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## WORKING WITH THE HOMELESS POPULATION: AN EXPLORATORY STUDY OF GRADUATE SOCIAL WORK STUDENT'S CONFIDENCE AND WILLINGNESS

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OF GRADUATE SOCIAL WORK STUDENT'S CONFIDENCE AND  
WILLINGNESS

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A Project  
Presented to the  
Faculty of  
California State University,  
San Bernardino

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In Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Social Work

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by  
Ana Rosa Ortiz  
Mariam Kiara Lowe

June 2020

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## ABSTRACT

Homelessness is a multilayered problem that affects hundreds of thousands of people across the United States. The social work profession cannot rest on its laurels when large numbers of individuals and families suffer due to a lack of shelter, a necessity. Historically, social work was at the vanguard of interventions against homelessness. However, over the past 30 years or so, the profession arguably has shifted its focus toward micro practice. As a result, macro issues such as poverty and homelessness have received comparatively less interest in the field. Using an exploratory design, this study examined factors associated with level of confidence working with the homeless population among 80 graduate social work students in a Southern California University. Mann-Whitney U Test results revealed that gender and undergraduate social work degree (BSW) correlate with participants' confidence level toward working with people who are homeless. Male students had higher confidence level than their female counterparts, and BSW students reported higher confidence level than their non-BSW counterparts. Meanwhile, descriptive statistics revealed that less than 2% of the participants reported some interest in working with people who experience homeless population. Implications of the findings for theory, research, and social work are provided.

*Keywords:* homelessness, social work, social construction

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## CHAPTER ONE

### INTRODUCTION

#### Problem Formation

Homelessness is defined as a condition in which individuals and families that are experiencing an extreme form of poverty and are either living or sleeping in public areas, or do not have a stable home environment (U.S Department of Housing and Urban Development [HUD], 2018). In the United States (U.S.), approximately 552,830 individuals and 180,000 families experience homelessness on a given night in 2017 (HUD, 2018). Children, women, families, and black individuals make up larger percentage of the homeless population (Lee Tyler, & Wright, 2010). According to Lane, McClendon, and Matthews (2017), the fastest growing homeless population are no longer men, veterans, or the stereotypical perception of homelessness, but rather it is youths and families.

In January 2019, about 30% of the homeless population were families with children (National Low Income Housing Coalition [NLIHC], 2019). Approximately 27% of the homeless population was unaccompanied youth (NLIHC, 2019). Out of that 27%, 40% of the unaccompanied youth were part of the LGBTQ population. Another population greatly impacted by homelessness is veterans. Veterans represent 8% of the overall population in the US, yet it is estimated that 18 out of every 10,000 veterans will experience homelessness (HUD, 2018).

According to the National Alliance to End Homelessness (2018), there are racial disparities when looking at the homeless population. Research has shown

an overrepresentation of African Americans within the homeless population (HUD, 2018). African Americans make up about 13% of the population of the United States but represent about 40% of the homeless population (NLIHC, 2019). This is significant especially compared to the White population, which makes up about 77% of the overall United State population but only about 47% of the people who are homeless (NLIHC, 2019). American Indians, Pacific Islanders, and Hispanics are also overrepresented among the homeless when compared to the general population in the United States.

Approximately 16% of the homeless population suffer from a mental health disorder (National Coalition for the Homeless, 2019). Unfortunately, the current systems in place do not make it easy for individuals who are homeless to receive mental health services. Individuals who are homeless individuals face high-risk situations on a daily basis yet there are not enough homeless services to meet the demand.

The profession of social work used to be at the forefront of the fight against homeless. In effect, the history of the social work profession began with women like Jane Addams and Ellen Gates who created the Hull House in 1889 to assist those in danger of becoming homeless (Ingrao, 2014). Along with other social workers, Addams and Gates provided resources and advocated for the needs of this vulnerable population. This unique history of social work resulted in the profession creating a mission driven to empower vulnerable populations, specifically addressing poverty (Larkin et al., 2016). Through its 2017 Code of

Ethics, the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) emphasized that the primary mission of the social work profession is to enhance the quality of life for all clients, with specific consideration for attention to those considered oppressed, vulnerable, and living in poverty.

Despite social work's historical ties to marginalized populations (including the homeless population), research suggests that social work graduates continue to distance themselves from working with clients in poverty (Castillo & Becerra, 2012). Indeed, social workers were found to be more interested in entering private practice with a preference for middle class Caucasian clients with limited emotional issues (Castillo & Becerra, 2012). While acceptable, this finding is alarming given the profession's strong focus on working with those who are at the bottom of the socioeconomic pyramid. As Aykanian and Lee (2016) argued, the social work should be the profession that advocates for and empowers the homeless population. This is important, especially given the connection between homelessness and other social problems such as racial inequality, severe mental health, substance use, domestic violence, and more (Lane, McClendon, & Matthews, 2017). Hence, homelessness is multilayered and complex and today's social workers are not the ones tackling the complexities of this issue (Aykanian & Lee, 2016).

With respect to homelessness, the gap between mission and action within the field of social work can be attributed to curriculum deficiencies. According to Sun (2001), curriculums for schools of social work do not educate current

students on the importance of promotion of social and economic justice and population at-risk (Sun, 2001). Furthermore, schools of social work largely fail to recruit students with an interest in working with this vulnerable population, a mission that is emphasized in the NASW Code of Ethics. This oversight continues the cycle of social workers interested in working with individuals rather than having an interest in working towards social change (Weiss, 2003). This lack of attention in the social work curriculum reflects why just 1% of licensed clinical social workers (LCSWs) reported working within homeless services (Larkin et al., 2016). The lack of a focused curriculum and interest in working with this population leads to little research as well as support and resources for people who experience homelessness (Lane et al., 2017).

In 2015, the *Grand Challenge to end Homelessness* project began and around 20 universities adapted further training to equip students with skills to work with the homeless population (Larkin et al., 2016). The goal of this initiative was to strength the curriculum to prepare students to work with the homeless population, because social workers were not taking the lead in addressing the needs of this population (Larkin et al., 2016). Yet, there is still a long way to go with respect to educating students on macro issues.

#### Purpose of the Study

The goal of this study is to examine the level of confidence and willingness of graduate social work students (MSWs) to work with the homeless population. For the reasons previously enumerated, studying this homeless is imperative.

Social workers should be at the forefront on tackling homelessness from a macro and micro level (Lee et al., 2010). Homelessness not only deprives people of the right of a home, but also affects them physiologically and emotionally (Somerville, 1992). This study sought to answer the following two questions:

1. What are factors associated with graduate social students' confidence level for working with the homeless population?
2. What is the proportion of graduate social work students who plan to work with the homeless population after graduation?

#### Significance of the Project for Social Work

Social workers should be the discipline leading the way towards social justice, and empowering disenfranchised populations. Homeless individuals are the most vulnerable population in the United States with many complex issues affecting them, not just extreme poverty (Lee, Tyler, & Wright, 2010). However, the current social work curriculum offered within Universities does not adequately address the multidimensional layers of homelessness, which results in social workers not working in homeless services (Larkin et al., 2016). Results from this research will potentially encourage schools of social work to analyze the curriculum, and incorporate courses geared toward preparing students to work with diverse populations, including unsheltered people.

Additionally, the findings will encourage new social work students to analyze their values, beliefs, and attitudes towards working with the homeless population. Conducting this study is important in order to understand why MSW

students do not work with the homeless population after graduating, despite the professions duty to serve vulnerable populations. Since there is limited research this study is very important in creating the first steps in addressing curriculum and the reason why so little social workers go into a job that will provide experience with working with a variety of different unique needs.

## CHAPTER TWO

### LITERATURE REVIEW

#### Introduction

This chapter reviews the literature on homelessness and overviews the theoretical perspectives that guide this research. More specifically, this chapter provides valuable information on the etiology of homelessness, as well as its costs on society and the individuals who experience this problem. This chapter concludes with a critical analysis of the literature and the theories guiding this study.

#### The Cause of Homelessness

According to Cronley (2000), homelessness perceptions amongst the general population tend to place blame on the individual. The public view of homelessness is negative. Often times the public believes homelessness is a result of bad luck or poor decisions (Lee, Tyler, & Wright, 2010). Yet, most research suggests that there are societal structures in place that contribute to homelessness and that it is much more complex than people's perceptions (Lane et al., 2017).

Johnson and Cnaan (1995) created a list of structural items that contribute to the causes of homelessness. Some structural items included in the list are: unemployment, changes in welfare eligibility, and the decline of blue-collar jobs (Johnson & Cnaan, 1995). Additional societal structures that have affected the homeless population are gentrification and deinstitutionalization. Other societal

problems that lead to homelessness are poverty, lack of affordable housing, racial disparities, and family structures (Lane et al., 2017).

Due to these structural changes within society, research continues to suggest that homelessness is multidimensional. According to Chamberlain and Johnson (2011), five non-mutually exclusive paths lead to homelessness. These are: a housing crisis (financial hardship), family breakdown (domestic violence or failed relationship), substance abuse, mental health, and youth to adult conversion (becoming homeless at 18 years old after being in the states' care or leaving home due to traumas). The disproportions seen in the homeless population suggests that there is an institutional homeless linkage. This has been suggested because youth and adults that have been connected to the foster care system, treatment centers, and prisons are more likely to be homeless after discharge (Lee et al., 2010).

Urban settings have been gentrified and mental health hospitals have been deinstitutionalized without providing housing for the people being removed (Johnson & Cnaan, 1995). The consequence of the gentrification of communities and deinstitutionalization of mental health facilities has resulted in an influx of people without the proper social supports to receive housing and resources (Lee et al., 2010). The pressure to address visible homelessness (McNamara, Crawford, & Burns, 2013) leads to the criminalization of the problem (Aykanian & Lee, 2016).

There are individual causes of homelessness, including substance use, mental health disorders, and domestic violence (Chamberlain & Johnson, 2011). However, research suggest that homelessness is more complex than just blaming an individual, there are structural factors along with cultural factors and individual factors that limit the opportunities given to people (Chamberlain & Johnson, 2011). The etiology of homelessness is multifaceted. Yet, research suggests that structural factors play a bigger role on homelessness than individual factors do (Castillo & Becerra, 2012).

Despite these findings, there is still a common belief that the homeless individual is solely to be blamed, continuing the thought that homeless people are deviant (Aykanian & Lee, 2016). The individualist approach used to place blame on the homeless individual gravely affects the treatment of this population. Policies are made that provide short-term solutions, like rehabilitation, and corrections rather than long-term solutions such as affordable housing (Weiss, 2003). People's perceptions affect the policies and actions taken upon the issue, thus affecting the approaches organizations use when working with this population.

### The Cost of Homelessness

The cost of homelessness is tremendous not only for the person experiencing this extreme form of poverty, but also the community that harbors them. The cost of homelessness and the lack of interventions lead to a financial drain on society and take an emotional toll on individuals dealing with this

problem. Hence, everyone is affected by the cost of homelessness.

Criminalization of homeless individuals is three times more costly than providing supportive housing (National Coalition for the Homeless & National Law Center on Homelessness & Poverty, 2006). Research has suggested that simply providing housing can save communities thousands because housing the individual would reduce the interactions with police and hospitals (Lee et al., 2010). As homeless individuals continue to be criminalized for being unsheltered and barriers are constantly placed in front of them, it becomes increasingly difficult to ever become financially stable (Lee et al., 2010). Current policies in place give short-term relief and do not provide long-term solutions (Cronley, 2010). Existing policies created to assist the homeless population cost taxpayers millions of dollars, and still the needs of this population are not met (Johnson, 1995).

Meanwhile, the stigmatization of homelessness can lead to the perpetuation of the problem (Chamberlain & Johnson, 2011). Being homeless is difficult, and studies have suggested that the person experiencing homelessness is impacted emotionally (Shier, Jones, & Graham, 2010). Research has suggested that homeless individuals have feelings of embarrassment, which can affect their behaviors and interactions with others (Shier et al., 2010). In fact, individuals who are homeless report having lower self-esteem and often feel unable to ask for help (Shier et al., 2010). These individuals face the risk of

continuous traumas that hinder their ability to feel comfortable reporting (Lee et al., 2010). Hence, the cost of homelessness is incalculable.

### Previous Studies on Social Work Students

Researcher conducted by Sun (2001) revealed that gender is associated with social work students' beliefs about whether homelessness is structural or individual. Male social workers were more likely to see homelessness being caused by both individual and structural factors than their female counterparts who believe mainly in structural causes (Sun, 2001). However, findings from Castillo and Becerra's (2012) research departed from Sun's (2001) study by showing that graduate social work students believe in an individual cause of poverty.

Research has also suggests that there is a correlation between perceptions of poverty and willingness to advocate for or work with people in poverty (Castillo & Becerra, 2012).

In addition, previous research indicates that political views can influence the perceptions people have of individuals who experience homelessness. Interviewing 200 women and 200 men, Pellegrini, Queirolo, Monarrez, and Valenzuela (1997) found a political divide in Northern California where Democrats believed that homelessness was caused primarily by societal factors, while Republicans believed it was more an individual issue. Pellegrini et al. (1997) also found that Democrats wanted to increase funding to address homelessness, while republicans wanted to decrease the funding allocated to

resources for homelessness (Pellegrini, Queirolo, Monarrez, & Valenzuela, 1997). Pellegrini et al.'s (1997) work is further evidence of the implications of political ideology on a major social problem. Furthermore, studies have suggested that education boosts tolerance of homelessness, yet reduces support for economic changes (Lee et al., 2010).

### Limitations of the Literature

In the existing literature, there is little conversation on the impact homelessness has on society and research has not been geared to support the needs of these individuals (Larkin et al., 2016). There is also a paucity of research conducted on the impacts of MSW students not working with the homeless population. Additionally, there is little information on the reasons MSW students do pursue a career working with this population. The literature gaps regarding the confidence levels and willingness of social work students toward working with the homeless population need to be filled. This study is a step in that direction.

## Theories Guiding Conceptualization

### Social Constructionist Theory

Social Constructionist Theory refers to the social context in which people interpret their experiences and make sense of the world (Cronley, 2010). Social Constructionist Theory is the post-modern framework that looks to the social context in which people interpret their experiences and make sense of the world (Cronley, 2010). This theory contends that outside forces like media, public

relations, and political forces that constantly interpret and distort the truth (Cronley, 2010) affect reality. Therefore, if the socio-political forces define homelessness as an individualistic problem society will continue to view the homeless individual as the problem. It will also affect the way scholars conduct research when looking at the homeless population and what laws are put into place to help this vulnerable population.

According to Cronley (2010), homelessness is a national concern among media outlets, academia, and policy makers attempting to explain the cause of homelessness. A critical aspect in the debate of homelessness is whether it is the result of individual or structural level factors. Researchers have found that homelessness results from the convergence of individual and structural factors (Cronley, 2010). The influence of this ideology on homelessness is evident today with the current emphasis on correction and rehabilitation rather than housing (Cronley, 2010). Socio-political forces continue to make society believe that homelessness is a result of laziness and addiction. Society continues to believe that if the individual becomes sober employment and housing will fall into place. This belief is convenient as it takes responsibility away from society to assist this vulnerable population.

### Sociological Imagination Theory

Sociological Imagination Theory seeks to identify how society level risk factors impact the homeless (Cronley, 2010). Some of the societal risk factors researchers look at were economic decline and housing shortages (Cronley,

2010). The sociological imagination ideology connects the personal troubles of an individual to public issues. Martha Burt (1992) argues that the most important factor associated with homelessness is the lack of affordable housing and not a personal deficiency. This contradicts popular beliefs that homelessness is caused by a personal defect and argues that the leading cause is a lack of societal support.

The aforementioned theories are important to this research because the homeless are a population the social work profession serves. It is important that social workers remain neutral in the debate regarding the cause of homelessness and do what is best for the client. Over time, different groups with opposing agendas have framed the definition of homelessness. Social construction has influenced academia by dictating the research on homelessness (Cronley, 2010). Graduate students have a responsibility to join the forefront in the fight against homelessness and one way that can be done is in the school of social work.

When critically analyzed with the Joseph and Macgowan's (2019) Theory Evaluation Scale (TES), the Social Constructionist Theory and the Sociological Imagination Theory scored 32 and 34, respectively. The TES appraised the quality of theories on nine criteria: coherence, conceptual clarity, philosophical assumptions, historical roots, ability for testing, empiricism, limitations, usefulness for social work practice, and human agency. Each criterion is worth a minimum of 1 point and a maximum of 5 points (Joseph & Macgowan, 2019). Overall scores between 30 and 45 are considered excellent under the TES

(Joseph & Macgowan, 2019). In other words, both theories guiding this study are of excellent quality.

### Summary

This chapter reviewed the most salient research findings in the literature that pertain to homelessness in America. This is a multilayered social issue caused by both individual and systemic factors. This chapter also indicated that, based on findings from the TES, the Social Constructionist Theory and the Sociological Imagination Theory selected for this study are of excellent quality.

## CHAPTER THREE

### METHODS

#### Introduction

This study explores the level of confidence and willingness of MSW social work students regarding working with the homeless population. This chapter addresses the study design, sampling techniques, data collection instruments and procedures, protection of human subjects, as well as data analysis techniques.

#### Study Design

This research took a descriptive design to examine graduate social work students' confidence level toward working with people who are homeless. This study was also exploratory because previous research failed to investigate this area. Hence, the study design was consistent with the quantitative research paradigm.

#### Sampling

This study utilized a purposive sampling method to recruit participants for this research. The sample was made of 80 graduate social work students (N = 80) recruited from a large urban university in Southern California. Participants without master's standing were excluded in this study. A complete description of

the participants' demographic characteristics are presented in the next chapter (Results).

### Data Collection and Instrument

The literature has no scales that measure graduate social work students' confidence toward working with unsheltered people. However, the work of Jesus and Leon (2018) contained some questions on students' preparedness that are relevant to this study. These questions were included in the new questionnaire that the researchers developed for this exploratory nature of the study. The questionnaire includes both demographic questions and questions that are consistent with the purpose of this study. Please see Appendix A for the full questionnaire.

### Procedures

The researchers used Qualtrics to disseminate the questionnaire. The participants were then directed to the informed consent page that included information on the researchers, information of the researchers' faculty advisor, and the purpose of the research. The participants were informed that this survey was completely voluntary and that there were no incentives or risks associated with participation. A confidentiality statement was also attached to the survey; the individual had to agree to participate in the survey by clicking a box in order to proceed. If a participant did not agree to the informed consent or did not wish to complete the questionnaire, the student was able to exit out of the Qualtrics

program at any time. Once the questionnaire was completed and the participants submitted the survey, the researchers had access to the anonymously collected data.

### Protection of Human Subjects

The California State University San Bernardino Institutional Review Board approved this study in Fall 2019. The research team ensured the protection of the rights and wellbeing of all participants through the procedures implemented. The participants were informed of the purpose of the study and their right to withdraw consent at any time since their participation is fully voluntary. Personal information was not collected during this study and all demographic information such as age, gender, ethnicity, income, education, and training were collected anonymously. Each participant who took the survey, once the survey was completed, was identified as a number that neither the participants nor the researchers knew. The completed online surveys were kept in a password-encrypted file on the password-encrypted laptop of the primary researcher. The information obtained from the participants were reviewed and inputted by only the two researchers and the researchers' faculty advisor.

### Study Variables

The dependent variables in the study were graduate social work students' level of confidence for working with the homeless population. A score on confidence level measures the dependent variable and the level of measurement

is interval. This variable was coded as follows: 1 = low level confidence, 2 = moderate level of confidence, 3 = high level of confidence, and 4 = very high level of confidence. There were six categorical independent variables: gender, race, age, undergraduate social work degree, social work experience, and MSW cohort. All of the independent variables were binary: male/female, Hispanic/non-Hispanic, under 25 years old/ over 25 years old, social work degree/non-social work degree, past social work experience/ no past social work experience, and 1<sup>st</sup> year in the MSW program/ 2<sup>nd</sup> – 3<sup>rd</sup> year in the MSW program.

### Data Analysis

Because (1) the data points were not normally distributed, (2) the dependent variable was ordinal, and (3) the independent variables were binary, the researchers ran a non-parametric method of data analysis, particularly the Mann-Whitney U Test. The researchers used IBM SPSS, Version 26.0 as statistical software for the analysis.

### Summary

This chapter exposed the rationale for choosing the descriptive design and quantitative research methodology for this study. This chapter also covered the purposive sampling methods and the approval obtained to conduct this research. In addition, this chapter presented the case for non-parametric data analysis method, notably the Mann-Whitney U Test.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### RESULTS

#### Frequency Distributions

Frequency distributions of the study variables are presented in Table 1 below. As seen in the table, 80 people participated in this study. Out of the 80 participants, 66 identified as female (82.5%) and 14 identified as male (17.5%). The ethnicity information collected asked if participants were African American, Hispanic, Asian, White, Middle Eastern, or Other. Only 1 person identified as Middle Eastern (1.3%), 9 people identified as Black (11.3%), 4 people identified as Asian (5%), 13 people identified as White (16.3%), 7 people identified as Other (8.6%) and 46 people identified as Hispanic (57.5%). The researchers categorized ethnicity in two groups those who identified as Hispanic and those who identified as Non-Hispanic. There were 46 people who reported being Hispanic (57.5%) and 34 people who reported being Non-Hispanic (42.5%). The age of the participants was categorized as follows: 25 reported being Under 25 years old (31.3%) and 55 reported being over 25 years old (68.8%).

The 80 MSW students who participated in the survey also reported past social work experience, the amount of years the students have been in the MSW program, either being a first year student, or second and third year student. The researchers also asked whether or not the social work student participant had a bachelor's degree in social work prior to attending the MSW program. The results showed that 19 participants reported having past social work job

experience (23.8%), and 61 reported not having any social work job experience (76.3%). There were 54 first year students (67.5%) and 26 second or third year students (32.5%). 26 participants reported having a bachelor's degree in social work (32.5%) and 54 do not have a bachelor's degree in social work (67.5%).

Table 1 displays the frequency distributions of the study

Table 1. Frequency Distributions of Study Variables (N=80)

Variables	N	%
<b>Gender</b>		
Female	66	82.5
Male	14	17.5
<b>Ethnicity</b>		
Hispanic	46	57.5
Non-Hispanic	34	42.5
<b>Age Groups</b>		
Under 25	25	31.3
25 and older	55	68.8
<b>Past Social Work Job Experience</b>		
Yes	19	23.8
No	61	76.3
<b>Years in the CSUSB MSW Program</b>		
First Year	54	67.5
Second or Third Year	26	32.5
<b>Bachelor Degree in Social Work</b>		
Yes	26	32.5
No	54	67.5

### Descriptive Statistics on Dependent Variable

Figure 1 presents descriptive statistics for the study dependent variable. Based on the bar chart data, about 15 percent of the participants reported no confidence working with the homeless population. More than half of the participants (57 percent) reported some confidence working with the homeless population. Approximately one quarter of the respondents (23.8 percent) had high confidence working with the homeless population, and only small proportion of the surveyed participants (3.8 percent) reported very high confidence working with people who are homeless. Hence, the vast majority of the respondents (about 85 percent) admitted to having some form of confidence working with people experiencing homelessness (about 85 percent).

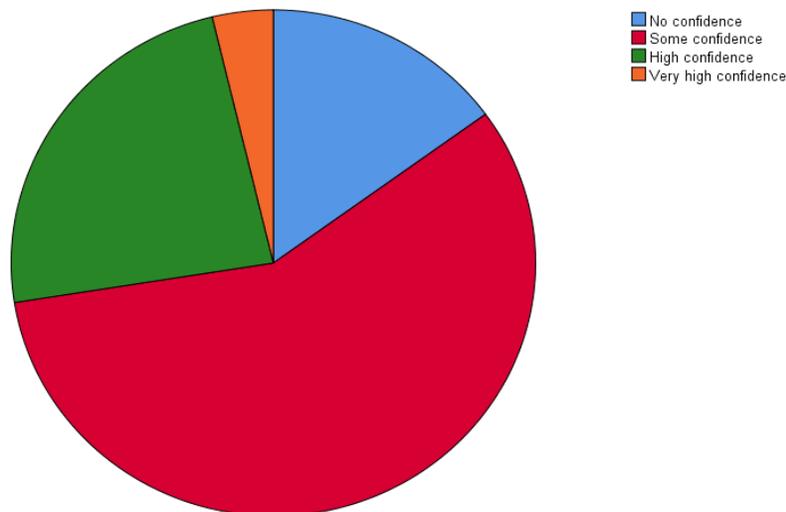


Figure 1. Participants Overall Confidence Level Working with the Homeless Population

Meanwhile, with regard to the study participants' willingness or interest to work with the homeless population after graduation, Table 2 depicts a different story. In fact, just 1 participant (out of 80) reported interest in working with the homeless population. That is, approximately 98 percent of the graduate social work students in this study opted for other areas of social work concentration. In particular, these students reported a desire to work in the areas of child welfare, veteran services, school of social work, medical settings, mental health, and gerontology.

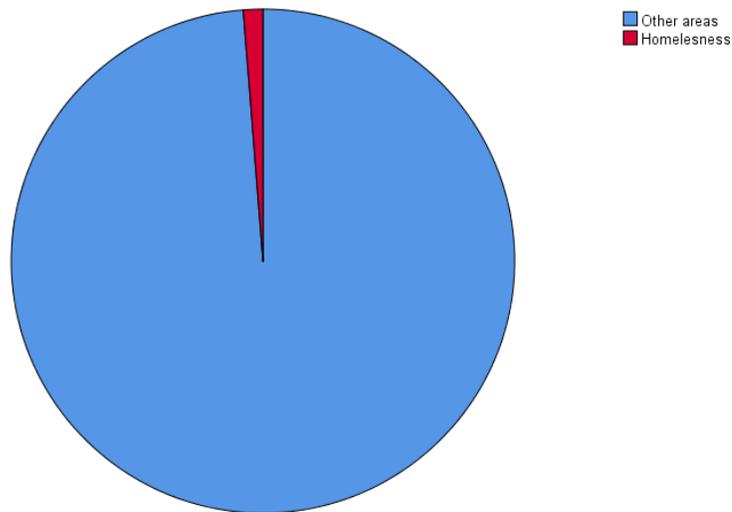


Figure 2. Proportion of Graduate Social Work Students Seeking a Career with the Homeless Population

## Mann-Whitney U Test Results

Table 2 reported the factors associated with graduate social work students' confidence level toward working with people living in homelessness. The Mann-Whitney U Test revealed that, of all the predictors, only gender and prior social work degree are statistically significantly correlated with the confidence working with the homeless population: gender ( $Z = 2.554, p = 0.14$ ); prior social work degree ( $Z = 2.416, p = .06$ ). Male students reported higher confidence level working with people in homelessness than female students. Similarly, students who completed a BSW degree had higher confidence level toward working with people in homelessness than students who did not have a BSW degree.

Table 2. Asymptotic Significance Results (N=80)

Variables	2-tailed $\alpha^*$	Z-Score	$r$	$r^2$
Age	.210	1.253		
Gender	.014	2.554	.27	.07
BSW**	.016	2.416	.27	.07
Mentoring	.921			
Living arrangement	.654			
First generation student	.537			

\*Alpha level ( $p < .05$ )  
 \*\* Bachelor's degree in social

There was a moderate relationship between gender identity and reported confidence level ( $r = .27$ ). There was also a moderate relationship between prior social work degree and reported confidence level ( $r = .27$ ). In other words, overall the model explains 14 percent of the variance in the dependent variable ( $r^2 = .07 + .07$ ).

## CHAPTER FIVE

### DISCUSSION

This study sought to examine the level of confidence and willingness of MSW students to work with the homeless population. This is an important study because homelessness is a problem that affects hundreds of thousands of people across the United States (HUD, 2018). Using an exploratory design, this study examined factors associated with level of confidence working with the homeless population among 80 graduate social work students in a Southern California University. Mann-Whitney U Test results revealed that gender and undergraduate social work degree (BSW) correlate with participants' confidence level toward working with people who are homeless. Male students had higher confidence level than their female counterparts, and BSW students reported higher confidence level than their non-BSW counterparts. Meanwhile, less than 2% of participants reported interest in working with the homeless population.

#### Explanation of Findings

There are several possible explanations for the findings of this study. One explanation for why social work graduate students may not want to work with the homeless population is the stigma associated with homeless individuals. Although social work's intrinsic values promote inclusion, it is possible that some social work graduates have been affected by society's negative views on homeless individuals. According to Castillo and Becerra (2012), the perception

most people have of those in poverty is that the population is lazy and abusing the system. These negative perceptions of this vulnerable population has affected during the current Coronavirus Pandemic. The stigma associated with the homeless population is affecting the health of those individuals during this Covid-19 pandemic. People are fighting against efforts to keep the homeless community safe by refusing to have them sheltered in communities near them.

Another possible explanation is the lack of incentives for working with this population. Many schools of social works offer the Title- IV-E Program, which provides financial assistance to graduate and undergraduate level students interested in a career in the field of public child welfare. Currently, there are no programs like Title- IV-E to encourage students to pursue a career with the homeless population.

Social work students' motivation for joining the social work field may also explain why less than 2% of participants reported interest in a career with the homeless population. Some individuals are attracted to the field of social work because of personal life experiences. People choose social work for reasons such as mental health in the family, substance use by themselves or someone they love, to help fellow veterans, etc. Finally, research has shown that social workers are more likely to choose careers with higher paying wages. Castillo and Becerra (2012) found that social workers prefer to work with the middle class Caucasian clients.

## Implications

### Theory Implications

The way society sees and defines things may be detrimental to the homeless population. The Social Constructionist Theory as defined by Cronley (2010), argues that reality is subjected and greatly affected by outside actors such a media, politics, and public relations. Therefore, if socio-political forces define homelessness as an individualistic problem rather than a structural one, society will not feel a need to assist this vulnerable population. Policy makers will not see the need fight for more affordable housing or governmental assistance for the homeless population. The negative stigma associated with the homeless population has been so ingrained into society that even social work professionals who vowed to assist the most vulnerable populations refuse to work with homeless individuals.

### Implications for Research

This study holds significant implications for research. To the researchers knowledge this is the first study to assess for gender as a factor for confidence among graduate social work students towards working with the homeless population. There are also no other analysis on graduate students' confidence and willingness towards working with unsheltered individuals. This study is significant to the literature as it is the first of its kind. The researchers' analysis of MSW students' preparedness and willingness to work with the homeless population will encourage future scholars to further analyze why health care

professionals such as social workers choose not to work with the homeless population.

### Implications for the Social Work Profession

The study also holds implications for the social work profession. Social workers will have the opportunity to use the findings of this research to advocate for the homeless population. The findings of this analysis can also be used to further incorporate the homeless population into the NASW code of ethics to which all social workers vow to adhere to. In addition, this study possesses significant implications for social work education. This study showed that 75.5% of participants reported some to no confidence when it comes to working with the homeless populations. The aforementioned findings indicate that the school of social work's curriculum has not done a proper job of preparing its student to work with the homeless population. The homeless issue is multi-faceted and the population is diverse and complex. Increasing students' exposure to the homeless population by adding homelessness to the curriculum would better prepare and encourage students to pursue a career with this vulnerable population upon graduation.

Social workers have not been the profession taking the stance on addressing homelessness (Larkin et al., 2016). Which is why in 2015 the American Academy of Social Work and Social Welfare (AASWSW) created the Grand Challenge to End Homelessness (Larkin et al., 2016). This challenge began the conversation of the need for social work schools to prepare social

work students with the skills to work with the homeless population and some schools throughout the country took on this initiative. The importance of implementing skills to work with the homeless population, is not only because this population has many needs and are low on resources, but also because social workers no matter what area the student decided to pursue will most likely interact with someone suffering from severe poverty (Larkin et al., 2016). The goal of the Grand Challenge to End Homelessness was to strengthen the School of Social Work curriculums to fill the gaps in research for the homeless population, practice, and work (Larkin et al., 2016). Yet, based off this research the gaps need to be filled throughout the country because students are still not willing to advocate and support this population.

#### Limitations

This study had various limitations. One limitation was the relatively small sample size, with only 80 participants. Another limitation was the sample of convenience, which is limited to one university in Southern California. The findings may not represent social work graduate students on a national level. Due to the study's qualitative nature, it lacks students' perception and reasons for not choosing a career with the homeless population. Although it was appropriate for this study, a non-parametric method provides a weaker analysis than a parametric one.

## Recommendations

Future research would benefit from a larger sample size that is not restricted to a single university. Recruiting participants across states will increase the sample size and would provide for better representation of master of social work students across the nation. Additionally, having a stronger methodology such as mixed methods would be beneficial in order to learn the participant's reasons for not pursuing a career with the homeless population. In the meantime, the findings may serve as a benchmark for research on social work students' preparedness for working with individuals and families from various backgrounds, including those at the bottom of society.

APPENDIX A  
SURVEY

Survey Adapted from Jesus and Leon (2018)

1. Identified Gender: Male      Female      Non-Binary      Other:
2. Age:
3. Ethnicity (mark all that apply)

African American

Hispanic/Latino      Asian/Pacific Islander      Native American  
White/Caucasian      Middle Eastern      Other:

4. Have you previously been or are you currently employed as a social worker?    Yes    No
5. If you answered yes to question 4, how many years did you or do you have in employment as a social worker? \_\_\_\_\_
6. Please choose your focus of study in the social work program:

Generalist      Title IV-E recipient

7. Are you a Master's or Bachelor's of social work student?    Master's      Bachelor's
8. What year of the program are you currently in?

1st year full time      1st year part time      2nd year full time  
2nd year part time      3rd year part time

9. Do you have a Bachelor degree in social work?    Yes      No
10. If you answered yes to question 9, is this Bachelor of Social Work degree from Cal State San Bernardino?    Yes      No

Participants, please note that for the purposes of this study, the definition of homelessness is: individuals and families that are experiencing an extreme form of poverty and are either living or sleeping in public areas, or do not have a stable home environment.

11. What is the main cause of homelessness?

Poverty      Drugs/Alcohol      Domestic Violence      Mental Illness  
Childhood Trauma      Limited Support System      Drugs/Alcohol & Mental Illness  
All of the Above      Other:

12. Did your Human Behavior in the Social Environment (HBSE) course discuss homelessness? Yes No

**Was the content (Check all that apply):**

Definition based Intervention based Engagement Based

13. Did your Micro (for MSW students) or Practice (for BASW students) courses discuss homelessness? Yes No

**Was the content (Check all that apply):**

Definition based Intervention based Engagement Based

14. How many role plays in class have you engaged in involving interacting with the homeless population?

0 1 2 3 4 or more

15. Have any of your internships at Cal State San Bernardino been in a setting working with homeless individuals (youth/adults/veterans/ families)? Yes No

16. Was this internship as a: Masters student Bachelor's student Both N/A

17. How confident do you feel to engage with homeless youth in the field of social work?

Very confident Somewhat confident Not confident

18. How confident do you feel to engage with homeless families in the field of social work?

Very confident Somewhat confident Not confident

19. How confident do you feel to engage with homeless adults in the field of social work?

Very confident Somewhat confident Not confident

20. How confident do you feel to engage with homeless veterans in the field of social work?

Very confident Somewhat confident Not confident

21. How confident do you feel to assess homeless youth in the field of social work?

Very confident Somewhat confident Not confident

22. How confident do you feel to assess homeless families in the field of social work?  
 Very confident                      Somewhat confident                      Not confident
23. How confident do you feel to assess homeless adults in the field of social work?  
 Very confident                      Somewhat confident                      Not confident
24. How confident do you feel to assess homeless veterans in the field of social work?  
 Very confident                      Somewhat confident                      Not confident
25. How confident do you feel to interview homeless youth in the field of social work?  
 Very confident                      Somewhat confident                      Not confident
26. How confident do you feel to interview homeless veterans in the field of social work?  
 Very confident                      Somewhat confident                      Not confident
27. How confident do you feel to interview homeless adults in the field of social work?  
 Very confident                      Somewhat confident                      Not confident
28. How confident do you feel to interview homeless families in the field of social work?  
 Very confident                      Somewhat confident                      Not confident
29. How knowledgeable do you feel about the effects of homelessness?  
 Very knowledgeable                      Somewhat knowledgeable                      Not knowledgeable
30. My social work education is preparing me for working with homeless individuals:  
 strongly disagree    disagree    unsure    agree    strongly agree
31. The social work program should cover content related to homelessness?  
 strongly disagree    disagree    unsure    agree    strongly agree
32. Having knowledge about homelessness is necessary to work in the social work field:  
 strongly disagree    disagree    unsure    agree    strongly agree
33. Having knowledge about homelessness beneficial to work in the social work field:  
 strongly disagree    disagree    unsure    agree    strongly agree

34. I am interested in learning more about homelessness:  
 strongly disagree    disagree    unsure    agree    strongly agree
35. I am interested in working with homeless individuals/families:  
 strongly disagree    disagree    unsure    agree    strongly agree
36. I am willing to work with homeless individuals:  
 strongly disagree    disagree    unsure    agree    strongly agree
37. How many community resources in San Bernardino County are you aware of that work  
 with homeless individuals? 0 1 2 3 4 5 or more
38. Please rate your interest level in learning how to work with individuals who are  
 homeless:  
 very interested    somewhat interested    unsure    uninterested    very uninterested
39. How many times in the past have you volunteered with homeless organizations?  
 0    1    2    3    4    5 or more
40. After I graduate the population I would like to work with are: \_\_\_\_\_
41. After I graduate I plan to pursue employment in: (check all that apply)
- |                    |                     |   |
|--------------------|---------------------|---|
| Adult and Aging    | Child Welfare       | Individuals with Developmental Disabilities |
| School Social Work | Medical Social Work | Mental Health County VA                     |
| Non-Profit         | Other_____          |   |

APPENDIX B  
INFORMED CONSENT FORM

***Informed Consent***

The study in which you are asked to participate in is designed to assess the preparedness, willingness, and eagerness of CSUSB social worker students to work with the homeless population. The study is conducted by Mariam Lowe and Ana Ortiz, MSW students under the supervision of Dr. Rigaud Joseph, Associate Professor in the School of Social Work, California State University, San Bernardino. The study is approved by the Institutional Review Board Social Work Sub-Committee, California State University, San Bernardino.

**Purpose:** The purpose of this study is to examine whether students enrolled in CSUSB School of Social Work program are properly prepared to engage and work with homeless individuals and whether social work students are willing and eager to work with this population.

**Description:** Participants will be asked questions regarding their preparedness, willingness, and eagerness towards serving homeless individuals and families, along with some demographic information.

**Participation:** Your participation in this study is totally voluntary. You can refuse to participate in the study or discontinue your participation at any time without any consequence.

**Confidentiality:** Your response will remain anonymous and data will be secured with a password, which only the researcher will be granted access to. Written responses will be locked in a desk and shredded once information is obtained.

**Duration:** It will take 15 to 20 minutes to complete this survey

**Risks:** There are no foreseeable risks to the participants.

**Benefits:** There will be no direct benefits to the participants.

**Contact:** If you have any questions about this study, please feel free to contact Dr. Rigaud Joseph at (909) 537-5507, email: [rjospeh@csusb.edu](mailto:rjospeh@csusb.edu)

**Results:** Results of this study can be obtained from the Pfau Library ScholarWorks.

This is to certify that I read the above and I am 18 years or older.

\_\_\_\_\_

Place an X mark here

\_\_\_\_\_

Date

APPENDIX C  
IRB APPROVAL



January 21, 2020

**CSUSB INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD**  
Administrative/Exempt Review Determination  
Status: Determined Exempt  
IRB-FY2020-104

Ana Ortiz Rigaud Joseph, Mariam Lowe  
CSBS - Social Work  
California State University, San Bernardino  
5500 University Parkway  
San Bernardino, California 92407

Dear Ana Ortiz Rigaud Joseph, Mariam Lowe

Your application to use human subjects, titled "SOCIAL WORK STUDENT'S PREPAREDNESS TO WORK WITH HOMELESS INDIVIDUALS" has been reviewed and approved by the Chair of the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of California State University, San Bernardino has determined that your application meets the requirements for exemption from IRB review Federal requirements under 45 CFR 46. As the researcher under the exempt category you do not have to follow the requirements under 45 CFR 46 which requires annual renewal and documentation of written informed consent which are not required for the exempt category. However, exempt status still requires you to attain consent from participants before conducting your research as needed. Please ensure your CITI Human Subjects Training is kept up-to-date and current throughout the study.

The CSUSB IRB has not evaluated your proposal for scientific merit, except to weigh the risk to the human participants and the aspects of the proposal related to potential risk and benefit. This approval notice does not replace any departmental or additional approvals which may be required.

Your responsibilities as the researcher/investigator reporting to the IRB Committee the following three requirements highlighted below. Please note failure of the investigator to notify the IRB of the below requirements may result in disciplinary action.

- Submit a protocol modification (change) form if any changes (no matter how minor) are proposed in your study for review and approval by the IRB before implemented in your study to ensure the risk level to participants has not increased.
- If any unanticipated/adverse events are experienced by subjects during your research, and
- Submit a study closure through the Cayuse IRB submission system when your study has ended.

The protocol modification, adverse/unanticipated event, and closure forms are located in the Cayuse IRB System. If you have any questions regarding the IRB decision, please contact Michael Gillespie, the Research Compliance Officer. Mr. Michael Gillespie can be reached by phone at (909) 537-7588, by fax at (909) 537-7028, or by email at [mgillesp@csusb.edu](mailto:mgillesp@csusb.edu). Please include your application approval identification number (listed at the top) in all correspondence.

If you have any questions regarding the IRB decision, please contact Michael Gillespie, the Research Compliance Officer. Mr. Michael Gillespie can be reached by phone at (909) 537-7588, by fax at (909) 537-7028, or by email at [mgillesp@csusb.edu](mailto:mgillesp@csusb.edu). Please include your application approval identification number (listed at the top) in all correspondence.

Best of luck with your research.

Sincerely,

*Donna Garcia*

Donna Garcia, Ph.D., IRB Chair  
CSUSB Institutional Review Board

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## ASSIGNED RESPONSIBILITIES

This project was a collaborated effort between Ana Ortiz and Mariam Lowe. The two researchers divided and conquered the work together. Ana and Mariam worked together on the introduction, literature, and methods section. Together, Ana and Mariam also completed and submitted the IRB application in order to receive permission to conduct this research. Often Mariam and Ana worked in the library and wrote the paper together however on the few instances where they divided the sections both still edited the other partners work.

Mariam Lowe wrote the table of contents, used the Qualtrics system to adapt the questionnaire, completed data analysis with SPSS, and created the figures and tables shown in the results section. Additionally, Mariam was responsible for completing the presentation of the findings, key findings, and inferential statistics. Ana Ortiz was in charge of writing the discussion, implications, limitations, and recommendations section. Overall, the completion of this research was a joint effort between Ana and Mariam.