Victimization of the Homeless: The Role of Public Perceptions and Implications for Social Work Practice

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Victimization of the Homeless: The Role of Public Perceptions and Implications for Social Work Practice
LEARNING OBJECTIVES

• You will be able to recognize the nature and extent of violent crimes against members of the U.S. homeless population.
• You will be able to identify the public’s perception of homelessness as well as other socio-cultural factors that impact homeless individual’s vulnerability to violent crime.
• You will be mobilized to support ongoing legislative efforts to address violent crimes against the homeless and understand the implications these have for social work advocacy.
OUR BACKGROUND

• Dr. Gabbard has conducted research on homelessness for 15 years and published on spirituality, legislation, and effective interventions pertaining to homelessness. He has also presented on the topic locally, nationally, and internationally.
• Dr. Funge was a counselor and program coordinator for a homeless drop-in center in Orange County, CA. He has been involved with special task forces addressing homelessness in Long Beach, CA, and is trained in teaching the recovery model to help people with MI recover and reintegrate into the community.
• Ms. Murray is an MSW candidate at WKU with experiences in the field of child protective services and medical social work. Marion plans to pursue her LCSW and continue contributing to social work research including research addressing homelessness.
THE STORIES

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The homeless population is disproportionately victimized
Changing negative public perceptions may reduce likelihood of victimization
Public perceptions about the homeless population are influenced by and influence the ways in which homelessness is addressed
Social workers are both uniquely positioned and ethically obligated to support changes that shift negative perceptions and protect the homeless
CRIMES AGAINST THE HOMELESS

- Tara Cole, Nashville, TN (Knox, 2007) & George Mohr, Doylestown, PA (NCH, 2014)

- Disproportionately higher rate of victimization and crime
- Victims of burglary, petty larceny, motor vehicle theft, and robbery; including physical assaults (Merrill, 2012)
- Target of offensive speech, threats, and insults (Wachholz, 2005)

- 1,437 acts of violence against the homeless reported in the past 15 years; 1 in 4 were killed (NCH, 2014)
- Between 1999 and 2013, total number killed 3x all other protected classes combined (NCH, 2014)
- Crimes against the homeless are largely underreported (Novac, Hermer, Paradis, & Kellen, 2009; Jasinski, Wesely, Wright, & Mustaine, 2010)
Characteristics of Victims

- More likely to be middle-aged and male (Kushel, Evans, Perry, Robertson, & Moss, 2003; Jasinski et al., 2010; NCH, 2014)
- Increased risk of a violent attack if homeless more than 2 years and older
- Females at higher risk for sexual assault (Meinbresse et al., 2014)
- Those who experience violence as a child, more susceptible to IPV and homelessness as adults (Jasinski et al., 2010)
- Mental health issues, trauma, exposure, disaffiliation, substance use, and health problems increase probability of victimization (Lee & Shreck, 2005; Muñoz, Crespo, and Pérez-Santos, 2005)
- Viewed as outsiders who are not well integrated into the community (Muñoz, Crespo, and Pérez-Santos, 2005)
Characteristics of Perpetrators

- Demographic profile unclear b/c perpetrators not often caught (NCH 2014)
- Of those known, 93% are male; 82% under the age of 30 (NCH, 2014)
- In 2013, 48% of perpetrators were under 20 years old
- Attacks by individuals, pairs, and groups
- Sometimes law enforcement officers; excessive force and brutality; in 2013, 5 cases involving police brutality (NCH, 2014)
Public Perception of Homelessness

- How does the public view people who are homeless?
- What explains these views? i.e., why does the public hold these views?
- How do these views contribute to the victimization of people who are homeless?
PUBLIC PERCEPTION OF HOMELESSNESS

- Disparate views re: causes of homelessness (Agans et al., 2011; Buck, Toro, & Ramos, 2004)
- Often portrayed as nonproductive, viewed as undeserving, and involved in illegal activities and prone to violence (Belcher & DeForge, 2012; Jasinski, Wesely, Wright, & Mustaine, 2010)
- Public may acknowledge structural causes and support macro-level interventions BUT also cite individual factors (Tompsett, Toro, Guzicki, Manrique, & Zatakia, 2006)
- People with greater exposure to the homeless more sympathetic and acknowledge structural causes (Lee, Farrell, & Link (2004)
  - BUT may still advocate for more coercive measures (e.g., forcible removal from public spaces) (Knecht & Martinez, 2009)
Victim Precipitation Theory (Wilcox, 2010)
- **Passive precipitation:** victim unconsciously displays behaviors or characteristics that prompt victimization
- **Active precipitation:** victim deliberately tries to provoke an attack.
  - e.g., Homeless youth may use violence to resolve disputes and are similarly victimized by their peers (Baron, Forde, & Kennedy, 2007)
  - None of the perpetrators reported in the crime data from NCH (2014) were acting in self-defense
Lifestyle Theory (Wilcox, 2010)
- Length of time in public spaces (particularly at night), isolation from support networks, or heightened exposure to potential offenders
- e.g., Panhandling, sleeping outside, prostitution, food scavenging, drug and alcohol distribution (and use) may contribute to the likelihood of their victimization (Lee & Schreck, 2009)
- Suggests that victims choose the lifestyle that contributes to their vulnerability
Deviant Place Theory (Gaetz, 2009)
• Exposure to dangerous places makes an individual more likely to become the victim of a crime
• Victims may inadvertently find themselves in an unsafe environment with little to no opportunity to move to a different place in order to protect themselves
• e.g., abandoned buildings, areas of cities where there are higher crime rates, and less fortified structures such as tents and cars
Social Exclusion Theory (Gaetz, 2004)

- Restricted access to social, economic, political, and cultural systems of a community may inhibit integration and promote victimization
  - e.g., limited access to adequate housing, employment opportunities, social supports and a healthier lifestyle
- Social exclusion could be a factor long before an individual becomes homeless, but may be intensified when they are no longer housed
- Due to compromised safety, health, and opportunity it is difficult to escape social exclusion
Cities across the country have turned to law enforcement and the criminal justice system to respond to quality of life issues:
- e.g., sleeping, loitering, camping, storing property, and begging in public places (NCH, 2006)

In CA, municipal codes against sleeping, standing, and eating in public have more than doubled since 1990 (Fisher, Miller, Walter, & Selbin, 2015)

Homeless more likely to be arrested for order maintenance and property offenses (i.e., misdemeanors), than for felonies (Fitzpatrick & Myrstol, 2011)

Criminalizing the homeless shapes public’s negative perception of them, which may result in further exclusion, and vulnerability to victimization
MAKING HOMELESSNESS A CRIME

What happens when cities make homelessness a crime?
POLICY IMPACTS ON HOMELESSNESS

• Protecting the Homeless
  • A hate crime is an “illegal act motivated by the wish to harm groups or individuals whose affiliations, values, or actions are intolerable to the perpetrator” (Barker, 2003, p. 191)
  • Protected identities include ethnicity, religion, ability status, and sexual orientation (Stoops, 2005)
  • 1990 Hate Crime Statistics Act – Gathering data
  • Hate Crimes Sentencing Enhancement Act of 1994 – Increased penalties

• Hate crimes against the homeless not currently recognized in federal hate crimes statutes BUT some statewide (e.g., Maryland) and municipal recognition
POLICY IMPACTS ON HOMELESSNESS

- NCH (2014)

FATAL ATTACKS - HATE CRIMES COMMITTED 1999-2013

132 Protected Classes
(Attacks motivated by a bias against race, ethnicity, religion, gender identity, sexual orientation, or disability)

375 Unprotected Class
(Attacks resulting in the death of a HOMELESS INDIVIDUAL)
POLICY IMPACTS ON HOMELESSNESS

- Protecting the Homeless
  - In 2014, 7 states and 3 cities recognized violence against the homeless as a hate crime (Cain, 2014)
  - H.R. 1136, the *Violence Against the Homeless Accountability Act of 2013*
    - Introduced by Rep. Eddie Bernice Johnson (D-Texas)
    - Proposed to include homeless people as a protected class under the *Hate Crimes Statistics Act* (Cain, 2014)
    - Not enacted
HATE CRIMES AGAINST HOMELESS PEOPLE

Amending a state’s hate crimes act
• Should people who are homeless be included in hate crimes legislation? Why or why not?
• What are the arguments against including the homeless and how can these be counteracted?
IMPLICATIONS FOR SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE

- We must challenge negative perceptions by advocating for changes that serve to humanize this population.

- Social workers should:
  - Support housing first initiatives focus on getting the homeless into safe housing in an expedient manner and then blanketing them with critical services (Padgett, Henwood, & Tsemberis, 2015)
  - Support law enforcement agencies in some municipalities are collaborating with social service providers and proactively training their officers to more effectively work with the homeless (United States Interagency Council on Homelessness, 2012)
IMPLICATIONS FOR SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE

- Social workers should:
  - Support organizations such as the National Coalition for the Homeless, National Alliance to End Homelessness, and Homeless Advocates Group
  - Advocate against the criminalization of the homeless in favor of more constructive approaches
  - Support legislative efforts to include homeless persons as a protected class in hate crime statutes

- Advocacy in these areas will likely shift public perceptions about the homeless AND promote greater protection of the homeless
What are you already doing in your communities to support and advocate for policies that protect the homeless? OR what can you do to support and advocate for such policies?

In what other ways can social workers counteract the public’s negative perception of people who are homeless?

What can we do better to educate social work students about their role as social workers and their responsibility to address these efforts?
ENDING HOMELESSNESS
Q & A

- Questions/thoughts/comments?
REFERENCES

- Kushel, M., Evans, J., Perry, S., Robertson, M., & Ross, A. (2003). No door to lock: Victimization among homeless and marginally housed persons. Archives of Internal Medicine, 163, 2492-2499.
REFERENCES


THANK YOU!

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