59	216	17.18
	60-69	140	11.14
	70 or above	57	4.53
Political Affiliation			
	Very Liberal	263	20.94
	Somewhat Liberal	421	33.52
	Neither liberal nor conservative	366	29.14
	Somewhat Conservative	158	12.58
	Very Conservative	48	3.82

Before participants were presented with the experimental vignettes, the survey first asked a series of questions that assessed the perceived condition of the homelessness problem in the respondents’ communities. Over 94% of respondents felt that homelessness was a problem

where they lived; 86% felt homeless people make public spaces less pleasant; and almost 88% felt there were too many homeless people in public spaces.

Table 2: General Questions About Homelessness

	N	N%
Where you live, is homelessness a problem?		
Yes	1189	94.59
No	68	5.41
Where you live, do homeless people make public places less pleasant?		
Yes	1082	86.08
No	175	13.92
Where you live, are there too many homeless people in public spaces?		
Yes	1104	87.83
No	153	12.17

Overall, participants most frequently indicated the police officer should respond by helping the homeless individual regardless of the background condition or race of the character (see Table 3). Public opinion overall became less favorable and more punitive when the offense was of a more serious nature, i.e. trespassing onto a construction site or refusing to leave a store when asked by the owner. For these survey questions, respondents more frequently indicated that the police officer should arrest the homeless man, regardless of race or background condition. When presented with low level offenses such as panhandling outside a store or digging through bins for cans, respondents overwhelmingly indicated the police should offer a helpful response or ignore the individual and continue on their business.

Table 3: Cumulative responses to each offense committed by notional homeless character

Offense	N	N%
<i>Sleep in tent in park</i>		
Arrest	55	4.38
Help	997	79.32
Ignore	205	16.31
<i>Campfire under a bridge</i>		
Arrest	241	19.17
Help	835	66.43
Ignore	181	14.4
<i>Urinate behind building</i>		
Arrest	385	30.63
Help	627	49.88
Ignore	245	19.49
<i>Panhandle outside store</i>		
Arrest	78	6.21
Help	888	70.64
Ignore	291	23.15
<i>Dig through bins for cans</i>		
Arrest	20	1.59
Help	657	52.27
Ignore	580	46.14
<i>Pull back fence to construction site</i>		
Arrest	649	51.63
Help	560	44.55
Ignore	48	3.82
<i>Refuse to leave store</i>		
Arrest	656	52.19
Help	592	47.1
Ignore	9	0.72
<i>Threaten to fight an acquaintance</i>		
Arrest	584	46.46
Help	630	50.12
Ignore	43	3.42

Regression Analysis

The experimental variables, Race and Background Condition, were the primary focus of the regression analysis. The results of the multinomial logistic regression on the Race variable without the interaction with Background Condition revealed the relative risk of a respondent choosing the Arrest outcome in comparison to the Help outcome was lower (less than 1) for the black character for all offenses, while the relative risk of a respondent choosing the Ignore outcome in comparison to the Help outcome was either similar (close to 1) or higher (greater than 1). What this translates to is that respondents were less likely to choose the Arrest outcome

for the Black Character than the White Character. For the Background Condition variable without the interaction of Race, participants were most likely to respond favorably to the Combat Veteran Character and the character suffering from a mental illness (See Table 4). For the combat veteran character treatment, RRR for the Arrest outcome was never greater than 1 in comparison to the base outcome of Help for any offense, even for the offenses where Arrest was the most frequent outcome, suggesting that identifying the character as a combat veteran reduced relative risk that a respondent would choose the Arrest outcome. The combat veteran character, in fact, consistently displayed the lowest relative risk across all experimental treatments that respondents would choose the Arrest outcome versus the Help outcome. Overall, the character with a history of substance abuse and the control character displayed the highest relative risk that respondents would choose the Arrest outcome in comparison with the Help outcome. These results may speak to the social constructions of populations perceived as more deserving such as veterans and those with a mental illness, compared to the stigma and negative constructions of individuals who abuse substances and the general homeless population.

Based on the results of the logistic regressions it is also relevant to draw attention to the variables representing internal participant factors such as the demographics and experiences of the respondents. Both the demographic variables and experience variables were shown to be statistically significant depending on the offense, although these results were not always statistically significant. Age had both a positive and negative effect on the relative risk of a respondent choosing the Arrest outcome compared to the Help outcome, while education predominately had a negative effect on the relative risk of a respondent choosing the Arrest outcome. Political conservatism did show a consistent impact on respondents' choices. The more conservative a respondent was, the greater the chance he or she would choose a more

punitive (Arrest) response compared to a helpful response, and this held to be a significant effect across all offenses. This outcome is consistent with conservative ideals of the political right that emphasize personal responsibility and individual causes of poverty and homelessness (Griffin & Oheneba-Sakyi 1993; Zucker & Weiner 1993; Kluegel & Smith 1986).

Relative risk ratios are nonintuitive and can be difficult to interpret. Discussing results in terms of the relative risk of choosing one outcome versus another does not easily convey the outcomes of the survey. Predicted probabilities are another method to display these results in a more intuitive way. Predicted probabilities are a more straightforward way of displaying the results and better present the difference in responses within the experimental manipulation. Predicted probabilities allow for the display of results for all outcomes and variable categories, eliminating confusion that results from reference categories.

Table 5 shows the predicted probabilities for each of the eight offenses presented to the respondents given the combination of race and background characteristic they were randomly assigned, holding all other variables at their means. What this means is the predicted probabilities are representative of the ‘average’ survey taker. Take for example the scenario in which the character is found sleeping in a tent in the park: the predicted probability that an ‘average’ respondent assigned the white control character would choose the Arrest option is 0.075 (a 7.5% chance), while the predicted probability they would choose to help is 0.779 (77.9%) and the predicted probability they would choose to ignore is 0.145 (14.5%). Using predicted probabilities, it is much easier to compare these predicted responses for all eight possible combinations of a character that survey respondents could be assigned. In this format, the difference in the outcomes for each notional homeless character is more apparent.

The predicted probabilities better convey the relationship between the Race and Background Condition variables and the probability that a respondent will choose each one of the outcomes. As the offenses become more serious, i.e. trespassing, refusing to leave a store and threatening to fight someone else, participants are far less likely to recommend the police officer ignore the situation. In fact, the predicted probabilities approach zero for outcomes in the scenario in which the character refuses to leave a store. Instead, survey respondents became more punitive, while maintaining an apparent difference between responses for the control characters and the treatment characters, as well as the black and the white characters. For example, in the situation in which the character refuses to leave a store after being asked, the predicted probability that an average respondent would choose the Arrest outcome for the White control character is 0.624 and 0.463 for the Black control character. This is a difference in predicted probability of 0.161 (16.1%). The predicted probabilities for the Help outcome for the same situation for the same characters are 0.375 and 0.529 respectively, a difference of 0.154 (15.4%). As we move down the chart and look to the treatment character backgrounds, this large spread lessens and almost disappears. For the character with a mental illness, the difference in predicted probabilities of Arrest for the White and Black character is a difference of 0.030 (3%). For the Combat Veteran character, the difference in predicted probabilities of Arrest for the White and Black character is only a difference of 0.005 (0.5%). This pattern is repeated throughout the results, suggesting that the effect of Race is tempered by the effect of the Background Condition, or that participants were more influenced in their decision by the Background Condition of the character than by the Race of the character. 95% confidence intervals have been included to demonstrate the statistical significance of these results. See Table 5 for a complete list of predicted probabilities for all eight offenses.

Table 4: Multinomial Logistic Regression Results, Full Model Specification with Relative Risk Ratios (RRR)

Offense	Sleep in tent in park		Campfire under a bridge		Urinate behind building		Panhandle outside store		Dig through bins for cans		Pull back fence to construction		Refuse to leave store		Threaten to fight an acquaintance	
	Arrest	Ignore	Arrest	Ignore	Arrest	Ignore	Arrest	Ignore	Arrest	Ignore	Arrest	Ignore	Arrest	Ignore	Arrest	Ignore
Race																
Black	0.481	0.962	0.79	1.277	.569**	0.988	.207**	0.829	0.574	0.708	.440**	2.386	.500**	699700.6	0.682	1.195
Background																
History of Substance Abuse	0.821	1.145	1.063	0.616	1.044	0.935	.490*	1.022	0.425	1.115	0.901	1.234	0.889	1.026	1.156	.136*
History of Mental Illness	0.657	1.679*	0.855	1.239	0.707	0.961	.347**	1.406	0.44	1.12	.496**	1.668	0.695	2833945	0.97	0.901
Combat Veteran	.354*	1.19	0.631	0.814	.629*	0.642	.364**	0.717	0.221	0.909	.493**	1.184	.437**	0.857	0.788	.228*
Race x Background																
Black Character with a History of Substance Abuse	1.287	1.145	1.421	1.643	1.950*	1.262	3.885**	0.789	2.224	1.116	1.401	0.439	1.799*	2.308	1.168	4.098
Black Character with a History of Mental Illness	1.174	0.609	1.899	.379**	2.004*	0.815	5.355**	0.86	1.963	1.056	2.118**	0.313	1.631	7.42E-07	1.169	0.629
Black Character who is a Combat Veteran	2.87	0.614	1.419	0.923	1.688	1.39	4.56**	1.162	7.095	2.496**	2.708**	0.479	2.074**	1.317	1.028	1.747
Individual(Respondent) Characteristics																
White Survey Respondent	0.726	1.502**	0.979	1.524**	.769*	1.073	0.682	1.31	0.495	1.221*	.736**	0.802	1.075	0.825	0.882	1.53
Education	1.064	0.936	0.915	0.902	.878**	1.002	1.022	1.009	1.219	0.942	.906**	0.954	.887**	0.745	0.957	1.066
Age	1.021	0.959	1.072	0.995	.808**	.847**	1.145	.882**	0.87	1.093**	1.001	0.985	0.946	0.718	.831**	.785**
Political Conservatism	1.783**	.793**	1.452**	0.889	1.367**	.876*	1.405**	0.928	1.640**	.906*	1.416**	1.269	1.567**	0.786	1.407**	1.416**
Experience with Mental Illness	.422**	1.056	0.998	0.805	0.802	.728*	0.86	1.096	0.414	1.045	.611**	0.642	0.794	.193*	0.842	0.782
Experience with Substance Abuse	2.233**	0.918	1.714**	0.998	0.807	1.057	1.237	.717*	1.339	0.982	1.367**	1.298	0.942	1.0578	0.943	0.558
Experience with Homelessness	.510**	1.665**	.535**	1.329	0.812	0.986	0.663	1.517**	0.822	1.253*	0.993	2.164**	0.832	.083**	.789*	1.464
Family in Law Enforcement	0.629	0.99	.747*	.712*	1.025	0.907	0.81	0.831	0.676	0.866	0.809	.381**	0.858	2.284	0.864	1.063
Military Experience	0.92	0.779	.707*	0.848	0.867	0.732	0.757	0.955	0.437	1.02	1.243	1.203	1.084	1.308	1.165	0.686

Note: The reference outcome is "Help". The reference category for race is "White". The reference category for background is "Control".

* P is less than 0.10

** P is less than 0.05

Discussion

The results of the multinomial logistic regressions suggest that the race and background characteristic treatments had at least a modest to moderate effect on respondents' opinions of whether police should arrest the homeless man, help him, or ignore the offense. These two variables and their interaction were shown to be statistically significant in some instances but not all, while logistic regression results and predicted probabilities were mostly consistent for each offense. The character's race had a larger impact in the control group than the other character backgrounds, with participants less likely to choose the Arrest outcome for the Black character than the White character. As the experimental variables interacted, however, Race had less of an impact than the Background Characteristic.

The independent variables representing individual factors of the participants also had an effect on respondents' opinions of the appropriate police responses. Political viewpoint had a consistent, significant effect on the outcome chosen, with more conservative participants more likely to opt for the punitive response. This outcome is consistent with a body of research that argues conservative political and ideological beliefs are correlated with individual causal attributions for poverty, while liberal political and ideological beliefs are correlated with more structural attributions for poverty and inequality (Zucker & Weiner 1993; Kluegel & Smith 1986). An increase in the age of the respondent was associated with a greater likelihood they would choose the helpful response, and experience with homelessness, substance abuse and mental illness were also associated with the helpful response. Younger respondents were more punitive than older respondents, which was unexpected based on the evolution of public opinion towards structural causes of homelessness instead of individual causes. However, this may be the case because older respondents have experience with times of deep recession when

unemployment was beyond the control of any individual (Kluegel & Smith 1986). Respondents with lower levels of education were more punitive than more educated respondents, which is consistent with existing research on the relationship between education and political ideology and liberalism (Pew Research Center; Morgan et al 1997).

In many cases, though not all, survey participants were less likely to respond punitively and more likely to respond helpfully to the black character than the white. Race may be less of a determining factor than background condition or individual participant factors, or it is possible that the (predominately white) participants taking the survey may have been more aware of the existence and influence of implicit bias while answering these questions.

Overall, people responded more punitively to the substance abuse character and less punitively to the mental illness and combat veteran characters. This is consistent with the social constructions of target populations who are homeless and abuse substances (deviant and undeserving) versus homeless people with a mental illness or homeless combat veterans (dependent and deserving). This suggests that public opinion towards police responses to homelessness may partially be determined by whether or not they feel the people in question are deserving or undeserving of beneficial treatments and policies.

In the more benign situations such as collecting cans, responses from the respondents were overwhelmingly helpful or neutral regardless of the independent variables. This indicates that the public as a whole may prefer to see these situations handled in a way that points homeless people in need towards services, or they would prefer for law enforcement not to engage in these situations at all. As the offenses approached more criminal acts (trespassing, refusing to leave a store, threatening to fight someone), punitive responses increased across all participants. However, the social construction of the characters carried into these scenarios as

well. People continued to be less punitive towards the combat veteran character and the character with mental illness in these situations and continued to be more punitive towards the control and substance abuse characters. This is consistent with the social constructions and determination of deservingness among homeless subpopulations and populations who abuse substances versus those with mental illness or veterans.

Policy Implications

The results of this research reinforce the theories set forth in Schneider and Ingram's Social Construction of Target Populations and highlight the importance of considering public opinion in the policymaking process. These results seemingly contradict the perceived public acceptance and popularity of punitive policies that are used in many cities across the United States, calling into question the suitability of these policy tools. In Social Construction Theory, elected officials take into consideration perceived social constructions of target populations during the policy design process in addition to considering what policies the public will support for deserving and undeserving populations (Schneider & Ingram 1993). Having a more accurate perception of how the public views target populations, in conjunction with the types of policies the public will support, can improve policy design and the types of policy tools chosen by policymakers.

While the homeless as a target population are often negatively constructed or seen as undeserving, people who are homeless are not a homogenous group. According to Social Construction Theory, social constructions become embedded in policy as messages and signals. Policy agendas and tools send a message to the target population that notify them of their status and how they can expect to be treated by government (Schneider & Ingram 1993). Punitive and exclusionary policy tools used by city officials send the message to homeless citizens that they

are not welcome, effectively criminalizing homelessness. When asked to consider on a deeper level the individual populations who make up the larger group of homeless people, public opinion appears to shift to favoring more helpful approaches when they are aware of the underlying background characteristics of who they consider a more deserving population.

Responses in this survey seem to contradict the punitive nature of many local ordinances that seek to cite or arrest homeless individuals for exhibiting these behaviors. Public opinion of policing and homeless policy is important because police legitimacy requires participation and support from the general public (Moule et al 2019). Therefore, cities and counties may be more likely to receive positive cooperation from the public if they agree with the policing methods. If public opinion leans towards a more helpful and restorative role for police officers, then punitive and harmful homeless policy may not be effective for the area and could backfire on the politicians during elections.

The results of this research notably raise the question of who should be responsible for responding to situations such as the ones presented above. The majority of the respondents in this survey felt like the police should help in almost every circumstance, regardless of the character's background. Many others felt as if the police should ignore the behavior altogether and continue on their way. When these results are viewed within the context of contemporary protests of policing in the United States, one must ask whether the police are the appropriate organization to respond to these issues in the first place. Recent protests against aggressive and overly punitive policing methods in the United States have seen renewed calls to reduce funding for police departments, redirecting those towards social service agencies with the mission and training to appropriately respond to social problems. Cities arguably ask the police to do too much in comparison with the budgets they're given and the services they are mandated to provide, and

instead police departments are used as the default agency to handle all social ills (Herring 2019). Police are given arrest and citation authority and charged with enforcing the law and keeping the peace. Police are meant to respond to criminal offenses; they are not social workers nor are they properly trained or equipped to deal with social problems such as homelessness. Further, many police departments are not trained to effectively respond to situations involving individuals suffering from mental illness and historically this has led to disaster such as the shooting of Charles Kinsey in Miami, Florida in 2016 (Flechas et al 2020). When viewed in this context, there may in fact be greater public support for redirecting police funds towards community organizations and social welfare groups that are properly equipped to address the root causes of poverty and homelessness.

Limitations

This research has a number of limitations and opportunities for future research. First, Portland, Oregon is not representative of the rest of the state or the population of the rest of the country. As of January 2020, over 50% of the registered voters in Multnomah County, the county in which the majority of Portland is located, were registered Democrats, compared to the rest of the state of Oregon where Democrats account for only 34.5% of registered voters (*Oregon.gov*). Additionally, approximately 49% of Portland residents hold a bachelor's degree or higher compared with 33% of the rest of Oregon, and the median household income of Portland is over ten percent higher than that of the rest of the state (*Census.gov*). A more politically liberal sample of respondents with higher educational attainment may account for the relatively sympathetic views expressed in the survey. Second, the survey did not collect a great deal of demographic data on respondents, and therefore I was unable to further analyze responses based on income, gender or employment considerations. Many cities enact punitive homeless policy as

a way to placate business interests and encourage future investment in urban areas, so they may not take into consideration the general public opinion when designing these policies. Future research could use a larger national sample more representative of the United States or could focus on the business community to better understand if their opinions and interests are more aligned with punitive homeless policies.

Conclusion

The criminalization of poverty perpetuates cycles of homelessness in our society through far reaching negative impacts on the urban poor and homeless populations. The enforcement of move along orders, citations and arrests for low level offenses limit homeless people's access to services, housing, and employment while damaging their health, safety and well-being (Herring et al 2019). Based on the results presented above, the research indicates at least a partial support for the hypothesis that background conditions and race impact the public's support for punitive or restorative policies. Based on Social Construction Theory, the characters presented with a more positive and deserving social construction were more likely to receive public support for helpful responses, and the characters presented with a more negative and undeserving social construction were more likely to receive public support for punitive responses. Further, this research reinforced the idea that political ideology, education, age, and personal experiences impact an individual's beliefs on poverty and homelessness.

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