

Differing attitudes for various population groups towards homeless people

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ABSTRACT

Introduction: People who are homeless are most often unable to acquire and maintain regular, safe, secure, and adequate housing, or they lack a “fixed, regular, and adequate night-time residence”.

Purpose: To assess the attitude of secondary-school students, high-school students, university students, and working adults towards homeless people.

Materials and methods: A survey of 420 randomly selected middle school students (n=120), high school students (n=100), university students (n=100), and working adults (n=100) was conducted. Nearly half of the participants reported a fear of homeless people.

Results: According to the majority of respondents, a homeless person collects scrap metal and waste paper, and also begs. The first words that come to mind when a majority of people think of the

homeless were: poor, unhappy, dirty, lonely, and smelly. The participants reported the main reasons for homelessness to be: joblessness, family problems, alcohol, helplessness, and avoiding work. The majority of respondents argued that social and legal problems are the main reasons that it is difficult for homeless people to extricate themselves from their situation. The groups surveyed had a variety of opinions about homelessness. According to most respondents, a homeless person is a poor, miserable, lonely, childless man with a vocational education who begs, collects scrap metal and waste paper, and is also usually dirty and smelly.

Conclusions: In the survey groups, respondents’ opinions about homelessness varied.

Key words: Homeless people, youth, attitudes

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INTRODUCTION

Homelessness describes the condition of people who lack a regular dwelling place. People who are homeless are most often unable to acquire and maintain regular, safe, secure, and adequate housing, or they lack a “fixed, regular, and adequate night-time residence” [1]. According to Branowski [2] homelessness is a manifestation of social exclusion. As a social phenomenon, homelessness is highly diverse and often defies scientific knowledge [3]. Homelessness has many faces, and there are a number of concepts and terms included in its various definitions [4]. There exists a wide range of social policy solutions aimed at reducing homelessness and the presence of various forms of social work undertaken with regards to the homeless population.

In the United States and Western Europe, the number of articles published on the topic in both popular and professional literatures has increased dramatically since 1980 [5]. In Europe the literature on homelessness is mostly published in scientific journals and reviews (72%), with other materials being found in unpublished reports (16%) and books (12%) [6]. Most of this research has been conducted in the UK and France with only a few publications concerning the European Community or multiple European countries as a whole (3.5%). Finally, very few studies have been found for Eastern countries (3 for Russia and 1 for Romania—all focused on homeless youth).

In Poland, the problem of homelessness was ignored and silenced until 1989 due to socialism [4]. The phenomenon of homelessness quickly grew into a social problem and has been the subject of active social policy by the state. In Poland, an estimated 30,000 to 35,000 people are homeless, and it is believed that during the last decade this number has remained constant [7]. A review of the scientific literature reveals few studies regarding Polish attitudes towards the homeless have been conducted, and correspondingly, no scales have designed to measure such attitudes.

Debski [3] conducted a study of a representative sample of 2,211 homeless adults and 197 homeless children in 2007. The vast majority of those surveyed were men (83.6%), while only 16.4% were women. The average age of those sampled was 49 years. Among those included in the study, people with a secondary education (40.4%) and primary education (39%) were predominant. In public opinion, homelessness is often seen as a conscious choice, and thus helping the homeless is often regarded as unfair, unwarranted, or a waste of money and effort [8].

Mądrzycki [9] believes that stereotypes are closely associated with the process of the categorization of transactions carried out, but they differ from this in some respects. They are

characterized by fact and are less relevant in relation to reality, which means that individual characteristics attributed to certain categories of people are often exaggerated and are thus arbitrarily assigned to those who may not have these qualities. Stereotypes are social, and function in a community of people. Stereotypes are constant and stable cognitive schemas, which to a large extent are adopted early in life and are related to social pressure. Public perception considers a homeless man living on the street to be an alcoholic, to be lazy, and to be potentially dangerous. Therefore, because homelessness is seen largely as a character flaw rather than as a product of socioeconomic circumstances, homeless people are often held personally responsible for their plight. Most previous studies on attitudes toward the homeless have included mainly one group of students or respondents.

To date, there have been no reports on the attitudes held by different population groups towards homeless people. The aim of this study was to assess the attitudes of secondary-school students, high-school students, university students, and working adults towards homeless people.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

A survey of 420 randomly selected middle school students (n=120, group, I), high school students (n=100, group, II), university students (n=100 group, III), and working adults (n=100, group, IV) was conducted between February 2012 and April 2013. We used the original questionnaire developed by the Department of Integrated Nursing Care, Białystok. The questionnaire consists of five demographic questions (sex, age, place of residence) and 19 questions about the homeless. The study was approved by the ethics committee of the Medical University of Białystok, Poland. Informed consent was obtained from the participants.

RESULTS

A total of 281 women (67%) and 139 men (33%) participated in the study, thus giving us a sex difference (Chi-square test $p=0.0019$). Most participants lived in the city 252 (60%). The mean age of the whole sample was 26.8 (SD, 12.2) years of age (range, 17–50 years).

Nearly half of the participants in groups II and III reported a fear of homeless people, and 70% of the respondents in group I did not have an opinion on the matter. Most of the respondents did not want to meet a homeless person or have a neighbor who was homeless. Details are shown in Table 1. For most respondents, homeless people are elderly men, come from single-parent families, and do not have children. The youngest respondents

reported more often that homeless people were elderly when compared to the adult group (IV).

They live in the city and have a vocational education. Details are shown in Table 2.

Table 1. Attitudes toward homeless people

	Group I n=120	Group II n=100	Group III n=100	Group IV n=100
Fear of homeless people				
Yes	9.2%	46%	41%	27%
No	20.8%	12%	5%	48%
It is difficult to say	70%	42%	54%	25%
Do you want to know a homeless person?				
Yes	16.7%	20%	17%	32%
No	40.8%	42%	36%	33%
It is difficult to say	42.5%	38%	47%	35%
Do you want to have a homeless person as a neighbor?				
Yes	1.7%	3%	1%	4%
No	70.08%	57%	81%	51%
It is difficult to say	27.5%	40%	18%	45%
Willingness to help homeless people				
Yes	37.5%	40%	35%	23%
I am helping	-	5%	1%	-
No	8.3%	9%	6%	53%
It is difficult to say	54.2%	46%	58%	24%

Table 2. Characteristics of a homeless person

	Group I n=120	Group II n=100	Group III n=100	Group IV n=100
Elderly	80%	75%	51%	34%
Men	78.3%	83%	82%	67%
From single-parent families	53.3%	47%	28%	39%
Singles	50%	62%	47%	58%
Residents of larger cities	49.2%	55%	45%	67%
Do not have children	41.7%	47%	33%	78%
Vocational education	39.2%	50%	40%	80%
Secondary education	18.3%	16%	6%	10%
Married	9.2%	5%	2%	11%

According to most respondents, a homeless person collects scrap metal and waste paper, and also begs. Only a small percentage of respondents argued that homeless people steal.

Details are shown in Table 3. For most respondents, the first words that come to mind when they think of the homeless are: poor, unhappy, dirty, lonely, and smelly. Details are shown in Table 4.

Table 3. Activities of homeless people

Activities	Group I n=120	Group II n=100	Group III n=100	Group IV n=100
Collecting of scrap metal	83.3%	76%	77%	43%
Begging	68.3%	68%	68%	32%
Collecting of waste paper	35.1%	60%	52%	65%
Nothing to do	30.8%	19%	35%	54%
Drinking alcohol	12.5%	15%	6%	62%
Theft	14.2%	12%	5%	3%

Table 4. The first thing that comes to mind when they think of homeless people

The first thing that comes to mind	Group I n=120	Group II n=100	Group III n=100	Group IV n=100
Positive				
Poor	80.1%	55%	60%	58%
Unhappy	55.8%	30%	36%	34%
Lonely	38.3%	22%	26%	85%
Ridiculed	18.3%	13%	10%	34%
Helpless	1.7%	1%	2%	39%
Negative				
Dirty	27.5%	56%	73%	68%
Smelly	25.2%	30%	42%	58%
Lazy	9.2%	7%	3%	32%
Aggressive	2.5%	3%	1%	1%
Burdensome	3.4%	6%	3%	1%

The participants reported the main reasons for homelessness as being: joblessness, family problems, alcohol dependencies, helplessness, and avoiding work. Details are shown in Table 5. Most of respondents also reported that homelessness raises

the crime risk (details are not shown). The majority of respondents argued that social, psychological, and legal problems are the main reasons that it is difficult for homeless people to extricate themselves. Details are shown in Table 6.

Table 5. The causes of homelessness reported by respondents

The causes of homelessness	Group I n=120	Group II n=100	Group III n=100	Group IV n=100
Joblessness	46.7%	13%	36%	87%
Family problems	38.3%	29%	42%	75%
Unqualified	31.7%	25%	18%	58%
Avoiding work	27.5%	36%	33%	67%
Prefer to use social assistance	25%	24%	29%	30%
Helplessness	23.3%	38%	48%	11%
Alcohol	13%	3%	4%	78%

Table 6. Problems hindering the exit from homelessness

Problems	Group I n=120	Group II n=100	Group III n=100	Group IV n=100
Social	50.8%	45%	31%	56%
Psychological	50%	44%	46%	58%
Law	33.3%	23%	37%	78%
Institutional	9.2%	6%	7%	54%

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to assess the opinions and attitudes held towards the homeless population in Poland. Previous studies have focused on the predictive value of demographic factors in examining how a person’s background influences their opinions. These studies have found that age, gender, and political affiliation are consistent predictors of one’s attitude towards the homeless, while religion, income, and socio-economic status are less reliable [7-11]. Our findings more or less agree with these previous studies.

For the purposes of this study, “homelessness” describes both people who are “street homeless,” meaning that they live on the street and also places that qualify as “homeless shelters,” meaning places that assist people who have no homes of their own [8]. On the one hand, the term “homeless people” includes people who are generally capable of living independently in socially acceptable ways. For these people, not owning a home is not due to a lack of effort on their part; they do not need integration programs, jobs, or homes. On the other hand, the term “homeless people” also includes people who are unable live in

socially acceptable ways, either due to social maladjustment, addictions, mental disorders, or senility.

Nowakowska [12] includes the following terms as alternatives for “homeless people:” “bums,” “manges,” “would,” “tramps,” “alcoholics,” and “thieves.” Nowakowska also identifies the adjectives “worthless,” “dirty,” and “degenerates” as common modifiers for “homeless people.” The terms imply that homeless people live on the margins of society, are outcasts, and arouse disgust and other negative emotions. They often collect beer cans, search garbage cans, beg, and annoy or harass other people. Another implication is that we should be afraid of homeless people.

Bartczak et al. [13] found that homeless people are most often associated with being dirty (82.9%), irresponsible (56.4%), unhappy (60.5%), resourceless (54%), and lazy (47.6%). The sample surveyed described homeless people as “tramps,” “trollops,” “drunks,” “drug addicts,” and “losers.” The vast majority of respondents also indicated that they believed the typical homeless person was a male over the age of 30 with only a primary education. Compared to other people, homeless people are often abused and ridiculed, more vulnerable and difficult to live with, but not any more aggressive or dangerous than other people. Due to these stereotypes, homelessness is a social stigma associated with “street” living. At the same time, opinions suggest that homeless people have their own awareness of otherness and remain reluctant to alter their neglectful appearance and way of life.

This study’s survey respondents agreed that homeless people are more often ridiculed and abused than other people, and this study reports similar results. For most respondents, the first words that come to mind regarding the homeless were “poor and miserable,” “dirty and poor,” “poor and smelly,” and “requiring support and help.”

By contrast, data analysis regarding homeless people from various areas of Poland conducted by Sochocki [14] showed that men constitute the greatest portion of the homeless population over the age of 40. He also emphasized that homelessness extends to both women and men, that more than 80% of homeless people are unmarried, and only 3% of homeless people have a university education.

Bielecka-Prussia and Maciejewska [15] similarly report that homeless people are generally unmarried, filled with fear and concern about their future, exhibit loneliness, are often ill, rarely plan for their futures, live in the present, and fight for their survival. Nevertheless, homeless people generally do not regard themselves as persons deprived of enjoyment, and homeless people generally have a strong sense of life. In addition, they are not people without morals

In 2010, Baranowski [2] surveyed a sample of 91 homeless women (19.8%) and men (80.2%) mostly between the ages of 51 and 60. Almost half (46.2%) of the homeless people surveyed declared having a vocational education, while 25.3% reported having a secondary education, and 24.1% only primary education.

Szluz [11] reports that the consequences of homelessness are unemployment, unwillingness to work, and conflict with the law.

Interesting, respondents of the present study reported that a consequence of homelessness is an increase in crime.

According to Bartczak et al. [13], the main source of income for homeless people is collecting scrap metal, waste paper, and begging. Other studies [1,4] report similar findings, and count social assistance as well. Only a small percentage of homeless people retire, and our findings agree with these results.

Half of the respondents in Bartczak et al. [13] report being afraid of coming into contact with homeless people for fear of contracting skin diseases. The present study similarly finds that most of its respondents fear coming into contact with homeless people. Many causes for becoming homelessness have been suggested, including domestic violence, history of mental illness, chronic disease, alcohol dependency, drug abuse, and unemployment [1,2].

Dębski [3] distinguished three main causes for becoming homelessness (i.e., “myself,” “my family,” and “the state”). Men more often checked the box reading “I am responsible for my homelessness,” while women and people under 30 more often checked the box “My family is responsible for my homelessness.” People with chronic homelessness issues more often than not checked the box reading “The government is responsible for my homelessness.”

Szluz [11] demonstrated that some people are homeless because they do not receive help from anyone (e.g., their families, communities, and social institutions). These people include orphans, ex-convicts, people previously living in psychiatric hospitals, and victims of domestic violence. Bielecka-Prus and Maciejewska [15] in their study also show that the majority of homeless people receive social welfare assistance.

In another study [10] respondents reported that the following institutions should be responsible for relieving homeless people: social welfare centers, the government, non-governmental organizations, churches, municipal offices, and county work offices. In the current study, respondents generally indicated that social welfare centers should provide help for homeless people.

According to Pawlik-Popielarska [16], until recently, homeless people were lonely people affected by mental illness and alcoholism.

Presently, homelessness also affects families and women with small children.

Homelessness is a complex problem that, for many people, results from a complex interaction of psychological, legal, health, cultural, economic, and ethical factors. The problem of homelessness cannot be solved by providing accommodations alone. Individual programs may be the most successful place to relieve homelessness [17,18].

CONCLUSIONS

1. In the survey groups, respondents' opinions about homelessness varied.
2. According to most respondents, a homeless person is a poor, miserable, old, lonely, and childless man with a vocational education who begs, collects scrap metal, waste paper, and is usually unkempt, dirty, and smelly.
3. Respondents generally reported that a lack of work and family conflicts cause homelessness.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors have no conflicts of interest to declare.

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