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The Media Portrayal of Homelessness in Portland, Maine

Molly Hardman
University of Southern Maine

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Abstract

On January 24, 2017, 1,188 people were identified as homeless in Maine. The Maine State Housing Authority estimates that 527 of those people were unsheltered or resided in emergency homeless shelters in the City of Portland. People who suffer from mental illness and substance abuse, survivors of domestic violence, as well as unaccompanied youths and veterans represent many of the homeless individuals in the City of Portland (MSHA, 2017). There is an abundance of research on homelessness as it relates to mental health disorders and substance abuse (Sarvis, 2017); however, less attention has been paid to the portrayal of homelessness in the media.

Introduction

Existing literature on homelessness in the media identifies social justice as well as stigmatization and charity as themes within the public domain (Lancione, 2014; Best, 2010). This study presents an ethnographic content analysis of local newspaper articles to identify themes in the media portrayal of homelessness. Visual and text data from local newspaper articles in the *Portland Press Herald* from 2015-2017 were used in this content analysis. The local media's portrayal of homelessness in Portland was analyzed to help inform how the public narrative can best be used to develop strategies and re-frame homelessness as a collective, systemic social problem rather than an individual deficit.

Research Question

What is the public narrative of homelessness in the media of Portland, Maine from 2015 to 2017?

Methods

- An ethnographic content analysis was completed using 25 *Portland Press Herald* articles published between 2015-2017.
- Data was coded using the following themes:

Homeless Imagery

Identification of the Problem

A Call to Action

- The theoretical framework of social constructionism and symbolic interactionism guided this ethnographic content analysis. These theories helped to address the social meaning-making process and the influence of the media on public perception.



Figure 1. Darren Pelletier huddles on a porch near Oxford Street Shelter (Photo by: Brianna Soukup, Portland Press)



Figure 2. "With every car that passes by, a piece of my soul goes away." -Aaron Root (Photo by: Gregory Rec, Portland Press)



Figure 3. Dr. Adam Normandin and Brian French at the MMC-Preble Street Learning Collaborative (Photo by: Derek Davis, Portland Press)

Preliminary Results

- The *Portland Press Herald* presented an overall sympathetic portrayal of the homeless population as evidenced by Figures 1 & 2.
- Both text and images presented the current state of homelessness in Portland, while advocating for change and highlighting new community resources such as the MMC-Preble Street Learning Collaborative in Figure 3.
- Articles provided the voice of both social service providers and homeless individuals to convey the need for increases in funding and available housing for the homeless population.
- "No one chooses to be homeless" was a common quote from service providers in the Portland area.
- Coverage of homelessness increased from 2015-2017. In 2015, coverage focused on homeless campsites and in 2017, a greater focus was placed on the shelter system. Across all years, media coverage increased during the winter months.

Discussion & Next Steps

- This ethnographic content analysis highlighted the importance of the media to inform the public opinion on homelessness.
- Much like the content analysis of 574 *New York Times* Articles from 1980-1990 (Buck, Toro, & Ramos, 2004), the *Portland Press Herald* represented a solution-focused mindset in the public domain.
- The *Portland Press Herald* highlighted the many forms of homelessness (camping, emergency shelters, couch surfing, living in cars, etc) that were not all captured in the current literature and Point in Time surveys (MSHA, 2017).
- Further research is needed to identify themes of homelessness in the media on a larger scale in order to connect to the national narrative and discourse of homelessness.
- Next steps include continued collaboration of service providers, and increased press coverage of said collaboration, in order to continue to reduce the stigma of homelessness, while boosting the solution-focused mindset present in many *Portland Press Herald* articles.

"We know exactly how to end homelessness, but it takes an umbrella of common allies working together toward the same end to do so." (Ryan, 2017)

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