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Faceless, nameless, invisible: a visual content analysis of photographs in U.S. media coverage about homelessness

Elizabeth A. Bowen and Nicole Capozziello

School of Social Work, University at Buffalo, State University of New York, Buffalo, NY, USA

ABSTRACT

Media coverage plays an important role in shaping public opinion and approaching solutions to homelessness in the United States and beyond. Scant prior research has shown that stories often highlight individual rather than structural causes and solutions to the issue, while also perpetuating anti-homelessness stigma and stereotypes. However, few studies have looked specifically at the role of photography in media stories about homelessness. In this study, we used content analysis methodology to assess features of 226 photographs accompanying stories about homelessness from U.S. news media outlets in 2019. Our analysis found that presumably homeless people were frequently photographed without eye contact and were not identified by name in captions, and that photographs often featured homelessness paraphernalia (e.g. tents, shopping carts) but rarely depicted affordable housing. These findings affirmed the dehumanizing nature of news photographs about homelessness, and underscore the importance of partnering with the media to raise awareness of stigma and ultimately bring about policy change.

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Introduction

Homelessness is an ongoing crisis around the world. In the United States, official point-in-time counts estimated that approximately 580,000 people were homeless on a single night in January 2020 (Henry et al., 2021). Homelessness advocates and researchers widely consider this to be an under-estimate of the true extent of the problem, given that this is based on a narrow definition of homelessness excluding people who are couch-surfing or precariously housed, as well as the challenges inherent in finding and enumerating people experiencing homelessness (Boone, 2019).

Homelessness is a particularly acute and growing problem in the West Coast region of the United States. As of 2019, an estimated 27% of the entire U.S. homeless population lived in the West Coast state of California; between 2017 and 2018,

CONTACT Elizabeth A. Bowen eabowen@buffalo.edu School of Social Work, University at Buffalo, State University of New York, 685 Baldy Hall, Buffalo, NY 14260, USA.

homelessness in California increased by 16.4%, far outpacing the national increase of 2.7% during this same time period (Gabriel & Ciudad-Real, 2020; Henry et al., 2021). In California as well as nationally, rising homelessness is linked with the growing cost of housing relative to income, particularly in the rental housing market (Glynn et al., 2021).

A potential barrier to ending homelessness is the fact that people experiencing homelessness are highly stigmatized, in the United States, Canada, Australia, and elsewhere (Chamberlain & Johnson, 2018; Omerov et al., 2020; Torino & Sisselman-Borgia, 2017). Although stigma is shaped by many factors, media coverage and framing can reflect and exacerbate stigma, influencing public perception of social issues and ultimately public policy responses (Best, 2010; Yanovitzky & Weber, 2019). Therefore, this study uses visual content analysis to examine the extent to which photography in U.S. news stories about homelessness—an under-researched area of media analysis—conveys elements of stigma and dehumanization, thus contributing to these dynamics.

Homelessness stigma and social problem framing

Although the existence of homelessness in the United States is not widely disputed, whether homelessness is viewed as a social problem necessitating public action or a primarily individual problem is a contested topic (Bogard, 2003). Theoretically, if an issue is viewed as a social problem, it is more likely to be acted upon, receiving more attention and public resources than if it were not (Best, 2010). Several scholars argue that homelessness is indeed a social problem, in that it has complex social determinants and ultimately impacts public health and the wellbeing and economy of society as a whole (Aykanian & Lee, 2016; Padgett et al., 2016; Tsai et al., 2017). In contrast, perceptions of homelessness as a social problem have long coexisted with individualistic views that center persons experiencing homelessness as solely responsible for their situations, attributing homelessness primarily to perceived personal traits such as laziness (Belcher & DeForge, 2012; Torino & Sisselman-Borgia, 2017).

Key to the public perception of social problems is the question of how individuals experiencing the problem are viewed, which can be both complex and fluid (Best, 2010). Specifically, the extent to which a population is stigmatized both reflects and shapes assumptions about the causes and possible policy solutions to a problem (Belcher & DeForge, 2012). Link & Phelan (2001) propose that stigma has several components, all of which are dependent upon being in a society in which there is unequal social, economic, and political power. Stigma begins with the distinguishing and labelling of human differences, such as various degrees of being housed (Link & Phelan, 2001). Then, dominant cultural beliefs connect those labeled as lacking housing with undesirable characteristics, like being dirty, dangerous, or untrustworthy (Farrugia, 2011). Society places such persons into a distinct category ('homeless'), creating a separation of 'us' and 'them' (Link & Phelan, 2001). Finally, individuals experience status loss and discrimination in arenas such as housing, employment, or healthcare as a result of this labeling, leading to unequal outcomes (Link & Phelan, 2001). In fact, Hatzenbuehler et al. (2013) argue that

stigma is a fundamental cause of inequities in health and quality of life at the population level.

Stigma adds to the numerous challenges that people experiencing homelessness face in their day-to-day survival. For this population, being the object of stigma has been linked to an array of negative impacts on health and wellbeing, including higher emotional distress, an increase in depressive and psychotic symptoms, and reduced social connections (Mejia-Lancheros et al., 2020). In addition, homelessness-related stigma impacts people's mental and physical health as well as their relationships, including their choice to interact with healthcare and other systems (Omerov et al., 2020; Weisz & Quinn, 2018). For instance, Omerov et al. (2020) found that individuals who were homeless often reported experiencing stigma and discrimination from healthcare professionals, which in turn negatively affected their wellbeing and willingness to seek care. The stigma associated with homelessness can persist even after people exit homelessness and obtain stable housing (Chamberlain & Johnson, 2018).

In addition to these effects at the individual level, homelessness stigma also has structural implications. An outgrowth of stigma is dehumanization, when members of a group are perceived as not fully human and instead as objects evoking disgust, hatred, or other negative emotions (Harris & Fiske, 2006). The dehumanization of marginalized groups shapes policy responses and the extent to which public resources are allocated or denied. For example, scholarship on the history of the HIV/AIDS epidemic in the United States links the dehumanization of gay people, people using injection drugs, and racial minorities to the federal government's 'broad indifference' and policy inaction as the epidemic spread rapidly in the 1980s (Stewart-Winter, 2020). Thus, the dynamics of stigma and dehumanization are a critical factor, affecting the extent to which homelessness is seen as a social problem necessitating the use of public resources for housing and services, or a primarily individual problem that can be criminalized, ignored, or addressed through private charity (Best, 2010; Tsai et al., 2017).

It is important to recognize that policy responses to homelessness the United States as well as countries including Canada, the United Kingdom, and Australia range from those that are largely punitive in nature, such as laws that criminalize homelessness or aim to 'clear' encampments of unhoused persons, to care-oriented policies that seek to address the structural causes of homelessness through the provision of affordable housing and social services (Clarke & Parsell, 2020; DeVerteuil et al, 2009). An example of the latter is Housing First, which emphasizes helping people transition quickly from homelessness to permanent affordable housing and providing supportive services to assist people in meeting their self-determined goals (Padgett et al., 2016). However, the rising prominence of Housing First does not represent a definitive embrace of compassionate homelessness policy. Research in Australia and the United States reveals tensions in how Housing First programs are shaped by neoliberalist resource constraints and sometimes implemented in ways that maintain coercive or punitive elements (Clarke & Parsell, 2020). Thus, critical questions remain regarding how stigmas associated with homelessness will continue to shape policy in moving in more compassionate or more punitive directions, and the role that media coverage and framing plays in this.

The role of the media in stigma and framing

The media – including traditional print sources such as newspapers and news magazines, television and radio stations, and online-only news platforms – contributes to public perception of social problems and the groups affected by them (Best, 2010; Kim & Willis, 2007). The media not only dictates what stories get coverage, but also how they are framed, inherently emphasizing certain aspects of reality while minimizing or leaving out others (Heuer et al., 2011; Kim & Willis, 2007). An enduring criticism of the news media is its tendency to reduce complex social issues, such as childhood obesity or opioid addiction, to individual-level problems (Barry et al., 2013; McGinty et al., 2016). By disassociating problems from larger social, political, and economic factors, the role of social responsibility in addressing problems is minimized (Barry et al., 2013; McGinty et al., 2016). Media framing influences policy, as well as individual impressions and actions. For instance, in a study examining the connection of storytelling to policy development related to rental housing affordability, Bierre & Howden-Chapman (2020) found that media narratives could be used as tools to both define policy problems and advance or hinder solutions.

Visuals, such as videos or photos, play an important role in media coverage (Remillard & Schneider, 2010). As an accompaniment to a story, whether in print, on television, or online, photos provide a visual hook that may intrigue, satisfy, or repel the viewer, and complement or distract from the headline or the story itself (Messaris & Abraham, 2001). Like stories, photographs emphasize certain aspects of reality over others—and often very immediately and provocatively (Kim & Willis, 2007). Both the content and context of photographs—including factors such as captioning, photography credits, and size and placement of a photograph relative to text—can be analyzed to infer nuances regarding media messaging and the visibility, stigmatization, and/or glorification of particular populations and issues (Bock et al., 2011; Parry, 2020).

In recent years, both researchers and photojournalists have commented on photojournalism's tendency to sensationalize vulnerable subjects and contribute to stigma (Heuer et al., 2011; Jones, 2018). This may be reflected in who is chosen as a subject; in the case of the crack or opioid epidemic, Jones (2018) points out that imagery has focused 'almost exclusively on the poor and people of color, and in the single dimension of misery'. Subject gaze and eye contact with the camera generally denotes an invitation for the viewer to engage with the subject; therefore, absence of these elements in photographs of marginalized subjects may signify dehumanization of the subject and social distance between the subject and the viewer (Parry, 2020; Remillard & Schneider, 2010). In addition, stock photos or caricatures, such as images of drug paraphernalia, may also be chosen as a stand-in for human subjects, further contributing to dehumanization in the eyes of the viewer (Health in Justice Action Lab: Changing the Narrative Initiative, 2019a).

Media and homelessness stigmatization

We located very few contemporary studies systematically analyzing homelessness stigmatization in media coverage. An edited volume published in 1999 explored

complexities of representations of homelessness in various forms of media, including television and radio news coverage, newspapers, and film (Min, 1999). For example, one chapter conducted a thematic analysis of how television news typically covered homelessness in ways that perpetuated individualism and the othering of persons experiencing homelessness (Whang & Min, 1999). In a content analysis of how the issue of homelessness is framed in newspaper articles, Best (2010) reviewed 475 articles about homelessness from two Denver, Colorado (United States) newspapers and found that the articles presented homelessness as a social problem only about a third of the time.

Other relatively recent studies include Truong's (2012) analysis of newspaper article and editorial coverage of restrictive ordinances pertaining to homelessness in five U.S. cities, which found that coverage frequently portrayed persons experiencing homelessness in stigmatized and stereotypical ways, highlighting individual behaviors and downplaying structural causes of homelessness, such as the lack of affordable housing. Pruitt et al. (2020) found that although newspaper coverage of homelessness in the U.S. state of Hawaii included attention to structural as well as individual causes of homelessness, it often perpetuated stereotypical narratives of unhoused persons as both threats and powerless victims. A review of homelessness media coverage research in Canada found evidence for the use of varying frames in coverage, including deviance frames linking homelessness with other stigmatized issues, dependence frames portraying people experiencing homelessness as dependent on and taking advantage of public resources, and solution frames typically highlighting short-term charitable responses to homelessness, amongst others (Calder et al., 2011).

In one of the few studies focusing on photography in the media, Remillard & Schneider (2010) analyzed 61 photographs in homelessness-related stories from a single newspaper based in Calgary, Alberta, Canada. They noted several distinctions in how volunteers engaged in homelessness-related causes and persons experiencing homelessness are photographed, with the former photographed in ways that conveyed action and community, in contrast to the isolation and othering typically portrayed in photographs of people perceived to be homeless. They concluded that the photography in their sample reinforced stereotypes about homelessness and valorized short-term charitable acts, at the expense of systemic change.

Current study

In sum, although prior research is limited, the extant literature indicates that media coverage of homelessness often reflects stigma and stereotypes, and emphasizes individual rather than structural causes and solutions. In particular, there is a notable dearth of recent studies using national media samples (versus a single city or publication source) and analyses of photography in homelessness media coverage. Though insightful, Remillard & Schneider's (2010) study—the only research we located specifically focused on homelessness photography—was primarily qualitative and used a small sample from one newspaper. Thus, the use of quantitative content analysis methods to systematically analyze larger datasets of photography from multiple news sources offers the potential to yield insights not previously examined

in research. This study aims to accomplish this goal, through exploring the following research question: How and to what extent do features of photographs accompanying media stories about homelessness—including subject eye contact, subject identification, presence of homelessness paraphernalia, and presence of housing—reflect stigma about homelessness?

Methods

Methodological approach

This study used content analysis methodology to address our research question. Content analysis is the empirical study of the meanings, messaging, and effects of various communication mediums (Krippendorff, 2013). Though most commonly used with text, researchers can also apply content analysis methods to visual mediums, including photography (Heuer et al., 2011; Tiggemann & Zaccardo, 2018). This typically involves specifying sampling parameters; gathering a sample of photographs; developing coding categories and definitions based on the research questions; coding the sample; and finally analyzing the coded data to answer the research questions. Below, we describe how we completed each of these steps in the current study.

Sampling parameters and dataset

We used a probabilistic sampling approach to develop our dataset, meaning that all images in the sampling frame had equal probability of being selected for inclusion in the analysis (Drisko & Maschi, 2016). Within this approach, we incorporated the systematic selection of the first image only for news sources containing multiple images (described further below). To establish the sampling frame, we applied a keyword approach (Parry, 2020) using a specialized Google search with news and date range specification options. We used *homeless** as a search term, with the asterisk noting truncation, ensuring that stories containing either *homeless* or *homelessness* would be included (Bronson & Davis, 2012). The 'news' search specification restricts the results to stories identified through Google's algorithm as news, including stories from traditional media (e.g. newspapers and television and radio news) and online-only sources. A keyword approach produces results that include the search term anywhere in the text, meaning that results included stories addressing homelessness in a variety of contexts, including stories covering homelessness as a policy or social issue and stories profiling individuals or groups experiencing homelessness or addressing it through charitable efforts. Our use of probabilistic sampling and a keyword search approach were informed by prior visual content analysis studies, such as Heuer et al.'s (2011) study of photographs in news coverage about obesity.

Because coverage of homelessness can vary cyclically throughout the year (Lee et al., 2010; Remillard & Schneider, 2010), we randomly selected one date from each month in 2019: January 8, February 21, March 15, April 9, May 18, June 2, July 29, August 28, September 14, October 10, November 6, and December 16. We used the 'custom range' option under Google news search tools to pull news stories only from these dates. To reduce the likelihood of the search results being influenced

by prior searches, we cleared the cache from the browser that we used prior to carrying out the search for each date. Each date yielded between 8 and 44 unique news stories, for a total of 340. Although we did not include geographic specifiers in the search, all searches were carried out from the same location within the United States and results primarily returned U.S.-based articles.

Exclusion criteria for the final dataset were: (1) stories not pertaining to homelessness in the United States and (2) stories that did not contain at least one photograph. The later criterion comprised stories that contained no visual elements and stories that included illustrations, graphics, videos, or video stills but no photographs. Depending on the goals of the content analysis, researchers may take an exhaustive approach and include every result yielded by the sampling approach in the study's final dataset for analysis, or use a selective approach to systematically selecting a portion for inclusion (Bock et al., 2011; Parry, 2020). In making these choices, researchers strive to ensure a balance between representativeness and feasibility (Parry, 2020). For our sample, we used a selective approach, retaining only the first photograph to appear on the page if a story within the sampling frame contained multiple photographs. Our primary rationale was that this allowed us to treat images in the sample as independent observations, akin to selecting one respondent per household in a survey sampling frame. Including one image per story generated a sample that was representative of the news stories identified through our search process, rather than biased by the inclusion of multiple photographs of the same subject by the same photographer from single news stories. After applying our inclusion and exclusion criteria, we retained a total of 226 unique photographs for the final dataset, archiving photographs with headlines, captions, and news source for analysis.

Categories, codes, and coding process

Prior to beginning coding, we developed a codebook delineating categories with features relevant to the study questions. Our coding categories and codes were informed by previous studies, including text and photography-based analyses of homelessness in the media (Remillard & Schneider, 2010; Truong, 2012) and other studies from communications, cultural studies, and public health applying quantitative content analysis methods to media photography (Heuer et al., 2011; Parry, 2012;; 2020). The codebook included two main sections: characteristics of the news sources and stories from which the photographs were drawn, and characteristics of the photography subject matter. Within the first section, *news source* delineated the type of publication, e.g. newspaper, news website, or online articles associated with television or radio stations. Within these types, we distinguished between publications that were national or regional in scope.

For *focus of story*, we created four mutually exclusive codes: (1) extent of the homelessness problem (e.g. stories about the number of people experiencing homelessness or problems related to homelessness); (2) addressing homelessness (stories about homelessness funding, policies, programs, or services); (3) human interest profiles of currently or formerly homeless people, volunteers, workers, or advocates addressing homelessness; and (4) crime stories about homeless people as victims

and/or perpetrators of crimes. The inclusion of focus of story as a coding category was informed by prior work such as Heuer et al., (2011) and codes were informed by the documented range of topics in other analyses of homelessness representation in the media (Remillard & Schneider, 2010; Truong, 2012). An 'other' code captured stories that did not fit into these categories. For *region*, we coded the geographic region corresponding to the focus of the story, using the following codes: national, Northeast, Southeast, Southwest, Midwest, Mountain West, West Coast, and Hawaii/Alaska. We also created codes to capture the *photograph origin*, e.g. original photo, file photo, stock photo, or mug shot.

The second section of the codebook contained categories and codes pertaining to characteristics of the subject matter of the photos (Bock et al., 2011; Parry, 2020). *Human subjects in photo* used the following codes to describe types of people in photos: no people; presumably homeless people only; formerly homeless people only; presumably non-homeless people only (e.g. volunteers, service workers, politicians, philanthropists, bystanders); any combination of presumably homeless and non-homeless people together; any combination of formerly homeless and non-homeless people together; and presumably homeless, formerly homeless, and non-homeless people together. We added an additional code to describe photographs where people were present but homelessness status could not be readily determined. Regarding language, although we recognize the importance of person-first language (Palmer, 2018) and use phrasing such as 'people experiencing homelessness' elsewhere in this paper, we use the phrasing 'presumably homeless people' when describing this coding category for brevity. We include the qualifier 'presumably' as an indicator that homelessness status is a presumption we inferred from the photographs that we cannot externally validate.

For all photographs containing people, we coded *eye contact* by homelessness status (presumably homeless people, formerly homeless people, and non-homeless people). Eye contact codes included no eye contact (person looking down, wearing sunglasses, eyes closed, or shot from an angle at which their face was not shown); partial eye contact (part of a person's face and eyes were visible, but both eyes not visible looking toward the camera); and full eye contact (both eyes visible and looking in the direction of the camera, though not necessarily directly at it). These codes are a simplified distillation of the range of eye contact codes described by Parry (2020).

Informed by Parry's (2012) discussion of the naming of subjects in analyzing press photography of civilian casualties in the 2003 Iraq invasion, we also coded *identification* by homelessness status. Under this coding category, we delineated if people in the photograph were identified in either the story headline or caption by full name, first name or nickname only, or not at all. In photographs featuring multiple people, only one person in each homelessness status category was needed to fulfill a code; for example, if a photo featured multiple presumably homeless people, the photo would be coded as 'homeless person - full eye contact' if one person was demonstrating full eye contact, even if others in the photo were not.

Three other categories denoted features of photographs not pertaining to people and reflecting elements noted in analyses of the text of media articles about

homelessness (Truong, 2012). *Homelessness paraphernalia* was a dichotomous code describing the presence of materials associated with encampments and street homelessness, such as tents, sleeping bags and mats, shopping carts, or piles of belongings. *Housing* distinguished between photographs showing interiors or exteriors of affordable housing (e.g. supportive housing, subsidized housing, 'tiny house' programs) and general housing. *Service site* was a dichotomous code describing interior or exterior depictions of programs serving people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness, such as shelters, drop-in centers, or meal programs.

We refined the codebook through several rounds of practice coding, by coding photos accompanying stories about homelessness that were not from the dates included in the dataset but otherwise met the study's inclusion criteria. This process of practice coding provided a training ground for using and applying the codes, as well as enabling us to make minor revisions to the codes based on insights derived from the coding process (Drisko & Maschi, 2016). After finalizing the codebook, two coders (the first and second author) independently coded all photographs in the sample. The coders met after completing coding for each of the 12 dates to compare codes, clarify discrepancies, and reach consensus on any differing codes.

Analysis

After finalizing coding, we calculated inter-coder agreement using Cohen's kappa. Next, we calculated descriptive statistics to summarize characteristics of the photographs in the sample, based on codes. We then completed a bivariate analysis using chi-square tests to determine if the likelihood of making full eye contact or being identified by one's full name in a caption was significantly different for presumably homeless as compared with presumably non-homeless subjects. Although this analysis focused on the quantitative synthesis of codes, we made notes during the coding process about emerging themes and used these notes to identify qualitative thematic impressions as a supplement to the primary quantitative analysis.

Results

Descriptive and bivariate analysis

Table 1 summarizes characteristics of the news sources and stories ($N = 226$ stories). Kappa values indicating inter-coder agreement for these categories ranged from .57 to .95. Origin of photo had the lowest kappa value, primarily reflecting ambiguity in distinguishing between original photos and file photos. Jointly, national news sources accounted for 13% of images in the dataset, with the bulk of photographs in the dataset coming from regional newspapers (51%), web stories from regional television or radio stations (27%), or regional news sites (10%). In terms of story focus, nearly two-thirds (63%) of photographs were from stories primarily about addressing homelessness. Almost half of photographs (47%) were from stories about homelessness on the West Coast, encompassing the states of California, Oregon, and Washington, echoing the high prevalence and visibility of homelessness in this

Table 1. Characteristics of news sources, stories, and origin of photographs ($N = 226$).

Characteristic	Inter-coder agreement (Cohen's kappa)	%
News source	.91	
National newspaper		4
National news magazine		2
National news site		3
National news site – alternative		4
Regional newspaper		51
Regional television or radio station		27
Regional news site – alternative		10
Focus of story	.70	
Extent of the problem		15
Addressing homelessness		63
Human interest profile of current or formerly homeless person, volunteer, or advocate		13
Crime story		6
Other		3
Region	.95	
National		5
Northeast		9
Southeast		10
Southwest		8
Midwest		12
Mountain West		8
West Coast		47
Hawaii/Alaska		1
Origin of photo	.57	
Original photo		52
File photo		36
Stock photo		4
Mug shot or crime victim photo		2
Unclear		6

region. Original photographs accompanied half (52%) of stories, with other stories using file photos (36%), stock photos (4%), or mug shots (2%).

Table 2 describes aspects of the photography subject matter. Kappa values ranged from .63 to .98. The majority of photographs (77%) included people, in various manifestations including presumably homeless people; people identified as formerly homeless; presumably non-homeless workers, volunteers, politicians, advocates, or bystanders; and combinations thereof. We analyzed eye contact and identification separately for presumably homeless, formerly homeless, and non-homeless individuals. For photos containing at least one presumably homeless person (n = 99), 70% demonstrated no eye contact, 12% included at least one person making only partial eye contact, and 18% contained at least one person making full eye contact. Only 22% of captions or titles accompanying photos contained the full name of a homeless subject, with 8% identified by a first name or nickname only. A total of nine photos (4% of the dataset) contained a presumably homeless subject who was making full eye contact and identified by their first and last name.

These characteristics varied for formerly homeless or non-homeless individuals represented in photos. Formerly homeless individuals demonstrated full eye contact in 50% and non-homeless individuals showed full eye contact in 45% of the photos in which they respectively appeared. Formerly homeless individuals were almost

Table 2. Subject material of photographs (N = 226).

Variable	Inter-coder agreement (Cohen's kappa)	%
Human subjects in photo	.85	
No people present in photo		23
Presumably homeless people only		25
Formerly homeless people only		4
Presumably non-homeless people only (e.g. volunteers, service workers, politicians, philanthropists, bystanders)		22
Combination of presumably homeless and non-homeless people		18
Combination of formerly homeless and non-homeless people		2
Combination of presumably homeless, formerly homeless, and non-homeless people		0.4
People present but homelessness status not clear		4
Eye contact for presumably homeless people ($n = 99$)	.69	
No eye contact		70
At least one individual making partial eye contact		12
At least one individual making full eye contact		18
Eye contact for formerly homeless people ($n = 14$)	.88	
No eye contact		35
At least one individual making partial eye contact		14
At least one individual making full eye contact		50
Eye contact for presumably non-homeless people ($n = 98$)	.63	
No eye contact		46
At least one individual making partial eye contact		17
At least one individual making full eye		36
Identification of presumably homeless people ($n = 99$)	.98	
No names provided		70
First name or nickname only provided		8
Full name provided		22
Identification of formerly homeless people ($n = 14$)	.72	
No names provided		7
First name or nickname only provided		7
Full name provided		86
Identification of presumably non-homeless people ($n = 98$)	.98	
No names provided		55
First name or nickname only provided		0
Full name provided		45
Other subject material		
Homelessness paraphernalia	.92	32
Housing – affordable	.64	7
Housing - general	.64	5
Service site	.70	19

always identified by full name (86%) or first name/nickname (7%) while captions and titles identified non-homeless individuals by full name in 45% of photos. No non-homeless individuals were identified by first name or nickname only. Further, one-third (32%) of photos contained homelessness paraphernalia, with a small minority showing general (5%) or affordable (7%) housing.

Given their small proportion in dataset, we excluded formerly homeless individuals from the bivariate analyses. The bivariate analysis of homelessness status and eye contact indicated that presumably homeless individuals were significantly more likely to be photographed with no eye contact, while non-homeless individuals were more likely to be photographed with partial or full eye contact, $\chi^2(2, n = 197) = 11.91$, $p = .003$. The bivariate analysis of homelessness status and identification was also

significant, with presumably homeless people being significantly more likely than non-homeless people to be unidentified in photographs or identified by first name or a nickname only, $\chi 2(2, n = 197) = 17.16$, $p = .000$.

Qualitative thematic impressions

Throughout the coding process, we engaged in memo-writing, in which we independently recorded and then discussed nuances and themes that could not be entirely captured by the quantitative coding. This helped us to identify patterns within the coding categories. Upon completion of coding, we reviewed our memos to discuss patterns, i.e. observations that were noted multiple times in the dataset. These inductive themes constituted details that occurred in the majority of photos within a category but were not captured by the coding categories.

For instance, we noticed that in photos of presumably homeless people who did not show eye contact and were not identified, the photographs were frequently shot from a distance, so that a person's face was not clearly visible (e.g. News-Press NOW, 2019); shot from behind (e.g. Fagan, 2019); shot while a person was looking down or away (e.g. Daily Democrat Archives, 2019); and/or shot while a person appeared to be sleeping, often covered with blankets obscuring much of their face and body (e.g. Orr, 2019). Although we cannot be certain, these photographs gave the impression that the photographer did not interact directly with the subject, and that the subject may not have known their photograph was being taken. In contrast, when presumably non-homeless people were photographed without eye contact or identification in captions, it was typically because they were bystanders (e.g. passersby on the street) in photographs featuring a homeless subject.

Notably, formerly homeless individuals were identified by their full names in most photos in which they appeared (86%) and were making full or partial eye contact in the majority of photos (64%). This may be due to the fact that a person's status as formerly homeless was a focal point of most of the stories accompanying these photos. For example, stories described how formerly homeless people were thriving due to housing and support they received, such as formerly homeless people living in tiny houses (Sakas, 2019); how people became involved in volunteering, advocacy, or homelessness service provision after exiting homelessness themselves (Scheinblum, 2019); or formerly homeless people achieving successful milestones, such as graduating from college (CBS4 Miami, 2019). We found the contrast between how presumably homeless and formerly homeless people were photographed to be remarkable. People presumed to be homeless were frequently photographed in ways that rendered them faceless and nameless, or in some cases completely invisible and represented only by tents, shopping carts, or other objects associated with homelessness. Photographs of formerly homeless people suggested a re-humanization process, in which subjects were now deemed worthy of being photographed in ways that conveyed their unique identities and humanity.

We also observed themes in how housing was shown—or not shown—in photographs. Although we classified 63% of stories as pertaining to how homelessness was or could be addressed through policy, services, or charitable work, only 7% of

photos showed affordable housing. We would not expect all of such stories to visually depict affordable housing; however, we found it notable that it was so absent from photographs, given homelessness advocates' unequivocal messaging that affordable housing is essential to ending homelessness (National Alliance to End Homelessness, 2020). Even when the content of a story is solution-oriented, a viewer is likely to see photographs that reify homelessness as an individual and intractable problem, through dehumanizing images of presumably homeless people who are not identified and whose faces are largely not visible, or images featuring homelessness paraphernalia. By and large, photographs do not convey the rising unaffordability of housing as a driver of homelessness, nor affordable housing as a solution.

Discussion

This study adds to the scant literature examining photography in homelessness media coverage. Overall, our findings indicate substantive differences in how presumably homeless, formerly homeless, and non-homeless people are photographed and the relative predominance of homelessness paraphernalia in photos, compared to the absence of visual representation of affordable housing—all trends signaling evidence of stigma perpetuation through photography. Notably, these trends align with established tropes associated with people experiencing homelessness, such as *sub-human status*, *invisibility*, and *aesthetically unappealing* (Torino & Sisselman-Borgia, 2017). These tropes are in turn related to microaggressions, such as deliberately ignoring the presence of a homeless person in a public space or business (Torino & Sisselman-Borgia, 2017). Although we did not find any prior studies focusing on the specific photographic elements analyzed in this study, our findings are broadly in line with previous research efforts documenting various ways in which media coverage contributes to the stigmatizing and othering of people experiencing homelessness and deflects structural causes (Best, 2010; Calder et al., 2011; Pruitt et al., 2020; Remillard & Schneider, 2010; Truong, 2012).

One problematic aspect of photography highlighted in our analysis was the infrequency of eye contact from presumably homeless subjects. We recognize that eye contact alone does not render a photograph humanizing or dehumanizing. For instance, our dataset included a few examples of what appeared to be thoughtfully executed portraits in which the presumably homeless subject was looking down or to the side, but was identified by name and clearly aware the photograph was being taken (e.g. Beck, 2019; Molina, 2019). In addition, it is possible that some presumably homeless people might consent to being photographed but ask to be shown in a way in which they cannot be identified, through facial identification or naming. Although there is no way to deduce this directly from the analysis of photographs and captions, the nature of the majority of photographs in the no-eye contact category—shot from behind, from a distance, and/or of people sleeping—are inconsistent with this possibility. Subsequently, a person perusing news stories about homelessness is far more likely to see such an image, or an image of homelessness paraphernalia without people present, than they are to see an image conveying the humanity and dignity of a presumably homeless person through both full eye contact and naming, as such photos represented only 4% of the dataset.

We acknowledge that our analysis is constrained by several limitations. We frequently encountered discrepancies in coding, particularly with categories such as distinguishing between partial and full eye contact or general versus affordable housing, leading to subpar kappa values for these codes. We view these discrepancies less as a failure of our coding process and more as an indicator of the inherent ambiguity of interpreting some aspects of visual images. Thus, the frequent discrepancies we confronted reinforced for us the value of having multiple independent coders, and we believe that the consensus process through which we considered and resolved discrepancies ultimately enhanced the rigor of the analysis.

Other limitations concern the sampling approach and dataset. Although following a probabilistic sampling approach with clear parameters enhances the transparency of the study, no method of selecting a sample, including ours, is guaranteed to be free from bias (Drisko & Maschi, 2016). While using the Google News algorithm enabled us to include stories from diverse news sources including newspapers, television, radio, and online-only platforms, it remains possible that there was additional relevant news coverage of homelessness on our selected dates that the algorithm excluded. Several of the initial results yielded featured only videos and were thus excluded from this analysis. Analysis of videos and moving images in homelessness media coverage has received very little scholarly attention to date and is an important topic for future research. In addition, while our study captured a U.S.-based national sample, we did not analyze regional differences in photography. Future studies might favor depth over breadth and assess trends in photography in homelessness news coverage in particular states or regions, as well as in other national contexts.

Lastly, an overarching limitation concerns aligning codes with our research objective of understanding how elements of photographs reflect anti-homelessness stigma. In comparison with text-based analyses that can readily assess the presence or absence of stigmatizing terms or phrases (e.g. McGinty et al., 2019), determining what makes a photograph stigmatizing is less clear-cut. The coding categories that we selected to assess elements such as eye contact, identification, and homelessness paraphernalia are tied to stigma, though as noted above with regard to eye contact, there are nuances that the codes alone do not convey. It is feasible, for example, that when a presumably homeless person is not identified in a caption, this is the result of a considerate conversation between the photographer and subject, following which the person consented to the photograph but chose not to be identified. There is no way to directly measure if such conversations took place, although we have difficulty imagining that they did with regard to many photographs we analyzed.

These shortcomings in coding speak to the value of other forms of content analysis and media studies. We encourage future researchers to engage in in-depth qualitative thematic analyses of photographs or to interview photographers and people experiencing homelessness to gain additional insights and build from the limitations of this primarily quantitative content analysis. Further, qualitative thematic analyses could examine other questions of interest, such as the interplay between photographs and text to convey particular arguments or perspectives about homelessness.

Implications

The findings of this study convey vital implications for ongoing media coverage and policy change related to homelessness. First, although this study was conducted in the United States and this U.S. context guides our discussion, we believe that the implications we describe are not bound nationally. Homelessness is highly stigmatized in many regions, and studies conducted in other countries and areas including Canada (Calder et al., 2011) and Scotland (Kearns et al., 2013) have indicated that the media plays a pivotal role in perpetuating stigma and dominant narratives about homelessness and social housing programs. Further, news coverage is increasingly global, with viewers able to consume and be influenced by news from not only their home countries but various locations, due to the ease of online news' accessibility (Curtin, 2020; Jenkins et al., 2013). This is especially true for the medium of photography, which is not constrained by language. Thus, the implications we outline below for changing media coverage and influencing public policy are relevant beyond the borders of the United States.

Although there is still much to be explored about the ways in which photos in media coverage impact policy change, it is indisputable that people have long recognized photography's power to sway public opinion. In 2015, a union of the New York Police Department spearheaded an anti-homelessness campaign called 'Peek-A-Boo, We See You Too', in which they photographed individuals in encampments and strategically used those images to reinvigorate public debate in New York City (Goldfischer, 2020). The goal of this campaign – to paint the mayor as soft on homelessness, resulting in insidious urban disorder – was successful, mobilizing members of the public to voice concern and demand action about encampments. While photos in this case were weaponized with the intent of harming homeless people, this campaign shows the power of photography in general. We believe that photography, particularly when used in journalism, can also be harnessed to build empathy and benefit people experiencing homelessness, in everyday interactions as well as policy.

To this end, it is important to recognize that media coverage is malleable. Homelessness advocates can work with media partners to promote destigmatizing and humanizing practices in photography for homelessness-related coverage, emphasizing the importance of consent and visually representing people who are homeless as full human beings. A model for conducting such media advocacy work is Changing the Narrative, a network of researchers, advocates, and journalists that have coalesced to challenge stigmatizing and exploitative media coverage of drug use and addiction, particularly with regard to the opioid crisis (Health in Justice Action Lab: Changing the Narrative Initiative, 2019b). To assist members of the media in doing more sensitive reporting, Changing the Narrative compiled extensive resources, including a style guide; a topical guide contrasting aspects of problematic and informed narratives for specific issues, such as justice-involved populations; a directory of experts; and a listing of resources and examples of exemplary coverage, all available on an easily searchable website (https://www.changingthenarrative.news).

Although Changing the Narrative's topical index includes an entry on stigmatizing images and photography, the majority of the content in the topical and style guides

focuses on language. With regard to homelessness, we see an acute need for resources to guide photographic coverage, as well as language and verbal aspects of reporting. Photography is a highly salient and potent aspect of media coverage in general. Photos are often more memorable to news consumers than the textual content of articles and viewers are apt to accept photographs as reality, downplaying the role of photographic choices that shape how a subject is framed (Heuer et al., 2011; Messaris & Abraham, 2001). Thus, we view advocacy and partnership with members of the media to change the stigmatizing nature of homelessness photography as equally or possibly more important than efforts addressing language reform, such as calls to use person-first language (Palmer, 2018). Ideally, humanizing both photography and language can be done jointly and carried out in a manner that is mutually reinforcing. Grassroots organizations such as Invisible People—whose founder experienced homelessness personally—are formidable agents for change, offering video profiles of people who are homeless telling their own stories (Invisible People, 2021). This content provides a powerful counternarrative about homelessness to news consumers, as well as provides an exemplar for mainstream media for covering homelessness in more sensitive ways.

Although changing media coverage is an important goal in its own right, advocates should keep in mind its connection to policy change. It is difficult to imagine public support for policy that protects housing as a human right when dominant narratives underscore the idea that people who are homeless are less than human (Torino & Sisselman-Borgia, 2017). Photographs that downplay the humanity of people experiencing homelessness and render them faceless, nameless, or invisible reflect and magnify this narrative. Quite simply, we see a shift in media coverage, and photography in particular, as a necessary precursor to generating broad recognition of the humanity of people who are homelessness. This recognition is inherently needed to harness public support for progressive policy change, specifically policies that would make affordable housing an entitlement benefit that is available to all who need it.

Conclusion

As long as homelessness persists, it will continue to be a topic of media coverage. Our content analysis uncovered several ways in which news photographs pertaining to homelessness are problematic and dehumanizing. We encourage researchers to partner with advocates and members of the media to generate better awareness of anti-homelessness stigma and understanding of how photographs and media coverage more broadly can either perpetuate or disrupt this stigma. Although deeply entrenched, neither homelessness nor the stigma associated with it need be accepted as permanent. We envision a future in which people experiencing homelessness are recognized as fully human and photographed accordingly, until the time that homelessness is ended.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Notes on contributors

Elizabeth A. Bowen, PhD is an Associate Professor in the University at Buffalo School of Social Work in Buffalo, NY, United States. Her work addresses the intersections of homelessness, health, and recovery.

Nicole Capozziello, MSW, is a PhD candidate in the University at Buffalo School of Social Work in Buffalo, NY, United States. As a scholar, writer, and academic, her interests include different forms of media and social justice issues, including homelessness and incarceration.

ORCID

Elizabeth A. Bowen http://orcid.org/0000-0002-4726-6039

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