

What Stigma is Associated with Homelessness?



Presented by Health for Homeless
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But first...what is stigma?

When someone faces stigma, it means that they are **rejected from social acceptance or treated differently and unfairly** because of one or more aspects of who they are.

People may face stigma because of their:

- Skin colour
- Race
- Culture / Religion
- Gender / Sexual orientation
- Behaviour
- Illness
- Living situation
- Participation in certain activities (e.g., drug use)



...and more

How can stigma manifest?



Self-stigma

Internalized feelings of shame and low self-esteem.

Social Stigma

Stereotypes, prejudices, and discrimination believed by society because of one or more parts of your life/identity.

Structural Stigma

Policies, laws, and institutions that discriminate against certain groups of people based on stereotypes.

What comes to your mind
when you hear the word
HOMELESS ?



Is it something like this?

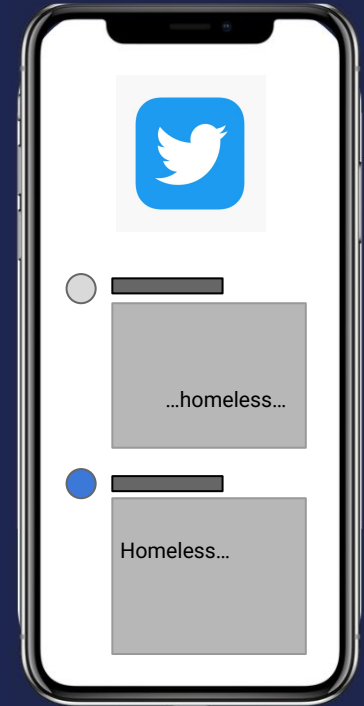


One interesting study...

Researchers from the University of California, San Francisco were curious to see what people were posting on social media about homeless people. They searched Twitter for any tweets containing the word "homeless" over 3 months in 2013.



They identified **1.75 million** tweets fitting the criteria. Taking a random sample of 6,400 tweets for further analysis, they found several **trends in public opinion on homelessness**. (Kim et al., 2021).



1) “Homeless people are **dirty/ unhygienic**”

Many joke or comment about homeless people lacking hygiene, smelling bad, and peeing or defecating in public.

These comments make it seem like people experiencing homelessness are irrational and being unhygienic by choice, which makes them inferior to the rest of society.



“The homeless shelter is for dirty a** People...”



“Spraying Febreze on homeless people ...”

➔ Let's learn and change this mindset:

This type of commentary is **DEHUMANIZING**.

Factors to consider:

- People experiencing homelessness may not have access to a bathroom, shower, sink, bar of soap, toothbrush, or hair brush.
- Many areas lack available public bathrooms.
- Most stores reserve their facilities for customers only.
- Being homeless sometimes involves carrying everything you own on your person -- many don't have a clean wardrobe or washing machine.



2) “Homeless people are **threatening, violent, and/or criminal**”

People online mention instances of aggressive panhandling, cursing, being chased, and bizarre behaviours that seem threatening.

Though these episodes are RARE, these are the ones people choose to report on social media -- not cases where they passed by an unhoused person and NOTHING happened.

This can bias people by exaggerating the frequency of negative experiences around people who are unhoused.



2) “Homeless people are **threatening, violent, and/or criminal**”

Others have unsubstantiated claims that an unhoused person will be violent towards them.

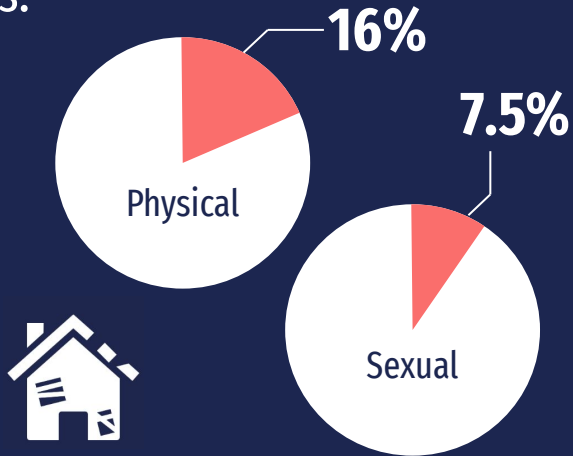


“There’s this crazy homeless guy sitting on our porch ... Just in case I die, you all know.”



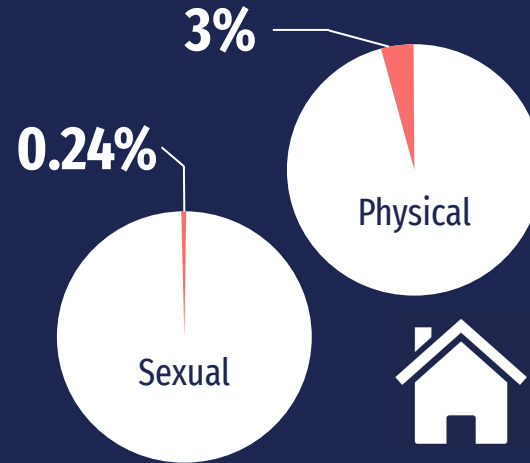
Let's learn and change this mindset:

Homeless people are actually much **more likely to be VICTIMS of crime** than criminals themselves.



of people experiencing homelessness report being victims of violence in the last 30 days.

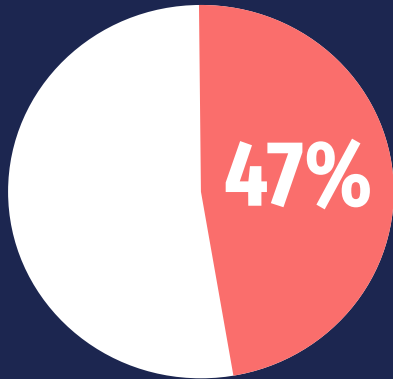
V.S.



of the housed population who report being victims of violence in the last year.



Let's learn and change this mindset:



of 187 studied U.S. cities have “anti-homeless” laws.

These make homeless people prone to arrest for sitting or lying down in public spaces for a prolonged period of time, staying in city encampments, living in a vehicle, begging, and dumpster diving, among other things.

Anti-homeless laws can play a big role in enabling the **pervasive and ignored harassment** of these vulnerable populations.

➔ Let's learn and change this mindset:

Ontario also has some laws that can be **misused to criminalize homelessness**.

For example, the **Safe Streets Act**, created in 1999, addresses panhandling and squeegee cleaning. The Act prohibits:

- “Aggressive solicitation” (ex. panhandling in a way that causes fear)
- Solicitation near ATMs or public transit stops
- Disposing of dangerous things (ex. syringes) in public places

First time offenders can be fined \$500

Subsequent offenses can result in \$1,000 fines and up to 6 months in jail



➔ Let's learn and change this mindset:

But some issues with the *Safe Streets Act* include:

- ✘ This act only tries to make homelessness less visible. It **does not tackle the underlying societal issues** causing homelessness.
- ✘ This act can be used to target non-aggressive panhandlers. Enforcing this Act can lead to **greater police involvement**, drawing attention to homeless people and **further stigmatizing** the unhoused population as “dangerous” in the public view.
- ✘ Sometimes, expenses poured into prosecuting unhoused individuals who are unable to pay their fines far exceeds the original fine.



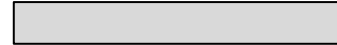
Penticton, BC spent **\$26,000** on legal fees in their prosecution of Paul Braun who had only racked up **\$145** dollars in fines from panhandling tickets.



3) “People are homeless because they are **lazy**”

Many people also look down on those who are unhoused because they think unhoused people DESERVE their situation

Many attack the personal characters of unhoused people, calling them lazy and unable to match the goal-setting and survival skills of housed people



“I only give homeless people money if they are old or disabled. if u my age u need to get a f***in job. stores pay people to hold signs”



“Yes I drink and smoke sometimes, but I’m not going to end up homeless, I have goals and I’m going to accomplish them”



Let's learn and change this mindset:

Lazy and unskilled...no wonder he can't keep a house

I do it all so much better!

Social Status



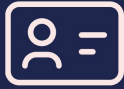
This type of thinking sets unhoused people apart because of what **we assume** must be their personal attributes. It makes it easier for us to look down on homeless individuals because we think that they must deserve their situation because of their own personal failings or poor choices.

It also **normalizes the physical, mental, and social suffering** that people without homes may be experiencing and can make us less inclined to offer help.



Let's learn and change this mindset:

Actually, up to **20%** of homeless individuals may be employed! But there are lots of barriers that make it *harder* of these individuals to find and keep work, including:



Lacking ID, a bank account, or a home address for documentation and paychecks



Having physical disabilities, poor mental health, and substance use issues, which can interfere with concentration, focus, and time



Lack of experience, training, and/or a university degree



Lack of computer access and skills, which makes it near impossible to find and fill out online job applications



Limited access to transportation and basic human needs, like food and good sleep



➔ Let's learn and change this mindset:

Many who are homeless struggle with physical illnesses or disabilities, substance abuse, and/or mental illness. Others may be part of a visible minority. Each of these can become a barrier that affects their ability to keep a job or maintain a home, but **none are choices**.



People do not choose to fall prey to the vicious cycle of illness, substance abuse, or stigmatization of any kind. And many don't know where or how to access help!

4) “Homeless people are **socially deviant**”

Some people believe that people who are unhoused are “**scam artists**” who fake being homeless and use the money they get from begging on drugs and alcohol rather than food or shelter.

This morally justifies the notion that homeless people can be ignored and that there is no obligation from a housed person or society to help.



“When I see a homeless person I honestly don’t know [i]f they’re faking or not so they gets nothin from me.”

5) Trivializing or joking about **hate crimes** against homeless individuals

Some people on the internet write about acts of violence against homeless people, whether real or imagined.

Jokes about the sexual abuse experienced by many minorities and LGBTQIA2S+ people are also common.

The study also found **no action was taken by Twitter to moderate such posts**, indicating how normalized such behaviours and content are.



One time my friend told me that the homeless were people too. Then we both laughed and curb stomped a hobo to death in.



...peeing on homeless people to keep them warm...



Considered altogether,
these trends in society's perspective
on homelessness perpetuate
harmful misconceptions and **stigma.**

Internalizing Stigma

Many people experiencing homelessness start to believe these myths and misconceptions about “the homeless.” This can erode their self-esteem, morale, and belief in the systems of support that help the rest of society.

Losing faith in oneself and in others’ ability to help out distances these most vulnerable members of society more than they already are and manifests itself as higher rates of physical and mental health problems, longer periods of homelessness, and a disdain for society.



How do we destigmatize homelessness?



What can I do?

Learn to
recognize stigma



Reject the stigma.

Recognize homelessness is **not a choice**. Try to understand the systemic causes behind homelessness and how people form negative connotations from misunderstandings and misconceptions. Form real opinions and make effective decisions on a case-by-case basis.

What can I do?

Have compassionate conversations about homelessness & the needs of those who don't have a home



Change your vocabulary.

We listen, think, and communicate through language. As unconscious as it may be, referring to a **diverse** group of individuals with only **one** term (“the homeless” or “homeless people”) confines our thinking in a box and prevents us from reshaping our ways of thinking. Being homeless doesn't define a person!

What can I do?

Innovate solutions +
policies addressing
homelessness



See the flaws of our current approach.

Consider the circumstances that might lead to someone losing their housing. Now think further on the impossibility of remedying the situation on your own while you must navigate the shelter system with no stability or guarantees of personal, food, health, or financial safety. All while society views you as nameless, inhuman, dangerous, and worthless. Providing basic human rights through models like **Housing First** and restoring community connections are proven to give people the stability and security to reintegrate into society. Are there any other avenues we can pursue?

References

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