

## HOMELESSNESS, DEHUMANIZATION, AND THE ROLE OF EMPATHY

Inhumane treatment, degradation, and horrific acts of violence are common occurrences in the lives of individuals affected by homelessness. Poverty and severe mental illness frequently force these individuals to live on the streets, in cars, or homeless shelters plagued by violence. According to the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (2020), over 567,000 people were homeless in the United States on any given night in January 2019, with over 98,000 of those experiencing chronic homelessness. Negative perceptions of people that are homeless are a global issue, and these individuals are the subjects of extreme forms of dehumanization and discrimination.

As described by Haslam (2006), dehumanization is a phenomenon whereby a person strips another individual of the characteristics that make them uniquely human. Similarly, Harris and Fiske (2011) defined *dehumanized perception* as the failure to perceive another as a human being with an actual mind and emotional experiences. Rather than perceiving them as people, they are perceived as objects or animals associated with disgust. Empirical research has consistently documented negative and dehumanized perceptions of people impacted by homelessness. Additionally, dehumanization may be a mechanism that enables a person to morally disengage and perpetuate inhumane acts against this vulnerable population.

This research study aimed to document the public's tendency to dehumanize individuals that are homeless and to determine whether empathy plays a role in lowering levels of dehumanization. This study hypothesized that participants provided with a limited narrative would score higher on dehumanization and lower on empathy than participants provided with a personalized narrative.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### PERCEPTIONS OF INDIVIDUALS EXPERIENCING HOMELESSNESS

The public's perceptions of individuals affected by extreme poverty and homelessness and their broader thoughts and attitudes toward homelessness are quite diverse. Dittmeier and colleagues (2018) conducted a study to examine the varying perspectives on homelessness held by various genders and generational groups. The participants in this study consisted of 455 university students, most of whom were female (69%) and in the Millennial generation group (60%).

Participants responded to an online survey eliciting their opinions on housing and economic factors contributing to homelessness. The survey also asked participants questions regarding their perceptions of persons that are homeless. These included the beliefs that homeless persons are dangerous and that personal attributes like laziness or poor choices contribute to or are the cause of their

homelessness. Researchers also inquired about participants' prior experiences volunteering or contributing to efforts to end homelessness and their willingness or intention to participate in these activities in the future.

Dittmeier et al. (2018) analyzed results by gender and generational age group, noting that most participants (over two-thirds) belonged to the Millennial generation group. Millennials were also found to have significantly more negative attitudes toward people experiencing homelessness than the other generations in the study. In comparison to older generations, Millennials expressed a greater belief that negative personal characteristics such as laziness or irresponsible behavior contributed to homelessness and that homeless individuals were generally to blame for their situation. In contrast, older generations exhibited less personal judgment regarding factors that contribute to homelessness. Older generations attributed greater blame to factors such as a lack of familial support and a scarcity of affordable housing. These findings suggest that Millennials have significantly less empathy for people impacted by homelessness than previous generations. They may also lack an awareness of other environmental factors contributing to the homeless problem.

In addition to age group, gender was also analyzed in this study (Dittmeier et al., 2018). Consistent with prior research, females demonstrated greater empathy and support for housing and community programs than males when asked about factors that contribute to homelessness. Females were also more likely to report that they would live in a community with shelters or housing for the homeless. This response could indicate that females have a greater awareness of the environmental and social hardships facing homeless populations. Furthermore, females may report greater support for homeless shelters due to their increased scores on empathy, which could indicate greater tolerance for the homeless population than males.

This study exposes the critical need for increased education on homelessness among the Millennial generation group and males. These data also add to the existing literature on how different generational groups and genders perceive this disadvantaged population.

## THE ROLE OF DISGUST

Public policies addressing homelessness receive varying levels of support from the public, and the public has frequently backed policies that both aid and criminalize the homeless. Clifford and Piston (2017) hypothesized that disgust sensitivity would contribute to this contradictory support for policies that help the homeless and policies that seek to exclude them from the public and society. They described disgust as an evolutionary adaption designed to keep humans away from objects that can potentially cause illness or toxicity. According to Clifford and Piston (2017), disgust sensitivity concerning homelessness elicits a desire for

physical separation from persons that are homeless, as they are frequently viewed as unclean or contaminated (Clifford & Piston, 2017).

In order to research the phenomenon of disgust sensitivity, Clifford and Piston (2017) conducted a study in two waves. In Study 1, researchers collected quantitative data from 861 participants, including participants' attitudes toward people that are homeless and their general disgust sensitivity to pathogens. The second wave randomly assigned subjects to one of four stimulus conditions and assessed their attitudes toward two exclusionary policies and two assistance policies to the homeless. The authors recruited 504 subjects for Study 2 via Amazon's Mechanical Turk; as with the previous study, researchers assessed attitudes toward the same four homeless policies and participants' pathogen disgust sensitivity.

Clifford and Piston (2017) discovered that in both samples, participants that rated higher on disgust sensitivity were equally likely to support policies that assisted people in transitioning out of homelessness. While disgust sensitivity was found to be significantly associated with participants' support for exclusionary policies and a desire to keep homeless people at a distance, it did not diminish participants' support for aid policies. These findings are significant because they imply that disgust is a motivating factor behind policies that keep the homeless at bay and out of public space. The public's support for exclusionary policies and negative attitudes toward the homeless does not negate the public's desire to assist the homeless.

#### POSITIVE IMAGINED INTERACTIONS

Discrimination against social outgroups is a significant issue in the United States, and it is well-known that individuals that are homeless experience this type of exclusion frequently. Hodson et al. (2015) investigated whether mental simulations of imagined contact can help reduce prejudicial attitudes toward outgroups. Researchers randomly assigned participants to one of three groups: the control group was instructed to visualize a neutral, outdoor scene; the imagined contact (IC) group was instructed to visualize themselves having a relaxed, positive interaction with a homeless stranger; and the elaborated imagined contact (EIC) group were instructed to visualize themselves having a relaxed, positive interaction with a stranger who is homeless. Hodson et al. (2015) assessed disgust sensitivity, intergroup disgust sensitivity, intergroup anxiety, feelings of trust, and attitudes toward the homeless. The authors discovered that the EIC group rated the homeless as more trustworthy and that both the EIC and IC groups experienced less disgust than controls. These findings are an essential contribution to the existing body of knowledge regarding discrimination against the homeless. Additionally, they may

pave the way for novel clinical interventions to reduce dehumanization and prejudice toward social outgroups such as the homeless.

## METHOD

### PARTICIPANTS

A convenience sample of 423 people was recruited via Facebook to participate in an online survey. In this study, only participants residing in the United States and those with completed surveys were included in the analysis. Also, a disproportionate number of respondents were female, so male participants were excluded from the analysis. Thus, the total number of participants included in the sample was reduced to 270. The majority of participants were between the ages of 25-39 (38.1%) and 40-59 (44.8%), with the remainder in the age range of 18-25 (7.8%) or over 60 (9.3%). Participants were primarily white, consisting of 85.9% of the sample (n = 232). More than three-quarters of the sample (87%) reported attending college, while 34.4% hold a bachelor's degree and 23% hold a graduate or professional degree. Most participants lived in suburban communities (74.8%), and only 5.2 % reported living in an urban setting (n = 14). Very few participants have experienced homelessness themselves (7.8%, n = 21); however, 25.2% (n = 68) reported having a friend or family member who has been homeless.

### MATERIALS

Two narratives were used in conjunction with an image of a man who is homeless. Narratives included either limited, non-personalized information (name, major life events, how he came to be homeless), and both groups viewed the same image. The survey consisted of demographic questions (gender, age, level of education, type of community residing in) and personal experiences with homelessness. A series of questions were asked to measure dehumanization, empathy, general attitudes and beliefs, and likely behavior toward the homeless (altruism, avoidance, demeaning).

### PROCEDURES

A convenience sample was recruited via Facebook and linked to a survey on qualtrics.com. Participants were randomly assigned to two groups: the limited narrative group (n = 141) or the personalized narrative group (n = 129). They were instructed to view the image of a homeless man, read the accompanying narrative, and complete a series of questions measuring perceptions of the homeless, dehumanization, empathy, and demographic information. Upon completion,

participants were then debriefed, informed of the fictional nature of the narrative, and linked to the factual story of the man in the image.

## RESULTS

### ANALYSIS

An independent samples t-test was conducted to test whether participants given the humanized narrative will rate higher on empathy and lower on dehumanization than the limited narrative group. There was a significant difference in empathy scores for the personalized group ( $M = 3.64$ ,  $SD = 1.39$ ) and the limited narrative group ( $M = 4.52$ ,  $SD = 1.71$ ) conditions;  $t(264) = 4.680$ ,  $p < .001$ .

There was not a significant difference in total scores for dehumanization for the personalized group ( $M = 2.76$ ,  $SD = 1.20$ ) and the limited narrative group ( $M = 3.07$ ,  $SD = 1.45$ ) conditions; the results approached but failed to reach significance  $t(268) = 1.91$ ,  $p = .057$ . However, when disgust/repulsion was analyzed separately, there was a significant difference between the personalized group ( $M = 1.32$ ,  $SD = .673$ ) and limited narrative group ( $M = 1.57$ ,  $SD = .856$ ) conditions  $t(262) = 2.75$ ,  $p = .006$ .

These results suggest that when people are exposed to information that humanizes individuals affected by homelessness, they feel more empathy and less disgust for this vulnerable population and the suffering and hardships they have experienced.

## DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to determine the effect of empathy on people's tendency to dehumanize individuals that are homeless. This hypothesis was largely supported. The results demonstrated that when exposed to information that humanizes a homeless man, the participants' levels of empathy increased, and levels of disgust decreased. However, the personalized narrative did not impact the total level of dehumanization, which included levels of both disgust and anger. One explanation for this is that disgust, rather than anger/contempt, might be a more reliable indicator of dehumanization.

The present study found no significant differences in the general attitudes and beliefs of the homeless when presented with the personalized narrative. These findings suggest that humanizing the homeless does not affect the overall perception of this social outgroup, even when empathy is evoked. Additionally, results also demonstrate that humanizing the homeless does not impact a person's likelihood of giving to the homeless or their likelihood of avoiding or demeaning the homeless.

Some limitations of this study should be noted. First, the participants in this study were predominantly white, educated females who lived in suburban communities; thus, the sample was not representative of the general population. Second, the measurement to assess dehumanization may not be a valid measurement, which might explain why this variable failed to reach significance. Further research would benefit from valid, reliable measures to assess dehumanization and additional methods of evoking empathy for people that are homeless, potentially leading to increased awareness for the inhumane treatment of the homeless and education aimed at increasing empathy for this group.

## REFERENCES

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## APPENDIX A

### **INFORMED CONSENT**

#### **Title of Project: Attitudes Perceptions of the Homeless**

**Researcher:** Christina Esker  
Department: School of Psychology  
Email: eskerc@kean.edu

**Faculty Advisor:** Verneda P. Hamm Baugh, Ph.D.  
Department: School of Psychology  
Contact Information: Telephone (908) 737-5874    Email: vbaugh@kean.edu

#### **Invitation to Participate:**

You are being asked to participate in a research study. It is my hope to gather information about the current attitudes and beliefs of America's homeless population.

#### **Subject Selection:**

Approximately 200 subjects were approached and invited to participate. Participants must be at least 18 years of age.

#### **Purpose of Study:**

The purpose of the study is to investigate people's general perceptions and beliefs of the homeless. The potential goals of this study are to learn if certain attitudes or beliefs are associated with the portrayal of the homeless.

**Procedures:** You will be asked to view an image of a homeless man and read a description that may contain sensitive information. You will then be asked to complete an 18 question survey. Questions will pertain to your attitudes and beliefs as they relate to the image and description as well as non-identifying demographic information. This survey will take approximately 5 to 15 minutes to complete.

#### **Participation:**

Your participation is voluntary, and you may withdraw your participation at any time without penalty.

#### **Potential Risks:**

Risks associated with participation in this study are low to moderate. The image and/or the accompanying description may be sensitive to some participants, particularly those that have experienced homelessness. Potential risks include experiencing uncomfortable feelings, anxiety, or stress associated with viewing and reading about a homeless individual, prior experience with someone who has been homeless, or personal experience with being homeless.

**Potential Benefits:**

No potential benefits will be experienced directly by you, but you will aid in helping expand our knowledge of this topic.

**Financial obligation:**

There will be no financial obligation to the respondent.

**Compensation:**

There is no compensation associated with this study.

**Confidentiality:**

No names will be associated with the data collected. All data in the form of printed documents will be stored in a locked cabinet, while electronic files will be stored on a password-protected external hard drive, also stored in a locked cabinet. Data will be kept until the completion of the Fall 2020 semester (approximately mid-December).

**Questions/Comments:**

You can contact the primary investigator or faculty advisor for questions about this study

**Primary Investigator:** Christina Esker, (732) 343-5063, eskerc@kean.edu

**Faculty Advisor:** Verneda Hamm Baugh, Ph.D., (908) 737-5874, vbaugh@kean.edu

**Agreement to Participate:**

Please sign and print your name where indicated below if you agree to participate in the study. Your signature indicates that you have read and understood the information provided in this document, and that you agree to participate in the study. If at any time you have questions or concerns regarding this study, you should feel free to contact the primary investigator or faculty advisor at the telephone numbers or email addresses provided in this document.



Q1.2 By selecting "I agree", I acknowledge that I am at least 18 years old and that I voluntarily consent to the conditions described above.

- I agree
- I do not agree

## APPENDIX B

### DEBRIEFING FORM

**Title of Project:** Attitudes Toward the Homeless

**Researcher:** Christina Esker

Department: School of Psychology

Contact Information: Email: [eskerc@kean.edu](mailto:eskerc@kean.edu)

**Faculty Advisor:** Verneda P. Hamm Baugh, Ph.D.

Department: School of Psychology

Contact Information: Telephone (908) 737-5874, Email: [vbaugh@kean.edu](mailto:vbaugh@kean.edu)

**Thank-you statement:** Thank you for electing to participate in this study. Your participation is very important to understanding this topic.

**Recap Statement:** The purpose of this study is to investigate the general attitudes and beliefs people have of the homeless. The potential goals of this study are to learn if induced empathy impacts these attitudes, and whether a relationship exists between certain demographical information and the way this marginalized population is perceived.

The image in this study is of a real man named David Magadini, and he is a homeless man from Great Barrington, Massachusetts. The story of this man's life in the long version of this survey is fictional; it is a compilation of several true stories of people that have lived on the streets. The author retrieved his name, age, and image from an article in The Berkshire Edge, dated January 7, 2015. The article can be found here:

<https://theberkshireedge.com/david-magadini-jail-sentence-delayed-homeless-man-still-street/>

**Compensation/Treatment:** There is no direct reward or compensation for participating in this study.

If you have any questions about the study, please feel free to contact the primary investigator or faculty advisor.

**Primary investigator:** Christina Esker. (732) 343-5063, [eskerc@kean.edu](mailto:eskerc@kean.edu)

**Faculty Advisor:** Verneda P. Hamm Baugh. (908) 737-5874, [vbaugh@kean.edu](mailto:vbaugh@kean.edu)

## APPENDIX C

### Start of Block: Demographics

Q2.1 Do you currently live in the United States?

Yes

No

*Skip To: End of Survey If Do you currently live in the United States? = No*

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Q2.2 What is your gender?

Male

Female

Other

---

Q2.3 What is your age?

- 18 - 24
  - 25 - 39
  - 40 - 59
  - 60 or older
- 

Q2.4 How would you describe yourself? Please select all that apply.

- White
  - Hispanic or Latino
  - Black or African American
  - American Indian or Alaska Native
  - Asian
  - Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander
  - Other
-

Q2.5 What is the highest degree or level of school you have completed?

- Less than a high school diploma
  - High school degree or equivalent (e.g. GED)
  - Some college, no degree
  - Associate degree
  - Bachelor's degree
  - Graduate degree (master's, doctorate or professional degree)
- 

Q2.6 What is your current employment status?

- Urban
- Suburban
- Rural

**End of Block: Demographics**

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**Start of Block: Block 1 add**

Q3.1 Please view the image and read the description below.

This man is homeless and lives on the streets in Massachusetts. He is regularly seen with his cart on Main St. in downtown Great Barrington. He has been homeless for 15 years.

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Q3.2 Have you had any of these experiences with homelessness?

*Check all that apply.*

- Been homeless
- Have a friend, family member, or acquaintance who has been homeless
- Given money, food, or clothing to a homeless person on the street
- Had a negative experience with a homeless person
- Had a positive experience with a homeless person

Page Break

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**Q3.3 Keeping the image and description of the homeless man in mind, please rate the extent you feel the following emotions:**

I feel compassion or sympathy:

- Not at all
  - Very little
  - Somewhat
  - A moderate amount
  - A great deal
-

Q3.4 I feel disgust or repulsion:

- Not at all
  - Very little
  - Somewhat
  - A moderate amount
  - A great deal
- 

Q3.5 I feel warmth or affection:

- Not at all
  - Very little
  - Somewhat
  - A moderate amount
  - A great deal
-

3.6 I feel anger or contempt:

- Not at all
  - Very little
  - Somewhat
  - A moderate amount
  - A great deal
- 

Page Break

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**Q3.7 Keeping the image and description of the homeless man in mind, please indicate the extent to which you believe....**

Homeless people use the system when they could pay their own way

- Strongly disagree
  - Disagree
  - Somewhat disagree
  - Neutral
  - Somewhat agree
  - Agree
  - Strongly agree
-

Q3.8 You cannot reason with a homeless person

- Strongly disagree
  - Disagree
  - Somewhat disagree
  - Neutral
  - Somewhat agree
  - Agree
  - Strongly agree
- 

Q3.9 Resources that go to homeless people take away from resources from people like me

- Strongly disagree
  - Disagree
  - Somewhat disagree
  - Neutral
  - Somewhat agree
  - Agree
  - Strongly agree
-



Q3.10 Homeless people have very different values than people like me

- Strongly disagree
  - Disagree
  - Somewhat disagree
  - Neutral
  - Somewhat agree
  - Agree
  - Strongly agree
- 

Q3.11 Homeless people only care about themselves

- Strongly disagree
  - Disagree
  - Somewhat disagree
  - Neutral
  - Somewhat agree
  - Agree
  - Strongly agree
-

Q3.12 Homeless people infect outdoor areas

- Strongly disagree
  - Disagree
  - Somewhat disagree
  - Neutral
  - Somewhat agree
  - Agree
  - Strongly agree
- 

Q3.13 Homeless people have likely committed felonies

- Strongly disagree
  - Disagree
  - Somewhat disagree
  - Neutral
  - Somewhat agree
  - Agree
  - Strongly agree
-

Q3.14 Homeless people are lazy

- Strongly disagree
  - Disagree
  - Somewhat disagree
  - Neutral
  - Somewhat agree
  - Agree
  - Strongly agree
- 

Q3.15 If homeless people were smarter, they would not be homeless

- Strongly disagree
  - Disagree
  - Somewhat disagree
  - Neutral
  - Somewhat agree
  - Agree
  - Strongly agree
- 

Page Break

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**Q3.16 To what extent are you likely to behave in the following ways toward the homeless:**

Say bad things about homeless people (directly or to others)

- Not at all likely
  - Slightly likely
  - Somewhat likely
  - Moderately likely
  - Very likely
- 

**Q3.17 Offer a homeless person money, clothing, or food**

- Not at all likely
  - Slightly likely
  - Somewhat likely
  - Moderately likely
  - Very likely
-

Q3.18 Go out of your way to avoid a homeless person

- Not at all likely
  - Slightly likely
  - Somewhat likely
  - Moderately likely
  - Very likely
- 

Q3.19 Act aggressively or commit violence against a homeless person

- Not at all likely
- Slightly likely
- Somewhat likely
- Moderately likely
- Very likely

**End of Block: Block 1 add**

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**Start of Block: Block 5**

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**Start of Block: Block 2 add**

Q4.1 This is David, a 68-year-old homeless man from Massachusetts. David was born into a white, suburban, middle class family. His father owned the local mom-and-pop grocery store, his mother was a homemaker, and he was the youngest of 3 boys.

In 1967, at the age of 15, David's family suffered a terrible loss when his oldest brother

was drafted into the military and later killed in action during the Vietnam War. The loss had a huge impact on him and his family, and David later became estranged from his parents and surviving brother.

After graduating high school, David began working at a local plant manufacturing autoparts. He married his high school sweetheart, Barbara, at the age of 23, and their only son was born two years later. David was a devoted husband and father, and over the years his work ethic helped to elevate him to a management position within the plant.

In 2005, David's wife of 30 years died of cancer. In the midst of his grief, his only son was killed in a fatal automobile accident five months later. Still struggling with unresolved trauma and loss, he was laid off from his position at the manufacturing plant when they closed their doors a year later. David has been homeless ever since.

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Q4.2 Have you had any of these experiences with homelessness?

*Check all that apply.*

- Have been homeless
- Have a friend, family member, or acquaintance who has been homeless
- Given money, food, or clothing to a homeless person on the street
- Had a negative experience with a homeless person
- Had a positive experience with a homeless person

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Page Break

**Q4.3 Keeping David's story and picture in mind, rate the extent that you feel the following emotions:**

I feel compassion or sympathy:

- Not at all
  - Very little
  - Somewhat
  - A moderate amount
  - A great deal
- 

**Q4.4 I feel disgust or repulsion:**

- Not at all
  - Very little
  - Somewhat
  - A moderate amount
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Q4.5 I feel warmth or affection:

- Not at all
  - Very little
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  - A moderate amount
  - A great deal
- 

Q4.6 I feel anger or contempt:

- Not at all
  - Very little
  - Somewhat
  - A moderate amount
  - A great deal
- 

Page Break

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**Q4.7 Keeping David's story and picture in mind, please indicate the extent to which you believe....**

Homeless people use the system when they could pay their own way

- Strongly disagree
  - Disagree
  - Somewhat disagree
  - Neutral
  - Somewhat agree
  - Agree
  - Strongly agree
- 

**Q4.8 You cannot reason with a homeless person**

- Strongly disagree
- Disagree
- Somewhat disagree
- Neutral
- Somewhat agree
- Agree
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Q4.9 Resources that go to homeless people take away from resources from people like me

- Strongly disagree
  - Disagree
  - Somewhat disagree
  - Neutral
  - Somewhat agree
  - Agree
  - Strongly agree
- 

Q4.10 Homeless people have very different values than people like me

- Strongly disagree
  - Disagree
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  - Neutral
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  - Agree
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Q4.11 Homeless people only care about themselves

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  - Somewhat disagree
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Q4.12 Homeless people infect outdoor areas

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  - Neutral
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  - Agree
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Q4.13 Homeless people have likely committed felonies

- Strongly disagree
  - Disagree
  - Somewhat disagree
  - Neutral
  - Somewhat agree
  - Agree
  - Strongly agree
- 

Q4.14 Homeless people are lazy

- Strongly disagree
  - Disagree
  - Somewhat disagree
  - Neutral
  - Somewhat agree
  - Agree
  - Strongly agree
-

Q4.15 If homeless people were smarter, they would not be homeless

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Page Break

**Q4.16 To what extent are you likely to behave in the following ways toward the homeless:**

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  - Somewhat likely
  - Moderately likely
  - Very likely
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**Q4.17 Offer a homeless person money, clothing, or food**

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Q4.18 Go out of your way to avoid a homeless person

- Not at all likely
  - Slightly likely
  - Somewhat likely
  - Moderately likely
  - Very likely
- 

Q4.19 Act aggressively or commit violence against a homeless person

- Not at all likely
- Slightly likely
- Somewhat likely
- Moderately likely
- Very likely

**End of Block: Block 2 add**

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**Start of Block: Block 4**

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