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Perceptions and Misconceptions: The Relationship Between Education and Understandings of
Individuals Experiencing Homelessness

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Abstract

An impediment to solving social issues such as homelessness lies in people's stereotyped views and lack of knowledge regarding the issues. Holding stereotypes of entire groups of people often marginalizes the group of people and perpetuates their struggle. This can be seen in stereotypes that are held of individuals experiencing homelessness. The homeless population is highly stigmatized in the U.S. based on stereotyped views. Previous research, such as that completed by Knecht & Martinez (2009) indicates that individuals who have positive interaction with people experiencing homeless, as well as education about the issue, are much less likely to hold stereotyped views. In this study, I surveyed 148 Bridgewater State University students regarding their personal opinions regarding the homeless, as well as their experience level and education concerning the population. The survey was conducted through a snowball sample online. The data shows a relationship between personal experiences working with the homeless population and a lack of stereotyped views. Additionally, those whom have served homeless populations generally have more positive, realistic views of the population and the greater issue of homelessness.

Introduction

"At sixteen, or maybe seventeen years old,
Depending on which document you carried,
You had already seen the horrors of war without setting foot on foreign soil.
Rape at home,
Death at camp,
And a world that didn't give a damn about you, the abused, or the dead…
Now I know why you drank…
As two more bottles were emptied,
You built an hourglass,
Filled it with the sand from within your military issued combat boots
And waited while yesterday was sifted through your dreams…
You spent more than three years in the streets
Hoping these flashbacks would come to an end.
Eight years later I started walking around Boston with friends.
At every corner I saw a homeless person
And was reminded of a man I never met.
Within nine or ten seconds I'd decide whether or not
I would put money in their cup."

--Excerpt from "A Man I Never Met" by Richie Morris, Bridgewater State University

The poem "A Man I Never Met" was written by a grandson of a man who was faced with innumerable challenges throughout his life, including experiencing homelessness. The poem walks through this young man's struggles, from witnessing sexual abuse and war, to addiction, and eventually homelessness. The poet describes how whenever he encountered someone experiencing homelessness, he is only given nine or ten seconds to imagine and acknowledge the hardship this person may have endured, and whether they are worthy of his generosity or not. A popular stereotype about homelessness is that the majority of people experiencing homelessness struggle with addiction. It is negative stereotyped images such as this that impede on the eradication of homelessness. Although this man, unlike the majority, did struggle with addiction, it is his story that provides insight into the reality that there is much more to someone's story than meets the eye. Education and interacting with a stigmatized population can

provide the real experience, insight, and knowledge that can break down barriers between people.

Literature Review

Stereotype Overview

Every day encounters between people are often superficial, where individuals learn very little information about each other. However, the little information that is gained from those encounters is used to categorize the other. People first notice the physical attributes of others, such as the color of their skin, what they are wearing, their age, and gender. In these superficial encounters, there is no opportunity for intimate interactions but, "instead we notice a trait which marks a well known type, and fill in the rest of the picture by means of the stereotypes we carry in our heads" (Schneider, 2004, p. 9). Much of what we perceive "goes beyond the information given," where the human mind naturally begins to make inferences and assumptions about the people they encounter (Hinton, 2000, p. 6). Stereotyping through grouping together people who appear similar can make them seem more understandable and less overwhelming. Stereotyping involves judging people as category members, rather than individuals and is linked to a person's understanding of why people are as they are. (In Hinton 2000) Walter Lippmann introduced the concept of a stereotype in his book *Public Opinion* in 1922. He explained a stereotype as a simplified picture in people's heads of others. He asserted that because the world is so complex, people construct these pictures to simplify what surrounds them. These pictures could be made by the individual, or could be given to them by their culture (Hinton, 2000).

Lippmann claimed that because these stereotypes are constructed, they are essentially flawed. It is the lack of knowledge and direct experience that creates a stereotype (Hinton,

2000). Hinton (2000) cites that many studies have been conducted to test the longevity and rigidity of stereotypes, beginning in 1933 by Katz and Braly, who revealed the strong consensus of stereotypes between participants over long periods of time. It was found that individuals consistently associated certain stereotypes with a specific group of people. (In Hinton, 2000) Katz and Braly (1933) carried out their research to demonstrate the inaccuracy and inflexibility of stereotypes as overgeneralizations based on a lack of experience and true knowledge. Brown (1965) (in Hinton, 2000) argued that it is ethnocentrism that makes stereotypes false, as this insinuates that these views (or stereotypes) are the correct way to perceive the world. This would mean that people believe that their cultural norms are right, and that other views are wrong. It is also believed that the holder of the stereotype often blames the characteristics of the group for any hostility that they hold towards the out-group (Hinton, 2000).

The way in which people perceive others is part of their own personal experiences, but researchers have found that people hold stereotypes of nationalities that they have never personally encountered. This can be attributed to other influences, such as friends or the media. When there is a lack of knowledge about another group of people, often individuals will accept other's views as the appropriate way to view the group and assimilate those perceptions as their own knowledge. Hinton (2000) explains that this categorization helps simplify the social world and protects people from cognitive overload. However, in turn, these stereotypes can create barriers between groups of people. Stereotypes are not necessarily "bad," however they typically emphasize the negative features of certain groups, rather than the positive, which frequently leads to prejudice and discrimination (Schneider, 2004). This can create severe barriers for the stereotyped population to overcome, limiting their opportunities to become successful in society (Hinton, 2000).

Stereotypes of Homelessness

Stereotypes are an avenue of rationalization for inequality in society. Attributing stereotyped personality characteristics such as *lazy* and *unintelligent* to poor people, and *hard-working* and *intelligent* to rich people can help reinforce and justify the status quo (Hinton, 2000). Crediting these stereotypes as the reasoning behind why people are poor or homeless helps rationalize why the poor have come to be in that position. It is simply easier for people to stereotype the group so that they feel like things are as they should be and that nothing should be changed. Having a mindset that people are homeless because they deserve it perpetuates the problem by agreeing that it is not an issue. Blaming the individual for their struggle based on false stereotypes takes the responsibility off of the systematic issues that are actually to blame, as well as the people who are standing by and not doing anything about it (Hinton, 2000).

Previous research has shown that many Americans believe that poor individuals are responsible for their own struggles, rather than a failure of the greater system (Seider, Rabinowicz, & Gillmor, 2012; Lee, Farrell, & Link, 2004). This viewpoint affects the public policy regarding poverty and homelessness. Due to stereotyped perceptions of low-income individuals, including individuals experiencing homelessness, many Americans are unwilling to pass policies in order to help these populations, who according to them, have led themselves into their current position, and deserve to stay there unless they work themselves out of it. This individualistic perspective indicates character traits such as "laziness, perseverance, and intelligence as to account for differences between affluent and poor citizens," instead of structural issues such as "job shortages, low wages, discrimination, and unequal schooling opportunities" (Seider, Rabinowicz, & Gillmor, 2012, p. 3). Many Americans believe that

poverty is a lack of effort, and that inequality in society is due to differences in hard work, knowledge, and ability.

Frequently public opinion of people experiencing homelessness is that homeless individuals are lazy, and uninterested in finding permanent work. (As in Shier, Jones, & Graham, 2010) when many people think of homelessness the image that arises is a sort of "skid row," where people are abusing drugs and alcohol, are mentally ill, and are content being marginalized from society. These stereotypes create a serious stigma around the population, which creates significant barriers to their future success. This negative stigma can be a huge impediment for individuals experiencing homelessness in finding employment or the services they need to get back on their feet (Shier, Jones, & Graham, 2010).

The Impact of Stereotypes

The stigma that has been created around the issue of homelessness has a big impact on the self-worth of people experiencing the issue. According to a study done by Shier, Jones, & Graham (2010) many homeless individuals reported feeling shame in utilizing the services that are provided to them because they felt that they were being judged. Many individuals also reported that their hygiene while experiencing homelessness made them feel embarrassed to the point where they want to hide because they are so full of shame that they do not want to be seen by anyone. One respondent explained the simple feeling of being clean: "it gives you more self-esteem to go out there and walk around and use the computers and print out resumes and walk around and drop off your resumes at job sites. They actually look at you different: like not as a homeless gangster or a bum. They actually reach out and they shake your hand" (Shier, Jones, & Graham, 2010, p. 12). Experiencing homelessness often makes people feel worthless, that they

have failed, and often beat themselves up over it. Being looked down upon by the rest of society can have a huge impact on one's self esteem and self-worth, which in turn can impede on one's ability to take the steps necessary to overcome that adversity and get back on their feet (Shier, Jones, & Graham, 2010).

The way in which society views an issue such as homelessness has a direct impact on the resources and services that are provided to the population struggling with it. Due to these negative perceptions, society does not provide the resources to provide help to those in need (Shier, Jones, & Graham, 2010). It has been concluded that it "is not a lack of knowledge about how to ameliorate economic suffering but instead a lack of public understanding of the barriers that block economic mobility" (Seider, Rabinowicz, & Gillmor, 2011, p. 1). Without having accurate knowledge of the social causes of poverty and inequality in society, many Americans blame individuals for their own misfortunes, which in turn creates a barrier to implementing the necessary policies and programs in order to alleviate social issues. For example, people who think that rich people are rich due to their hard work are much less likely to support high income taxes than people who believe that their success is largely from luck and connections, just as how "individualistic explanations for poverty have had a tremendous impact on various social policies, such as welfare and support for helping homeless persons" (Schneider, 2004, p. 526).

This can be seen in the welfare policies in effect in the U.S. With the exclusion of the War on Poverty in the 1960's, welfare has always held a rather derogatory meaning and has often boiled down to a moral debate. Daguerre (2008) emphasized that public sentiment holds that only people who are willing to work, or are incapable of working due to a disability, are worthy of public support. Rather than concentrating on the "structural causes of poverty and unemployment, the debate has focused on individual characteristics of adult welfare recipients,"

which was seen through the "welfare queen" stereotype popularized by Ronald Reagan in the 1980's who slimes off of the system, as well as the shift from AFDC to TANF in the 1990's (Daguerre, 2008, p. 13). The concept that people are sliming off the system still reverberates throughout society today, where the poor's struggles are depicted as individual behavioral problems, such as that people were unwilling to work, rather a lack of employment opportunities (Daguerre, 2008). Kozol (as cited by Min, 1999) summarizes the harsh truth by which Americans can displace their involvement in the issue of homelessness:

> "The notion that the homeless are largely psychotics who belong in institutions, rather than victims of displacement at the hands of enterprising realtors, spares us from the need to offer realistic solutions to the fact of deep and widening extremes on wealth and poverty in the United States. It also enables us to tell ourselves that the despair of homeless people bears no intimate connection to the privileged existence we enjoy when, for example, we rent or purchase one of those restored townhouses that once provided shelter for people now huddled in the street" (Min, 1999, p. 35).

Attitude changes, knowledge, and understanding of structural causes behind social issues, such as homelessness, are crucial to creating solutions. Without public support for programs that address structural resolutions, poverty and inequality will sustain in the U.S.

The Framing of Homelessness

Where there is a lack of interaction between homeless individuals and the rest of the general population, the ways in which the issue is framed can have a huge impact on the way in which people perceive the problem. Schneider (2004) asserts that "there are abundant data supporting the idea that the media framing does effect the way people and politicians interpret issues," especially support for social policies, which places a considerable amount of political power in the media's hands (Schneider, 2004, p. 347). Often information around homelessness is disseminated in a light that ends up reinforcing stereotypes, rather than targeting the underlying problems and identifying possible solutions. Information regarding the homeless

population often focuses on the characteristics of people experiencing homelessness, such as health and mental health status. By focusing on what might be considered "wrong" with homeless individuals, people begin to blame the victim, rather than the system. This framing can divert attention away from the real issues, distracting society "from studying and countering the growth of poverty, the erosion of welfare benefits, the destruction of low-income housing, and other contributors to homelessness that are not characteristics of individual victims," and instead reinforcing negative stereotypes (Shinn & Weitzman, 1990, p. 2).

Media is so prevalent in people's lives today that quite frequently they accept the information that they are given without thinking critically about it. The media frames social attitudes along with news-based information. Since people watching the news are most likely uninvolved with the news story happening, the information that is presented is new knowledge to them, and because they are not personally experiencing the event, they often take the information as fact. This provides the media with considerable power in how they circulate and frame information. The news media is a system in which "reality is produced, maintained, repaired, and transformed" (Min, 1999, p. x), using their power to assert specific agendas and viewpoints.

The way in which homelessness is depicted in the media has a large impact on public perceptions of the issue. People who have never interacted with someone experiencing homelessness should have no biases towards them, however, as the media has presented stories about the issue of homelessness, that information generally becomes seen as truth behind the issue. As Min (1999) explains, when homeless individuals are presented in the media as "crazy", alcoholics, and drug abusers, then without any other knowledge or experience, the public begins to assume that these characteristics are applicable to the whole of the group—therefore all

homeless people fit this mold of abuse and mental illness, perpetuating these negative stereotypes.

These stereotypes create a divide between the homeless and housed populations. Most people believe that there is no way that they would ever have to experience homelessness. There is a definitive 'us vs. them' attitude when it comes to homelessness, and most people want to separate themselves as much as possible from these stereotypes which are propagated by the media. The language used by a reporter can have a major impact on how a story is perceived. For example, CBS's Dan Rather narrated a story by saying, "We pass them everyday… We call them homeless. They call the streets their home. Now a new program to help these people in trouble is already in trouble itself" (Min, 1999, p. 29). The language used is subtle, however it creates a substantial divide between "us" and "them", where, as Rather explained "*We* pass *them.*" This sort of language detaches the viewers from sympathizing with the homeless, or the *others."* By "terming economic victims 'psychotic' or 'disordered' helps to place them at a distance. It says that they aren't quite like us—and, more important, that we could not be like them" (Min, 1999, p. 42).

People are more likely to support a cause if they feel that they can identify with the victims, so by creating this boundary the news media is influencing the viewers' perceptions and attitudes toward the story. A common depiction of homelessness in the media is through portraying a very specific case, where the news becomes "dramatic documentaries" illustrating the misfortunes of individuals, rather than attacking the structural causes behind the issue. This "victim blaming" perspective blames the homeless themselves, rather than creating conversation around the fundamental structural problems, such as unemployment, lack of affordable housing, and the gentrification of cities. Ryan, as quoted through Min (1999), describes the process of

victim blaming, where he explains that after identifying a social problem, the next step is to study those affected and identify the ways in which they are different from the rest of society, and then blame those differences as the cause of the problem. By citing the cause of any social problem as a result of personal circumstances or choices hinders the creation of policies to eradicate the issues. Framing homelessness in such a way brands the issue as the victim's problem to fix, rather than the greater society (Min, 1999). By blaming the victim, people are able to detach themselves from the issue,

Contact Hypothesis

The contact hypothesis asserts that positive contact between in and out groups can help erode stereotypes and reduce the fear of the other group. Humans have a tendency to create categories of people in their mind, which likely results in people having preferences for others who they perceive to be like them. It has been found that stereotypes "reflect the socio-structural relations that exist between groups," especially in-groups and out-groups (Vaes & Paladino, 2010, p. 1). In the case of homelessness, the contact between the in-group, or housed individuals and the out-group, or the homeless, has an impact on the perceptions of each group. Research has shown that there is a tendency for the in-group to hold more positive perceptions of their own group, and more negative perceptions of the other, even to the point of devaluing, and dehumanizing the out-group (Vaes & Paladino, 2010). The stigmatizing of an out-group encourages their devaluation as individuals. The homelessness population in the U.S. is a highly stigmatized population. This makes them more likely to be stereotyped, or to be categorized into a negative framework, especially when there is a lack of significant, positive interaction (Lee, Farrell, & Link, 2004).

The general conspicuousness of homeless individuals on the streets can serve as a constant reminder of their presence, and reinforce negative stereotypes. People living on the streets often are treated as sub-human, as passersby often completely ignore their existence, and as many blame the individuals for being homeless (Lee, Farrell, & Link, 2004). While it is believed by some researchers that contact with the stigmatized population can have a positive impact on perceptions of that population, Lee, Farrell, and Link (2004) assert that the type of interaction can play a large role in this attitude shift. For example, in general if a homeless individual is panhandling on the streets, they may interact with the in-group, but this does not mean that stereotypes will be eroded. The nature of the contact must be positive and substantial in order to have an effect on the in-group's perceptions (Lee, Farrell, & Link, 2004). This can mean that simply getting to know someone that an individual would not normally interact with can "spark the realization that they are 'just like me'" (Knecht & Martinez, 2009, p. 10). This is the key to effective contact, where people discover commonalities and points of interest within one another, the more they like each other. This therefore reduces prejudice, and encourages empathy and the creation of new perspectives (Schneider, 2004). Community service has been deemed an effective method to erode prejudice and stereotyped views between groups that normally do not interact with one another, including with people who are experiencing homelessness (Hoffman, Wallach, & Sanchez, 2010).

A study completed by Knecht and Martinez (2009) administered pre-and post-service surveys to individuals completing service with people experiencing homelessness. The stereotypes that were held pre-service included that the homeless were criminals, drug-users, and mentally ill. The post-service survey comments included very different perspectives than before the service. The general consensus among respondents was that homeless people were really no

different from everyone else, and that the respondents' previously held stereotypes were not true. Respondents moved from having mixed feelings to feeling strongly convinced that mental illness and drug abuse were *not* root causes of homelessness. One respondent explained her surprise that the homeless individual she was partnered with was not a substance abuser or mentally ill, but rather ''. . .talked just like me and seemed very intelligent. He read all the time and took his work seriously" (Knecht & Martinez, 2009, p. 8). Here it is clear that only one positive interaction with an out-group can have an immense impact on an individual's perceptions of the group, breaking down the stereotypes and stigmas around the homeless population.

The results demonstrated that the experience working directly with the population deeply influenced the respondents' perceptions. Respondents were much less likely to view homeless persons as substance abusers, mentally ill, or dangerous (Knecht & Martinez, 2009). The homeless population is incredibly stigmatized in U.S. society, and because contact between groups of homeless and homed is very limited, simply having one personal interaction with a person experiencing homelessness has the potential to completely erode previously held stereotypes (Knecht & Martinez, 2009). This demonstrates the importance of direct service as a tool to better educate people in order to reduce stereotyped perceptions of homeless populations. Interaction with a stigmatized population, such as the homeless, can be as simple as an educational experience. Positive personal interactions, just taking time to get to know someone who is experiencing the issue, supplements real knowledge to replace the stereotypes that people once relied on (Knecht & Martinez, 2009).

Without accurate knowledge about the issue of homelessness, people are forced to depend on the information that is provided to them, which usually revolves around negative stereotypes. Their ignorance is linked directly to their lack of personal connection and

interaction. Lee, Farrell, & Link (2004) assert that holding more informed views of

homelessness can have an impact on individual's behavior, such as that they are more likely to

rent to or hire someone experiencing homelessness, or to donate their money to solving the issue,

and adversely, people who hold negative stereotypes and see homelessness as a community

burden are much less likely to donate or help someone struggling. Providing experiences and

education about the issues of homelessness could dissipate negative stereotypes of the

population, assist in initiating larger steps to solving the issue for good, and promote public

policy changes.

Service, Education, and Perceptions

It has been assumed that categorizing people is an inevitable, automatic part of human

nature. It is arguably impossible to encounter an individual without recognizing their basic

features such as their race, gender, or age. Although this sort of generalizing people seems

inevitable, there is hope in disarming the stereotypes that impact and oppress certain groups of

people. It is important to realize the diversity of any group, as there is no such thing as "one size

fits all." Through education, awareness, and an open mind, people can better understand others,

rather than attempting to simplify them. Schneider (2004) states that it is not the need to

eliminate stereotypes altogether, but to "work toward a better understanding of their complexity,

their subtlety, and the many ways they affect our behavior. Then perhaps we can use that

knowledge to treat our fellow human beings with the dignity they deserve" (Schneider, 2004, p.

568).

Schneider (2004) asserts that "among the most consistent and powerful correlates of

unprejudiced and non-stereotypic thinking are education and information" (Schneider, 2004, p.

416). Trends have shown that education creates more tolerant thinking, and there have been

many reports that education has produced significant attitude changes in college classes (Schneider, 2004). College is an opportune time for engaging students in important social issues. It is a time where people seek to broaden their horizons and create a deeper understanding of the world, making it a decisive time that influences the type of future they will lead as adults. Colleges and universities around the country have begun to implement new service programs and requirements in order to prepare their students for the betterment of society. Recently mandatory service learning programs have become especially popular in higher education. Service learning can be defined as form of experiential learning ''in which students engage in activities that address human and community needs together with structured opportunities intentionally designed to promote student learning and development'' (Braunsberger & Flamm, 2013, p. 3). Service learning fundamentally combines education and hands-on service experience to reach specific learning outcomes.

Service learning has been shown to boost social awareness and civic responsibility in students, as well as increasing good citizenship and social activism into the future. Scholars have found that students who engage in community service learning opportunities become less likely to hold stereotyped perceptions of people experiencing different social issues, less likely to blame the individual, and be more knowledgeable about social issues. Personal experiences with people experiencing the problem can help put a face to the issue, shattering previously held stereotypes (Seider, Rabinowicz, & Gillmor, 2012). It is believed that this sort of hands-on service experiences combined with education will not only erode close-minded perceptions of homelessness, but also create more engaged citizens to ignite positive change for the future.

Significance of Study

In a time where civic engagement appears to be on the decline, and social issues are on the rise, our society is desperate for engaged citizens to ignite positive social change for the future. It is clear that stereotypes have a huge impact on the well-being of the out-group, as well as on the social programs and policies that are implemented to properly address the issues. In the case of homelessness, the stereotypes and emphasis on individual characteristics are a huge impediment in executing effective programs that address the structural problems at the core of the issue. It is essential to attempt to erode misconceptions that are deeply rooted in our society in order to eradicate this problem for good. Education and personal interaction is at the core of eroding negative perceptions, which can lead to effective legislation that actually addresses the structural problems perpetuating the issue.

As stated earlier, college is a time in a person's life where there is a wealth of opportunity to engage in diverse experiences and advance knowledge. College should be preparing the leaders for the future to make the world a better place. It is the perfect time to engage students in social issues to create more well-rounded, socially aware students, who will become active change agents for the future. I believe that post-secondary education should definitely invest in creating those opportunities for all of their students, whether that be implementing a mandatory service learning requirement for all undergraduates, or requiring a course about social issues and social justice as part of the core curriculum. Students across all disciplines should be educated about the issues our world is facing today to empower them to create social change.

Hypotheses

H_1: People who have served people experiencing homelessness are less likely to hold stereotyped views.

H$_2$: People who have served the homeless population are more likely to believe homelessness is a result of structural problems, rather than individual choices or characteristics.

H$_3$: People who are educated on the issues of homelessness are less likely to hold stereotyped views.

H$_4$: People who are educated on the issues of homelessness are more likely to indicate structural causes of homelessness, rather than individual characteristics or choices.

Methodology

Sample

This study was conducted at Bridgewater State University (BSU) in Southeastern Massachusetts. BSU is a medium-sized state university located in Bridgewater, MA. Bridgewater is a large town located in a suburban setting. BSU is the 8th largest four-year college or university in Massachusetts, and is primarily a commuter campus, with only 29% of all undergraduates living in on-campus housing. BSU's students are primarily from Massachusetts, with only 4% of students from out of state. 58% of students are women, and 42% are male. 82% of students are white, 7% black or African American, 5% Hispanic or Latino, and 2% Asian. The average age of all full time students is 21.

For this study I used a nonprobability sample, first surveying students through my personal web of contacts through co-curricular organizations. I asked my peers to participate in the survey, and then to forward the survey to three of their peers, thus creating a snowball sample. The survey was also sent out to a few select Sociology classes requesting their optional participation. The sample is not representative of the student population. This was a sample of convenience, meaning that they are not representative of students across colleges and the whole

student body. The survey was completed online through Survey Monkey. Students read an informed consent, and by continuing onto the survey, they were agreeing that their participation in the study was completely voluntary and acknowledging that their answers would be kept anonymous. Respondents read in the consent form that they could skip any questions they did not understand or feel comfortable answering. No names were recorded from the study.

I surveyed 148 BSU students for this study. 95.24% of respondents were full-time status at BSU, and 4.76% were part-time students. Freshman students accounted for 2.03% of the respondents, 22.97% were sophomores, 29.73% were juniors, 31.76% were seniors, and 13.51% were 5th year seniors. 81.08% of respondents were female, and 18.92% were male. 86.21% of respondents identified as white, 4.14% identified as Cape Verdean, 3.45% identified as Black or African American, 3.45% identified as Hispanic or Latino, and 2.76% identified as Asian or Asian-American. The majority of students, 51.03%, indicated that they grew up in a middle class household, 31.73% indicated that they grew up in a lower middle, lower class, or poor household, 17.24% indicated that they grew up in an upper middle or upper class household. 43.75% of respondents identified as holding liberal or very liberal political views, 33.33% identified as moderate, and only 5.55% indicated that they were conservative or very conservative. The majority of respondents, 61.54%, indicated that they had served the homeless population at least once before.

Instrumentation

For this study I used an adapted version of The National Survey of Civic and Political Engagement of Young People to survey students at Bridgewater State University which can be found in the Appendix. The survey asked for some demographic information at the beginning

such as their status at BSU, socioeconomic status, race, and political orientation. The survey then questioned respondents on their participation in community service, attitudes regarding homelessness, and their education about the issue. This included multiple choice questions regarding statistics of the number of people they believed to be experiencing homelessness, as well as what they believed were the root causes of the issue. The survey also requested respondents to indicate which courses they had taken, if any, which discussed the issue of homelessness at BSU. The last part of the survey was a series of statements in which respondents indicate their levels of agreement on a variety of different topics regarding homelessness in order to decipher stereotypes that may be held by the respondents.

Data Collection

All data was collected online through Survey Monkey. The survey asked questions regarding the students' perceptions of homelessness, education about the issue, and personal experiences serving the population. Limited demographic information was requested. The survey could be completed in approximately five minutes.

Data Analysis

In order to analyze the data collected from the surveys, I utilized SPSS to run correlation tests to identify relationships between the variables I tested. I used cross tabulations, as well as ran Pearson product-moment correlation coefficient to identify relationships between variables such as education about homelessness, service experience, and stereotyped viewpoints of homelessness.

Limitations

One limitation of this study is that the sample used is not representative of the greater population at BSU, or other colleges. I initially sent my survey out to students who are in the same campus organizations as I am, and requested that they also send the survey along to three of their friends. This snowball sample was a matter of convenience, but definitely does not represent the greater population at BSU. Another limitation that lies within the sample is that the majority of the organizations that I am a part of on campus are social justice-based. This can have a significant impact on the results, as my social network on campus is collectively more socially aware than the great majority of students on campus. Another important thing to note about my sample is that 44.22% of respondents indicated that they were either a Sociology, Social Work, or Psychology major. This is not only an over-representation of social sciences on campus, but these students are also more likely to be more social issue-oriented than other disciplines. Had I been given the opportunity to survey a more diverse group of BSU students, I believe that I would have found a larger prevalence of negative views towards people experiencing homelessness.

Another limitation of the sample is that people could have felt pressured to answer questions a certain way, whether that be because they felt that they would somehow be judged because of their answers, or because of a personal connection with me. The questions that asked for level of agreement with certain statements such as "People who are homeless are more likely to commit crimes," could make respondents feel uncomfortable and they may not have been completely truthful with their answers. This could have skewed responses, where people felt uncomfortable saying that they, for instance, believe that people experiencing homelessness are lazy. In the same regard, although the survey did not ask for names and was completely anonymous, respondents may have felt that I, as the researcher, could have the ability to track

their responses back to them, especially because I know some of the respondents very well. This could have altered some of their responses, in fear that I may judge them for answering a certain way.

Findings and Discussion

H_1: People who have served people experiencing homelessness are less likely to hold stereotyped views.

In order to investigate this hypothesis I first created a new variable that combined different attitudes that indicated stereotyped views. The new variable included that drug abuse and laziness were top causes of homelessness (Question 17, Appendix), each of which were counted as a point towards the respondent's overall score if they were selected, as well as the statements "Homeless people are lazier than people who have a home" (Question 21, Appendix) and "People who are homeless are more likely to commit crimes" (Question 23, Appendix). I recoded the statements "Homeless people are lazier than people who have a home" and "People who are homeless are more likely to commit crimes," where respondents who *Strongly Agree* with the statement were coded as "5", and respondents who *Strongly Disagree* were coded as "1," therefore respondents who hold stereotyped views would have a higher score. This new variable was analyzed alongside a service variable (Question 12, Appendix), where respondents indicated if they had served the homeless population at least once before. Respondents who indicated yes were coded as "2" and those who did not were coded as "1."

As can be seen below in Table 1, I ran a Pearson correlation between stereotyped views and whether or not the respondent has served the homeless population at least once in the past. It was found that there is a significant moderate negative relationship between stereotyped views

and service of -.394 at the 0.01 level, meaning that respondents who have served the homeless

population at least once are less likely to hold stereotyped views of homeless individuals.

Table 1: Service and Stereotyped Views

		YesStereotypes	Served_Homeless_
YesStereotypes	Pearson Correlation	1	-.394**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
	N	139	139
Served_Homeless_	Pearson Correlation	-.394**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	
	N	139	142

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

This data supports previous research that personal interactions with people experiencing

homelessness is associated with a lack of stereotyped perceptions. These findings mirror the

study done by Knecht & Martinez (2009), where contact with a stigmatized population can

significantly improve perceptions of them. The issue becomes much more personal, and people

are able to sympathize, as they realize that they are "just like me." This interested me in seeing

if there is a relationship between people who have served people experiencing homelessness and

sympathizing with people struggling with the issue. I ran a Pearson correlation test between the

variable for service (Question 12, Appendix) and the statement "I feel sympathetic when I see

people sleeping on the streets" (Question 24, Appendix), and found that there was a negative

moderate relationship of -.205 at the .05 level. This means that there is a relationship between

people who have served the population before and low scores with the statement, indicating that

people agree with the statement.

Table 2: I feel sympathetic when I see people sleeping on the streets

		Served_Homele ss_	Sympathy_for_ Homeless
Served_Homeless_	Pearson Correlation	1	-.205[*]
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.015
	N	142	139
Sympathy_for_Homeless	Pearson Correlation	-.205[*]	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.015	
	N	139	139

*. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

This data shows that people who have served individuals experiencing homelessness not only have fewer stereotyped views of the population, but also feel sympathy for people struggling with homelessness. Whether or not the positive attitudes are due to the service or not, these positive attitudes are a possible indicator of support for public policies and programs to address the structural causes of homelessness.

H_2: People who have served the homeless population are more likely to believe homelessness is a result of structural problems, rather than individual choices or characteristics.

In order to test the relationship between service with the homeless population and perceived causes of homelessness I ran a Pearson correlation test. I created a new variable named "Structural Causes" that combined unemployment and lack of affordable housing as top causes for homelessness (Question 17, Appendix). Respondents who did not select either unemployment or lack of affordable housing as top causes of homelessness were coded as "0," respondents who indicated one of the options as a top cause were coded "1," and respondents who indicated both were coded "2." I then ran the test with the service variable (Question 12, Appendix). As can be seen in Table 3 below, there is a significant positive moderate relationship

between respondents who have served the homeless population, and indicating structural causes

of homelessness of .275 at the .01 level. Indicating structural causes of homelessness, rather

than individualistic causes or characteristics can arguably demonstrate that people who have

served people experiencing homelessness have generally less stereotyped views of the homeless

population than someone who lacks the personal interaction. This data supports H_2, as well as

the contact hypothesis discussed earlier, where having interactions with people in an out-group

can have a significant impact on their views.

Table 3: Structural Causes and Service

		Structural_Causes	Served_Homeless_
Structural_Causes	Pearson Correlation	1	.275[**]
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.007
	N	95	95
Served_Homeless_	Pearson Correlation	.275[**]	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.007	
	N	95	142

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

After discovering the relationship between service and attributing homelessness to

structural causes, I was then interested to support the hypothesis in another way by looking at the

relationship between service and the statement "Homeless people are homeless because they

choose to be. There are plenty of services available to them" (Question 20, Appendix). I

believed that this statement would be a good indicator in attributing personal choices as the top

causes of homelessness. The results of a Pearson correlation test shows a significant negative

moderate relationship of -.260 at the 0.01 level, which can be seen below in Table 4. This means

that there is a relationship between respondents who indicated that they had served the homeless

population (Question 12, Appendix), and low scores with the aforementioned statement. Low

scores indicated that people disagreed that homelessness is a personal choice. This demonstrates

that people who have served the homeless population generally do not see homelessness as a choice, or a result of poor personal choices. This could mean that people who have served are more likely to attribute homelessness to structural causes, which data supports above in Table 3.

Table 4: Homeless people are homeless because they choose to be. There are plenty of services available to them

		Served_Homele ss_	Choose_Homel ess
Served_Homeless_	Pearson Correlation	1	-.260^{**}
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.002
	N	142	139
Choose_Homeless	Pearson Correlation	-.260^{**}	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.002	
	N	139	139

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

I also wanted to take a look at attributing personal characteristics as top causes of homelessness, and decided that laziness is probably the most frequently utilized personal characteristic to describe people experiencing homelessness. I wanted to see if there was a relationship between people who have served the homeless population and those who agreed with the statement "Homeless people are lazier than people who have a home" (Question 21, Appendix). I ran a Pearson correlation test, which can be seen below in Table 5. I found that there was a significant positive moderate relationship of .377 at the .01 level between service to people experiencing homelessness and strongly disagreeing that those experiencing homelessness are lazier, where *Strongly Disagree* holds the highest point value. This means that people did not agree that people experiencing homeless are lazier than people who have homes. This supports the hypothesis, as well as matches findings in previous research that stereotyped views are less common after people have direct interactions with people in the out-group.

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Table 5: Homeless people are lazier than people who have a home

		Served_Homeless_	Lazier
Served_Homeless_	Pearson Correlation	1	.377**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
	N	142	139
Lazier	Pearson Correlation	.377**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	
	N	139	139

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

H$_3$: People who are educated on the issues of homelessness are less likely to hold stereotyped views.

I believed that students who took at least one course that discussed the topic of homelessness would have more positive, accurate perceptions of the issue. In order to examine this, I asked students to indicate which classes, if any, that they took at BSU from the following list: Citizenship and Community Leadership, Social Work Issues of Diversity and Oppression, Social Issues, Social Inequality, Cities and People: Urban Sociology, and Homelessness in US Society. These courses designated discussing diversity and social issues such as homelessness in the BSU course catalog. If the respondent had taken at least one of these courses, they were coded as "1.00" and any respondent indicated that they had not taken any of the classes, they were coded as ".00," and the variable was named "Education."

I ran a cross tabulation for the statement "People who are homeless are lazier than people who live in a home" (Question 21, Appendix) with education (Question 13, Appendix), which can be seen below in Table 6. When looking at the table, it is clear that people who were

educated on the issue of homelessness in one of their courses were skewed significantly more towards *Disagree* and *Strongly Disagree* along the scale. This shows that the majority of people, 82.1%, who took one of the designated courses on the survey answered *Disagree* or *Strongly Disagree* that people who are homeless are lazier than people who live in a home. The courses may not be the reason why these students lack the stereotype, but it can be seen that the majority who have taken at least one course from the list do not agree.

Table 6: Educated * Lazier Crosstabulation

			Lazier					
			Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Total
Educated	No	Count	1	6	14	43	19	83
		% within Educated	1.2%	7.2%	16.9%	51.8%	22.9%	100.0%
	Yes	Count	1	3	6	19	27	56
		% within Educated	1.8%	5.4%	10.7%	33.9%	48.2%	100.0%
Total		Count	2	9	20	62	46	139
		% within Educated	1.4%	6.5%	14.4%	44.6%	33.1%	100.0%

This data demonstrates that people who are educated about homelessness have positive perceptions of homeless people, however the data does not show that people who did not take a course are necessarily more negative than those who have been educated. 74.7% of students who indicated that they did not take one of the listed courses also *Disagree* or *Strongly Disagree* with the statement. This demonstrates that the majority of respondents generally agree that homeless people are not lazier than people who live in a home, regardless of if they had taken one of the listed courses or not. This could be attributed the fact that my sample started with my

web of connections at BSU, and I am involved with many social-justice and diversity based organizations. BSU is also a generally socially-aware campus, as indicated in the Campus Climate at BSU Survey, which can mean that overall perceptions could be more positive than other campuses (Sullivan, 2014). Although the respondents may not have not taken one of the courses discussing homelessness does not mean that they have not been educated on the issue through their involvement on campus.

H_4: People who are educated on the issues of homelessness are more likely to indicate structural causes of homelessness, rather than individual characteristics or choices.

In order to identify a relationship between structural causes of homelessness and education I looked at education and the statement "Homelessness is a failure of the system, rather than a result of personal choices" (Question 22, Appendix) as seen below in Table 7. I believed that this statement demonstrates a deeper understanding of the issue of homelessness, indicating structural problems as the main cause. I believed that students who have taken one of the courses would agree that homelessness is a failure of the system, rather than blaming the individual. I created a cross tabulation, and found that a larger percentage of respondents who had taken a listed course indicated that they agreed with the statement (46.5%), rather than disagreed (23.2%). However, 30.4% of the students who had taken a class responded neutrally to the statement. Also, there is very little differentiation between the educated respondents, and those who were not, as 38.5% of those who did not take a course also agreed with the statement, meaning that the relationship between the courses and more positive perceptions is not strong. Therefore, the data does not support the hypothesis that people who have taken courses discussing homelessness are less likely to hold stereotypes.

Table 7: Educated * Failure_of_System Crosstabulation

			Failure_of_System					
			Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Total
Educated	No	Count	10	22	32	16	3	83
		% within Educated	12.0%	26.5%	38.6%	19.3%	3.6%	100.0%
	Yes	Count	10	16	17	11	2	56
		% within Educated	17.9%	28.6%	30.4%	19.6%	3.6%	100.0%
Total		Count	20	38	49	27	5	139
		% within Educated	14.4%	27.3%	35.3%	19.4%	3.6%	100.0%

I also believed that students who took one of the courses that discussed homelessness would be more likely to indicate problems with the way in which society is structured, rather than blaming individuals for their misfortunes. I wanted to look at the statement "I believe there is equal access to opportunity for all Americans" (Question 25, Appendix) with education about homelessness in Table 8. I ran a cross tabulation, and found that for students who took a listed course, results were skewed towards disagree, meaning that 78.1% of respondents disagree that there is equal opportunity in America. However, when looking at the cross tabulation, there again as with Table 7 above, is not a substantial difference in respondent's answers from those whom did not take one of the courses, 63.9%.

H4 therefore is not supported by this data because there is not a substantial difference in perceptions that the system in unfair and poorly structured between people who have taken the indicated courses, and those who did not. The data does show that students generally do

recognize the structural problems and inequality in society, but the courses do not seem to have a large impact on perceptions.

Table 8: Educated * Equal_Opportunity Crosstabulation

			Equal_Opportunity					
			Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Total
Educated	No	Count	2	13	15	39	14	83
		% within Educated	2.4%	15.7%	18.1%	47.0%	16.9%	100.0%
	Yes	Count	1	7	4	19	24	55
		% within Educated	1.8%	12.7%	7.3%	34.5%	43.6%	100.0%
Total		Count	3	20	19	58	38	138
		% within Educated	2.2%	14.5%	13.8%	42.0%	27.5%	100.0%

Conclusions and Future Research

The data collected in this study supports the hypothesis that people who have served people experiencing homelessness are less likely to hold stereotyped views. It was found that there is a statistically significant relationship between service, lack of stereotyped views, and sympathy for people struggling with homelessness. This matches findings in previous research, such as that done by Knecht and Martinez (2009) in that people who have had personal interactions with stigmatized populations are more likely to have positive perceptions. It cannot be asserted that the service and personal interactions with people experiencing homeless is

responsible for the more positive views of the issue, but it is clear that there is a relationship between the two variables.

It was also found that there was a significant relationship between service and indicating structural causes for the issue of homelessness, rather than blaming individual choices or characteristics. This too matches previous research that positive interactions with stigmatized populations can help create a better understanding of the issue, and are less likely to blame the individual for their problems. These findings also differ with previous research which asserted that many Americans believe that poor individuals are responsible for their own struggles, rather than a failure of the greater system, as it can be seen that a considerable amount of respondents agreed that homelessness was a failure of the system (Seider, Rabinowicz, & Gillmor, 2012; Lee, Farrell, & Link, 2004). This could however be a reflection of a socially-aware sample in this study.

It was found that taking at least one of the courses that discussed homelessness at BSU was not a significant indicator in having more positive perceptions than students who did not take one of the classes. Yet, the data did show that people who took one of the courses that discussed homelessness generally did not hold stereotyped views. This mirrors findings by Schneider (2004) and his assertion that education and information is at the heart of creating more tolerant-minded individuals. It was also found that there was a relationship between people who took courses that discussed issues of homeless and indicating structural causes of homelessness, however it did not seem that there was a substantial difference between students who took at least one of the courses, and those who did not. It does not appear that the courses alone had a significantly bigger impact on the students' perceptions of the issue than students who did not take a course.

Overall, it appears that there is a relationship between service and a lack of stereotyped perceptions of people experiencing homelessness. Respondents who have served the population do hold more positive views of those experiencing homelessness, and seem to be more knowledgeable about the structural causes of homelessness. It also appears that education can have an effect on decreasing stereotyped views, although the difference for respondents in this study seems to be small. It seems as though generally respondents from this study have positive perceptions of those experiencing homelessness. I believe that the sample and the campus culture at BSU had a big impact on the results. As BSU is a socially aware campus (Sullivan, 2014) in a liberal state, and because my web of personal connections is highly social justice-based, I believe that had I been given the opportunity to survey a more diverse population, I would have found a higher prevalence of stereotyped views.

It is also important to note that just because respondents did not indicate that they had taken one of the courses on the survey does not mean that they have not been educated through another structure on the issue of homelessness. This is especially true through the organizations that students are involved in within my personal contacts, where education about different social issues is frequently integrated and at the core of the mission. It is also important to note, just as stated earlier, that when people lack knowledge on an issue, they can often base their perceptions off of their friends' views. This can mean that basic conversations about social issues between someone who has taken courses that focus on the issue can create awareness for others and break down those stereotypes. It would have been interesting to take a look at student involvement in these types of social justice driven organizations to see if students engaged in those organizations had more positive perceptions of homelessness than students who were not engaged on campus,

or who took any of the listed courses that discussed homelessness. BSU and schools all over the country can benefit from educating their students further on social issues in society.

Implementing a course about social justice issues and social change as part of the core curriculum would be extremely beneficial to students across all disciplines, as well as the greater society. Also the findings in this study highlight the need for more direct service opportunities for students, as direct contact with individuals experiencing homelessness decreases stereotyped views. In noting this, the implementation of a service learning requirement would also be beneficial to students and society as a whole through combining service and education. Educating and involving students in their communities addressing different social issues can help solidify their civic responsibility and diversify their perceptions. Previous research has shown the immense positive impact of combining education and service for both students and society (Seider, Rabinowicz, & Gillmor, 2012; Braunsberger & Flamm, 2013). It is time to create more engaged, socially aware students who will acknowledge the issues in society, and become empowered to change them.

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Appendix

Bridgewater State University Student Survey Regarding Issues of Homelessness

1. What is your current enrollment status at BSU:
   - ☐ Full-time student
   - ☐ Part-time student
   - ☐ Dual enrolled High School student

2. What year were you born? _____

3. What year are you at BSU?
   - ☐ Freshman
   - ☐ Sophomore
   - ☐ Junior
   - ☐ Senior
   - ☐ 5th year Senior

4. What is your sex?
   - ☐ Female
   - ☐ Male
   - ☐ Transgender
   - ☐ Intersex

5. What is your race?
   - ☐ Black/African-American
   - ☐ Asian/Asian-American
   - ☐ Hispanic/Latino
   - ☐ Cape Verdean
   - ☐ Native American
   - ☐ White
   - ☐ Other, please describe: _____

6. What is your major?
   - ☐ Math/Sciences
   - ☐ Sociology/Social Work/Psychology
   - ☐ Communications/English/History/Philosophy
   - ☐ Accounting/Aviation/Management
   - ☐ Criminal Justice
   - ☐ Political Science/Economics

☐ Art/Music/Theater/Dance

☐ Undecided

7. How would you describe the socio-economic category of the household where you grew up?

☐ Upper Class

☐ Upper Middle Class

☐ Middle Class

☐ Lower Middle Class

☐ Lower Class

☐ Poor

☐ Other, please specify: _____

8. To the best of your knowledge, which of the following income categories includes your parents'/guardians' total household income for 2013, or if you are head of your own household/family, please answer for your household?

☐ Less than $20,000

☐ $20,000-$29,999

☐ $30,000-$39,999

☐ $40,000-$49,999

☐ $50,000-$74,999

☐ $75,000-$99,999

☐ More than $100,000

☐ I do not know/I prefer not to answer

9. What is your current religious preference/practice?

☐ Catholic

☐ Protestant

☐ Jewish

☐ Muslim

☐ Mormon

☐ Buddhist

☐ Hindu

☐ None

☐ Other, please specify: _____

10. How would you describe the dominant political environment of the household in which you grew up?

☐ Very Conservative

☐ Conservative

☐ Moderate

☐ Liberal

☐ Very Liberal

☐ I do not know

☐ Other, please specify: _____

11. How would you describe your own personal political orientation?

☐ Very Conservative

☐ Conservative

☐ Moderate

☐ Liberal

☐ Very Liberal

☐ I do not know

☐ Other, please specify: _____

12. Have you ever volunteered your time serving people experiencing homelessness?

☐ Yes

☐ No

13. Have you ever taken any of the following courses at BSU? (please check all that apply)

☐ Citizenship and Community Leadership

☐ Social Work Issues of Diversity and Oppression

☐ Social Issues

☐ Social Inequality

☐ Cities and People: Urban Sociology

☐ Homelessness in US Society

☐ Other, please specify: _____

14. Approximately how many people are currently experiencing homelessness in the US on any given night?

☐ 376,093

☐ 398,678

☐ 610,042

☐ 884,694

15. Approximately how many people are experiencing homelessness in Massachusetts?

☐ 19,029

☐ 12,841
☐ 15,287
☐ 8,679

16. What group represents the largest demographic of people experiencing homelessness?
   ☐ Young adults (18-24 years old)
   ☐ Families with children
   ☐ Adults (25 years and older)

17. What are the top causes of homelessness? Please check all that apply: (Coding provided)

   1 Unemployment
   1 Drug addiction
   1 Lack of motivation
   1 Domestic violence
   1 Lack of affordable housing
   1 Mental Illness

Please indicate your level of agreement with each of the following statements: (Coding provided)

18. Most misfortunes that occur to people are frequently the result of circumstances beyond their control.

   1 Strongly Agree
   2 Agree
   3 Neither Agree or Disagree
   4 Disagree
   5 Strongly Disagree

19. I tend to make assumptions about how homeless people got to where they are.
   1 Strongly Agree
   2 Agree
   3 Neither Agree or Disagree
   4 Disagree
   5 Strongly Disagree

20. Homeless people are homeless because they choose to be. There are plenty of services available to them.
   1 Strongly Agree

2   Agree
3   Neither Agree or Disagree
4   Disagree
5   Strongly Disagree

21. Homeless people are lazier than people who have a home.
1   Strongly Agree
2   Agree
3   Neither Agree or Disagree
4   Disagree
5   Strongly Disagree

22. Homelessness is a failure of the system, rather than a result of poor personal choices.
1   Strongly Agree
2   Agree
3   Neither Agree or Disagree
4   Disagree
5   Strongly Disagree

23. People who are homeless are more likely to commit crimes.
1   Strongly Agree
2   Agree
3   Neither Agree or Disagree
4   Disagree
5   Strongly Disagree

24. I feel sympathetic when I see people sleeping on the streets.
1   Strongly Agree
2   Agree
3   Neither Agree or Disagree
4   Disagree
5   Strongly Disagree

25. I believe that there is equal access to opportunity to all Americans.
1   Strongly Agree
2   Agree
3   Neither Agree or Disagree
4   Disagree
5   Strongly Disagree