

How Religiosity Affects Perceptions of the Homeless

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ABSTRACT: While most research to date has found that the majority of people believe that homelessness is a serious issue, perceptions of homeless individuals vary. Although all major religions encourage compassion for the poor and homeless, little is known about the relationship between religious faith and perceptions of homeless individuals. This study explores how religion impacts people's perceptions of homelessness. This is an important area of research to explore because so many homeless service agencies in the United States are faith-based. The data is taken from a telephone survey of 483 Central Florida residents. Results show that the influence of religion on perceptions of the homeless is neither consistent nor predictable.

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INTRODUCTION

The public's perceptions of homeless individuals influence the way homeless people are treated and the aid they receive. Homeless people are typically viewed in one of two ways. The first view is that individuals are responsible for their homelessness and have chosen to live the way they do. The second view rejects the idea that homeless individuals are to blame and instead attributes homelessness to societal factors that operate at the macro-level (Donley & Wright, forthcoming). These structural factors (poverty, disabilities, and a lack of social service assistance) are outside of an individual's control (DeLisi 2000).

Even though general views of homeless people tend to be dichotomized, views about the relationship between homelessness and criminal activity are much more homogenous. While people may want homeless individuals to receive necessary assistance, many also see them as more prone to criminal activity. Barak (2002) illustrated that people tend to perceive a relationship between homeless individuals and crime, regardless of whether evidence substantiates the idea.

Many people are afraid of homeless people due to the negative attributes that are assigned to the homeless population (Donley 2008). However, a study by Whaley and Link (1998) examines people's conflicting views regarding these attributes. In this study, the factors that shape domiciled peoples' views of homeless individuals were examined to determine what causes them to view homeless individuals as dangerous. The analysis, which consisted of 1,240 participants, only examined Caucasian individuals. Over half of the people surveyed believed that it is only natural to be afraid of a person on the street (62%). Conversely, the majority disagreed that homeless individuals are dangerous (52%). Also, respondents generally claimed that they do not assume that homeless people commit more violent crimes than domiciled people (73%). Similarly, while 41% of respondents said they would be less likely to trust someone they knew had been homeless, the majority of respondents conversely reported believing that homeless people are no more dangerous than domiciled people (69%). The obvious contradictions in these findings illustrate the conflicting views people hold about the homeless population. Perhaps these views are influenced by the use of the term "homeless." The negative connotation of the word "homeless" was demonstrated in a study by Phelan, Link, Moore, and Stueve (1997). Respondents in this study

were given a profile of a poor man who was described as either domiciled or homeless in order to assess the impact of the label "homeless" on people's attitudes. Respondents reported a greater social distance when they read the homeless profile. Homeless individuals were stigmatized more severely than domiciled people, even when the domiciled individual was described as being poor.

While perceptions of homeless individuals and the factors that impact these perceptions have received some attention as described above, the relationship between religiosity and perceptions of homelessness has not been addressed in the literature. There seems to be a connection, however, between religion and homeless people. The connection is evident in the large body of religious materials devoted to the treatment of the needy and in the involvement of religious groups in helping homeless individuals.

Religious Teachings

Teachings about the treatment of the poor abound in the religious texts of Christianity, Judaism, and Islam. The poor are presented favorably, and it is often stated that individuals who are poor in this life will reap rewards in the next one. Through these teachings, these religions encourage their members to help alleviate poverty, a goal that is evidenced in the large number of religious organizations aimed at providing help to the needy.

In Christian doctrine, giving aid to the hungry, needy, and marginalized distinguishes between those who are saved and those who are condemned (Matthew 25:34-40; Luke 6:20 New International Version). Individuals who show concern for the poor will be rewarded in the afterlife for their generous acts (Luke 6:20). Helping the poor is also seen as indicative of an individual's devotion (Acts 2:45). Prominent Biblical figures such as Jesus and Job serve as role models through the kindness they showed to those in need, and Jesus's original followers sold their possessions in order to provide for impoverished supporters (Acts 4:32). Christian teachings also state that to honor God, the needy should be treated graciously, and when they are mistreated God is taunted (Proverbs 14:31). According to Christian belief, the needy should be treated with open hands and given enough to make up for what they lack (Deuteronomy 15:7-8).

Jewish teachings about poverty and charity are similar to Christian teachings and also encourage aiding the needy. Jewish tradition teaches us to "speak up, judge righteously, champion the poor and the needy" (Proverbs 31:19). In

Judaism it is said that God commands, "Share your bread with the hungry, and take the wretched poor into your home; when you see the naked, clothe him and do not ignore your own kin" (Isaiah 58:7). Jewish teachings accentuate this lesson, teaching that all needy people should be given food and shelter, no matter if they are friends or strangers (Leviticus 25:35).

Muslim doctrine also discusses the issue of poverty and the importance of almsgiving. Zakat, one of the five pillars of Islam, is a tax levied to support the poor, orphans, debtors, and other disadvantaged people. This is distinct from voluntary charity, or sadaqah, which is also canonically promoted. The rewards one receive both in this life and the afterlife are said to be proportionate to the amount of sadaqah (30:39; 2:276). These two concepts of charity developed early in Islam, reaching back to Muhammad's lifetime (Singer 2006). The Qur'an details that providing assistance to those hindered by debt is an obligation from Allah that will be recognized (9:60; 2:273). It is further described in Muslim texts that only those who have forgotten their prayer would not urge the donation of food to those in need (107:1-7). The large number of soup kitchens found in Muslim communities attests to the importance of beneficence (Singer 2006).

According to the 2008 American Religious Identification Survey, 76% of the US adult population identifies as Christian, 4% identify with another religion and 15% have no religious identification. These statistics reflect an increase from 8.2% of people in 1990 who stated they have no religious identification. The Jewish population in America has declined from 1.6% in 1990 to 1.2% in 2008, while the Muslim population has doubled during the same time period (.3% to .6%). In the state of Florida in 2008, 80% of people identified with some religion (Kosmin & Keysar 2009).

It is unclear how the teachings of Christianity, Judaism, and Islam translate into efforts to aid the needy. The moral commitment of religious groups is considered advantageous by international development organizations. Religious groups are considered more effective at aiding the needy due to their deeper levels of motivation and high community and personal commitment (Martin et al. 2007). However, a study by DeFronzo (1972) revealed that religious orientations had a negative relationship with humanitarian orientations and Cline and Richards (1965) found that religious individuals were no more likely to hold humanitarian

values than non-religious individuals. Research by Morgan et al (1997) suggests that higher levels of religiosity correlate to greater willingness to help homeless people. The discrepancies in research findings indicate that religious teachings do not always translate to individual actions.

Discrimination

Religion attempts to promote acceptance by emphasizing loving one's neighbor regardless of color, race, or creed. Thus, it seems paradoxical that social science research often finds positive correlations between religious involvement and prejudicial behavior and attitudes. Despite religion's prosocial doctrines, religious individuals demonstrate less tolerance towards members of different racial and ethnic groups (Allport & Kramer 1946; Eisinga et al. 1999), gays and lesbians (Rowatt et al. 2009; Finlay & Waither 2003; Veenliet 2008) and non-believers (Jackson & Hunsberger 1999). While some research suggests that there is no correlation between religiosity and prejudice (Jacobson 1998; Chalfant 1983), the majority suggests that there is a relationship. Explanations have been offered for the inconsistencies between the teachings of a religion and the actions of its followers. Allport (1979) proposed that people distort religious teachings to justify their prejudices, even when the prejudices have no real basis in religion. These inconsistencies have also been explained by religion's possible promotion of strong in-group identities, which can lead to and even justify negative attitudes towards out-group members (Batson & Burris 1994; Rock 2004; Aronson 1992).

The Current Study

This study examines the impact that religious affiliation bears on perceptions of homelessness and homeless people. There is a long-standing connection between religion and homelessness. Religious groups are becoming more involved in efforts to help homeless individuals. For example, 56% of the agencies served by the Second Harvest Food Bank are faith-based. Also, 73% of all pantries, 65% of kitchens, and 43% of shelters that serve emergency feeding purposes are faith-based (O'Brien & Aldeen, 2006). Due to religious communities' increased involvement, religious individuals' perceptions of homeless people are important to examine. Although an association between religious teachings and the impoverished exists, the impact of religion on perceptions of homelessness has not been adequately explored to date. There is also some discrepancy in the previous research on how religion and attitudes toward homeless

individuals relate. This descriptive study explores the potential impact of religion on perceptions of homeless individuals.

METHOD

Due to the unexamined relationship between religiosity and perceptions of homeless people, this study analyzes data from a representative sample of residents in Central Florida. In July and August 2009, the University of Central Florida's Institute of Social and Behavioral Sciences surveyed 483 adult residents of Central Florida (Orange, Osceola, and Seminole Counties) via telephone. While the findings are not representative of the country as a whole, Florida's religious composition mirrors that of the nations (Kosmin & Keysar 2009) and thus provides insight into the interaction between religion and beliefs about homelessness.

The survey was designed to assess respondents' attitudes toward homeless individuals and issues dealing with homelessness. The survey included statements such as "Most homeless people have good job skills" and "Homelessness has gotten worse in this country." Participants either rated these statements on a 5-point agree or disagree scale or answered yes or no. Respondents were also allowed to give qualitative answers to some questions on the survey, which were used for the qualitative analysis portion of this study. Demographic questions were also used in the survey, including measures of religiosity. Analysis was conducted using the measures of religiosity and statements measuring attitudes toward homeless individuals to identify differences between religious and nonreligious respondents.

RESULTS

Three variables measured religious involvement among respondents: religious affiliation, the importance of religion in one's life, and how often one attends religious services. As shown in Table 1, the majority of respondents identify with some religion, mostly Christianity. Well over half of the respondents also state that religion is important in their lives and over one-third attend religious services weekly. Due to the small number of Jewish and Muslim respondents, religious affiliation was recoded simply as those who affiliate with a religion and those who do not. Therefore 86% of respondents are classed as "religiously affiliated."

TABLE 1: RELIGIOUS VARIABLES OF INTEREST

Religious Affiliation	Percentage
Protestant	18%
Catholic	23%
Another type of Christian	32%
Jewish	3%
Muslim	.3%
Some other religion	9%
No religion	14%
Importance of Religion	
Very important	47%
Somewhat important	33%
Not very important	8%
Not important at all	9%
Attendance at Religious Services	
Every week	34%
Almost every week	6%
Once or twice a month	12%
A few times per year	22%
Less often than that	9%
Never	12%
Not applicable (no religious affiliation)	5%

Respondents were read several statements (as shown in Table 2) and asked whether they agree strongly, agree, disagree or disagree strongly to each. These responses have been collapsed into agree and disagree categories to ease in the interpretation of the analysis. A crosstabulation between these statements and religious affiliation was conducted to ascertain significant differences in responses (Table 2).

There were statistically significant differences for two of the statements. The first is that most homeless people have good job skills. While over half (62%) of the affiliated respondents agreed with this statement, only 39% of the non-affiliated respondents also agreed ($\chi^2 = 11.84, p < .001$). The second statement where significant differences were found reads: it's only natural to be afraid of a person who lives on the streets. While the majority in both groups disagreed with this statement, religiously affiliated respondents were significantly more likely to agree ($\chi^2 = 7.08, p < .01$).

TABLE 2: PERCENTAGE AGREEING WITH STATEMENTS ABOUT HOMELESS INDIVIDUALS

Statement	Religiously Affiliated	Not Religiously Affiliated
Most have good job skills**	62%	39%
More likely to commit violent crimes	23%	16%
Can be identified by appearance alone	38%	46%
It's hard to understand how anyone becomes homeless	18%	22%
It's almost impossible to be safe when homeless	79%	81%
Programs for the homeless cost taxpayers too much	21%	16%
It's only natural to be afraid of a person who lives on the street*	41%	23%
Most homeless people could take care of a home	80%	76%
Even if they seem alright, it's important to remember they may be dangerous	60%	63%

*p<.01; ** p<.001

Respondents were also asked about their familiarity with the Coalition for the Homeless of Central Florida (Table 3). The Coalition is the largest emergency shelter in Central Florida and was established in 1987. While there are no statistically significant differences between the two groups, affiliated respondents were more likely to have heard of the Coalition and to have donated time or money to it. When asked how participants first became

TABLE 3: QUESTIONS ABOUT THE COALITION

Question	Religiously Affiliated	Not Religiously Affiliated
Have you heard of the coalition?	77%	72%
Have you ever donated money to the coalition?	37%	31%
Have you ever volunteered at the coalition?	18%	9%

aware of the Coalition, the most frequent answers given by affiliated respondents were from their church, through their job, another organization, or because they saw or visited the building. Unaffiliated respondents reported becoming aware of the Coalition because of other organizations and seeing the building. While the Coalition is not religiously affiliated, they work with many churches in the area and actively seek volunteers from them. Therefore we would expect that affiliated respondents would be more familiar with the Coalition.

The issue of panhandling is vital when examining perceptions of homeless people. For many in the general public, “panhandler” and “homeless person” are synonymous terms. However, a sizeable proportion of panhandlers are in fact domiciled (Lee, Farrell, & Link 2004). Likewise, several studies have demonstrated that the majority of homeless people do not engage in panhandling (Scott 2002). While these distinctions are recognized in academic studies, these studies often do not affect the view of the typical person (see Lee & Farrell 2003 for a review of this topic). Therefore, someone could have an experience with a (domiciled) panhandler that would affect how he or she views the homeless population, however unfair or misguided that might be.

The majority of both groups said that most panhandlers are homeless and the overwhelming majorities of both groups said that most homeless people panhandle from time to time (Table 4). Over half (57%) of religiously affiliated respondents agreed that panhandling is a problem in Central Florida, compared to just over one-third (34%) of unaffiliated respondents ($\chi^2 = 10.24$, $p < .001$). There were no significant differences in how often affiliated and non-affiliated respondents said they gave food or money directly to people on the street.

TABLE 4: PERCENTAGE AGREEING WITH STATEMENTS ON PANHANDLING

Statement	Religiously Affiliated	Not Religiously Affiliated
Panhandling is a problem in Central Florida**	57%	34%
Most homeless people panhandle from time to time	86%	91%
Most panhandlers are homeless	59%	55%

**p<.001

Participants who stated they give money to homeless people were asked why they do so. Of the 44 responses given by affiliated respondents, the most frequent response was to help the homeless person purchase food. Other common answers included the belief that homeless individuals need money, religious reasons, personal experience with homeless individuals, and fear of homeless individuals. An example of attributing giving money to religious reasons is, "I give money because I'm religious and believe it's the right thing to do." A response from the fear of homeless individuals category is, "I'm afraid of them and if I don't give, I'll be sorry." Among the 11 unaffiliated responses, the most frequent answer was because homeless people need food. There were no other common responses from the unaffiliated respondents.

Participants were also asked why they give food directly to homeless people. Among the affiliated participants, the most common response was that homeless people are hungry. Other common responses were because of compassion or a desire to help others, religious reasons, and the fear that homeless people would buy alcohol or drugs if given money. An example of a response in this category is, "If you give food, you know they have no money to buy drugs." Of the four responses from unaffiliated respondents who gave food directly to homeless people, two of these respondents cited this reason as well. One respondent said, "I don't want them to buy booze."

Respondents were asked to indicate whether they believed the problem of homelessness has gotten worse, if their personal opinions of homeless people have changed, and if they are personally acquainted with any homeless people (Table 5). Those who have changed

TABLE 5: CHANGING PERCEPTIONS OF HOMELESS PEOPLE

Question	Religiously Affiliated	Not Religiously Affiliated
Has homelessness gotten worse in our country?	90%	92%
Have your opinions about homelessness changed in the past year?	37%	29%
Do you personally know anyone who has been homeless?	41%	31%

their views about homeless people were asked what prompted the change in opinion. For affiliated respondents, the changes were most commonly attributed to personal experience with homeless individuals or personal economic trouble, awareness or education, and church involvement or religious beliefs. For non-affiliated respondents, the most frequent responses were awareness or education and personal experience.

Correlations were conducted between the variable measuring how important religion is in one's life and the statements listed in Table 6. There were statistically significant differences for three of the statements. There was a significant difference for the statement that most homeless people have good job skills ($r(477)=-.110, p<.05$). The second statement with a significant difference was that it is only natural to be afraid of a person who lives on the street ($r(497)=-.098, p<.05$). The last statement that was significantly different was that programs for the homeless cost taxpayers too much money ($r(448)=-.132, p<.01$). Respondents for whom religion is important were significantly more likely to agree with these three statements. However, the

TABLE 6: CORRELATIONS BETWEEN IMPORTANCE OF RELIGION IN ONE'S LIFE AND STATEMENTS ABOUT HOMELESS INDIVIDUALS

Statement	r
Most have good job skills*	-.110
More likely to commit violent crimes	-.021
Can be identified by appearance alone	.039
It's hard to understand how anyone becomes homeless	-.081
It's almost impossible to be safe when homeless	.024
Programs for the homeless cost taxpayers too much**	-.132
It's only natural to be afraid of a person who lives on the street*	-.098
Most homeless people could take care of a home	-.088
Even if they seem alright, it's important to remember they may be dangerous	-.046

* $p<.05$; ** $p<.01$

correlations are weak. Analysis of the correlation between agreement with these statements and frequency of attendance of religious services was also conducted, but there were no significant results.

DISCUSSION

The increased involvement of religious communities in aiding homeless individuals (Cohen, Kim, & Ohls 2006) coupled with the extensive teachings of the three major religions in the U.S. creates a strong connection between religion and homeless individuals. Because of the growing connection, this study sought to explore the impact religion has on perceptions of homeless people. Based on religious teachings about homelessness, it would seem that religious individuals would have more positive attitudes toward homeless individuals than would non-religious individuals. The results of the study, however, did not reveal a clear relationship between religious affiliation and perceptions of homeless individuals. There were no significant differences between affiliated and non-affiliated respondents on most of the measures of homeless perception. Religious affiliation was associated with negative measures of homeless perception, such as viewing homeless individuals as dangerous and considering panhandling to be a problem. These findings are consistent with studies addressing associations between religiousness and discrimination previously mentioned. The studies illustrate that religious teachings do not always translate into actions. Religiously affiliated participants were also more likely than non-affiliated participants to believe homeless people have good job skills. While on the surface this appears to be a positive view, it may indicate that people believe homeless individuals have the means to enjoy a better lifestyle than they do. Therefore, they may believe homeless individuals choose to be homeless. Also, although the findings were not significant, religious respondents were more knowledgeable about the Coalition for the Homeless of Central Florida and more willing to give food and money to homeless individuals. These findings are consistent with religious teachings about providing food and aid to the needy.

When the analysis was conducted based on those who view religion as important in their lives, the results were very similar. The respondents who valued religion were more likely to view homeless individuals as dangerous and believe that homeless people have good job skills. Respondents who stated religion was important were also more likely to think that programs to aid the

homeless cost too much money for taxpayers, a difference that was not found between affiliated and non-affiliated respondents. However, there were no differences when the analysis was run based on frequency of religious service attendance. This finding indicates that the content of religious services might help eliminate negative perceptions of the homeless.

There were also qualitative differences between affiliated and non-affiliated respondents. Affiliated respondents were moderately more likely to know about the Coalition and to donate money to the Coalition. When asked how they heard about the Coalition, the most frequent answer given by affiliated respondents was through their church, which is consistent with religious teachings. This could account for the difference in knowledge between the two groups. Participants were also asked to report why they give money to homeless people. Affiliated respondents frequently attributed their charity to religious motivation, showing that religious teachings were translated into action for some individuals. Similarly, religious participants also attributed giving food to homeless people to their religious beliefs. Another frequent answer from religious respondents was that they give money to homeless individuals because they are afraid of them. This answer was not given from any of the non-affiliated respondents. These answers suggest that religious individuals feel compelled to help because of their religion but that religious teachings do not change perceptions of homeless individuals. The findings from the study were not wholly consistent with either religious teachings or previous research on religion and discrimination. The overall pattern of perceptions shows that religious teachings may have an impact on some attitudes toward homeless people but not others. It may be the case that religion teaches people to feed and aid the needy but does not dispel negative attitudes toward this population.

LIMITATIONS

One important limitation of our study that should be acknowledged is the homogeneous religious composition of respondents. Our study included only six Jewish participants and a single Muslim participant. Due to these small numbers, all religious individuals were treated as one group, and we were not able to assess the differences among the three religions. The measures of religiosity also limited our ability to assess how people interpret their religion and its teachings. As with any research that assesses people's attitudes, social desirability

may have influenced respondents' answers. Social desirability is a response set in which participants answer in such a way to be viewed favorably by others. Social desirability in this context would deter participants from reporting negative attitudes toward homeless individuals. It could also lead to people over-reporting positive behaviors associated with helping the homeless, such as giving homeless people food or money.

FUTURE RESEARCH

The relationship between religion and perceptions of homeless individuals has not been adequately explored to date and further research is needed to fully understand this relationship. Future studies should look at the differences in homeless perception among practitioners of Christianity, Islam, and Judaism. Studies of perceptions of homeless people could benefit from qualitative inquiry to better understand the ways that these opinions are formed. To better assess religions attitudes toward homeless people, it would be beneficial to conduct focus groups with members of each religious community and their respective religious leaders about their perceptions and the relative importance of teachings about the homeless. Qualitative interviews would provide a better understanding of how contradictory beliefs develop. Differences may lie within each religion based on differences in how people personally interpret religious teachings. Due to these factors, the effect that religious fundamentalism bears on perceptions of homelessness should also be explored.

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