

Inclusive Labels: Label Effects on Perceptions and Behaviors Toward Unhoused Individuals

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Abstract

This study investigates how inclusive labels, compared to stigmatizing terms, shape public perceptions and prosocial behaviors toward unhoused individuals. Drawing on theories of labeling and stigma, we hypothesized that person-centered labels (e.g., “people experiencing housing insecurity”) would reduce stigma and stereotypes and increase donations. A preregistered online experiment with 400 U.S. adults tested these hypotheses using a between-subjects design. Participants viewed materials referencing either “the homeless” (stigmatizing label) or “people experiencing housing insecurity” (inclusive label). Results supported H1: inclusive labels significantly reduced stigma and negative stereotypes. However, H2 was unsupported, as donations did not differ between conditions. Stigma negatively correlated with donation amounts, but stereotypes showed no relationship. Exploratory analyses found no moderation by political orientation or age. These findings highlight the potential of inclusive labels to mitigate stigma, though additional strategies are needed to bridge the gap between attitudinal and behavioral change. Implications for advocacy, policy communication, and future research are discussed.

Keywords: Inclusive Language, stigma, homelessness, prosocial behavior, labeling effects

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On a given day in January 2023, roughly 653,104 people, or about 20 of every 10,000 people, experienced homelessness across the United States. This is the highest number of people who reported experiencing homelessness on a single night since 2007 based on the report by Tanya de Sousa et al. (2023). Although experiences vary within the unhoused population, people often categorize individuals experiencing housing insecurity with the broad and stigmatized label “*the homeless*” (J. Phelan et al., 1997). This label contains negative biases that can affect the public’s perception, attitude, and behavior toward unhoused individuals. Therefore, it is important to understand how different labels influence public responses to homelessness in order to develop effective and caring social interventions and policies to support this marginalized group.

Label Effects

Labels play a fundamental role in social cognition and can shape how individuals categorize and interact with labeled individuals. Humans can comprehend others by assigning labels through descriptive-to-prescriptive reasoning, a skill they developed from early childhood (Roberts et al., 2021; Roberts, 2022). However, labeling can not only reduce our cognitive load as a mental shortcut but also backfire on our perceptions, judgments, and behaviors, which may lead to biases and stereotypes (Feroni & Rothbart, 2013). Socially stigmatized labels, in particular, can negatively influence individuals’ behaviors and willingness to help members of associated groups. For example, labels such as “mentally ill” and “welfare recipient” are linked to public perceptions that those labeled are responsible for their situation, thereby reducing sympathy, increasing the preference for social distance, and creating a reluctance to offer support (Angermeyer & Matschinger, 2003; Pescosolido et al., 2013).

However, notably, the same stigmatizing labels can sometimes evoke compassion if people view the labeled group as severely disadvantaged or morally deserving of help. For instance, when people in poverty are perceived as not responsible for their financial hardship, the same stigmatizing label, “the poor,” arouses more sympathy (D. J. Phelan et al., 2008; Weiner et al., 2011). This mixed effect of stigmatized labels can help understand public responses to

marginalized groups, as certain stigmatized labels may simultaneously reinforce negative stereotypes and invoke moral obligations. Moreover, the influence of stigmatized labels on prosocial behaviors remains unclear, particularly whether such labels facilitate or inhibit helping behaviors. Nevertheless, the previous studies about label effects showed more evidence for the negative impact of stigmatizing labels. Therefore, in order to replace the conventional and stigmatized labels, many new terms have been developed in recent years, known as inclusive labels.

Inclusive Labels

Inclusive language often emphasizes the personhood of individuals, preferring terms like “person who is incarcerated” or “person living with HIV” to “prisoner” or “HIV-infected patient” (Tran et al., 2018). Inclusive language has been considered as an alternative to traditional and often stigmatizing labels, which may reduce the negative impact of labeling on underrepresented and marginalized groups (Bedell et al., 2018; Tran et al., 2018). The shift toward inclusive terms is based on the belief that language shapes thoughts. It suggests that non-stigmatizing labels might help alter public attitudes and reduce bias. However, there are debates about the effectiveness of inclusive languages: some argue that inclusive language emphasizes group differences, potentially reinforcing divisions, while others believe it can diminish stigmatization by promoting respectful language (Duarte et al., 2015). Mental health, physical health, and incarceration are the most well-studied topics in the existing research on the use of inclusive language. Studies in mental health, for instance, indicate that the more person-centered labels (i.e., inclusive labels) can reduce negative stereotyping by reframing individuals as people first rather than as representatives of a stigmatized category. For example, “person with schizophrenia” fosters empathy and reduces stigma compared to categorical terms like “schizophrenic” (Corrigan et al., 2003).

However, while inclusive labels have shown influence in reducing stigmatized beliefs toward some marginalized groups, their effectiveness in fostering supportive behaviors has not been well-studied. Nevertheless, each underrepresented and marginalized group has its own characteristics and social perceptions. Therefore, the conclusions from one group cannot be

directly applied to another group. Compared to other conditions, unhoused individuals, as an unignorable marginalized social group, have been understudied in the topic of inclusive label effects.

Labels for Unhoused Individuals

Homelessness is associated with high levels of stigma and stigmatized labels that frame individuals as abnormal or morally responsible for their circumstances. Conventional but stigmatized terms like “the homeless” can evoke stereotypes, reduce public empathy, and reinforce societal distance from unhoused individuals (Belcher & DeForge, 2012). They may thereby decrease people’s direct support for unhoused individuals and the support for policies or interventions aimed at helping them. Inclusive terms such as “people who experience housing insecurity” attempt to reframe homelessness as a condition rather than an identity, highlighting the external factors contributing to housing insecurity.

Previous studies have explored public perceptions of homelessness and the factors influencing support for homeless services (Belcher & DeForge, 2012; Kim et al., 2023; J. Phelan et al., 1997), but research specifically investigating the effect of labeling on public attitudes and willingness to help remains limited. Studies on other marginalized groups have shown that label choice significantly affects stigmatization and support (Angermeyer & Matschinger, 2003; Corrigan et al., 2003). However, few studies have examined whether inclusive language can shift public opinion and behavior toward unhoused individuals. Hence, in order to address the gaps in label effects on helping behaviors and in homelessness study, this thesis will focus on the role of inclusive language, or person-centered labeling specifically, in reducing stigma and fostering prosocial behaviors toward unhoused individuals.

Research Question & Hypothesis

In the present study, we will explore the question: can inclusive language, specifically person-centered labeling, reduce perceptions of stigma and stereotypes and foster prosocial behaviors toward unhoused individuals among English-speaking adults? Previous studies show that compared to conventional terms, inclusive terms for stigmatized groups will foster empathy

and reduce stigma ([Angermeyer & Matschinger, 2003](#); [Pescosolido et al., 2013](#)). Aligning with these studies, we hypothesize that inclusive terms will reduce perceptions of stigma and stereotypes of unhoused individuals (Hypothesis 1). Furthermore, since conventional labels may make the public think the labeled individuals are responsible for their situations and thus create a reluctance to offer support, we hypothesize that using inclusive labels will foster people's helping behaviors toward unhoused individuals (Hypothesis 2).

Understanding these questions may facilitate society and organizations to develop more effective and reliable interventions and methods to alter the negative perceptions toward unhoused individuals and promote the public's helping behaviors. Moreover, understanding the effect of language may help to avoid the backfires from language misuse in well-intended behaviors.

Method

Participants

A total of 399 participants were recruited from an online experiment platform (e.g., Prolific) and directed to an online survey hosted on Qualtrics. All included participants will be: (1) adult US citizens or permanent residents; and (2) English speakers with English as their first language. Participants will be excluded if they do not pass an attention check. On completing the survey (approximately 13 minutes), respondents will receive compensation at the rate of \$12/hour. 9 participants were excluded due to failing attention checks. Thus the final sample size was 390.

Design and Procedure

The current study will use a cross-sectional online experiment in a survey format. Participants will be randomly assigned to either inclusive or conventional label conditions. In the inclusive label condition, participants will be exposed to the term “people experiencing housing insecurity,”¹ while in the conventional label condition, they will encounter the term “the homeless.” Participants will complete a series of measures assessing their perceptions of stigma,

¹ The term “people experiencing housing insecurity” was chosen based on previous research on inclusive language and homelessness ([Bedell et al., 2018](#); [Tran et al., 2018](#)).

stereotypes, and supportive behaviors toward unhoused individuals.

Measures

The survey will measure participants' perceptions of stigma, stereotypes, and support toward the labeled group. Perceived stigma is measured with 6 items divided into three categories:

1. Responsibility (n=2) (e.g., “[label] is responsible for their condition.”);
2. Social distance (n=3) (e.g., “I would be willing to have [label] as my close personal friend.”);
3. And danger (n=1) (e.g., “[label] is dangerous.”).

The measures of responsibility and danger are developed for the current study, and the measures for social distance are derived from a validated questionnaire ([Mitelman et al., 2023](#)). Participants will indicate how much they agree with each item using a 5-point Likert scale (from 1 = “strongly disagree” to 5 = “strongly agree”).

Participants' stereotypes will be measured with the 8-item Abbreviated Questionnaire from the Stereotype Content Model ([Fiske et al., 2002](#)). Participants will report their beliefs on unhoused individuals' competence, warmth, status, and competition. They will respond to each item on a 5-point Likert scale (from 1 = “not at all” to 5 = “extremely”; or 1 = “strongly disagree” to 5 = “strongly agree”).

To measure supportive behavior in a relatively realistic setting, participants will be asked to distribute a \$100 donation among three organizations: one focused on unhoused individuals, one dedicated to children, and one for animals. After reading brief descriptions of the organizations, with the labels in the unhoused organization descriptions assigned according to their label conditions, participants can allocate the funds to each organization as they choose, with a total of \$100 required. The amount allocated to the unhoused organization will be recorded as their supportive behavior to unhoused individuals (see [Table 1](#) for detailed measures and items).

At the end of the survey, the demographics of participants will be collected, including their age, gender, education level, and annual household income. This study was approved by the

University of Chicago Social and Behavioral IRB Office (**H11209**). Informed consent will be obtained from all participants.

Table 1

Main Measures

	Measures	Items
Survey Measures	Stigma $N = 6$	[Label] are responsible for their condition
	<i>Likert (1-5)</i>	[Label] are dangerous
		It is better to be away from [Label].
	Stereotypes $N = 8$	How competent are [Label]?
	<i>Likert (1-5)</i>	How well educated are [Label]? How warmhearted are [Label]?
Behavioral Measures	Donation \$100	Covenant House - For [Label]
		Save the Children
		American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to
		Animals (ASPCA)

Note. Stigma measures include: Responsibility, danger, social distance; Stereotypes measures include: Competence, warmth, status, competition.

Result

H1: Person-Centered Labels and Perceptions

Stigma

A one-way ANOVA revealed significant differences in perceptions of stigma between participants exposed to inclusive labels and conventional labels. For stigma (average across responsibility, social distance, and dangerousness), the main effect of label condition was significant ($F(1, 388) = 8.24, p = .004$) (see Figure 1). Participants in the inclusive label condition reported lower stigma perceptions ($M = 2.07, SD = 0.71$) compared to those in the

conventional label condition ($M = 2.28$, $SD = 0.73$).

Stereotypes

Similarly, a one-way ANOVA revealed that stereotype perceptions (average across competence, warmth, status, and competition) also differed significantly by label condition ($F(1, 388) = 7.43$, $p = .007$) (see Figure 2). The inclusive label associated with lower negative stereotypes ($M = 3.37$, $SD = 0.52$) than the conventional label ($M = 3.51$, $SD = 0.53$).

Figure 1

Stigma: Conventional vs. Inclusive Labels

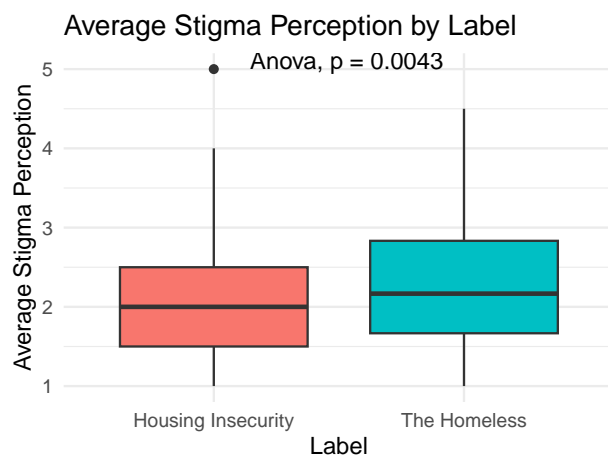
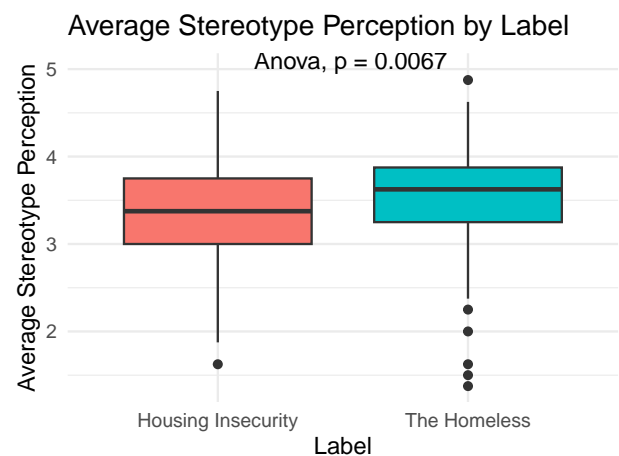


Figure 2

Stereotype: Conventional vs. Inclusive Labels



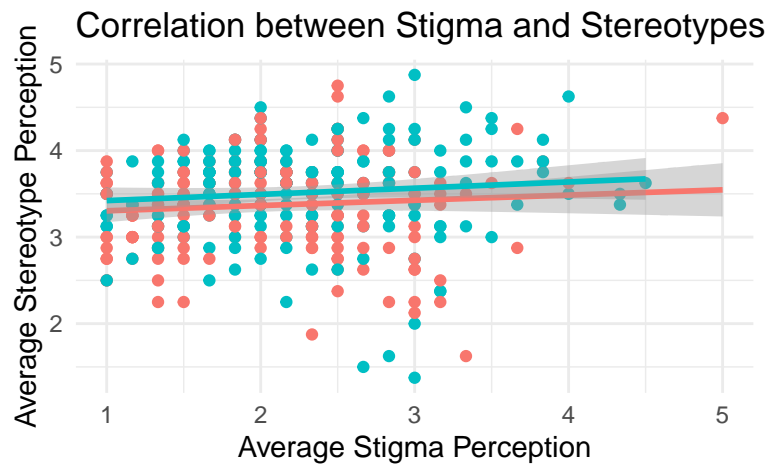
Stigma and Stereotypes Correlation

Furthermore, stigma and stereotypes were significantly positively correlated ($r(388) = 0.11$, $p = 0.031$), suggesting that lower stigma perceptions co-occurred with reduced stereotypical beliefs.

These findings support Hypothesis 1. They suggest that person-centered inclusive labels can reduce stigma and stereotypes toward unhoused individuals. When people see inclusive labels, they are less likely to hold stigmatizing beliefs and stereotypes about the labeled group, which is unhoused individuals in this case.

Figure 3

Stigma vs. Stereotypes



H2: Person-Centered Labels vs. Donations

Donation Distribution

Among the three organizations, average donation to the unhoused organization is the highest (report mean donation to unhoused) compared to children (report mean donation to children) and animal (report mean donation to animal) organizations (see Figure 4).

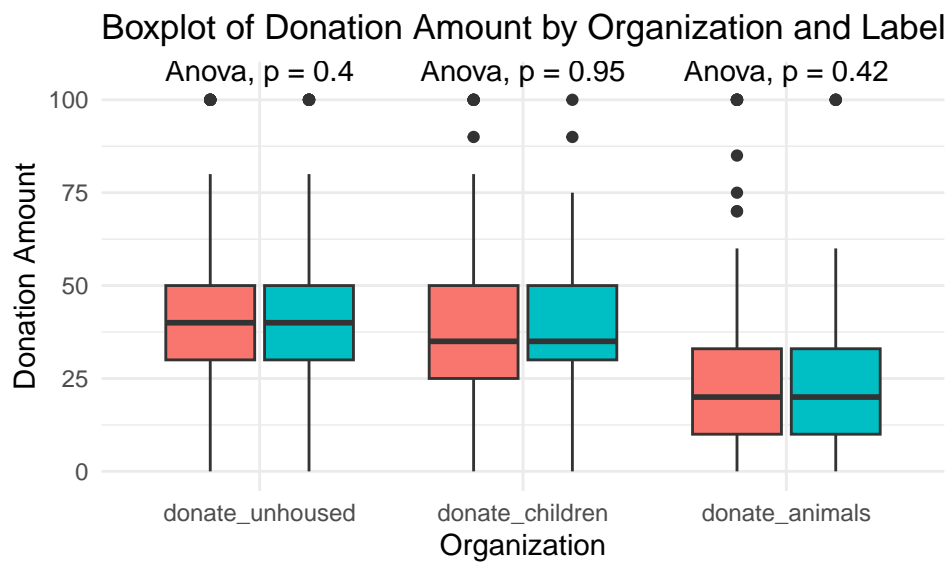
Among the three organizations, participants allocated the highest average donation to the unhoused organization ($M = \$41.17$, $SD = 20.71$), followed by children ($M = \$35.44$, $SD = 18.49$) and animal organizations ($M = \$23.4$, $SD = 20.25$).

Donation to Unhoused Org. by Label

Donation, however, did not significantly differ by label $F(1, 388) = 0.71$, $p = .402$. Participants in the inclusive label condition did not donate more to the unhoused organization ($M = 40.29$, $SD = 21.06$) compared to those in the conventional label condition ($M = 42.06$, $SD = 20.36$). Moreover, the donation to children and animal organizations also did not differ by label (see Figure 4). Thus, Hypothesis 2 was not supported. Labeling did not influence donation behaviors toward unhoused individuals in our study setting.

Figure 4

Donation Distribution by Label



H3: Perceptions vs. Donation

A linear regression was conducted to predict donations to the unhoused organization based on stigma perceptions and label condition. The overall model was significant ($F(3, 386) = 9.4$, $p < .001$, R^2 of 0.068). Stigma perception negatively predicted donation amounts to the unhoused organization ($b = -8.24$, $SE = 2.01$, $t = -4.1$, $p < .001$), such that higher stigma was associated with lower donations. However, this relationship did not differ by label condition ($b = 1.8$, $SE = 2.82$, $t = 0.64$, $p = 0.522$) (see Table 2 and Figure 5).

Table 2

Regression for Stigma Predicting Donation to Unhoused Organization by Label

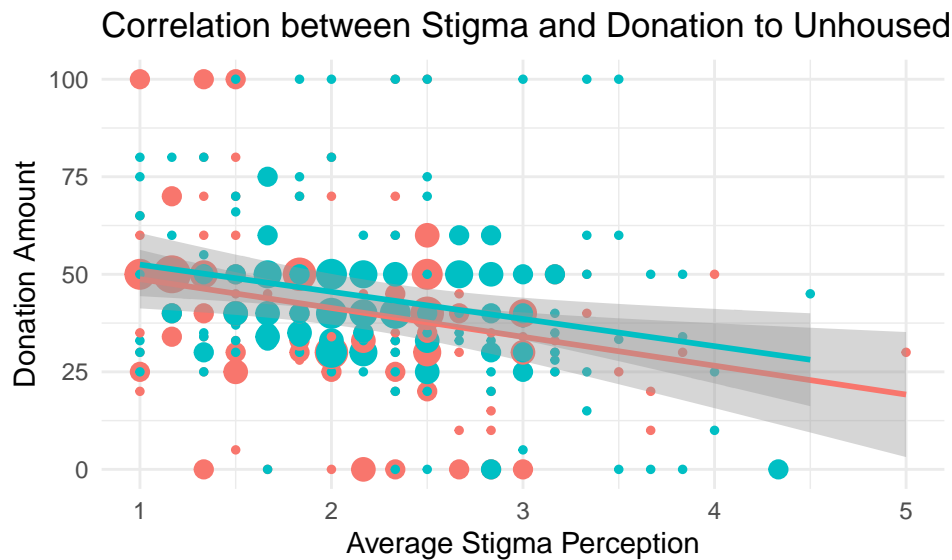
	Estimate	Std. Error	t value	Pr(> t)
(Intercept)	39.437	1.445	27.294	0.000
stigma_avg_c	-8.240	2.010	-4.100	0.000
labelThe Homeless	3.304	2.054	1.609	0.109
stigma_avg_c:labelThe Homeless	1.804	2.817	0.640	0.522

Stereotype perception, however, showed no significant correlation with donation amounts ($r(388) = 0$, $p = 0.927$), suggesting stereotypes alone did not directly influence prosocial behavior.

These results partially support Hypothesis 3, as stigma—but not stereotypes—predicted

Figure 5

Stigma vs. Donation



= .057) (see Figure 7), with older participants in the inclusive label condition allocating slightly more to the unhoused organization compared to younger participants.

Figure 6

Donation by Political Orientation and Label

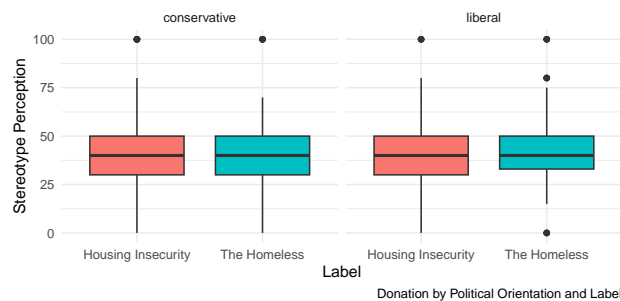
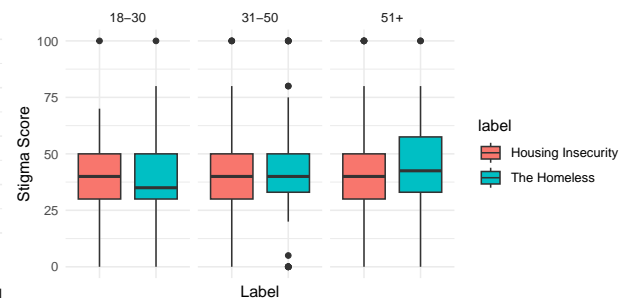


Figure 7

Donation by Age Group and Label



Discussion

Consistent with H1, we found that using inclusive labels significantly reduced stigma and negative stereotypes toward unhoused individuals. Participants who encountered the term “people experiencing housing insecurity” perceived less responsibility, social distance, and dangerousness associated with this group compared to those who were exposed to the term “the homeless.”

These findings align with prior research on labeling effects ([Link & Phelan, 2001](#)) and suggest that language plays a crucial role in mitigating dehumanizing perceptions and promoting a more empathetic understanding of marginalized populations.

Contrary to H2, however, donation behaviors did not significantly differ between label conditions. While participants allocated the highest average donation to organizations supporting the unhoused, the choice of label did not appear to influence the amount contributed. This finding suggests that while inclusive labels can shift attitudes, they may not be sufficient to drive behavioral change, a pattern observed in other domains of prosocial action ([Cialdini et al., 1990](#)). This highlights a key limitation of linguistic interventions in affecting tangible outcomes, suggesting that other motivational factors may play a more critical role in prosocial decision-making.

In partial support of H3, stigma negatively predicted donation behavior, indicating that participants with higher stigma perceptions allocated fewer resources to the unhoused organization. However, stereotypes did not significantly correlate with donation amounts, suggesting that cognitive evaluations of competence or warmth may be less influential in prosocial giving than affective responses associated with stigma. This aligns with research indicating that emotional rather than cognitive factors often drive charitable behavior ([Small et al., 2007](#)).

Theoretical and Practical Implications

Our findings contribute to the literature on stigma reduction and prosocial behavior by demonstrating the nuanced effects of labeling on both attitudinal and behavioral outcomes. While inclusive labels can reduce stigma and stereotypes, their limited impact on donation behavior suggests that additional interventions are needed to bridge the gap between perception and action. Future research should explore whether message framing (e.g., emphasizing personal agency or structural causes of homelessness) or direct appeals to moral responsibility can enhance the effectiveness of labeling interventions.

Additionally, our exploratory analyses suggest that age may play a role in moderating the relationship between labeling and donation behavior. Older participants in the inclusive label

condition tended to donate slightly more, indicating that generational differences in attitudes toward inclusive language may influence behavioral responses. Further research should investigate how demographic factors shape the receptiveness to linguistic framing in social advocacy contexts.

Limitations and Future Directions

Despite its contributions, this study has several limitations. First, our measure of donation behavior was hypothetical rather than actual monetary contributions, which may limit the ecological validity of our findings. Future studies should incorporate real donation decisions to assess whether labeling effects persist in real-world charitable giving. Second, our sample was drawn from an online platform, which may not fully represent the diversity of attitudes found in the general population. Replicating this study with broader and more diverse participant pools would enhance the generalizability of our results.

Another limitation is the potential influence of social desirability bias. Participants may have reported lower stigma in response to inclusive labels due to perceived social norms rather than genuine attitudinal shifts. Future research could address this concern using implicit measures of bias or behavioral indicators of stigma, such as willingness to interact with unhoused individuals.

Finally, while our study focused on a single linguistic intervention, future research should explore how labels interact with other messaging strategies, such as narratives that emphasize personal stories of homelessness or structural explanations for housing insecurity. Combining linguistic reframing with evidence-based persuasion techniques may offer a more comprehensive approach to reducing stigma and promoting prosocial action.

Conclusion

Overall, this study provides compelling evidence that inclusive labels can meaningfully reduce stigma and stereotypes associated with homelessness. However, their limited effect on donation behavior underscores the complexity of translating attitudinal change into prosocial action. These findings have important implications for advocacy groups and policymakers seeking

to design effective communication strategies that not only alter perceptions but also encourage tangible support for marginalized communities. Future research should continue exploring how linguistic interventions, combined with motivational and structural factors, can foster both attitudinal and behavioral change in addressing social issues.

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