Perceptions of and Reactions to the Homeless: A Survey of Fourth-Grade, High School, and College Students in a Small Midwestern Community

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A total of 459 fourth-graders, high school students, and undergraduates completed a Homelessness Questionnaire developed for use in this study. Although participants generally expressed positive and supportive attitudes toward the homeless, attributing homelessness to either social maladjustment (e.g., drug problem) or negative characteristics (e.g., laziness) within the homeless was positively associated with "fear of and anger toward the homeless" for all groups of participants. In addition, perceptions of and reactions to the homeless were influenced by both the participants' gender and age group. Although high school and college students' interest in helping the homeless was associated with various attitudes and reactions (e.g., feelings of sympathy/support), their indication that they had ever helped homeless people (either directly or indirectly) was consistently associated only with the acknowledgment that their mother and father had ever helped homeless people (either directly or indirectly). Among these older participants, homelessness in the United States was rated as a more serious problem at the end of the questionnaire than at the beginning.

KEY WORDS: homeless; attitudes; perceptions; cross-sectional.

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INTRODUCTION

Although there have always been homeless individuals and families living within the United States, the breadth and awareness of this social problem have increased dramatically in recent years. The number of homeless individuals has been estimated at between 567,000 and 600,000 by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (Kondratas, 1991), but some authors have placed the number at more than 3 million (Bender, Leone, & Orr, 1990; Hombs & Snyder, 1982). Numerous articles in the Journal of Social Distress and the Homeless, as well as special volumes of the American Behavioral Scientist, Journal of Social Issues, Community Mental Health Journal, and American Psychologist, have focused on the plight of the homeless. Many of these reports have dealt with alcohol abuse, drug abuse, criminal activity, and mental and physical illness among the homeless (Berg & Hopwood, 1991; Fischer & Breakey, 1985, 1991; Gelberg & Linn, 1989; Gelberg, Linn, & Leake, 1988; Koegel, Burnam, & Farr, 1988; McCarty, Argeriou, Huebner, & Lubran, 1991; Rosenheck, Leda, & Gallup, 1992; Susser, Conover, & Struening, 1990); others have focused on homeless women, children, and families (Hill, 1991; Milburn & D’Ercole, 1991; Rafferty & Shinn, 1991; Rossi, 1994). In general, research to date has been largely descriptive, outlining the characteristics and experiences of the homeless themselves.

In contrast to the extensive descriptive literature, “there has been little systematic inquiry into public perceptions, beliefs, and attitudes about homelessness” (Toro & Warren, 1991, p. 1206). This would appear to be an important oversight because trends in issue-specific public opinion are known to influence public policy and the enactment of relevant legislation (Burstein, 1985; Jason & Rose, 1984; Page & Shapiro, 1982). The limited data that are available on adults’ attitudes toward the homeless are quite inconsistent. On one hand, a majority of individuals (a) are knowledgeable about the characteristics and plight of the homeless, (b) are sympathetic to the homeless (expressing, for example, a willingness to pay additional taxes to assist these individuals), and (c) attribute homelessness more to bad luck and structural factors within society than to flaws within the homeless themselves (Barbanel, 1989; Hunter, Getty, Kemsley, & Skelly, 1991; Lee, Jones, & Lewis, 1990; Lee, Link, & Toro, 1991; Media General Research, 1989; Toner, 1989; Toro & McDonell, 1992). However, as the problems of the homeless become “old news” and appear intractable, there is evidence of public desensitization and negative sentiment toward the homeless. For example, although the number of professional citations on the topic of homelessness has increased dramatically during the past several years, the rate at which relevant articles