

Public Knowledge, Attitudes, and Beliefs About Homeless People: Evidence for Compassion Fatigue?¹

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Media reports suggest that the public is becoming impatient with the homeless—that so-called “compassion fatigue” has gripped the nation. This characterization of public sentiment could have important policy consequences—restrictive measures can be justified by growing public impatience, and progressive housing policies seem infeasible within a hostile climate of opinion. But evidence to support the compassion fatigue notion is anecdotal. We examine the issue by tracking the results of public opinion polls and by reporting detailed evidence from a nationwide random-digit dial telephone survey (N = 1,507) concerning knowledge attitudes and beliefs about homeless people. To be sure, the public sees homelessness as an undesirable social problem and wants something done about it. However, although the homeless are clearly stigmatized, there is little evidence to suggest that the public has lost compassion and is unwilling to support policies to help homeless people.

KEY WORDS: homeless people; public impatience; housing policy.

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While there have always been homeless people in the United States, the number grew tremendously in the decade of the 1980s (Burt, 1992; Link et al., 1994; Rossi, 1989). No longer confined to skid-row sections of the urban landscape, homeless people are now readily observed throughout America's cities and consequently have been thrust into the daily consciousness of millions of Americans. Even those who do not have personal contact with homeless people are exposed to the issue as a result of extensive media coverage (Lee, Link, & Toro, 1991). People are forced to confront the reality of homelessness, to make judgments about the people they see in this condition and to draw conclusions about what should be done (see Lee, Hinze-Jones, & Lewis, 1990; Toro & McDonnell, 1992).

The way in which Americans view homeless people is a matter of considerable importance. A consistent body of research documents that attitudes are significant predictors of behavior (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1980; Schuman & Johnson, 1976). Thus people's conceptions of the problem are likely to shape the way they treat homeless people. In addition, as Shinn (1992) pointed out, attitudes and beliefs are likely to influence public responses to policy initiatives that affect homeless people. She cited the classic NIMBY (not in my backyard) response to the location of programs for homeless people in one's neighborhood as an example. In addition, policies such as placing restrictions on panhandling in the subway, constructing low-income subsidized housing, and involuntarily committing homeless mentally ill people to mental hospitals would all be difficult to implement without some degree of public support.

But how do Americans view homeless people? The answer provided by the mass media is clear: The public is losing compassion and is becoming increasingly hostile toward homeless people. Newspaper, magazine, and television reports repeatedly emphasize growing public indifference and anger toward homeless people spawned by extensive contact with them. For example, *Time* magazine published an article entitled "Shrugging Off the Homeless: The Nation's Toughest Urbanites Lose Patience with the Homeless." The article concludes that New Yorkers are faced with "the daily task of extracting compassion from a supply that seems nearly exhausted" ("Shrugging off," 1990). Similarly Barbara Walters, as guest host of *ABC News Nightline* (1990) aired a program entitled "More Homeless and Hungry Face Colder Hearts." In it she claimed that the American public had stopped caring about homeless people, leading her to question whether the country had "lost its compassion." Consistent with these examples Blasi (1994) conducted a comprehensive review of front-page *New York Times* articles about homelessness and found a dramatic shift from articles "discovering" the horror of homelessness in the early 1980s to articles focusing on the supposed backlash against them in the early 1990s. In focusing on the backlash, the media depict

public opinion as having been initially compassionate but then turning sharply negative to a point where it can best be described as “uncaring.” Compassion has turned to “compassion fatigue.”³

Accurate or not, this image could have real and significant negative consequences for policy decisions affecting homeless people through mechanisms consistent with the self-fulfilling prophecy (Merton, 1968). If politicians believe that the public has lost compassion, restrictive policies toward homeless people would be seen as consistent with public opinion and would be adopted more readily. Indeed, more and more municipalities are adopting restrictive policies (“Many cities in crackdown,” 1994, p. 8), a fact that the media has attributed to compassion fatigue. For example, a *New York Times* article with the headline “Shift in Feelings on the Homeless: Empathy Turns to Frustration” reported that “Ten years after the wan face of homelessness first captured the nation’s attention, empathy is turning to intolerance as cities impose harsher restrictions on homeless people to reduce their visibility or force them to go out on their own.” Moreover, the article claimed that city governments have been “pressed” to pass restrictive laws “by a public that has grown increasingly impatient” (“Shift in feelings,” 1991, p. 1).

There are two potential inaccuracies in the media’s depiction of compassion fatigue. First, its emphasis on “fatigue,” as in the *New York Times* article just cited, suggests that the public was compassionate at one time. As defined by the *American Heritage Dictionary* (1985), compassion has two basic components—a willingness to help and “a deep feeling of sharing the suffering of another” (p. 300). Given this definition and the complexity of the homeless situation, it is unlikely that the full range of public sentiment can be encompassed, now or at any time in the past or the future, by the simple descriptive designation of compassion. Thus it may be that the media erred in suggesting that the public was initially fully compassionate when homelessness emerged in the late 1970s and early 1980s.

The second major problem with the media’s depiction is the unsubstantiated assertion that public opinion has taken a sharp turn for the worse because of the unpleasant nature of day-in day-out contact with homeless people. Neither data over time nor evidence concerning the effect of contact on attitudes have been garnered to support this claim. In fact, the only

³It is interesting to note in this regard that Blasi questions whether it might be more accurate to characterize the elite media as suffering from compassion fatigue. In support of this view, Lee et al. (1991) found a sharp decline in the number of reports about homelessness in the printed media in the late 1980s. Further, these authors content analyzed articles published in the *New York Times* and discovered a dramatic increase in the frequency with which published articles mentioned deviant characteristics like alcoholism, substance abuse, begging, and crime.

evidence supporting this portrayal of public opinion is indirect or anecdotal. For example, Barbara Walters' assertions about an uncaring public (*ABC News Nightline*, 1990) were based not on direct assessment of public opinion but on a survey of mayoral representatives who were asked about their perceptions of public opinion.

We propose to empirically evaluate the validity of the compassion-fatigue characterization of public opinion. If such a characterization is valid, it follows that a) levels of compassion among the general public should be relatively low; b) levels of compassion should have decreased over recent years; and c) greater contact with homeless people should be associated with less compassion for them. To implement tests of these predictions, we use two sources of data: a series of public-opinion polls conducted between 1987 and 1993 and a comprehensive nationwide survey of 1,507 people concerning knowledge, attitudes, and beliefs about homelessness, conducted in 1990. Assessing compassion or compassion fatigue using surveys like these involves defining which questions are relevant to these issues. But defining compassion or related concepts like "altruism" or "prosocial behavior" has been notoriously difficult (Wuthnow, 1991) and has depended on the theoretical orientation of the investigator and the nature of the question being addressed (Darley, 1991). In keeping with the dictionary definition of compassion and the relatively broad definitions used by others (Grusec, 1991; Wuthnow, 1991) we conceptualized two domains that indicate compassion or its absence. First is a willingness to help by paying more in taxes, volunteering, or donating food, money, or clothing. Second are indicators of the extent to which respondents experience a feeling of shared suffering with homeless people.

The first source of data we use to assess compassion fatigue consists of a host of public opinion polls that began asking a limited number of questions about homelessness in the mid 1980s. Our main purpose in examining the results of these polls is to track trends in public opinion during the period in which the media reported the emergence of widespread compassion fatigue. These polls consistently assessed only a limited range of questions relevant to the public's sentiments regarding compassion fatigue—the willingness to spend more government money and to pay more taxes to help homeless people. Nevertheless, if the public has become less concerned about the fate of homeless people, we should observe a decline in willingness to help them in these ways.

Our nationwide survey of public knowledge, attitudes, and beliefs about homeless people addresses a much broader range of issues concerning homelessness and allows us to examine more complex patterns of public sentiment than was possible with the opinion polls. It therefore provides a more complete characterization of the American public's compassion for homeless peo-

ple and allows us to evaluate whether, by 1990, compassion for homeless people was indeed running low, as suggested by media accounts. We also use data from this survey concerning respondents' contact with homeless people to test the idea that people with high levels of contact have more negative views of homeless people than do those with less contact.

METHOD

Archival Opinion Poll Data

Information about public opinion polls and the questions they asked were gleaned from American Public Opinion Data and from the data bank of the Roper Center. We located 24 surveys that asked questions about increased spending to address the problem of homelessness and 23 that asked about willingness to pay more taxes to help homeless people. Most of the surveys were conducted by survey research organizations such as Yankelovich or Gallup or by university-based research organizations, using random-digit dial telephone procedures; two were based on face-to-face interviews. Slightly more than half were nationwide studies; the rest were samples of cities, counties, or states. (A table with the source, sample size, question wording and response frequencies is available by writing to the corresponding author.)

The Comprehensive Nationwide Study of Knowledge, Attitudes, and Beliefs About Homelessness

Sample

Information about the public's knowledge, attitudes, and beliefs about homeless people come from a nationwide survey of 1,507 people living in households with telephones.⁴ Two lists of telephone exchanges—one for the largest Primary Metropolitan Statistical Areas (PMSAs), as defined by the Bureau of the Census for the 1990 Census, and the other for the rest of the country—were created. Probability samples of occupied housing units served by numbers in these strata were drawn using the two-stage strategy proposed by Waksberg (1978). Objective selection of a respondent from

⁴As a household-based sample people living in institutional settings such as dorms, barracks, hotels, and prisons are excluded. Of course, students or military personnel living in households would be included.

among adults ages 18 or older in sampled households was made using a variation of the method designed by Kish (1965). Telephone interviews averaging 40 minutes in length were conducted with 1,507 adult residents of the continental United States between August 1 and November 20, 1990. Potential respondents were offered a \$10 incentive to participate in the survey. The response rate was 65% among English-speaking persons and 63% if non-English-speaking respondents are included in the denominator. This response rate was achieved with considerable effort. The average number of calls required to obtain an interview was 9, and 5% of the interviews required 33 or more calls before the interview was obtained. All 783 initial refusals were recontacted in an attempt to obtain an interview, and 140 (22%) were converted.

Weighting

The results from this study are weighted to take into account the stratification based on PMSAs, the number of persons in a household, and the number of telephone numbers within a household through which a person could have been reached. While our weighting scheme generates the same number of cases as the unweighted sample (1,507), standard statistical packages such as SPSS and SAS, which assume simple random sampling, produce incorrect standard errors. To address this problem, we use the software program SUDAAN (Shah, Barnwell, Hunt, & LaVange, 1992) that allows the estimation of standard errors for complex survey designs. All statistical tests are calculated using this program.

Comparison with the Census

A comparison between our weighted sample and 1990 census data for gender, ethnicity, age, marital status, educational attainment, and family income revealed no major discrepancies. Our data slightly over-represent women (57 vs. 51%), people between the ages of 25 and 54 (65 vs. 58%), and married people (62 vs. 55%). Since the interview was conducted in English, our sample under-represents Hispanics (3.9 vs. 6.5%). The largest discrepancy concerns education, with people who have more than a high school education overrepresented in our sample (85 vs. 75%). Nevertheless, this comparison with census data suggests no large sample bias due to non-response or omitting those without telephones, at least with regard to the variables we examined.

*Comparison of Respondents Who Initially Refused to the Rest
of the Sample*

A second check on representativeness involves comparing people who initially refused but were interviewed on subsequent attempts with other respondents (Groves, 1989, Chapter 5). The reasoning behind this approach is that without extensive efforts, initial refusers would have been nonresponders. We found no significant differences between those who initially declined but were later persuaded to participate ($n = 140$) and other respondents ($n = 1,367$) in terms of gender, ethnicity, marital status, family income, experience with poverty, history of mental hospitalization, or personal experience of homelessness. There was only one very modest difference; respondents who initially refused were slightly less educated (18.4% < high school education) than other respondents (14.2% < high school education). Overall, our analysis of converted refusers suggests little evidence of severe bias.

Measures

We used one single item and seven multiple-item scales to serve as indicators of compassion. In the Results section we present the precise wording of the individual items along with frequency distributions in order to convey the expressed level of compassion. We use the total scale scores to test the relationship between compassion and contact. Here we describe the rationale for including each scale along with its internal consistency reliability. All scales were constructed by summing items contained in them and dividing by the number of items.

We used two scales and one single-item behavior to assess the willingness-to-help component of compassion. We constructed a four-item scale ($\alpha = .75$) that assessed respondents' *willingness to help* homeless people by paying more taxes, volunteering, or allowing housing for homeless people in their neighborhood or a shelter near their home. We also include a seven-item scale ($\alpha = .80$) assessing whether the respondent *supports federal efforts* to address homelessness. Finally, a novel indicator of compassion involved the *donation* of the \$10 respondent fee. At the end of our interview, we asked respondents for their names and addresses so that we could send them a \$10 token of appreciation for participating in the study. At this point, if respondents spontaneously asked whether they could donate the money, we made provisions to donate to a national organization devoted to helping homeless people. Thus one indicator of compassion is this unsolicited donation.

We used five scales to assess the experience of shared suffering as a component of compassion toward homeless people. A four-item scale ($\alpha = .60$), *emotional responsiveness*, indicates whether respondents feel emotions like anger, sadness, or compassion when they think of homeless people. A six-item scale ($\alpha = .70$) assesses the extent to which respondents indicate a *lack of empathy for the situation of homeless people*, for example, by reporting that they cannot understand how someone becomes homeless or by agreeing that being homeless frees one from worries about jobs and family. The remaining scales are derived from theory about stigma. Stigma theory indicates that a person is stigmatized when he/she is marked by some attribute and then linked to undesirable characteristics as a consequence (Jones et al., 1984). Further, stigma, in our formulation, entails an effort to restrict the behavior of the stigmatized so as to limit contact with them. Because the process of stigmatization involves setting others apart as different and undesirable, we consider it a denial of the aspect of compassion that involves sharing the suffering of another. To measure the extent to which respondents link homeless people to undesirable characteristics, we created two scales: A two-item scale, *deviant attributes* ($\alpha = .73$), that is based on respondents' estimates of the proportion of homeless people who are exconvicts or addicted to drugs; and a six-item scale, *dangerous and undesirable* ($\alpha = .70$), that assesses whether homeless people are perceived to be dangerous and problematic for communities. To assess the phenomenon of restricting the behavior of the stigmatized, we created a three-item scale ($\alpha = .69$) that measures whether respondents believe *restrictions* should be placed on homeless people who panhandle, sleep in public places, or construct temporary shelters in parks.

As a partial control for *social desirability* effects we use a 6-item measure ($\alpha = .67$) that was adapted from the Crowne-Marlowe (1960) scale but with content specific to homelessness. Respondents were asked whether statements like "You would always go out of your way to help a homeless person" and "You would never have an unkind thought about a homeless person" were true or false.

Analysis

Our analysis was designed to answer three questions. First, we used archival opinion poll data to answer the question: Has there been a downward trend over the period from 1987 to 1993 in willingness to spend or pay more in taxes to help homeless people? To answer this question, we graphed time trends in percentages of people who endorse spending more money (24 studies) and percentages of people who are willing to pay more taxes (23 studies).

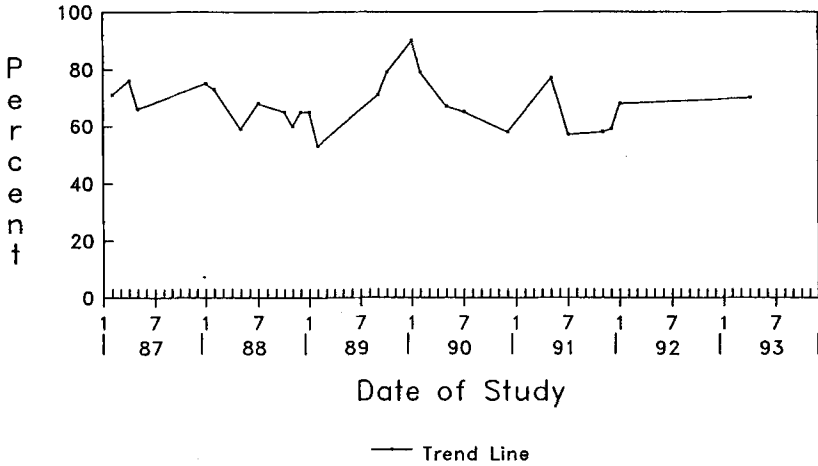


Fig. 1. Percentage favoring increased spending on homelessness.

Second, we used data from our nationwide study of public opinion to answer the question: How much compassion did the American public feel toward homeless people at the time we interviewed them? We characterized the extent of public compassion using responses to items included in the compassion-relevant scales described above.

Third, we once again used data from our nationwide study to answer the question: Is greater contact with homeless people associated with lower levels of compassion? In this instance, we used analysis of variance and multiple regression to determine whether extensive contact with homeless people is associated with less compassion.

RESULTS

Trends in Public Opinion

Figure 1 shows time-trend data from the archived public opinion polls regarding questions about increased government spending for programs and policies pertaining to homelessness. Although the wording of the questions varies, a typical question reads: "Do you think federal spending on helping the homeless should be increased, decreased, or should it stay the same?" As Figure 1 shows, there is no strong evidence that the public has become less supportive of spending over recent years. Rather, the public

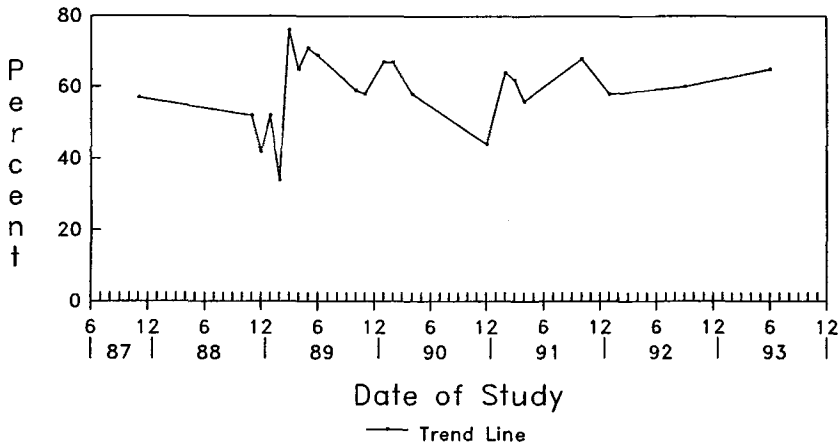


Fig. 2. Percentage willing to pay more taxes to help homeless people.

has consistently supported increases in spending. Across the 24 studies, the median percentage supporting increased spending is 66.5%, indicating a high level of support for spending. This tendency to advocate increased spending is particularly striking given the general unpopularity of government spending. Moreover, when studies include helping homeless people in a list of other important social problems, homelessness commands a higher spending priority than many other issues. In fact, in the five polls that asked about spending priorities, homelessness consistently ranked in the top one third, ahead of such issues as aid to farmers, the environment, basic scientific research, and financial aid to college students.

Figure 2 shows, time trends in responses to questions about willingness to accept a personal tax increase. A typical question reads as follows: "Would you be willing to pay more in taxes to reduce the amount of homelessness?" As Figure 2 shows, there is no evidence to suggest a strong downward trend in the public's willingness to accept a personal tax increase to address homelessness. Moreover, the median across the 23 studies suggests that a majority, 60.0%, are willing to pay more in taxes.⁵ Thus, at least

⁵Note in Figure 2 that the percentage willing to pay more in taxes appears to fluctuate greatly. Much of this fluctuation is due to methodological variation among the studies. Six studies asked about paying more taxes only if a person earlier indicated support for increased spending. These six studies have a median of 52.0%, whereas the median for studies that do not ask the question in a contingent fashion is 65.0%. If one examines the trends separately for the two different approaches, the conclusion one reaches is the same as the combined figures suggest: There has not been much change in willingness to pay more in taxes over the past few years.

with respect to questions about government spending and willingness to pay more taxes, there is no evidence for the sharp downward trend in support for homeless people predicted by the compassion fatigue idea. Instead, public sentiment appears stable at a relatively high level of support.

Indicators of Compassion/Compassion Fatigue in a Nationwide Study

Compassion as Willingness to Help

Willingness to Help Personally. Table I shows that a large majority of people (81.8%) say they would be very or somewhat willing to pay \$25 a year more in taxes to reduce homelessness. Fewer, but still a majority (53.5%), would be very or somewhat willing to pay \$100. Relatively few would be very or somewhat willing to pay as much as \$500 a year more in taxes. Most people say they would be very or somewhat willing to volunteer 2 hours a month to have housing for homeless people in their neighborhood and to have a shelter for homeless people located near their home. Table I also provides the unique piece of information that resulted from the spontaneous donation of the respondent fee. A surprising 18.3% of the respondents who were willing to provide us with their address (92.2% of the sample) offered to donate their respondent fee.⁶

Support for Federal Efforts to Address Homelessness. As Table I shows, a large majority of the public favor federal intervention to help homeless people. Even the least popular federal initiative (spend more on welfare benefits for homeless people) was endorsed by a majority of respondents. The most strongly endorsed areas for federal intervention and spending were to provide free drug and alcohol treatment to reduce homelessness (endorsed by 83%), build shelters and emergency housing (83%), and build affordable housing for poor people (79%). Thus, the public would support a variety of federally initiated efforts to reduce homelessness even if an outlay of federal funds were required.

⁶Because we had an interest in contacting respondents again for further research, we always asked for names and addresses even if the respondent offered to donate the respondent fee. Some subjects ($n = 117$) who donated the fee declined to reveal their name and address. Since we cannot tell whether these respondents would have donated if they were not concerned about anonymity, we have excluded them from consideration in calculating the percentage spontaneously donating. Thus the 18.3% (under "Donation" in Table I) represents the percentage of donors among the group who were willing to reveal their address.

Table I. Compassion as a Willingness to Help Homeless People (N = 1,507)

	% Responding			
	Very willing	Somewhat willing	Not willing	
Willingness to help				
How willing would you personally be to				
1. Pay \$25 a year more in taxes to reduce homelessness?	40.2	41.6	18.2	
2. Pay \$100 a year more in taxes to reduce homelessness	17.5	36.0	46.5	
3. Pay \$500 a year more in taxes to reduce homelessness?	3.6	17.1	79.4	
4. Spend two hours a month doing volunteer work to help the homeless?	36.0	48.6	15.4	
5. Have housing for the homeless located in your neighborhood?	27.0	49.6	23.4	
6. Have a shelter for homeless people located near your home?	24.4	49.2	26.4	
	Yes	No		
Donation	18.3	81.7		
	Definitely Yes	Probably Yes	Probably No	Definitely No
Support for federal efforts				
Do you think the federal government should spend more money				
1. To building affordable housing for poor people?	41.1	37.8	14.1	7.0
2. To build shelter and other emergency housing?	45.5	37.1	10.7	6.7
3. To give rent subsidies to homeless people so they can afford to pay rent?	35.3	38.0	16.5	10.3
4. On welfare benefits for homeless people?	20.9	33.5	27.9	17.7
5. To provide free alcohol and drug treatment programs to reduce homelessness?	52.2	30.9	8.3	8.5
Do you think the federal government should				
6. Raise the minimum wage as a way of reducing homelessness?	42.4	25.3	19.5	12.7
7. Give more tax breaks to private developers that build housing for poor people?	41.3	34.8	14.3	9.7

Compassion as the Experience of Shared Suffering

Emotional Responsiveness. As Table II shows, a large majority of respondents (86%) agree or strongly agree when asked whether they feel "sad and compassionate" when they think of homeless people. People also feel angry that homelessness exists in a country as rich as ours (89% agree or strongly agree). Further, most people (77%) disagree or strongly disagree that they feel less compassion than they used to.⁷ Finally, most people reject the statement (64% disagree or strongly disagree) that programs for the homeless cost taxpayers too much money.

Lack of Empathy for the Situation of Homeless People. Other items in Table II indicate limitations on the ability to understand what homelessness is like or how it arises. Thirty-seven percent think homelessness frees one from worries that others experience around family and jobs, 39% cannot understand how anyone becomes homeless, 62% cannot imagine what homeless people do with all of their free time, and 55% believe homeless people can be identified by their appearance alone. Moreover, most people think that irresponsible behavior (72%) and laziness (64%) on the part of homeless people themselves contribute some or a lot to homelessness.

Stigma: Linking of Homelessness to Deviant Characteristics. To determine whether the public associates homelessness with deviant status characteristics, we asked the following question: "In your opinion, out of 100 homeless adults, about how many do you think (are addicted to drugs or alcohol/have ever been in jail or prison)?" The average respondent estimated that 55 out of 100 homeless adults are addicted to drugs or alcohol. Twenty-six percent indicated that at least three fourths of the homeless are addicted to drugs or alcohol whereas only 13% believed that less than one fourth are. The average respondent estimated that 45 out of 100 homeless adults had been in jail or prison. Seventeen percent believed that more than three fourths have been in jail or prison and 28% believed that less than one fourth have been. Regarding the perceived dangerousness and perceived undesirability of homeless people, Table III shows that only one of six questions (Question 4) indicated that a majority of respondents are fearful of homeless people, but sizable minorities (always more than a quarter) believe that statements affirming the dangerousness of homeless people

⁷It is important to note that a minority (23%) indicate that they feel less compassion than they used to. This finding would have been more revealing about trends in sentiments towards homeless people had we also asked whether respondents felt more compassion than they used to. As it stands, we cannot tell whether these responses represent an overall decrease in compassion or whether people move up and down in terms of their levels of compassion and we have only measured the downward side of that fluctuation.

Table II. Compassion as an Experience of Shared Suffering with Homeless People Homelessness (*N* = 1,507)

	% Responding			
	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
Emotional responsiveness				
When you think about homeless people you feel sad and compassionate.	35.3	50.5	11.8	2.4
It makes you angry to think that so many people are homeless in a country as rich as ours.	53.2	35.7	8.8	2.3
You feel less compassion for homeless people than you used to.	6.2	17.1	48.7	28.1
Programs for the homeless cost taxpayers too much money.	9.3	26.5	47.3	17.0
	Definitely true	Probably true	Probably false	Definitely false
Lack of empathy for the situation of homeless people				
Being homeless frees you from many of the worries that other people have about jobs and family.	9.1	28.0	26.7	36.1
It is hard to imagine what homeless people do with all the free time they must have.	25.8	36.0	19.5	18.7
It is hard to understand how anyone becomes homeless.	12.2	26.3	30.5	30.9
Most homeless people can be identified by their appearance alone.	17.8	37.8	26.0	19.1
	A lot	Some	A little	Not at all
How much does laziness on the part of the homeless themselves contribute to homelessness	29.0	35.2	30.6	5.1
How much does irresponsible behavior on the part of the homeless contribute to homelessness	26.2	45.8	25.1	2.7

are somewhat or definitely true. For example, 26.7% believe that the statement “homeless people are more likely to commit violent crimes than other people” is probably or definitely true. In addition, most Americans believe that homeless people make neighborhoods worse, spoil parks for families and children, hurt local business by their presence, and threaten the quality of life in our nation’s cities.

Stigma: Endorsement of Restrictions on Homeless People. Table III also shows responses to three questions concerning restrictions that might be placed on homeless people. Opinion is about evenly split concerning

Table III. Compassion as an Experience of Shared Suffering with Homeless People: Stigma-Related Indicators

	% Responding			
	Definitely true	Probably true	Probably false	Definitely false
Perceived dangerousness and undesirability				
Homeless people are more likely to commit violent crimes than other people.	4.1	22.6	60.9	12.4
Even when homeless people seem all right, it is important to remember that they may be dangerous.	9.2	38.9	42.2	9.8
It's only natural to be afraid of a person who lives on the street.	13.4	48.5	26.1	12.0
If I knew a person had been homeless, I would be less likely to trust him or her.	6.0	34.5	39.5	20.0
In the interest of public safety, homeless people should not be allowed to gather in public places.	5.8	20.2	42.7	31.4
The more homeless people there are in an area the worse the neighborhood becomes.	29.5	48.4	18.3	3.8
The presence of homeless people spoils parks for families and children	14.4	51.4	25.6	8.6
	Definitely yes	Probably yes	Probably no	Definitely no
Restrictions				
Should homeless people have the right to sleep overnight in public places like parks, or bus and train stations?	15.4	33.8	31.0	19.8
Should homeless people be allowed to beg or panhandle in public places?	8.5	21.7	35.0	34.9
Should homeless people be allowed to set up tents or other temporary shelter in public parks?	8.1	22.7	34.2	34.9

whether homeless people should be allowed to sleep overnight in public places like parks or train and bus stations. However, a majority would restrict panhandling in public places and limit the construction of temporary shelters in public parks.

Does Extensive Contact with Homeless People Induce Compassion Fatigue?

The characterization of the American public as suffering from compassion fatigue is based on the assumption that day-in day-out exposure

has had a wearing effect. If so, evidence of compassion fatigue should be more prominent among those who have been extensively exposed to homeless people. Before testing whether contact is in fact related to diminished compassion, we present preliminary evidence on the extent of public contact with homeless people.

To assess contact with homeless people we asked "How frequently do you see a homeless person in your neighborhood" and "How many homeless people do you see in an average week?" In light of the compassion-fatigue idea, it is interesting that about three quarters of the public seldom or never see a homeless person in their neighborhood, and only 11% see more than 10 in an average week. Moreover, concerning panhandling we asked "In the past year, how often has a homeless panhandler or beggar asked you for money?" and found that only 15.2% of the public had been asked for money more than 10 times in the past year. Thus, extensive personal contact with homeless people is relatively rare among the American public and is unlikely to be a basis for pervasive compassion fatigue.

Table IV reports the relationship between contact with homeless people and the dimensions of compassion described above. For each measure of contact, we report the results of one-way analyses of variance comparing the means of the eight indicators of compassion in four groups with differing levels of contact. There are only two significant associations when contact with homeless panhandlers is examined, and both are inconsistent with the compassion-fatigue hypothesis. The greater respondents' exposure to homeless people the more willing they are to help. In addition, respondents with greater exposure are less likely to endorse items revealing a lack of empathy for the situation of homeless people. None of the other compassion indicators were significantly related to contact with homeless panhandlers.

When the number of homeless people seen in an average week is considered, it is usually people with more contact who express more compassion. With only one exception, the highest mean compassion score is found in one of the top two levels of contact, whereas the lowest mean compassion score is associated with one of the two lowest levels. The one exception concerns the measure of perceived deviant characteristics of homeless people. Here, those with no weekly contact are least likely to perceive homeless people as addicted to drugs or as exconvicts.

Table IV also shows that there are some instances in which the association between contact and compassion is not linear. For example, mean levels of emotional responsiveness and the belief that the federal government should address homelessness peak among respondents who report seeing 3 to 10 homeless people per week, and then drop for the highest contact group. While this might be taken as some evidence for

Table IV One-Way Analysis of Variance Showing Relationship Between Exposure to People Perceived to Be Homeless and Indicators of Compassion

Scale	Homeless people seen in an average week				<i>F</i>
	None	1 or 2	3-10	>10	
<i>n</i>	573	462	304	165	
Willingness to help					
<i>M</i>	1.79	1.89	2.02	2.06	12.86 ^d
<i>SD</i>	.46	.47	.48	.54	
Donation of respondent fee ^a (%)	19.8	13.8	19.2	26.1	$\chi^2 = 9.76^b$
Support for federal efforts					
<i>M</i>	2.93	3.05	3.17	3.10	5.92 ^d
<i>SD</i>	.65	.63	.58	.70	
Emotional responsiveness					
<i>M</i>	3.03	3.06	3.18	3.06	3.14 ^b
<i>SD</i>	.50	.51	.58	.60	
Lack of empathy for homeless situation					
<i>M</i>	2.60	2.60	2.44	2.54	5.05 ^c
<i>SD</i>	.59	.60	.62	.64	
Perceived deviant characteristics					
<i>M</i>	48.17	50.29	49.59	54.73	2.96 ^b
<i>SD</i>	20.09	19.53	20.66	22.44	
Perceived dangerousness and undesirability					
<i>M</i>	2.56	2.54	2.47	2.55	1.90
<i>SD</i>	.42	.48	.46	.49	
Restrictions					
<i>M</i>	2.87	2.89	2.69	2.68	4.47 ^c
<i>SD</i>	.72	.74	.79	.80	
	"Homeless" panhandlers encountered in the past year				<i>F</i>
	None	1 or 2	3-10	>10	
<i>n</i>	569	416	289	229	
Willingness to help					
<i>M</i>	1.81	1.92	1.94	2.02	8.81 ^d
<i>SD</i>	.47	.49	.48	.49	
Donation of respondent fee ^a (%)	18.1	16.2	16.6	24.7	$\chi^2 = 5.30$
Support for federal efforts					
<i>M</i>	2.97	3.08	3.09	3.03	2.03
<i>SD</i>	.66	.61	.61	.68	
Emotional responsiveness					
<i>M</i>	3.05	3.10	3.11	3.04	1.09
<i>SD</i>	.50	.52	.55	.62	
Lack of empathy for homeless situation					
<i>M</i>	2.64	2.55	2.51	2.44	5.06 ^c
<i>SD</i>	.60	.61	.58	.61	
Perceived deviant characteristics					
<i>M</i>	48.73	49.85	51.19	50.80	0.91
<i>SD</i>	20.55	19.09	19.71	22.89	
Perceived dangerousness and undesirability					
<i>M</i>	2.54	2.51	2.50	2.59	1.53
<i>SD</i>	.43	.49	.45	.45	
Restrictions					
<i>M</i>	2.89	2.81	2.78	2.74	1.90
<i>SD</i>	.73	.76	.74	.80	

^aThere are 1,390 cases for this variable. People who did not give addresses (*n* = 117) are excluded. Since we could not send the respondent fee to these people without an address we asked whether they would like to donate the fee. All 117 said they would like to do so.

^b*p* < .05.
^c*p* < .01.
^d*p* < .001.

compassion fatigue among those with the most contact, it must be balanced by other considerations. First, this is not a consistent pattern, in that other variables show a linear pattern with the most compassion expressed in the highest contact group. In addition, for those significant associations in which the highest contact group is not the most compassionate (i.e., support for federal efforts, emotional responsiveness, lack of empathy for the situation of homeless people, perceived deviant characteristics with number of homeless people seen in an average week), it is usually the second most compassionate.

Although the results in Table IV show little evidence to suggest that contact induces compassion fatigue there are two potential ways in which these results might mask compassion fatigue. First, one might argue that people who have extensive contact with homeless people express more compassion because they are, for example, more likely to be single, young, liberal or inclined to give socially desirable responses, than those with less contact. With two exceptions, the pattern of results reported in Table IV remained the same when age, sex, education, marital status, political orientation, and a homelessness-specific measure of social desirability were controlled in a multiple regression analysis. The association between emotional responsiveness and the number of homeless people seen in an average week dropped to nonsignificance as did the association between a lack of empathy for the homeless situation and the number of panhandlers encountered in the past year. However, in no instance did an association change so that more contact was related to less compassion.

The second possibility is that some people with high contact, like volunteers in homeless shelters, choose such contact because of compassion for homeless people. To the extent that this occurs, the effect of compassion fatigue through extensive contact would be underestimated. Fortunately, we included a question that allowed us to examine the effect of contact on indicators of compassion/compassion fatigue while controlling for the tendency of some people to choose work or volunteer roles that engenders extensive contact with homeless people. Specifically, we used the yes/no response to the question, "Have you ever volunteered or worked for pay in a place that provides services to homeless people?" As expected, the 312 people who answered yes to this question were significantly more likely to see many homeless people in an average week ($p < .001$) and to have encountered homeless panhandlers during the past year ($p < .001$). However, controlling for voluntary contact did not change the direction of our results.

DISCUSSION

Evidence Concerning Compassion Fatigue

In the introduction to this paper, we noted a tendency for the media to portray recent public opinion concerning homeless people as having undergone a sharp negative turn from compassion to “compassion fatigue.” We also noted that the evidence supporting such a claim is almost entirely anecdotal. Three aspects of our analysis reflect on the validity of the compassion-fatigue idea.

First, our review of public opinion polls reveals that most Americans would be willing to pay more in taxes to help homeless people, and that an even higher percentage favor increased government spending on the problem. More important, there was no apparent decline over time in public support for homeless people using these two indicators—a fact that runs counter to the compassion-fatigue idea.

Second, our nationwide survey of knowledge, attitudes, and beliefs reveals a set of findings inconsistent with the assertion that compassion fatigue has enveloped the nation. Most report feeling sad, compassionate, and angry that homelessness exists in a nation as wealthy as ours. Many are willing to make personal commitments, such as paying more in taxes or doing volunteer work to help homeless people. Moreover, most members of the public believe the federal government should do things like build more affordable housing for poor people and give rent subsidies to people who need them. Taken together, these aspects of public opinion and behavior are hard to mesh with the media’s portrait of current opinion as hostile and uncaring.

Third, the compassion-fatigue argument is based on the claim that extensive contact depletes compassion. As such, it should affect those who experience the most contact with homeless people—those who, according to the compassion-fatigue notion, should have lost patience and become more hostile towards homeless people. We found, first, that only a small minority have levels of contact that seem high enough to generate compassion fatigue. Moreover, there is little evidence to suggest that contact dramatically reduces compassion for homeless people. In fact, those with more contact in an average week were more willing to make personal sacrifices to help homeless people, less likely to respond in ways indicative of a lack of empathy for homeless people, less likely to favor restrictive policies, and more likely to donate the respondent fee. Even frequency of exposure to panhandling, a possibly more invasive form of contact, was associated with increased compassion for two of eight indicators. These

findings are not unique to our study. Although they were not focused on the issue of compassion fatigue, three previous studies (Lee et al., 1990, 1991; Toro & McDonnell, 1992) assessed the association between various forms of contact with homeless people and attitudes or beliefs relevant to compassion. Like ours, these studies reveal either no association between contact and indicators of compassion or actually suggest that more contact is associated with greater compassion.

Taken alone, the results of our trend analysis might be questioned because they are limited to issues of spending and taxation and because they do not incorporate stratification by levels of contact with homeless people. Similarly, one might challenge results from the nationwide survey because they are cross-sectional and cannot reveal time trends. The weakness of the trend analysis, however, is offset in the nationwide survey in which we were able to look at many dimensions of public sentiment and to stratify our results by the amount of contact respondents experienced. Similarly, the weakness of the nationwide cross-sectional survey is offset by the results over time that the multiple opinion polls provide. Taken together, they present a strong challenge to the media characterization of a public that has turned from compassion to compassion fatigue.

The Possibility of Pockets of Compassion Fatigue

As quotes at the outset of this paper indicate, the compassion-fatigue idea involves a characterization of public opinion as a whole, labeling the public as uncaring, compassionless, or hostile. In response, our analysis also focused on public opinion as a whole, and found that it did not conform to the compassion-fatigue idea. The possibility remains, however, that pockets of compassion fatigue exist among subgroups of the population. We examined one group that might be especially vulnerable to compassion fatigue—those with a high level of exposure to homeless people. Our results suggest the possibility of some signs of compassion fatigue among those with the most contact. However, even among this relatively small group, increased contact does not seem to create a generalized turn away from compassion.

Can Public Sentiment be Characterized as Compassionate?

At the outset of this paper, we suggest that public sentiment would likely be more complex than the terms “compassion” or “compassion fatigue” convey. Our argument against compassion fatigue is aimed mainly

at countering the claim that the public no longer cares about homeless people and that their growing hostility naturally supports a restrictive, get-tough policy. However, our rejection of the compassion-fatigue argument does not imply that the public can be characterized as unambiguously compassionate. The fact remains that restrictive policies are being implemented across the nation (“Shift in feelings,” 1991), public opinion has not stopped these policies, nor has the public offered strenuous objections to them. A reexamination of some of the findings from our survey suggests ways in which the public deviates from full compassion and helps explain why restrictive policies have been implemented.

According to our survey, the public tends to associate the homeless population with stigmatized groups—they estimate that fairly large proportions abuse drugs and alcohol or have been in jail. Moreover, in the public’s estimation, irresponsible behavior and laziness on the part of homeless people contribute substantially to homelessness. Perhaps most important, many people endorsed items that indicate a lack of empathy for the situation of homeless people—a majority endorsed the item suggesting that homeless people have a lot of free time, and over a third thought homelessness relieved one from worries about jobs and family. In addition, there is strong evidence to suggest that homeless people are seen as undesirable; most people believe their presence makes neighborhoods worse, spoils parks for families and children, and threatens the quality of urban life. Moreover, a majority of the public directly endorses restrictions on frequently used survival strategies such as sleeping over night in public places, panhandling, and erecting temporary shelters in public parks.⁸ In keeping with these results, we conclude that compassion for homeless people, as we have defined it, is not complete. In terms of willingness to help, the public’s compassion is clear and consistent. However, when we examine indicators of the experience of shared suffering, we find that, alongside attitudes indicative of compassion are attitudes that set distinct limits on compassion. Although these limits might seem to offer some support for the compassion-fatigue idea, we reject the “fatigue” component of the argument because we find little indication that these less compassionate attitudes result from extensive contact with homeless people. Instead, our data suggest that the public holds (and we suspect has held for some time) a complex and sometimes

⁸Respondents may object to behaviors like panhandling whether or not they are engaged in by someone who is homeless. As a consequence, one might argue that these are not restrictions on homeless people per se but on behaviors that would be objectionable under any circumstances. Although this is true, we wrote our items to insure that the endorsed restrictions focused on homeless people and not just the behavior. Each item refers to whether *homeless people* should be allowed to sleep overnight in public places, panhandle, or erect temporary shelters.

conflicting image of homeless people. Given these complexities, how can one characterize public sentiment, and what implications might that sentiment have for policy in the time ahead?

Conclusion

The public thinks homelessness is a very important problem and one that is undesirable and harmful, especially to urban life. They are upset by the problem and want something done about it. However, as our results suggest, public opinion supports a variety of approaches to addressing homelessness. On the one hand, they consistently and without any evidence of compassion fatigue support increased spending and increased taxes to help homeless people. Moreover, they are favorable to policies like increased federal spending for low-income housing and other such solutions. On the other hand, they also want to ban begging and sleeping in public places. Briefly put, the public wants something done, but public opinion does not provide specific directions for policy makers, because no set of policy alternatives is clearly favored while another set is clearly disfavored. Instead, public opinion is compatible with a broad range of policy initiatives. As a consequence, the trend toward restrictive policies has not been halted by public opposition since this is one kind of policy the public endorses. At the same time it would be wrong to conclude that such restrictive policies are the only ones consistent with current public opinion since the public also endorses a wide range of pro-active strategies.

Rather, our analysis suggests that policy makers have an unusual opportunity to forge effective policies, both because of the wide range of potential policies that are consistent with public opinion and, as argued by Toro and McDonnell (1992), because of the public's general support for ameliorative policies and their willingness to make personal sacrifices. It may well be that the trend toward restrictive policies will continue and that strategies to improve housing will not be widely implemented. If this occurs, it will be important to recognize that significant public support for a very different set of policy initiatives existed and might have been mobilized to mount effective programs to reduce homelessness. It would be truly unfortunate if policy makers rejected these alternative strategies because of unsubstantiated media-based assertions of widespread compassion fatigue.

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