A Content Analysis of Youtube Comments Framing the Criminalization of Homelessness

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Research Question

Homelessness is a major social issue. A lot of the strategies to combat the issue have been to criminalize the homeless through bylaws that prohibit sleeping in public spaces, red zoning homeless individuals, or putting them in jail. Strategies like the housing first model to combat homelessness and other programs tend to be few and far between. However, how do people feel about these strategies and how do they frame this issue? My research question is: how does the Youtube community frame the issue of homeless criminalization?

Gaps in the Literature

The literature on this topic has little focus on the perspective of community members and how they understand the issue of homeless criminalization.

Methodology

This is a content analysis of youtube comments responding to images of homeless criminalization. A content analysis is a qualitative research method that analyzes already existing content such as films, newspapers, or Youtube comments to find patterns (Bailey, 2020). A video was chosen on the basis that it had approximately 300 comments and displayed images of homeless criminalization. The video selected also demonstrated a housing first model for combatiting homelessness.

Coding Process

Codes were validated by making sure they were relevant, repetitious, and grounded in the data (Bailey, 2020). The analysis process used the framework set out by Bailey (2020). Bailey sets out five steps to analysis that need to be grounded in the data that were used to organize the methodology of this paper. These steps are: description, comparison, categorization, conceptualization, and explanation (Bailey, 2020).

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R6v5y_YbokU

Results

The coding process uncovered three main themes in that data. These themes make up how the Youtube commenters for the video frame the social problem of the criminalization of homelessness: olitical (polarized tension between political ideologies), economic (how money should be allocated), and social (concepts of social class, society, and religion).

Political Frame

The images of homeless criminalization and discussion of housing first lead to debate on political ideology (conservatives versus liberals). They framed the issue of homelessness and how to handle it as a political issue:

"I always felt that the biggest difference between conservatives and liberals is that conservatives want to punish you for being homeless, or for having addiction problems, or for being to poor to afford access to health care. Where as liberals want to help you with these problems by providing social safety nets and access to affordable health care. Conservatives complain about the cost of social safety nets, but the cost of prison is worse in my opinion."

This quote also ties into the economic frame and the idea of money versus morality on the next slide.

Economic Frame

Money is a pattern that came up throughout the comments. It is often set up in a way that it is pitting money against morality:

"This is not only financially a good idea but also humanely the way to go. Without a home you cannot even begin to make your life better."

Morality is not a good enough argument so money is used to strengthen the suggested allocation of money into programs like housing first.

Social Frame

Patterns of social class, blameworthyness, and religion are built into the social frame. It ranges from seeing people as high and mighty needing understand homeless individuals to blaming them for mental illness and not contributing to society. There is also a pattern of society or "America" is the problem and religion is the solution:

"This is against Jesus... so maybe Americans are Antichrists ? ..."

Analysis

Best's (2017) social problems theory is helpful as a theoretical framework for my paper. He describes the process in which situations become problematized. It is a process that starts from a claim being made, to the media covering the claim, to people reacting to the media coverage, and then policy is developed (Best, 2017). Taking this process into account, it is important for context to understand how social problems come about and are framed. It also emphasises the importance of studying public reactions and how they frame issues, because public reaction can inform policy.

Blameworthiness can be grounded in several concepts that were presented in the themes (or frames), such as social class. Other concepts that the connection to blameworthiness can be drawn to include: society is the problem, religion as remedy, the problematization of helping, political ideology, the worthiness of money, and money versus morality.

There was a lack of a criminalization frame and minimal discussion about police in the comments suggesting an alignment with the literature of Hipple (2017) and Herring (2019). Hipple and Herring suggested that police may not be the most appropriate resource for dealing with homelessness. The Youtube commenters appear to agree with this idea. They do not understand homelessness as a criminal act. They instead understand the issue as political, economic, and social. However, more information is required to understand public understanding of policing the homeless, for future research.

References

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