Public Opinions on Homelessness
Marion County Homeless Council
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Survey/Report Conducted by
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As an agency which strives to serve the homeless population, it was determined that it would be of great benefit to have a better understanding of public opinion concerning homelessness. The ultimate goal of gathering this information was two-fold; discover the most prevalent beliefs about this population and share research-based facts along with the results. In order to attain greater insight on this matter, surveys were conducted over the period of a month. This survey was not designed to be a rigorous study on the matter, it is merely an attempt to receive a general overview of how our housed community members may be feeling about their unhoused neighbors.

At present, there are a variety of opinions about those who are facing homelessness. While some are inclined to categorize this group in negative terms, others view those who are without housing through a different lens and prefer to use more positive or neutral words to describe them. The wide range of thoughts on this matter can be attributed to the fact that no two people are exactly alike. A person’s upbringing, the media’s portrayal of homelessness, lived experiences, and exposure to the homeless population, or lack thereof, are all factors that can contribute to the way people feel about this topic.

Since this is the case, the survey was created by using five basic questions. Three of the questions were yes or no style and of those three, one of them had sometimes as an option as well. The yes or no questions were as follows:
1. Have you ever been homeless?
2. Have you ever known someone who was homeless?
3. Should we help the homeless?

The other two questions were descriptive in nature and included a range of the most common responses that are often connected with thoughts on homelessness. Survey participants were given the opportunity to choose one or more of the descriptive words or all of the above. These questions were as follows:

1. How do people become homeless?
2. How would you describe the homeless?

Additionally, participants were prompted to share demographic information related to age and gender, but were assured that the survey was anonymous, which meant that no one was to share their name, phone number, or address. The survey was structured in this manner so that people would be more inclined to share their genuine beliefs about homelessness, as opposed to feeling obligated to choose answers they might assume the surveyor to possess.

The survey sessions were held at three different open-air locations within Marion County where there was a continual flow of people. This was done with the hopes of getting the opinions of a broader spectrum of individuals. Although no racial demographic data was collected, at each of the locations there were people of diverse backgrounds who participated. The diversity was not limited to race though, it also included people from varying age groups and socio-economic backgrounds.

After the data was collected, the information was organized and separated by gender. The next step involved converting the data into charts so that the results could be viewed in a quick and concise manner. Though all ages were present in the survey, the majority of the male participants were in their
20’s and the majority of the female respondents were in their 30’s. There was a total of a hundred and one respondents and of that number sixty-nine were male and thirty-two were female.

Of the sixty-nine male participants nineteen had previously been homeless and ten of the thirty-two females had as well. Fifty-five of the men had known someone who was homeless and twenty-four of the women had also known people who were unhoused. Fifty of the males surveyed believed that we should provide the homeless population with assistance and twenty-nine of the ladies agreed. Two of the men stated that they should not be helped and none of the women felt that they should be excluded from receiving help. Sixteen males stated that aid should only be provided sometimes and three of the female participants shared the same opinion.

When asked how people arrive at homelessness, the most common response given by men was financial difficulty in first place and drug addiction in second place. The most popular opinions shared by women were drug addiction in first place and mental health in second place. Males were least likely to state trauma as a causing factor and females were least likely to present personal choice as a reason. More often than not, the men chose less fortunate and challenged as descriptive words for the homeless, while women chose less fortunate and addicted. Both males and females were least likely to describe the homeless as lazy.

A consideration of the results reveal that men seem to be more inclined to attribute homelessness to external factors related to finances and women more readily included internal issues such as mental health. Potential reasons for this may have to do with the fact that males have traditionally felt the pressure to be the primary bread winners and are often taught to acknowledge emotions less often. Since mental health is often connected to emotional states as well, it would make sense that men might be less willing to state it as a primary causal factor. That said, males did still acknowledge mental health as a potential contributor and their collective responses revealed that they believed it to be the third most prevalent reason out of the list of six possible causes. Although trauma was not last on the list of
potential causes on women’s lists, it happened to come in as second to last. This means that both men and women did not believe trauma to be a common cause of homelessness.

These findings are interesting because recent studies have found that trauma can actually be a leading cause to homelessness in the lives of many people. In fact, according to a study from the National Center on Family Homelessness which lasted 2 ½ years, the only factors that were found to cause persistent residential instability were trauma and lower self-esteem (Prioleau, 2016). In an article written by Dr. Josephine Ensign from Psychology Today, she states that, “it is a well-established fact that trauma both precedes and accompanies homelessness (Ensigne, 2018).” Research conducted by the European Federation of National Organizations Working with the Homeless shared that “many people who are at risk of or are experiencing long term homelessness have been exposed to trauma (‘Recognizing the Link’, 2017).” Since this is the case, it is vital that we understand that many people experiencing homelessness have had to endure traumatic events without receiving the appropriate attention and assistance that is needed for their recovery. Expecting traumatized individuals to function without help is like expecting a car to function properly without fuel.

In conclusion, there are a variety of opinions about homelessness. Men and women can differ in what they believe to be the primary causes of homelessness, but both seem to believe that trauma is not a significant contributing factor leading to instability in housing. Although the general public feels that traumatic events are not likely to be a primary cause, research actually reveals that the opposite is true. People with traumatic histories have a much higher chance of becoming homeless. As a logical outworking of this knowledge, we must begin to approach the topic of homelessness with more compassion and allocate sufficient funds towards providing this segment of our population with the necessary resources for healing and growth.
Charts: Public Opinions on Homelessness

Number of Respondents by Gender

- Female: 32
- Male: 69

Age of Male Respondents

- Eighteen+: 1
- Seventies: 3
- Sixties: 8
- Fifties: 7
- Forties: 13
- Thirties: 11
- Twenties: 26
Age of Female Respondents

- Seventies: 1
- Sixties: 3
- Eighteen+: 4
- Twenties: 4
- Thirties: 10
- Forties: 2
- Fifties: 8

Have you ever been homeless?

- Yes: 19
- No: 50
- Total: 19 + 50 = 69
Have you ever known someone who was homeless?

- Yes: 55
- No: 24

How do people become homeless?

- Drug Addiction: 59
- Mental Health Issues: 51
- Financial Difficulties: 62
- Trauma: 46
- Physical Illness: 47
- Personal Choice: 47
References

Ensigne, Josephine (2018). The things they carry: Trauma and homelessness.

Prioleau, Brian (2016). Shift study highlights trauma’s impact on homelessness.