The Role of Social Contact in Public Perceptions of Homelessness in Parks and Public Spaces

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Abstract:

Unsheltered homelessness – in which people reside in parks or on streets – is on the rise and poses a challenge for municipal parks and recreation agencies. Simultaneously, public opinion on homelessness has softened in recent years and may be misaligned with park agency practices. This study measured public attitudes on homelessness and on park agency involvement in addressing homelessness, using intergroup contact theory. Prior experience with homelessness was related to support of homelessness solutions and positive ideology toward homelessness. Support of homelessness solutions and positive ideology toward homelessness were related to support of the involvement of parks agencies in addressing homelessness.

Keywords: Homelessness | intergroup contact | local government | parks | public opinion

Article:

Introduction

In the last decade, the rate of homelessness has risen in the U.S., as well as worldwide (HUD, 2020; Tsai, 2018).The reasons for this rise are numbered and varied and include systemic issues such as insufficient housing in many cities across the country, as well as other long-term economic trends such as stagnant wages and income inequality (Barile et al., 2018). Another nation-wide concern, the opioid crisis, has exacerbated home-lessness in some parts of the U.S. (Farley, 2019). Local governments, which have already suffered budget cuts that have not recovered in the post-Great Recession era, are left to deal with rising homelessness (Deslatte et al.,2020). This larger trend in homelessness is almost entirely accounted for by a rise in unsheltered home-lessness – a 7% increase in unsheltered homelessness from 2019 to 2020 alone. Unsheltered homelessness describes conditions when affected persons reside in parks, on streets, or in their cars (HUD, 2020).Unsheltered homelessness in particular poses a challenge for

municipal parks and recreation agencies, who are often front-line responders to people experiencing homelessness (Baur et al., 2015; Bottorff et al., 2012;Neild & Rose, 2018; NRPA, 2019). As homelessness shows no signs of slowing down, and as communities continue to struggle with fewer government resources available to address it, understanding whether local government action toward addressing homelessness aligns with public opinion is crucial (Baur et al., 2015).In this paper, we ask, to what extent is the American public's view of using government resources to address homelessness related to their own experiences with homelessness, and how does the public view the role of local parks and recreation agencies in helping solve this issue?

Literature review

Local government and homelessness

Addressing homelessness at the local government level is common. Although many services provided to people experiencing homelessness (PEH) are administered through an assortment of nonprofit, philanthropic, and private partners (i.e., through Continuums of Care), some local governments provide services directly through various departments including community development, libraries, and parks and recreation (Kavanaugh & Schally, 2022; Mosley & Park, 2022; NRPA, 2019). Despite dealing with PEH on a regular basis, and handling in-person encounters, parks and recreation services are often among the least resourced local government entities, and therefore may refer situations to local police, escalating such encounters unnecessarily (Barrett et al., 2017; Neild & Rose, 2018). When resources are available to support PEH, some of the services provided include temporary housing, help procuring permanent housing, rehabilitation and prevention services, and outreach programs (HUD, 2012). Some research indicates that these services are delivered more efficiently and effectively by a collaborative governance approach within Continuums of Care – which are the standard for municipalities across the country – and that government responses to homelessness see larger reductions in the number of PEH when such collaborations are used (Mosley & Jarpe, 2019; Mosley & Park, 2022).

Collaborative governance can include public–private partnerships, in which governments share service delivery with nonprofit partners, but also through forming interdepartmental collaborations – such as partnerships between one government entity with another (H.-W. Lee, 2020). One division of local government that is often on the front lines of homelessness service delivery is parks and recreation. Parks are home to many unsheltered people experiencing homelessness, as their facilities are used by PEH (Neild & Rose, 2018; Rose, 2019). Some municipalities have defaulted their first point of contact with PEH to be parks and recreation, particularly in scenarios when there is not a need for law enforcement involvement (Baur et al., 2015; Neild & Rose, 2018; NRPA, 2019). Parks and recreation involvement in homelessness often includes allowing access to facilities; occasionally it is through specific programming or by facilitating connections to other public services. According to a recent report from the National Recreation and Park Association (NRPA), more than half of the local park agencies indicated they offer services to PEH, such as temporary shelter. However, in this same report, nearly half of the professionals surveyed viewed PEH as a "nuisance" user group, and a majority of agencies report being authorized to clear homeless encampments with no prior notice (NRPA, 2019). Therefore, given the amount that parks and recreation agencies handle issues related to homelessness, despite their precarious budgetary position in many places, this paper focuses on

the potential role of parks and recreation in helping solve issues of homelessness (Barrett et al., 2017).

The views and policies of park agencies – that PEH constitute a problematic user group – contradict some recent research on the general public's opinions on PEH, which indicates that public attitudes toward PEH may have softened over time. In a 1997 study of general public attitudes toward PEH, participants displayed high stigmatization of PEH, even compared hypothetically to low-income people (Phelan et al., 1997). But more recent research has shown that some people are more compassionate about homelessness, and recognize its structural causes, than in previous decades (Tsai et al., 2019). For instance, a 2019 study found that the general public was compassionate toward PEH, even if their beliefs about how homelessness should be addressed differed based on such characteristics as gender and political affiliation (Tsai et al., 2019). Even more recently, a 2021 study showed seeing PEH reduced stigmatization, and that these effects are sustained over time (Smith & Stathi, 2021). Specific to the context of local parks and recreation, recent data indicates that members of the public are in general supportive of agency actions to support people experiencing homelessness. This is particularly true with regard to services-related, rather than housing-related, support activities, and among younger people, park users, and more affluent respondents (Pitas et al., 2021). Although these recent studies describing improved public attitudes toward homelessness in some instances, stigmatization of PEH has not disappeared entirely – which may help explain discrepancies between some agency actions and attitudes and the general public's views (Mejia Lancheros et al., 2020; Torino & Sisselman-Borgia, 2017). One social factor which may help soften public opinion on PEH is having social contact with PEH. Research shows that encountering members of a different social group can improve attitudes toward that social group over time; thus, social contact with PEH may be important to improving public – and park agency – opinion on PEH (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006).

Contact was shown in a 2004 study to make a difference in general public attitudes toward homelessness (B. A. Lee et al., 2004). In this study, even though the outgroup (i.e., PEH) was at the time a highly stigmatized group, both indirect contact – e.g., knowing someone who knows PEH – and direct contact – e.g., speaking with PEH on the street, or volunteering in a shelter – had positive impacts on attitudes toward PEH (B. A. Lee et al., 2004). Another study looking at exposure to PEH found that quality contact with PEH had a positive impact on attitudes toward PEH (Aberson & McVean, 2008). Thus, there may be a disconnect between public opinion and the views and actions of park and recreation agencies.

Intergroup contact theory

Given that the public, in part, forms their opinions on marginalized groups through exposure to those groups, we used intergroup contact theory to drive our measurement and analysis. Intergroup contact theory (ICT) states that contact with an "outgroup" – defined varyingly based on social characteristics, such as race, class, gender, or religion – will reduce prejudice over time between the two groups. Researchers have tested opinion using this theory in many different social contexts and settings, and between many different social groups. Originally called the contact hypothesis, intergroup contact theory has grown over time as it has been tested with various groups and contexts. Over its long history as a social psychological theory, researchers have both confirmed and questioned its usefulness. Some critiques include that more tolerant people likely have more intergroup contact and are more receptive to changes in opinion (Pettigrew, 2021). Another common critique is that outcomes of negative contact are not studied often enough, despite their potential to do damage to intergroup relations, particularly in spaces

normally attributed to positive experiences, like parks (Mullenbach et al., 2022). Additionally, some evidence shows that although regular contact over time reduces negative opinions, initial intergroup contact can heighten anxiety and tensions, and some people never get past this initial negative reaction (Pettigrew, 2021). Getting over the hurdle of initial intergroup contact hesitance and toward long-term acceptance and tolerance can be made more difficult by structures built to keep groups apart (e.g., systemic racism and de facto segregation) and political leaders espousing polarized views (Pettigrew, 2021). In the context of homelessness, local policies or ordinances hostile toward PEH may increase or maintain prejudice and diminish support for addressing homelessness.

Despite these critiques, support of the theory emerges through several meta-analyses across multiple countries, establishing the largely accepted notion that contact between groups can reduce prejudice over time (Pettigrew, 2021). Research on ICT has evolved such that regular contact is now thought to lead to a cognitive recategorization of the "outgroup" as members of the "ingroup" (Dovidio et al., 2017). Further, facilitating factors, such as more frequent contact in settings with institutional support – such as in homelessness care facilities or charities – as well as more intimate contact – such as knowing someone personally who has experienced homelessness – can facilitate positive opinions though are not required for contact to have positive effects (Bagci et al., 2018). Lastly, although some evidence points to a larger effect for more privileged groups, meaning less privileged groups do not modify their views of the other group as more privileged groups do, given the inordinate power of housed individuals to vote and make decisions about PEH, a larger positive effect for this privileged group could lead to overall positive outcomes in the form of greater support for humane homelessness solutions and government action (Dovidio et al., 2017; Reimer et al., 2017; Selvanathan et al., 2018).

Since PEH are a marginalized group in U.S. society, who have faced myriad forms of discrimination and stigma, ICT can provide possible theoretical explanations for formation of attitudes toward PEH. In this study, PEH represent the "outgroup" that the general housed population is exposed to at varying rates. Previous exposure to PEH and experience with homelessness could be a precursor to forming opinions on solutions for homelessness and use of government resources to address homelessness. Applying the theory to homelessness, we posit that more contact – defined here as previous experience with homelessness (i.e., through having been homeless in the past or closely known someone who has) and interactions with PEH – with homelessness can reduce prejudicial attitudes over time, and that these more positive attitudes would manifest as more support of government resources to solve homelessness, such as parks and recreation services.

Though we acknowledge that we are applying a social psychological theory to assess an issue with structural and systemic roots, we believe it is appropriate as a guide for our analysis; we did not seek to confirm or refute the theory. Others have tested ICT with groups to assess stigmatization and prejudice toward PEH and found that contact with PEH can result in more positive attitudes, especially when the quality of contact is good (Aberson & McVean, 2008; B. A. Lee et al., 2004; Smith & Stathi, 2021; Tsai et al., 2019). Thus, we do not wish here to repeat those assessments, but rather to extend that prior work toward opinions of local government efforts to solve homelessness – both generally and using parks and recreation resources.

Hypotheses

Given the purpose of this study to better understand the relationship between contact with PEH and attitudes toward addressing the issue, we created the following hypotheses:

(1) Individuals with more contact/experience with homelessness will have more favorable attitudes toward people experiencing homeless-ness, and be more supportive of humane solutions

(2) More positive attitudes toward PEH and more support of humane solutions will be associated with support of using parks and recreation resources to address homelessness

Materials and methods

To assess relationships between experience with homelessness, policies and ideology about homelessness, and involvement of parks and recreation in addressing homelessness, we conducted an online survey of the general public in the United States. This section will describe survey administration, sampling, survey design, and analysis.

Survey administration

We contracted with an online survey platform called Qualtrics to administer the survey. We distributed the survey to a sample of adult residents of the United States, who were part of a panel of respondents from Qualtrics. The survey was administered over a period of 3 weeks in October–November 2021. Median survey completion time was 16 minutes, and we included attention checks. Several questions were in forced choice format, to minimize missing data.

Qualtrics uses an actively managed double opt-in panel of survey respondents from which they draw for requested samples for researchers. They maintain quality by performing checks on IP addresses and digital fingerprinting to remove duplicates. To obtain sufficient responses from hard-to-reach groups or other populations specified by the researchers, Qualtrics uses specialized recruitment campaigns. To obtain samples for researchers, Qualtrics randomly selects respondents likely to qualify. After filtering and excluding respondents based on their screening criteria, Qualtrics delivers the final sample to researchers that meets the requirements of their survey project. In our case, we sought a sample of 900 respondents, which met quotas set for gender, race/ethnicity, age, and location type. Qualtrics continued sampling within their existing panels until these quotas were met with completed, high-quality responses. Other quality control measures taken by Qualtrics include their protocol related to removing responses below a third of the median response time, "straight-lined" responses, and those that fail to meet attention checks.

Sampling

In order to get an understanding of the general population's opinions about homelessness, our sample represented the general U.S. population in terms of a number of sociodemographic characteristics. We obtained a sample from Qualtrics that was racially representative of the U.S. as a whole, with quotas for certain racial and ethnic groups, as follows: 66% white, 12% Black, 10% other races, 12% Hispanic/Latino. Our sample also had an age distribution that was 33% each for ages 18–34, 35–55, and 55+ years old. Lastly, we obtained an even gender distribution and 80% urban, 20% suburban or rural distribution in our sample.

Survey design

Our survey was designed in conjunction with professionals who have experience in both local parks and recreation and homelessness services delivery. The survey contained a number of

sections, including: experience with homelessness, ideology and opinions about homeless policies/solutions, and opinions about involvement of parks and recreation in addressing homelessness.

Demographics
In addition to the demographic variables mentioned above used to collect quotas (i.e., race/ethnicity, gender, location type, and age), we also asked respondents to state their household income in 2020, whether they rent or own their home, and how long they have lived in their current residence. Although it does not represent a demographic variable, we also asked respondents how often they visit parks in a typical month, with response options in five-day intervals from 0 to 30 days (i.e., I do not use parks, 1–5 days, 6–10 days … 26–30 days).

Experience with homelessness
To understand respondents' experience with homelessness, we asked a variety of questions regarding encounters with people experiencing homelessness (6 questions), whether they have friends or family members that have been homeless (with binary yes/no response options), and whether they have themselves experienced homelessness (yes/no). These items can be found in the supplemental tables in the Supplementary Material (i.e., Table S1).

Homelessness ideology
To understand respondents' ideology regarding homelessness as a social and economic issue, we asked several questions. One item was adapted from Guzewicz and Takooshian (1992): "for many people experiencing homelessness, it is not their fault," which was rewritten from the original item to avoid reverse-coding. Response options were on a five-point Likert scale from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree." The other five items were adapted from a scale measuring people's "support for civil liberties" (Phelan et al., 1997), but were reworded slightly so that the items referred to "people experiencing homelessness" rather than "the homeless." This rewording reflects a conversation we had with a former practitioner at a homelessness aid nonprofit (personal communication, 2021). The question was worded such that each item was prompted with "The following question asks you to rate your level of agreement or disagreement with statements regarding people experiencing homelessness in the United States. Please answer to the best of your ability. 'People experiencing homelessness…'" followed by five statements. Response options were on a five-point Likert scale from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree." Example statements include "have the right to sleep in public places," "have the right to set up tents in parks," and "should be allowed to gather in public places."

Homelessness solutions
To understand respondents' attitudes toward policies directed at solving homelessness, we asked several questions adapted from prior research. One item was adapted from Guzewicz and Takooshian (1992): "society should have to support or house people experiencing homelessness," which was rewritten from the original item to avoid reverse-coding. Response options were on a five-point Likert scale from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree." The other 17 items were adapted from the "attitudes toward homeless policies" scale from Phelan et al. (1997). Some items were reworded, as described previously to more sensitively refer to "people experiencing homelessness." This latter group of questions were provided the prompt "The following questions ask about your opinions on policies about homelessness in the United States. Please answer to the best of your ability" followed by statements. Response options were on a five-point Likert scale from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree." Example statements include

"The federal government should spend more on affordable housing," "More temporary housing/shelters would reduce homelessness," and "raising the minimum wage would reduce homelessness." These questions were written as hypothetical solutions that municipalities may adopt, to gauge respondents' support for them if their own town or city were to adopt them.

Involvement of parks and recreation in homelessness
To assess people's opinions about the involvement of parks and recreation in addressing homelessness, we asked questions about the ways that parks and recreation can provide assistance, the role of parks and recreation in addressing homelessness, and the appropriateness of shifting financial resources from other government departments with parks and recreation to address homelessness. The latter question was included to address the fact that many local government departments may offer services to PEH, but due to our focus on the potential role of park agencies in PEH management we wanted to assess this role in relation to other municipal services. Many of these items were written by the researchers, alongside staff at NRPA and professionals with experience in homelessness service delivery, though the appropriateness question was adapted from Mueller et al. (2018). Similar to homelessness solutions items, respondents were instructed to answer how appropriate or inappropriate they felt the hypothetical actions would be if taken in their own town/city. These instructions were meant to invoke a sense of locality, even with a national sample.

Analysis

After first characterizing our data by calculating descriptive statistics and frequencies, we conducted a two-step analysis, beginning with confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) followed by structural equation modeling (SEM). The model we hypothesized is shown below in Figure 1. Although many of the questions in the survey come from established metrics, a CFA was needed to establish relationships between the latent variables. We followed CFA with SEM to model effects of measured and latent variables on our dependent variables of interest.

Results

Sample characteristics

Sample demographics are displayed in Table 1. We contracted a sample from Qualtrics that was representative of the national population for race/ethnicity, gender, and location type (urban, suburban, rural). Thus, most (67%) of the sample was white, non-Hispanic/Latino (88%) and from an urban area (78%). Further, our sample contained a fairly even distribution of ages and incomes.

Descriptive statistics

Descriptive statistics and frequencies for individual items in the model are available in Tables 2 and 3 below.
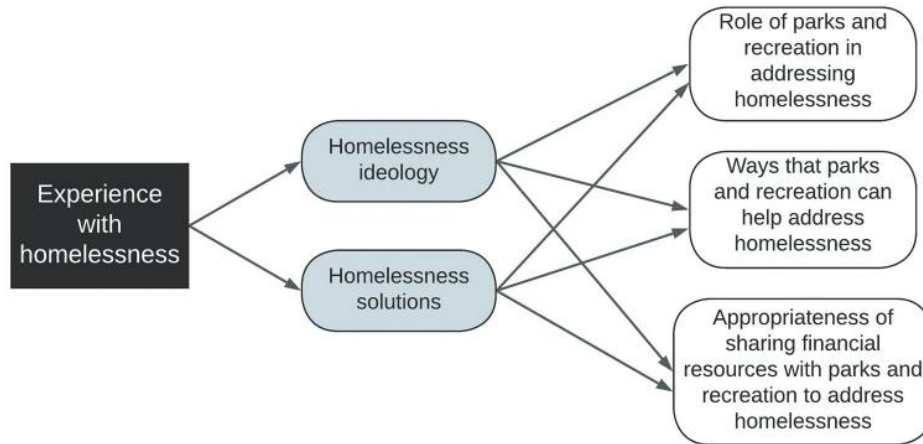
Figure 1. Hypothesized model, showing experience with homelessness expected to be associated with homelessness ideology and solutions, which are expected to be associated with involvement of parks and recreation in addressing homelessness.

Table 1. Sample demographics ($N = 952$).

Demographic characteristic	N (%)
Race/Ethnicity	
White, non-Hispanic/Latino	637 (67%)
Black or African American, non-Hispanic/Latino	107 (11%)
Other races, non-Hispanic/Latino	93 (10%)
Hispanic or Latino	114 (12%)
Location type	
Urban	747 (78%)
Suburban or Rural	205 (22%)
Gender	
Man	475 (50%)
Woman	471 (49.6%)
Other gender/non-binary/gender nonconforming	4 (0.4%)
Household Income in 2020	
Less than $20,000	180 (20%)
$20,000-40,000	184 (20%)
$40,001-60,000	112 (12%)
$60,001-80,000	100 (11%)
More than $80,000	337 (37%)
Age	
18-34	309 (34%)
35-55	331 (37%)
Over 55	264 (29%)

Confirmatory factor analysis

The first measurement model tested had poor model fit, so modification indices were consulted to identify sites of localized strain. The items that were reverse-coded had high modification indices and were subsequently removed, a common problem in survey research (Chyung et al., 2018). See Table A1 for measurement model results.

Table 2. Descriptive statistics, regarding contact/experience with homelessness

Item	Yes (%)	No (%)
How many people experiencing homelessness have you known personally?	Mean = 4	SD = 13
Has anyone in your immediate family ever experienced homelessness?	284 (30%)	668 (70%)
Have you ever had a close friend that experienced homelessness?	340 (36%)	612 (64%)
Have you ever had a time in your life when you considered yourself homeless?	311 (33%)	639 (67%)
Do you see people experiencing homelessness during an average week?	701 (74%)	251 (26%)
Has a person experiencing homelessness done something nice for you in the past year?	336 (35%)	616 (65%)
Have you seen a person experiencing homelessness do something nice for someone other than you in the past year?	380 (46%)	438 (54%)
Have you ever worked or volunteered in a homeless shelter or other homelessness related nonprofit/charity?	357 (38%)	593 (62%)

Structural model

The final structural model had good model fit, and the composition of items within latent variables made conceptual sense (model fit statistics: $\chi 2 = 4847.5$, $df = 1526$, $p < .001$, Yuan-Bentler scaling correction factor = 1.24, robust CFI = .882, robust TLI = .876, robust RMSEA = .053, robust SRMR = .059). Although the beta coefficients in the model appear somewhat small, the R-squared values, which indicate the amount of variance explained by the latent variables, were strong for all three outcome variables, indicating that our model is effective at measuring the modeled relationships.

This model (as shown in Figure 2) shows that the ways that respondents had contact and experience with homelessness had varying relationships with ideology about homelessness and attitudes about solutions. In some instances (i.e., seeing PEH in neighborhood, seeing PEH do something nice for others or yourself, volunteering for homelessness-related charity), respondents' contact with PEH and prior experiences were significantly and positively related to ideology and attitudes. In other instances (i.e., seeing PEH in an average week, being approached by PEH for money, family members experiencing homelessness, friends experiencing homelessness) respondents' contact and experiences were not related; and the number of PEH known personally by respondents was significantly and negatively related to ideology and attitudes about solutions. Moving forward in the model, ideology and attitudes toward solutions were both significantly and positively related to all three outcome variables regarding parks and recreation. In the section below, we discuss these significant relationships as they pertain to our hypotheses.
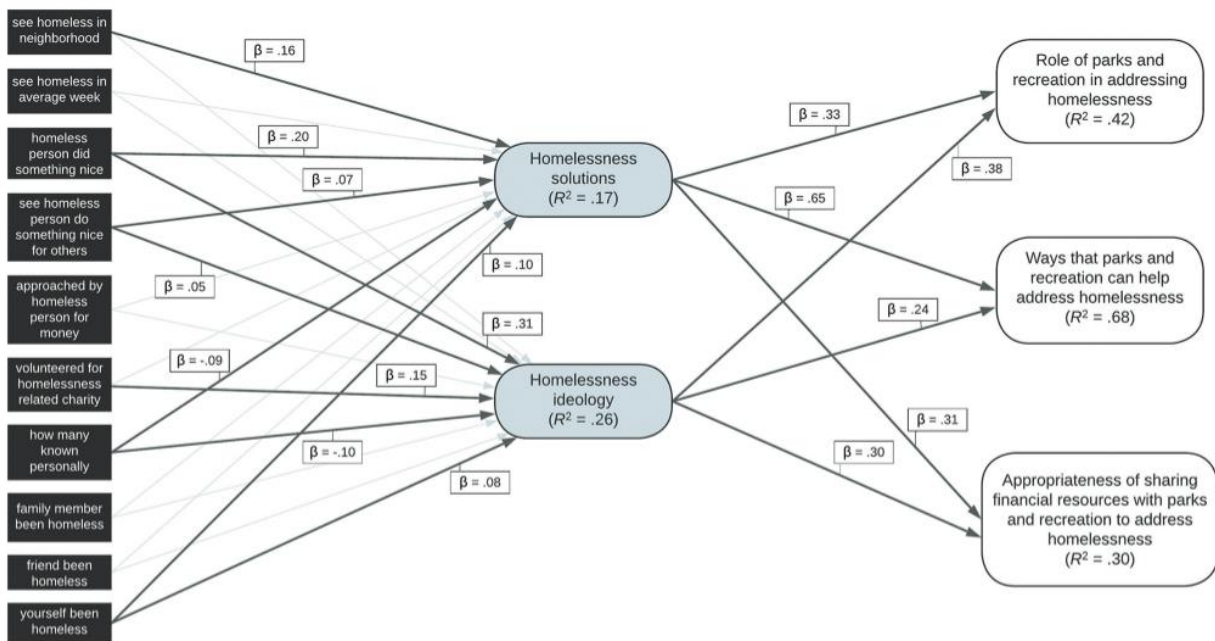
Figure 2. Structural model. Note: nonsignificant paths are grayed out. Boxes indicated measured variables, ovals and rounded boxes indicate latent variables. Model fit statistics: $\chi^2 = 4847.5$, df = 1526, p < .001, Yuan-Bentler scaling correction factor = 1.24, robust CFI= .882, robust TLI = .876, robust RMSEA = .053, robust SRMR = .059.812 L. E. MULLENBACH ET AL.

Table 3. Descriptive statistics regarding how often respondents see people experiencing homelessness, are approached by people experiencing homelessness, and visit parks.

	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Always

How often do you see people experiencing homelessness in your own neighborhood?	99 (10%)	200 (21%)	237 (25%)	224 (24%)	192 (20%)
How often have you been approached by a person experiencing homelessness for money or other things in the past year?	131 (14%)	225 (24%)	373 (39%)	222 (23%)	
	I do not use parks	**1-5 days**	**6-10 days**	**11+ days**	
How often do you visit parks near you in a typical month?	207 (22%)	413 (43%)	157 (16%)	175 (18%)	

Hypothesis testing

Hypothesis 1
We found partial support for our first hypothesis (see Table 4). Some measurements of contact and/or experience with homelessness were associated with attitudes toward people experiencing homelessness (PEH). Seeing PEH in one's neighborhood during an average week was associated with more support of homelessness solutions, though was not significantly related to homelessness ideology, suggesting an instrumental rather than ideological support of homelessness solutions. Similarly, witnessing PEH do something nice for others or for you were positively associated with attitudes toward homelessness solutions and more supportive homelessness ideology. Personal experience with being homeless was positively associated with attitudes toward homelessness solutions and ideology. Lastly, having volunteered for a homeless shelter or other homelessness related non-profit/charity was associated with more supportive homelessness ideology.

Somewhat contrarily, the number of PEH known personally by the respondent was related to attitudes toward homelessness solutions, but the relationship was negative, such that the fewer PEH one knew personally the more positively they viewed homelessness solutions. The same was observed for homelessness ideology. All other contact/experience measurements were unrelated to homelessness solutions and ideology.

Hypothesis 2
This hypothesis was fully supported. Both homelessness solutions and homelessness ideology were related to all three outcome variables and in the expected direction. More favorable attitudes toward solutions and ideology were associated with more support of involvement of parks and recreation in addressing homelessness.

Table 4. Structural model, testing hypothesized relationships between items and laten variables

Latent variable	Predicted by	B	SE	Z	p	β
Role of P&R* in addressing homelessness (R^2 = .42)	Homelessness solutions	.44	.07	6.24	<.001	.33
	Homelessness ideology	.61	.09	7.03	<.001	.38
Ways that P&R can help address homelessness (R^2 = .68)	Homelessness solutions	.63	.05	13.59	<.001	.65
	Homelessness ideology	.28	.05	5.96	<.001	.24
Appropriateness of P&R addressing homelessness (R^2 = .30)	Homelessness solutions	.71	.11	6.64	<.001	.31
	Homelessness ideology	.85	.14	6.12	<.001	.30
Homelessness solutions (R^2 = .17)	How often do you see PEH** in your neighborhood?[a]	.09	.03	3.63	<.001	.16
	Do you see PEH during an average week?[b]	.002	.07	.03	.97	.001
	Has a person experiencing homelessness done something nice for you in the past year?[b]	.30	.06	5.24	<.001	.20
	Have you seen a person experiencing homelessness do something nice for someone other than you in the past year?[b]	.05	.02	2.25	.02	.07
	How often have you been approached by a person experiencing homelessness for money or other things in the past year?[a]	.04	.03	1.37	.17	.06
	Have you ever worked or volunteered in a homeless shelter or other homelessness related nonprofit/charity?[b]	.09	.05	1.72	.09	.06
	How many people experiencing homelessness have you known personally?(numerical value)	**-.0002**	**0.0000**	**-8.19**	**<.001**	**-.09**
	Has anyone in your immediate family ever experienced homelessness?[b]	-.07	.07	-1.06	.29	-.04
	Have you ever had a close friend that experienced homelessness?[b]	.03	.06	.53	.59	.02
	Have you ever had a time in your life when you considered yourself homeless?[2]	.03	.06	2.33	.02	.10

				.06		
			.15			
Homelessness ideology (R^2 = .26)	How often do you see PEH in your neighborhood?	.08	.02	*3.47*	*.001*	*.16*
	Do you see PEH during an average week?	-.06	.05	-1.20	.23	-.05
	Has a person experiencing homelessness done something nice for you in the past year?	**.31**	**.06**	**5.67**	**<.001**	**.25**
	Have you seen a person experiencing homelessness do something nice for someone other than you in the past year?	*.05*	*.02*	*2.65*	*.01*	*.08*
	How often have you been approached by a person experiencing homelessness for money or other things in the past year?	.01	.03	.32	.75	.01
	Have you ever worked or volunteered in a homeless shelter or other homelessness related nonprofit/charity?	**.20**	**.05**	**4.10**	**<.001**	**.25**
	How many people experiencing homelessness have you known personally?	**-.0001**	**0.0000**	**-9.84**	**<.001**	**-.10**
	Has anyone in your immediate family ever experienced homelessness?	.06	.06	1.13	.26	.05
	Have you ever had a close friend that experienced homelessness?	.02	.05	.40	.69	.02
	Have you ever had a time in your life when you considered yourself homeless?	*.11*	*.05*	*2.13*	*.03*	*.08*

*P&R = parks and recreation, **PEH = people experiencing homelessness. Model fit statistics: χ^2 = 4847.5, df = 1526, $p < .001$, Yuan-Bentler scaling correction factor = 1.24, robust CFI = .882, robust TLI = .876, robust RMSEA = .053, robust SRMR = .059.
[a] Scale: never, rarely, sometimes, often.
[b] Yes (1), No (0).
Bold indicates $p < .001$, italics indicates $p < .05$

Discussion

In this paper, we assessed relationships between the general public's experiences with homelessness, attitudes about homelessness, and support of using parks and recreation resources

to address homelessness. We have two main findings. First, exposure to, or prior experience with, homelessness – particularly positive interactions – is related to support of homelessness solutions and more positive ideology toward PEH. Put another way, contact with PEH – either neutrally in your neighborhood or positively through pro-social gestures and volunteering – is associated with more agreement with homelessness solutions and a more positive ideology toward PEH. Second, support of homelessness solutions and more positive ideology toward PEH are related to support of the involvement of parks and recreation in addressing homelessness. This finding indicates respondents feel parks and recreation agencies are an appropriate local entity to deal with homelessness in a humane manner. Since park and recreation agencies interact with PEH on a regular basis, and since our data show people largely support park and recreation agencies providing services to support PEH, they may be effective leaders in this effort.

There are differences in attitudes based on the type of contact. Knowing many PEH, versus a few or none, was not associated with more positive attitudes toward solutions nor more positive ideology. This could be because residence in an area with a high rate of homelessness may result in more antagonism toward PEH (B. A. Lee et al., 2004). Similarly, seeing PEH frequently (i.e., in an average week), being approached for money, or indirect experience (i.e., through a friend or family member) were not types of contact that were associated with more compassionate orientations toward PEH. Thus, the amount or type of homelessness encounters within one's town/city is an important indicator of attitudes. These findings could be further fleshed out in the future by connecting localized context to survey questions. For instance, encounters with PEH in spaces outside the purview of parks and recreation may be teased out from encounters within parks, to deepen our understanding of public opinion.

Although these particular findings depart from prior literature, we still found that most associations were in the expected positive direction, reflecting the general trend that the public has relatively compassionate views of PEH in general (B. A. Lee et al., 2004; Tsai, 2018; Tsai et al., 2019), and specifically in the context of parks and recreation (Pitas et al., 2021). This complexity in attitudes associated with different types of contact is interesting but not without precedent (B. A. Lee et al., 2004), and speaks to the reality that more research that includes a focus on local conditions is necessary to complement our more general analysis.

Interestingly, a large number of our respondents reported having experienced homelessness themselves in the past (33%). Although this proportion is substantially higher than estimated rates of lifetime homelessness in the U.S. population, it may reflect the reality that many people experience homelessness at some point in their lives; transitional or episodic homelessness is more common than chronic homelessness, less visible to outside observers, and may have increased in recent decades (Kuhn & Culhane, 1998; Link et al., 1994; Tsai, 2018).

This study provided some support for intergroup contact theory. We found that increased contact with people experiencing homelessness is related to more support of solutions and more positive ideology. This is in line with the theory, which states that more frequent contact with the group of interest leads to reduced prejudice and more positive feelings over time. Some items relating to exposure to homelessness were not significant, particularly those that were related to regular contact or negative contact, so we did not find full support of the theory. However, this could be because a national survey is necessarily divorced from local context, and thus opinions may shift in the absence of that context. Some prior research has critiqued this theory in the past, especially as it relates to parks and recreation (Mullenbach et al., 2022), though this study provided confirmation that it may hold up for certain types of contact with PEH. These findings align with prior work using ICT to assess prejudice against PEH, which espoused the importance of positive and high quality contact for developing positive attitudes toward PEH (Pettigrew & Hewstone, 2017; Smith & Stathi, 2021).

In line with past research on ICT, the findings of the present study showed that people hold different attitudes based on the nature of the contact. More robust contact – such as volunteering or witnessing an act – was related to slightly less favorable attitudes toward homelessness than more fleeting contact – such as seeing a person experiencing homelessness in the neighborhood. These nuanced findings raise questions for local governments about how to facilitate deeper positive contact with PEH that may lead to better relationships between housed residents and PEH. This may be important for municipalities given the growing homelessness population in many places. Additionally, these concerns may be addressed in future research.

As governments become more participatory, understanding the views of constituents is increasingly important. This study provides evidence that the general public has exposure to homelessness, and that this exposure may influence their views of how to address homelessness. Given relationships between ideology toward PEH and support of homelessness solutions and support of the involvement of parks and recreation resources to addressing homelessness, there are implications specifically for municipal parks and recreation. Park and recreation departments in municipalities across the country could help solve homelessness issues, and may have the support of voters who also hold more compassionate views of PEH and are in favor of park and recreation agency actions intended to support PEH (Pitas et al., 2021). Thus, municipalities trying to address crises related to homelessness could engage in several supportive actions, such as relying on and speaking to their constituents who hold more positive views of PEH to enact their agenda; encouraging positive contact with PEH through programming or events; and providing a sympathetic portrayal of this group in official communications.

However, despite these relationships, mean values for all constructs in the survey were relatively moderate/ neutral. Thus, although one's attitudes toward homelessness – regarding solutions, general ideology, and use of parks and recreation resources – are all related, overall views on homelessness are neutral. As mentioned previously, attitudes were stronger for some types of contact, but for many other types of contact, attitudes were close to neutral. For instance, the modal response to number of PEH known personally was zero, followed by one. Additionally, the mean value for an index of the items related to attitudes toward homelessness solutions is 3.79 on a 5-point scale, which lies between "neither disagree nor agree" and "agree" and thus does not indicate strong support of such solutions. Other indices show similar relative apathy. This is line with most other political issues and public sentiment, and although respondents do not agree strongly with many items, their opinions fall on the supportive side. These results have implications for public administration – of homelessness services and in general. For instance, if municipalities were to enact positive solutions to solve homelessness (e.g., by providing housing and/or jobs), there may be little pushback by constituents. Although this study focused only on homelessness service delivery, the findings imply that the general public favors using some government resources to address this public issue – a finding that may translate to other local government services. Additionally, municipalities may consider communicating in ways that humanize PEH or portray them more positively, given that the public's opinions are not crystallized, are subject to change, and do not rely solely on contact to form. This possibility is an important one for local governments to consider.

Limitations

Although we do offer some interesting and significant findings, we also extend caution in the interpretation of our results, and call for future work that addresses some limitations. Specifically, the scale of our work is national, despite the fact that homelessness is an issue with largely localized impacts. Our findings are from a national sample of respondents answering

about hypothetical situations, and although respondents provided responses based on their experiences from their own location, future work situated within a localized framework may add additional context to the findings that we report. Just as this manuscript – focused on local public park and recreation agencies – provides additional nuance to more general national-level data towards homelessness (i.e., Tsai et al., 2019), future work situated in a localized context will extend on the results we provide here and allow for further validation of the relationships that we report here.

Our use of Qualtrics panel data has its limitations. Despite increasing popularity of online survey platforms to purchase samples, as well as literature to support its legitimacy (Boas et al., 2020), Qualtrics completes the sampling themselves and performs its own response quality checks. As a means of ensuring high-quality data, we inserted multiple ways to minimize poor quality data (e.g., attention checks, forced choice). Additionally, we piloted several new survey items in this study, which should be tested with additional samples, even if our measurement models had good fit in the present study. Further, this study adapted items from established scales, though these scales originated nearly three decades ago (Guzewicz & Takooshian, 1992; Phelan et al., 1997). Thus, it is possible that despite our updated language that these sentiments are no longer salient with the general public. A survey asking about specific local policies, rather than general policies presented hypothetically and asking respondents to respond in light of their own town or city, or interviews to supplement the survey data, could have strengthened our findings. As with any study that uses surveys to collect data, it is possible our findings reflect social desirability bias, in which respondents select answer choices that reflect socially desirable opinions rather than their true attitudes. That said, prior work in parks and recreation has shown that people place parks and recreation low in the priority list of government services, possibly indicating that people are more willing to use parks and recreation to solve homelessness issues, but not other local government actions (Barrett et al., 2017; Pitas et al., 2017). A study which does directly test ICT may contribute more strongly to theoretical advancement (B. A. Lee et al., 2004). Lastly, although structural equation modeling is equipped to make causal statements assuming a correct underlying theory, our data were cross-sectional and thus we cannot make claims regarding causality or direct, one-way influences of opinion.

Future research

Despite the limitations described in the preceding section, we feel that our work provides a number of future research directions that can address many of these concerns. Additionally, our work speaks to general national trends in opinion, which could be augmented through additional inquiry. The best way to improve this line of work in future studies is to conduct localized, contextualized research. Given heterogeneity in homelessness rates and approaches to solutions in municipalities across the U.S., future research should translate our findings to smaller scales – such as studies conducted at the community level – to further assess opinions regarding homelessness solutions within local contexts. This research could include additional local information, such as the extent that the location uses a collaborative approach in their Continuum of Care – and its structure, if so – as well as attitudes toward specific local policies addressing homelessness, housing development, or park management, which could bring out stronger opinions or highlight more firm relationships among sets of opinions (Sullivan et al., 2021).

Additionally, this study did not measure the opinions of local officials, nonprofit partners, or others who work directly either in parks and recreation or on issues related to homelessness; however, understanding views of this group would be the next logical step in this research. Related to this, future research should investigate whether parks and recreation represent a more

effective "frontline" service provider than traditional providers, and whether the public supports shifting funding from those traditional providers to parks and recreation services.

To respond to calls in prior research, future work may consider studying the effects of negative contact on opinions of PEH (Mullenbach et al., 2022). Lastly, future studies should introduce comparisons across different relevant groups, such as high- and low-income groups, or political ideologies, as these characteristics may influence attitudes toward both homelessness and government action. For instance, future studies could conduct quasi-experimental vignette studies to test several hypothetical scenarios, or conduct pilot programs within parks, of interaction between PEH in parks and other park users.

Recently, several U.S. states (e.g., Missouri, Tennessee, Texas) have acted to criminalize homeless encampments on public land, which pose complications for municipalities who wish to allow camping in their parks (Edelman, 2022; Garnham, 2021; Rivas, 2022). Although these laws are new and their implications are as yet unknown, we can hypothesize that local government agencies and nonprofit partners are scrambling to house people in the states where encampments have been outlawed. In municipalities that are more progressive in their approach to homelessness, it is possible the laws are being inconsistently enforced, based on the city or town's resources to temporarily house PEH who had been camping on public land. In some instances, these states outlawed encampments but did not provide local governments with financial or other resources, leaving enforcement of the law up to individual places. Given these recent laws, using parks as a place to temporarily house PEH would not be a viable option, but using parks and recreation resources that do not involve camping in parks, and using parks and recreation as a connecting service, a la CoC, could still be a viable solution in line with public sentiment (Pitas et al., 2021). These recent law changes may provide an opportunity to witness public reactions and gauge their response to their local government's action on these new laws – which may confirm or refute the findings of the present study regarding general support for public services for PEH.

Conclusion

Our findings show the general public is in favor of involving parks and recreation in addressing homelessness, and that this support stems in part from positive ideology and attitudes regarding people experiencing homelessness and solutions. The representative nature of our sample indicates these views may be representative of the U.S. general public. If cities and towns across the country were to implement strategies to assist in the growing homelessness issue, this study provides evidence of general support of certain types of solutions, including using parks and recreation as a frontline resource to implement these solutions. Lastly, experience with homelessness was shown to relate to broader homelessness attitudes and ideology; thus, with homelessness on the rise – and potentially more exposure to people experiencing homelessness – we may see these positive attitudes toward solving homelessness in the public sector increase and grow more strongly in the future. However, further localized study is necessary to confirm this.

Disclosure statement

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Appendix: Measurement model results

Table A1. Measurement model with factor loadings for items related to homelessness solutions, homelessness ideology, parks and recreation involvement, and sharing resources with parks and recreation.

Latent Variable	Item	*B*	*SE*	*Z*	*p*	β
Homelessness solutions	Society should have to house PEH*	1	0			.67
	Federal gov't should spend more on affordable housing	1.07	.05	22.05	<.001	.80
	More affordable housing would reduce homelessness	1.08	.05	22.24	<.001	.80
	Rent subsidies would reduce homelessness	1.09	.05	22.45	<.001	.80
	Federal government should spend more on rent subsidies	1.14	.06	20.69	<.001	.82

	Federal gov't should spend more for temporary housing	1.08	.05	23.84	<.001	.79
	More temporary housing would reduce homelessness	1.00	.05	20.51	<.001	.76
	A shortage of gov't aid contributes to homelessness	1.14	.05	22.97	<.001	.78
	Federal gov't should spend more on welfare benefits	1.25	.05	22.73	<.001	.80
	Raising the minimum wage would reduce homelessness	1.12	.06	19.97	<.001	.70
	More welfare benefits would reduce homelessness	1.23	.05	22.58	<.001	.77
	The federal government should raise the minimum wage	1.03	.06	17.66	<.001	.68
	Child care programs would reduce homelessness	1.03	.05	19.16	<.001	.68
	Federal gov't should give tax breaks for housing for PEH	.98	.05	19.02	<.001	.74
	Lack of affordable housing contributes to homelessness	1.01	.05	19.38	<.001	.75
	Federal gov't should give free drug and alcohol treatment	.99	.05	18.27	<.001	.69
	Most PEH could take care of a home	.80	.05	16.21	<.001	.60
	Federal gov't should spend more on mental health service	.84	.05	16.67	<.001	.67
Homelessness ideology	For many experiencing homelessness, it is not their fault	1	0			.56
	Have the right to sleep in public places	1.53	.10	15.37	<.001	.80
	Have the right to set up tents in parks	1.67	.11	14.78	<.001	.81
	PEH should be allowed to panhandle	1.49	.10	14.75	<.001	.75
	Have just as much of a right to be in parks as others	.98	.07	14.47	<.001	.61
	Should be allowed to gather in public places	1.12	.07	15.35	<.001	.67
Ways that parks & recreation can help address homelessness	Provide temporary shelter during severe weather/temps	1	0			.74
	Provide access to free meals at facilities	1.11	.04	24.84	<.001	.77
	Allow access to facilities during specific days/times	.96	.04	23.20	<.001	.74

	Be involved with local homeless service organizations	1.07	.04	25.15	<.001	.78
	Conduct outreach to PEH to connect them with resources	.94	.04	21.49	<.001	.73
	Train staff to build productive relationships with PEH	.93	.05	18.12	<.001	.72
	Develop recreation programs specifically for PEH	1.05	.05	22.15	<.001	.74
	Connect PEH to permanent housing	.97	.05	19.64	<.001	.73
	Donate park land for affordable housing to be built on	1.12	.06	18.18	<.001	.65
Role of parks & recreation in addressing homelessness	It is the duty of P&R** to help address homelessness	1	0			.82
	P&R depts are equipped to help address homelessness 1	1.02	.04	27.29	<.001	.80
	P&R have an obligation to help PEH who live in parks	1.07	.04	30.09	<.001	.85
Appropriateness of using . . . resources to help parks & recreation address homelessness	Education	1	0			.81
	Libraries	.93	.02	42.18	<.001	.80
	Public welfare	.83	.03	27.94	<.001	.78
	Hospitals	1.12	.02	47.97	<.001	.88
	Health	1.07	.03	39.21	<.001	.88
	Police	.95	.03	29.25	<.001	.79
	Corrections	.87	.03	27.41	<.001	.77
	Fire	.90	.03	28.93	<.001	.77
	Housing	.85	.03	24.99	<.001	.76
	Community development	.76	.03	23.12	<.001	.74
	Transportation	.92	.03	35.15	<.001	.84
	General fund	.67	.03	19.22	<.001	.67

*PEH = people experiencing homelessness, **P&R = parks and recreation. Model fit statistics: $\chi^2 = 4847.5$, df = 1526, p < .001, Yuan-Bentler scaling correction factor = 1.24, robust CFI = .882, robust TLI = .876, robust RMSEA = .053, robust SRMR = .059.