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# Representations of Homelessness in Four Canadian Newspapers: Regulation, Control, and Social Order

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*This article reports on a content analysis of homelessness representations in four Canadian newspapers: two city broadsheets, one city tabloid, and one national newspaper. Clear differences between the papers emerged showing that in general coverage of homelessness in Calgary was much more positive than coverage in Vancouver. It conveyed a stronger sense of crisis or urgency and a stronger sense of optimism that the problem should and can be solved. Experts dominate public discourse about homelessness, with people who experience homelessness themselves marginalized as speakers. Despite these differences, the four papers present a unified narrative of homelessness in which readers are exhorted to be sympathetic to the plight of homeless people while at the same time, 'they' are presented as needing to be controlled and regulated in order to maintain social order. This narrative has implications for citizenship and social inclusion of people who experience homelessness.*

Key words: *homelessness, media coverage, content analysis, regulation and control, framing*

Media accounts of homelessness have become commonplace. These accounts are a primary source of information about homelessness for many citizens, especially if they live in the suburbs where they are less likely to see people begging on the streets or lined up in front of a shelter waiting to be admitted for the night. Media accounts typically report on shelter use, offer information about rates of homelessness, and detail crimes carried out by or upon people who are homeless. They introduce readers to individuals who have experienced homelessness and provide selected details about their circumstances and explanations for their plight.

However, news coverage does much more than simply present an "objective" description of the "facts." Journalists do not just recount events, they also interpret and explain them and try to influence people to see things and to act in particular ways (Fairclough, 1995). Tuchman (1978), for example, asserts that media can be understood as a framing or constructive force that contributes to the production of social reality in general and to the understanding of the nature of specific social problems. So while news media may indeed reflect what goes on in a community, they also shape social phenomena in important ways. In fact, the very recognition of homelessness as a social problem rather than simply a personal circumstance may be attributable to the way in which it is represented in the news media. Numerous scholars have traced the emergence of particular issues, such as AIDS or smoking, as social problems in media representations (Albert, 1989; Malone, Boyd, & Bero, 2000). These studies have established the important role that the media play in framing and constructing social problems, particularly policy problems, in the public arena.

Readers do not, of course, believe everything they read in the media. Rather, news media provide a central source of information, which people often draw upon in shaping personal understandings of social issues such as homelessness. Silverstone (2007) offers the concept of the mediapolis, in which news media are seen as central to civic life, in many respects constituting an extension of the ancient Greek *polis* or

the shared space for civic communication. The mediapolis is a technologically mediated forum where contemporary social issues, including homelessness, can be deliberated. Like the ancient polis, this forum is typically exclusive and somewhat elitist. It is constructed through processes of symbolic power whereby some people and groups have more access to appearing and speaking in the media than others. This can be seen in the reliance by journalists on professionals and experts to frame social issues (Silverstone, 2007). The concept also offers the potential for extending civic participation through the inclusion of marginalized voices in news media reports. Systematic analyses of news media coverage are crucial for realizing this and for extending the range of participants and perspectives involved in framing issues such as homelessness.

The framing perspective as laid out by scholars such as Entman (1993) and Iyengar (1991) offers a way to understand how the media shape social problems. As Entman (1993) says, "To frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation" (p. 52). Frames therefore define problems, diagnose causes, make moral judgments and suggest remedies. They do this by highlighting some kinds of information over others, drawing attention to some aspects of reality while obscuring others, making some ways of thinking about a topic more salient to audiences than other possible ways. Media representations thus have the potential to contribute to public understandings of homelessness, influence how homeless people are regarded and treated (Ruddick, 1996), and play a role in debates about public policy about homelessness (Greenberg, May, & Elliot, 2006).

Homelessness was "rediscovered" by mainstream North American journalism in the early 1980s (Campbell & Reeves, 1999). The amount of media coverage of homelessness in the United States increased rapidly during the 1980s, reaching a peak in 1987 and then leveling off in the late 1990s and early years of the 21<sup>st</sup> century (Buck, Toro, & Ramos, 2004). Studies of media representations of homelessness have generally been critical of the ways that journalists have represented

homelessness. While news coverage is often sympathetic to individuals who are homeless, it tends to portray homelessness as an individual rather than structural problem, thus blaming individuals for their circumstances (Buck et al., 2004; Hodgetts, Cullen, & Radley, 2005). News items typically emphasize the "stubborn" nature of homelessness and ignore the complexities of the problem (Klodawsky, Farrell, & D'Aubry, 2002). Shields (2001) suggests that changes in the amount of coverage may not reflect changes in the actual circumstances of homelessness, although it is very difficult to determine actual circumstances and numbers of people experiencing homelessness. In fact, intensified news coverage of a social problem may have the paradoxical effect of stabilizing and perpetuating the problem rather than leading to social change (Shields, 2001).

Homelessness representations also have implications for citizenship and social inclusion. The "common sense" understandings produced by news coverage work to exclude homeless people from participation in society by fixing the boundaries between "us and them" (Forte, 2002; Shields, 2001; Whang & Min, 1999) and perpetuating a view of homeless people as residing "outside of 'normal' social enterprise and relationships" (Hodgetts, Hodgetts, & Radley, 2006, p. 525). What has emerged is a restricted mediapolis, missing both diversity of voices and perspectives and discussion of the complexities of homelessness.

In this article we report on a study of homelessness representations in Canadian newspapers. Although they were writing in 2000, in the early days of the internet explosion, we believe Hackett and Gruneau (2000) are still right when they say that newspapers are an important medium to study because they offer "accessibility, in-depth analysis, potential diversity of viewpoints, and sustained reflection on important political and economic issues" (p. 12). In fact, in spite of dire predictions about the fate of newspapers in the internet age, particularly in the United States, readership has remained stable and even increased in Canada from 2007 to 2008 (NADbank, 2008), the time period during which this study took place. Print media therefore contribute significantly to the process by which both social problems and appropriate responses to them are framed. Our goals were to assess how homelessness is

represented in Canadian newspapers, to provide a corpus of material for future discursive analysis, and to provide a baseline for further work with audiences, journalists, and people who have experienced homelessness themselves. The research question was "How is homelessness represented in four Canadian newspapers?" The data we collected offered an overview of trends and patterns in coverage, revealed some unexpected differences between papers, and sensitized us to a number of issues for further exploration. We make no claims about public opinion or about policy responses to homelessness in Canada, as we did not study either of these. However, we concluded that the problem of homelessness is framed somewhat differently in the two cities we studied, leading to different ideas about who can and should respond to it. In addition, coverage in all the papers we studied works to assert a need for control and regulation of "them," homeless people, in order to maintain social order. This overarching narrative of control and regulation is problematic in its implications for citizenship and social inclusion of homeless people, leading us to suggest a need for media advocacy to change the way in which homelessness is framed in the press.

### Method

Items from four Canadian newspapers were collected for the period from August 1, 2007 to July 31, 2008: two broadsheet newspapers, the *Calgary Herald* and the *Vancouver Sun*; a tabloid, the *Vancouver Province*; and a national newspaper, the *Globe and Mail*. Weekday circulation of the four papers in 2007 was as follows: *Calgary Herald*: 125,000; *Vancouver Sun*: 165,000; *Vancouver Province*: 141,000; *Globe and Mail*: 323,000 (Canadian Newspaper Association, 2009). These papers were selected to compare coverage in the largest circulation daily papers in two large Western Canadian cities, to compare coverage in the broadsheet and tabloid press in Vancouver, and to see how local-provincial concerns in these two cities are represented in the national press.

Calgary and Vancouver were selected because each has unique circumstances that make them suitable for comparison. Calgary is the site of the first ten-year plan to end homelessness

in Canada, an initiative spearheaded by CEOs of major corporations in the city. Alberta, the province within which Calgary is located, is the first, and at this writing the only, province in Canada to adopt a plan for ending homelessness. Vancouver was planning for the 2010 Winter Olympics during the time that data was collected, and much concern was expressed about how visitors would perceive an area known as the Downtown East Side, one of the most poverty-stricken neighborhoods in Canada. This neighborhood has become synonymous with homelessness, addictions, and mental illness, and presents a "problem" that is widely cited not just in the Vancouver press but all across Canada. Thus the circumstances in each city offered an opportunity to examine similarities and differences in coverage in the two cities.

The time period for data collection was selected as both cities released homeless "counts" during that year, and Calgary announced its ten-year plan. The most recent homeless count for Calgary (Stroick, Hubac, & Richter-Salomons, 2008) showed that, with a population of just over 1 million, 4,060 people were identified as being homeless, an increase of 18% over the previous count in 2006. In Vancouver, with a population of well over 2 million, 2,592 people were identified as being homeless in 2008, an increase of 22% over the previous count in 2005 (Greater Vancouver Regional Steering Committee on Homelessness, 2008). The documents associated with these counts in Calgary and Vancouver indicate a number of differences in who was selected for counting and how the count was conducted, leading to very different results in relation to the size of the population in each city. Homeless counts have been critiqued as a way to ascertain existing levels of homelessness (Cloke, Milbourne, & Widdowfield, 2001; Shields, 2001), but their results are widely publicized in the media and they provide a local context within which further media coverage of homelessness unfolds. We cite these numbers not to establish a definitive assessment of the number of homeless people in these cities but to describe a context in which there seems to be an ever-increasing number of homeless people, despite the prosperity and wealth of both Calgary and Vancouver during the period of the study. There was therefore much coverage of homelessness in both cities during this year, offering a wealth

of material for examination of how homelessness is framed as a social problem.

Each newspaper was searched in the database ProQuest using the following search terms: homeless\*, vagran\*, squatt\*, street pe\*, panhandl\*, affordable housing, subsidized housing, social housing, and NIMBY (not in my back yard). As the focus of the study was on how the media presents urban homelessness, we omitted several kinds of items that these terms identified, for example, items about homeless pets, homelessness because of natural disasters, and artistic works about homelessness. We also excluded items in which politicians referred in passing to homelessness as a way to advance their own political agendas and letters to the editor which, although they offer a glimpse into how readers respond to news items about homelessness, do not reflect how people who work in the media write about the topic. We also excluded items that focused primarily on affordable housing if they did not mention homelessness. This resulted in a corpus of 765 items in the four papers.

A coding frame consisting of a set of exhaustive and mutually exclusive categories was constructed based on coding information available in previous studies of media coverage of homelessness, consultations among the three authors, and a series of trial coding sessions carried out by the principal author and three research assistants using newspaper items collected for the study. Definitions for all terms that appeared in the coding scheme were also developed. After coding of the newspaper items began, inter-coder reliability tests were conducted every two days using two of the items being coded that day. Inter-coder reliability averaged 81%. Items were coded for various technical aspects of their appearance in the paper: month of publication, word count, type of item (news, editorial etc.), location in the paper, presence of images, and word count of quotations in items. Content of items was also coded: age, gender, race, family membership and portrayal of the main homeless person; causes, solutions, and responses to homelessness; crimes mentioned and whether the homeless person was the victim or perpetrator; and associations of homelessness with about 25 additional factors including such things as mental illness, addictions, weather, health problems, and so on. The coding frame is available upon request from the first



author. Data was analyzed using SPSS, a statistical package for the analysis of quantitative data.

## Results

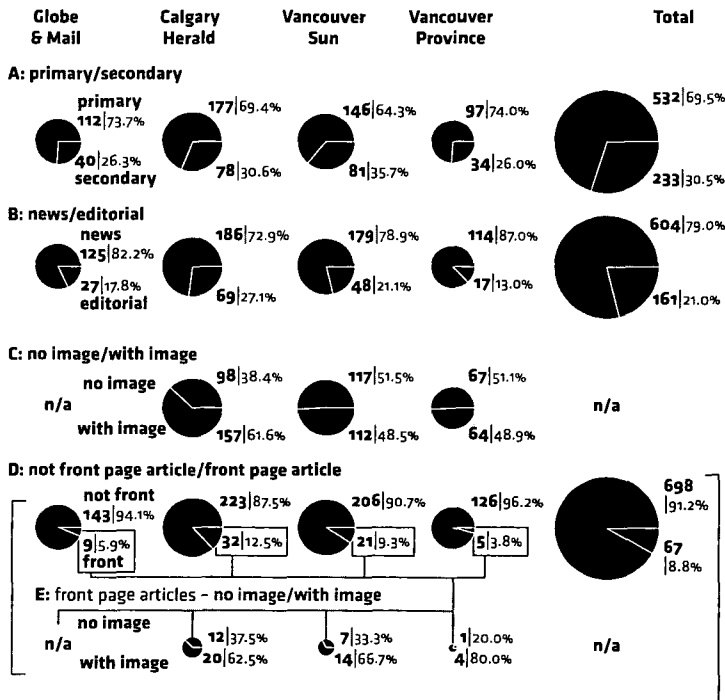
Of the 765 items coded in total, 255 appeared in the *Calgary Herald*, 227 in the *Vancouver Sun*, 131 in the *Vancouver Province*, and 152 in the *Globe and Mail* (see Figure 1). Of these, 532 were identified as “primary” items about homelessness (i.e. homelessness was the main topic of the item, for example an item about the costs of social services for homeless people, or one about how many people are using homeless shelters during a cold spell). The remaining 233 were identified as “secondary” items about homelessness (i.e. homelessness was mentioned or described in the item, but was not the main topic, for example an item on downtown violence that describes a number of recent crimes, among them one committed by or against a homeless person) (see Figure 2A). The *Calgary Herald* had the largest number of items overall and the largest number of primary items. However, the *Vancouver Sun* had both the largest number and the largest proportion of secondary items; that is, the topic of homelessness appeared in the *Vancouver Sun* in a larger proportion of articles that were not primarily about homelessness. This was largely due to frequent references to the area known as the Downtown East Side. We also identified whether an item was a news story or an editorial (this category included both editorials and columns) (see Figure 2B). The *Calgary Herald* had a significantly higher number and proportion of editorial items dealing with homelessness than the other newspapers. This measure offers an indication of how much weight a newspaper attributes to an issue; when journalists choose what to write about in editorials and columns, they are choosing more often in Calgary to write about homelessness.

Figure 1. Number of Articles Found



A number of measures indicate the prominence of items in these newspapers. They include where the item is located in the newspaper and whether an image accompanies the item. In comparison to the other papers, significantly more images of homelessness appeared in the *Calgary Herald* than in the other papers (see Figure 2C). Additionally in this paper, more items were located on the first page of the section they appeared in, more appeared on the front page of the paper, and more of the front page items were accompanied by images (see Figures 2D and 2E). Even people who do not read the paper in Calgary are exposed to more headlines and visual representations of homelessness as they walk by newspaper boxes or see papers lying around in coffee shops and workplaces. We are not able to comment on images in the *Globe and Mail* as the database we used did not report on the presence of images in this newspaper.

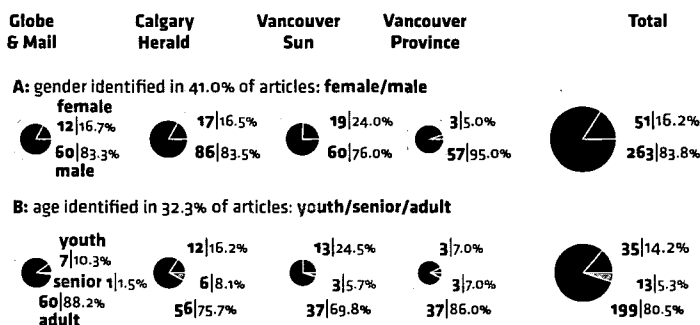
Figure 2. Technical Aspects



*Who is Homeless*

Our results confirm the stereotype identified in the literature of the typical homeless person as a single adult male (Widdowfield, 2001). We coded the main homeless person described in an item for gender, age, and family membership only if these characteristics were identified in the item. At least one homeless person was identified in 315 items, but not all pieces of information were available for each of these people. In our corpus, 79.8% of the people described in items in which the gender and age of the main homeless person could be identified were adult males (see Figure 3A). Women, young people, and seniors were also identified as being homeless. Particularly in the *Calgary Herald* and *Vancouver Sun*, there were a significant number of references to homeless families (33 in the *Calgary Herald* and 19 in the *Vancouver Sun*). Although the most prevalent representation is still that of the adult male, these references to other groups may signal an understanding that homelessness also affects young people, old people, and families (see Figure 3B). It is also perhaps a result of the work of an organization like the Calgary Homeless Foundation to increase awareness of “the many faces” of homelessness. Homelessness is seen to be affecting people who don’t fit the usual stereotype—deserving groups of people like women and children who cannot be as easily dismissed as having brought their problems on themselves.

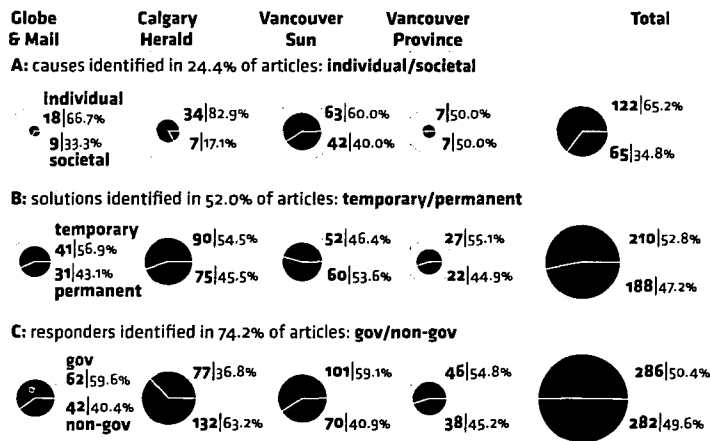
Figure 3. Demographics



*How are Causes, Solutions, and Responses to Homelessness Depicted*

Two main ways of attributing causes for homelessness have been identified in the literature: individual deficits such as mental illness, addictions, and poor life choices; and societal/structural factors such as low availability of fair-wage employment and decent low-cost housing. Buck et al. (2004) note that their sample showed a greater emphasis on the individual deficits and deviance of people experiencing homelessness and a lesser emphasis on societal or structural causes of homelessness. Causes were identified in only 24.4% of our corpus. Even in stories in which we coded causes, we often had to infer causes when, for example, mental illness was associated with homelessness. Any conclusions about causes must therefore be regarded as tentative. Overall, individual causes were cited more than societal causes (see Figure 4A). The *Vancouver Sun* data shows a much larger number of items in which causes were identified. This may be because we could infer causes in more cases in this newspaper as it contained a much larger number of references to addictions and mental illness (55% of items referred to addictions, 39% referred to mental illness, compared to averages of 29% and 20% in the other newspapers). The *Vancouver Sun* also showed a greater number and proportion of references to societal causes of homelessness.

Figure 4. Causes, Solutions, and Responses



Solutions to homelessness were mentioned in 52% of our corpus (See Figure 4B). However, our decision to exclude items that focused on affordable housing without mentioning homelessness means that we may have excluded items that discussed potential permanent solutions to the problem of homelessness. There is a general sense in the homeless-helping community that the solution to homelessness is housing people long term, not sheltering them short term (Calgary Committee to End Homelessness, 2008; McLean, 2008). In the news items, we see somewhat more reference to temporary solutions, particularly in the *Calgary Herald*. As a result of our exclusions we cannot make any definitive statements about whether the “providing permanent housing” perspective, contested by some (McLean, 2008), is increasingly making its way into popular understanding.

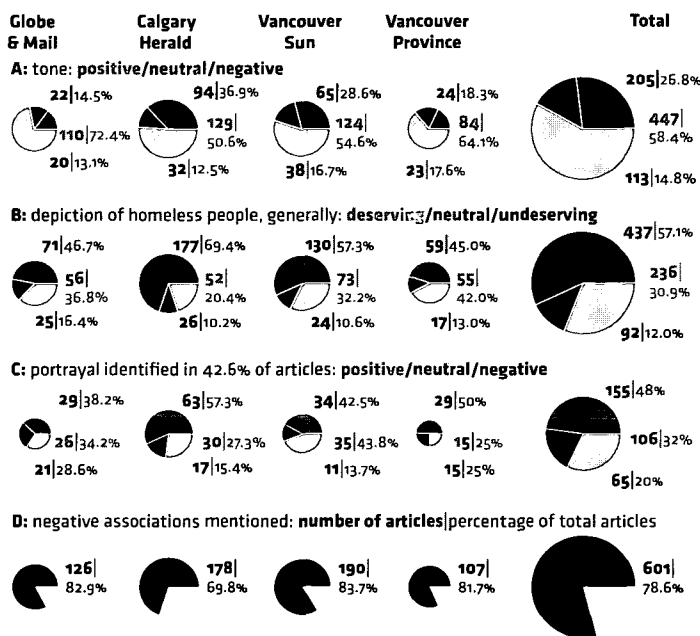
We also coded our data for references to who was or should be responding to homelessness. Responders were mentioned in 74.2% of the stories (see Figure 4C). These were coded according to whether the potential or actual responder was a government responder (either a specific government department or a government representative) or a non-government responder (a non-profit agency, a corporate entity or representative, or a private individual). The *Calgary Herald* was the only paper in which non-government responders were identified more often than government responders. The much larger attribution of societal causes for homelessness in the *Vancouver Sun* may be related to the larger number of mentions of government responses—if the problem is structural, then the government, rather than members of society, will be able to address it.

#### *How are Homelessness and Homeless People Characterized*

Characterizations of homeless people and depictions of homelessness generally were assessed with three codes. These included the tone of the item toward homelessness generally; the depiction of homeless people generally presented in the item; and in items in which a main homeless person could be identified, the portrayal of that person. These codes were operationalized by having the coders make a global assessment of the dominant tone of items or depiction of people using a five point scale (1 = positive, 3 = neutral, 5 = negative). This enabled

us to achieve a high degree of inter-rater reliability on these codes. While the tone of the items in all four newspapers was primarily neutral, as might be expected given journalistic standards of reporting, in Calgary the tone was somewhat more positive than in the other papers (see Figure 5A). Across all the papers, characterizations of homeless people were overwhelmingly deserving or neutral (see Figure 5B). However, the *Calgary Herald* presented both the highest number and the highest proportion of deserving representations. Portrayal of individual homeless people who were mentioned in items was overwhelmingly neutral or positive (see Figure 5C). Again in the *Calgary Herald*, however, there were both a larger number and a larger proportion of positive portrayals than in the other newspapers.

Figure 5. Depiction, Tone, Portrayal and Negative Associations



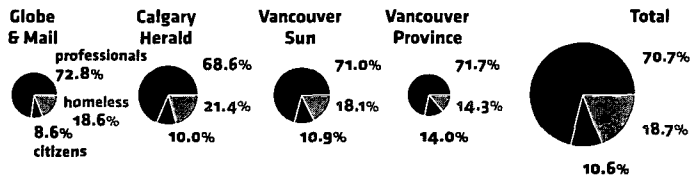
We also coded for what we called “associations” with homelessness (e.g., inappropriate use of public space, bottle-picking, addictions, mental illness, health problems caused or exacerbated by being on the street, safety issues for the public or for homeless people, and so on) and for specific crimes

described in items (e.g., theft, drug-related crime, vandalism, panhandling when it was represented as a crime, murder, and so on). In some cases, these factors were not central to the item itself, instead appearing in stories about other topics, for example a story about the length of jail sentences that referred in one short paragraph to repeat offenders who are homeless people with mental illnesses. We have combined these factors into a variable we called negative associations (see Figure 5D). A significantly lower proportion of articles in the *Calgary Herald* referred to one or more of these factors. This supports the results of the previous three variables indicating that coverage in the *Calgary Herald* was significantly more positive than in the other three newspapers.

#### *Who Speaks about Homelessness*

We assessed who was speaking about homelessness by counting the number of words that appeared inside quotation marks in the items and were attributed to specific sources. While sources are often paraphrased as well as quoted directly, we were unable to achieve inter-rater agreement on paraphrases, so have not included these in the study. We used Martin's (1997) classification of journalists' sources into three "tiers" to code the quotes. These tiers consist of primary or expert sources, people who are quoted because of their status as a public figure or because of their professional or academic expertise; secondary sources or citizens, ordinary people who are typically asked for their reactions to events and issues; and marginalized groups, in this case, homeless or formerly homeless people. Overall, 70.7% of the words that appeared in quotation marks in the stories were attributed to experts. In our data, this category includes social service agency workers, government representatives, scholarly experts, and celebrities. The rest of the quotes were split between homeless or formerly homeless people (18.7%) and citizens (10.6%) (see Figure 6). When homeless people are quoted, it is primarily to "tell their story" and emphasize the importance of "having a home." These personal stories provide a backdrop to and justification for the pronouncements of the various kinds of experts identified above. Domiciled experts dominate public discourse about homelessness, with people who experience homelessness themselves marginalized as speakers.

Table 6. Who Speaks



*Comparisons Among the Newspapers*

We identified a number of interesting similarities and differences between the newspapers of the two main cities, between the national paper and the two main city papers, and between the tabloid and broadsheet newspapers in Vancouver.

*Calgary/Vancouver broadsheet comparisons.* A comparison of the two main city newspapers shows a number of similarities in coverage but also some significant differences. Both newspapers paid a significant amount of attention to the topic of homelessness. In fact, readers of the *Calgary Herald* and *Vancouver Sun* were bombarded with stories that referred to homelessness, with one appearing on average two out of three days during the year of the study. Both papers had a substantial number and proportion of secondary articles that mentioned homelessness, indicating that homelessness is regarded as an important enough problem to show up repeatedly in articles that are not primarily about homelessness. Both newspapers also had references to women and people in families, groups that do not fit the traditional stereotype of the adult male homeless person.

However, coverage also shows some significant differences. In general, the *Calgary Herald* coverage conveyed a stronger sense of crisis or urgency than *Vancouver Sun* coverage and also a stronger sense of optimism that the problem should and can be solved. This sense of urgency was conveyed by the finding that the *Calgary Herald* had more items overall than the *Vancouver Sun*, a larger number and proportion of primary items and editorials, more images, more front page stories with images, and more mention of temporary solutions rather than permanent solutions. Calgary readers also saw a considerably larger number of items that communicated a sense of crisis than those in Vancouver—59 in the *Calgary Herald* compared to 39 in the *Vancouver Sun*.



Calgary readers also saw more items that communicated a sense of optimism that something can be done about homelessness. The *Calgary Herald* had many more items that were positive in tone, more items that presented homeless people as deserving, more positive portrayals of homeless individuals, and fewer negative associations with homelessness. The *Calgary Herald* also had more references to homeless people who are working, more references to homeless people as victims of crimes (23 compared to 9 in the *Vancouver Sun*), and fewer mentions of mental illness and addictions. The coverage conveyed a general sense that these are people who need and deserve our help. In addition, a much smaller number of items described or asked for government responses to homelessness in the *Calgary Herald* compared to the *Vancouver Sun*. Homelessness is something the community can address without waiting for the government. This may be related to the optimistic entrepreneurial can-do spirit that is said to characterize Calgary, which also expresses itself in a distinct conservative, less-government-intervention political bent in Calgary.

*National/local coverage comparisons.* Coverage in the national newspaper, the *Globe and Mail*, differed from coverage in the two main city newspapers in a number of ways. The *Globe and Mail* offered significantly less coverage of homelessness than either of the city broadsheets, and the coverage it did offer was more negative. It included a higher proportion of primary items, a lower proportion of editorials as compared with news items, and a lower proportion of items on the front page. Altogether, homelessness was given much less prominence in the *Globe and Mail* than in the two city broadsheets. It also had a lower proportion of positive portrayals and a larger proportion of negative portrayals of homeless individuals, a lower proportion of deserving depictions and a higher proportion of undeserving depictions of homeless people in general, and a much larger proportion of articles with neutral tone resulting in a lower proportion with positive tone. Negative associations appeared in a larger proportion of items than in the *Calgary Herald* and about the same proportion as in the *Vancouver Sun*, but the average number of negative associations per item was higher than in either of the city papers (3.6 in the *Calgary Herald*, 4 in the *Vancouver Sun*, and 4.5 in the *Globe and Mail*).

This was calculated by dividing the total number of negative representations in each paper by the number of items in which negative associations appeared.). Fewer homeless individuals were identified as being in families, more mention was made of enforcement of laws targeting homeless people, and many fewer homeless people were identified as working.

In the *Calgary Herald* and the *Vancouver Sun*, items described homelessness primarily in the local or provincial context (84.8% and 68.9% respectively). In the *Globe and Mail*, items were also primarily provincial, being about homelessness in a specific city or province in Canada, and only rarely had a national focus on homelessness. However, in spite of the somewhat greater attention to homelessness in the *Calgary Herald* than in the *Vancouver Sun*, only 6 (4%) of the *Globe and Mail* stories in which the location was identified were about Alberta. In contrast, 82 (54%) were about British Columbia and 49 (32%) were about Ontario. If readers of the *Globe and Mail* across Canada are gaining a sense that there is a homelessness crisis, it has a British Columbia face, not an Alberta one. In general, there is more reference in the *Globe and Mail* to problematic individual behaviors and personal failings than in the two city papers. In conjunction with fact that there are very few national stories about homelessness in the *Globe and Mail*, we conclude that the national paper presents homelessness as an individual and local problem, something that accords with the fact that there is no national strategy for homelessness in Canada.

*Vancouver broadsheet/tabloid comparisons.* A comparison of the two Vancouver papers shows that the tabloid *Province* offered significantly less coverage of homelessness than did the broadsheet *Sun* and the coverage it did offer was more negative than that in the *Sun*. The *Province* carried just over half as many items on homelessness as the *Sun* and offered a significantly lower proportion of editorial comment on the issue, indicating that it accords less importance to the issue than the *Sun*. Only five stories and four images appeared on the front page compared with 21 stories and 14 images in the *Sun*. It also had a much larger proportion of shorter stories than the *Sun*. Almost all the individuals described or mentioned in the *Province* were adult males (95%) and a significantly higher

proportion of these individuals were portrayed negatively. The *Province* also had a significantly lower proportion of items with positive tone and deserving depictions. Although there was no significant difference in the proportion of items that made reference to negative associations in the two papers, a lower proportion of homeless people were described in the *Province* as working, as having health problems, or as victims rather than perpetrators of crimes, factors that might be expected to increase sympathy for homeless people. Overall, coverage in the *Vancouver Province* was sparser and more negative. It is likely that these depictions of homelessness are shaped by assumptions about the readership of each of these papers. The *Province* is a tabloid newspaper, and tabloids tend to offer shorter stories that examine issues in less depth and to offer more sensationalist—in this case, more negative—coverage than broadsheets. In both papers, more items referred to government responses to the problem, something that might be expected in the more social democratic political environment of British Columbia.

### Discussion

We found clear differences between the newspapers we studied in how homelessness is framed. In Calgary, coverage was more positive than in Vancouver, conveyed a stronger sense of both urgency and optimism that the problem of homelessness should and can be solved, and focused on the community rather than the government as the source of solutions. In Vancouver, coverage was more negative, conveyed less urgency, and focused on the government as the source of solutions. The national paper presented homelessness as a local rather than national problem. It seems that when homelessness is presented more positively, as in Calgary, the community is more willing to take responsibility and participate in finding solutions. When it is presented more negatively, as in Vancouver, there is an expectation that the government will take care of the problem.

Despite these differences, overall the four papers present a unified narrative of homelessness in which readers are exhorted to be sympathetic to the plight of homeless people, while at the same time, “they,” homeless people, are presented

as needing to be controlled and regulated in order to maintain social order. This framing of homelessness as a problem needing control and regulation is an overarching narrative that dominates in the construction of homelessness as a social problem. Bird and Dardenne (1988) describe news narratives as myth, meaning not that they are false, but that they become “what everyone knows” about a topic. Narratives provide a frame for ongoing coverage, as each individual newspaper item is presented not as an entirely new piece of information but as an element in this ongoing narrative (Silverstone, 1988). Readers are less likely to remember individual news stories than the overarching narrative onto which individual stories are hung. Kitzinger (2000) suggests similarly that templates organize news coverage, with previous coverage providing a frame for further coverage, encouraging readers to understand new coverage in light of the old. Templates present one dominant version of a problem, thereby becoming “instrumental in shaping narratives around particular social problems” (Kitzinger, 2000, p. 61) and guiding public discussion and advocacy for policy change.

The ongoing narrative that we identified in the newspapers we studied supports the work of scholars such as Hopper (1988) and Feldman (2004) who point to two dominant versions of homeless people that appear in media coverage. One version represents them as victims of circumstances beyond their own control who need and deserve help. The second version, which often overlays the first by appearing at the same time, represents them as having freely made bad choices that have led to their present unfortunate circumstances. Therefore they do not deserve help and are a social evil needing to be controlled and even punished. They are “matter out of place” (Feldman, 2004, p. 6).

These two frames occurred together throughout our data. On the one hand, representations of individual homeless people were overwhelmingly neutral or positive (overall only 19.9% were negative), and depictions of homelessness and homeless people were overwhelmingly neutral or deserving (only 12% negative). On the other hand, 78.6% of items mentioned negative associations, with an average of 4 associations in each of these items. Most of these negative associations are

individual characteristics or behaviors, such as addictions, squatting, or panhandling, which are easily understood as individual choices. At the same time as people were described as needing and deserving help, they were described as somehow associated with or as having chosen activities that domiciled people do not like and want to have disappear from the streets and other public places. Although the representation of homeless people as needy and deserving seems positive and sympathetic, both representations work to keep people who are homeless on the margins of society, controlling them, disenfranchising them, and denying them full participation as citizens. The first representation casts them as requiring charity, a relationship that positions them as socially inferior to those who provide the charity. The goal of this charity is, of course, to turn them from homeless people into domiciled people and in this way charity functions a means of social control (Stern, 1986). The second representation more self-evidently functions to justify control and regulation of homeless people and their exclusion from full participation in society because in this version they have chosen to engage in socially disruptive or outright illegal behaviors.

In keeping with this narrative of regulation and control, our data shows that the voice of people who are or have been homeless is largely excluded from media coverage. Over 70% of the words quoted in our corpus come from domiciled experts. Less than 19% come from homeless people themselves. While the predominance of the voice of experts is in part a result of the social organization of news gathering and reporting (Fishman, 1980), it is nevertheless problematic in a number of ways. Experts work as filters to separate homeless people from their own experience by effacing their public voice. They are the intermediaries who speak for and about homelessness, translating for readers the "facts" about the "experiences" of homeless people. This sets up an opposition between those who are entitled to speak about homelessness, "experts," and those who are spoken about, "them," whose stories are there primarily to give the experts something on which to comment. Despite the fact that coverage often tells the "story" of particular individuals who are homeless, they are generally displaced from their own stories by journalists who tap into the ongoing

narrative to present aspects of the story that they think the public will expect to read (Hodgetts et al., 2005).

The predominance of quotations from experts also produces a sense that homeless people are a problem to be solved not by “us” ordinary newspaper readers but by the professional “carers” who speak about them. Frequent references to solutions in the media coverage works to justify the activities of experts, who are designated to stand in for “us” to take care of the problem. Solutions were mentioned in over half of the items. But these are not solutions that ordinary domiciled people can implement—establishing temporary shelters or constructing affordable permanent housing. These are solutions that service providers, politicians, and others must implement. Ordinary domiciled people, while they may decry the existence of homelessness in rich societies such as ours, are off the hook for actually doing anything about it.

Control and regulation are implicit in the assigning of responsibility to care-giving professionals for “solving” the homelessness “problem.” Fox (1995) describes the paradoxical nature of care. Care is almost always seen as a good thing, and the word carries almost no negative meanings. Control, however, seems to be an inevitable consequence of the provision of care, even if not intended by carers. On the one hand, the act of caring comes from concern and a desire to provide for the needs of others. On the other hand, the disciplinary knowledge of the carer—that is, their expertise in the field of homelessness and/or mental health and knowledge of theories of care and professional practice—supplies “the basis for the authority and power of those who practice care” (p. 111). Fox captures the control aspects of care in his description of what he calls the vigil of care in which the cared-for are continually subjected to “the vigilant scrutiny of carers” (p. 112). For Fox, the vigil is more about power, surveillance, and control grounded in the professional knowledge of care givers than it is about the positive values typically associated with care. Control and regulation are thus embedded within even sympathetic media items that present homeless people as worthy of the efforts of the charitable organizations that are designated to address their problems.

## Conclusion

The framing of homelessness in the coverage we studied has clear implications for citizenship and inclusion of people who are homeless. If, as Silverstone (2007) has pointed out, the media have become the primary site of public debate in society, participation in society depends, at least in part, on being able to find a voice in the media. Homeless people find it difficult to get their voices into the media and to affect the ongoing public narrative about themselves. Various scholars (Greenberg et al., 2006; Iyengar, 1991; Klodawsky et al., 2002) assert that framing in media coverage informs the policy solutions that are considered; if so, then homeless people are excluded from full participation both in defining and in finding solutions to their "problems." The narrative of control and regulation positions people as legitimate objects of scrutiny, regulation, and control. While we cannot make any claims about the effects of the coverage we studied, it is likely that it contributes to an ongoing estrangement of homeless people from domiciled people and therefore decreases the likelihood of the development of effective national policies in Canada to address homelessness.

Although the narrative of regulation and control that we identified dominates media coverage of homelessness, it is not fixed and immutable. The media are often described as "having" widespread symbolic power through their ability to broadcast to large numbers of people over wide geographical areas. Couldry (2001) offers instead an understanding of media power as a social process that requires constant reproduction through the activities of social actors at every level of social life, including ordinary members of audiences. Media power comes to seem natural through routinized patterns of reporting and reading, but it can also be resisted and contested, offering the possibility that the ongoing narrative of homelessness could be different than it now is. Journalists could write differently, audiences might think differently, and policymakers might then respond differently. This offers the possibility of a civic oriented journalism (Hodgetts, Chamberlain, Scammell, Karapu, & Nikora, 2008) in which journalists come to recognize and understand the implications of the present ongoing narrative for both audience and policy responses and perhaps work directly with people who are homeless to find ways to

represent them that interrupt the dominant frames.

Not surprisingly, almost nothing of the ways in which homeless people organize themselves socially and make lives for themselves on the streets and in shelters appeared in our corpus. This is a version of homelessness in which people have a legitimate right to choose how they will live, to use public spaces, and to interact with domiciled people that does not fit easily into the ongoing narrative that we have just described. Hodgetts et al. (2008), however, show the possibilities for change in media representations. They describe a situation in which the authors worked with journalists to change the tone and content of reporting on use of the local library by homeless people by showing that homeless people use the library for the same activities as domiciled people.

This form of media advocacy is, however, a difficult enterprise that requires planning and reflection. Platt (1999) notes that a “warts and all” portrayal of homeless people is difficult to present. As he says,

Someone who is homeless may be unlikable and in need at the same time, may be spending too much of their money on drink and drugs and still be worthy of help in getting enough to eat, may have lost their last home in part due to their own action but still a need a roof over their head now. (p. 113)

There is a risk of perpetuating stereotypes when increasing journalistic engagement with homeless people. One means of overcoming this is to develop relationships between researchers and journalists to create a meta-commentary that allows for “warts and all” portrayals without undermining the need for empathy and support.

In summary, there are clear differences between the Canadian newspapers we examined, likely tied to local contexts and expectations of readership. However, the problematic overarching narrative of regulation and control present in all the newspapers points to a need for media activism with journalists to promote a more complex look at the lives of homeless people. This may require journalists and their employers to look beyond the simple stereotypes that underpin the narrative of regulation and control and to work actively to present stories that promote the social inclusion and citizenship of all members of society, regardless of their housing status.



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