

PUBLIC PERCEPTIONS OF HOMELESSNESS IN HUMBOLDT COUNTY

By

John Krapf

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Committee Membership

Dr. Meredith Williams, Committee Chair

Dr. Christina Martinek, Committee Member

Dr. Meredith Williams, Program Graduate Coordinator

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ABSTRACT

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John Krapf

Homelessness is a social and political issue of great importance in the United States. For every 10,000 people in the U.S. 17 are experiencing homelessness (Bishop et al. 2017). Despite being a consequence of structural factors in the economy such as a lack of affordable housing and livable wages, the news media often frames the issue as an outcome of individualistic factors such as deviant characteristics, criminality, and personal flaws like drug addiction and mental illness. This study examines public perceptions of homelessness in Humboldt County. To explore this question, I conducted a content analysis of 94 articles on homelessness published from 2008 to 2017 in a popular online news media source, the Lost Coast Outpost (LOCO). Previous research suggests public perceptions can be understood by analyzing the media because public knowledge is often derived from mediated experience (Hodgetts and Radley 2005). Often, the public must rely on the media to understand issues such as homelessness, which they do not have direct knowledge and experience with (Calder and Burns 2011). The findings of this study reveal that the LOCO consistently utilized stigmatizing labels, and unsympathetic frames to influence public perceptions in order to support policies that criminalize homelessness and exclude the homeless from public spaces. These findings are consistent

with previous research into media constructions of a stigmatized homeless identity and social policies of exclusion.

Keywords: homelessness, public perceptions, stigmatized identity, criminalization, media influence, media frames, homeless policy

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INTRODUCTION

Homelessness is a social problem of great importance in the United States. There are roughly 553,742 people who are homeless in the U.S. as of January 2017 (Bishop et al. 2017), or about 17 out of every 10,000 residents. Homelessness is not just an issue in the U.S., but in other post-industrialized nations as well. For example the U.K. has a rate of 50 out of every 10,000 residents (Butler n.d.). Although nationwide counts in the U.S. indicate homelessness has declined by 14 percent overall since 2007, in 2017 homelessness increased by one percent nationwide. States with high concentrations of homelessness like California (Nichols 2018) saw increases of nearly 14 percent between 2016 and 2017 (Nichols 2018), perhaps signaling a new wave of homelessness. Overall, homelessness in California grew by nine percent since 2010. For every 10,000 people in California, 34 are experiencing homelessness (twice the national average). This makes California the state with the third highest rate of homelessness in the U.S., while carrying the largest total number of people who are homeless (roughly 134,278). Hawaii is one of two states with higher rates of homelessness than California. Hawaii ranks first with 51 people experiencing homelessness per 10,000, and New York follows with 45 per 10,000 residents (Nichols 2018). New York and California combined constitute nearly half of the nation's homeless population (41 percent) (Rosenheck 2016), and California alone made up 25 percent of the nation's homeless population in 2017 (Bishop et al. 2017). The Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) attributes recent increases to

changes within major U.S. cities. Other reports narrow down explanations to shortages in affordable housing (Fessler 2017).

Notwithstanding a growing understanding that homelessness is a consequence of market forces such as decreases in affordable housing and a scarcity of jobs that pay livable wages within labor markets, there still remains a tendency in policy to address homelessness through punitive measures that seek to criminalize homelessness rather than address the aforementioned root causes. This is due in part to public pressure on policymakers and negative media frames; media use of stigmatizing labels that isolate homelessness as a problem of individuals rather than social and structural inequality. Even with some current media reports of homelessness as a consequence of a housing crisis, there is still a tendency in some media sources to report on homelessness as stemming from individual pathologies such as mental illness and substance use. In a recent article published by a California fact-checking group, *PolitiFact California* (2018), Nichols (2018) attributed the recent 2017 surge in homelessness on the streets in Los Angeles and other West Coast cities to a shortage of housing. Nichols quotes Orange County Assemblyman and GOP candidate Travis Allen. In the article, Allen states he would tackle the problem, if elected, by creating more state run mental institutions to offer people experiencing homelessness various substance abuse and psychiatric services so “they can get back on their feet and re-enter the workforce.” (Nichols 2018).

Many people experiencing homelessness may suffer from mental illness and substance use disorder, but healthcare reform will not address the literal lack of housing causing homelessness, and it is important to note many people who experience

homelessness do not have a diagnosed mental illness (Lyon-Callo 2000). A 2009 estimate puts the figure at around 20 to 25 percent of the homeless population in the U.S.

(National Coalition for the Homeless 2009). Whether or not one has a diagnosis of a mental illness, or if a person uses drugs, housing is still crucial. Homeless policy focused on increasing access to healthcare may further stigmatize homeless identities by implying individuals with physical and mental disabilities are not deserving of housing until they address what is perceived to be their physical and/or psychological flaws. To end this cycle of stigma and demonization for people experiencing homelessness, it is important for media, policymakers, service providers and the general public to understand and address the root causes of homelessness.

In the 1980s, when homelessness had its first significant increase since the Great Depression, media and policymakers focused on the effects of deinstitutionalization (the closing of state run mental hospitals) as the cause for increases in homelessness. Much of the early research focused on understanding the news media's influence on public perception, and how negative images were used to produce stigmatized identities that supported social distancing as homeless policy. There has been little research on media representations on homelessness in the post-2008 recession. This is crucial because past research has shown media influences public perception and public perception influences policy. In order to understand public perceptions of homelessness in Humboldt County, I conducted a content analysis of 94 articles published over the last nine years from a popular media outlet, the *Lost Coast Outpost* (LOCO). With this study I build on previous research on public perceptions of homelessness and media influences on public

attitudes towards stigmatized groups through the use of negative frames and stigmatizing labels. There is a substantial body of literature that explores the media effect on public perceptions and on social issues surrounding homelessness (Buck, Toro, and Ramos 2004; Bunis, Yancik, and Snow n.d.; Calder and Burns 2011; Link, Schwartz, Moore, et al. 1995; Shields 2001; Tompsett, Toro, and Guzicki 2006).

In Chapter 1 I explain the historical context in which public perceptions of homelessness first unfolded in what is called the “new homelessness” from 1980 to present. I trace early understandings of homelessness and its perceived causes by media in early literature on the topic. I then examine how early constructions of homeless identities transformed from the “old homeless” (prior to 1980) to the “new”, and the dynamics behind these ascribed identities. In Chapter 2, I discuss my methodology, including why I felt content analysis was the best choice for understanding public perceptions of homelessness in Humboldt County. In Chapter 3, I reveal how the LOCO has constructed public understandings of homelessness and how similar dynamics behind these ascribed identities that were found in the literature are at work in local media representations of homelessness in Humboldt County. In Chapter 4, I provide my final thoughts on public understandings of homelessness in Humboldt County, this study’s limitations, and the future of research on homelessness in Humboldt County.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

In this section I will begin by exploring various eras in homelessness research and how public perceptions have evolved over time, along with homeless identities. In addition, I will lay out the transformation of news media coverage over time, and how strategic news media coverage was used to serve specific policy outcomes that are disadvantageous to those experiencing homelessness and to the broader society.

The Old and New Homelessness

Homelessness has been a topic of interest for sociologists since the Great Depression (Lee, Tyler, and Wright 2010). Much of the sociological literature divides research eras on homelessness into two primary eras: the “old” and “new” homeless. The “old homeless” era of research began in the 1940s and ended in the 1970s, during which time, homelessness declined to the point where researchers were predicting its virtual disappearance (Rossi 1990). The “old homeless” era was best known for its portrayals of skid rows, which were dilapidated urban areas comprised of cheap hotels, inexpensive restaurants, and bars, typically located near industrial yards and railroads (Rossi 1990). The people reported to be experiencing homelessness in this era consisted mostly of older, single white men, who were often depicted as alcoholics (Lee et al. 2010; Rossi 1990). These homeless men were typically sheltered in substandard dwellings, relegated to the outskirts of town (Hopper, Susser, and Conover 1985). Before the 1980s there were no definitive counts of people experiencing homelessness. During the Depression era,

homeless estimates ranged from 200,000 to 1.5 million. However, during the post-World War II skid row era, homelessness shrank to a fraction of the Depression era. During the skid row-era a few estimates were made within large cities such as New York and Chicago by a handful of researchers (Rossi 1990). According to one study, Chicago's homeless during the late 1950s had a median age of 50 and were more than 90 percent white, with one quarter earning their living from Social Security, while the remainder earned their living through low paying seasonal or other temporary labor (Rossi 1990). In this same study, the demographics were broken down according to the following labels: 20 percent of the population were composed of physically disabled men, 20 percent had chronic mental illness, 10 percent were considered to have social maladjustment, and the remainder were labeled chronic alcoholics (Rossi 1990). Other studies conducted during the 1960s noted that virtually all of the homeless men were socially isolated, had little contact with family, and were never married (Rossi 1990). Though relegated to particular areas, often in single occupancy rooms (Bahr and Caplow 1974), people experiencing homelessness in this era were predominately sheltered.

In contrast to this image of an older, single-white-male alcoholic, living in single occupancy rooms (Bahr and Caplow 1974), the "new homelessness," beginning in 1980, brought a shift in the experience and perceptions of homelessness. Those experiencing homelessness in this new era were very visible to the public's eye, as they were now predominantly unsheltered (C. J. Bogard 2001; Hopper 1988; Klodawsky, Farrel, and D'Aubry 2002; Lee, Lewis, and Jones 1992; Lee et al. 2010; Lovell 1997; Wilson 1996). The new shift in homelessness was brought by the closure of the flop houses and

structural changes in the global economy. The “new homelessness” from the early 1980s and continuing today, is very visible as people experiencing homelessness are no longer confined to skid rows and substandard dwellings. People who are homeless can be seen literally sleeping in the streets, in cardboard boxes, in subway stations, and in the doorways of businesses (Rossi 1990). This level of visibility is apparent in many major cities in the U.S. The “new homelessness” also depart from their counterparts in composition, in that people experiencing homelessness are now younger, comprised of women, transgender individuals, members of racial minority groups, families, and unaccompanied minors, or youth living homeless without an adult (Bogard et al. 2006; C. Bogard 2001; Hopper 1988; Lee, Jones, and Lewis 1990; Lee et al. 1992, 2010; Rossi 1990).

Much of the scholarly work on homelessness in the early 1980s credited the transition from the old to the new homelessness as a consequence of deinstitutionalization, gentrification of working class neighborhoods to upper middle-class neighborhoods, and restructuring within urban labor markets (Holden 1986; Hopper, Susser, and Conover 1985; Stern 1984). Deinstitutionalization, as an explanation for homelessness, was popularized by city governments and news media. During the 1970s, many state mental hospitals closed down; several cities like New York then claimed their homeless populations were severely disturbed, former mental patients. They blamed deinstitutionalization, saying the people who would have been safely warehoused in previous decades were now forced to a marginalized existence on the streets. Local municipalities and the media pushed this idea because of the politics associated and the

overlapping involvement of various levels of government. If homelessness was an issue of deinstitutionalization, the burden of responsibility would fall within the states' jurisdictions, and County Departments of Health would be charged with implementing services. Conversely, if homelessness was a welfare problem then the local municipal governments would have responsibility (Stern 1984). *The New York Times* committed to deinstitutionalization as a causal model for homelessness during the early 1980s by publishing a number of articles reporting the government was responsible for rises in homeless dating as far back as the early 1970s when the state embarked on a policy of deinstitutionalization releasing thousands of mental patients to the streets (C. J. Bogard 2001). The next year *The New York Times* and other major media outlets paid significant attention to the Baxter and Hopper (1981) study that found nearly half of the people who were homeless were also mentally ill, ignoring all the other contributing factors leading to homelessness, like earlier reports on the effects of gentrification (C. J. Bogard 2001). Deinstitutionalization was a popular causal model because there was evidence to support it with regards to the decline of the number of people in inpatient mental hospitals. One of the problems with this belief is deinstitutionalization occurred in the 1960s and early 1970s, but over half of the total decline in inpatients from 1965 to 1985 took place by 1971. However, increases in homelessness did not occur until the early 1980s (Mathieu 1993). It was not until the early 1980s that former patients of state hospitals began to show up in shelters, suggesting a larger host of changes in the economy were responsible (Hopper 1988).

Increases in homelessness were also driven by major changes in the labor markets within major cities, such as the outsourcing of manufacturing jobs overseas and the shift towards financial and tech jobs (C. J. Bogard 2001; Holden 1986; Hopper 1988; Hopper et al. 1985; Nord and Luloff 1995). For example, New York City. Between 1970 and 1980, NYC lost more than a quarter of a million manufacturing jobs due to international competition. The loss of unskilled manufacturing jobs, decreases in wages, and increases in living costs displaced the poor. Neighborhoods that housed the working poor gave way to upscale apartments and shopping centers catering to the upscale tastes of the new white-collar class (Hopper 1988). In New York in 1980, the same year *The New York Times* began linking homelessness to deinstitutionalization, the paper published a story regarding a memorandum from the New York Governor's office. The memo suggested the City of New York had displaced thousands of people by giving tax breaks to owners of single-room-occupancy hotels to upgrade their buildings, noting the closing of "flop houses" and other gentrification processes were the greatest causes of homelessness (C. J. Bogard 2001). *These* were the changes that displaced the already vulnerable poor (mentally ill and single parents) and forced many into the streets (C. Bogard 2001). The single occupancy rooms were a last resort for some of the former psychiatric patients during the 1960s and 1970s, but by 1982 an estimated 87 percent of these rooms had been lost in New York City alone (Hopper 1988). At the same time low-income, single-family apartments began to decline an average rate of 31,000 units annually from 1970 to 1981 (Hopper 1988). Young mothers and their children constituted the fastest growing segment of the homeless population in that era. In 1986 New York City reported that

two-thirds (66 percent) of its homeless population were families with children (Mathieu 1993). The lack of livable wages, coupled with a lack of affordable housing, led to the displacement of thousands of people in New York City alone (Hopper 1988). In more recent decades rapid gentrification has also occurred in neighborhoods in Boston, Portland, Chicago, and Seattle. At a slower rate, gentrification has occurred in Denver, Washington D.C. and Atlanta (Kennedy and Leonard 2001). Gentrification has historically displaced lower income African American residents replacing them with higher income white residents. This has also been the case with other minority neighborhoods, such as Latino neighborhoods in Los Angeles (Kennedy and Leonard 2001). However, recent trends in gentrification are revealing that higher income newcomers are more racially diverse than the late 1970s and 1980s. San Francisco's Hunters Point neighborhood has seen growth in higher income Asian households, and Atlanta and Washington D.C. has experienced increases in higher income African American families (Kennedy and Leonard 2001). Displacement was much more severe in cities with tighter housing markets such as San Francisco. Between July, 1999 and June, 2000 881 rental units in San Francisco were converted for other uses compared to just 300 in 1998 (Kennedy and Leonard 2001).

Homelessness from 2008 to Present

In the wake of the 2008 recession, homelessness has once again received significant attention among social scientists and the public (Lee et al. 2010). The Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) has developed a multitude of

definitions to describe the complex demographics of the “third wave of homelessness.” This includes chronically homeless individuals and families, sheltered/unsheltered homeless, and unaccompanied youth. The HUD defines chronically homeless as any individual or head of household (in chronically homeless families) who has been homeless for one year or more and has a disability. Unsheltered homeless are defined as individuals and families whose primary nighttime location is public or private, but not ordinarily used for regular sleeping accommodations (for example, streets, vehicles, or parks). Finally, the agency defines unaccompanied youth as either over or under 18 years of age, but no older than 24, who are homeless without the company of a parent or guardian (Bishop et al. 2017).

The 2017 HUD Annual Homeless Assessment Report (AHAR) to Congress, delivered annually since 2006, found on a single night in January, 553,742 people in the United States were considered to be homeless. According to this report, overall homelessness declined by 14 percent between 2007 and 2017; however, 2017 saw the first increase in homelessness in seven years, with an increase of one percent. According to the authors, this increase can be attributed to economic changes within major U.S. cities across the nation, especially where the majority of the homeless population is located: New York City, Los Angeles, and San Francisco. Increases in homelessness in the 50 largest cities in the U.S. accounted for most of the 2017 increase (Annual Homeless Assessment Report 2017). Thirty-seven years after the dawn of the “new homeless” era, major changes within cities are still considered the cause of homelessness.

However, this report does not explain specific changes within cities contributing to homelessness, or address patterns and trends in rural communities.

The 2017 HUD report found the majority of homeless individuals in 2017 were male and over the age of 24 (72 percent). Just over one quarter (26 percent) of the people counted were female, and individuals identifying as transgender or another gender represented a combined total of one percent. Of the total population, the majority of homeless individuals identified as either white (54 percent) or African American (30.6 percent) (Annual Homeless Assessment Report 2017). In sharp contrast to the “old homeless” era of the 1940s to 1970s, with homelessness largely being experienced by single white men, families with children made up one-third (33 percent) of the total homeless population in 2017. About seven percent (7.4 percent) of the people counted were unaccompanied youth, or those living alone under the age of 25; this group was disproportionately more likely to be unsheltered (88 percent). Of all people experiencing homelessness, approximately two-thirds (65 percent) were staying in emergency shelters or transitional housing programs, and about one-third (35 percent) were in unsheltered locations (Annual Homeless Assessment Report 2017).

California had the highest concentration of homelessness in 2016, according to the AHAR (2017), with one-quarter (25 percent) of the nation’s total homeless population. New York followed California with 16 percent of the nation’s total. California and New York alone constituted 41 percent or 223,781 of the nation’s 553,742 homeless persons. Other states considered to have high concentrations of homelessness were Florida (6 percent) and Texas (4 percent). California accounted for nearly half (49

percent) of all unsheltered people in 2017 (91,642 people). Homelessness in California increased by 13.7 percent since 2016 and 1.6 percent overall since 2007. In 2017, the City of Los Angeles had 55,188 people who were homeless while New York City had 76,501 people, and San Francisco had 6,858 people experiencing homelessness. In 2017, California had the second highest rate of homeless unsheltered unaccompanied youth at 82.5 percent of the nation's total, second only to Nevada at 89.2 percent (Bishop et al. 2017).

The primary objective of the HUD's AHAR report, also known as the Point in Time (PIT) count, is to provide a snapshot of two aspects of homelessness in the United States: (1) estimations regarding the number of people experiencing homelessness, and (2) demographics (who makes up the population). It is important to note both of these questions raise significant methodological questions. Counting individuals experiencing homelessness raises questions such as: who is considered homeless? There is no single agreed upon definition of homelessness, making any count controversial (Baron 2004). It is also difficult to reach every possible corner of every city in the U.S. to count individuals when the people being counted may be looking for hidden spaces to sleep without harassment from community members or law enforcement (The National Law Center on Homelessness and Poverty 2017). As the PIT count takes place in January, many people may be looking for very isolated spaces to sleep as a protection from winter weather, in some cities. The count may also miss people who are "couch surfing" or living temporarily in motels, again perhaps increasing due to winter weather. According

to the National Alliance to End Homelessness (2012), there have also been wide methodological variations in the PIT count between years, and between types of housing.

Many nongovernmental agencies have criticized the HUD and other governmental agencies for grossly underrepresenting the severity and pervasiveness of homelessness (Shields 2001). According to the National Law Center on Homelessness & Poverty (NLCHP), the point in time count fails to account for the transitory nature of homeless by relying on its volunteers to conduct a count in predetermined destinations where “known” populations of homeless reside. This is problematic for two reasons. First, these locations are known mostly because they are visible from roads, and other heavily trafficked vantage points, which makes them easy targets for law enforcement “sweeps,” for violations of camping and other ordinances, so inhabitants are already reluctant to interact with outsiders. Second, many homeless adults live in areas classified as “not-visible” for reasons mentioned above (The National Law Center on Homelessness and Poverty 2017). There are other homeless counts conducted by service providers believed to obtain more accurate counts such as, The National Survey of Homeless Assistance Providers and Clients (NSHAPC). This method features a multi-stage probability sample representative of all homeless people who used services focused on homelessness (Burt et al. 2001). These estimates have produced figures believed to be 2.5 to 10 times greater than the HUD PIT, depending on the year (The National Law Center on Homelessness and Poverty 2017).

Despite the limitations of the PIT counts, it is still the only measure that enumerates homelessness in all its forms (National Alliance to End Homelessness 2012),

and is widely used by advocates, government agencies, lawmakers and the media to understand patterns and trends in homelessness. Information from this report is used by Congress and local and state agencies to analyze the effectiveness of the overall homeless assistance system, and to gage certain aspects, such as the need for emergency shelters or rapid rehousing programs (housing models designed to provide temporary housing assistance to homeless persons, until they can quickly move them into permanent housing) (National Alliance to End Homelessness 2012). Given its limitations the actual numbers may be much higher than what is found in the AHAR's PIT count.

Current Patterns in Homelessness

The HUD's PIT count produces information to help assess the need for funding to support various states' and local community's response to homelessness. As the need for these vital services continues to grow in many areas, the site location of these service programs has increasingly become a source of conflict in many communities across the nation (Link, Schwartz, Moore, et al. 1995). There is a current trend in decentralizing homeless shelters and homeless-targeted service sites from downtown centers, as many cities now try to revitalize their downtowns and centers (Forte 2002). There has been an effort in many cities to relocate homeless service sites to depressed inner-city communities, where they may be most needed, but many of these communities are hindering these efforts, arguing their neighborhoods and communities have already been dumping grounds for unwanted service sites. Even as homelessness may be on the rise, there is a growing perception of homelessness as related to crime and danger, discussed

below. Many neighborhoods are linking the rise in crime to the rise in homelessness (Lee, Tyler, and Wright 2010). Many communities are ill-equipped to handle recent surges in homelessness. In cities like Los Angeles, there is an anti-homeless backlash because the public is afraid the presence of homelessness will mean public safety issues and lower property values (Lyon-Callo 2000). So far, middle-class neighborhoods have been very successful at keeping these service-sites out of their neighborhoods and communities because of the concentration of social capital in these more affluent neighborhoods. In response to these ‘Not in My Backyard’ (NIMBY) obstacles, many service sites have been pushed to the outskirts of town, away from downtowns and civic centers, in order to remove the visual blight of homelessness and its perceived impact on tourism and businesses. In contrast to the handling of homelessness in prior eras, the removal of the homeless from public spaces is how many cities are “handling” homelessness. This is being done through criminalization, rather than compassion or other strategies and motivations (Forte 2002; Lee et al. 2010; Link, Schwartz, and Moore. Robert 1995).

The Criminalization of Homelessness

Some communities have worked diligently to understand and reduce homelessness by looking at ways to address homelessness non-punitively. For example, Charleston, South Carolina, permitted homeless persons to remain in encampments until they were able connect them with permanent housing (National Law Center on Homelessness and Poverty 2016). Conversely, many other communities have increasingly relied on fear- and crime-based strategies to displace and imprison people

experiencing homelessness. Municipal governments have responded to homelessness by imposing anti-homeless laws, criminalizing everyday survival behaviors such as eating, drinking, resting, sleeping, and performing bodily-functions because of where they occur (Amster 2003; Baron 2004; Lee and Farrell 2003; Lee et al. 2010; Lyon-Callo 2000; Speak and Tipple 2006; Toro et al. 2007). For example, from 2012 to 2015, the city of Dallas, Texas had an estimated population of 600 unsheltered homeless persons sleeping in public. During that time, Dallas issued more than 11,000 citations for sleeping in public and approximately 2,000 citations for panhandling in relation to its anti-panhandling ordinance (National Law Center on Homelessness and Poverty 2016). Honolulu, another city with a high rate of homelessness, outlawed sitting and lying in public places. The city has issued 16,215 warnings and 534 written summonses between 2014 and 2016 (National Law Center on Homelessness and Poverty 2016). When homeless people cannot pay the fines for violating many of the recent anti-homeless ordinances, many are incarcerated, leading to chronicity of homelessness, which will be discussed in more depth below (National Law Center on Homelessness and Poverty 2016).

Efforts to criminalize homelessness is not a new phenomenon. Criminalization as a response to homelessness first gained traction in large cities like New York in the mid to late 1980s and continues in many cities today, including notoriously liberal West Coast cities such as San Francisco, Berkeley, Santa Cruz, and Western cities like Denver. These cities have used criminalization such as the eviction of homeless encampments as a primary homeless policy (Amster 2003; Lee, Farrell, and Link 2004; Mathieu 1993; Noy

2009). To make sense of this, homeless advocate and legal scholar Baron (2004) argues it would be more helpful to think of homeless persons' identities in terms of property. From this perspective, homeless persons live in a legal status of "no property." Baron (2004) further proposes that their lack of property leaves them vulnerable to a set of complex legal disabilities. Without property, they lack all the property rights the domiciled public take for granted, like the right to cleanliness, to sleep, and to perform normal bodily functions. Every life-sustaining activity has to be done somewhere, but in many places, there is no actual, physical place where homeless persons are entitled to be, even for those activities (Baron 2004).

Public Perceptions of Homelessness

The criminalization of people experiencing homelessness has come in response to negative public reactions to increases in homelessness in many communities. The criminalization of homelessness augments the already stigmatized identity of homelessness by labeling homeless persons as criminals. The wave of anti-homeless statutes and policies were largely based on negative perceptions of homelessness. Negative perceptions were believed to be a direct result of increased contact between the domiciled persons and the homeless as more homeless persons were forced to live their lives in public spaces. These negative perceptions were intensified by damaging portrayals of homelessness by the media (the media and homelessness will be discussed in more detail later).

To try to understand how the public forms both positive and negative understandings of homelessness, many scholars have examined the underlying dynamics driving these perceptions (Lee and Farrell 2003; Lee et al. 2004; Link, Schwartz, and Moore. Robert 1995; Merolla, Hunt, and Serpe 2011; Phelan et al. 1995, 1997; Toro et al. 2007). For example, Lee and colleagues (2004), using contact theory, found the context and quality of an encounter between a domiciled person and a homeless person will produce either a negative or positive perception. Positive perceptions are more likely to form in contexts where social exchanges are personal and longer in duration. Typically, these types of encounters occur in settings where contact is frequent and occurs over a period of time. For instance, someone volunteering their time with a homeless service organization is more likely to develop a more positive and complex understating of homelessness than someone who has only had brief contact in passing (Lee et al. 2004; Mobley 2007). A good example of contexts fleeting in nature are panhandling encounters. These types of encounters are more likely to develop negative perceptions because they are anxiety provoking. Panhandling encounters produce anxiety because the exchange is one-way and does not last long enough for the domiciled and homeless persons to build a bond (Lee et al. 2004). The growing discomfort with panhandling seems apparent, with many cities such as Sacramento, California (Lillis 2017) and Oklahoma City (Ross 2017) bowing to public pressure to pass anti-panhandling ordinances. Rather than providing additional services or housing options for homeless persons, cities are electing to criminalize activities associated with homelessness.

Public perceptions of poverty have been extensively researched and provide useful insight into public perceptions of homelessness since homelessness can be considered the most extreme form of poverty. By understanding how the “generic poor” are stigmatized we can see how poverty serves as an additional stigma to homeless persons. A study done by Hunt (1996) examined public beliefs about the causes of poverty in comparison by race, and in a later study (Hunt 2004) examined beliefs about wealth in relation to race and ethnicity. In his earlier study examining racial differences regarding beliefs about poverty, Hunt’s (1996) research supported previous held beliefs that black respondents are more likely to support structuralist beliefs about the causes of poverty than whites. A greater percentage of white respondents and people with higher economic status favor individualistic explanations for poverty. In addition, Hunt (1996) found black and Latino respondents attribute more importance to both individualistic and structuralist reasons for poverty. Hunt (1996) explains this dichotomous viewpoint in relation to a dominant social order in democracy that supports multiple opposing views. There are various opposing viewpoints in a democratic society; however, society will place greater legitimacy on the dominant culture’s viewpoint. He explains that without a dominant viewpoint, lower status groups would unite under a single structural explanation for the causes of poverty. Hunt (1996) believes a wider inclination for structuralist beliefs among black and Latino respondents is related to economic-self-interest. Members of groups that are disproportionately poor, such as racial minorities, tend to support structuralist explanations that externalize the cause of their poverty and the opposite holds true for higher status groups, which tend to internalize their

advantageous position (Hunt 1996). His later study regarding beliefs about wealth supported his previous study regarding beliefs about poverty. Hunt found white, black, and Latino respondents all seemed to all favor individualistic viewpoints for wealth. This can be explained by individuals internalizing success and wanting to externalize poverty, which can be seen as a form of failure by society (Hunt 2004). This is consistent with earlier research regarding social position and beliefs about homelessness (Lee and Farrell 2003).

Homeless Identities

The construction of homeless identities in relation to stigmatizing labels ascribed by the media and thorough public discourse has a large body of research. Kingfisher (2007), examined the discursive practices that construct categories of homelessness in a small Canadian prairie city. Kingfisher (2007) explored how the category of “drunken Indian” was constructed and used against First Nations people experiencing homelessness. This category was constructed indirectly by omission in public discourse of homelessness. When community members spoke about the issues of homelessness in a public setting they would mention if the people they were discussing were white, but they would not acknowledge racial membership when referring to First Nations people. Rather they would describe individuals as “users” or “drunks” without directly denoting their First Nations status. Kingfisher (2007) argued that through the omission of racial designation in discourse, the dominant group constructed an “unmarked category” of the “drunken Indian” through implied meaning. Kingfisher (2007) argued, “this unspoken,

assumed categorization served to produce, inscribe, and enact a particular kind of Native body, one that was taken as representative of First Nations as a group, despite its mediation by class” (92). By constructing homelessness as a characteristic or property of individuals or “diseased bodies”, the dominant group neglects the systemic inequality and the material and historical conditions that produced it (Kingfisher 2007).

Other theories of stigma and stereotyping found homeless people are more stigmatized than other poor people because they live in public spaces, and they are associated in the public’s mind with other stigmatizing conditions such as mental illness and substance abuse (Phelan et al. 1997). Another study sought to distinguish the “enacted identities” of homelessness from the “ascribed identities” (Parsell 2011). Ascribed identity refers to the identity that homeless persons are imposed or burdened with by the public; whereas enacted identity refers to physically embodying or representing a sense of who one is in relation to others. Enacted identities are something people display; for homeless persons, this proposes that the realities of living in public places means that certain behaviors are displayed and thus taken as informative of identity. Without the ability to conceal certain undesirable behaviors like the domiciled, the constant display of such behaviors produces a perception of people who are homeless that is highlighted by deviance and problematic attributes (Parsell 2011).

The Removal of Homeless Persons from Public Space

The criminalization and the stigmatized identity of homelessness has essentially led to efforts to remove homeless persons from public spaces (Lee et al. 2004; Phelan et al. 1997; Speak and Tipple 2006). The removal of homeless persons from public spaces can be understood through “the broken window theory”. According to this theory, if a building has one broken window that is left unrepaired, eventually all the windows will become broken (Wilson and Kelling 1982). This belief, adopted as law enforcement policy in some jurisdictions, spread culturally as a normalized belief system in the 1980s and 1990s (Childress 2016). The theory has transcended to beliefs about homelessness. , if you allow “broken” people to exist in communities unchecked, more will arrive. This theory has become a corner stone of "community policing," justifying aggressive policing towards the homeless seeking to push them to the margins of society (Amster 2003). Stigmatizing media depictions portraying homeless persons as being diseased and/or illegal has led to policies of exclusion that seek to sanitize public space of the seemingly diseased homeless (Amster 2003). Amster (2003) argues people experiencing homelessness are at odds with the dominant culture because they embody fears of contamination, and deviant characteristics. These perceived embodiments reinforce and justify social distancing and efforts to push the homeless as far out of sight as possible (Amster 2003). Speak and Tipple (2006) discuss how negative media portrayals of homeless persons as dirty or unclean reinforce common notions of homeless people as “others.” This othering of homeless persons has steered the public and policymakers to

support clearance operations that seek to rid the area of homeless persons so they can improve the value of the land and the quality of life (Speak and Tipple 2006).

To minimize having to see or interact with homeless, many cities (on top of criminalization) have also used other strategies to keep the homeless out of public spaces. Cities use particular architectural strategies to limit the ability of people to sit down, lay down, or rest for more than a moment. These strategies have been called defensive or hostile architecture. For example, cities have redesigned areas to stand, rather than sit or lie down, at bus stops and other public spaces. In some cities, businesses have put spikes in the sidewalks to stop people from being able to sleep or sit in front of storefronts. City benches often have handles or breaks in the design so someone can temporarily sit, but not lie down. Altogether, these efforts are a set of strategies for keeping people uncomfortable and attempting to push people experiencing homelessness away from bus stops, businesses and public spaces (Adler-Gillies 2018; Atkinson 2015; Rosenberger 2014).

Criminalization and Chronicity of Homelessness

Criminalization not only further stigmatizes the homeless, it has a tremendous impact on quality of life outcomes that can lead to chronicity of homelessness (Lee et al. 2010). This reproduces the very issues that may have led to the initial bout of homelessness, turning a potentially temporary situation into a chronic issue.

Criminalization, especially criminalizing survival and basic bodily functions, can affect a homeless person's chances of obtaining and maintaining employment, access to housing,

public benefits, justice, and voting (National Law Center on Homelessness and Poverty 2016). According to the National Law Center on Homelessness and Poverty's (NLCHP) report, *Housing Not Handcuffs* (2016), fines and court fees associated with criminal charges for innocuous crimes, like sleeping in a public park, can amount to hundreds and thousands of dollars. Without the resources to pay, this often leads to additional jail time, which makes it impossible to hold down a job.

In addition, the report found minor criminal convictions severely limit a homeless person's options for employment because many employers run criminal background checks. The employer may choose not to hire someone with a criminal background, regardless of whether or not the offense bears any resemblance to the type of employment. Criminal backgrounds can also make finding housing very difficult, including subsidized housing, because Federal housing subsidies require applicants to disclose any criminal history, including minor non-violent offenses. This can create issues because Public Housing Authorities (PHAs), the local agencies charged with administering federal housing subsidies, have wide-ranging discretion to determine regulations pertaining to eligibility for applicants with criminal convictions. In 2015 the HUD initiated regulations prohibiting PHAs from denying or evicting tenants solely based on a criminal background (National Law Center on Homelessness and Poverty 2016), but to date no such protections from private housing sources exist. Countless people were blocked from housing before that ruling.

Criminalization can also have a tremendous impact on a homeless person's ability to access public benefits such as Supplemental Security Income (SSI). If an individual is

incarcerated, these benefits are suspended; if they are jailed for more than a year they are terminated and the individual has to reapply. When individuals are cited for various anti-homeless ordinances and cannot pay the multiple fines, jail time can add up (Stembaugh 2014). This can have a major impact on a homeless beneficiary; if she or he has to reapply, eligibility is not guaranteed, and the application process can take months to a year to get approved (National Law Center on Homelessness and Poverty 2016). Most people do not have savings or the ability to weather any sort of interruption to their income, especially those who are trying to get housing. In 2016, 7 million people in poor households were paying more than 50 percent of their income towards housing, if one member were to become jailed, the household could lose half their income and become homeless (Rosenheck 2016).

Prosocial Homeless Policy Changes

Despite negative public perceptions, and increasing policies that criminalize homelessness, there is agreement among homeless advocates, the media, and policymakers that homelessness is an issue of great concern and we need to do something about it (Lee et al. 2010). National homeless policies have changed significantly since the 1980s (Blekesaune and Quadagno 2013; Buck et al. 2004; Hopper 1988; Hopper et al. 1985; Lovell 1997; Lyon-Callo 2000; Meschede 2011; National Law Center on Homelessness & Poverty 2016; Noy 2009; Phelan et al. 1997; Reutter, Neufeld, and Harrison 1999; Stern 1984; Toro 2006). During the late 1980s, the first comprehensive homeless assistance act, the McKinney-Vento Act, was signed into law. The major focus

of this law was to increase emergency services for homeless persons. These early programs provided emergency shelter, food, mental health, healthcare, and substance abuse treatment through short term grants. However, these early policies did not provide long term access to healthcare and did little to address housing shortages, high costs of living, lack of livable wages and other obstacles to maintaining permanent housing (Rosenthal and Foscarinis 2006).

During the early 1990s homeless policy shifted towards the Continuum of Care (CoC) model. CoCs are the local planning bodies responsible for coordinating the full range of homeless services within a geographic area, which may cover a city, county, metropolitan area, or even an entire state (Culhane et al. 2007; Park et al. 2012). CoC are a requirement of the HUD to streamline community efforts to receive federal funding to address homelessness. This model was designed with the intent to reduce government waste by reducing any overlapping of services. Part of the CoC model is to provide permanent housing in conjunction with other necessary services such as medical, mental health, addiction treatment, and other social services, to increase the chance of chronically homeless individuals sustaining permanent housing (Annual Homeless Assessment Report 2017). This model has been criticized by housing first advocates, who argue that permanent housing needs to come first, followed by additional supports and services. This is in contrast to many of the CoC transitional housing programs, which require people who are chronically homeless or otherwise to address issues with substance abuse, or mental health before they can receive permanent housing (Lee et al. 2010). In 2009, the HEARTH (Homeless Emergency Assistance and Rapid Transition to

Housing) Act passed, which placed a greater emphasis on permanent housing, such as permanent supportive housing, and rapid re-housing as solutions to homelessness (Locke et al. 2007). According to the NAEH (National Alliance to End Homelessness) 2016 report, rapid re-housing programs grew by 59.6 percent nationally between 2014 and 2015, and during that same period the number of permanent supportive housing beds grew by 6.3 percent, while transitional housing programs (temporary housing) continued to decrease (National Alliance to End Homelessness 2012). In the following section I will present the origins of homelessness followed by perceived causes that have been obscured by service providers and the media in order to influence particular policies.

Root Causes of Homelessness

Research conducted by homeless advocacy groups and government institutions overwhelmingly demonstrate homelessness is a consequence of structural forces such as economic inequality and a lack of affordable housing (Bishop et al. 2017; National Law Center on Homelessness and Poverty 2016, 2017; Rosenheck 2016). Although beliefs about causes of homelessness have changed over time, there is more agreement among researchers today than in past years (Lee et al. 2010). However, policymakers and professional service providers beliefs on the causes and solutions of homelessness differ widely from researchers. Many professional service providers in mental health and medicine, for example, view homelessness as a condition resulting from individual pathologies such as mental health diagnoses or substance abuse. Conversely, most social researchers today favor a model integrating both structural and individual causes (Hunt

1996; Lee et al. 1992, 2010). In this section, I outline the common structural and individualistic beliefs about the root causes of homelessness, and the more recent medicalization of homelessness.

Structural Explanations of Homelessness

With the onset of the “new homelessness” in the early 1980s, homelessness experts were polarized about the root causes of homelessness (Holden 1986). Beliefs about the causes of homelessness can be divided into two major camps: structuralists and individualists. The structural argument was prevalent in the mid-1980s research. There was a new kind of poverty taking place believed to be associated with the decline and relocation of industries, loss of manufacturing jobs, shifts towards white-collar professional jobs, and the gentrification of working class neighborhoods into financial centers. These new structural changes displaced low-income residents as land values increased and rents catered to more affluent residents (Bean Jr., Stefl, and Howe 1987; C. J. Bogard 2001; Holden 1986; Hopper 1988; Hopper et al. 1985; Lee et al. 2010; Mathieu 1993). Many scholars in the mid-1980s, like today, believed that to understand the causes of homelessness, there must be an examination of the economic forces such as the labor market, along with the housing market, to understand the underlying causes of homelessness (Bean Jr. et al. 1987; C. J. Bogard 2001; Holden 1986; Hopper 1988; Hopper et al. 1985; Lee et al. 2010; Mathieu 1993). Despite current and past research that suggests homelessness is a product of structural forces, there is a continued belief that homelessness can be addressed by increasing access to mental health services and access

to medical. Beginning in the late 1980s and continuing today, many homeless policy efforts prefer to address homelessness by diagnosing and treating drug addiction and mental illness, yet only 25 percent of the homeless population have a diagnosed mental illness. Regardless of mental health status there is still a need for affordable housing (Wasserman and Clair 2011). The continued reluctance to frame homelessness as a structural condition is partially a consequence of the political climate within cities and the agencies that are charged with addressing homelessness as indicated by previous research in the 1980s. Hopper (1988), found that many cities framed homelessness as an individualistic consequence of deinstitutionalization because it placed responsibility on the state for closing mental hospitals. Subsequently, state governments supported structural explanations such as gentrification, because it made homelessness a responsibility of city and county governments (Hopper 1988). It is possible that the tendency by politicians, government agencies and some news media outlets to frame homelessness in terms of individualistic explanations is a direct consequence of funding. By rooting homelessness in deviant characteristics, funding continues to be directed towards service providers, law enforcement agencies and the prison system. In addition, structural explanations reveal growing inequality as a result of job loss, the global economy, and regional housing markets, which governments seem unwilling to address given the political influence of the financial institutions and corporate entities that benefit from this economic inequality.

Individualistic Explanations of Homelessness

Contrary to structuralist explanations of homelessness, individualist beliefs about the causes of homelessness primarily attribute homelessness to individual inadequacies (Bogard 2001; Hopper 1988). This explanation places the causes of homelessness on homeless persons themselves. From this perspective, homelessness is a consequence of individual shortcomings, such as mental illness, lack of work ethic, poor life choices, and/or substance abuse. Individualistic beliefs about the causes of homelessness are entrenched in what scholars have called the “dominant ideology” of poverty. Beliefs about homelessness are an inherent product of the American social stratification, which is a set of traditionally held values: equality, success, and democracy. In this perspective, socioeconomic inequality is justified because in a society with equal opportunity for all people, individuals are responsible for their own economic fate (Hopper et al. 1985; Wilson 1996). Therefore, homelessness can be seen as just in a society where all one needs to do to be successful is apply themselves and work hard. Other research has suggested this understanding of inequality can correlate to social position (Lee et al. 1992). According to the "antecedents hypothesis," people positioned favorably within the stratification system are more likely to support individualistic beliefs regarding the causes of homelessness (Lee et al. 1992). As mentioned earlier, someone who holds wealth is more likely to attribute their success to hard work and preservation and conversely, blame others' poverty on individual shortcomings, such as a poor work ethic or low moral character.

Political ideology can also have an influence on beliefs about the root causes of homelessness. Individuals positioned on the right (conservative) end of the political

spectrum tend to take an individualistic viewpoint. They often see homelessness largely as a problem of failed individuals. This holds true with most issues beyond homelessness, such as beliefs about poverty in general. From this perspective, conservatives generally believe people experiencing homelessness choose to be homeless, or are in that situation due to personal limitations, deficiencies, or deviant choices such as drug use (Noy 2009). The notion that homelessness is a choice can be traced back to the Reagan administration when President Reagan stated those who are homeless are so by choice (Mathieu 1993). Individuals positioned on the center and left (liberal) end of the political spectrum tend to attribute structural causes to homelessness, like a lack of social services, insufficient supply of affordable housing, and a shortage of living-wage jobs (Noy 2009).

However, some research has suggested it is more likely most people hold a combination of beliefs about the causes of homelessness and adhere to both structural and individual explanations (Lee et al. 1990). These findings may reflect policy changes, like 1990's CoC. Those strategies addressed homelessness through medical care, mental health intervention and housing, recognizing homelessness is both a result of vulnerable people (e.g. those struggling with mental illness or substance abuse) and structural changes in the housing and labor market. Nevertheless, there seems to be a greater movement towards an understanding that housing is a fundamental human right. This has been demonstrated in the housing first movement, or the idea that one does not need to be sober or agree to take medication to deserve housing.

The Medicalization of Homelessness

Medicalization is another manifestation of the individualistic understanding of the causes of homelessness. From this paradigm, homelessness is seen from an "impaired capacity" model where deviancy, drugs and alcohol are the cause of homelessness (Hopper 1988). The model is common among professional service providers (especially in healthcare and public health) who often treat homelessness like any other condition, afflicting those who are unfortunate enough to suffer from an ailment such as mental illness, substance abuse disorders, and other stigmas that make it difficult to hold down a job (Lyon-Callo 2000). Medicalization has become a cornerstone of CoC models, where community programs treat the multiple "symptoms" thought to cause homelessness. The moment a homeless person walks through the door of a shelter, they are being diagnosed and treated for pathologies believed to be responsible for their situation (Lyon-Callo 2000). The medical perspective comes from a place of pity rather than empathy (Lovell 1997). Providers see individuals as the sum of all their life traumas and misfortunes rather than vulnerable individuals subject to external forces outside any one individual's control. Individuals are seen as broken and undeserving of housing (Lyon-Callo 2000). The medicalization of homelessness demonstrates a need to be strength-based and trauma-informed. From this perspective, providers could build on individual strengths that build wellness and help remove stigmas and social distancing. By being trauma informed, providers are aware of the traumas homeless people have suffered and could appropriately address them without defining them by their trauma.

Historically, public discourse from city governments such as local Health and Human Service departments and the media has used a language of pathology and often

grotesque images to explain the conditions of homelessness. This has been evidenced by reports of dirty unbathed individuals talking to themselves and public disturbances by deranged unmedicated schizophrenics (Lovell 1997). The medicalization of homelessness has also been used as a tool, or justification, to remove the homeless from public spaces as people who are homeless are perceived as sick or diseased. Many local governments have instituted practices for dealing with “public disturbances” by homeless persons with mental health concerns that connect medicalization to criminalization. For example, some cities will take homeless persons in crisis to a county mental health facility for a 24-hour hold, or when mental health facilities are at full capacity, county jails become a replacement for mental health problems (Mathieu 1993).

This approach becomes problematic because it shifts focus from the structural political-economic causes, which have become a “normal” feature of life in the United States (Lyon-Callo 2000), and places blame on the homeless themselves (Hopper 1988). This approach does not address the structural conditions limiting access to resources or alternative explanations such as class, race, and gender dynamics. By medicalizing the homeless as mentally ill, the media and other dominant groups can marginalize the political-economic context of homeless people to issues of mental health (Mathieu 1993). This medical approach can then be seen as producing self-blame, by blaming individual’s deficiencies for the cause of homelessness (C. J. Bogard 2001; Lyon-Callo 2000; Wasserman and Clair 2011).

The Media Effect on Public Perceptions

There is a rich history of research into media influence on public perceptions. The news media wields tremendous influence over public perceptions regarding the relative salience of a given social issue, and how one should feel about that (Bunis, Yancik, and Snow 1996). Mass media coverage of social issues can increase public awareness and mobilize public support for specific policies. The media can also do the complete opposite; the news media can omit particular social issues and prevent public awareness all together. Either way, media frames help the reader and author make sense of the social world. They are defined both by what they include and what they omit (Calder and Burns 2011).

The way the media frames an issue can also be used to shape public opinion by framing an issue in a certain way in order to create the illusion of popular consensus that leads individuals to reassess their own personal views (Tompsett et al. 2006). An illustration of this can be found in a study that revealed how the media had been misrepresenting public opinion on homelessness (Link, Schwartz, and Moore. Robert 1995). *The New York Times*, CBS, and NBC evening news had been reporting the public is becoming impatient with people who are homeless, and widespread “compassion fatigue” had gripped the nation. In various news stories, the news sources claimed people were tired of the homeless and wanted something done about it. Researchers wanted to test these claims, so they examined public opinion polls and administered a nationwide survey using a random sample. They found the opposite; they discovered the public was very compassionate towards the homeless and wanted more policy to address the lack of affordable housing and other services (Link et al. 1995). Illustrations such as this support

the notion that the media imposes social order by framing the activities that define and construct our social reality (Bunis et al. n.d.). In terms of social problems, the media's power rests in its ability to frame social problems and set agendas. The media can influence what mass audience see, hear, and read, and how they feel about a given issue (Bunis et al. n.d.).

Media Influences on Public Perceptions of Homelessness

Media reporting on homelessness has changed over the years. During the early 1980s, the large increase in homelessness gained a lot of media attention in printed and televised news. During this period, social perceptions of homelessness shifted from images of the skid-row alcoholics to the deinstitutionalized mentally-ill (Buck et al. 2004). News coverage of the "crisis" of homelessness during this time permitted viewers to sympathize with the homeless while simultaneously praising shelters and kitchens as the answers (Shields 2001). By the late 1980s, frequency of coverage began to decline. What little printed media remained from 1988 to 1990 tended to be negative (Lee et al. 1991). Stories shifted focus from the failings of deinstitutionalization to the deviant characteristics of people who were experiencing homelessness by printing stories about rampant drug use, public intoxication, and public deification (Buck et al. 2004).

The Media, Stigmatization and Anti-Homeless Laws

During the late 1980s through the mid 1990s, the media played a major role in increasing the stigmatization and criminalization of homelessness by producing and

reinforcing negative images of homelessness (Amster 2003; Mathieu 1993). During this time, *The New York Times* published articles portraying the homeless in lurid terms by describing their appearance and presence as rancid and "bad for tourism." The paper reported on the presence of homeless persons in parks, bus stations, subways, and other public areas as a nuisance. At the same time, cities like New York began shifting their homeless policies to criminalization by banning sleeping and loitering in public spaces. Individuals found sleeping in parks or other public places were charged with criminal trespass. Negative media framing helped justify policies that began to push the homeless out of parks, subways and other public spaces and move them to shelters, where conditions were like prisons, and violence and disease were highly prevalent (Klodawsky et al. 2002; Mathieu 1993). Because homelessness is a product of economic inequality and a real indicator of the increasing class disparity in the U.S., the media and policymakers have found punitive measures to be more effective than addressing the real economic conditions in the housing and labor markets that have fashioned widespread poverty and homelessness. The news media has lead the part in concert with city governments to obscure the root causes of homelessness such as deficits in affordable housing and livable wages present in many major U.S. cities and surrounding communities. By stigmatizing the homeless through use of labels, policymakers can push the many people experiencing homelessness further to the margins of society with little pushback from the public.

Humboldt County, California

Humboldt County is located on the remote northern coast of California. It is almost 300 miles north of San Francisco and more than 400 miles south of Portland, Oregon (google maps 2018). Humboldt County is home to Redwood National Park and Humboldt Redwoods State Park, where the world's tallest trees reside. Within Humboldt County are eight Federally Recognized Native American Tribes; Wiyot, Yurok, Hupa, Karuk, Chilula, and the Whilkut (Anon n.d.). The 2017 U.S. Census estimates the population to be 136,754. Humboldt County is predominately white making up nearly three-quarters (74 percent) of the population. African-American or black residents make up one percent of the county's population, while Native Americans make up six percent. Hispanics or Latinos make up 11 percent while eight percent of the county is Asian Americans. Sixteen percent of the population is 65 years of age or over, while 19 percent are under 18 years of age and five percent are under five years of age. The remaining 60 percent of the population are between the ages of 18 and 64. The two major industries in Humboldt include timber and agriculture; the two largest agriculture industries are dairy and cannabis. During the 1960s and 1970s Humboldt County earned its reputation as a hippie community after many hippies moved to the area to cultivate marijuana. Humboldt County was an ideal location for the cultivation of marijuana because of its remote location and heavily forested landscape provided cover for illegal grows. Today the county still maintains its hippie culture and reputation for producing high yields of marijuana.

The two largest cities in the county are Arcata and Eureka (Eureka holds the county seat). Arcata is home to Humboldt State University (HSU) and Eureka is home to

College of the Redwoods, as well as the majority of the social services. Humboldt County, referred to “Humboldt” by the residents, is known for being a progressive place that votes blue. According to the 2010 census, 41.6 percent of the registered voters in Humboldt County are registered democrats, while 25.4 percent are registered republicans. The remaining voter population are 11.9 percent other and 24.3 percent no party preference (2010 Census). In the 2016 presidential primary elections, exit polls showed that Democratic Party runner up, Bernie Sanders, received 67.18 percent of the votes in Humboldt County (Sims 2016). The region is also known for its culture with strong traditions in environmental protection, perhaps correlated to the region’s rich biodiversity. This tradition is especially espoused by HSU’s mission statement which states one of its primary objectives is to serve its students by “...providing a wide array of programs and activities that promote understanding of social, economic and environmental issues” (Anon n.d.). The university’s commitment to environmental protection is also seen in the grad pledge, the first of its kind, which graduates are encouraged, to make a pledge promising to consider the social and environmental impact of any position they occupy or are considering occupying with a company or organization, and to improve its accountability and reduce its impact on the environment (Anon n.d.).

Humboldt County and Homelessness

Although Humboldt County is rural and underpopulated in comparison to other counties in California, it has a significant homeless population. According to the 2017

PIT count, on February 27th, there were 759 people experiencing homelessness throughout Humboldt County (559 per 100,000) – compared to California which has a rate of (340 per 100,000). The 2017 PIT count indicates a 53 percent decrease from the earliest available Humboldt PIT count in 2011 which reported a total of 1,626 people experiencing homelessness. Of the 759 persons reported to experience homelessness in 2017, 434 (57 percent) were unsheltered, 81 (11 percent) were in transitional housing and 244 (32 percent) were in emergency shelters. According to the report, there were more than 30 families with at least one adult and one child; eleven of those families were unsheltered. There was a total of 77 children under the age of 18, and 16 of those children (21 percent) were unsheltered. Children under the age of 18 made up 10 percent of the total homeless population, and two percent of the total homeless population were unsheltered minors. Looking at gender, more than two-thirds (67 percent) of the people counted in the 2017 Humboldt County PIT count identified as male. Thirty-one percent identified as female (236), one respondent identified as transgender and ten did not identify a gender. Two-thirds (67 percent) of the people counted identified as white (616), 59 identified as being Hispanic/Latino (eight percent), 16 identified as being black or African American (two percent), five identified as being Asian, 80 (11 percent) identified as being American Indian or Alaska Native, and 36 (five percent) identified multiple races. It is difficult to compare changes in the racial composition of the homeless population between 2011 and 2017 because only 54 percent of the 2011 respondents reported a racial identity. 2013 was the next earliest year for comparison. In 2013 1,054 people reported they were experiencing homelessness 32 percent higher than

2017 which indicated a 28 percent decrease since 2013. In 2013, (59 percent) identified as white, (five percent) identified as American Indian/Alaskan Native, (10 percent) identified as Hispanic, (three percent) identified as black or African American, (0 percent) identified as Asian, (four percent) identified as mixed, (seven percent) identified as other, and (26 percent) declined to identify a race. It is still difficult however to determine changes in the racial composition between 2013 and 2017 because 26 percent declined to identify a race in 2013, and the 2017 Humboldt County PIT report is not complete and does not provide the number of respondents that declined to identify a race.

Humboldt County and the Criminalization of Homelessness

In response to Humboldt County's own homeless population and from pressure by local business, several cities in the county have adopted anti-homeless ordinances in the past and more recently. For example, in 2010, the City of Arcata passed an ordinance that banned panhandling in specific areas of the city, including major intersections, pedestrian bridges, and the entrances and exits of businesses (Eureka Times-Standard 09/27/12). Local panhandling ordinances did not pass without pushback. Local homeless advocates in the community have protested in front of the county courthouse over these laws that specifically target the homeless. One local homeless advocate and attorney filed a suit against Eureka's anti-panhandling ordinance on the grounds that it violates First Amendment rights to freedom of speech (Houston 2017).

Additionally, anti-camping ordinances are favored by local municipalities in Humboldt County. These ordinances specifically target the homeless because no

domiciled member of the community would sleep in public space, yet the homeless are left with no other choice but to live their private lives in public spaces (National Law Center on Homelessness and Poverty 2016). In 2015, the City of Eureka began an aggressive campaign to evict homeless persons camping in an area popularly known as “the devil’s playground,” located along Eureka’s waterfront along the Humboldt Bay (Sims 2015). The plan operated under the auspices of the “Eureka Open Space Property Management Plan,” a policy said to protect open space within the defined boundary of city owned waterfront property. The policy is stated to provide ordinances and policy direction for environmental cleanup and camping enforcement within the waterfront area. The ordinance was issued in response to concerns about illegal camping within the Coastal Zone due to issues of sanitation, hazardous waste, and criminal activity. Eventually, nearly 200 people living in the space were evicted, and their possessions thrown away. A local attorney filed a suit on behalf of “The Palco 12” (twelve inhabitants of the Palco Marsh represented in a lawsuit against the city of Eureka).

The City of Eureka has a number of ordinances that specifically criminalize homelessness, although these ordinances are framed to “address certain behaviors that negatively impact the community” (Houston 2017) such as shopping carts, people sitting or lying in commercial areas, open burning, and others. Perhaps its most controversial ordinance is the “storage of personal property ordinance”. This ordinance targets homeless persons because they lack the basic property rights that protect personal property, just because they are undomiciled and do not have space of their own.

In the next chapter I will discuss my methods for understanding how the LOCO has linked homelessness to criminality in order to influence public perceptions and public support for punitive policies and the removal of homeless persons from public spaces. As noted by the literature, the media shapes meaning through use of frames and labels. The LOCO uses many labels and frames to produce public understandings of homelessness through their coverage of local events.

METHODS

The media and the public often portray many unsheltered persons as “public nuisances,” “criminals,” “drug-addicted,” “mentally ill” and “unworthy of public help.” In this section, I will describe my methods for examining social perceptions of homelessness in Humboldt County. I will begin with my data collection procedures, followed by my analytical approach.

To understand public perceptions of homelessness in Humboldt County, I employed qualitative research methods using content analysis and grounded theory. I analyzed articles published over the last nine years (2008 to 2017) from a popular local media outlet, the *Lost Coast Outpost* (LOCO). This study was approved by Humboldt State University’s Institutional Review Board (IRB 17-015). I chose qualitative methods over quantitative methods because I wanted to capture meaning-making practices that create reality in a very specific geographic location, Humboldt County. It is not my intention to uncover universal meaning-making process that form public perceptions, or the frequency in which specific perceptions occur, but rather explore the embedded meaning that can be found in journalist accounts of homelessness, and how those accounts shape the unique perspectives of Humboldt County’s domiciled residents towards their homeless neighbors.

Data Collection

I compiled 94 articles from LOCO, a free online media source that covers news local to Humboldt County California. The LOCO covers a variety of topics from local “breaking news”, such as natural disasters, to more in-depth stories that unfold over the course of weeks, months, and even years. More in-depth stories typically cover local issues about local government issues of public concern such as homelessness, and topics related to local subcultures. LOCO is widely read throughout Humboldt County making it ideal for examining public perception of the County’s homeless. It can be accessed through their website (<https://lostcoastoutpost.com/>) or through social media like Facebook. As of December 17, 2017, the LOCO Facebook page has 73,618 subscribers/followers in a county with a population of 134,623 (Census 2010). This makes the LOCO one of the most widely read media sources in the county, if not the most widely read. Such wide readership makes the LOCO a loud voice in identifying and constructing public issues in Humboldt County.

The primary unit of analysis was each article, and I selected articles from 2008 (the oldest articles in LOCO’s archives) to the present. I found articles using keyword searches containing the words “homeless,” “homelessness,” and “transient.” I included all articles containing any of those keywords in their headline and articles that had issues of homelessness or people who are homeless as the primary subject of the article. To assemble the articles into a database, I converted each to PDF format and uploaded the articles to a table in Mendeley (an online reference management system). If articles contained keywords related to homelessness but homelessness did not represent a major topic within the article, I excluded them from the database.

Once the articles were entered into the database, I categorized them based on the year, the month, and the day they were published. For each year, articles were assigned a number based on the numerical order they were published that year. For instance, an article published January 1st would be assigned the number 1, an article published January 16th would assigned number 2, and an article published March 3rd would be assigned 3 assuming there were no articles published in the month of February. The database consisted of 184 articles in total, and 94 articles remained to be analyzed. I selected up to ten articles for each year; if a certain year (like 2008, for instance) only had four articles that met the above criteria, I would include all of them in my analysis. 2015 had 30 articles of which the majority were related to law enforcement efforts to evict the homeless from the Palco Marsh. In order to avoid skewed data that over represented the removal of homeless persons from the Palco Marsh, I selected the ten articles using a purposive selection in order to ensure that I captured all nuances in framing of homelessness. For that year, six articles were not related to Palco Marsh evictions. I selected those six articles and the remaining four articles I selected were related to Palco Marsh evictions.

Data Analysis/Content Analysis

The dataset was organized in Mendeley, then I uploaded the PDFs of each article into Dedoose (a web based qualitative data analysis software program) for content analysis. I chose content analysis as a specific methodology because such a technique allowed me to understand how the LOCO uses labels and various frames to construct

public understandings of homelessness. In addition, I wanted to understand how homeless identities were constructed and assigned by the LOCO, and how these assigned identities serve various institutions in the community (i.e. local city governments, law enforcement agencies, and business communities). The news media outlets often portray themselves as harbingers of objective facts. It is not uncommon to hear self-proclamations like, “bringing you the facts”, or “unbiased balanced news” by national and local news media outlets. These claims are misleading to the consumers because it implies these sources simply provide unbiased facts, and it is up to the consumer of this information to make sense of it and piece together reality. However, this is not the case; there is purpose and intent behind every news media communication. Some intent is manifest and some is more latent. Content analysis is a tool allowing the researcher to uncover the embedded meaning evidenced in the way the media frames information, omits information, and normalizes and reinforces cultural practices. For example, an article seeming innocuous might be reinforcing institutional practices marginalize particular groups such as homeless persons by indirectly linking them to crime or associating them with other deviant characteristics.

Grounded Theory

Before reviewing any of the literature on homelessness, I began coding articles for content using the strategies of grounded theory (Charmaz 2006). I wanted to develop my initial code sheet, but at the same time, I wanted to be open to discovering new theoretical possibilities about homelessness that may not be present in the current body of

literature on homelessness. I developed initial codes at the sentence level by developing categories that captured actions while preserving the original phrasing. After I coded 25 articles, I began to see saturation (same reoccurring codes), so I constructed my code sheet based on the codes produced in the analysis of the first 25 articles.

After developing an initial code sheet, I moved to Axial Coding (Berg and Lune 2004). At this stage, I analyzed my initial codes to develop categories that captured greater meaning within the body of texts. For instance, in my initial coding process, I created the codes “mental illness” or “drug addicted” when the authors used these words to describe people who were experiencing homelessness. From these initial codes, I revisited the text to analyze the contexts in which these categories were applied, and I developed a parent code “social stigma.” The code for “social stigma” was used to identify the broader issue of using stereotypes of people experiencing homelessness as mentally ill and/or addicted in order to dehumanize and stigmatize them.

At the Axial level, I was able to understand the deeper meanings (Berg and Lune 2004) present in LOCO reports. I linked central concepts to other codes to develop larger theories on the meaning-making process on homelessness. At this stage, I was able to see emerging patterns and their meaning were consistent with the review of the literature. For instance, I was able to see how the parent code “social stigma” and its child code “mental illness” were used in conjunction with other codes such as “criminalizing homelessness.” These codes worked in concert to support a broader category of “removing homeless persons from public spaces” and “social exclusion”. At this stage I was able to further develop codes based on concepts found in the literature. Certain codes were rephrased to

better capture or describe social process found in the data to be more consistent with the literature. For example, the code “negative impact on community” was changed to “lower quality of life,” a concept present in the literature and seemed to provide a better description of context in which homelessness was often framed by the LOCO.

In the next chapter, I will demonstrate how the LOCO used certain frames and stigmatizing labels to support the removal of the homeless from public spaces in my study.

DATA ANALYSIS

Despite volumes of research suggesting homelessness is the consequence of structural forces beyond any individual's control (Lyon-Callo 2000), people experiencing homelessness in the U.S. continue to be stigmatized by the mass media and the public. Consequently, they are often blamed for their situation. Public opinion on homelessness matters because public opinion affects policies addressing homelessness. As elucidated by the literature, negative public opinion can often lead to ineffective policies that criminalize homelessness rather than address the root causes. As the literature has also shown, the media (particularly the news media) plays an important role in forming public perceptions surrounding social problems, and public opinion often influences public policy (Noy 2009).

As explored in the previous chapters, homelessness remains a pervasive social problem affecting 170 out of every 100,000 Americans. People in Humboldt County experience homelessness at a rate three times the national rate. For every 100,000 people in Humboldt County, 559 people are homeless. To explore local perceptions of homelessness in Humboldt County, as well as understand local homeless policies, I performed a content analysis on local media articles posted in the Lost Coast Outpost (the LOCO). The LOCO is a popular online news media source in Humboldt County. I analyzed 94 articles from a nine-year period from 2008 to 2017.

Analysis of LOCO coverage on homelessness in Humboldt County, contained four interrelated themes, and the first three themes seemed to emanate from a larger

concept. The theme that occurred most frequently was the media framing of *homelessness as a public nuisance/problem*. This theme supported a consistent belief that the homeless are an inconvenience and have a negative impact on the community by lowering the quality of life. Another dominant theme, often co-occurring with the first, is the concept of *homelessness as an environmental problem*. From this perception there is a widely accepted understanding homeless persons have a negative impact on the environment. The third theme encountered was *homelessness as a stigmatized identity*. This is a belief that the homeless deviate from the general population beyond their lack of housing in some way, such as drug use, mental illness or criminality. All three themes support the overarching theme “the removal of the homeless from public space,” which is consistent with previous research on perceptions of homelessness (Amster 2003; Mathieu 1993). I will explore each of the themes in more depth below.

Homelessness as a Public Nuisance/Problem

The LOCO consistently posted articles and opinion pieces depicting the homeless as a public nuisance (mentioned 51 times in 27 articles). This was sometimes done explicitly, but mainly through negative frames I grouped into: *negative impact on businesses and tourism* (counted 15 times in seven articles), *linking homelessness to crime* (observed 59 times in 31 articles), and *threats to public safety* (mentioned 34 times in 20 articles) For example, one 2016 news article illustrated *homelessness as a public nuisance*, and several of the subthemes, in describing the City of Eureka’s plan to shelter the homeless after evicting them from an encampment:

The shipping-container camp is likely to wind up housing the worst of the worst –a drug den full of homeless addicts, mental patients and sex offenders...The City can apply to the 3rd and Commercial Street project any lofty euphemism it wants, but the reality will remain that the city and its partners in the project will intentionally be creating a nuisance (*Eureka Business and Property Owners Threaten Lawsuit Over Shipping Container Homeless Camp* 2016).

This excerpt contains many overlapping themes, establishing how articles in the study often explicitly referred to the homeless as a nuisance. The media framing homeless people as having a *negative impact on business and tourism* occurred in 7.5 percent of the articles. One article quoted an outspoken member of the community depicting the homeless in a dehumanizing way to illustrate the negative impact they are perceived to have on local businesses and tourism:

...Eureka has an image problem and low self-esteem issues...when your business district appears more like a casting call for extras of *The Walking Dead*, it doesn't bode well for tourists, locals and potential investors coming to Humboldt (*Get Involved or Get Outta the Way* 2014).

Stigmatizing portrayals of people experiencing homelessness, like the above excerpt, is consistent with previous literature examining media representations of the homeless in *The New York Times* during the late 1980s (Klodawsky et al. 2002; Mathieu 1993). By describing the homeless in lurid terms, the media reproduces negative stereotypes that stigmatize homeless persons and justify policies that push them to the margins of society both symbolically and literally. In addition, reporting that the homeless are “bad for business” further obscures the structural causes of homelessness by blaming the homeless for a poor economy rather than blaming a poor economy for

homelessness. This reversal of blame is a way to distract the public from the real causes of homelessness, or empowering people to solve the root issues, like the lack of affordable housing and livable wages.

Perhaps the strongest representation of *homelessness as public nuisance* is *linking homelessness to crime*. One-third (33 percent) of the articles linked homelessness and criminality. This was often done by highlighting a person's housing status when a person committed a crime but omitting a domiciled status when someone not experiencing homelessness committed a crime. However, the linking of homelessness to criminality was typically done indirectly. The following excerpt from a 2015 article with the headline "Anti-Crime Activists Hit the Streets of Eureka" provides an example:

A few dozen anti-crime activists rallied outside the Bayshore Mall this evening, in a response to a city council that has been mostly indecisive toward addressing the homeless community living in the Palco Marsh [a large homeless encampment] (*Anti-Crime Activists Hit the Streets of Eureka 2015*).

The indirect linking of homelessness with criminality normalizes this idea, framing it as "conventional wisdom" or "common sense." In addition, the indirect linking of homelessness with criminality creates a false political and cultural reality because "common sense" appeals to the belief system of reality (Shields 2001). Politicizing homelessness as a criminal issue conceals the real politics of inequality. This is essentially the opposite tactic of medicalizing homelessness which depoliticizes homelessness as an issue of individual pathologies rather than inequality. The indirect linking of homelessness and criminality allows the reader to make connections regarding

taken for granted information about people experiencing homelessness and crime, regardless of any specific act linking a homeless individual to the commission of an actual crime. The linking of homelessness to crime has been especially reinforced by the media using a language of criminality whenever they are reporting on homelessness. The LOCO consistently describes homeless dwellings as “illegal encampments” (31 times in 26 articles) to legitimize law enforcement raids. By using a language of “illegality,” the LOCO reproduces the link between homelessness and criminality. This supports the idea that people who are homeless hold an illegal status (Baron 2004) and are therefore deserving of the criminalization they receive.

In close relation to the linking homelessness to crime, the LOCO often framed the homeless as *threats* to public safety. This framing was in conjunction with the *linking of homelessness to crime*. This is a logical next step to linking homeless persons to criminal activity, as a population that needs surveillance and control; it is not difficult for the public to assume that if homeless persons are criminals then they must be dangerous too. This was surprisingly unique to Humboldt County. In much of the literature (Bogard 2001; Hopper 1988), the framing of homeless as a threat to public safety was in association with the stigmatized identity of “mental illness”. During the early 1980s, when homelessness was presented as a problem of deinstitutionalization by the media, they were depicted as crazed homicidal loonies that were released out into the streets by the government closing of mental hospitals (C. Bogard 2001; Hopper 1988; Hopper et al. 1985; Stern 1984). An excellent example of how the LOCO has utilized “safety threat”

frames to depict the homeless as dangerous, can be found in the following 2016 article regarding the termination of a sleeping program for the homeless in Eureka:

53 percent of violent crime reports in the last quarter involved homeless transients either as the victim or suspect. Due to the high rate of violent crime and theft it has been determined that in the best interest of the community, the temporary sleeping locations need to be discontinued (*Eureka Abruptly Ends Overnight Homeless Sleeping Program* 2016).

Despite the above excerpt stating that the homeless were related to 53 percent of violent crimes as either victims or perpetrators, there were only three articles that framed the homeless as victims of unprovoked violent crimes. All three articles were about the homeless being attacked while sleeping in their sleeping bag. In two of the reports, two separate homeless individuals were set on fire on two separate occasions while sleeping (Dronkers 2011; Ferrara 2017). Like the excerpt above, none of the reports made mention of the housing status of the alleged perpetrators. Conversely, whenever a homeless person committed a violent act, the LOCO never failed to mention the perpetrator's status as a person experiencing homelessness.

Homelessness as an Environmental Problem

The idea that the homeless are responsible for environmental degradation was common among LOCO stories on homelessness, as well as the idea homeless are a *threat to public health*. This theme of *Homelessness as an Environmental Problem* was explicitly present in 17 articles and was mentioned 30 times. These articles specifically stated the homeless pose a threat to the environment or wildlife habitat, which was frequently used to justify their removal from public space. The following excerpt from a

2017 article provides a good example of the LOCO framing *Homelessness as an Environmental Problem* to justify the forced removal of the homeless individuals living in a public area:

Over the years an extensive homeless encampment was formed on the greenbelt along Humboldt Bay in Eureka, coined the “Devil’s Playground.” But due to the environmental degradation, crime and city pushing for development, everyone was evicted (*Dirty Needles and Mountains of Trash Have Become Perilous Problems in Eureka’s Public Places* 2017).

Articles that alluded to homelessness as a harm to the environment included stories covering the heaps of garbage and hazardous waste left behind after homeless persons were evicted from their encampments and the impact of those encampments on the environment and local wildlife. *The Environmental Impact of Illegal-Encampments* as a subtheme to *Homelessness as an Environmental Problem*, was mentioned 22 times in 12 articles. The following excerpt, from a 2014 article about a post-encampment raid cleanup demonstrates this subtheme:

This is the first phase of the cleanup project. The Arcata Police Department and the Humboldt County Sheriff’s Department are assisting the property owner with the removal of the illegal camps. The illegal camps have led to an epic accumulation of trash and human waste. The camps and dumping are a public nuisance for residents and contribute to pollution of our waterways. The dense vegetation and marshy conditions surrounding these camps is home to many waterfowl and other wildlife (*Illegal Camp Cleaned with Help of Inmate Crew* 2014).

By unremittingly reporting on law enforcement raids of illegal-encampments and the impact these camps have on the environment, the LOCO reinforces public policy

efforts that both criminalize and support the removal of homeless persons from public spaces.

The implicit harm to the environment caused by *illegal-encampments* is often reported in conjunction with the *Threat to Public Health* subtheme, that people who are homeless pose a public health threat as a result of the many discarded items left behind, such as syringes and human waste. The *Threat to Public Health* associated with homelessness was mentioned 18 times in 11 articles. One 2017 article reporting on Eureka's POP (Problem Oriented Policing) unit's effort to sweep "illegal encampments" provides an example of this:

Another concern is the threat to the environment and public health. "POP said even with continuous efforts, we're still hauling between 1,000 to 1,500 pounds of trash from the greenbelt area per week." "What they're burning –the hazmat of the needles, caps and sharps –this is creating an unhealthy environment by anybody, and we just can't allow it" (*A Day with Eureka's Problem Oriented Policing Unit, Illegal Encampments and Disorder Continue in the Greenbelt* 2017).

The idea people experiencing homelessness are a threat to the environment and public health is related to the idea of "private lives lived in public spaces" (Amster 2003; Baron 2004; Bogard et al. 2006; Speak and Tipple 2006). There is an unfair burden of blame placed on the homeless because they are forced to live their lives out in public spaces. Because they live in public spaces their consumption as with their body functions becomes a visible blight. We, the domiciled, far outnumber the homeless and consume more goods, and contribute far more to environmental degradation through our mass consumption, but we have the luxury of privacy. We have garbage service, indoor

plumbing, access to public sewage, and our waste is concealed and piped away or privately stored in bins and hauled off to landfills to be out of sight and out of mind. In the specific case of Humboldt County, there are few public bathrooms, (one in Arcata and a few in community parks in Eureka), and local business owners reserve their restrooms for paying customers. A good example of how homeless in Humboldt County are forced to perform life-sustaining bodily functions in public can be found in a 2011 article about a porta-potty dispute in a southern Humboldt park in the small community of Redway:

SoHum has been arguing about the Porta-Potty recently placed in a small park at the north end of town. Debra Carey, a local woman concerned about both the homeless and hygiene rented it and had it placed in the Veterans' Park last Thursday. While the rental company was still positioning it, local law enforcement arrived asking that it be removed. Words grew heated between the officers and homeless advocates. The porta potty stayed but its tenure is uncertain. In fact, Clif Clendenen—the district's supervisor—said on yesterday's Monday Morning Magazine that as it is un-permitted, it will have to be removed. The community is divided. The basic arguments against the porta-potty is that it will draw more homeless to the area which will cause more problems for locals and business owners... (*Even Laundry Nazi's Get Hurt Feelings* 2011).

The impediment of building public restrooms can be seen as another form of “defensive architecture” as mentioned earlier where cities are starting to design their downtown infrastructure to be less inhabitable to homeless persons (Atkinson 2015).

Homelessness as a Stigmatized Identity

Living in public spaces contributes greatly to the stigmatization of homeless person's identities because many homeless persons lead very visible lives without the ability to clean and groom, thus making them aesthetically unappealing (Phelan et al.

1997). The LOCO commonly depicts the homeless in terms of stigmatizing labels. Stigmatizing labels were used in 50 articles (53 percent of total articles) with a frequency of 84 mentions. There are four labels primarily used to describe people experiencing homelessness: (1) *Drug Addict/Alcoholic*, (2) *Disabled*, (3) *Dirty and/or Diseased*, and (4) *Mentally Ill*. These labels were either implied or explicitly stated and often coincided with other labels. It is important to note these labels are being applied at the same time as criminalization efforts are, causing additional stigma to people experiencing homelessness.

The label *Drug Addict/Alcoholic* was found in 17 articles (17 percent of total articles) and had a frequency of 28 mentions. One 2014 article (on community policing of homeless) quoted a community member conducting homeless street outreach, capturing the use of this stigmatizing label:

I've been out walking the streets of Old Town [downtown area] these past few weeks in my bright yellow neon T-shirt with other Old Town business folks along with our EPD escorts. It's making a difference; however, it takes time and a commitment from local community members. We're out shaking the bushes and looing (literally) at every nook and cranny in Old Town offering services and moving along the sleeping druggies and citing (via EPD citation) those committing crimes (drinking, drugs and smoking on the Boardwalk) and/or anti-social behavior. I'd recommend the Henderson Center Merchants and the businesses on Broadway get organized and do the same (*Get Involved or Get Outta the Way 2014*).

By quoting a local citizen describing people who are homeless as “druggies” and alcohol abusers, the LOCO is able to frame beliefs about homelessness as normal and validated, beyond individual opinions, representing popular consensus. This was consistent with Tompsett’s research on homelessness and public opinion (2006).

Tompsett found the media was attempting to shape public opinion by claiming the public was experiencing “compassion fatigue.”

The label *Disabled* only occurred in two articles (2 percent of total articles) and had frequency of two mentions. The two stories that framed the homeless as having disabilities used the label in the context of services provided to the homeless mostly, around the winter holiday season. One 2014 story was published around Thanksgiving and described a holiday meal for the homeless. The author of the article was reporting on the results of the 2013 PIT count in Humboldt County. A local homeless service provider made the following statement:

Previous PIT counts have indicated that over 60 percent of those surveyed became homeless in Humboldt County and about 25 percent have been homeless for three years or more. Approximately 50 percent have mental health issues, and almost half are hindered by physical disabilities (*Homeless or Hungry? Lonely or Disabled? Community Thanksgiving Meal* 2014).

One of the hallmarks of the American tradition of Thanksgiving, is the idea of taking a break from normal work routines to reunite with friends, family, and neighbors and acknowledge all that we have to be thankful for and to help out those who are less fortunate. The homeless are visual embodiments of misfortune, and the media is not going to pass up the opportunity to capitalize on the misfortune of the homeless especially around the holidays. There were fewer articles about services available to the homeless, with an exception to the holidays and periods of extreme weather and low temperatures. This was consistent with other literature (Bunis et al. n.d.). Snow (1996) found cyclic patterns regarding sympathy in media coverage. Sympathetic framing spikes

around the holidays and cold weather and immediately declines after the holidays. These periods were also the few times reports were void of stigmatizing language and used positive or neutral frames. This may have to do with the ritualization of sympathy. During holidays certain rituals like giving to others etc. serve to reaffirm basic values and the news media can be seen as a guardian of moral order which is maintained through framing and agenda setting (Bunis et al. 1996).

During the nine-year period of reporting on homelessness in the LOCO, the label *Dirty and/or Diseased* appeared in five (5.3 percent of total) articles and had a frequency of eight mentions. Articles using this label were consistent with other literature on the patterns of exclusion, and the “sanitizing of public space” (Amster 2003: 197) where the homeless are depicted as being diseased. This framing is used by the mainstream media in efforts to sanitize and quarantine the homeless (Amster 2003; Bogard et al. 2006; Johnsen, May, and Cloke 2008). One example of the LOCO depicting the homeless as *Dirty and/or Diseased* was found in the 2014 article titled “Eureka Names ‘Shopping Cart Czar’ So Your Kid Won’t Catch Hep C from a Homeless Person”:

A mom walks into a grocery store carrying her child. Her arm is sore and she sits him down in the shopping cart she just pulled from the rack of carts just outside the store. Starting to shop she puts fruit, vegetables, and other various products into the cart, while mom’s not looking the child starts to lick the cart. As she turns around to see what the child is doing she insists he stop putting his mouth on the cart as there are germs etc. Unfortunately she has no idea where this cart has been in the last several days. Being pushed down the street piled high with trash, personal items, syringes and other unspeakable items. The cart was pushed by a person with Hepatitis C and other communicable diseases and has not been washed in weeks. It was stolen from the store for personal use. The cart was ultimately returned without sterilization and put back into service (*Eureka Names ‘Shopping Cart Czar’ So Your Kid Won’t Catch Hep C from a Homeless Person* 2014).

This article represents the social distancing of the homeless through a medicalized language of disease that promotes the sanitizing of public spaces in order to rid the land of homelessness (Amster 2003). This also places people experiencing homelessness in opposition to “clean” or “healthy” domiciled people who are worthier of compassion and humanity.

The final stigmatizing label used by the LOCO refers to the homeless as being *Mentally Ill*. This label occurred 19 times in 11 articles (11.7 percent of total). The majority of the articles link mental illness to homelessness indirectly by reporting on services available to the homeless that address mental illness. The reports do not directly state mental illness causes homelessness, or that all people experiencing homelessness are mentally ill, but attaches the stigmatic label to homeless persons in conjunction with other stigmatized labels, such as criminal, to form a stigmatized identity. For example, in a 2014 article on high profile murders that took place that year, the author stated:

Humboldt County recently experienced a perfect storm. Bubbling frustration with the homeless persons with mental illness and alcohol/drug abuse in our community came to the national spotlight when after midnight on New Year’s Day 2014, Father Eric Freed was murdered in the church rectory, allegedly by Gary Lee Bullock who may have or may not have had mental illness along with alcohol/drug issues (*Matthew In the Middle: Public Therapy 2014*).

The above excerpt demonstrates how reports on homelessness by the LOCO construct a highly stigmatized homeless identity by indirectly linking homelessness to crime, drug abuse and mental illness, consistent with previous research into the

stigmatized identities of homelessness (Phelan et al. 1997). This is not to say the homeless do not suffer from mental illness, or that no homeless persons struggle with substance abuse. The problem with this is attaching these stigmatized identities to homelessness distracts the public and policymakers into believing the best policy for homelessness is increasing access to mental healthcare and substance abuse disorder treatment, or worse, rationalize criminalizing homelessness when access to mental health is found to be ineffective. It shifts the focus away from the structural causes of homelessness and transfers it to individual pathologies. A good example of the LOCO framing homelessness as a consequence of mental illness can be found in a 2013 article on funding to improve community health:

Mental health, substance abuse, homelessness, dental care, and healthcare reform. These are all issues that greatly impact our communities and many organizations are working hard to address them. Union Labor Health Foundation has grants available to help Humboldt organizations make an impact in community health (*Grants Available for Humboldt Organizations to Improve Community Health* 2013).

Greater access to healthcare will undoubtedly improve the quality of life for those experiencing homelessness, but it will do nothing to address the structural causes of homelessness such as a lack of affordable housing, and livable wages. In contrast to the frames I coded above, affordable housing was mentioned in two articles, but living wages was not discussed. There was little mention of the causes of homelessness by topic in LOCO reporting on homelessness. However, the implied causes were individualistic given that the LOCO frames supported punitive measures rather than structural policies changes in the housing and labor markets.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Homelessness is still a pervasive social problem globally and throughout the United States. According to the most recent AHAR report (Bishop et al. 2017), for every 100,000 people in the U.S., 170 are homeless. In Humboldt County, this disparity is much greater. For every 100,000 people there are 559 people who are homeless according to 2017 Humboldt Point in Time (PIT) count. The rate of homelessness in Humboldt County is a little more than three times the national rate. Many researchers estimate the actual amount of people who are homeless nationally to be much greater than the AHAR report (The National Law Center on Homelessness and Poverty 2017). There are also an additional 7.4 million people at risk of becoming homeless based on economic indicators, such as families doubling-up, stagnant wages, lack of affordable housing, and increases in living costs. These indicators suggest that homelessness will likely affect greater portions of low income individuals and families in the near future, especially more vulnerable populations with physical and mental disabilities (The National Law Center on Homelessness and Poverty 2014). I wanted to understand what public perceptions of homelessness were in Humboldt County and how these understandings were constructed by the LOCO. In order to explore these questions, I conducted a content analysis of 94 articles published in the LOCO between 2008 and 2017.

Through my analysis I discovered Humboldt County does not differ much from the national media outlets, in how the local media frames homelessness. During efforts to

remove the homeless persons from public spaces such as the 2016 displacement from the Eureka waterfront, the LOCO scaled up their reporting on homeless, almost like an anti-homeless campaign. Additionally, LOCO reports used negative frames indirectly linking criminality to homelessness. This was done by posting stories focusing on the cleanup efforts after local law enforcement “raided” “illegal-encampments,” and “evicted transients.” By associating the word “illegal” with “encampment” the LOCO indirectly linked criminality with homelessness. In addition, the word “evicted” was frequently used to justify law enforcement actions because it infers they have the support of the law, or that those being “evicted” are trespassing, and do not have to right to be there despite it being public land. In addition, these reports often provided a count of the number of hypodermic needles cleaned up as a way to passively label all people experiencing homelessness as drug-addicted. In the same fashion, reports cite the number of arrests made for individuals with outstanding warrants, but often omit information indicating the reason for the arrest warrants. This is particularly disconcerting given the illegal status of homelessness through various criminalization campaigns. It would not be a great leap to assume some, if not many of the warrants issued to the inhabitants of these camps, have been issued in relation to violations of the numerous anti-homeless ordinances.

Other LOCO portrayals of homelessness framed the homeless as a public nuisance, or as having a negative impact on the local business economy. By claiming the homeless have a negative impact on the local economy and business community is essentially blaming the homeless for their situation as well as the overall state of the economy.

The only time the media used positive frames when reporting on homelessness was around the holiday season, or when the temperatures dropped to freezing levels. Reports around the holidays often featured stories about local community efforts to provide holiday meals, but not on root causes of homelessness, or without dehumanizing individuals experiencing homelessness. What was perhaps most interesting about these stories was that it was one of the few occasions when the homeless were referred to as “members of the community.” Reports around cold spells were similar to holiday reports, in that they mostly featured stories of people providing an “act of kindness to help out those less fortunate,” or they provided information to inform the public of locations of shelters, or where people could donate warm clothing.

The interconnected web of these themes overlap and work synergistically to support one another. Rarely did these negative perceptions operate in a vacuum. We can see how criminalization gave the homeless a stigmatized identity, and their stigmatized identity, which links homelessness with crime, fosters quality of life ordinances that criminalize homelessness in an effort to remove the homeless from public space. The medicalized identities of the drug addicted and mentally ill support efforts to sanitize and sterilize public spaces of homelessness.

In answering the research question, “what are the public perceptions of homelessness in Humboldt County?” This study provides insight into the possible ways the LOCO influences and constructs public understandings of homelessness in Humboldt County. We can understand public perceptions by examining the media because public knowledge is often derived from mediated experience (Hodgetts and Radley 2005). The

public relies on the media to understand issues like homelessness that they do not have direct knowledge or experience with. By framing issues a particular way, the news media helps the public make sense of the experiences of those who are homeless and the prescribed solutions to the problem (Bunis, et al. 1996). The LOCO frames indicate members of the public in Humboldt County might possibly view the homeless through a stigmatized lens. LOCO reports often ascribed stigmatized identities to homeless persons by linking homelessness to “criminality”, “drug addiction”, and “mental illness”. The prescribed solutions often supported criminalization, removal from public space, and increased access to mental health. These frames imply an individualistic explanation for homelessness because the prescribed solutions did not address the structural factors in the housing and job markets, but rather focused on controlling the behaviors of those experiencing homelessness. This misleads the public to believe that homelessness is a consequence of poor choices made by individuals who are criminals and struggle with drug addiction. It also distorts the structural causes making homelessness seem like it is an outcome of a failing healthcare system that is unable to provide adequate access to mental health. There may be homeless people that suffer from mental illness, but this implies they are underserving of shelter. It does not account for the vast number of homeless people that do not have a diagnosed mental illness.

Based on LOCO frames of homelessness, there is a possibility that the public view homelessness as a “public nuisance” and an “environmental problem”. Previous research suggests media frames affect the relative salience of issues (Calder and Burns 2011). By framing homelessness as an environmental problem rather than a “housing

crisis”, the media and policymakers were able to evict the homeless from the Palco Marsh in 2016 without addressing the housing crisis. This was done by framing homelessness unsympathetically using negative frames. However, there was negative backlash from the downtown business community in Old Town Eureka. Members of the business community threatened to sue the City of Eureka fearing the homeless eviction would displace the homeless into business districts creating a public nuisance and thus having a negative impact on the economy.

LOCO framing of homelessness as an “environmental problem” is unique to Humboldt. This may be a unique response to the strong culture of environmental protection, and ecological justice Humboldt County is known for. Despite the progressive culture in Humboldt County, local media still relies heavily on negative frames, and homeless policy primarily relies on punitive measures for addressing homelessness. There is a great need by community homeless advocates to reframe the issues of homelessness as an issue of structural factors such as the housing shortage and lack of employment opportunities.

Limitations and Future Research

This study has limited implications in understanding broader community perceptions of homelessness in Humboldt County, given it is an analysis of one media source. Analyzing other media sources may have illuminated a wider variety of frames. To better gauge wider public perceptions of homelessness in Humboldt County, future studies would need to analyze other widely read news media sources such as the *Times*

Standard, Mad River Union, and North Coast Journal. In addition, content analysis is only way of looking at perceptions, and may not be actually representing the perceptions of the readers. It may be beneficial to administer a county-wide survey on public attitudes and perceptions of homeless and compare the results to a comprehensive content analysis of the aforementioned news media sources to understand if public attitudes and perceptions reflect news media representations. Last, I was only able to locate nine years of LOCO articles online. As homelessness is a large, ongoing issue, it is difficult to use less than one decade to capture the complexity, and the evolving peripheral issues. Future studies could utilize archived articles, from a longer period of time, to look for changes in frames and perceptions over time. In addition, future analysis of the LOCO comment section could be useful for future research in the community because it would allow the researcher to gain some qualitative insight into public opinion in relations to LOCO representations of homelessness.

Conclusion

Given the current political climate, and the complex issues surrounding homelessness, having some proportion of the population living in unstable housing, or homeless, is going to be an ongoing issue in the United States for the foreseeable future. If the recent patterns continue, we may even be on an upswing. While there are many reasons people may end up experiencing homelessness, they are often lumped together into a stigmatized identity, ostracized and maybe even criminalized by their communities. How a community understands those living homeless among them is important, as it

translates into very material realities for those in the stigmatized groups. In this study I found that even in a relatively liberal area, in a relatively liberal state, people experiencing homelessness are understood in dehumanizing and troubling ways. As I discussed in this thesis, this reinforces stigmatized beliefs about the people experiencing homelessness, and contributes to the unbending structural constraints that cause homelessness to begin with. Even given the limitations of my study, it appears we have locally bought into some dominant narratives of homelessness as a medical and criminal issue. I hope with this thesis I can start a conversation for the people of Humboldt County to look at the way they talk about the most vulnerable members of their community.

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