Homeless and Hopeless: Resignation in News Media Constructions of Homelessness as a Social Problem

Bernadette R. McNulty
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Homeless and Hopeless: Resignation in News Media Constructions of Homelessness as a Social Problem

Abstract
This dissertation examined news constructions of homelessness as a social problem to identify how news stories communicate notions of what constitutes homelessness; how many and what types of people are homeless; and who can, should or must do something about this social problem. The study entailed a narrative analysis of 92 news magazine articles and 111 CBS news broadcasts about homelessness. The dissertation included a frequency analysis of homeless-related citations appearing in Reader’s Guide to Periodical Literature, Television News Index and Abstracts and the Social Science Index from 1976 to 1990.

News stories present no explicit definition of homelessness and use the term to describe multiple and diverse populations. Imprecise language regarding homelessness leads to variance and contradiction yet meager debate about the nature—or size—of the homeless population. News stories portray homelessness as related to or "enmeshed" in several other social problems and rarely clarify whether homelessness is a cause, effect or symptom of such problems. News stories thus portray homelessness as a vague, incomprehensible and intractable problem.

News constructs five central images of homeless people by focusing on social actors, relationships, behaviors, conditions and causes of homelessness. Homeless people appear as "institution avoiders," "mentally ill individuals," "families and children," "runaway or abandoned teens," and "threatening villains." Biographies and vignettes, journalistic commentary, visual techniques, and the presentation of numerical and research information are conventions establishing news stories as factual. Images portray unambiguous sets of victims and villains, emphasize individualistic problem causes and contribute to resignation about homelessness.

The study proposes two models of communication about homelessness: a "social action model" presenting a problem about which someone must do something, and a "hopelessness model" suggesting an unchangeable problem. Overall, news stories exhibit resignation that nothing can be done to alleviate homelessness; they lack calls for action, responsibility and remedies regarding homelessness. A proposed conceptual continuum describes four levels of resignation about homelessness; each level reflects a different configuration of the two models. The study suggests directions for future research.

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HOMELESS AND HOPELESS: RESIGNATION IN NEWS MEDIA
CONSTRUCTIONS OF HOMELESSNESS AS A SOCIAL PROBLEM

Bernadette R. McNulty

A DISSERTATION

in
Communication

Presented to the Faculties of the University of Pennsylvania in
Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Doctor of
Philosophy

1992

[Signatures]
Supervisor of Dissertation
Graduate Group Chairperson
To My Determined Irish Ancestors...

the Caseys, the Egans, the McNultys and the Morrisseys
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ABSTRACT

HOMELESS AND HOPELESS: RESIGNATION IN NEWS MEDIA CONSTRUCTIONS OF HOMELESSNESS AS A SOCIAL PROBLEM

BERNADETTE R. MCNULTY

CHARLES R. WRIGHT

This dissertation examined news constructions of homelessness as a social problem to identify how news stories communicate notions of what constitutes homelessness; how many and what types of people are homeless; and who can, should or must do something about this social problem. The study entailed a narrative analysis of 92 news magazine articles and 111 CBS news broadcasts about homelessness. The dissertation included a frequency analysis of homeless-related citations appearing in Reader's Guide to Periodical Literature, Television News Index and Abstracts and the Social Science Index from 1976 to 1990.

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News constructs five central images of homeless people by focusing on social actors, relationships, behaviors, conditions and causes of homelessness. Homeless people appear as "institution avoiders," "mentally ill individuals," "families and children," "runaway or abandoned teens," and "threatening villains."

Biographies and vignettes, journalistic commentary, visual techniques, and the presentation of numerical and research information are conventions establishing news stories as factual. Images portray unambiguous sets of victims and villains, emphasize individualistic problem causes and contribute to resignation about homelessness.

The study proposes two models of communication about homelessness: a "social action model" presenting a problem about which someone must do something, and a "hopelessness model" suggesting an unchangeable problem. Overall, news stories exhibit resignation that nothing can be done to alleviate homelessness; they lack calls for action, responsibility and remedies regarding homelessness. A proposed conceptual continuum describes four levels of resignation about homelessness; each level reflects a different configuration of the two models. The study suggests directions for future research.
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Chapter One

INTRODUCTION: THE RESEARCH PROBLEM

The stories we tell about the homeless may shape the way we think about and act upon homelessness. Throughout history, people without homes have appeared as characters in the stories that are part of our cultural heritage. The following narrative excerpts represent different ways of thinking about the homeless.

And so it was, that, while they were there, the days were accomplished that she should be delivered. And She brought forth her firstborn son, and wrapped him in swaddling clothes, and laid him in a manger; because there was no room for them in the inn. And there were in the same country shepherds abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night...(St. Luke 2. 2:6-8. Holy Bible, King James Version).

There was an old woman who lived in a shoe, She had so many children, She didn't know what to do... (The Mother Goose Book, 1983).

...Though he is now dying on the streets, Gary used to be a respectable citizen. His full name is Gary Shaw, 48, and he is a life-long resident of Philadelphia and father of three. He once worked as a precision machinist, making metal dies for casting tools...But he lost his job and wife to alcohol...(Time, February 2, 1987:29).
It's a weekly comedy about the homeless... But not in a depressing way. We want to find a funny, upbeat way of bringing the issue of homelessness to television. There are three wacky homeless characters but they're wise... And the hook is, they love being homeless (TV executive to Jeff Bridges in *The Fisher King*; quoted in *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, October 27, 1991:L1).

We might say that stories reflect and influence our conceptions of "the reality" of homelessness--especially when we label these stories "news reports" documenting an "objective reality."

We see the homeless on the streets, in the subways, on our campuses and outside our convenience stores. We read about the homeless in newspapers, magazines, journals and books. We watch television sitcoms and dramas portray homeless characters, listen to popular songs about homelessness, and even go see movies where homeless characters appear with increasing frequency. Yet few of us have experienced homelessness directly.

News stories are both a form of storytelling and a construction of reality. News stories about homelessness may profoundly influence our conceptions of what homelessness is and why it exists. News stories about homelessness are particularly significant because they convey ideas about whether someone should do something about the problem. And they may even tell us who should do what to alleviate this social problem.

My study examines news stories about homelessness to investigate the construction homelessness as a social problem. The study entails a narrative analysis of 203 news stories from 1980 to 1990. Specifically, I address the following questions:
1. What is the extent of public attention to homelessness in national magazines, social science journals and network news broadcasts from 1980 to 1990?

2. How do news stories construct homelessness in terms of claims about the definition and extent or size of the problem?

3. How do news stories portray the causes of homelessness and the relation of causes to other social problems?

4. What images of the homeless population emerge in news stories, and how are these images communicated in terms of journalistic techniques and news narrative structures?

5. How do news stories portray homelessness in terms of who could, should or must do something to alleviate the problem?

6. To what extent do portrayals of homelessness promote social action or hopelessness about this social problem?

I looked at how news stories construct homelessness by identifying stories' claims about what constitutes homelessness, who are the homeless, what causes homelessness, what actions might alleviate the problem, what actions have already been taken, and who is or should be responsible for responding to the problem. When identifying claims, I examined news source comments, journalistic commentary and visual depictions and their captions. I examined both what news narratives say when they construct homelessness as a social problem and how narratives establish news stories as the "objective truth."

In an effort to evaluate whether news stories present homelessness as something about which someone must do something, I explored the data to develop two models for
communication about homelessness. The first model proposes communication components that promote social action; the second proposes communication components that suggests hopelessness. I used these two models to assess the extent to which news stories present homelessness as a problem about which someone must do something. My assessment suggests that news stories exhibit varying levels of resignation about homelessness. I propose a conceptual continuum describing four levels of resignation about homelessness; each level reflects a different configuration of components either promoting social action or suggesting hopelessness.

THE COMMUNICATION PROBLEM

My study focuses on news stories that construct "facts" about homelessness. The social significance of this research lies with the premise that media news may influence the nature of public understandings of homelessness and the development of homelessness-related policy. The study is based on the assumption that news stories represent a subjectively and selectively created reality (Ettema and Glasser, 1988; Carragee, 1986; Gitlin, 1980; Gans, 1979; Tuchman, 1978). However, my research in no way intends to dismiss or make light of the objective reality of those who have in any way experienced homelessness or been involved in serving the homeless.
The theoretical base of my study draws upon the views and research of scholars interested in constructionist studies of social problems. A review of the relevant literature from this field has been included in the literature section of this report. The following discussion outlines the concerns of my study as suggested by my understanding of constructionist theories of social problems and their relation to mass communication theory.

Constructionists view social problems as activities of individuals or groups making assertions of grievance and claims with respect to some putative conditions (Spector and Kitsuse, 1977:75). Social problems are constructed by claims-makers—victims, activists, or experts with special knowledge about some social condition—who make claims about that condition (Best, 1989). Claims-makers construct social problems according to their personal views of the conditions that cause a problem and the measures which should be used to address a problem.

Individual claims-makers often propose unique constructions of a social problem. Claims-makers thus compete because they have vested interests in bringing their unique constructions to public attention. They often aim to shape policy so that laws, budgets and programs respond to their particular construction of a problem.

When claims-makers compete, they muster and use resources to gain public attention. In doing so, they vie for mass media attention and access to news media audiences. They may also gain the attention of social scientists and inspire research addressing their cause. Because power and resources are differentially
distributed within our society, claims-makers have differential access to resources. Thus, they possess varying abilities for gaining the attention of media news workers who may communicate their claims within larger arenas.

The complexity of claims-making processes grows in consideration of the conventions and constraints that shape the production and distribution of news media reports. Reports distributed by media news organizations may allege neutrality and facticity. However, researchers acknowledge that news information is selectively gathered, interpreted and constructed using conventions which may hide the selective processes involved in the social construction of news as reality. For example, Tuchman (1972, 1978) suggests that journalists invoke "objectivity" by practicing a set of normative work routines or "strategic rituals" that protect them from the political and professional risks associated with news work. Such work routines or conventions establish news as "objective facts" and conceal evidence of the work journalists perform as they create news stories.

News constructions may influence the opinions, beliefs and actions of the public or policy makers. News may be particularly influential for topics about which news audiences have few non-mediated sources of information. Members of the public may encounter homeless individuals in their travels to work or in their neighborhoods. Still, personal experience or interpersonal communication channels may provide few objective means of
directly learning about the actual experiences of the homeless. Policy-makers may also face this dilemma.

Individuals, groups and organizations possess varying levels of power and authority for organizing particular constructions of a social problem. Any social agent with power or authority may take actions to encourage a particular construction of homelessness. For these and other reasons, those individuals and organizations who have the status and resources to produce and distribute public information about homelessness may do so with great influence—particularly if the public or policy-makers accept this information as factual and objective.
REVIEW OF RELATED THEORIES AND RESEARCH

Theoretical Background

My research perspective develops from a constructionist framework for the study of social problems. The constructionist perspective views social problems as emerging through a process of claims-making (Spector and Kitsuse, 1977). For example, Hilgartner and Bosk (1988) view social problems activities as taking place within arenas of public discourse and action. Public arenas include the executive and legislative branches of government, the courts, the news media, social advocate groups, the research community, religious organizations, professional societies and private foundations. Hilgartner and Bosk identify actors involved in constructionist activities as "operatives;" (other constructionists label them "claims-makers"). Operatives in each arena discuss, select, define, frame, dramatize, package and present social problems to the public (58).

The constructionist perspective on social problems arose in reaction to a tradition which viewed social problems as unwanted or offensive objective conditions in an environment. Constructionists reject the traditional objectivist view because it ignores the subjective nature of social problems--and because objectivist research fails to shed light on the common processes through which conditions become defined as social problems.

Constructionists assume that conditions become labeled social problems because groups organize activities calling for the eradication, change or betterment of a particular set of conditions.
This framework borrows from the sociology of work and organizations in order to formulate theory and research agendas aimed at greater understanding of the nature of social activities related to problem construction.

According to Spector and Kitsuse:

The central problem for a theory of social problems is to account for the emergence, nature, and maintenance of claims-making and responding activities. Such a theory should address the activities of any group making claims on others for ameliorative action, material remuneration, alleviation of social, political, legal, or economic disadvantage (1977:76).

Best (1989) holds a similar view. He suggests constructionist studies should identify the processes through which claims-makers define, lodge, and press claims; publicize their concerns; define issues in the face of political obstacles, indifference or opposition; and enter allegiances with other claims-makers. Spector and Kitsuse view claims-making as an interaction in which one party demands of another that something be done about a putative condition. They draw attention to the means by which claims-makers assign blame, locate officials responsible for rectifying conditions or describe groups who may contribute to or benefit from conditions. They suggest that claims-makers use values as linguistic devices for articulating claims or persuading and building coalitions (Spector and Kitsuse, 1977:74).

Spector and Kitsuse suggest that the construction of social problems may be studied through identification of: claims-makers'
definitions of their own activities; historical changes in the organizational form of groups of claims-makers; decisions made by claims-makers involving the act and timing of the launching of claims. They suggest researchers should locate and analyze documents containing claims. Such documents may include scholarly and professional journals and newsletters; minutes to scholarly or professional meetings; memos, private letters, or professional letters; research proposals; letters to editors of journals or newspapers; or newspaper or magazine articles. Additionally, researchers may conduct interviews with "elites" or those identified in documents as authoritative sources of information about particular claims.

Constructionists disagree about some of the assumptions which guide their analysis; they may be divided into a "strict constructionist" camp and a "contextual constructionist" camp. Strict constructionists argue that analysts should avoid either evaluating the content or empirical reality of claims or taking sides by trying to validate some constructions and discredit others. (Spector and Kitsuse, 1977:77-78). Contextual constructionists argue that social analysts can and should locate social problems construction within its context (Gusfield, 1984; Best 1989). They see the incorporation of background knowledge into analysis as a necessary prerequisite for addressing questions of how and why claims emerge. They also suggest that analysts may be unable to avoid making some assumptions about objective reality.
My research orientation follows a contextualist framework. Individual contextualist researchers emphasize varying aspects of social problems construction. Best (1989:244-248) describes contextualist aims as evaluating claims to locate their basis. He suggests that official statistics or data--while perhaps biased or imperfect--provide a means for the description of the context within which claims-making occurs. Best makes several suggestions for contextualist research: analysts may use social conditions to explain the emergence of claims; refer to social conditions when explaining why some conditions (and not others) receive attention or shape social policy; contrast official (institutional) information with claims made by unofficial groups; investigate whether claims-makers ignore or present only partial descriptions of official statistics or information; assess claims-makers' choices in presenting typical or atypical examples or inflated statistics.

Best (1989) suggests that claims-makers not only label conditions as problems; they also characterize a set of conditions as
a particular sort of problem. The process of characterizing a problem's nature is termed "typification." Typification gives conditions an orientation that locates the problem's cause and recommends a solution; this often involves drawing attention to examples that justify particular claims. Typification may involve emphasizing certain aspects of problems and ignoring others; promoting specific problem-orientations; and focusing on particular causes and advocating particular solutions. Best suggests that typification may be studied through the examination of claims, claims-makers, cycles and social policies.

Gusfield (1981) employs a contextualist framework to study the "culture of public problems." Gusfield distinguishes between those social problems which become "public problems" and those which do not. This distinction emphasizes an interest in the processes by which constructed issues emerge in the public arena "as something about which 'someone ought to do something'" (1981:5). Gusfield applies his approach to the drinking-driving problem. He argues that this problem exists as the result of construction activities. He suggests that the automobile and fatalities have been constructed as a problem of societal concern, to be acted upon by public officials and agencies (5). The public character of problems may also be open to constructions which vary in terms of conceptions of resolution. Problem resolutions place responsibility for ameliorative action with particular individuals, organizations or institutions.
A central interest in my study concerns the role of the media in communicating notions of responsibility for resolving conditions related to homelessness. The specification of an authority relates to the view that, in the public arena, social actors possess varying amounts of power and authority for defining or constructing aspects of social problems. Gusfield (1981:12) suggests:

the question of ownership and disownership is very much a matter of the power and authority groups and institutions can muster to enter the public arena, to be kept from it, or to prevent having to join. The power to influence the definition of reality of phenomena is a facet of a politics of reality.

Those who own a problem construct notions of causal and political responsibility. Causal responsibility relates to conditions that may account for the problem. Political responsibility relates to activities involved in establishing notions about who must rectify or resolve conditions.


To "own" a problem is to be obligated to claim recognition of a problem and to have information and ideas about it given a high degree of attention and credibility, to the exclusion of others. To "own" a social problem is to possess the authority to name that condition a "problem" and to suggest what might be done about it. It is the power to influence the marshalling of public facilities—laws, enforcement abilities, opinion, goods and services—to help resolve the problem. To disown a problem is to claim that one has no such responsibility.
Gusfield (1981) suggests that, in the case of the social science or academic arenas, scientific discourse will be used to support authority by rationalizing particular constructions and grounding them in neutrality. In this view, the appearance of common sense and plain truth is important in the casting of claims. "Cold hard facts" and an image of technical expertise become powerful resources for constructing authoritative presentations.

Gusfield suggests that the categories used in the perception and conception of a problem influence the data collected and the attribution of causal responsibility which emerges. He emphasizes the importance of examining the linguistic and logical categories used in thinking about a problem. The categories researchers emphasize in their conceptualization of a problem may differ from those emphasized in the presentation of data. Gusfield emphasizes the importance of considering alternative categories which claims-making researchers may overlook, dismiss, or reject when constructing a problem.

Gusfield's study involves a "rhetorical and dramaturgical" analysis of scientific research documents and legal documents. These are analyzed to explore the content and presentation of documents as arguments in communities of science and in public arenas. Documents and public presentations are analyzed as materials which dramatize the drinking-driving phenomenon as both a cognitive and a moral matter. Documents are examined in terms of style, modes of persuasion, and fictional components. The study of the "arena of law" allows an exploration of the contradictions.
between formally stated intentions and aspirations of law and legislation and the daily routines of courts and police (18).

Gusfield sees the notion of responsibility as having both a cultural and structural dimension. Responsibility at the cultural level implies a way of seeing a phenomenon in view with the dominant norms and values of the culture—in other terms, it implies seeing a construction of claims unique to a given culture. Responsibility at the structural level implies that fixing responsibility may involve charging various institutions and personnel with obligations and opportunities to attack a problem. To illustrate the two levels of responsibility, Gusfield offers the example of seeing drinking-driving as a choice by a willful person who drinks and then drives and fixing responsibility for preventing accidents with laws against drinking-driving. Alternatively, drinking-driving could be seen as a medical problem involving compulsion and illness and fixing responsibility for preventing accidents with medical policy.

Gusfield suggests that because modes for conceiving reality affect claims to authority over a problem and the persons connected with it. Thus modes for understanding reality are closely related to problem resolution activities. Gusfield suggests that public problems may be seen as the application of values to an objective set of conditions. This perspective views conditions as "part and parcel of the process through which problems are attacked" (1981:8). In this sense, public problems may be conceived as a structure of
thoughts and actions within which institutions and groups contain problems and exclude alternative constructions.

Analysis of this structure, says Gusfield, involves locating the conceptual and institutional orderliness in which problems emerge in the public arena. Issues and problems may arise, emerge and display structure in a patterned manner. The way in which activities and ideas emerge in the public arena may be related to the ability, power and authority that social actors possess. Gusfield argues that at any specific moment, all possible parties to an issue do not have equal abilities to influence the public. Nor do they possess the same kind or degree of authority to be legitimate sources for definition of the reality of the problem, or to assume legitimate power to regulate, control and innovate solutions.

Gusfield views the structure of public problems as involving both a cognitive and a moral dimension. The cognitive dimension consists of beliefs about the facticity of the situation and events comprising the problem. The moral dimension is that which enables a view of the situation as intolerable. Public problems necessitate a cognitive belief in alterability and a moral judgement of character. The reality of a problem may be expanded or contracted in scope as cognitive or moral judgement shifts (10). Thus, unless problems are constructed so the public may recognize and understand the "facts" and alterability of situations--and see facts as intolerable--then phenomena will not be considered "public problems" requiring action and change.
Tuchman (1978) suggests that the process of making news involves the social construction of reality through the use of objective reporting methods. Tuchman (1972, 1978) suggests that journalists invoke "objectivity" by practicing a set of normative work routines or "strategic rituals" that protect them from the political and professional risks associated with news work. Such work routines or conventions establish news as "objective facts" and conceal evidence of the work journalists perform as they create news stories. It seems possible that, along with the methods suggested by Tuchman, news makers may use visuals that support particular claims yet still present the semblance of neutrality or objectivity. Hilgartner and Bosk suggest that officially certified "facts" are coupled with vivid, emotional rhetoric when claims are cast in certain arenas.

According to Aronson (1984), successful claims-making in both social and scientific arenas involves skilled documentation, the ability to command the attention of the appropriate audiences, and access to resources needed to defend claims against criticism. She suggests that, in both arenas, successful claims-making campaigns obliterate the evidence of their own existence so that successful claims become facts that seem to exist independently of any human activity. She offers several examples of studies which document the processes through which scientific facts are socially constructed.

Hilgartner and Bosk discuss the processes through which social problems rise and fall. They treat public attention as a
scarce resource and emphasize competition and selection in the media and other arenas of public discourse. They suggest that social problems are constructed in arenas of public discourse such as the news media, Congressional committees, non-profit organizations and foundations. Within arenas, operatives—such as journalists, politicians, advocates, public interest law firms and members of the public—use finite resources to allocate social problems. Resources limit the size of a specific problem and the range of different problems that can gain attention at any one time.

The public arena model discussed above may be applied to those involved in compiling homelessness-related news, research, and policy reports—including academics, politicians, bureaucrats, social workers, and private or advocate organizations. Many groups make reports public in order to further their organizational goals. A superficial examination of homelessness-related literature identified a diverse group of local, regional and national parties with interest in homelessness policy; these ranged from Public Interest Research Groups, the Urban Institute, the Consumer's Union, and the (PA) Governor’s Policy Office—to the National Mental Health Association, the Children's Defense Fund, numerous religious groups and the (National) Housing Assistance Council. These operatives may be categorized according to the arena within which they operate.

Operatives in each public arena possess varying levels of resources and status. Groups may have unique reasons for undertaking efforts to document homelessness—and reasons, as well as resources and status, may influence each group's
documentation methods. Not all academics who propose policy directions get involved in legislative debates or actions: some academics may intend to describe the "objective" conditions of the problem, while others may aim to shape social policy. Private organizations such as the Consumer's Union may intend to "objectively" document poverty, while advocate organizations such as the National Coalition for the Homeless may hope to gather evidence to support larger federal budget allocations. Meanwhile, the Inter-Agency Council on the Homeless, organized by Bush Administration Secretaries, may compile data that support existing policy or budget rationally.

Research Related to Homelessness

The following section presents a review of studies focusing on news coverage of homelessness and a summary of pertinent aspects of two other unpublished studies which I conducted in 1988 and 1989, respectively. The Center for Media and Public Affairs conducted an empirical study of news coverage of homelessness in 1989 (Media Monitor, March 1989). The Center is a nonpartisan and non-profit research organization which describes its research as scientific studies of how the media treat social and political issues. The Center publishes the findings of studies in Media Monitor, a newsletter published and circulated ten times a year. This newsletter has limited utility for our purposes because it does not contain descriptions of samples, methods or instruments used to obtain findings. The Center claims to have found 26 news magazine
articles on homelessness during the sample period, but provides no list of article citations or even titles. Assessment of the findings may be difficult because the study's terms of analysis sometimes seem inconsistent. Nevertheless, a review of the Center's study is useful here.

The study analyzed national print and broadcast coverage of the homeless from November 1986 to February 1989. The sample analyzed included a total of: 103 network television news stories (all three networks) lasting 3 hours and 31 minutes; and 26 magazine articles printed in Time, Newsweek and U.S. News and World Report, cumulating 641 column inches. The Media Monitor describes findings reflecting seven news coverage issues. The newsletter contains no information about whether these seven issues were identified before the analysis, or rather, arose as impressions from studying news contents. Furthermore, the newsletter contained no information about the number or content of any other issues the study may have aimed to address.

The report described the following issues: 1) levels of attention over the 28 month period under study; 2) major topics of coverage; 3) nature of sources of news information; 4) sources' statements about the causes of homelessness; 5) source statements concerning what to do about homelessness; 6) types of portrayals of the public's reaction to the homelessness; 7) the nature of anecdotes used to illustrate the homeless population. The Media Monitor reports that overall news coverage of homelessness reflected a collection of local stories from around the country. These stories
focused primarily on the presence and absence of city programs and services and locally based private efforts, rather than federal programs and policies. The study reports that the second major story focus described the personal backgrounds and social demography of the homeless in a general and non-analytical manner. Other topics covered, in order of prominence, included: 3) private relief efforts; 4) federal programs or policies; 5) conditions on the streets; 6) causes of homelessness; 7) homeless advocacy; and 8) panhandling.

One of the most surprising aspects of the Center's findings involves the nature of news sources appearing in coverage of homelessness. According to the report, homeless individuals were the primary source of information appearing in articles. The homeless apparently outnumbered local, state and federal officials combined.

According to the Monitor, the typical quotations involved homeless people telling their own stories, advocacy groups and volunteer workers describing difficulties of meeting their own needs, and advocates calling for social action. This aspect of the Center's study contrasts with my findings of comparative research on news workers' methods of reporting on homelessness (Mc Nulty, 1989). I found that journalists and editors described their approaches to seeking information and writing about the homeless as consistent with approaches to any other story.

The Monitor reports that few news stories explored the causes of homelessness in depth; however, the study describes sixty-nine
sources (from a total of 377 citations) as offering their opinions on the causes of this problem. According to the Monitor, "only 4% attributed the plight of the homeless to their own personal problems, such as mental illness, lack of motivation, or drug and alcohol abuse" (3). Other source statements about homelessness, in order of their prominence, were described as: 1) housing market forces; 2) government inaction; 3) labor market forces, tied with 4) the mainstreaming of the mentally ill; and finally, as mentioned above, 5) personal problems.

The Monitor reports that news coverage contained little debate over what to do about homelessness. However, coverage presented some general assertions that the government was not doing enough to help. The study suggests that the media provided numerous images of the public's reaction to the homeless population. According to the study, public reaction to the homeless was mostly (68%) compassionate, while reactions to panhandlers as a subgroup of the homeless was generally negative (64%).

The Center's study suggests that anecdotes describing the situations of individual homeless people occupy a central role in news coverage of the homeless. The study identified 174 personal anecdotes in the total 129 news items. The overall findings indicate that 42 anecdotes were negative, 18 positive and 114 neutral. Geographic locations were as follows: New York City, 52 anecdotes; Philadelphia, 15; Los Angeles, 9; Kansas City and Boston, 8 each; Chicago, 7; and Salt Lake City, 5.
The study described in the Monitor seems somewhat impressionistic and unreliable in terms of methodology. However, it does support my overall study design and areas of concern; it also suggests that analysis of news coverage for the terms under study should reveal interesting information about levels of attention, portrayals of the causes and resolution of homelessness, depictions of the composition of the homeless population, the use of examples as illustration, the use of visuals, and the nature of sources used to verify portrayals.

In 1989, I conducted a study of news workers' constructions of homelessness in three newspapers in Pennsylvania. One aspect of this study involved a review of approximately 179 articles printed in a major newspaper in the state's largest city for the six-month period between October 1, 1988 and March 31, 1989. (Mc Nulty, 1989: 38-45). This study describes the majority of articles as focusing primarily on events occurring in the city and/or the surrounding suburbs at this time. However, the study reports that issues related to national or state wide homeless problems--and government's responses to these--also received attention with the overall coverage.

The topics covered extensively in the newspaper were grouped into the following categories, in order of overall prominence: 1) charity events/volunteer programs; 2) features on the homeless; 3) the national homeless problem; 4) federal and state policies/legislation; 5) city politics and homeless policies; 6) local, regional and national homeless protests; 7) new shelter
openings/new programs; 8) suburban homeless problems; 9) disputes between shelter owners and city officials; 10) problems with homeless in congregating in subway concourses; 11) controversies surrounding a resettlement project; and 12) corruption in homeless programs or crime among the homeless.

The newspaper examined in this study is not national in scope. However, the findings of this study provide some information about the potential range of homeless-focused constructions that may appear in news media under study in the current research. A comparison between the Center's study and McNulty's review provide a few insights about the extent, range and emphasis of news coverage of homelessness. The findings of the two studies discussed above suggest to me that homeless constructions may focus on a wide range of topics including, among other topics, charity, population aspects, service programs, and political activity. My study is particularly concerned with how constructions convey notions about the resolution of homelessness.

A study conducted by Campbell and Reeves (1989) provides a look at some other aspects of news coverage of the homeless. This analysis focused on a sample of network news about an aspect of homelessness in an effort to examine how network news makes sense of the homeless. The authors interpret three conventional news narratives and a 60 Minutes story about Joyce Brown, a homeless woman who, against her will, was institutionalized by the city of New York. The authors suggest that television news marks boundaries between the marginal and the mainstream, and between a
major socioeconomic problem demanding collective engagement and a personal problem requiring private remedy.

The authors cite Herman Gray (1988) to support their thesis that the news typically emphasizes intellectual, mental, and moral deficiencies of individual members of disadvantaged groups; the news takes this emphasis instead of examining social inequalities, social prejudices or mechanisms which perpetuate class inequalities. The authors argue that all the news accounts of the Brown controversy attribute homelessness to personal deficiencies, drunkenness, and mental illness. Campbell and Reeves suggest that the three networks, through their news coverage, frame homelessness in a way that reaffirms basic centrist values. News coverage is described as imposing order by marking off the homeless as marginal. According to this study, the 60 Minutes story restores safety and normalcy by portraying Joyce Brown as an alien representative from another world who reenters and reaffirms our own world (1989:39).

Campbell and Reeves suggest that the networks transform the troubling experiences of the homeless into familiar and orderly news packages and stories. This transformation is seen as imposing distance between the viewers and the objects of these stories. According to the authors:

The medium lets us see the homeless, identify briefly with their predicament, yet, in the end, it sustains the fragile boundaries that mark off the intruders (1989:40).
This study disputes the Center's study in respect to how news coverage suggests notions about the systemic causes of homelessness. A review of a final exploration of this issue may shed light on the complexity of this issue.

In 1988 I conducted an analysis of all articles (n=10) related to homelessness appearing in Time and Newsweek between January 1987 and January 1988. My analysis examined the ways in which news magazines 1) described the homeless population, 2) presented reasons for the existence and growth of this population, and 3) described actions being taken to resolve the homeless problem. I inferred overall themes from a reading of the ten articles.

The group of articles, on the whole, presented five different themes when covering homelessness. One theme emphasized the individual character flaws and mental health problems of the homeless. Another theme described social service responses to the problem of homelessness. In contrast, another theme criticized institutional responses to the homeless problem and suggested that the problem was not being addressed adequately. Another theme running throughout the articles described the shifting demography of the homeless population; this theme emphasized that families and educated individuals were among the homeless. Finally, a fifth theme described how policy regarding the mentally ill promoted homelessness (Mc Nulty, 1988).

James Power (1991) reports on a study of the communication of otherness in network television news coverage of homelessness. He suggests that otherness is communicated by mechanisms that
engender the perception of difference and inferiority. Power conceptualizes the communication of difference in terms of attributing life circumstances to the individual rather than to other agents. He conceives of inferiority as communicated in terms of stigmatization.

Power employs a multi-method approach with three focuses. First, he examines the general portrayal of homeless people in network television news. Two coders judge 124 network news segments on homelessness according to several criteria. The coding allows for the selection of eight ideal types of portrayals of homeless people. Second, Power assesses the level of identification expressed by viewers exposed to the select sample of news segments. Viewers watch one of the eight ideal types of portrayals. Power measures the 284 adult viewers in terms of their level of identification with the homeless person portrayed in the news story. Finally, he explores how portrayals of homeless people are related to the role of the media system as a cultural institution. His exploration entails analysis of the open-ended responses of viewers in relation to the texts of the various news segments.

Power reports that the majority of news segments concerned with homeless people attribute these people's life circumstances to social factors and present non-stigmatized characterizations. Viewer identification is reportedly lowest for segments which are both non-stigmatized and where life circumstances are attributed to the individual. Conversely, viewer identification is highest for
segments which are both non-stigmatized and where life circumstances are attributed to the individual.

Power interprets analysis of the open-ended responses of viewers in relation to the texts of the various news segments as evidence of a hegemonic process. He views this hegemonic process as operating for how people understand the media's portrayal of homeless people. Powers suggests that, in general, viewers only demonstrate the capacity to understand the phenomenon of homelessness in individual level terms.

The studies described above provide some indication of the range of constructions of homelessness that may appear in news coverage of homelessness during the period under study. These studies suggest that further research and exploration must be conducted in order to examine how news media and their sources convey notions about the nature, seriousness, pervasiveness, cause and resolution of homelessness as a social problem. Below we examine some studies of media coverage other social issues. These studies hold relevance for how the media tell stories about homelessness and what impact these stories may exert.

Relevant Studies of Other Social Issues

Barbara Nelson (1984) conducted a study of the media's role in establishing child abuse as a new area of public policy. Nelson suggests that four factors to contribute to the enduring coverage of child abuse in the news. These factors--topic differentiation, issue aggregation, the link between the professional and the mass media,
and the growing appeal of human interest stories—may promote prolonged media attention to many social issues. Two of these factors, topic differentiation and issue aggregation, may relate to homelessness and explain the news media's continued interest in this issue.

Nelson describes a pattern of early general reports of child abuse followed by attention to specific types of abuse. Thus the more general problem of child abuse became differentiated over time into more narrowly defined topics such as the relationship between illegitimacy and abuse, or abuse within military families. Topic differentiation resulted in increased news coverage of child abuse.

Coverage of child abuse also increased because the problem was linked to what Nelson calls "larger, more overarching concerns," such as intrafamilial violence. Intrafamilial violence includes abuse of a spouse, parent, or even grandparent. Through issue aggregation, the scope of child abuse increased (1984:57).

When considering how homelessness is constructed in relation to other social problems, we must also consider the general tendency for social problem definitions to broaden over time. Best (1990) reports on a study of claims about threats to children. He describes trends in concern for child victims and documents public concern and rhetoric about child abuse, child pornography, incest, child molestation, harmful rock lyrics, missing children and related dangers. Best characterizes the natural history of many social problems as entailing a process of domain expansion in which
various groups of claims-makers construct and reconstruct a problem over time. According to this view, domain expansion can be divided into three stages: initial claims-making, validation, and domains-expansion.

Initial claims-making occurs when new claims-makers compete against with political interest groups representing established social problems. Claims-makers compete in an effort to gain recognition of their problem. New claims-makers may gain optimal attention and acceptance if they lodge claims which stress the novelty of their problem, offer dramatic examples to typify their problem in a concrete and emotion-evoking manner, and define their problem in a narrow sense.

Validation occurs when early claims gain widespread acceptance and the problem is established with a place on the social policy agenda. Once initial claims are validated, they become a foundation for the construction of claims about new phenomena. Thus established social problems become vulnerable to new claims-makers wishing to piggy-back their interests onto validated "core problems." Best labels this piggy-backing "domains-expansion."

One vein of agenda-setting research explores the specific impact of news media investigative journalism and emphasizes the link between media content and public opinion (Cook et al., 1983; Protess et al., 1985; Leff, Protess and Brooks, 1986; and Protess et al., 1987; Protess, Cook, Doppelt, Ettema, Gordon, Leff and Miller, 1991). The research of Protess, Cook et al. focuses on the
techniques of investigative reporting and its impact on public opinion and government policy making.

This research builds upon a series of field experiments used to develop a preliminary model specifying conditions under which investigative reports influence public agendas and policy-making priorities (Protess et al., 1987:166). The field experiments follow a multi-step design. Researchers conduct surveys before and after the publication of news media investigations. They also examine the course of media reports from the initial journalistic investigation phase, to the publication of the report, the effects on the general public and policy-makers, and the eventual outcomes. The field experiments were followed by interviews with more than 900 investigative reporters and editors in the U.S. The interviews were used as a basis for making generalizations from the field experiments to broader trends in investigative reporting (Protess et al., 1991).

The preliminary model identifies two factors that seem important to public attitude change: the nature of media portrayals of issues and the frequency of attention by the media to the issues in the past. The nature of media portrayals are described as either ambiguous or unambiguous in terms of the characterization of victims and villains and the use of dramatic, clear and convincing evidence for the documentation of a serious problem.

The "frequency of attention by media in the past" is described in terms of "recurring issues" versus "non-recurring issues." According to the model, investigative stories about recurring issues
have lower impact potential, while issues that become the subject of breakthrough reports have a greater opportunity to produce effects. Thus, in relation to both factors in the model, investigative reports on unambiguous nonrecurring issues produce the strongest effects on public attitudes, while investigative reports on ambiguous recurring issues produce the weakest effects on either the public or policy makers.

Protess et al. update their preliminary model through consideration of the findings of additional case studies of investigative news and journalists' reports of their own investigative work techniques. The researchers suggest that reporters follow five stages of investigative agenda building; at each stage, they perform a series of tasks essential to the full development of the story (Protess et al. 1990:205). The stages include story "initiation" and "conceptualization;" "investigation;" "presentation," which occurs through writing and producing the story; and post-publication "investigative influence." Below I outline the tasks involved in the presentation phase, because these relate to the narrative construction of news about homelessness.

Protess et al. suggest that the construction of investigative news requires news workers to dramatize and "bring color" to the villains and victims of journalistic investigations. Visual evidence of misconduct lends credence to the construction of menacing villains and suffering villains. Colorful and "loaded" news language cues readers on how to interpret situations; such language also illustrates unambiguous wrongdoing in newspaper stories. Villainy
is juxtaposed with victimization in editing sequences that simplify the reality of complex and evolving societal interactions. Editing thus suggests simple causal links allowing audiences to draw clear inferences about the allocation of blame. Protess et al. thus conclude that character portrayal involves the use of literary devices that tell moralistic stories for broader societal purposes.

STUDY DESIGN AND METHOD

Study focus

The study was designed to elicit information about how news stories construct homelessness when they present so-called "objective facts" about this social problem. The focus of the study was two-fold: first, to examine what the news stories say as they construct homelessness as a social problem; and second, to identify how the news stories use various conventions or narrative strategies to establish as valid their constructions of homelessness. In keeping with the constructionist perspective for the study of social problems, I sought to identify news story presentation of claims that characterize or typify homelessness as a particular type of social problem necessitating a particular type of social response.

I followed several steps for examining the nature of constructions of homelessness in news stories. I began with a frequency analysis of attention to homelessness in news magazines, social science journals, and national network news broadcasts. The frequency analysis entailed examination of citations appearing in
the Reader's Guide to Periodical Literature, the Social Science Index and the Television News Index and Abstracts for the period 1976 to 1990.

The main study method entailed a narrative analysis based on detailed examinations of 92 news magazine articles and 111 network news stories for the period 1980 to 1990. The narrative analysis entailed an investigation of the narrative features of the news stories; the specifics of this analysis are detailed below. Overall, the dissertation reflects consideration of all the apparent news stories on homelessness appearing in Time, US News & World Report, and Newsweek and broadcast on CBS News for an 11 year period.

The dissertation does not take into account alternative sources of homelessness-coverage that may exist in newspapers, radio or popular fictional media. Nevertheless, it is important to note that the news stories examined are from national news media. These news stories provide grounds for assessing how homelessness is constructed for the nation as a whole.

Below I outline the specific steps I followed while studying the research problem. I describe how I selected the research sample and collected data or texts for analysis. I also discuss my procedures for analyzing texts to identify both the images of the homeless that emerge as journalists construct news stories about homelessness and the essential features of narratives for such news. Finally, I describe my methods for exploring the data and developing two models for communication about social problems.
Sample Selection for Public Attention Analysis.

I began my study by tracing public attention to homelessness in news and popular magazines, network television news, and social science journals from 1980 to 1990. I drew my samples from citations listed in the Reader's Guide to Periodical Literature (RDG), a national index for news and popular magazines; the Television News Index and Abstracts (TNIA), which provides index and abstracts for the three network's daily news broadcasts; and the Social Science Index (SSI), which indexes scholarly and professional national journals. I used on-line CD-ROM Wilson Disk Indexes for the RDG and SSI for available years, and used index "hard copy" publications for prior years and for the TNIA.

I searched each index for the earliest occurrence of the topic headings "homelessness," "homeless persons" or "homeless." I found that the terms homeless and homeless persons came into use as topic headings for the classification of articles in 1980 for the Social Science Index and the Reader's Guide to Periodical Literature. In 1982 the Television News Index and Abstracts listed the term homelessness but instructed readers to "See: Cities, U.S."


I searched each index for occurrences of homeless topic heading terms for the period 1976-1982 to ensure that no earlier articles had appeared under these headings. I thus confirmed the "first occurrence" dates of 1980 and 1982. Prior to these dates,
annual indexes listed rare homeless-related articles and broadcast segments under topical headings like "runaways," "street people," "tramps," "vagrancy," or "skid row."

I drew my samples for the analysis of public attention to homelessness from the citations listed in each of the three indexes exclusively under the three homeless topic heading terms. I excluded citations for exclusively international aspects of homelessness. I conducted several checks of the accuracy of topic headings for the classification of homeless related articles and news broadcast stories in the three indexes. I read all abstracts listed under "homelessness" and "see also" headings for the *Television News Index and Abstracts*. I read a sample of news articles listed under the topic "homelessness" in the *Reader's Guide* for selected years throughout the period 1980 to 1990. I also read a sample of journal articles cited under the topic "homeless people" in the *Social Science Index* for selected years from 1980 to 1990. I concluded that topic headings accurately classified articles and news stories for the subject of homelessness.

For my analysis of public attention to homelessness, I counted all citations listed under the three homeless topic headings in each index. I made lists of each magazine title and journal title to examine the "breadth" of attention in different magazine and social science outlets for each year across the period. I also examined the number of news stories broadcast on network news and compared numbers for each network throughout the period 1982-1990.
Sample Selection for Narrative Analysis.

I decided to cast the widest net possible--given financial constraints--for the selection of stories for the narrative analysis. After an analysis of network news attention to homelessness for the period 1982-1990, I surmised that CBS news covered the topic of homelessness most consistently throughout the period. I read all abstracts of news stories broadcast on the three networks and found no obvious differences in the subjects presented or the nature of stories on either ABC, NBC or CBS. I therefore selected CBS news stories as the basis of my network news analysis.

My CBS sample included all news stories cited in the National News Index and Abstracts under the headings "homelessness" or "Hands Across America" for the years 1982-1990. The sample consisted of 111 CBS news stories. I included the citations listed under the "See also: Hands Across America," heading because they represented the only "homelessness, see also" topic in the index. (Hands Across America was a major national event to raise money and draw attention to Hunger and Homelessness in the U.S. in 1986). I acquired videotapes of the 111 CBS news stories through the Vanderbilt Television News Archive.

I returned to the list of articles indexed in the Reader's Guide to decide upon my sample of news magazine articles. I selected all articles listed under homeless topic headings for the three major news magazines Time, Newsweek and US News. I read each article and excluded those few articles that did not deal primarily with contemporary homelessness in the United States. I also conducted a
search for citations listed under "Homelessness: See also" headings for the three news magazines. I read each "see also" article to check whether the article actually focused on some aspect of homelessness.

I found that many see also articles merely mentioned homelessness or poverty in one sentence. For example, several "see also, Campaign Issue" articles mentioned that homelessness might be an issue on presidential campaigns in 1984 or 1988; however, these articles did not discuss homelessness per se. Other news magazine articles focused on aspects of homelessness such as runaway teens, and used the term homeless as synonymous to this population. For the narrative analysis I included only the "see also" articles that focused on aspects of homelessness. The procedures led me to add a total of four "see also" articles; these were either indexed under "see also: runaways" or "see also: children, homeless."

While collecting the news magazine sample and reading over the articles, I found several articles that focused on panhandling and used the terms "homelessness" and "panhandling" interchangably. One such article appeared in a news magazine beside a second article on panhandling that was not indexed under homelessness; the second article also used the terms "homelessness" and "panhandling" interchangably. This finding lead me to conduct a search for citations listed under the terms "beggars and begging" for the three news magazines. I then read all articles appearing under this heading and identified those articles which focused on homelessness and/or used the terms "homelessness" and "panhandling"
Analysis of News Magazine Stories

I examined each news magazine story to identify the presentation of all claims regarding several aspects of homelessness as described below. I employed a "questionnaire" to guide my systematic examination of each article. Aspects useful to the analysis are detailed below. The analysis itself is based on examination of all statements in each news story, including direct and indirect news source quotes, journalistic commentary, and all captions appearing with photographs. This examination included, among other things, making a descriptive summary of the news story topic. I also noted the name and occupational title of news sources for direct and indirect quotes.

I examined the presentation of personal accounts about individual homeless people and claims about "who" are the homeless in terms of social characteristics and behaviors. I also examined the presentation of causes of homelessness. Next I examined the presentation of implicit or explicit definitions of homelessness, claims regarding the conditions that constitute the problem, and whether homelessness was linked to other social problems. I examined whether the news story focused on either the impact of homelessness on homeless people or the impact of homelessness on society. I identified claims regarding who is or should be
responsible for alleviating homelessness. Next I looked at the characterization of public sentiments toward the homeless.

I recorded information about the presentation of numbers, statistics, or research claims about some aspect of homelessness. I examined claims about how individuals, groups, communities, and public and private institutions act to help or control the homeless. I examined the characterization of solutions for homelessness. Finally, I investigated the news story's characterization of society with homelessness in it, especially whether the news story suggests that homelessness is either inevitable or shameful.

Magazine Visual Analysis

I also examined each news magazine story's presentation of photographs. Visuals were analyzed on the basis of 17 questions. Questions were designed to elicit information about how visual presentations might contribute something to the news constructions of homelessness as a social problem. While not every question elicited information useful for the study's purpose, I describe some of the questions here to illustrate the rigor and breadth of the study's exploratory design.

I examined and recorded photograph size, the number of people in the photograph, and the number of apparently homeless people in the photograph. Each homeless person was described in terms of age level, gender, and race—if these were discernable. Descriptions also addressed the photograph's setting in terms of physical space
(e.g., shelter, soup kitchen, park, etc.) and time of day. I noted the activities of the homeless in the photographs.

I noted whether or not the homeless were identified by name. I judged whether the photograph seemed to present a clear claim about homeless people, the causes of homelessness, public responses to homelessness, conditions faced by the homeless, public opinion about the homeless or the social impact of homelessness on communities. I noted the text of the caption and judged whether this caption seemed to provide statements that were informational, descriptive, judgmental, editorial, or questioning. I described the contents of the photograph and noted my impressions about the overall theme presented.

**CBS News Story Analysis**

In my analysis of the CBS Network news about homelessness, I examined all CBS news stories and recorded all news source names. I also took detailed notes regarding all direct and indirect news source quotes, all comments made by journalists appearing in or narrating news stories, and all visual or graphic captions or texts. My notes aimed to summarize quotes and comments and provide an indication of the types of claims put forth by journalists or news sources.

My summary of quotes and comments reflected the news story's presentation of information regarding the original "questionnaire" areas. For example, I summarized and often transcribed quotes about who are the homeless, how many people are
homeless, what actions might solve homelessness, who is responsible for alleviating homelessness, what response actions have attempted to help or control the homeless, what are public sentiments toward the homeless, what conditions constitute homelessness, and what other social problems are related to homelessness. I also recorded all numbers or statistics presented in the news story.

Finally, I took detailed notes describing the contents of all visual presentations within each news story. These notes followed a format similar to the visual question guideline outlined above in reference to the magazine photograph analysis. For each visual scene, I noted: the physical setting and time of day; the names of people presented, where indicated; the age level, gender and race of each homeless person, when discernable; and the activities of the homeless visual subjects.
Chapter Two

PUBLIC ATTENTION TO HOMELESSNESS

The plight of people "living on the streets" emerged as an issue of concern for national news and general interest media and social science journal outlets in the early 1980's. Prior to 1980, the term "homelessness" appeared rarely in magazines or professional journal articles. Annual indexes listed rare homeless-related articles and broadcast segments under topical headings like "runaways," "street people," "tramps," "vagrancy," or "skid row." In the early eighties, however, this situation changed. The terms homeless persons and homeless came into use as topic headings for the classification of articles in the Social Science Index and the Reader's Guide to Periodical Literature in the years 1980 and 1981, respectively. The term homelessness came into use as a topic heading for the classification of news stories in the Television News Index and Abstracts in the year 1982. The use of these three new terms marked the beginning of an era of popular, professional, scholarly and news media attention to homelessness as a social problem.

Figure One illustrates the dramatic increase of public attention to homelessness, as indicated by media publications and broadcasts, for the period between 1980 and 1990. The growth in attention to homelessness is evident when I examine the frequency of index citations for this eleven year period (see Appendix A for Table 1 and all other tables). The three annual indexes list a
Figure One: Public Attention to Homelessness

- magazine articles
- journal articles
- network news stories
cumulative total of 17 magazine articles, 6 journal articles, and 5 broadcast news items exclusively under the three homeless topic terms for the combined years 1980, 1981 and 1982; (a few topically related articles also appear at this time). However, the level of attention to homelessness changed dramatically by the late 1980's. For the combined years 1988, 1989 and 1990, the indexes list a total of 233 magazine articles, 198 journal articles, and 155 broadcast news items exclusively under the three homeless topic terms. The following chapter details the explosion in attention to homelessness in social science journals, national network news broadcasts, and news and general magazine publications from 1980 to 1990.

The story of this explosion in attention to homelessness is one of steadily increasing and widening interest in a loosely-defined topic, as indicated by the growth in numbers of broadcast and publication items on the subject, the types of publication outlets attending to homeless-related topics and the continuously expanding range of issues which become associated with the general topic of homelessness. Below I explore magazine attention to homelessness by employing two measurement concepts: attention height and attention breadth.

I employ three methods to examine the "height" of public attention. First I examine the numbers of stories printed in all magazines for each year in the period. Next I compare percentage increases in total magazine coverage annually. Finally, I track cumulative magazine coverage from 1980 to 1990.

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I use similar means to investigate the breadth of public attention to homelessness. First I examine the number of different magazine outlets publishing articles on homelessness for each year between 1980 and 1990. Next I look at the number of new outlets including such stories each year. Finally, I track the cumulative number of different magazine outlets attending to homelessness for each of the eleven years in the period.

**General Magazine Attention**

In 1980, the "Reader's Guide" employed the term homeless as a topical indicator for the first time; however, instead of listing articles under this term, the Guide instructs readers to "see also Children, Homeless." One *US News* article appears under the "Children, Homeless" heading. Figure Two illustrates the rise in magazine articles listed exclusively under the topic indicator "homeless" for the period 1980 to 1990. Articles about homelessness appear with increasing frequency in the early eighties: two articles in the year 1981, 15 articles in 1982, 21 articles in 1983, and 33 articles in 1984. Thus the overall trend for this interval reflects an interest in homelessness that grows steadily across the four year period.

For the period between 1985 and 1988, magazines continue to publish an increasing number of articles related to homelessness. However, the growth in number of homeless-related articles published each year shows some variation for this interval: 31 articles in 1985, 52 articles in 1986, 60 articles in 1987, and 81
Figure Two: Magazine Attention to Homelessness
articles in 1988. If I dismiss the small decline in articles published between 1984 and 1985 and concentrate on the overall trend for this period, I find a tendency for a continuous and quickening growth in attention to the topic of homelessness between 1985 and 1988.

The first indication that magazine interest in homelessness may be stabilizing or leveling off appears in the period beginning in 1989. This leveling off seems apparent in the smaller increase in articles published between 1988 and 1989--from 81 articles to 89 articles--and in the small decline in articles published in 1990--63 articles, a 16 article decline. I would need to trace magazine publication activity after 1990 (a task beyond the scope of this study) to ascertain whether this stabilizing trend continues.

In Figure Three I follow the trend for cumulative number of articles published between 1980 and 1990. I find the three stages described above represent somewhat different periods of interest in homelessness--although the numbers are too small to make detailed generalizations. For the years from 1981 to 1984, the cumulative "level of interest" in homelessness increases at a modest average of 18.8 articles per year. For the second interval, 1985 to 1988, the cumulative level of interest increases at an average of 56 articles each year. Finally, for 1989 and 1990, the cumulative number of articles increases at an average of 76 articles per year. Thus magazines publish a cumulative total of 447 articles between 1980 and 1990.

I study the expansion in the "breadth" of magazine attention to homelessness by examining the number of different magazine
outlets carrying articles on homelessness between 1981 and 1990. In Table 2 I identify, for each year: the number of different magazine outlets carrying articles on homelessness, the number of new outlets beginning to attend to the problem, and the cumulative number of different magazine outlets publishing articles on homelessness. I find several trends regarding the breadth of magazine attention to homelessness.

Figure Four illustrates the growth in the number of different magazine outlets covering homelessness each year. I find a total of: two general interest magazines carrying articles on homelessness in 1981, nine magazines in 1982, 16 magazines in 1983, and 18 magazines in 1984. Thus, by 1984, 30 different magazine outlets cover the topic of homelessness in some manner. These "early-attention" outlets include many general news and interest magazines appealing to wide heterogeneous audiences, such as *Time*, *Newsweek*, *US News*, *USA Today*, *Reader's Digest*, and *People Weekly*. Early attention outlets also include more specific interest magazines featuring political, religious, fashion and women's or human-interest topics appealing to more specialized and segmented audiences, for example, *the National Review*, *Society*, *New York*, *American History Illustrated*, *Christian Century*, *Atlantic*, *Glamour*, *Commentary*, *Nation*, *Redbook*, *Science* and *Working Woman*.

The tendency for homeless-topic articles to appear in specialized magazines continues throughout the decade. Attention continues to climb in 1985 as articles appear in 20 different magazines. Throughout the mid- and late eighties increases in the
Figure Four: Number of Different Magazines Covering Homelessness
number of different magazines covering homelessness occur each year, with 27 magazines covering the topic in 1986, 36 in 1987, 38 in 1988 and 44 in 1989. In 1990, however, only 35 different magazines cover the topic of homelessness.

The general trend, therefore, is for an ever-growing number of outlets representing different types of audience interest areas and audience "taste segments." Steady increases occur in both the number of articles appearing annually and the variety of different publication outlets. The increase in number of outlets in the mid '80's reflects a widening range of special interest magazines attending to the topic. For example, in the mid '80's, articles on the homeless appear for the first time in black-oriented, scientific, architectural, business, and regional appeal magazines; they also appear in an increasing number of religious, politically-oriented, family and women's magazines.

Thus, by the mid-eighties, a large number of magazine outlets had presented their different audience segments with some type of story about homelessness at least once. These outlets included such diverse titles as Good Housekeeping, Scientific American, Psychology Today, Black Enterprise, Glamour, New Republic, Southern Living, The Futurist, and Forbes. New types of outlets began attending to homelessness even in the late eighties. These included educational magazines such as Scholastic Update and Education Digest; Music oriented magazines such as Rolling Stone, Down Beat, and Dance; magazines on social and environmental issues
such as Mother Jones and Sierra; and age-specific magazines such as Seventeen, Parents, Childhood Today, and New Choices.

Apparently, several new magazine outlets carry articles on homelessness for each year throughout the decade. Figure Five illustrates the steady growth in cumulative attention to homelessness in different magazines. For the period between 1981 and 1984, cumulative attention to homelessness increases at an average of 7.5 new outlets each year. For the interval between 1985 and 1988, cumulative attention climbs at an average of 8.3 new outlets each year. In 1989, the number of new outlets carrying articles on homelessness peaks at 14 new magazines, while in 1990 the number declines as only three new magazine outlets attend to the problem. For 1989 and 1990 the cumulative number of outlets increases at a rate of 8.5 new outlets per year. Thus a cumulative total of 80 magazine outlets attending to homelessness between 1980 and 1990.

Social Science Journal Attention

I employ the concepts of attention height and attention breadth to examine professional and research journal interest in homelessness for the period 1980 through 1990. The pattern of social science journal attention to this topic--as indicated by annual listings in the Social Science Index--develops through phases similar to those exhibited by magazines listed in the Reader's Guide.
Figure Five: Cumulative Attention In Magazine Outlets
Figure Six depicts the number of journal articles published each year from 1980 to 1990. Figure Seven illustrates cumulative journal attention to homelessness across the period.

In 1980 the topical heading "homeless persons" appears in the Social Science Index for the first time. Four articles appear under the new heading, along with the instructions to "see also" several other topically related subjects. In the ensuing four years, interest in the topic of homelessness grows slowly, as indicated by the low number of articles published in scholarly and professional journals: one each in 1981 and 1982, and six each in 1983 and 1984. Thus, in the years from 1981 to 1984, the cumulative number of articles appearing in social science journals increases at an average of 3.5 articles per year.

In the four year interval between 1985 and 1988, the greater number of articles published for each of these years indicates an intensified interest in homelessness. Thus, in 1985, the index lists 12 articles published for the year, with 27, 50, and 49 articles published in the successive years 1986, 1987 and 1988. The measure of cumulative journal attention for this interval provides another indication of intensified scholarly and professional interest in homelessness. For the period between 1985 and 1988, the cumulative number of articles published in social science journals climbs at the steep rate of 34.5 articles per year.

For the years 1989 and 1990 there is a continued spurt of growth in attention to homelessness for social science journals. In
Figure Six: Journal Articles on Homelessness

Number of Articles

0 10 20 30 40 50 60 70 80 90

Figure Seven: Cumulative Journal Attention
1989, journals publish 62 articles—a 13 article increase from the preceding year. In 1990 journals publish 87 articles, the highest number published for any year in the period. Thus the cumulative number of journal articles rises at a rate of 74.5 articles per year in 1989 and 1990.

Just as the "height of attention" to homelessness increases in social science journals throughout the eighties, so does the "breadth of attention" to homelessness increase. Table Three depicts the increasing breadth of attention. The table identifies the number of journal outlets attending to the topic each year, the number of new outlets publishing articles each year and the cumulative number of different journal outlets across the decade.

The modest growth in height of attention to homelessness for the early eighties is mirrored in the growth of the breadth of attention. Figure Eight illustrates the increasing attention to homelessness in different journals for 1980 to 1990. The growth in number of different outlets attending to homelessness, although slow in the years between 1980 and 1982, begins to rise more quickly in 1983. In 1980 two journals publish articles on homelessness, while only one new outlet attends to the topic for 1981 and 1982. In 1983, six journal outlets attend to homelessness for the first time; four more journals follow suit in 1984. Thus, by 1984, 13 different social science journals had presented their audiences with a total of 18 articles on the subject of homelessness. These journals include titles such as *New Statesman*,
Figure Eight: Number of Different Journals Attending to Homelessness

In the interval between 1985 and 1988, the breadth of attention to homelessness appears to widen at an increasingly quicker rate. Continued jumps in the number of outlets carrying homeless-related articles occur each year, as do increases in the number of new journal outlets attending to the topic. In 1985 five journal outlets publish articles on homelessness for the first time, with eight more following suit in 1986 and 18 more doing so in 1987. By 1988, nine new journal outlets attend to the topic, bringing the cumulative number of different outlets attending to homelessness to 53.

Thus, for this mid to late '80's interval, many new social science outlets beginning to carry articles on homelessness. The intensified publication activity seems to reflect a widening scholarly and professional interest in the problem of homelessness, as journals representing diverse institutional interests begin to present information on the problem to their readership. In 1985, for example, public health and economic journals begin carrying articles on homelessness--while in 1986 journals reflecting an interest in public policy, mental health and social issues pay particular attention to the topic. By 1987 and 1988, the list of outlets publishing homeless-related articles expands to include titles representing such broad ranging interests as politics, law, economic history, geography and women and the environment. The overall list of journals publishing articles on homelessness for the first time
during this interval includes such titles as: *Community Mental Health Journal*, *the Journal of Housing*, *the Journal of State Government*, *The Economist*, *Social Science and Medicine*, *Child Welfare*, *Public Management*, *Psychology Reports*, *Police Chief*, *Death Studies*, and *Human Rights*.

In 1989 and 1990, both the number of different outlets attending to homelessness and the number of new outlets attending to homelessness continues to rise. In 1988, 33 journal outlets carry articles on the topic, 12 of these being new titles. In 1989, 37 different outlets publish articles on homelessness, with 13 of these being new titles. Thus, by 1990, 78 different journals had presented information on homelessness to their different--though possibly overlapping--audiences. The journals attending to homelessness for the first time in this late period include such specialized interests as *Contemporary Drug Problems*, *Marriage and Family Review*, *the American Journal of Child Psychology*, and *Adolescence*, as well as more general interest titles like the *Journal of Social Issues* and *Sociological Inquiry*.

The above discussion describes how new social science journals begin attending to homelessness each year. Figure Nine illustrates some relevant information about the cumulative number of journal outlets attending to homelessness from 1980 to 1990. For the period between 1981 and 1984, the cumulative number of different journal outlets attending to homelessness rises at a rate of 2.6 new outlets each year. For the interval between 1985 and 1988, the cumulative number of different journal outlets rises at a
Figure Nine: Cumulative Attention in Journal Outlets
rate of 10 new outlets each year. For 1989 and 1990, the cumulative number of journal outlets rises at a rate of 12.5 new outlets each year. Overall, a cumulative total of 78 different journals attend to homelessness from 1980 to 1990. Thus the trend is for an ever-widening range of outlets presenting a continuously increasing total number of articles to numerous audiences.

Network News Attention

Table Four summarizes network television news attention to homelessness from 1980 to 1990. The Television News Index and Abstracts, the annual guide to broadcast news content for the three major networks (ABC, NBC and CBS), first lists homelessness as a topic indicator in 1982. During this year, the index lists five news stories under the heading "U.S. Cities, homelessness." All three networks present news stories on homelessness this year, with NBC and ABC broadcasting one item each and CBS broadcasting three items. By 1990, the three networks had broadcast a total of 291 news items on the topic of homelessness; more than half of these stories appeared between the years 1988 and 1990. Overall, network attention to homelessness appears to have developed through periods of varying interest in the topic.

Below I examine network interest in homelessness across the nine year period from 1982 to 1990. Because network coverage is limited to three outlets and a shorter time period than either magazines or journals, my examination does not focus on attention breadth through different periods. Instead, my focus concerns the
general trend in attention across the nine years. The section ends with a brief description of differences in the three networks' level of attention across time.


Figure Eleven illustrates the pattern of cumulative network attention to homelessness between 1982 and 1990. The figure depicts a pattern of steadily growing interest for all three networks. From 1982 to 1984, the cumulative number of network news stories increases at a rate of 10.7 news stories per year. From 1985 to 1987, the cumulative number of network news stories increases at a rate of 35 news stories per year. And from 1988 to 1990, the cumulative number of network news stories increases at a rate of 51.3 news stories per year.
Figure Ten: Network News Attention to Homelessness
Figure Eleven: Cumulative Network Attention to Homelessness
Figure Twelve depicts a comparison of the three network's news coverage of homelessness for this period. I note that CBS exhibits the highest level of network interest in homelessness for the early years of coverage. Figure Thirteen presents a comparison of cumulative news attention to homelessness for the three networks. By 1990, ABC had broadcast a total of 93 news stories, NBC a total of 90 news stories and CBS a total of 108 news stories. CBS presents the highest cumulative number of stories for each year in the period. Although NBC presents the most stories in individual years 1989 and 1990, and ABC presents the most stories in 1984 and 1988, CBS maintains the most consistently high level of interest in homelessness across the period; that is, CBS has the highest cumulative number of stories on any given year in the period.

Cross-Media Influence and the Nature of Attention Growth

Above I outlined the explosion in attention to homelessness in professional or social science journals, national network news broadcasts, and news and general magazine publications for the period 1980 to 1990. I identified some trends in the amount of attention to homelessness across the period. I also illustrated how print and broadcast attention to homelessness grew in breadth and height.

While I note some differences in the amount of coverage within each medium at various points in time, the general nature of attention to homelessness seems to reflect a fairly steady growth rate across the time period. Detailed analyses of the impetus for
Figure Twelve: Comparison of Network Attention to Homelessness

- ABC News Stories
- NBC News Stories
- CBS News Stories

# News Stories

- 1980
- 1981
- 1982
- 1983
- 1984
- 1985
- 1986
- 1987
- 1988
- 1989
- 1990
Figure Thirteen: Comparison of Network Cumulative Attention

- ABC
- NBC
- CBS

# News Stories

- 1980
- 1981
- 1982
- 1983
- 1984
- 1985
- 1986
- 1987
- 1988
- 1989
- 1990
the steady growth--or of cross media relationships--is beyond the scope of this study. However, some speculations seem appropriate.

Examinations of AIDS coverage in the print media (Albert, 1989; Chalef, 1987) describe an erratic pattern for press coverage of AIDS. Attention to AIDS rises and falls in a pattern attributed to interest in the illness and death of celebrities such as Rock Hudson and Liberace, and well publicized AIDS cases such as that of teenager Ryan White. Recently, the growth in media attention to HIV-positive celebrities Irving "Magic" Johnson and Arthur Ashe seems to reflect a continuation of earlier attention patterns. In comparison to steadily growing media attention to homelessness in magazines, I see no functional equivalent to media attention to celebrities for the coverage of homelessness.

Above I note some differences in the level of attention to homelessness for social science journals, national magazines and network news broadcasts; these differences appear particularly dramatic during certain time periods. The lag in social science journal attention to homelessness may be attributed to editorial and scientific standards that delay the publication of social science articles. My examination of citation title and subject listings reveals no apparent trends regarding cross media attention to particular themes or aspects of homelessness. A more detailed analysis of cross media topic trends is beyond the scope of this study.

Below I explore the nature of news coverage by examining a sample of news magazine and network news stories appearing during
this period. I begin by looking at sampled news stories' presentation of "hard facts"--definitions and numerical estimates--related to homelessness.
Chapter Three

VAGUENESS IN DEFINING AND COUNTING THE HOMELESS

The Definition of Homelessness in News Media Stories

Another problem is the catchall name homeless, which throws together in one menacing bundle not only destitute people who need shelter but also AIDS victims, the mentally ill, drug and alcohol abusers, and street predators of all kinds (Time, April 16, 1990: 16).

No explicit definition of homelessness appears in any news story analyzed for my research. The term "homelessness" is used by groups and individuals appearing as news sources, and by journalists, to describe many different phenomena. The term "homelessness" does not describe a distinct or precise lifestyle, set of conditions or even living arrangements. In news stories, homelessness appears as an umbrella term that applies to people setting up tent cities, unemployed people riding the rails, people living in cars, extended families living together under one roof, runaways living on the streets, in group houses or in motels; babies and infants growing up in foster care because their parents are abusive, addicted or have abandoned them.

Journalists and claims-makers employ the word "homeless" to describe a variety of situations from the time that "homelessness" begins to receive coverage up until today. For example, a 1980 article (US News, June 9, 1980: 66) describes a phenomenon of
parents forcing their children out of their homes. The journalist claims:

"Whatever the reason, the increase in the number of juveniles who are forced out by their parents appears to be changing the pattern of homeless children in America's big cities."


The word homeless, as used in news stories, does not just apply to people without a roof over their heads. The word also applies to individuals and families "living" in abandoned houses or "living" in subway stations or in tunnels beneath train stations (Time, December 19, 1983:14; Newsweek, January 2, 1984:22; Time, March 11, 1985:68; CBS, March 27, 1986; CBS, November 24, 1987; US News, March 23, 1987:69). Families who travel from one cheap motel to another or sleep in campers are considered homeless. Alcoholics who spend their nights in flop-houses are also described as homeless (US News, March 8, 1982:60; CBS, December 20, 1983; US News, August 3, 1987:20; Newsweek, March 21, 1988:51).

Situations which might not come to mind when thinking of the term homelessness also get described in news stories about the problem: the "hidden homeless" are families and individuals that live in garages, tool sheds and converted chicken coops (Time, June 22, 1987); or extended families forced to come together under one roof (CBS, October 31, 1990; Time, December 17, 1990:46). "Garage People," are the homeless in Los Angeles who live in "hutches made for cars" (Newsweek, March 21, 1988:57). "Couch people" are those doubling up with relatives, those who "by night occupy the sofas of their friends, by day...hit the streets" (Newsweek, March 21, 1988:57; US News, August 3, 1987:20). Another situation described as "homelessness" involves the growing numbers of babies and infants "forced to live in hospitals or make-shift nurseries," because they are not ready to be adopted, not ready to return to parents who have abused or abandoned them (CBS, April 21, 1987).
There are few if any distinctions made between the temporary homeless, the long-term homeless or the previously homeless. Journalists apply the label "homeless" to people who are homeless on and off, such as one man who had spent 3 months living in his car over the course of a few years (CBS, December 15, 1982). The label also gets applied to people who rotate in and out of in-patient drug or alcohol rehabilitation programs, or people in other rehabilitation programs that offer residence in half-way houses upon program completion (US News, January 15, 1990:27; CBS, August 16, 1987).

Groups representing the homeless convey no sense of either consensus or in conflict regarding what constitutes homelessness. A conflict may have served to limit the use of the term to a particular group or a particular phenomenon, but no groups or individuals ever voice claims that a certain phenomenon should not be labeled homelessness. For example, advocates for homeless people living "in the streets" could have disputed foster-care advocates' use of the term "homeless" to describe abandoned babies boarding in hospital nurseries waiting for foster-care placement.

Conversely, if groups were depicted as being in agreement about what conditions constitute homelessness, a "united voice" defining homelessness and what should be done about it--what solutions are viable, who should take responsibility--may have emerged in news stories. This lack of consensus or conflict leaves the audience--the public and policy makers--without a clear idea of what are the limits, boundaries or criteria for defining what is homelessness or who are the homeless.
Social research by nature contains discussions of how researchers or report writers "conceptualize the problem" under study. While news stories do not use this scientific terminology, a common news writing practice involves the use of "official sources" who document the existence of a problem, provide a definition, or describe the nature of a phenomenon. News stories about homelessness contain no explicit definitions of homelessness and present an array of situations deemed examples of the problem. None of the news stories I studied offered official source views on how homelessness should be defined.

When news stories present descriptions, research information or sources' claims about the nature or size of the homeless population, they do not discuss how claims-makers or researchers arrive at their conclusions--nor do they provide explanations for discrepancies or contradictions between or among researchers, claims-makers or within one or more news story. Thus, news about homelessness contains very little debate about what conditions constitute homelessness, how many people are homeless, or what definition has been used to count the number of homeless.

The vagueness in news stories about homelessness may reflect widespread inconsistencies in how social service workers, government agencies and social researchers working with or studying the homeless perceive and collect information about this population. According to Jamshid Momeni, current social science literature on homelessness:
...bears the mark of lacking consensus on the most fundamental conceptual issue of defining homelessness. A cursory examination of the literature reveals that there is an array of definitions, ambiguities and variations in conceptualizing the problem (Momeni, 1990: 167).

Momeni conducted a study designed to examine, among other issues, how homelessness has been conceptualized, the size and social or demographic character of the homeless population, the causes of homelessness and what has been done about the social problem. He reports that this lack of consensus regarding the conceptualization of the problem is also evident in the literature he received from Mayors of cities with a population of 40,000 or more, state governors and US senators. He asked these officials to provide statistical data, copies of publications, comments, or general information regarding the extent, nature and composition of the homeless population in the official's jurisdiction.

Estimating the "Size of the Problem"

Variance and contradictions. The imprecise use of the term homelessness for describing multiple and diverse populations leads to variance and contradiction in claims about the size of the homeless population. Groups with opposing political, professional or ideological views of the nature of homelessness may arrive at conflicting counts of the homeless population. Momeni suggests that there is extensive controversy and political rhetoric regarding the true size of the homeless population. He reports that the upper and lower limits of the size of the homeless population are given by
two opposing groups: the US department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), and the Community for Creative Non-violence (CCNV), a homeless advocacy group. Momeni reports that these two groups have exchanged verbal and legal assaults with one another (1990:166). It seems likely that news stories discussing the size of the homeless population should reflect this "extensive controversy," yet the my findings indicate that news stories contain little debate over the size of the homeless problem.

Below I will discuss contradictions in journalists' reports of the number of homeless people in the nation. I will illustrate how news stories present a variety of different numbers--as well as different ranges of numbers--in an effort to quantify the problem of homelessness. Journalists rarely rely on official numbers; they also offer numbers that double over night without explanation.

It is in the nature of the problem that government does not even have a good fix on how many homeless there are in the nation. Numbers range from 250,000 to a million. (CBS, December 11, 1982).

Indeed, there is little about homelessness that can be established irrefutably--not the numbers of people (estimates range from 350,000 to 3 million), not the causes, certainly not the solutions (Newsweek, December 16, 1985:22).

News stories on homelessness lack conflict or consensus regarding both the definition of the problem and the size of the problem. However, stories repeatedly contradict one another when providing numbers meant to describe the size of various phenomena labeled
homelessness. Journalists present numbers describing the size of the homeless population and claim the numbers represent the "best estimate" of the size, but these best estimates change daily. Many stories claim no reliable estimates exist. The lack of consensus and the contradictions appear frequently throughout both television and magazine news stories, from 1982 to 1990.

In general, news stories lack both descriptions of the origin of numerical estimates and discussions of how sources arrived at such estimates. Early news stories about homelessness often include unattributed estimates of the size of the problem. For instance, a 1982 article claims "...an estimated 200,000 homeless adults roaming the country" (US News, March 8, 1982). Other magazine articles published this year claim "they number in the hundreds of thousands, and their ranks have been increasing..." (Time, February 8, 1982:66); and "there is no reliable estimate of their number nationwide" (Newsweek, February 15, 1982:28).

Television news stories seem quicker to offer estimates of the size of the homeless problem that approach the million mark. CBS network news broadcast four stories about homelessness in 1982. The first CBS story to include estimates of the size of the homeless population stated "numbers range from 250,000 to a million" (December 11, 1982). A news story broadcast on CBS four days later claims "The best estimates say as many as two million Americans are homeless" (CBS, December 15, 1982). According to these CBS news estimates, neither of which are attributed to a source, the homeless population more than doubled in four days.
In January 1983 the first news story to offer an official claim about the size of homelessness appears:

A recent survey of large cities by the United States Conference of Mayors puts the number of homeless at 2 million. Other projections range from 500,000 to 4 million (US News, January 17, 1983: 23).

This story illustrates both the lack of consensus and the contradictions inherent to news coverage of homelessness. The story offers an official count of the homeless but casts doubt on the official number by presenting a range with an upper limit double--and a lower limit less than half--the official number. The four million person projection appears as the highest estimate in any story about homelessness. Stories never provide information about who counted four million homeless or how sources making estimates projected this number. When journalists or sources offer numbers that describe the size of the homeless population or the demographic or social distribution of the population, they rarely evaluate numbers in terms of how or when they were derived. News stories on homelessness never include discussion of definitions used to compute or estimate population sizes.

In December 1983 CBS broadcast the network’s first news story to include an official estimate about homelessness (December 2, 1983). The number, supplied by Robert Hayes of the National Coalition for the Homeless, put the homeless at two to two and a half million Americans--an estimate quite similar to that claimed by U.S. Mayors eleven months earlier. The two million mark estimate
gets repeated several times in 1983 and is once claimed by an official government agency:

Indeed, late last month the Department of Health and Human Services estimated the U.S. homeless to be an astonishing 2 million, more than at any time since the Great Depression (Time, December 19, 1983:14).

From coast to coast, some 2 million persons--maybe more--are on the move, swamping charities, taxing local agencies, often facing disappointment (US News, January 17, 1983:23).

The 1983 Time article is the only story to attribute a 2 million person estimate to a government source. This Department of Health and Human Services estimate seems significant as all other federal government sources place the number of homeless no higher than 650,000.

Comparisons of the current homeless problem and related social and economic conditions to those of the Great Depression era arise throughout the eleven year news coverage span (CBS, January 22, 1985; CBS, December 24, 1985; Newsweek, January 2, 1984:20-29; US News, January 14, 1985:15. CBS, October 31, 1990; CBS, December 7, 1990). For example:

In all these cities it appears there were more homeless people seeking help last night than at anytime since the Great Depression (CBS January 20, 1983).

References to the Great Depression may serve to place the homeless problem in an historical context that draws to mind soup kitchen
lines and families struggling to find food, shelter or work. The association between the Great Depression and the current homeless problem seems to legitimize the contemporary situation as a widespread problem worthy of continued media attention.

The use of ranges to indicate size. Many news stories appearing between 1984 and 1990 provide ranges describing estimates of the number of the homeless people. The range itself varies from story to story, with no agreement as to where the upper and lower boundaries of the range should lie. The differences between the ranges do not seem to represent a mere growth in size over time. News stories present estimates in a manner which seems oblivious to contradictions regarding estimates about the homeless population. Estimates place the number of homeless between "250,000 to 2 million" (Newsweek, January 2, 1984: 21); "as low as 300,000 and as high as nearly 2 million" (Time, February 4, 1985:20); "300,000 to 3 million" (Time, December 17, 1990:45); "from 350,000 to 3 million" (Newsweek December 16, 1985:22; Newsweek, March 21, 1988:57); "600,000 to 3 million" (Newsweek, January 25, 1988:58; CBS, January 20,1989; CBS March 21, 1990).

The wideness of each of the five ranges and the disparity between the numbers seem to represent a conflict over the size of the problem, with different groups providing opposing views regarding problem size. News stories do not associate numbers with specific sources; therefore, they do not frame estimates in terms of a conflict between opposing news sources debating the size of the homeless problem. The presentation of ranges as estimates thus
adds to the apparent confusion over the magnitude of homelessness. Rather than illustrating the political nature of competing estimates of the size of the homeless population, news stories present information which creates a murky and shifting portrait of the extent of this social problem.

Concrete but disparate numbers. Even those few news stories which do not present estimates in terms of a range fail to agree on a common estimate of the size of the homeless population during this period. One news story claims: "even conservative estimates put the figure at half a million" (US News September 24, 1984: 57). Other estimates place the size at: 350,000 or more homeless citizens (Time, February 2, 1987:25); 300,000 minimum (CBS February 2, 1986); 3 million (CBS November 5, 1987; January 24, 1988); hundreds of thousands (CBS, November 6, 1989). None of the news stories cited above attribute their estimates to a source.

Numbers for a given night vs. a full year. News stories present numerical information about homelessness in a confusing manner even when available information could potentially clarify the issue of problem size. For example, some news stories make distinctions between the total number of people experiencing temporary or periodic homelessness in the course of a year and the number facing homelessness on any given night. However, these news stories do not use time frame distinctions to explain prevalent variation in estimates of problem size. Some news stories appearing between 1988 and 1990 present estimates of the size of the homeless
population that describe how many people experience homelessness during any part of a full year:

"This year, as many as 3 million men, women and children may at some point find themselves homeless and destitute" (US News, April 4, 1988:69)

Other news stories contain estimates that differentiate between the number of people homeless on any given night and the total number of people who experience homelessness for one or more nights in the course of a year.

For example, one CBS news story (September 20, 1988) reports that a National Academy of Sciences (NAS) study claims at least 100,000 children under the age of 18--not including runaways--experience homelessness on any given night. Bruce Vladeck, President of the United Hospital Fund and a source associated with the study, claims "There are probably several hundred thousand children in 1988 who will be homeless for several nights or more."

The distinction between the total number of people experiencing temporary or periodic homelessness in the course of a year and the number facing homelessness on any given night may have been used to explain the disparity in counts of the homeless for the decade. But news stories neither recognize discrepancies between numbers nor use time frame distinctions to explain numerical contradictions. News stories presenting distinctions between the number of homeless on any given night and the total number of people who experience homelessness over the course of a
year still do not present consistent numbers. A 1988 news article claims that estimates range:

from 250,000 individuals on a given night to 3 million homeless over the course of a year (US News, February 29, 1988: 26).

Other news stories appearing this year present numbers at odds with these estimates:

The National Academy of Sciences says in a recent report that three quarters of a million Americans are homeless on any given night (CBS October 10, 1988).

On any given night, an estimated 735,000 people in the U.S. are homeless. As many as 2 million may be without shelter for one night or more during the year (Time, October 24, 1988:34).

**Projections: the Size of Homeless Population "Segments"**

Many news stories focus on segments of the homeless population such as the mentally ill homeless, homeless children, or homeless families. Stories that discuss segments often provide estimates of the proportion of homeless people that fall into a particular social category or estimates of the number of homeless people constituting a particular segment. As with estimates of the total number of homeless people nationally, estimates of the size of particular segments of the homeless also provide contradictory and unattributed information.
**Homeless youth.** For example, a 1980 article on "throwaway children" claims: a growing share of the 2 million young runaways in America each year turn out instead to be "pushouts" (US News, June 9, 1980:66). This 1980 unattributed claim conflicts with one appearing in the same news magazine three years later. An article entitled "An Endless Parade of Runaway Kids," claims "They may number 1 million a year--frightened, rebellious and often easy prey." (US News, January 17, 1983:64). Later in this 1983 article, the one million estimate is attributed to the federal General Accounting Office. Another news magazine offers a slightly different, yet still unattributed, claim:

There are more that a million of them on the streets of our major cities...They are America's lost tribe of teenage runaways...(Newsweek, April 25, 1988:64).

These numbers appear particularly odd because up until 1983, all but one estimate of the size of the total homeless population put the number at no higher than 2 million, and many estimates fell below 300,000. Similarly, in 1988, the highest estimates of the homeless were 3 million. To accept the claim of more than 1 million teenaged street kids would mean that in 1988 at least one third of all homeless people were teenagers. One news story presenting an official source estimate of the number of homeless teens provides another confusing claim about the size of this segment of the homeless population:

A new report by the National Network of Runaway and Youth Services estimates that 40 percent of the nation's
1.5 million homeless youngsters are "throwaways," compared with 29 percent four years ago (US News, March 11, 1985:52).

This statement appears confusing because the article focuses on "troubled youth" who run away from home or get thrown out by parents. The reference to a 40 percent proportion of throwaways indicates that the remaining 60 percent includes runaways, but the author does not specify whether the "1.5 million homeless youngsters" includes children accompanying parents on the streets or in temporary shelters. If the 1.5 million homeless youngsters includes children and teens accompanied by parents as well as runaways and throwaways, the number still appears incredible. The highest estimates of the total number of homeless nationwide in 1985 put the number at 3 million. Many estimates put the number close to 300,000.

The Mentally Ill Homeless. Efforts to quantify the number of mentally ill homeless people also exhibit wide variations not explained by possible growth over time. News stories neither recognize nor explain contradictions that occur throughout time. A 1983 news article claims that at least a third of the total number of homeless--estimated at two million in this story--are mentally ill: this projection puts the number to at least 666,666 (Time, December 19, 1983: 14). A 1984 article that presents estimates of the total homeless population ranging from 250,000 to 2 million claims former mental patients make up one third to one half the total population; should readers make an effort to calculate these proportions, they would find claims of the homeless mentally ill
ranging from 83,333 to one million people (Newsweek, December 2, 1984:22).

Many attempts to quantify the size of the homeless mentally ill population offer fractions that describe the proportion of the total homeless population fitting into this category. These numbers appear particularly meaningless because they often represent fractions applied to a wide range of numbers.

It is estimated that between 20 and 50 percent of the people living on the streets of America's cities are chronically mentally ill (CBS, November 1, 1986).

Ranges shift size from story to story and fraction denominators are not fixed or specified. Thus, to say "one-third of the homeless are mentally ill" conveys little information when estimates of the number of homeless keep changing. News stories include, for example, the following claims: at least a third of the homeless are mentally ill (Time, February 4, 1985:21); at least one in four is mentally ill (CBS, May 11, 1984); as many as 3 million Americans are homeless, and half of them suffer serious mental illness (CBS, November 14, 1984); one fifth to one third of America's homeless are now considered mentally ill (Time, September 14, 1987:88); an estimated 30 percent to 40 percent of the homeless are mentally impaired (Time, October 24, 1988:34). None of these proportions are attributed to sources.

Some articles portray a situation in which authorities are not in agreement over the proportions:
Some say that only about a third of the homeless are mentally ill. Studies done in Boston and Philadelphia...yield estimates as high as 85 percent. A composite of studies of the homeless indicates that 35 percent have schizophrenia and 10 percent significant clinical depression, writes Dr. Irwin Perr of the Rutgers Medical School in New Jersey (Time, December 2, 1985:103).

George Bush said last year that mental illness was the "principal cause" of homelessness. Yet both the HUD survey and a 19-city health care demonstration project funded largely by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation show that only a third of homeless adults are mentally ill (US News, March 20, 1989:28).

In all, about a third of the nation's estimated 350,000 homeless people are believed to be mentally ill (Newsweek, January 23, 1989:58).

The final estimate is associated with E. Fuller Torrey, a psychiatrist who worked at the National Institute for Mental Health from 1970 to 1975 and in 1989 published a book criticizing mental health policies related to deinstitutionalization.

The two studies providing the one third mentally ill estimate cited in the US News article above are repeated in that magazine seven months later (October 16, 1989:30). These two articles, discussed in detail later below, represent one of the few instances in which news stories present debate over the size and social nature of the homeless population.

Whole number estimates appearing in news stories about the homeless also offer no consistent claim regarding the extent of
mental illness among the homeless. The five articles cited below offer four different projections of the number of mentally ill homeless. None of the following estimates is attributed to a source: 1.5 million homeless mentally ill persons (CBS, November 14, 1984; US News, September 24, 1984:6); 200,000 seriously mentally ill and homeless (CBS, March 3, 1989); as high as 250,000 (Newsweek, November 9, 1987:48); hundreds of thousands of displaced sick people are on the streets (US News, May 23, 1988:78).

Only two news stories attribute a projection of the number of homeless mentally ill to a source. These stories illustrate how the language used to present numerical information in the news may allow journalists to offer large number estimates that are confusing and contradictory but not necessarily false. The news stories cited below focus primarily on the mentally ill homeless. Each story cites official mental health institution sources that make claims regarding the number of mentally ill homeless.

The first story claims that while the total number of homeless Americans--estimated from 350,000 to 3 million--is under dispute, the number of chronic mental patients is readily available. The article continues:

How many of the mentally ill are homeless and how many of the homeless are mentally ill? No one really knows--and the debate, which now preoccupies officialdom and academic researchers alike, is largely beside the point...Recent surveys indicate that approximately one third of the nation's homeless are mentally ill...the National Institute for Mental Health estimates that 2.4 million Americans should be classified as chronically mentally ill and that approximately 1.5 million of them
now live "in the community."...Virtually any of those 1.5 million patients can be "homeless" at one time or another, for a chronic disease like schizophrenia tends to be cyclical, and its victims usually veer from periods of fragile stability to intermittent breakdowns all their lives (Newsweek, January 6, 1986: 16).

This story clarifies confusion over numbers by identifying a group of chronically mentally ill people "in the community" who are vulnerable to homelessness. People in this vulnerable group include those who live in halfway houses, those who live with their families or by themselves in rooming houses and cheap hotels, those referred for short-term stays in local hospital psychiatric wards and those who live on the streets.

This story provides some insight into the problems of defining and counting the homeless mentally ill. Considering the mentally ill living "in the community" as vulnerable to intermittent periods of homelessness might increase understanding of how it may be hard to label various situations as homelessness or quantify exactly how many mentally ill individuals lack permanent housing. The Newsweek story offers background information useful for understanding the complexity of making size estimates. But all other news stories discussing the mentally ill homeless offer size estimates without elaborating on how estimates are derived, who provides numerical information or what type of living arrangements are considered as "homelessness."

The other news story to attribute an estimate of the number of mentally ill homeless nationally claims:
An American Psychiatric Association task force reported that as many as 1.5 million persons needing mental treatment are living in the streets (US News, September 24, 1984:6).

This 1.5 million estimate may refer to those mentally ill living in the community and susceptible to homelessness— but the story never spells that out. The use of the phrase "as many as," and the reference to an official source seem to offer news workers protection from challenges regarding the accuracy of the large estimate.

Overall, stories which discuss the mentally ill homeless do not present a common image of the size of this segment of the total homeless population. Like stories about homeless youth, stories on the mentally ill contradict one another when offering projections of the number of mentally ill homeless and the proportion of the total homeless population that is mentally ill. Numerical information about the mentally ill is inconsistent with estimates of the total size of the homeless population. It seems that available official information—such as that presented in one story (Newsweek, January 6, 1986)—can clarify contradictions and confusion over size estimates. However, this information is rarely included in news stories; most size estimates are not even attributed to sources.

Other segments of the homeless. Numerical information regarding segments of the homeless population is also confusing. Stories discussing homeless families and their children provide inconsistent size estimates (Newsweek, December 16, 1985; Newsweek, January 6, 1986; Time, November 24, 1986; CBS,

Combined Segments. The presentation of numerical information is confusing in cases where several segments of the homeless population are "lumped together" and journalists or sources offer proportion or whole number size estimates of the combined segment. For example:

Activist Mitch Snyder...estimates that one-third of all the homeless are now families and the remaining two-thirds are single men and women. Of the single women, Snyder says, about three-fourths are mentally disturbed; of the men, two-thirds are composed of the elderly poor or disabled, drug addicts and alcoholics (Time, November 24, 1986:28).

National surveys of homeless adults have repeatedly shown that roughly two thirds are either mentally ill or hooked on alcohol or drugs (US News, July 16, 1990:10).

Nationwide, anywhere from one-half to two-thirds are either substance abusers, mentally ill or both (Time, December 17, 1990: 45).
Limited Debate over the Extent of Homelessness

Controversy or debate over the size and nature of the homeless population may facilitate discussion of how to help the homeless and who should take responsibility for doing something to alleviate this social problem. News coverage of controversy or debate may prove useful to public officials and administrators designing programs to service the homeless. Policy makers and program designers value information on how many people are homeless, what types of problems homeless people face, and what proportions of the homeless are mentally ill, parentless youth, substance abusers, or families.

News reports of a conflict have potential to provide some insight into how homelessness has been defined by various groups and how these groups went about the task of counting the homeless. However, none of the stories mentioning or emphasizing arguments over the size of the homeless problem relate conflicts to a definition. Approximately twelve news stories discuss a conflict or include debate between sources offering disparate estimates of the number of homeless people.

In March 1990, CBS broadcast three news stories focusing on the 1990 Census. These news stories describe a conflict centering around the census and counts of the homeless, but stories do not contain any estimates of the size of the homeless population.

The census is the basis for deciding every state's share of billions of dollars in federal benefit money...homeless Americans who count on that federal money may never be counted...No one knows how many 'shadow people' there
are in Chicago, in the country. The census will offer clues, but no answers (CBS, March 1, 1990).

The March first story focuses solely on a debate over the accuracy of the federal government's count of the homeless. Two other stories mention this debate and relate the census to issues such as the slowing population growth; changing age, minority and educational demographics across the country; and the relationship between changes in the U.S. population and the economy (CBS March 20, 1990; March 21, 1990). The March 21st story relates "the argument over the homeless" to a "larger argument about a national undercount" of people living in U.S. cities.

The three census stories emphasize the political nature of counting the homeless and highlight the financial ramifications of undercounts for cities needing federal aid to fund services for the homeless. Homeless advocate sources in these stories claim the government purposely undercounts the homeless in order to avoid spending money addressing their problems; census bureau sources deny any intent to undercount the homeless population. The census stories stand out in contrast to the majority of stories on homelessness because this majority fails to acknowledge that it makes a difference whether 300,000 people or 3 million people are homeless.

Journalists describe how census takers count the following groups as homeless: women and children in overnight shelters, men in line for emergency shelters, individuals sleeping at O'Hare airport, others sleeping in train stations, and families and individuals at a migrant workers' camp. Journalists also emphasize
that census counts "miss" some homeless in abandoned houses or in transit stations, sleeping in boxes, or turned away from crowded shelters and sent into the night. However, stories do not include discussion of the definition of homelessness used to decide who should be counted as part of the homeless population.

During later years in the period under study (1988-1990), two news stories claim that earlier claims-makers had presented false pictures of who are the homeless, why they are homeless and how many people are homeless. These stories present studies that claim to dispute false conceptions of the size and nature of the homeless problem. These stories suggest that, before studies were available, a consensus about homelessness existed. My research finds that not only were studies available "early" in the history of the recent homelessness crisis, but also consensus never existed. News stories appearing in the early 80's depict diverse and multiple portraits of who are the homeless, and make a variety of disparate claims about the size of the homeless population.

Two news stories appearing in the mid-80's suggest that disagreements over estimates of the homeless population exist; however, these stories do not frame disagreements in terms of a debate or conflict where two or more groups exchange or present opposing views. For example, two previously referred to articles claim:

The total number of homeless Americans, which is variously estimated from 350,000 to 3 million, itself is in dispute (Newsweek, January 6, 1986:16).
"No one is certain precisely how many homeless there are. The Reagan Administration puts the number of homeless at 350,000, a figure most advocates consider far too low. Some homeless advocates go so far as to suggest that the count is ten times the Administration's estimate, or about 3.5 million (Time, November 24, 1986).

Neither of these stories explores the issue of how two such greatly different numbers could have been reached, or whether one estimate is more accurate than the other. The Time article prefaces the two estimates with the claim, "no one is certain precisely how many of them there are;" this statement casts doubt on the accuracy of either estimate.

In 1989, CBS broadcast two stories about a march and demonstration attended by the homeless, social service workers and advocates (October 6, 1989; October 7, 1989). The October 7th news story includes footage of advocates criticizing the lack of federal government responses toward alleviating the problems of the homeless. One advocate, the Reverend David Hayden from Roanoke, VA, claims:

"When the official estimate of homeless people in this country is about 250,000, when the reality is 3 to 4 million: something is wrong! Let's hear the cry of the poor!"

Neither news story focuses discussion on how or why two such disparate counts of the homeless came about; however, the stories give attention to many advocates' and sympathizers' claims about what should be done about homelessness.
Stories emphasizing conflict and debate--and including debate about the size of the homeless problem--have potential to clarify issues of what is homelessness, what definitions and methods are used to count the homeless, and what social characteristics are exhibited by the homeless. Debate may give rise to demands that something be done about homelessness, as in the example above. Discussion of the size and nature of the homeless population may also provide coherent images of the needs of the homeless and thus suggest directions for social policy and program development, as in two articles which emphasize the need for shelters which offer rehabilitative care, child care, health care and treatment for substance abuse or mental illness (US News, March 20, 1989; US News, January 15, 1990).

Few news stories on homelessness make reference to research findings, and those which do rarely mention study methods. In a 1989 news article entitled "Shattering myths about the homeless: New research finally reveals how many there are and what they need," a journalist claims that an absence of any reliable national statistics caused competing visions of the homeless to cripple attempts to help "the country's most destitute citizens." This article claims that new research has finally solved the debate over who are the homeless and how many exist:

Democrats like Michael Dukakis and House Speaker Jim Wright, as well as countless news reports, have claimed that 3 million Americans are huddled in streets, doorways and shelters each night. Wrong. A 1988 study by the nonpartisan Urban Institute...concludes that at most 600,000 Americans were living in shelters or on

This article briefly mentions that the Urban Institute's study was based in part on interviews with 1,700 homeless individuals in 20 large cities. However, the story makes no further comment on how the homeless were counted or how homelessness was defined for any of the studies discussed.

In December 1990, a CBS news story examines the claims of "critics" stating "America is miscounting its economic casualties." The story presents sources such as poor people at soup kitchens, Congressional Committee representatives and labor research experts who discredit the accuracy of the federal government's count of those living in poverty, the homeless and the unemployed. This story includes debate over the government's use of the Urban Institute figure of 600,000 homeless; the number is criticized for being three years old and inaccurate.

According to this news story, "officials at the Urban Institute" and "other Homeless Aid groups" agree that the size of the homeless population is "as high as 2 to 3 million." The story emphasizes that government agencies need accurate counts of populations such as the homeless in order to alleviate the problems of these populations. However, the story fails to discuss how homelessness has been defined or what steps should be taken to respond to the problem.
Limited Debate Over the Nature of Homelessness: "Whitewashing?"

My research indicates that news stories presenting images of the social composition of the homeless from 1980 to 1990 depict multiple portraits of the size and nature of various segments of this population. However, some stories appearing in news magazines in the late '80's claim the news media had previously portrayed a misleading picture of the homeless and their personal problems. Some news stories decry a whitewashing of the homeless and may contribute to sentiments that the homeless are responsible for their circumstances and homeless advocates have exaggerated and mislead the public; such sentiments may reinforce resignation that homelessness is an inevitable social problem.

The "shattering myths" story discussed above draws on the Urban Institute's study and two others--one a U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development "national survey" and the other a "19-city health care demonstration project funded largely by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation"--to support claims that previous impressions of the homeless as mentally ill or "people like us" are "emotionally appealing" but "equally erroneous" (US News, March 3, 1989).

Statistical information about the social composition of the homeless population, drawn from the three studies, is presented in an effort to rectify previous "myths:"

...only a third of the homeless are mentally ill...33 percent to 38 percent of homeless adults are alcoholics, 13 percent to 25 percent are drug users and 21 percent to 24 percent have served time in state and federal
prisons...most homeless parents with children are black or Hispanic single women on welfare...women with children account for a quarter of those in shelters and on the streets (28).

A homeless population consisting of one third mentally ill individuals and one fourth women with children seems to create a sufficiently poignant and "emotionally appealing" portrait of the nature of the homeless problem. However, these statistics are presented in order to counter earlier "whitewashing" or "sanitizing" of the homeless in political rhetoric and "numerous media reports, particularly those on television." This story suggests that earlier discourse on the homeless presented a consistent--and erroneously whitewashed--portrait of the homeless. However, my research indicates that media reports from 1980 to 1990 contain variant and discrepant discussions and visual presentations about the size and nature of segments of the homeless population. For example, both print and broadcast media under study present news stories involving African-American, White and Hispanic homeless people; young, middle-aged and elderly homeless people; and male and female homeless people. Comparisons between the demographic distributions of homeless people appearing in news stories and the actual demographic distribution of homeless people are not only beyond the scope of this study but also impossible because of the lack of consistent data describing the demographic nature of the actual homeless population.

The debate over the "whitewashing" of the homeless is mentioned in a few other news magazine articles and is sometimes
but not always related to a debate over how many people are homeless:

In fact, Snyder badly exaggerated when he claimed the homeless were just victims of budget cuts and economic misfortune and in need of a cheap apartment. National surveys of homeless adults have repeatedly shown that roughly two thirds are either mentally ill or hooked on alcohol or drugs (US News, July 16, 1990:10).

...such tales by the news media and homeless advocates of a "new" homeless population--families victimized by acts of God, economic misfortune and tight housing markets--convey only a partial picture of the changing homeless population. The sad truth is that the personal disabilities of today's homeless, particularly among single adults, strongly resemble those of the old skid-row homeless (U.S. News, January 15, 1990:27).

Homeless advocates admit to a well-intentioned whitewash: in their search for support and sympathy, they conspired to uphold the sanitized image of the deserving poor, in fear that if the more complex truth were known, the public would blame the victims and walk away. And who would know the truth anyway...census takers tried to include the street people in their count, but some advocates fear that the tallies could be too low by as much as 70% (Time, December 17, 1990:45).

In summary, contradictions permeate discussion of the size of the homeless problem and the presentation of numerical information about the segments composing the homeless population. When I look across the entire sample of stories on homelessness, a coherent image of the size of the problem never emerges. Discussion of why
discrepant numbers exist, how numbers were reached, and the political ramifications of population miscounts is rare; when discussion of this type occurs it is superficial. Overall, the lack of consensus on both the size of the homeless problem and the proportion of groups making up the total population may be seen as contributing to a sense of resignation—a sense that because the problem can not be understood, the causes and solutions may never be found.
Chapter Four

THE MESHING OF SOCIAL PROBLEMS

Each disaster has its own genealogy; the problems of the street people only begin with the need for shelter. Perhaps that is because homelessness is a symptom of every other social ill: drugs, crime, teenage pregnancy, illiteracy, violence, even the decline of compassion during the me-first '80's (Time, December 17, 1990:45).

Many have downward-pulling problems, such as alcoholism or mental illness. Social events, like a recession, and social policies, like the careless deinstitutionalization of the mentally ill, swell the ranks of the street people. So do changes in social values: the increasing numbers of young homeless persons reflects an increasing readiness of parents to discard troublesome children (Newsweek, December 5, 1983:134).

In the absence of an explicit definition for the problem of homelessness or consistent portraits of who are the homeless, news stories provide no clear image of the limits, boundaries or criteria for distinguishing between homelessness and other situations which may themselves be considered as social problems. Thus a "meshing of social problems" occurs throughout the eleven year period. As homelessness is enmeshed with other large and so-called "intractable" social conditions, a sense of resignation that certain problems plague societies throughout time appears throughout news stories.
Homelessness is portrayed as both a symptom of other "social ills" and a situation causing or perpetuating these problems. Journalists and claims-makers often discuss two or more social problems within a news story but never differentiate between the problems to clarify which conditions constitute homelessness and which constitute some other problem. Stories rarely create a clear picture of whether one problem is a symptom or consequence of another "larger cause" problem. Homelessness is "enmeshed" with such issues, for example, as: unemployment; hunger and poverty; abandoned or runaway teens; crime, especially in subway, bus and train stations; panhandling; foster-care policy; problems within the mental health institution; the deterioration of public and private low-income/low-rent housing; hoboes who illegally hitch rides on trains, and people with AIDS who need housing. Enmeshing may create a sense that these problems are overwhelming or inevitable and thus might relate to the lack of discussion of who should do what about homelessness.

**Mental Illness and Homelessness**

While news stories on homelessness suggest that homelessness encompasses aspects of other social problems, they often fail to offer directions for beginning to solve either problem. For example, in the case of mental illness and homelessness, if mental illness policy was the "larger" problem, one could argue that addressing the larger problem would alleviate the smaller problem. But because homelessness and mental health problems are totally
enmeshed, no sense of where to begin addressing the problem gets projected. Mental illness is constructed as a social problem both encompassing homelessness and standing as an enormous problem in and of itself.

News stories depict mental health institutions as laden with numerous problems--only some of which relate to homelessness--that may resist efforts for solutions. According to one news story, many mental health professionals "now believe that the nation's primary-care system for chronic mental patients is in utter chaos" (Newsweek, January 6, 1986:14). Chaos in the mental health system is attributed to policies associated with deinstitutionalization reforms. These reforms resulted in a system which provides no psychiatric care for hundreds of thousands of mentally ill people in need, many of them homeless.

Currently, the mental health system faces such problems as: legal standards which prevent involuntary commitment; a shortage of bed space in psychiatric hospitals and a shortage of in-patient treatment facilities; widespread public resistance to building community mental health centers in residential or commercial locations; a funding system which allocates two thirds of all state and local mental-health funding to mental institutions that house less than 40 percent of the nation's chronic mentally ill; problematic health insurance policies; cuts or mismanagement of federal funding for mental health facilities; poor working relations between state hospitals and federally funded community facilities, or between health care administrators, legislators and civil service

The meshing of the two social problems of mental illness and homelessness creates a sense of resignation that these problems may never be overcome:

the outlook is bleak. The homeless mentally ill are not capable of becoming an organized interest group, and the help they need must come from hard pressed local governments that are reducing social services, not increasing them (CBS, November 20, 1983).

...nor is that the proper function of jails and shelters (to provide care for the chronic mentally ill). Because so few places fulfill that role, one national disgrace has given way to another (CBS, March 3, 1989).

Stories that "mesh" homelessness and mental health institution problems also convey a sense of resignation when they construct issues as a choice between one social problem or another: either the mentally ill live in overcrowded facilities and face inhumane mistreatment, or they gain the freedom to live and die as homeless on the streets.
Unemployment and Homelessness

Another example of social problem meshing occurs in stories about unemployment and homelessness. Unemployment is often cited as a problem contributing to homelessness. Some news stories describe "migrations" of unemployed individuals and heads of families who travel from state to state in search of employment. Many of these travelers run out of money along the way and find themselves homeless. These "nomads" and "wanderers" create problems for agencies and cities who face added costs which often strain meagre resources (US News, January 17, 1983; CBS, December 24, 1985; CBS January 30, 1989).

Other people searching for work find themselves homeless because of a "depression in the oil fields," "the depressed timber industry" or the recession in the Southwest U.S. (US News, March 8, 1982; CBS, November 11, 1986; CBS November 27, 1986). Several other stories emphasize claims that homelessness often contributes to unemployment because the homeless find it hard to locate and maintain jobs without a permanent address or a reliable place to sleep and stay clean, or because prospective employers do not want homeless employees (CBS, February 12, 1986; CBS June 26, 1986; Time, February 2, 1987; CBS December 19, 1990; Time, February 26, 1990). In some news stories, journalists and sources discuss both problems simultaneously without making it clear that not all unemployed people are homeless, not all the homeless are unemployed, or that unemployment is not the only cause of homelessness (CBS, December 11, 1982; Newsweek, August 16,
Hunger and Homelessness

New stories throughout the period under study--especially CBS stories--frequently relate homelessness to the social problem of hunger. Stories on "the hungry and homeless" typically involve discussions of government statistics or statements about the problem of hunger and present journalists visiting soup kitchens and/or shelters. Hunger is presented as a widespread problem affecting growing numbers of people: not only alcoholics and drug addicts, but also senior citizens on fixed incomes, the homeless, unskilled workers who can not find work, people who have jobs but can not make ends meet, and "the middle class" (CBS, December 9, 1983; CBS, May 22, 1986; CBS, July 16, 1987; CBS, December 23, 1987; CBS, December 18, 1990; CBS December 19, 1990).

Journalists make claims that cities throughout the country report painful increases in the numbers of homeless and hungry people. Visuals in many news stories depict people in lines waiting for meals. In some stories, soup kitchen workers claim they've never seen so many people coming for help...never seen so many women and children. But presentations do not make it clear if claims-makers are talking about hungry people or homeless people. In one story, the journalist describes families: "on line, with derelicts, at a soup kitchen." This story implies that some of the people in line are homeless, but does not make it clear which people
are hungry and homeless as opposed to just hungry (CBS, December 20, 1983).

Some stories highlighting "Hands Across America," a 1986 national event aimed at raising money for the hungry and the homeless, treat hunger and homelessness as one social problem, or relate these problems to the larger issue of poverty. These stories emphasize the pervasiveness of these problems and present information conveying a sense of resignation that poverty, hunger or homelessness may never go away (CBS, March 28, 1986; CBS, May 18, 1986; CBS, May 23, 1986; CBS, May 24, 1986; May 25, 1986; May 26, 1986; August 23, 1986).

For example, one CBS news story on Hands Across America presents "file tape" of scenes depicting a homeless man sitting on a bench eating; a person offering food to a homeless man huddled on a sidewalk beneath cardboard boxes; and close-ups of dirty-faced children, one eating a cookie. During these scenes a journalist comments on the impact of Hands Across America and other national one day events for social causes:

Good intentions don’t always work...And while short term help is simple, solving hunger and poverty is not. The government spent billions on programs which did not end poverty (CBS, March 28, 1986).

The theme that homelessness, hunger and poverty are related "social ills" appears frequently in the news stories studied. The meshing of these social problems conveys a sense of resignation that a "war on poverty" may last a long time and never be won, and that measures
addressing any of these issues constitute a "drop in the bucket" in comparison to the pervasiveness of the conditions.

News stories focusing on homeless youth link this segment of the homeless population to many social problems. The problem of youth living on the street is enmeshed in the problems of divorce; child abuse, neglect or abandonment; child abduction; drug and alcohol addiction and prostitution. Stories describe the problems teens flee when they run away or when they must leave home and claim that teens on the street become victims of violent crime. News stories relate homeless youth to many social problems as they emphasize that teens also perpetuate distressing social conditions through their involvement in prostitution, substance abuse and petty crime. Some journalists claim that the lifestyles of homeless youth make them susceptible to diseases such as AIDS (US News, June 9, 1980; US News, January 17, 1983; Newsweek, March 11, 1985; CBS, December 18, 1985; CBS November 24, 1987; Newsweek, April 25, 1988).

Crime and Homelessness

While criminal elements of the runaways and throwaways problem get associated with homelessness, the more general construction of crime as a social problem gets enmeshed with the problem of homelessness in several news stories, particularly between the years 1987 and 1990 (Newsweek, August 16, 1982; CBS, March 27, 1987; US News, March 23, 1987; Newsweek, January 25, 1988; Time, February 8, 1988; US News, July 24, 1989; Time, April
Several stories focus on crimes occurring within bus, subway and train stations or along railroad tracks. For example, an article entitled "A nightmare on 42nd street," proclaims: "the nation's busiest bus terminal is a microcosm of society's ills: crack, crime and homelessness." In this story, homelessness is linked to society's other "ills;" the homeless are presented as just one part of a larger dreaded population:

New York City's unwanted: the homeless and the addicted, the jobless and the desperate, the drunks and the hustlers--all of them looking for a warm place to sleep and a way to get by. At evening rush hour, the Port Authority's two cultures--the homeward bound and the homeless--collide (Newsweek, February 27, 1989).

This story goes on to describe or visually present hustlers stealing luggage, selling stolen credit card numbers and assaulting victims; males and females involved in prostitution; people selling or buying crack. Several individuals get arrested or shackled to a transit station wall. But the story never makes it clear whether all or just some of these criminals are homeless. Thus the homeless get associated and enmeshed with the general problem of crime, in a manner which may encourage fear of the homeless while suggesting no avenues for addressing either the problem of crime or that of homelessness.
Panhandling and Homelessness

News stories which focus on panhandling or begging often fail to present a boundary for distinguishing between homelessness and panhandling as social problems:

As the ranks of the nation's homeless continue to swell, pushy panhandlers...are indeed attracting attention. No longer simply an unpleasant reminder of society's failures, beggars are feared as a potential danger, particularly in a holiday season, when city streets are filled with shoppers and tourists (Time, January 11, 1988:33).

Another article entitled "Shrugging off the Homeless" claims:

the nation's toughest urbanites lose patience with panhandlers...New Yorkers, who pride themselves on having the nation's thickest urban carapaces, are cracking under the tightening grasp of the homeless (Time, April 16, 1990: 14).

These stories reflect a journalistic tendency for using the words "panhandler" and "homeless" interchangeably. Stories often suggest that all panhandlers are homeless, or that all homeless are panhandlers; distinctions between the two populations, if mentioned at all, get little attention (CBS, December 20, 1983; US News, March 23, 1987; Time, September 5, 1988:68; Time, September 5, 1988:73; Time, January 11, 1988; Newsweek, February 27, 1989; US News, July 24, 1989; Newsweek, February 12, 1990; Time, April 16, 1990; Newsweek, May 21, 1990). Some visuals in stories not focusing specifically on panhandling still portray the homeless as begging
The meshing of these two problems can be seen in stories which offer reasons for the growth of panhandling or which typify panhandling as an activity of the homeless. Stories which describe "backlashes" against the homeless also link homelessness and panhandling as they describe communities that enact legal measures--including includes bans against begging--to control "threatening," "aggressive" or "menacing" behavior of the homeless (Newsweek, October 29, 1984; Time, March 31, 1986; CBS, June 28, 1990). These stories usually include "on-the-street" interviews with men and women. These interviews, offered as an indication of public opinion towards the homeless, present people who decry the presence of people asking for money on every city corner (CBS, December 20, 1983; CBS, June 28, 1990; CBS, December 19, 1990).

News stories typically rely on news sources such as advocates for the homeless, religious and private social service professionals who work with the homeless, and social researchers of homelessness to present information on panhandling. One lengthy news magazine analysis of the problem of panhandling examines public opinion and legal action toward begging and includes "expert views" on the backgrounds of panhandlers, the causes of panhandling and the needs of panhandlers. According to this news story:

The population of panhandlers reveals the myriad scars of the underclass: they are victims of broken and abusive homes, or were squeezed between rising prices and stagnant wages, or were forgotten by an impenetrable
bureaucracy. Changes in the treatment of the mentally ill during the 1960's and '70's left thousands of deinstitutionalized patients on the streets...The single greatest reason for the growing ranks of panhandlers, many experts agree, is the desperate shortage of affordable housing (Time, September 5, 1988:71).

This passage illustrates an association between the causes of homelessness and the causes of panhandling; an association prevalent in many articles focusing on either homelessness or panhandling. The meshing of homelessness and panhandling evident as stories present brief biographies of homeless people who panhandle or panhandlers who are homeless.

The meshing of homelessness and panhandling creates a sense of resignation that both problems may never get resolved:

Faced with well over 350,000 homeless wandering the streets in search of food and shelter, cities cannot hope to get rid of beggars. The problem isn't panhandling, says Patrick Murphy, director of the police policy board of the U.S. Conference of Mayors..."It's an entire social structure. Without proper housing, there is little hope for a solution" (Time, January 11, 1988).

Meshing occurs in news stories from 1980 to 1990 as homelessness gets linked to large social concerns in a manner which blurs the distinctions between which conditions should be attributed to or equated with individual problems. In addition to the social conditions described above, homelessness is associated with other problematic issues such as foster care policy (CBS February 1, 1986); the Persian Gulf Crisis and the effects of war on veterans (CBS December 21, 1990); housing problems faced by lower middle
class and working class residents (CBS, March 12, 1989; October 31, 1990); and 1988 Presidential Campaign Conventions and agendas (CBS, January 19, 1988; January 24, 1988; February 12, 1988; July 15, 1988; October 10, 1988).

The meshing of homelessness with other social problems may function to keep homelessness alive in the media without fostering notions that something can and should be done to help the homeless. Meshing may serve to create or reinforce perceptions that homelessness is like hunger, poverty, crime or unemployment: an inevitable problem resisting attempts for resolution. However, the association between social problems may serve to make homelessness an issue worthy of attention in the news media, where complex social issues without simple, low-cost, non-controversial solutions may not attain prolonged news coverage. The following section will examine some processes which may facilitate media attention to social issues which, because of their nature, may otherwise fade rapidly from media agendas.

MESHING, ISSUE AGGREGATION AND TOPIC DIFFERENTIATION

In a study of the media's role in establishing child abuse as a new area of public policy, Barbara Nelson (1984) found four factors said to contribute to continuing news coverage of child abuse. Nelson suggests these factors--topic differentiation, issue aggregation, the link between the professional and the mass media, and the growing appeal of human interest stories--may promote
prolonged media attention to many social issues. Below I will discuss how two of these factors, topic differentiation and issue aggregation, may relate to the concept of meshing and help explain the news media's continued interest in homelessness.

Nelson describes a pattern of early general reports of child abuse followed by attention to specific types of abuse. Thus the more general problem of child abuse became differentiated over time into more narrowly defined topics such as the relationship between illegitimacy and abuse, or abuse within military families. Topic differentiation resulted in increased news coverage of child abuse.

Coverage of child abuse also increased because the problem was linked to what Nelson calls "larger, more overarching concerns," such as intrafamilial violence. Intrafamilial violence includes abuse of a spouse, parent, or even grandparent. Through issue aggregation, the scope of child abuse increased (1984:57).

I found that the process of meshing problems with homelessness was apparent throughout the period 1980-1990. Meshing relates to both topic differentiation and issue aggregation; these processes may explain how homelessness became an enduring news topic despite potential constraints associated with journalistic routines, audience interest and criteria for newsworthy topic matter. I can make a qualified comparison between the meshing of social problems and issue aggregation, for news stories on homelessness link the problem to other issues--such as hunger,
unemployment and mental illness—but often fail to clarify which is the "larger, more overarching" issue.

Nelson points out that connections between issues and the differentiation of a general problem into more limited topics allow journalists to draw information for news stories from an increasing pool of news sources and present the problem in novel and diverse ways to multiple types of audiences. Thus journalists could call upon previously established news sources when associating homelessness with other problems or specifying particular homelessness-related topics. By relying on official news sources with established reputations for access to credible information, journalists could cover homelessness in a routinized and efficient manner. Thus journalists produced news stories on homelessness through regular contact with such news sources as: mental health administrators, researchers and advocates for news of mental illness; FBI officials or the National Network of Runaway and Youth Services for the issue of runaways and throwaways; law enforcement officials at federal, state and local levels for crime and panhandling news; or, for other enmeshed issues, federal government officials for agriculture, labor, or welfare agencies.

In some cases, meshing or issue aggregation may serve to legitimize homelessness as a social condition worthy of media attention. Homelessness as a social problem lacks consensus, particularly in terms of problem definition, size, causes, responsibility and public sympathy. However, issues such as hunger, unemployment and crime may get more widespread recognition as
well-established conditions which necessitate continuous monitoring. It seems possible that news stories focusing on the mentally ill, the hungry or the unemployed—and possibly on teen runaways or throwaways—may appeal to readers' social interests and sympathies in a way that stories dealing with the general problem of homelessness may not. Coverage of homelessness exhibits topic differentiation to the extent that news stories focus on narrowly defined topics not only in recent news coverage, but also in the stories appearing in the early 1980's.

Local Homelessness

For example, stories about specific homeless situations in individual cities, towns or counties focus mainly on local homeless problems and briefly—if at all—relate these situations to the more general problem of homelessness nationally. Eleven news stories concerned primarily with local homeless problems appear from 1982 to 1988. These stories highlight the homeless-related conditions in Los Angeles; Washington, D.C.; Houston, Texas; Wasco County, Oregon; Ferndale, Michigan; and Boston (Time, July 19, 1982:81; Time, December 6, 1982:24; Newsweek, September 24, 1984:35; Time, October 22, 1984:42; Newsweek, January 7, 1985:15; Newsweek, July 8, 1985:44; Newsweek, December 5, 1988:94; Newsweek, March 6, 1989:27; CBS, November 7, 1988; CBS, December 24, 1988). An additional news story claims that communities across the nation have struggled to deal with local homeless problems. This Newsweek article contrasts the efforts of

Specific Responses to Homelessness


General Responses to Homelessness

Several news stories focus specifically on how cold weather affects the homeless and what emergency measures are taken to prevent deaths from exposure (Newsweek, February 4, 1985:24; CBS, January 12, 1982; January 20, 1983; January 12, 1985; CBS, December 3, 1985; January 5, 1988). One news story focuses on how large cities are struggling but falling short with efforts to help the homeless (US News, December 9, 1985:79). Two news articles emphasize that the homeless are receptive to help and highlight "successful" programs specifically tailored to meet the needs of segments of the homeless population (US News, February 29,
Harassment of the Homeless

Several news stories appearing between 1984 and 1990 focus on "backlashes" against the homeless (CBS, November 26, 1984; Newsweek, December 24, 1984:20; Time, March 11, 1985:68; Time, March 31, 1986:29; CBS, April 28, 1986). These stories describe the "negative" impact of the homeless on specific downtown business communities or recreation areas and detail legislative measures taken to control the behaviors of the homeless. Some stories describe how backlashes in certain communities have resulted in assaults and murder of homeless residents. A related story (CBS November 8, 1990) describes a court case involving a Spot, a Santa Barbara homeless man's dog. The case centered on a debate over the dog's alleged attack of a man who may have been stealing the property of the homeless. Throughout the news story, a lawyer described as "Spot's Attorney" defends Spots innocence, claiming the dog's arrest reflected just one instance of the town's harassment of the homeless.

Types of Homelessness

The general problem of homelessness is differentiated into topics which deal with specific forms of homelessness such as the
homeless living in garages (Time, June 22, 1987:23); the working homeless (CBS, January 29, 1985; CBS, February 12, 1986; CBS, June 26, 1986); and the homeless living in New York City subways and underground transit station tunnels (US News, March 23, 1987:69; CBS, March 27, 1986). In 1987, after the suicide of a transit station resident woman who had been interviewed one year previous, CBS profiled the background of this woman and related her situation to the "family" of homeless who live in the transit station "in the most desperate circumstances and a lot of peril" (CBS, August 14, 1987).

Homeless "Segments"


Homeless Individuals

Several news stories examine the life of a homeless individual--either one who has achieved "celebrity" status or one who lives or dies in obscurity. For example, Joyce Brown, "America's most famous street person," (Newsweek, March 21, 1988:8) gained public notoriety as the first mentally ill homeless person hospitalized against her will under a controversial New York City program. When the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) successfully defended Brown's right to live on the street, Brown
was released. She later appeared on talk shows and gave a lecture at Harvard University. One news story claims Brown was spotted shouting obscenities and panhandling outside her Manhattan hotel residence just seven weeks after her release (Time, November 23, 1987:29; CBS, December 18, 1987; Newsweek, March 21, 1988:8; CBS, February 19, 1988). A story broadcast on CBS News (November 5, 1987) describes the hospitalization and impending court case of Ann Smith, a.k.a. Ann Levy, but later stories do not clarify whether Levy is actually Joyce Brown.

Three other news stories profile homeless individuals. One CBS news story focuses on Luellen Couch, a homeless youth who starred in "Streetwise," a documentary on Seattle's street teens, and was later stabbed to death while trying to save a younger girl from assault (CBS, December 18, 1985). In another story a woman writes commentary on her brother Bob, an alcoholic homeless veteran who died alone in his car and left behind an ex-wife, three sons, friends and a Veteran's Administration counselor who all tried to stay in touch with him (Newsweek, October 3, 1988:12). One autobiographical article tells of a woman left homeless after losing her business because of a bank fraud and FDIC take-over (Newsweek, November 25, 1990:10).

Miscellaneous Topics

Several news stories describe highly specific topics such as the education of homeless children (Newsweek, CBS, November 23, 1988; January 23, 1989:51); "militancy" among the homeless
architects' designs for homeless shelters (January 1, 1990:38); or a calendar featuring the homeless of Berkeley, designed to convey the message that the homeless are "interesting and enjoyable to know about" (CBS, December 26, 1990). One news article presents an argument for restricting the homeless from community parks because their presence and behavior contributes to the "demoralization of neighbors," "the loss of social controls and the destabilization of entire communities" (US News, July 24, 1989:56).

Chapter Five

CONSTRUCTING IMAGES OF THE HOMELESS:

Narrative Components

The image of homelessness that emerges in news stories between 1980 and 1990 is one with many faces, many voices, many "personalities;" in fact, homelessness appears as a problem with multiple typifications, multiple faces. Just as there is no precise or explicit definition of homelessness, there is no single construction of the homeless. There are several constructions, and each appears and reappears throughout the eleven year period, so that no one image dominates or serves as a consistent symbol that could anchor homelessness as a particular type of social problem necessitating a specific type of social action. All constructions share certain content components: social actors, relationships, behaviors, conditions, causes.

Social actors. Social actors are victims, villains, and heroes. Those filling the roles of social actors are the homeless, social service workers, and advocates or volunteers. Occasionally, the homeless are constructed through stories about heroes who make incredible sacrifices or perform virtuous acts while working with the homeless; advocates and volunteers play the roles of heroes. News coverage of homelessness constructs no precise or consistent portrait of who are the villains and victims of homelessness. The absence of clearly identifiable villains and victims adds to the
murkiness that surrounds the construction of homelessness as a social problem. The ambiguity in identifying villains and victims contributes to the overall sense that solutions to homelessness may never be found.

News stories convey ambiguity as to whether the homeless are the victims or the villains of social conditions. In many news stories, the homeless get constructed as "hippies or hermits" who are homeless because of their own behaviors or character flaws. Hippie-hermits appear simultaneously as both victims and villains, for they are directly responsible for bringing about the problematic situations and wretched conditions they face. Some news stories construct the homeless as mentally ill victims of well-intentioned social policies. This construction provides no consistent impression of who are the villains that should be blamed for homelessness among the mentally ill and discusses both individual and systemic reasons for the high prevalence of homelessness among this sub-population. News sometimes constructs the homeless as villains preying upon the public. The victims of this construction are members of the "general public" who get assaulted or harassed by panhandlers, bums or "street crazies."

Relationships. Homelessness gets constructed as news stories focus on the relationships among and between social institutions and social actors experiencing or dealing with homelessness. News stories describe and characterize relations between the homeless and those who interact with or avoid them: "the public," members of welfare and religious institutions, and representatives of legal,
political and educational institutions. News coverage of homelessness at various times characterizes relationships as involving helplessness, dependencies, resistance, apathy and conflict.

**Behaviors of the homeless.** In each of the constructions, the homeless get described or visually portrayed as exhibiting a set of relatively distinctive behaviors. Constructions at various times emphasize behaviors that are deviant, bizarre, pathetic, destructive, hostile, or violent. Occasionally, in the case of homeless children and some parents, news characterizes behaviors as productive, caring or nurturing. As news stories depict the behaviors of the homeless, they convey impressions of whether the homeless cause their situations, whether the homeless want help, and whether the homeless can be helped. Thus the presentation of groups of homeless marching through the streets at night or breaking down the doors of abandoned buildings constructs a different portrait of the problem than depictions of the homeless sitting alone crying or muttering to no one.

**Conditions faced by the homeless.** Each construction of homelessness emphasizes a somewhat different set of conditions faced by homeless victims or villains. In general, conditions relate to the weather; to health, nutrition and physical safety; and to types of arrangements for taking shelter. Descriptions of conditions vary with regard to the characterization of their severity, their consequences, and whether the homeless have any power to act upon or control them.
For example, some constructions emphasize sickness that results from alcohol consumption and consequent exposure to extreme cold. Other constructions emphasize physical and psychological damage to children who live under harmful conditions in homeless shelters or welfare hotels. Descriptions of conditions play a role in constructing homelessness as either an intolerable social problem or an inevitable one. News coverage that constructs the homeless as innocent victims who suffer under wretched living conditions they can not control or alleviate obviously conveys more of a sense of urgency for resolving situations of homelessness than news coverage which does not.

Causes of homelessness. Many news stories about homelessness never mention potential causes of this social problem. Some news stories describe the events which led to individual cases of homelessness, but do not contain claims about the causes of the problem for the general homeless population. Individual news stories which do discuss causes attribute the problem to different types of forces: some systemic, others individualistic.

Some news coverage includes detailed numerical information or historical descriptions of social trends--such as the decline of the nuclear family or the deinstitutionalization of the mentally ill--which are characterized as contributing to the growth of the homeless population. Other news coverage includes brief references to simplified causes such as unemployment, "the recession" or "inflation." The causes which various constructions emphasize include: government policies which led to shortages of public low-
income housing; real-estate market developments resulting in the
decline of private low-cost housing, such as the gentrification of
skid rows and urban areas and the elimination of single-room-
occupancy buildings; "changes in social values" related to domestic
abuse and the abandonment of children and youth; federal budget cuts
to social programs; de-institutionalization and subsequent mental
health policies; and personal tragedies such as fires, illness and
accidents.

Each construction emphasizes a different set of causes for
homelessness, a different sense of "who is to blame" for bringing
about this social problem. Thus news coverage generates multiple
and discrepant images of blame for homelessness. The lack of
resolution regarding who is responsible for causing homelessness
generates ambiguity as to who is or should be responsible for acting
to alleviate these problematic conditions and situations. The
presentation of claims about the causes of homelessness seems to
create a general sense of resignation that permeates news coverage
of homelessness.

Narrative Conventions: Establishing Constructions as Valid

The above discussion illustrates how five content components
construct different portraits of the homeless. Now I turn to the
issue of how certain processes work to produce the various
constructions and establish them as valid. As news stories
selectively emphasize various images of homelessness through
mechanisms that characterize the homeless in one way or another,
they serve to compose different constructions of the social problem. Below I focus on four narrative conventions: biographies or vignettes of particular homeless individuals or families; news commentary--synonyms and adjectives--that describe and characterize the homeless; visual techniques used to depict the homeless; and the presentation of numbers, statistics and research findings.

**Biographies or vignettes.** News coverage constructs images of homelessness by providing personal stories about specific homeless people. Biographies focus on the histories of individuals or the events that led to their current situations, while vignettes highlight present circumstances. Together, biographies and vignettes offer concrete and often dramatic examples of how individuals become homeless; what it means to be homeless, in terms of lifestyle and facing obstacles; and how homeless people behave and interact.

The image of homelessness created through this constructing process typifies homelessness as a particular type of social problem affecting a particular segment of the general population. Biographies hold potential for humanizing the problem if they construct the homeless as having an identity--a history, a family, friends, emotions, values and hopes for the future. Vignettes present varied examples of how the homeless behave or exist. But the sentiments that individual accounts evoke for readers may depend upon the content of the accounts. Personal accounts vary in sympathy with respect to why the homeless individuals discussed became homeless or whether they have made efforts to overcome their situations. Obviously a vignette describing a young burglar
who became homeless after fleeing a legal investigation constructs a different image of the homeless than an account of an elderly couple who became homeless when a fire ravaged the apartment building where they lived and worked.

Journalistic commentary and language. Diverse portraits of homelessness get constructed through the use of news commentary-synonyms and adjectives—that describe and characterize the homeless. Terms such as vagrants, bums or trolls seem to provoke different images than terms like "the new poor" or "abandoned people." The language used to discuss the homeless population contributes to the creation of constructions which present multiple images which may vary in the extent of "humanness," compassion or sympathy they convey. Language attributes qualities to the homeless and plays a role in constructing them as either innocent or corrupt; human or animal-like; passive, dependent and helpless or lazy, greedy and rejecting.

Visual techniques depicting the homeless. Different constructions of homelessness emerge as the homeless get portrayed visually. The homeless get constructed through photographs and video shots which present visual evidence about what types of people are homeless in terms of age, race, gender, size and visible disabilities. Photographs and video footage also serves to characterize and present evidence about how the homeless behave and what conditions they face. Visuals provide glimpses of where the homeless spend their days and nights, whether the homeless live in total isolation or interact with one another or with
the non-homeless, and whether the interactions which do occur are positive or negative. Visuals characterize interactions among the homeless and between the homeless and authorities, volunteers or social service workers.

Individual photographs or shots of the homeless convey an impression of their subjects within the context of the news story in which they appear. A single image of a homeless person takes on meaning in relation to accompanying headlines, captions, text or narration. The typification of the problem presented by any one image may also be influenced by subsequent images included within the story. Thus the manners in which photographs get displayed and video segments get edited both contribute to the creation of multiple constructions of homelessness. In cases where images of homelessness get juxtaposed to images of "normal" living, contrasts may serve to emphasize either deviance and hostility or alienation and isolation.

For example, several news stories include visual texts and accompanying narration describing homeless people protesting, banning together in "militant" activist groups, erecting tent cities to "draw attention" to their plight, breaking into abandoned apartment buildings, or taking part in "battles" against the police (See Construction of Threatening Villains, below). The construction of homelessness created through the editing of "protest stories" contains a suggestion that advocacy among the homeless has become a widespread national movement employing hostile techniques. However, scenes are not identified clearly in terms of where and
when individual shots were taken. In each story, scenes are
interspersed throughout the individual news segment as journalists
describe "national unrest" and militancy in various cities.
Journalists do not disclose whether visual scenes depict one or two
isolated rallies or many widespread incidents. Viewers may
consider protests involving the homeless as widespread and
frequently destructive phenomena, yet they receive no information
to confirm or dispute this conception.

Presentation of numbers, statistics, research findings. News
coverage of homelessness often includes numbers, statistics and
research findings that claim to document the growth of
homelessness nationally or within individual cities or the social and
psychological nature of the homeless population, or that indicate
how situations in various locations differ. Numerical information is
used to detail the causes of homelessness as numbers document:
shrinking populations of mentally ill patients in state hospitals
since de-institutionalization, suggesting that more mentally ill
persons are now homeless; the declining pool of public and private
low-income housing; and federal funding cuts in the areas of
subsidized housing, welfare and social services. Statistics describe
the homeless population in terms of age, race, gender, education,
criminal history, mental and physical health, experience with
alcohol and other drugs, and employment history. Numbers and
statistics indicate how local, state and federal governments--and
private charities--have increased or decreased spending and staffs;
expanded or created additional facilities and services; and turned people seeking help away when service sites reach capacity.

The components described above operate to validate as true news story constructions of various images of "who are the homeless." The problem of homelessness has several different "faces;" each face seems to portray a unique portrait of the type of people who become homeless, the reasons people become homeless, and the characteristic behaviors and attributes of the homeless population. Each construction presents a distinct sub-population of homeless confronting somewhat unique circumstances, and involved in different types of activities. Below I describe the five distinct constructions of "who are the homeless" that I deduced from my analysis. While each construction shares a few common components with the larger group, each conveys a distinctive representation of the problem of homelessness.

Construction of Homeless Institution Avoiders: Hermits and Hippies

The most prominent construction of the homeless presented in news coverage conveys an image of the homeless as wanting to live a "separate" existence, outside the boundaries of established norms, isolated and alienated from social institutions. News coverage projecting this image portrays the homeless as disconnected from and avoiding social institutions, and refusing everything but subsistence charity from institutions. I label this construction the image of the homeless as institution avoiders. Two types of institution avoiders are "hermits" and "hippies." Hermits are
institution avoiders who shun all social relationships. Hippies are institution avoiders who form groups or small communities of their own. For literary convenience, I will refer to this construction as the image of homeless as "hippies or hermits" throughout the dissertation.

Social actors. In this construction, the homeless appear as victims of their own desires or behaviors. In a sense, institution avoiders are both victims and villains at the same time. They choose or passively accept their lifestyles. No external villain is blamed for the plight of the hippies or hermits. The police, "outreach workers," Salvation Army workers, volunteers and "citizens" of towns and cities also play roles in this construction.

Homeless hippies and hermits include mentally ill people living on the streets, but the mentally ill homeless are described as part of the larger group of hippies or hermits and are not separately identified in discussion or depiction of the larger group. Thus news stories describe the homeless as including the mentally ill, alcoholics, drug addicts and single unemployed men, and go on to describe the conditions the homeless face without singling-out the mentally ill homeless as a separate segment facing special conditions or displaying unique behaviors. In contrast, news which does construct the homeless mentally ill as a distinct segment of the homeless population (see construction two) portrays the mentally ill as victims.

Relationships. Hippies and hermits avoid relationships with representatives of social institutions. They voluntarily or because
of their own flaws separate themselves from "the mainstream" or the "general public." Homeless hermits are individuals who want to live outside social communities and avoid contact with non-homeless people. For the most part, individual hermits even avoid other hermits.

Hippies have chosen an "alternative lifestyle" outside the community. They may live in groups or enclaves within a bounded territory. For example, the homeless in Santa Barbara, CA, live in "Fig Tree Park" and are known as the "tree people," while other groups "take over" public areas such as San Francisco's Town Square, New York City's Central Park, or the beaches of Los Angeles. The homeless who live in tunnels beneath New York City's Grand Central Station get presented as a community. A priest at a local NYC church describes this enclave as:

a family that's surrounded by a kind of despair. They're not all unhappy people, they're not all miserable, but they're in the most desperate circumstances and a lot of peril (CBS, August 14, 1987).

Construction of hippies or hermits accentuates both resistance to "real casework" and dependency on subsistence help; in either case, the homeless form no personal or positive relationships with representatives of social institutions.

Hippies and Hermits are described as adopting adversarial or dependent relations with social workers, religious clergy, members of the public or police officers. Some news stories include quotes from social service workers--and sometimes the homeless
themselves--asserting that the homeless rely on "hand-outs" because they are lazy or apathetic. One Newsweek article puts fourth the following claims:

Too often, official efforts to help only make things worse...Steve Burger, who runs the mission, longs for the older bums who shared traditional values even if they violated them. "The young guys come in demanding help," says Burger, "they think they have a constitutional right to be taken care of" (October 29, 1984:14).

Some news stories emphasize dependent relationships by including claims that providing services for the homeless perpetuates the problems. For example, one homeless man claims he knows he can spend his money on drugs and still find free food (CBS, December 19, 1990).

Many news stories stress resistant relations between hippies or hermits and those who want to help the homeless. News sources claim the homeless accept survival necessities such as food, blankets, and sometimes emergency shelter, but for the most part they don't want "real help." For example, a CBS news story (December 3, 1985) highlights New York City's emergency action to get the homeless off the streets on a bitter cold winter night. The journalist reports that, on this particular night, 2,200 used the city's emergency shelter system. Of this group, 225 homeless people came off the streets willingly as buses and vans escorted people from transit stations and city streets to the shelters. Only four people of the 2,200 refused to consent to the wishes of escorts and had to be taken to shelters by forces. However, the news story
focuses on these four people and the theme of the homeless wanting to live on the streets.

The story presents several news sources--Norman Segal of the NYCLU and two homeless men--who argue that the homeless have a legal right to stay on the street if they so desire. Visuals depict a police officer rounding up homeless individuals sleeping in transit stations, a handcuffed man forced to take shelter, and another unidentifiable person carried off the streets struggling and screaming. Thus the news story emphasizes that the homeless want to be left alone to live as they wish.

Hippies and hermits are at various times (1984-1990) the object of a backlash of violence or legal action aimed at controlling their behaviors. News coverage of "backlashes" against the homeless emphasize adversarial relations between institution avoiders and "ordinary citizens" who find the homeless a public nuisance because of their behaviors. Occasional conflicts with police occur as hippies and hermits loiter or sleep in places where they are not wanted. News coverage emphasizes conflict for the homeless living in transit stations and violating laws about "off-limits" areas or curfew times.

Hippies and Hermits sometimes interact with "heroes" who make great sacrifices or perform wondrous feats to help the homeless. For example, Mitch Snyder undertakes a 51-day hunger strike to force President Reagan to provide money for a "model shelter" in Washington, DC. In 1982 Advocate Robert Hayes, a lawyer who sued New York State to force it to provide care for the
homeless, leaves a $40,000-plus Wall Street job to work full time for a national organization for the homeless. Michael Greenberg, described as "a Samaritan of the streets" who "ministers to the old, the reticent and the shy," distributes 300 pairs of gloves each year on the New York Bowery. An article entitled "Washington's Little Miracles" describes the "gloriously inexplicable" soup kitchen and daytime shelter created and run by Veronica Maz, a "hyperkinetic fireplug...always up and doing with a heart for any fate." In their interactions with heroes, hippies or hermits are constructed as alien, passive, helpless objects of charitable deeds:

From the shadows, and silent as shadows, comes a trickle of street people, many of them homeless, to receive soup, sandwiches and coffee (at one of Maz's trucks). Upward of a hundred come, eat ravenously and silently steal away, back into the crevices of the metropolis (Newsweek, December 5, 1983:134).

The presentation of interactions between hippies or hermits and heroes suggests that it takes a saint-like individual to try to help the homeless.

**Behaviors.** News coverage presents hippies or hermits who conduct themselves without regard for whether behavior is appropriate for their environment; they act in ways that violate social norms regarding sleeping, sitting, eating, talking, dressing, sexual conduct and drinking alcohol. For example, one article describes Mitch Snyder's 1,200 bed DC shelter as "well known for its chaotic living conditions." According to this report, "in some instances, drug dealers and prostitutes peddled crack and sex inside the shelter" (US News, July 16, 1990:10). Involvement in substance-
abuse is often related to the behavior of the homeless, while
drinking from beer cans or hard-liquor glass bottles frequently gets
depicted visually. Institution avoiders loiter in parks, on sidewalks
or outside abandoned buildings. They construct "tent-cities" on
beaches, fields and lots, and sleep in highway underpasses, in
doorways, and in cardboard boxes on the streets.

Part of the (negative) reaction seems to stem from a
common perception that the homeless of today are
basically the crazies of the 1960's refurbished with a
new name. "We called them the hippies, and the beatniks
before that, and hoboes before that," says Sergeant Bill
Aluffi of the Santa Cruz police. "Most of them, I think,
are burned-out druggies who walk around in a daze,
begging on the mall, eating out of garbage cans, urinating
on storefronts" (Time, March 11, 1985:68).
The behaviors of institution avoiders invoke public resentment.
Homeless "hippies and hermits" dress and wear hairstyles
associated with deviates: long hair, unkept beards, out-of-fashion or
out-or-season clothing. Other bizarre or deviant behaviors include
singing, shouting or cursing in public; sitting alone and muttering;
and pushing shopping carts piled high with junk.

Stories about the homeless living in subway tunnels or tunnels
beneath train stations depict the homeless sneaking passed police,
scurrying down staircases, bedding down between train-tracks. One
news story describes the lifestyles of "street girls" who sleep with
men who "take them in for the sake of kindness or sex" (Newsweek,
January 2, 1984:24). News coverage includes claims that the
homeless bring trash and junk into otherwise clean neighborhoods;
block sidewalks with milk crates; leave beer cans in "lush green
parks; urinate in public; and siege public recreation areas, occupying or ruining park benches and picnic tables. These behaviors emphasize that the homeless live “outside” the boundaries of "normal society" or "the mainstream."

**Conditions.** The conditions faced by the homeless institution avoiders often relate to the weather. The homeless are described and depicted as searching for warmth in phone booths, steam grates, trash dumpsters, cardboard boxes; in transit stations, abandoned buildings, makeshift shacks. They build fires in trash cans and huddle around these in small groups. News stories include references to the many homeless who freeze to death in the cold or burn to death after lighting fires in abandoned houses. Hippies and hermits suffer from illness and diseases such as heat-stroke, frostbite, gangrene, tuberculosis, Salmonella, and dysentery. They deal with hunger by scavenging for food in trash cans or waiting in long lines at soup kitchens for one meal a day. Shelters are packed and overflowing, although they are dangerous, noisy, provide few showers or services, contain parasites and vermin, and have broken windows or holes in walls and ceilings.

**Causes.** Hippies and hermits are homeless by choice or because of personal problems with drugs, alcohol, crime. Other causes discussed may relate to the growth and increasing visibility of this group. Gentrification of cities destroyed low-rent hotels and rooming houses and pushed up rents in traditionally low-rent neighborhoods. Deinstitutionalization contributed to the ranks of
"vagrant Americans." The decriminalization of public drunkenness made the problem more visible.

**Narrative Conventions Constructing Homeless as Institution Avoiders**

**Biographies and vignettes.** Personal accounts emphasize the personal problems of homeless hippies and hermits and dramatize individual cases where people abandoned jobs, homes, friends and family after becoming involved with drug addiction or alcoholism. Both biographies and vignettes highlight cases where hippies and hermits either take advantage of charitable donations or spurn the efforts of those who try to rehabilitate them. These accounts characterize the homeless as unusual or bizarre individuals who have turned their backs on mainstream society to follow lifestyles centered on alcohol, drugs, panhandling or other deviate behavior.

Biographies describing individuals who died on the streets epitomize the construction of the institution avoider. For example, two news articles highlight the case of Rebecca Smith, who froze to death in a cardboard box in Manhattan in 1982 after refusing the efforts of social workers to have her hospitalized (US News, March 8, 1982:60; Newsweek, March 15, 1982:28); another news story describes the deaths of Leander Gilmore, who froze to death in an abandoned house in Washington DC., and Jesse Carpenter, a 61 year old alcoholic who froze to death in a park in Washington DC (Time, February 4, 1985: 20).
Scenarios emphasizing individual weakness and character flaws contribute to the construction of the homeless hippies and hermits. For example, Roosevelt Richardson, a drunk homeless man in Atlanta, climbed into an abandoned car to sleep and ended up with frostbite. His condition resulted in gangrene. Joseph Hanshaw, 19, was kicked out of a jobs corp program for selling marijuana, and spent most of 1983 living on the streets in Manhattan, looking for job. According to the news article, Hanshaw would rather bunk down in a concrete corner of a bus depot than check into city shelter (Time, December 9, 1983). A CBS broadcast (December 26, 1990) presents several brief biographies of homeless hippies who live in the streets and parks of Berkeley, CA. One man, dressed in a skirt, wig and hat, says he grew tired of "type A" behavior and quit his job to become a bum.

Journalistic commentary. The synonyms and adjectives used to describe the homeless institution avoiders characterize them not only as poor and lacking shelter, but also as deviant, root-less and less than human. Thus journalists employ many terms to refer to the homeless: bums, derelicts, desolate men, destitute transients, vagrants, grizzled tramps, street people, vent men, hoboos, trolls, tree people, the indigent, down-and-outers, lost-weekenders and drifters. The homeless are "human litter in the streets" or "tattered human bundles." In many cases, the vocabulary used to construct the homeless accentuates distance and separation from the center of society:
They are the homeless--a tattered tribe of exiles from the mainstream...The perennial hard core is a breed apart: bag ladies, winos, drifters and crazies, all scavenging for their meager lives in trash cans and alleyways. The new arrivals are mostly younger men, many of them black or Hispanic, who have been forced onto the street by the onset of hard times (Newsweek, March 15, 1982:28).

Journalists also refer to the homeless as "vagabonds scratching out an existence on the fringes of society." They claim the "tattered ranks of America's homeless" have "drifted well past the limits of respectability" or "sunk through poverty into another dimension of precariousness." Words such as "society's failures," "misfits," and "outcasts" characterize the homeless as unwanted or at fault for their situations.

The following example of comments from a broadcast news narrator illustrates the typical language used to describe institution avoiders:

It's not nice to say...but many of them are life's losers. A sorry collection of alcoholics, of drug addicts, of mentally disturbed troubled people who forgot a long time ago what piece of mind is (CBS, December 20, 1983).

**Visuals.** Visual images construct homeless hippies and hermits through depictions which emphasize deviance and anomie. The isolation of the homeless is depicted frequently in both news articles and CBS broadcast news. The majority of broadcast news segments present a visual montage featuring shots of homeless individuals; the montage is often repeated several times within any one news segment. Homeless individuals are shown sitting, standing
or lying alone on street corners, parks or vents; standing in lines without speaking to one another; passively accepting food; sleeping in warehouse-like emergency shelters.

A few interactions occur among the homeless but these usually get depicted or described in a way which suggests illicit or immoral behavior. For example, one photograph depicts a man and woman embracing. The photograph's caption claims the man and woman left spouses and families behind and now live together in a subway tunnel (US News, March 23, 1987). Another photograph presents a group of homeless men hanging out together sharing a bottle of alcohol (US News, March 20, 1989). In general, photographs and video footage depicting the homeless as hippies or hermits tend to emphasize deviant behavior, disregard for social norms, and isolation from the mainstream.

**Numbers, statistics, research findings.** In the construction of the homeless as hippies and hermits—as in most constructions—numerical information serves as an indication of the growth of homelessness as a social problem. Numerical information thus details the presence of the homeless in various cities across the nation and describes percentage growth of people seeking help at public shelters or food banks. For this construction, however, numbers tend to emphasize the personal problems of the homeless and the amount of money and resources governments and charities allocate to address the problem.

News stories constructing an image of hippies and hermits emphasize the dollar amounts spent on services that provide free
food or shelter or describe the costs of providing welfare or building transitional housing and temporary shelters and staffing these with security guards and workers. Statistics are used in claims that the homeless population is made up of high proportions of alcoholics, drug users, "crazies" and convicts.

Construction of Mentally Ill Homeless as Victims

Social actors. The actors who play roles in the construction of the homeless mentally ill fall into several categories. The homeless in this construction appear as victims left homeless by a well-intentioned social policy originally designed to rectify problems in the mental health care institution. The families of mentally ill individuals in some cases also appear as victimized and burdened by responsibilities and concern related to the situations of their relatives. But the villains in this construction remain hard to identify.

News stories focus on conflicts between and among mental health institution representatives, advocate groups, civil liberty attorneys and the mentally ill and their relatives. However, news coverage presents no discernable portrait of who should do what about the problems of the mentally ill homeless. While the mentally ill homeless are clearly victims facing wretched conditions and tormented by their own mental problems, news stories fail to construct a consistent villain who could be blamed for the problem or held responsible for rectifying the situation.
Relationships. For the most part, news coverage characterizes the mentally ill homeless as isolated and lacking substantive relationships with any of the other actors. The mentally ill homeless are said to avoid or shun personal or intimate relationships because of distrust for authority or fear of hospitalization--or because their deluded states leave them apathetic to or unaware of their illness and vulnerability. News stories include no descriptions of friendships or positive interactions among the mentally ill homeless.

Individuals in this segment of the homeless population also remain isolated and disconnected from non-homeless family members, according to news coverage. News depicts the relatives of the mentally ill as contending with the wrath of deluded or deranged kin who want to be left alone. News stories report that healthy relatives occasionally seek contact or intervention, offer supportive care or try to hospitalize their kin; however, stories characterize these efforts as futile. News stories also describe cases in which relatives struggle against mental health administrators who refuse to accept responsibility for providing services for ill individuals: one story claims that involuntary commitment only results if mentally ill individuals commit overt acts of violence.

Individuals who work directly with the mentally ill homeless as volunteers or in social service, mental health care or outreach worker occupations at shelters or small clinics appear in portrayals as devoted, compassionate and hard-working. Individuals in such
occupations or volunteer positions serve the homeless by collecting and distributing food, blankets or clothing; leading the mentally ill homeless to emergency shelters or working in multi-service facilities which care for this sub-population. Individuals in such positions may have some interactions or occasional relationships with mentally ill homeless individuals. Relationships such as these are often portrayed as unusual in that workers such as these are rare, unusually self-sacrificing and samaritan-like or heroic. Because the mentally ill homeless are described as "notoriously tough to deal with" or as refusing help when it is offered, news stories seem to suggest that only extraordinary individuals would choose to work with this population.

News coverage portrays those groups involved in disputes concerning mental health care policy as in opposition to one another and as having little or no personal contact with the mentally ill homeless. Mental health institution representatives seem not to agree about what should be done to remedy the current system, which is described as chaotic and neglectful. Services for the mentally ill vulnerable to homelessness are characterized as insufficient, meager and inadequately funded. Advocates for mental health care reform often get described as well-meaning but lacking realistic or clearly defined plans; news coverage does not make clear whether these groups interact directly with the mentally ill homeless community.

The set of relationships among the actors in this construction may be characterized as complex and conflictual, yet no consistent
image of "good guys" and "bad guys" emerges. Those responsible for the design of de-institutionalization policies are described in some cases as well-meaning reformers addressing the inhumane conditions that existed under previous policy. One administrator claims: "I think we honestly believed we were on the right track, and I'm not sure we weren't." Journalists, however, say that critics label deinstitutionalization "an experiment in reform" that became "a cruel hoax" (CBS, March 3, 1989).

News stories often characterize doctors and administrators in psychiatric hospitals as callously supporting current policies and practices that benefit them in terms of work load or financing. For example, one story finds fault with administrators, legislators and civil service unions who continue to funnel money into near-empty facilities instead of using funds to create services for non-hospitalized patients. Other stories include claims which criticize hospitals for not accepting sick people even when families beg for assistance. News sources representing the American Civil Liberty Union (ACLU) claim that city representatives who want to force the mentally ill homeless into shelters or hospitals are politically motivated, mean-spirited or misled. Meanwhile, city officials and advocates of programs for re-hospitalization claim that civil liberty for the mentally ill homeless allows them to "die with their rights on."

Members of the "general public" who confront the mentally ill homeless on the streets of cities or in their home towns act are described as uninterested citizens who "look at them and pity them
and then usually look away." No cases of positive or sympathetic interaction between members of communities and mentally ill individuals appear in this construction. Community political officials and neighborhood groups oppose the development of additional community mental health facilities which could prevent or alleviate homelessness among the mentally ill.

**Behaviors.** News coverage of the mentally ill homeless portrays this population segment as exhibiting behaviors which are generally deviant, inappropriate, bizarre--and in many cases, violent or criminal. News stories describe the mentally ill homeless as wandering aimlessly from city to city, getting involved in activities or situations which lead to random encounters with police or periodic short term visits to psychiatric wards. News coverage provides conflicting descriptions of violent occurrences for this population.

Many news stories emphasize that the disoriented states of mentally ill individuals on the streets leave them extremely susceptible to robberies, assaults and rape. Some stories, however, include claims identifying the homeless mentally ill as perpetrators of violence against "the other homeless" or against non-homeless individuals. Several news stories describe highly-publicized incidents where mentally ill homeless individuals were found guilty of murder through shootings or beatings.

Bizarre or deviant behaviors described with reference to this population segment include shouting, singing or crying in streets, on sidewalks or in transit stations; lying on sidewalks during both days
and nights; walking aimlessly through traffic-filled streets; sitting alone on park benches; sifting through trash or objects like leaves or dirt; defecating in the streets or walking around in soiled clothes; preaching sermons about dooms-day to pedestrians in the streets; silently eating at crowded tables or standing motionless in lines for food or shelter. The mentally ill homeless are described or depicted as shunning, avoiding or retreating from those trying to offer food, money, or help.

In line with Campbell and Reeves (1989), I interpret the construction of the homeless mentally ill as highlighting the personal deficiencies of the homeless, "distancing" the homeless from the non-homeless, and diverting attention from discussion of systemic forces contributing to homelessness. News stories depict behaviors which are pathetic, grotesque, shocking and often intimidating, and deviant in terms of the norms for public settings. Thus news coverage seems to emphasize conflict and confrontation between two distinct populations in the United States: the mentally ill as an abnormal population in opposition to the mainstream public.

Conditions. News stories present the mentally ill homeless as subject to the same conditions as other homeless groups, yet as especially vulnerable to the severe consequences which may occur as a result of treacherous circumstances. Thus, like the hippies or hermit, the mentally ill face conditions related to exposure to severe weather, hunger, disease and illness, and the brutality of violent incidents. However, these conditions may have unique consequences for the mentally ill who often experience delusions
which affect their assessment of the dangers in their environment. News stories suggest that their confused states leave the mentally ill homeless particularly vulnerable to attack, rape, or robbery.

Several stories report incidents where mentally disturbed individuals freeze to death or become ill after refusing food or water. In addition to confusion and delusion, these ill homeless people may experience depression and subsequent apathy which could exacerbate their situations, according news coverage. For example, when an administrator of a well-acclaimed multi-service shelter in Boston discusses seeking shelter with a mentally ill homeless man, the man replies that he has no concern for his own safety:

I don't care. If it happens it happens. If it don't happen who gives a damn. I don't care (CBS, October 30, 1989).

In the face of these conditions, the mentally ill homeless often experience a process that news sources label "decompensation." This process occurs as tenuous interactions with overloaded and superficial support services diminish. Ill individuals fail to receive the medication and treatment they need to sustain a grip on reality and function to fulfill their basic needs. As their health continues to digress, the mentally ill homeless become increasingly susceptible to life-threatening situations and lose all contacts with individuals or organizations which could provide even basic or minimal support.

Causes. Deinstitutionalization was a policy developed in the 50's when experts thought that new drugs would allow the homeless
to live independently in the community. The new policy was deemed more humane. But community follow-up treatment never materialized and many of the de-institutionalized ended up homeless. Current policy makes it difficult for any one—including the families of the mentally ill homeless—to have a mentally ill person committed to an institution.

According to news coverage constructing this sub-population, the current situation of mental health institution policies and practices also perpetuates the problems the mentally ill homeless confront. Problematic policies include: a shortage of bed space in psychiatric hospitals; inadequate funding for the development or even maintenance of in-patient treatment facilities, group-homes or temporary shelters with mental health services; public resistance to the creation of community mental health centers in residential or commercial locations; government funding priorities favoring state hospitals which house less than half of the nation's chronic mentally ill; cuts and mismanagement of federal funding for existing facilities; and deteriorating institutional relations within the administration of state hospitals, community facilities, legislators and civil service unions and advocates for reform.

Conventions Constructing Mentally Ill Homeless as Victims

Biographies and vignettes. Biographies of the mentally ill homeless tend to emphasize the detachment and alienation of this group. Most personal histories describe how specific individuals were abandoned by or fled from families, "fell through the cracks" of
foster-care or mental health systems and ended up living on the streets, where they became increasingly ill and isolated. Several news stories highlight tragedies occurring when homeless mentally ill individuals commit violent attacks.

A few highly publicized biographies characterize the homeless mentally ill as hostile and unresponsive to efforts to provide services or support. Personal accounts highlight cases such as Joyce Brown, who filed suit against the city for her right to live on the street (see pp. 95-96). Several individual histories describe cases in which individuals survived horrible mistreatment while committed to mental institutions but faced equally wretched circumstances after de-institutionalization. These accounts suggest that the mentally ill population confronts a choice between two evils: the neglect and abuse of hospitalization or the atrocities of life on the streets.

A few biographies focus on individuals who currently receive treatment at facilities that provide housing; these often emphasize the uniqueness of such facilities and the role they play in cycles of periodic treatment and periodic homelessness. The story of "Mary" epitomizes the typical biography that serves to construct the image of the mentally ill homeless. Mary's history is described by a mental health worker while video footage depicts an overweight, disoriented, middle-aged woman who blinks and rolls her eyes, twists her mouth and shakes her head up and down. According to the caseworker, Mary was abused as a child and thus hears voices and screams spontaneously. Mary was institutionalized but "received
bad treatment." She now needs supervision and outpatient treatment, but she refuses further hospitalization (May 11, 1984).

One CBS news segment (March 3, 1989) describes a case with a characteristically unhappy ending. Jim Collins is a middle-aged adult who was released from a mental institution several years ago. His mother has repeatedly and unsuccessfully tried to re-institutionalize him. Jim's behavior is described as "so erratic and menacing" that his mother is afraid to let him live at home. She brings him money and clothes once a month. He sometimes spurns her packages.

Another story describes the life of Todd Chimura, 22, who became alcoholic at the age of 15 after his 13 yr old girlfriend was strangled in a park. According to Todd, he stayed drunk for about five years after this tragedy. He took meals at a city trash container and rotated in and out of county medical clinics. Sooner or later he stopped taking his medicine and relapsed into alcoholism. Relapses resulted in re-hospitalization. After his sixth trip to a state mental institution, caseworkers sent Todd to the El Rey Treatment Facility in Seattle, where he participates in a highly-acclaimed and rare treatment program (Time, December 17, 1990).

Journalistic commentary. The synonyms and adjectives used to describe the mentally ill homeless emphasize both difference and distance from mainstream society. The mentally ill are characterized as out of touch with reality, weird and strange--and also alienated, abandoned, and pathetic. They are "hard-core street crazies," "homeless psychotics" and "street schizophrenics." They
are "ragged, ill and hallucinating human beings." But they are also "the most vulnerable of the abandoned people." Language often emphasizes the potential for threat and violence from this homeless sub-population. Thus the homeless mentally ill are "unable to cope with society," "wild eyed and menacing," and "physically threatening homeless mentally ill." They move "through cities like a great muttering army: foraging, frightening and fearful."

**Visuals.** Visuals construct the homeless mentally ill through the use of photographs and video montage featuring series of images emphasizing physical deformities, deviant and bizarre behaviors, and isolation or alienation. Both photographs and video images frequently include close-ups that highlight behaviors, gestures and disfigurements which seem to set off the homeless mentally ill as a distinctly different, unusual or blemished, stigmatized or sub-human population. Thus images of the mentally ill homeless sitting alone and disoriented, speaking, crying, muttering or shouting to no one emphasize pathetic abnormality.

Abnormality is also emphasized when visuals are accompanied by soundtracks which present slurred, incoherent or belligerent speech. Visuals present the homeless mentally ill speaking to journalists and social service workers while lying on the ground or pavement or sitting hunched-over on subway steps. The homeless mentally ill are often presented as dressed in clothing inappropriate for the weather: heavy coats and clothes in summer, inadequate clothes in winter. News stories focusing exclusively on the homeless mentally ill often include black and white visuals.
depicting the atrocities and horrid conditions of mental hospitals
during the days of institutionalization. This footage represents an
era described as "disgraceful" or "shameful;" however, such visuals
emphasize an image of the homeless mentally ill as separate from
the mainstream and seem to suggest this group is sub-human.

Use of numbers, statistics, research findings. In the
construction of the homeless mentally ill, numerical information
and research finding are used to make claims about numbers of
mentally ill on streets and the proportion of homeless who are
mentally ill. Like other segments of the homeless, the mentally ill
homeless are constructed through the use of numerical information
concerning the allocation of funding from government budgets that
support social services for this sub-population. News stories
provide evidence about the costs of providing mental health services
as well as the consequences of budget cuts that result in reduction
in the quantity and quality of service programs.

Statistics are used in claims about the numbers of mentally ill
on the streets and in hospitals before and after de-
institutionalization; the number of proposed community mental
health facilities before de-institutionalization as opposed to the
numbers actually built and still operating; staff to patient ratios in
hospitals before and after de-institutionalization; the number of
violent incidents involving homeless mentally ill individuals in
cities nationally; the number of mentally ill without homes or social
contacts who end up in jails; and the number of mentally ill who die
from exposure on the streets annually.
Construction of Homeless Families and Children: Some Victims. Some Villains

Another prominent construction of the homeless centers around homeless families and children seeking to exist within a social system—that is, families with connections to other social institutions. This construction takes two basic forms: two parent white families and minority single parent or minority extended families (extended minority families lack husband-wife pairs). Homeless families are depicted in relation to welfare, religious, legal, charity, medical and educational institutions.

Social actors. For the most part, news portrays families as the victims of personal tragedies, economic "bad times," domestic abuse or some combination of systemic and individual problems. All homeless children who live together with family members appear in the news as innocent victims of circumstance. The villains in this construction are usually faceless forces such as "unemployment" or "changing social values," although isolated claims blaming callous budget-slashing politicians appear. Some news stories emphasize the personal problems of single parents and seem to suggest that these parents are villains responsible for the circumstances their families face.

Members of homeless families interact with one another, with other homeless individuals or families, and with representatives of other social institutions. Teachers, doctors, nurses, clergy, individuals members of the "general public" and volunteer and social service workers all play roles as they frequently come into touch...
with homeless children and their parents or other blood relatives. Representatives of political and legal institutions also appear in this construction. Individual politicians visit shelters, soup kitchens or "model programs" to monitor policy initiatives or to take advantage of "photo opportunities." Police officers play minor roles as they question or arrest homeless parents involved in criminal acts or as they attempt to "relocate" homeless families living in "tent cities" or other inacceptable settlements.

Relationships. News coverage of homelessness constructs an image of relationships within the homeless family as tight-knit sets of bonds formed as insulation from social or environmental forces. Homeless parents seem helpless in the face of insurmountable adversity, yet they struggle to care for their children. In their helplessness, homeless families inevitably come to depend upon whatever public or private assistance is available in their immediate environments. When localities fail to provide support services, homeless families may band together to form transient "communities" that take the forms of "tent cities" or box-house settlements on abandoned lots.

News stories depict homeless families as connected to social welfare institutions and as seeking help from religious or private charities. News coverage describes families' relationships with institutional representatives as involving a varying extent of dependencies. News stories portray families with fathers present in a manner that emphasizes male pride, a desire to work and a reluctance for accepting "hand-outs." Meanwhile, female-headed
families are often characterized as helpless, victimized by domestic abuse or bad fortune, and dependent upon federal or state welfare systems. Social service workers and volunteers who interact with homeless families appear as kindly, dedicated, over-worked "Samaritans." Direct care workers confront obstacles such growing case loads and budget cutbacks that deplete necessary resources and shrink staff sizes--yet they still offer whatever assistance possible to families in need.

News coverage describes some problematic relations between homeless families and members of the "general public" who occasionally provide help and support; homeless families and medical, legal or educational authorities; or homeless families and their non-homeless friends or relatives. For example, some stories present volunteer news sources who question the motives of homeless families who will not accept minimum wage employment, and other stories focus on police monitoring of drugs and other criminal activity within "tent cities" or in "welfare hotels. Several news stories describe relationships that deteriorated as needy families "doubled-up" in crowded quarters with friends or family for a period prior to becoming homeless.

A few news segments highlight disputes between homeless parents who try to enroll their children in school districts which require proof of permanent local residency, educational records from previous school districts, and proof of current immunization. News stories focusing on the education of homeless children depict teachers specializing in work with this segment as exceptionally
compassionate individuals who form supportive relations with students who require extra assistance with their emotional, psychological and intellectual development. News stories also highlight caring relations formed between homeless children and teachers, doctors, nurses or social service workers who fulfill children's special needs.

**Behaviors.** News coverage of homeless families tends to focus on either care-taking and supportive behaviors of family members or involvement in drugs or other anti-social behavior. Many news stories focus on behaviors associated with families who travel the country seeking work. Families who have been evicted or who leave homes in search of employment often end up on the streets or on the road where they must be wary of threats to the health and safety of their children. News thus emphasizes special efforts to protect and nurture the young. Families living in welfare hotels, or single parent families on the streets are often described as involved in suspicious activities. One story describes an incident in which homeless mothers living in a welfare hotel took to the streets to sell off teddy bears donated to their children by a department store. Another story tells of homeless children who's parents drop them off at a soup kitchen before dawn and disappear for the day.

News coverage portrays homeless children as exhibiting behaviors that are within the range of what is considered normal for this age group. Thus homeless children attempt to play, visit non-homeless friends, complete homework, do chores and form friendships with shelter staff and social service workers. News
stories often describe the problems children face in attempting to engage in these activities. Children confront problems because of lack of space and because of threats of assault.

**Conditions.** News coverage focusing on homeless families emphasizes two sets of conditions faced by this special population: one relates to the conditions endured by families struggling to maintain some type of housing arrangement or living on the streets; the other relates to conditions faced by families living in shelters, welfare hotels or transitional housing. Many news stories detail conditions related to situations families experience during periods prior to finally becoming homeless. News coverage suggests that families endure periods of conflict with landlords and police over failure to pay rent. Once families get evicted, many turn to friends or relatives who may allow them to sleep in apartment living rooms or double-up in housing project or trailer-home bedrooms. According to news stories, these homeless "couch people" eventually wear out their welcome or experience pressure to leave such precarious living arrangements.

The hardships faced by families sleeping in cars, campers, or on parks or beaches often gets described. According to news coverage, family members in these circumstances erect campfires and make-shift shacks to stay warm; take turns standing guard throughout the night while children sleep; search by day for food, baby formula or clothing needs; travel from one cheap motel to another while looking for employment; and work minimum wage jobs to satisfy immediate needs such as food or car repair or motel bills.
These families often survive by locating some type of public shelter with the Salvation Army or with a government relief agency.

News stories depict the conditions faced by families living in shelters or welfare hotels as uncomfortable, dangerous, unsanitary and sometimes life-threatening. Public shelters provide few opportunities for keeping clean or washing clothes or for privacy in general. Young babies, children and teens are forced to live together in cramped spaces with single adults who often suffer from mental illness or addiction problems. Neither emergency shelters nor welfare hotels offer youngsters an opportunity to play, study or do chores in safe or stable circumstances. However, occasional news stories describe innovative programs appearing in some cities across the country in an effort to provide special physical and emotional support to homeless families and parents in need.

Welfare hotels which house homeless families waiting for permanent housing are described as hellish environments frequented by gangs, prostitutes and drug addicts. They are located in neighborhoods ravished by crime and poverty. News coverage describes interior conditions ranging from leaky pipes and sewage on floors, peeling paint, rodent and parasite infestations, to general crime and over-crowding. Such conditions contribute to the medical problems of homeless children and their parents: pneumonia, lead poisoning, scabies and lice, ear infections, asthma, anemia, impetigo and other skin conditions.

Homeless children face an additional set of conditions as a consequence of their living circumstances. They attend school
sporadically—if at all—and are likely to experience some form of ostracism if their status as homeless becomes public. The educational problems and lack of stability faced by homeless children reportedly lead to deficits in social, intellectual and psychological development.

**Causes.** Portrayals seem to emphasize different types of causes for two parent as opposed to single parent families; in each case, homelessness for families seems to arise from a combination of problems related to physical health, emotional weakness, personal tragedies and causes related to systemic forces. Some news stories focusing on homeless families claim that homelessness among this population results from complex economic forces related to sun-belt and oil state industry failures. Other stories emphasize Federal Government housing policy failures such as budget cuts and loan failures tied to low-income housing shortages and deteriorating high rise projects; gentrification and the development of inner-cities, and related increases in rent prices; and welfare benefits that have diminished or not kept pace with inflation. Two parent families are most likely to be associated with causes related to personal tragedies. such as fire, building condemnation, mass lay-offs, disabilities or work-related injuries. Single parent families are reportedly homeless because of domestic abuse, insufficient welfare or work income, building condemnation and lack of low-income housing.
Narrative Conventions Construction Homeless Family Members

Biographies and vignettes. Two different types of personal accounts contribute to the construction of two distinctive images of the homeless family; both types emphasize troubles that arise from a mixture of personal problems and social conditions. The biography of a single mother included below represents a typical tale with an unusually happy ending. While most personal histories of female-headed families present a seemingly-hopeless situation which often involves some form of domestic abuse, this story focuses on a case in which a mother was able to overcome addiction with the help of unique multi-service treatment center.

Tina Baxter-Hill, 24, a single mother who entered a transitional housing program with her one year old daughter after a period of drug-addiction and homelessness. Baxter-Hill had been hooked on crack, marijuana and alcohol and had become homeless after "severing ties with family, friends and the working world." She had pawned jewelry and clothes and stole money from her hard-drinking father in order to buy crack. At one point she tried to commit suicide by taking an overdose of codeine pills—but she changed her mind in time to have her stomach pumped at the county hospital. After her boyfriend frightened her one day, Baxter-Hill took her daughter and moved to an exceptional program run by the nonprofit Shelter Against Violent Environments, Inc., in Alameda County, California. At the shelter her daughter attends day care while Baxter-Hill participates in Narcotics Anonymous meetings and parental-stress groups (US News, January 15; 1990:28).
A 1987 Newsweek article exemplifies the typical news portrait of the white two parent homeless family. The story presents the tale of Jim and Peggy Brand, from Kansas City, Missouri, and their four children: Dusty, 11; Jaime, 10; Shauna, 8; and Michelle, 5. The Brands became homeless after a lengthy period of employment troubles, health problems and bad luck; their biography highlights a series of misfortunes as they struggle to find work and make ends meet.

The family's troubles began when Jim, 37, lost his $14.75 an hour job after complications related to a work injury and an exchange of company ownership. Jim's back pain limited his employment opportunities. The family struggled to survive by living in a government subsidized housing project where Jim could do maintenance work around the building complex. Jim's wife Peggy contributed to the family's income by working part-time as a Head-Start teacher's aid. Together with food stamps and a veteran's disability check, the family income barely covered their living expenses.

The Brands troubles pushed them to the brink of homelessness when the apartment complex's management changed, their rent went up and they were eventually evicted. After a short stay with relatives in a cramped trailer home and another apartment, the family was evicted after car trouble resulted in Peggy's firing. Finally, the family moved to a Salvation Army shelter where 11 other families live together with single men and women.
The biography of this family emphasizes the problems the four children face in school and at the shelter as they struggle to maintain their self-esteem and some routinized lifestyle while living with their parents in a 14-foot-by-16-foot cubicle at the shelter. The shelter also houses a "transient" group of single men and many single women, who include "shirkers" who don't do their chores and make the shelter messy. The family is described as proud and hard working; the children complete chores and the parents work at the shelter to subsidize their relief benefits.

Journalistic commentary. The descriptions used to typify homeless families often presents this sub-population a one that is distinct from other groups of homeless persons and that reflects a change in the type of person that now faces this social problem. Thus phrases such as "the new poor," "a different breed," "the new homeless," "a homeless class of women and children," and "the new Oakies" emphasize that homelessness is no longer "just" a problem of "alcoholics, drug-addicts, and skid-row crazies." Descriptions such as "poor people with nowhere to go," "families that 'simply cannot pay the rent.'" "uprooted families" or "good, solid middle-class families" serve to portray this group as "people who in another time would be able to make it." The language used to describe homeless youngsters emphasizes their innocence and the sad nature of their plight. Thus the children of the homeless are "kids of the streets, pitiful and without prospects;" they are "the Gypsies of their generation," "children who are robbed of their childhood," and "America's investment in misery."
Visuals. Photographs and video presentations of homeless parents and their children tend to underscore a portrait of a group of people bonding tightly together to support and protect one another through dire circumstances. Visuals frequently depict family members interacting with one another in an affectionate or positive manner--or posing with arms around each other. Video segments offer views of social workers and volunteers serving homeless parents and children at emergency shelters or soup kitchen centers. Photographs document horrid conditions in "tent cities," "shanty towns" or camp grounds where homeless families huddle around fires, or sleep and eat in cars. Other visuals present dirty-faced children playing in groups or interacting with volunteers or special teachers.

Use of numbers, statistics, research findings. As with the construction of other segments of the homeless, numerical information appears in relation to the homeless family as journalists present claims about the growth of homelessness and the sharp increase in the number of homeless families. Many claims describe homeless children or families as "the fastest growing segment of the homeless" and detail the responses of various communities--large and small--to the needs of this special population.

Research claims describe the effects of homelessness on families with children or the consequences of homelessness for children. Thus researchers present evidence about delays in language development or physical or emotional development among
homeless youngsters. Other research claims describe psychiatric problems, educational gaps or delays and physical symptoms such as bed-wetting, aggressiveness or social withdraw.

Statistics indicate how social policies have contributed to the desperate economic circumstances faced by impoverished families. Journalists and news sources use numerical information to describe: a vast decline in federal government subsidies for low income housing and in the general stock of public and private low rent housing; growing numbers of applicants on waiting lists for public housing units; welfare and AFDC (Aid to Families with Dependent Children) benefits that have not kept pace with inflation and cost of living rates; trends in percentages of people who have applied for or been cut from welfare rolls; unemployment rates for families and job opportunity levels for people with low levels of education; trends in the proportion of homeless women who have been physically or sexually abused by spouses.

**Construction of Runaways and "Throwaways" as Deviant Victims**

**Social actors.** In this construction, the homeless are teenagers who break connections with home and family when they run away or get "pushed out." Most teens in this construction appear as victims of domestic abuse or "changing social values" that indirectly leave them homeless; however, these teen victims are not portrayed as innocent. The runaways and throwaways presented in news coverage appear as social deviates who get involved in alcoholism, drug addiction, prostitution and other criminal behavior.
Dedicated social service workers appear as concerned individuals struggling to aid groups of teens who often resist help. Religious clergy, police officers and volunteers play roles that vary from Samaritans and confidants to adversaries. Parents often appear as villains who had provided the original impetus for the current situation but who now remain in the background. Occasionally, individual mothers or fathers appear as helpless bystanders watching their child's peril.

**Relationships.** Teens in this construction remain connected to social institutions as they frequently interact with representatives of legal, social welfare, foster care, religious and medical institutions. Institutional representatives appear as resigned to, but concerned and overwhelmed by, the increasing presence of a population of youngsters who have turned their backs on "normality,"--yet who maintain contact with the mainstream. Thus youth center administrators, social workers, and outreach workers are described as "brave and selfless...tireless...fighting an out-manned battle with scant government ammunition."

The presentation of homeless teens in this construction portrays this group as a sub-population in which all members know one another's histories, personalities and emotional problems; several articles refer to the teen street population in any one locality as a "community" or "family" that looks out for one another. New stories discuss romantic relationships among the teens and highlight deviant elements of teens' behaviors with regard to their relationships. News presents scenarios in which gay teens leave
home to live on the streets with their lovers, young girls are pregnant but can not identify the father, or young male prostitutes seek "sugar daddies" who might give them a temporary home, money, or employment. Some news stories describes the manner in which criminal activity like prostitution, robberies--and in one case, a kidnapping--ruins romantic friendships among this population.

Most teens discussed in news stories have left home because they were physically or sexually abused, or because their step-parents did not want them in their "reconstituted" families. Some teens rotated in and out of various foster care arrangements before finally running away to the streets. News coverage portrays teens as having occasional strained contacts with parents; social workers claim that most parents, when contacted, did not want their runaway children to return. Occasionally, parents appear as news sources who claim they do not know what to do about their children's anti-social behavior.

Behaviors. As discussed above, news stories highlight teens' involvement in drinking, drugs, prostitution and petty crime. News tends to focus on this anti-social behavior in a manner that sensationalizes teens' deviance. Thus some news stories include dramatic generalizations such as the following:

...As they move from city to city, these youngsters typically fall quickly into patterns of runaway life: sleeping outdoors, hitchhiking, crashing parties, shoplifting, looking for odd jobs, panhandling or turning to prostitution, pornography or drugs (US News, January 17, 1983:64).
There are more than a million of them on the streets of our major cities...teenage runaways, hustling boldly in doorways or retreating into distant drugged reveries. They are prostitutes male and female, thieves petty and grand (Newsweek, April 25, 1988:64).

Dramatic generalizations tend to sensationalize the lifestyles of homeless teens. Such portrayals seem to emphasize self-destruction and distance from the "mainstream."

**Conditions.** News coverage of "street teens" highlights a slightly unique set of conditions with respect to this population. While other news construction of the homeless describe conditions related to hunger and surviving inclimate weather, news stories on runaways are concerned almost exclusively with severe conditions related to teens' lifestyles and behavior. Most news stories focusing on these teens make references to life-threatening elements of youth street life: some stories include claims similar to the one stating "more than 5,000 teenagers a year are buried in unmarked graves;" other stories outline numerous murder cases involving runaway victims. News reports that teens' involvement in prostitution and drug abuse leaves them particularly susceptible to AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases.

**Causes.** As discussed above, most news coverage of this social problem attributes teens' homelessness to physical or sexual abuse within the home. Some news sources claim that runaways have fled nightmarish home lives ruined by parental alcoholism or drug addiction or by incest. Other news sources attribute the problems of runaways and throwaways to economic reasons. One administrator
claims the number of runaways and throwaways has increased because "the economy contributes to the stress in the family;" this news source puts the blame on unemployment, inflation and situations where both parents must work. Other news sources emphasize the problems created by divorce and remarriage.

**Narrative Conventions Constructing Teens as Deviant Victims**

**Biographies and vignettes.** Accounts of individual teen runaways or throwaways fill news stories about this homeless segment. Personal accounts focus on the wretched home lives homeless teens flee, while vignettes underscore the dangerous conditions faced by teens on the streets. Overall, biographies and vignettes tend to emphasize incest or sexual abuse and activities involving drugs and prostitution. Many news stories sensationalize the abnormal lifestyles street teens lead and present case after case in which teens pick-up drunken "johns," experience withdraw from drugs, or discuss harrowing experiences "on the road."

Two news stories present biographies of two young women who are presented like "celebrities" after each dies on the streets (CBS, December 18, 1985; CBS, August 14, 1987). Each of these stories is representative of news coverage of homeless youth in the emphasis each places on describing "communities" of street youth with tenuous relations to social institutions and in the emphasis on street-life conditions that threaten the lives of this community. The first story describes the life and murder of Luellen (Lulu) Couch, a young women who left home at the age of 14 to live among
"Seattle's street kids." Lulu later became the star of the documentary "Streetwise" which focused on this community. She was killed by a knife-wielding attacker at the age of 22 after she came to the defense of younger girl facing assault.

The second news story focuses on April Savino, a teen runaway who killed herself to "escape from" a life of alcohol and drugs—habits supported through prostitution and other crimes. According to this news story, April left home at the age of 14 following her parents' divorce and her father's estrangement. April lived among a community surviving in the underground tunnels beneath New York's Grand Central Station. Her story ends with a statement from an advocate who is quoted as saying: "We have a society of throwaway kids and April was one of them."

Journalistic commentary. The synonyms and adjectives used to describe homeless teens characterize this sub-population as unwanted, emotionally scarred and facing the prospects of a dismal future. An article entitled "Somebody Else's Kids," for example, claims that teens "pose as hard-case predators so they will appear less like prey." This article goes on to say that these runaways are really throwaways, and many will become "casualties" who die "quickly and quietly" on our American streets (Newsweek, April 25, 1988). The terms "throwaways" or "America's throwaway children" appear frequently in news coverage of this population, as do descriptions such as "lost tribe of teenage runaways" or "street teens." Other news stories refer to this population as "bag kids, drifter teens, push-outs, troubled youth, or street kids."
**Visuals.** Photographs and video footage tends to construct homeless youth by either emphasizing the responses of social service organizations and relations between teens and representatives of social institutions, or highlighting deviant behaviors and lifestyles of this population. Thus the two broadcast segments described above include scenes from funerals in which clergy, advocates and members of homeless "communities" describe their friendships or relations to the deceased; family members appear distraught as they comment on their failed relations with the teens. Photographs and video segments in other news stories depict foster care and social service workers interacting with teens, conducting group therapy sessions or counseling teens at youth centers or in half-way houses. Several photographs depict young teens on the streets at night; hanging around in small groups on corners, drinking from brown paper bags; sitting slumped and disoriented in motel-type settings; or sleeping together on the couches or floors of tiny rooms.

**Numbers, statistics, research claims.** Journalists and news sources make little use of numerical information to support claims about homeless youth and seem to rely instead upon anecdotal evidence provided in dramatic biographies and vignettes. The numerical information that does appear in relation to the construction of homeless youth follows the general pattern found for other constructions. That is, news coverage presents claims about the size of this sub-population, trends in population growth in
Constructing the Homeless as Threatening Villains

Social actors. The homeless in this construction emerge as villains who prey upon "ordinary people" or who oppose legal or political institutions in aggressive, destructive or violent ways. Homeless villains appear as murderers, kidnappers, panhandlers, con-men and destructive or threatening militants; they are not constructed as human beings with histories, families, relationships or emotions. Occasionally, villains are described as "mentally ill." Illness is not, however, described as a health problem or as a reason for justifying aggressive or threatening behavior.

The victims in this construction are constructed as "ordinary," innocent, contributing members of society. News stories describe victims' statuses as parents and professionals: persons with ties to communities, organizations or institutions. Occasionally victims are presented as heroes who exhibit honor and bravery while fending off attacks from homeless villains. Political and legal representatives sometimes appear in roles as protectors of society who respond to villains and maintain the social order.

Relationships. News stories present no discussion of positive or even neutral relations between either homeless villains and any other actor or among groups of homeless villains. Homeless villains have adversarial relations with the police, with the public and with government officials--and are occasionally presented as opposing
journalists. Villains commit acts that violate social norms or laws: they commit physical assaults, shootings, and—in a few cases—mass murder. They accost pedestrians in the streets and commuters in the subway, plying victims with fabricated tales of woe or harassing victims by panhandling in a physically threatening manner. Homeless villains become a public nuisance by "taking over" public parks and pavements, exposing themselves indecently, or loitering in a manner that discourages downtown business development.

Occasionally villains are described as victimizing other homeless individuals: news stories report that the "physically strong" among the homeless prey upon their sick, weak or disoriented peers, attacking them or stealing their meagre possessions. Homeless leaders of and participants in advocacy and protest groups in the general homeless population are usually described as "aggressive militants." Militants band together to destroy public property or descend upon cities and communities to hold marches that often become riots. Militants are described and depicted as protesting together, but relationships among militant individuals are not mentioned.

**Behaviors.** As described above, the homeless in this construction exhibit behaviors which are at best inappropriate for public settings and at worst frightening or criminal. News coverage frequently suggests that homeless alcoholics and drug addicts present a threat to the safety and "stability" of communities and to the health of society. The following excerpt characterizes news descriptions of the activities of this population:
"Downwardly mobile and aggressively amoral, the worst of them turn panhandling into a form of extortion, sell their bodies to buy lunch, roll the older drunks and even steal from the missions" (Newsweek, October 29, 1984).

Several examples of how an emphasis on anti-social behavior among the homeless constructs an image of the homeless as villains occur in a news magazine article that describes several incidents of criminal activity among the homeless. The article (Time March 11, 1985) presents the following scenarios as indicative of how the homeless have become a "threat to society:" an 8 yr old girl kidnapped by a "drifter" is still missing after one year; the homeless who congregate in New York City's Central station are blamed for the murder of a man found dead of head injuries after the station was left open as a shelter for the homeless in the winter; three men "living at a shelter" are reported to have kidnapped, tortured and killed a doctor. In other news stories, an incident where a mentally ill homeless man shoots and kills a policeman in Dallas and is then shot by other police receives attention on television and in a news article. Other vivid incidents are described throughout the period.

Conditions. News stories constructing an image of the homeless as villain do not describe or emphasize conditions relating to the health or safety of homeless individuals. Instead, these stories focus attention to how the presence of homeless people exacts a negative social impact on communities.

Causes. For the most part, news coverage which portrays the homeless as villains does not focus attention to social forces that
may be responsible for the general problem of homelessness. Instead, some news stories tend to dwell upon individualistic personal problems that cause isolated cases of homelessness or offer statistics describing high proportions of alcoholism, drug-addiction, and criminal activity among the homeless. Other news articles mention additional social problems like domestic abuse or mental illness without relating these to social conditions such as poverty, unemployment or the lack of public treatment facilities for individuals with substance abuse problems.

Stories focusing on homeless militants describe protests of decline in development and support of low-income housing. News of protests depict the homeless as loud, angry, destructive and demanding. However, most stories of this type present little discussion of the forces responsible for declines in the stock of available public housing. A few news stories focusing on homeless militants give attention to advocates' claims that homelessness is linked to dwindling government commitment to anti-poverty programs or to the low minimum wage.

Narrative Conventions Constructing the Homeless as Villains

Biographies and vignettes. Few personal accounts of homeless villains appear in news coverage related to this construction. The rare instances in which the histories of individual villains get described follow a pattern similar to that of histories of hippies or hermits. For example, news stories present cases in which individuals turned their back on jobs, friends or family in favor of
lifestyles of panhandling or petty crime and addiction. A half-page feature on the history and lifestyle of "big Tim Brown" entitled "A Connoisseur of the Con" serves as a good example.

According to this article (Time, September 5, 1988:73):

...at 6 ft. 3 in., the former Golden Gloves boxer and current alcoholic is an intimidating presence as he accosts pedestrians and dashes into traffic to knock on car windows..."The scary part is that I'm starting to enjoy this," says Brown.

The article describes Brown's threatening, brash and deceitful tactics for acquiring money, cigarettes and food. The story claims that Brown, the adopted son of a well-off Washington family, gets a $637 per month disability from the government for problems arising from his alcoholism. Brown, who says he attended a military academy and spent time at college and in the Navy, reportedly took to the streets when family finances collapsed through mismanagement.

Journalistic commentary. The synonyms and adjectives used to describe the homeless villain emphasize deviance and disregard for the law. Thus the homeless get characterized as "drunks, addicts and crazies," "derelicts," "winos," "assorted hustlers," or "street predators of all kinds." Sometimes, the language used to describe this sub-population seems to present these homeless people as an organized underworld of seedy or criminal characters. For example, the homeless are described as a separate group, an "army of street people," a "gauntlet of beggars," "pushy panhandlers," or "lowlifes."
One article (Newsweek, February 27, 1989:24) describes violence among the "down and out" homeless and transvestites, hustlers and addicts who frequent New York City's Port Authority. This news story reports that the vast majority of violent felonies at the station are what "cops call 'garbage on garbage' crime--lowlifes beating up on each other." This language suggests an image of a population grossly different from normal law-abiding citizens living in "the mainstream."

**Visuals.** Homeless villains are presented visually in a manner which highlights anti-social and criminal behavior or activities. The most common images present the scenario of the lazy or dangerous homeless addict: a group of men sprawled across city pavements at night with beer cans piled up around them, or the single young homeless man sitting beneath a make-shift tarp, sipping from a large bottle covered by a paper bag, smiling or staring defiantly into the camera. Images such as these are accompanied by captions or narration identifying the homeless as people who "help each other find food and drugs," "live off a compassion-fatigued public," or make "angry demands." Photographs present panhandlers of all ages, some with signs making claims and requesting money, others belligerent, shouting or emitting slurred speech, demanding money.

Several videos depict militants marching, breaking into houses, engaging in conflicts with police, posing in "threatening" stances with arms raised or folded across chests, or taking part in "riots." For example, several news stories include visual texts and
accompanying narration describing homeless people protesting, banning together in "militant" activist groups, erecting tent cities to "draw attention" to their plight, breaking into abandoned apartment buildings, or taking part in "battles" against the police.

The construction of homelessness created through the editing of "protest stories" contains an implicit--and sometimes explicit--suggestion that advocacy amongst the homeless has become a widespread national movement employing hostile techniques. However, scenes are not identified clearly in terms of where and when individual shots were taken. In each story, scenes are interspersed throughout the individual news segment as journalists describe "national unrest" and militancy in various cities. Journalists do not disclose whether visual scenes depict one or two isolated rallies or many widespread incidents. Viewers may consider protests involving the homeless as widespread and frequently destructive phenomena, yet they receive no information to confirm or dispute this conception.

Use of numbers, statistics, research claims. Numerical information is rarely used in the construction of homeless villains. The statistics which do appear represent proportions of the homeless population who have criminal records or who abuse illegal substances. Crime statistics serve as another indication of the threat to society created by this homeless group.
Constructing Multiple Images of the Homeless: Conclusion

In summary, the five types of images emerging from news on homelessness represent multiple typifications of this social problem. It seems clear that news stories on homelessness create no simple story of a purely innocent victim besought with wretched conditions brought on by an evil villain. Instead, the five prevailing constructions seem to represent distinct journalistic approaches to telling stories about homelessness; in each case, news coverage characterizes the homeless as responsible, to some degree, for bringing about their own predicament.

While there are some differences in the level of sympathy conveyed by each construction—as well as opportunities for empathic sorrow for the conditions faced by unique homeless individuals—the overall tone of news coverage suggests that the homeless are ungrateful victims of individual weakness or personal choices who have come to depend too heavily on public charity and service. Thus the image of hippies and hermits accentuates individuals who have turned their back on "normal" lives.

News concerning the mentally ill homeless emphasizes a hopeless bureaucratic situation involving abandoned stigmatized people who may be better off left to wander the streets, rather than forcibly hospitalized in overcrowded hospitals which invite abuse. News concerned with runaways and abandoned teens highlights deviant behavior and corrupted morals. News of homeless villains portrays a shadowy underworld where drug addicts, panhandlers and
ex-cons prey upon the righteous public--confusing, threatening and overwhelming innocent and often vulnerable citizens.

The construction of homeless family members is the only image which emphasizes purely blameless victims--an innocent generation of youngsters growing up without a permanent home. However, this image deflects attention from prolonged criticism of societal institutions by emphasizing causes of happenstance and casting doubt on the innocence of homeless parents. Thus stories concerned with homeless families portray a problem of unfortunate mishaps, bad luck or individual tragedies--or a problem of single parents making bad choices and succumbing to personal addictions.

The five types of images of homeless people described above were derived from my examination of the entire body of news stories under study. The discovery of these images leads to interesting questions regarding possible changes in the nature of constructions over time or between media. While a detailed analysis of the distribution of the five images of homeless people across time or across media is beyond the scope of this study, my impressions suggest that CBS news stories differ very little from the news magazine stories under study. Both types of news stories frequently present images of institution avoiders and the mentally ill homeless from 1982 to 1990. News magazines construct images of runaway and throwaway teens periodically from 1980 to 1988; network news presents this image infrequently throughout the period. Families and children receive moderately high attention in news magazines and on network news from 1982 to 1990. Both
types of news stories present images of homeless villains periodically from 1982 to 1990.
Chapter Six

THE JOURNALISM OF RESIGNATION

My findings suggest that the content and structure of news media stories on homelessness convey the impression that homelessness can not or will not be solved. I label this pervasive sense of hopelessness "the journalism of resignation." This concept relates to news coverage on many levels. The "murkiness" conveyed by vague or non-existent definitions of homelessness and contradictory numerical information about the size and demographic distribution of the homeless population, and the meshing of homelessness with many other social problems--all contribute in the creation of a tone of hopelessness. News stories exhibit resignation through the language used to describe the homeless or present information about homelessness. As journalists present commentary or news source quotations, they make explicit claims and implicit suggestions that the homeless can not be helped or do not want help, that the problem of homelessness is overwhelming, or that hope for the homeless is not in sight.

News stories on homelessness lack resolution because they rarely address the the question of who should do what to help the homeless. Rather, stories often focus on how current responses to homelessness are costly and ineffective and may perpetuate existing social conditions. When news stories raise the issue of how the homeless can be helped, the issue of finding solutions to homelessness rarely gets resolved. Even those few stories that do
present claims regarding what needs to be done to help the homeless—or who should take responsibility for taking action on homelessness—express resignation that "while we may know what the homeless need, no relief is in sight."

Occasionally, news coverage does convey a sense of optimism or hope in relation to doing something about homelessness. Some news stories that project optimism focus on specific "successful" programs that "rehabilitate" the homeless and help them re-integrate into living and working situations. Other upbeat news stories focus on private programs to rehabilitate or create more low income housing, or on isolated cases where individuals overcame homelessness through the help of hard-working, selfless benefactors. However, even these few "low resignation" stories often fail to relate individual instances of overcoming homelessness with the more general question of how to rectify the social problems of the homeless.

Finally, the concept of a "journalism of resignation" relates to constructions of "who are the homeless." Homelessness is constructed in a variety of contradictory ways, with no agreement as to whether the homeless are either innocent victims; victims of their own behaviors, desires and character flaws; or villains who prey upon the public. These constructions may reinforce resignation over homelessness as multiplicity in portraying the problem for the public and policy makers may feed into confusion over what homelessness is and how it may get resolved. The journalism of resignation may contribute to the creation of a void where it is
impossible to generate concrete policies or programs for addressing this complex social problem.

TWO MODELS OF COMMUNICATION

The concept of resignation may become more clear as I focus on those components of problem constructions that do not generate resignation. Gusfield distinguishes between those social problems which become "public problems" and those which do not. He suggests that public issues are those constructed as "something about which someone ought to do something." According to Gusfield, the structure of a public problem exhibits several dimensions: a cognitive belief in the facticity of the situation and conditions composing an issue, a belief in the alterability of circumstances, and a moral view of the problem as intolerable. The identification of these dimensions provides a foreground against which to compare the construction of homelessness and explore the notion of resignation.

I have conceptualized two models for public communication about homelessness. The first "social action" model outlines components of communication with potential for promoting social action to alleviate homelessness. The second "hopelessness" model outlines components of communication which seem to suggest that homelessness is an inevitable, unchangeable and hopeless situation.

I identify several components integral to a construction of homelessness as a problem about which someone must do something.
My model of communication with potential for promoting social action consists of six components. The six components are: 1) public recognition of and agreement on "facts" the situation of homelessness, 2) moral indignation and outrage that conditions exist, 3) urgent calls or "battlecries" for action to alleviate or rectify existing conditions, 4) battlecries allocating responsibility for taking action, 5) prescriptions for policies or programs to remedy conditions and 6) conviction that prescriptions can and will work.

My model for communication suggesting hopelessness contains five components. These components are: 1) discord and vagueness suggesting homelessness is incomprehensible, 2) acceptance of the problem as natural to modern society, 3) rationalizations suggesting the problem is too expensive and intractable to solve, 4) pessimism suggesting no one will ever take responsibility, 5) individualization or blaming the homeless as lazy and dependent, 6) justifications for inactivity that emphasize public apathy and resentment. Components of communication suggesting hopelessness may oppose or substitute for communication promoting social action.

The "journalism of resignation" constructs homelessness as an inevitable or permanent social problem about which nothing can be done. Resignation is a product of the number of components promoting social action present in a story, the emphasis each component receives, and the extent to which countervailing components suggesting hopelessness emphasize the inevitability or permanence of homelessness. I suggest that the "journalism of
resignation" is a way of telling a news story about homelessness that deflects attention from amelioration or resolution.

The discussion below clarifies how news coverage constructs resignation that no one can do anything about homelessness. I begin by examining each of the communication components of social action. I explaining how, individually and in concert, communication may create opportunities for a construction of homelessness as an alterable public problem. I then describe six communication components suggesting hopelessness. Finally, I discuss how news stories on homelessness exhibit varying levels of resignation with respect to the inclusion or exclusion of the various communication components outlined above. I propose a conceptual continuum of resignation consisting of four levels of hopelessness. While I have made no attempt to classify each article according to the continuum of resignation, I do offer examples of news stories which exhibit different levels of resignation.

COMMUNICATION PROMOTING SOCIAL ACTION

Public Recognition of and Agreement on "Facts" the Situation

Gusfield's delineation of a "cognitive dimension" to a public problem suggests that the "successful" evolution from a problematic situation to "public problem " may depend primarily upon the identification of some concrete aspects of the situation of homelessness--such as the size and social or demographic distribution of the problem--and some general agreement about the
conditions and causes associated with homelessness. In general, news coverage of homelessness exhibits very little agreement about the "facts" of the situation of homelessness. The lack of consensus regarding what is homelessness, how many people are homeless and which segments of the homeless constitute the majority of the population promotes a sense of vagueness rather than clarity. However, a few aspects of the situation of homelessness get presented as accepted truths.

A few news stories "concretize" aspects of the situation of homelessness when characterizing new research information as the "final truth" that can dispel "myths" about homelessness. Other news stories often include claims asserting that homelessness is a large and growing problem, that the homeless population is growing more diverse over time, and that homeless people lacking reliable options for shelter face harsh conditions. These claims are usually presented as concrete facts and are rarely challenged.

Whether news stories discuss the homeless living on the streets; sleeping on steam vents; or taking refuge in abandoned houses, cheap motels, emergency shelters or welfare hotels; news portrays conditions the homeless face as precarious, unhealthy and dangerous. The majority of stories on homelessness include descriptions attesting to the conditions the homeless must endure: bitter cold or extreme heat, hunger, violence and disease; sleeping in vermin-infested flop houses, abandoned buildings, on sidewalks or heat vents; or in loud, crowded and dangerous warehouse-like shelters. But descriptions of conditions alone are not enough to
instill a sense of need for amelioration: the manner in which conditions get described plays a critical role in creating a sense that the situation of homelessness must change.

**Moral Indignation and Outrage that Conditions Exist**

The construction of homelessness as a situation that necessitates action and resolution must include a sense of outrage or indignation that circumstances exist. I find this second social action component in claims that characterize homeless-related conditions as inhumane, tragic, pathetic, or disgraceful. Claims of this type emphasize that homelessness is a grave problem of widespread concern, that the situation can not remain status quo.

"If we are going to continue calling ourselves a civilized country, people (must not) have to eat out of garbage pails or sleep in the cold because they lack a roof over their heads," Snyder contends (Newsweek, January 7, 1985:15).

"People must address the question of whether human beings in the U.S. have a right to better shelter than a dumpster," says Gary Blasi, a Los Angeles lawyer for the homeless (Time, February 4, 1985:21).

Outrage that people must live without homes does not appear as a dominant theme in news coverage of homelessness. However, occasional news sources do put forth claims attesting to the intolerability of homelessness.
For example, in one article homeless advocate Robert Hayes explains his decision to take legal action to force New York State to aid the needy:

"It was really the last resort. The homeless had no friends in government, formed no constituency. Someone had to help" (Time, February 8, 1982:66).

In a CBS news story (November 14, 1982), Dr. John Talbott, President of the American Psychiatric Association at that time, calls attention to the situation of the homeless mentally ill "who deserve, who need treatment." He describes people walking around with sores on their feet, people freezing to death. He calls the situation a "national disgrace...a national tragedy."

Claims such as these and the two included in the beginning of this section express anger about the conditions faced by the homeless and suggest that the problem of homelessness will not be accepted. The characterization of homelessness as an intolerable problem provides a starting point for a construction provoking social action. However, there is a difference between labeling a situation a national tragedy and suggesting that someone must take action. Thus, claims regarding action constitute a separate communication component.

**Battlecries for Action to Alleviate or Rectify Conditions**

Some news stories contain urgent calls for action to alleviate or rectify existing conditions. These "battlecries" are lodged by advocates for the homeless, politicians, mental health
administrators, researchers and social service workers. Battlecries vary with regard to specificity. The most general battlecries assert that "someone must do something" to help all homeless people, but do not identify the "someone" who must act or the type of action that needs undertaking.

For example, one lengthy US News cover article (February 29, 1988) entitled "Finally, hope for the homeless," includes the following general battlecry:

"That nothing can be done," write James Wright and Eleanor Weber in *Homelessness and Health*, "is no longer an acceptable excuse for doing nothing, if indeed it ever was" (26).

A few general battlecries stress the consequences of not responding to help the homeless, but fall short of designating an agent who should be responsible for taking action. This type of battlecry usually relates to homeless families or children:

Jan Mitura, Downtown Family Shelter Worker, Dallas Texas: "If we don't stop the cycle now and get the parents on the right track, then we're going to have all these children living on the streets afterwards and the problem will be insurmountable" (CBS, November 27, 1986).

"The road back is very, very hard," (Dr. Ellen) Bassuk says. "We're beginning to raise a generation of kids in the streets. That has dire consequences for the future" (Newsweek, January 12, 1987:44).
Battlecries allocating responsibility

Less general battlecries specify an actor or agency that needs to take action--like the federal government or religious institutions. For the most part, claims-makers allocate responsibility in terms that are generally vague. The vaguest claims suggest that "we are all responsible" for doing something about the homeless. Other vague claims criticize agents such as religious organizations for not doing more to help shelter homeless in particular localities. In some cases, claims designate responsibility for addressing the mentally ill homeless or homeless families, but not for the entire homeless population.

Some claims emphasize responsibility in very non-specific terms:

The homeless are unpleasant to contemplate, especially in a prosperous country. But if they are a public disgrace, they are also a public responsibility (Time, December 19, 1983:15).

The theme of public responsibility occurs in a few CBS news segments at the time of Hands Across America, an event to raise money for hunger and homelessness. Ken Kragan, the event organizer, makes an appeal in one interview: "The only way we'll solve these problems is if everyone from the President on down...pitches in to do something" (CBS, May 25, 1986). A few news stories include claims asserting that a particular level of government must take action. One story examining the 1988 Presidential campaigns of various Republican and Democratic
candidates includes an excerpt from a speech in which candidate Senator Robert Dole states:

Let's say you're homeless tonight and it's below zero and nobody will help. It's gotta' be the government if no one else (CBS, January 19, 1988).

While Dole's reference to "the government" is vague, a quote such as this, appearing in reference to the presidential election, had potential to reach a wide audience and promote discussion of whether the government has a duty to address the problems of the homeless. A few battlecries allocate responsibility in a more straight-forward, specific and critical manner; these appear rarely. For example, one news article includes an appeal for action lodged by Raymond Flynn, the mayor of Boston:

We need a real long-term strategy for the homeless, and it is short-sighted and callous for the federal government to turn its back on this issue (US News, December 9, 1985:79).

Battlecries, whether general or specific, do not detail particular types of action for addressing homelessness. However, battlecries implicitly or explicitly provoke questions regarding who needs to be responsible for responding to homelessness. Because they explicitly claim that something must be done to help the homeless—and occasionally identify an agent as responsible for taking some action—battlecries may serve to draw attention to homelessness in a way that characterizes the problem as intolerable and encourages mobilization to rectify the situation.
Prescriptions for Action to Remedy Conditions

News sources and journalists occasionally offer "prescriptions" for courses of action to address the general problem of homelessness. Prescriptive claims specify what type of action must be taken to help solve the problems of the homeless. The broadest prescriptions identify what the general homeless population needs to overcome existing situations and offer long-term ideas about how to fulfill these needs. The broader a prescriptive claim, the greater its communication potential in relation to contributing to solutions for homelessness. More narrow prescriptions focus on short-term remedies for emergency care, local initiatives or plans for action in specific cities or antidotes for meeting the needs of individual segments of the homeless. Narrow prescriptions convey ideas regarding, for example, the education of homeless children or the counseling and medication needs of the homeless mentally ill.

Local prescriptions offer greater potential for social actions if the issue of generalizability on a national scale is raised. For example, one news article (Newsweek, January 7, 1985:15) describes how the advocate group CCNV organized a DC referendum mandating that the city provide overnight shelter to any street person wanting it. This initiative passed despite opposition from local politicians. Mitch Snyder, CCNV leader, called the issue a moral imperative and claimed the initiative was "the first step toward a national legislative right to shelter by the 21st century." At the time the article was written, the city had blocked the
initiative with a legal suit based on the grounds that the plan would violate budget processes.

General prescriptive claims emphasize responding to homelessness with large-scale plans rather than stop-gap or band-aid measures; they offer hope for long-term solutions. Thus some news sources proclaim that the homeless need more low-income housing, more job training programs, or more facilities offering rehabilitation for substance abusers. Claims-makers offer broad prescriptions for raising taxes, raising the minimum wage, or creating an agency to coordinate local and national efforts to address homelessness. Prescriptions have potential to instill optimism and promote social action because they suggest that knowledge about the needs of the homeless exists and offer concrete measures for taking action; they also acknowledge that homeless people want aid, and that available remedies for homelessness could work.

Prescribing action to address the needs of the homeless is not the same as allocating responsibility for carrying out action or specifying how prescriptions can be implemented on a large-scale basis. For this reason, prescriptive claims lodged in isolation still fall short of projecting a sense of hope that someone will take action or that action will work. For example, one article includes two prescriptions for helping the homeless without resolving the questions of who should do what, or whether solutions are viable:

"There is a three-word solution: Housing, housing, housing," said Robert Hayes...Others argue it isn't so
"If you give a person a piece of bread and shelter, you haven't solved the problem," declared James Starkes of the Dallas Life Foundation. "What's needed is jobs and good training" (US News, February 9, 1987:10).

This excerpt reflects two views on what actions might help the homeless. These claims appear as the conclusion of a brief article discussing the struggles of cities trying to cope with "a rise in the ranks of the homeless." While the article includes these two prescriptions, it emphasizes the extent of homelessness and offers little hope that anyone will take action to make an impact on the growing problem.

Conviction

The final communication component of the social action model relates to conviction—not only that measures to help the homeless do work, but also that these measures can be enacted on a large scale in the near future. A news story may include all other social action components but suggest that, while we know how to help the homeless, no one wants to take action and the future looks bleak. Conviction opposes resignation about the future because it conveys the impression of an alterable situation. For example, San Francisco Mayor Art Agnos offers the following claim:

"If you give me the money, we have the chance to end sleeping on the streets. I'm willing to be the first mayor in America to say so" (Time, December 17, 1990:45).

A CBS story, described in greater detail below, highlights a program in which 55 homeless shelter residents renovate city-owned
apartments so families can move out of welfare hotels. This story provides another claim which illustrates conviction. Advocate George MacDonald, who created the program, states:

We've been saying for ten years that all folks need is an opportunity. After all, what's the difference between a person who is homeless and a person who has a job and a home? The job and the home (CBS, April 30, 1990).

Like the other components, conviction varies in specificity and at times applies to only some parts of the homeless population. Thus a story may exhibit resignation that action can help some segment of the homeless population but not others. For example:

It is true that drug addicts, alcoholics and the severely mentally ill make up the hardest core of the homeless. These are the broken derelicts, the muttering crazies, the junkies with kaleidoscope eyes whom most people would rather avoid than help. Their psychological and medical problems run very deep, they are prone to violence and crime; treating them is expensive--and some refuse help when it is offered. But studies suggest that they add up to less than half of the total homeless population...activists say so many more on the overall rolls could be helped back into productive society (Newsweek, March 21, 1988:57).

The above excerpt reflects conviction that many of the homeless can be reintegrated into "productive society;" however, the statement also alludes to a large portion of people for whom the situation may never improve. The passage illustrates both communication promoting social action and countervailing communication suggesting hopelessness. This illustration emphasizes the need for
examining the ways in which claims and themes appearing alongside communication promoting social action can offset dimensions of hope.

Resignation emerges not only from an absence of communication promoting social action but also from the presence of news source claims or journalistic commentary which emphasizes hopelessness, futility and permanence. In general, news coverage of homelessness projects resignation because only a minority of news stories emphasize social action. On an individual level, a news story can convey resignation if it contains several components promoting social action but still emphasizes pessimism. To clarify how levels of resignation exist I describe how communication suggesting hopelessness may oppose or substitute for communication promoting social action.

COMMUNICATION COMPONENTS SUGGESTING HOPELESSNESS

News coverage of homelessness constructs an image of an unsolvable problem when news exhibits the following components of communication: 1) discord and vagueness suggesting homelessness is incomprehensible, 2) acceptance of the problem as natural to modern society, 3) rationalizations suggesting the problem is too expensive and intractable to solve, 4) pessimism suggesting no one will ever take responsibility, 5) individualization or blaming the homeless as lazy and dependent, 6) justifications for inactivity that emphasize public apathy and resentment. Communication suggesting
hopelessness appears frequently in news stories about homelessness. At times this communication appears as countervailing themes which oppose communication promoting social action. Elsewhere communication suggesting hopelessness dominates news stories where no promotion of social action exists. Later I will discuss how individual components of hopelessness often substitute for corresponding components promoting social action. But first a clarification of each component seems in order.

**Discord and Vagueness Suggesting Homelessness is Incomprehensible**

The construction of homelessness as a hopeless situation seems rooted in an overwhelming sentiment of confusion over exactly what conditions and situations constitute the problem. The lack of consensus over the "facts" of the problem of homelessness seems to prevent any widespread cognitive belief that homelessness is something someone ought to do something about. Confusion, vagueness and contradiction permeate news coverage of homelessness. Confusion is most apparent in the pattern of contradictory claims presented throughout the entire sample of news stories. However, individual news stories exhibit this communication component when they make explicit claims about the futility of trying to understand or assess the accuracy of information about aspects of the situation. The communication of vagueness opposes or substitutes for the presentation of
information as recognizes, agreed upon "concrete facts" about the situations and conditions composing homelessness.

The lack of an explicit definition for homelessness and the absence of consensus over the precise conditions that constitute homelessness creates resignation because if we do not know what the problem of homelessness is, we can not begin to develop solutions to the problem. News stories suggest that homelessness encompasses a broad set of conditions and a variety of situations with few boundaries in time or space. Thus stories fail to distinguish between temporary, periodic and permanent homelessness; they also suggest the homeless "live" everywhere—"in every city, huddled in every doorway," (CBS, November 20, 1983) in rural areas, and even on beaches.

Many journalists emphasize the "murkiness" surrounding situations of homelessness through the language they use when describing the homeless or characterizing public perceptions of homeless people. Journalists claim "most are nameless, faceless people" (CBS, December 18, 1985); "the street is a confusing place, and it's people confuse us" (CBS, December 20, 1983); "they're down and outers who live in the shadows in a world of their own on the streets of our big cities" (CBS, November 24, 1987); "the homeless are no longer always who we think they are" (CBS, February 2, 1986); "most of us see the homeless as the lonely figure on the city street, the dispossessed in an urban jungle, but...the homeless are everywhere (CBS, January 30, 1989).
Elsewhere I discuss the ambiguities and confusion evident in presentations of numerical information about the homeless. The contradictions and lack of consensus evident in discussions of how many people are homeless contributes to a sense that nothing about the problem is determinate. Uncertainty is particularly obvious when news stories explicitly claim that counts of the homeless are not accurate or that because trying to count the homeless is an impossible task, we may never know how many people are homeless.

The relationship between uncertainty about the causes and extent of homelessness and apathy towards finding solutions is evident in comments such as this:

Indeed, there is little about homelessness that can be established irrefutably—not the numbers of people (estimates range from 350,000 to 3 million), not the causes, certainly not the solutions (Newsweek, December 16, 1985:22; emphasis added).

Naturalization of Homelessness

A large portion of news stories present the problem of homelessness as if it were a natural and inevitable situation for modern society. The component of naturalization opposes or substitutes for outrage or indignation. News stories accept homelessness as a natural phenomena when the homeless are portrayed as just another segment of the poor "whom ye have with you always" (Time, February 8, 1988:74). Several news stories evoke images of the poor of past eras; they seem to suggest that there always have been poor, bums, or hoboes, and there always will
Sometimes naturalization involves explicit claims conveying a sense of inevitability:

They have always been with us. The same beggar who stretched a suppliant palm toward the passing togas of Ancient Rome can be found today on Colifax Avenue in Denver, still thirsty for wine; the bruised and broken woman who slept in the gutters of medieval Paris now beds down in a cardboard box in a vest-pocket park in New York City (Newsweek, January 2, 1984:20).

In a sense, the naturalization of homelessness functions as a justification for inactivity. Resignation seems strongest when claims-makers argue that because homelessness is inevitable, efforts to address the problem are futile and a waste of money:

Once, the country had "bums" who were given cots in dreary shelters or missions reminiscent of a work camp, which was all that society thought they deserved. Now cities are filled with the homeless, and the semantic shift that word embodies has given rise to a new theory about their needs: not just for "shelter" but a home...How much space, how much privacy can society provide for free? (Newsweek, January 1, 1990:38).

News exhibits acceptance of homelessness when stories fail to raise the question of what causes the problem. News that reports on situations involving the homeless without discussion of why people live on the streets creates the impression that the homeless are a natural part of modern urban and sometimes rural landscapes.
Rationalization: The Problem is Too Expensive and Intractable to Solve

Many news stories exhibit resignation when they emphasize claims that the problem of homelessness is too big to solve, or that the homeless either can not be helped or do not want help. Claims such as these oppose or replace battlecries for action to address homelessness. News stories on homelessness frequently contain lengthy accounts of how local governments and private charities in cities across the country have struggled to provide emergency shelter, food and minor services for the homeless.

News emphasizes the despair of social service workers and volunteers who claim they are doing all they can and still the outlook is bleak. For example, in one CBS segment, Jim David, the director of an eviction prevention program in Baltimore, Maryland, conveys a sense of defeat:

Its people that were able to help themselves before that are not able to help themselves now...They come to you at the last resort (and ask) what can you do for me...There isn't much you can do (CBS, December 11, 1982).

Other stories characterize the homeless as a burden for taxpayers and stress that services for the homeless are expensive and that the costs of trying to offer even minor aid are prohibitive.

Men and women, young and old, broken down or just broke-thousands of vagabonds are barely scratching out an existence on the fringes of society. Outlook: As times get tougher, misery and cost will grow...Destitute people, once a big-city phenomenon, today are found almost everywhere. Efforts to provide food and shelter are
costing charities and taxpayers millions of dollars, and still the drifters keep dying in distressing numbers (US News, March 8, 1982:60).

Many news stories emphasize the intractability of the problem or stress the complexity of the situation. News stories convey the impression that "nothing works" when they stress that homeless individuals suffer from multiple medical, psychological and mental problems that are hard to treat. According to claims-makers, not only do the problems of the homeless resist treatment, but also, the homeless themselves evade the efforts of sincere politicians, experts and caretakers who want to help them:

The bedraggled homeless are walking emblems of poverty and suffering--the only poverty many Americans ever see. But solutions for their plight are not easily found. For one thing, the forces that caused them are long standing and complex...For another, the homeless move outside the ordinary social structures that might help them, and often resist any effort to bring them in. The result is an entire underclass of people who have managed to slide right through the safety nets and into the gutter (Newsweek, January 2, 1984:21).

Some news sources and journalists describe the homeless as "sociologically disintegrated," and totally alienated from the community, or as suffering from delusions which prevent them from acknowledging their illness and seeking help. Stories suggest that "no safety net, however tight its mesh, could prevent many such persons from falling through" (Newsweek, December 5, 1983:134).
Pessimism Suggesting Endless Lack of Responsibility

News coverage of homelessness exhibits hopelessness when claims portray a situation that will not change because no one will accept responsibility for taking action.

Beyond their misery, the homeless signify that the country is fraying badly along its economic and social hems. The strain should disturb everyone. But right now most people seem to prefer fighting over ideological and economic purity to collaborating on a common attack (Newsweek, March 21, 1988).

Many news stories do not even raise the issue of who should be responsible for attempting to change the conditions faced by the homeless; the few that discuss this issue usually suggest that the situation will not change because no level of government will accept responsibility for trying to do more. Thus themes suggesting that no one will take responsibility offset or substitute for battlecries allocating responsibility.

Some stories discuss government inactivity or the apathy of individual citizens and emphasize that the future looks bleak. For example, one CBS news story examines the situations of groups of homeless living in tent camps in the woods near Naples, Florida. A journalist describes the conditions faced by these homeless people, many of whom are said to hold construction jobs. The journalist describes a grim picture emphasizing resignation for the future:

There are no government programs to help the Naples homeless. They rely on volunteer groups for aid. The woods people say they can't even qualify for food stamps because the application must include a home address...For
now, the homeless people of Naples are without public help and virtually without hope (CBS, March 6, 1987).

Like many news stories, this CBS segment presents discussion of inactivity in a matter of fact tone that falls short of criticism. This story highlights political abandonment of the homeless and presents the story with a defeated tone. A few news stories do present criticism of the public social service system, yet still exhibit resignation that things will not change:

Ever since medieval townsmen launched the insane in ships of fools, public officials have tried to deal with the homeless by simply shoving them out of sight...for hundreds of thousands of shelters resident that live on government assistance, the system does little more than prolong their homelessness (US News, February 29, 1988:33).

Help Perpetuates the Problem: Blaming the Homeless

Another component of hopelessness appears through claims which convey a belief that help perpetuates the problem because the homeless are lazy or become helpless when social programs or charity fulfills their needs. This communication of hopelessness counters battlecries calling for action or allocating responsibility and suggests that prescriptions for rectifying conditions are futile.

Some news sources claim the homeless take advantage of efforts to help them. Other claims-makers express fears that programs offering comprehensive services to the homeless could attract too many people or allow the homeless to become dependent.
This theme is somewhat contradictory to the claim that the homeless refuse help when it is offered. Resignation that help perpetuates the problem appears particularly strong when those lodging claims are people working to help the homeless: For example:

(The homeless) "show up where the food is free and the beds are clean and it's easiest to get in and out without somebody hassling them," says Salvation Army Capt Danny Morrow. "They won't let you do casework on them. They don't want to work. You'd rather just kick them in the pants and say 'Why don't you get a job, and we'll help you?" (Newsweek, March 15, 1982:28).

Steve Burger, who runs the mission (in Seattle) longs for the older bums who shared traditional values even if they violated them. "The young guys come in demanding help," say Burger, "they think they have a constitutional right to be taken care of" (October 29, 1984:14).

Public Apathy and Resentment as Justifying Inactivity

The final component of hopelessness involves justifications for inactivity through claims that the general public is apathetic or resentful of the homeless. Claims such as these appear frequently in news coverage of homelessness. They oppose or substitute for any of the communication components promoting social action. In CBS news stories, commentators often introduce segments with claims that people are blind to the homeless, or see them and quickly forget or walk away and put their situations out of mind. These stories sometimes include interviews with "citizens" on the
street who claim they're tired of people "trying to get something from them" everywhere they turn. Other claims suggest the pervasiveness of the problem has left the public numb.

Claims express hopelessness when they emphasize the apathy of politicians and policy-makers and suggest the homeless are totally disenfranchised. For example, a journalist in one news segment claims the homeless are "out of sight and out of mind" and an advocate echoes these sentiments:

Never before in the history of America have the rich been richer and the poor been poorer...these folks have no economic power and they have no political power, so therefore they are invisible in our society (CBS, March 27, 1986).

Politically, the homeless have been a non-issue: in this year's elections they were all but invisible. Homeless people, of course, do not frequent polling places either to vote or seek shelter (Time, November 24, 1986:28).

Similar sentiments emerge when social service workers dismiss the claims of candidates for the 1988 Presidential election who mention homelessness as a campaign issue. Social workers say candidates only pay lip service to the problem in order to get votes (CBS, January 24, 1988). Claims such as these illustrate the resignation of those who represent and work with the homeless but feel that society as a whole is apathetic to the plight of those without homes. Beyond apathy, resentment expressed both by institutional and "ordinary" news sources contributes to a construction of homelessness as an insurmountable problem.
Resentment towards the homeless appears in essays discussing the negative impact the homeless have on society and stories describing political statements expressing insensitivity to the poor or local backlashes against the homeless. For example, a few news stories highlight the Reagan administration's apathy to the poor and hungry and suggest this political attitude can not be overcome (CBS, December 9, 1983; May 22, 1986; May 24, 1986).

News magazine essays equate the presence of the homeless with a breakdown of neighborhood communities or decry the use of tax dollars to support alcoholics and drug addicts. In one essay entitled "No Heart for the Homeless," the author makes the following proclamation:

My tax money keeps the streets paved and clean. That makes me their landlord. I want to evict them...I don't know, exactly, when they got the right to live on the street. I don't know, exactly, when I lost the right to walk through town without being pestered by panhandlers (Newsweek, December 1, 1986).

Resentment is evident in claims which express dismay for the homeless who congregate and make their presence felt in parks or downtown shopping areas where they are not wanted. A few news stories describe proposals or actual legislation designed to prevent the homeless from sleeping in public, loitering in neighborhoods or downtown areas, or picking through trash. The tone of some articles at times condones social control of the homeless.
Some claims suggest that resentment for the homeless in cities has reached the level of "public wrath at the homeless."

"How many subway riders, wary of the deranged homeless who make the subterranean world so menacing, have not fantasized responding to assault with violence?" wrote social commentator Myron Magnet in the *New York Times* (Time, April 16, 1990:15).

This statement was written in defense of Rodney Sumter, who was charged with first-degree manslaughter for beating to death a homeless man who had spat on him and punched him in the head on a subway platform. Sumter was cleared of any wrongdoing, a legal decision termed a "victory" for "respectable citizens over society's lunatic fringe" (15).

Expressions of apathy and resentment appear throughout news coverage of homelessness. They seem to function in a manner similar to claims attesting to the laziness, dependency and multiple personal problems of the homeless; all these themes offer rationalizations and justifications for not allocating more resources to address homelessness.

**CONTINUUM OF RESIGNATION**

The discussion above delineates two sets of contravening components which operate to construct homelessness as a problem about which either "someone should do something" or "no one can do anything." News coverage of homelessness tends to emphasize resignation that nothing will happen to improve the situations of the
homeless in the near future. As I examine the presence of both sets of communication components within news coverage of homelessness, patterns reflecting different levels of resignation for the future of the homeless emerge. News coverage conveys resignation as communication components suggesting hopelessness comprise the dominant themes of stories, and oppose or substitute for communication components promoting social action. Thus a story may include a quote or comment emphasizing indignation or a battlecry for action, but these communication components get offset by claims stressing acceptance of homelessness as natural or rationalizations that efforts to help the homeless perpetuate the problem.

News stories on homelessness fall along a continuum with respect to how much resignation they exhibit; this continuum exhibits four levels of hopelessness. At one end of the continuum lie news stories emphasizing hopelessness but conveying a modicum of hope. News coverage projecting the some hope contains many of the components of communication related to a construction of homelessness as a public problem. News coverage of this type constructs homelessness as a problem necessitating action and projects some sense of optimism for developing or implementing solutions. Stories exhibiting optimism may contain occasional communication components suggesting hopelessness but these are generally subtle themes or brief claims.

At the other end of the continuum lies news that exhibits complete despair and resignation. News emanating the most
resignation emphasizes many components suggesting hopelessness. News stories at this level project a sense of despair or indifference; they fail to present homelessness as a compelling issue "about which someone ought to do something." At the center of the continuum I find two levels of resignation conveyed by stories which sometimes include two or three components of social action but nonetheless project an overall sense that the problem of the homelessness will not change.

**Level One: Some Hope for the Homeless**

News coverage conveying the lowest level of resignation emphasizes many of the communication components promoting social action and thus suggests that institutions and organizations should take steps to rectify the situations of the homeless. All news stories of this type construct homelessness by presenting claims of outrage or indignation that suggest the conditions of homelessness are intolerable; they also include battlecries calling for action and allocating responsibility. Low resignation news includes prescriptions for rectifying the problem. Some news stories conveying low resignation present information about aspects of homelessness in a manner that suggests that journalists have uncovered "hard facts" representing "the truth" about homelessness. Most news coverage of this type conveys conviction that agents possess the means for resolving the problem of homelessness; however, conviction that agents will enact solutions is sometimes absent or opposed by communication suggesting hopelessness.
Stories which project some hope for the homeless include seven CBS segments that highlight six different programs deemed successful for "rehabilitating" the homeless or bringing them back into communities (CBS, November 1, 1986; January 11, 1986; August 16, 1987; November 26, 1988; March 12, 1989b; April 30, 1990; December 22, 1990); one CBS news story about a program to develop more low-income housing (March 12, 1989a); two news articles which each feature several "successful" small scale programs and offer prescriptions for long-term solutions to homelessness (US News, February 29, 1989; Time, December 17, 1990); one news article which describes homelessness as an important issue facing the successful candidate of the 1988 presidential election (Time, October 24, 1988); and one additional news story that focuses on an individual case where a group of people took action to help a homeless family renovate and furnish an abandoned home they had bought for $1200 (CBS, December 24, 1990).

The broadcast news segments present claims that suggest the homeless want help and take advantage of programs that meet their needs. The optimism conveyed by these stories may be limited by the fact that news focuses on isolated cases of success and sometimes emphasizes communication suggesting hopelessness. For example, some stories include claims that "homelessness is a big problem, this is a small program" or suggest that many existing programs make the homeless dependent on subsistence benefits. These stories for the most part include no claims about how the
individual programs could be generalized to provide hope for the entire homeless population.

Two of the three news articles projecting a low level of resignation describe several successful "model programs" that provide services for different segments of the homeless population. The three news articles include all components of the social action model. They present information about aspects of homelessness as "concrete facts" by including claims about the historical causes of homelessness and research findings describing social characteristics of the homeless population. The articles each suggest tangible prescriptions for alleviating homelessness; prescriptions offered include: creating more community-based health clinics, rehabilitating the 1.3 million public housing units vacant because of neglect; creating support systems to offer the homeless emotional support; developing more outreach programs that treat the mentally ill while they live on the streets; extending drug and alcohol rehabilitation programs; and coordinating local efforts and promoting joint public-private endeavors.

The communication promoting social action included in these articles at times seems tempered by the appearance of communication suggesting hopelessness. Each news article includes claims that highlight the obstacles faced by those trying to remedy homelessness and document the failure of previous and existing legislation, programs and services designed to aid the homeless. Claims suggest that many existing responses to homelessness perpetuate the problem and offer few indications that the social
service system will undergo radical changes in the future. Thus the three news articles convey some optimism for helping the homeless but offer no claims about the likelihood of large-scale efforts to enact prescriptions.

An examination of one CBS segment (April 30, 1990) illustrates how level one news stories contain social action communication components that work together to convey some optimism for the homeless despite the presence of communication suggesting hopelessness. The story begins with the journalist "in the newsroom" introducing the segment as "news on the question of what to do about the nation's homeless." The anchorman says that the number of homeless seems to increase daily and claims the people to blame for the problem are "government officials, greedy speculators and the homeless themselves." He then turns to the subject of advocates doing something about homelessness "one step at a time" by creating a program that "helps the homeless help themselves." Video shots depict a group of men leaving a construction site. The voice of the journalist-narrator introduces one man as someone who knows "what it feels like to be down and out, homeless and helpless." The man, Mohammed Rasheed, describes how he became homeless after his house burnt down and he lost everything he owned. He claims he lived in abandoned homes and became "dependent on people who insisted on taking care of him." A second journalist describes how Rasheed, still homeless, became involved in a program which put him to work renovating city owned apartments. Rasheed identifies various needs of the homeless: a
routine of getting up and going to work and a means of learning how to pay rent and save money. The next scene depicts Mayor Dinkins in an office, discussing his support for the program. Dinkins makes a battlecry emphasizing intolerable conditions and the need for action and responsibility:

...It is essential that we rehabilitate city owned properties, that we get them (the homeless) out of...welfare hotels so-called, out of shelters and armories. Those are inhumane circumstances in which to live.

From Dinkins the story cuts to advocate George MacDonald making a claim indicating conviction that the homeless can be helped. The voice of the journalist-narrator describes how participants in this program receive net $110 a week and are forced to save $30 of this pay. The voice-over introduces a homeless woman involved in the program who makes an enthusiastic comment illustrating how the program has helped her. Two anonymous homeless workers echo her sentiments. The journalist-narrator says the workers are guaranteed an apartment and a full time job at the end of the nine months of work. Visuals depict participants working to reconstruct an apartment and waiting in lines to get paid. Finally, the journalist makes a closing comment:

Homelessness, its a big problem. (accompanying visual: a close-up of black person with hands covering face, wearing knit skull-hat, seeming disheveled) "And this is a small program. But for these 55 people, its the solution" (accompanying visual: workers handling pay, smiling, talking).
This news story, one of the most optimistic of all stories in the sample, contains all of the communication components promoting social action. The story thus projects hope that we can do something about homelessness. However, this story emphasizes the pervasiveness of homelessness without presenting claims about how programs such as this could be extended to provide relief for the general homeless population. The story also contains claims which suggest the homeless cause their situations and become dependent on those "insisting on taking care" of them. Still, the overall tone of this story suggests optimism for some fortunate homeless people.

**Level Two: Outrage But Overwhelming Resignation**

News coverage conveying the second level of resignation communicates a few components promoting social action but overall emphasizes many components suggesting hopelessness. At this level, news stories all present outrage or indignation indicating that the situations of the homeless are intolerable. Some stories include battlecries calling for action and emphasizing responsibility, while other stories present prescriptions for addressing the needs of the homeless. However, resignation is overwhelming because all stories present themes suggesting the problem of homelessness is "too big" to solve or that those trying to help the homeless admit that nothing works. Some news stories communicate hopelessness by suggesting that homelessness is a natural phenomenon, that help perpetuates the problem or that public apathy and resentment justify inactivity.
Some stories at this level present "outrage and battlecries" that suggest someone must do something, but present no indication of what should be done or fail to identify the "someone" who must act and take responsibility. Other stories discuss prescriptive actions but contain opposing claims that no one will accept responsibility for allocating resources for implementing antidotes. These stories suggest that stop-gap measures have provided very limited relief. While this type of news contains some claims attesting to the alterability of the homeless situation, it presents no assertions regarding the likelihood of widespread adoption of the recommended prescriptions.

For example, one early CBS news story contains footage of the "first Congressional hearing on homelessness in 50 years." At the hearing, Mitch Snyder, advocate for the homeless, presents an impassioned speech, included here because it illustrates indignation, the need for mobilization, and the allocation of responsibility. Snyder appeals to Congress:

They're crisscrossing this country, looking for work, begging for jobs. They're living in their cars and tents. They're living in abandoned buildings. People are dying, people are suffering, innocent Americans are going through hell in record numbers. And what's happening is not sufficient in response to that. It is not enough. There is a national emergency. Treat it as such (CBS, December 15, 1982).

This story ends with CBS correspondent Jane Miller standing in the street in the night. Miller says the US House of Representatives passed a $50 million grant for emergency food and shelter for the
homeless: "Advocates say the money will help--but in terms of solving the problem, they call it just a drop in the bucket." The choice of ending on a despairing note emphasizes that homelessness is too big a problem to solve. The absence of any claims about what remedies could solve the problems of the general homeless population also contributes to a sense of resignation that homelessness may never go away.

Second level news stories often assert that certain phenomenon cause homelessness, present claims of outrage and calls for action, and include assertions suggesting people could escape homelessness if their needs were met. A few news stories contain claims which identify specific needs which must be met in order to resolve the problem of homelessness and describe isolated instances where programs try to fulfill these needs. However, no plan for how needs can be met on a large scale basis is put forward. Thus news still projects no sense of optimism that homelessness could be solved in the near future. Communication promoting social action is outweighed by communication suggesting hopelessness.

For example, one news story contains claims that many cities are unable or unwilling to help the homeless:

The homeless have proved to be such a diverse group, with such complex reasons for their difficulties, that politicians have been hard pressed to suggest anything more than patchwork remedies...Shelters, say activists, are not solutions. They are temporary way stations for the unfortunate. One workable alternative (to emergency housing) is programs that help the dispossessed on a one-to-one level...Unfortunately, such painstaking solutions may be swamped by the increasing numbers of the
destitute. At the moment, with unexpected wintry blasts chasing people off the streets, it will be an achievement just to give the homeless a place to come in from the cold (Time, November 24, 1989).

Level Three: Overwhelming Resignation

News coverage at the third level suggests that homelessness is a disgraceful situation but conveys overwhelming resignation that the situation will not change. No claims suggest that some person, agency or group should rally to act upon the problem. No voices identify an agent that should take it upon themselves to rectify homelessness. Many claims represent components suggesting hopelessness. All news coverage at this level emphasizes that homelessness is a problem too big or stubborn to tackle. Some news stories stress that homelessness is an inevitable problem in modern societies; others suggest that trying to help the homeless will only perpetuate the problem. Stories present public opinion as apathetic or resentful.

Both early and recent coverage of homelessness presents claims constructing homelessness as a serious, pervasive problem with an impact on all levels of society. Stories of this type usually include claims that identify one or more cause of homelessness. News coverage acknowledges the extent of the problem of homelessness by presenting indications of the numbers of homeless people searching for public shelter or appearing at soup kitchens. A large proportion of the news stories draw attention to intolerable conditions such as life-threatening weather, hunger, disease,
susceptibility to violent crime. News stories characterize these conditions as inhumane or a disgrace to "our society," but fail to offer any claims calling for action to alleviate these conditions.

For example, a 1983 CBS news story focusing on protests about the problem--a story topic ripe for offering claims regarding the need for action--emphasizes the gravity of the situation without including calls for action. According to the journalist, the homeless at a DC rally before the State of the Union Address blame the President and his policies for their growing numbers. Meanwhile, at a San Francisco rally, the homeless "tell stories of no job, no prospects, welfare too low to cover housing." An Episcopal Bishop in San Francisco expresses indignation as he claims "the majority of people who are homeless are people who are very much like you and me. We are watching the middle class become the poor before our eyes." The story finishes with a quote from an anonymous homeless man: "when you're homeless, the recession is a depression" (January 25, 1983).

As the story ends on this sad note, visuals depict two homeless individuals huddled around a fire in a trash can on a New York City street at night. Both the commentary and the photograph project a sense of resignation. No claims call for public or private action to alleviate intolerable conditions; no mention of efforts to solve the problem of homelessness occurs. Thus, the story fosters a sense of resignation that this sad problem may continue unabated.

Many of these stories include claims attesting that the homeless are not easy to help. Claims suggest that physical,
even when it is available. Thus claims like the following emphasize that nothing works because the problem of homelessness is too big, the problems of homeless individuals too deep:

"It's a strange phenomenon," comments David Dalberg of the Salvation Army in Chicago, "but it is a reality of the street that you can starve to death, you can go homeless, but you never have to go without a drink. You can hook up with a couple of buddies who are working towards a bottle..." (US News, March 8, 1982:61).

Level three news coverage often includes discussions of how local governments and private charities have responded to the growing numbers of the homeless.

In general, discussion of responses to homelessness allege that current programs and policies are inadequate and emphasize how and why certain responses do nothing to alleviate the overall situation. These discussions also emphasize the costs of response policies or programs and often describe these as a burden for local governments or taxpayers. The discussion of responses also includes claims that helping the homeless perpetuates the problem or that setting up response programs will only cause more people to ask for help. Discussion of responses seems to substitute for discussion of solutions to homelessness. Stories at this level contain no commentary or news source claims describing possible solutions to the problem. Some stories of this type explicitly state "no one knows how to solve homelessness."
The following commentary, taken from news stories which contain no calls for action or prescriptions, illustrates the extent of resignation at this level:

How can man cope with our newest most modern challenges when we still have not dealt with the oldest (CBS, January 20, 1983).

If you think (mentally ill homeless man) Krist is pathetic, multiply him by a million and you'll have an idea of the size of the problem (CBS, November 14, 1984).

**Level Four: Complete Resignation, Total Despair**

News coverage that exhibits the highest level of resignation includes no communication promoting social action. News stories of this type include no claims about what causes homelessness or what might solve the problem. They present information and situations in a manner which emphasizes many components suggesting hopelessness. All news stories at this level construct homelessness as a natural or inevitable phenomenon.

Some fourth level news stories highlight the conditions faced by homeless people and some focus on the problems the homeless cause in local communities. Some fourth level news stories focus on situations or events to which the homeless are either enmeshed or else involved only peripherally. Some stories describe homeless-related conditions in detail and offer vignettes or biographies about homeless people who suffer through them without characterizing
these conditions as intolerable or disgraceful. Vignettes tend to highlight the situations of mentally ill individuals, criminals or substance abusers. The emphasis on personal problems reflects the theme that "nothing works" for helping the homeless and sometimes conveys the impression that help perpetuates homelessness by support a system of dependency.

Stories expressing complete resignation exhibit no outrage that people should have to live as the homeless do. Stories of this type do not present information or claims regarding the general causes of homelessness, although a handful of stories describe the events leading up to individual cases of homelessness. No mention of what should be done or who should take responsibility for solving the problems faced by the homeless occurs. Instead, stories focus on topics that project hopelessness, for example: how private agencies or religious charities have struggled to feed and shelter the homeless; how emergency agencies are swamped or overwhelmed by growing numbers; how responses burden taxpayers; or how the homeless do not want help or can not be helped.

A few stories exhibiting "complete resignation" follow a format which may prevent any in-depth evaluation of homelessness as a social phenomena. These news stories are extremely brief and most contain no direct quotations attributed to news sources. Some present no video footage or photographs. Others present no news source quotes.

For example, a 50 second CBS story describes and depicts visually the General Services Administration's construction of
heating vent covers that prevent the homeless from using vents as a means of warmth (September 19, 1984). This story emphasizes apathy and resentment, although the journalist reports that "following protests, the grate covers will be removed." A 30 second CBS segment describes how Mitch Snyder ended his 51 day hunger strike after Reagan agreed to fund a $5 million homeless shelter (November 4, 1984) and a 20 second CBS segment describes a Supreme Court ruling upholding Santa Barbara's law banning sleeping in public places (April 28, 1986) emphasize apathy and resentment. Although these stories are short, they seem to emphasize resignation, especially when they focus on the theme that homelessness is an overwhelming problem or project a sense of homelessness as a natural or inevitable part of modern landscapes.

For example, one CBS news story (January 16, 1985) reports that the Los Angeles County Grand jury wants to declare the county a local, state and Federal disaster area so it can qualify for funding to help the homeless. According to the news anchor, the county aimed to terminate as many people as possible from public assistance for as long as possible. Visuals depict several shots of homeless people: one man pushing a shopping cart, two sitting in a doorway, one walking down a sidewalk street with a sack, another picking through a trash dumpster. The visuals present the homeless as separate from the general public, nomadic, deviant. These visuals testify to the pathetic conditions the homeless in Los Angeles face, but no claim in the story characterizes conditions as disgraceful or intolerable. Nothing about the way in which the story is reported
suggests that someone needs to take action to respond to homelessness. Although this news story describes what could be a federal emergency, the tone portrays the situation as unremarkable. The story projects resignation that homelessness is permanent, perhaps inevitable.

In addition to the above CBS stories, some news articles present brief reports in a "straight news" format that focuses exclusively on the who, what, where and how of a homeless-related event. These short straight news stories do not raise questions about the origin of homelessness or why individuals are homeless. Thus the straight-news format results in a naturalization of homelessness.

Many news stories portraying homelessness as enmeshed with other social problems exhibit total resignation. While some stories which portray homelessness as enmeshed with crime or panhandling discuss the causes of homelessness or solutions to homelessness, most do not. Stories which mesh homelessness and panhandling tend to focus attention to issues such as whether people should have the right to beg in subways or whether legislation should restrict begging; how mass transit travelers or pedestrians in big cities fear and resent the homeless; or how people who live in transit stations spend their days drinking, taking drugs or panhandling (US News, March 23, 1987; Time, September 5, 1988; Time, January 11, 1988; Time, April 16, 1990; Newsweek, February 12, 1990; Time, February 12, 1990; Newsweek, May 21, 1990).
The homeless presented in these stories are drug-addicts, alcoholics, hustlers, con-men: people who harass and threaten pedestrians. The focus of these news stories directs attention away from the questions of what are the major causes of homelessness and how these causes can be addressed to eradicate the problem, or who should be responsible for devising and funding a plan to resolve the problems of the homeless.

Just as the process of meshing generates resignation about homelessness, the process through which the general topic of homelessness gets differentiated into smaller, more narrowly defined topics in some cases contributes to a sense that the problem is inevitable. Thus, resignation occurs when news focuses on such highly specific topics as architectural designs for sheltering the homeless (Newsweek, January 1, 1990); a controversial shelter in Michigan (Newsweek, December 6, 1988); a calendar featuring the homeless of Berkeley (CBS December 26, 1990); or a Soviet documentary featuring a NYC man claiming to be homeless.

News stories also project complete resignation when they examine the backgrounds of individual advocates or volunteers working with the homeless (Time, January 2, 1989; Newsweek, July 16, 1990) without discussing the larger issues of what causes homelessness and what should be done about it. Stories dealing with topics associated with unique responses to address homelessness project hopelessness when they include no discussion of the problem's causes and solutions but foster the impression that "someone is doing something" to respond to the problem. These
stories exhibit complete resignation because they place little or no emphasis on characterizing the conditions faced by homeless as intolerable or disgraceful, they include no battlecries or prescriptions and convey many communication components suggesting hopelessness.

Stories emphasizing controversies that occur when communities or groups try to respond to the homeless emphasize that some groups claim the homeless threaten the safety of communities and cause problems, and that offering assistance to some homeless will only attract larger groups and perpetuate the problem. Such stories suggest that even small scale attempts to help the homeless by offering minor assistance face adversity. Therefore the focus on controversies may create sense that nothing can be done, the homeless can't be helped.

For example, an article about Los Angeles reports on a "controversial park for derelicts." This park was created as part of a downtown redevelopment plan that attacked a slum by adding new housing, rehabilitation, social programs and two parks. The parks were designed to discourage "Skid Row Bums" from wandering downtown by giving them patches of grass and benches to sleep on, a shelter for keeping dry, toilets, and a sense of safe territory; parks also provide areas for children to play. This story includes claims that the park has done little to draw derelicts away from downtown or reduce crime, and that derelicts do not deserve a "haven." The article includes no claims about the causes of homelessness, the intolerability of conditions the homeless face, and no battlecries or
prescriptions. The issue of exploring solutions for the general homeless population is not discussed. An article about a controversy surrounding neighborhood objections to a Michigan church's programs. The church hosted a shelter for the homeless for one week a year and held AA meetings weekly, but the community filed a suit blocking the two service programs. This news story follows a similar pattern of claims resulting in complete resignation.

Some stories describing local backlashes against the homeless exhibit complete resignation when they focus on how communities harass homeless with ordinances or physical abuse but do NOT characterize the conditions the homeless face as inhumane, or include battlecries or other communication components promoting social action. These stories contain many claims which emphasize public apathy or resentment for the homeless. Thus these stories exhibit total resignation and convey an impression that no one can do anything to solve homelessness.
Chapter Seven:

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

In this final chapter I return to the original research concerns and address these in light of the study's key findings. I also assess the limitations of the study's method and findings. Finally, I go beyond the data to speculate about the study's implications for future communication research.

Let us begin by reviewing my main findings concerning the original research questions, namely:

1. What is the extent of public attention to homelessness in national magazines, social science journals and network news broadcasts from 1980 to 1990?

2. How do news stories construct homelessness in terms of claims about the definition and extent or size of the problem?

3. How do news stories portray the causes of homelessness and the relation of causes to other social problems?

4. What images of the homeless population emerge in news stories, and how are these images communicated in terms of journalistic techniques and news narrative structures?

5. How do news stories portray homelessness in terms of who could, should or must do something to alleviate the problem?

6. To what extent do portrayals of homelessness promote social action or hopelessness about this social problem?
FINDINGS

Public Attention to Homelessness

Between 1980 to 1990 I find a virtual explosion in attention to homelessness in social science journals, national network news broadcasts, and news and general magazine publications. This explosion in interest is apparent when I examine the Reader's Guide to Periodical Literature, the Social Science Index, and the Television News Index and Abstracts. The three annual indexes list a cumulative total of 17 magazine articles, 6 journal articles, and 5 broadcast news items exclusively under the three homeless topic terms for the combined years 1980, 1981 and 1982. For the combined years 1983, 1984 and 1985, the three annual indexes list a total of 85 magazine articles, 24 journal articles and 52 network news stories. However, the level of attention to homelessness changed dramatically by the late 1980's. For the combined years 1986, 1987 and 1988, the three indexes list a total of 193 magazine articles, 126 social science articles, and 137 network news stories. And in 1989 and 1990, the indexes list a total of 152 magazine articles, 149 journal articles, and 98 broadcast news items under the topic of homelessness.

Steady increases occur in both the number of articles appearing in news magazines annually and the variety of different publication outlets. The increase in number of outlets throughout the 1980's reflects a widening range of special interest magazines
attending to the topic. By 1990, 80 different magazines had presented articles on homelessness to their different audiences.

Attention to homelessness in social science journals develops through similar stages. In the early 80's, journals are slow to attend to homelessness, with only 18 different journals attending to homelessness by 1985. However, social science journals expand their interest in homelessness in the mid to late '80's. By 1990, 78 different journals had presented information on homelessness to their different audiences.

Defining and Estimating the Size of Homelessness

No news story in the sample provides an explicit definition of homelessness. The term "homelessness" thus describes many phenomena, many sets of conditions, living arrangements and lifestyles. News sources and journalists make few if any distinctions between the temporary homeless, the periodically homeless, the long-term homeless or the previously homeless. Political groups and support service experts making claims in news stories neither agree nor argue about how homelessness should be defined.

Both the lack of agreement and the lack of conflict facilitate acceptance of the word homeless as a blanket term applicable to many situations. Thus news stories provide no consistent or unified boundaries or criteria for identifying what constitutes homelessness and who are the homeless. I suggest that some concise criteria for defining homelessness could be a first step towards developing notions of who ought to do what to alleviate this social problem.

The imprecise use of the term homelessness for describing multiple and diverse populations leads to variance and contradiction in claims about the size of the homeless population. Groups with opposing political, professional or ideological views of the nature of homelessness offer conflicting counts of the homeless population. However, my findings indicate that many estimates or counts of the homeless in news stories appear without source attributions. I also
find that individual news stories contain little debate over the size of the homeless population.

News stories present counts of the homeless in many different ways: they offer numerical ranges that vary from story to story, with no agreement on where the upper and lower boundaries of the range should lie; they offer concrete but disparate numbers that sometimes shrink or triple over night; and they present numbers for shifting time frames that sometimes focus on one night and other times focus across a year. News stories also offer projections of the size of various segments of the homeless population, and again, these projections contradict one another over time.

A few news stories present limited debate between news sources disagreeing on the size and nature of the homeless population. Unfortunately, these few stories do not explain why different sources arrive at different size estimates: they do not describe how sources define homelessness, or the methods they use to reach their estimates. Thus, even news stories that present debate offer no consistent portrait of the nature and size of the homeless population. I suggest that the lack of consensus on both the extent of homelessness and the proportion of groups making up the total homeless population may be seen as contributing to a sense of resignation about the problem. This resignation arises from the sense that because the problem cannot even be defined, the causes and solutions may never be found.
Homelessness: Its Causes and Relation to Other "Social Problems"

In the absence of an explicit definition for homelessness, news stories provide no clear boundaries for distinguishing between homelessness and other situations which may themselves be considered as social problems. Therefore, news portrays homelessness as "enmeshed" in other large and so-called intractable social conditions. When news stories portray social problems as enmeshed, they do not clarify whether homelessness is a cause, effect or symptom of another problem--or simply a coincidence.

Homelessness is enmeshed with numerous other problems in news stories from 1980 to 1990. Homelessness appears--both within individual stories and across many stories--as a condition perpetuating other problems, a symptom of other problems, and a consequence of such conditions. Therefore, news stories across the sample create no consistent picture of whether homelessness is a cause or result of another "larger" problem. The problems enmeshed with homelessness include, as examples: unemployment; hunger and poverty; runaway or abandoned infants, children and youth; panhandling; inadequate foster-care policies; mental health institution breakdowns; the deterioration of public and private low-income or low-rent housing; the illegal practice of hitching rides on freight trains; and AIDS. I suggest that meshing creates a sense of resignation that certain social conditions are inevitable and too enormous and complex to resolve.
Constructing Images of the Homeless: Content Components and Narrative Conventions

The image of the homeless that emerges in news stories between 1980 and 1990 is one with many faces, many voices, many "personalities;" in fact, homelessness appears as a problem with multiple characterizations, multiple typifications. Just as there is no precise or explicit definition of homelessness, there is no single construction of the homeless. News stories construct several images of homeless people, and each appears and reappears throughout the eleven year period. Therefore, no one image dominates or serves as a consistent symbol that could anchor homelessness as a particular type of social problem necessitating a specific type of social action.

I identify five central images or constructions of the homeless. The homeless appear as "institution avoiders," "mentally ill individuals," "families and children," "runaway or abandoned teens," and "threatening villains." These prevalent images seem to evolve from different journalistic narratives for organizing news about the homeless. Each narrative characterizes the homeless as responsible--to varying degrees--for bringing about their own predicament.

News stories employ five different content components and four different narrative conventions as they construct five images of homeless people. The components of each narrative are: social actors, relationships, behaviors, conditions and causes. The four narrative conventions are: biographies or vignettes about homeless
individuals; journalistic commentary or descriptive language; visual techniques; and the presentation of numbers, statistics and research findings. Individual narratives rely on each of these components and processes to varying degrees. A brief description of the individual components and processes seems appropriate.

Social actors and relationships. Social actors are victims, villains and heroes; the homeless, social services workers, and advocates or volunteers rotate through these roles. The absence of clearly identifiable victims and villains in news stories about the homeless seems to add to the vagueness prevalent in the construction of this social problem. Social actors and social institutions get involved in several types of relationships. News coverage of homelessness at various times characterizes relationships as involving helplessness, dependencies, resistance, apathy and conflict.

Behaviors of the homeless. The homeless engage in many different behaviors. Each of the five narratives describes relatively distinct sets of behaviors. News stories at various times emphasize behaviors that are deviant, bizarre, pathetic, destructive, hostile or violent. The description of behaviors conveys impressions about whether or not the homeless cause their own predicaments, whether the homeless want help, and whether or not we should try to help the homeless.

Conditions faced by the homeless. Each narrative emphasizes a somewhat different set of conditions faced by homeless victims or villains. In general, conditions relate to the weather; to types of
arrangements for taking shelter; to health, nutrition and physical safety; and to psychological, emotional and intellectual trauma. Descriptions of conditions vary in the characterization of their severity, their consequences, and whether or not the homeless have any power to act upon or control them.

**Causes of homelessness.** Many news stories never mention potential causes of homelessness. Other news stories describe the events that bring individual people to homelessness, but do not generalize about the causes of homelessness for the larger homeless population. When individual news stories present discussions of the causes of homelessness, many focus on one or more of the following situations: government policies resulting in a shortage of public low-income housing; real-estate market developments such as gentrification of skid rows and urban areas and the elimination of single room occupancy buildings; "changes in social values" related to domestic abuse and child and youth abandonment; federal budget cuts affecting social service programs; de-institutionalization and subsequent mental health service deficits. In addition to these systemic forces, news stories often emphasize individualistic problems causing homelessness: drug or alcohol addiction, criminal behavior, or personal tragedies such as fires, illness and accidents.

News coverage of homelessness presents a broad range of causes of this social problem. Each image of the homeless emphasizes a different set of causes. Thus news stories present no consist sense of who is to blame for bringing about the problem. I suggest that the multiple and discrepant news accounts of alleged or
implied causes generate ambiguity about who should be responsible for alleviating homelessness. They further contribute to the sense of resignation that nothing can be done about this social problem.

**Narrative conventions.** Journalists employ several different narrative conventions or techniques for telling stories, in this case about the homeless. Narrative conventions serve to establish constructions of homeless people as valid or true. My research focused on four techniques used to tell stories about the homeless: biographies or vignettes about homeless people; commentary or terms used to describe and characterize homeless people; visual techniques that portray the homeless in different ways; and numbers, statistics and research findings that offer "quantitative information" about the homeless population. Through these narrative conventions, news stories from 1980 to 1990 construct five unique images of homeless people.

**Constructing Images of the Homeless: A Typology**

I now turn to the images of the homeless that emerge from an analysis of the content components and journalistic techniques described above. I focus on five images of homeless people: the homeless as hippie or hermit, as mentally ill, as families and children, as abandoned or runaway "teens," and as threatening villains. Each image represents a different typification of homelessness, a distinct formulation of the nature of the problem. Each image presents a unique portrait of the type of people who become homeless, the reasons people become homeless, and the
characteristic behaviors and attributes of the homeless population. The multiplicity of images, the lack of an unambiguous set of victims and villains, and the emphasis on individualistic causes of homelessness—all seem to contribute to resignation about the fate of the homeless.

**Homeless as institution avoiders: hippies and hermits.** The most prevalent image of the homeless presents characters who want to live a "separate" existence outside the boundaries of established norms and away from "normal" people. Hermits want to live outside communities and avoid contact with both the homeless and the non-homeless. Hippies choose an "alternative lifestyle," and may live in enclaves within a bounded territory such as a park, a beach or a subway tunnel. Thus hippies and hermits avoid contact with social institutions and their representatives.

News stories emphasize that hippies and hermits adopt adversarial or dependent relations with police officers, social service workers, religious clergy, or volunteers. While hippies and hermits accept food, blankets, clothes or money, they reject efforts to "rehabilitate them" back into the community. This image of the homeless emphasizes behaviors that violate social norms regarding sleeping, "loitering," eating, talking, dressing, sexual conduct, drinking alcohol and taking drugs.

The conditions faced by hippies and hermits usually relate to the weather. Thus the homeless suffer from frostbite and related conditions, freeze to death, or set themselves ablaze trying to light fires. They suffer illness such as heat-stroke, gangrene,
tuberculosis and food poisoning. In relation to the causes of homelessness for hippies or hermits, news stories describe them as homeless by choice or because of personal problems with drugs, alcohol and crime.

Biographies and vignettes emphasize the personal problems of homeless hippies and hermits and dramatize cases where individuals abandon jobs, homes, friends and family after becoming addicted to alcohol or other drugs. The language used to describe hippies and hermits characterizes them as deviant, root-less and sub-human. Thus words like "bums", "derelicts", "grizzled tramps", "vent men", "trolls", "tree people" and "human litter" describe the homeless hippies and hermits. Visuals emphasize deviance and anomie by repeatedly showing individuals alone, engaged in behavior that violates norms, oblivious to the "general public" or authorities attempting to control them. Numerical information in news stories provides an indication of the growth of homelessness and emphasizes public expenditures "dropped in the bucket" to keep hippies and hermits alive or under control.

**Homeless as mentally ill.** News stories describe the Mentally ill homeless as victims of de-institutionalization, a social policy originally intended to help them. The families of the mentally ill are also victims in the sense that they are burdened by the responsibilities of caring for, controlling or worrying about the mentally ill homeless. News stories projecting this image identify no consistent villain responsible for causing the problems of the
mentally ill homeless; they identify no actor responsible for alleviating the problems of the mentally ill homeless.

News stories characterize the mentally ill homeless as isolated because of fear or distrust of substantive relationships with other people. Behaviors associated with this image are characterized as deviant, inappropriate, bizarre, violent or criminal. News coverage describes the mentally ill homeless as wanderers who occasionally get into trouble with police and periodically get hospitalized after causing public disturbances. The mentally ill homeless sing and shout inappropriately, sprawl on busy sidewalks or traffic filled streets, or sift through trash cans. The conditions news stories describe in relation to the mentally ill homeless are similar to conditions endured by other homeless groups. However, the mentally ill homeless are depicted as especially vulnerable to severe consequences of conditions, because they are unaware of the state of their health or safety.

Biographies and vignettes describing mentally ill homeless individuals emphasize their detachment and alienation. The typical biography describes how specific individuals were abandoned by families, hospitalized and de-institutionalized, and ended up on the streets, where they became increasingly ill and isolated. The news commentary used to describe the homeless mentally ill emphasize both difference and distance from mainstream society, and the potential for threat and violence. Thus the mentally ill are characterized as weird, strange, alienated, abandoned, pathetic, psychotic, crazy, menacing and "out of touch with reality."
Visuals present the homeless mentally ill through photographs and video montage emphasizing physical deformities, abnormal or inappropriate behavior or speech, and isolation or alienation. For example, the mentally ill homeless appearing in news story visuals dress for the weather inappropriately; shout at police officers, pedestrians or journalists; or roll their eyes, shake their heads or extend trembling hands. Numbers, statistic and research findings construct an image of the mentally ill by documenting aspects of the mental health institution services before and after de-institutionalization.

Homeless as families and children. The image of the homeless as families and children appears frequently in news stories about homelessness. This image generally takes two forms: the white two-parent family, and the minority female-headed family. News usually depicts these families as connected to welfare, religious, legal, charity, medical and educational institutions. The children in this image occupy the only pure victim role in any news image of the homeless. News stories portray homeless parents as either victims of personal tragedies, "hard times," domestic abuse or victims of some combination of systemic and individual problems. In this construction of the homeless, most social actors--family members, social workers, religious clergy, teachers, volunteers--form positive relationships with one another. Most families are portrayed as maintaining tight-knit relations to insulate them from wretched conditions. News stories portray some families as depending too heavily on welfare benefits.
In relation to the behaviors associated with this image of the homeless, news stories tend to focus on either supportive actions, efforts to overcome homelessness, or addictions and related criminal behavior. News coverage emphasizes two sets of conditions related to the image of homeless families. Conditions focus on the consequences of either living in the streets or living in shelters, "welfare hotels" or "transitional housing." News stories emphasize different causes of homelessness for two-parent as opposed to single-parent families. In either case, homelessness is said to arise from a combination of individualistic forces related to physical health, emotional weakness, personal tragedy and social forces such as unemployment, federal budget cuts or real-estate inflation.

News stories construct an image of homeless families through biographies and vignettes describing the events which bring families to the brink of homelessness and beyond. The news commentary used to describe homeless families emphasizes the difference between families and "the other homeless." Thus families are said to be "a different breed," the new homeless" or "families that simply cannot pay the rent." The terms used to describe homeless children emphasize innocence and sadness.

News stories construct an image of homeless families and children through visuals that highlight emotional and protective bonds between relatives and the charitable support of volunteers and social service workers. Numbers, statistics and research appearing in relation to this image tends to focus on homeless families as the
"fastest growing segment" of the homeless population or detail the responses of communities and professionals attempting to help homeless families.

**Runaway and "Throwaway" Teens.** News constructs an image of runaway or throwaway teens as it tells stories about teenagers who break connections with parents and communities when they run away or get "pushed out" of their homes. While news stories portray teens as victims of domestic abuse, they do not characterize teens as innocent. Thus runaways and throwaways get involved in prostitution, alcoholism, drug addiction and petty crime. Teens form relationships with one another, with police and welfare officials, and with older "social deviates" on the streets. News stories describe these relationships as friendly, manipulative, abusive, dependent or adversarial.

News coverage of "street teens" describes a somewhat unique set of conditions for homeless teens. Conditions usually relate to teens' lifestyle and behaviors, rather than to environmental threats. Thus news stories focus on street teens as victims of violent crimes and as susceptible to AIDS and other socially transmitted diseases because of drug abuse and prostitution involvement.

News stories construct an image of runaway and throwaway teens through biographies and vignettes detailing the horrid home situation from which the teens fled, the deviant lifestyles teens follow, and the dangerous consequences of life on the streets. Both personal accounts and visuals seem to present this image in a sensational manner that emphasizes shocking and dramatic
circumstances. Thus many photographs and video footage focus on funerals, distraught mourners, or deviant scenes of teens "on the streets." Visuals sometimes emphasize teens' relationships with social service workers.

The news language used to describe homeless teens characterizes them as unwanted, emotionally scarred and facing prospects of a dismal future. Thus terms such as "casualties," "throwaways" or "lost tribe" describe homeless teens. News stories present little numerical information in relation to teen runaways or throwaways. The few statistics that appear usually relate to the "millions" roaming the streets or the "5,000 teenagers a year" who are "buried in unmarked graves."

**Homeless as threatening villain.** News stories construct an image of the homeless as threatening villains when they tell about homeless individuals who prey upon "ordinary people" or the "general public." This image of the homeless portrays the homeless as murderers, kidnappers, panhandlers, con-men or destructive and threatening militants. The homeless forge adversarial relations with police, politicians and the public. News stories do not portray homeless villains as human beings with histories, families, relationships or emotions.

Homeless villains exhibit behaviors which are at best inappropriate for public settings and at worst frightening or criminal. News stories constructing an image of the homeless villain ignore the conditions faced by the homeless and focus instead upon the conditions faced by members of "communities" where
homeless villains cause disturbances. Most news stories portraying the homeless as villains focus on individualistic personal problems as leading to homelessness rather than on social forces potentially responsible for the general problem. Those few news stories which also mention social problems like domestic abuse or mental illness do not relate these problems to social conditions such as poverty, unemployment or the lack of public facilities for treatment of substance abuse or mental illness.

The techniques employed in the construction of the homeless as villain follow a pattern similar to that used for the hippies and hermits. Thus, the few biographies or vignettes appearing in relation to this image tell stories of individuals who turn their backs on jobs, friends or family in favor of lifestyles of panhandling, petty crime and addiction. News commentary used to describe homeless villains emphasizes deviance and disregard for the law. For example, the homeless are described as a "gauntlet of beggars," "street predators of all kinds" or "lowlifes." Visuals highlight anti-social or criminal behavior such as public drinking or loitering, "militants" marching through cities at night, or breaking into locked or abandoned houses; or threats lodged by panhandlers. News stories rarely present numerical information when constructing an image of homeless villains. Those few statistics which do appear describe the proportions of the homeless population with addictions or criminal records.
The Journalism of Resignation

Social action or hopelessness. In an effort to evaluate whether stories present homelessness as something about which someone ought to do something, I developed two models for public communication about homelessness. I conceptualized these models based on my understanding of social problem construction theory and scholarship concerned with mass communicated news. My "social action model" outlines components of communication with potential for promoting social action to alleviate homelessness. My "hopelessness model" outlines components of communication which seem to suggest that homelessness is an inevitable, unchangeable and hopeless situation.

My model of communication with potential for promoting social action consists of six components: public recognition of and agreement on "facts" of the situation, moral indignation and outrage that conditions exist, urgent calls for actions to alleviate conditions, battlecries allocating responsibility for corrective actions, prescriptions for policies or programs to remedy conditions, and conviction that prescriptions can and will work.

The components of the social action model begin with public recognition of the problem and agreement on some "facts" or concrete aspects of the situation. For example, news about homelessness could communicate a sense of consensus about what constitutes homelessness and how extensive the problem is, or agreement about the causes and conditions associated with it. The communication of moral indignation and outrage can begin with news
source statements attesting to the intolerability of homelessness illustrate this component.

Urgent calls for action to alleviate problematic conditions could be expressed by news sources such as advocates for the homeless, politicians, mental health administrators, researchers and social service workers. These calls for action neither specify the type of action needed nor identify who ought to take responsibility for these actions. Battlecries allocating responsibility, on the other hand, specify an actor or agency that needs to take action. For the most part, journalists and news sources allocate responsibility in general or vague terms that suggest "we are all responsible" for doing something about homeless conditions. Other vague terms criticize specific institutions for not doing more or make claims about responsibility for particular subgroups of the homeless but not the entire population.

The fourth component of a model promoting social action is communication offering prescriptions for courses of action to address the general problem of homelessness. Prescriptions for action can be proposed through news source quotations or journalistic commentary that specifies the type of action necessary for solving the problems of the homeless. These range from short-term remedies for emergency care to initiatives for local homeless segments or for demographic sub-populations. Some prescriptions even detail ideas for programs and policies to alleviate the problem on a national scale.
The final and crucial component promoting social action is the communication of conviction that measures to help the homeless on a national scale can and will work. Some news stories offer the other components promoting social action, and even admit "we know what to do to help the homeless;" however, these news stories suggest that the future looks bleak because no one wants to take the time or spend the money to carry out plans. News sources and journalistic commentary in a few news stories about the homeless offer conviction that communicates hope for either part or all of the homeless population. For example, San Francisco Mayor Art Agnos says in 1990 that "If you give me the money, we have the chance to end living on the streets."

My model for communication suggesting hopelessness contains five components: discord and vagueness suggesting the problem is incomprehensible; acceptance of the problem as natural to modern society; rationalizations suggesting the problem is too expensive and intractable to solve; pessimism suggesting no one will ever take responsibility; individualization or blaming the homeless as lazy and dependent; justification for inactivity emphasizing public apathy and resentment.

News stories communicate discord and vagueness about what constitutes homelessness and how many people are homeless. Discord and vagueness permeate news about homelessness as journalistic commentary and news source quotations provide no explicit definitions of homelessness, label many different and
unrelated situations as "homelessness," and offer contradicting and constantly shifting accounts of how many people are homeless.

News stories tend to present the problem of homelessness as if it were a natural and inevitable situation for modern society. At times news sources and journalists make explicit claims portraying homelessness as natural; saying, for example: "they have always been with us" or "whom ye have with you always." At other times, news stories suggest naturalization when they fail to raise the question of what causes the problem.

The communication of despair and rationalization also suggests hopelessness. News stories communicate despair and rationalization when they emphasize the cost of addressing homelessness or homeless people's resistance to rehabilitation. Thus news sources or journalists comment that public expenditures to help the homeless continue to rise "with no relief in sight"--or claim that the homeless either cannot be helped or do not want help. Social service news sources also communicate pessimism when they claim they are doing all they can and still the outlook is bleak.

The fourth component of a model suggesting hopelessness is communication of pessimism that the situation will not change because no one will accept responsibility for acting to alleviate conditions. Many news stories discuss homelessness without raising the issue of who should be responsible for taking actions. Those few stories which do discuss responsibility usually suggest that the situation will not change because no level of government will accept responsibility for trying to do more. Thus
even rare discussions of responsibility may end without criticizing inactive agencies or politicians.

News stories also communicate hopelessness as they individualize the problem and blame the homeless as lazy and dependent. News coverage may convey notions that help perpetuates the problem because social programs and charity cause the homeless to become dependent. News sources and journalistic commentary suggests that the homeless take advantage of "free meals" and "clean beds," and demand subsistence help, but resist efforts to rehabilitate them.

A final component of a model suggesting hopelessness is the communication of apathy and resentment as justification for inactivity. Throughout news stories on homelessness, journalist narrators and news sources lodge claims suggesting the public is "blind" to the plight of the homeless or tired of "harassment" from street people. Apathy and resentment appear through public opinion polls or "woman on the street" interviews emphasizing public disinterest, and through claims describing the homeless as politically "disenfranchised" or a political "non-issue."

**Continuum of Resignation**

The above discussion delineates two models of communication about homelessness; one presents a problem about which someone must do something, the other suggests a hopeless situation. I suggest that, overall, news stories about homelessness exhibit varying levels of resignation that nothing can be done about the
problem. Resignation results because, within news stories, components of communication suggesting hopelessness tend to substitute for or oppose communication promoting social action. I propose a conceptual continuum describing four levels of resignation about homelessness; each level reflects a different configuration of communication components promoting social action or suggesting hopelessness.

I have made no attempt to classify each news article or broadcast segment according to the continuum of resignation. That would be beyond the scope of my study. Instead, I offer examples of news stories which exhibit different levels or resignation.

**Level one resignation.** At one end of the continuum lie news stories conveying a modicum of hope. Few news stories seem to exhibit this "first level" of resignation. At this level, news stories communicate several components promoting social action. They sometimes contain claims that advocates and social service workers "know" how many and what types of people "really" experience homelessness. Level one news stories always communicate moral outrage or indignation, calls for action, battlecries allocating responsibility, and prescriptions detailing remedial programs or policies. These news stories sometimes communicate conviction that homelessness can and will be eliminated.

News stories exhibiting level one resignation may communicate some or all components suggesting hopelessness. Thus any of the following components may appear in a level one news story: vagueness or dissonance about the "facts" of homelessness,
naturalization of the problem, despair and rationalization emphasizing the cost of addressing homelessness or the resistance of the homeless, pessimism suggesting no one will ever take responsibility for remedial actions, individualization or blaming the homeless as lazy and dependent or justifications for inactivity emphasizing public apathy and resentment.

The following summary presents a news story exhibiting "level one resignation." (Please see above for more detailed description of this story). A CBS news anchorman introduces the story saying "there are plenty to blame for the problem...government officials, greedy speculators and the homeless themselves." This statement suggests some consensus on the "facts" of the situation. The story continues as a narrator and video tape describe a NYC program providing the homeless with job training, pay, and an apartment.

The program is presented as a prescription to remedy homeless conditions. A homeless man, Rasheed, claims that before involvement in the program he lived in abandoned houses and became "dependent on people who insisted on taking care of him." He thus communicates individualization of the problem. However, Rasheed also identifies the various needs of the homeless: a routine, a job, a means of learning how to pay rent and save money. He says he fulfills these needs through the program. This statement again reinforces the program as a prescription addressing homelessness. The next scene depicts Mayor Dinkins discussing his support for the program and making a battlecry emphasizing intolerable conditions and the need for action and responsibility. Dinkins says: "it is
essential...we get them out of...shelters...those are inhumane conditions." Next the story cuts to advocate George MacDonald who offers conviction, saying only "a home and a job" keep people homeless.

The news story described above--perhaps the most optimistic story of the sample--contains all communication components promoting social action. However, the story contains no suggestions for how similar programs might provide relief for the general homeless population. The story also communicates individualization of the problem through Rasheed's suggestion that he had once been lazy and dependent on others.

**Level two resignation.** News stories exhibiting second level resignation communicate a few components promoting social action but emphasize many components suggesting hopelessness. News stories at this level all present outrage or moral indignation through claims that indicate homeless conditions are intolerable. Some stories include battlecries calling for action and allocating responsibility to some agency or institution, while other stories present prescriptions for programs or policies to alleviate homelessness.

The above communication components promoting social action seem overwhelmed by components suggesting hopelessness. All news stories at this level communicate despair that homelessness is too big, too complex, too intractable or too costly to solve; these claims serve as a rationalization for inactivity. Some level two news stories present claims suggesting homelessness is natural to
modern societies, individualize the problem and suggest help perpetuates the problem; other news stories justify inactivity by emphasizing public apathy or resentment towards the homeless.

**Level three resignation.** News coverage at the third level suggests that homelessness is a disgraceful situation but conveys overwhelming resignation that the situation will not change. Level three news stories all communicate outrage and moral indignation that homelessness exists, and some communicate a sense of consensus regarding the "facts" of homelessness. However, no stories convey any of the other components promoting social actions. Thus no news stories offer any claims calling for action to alleviate conditions of homelessness, discuss who should be responsible for taking action or offer prescriptions to remedy homeless conditions.

Components of communication suggesting hopelessness frequently appear in news stories at this level. Third level news stories all present rationalizations suggesting homelessness is too complex and intractable to rectify. Thus stories may emphasize the costs of existing programs or the burden of such programs for tax payers. All third level news stories also convey pessimism that no one will take responsibility for acting upon the problem. Sometimes these stories present claims that individualize the problem's cause and label the homeless as lazy or dependent. Sometimes level three news stories describe public apathy and resentment as a justification for inactivity.
Level four resignation. News stories exhibiting the highest level of resignation contain none of the components of communication promoting social action. Level four news stories include no claims about what causes homelessness or what might solve the problem. They all suggest that homelessness is a natural or inevitable phenomenon and justify inactivity by describing public apathy or resentment of the homeless. News stories at this level often communicate despair and rationalization regarding the stubbornness of homelessness and the expense of remedial programs—or they convey pessimism that no one will ever take responsibility for taking action. News stories may also communicate individualization for the cause of homelessness and thus suggest that the homeless are lazy and dependent.

Some news stories at this level highlight conditions faced by homeless people, while others focus on problems inflicted on local communities by homeless people "harassing" community "residents" or "taking over" public areas. Some news stories focus on situations or events to which the homeless are secondarily or peripherally involved. Other news stories describe homeless-related conditions in detail and offer personal accounts of homeless people who suffer through them, but do not characterize these conditions as intolerable or disgraceful. Many of the types of stories discussed above follow an "inverted pyramid" format that focuses exclusively on the who, what, where and how of an event. These "straight news" stories do not discuss the origin of homelessness or why individuals
are homeless. Thus the straight news format results in a naturalization of homelessness.

The conceptual continuum I propose is useful for clarifying the extent of despair and resignation exhibited by news stories on homelessness from 1980 to 1990. It is important to note that the vast majority of news stories exhibit overwhelming resignation that homelessness is an inevitable, unsolvable and perhaps natural phenomenon. Rare "level one" news stories offer some optimism for alleviating conditions related to homelessness; however, these stories also convey a moderate amount of resignation about homelessness. I suggest that my proposed continuum provides a novel way of examining how the nature of news coverage may actually prevent or inhibit social problems from reaching agendas of public action.

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

Efforts to explore communication problems from a multidisciplinary basis seem to necessitate the development of new research methods. I approached the general problem of how news media construct homelessness as a social problem from a perspective informed by several different theoretical and research areas. I was informed by literature focusing on many concerns: the cultural content of mass communication; sociological "constructionist" views of social problems; news as the social construction of reality; and the social consequences of mass
communication, especially with respect to mass communication's influence on people's attitudes, opinions, beliefs, views of "reality" -and on public and policy-making agendas. Consequently, the method I used to address my research questions drew from all of the above theoretical areas. In designing this study, I explored both the research questions and the usefulness of a new method for approaching these questions.

Naturally my method--which is necessarily qualitative for such exploratory purposes--provides findings vulnerable to the limitations of all qualitative research. The primary limitation of this study rests with its interpretive nature. While employing an interpretive method for this study, I took great pains to make judgements based on consistent criteria established prior to the analysis; my judgements were neither idiosyncratic nor precarious. The findings are limited because the method is based on my subjective interpretation of the news stories in the sample. My interpretations may be influenced by my experience as a "liberal" scholar who is personally concerned with the plight of the homeless. It may occur to the reader that, on the basis of some of the quotations cited in the dissertation, some of the stories quoted might suggest an ironic rather than literal interpretation. However, before classifying any of the quotations I examined each news story from beginning to end. I thus judged the segment's meaning within the context of the entire news story.

The scope of this exploratory study was purposely broad. Future research might benefit from analyses which focus on either
the images of homeless people in news stories or the nature of claims about who could, should or must do what to address homelessness. Such narrowed research might focus more singularly on, for example, the nature of claims-makers or news sources providing direct or indirect quotes about the nature and consequences of homelessness and responses to this social problem.

The generalizability of the findings may be somewhat limited by the nature of the sample (see method section for details of sample selection). The sample consisted of all national news stories on homelessness and related topics appearing in the three major news magazines--Time, Newsweek, and US News & World Report--or on the CBS Network News for the period 1980-1990. A review of Network News Abstracts revealed no discernible differences between the topics or themes associated with CBS News about the homeless as opposed to the other two networks' news coverage. However, a larger sample representative of all three networks might yield different findings.

The study's findings seem generalizable to all national news--network broadcasts and magazine articles--publicized between 1980 and 1990. The findings may hold some relevance to national or local newspaper stories, popular non-news magazines, and local broadcast news. Future research should assess the relevance of these findings to such research samples. I turn now to some additional proposed directions for future research.
Implications for Future Research

This study seems to have implications for several areas of communication research. In this section I discuss some apparently problematic aspects of communication about social problems. I speculate about how my research might suggest directions for research addressing communication problems. My research focuses exclusively on how news media communication constructs and defines a single social problem: homelessness. Now I would like to go beyond my own data to suggest how future research might focus on the social consequences of other types of communication about additional social problems. I view my research as holding implications for the study of mass communicators, interpersonal and mass communication, and for the study of such "media effects" as agenda setting and agenda building.

Implications for studies of mass communicators. In an earlier study (McNulty, 1989) I suggest how particular news work factors seem related to variation in local journalists' approaches to gathering information and constructing news stories on homelessness. In light of the current study, I believe that we researchers need to undertake more studies that explore the factors that may influence journalists' orientations to the work of defining and constructing--that is, reporting--on social problems.

I see a need for identifying the factors potentially associated with national journalists' decisions regarding the selection of news sources when gathering visual and written information about social problems, and the selection and presentation of information when
creating or producing such stories. Specifically, we need to explore how journalists decide who are the victims and villains of a particular social problem and whether or not news stories necessitate expert definitions of such social problems.

We also need to examine how journalists decide which sources to use for numerical or research information about the extent and nature of a social problem, and whether or not to cite a source when offering a size estimate in a news story. We need to examine how journalists choose news sources for interviews or personal accounts--biographies or vignettes--related to personal experience with a social problem, and which accounts to include within a news story. Finally, we need to examine journalistic decisions about who to use as the subject of video footage and photographs for news stories, and how to edit such visual material.

**Implications for nature of social problem communication.** My study examines many aspects of public mediated communication about the specific social problem of homelessness. I see several directions for research examining similar aspects of public communication about homelessness and other social problems. Below I outline some of those directions.

My research suggests that news stories appearing between 1980 and 1990 construct five prominent images of homeless people: hippies or hermits, mentally ill individuals, family members, runaway and abandoned teens, and villains. Future research might assess the extent to which other publicly communicated stories about homelessness present these five or other different images.
Such research might focus on images appearing in "informational" or non-fiction articles; photographic and art exhibits; poetry or theater; or popular culture media such as television movies or series, popular films or music.

Specifically, research might assess the extent to which images of the homeless as hippies or hermits, mentally ill individuals, family members, runaway and abandoned teens, or villains--or other images--appear in "informational" stories in popular magazines, such as those described in the Reader's Guide to Periodical literature; in national or local news papers listed in the National Newspaper Index or other newspaper indexes; or in scholarly books concerned with the homeless or the urban poor. The findings of such research might be further compared or analyzed to explore how different types of "non-fictional" mass communication construct and present various images of people experiencing this social problem. Similar research could focus on historical trends in the presentation of the five images in types of "non-fictional" mass communication. Researchers could also make comparisons between fictional and non-fictional communication constructing images of homeless people across time.

All of the proposed research above focuses on the five images of homeless people I found in my study. Naturally, the research described above could apply to images of people experiencing any "social problem." Thus, researchers might explore how publicly communicated news stories construct images of people experiencing or involved in such social issues as, for example, unemployment or
hunger; health, insurance or service fraud; rioting; pollution, environmental waste, spills or contamination; sexual harassment or discrimination; electromagnetic field exposure; or "the savings and loan crisis." Research in this area might focus on the "content components" and "journalistic techniques" I identify as central to journalistic storytelling.

My models of communication promoting social action and communication suggesting hopelessness could be useful for designing research examining communication about social problems. Comparative studies of public communication with reference to my models seems particularly relevant. Such research might assess the relative importance of individual components of communication for either promoting social action or suggesting hopelessness.

Comparative research should assess the extent to which the two models apply to various news story formats. Studies might assess the occurrence of components of each model in formats such as: exposes, investigative stories or series; front-page or breaking news stories; features; human interest stories; or editorials or columns. Such research may reveal whether news stories construct social problems differently when presenting the problem to various audiences or taste segments.

Researchers might examine the prevalence of components of each communication model in news stories about two different social problems. Researchers could compare news about a "hopeless" social problem to news about a social problem drawing much public concern and legislative actions. For example, we could use the two
models to compare news stories about homelessness and news stories of problems such as child abuse, missing children, drinking-driving, the war on drugs, or illegal immigration.

Research in another vein might assess whether my models of communication promoting social action or suggesting hopelessness apply to social problems which, like homelessness, seem constructed in a vague manner. Several problematic social issues that today attract widespread public attention and concern seem vague and ambiguous in terms of a problem definition and delineation of consistent victims and villains. For example, public communication about sexual harassment, political correctness, racism and date rape seems to construct vague problems. All of these issues may concern us as citizens; however, research needs to explore how public communication constructs notions of, for example, what it means to be "politically correct" or who are the victims of "political correctness."

Research comparing constructions of vague social problems may also tell us something about the relative importance of different components of communication models. We might compare two "vague" social problems with respect to the level of attention they attract in news outlets and the relative prominence of communication suggesting either social action or hopelessness. Results of such comparisons could provide a measure of how news exhibiting different "levels of resignation" might attract differential levels of attention in news media.
Implications for studies of "Media Effects". Research concerned with the media's potential for setting or building the public agenda has focused on the impact of news media on public opinion, beliefs and awareness of issues; and on policy makers and public policy. One vein of agenda-setting research explores the specific impact of news media investigative journalism (Cook et al., 1983; Protess et al., 1985; Leff, Protess and Brooks, 1986; and Protess et al., 1987). Research concerned with investigative journalism and agenda setting is being conducted at the Center for Urban Affairs and Policy Research (CUAPR), Northwestern University.

The Northwestern University CUAPR research consists of a series of field experiments used to develop a preliminary model specifying conditions under which investigative reports influence public agendas and policy-making priorities (Protess et. al. 1987:166). The CUAPR model seems to support my findings. The model identifies two factors that seem important to public attitude change: the nature of media portrayals of issues and the frequency of attention by the media to the issues in the past. The nature of media portrayals are described as either ambiguous or unambiguous. Ambiguity relates to the characterization of victims and villains and the use of dramatic, clear and convincing evidence for the documentation of a serious problem.

The factor identified as "frequency of attention by media in the past" is described in terms of "recurring issues" versus "non-recurring issues." According to the model, investigative stories
about recurring issues have lower impact potential, while issues that become the subject of breakthrough reports have a greater opportunity to produce effects. Thus, in relation to both factors in the model, investigative reports on unambiguous nonrecurring issues produce the strongest effects on public attitudes, while investigative reports on ambiguous recurring issues produce the weakest effects on either the public or policy makers.

The findings of Protess et al. illustrate how the nature of news reporting on issues might play a role in shaping public opinion or policy making decisions. With respect to my findings, similar research could explore whether investigative reports on homelessness produce results that might vary according to the level of resignation communicated through such reports. If possible, such research might follow Protess's example of a research design consisting of pre- and postpublication surveys and examination of the course of media reports from the initial journalistic investigation phase, to the publication of the report, the effects on the general public and policy-makers, and the eventual outcomes.

While the design of Protess et al. provides insight into the agenda setting process within a natural research setting, it seems to apply only to the cases of journalistic investigations. Additional research concerned with agenda-setting might follow more traditional designs. Such research could make use of my models for communication components which either promote social action or suggest hopelessness, and my levels of resignation classification of news stories.
Future research should address the question of whether exposure to news stories that exhibit varying levels of resignation might have differential effects on respondents' opinions about the seriousness of homelessness, the nature of the homeless, and whether public or private agencies must act to alleviate the problem. Respondent groups could consist of samples representing the "general public," private charity or social service groups, policy makers, or news workers. Analyses might examine the relative strength of associations between various components of communication and agenda-setting effects.

Conclusion

Above I outline my interpretation of how news stories construct five different images of homeless people and present news about homelessness in a manner that suggests resignation regarding who ought to do what to address this social problem. I propose two models of communication with components which either promote social action or suggest hopelessness. I use these models to illustrate how news stories exhibit four different levels of resignation with reference to their presentation of components that either promote social action or suggest hopelessness.

The models I propose must be refined through further research. Such research must also examine the applicability of these models to specific types of news formats, to news stories about other social problems, or to news stories appearing in different historical periods. Finally, research might suggest whether such models might
be useful for predicting the outcome of news exposure for public opinion, policy making agendas, and actual legislative decisions.
Appendix A

Public Attention to Homelessness, 1980-1990: Tables
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<th>Year</th>
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Table Two: Breadth of Magazine Attention

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Table Three: Breadth of Journal Attention to Homelessness

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BIBLIOGRAPHY


