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Matt DeLisi

Int J Offender Ther Comp Criminol 2000; 44; 59

DOI: 10.1177/0306624X00441006

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Who Is More Dangerous? Comparing the Criminality of Adult Homeless and Domiciled Jail Inmates: A Research Note

Matt DeLisi

Abstract: *The criminality of 100 homeless and 100 domiciled jail inmates was compared. Homeless jail inmates were significantly more likely than domiciled jail inmates to be mentally ill, to be arrested for nuisance offenses, to have more extensive criminal histories, and to have prior arrests for use of weapons, drugs, and alcohol. Suggestions for processing homeless offenders are given.*

Homeless people in the United States are a source of frequent and varied sociological inquiry. Researchers are ideologically torn over whether the homeless are worthy or unworthy of public sympathy and support (Wright, 1988b). A classical school argument (e.g., Cesare Beccaria and Jeremy Bentham) is that the homeless are rational, free-thinking actors who have no one but themselves to blame for personal inadequacies such as alcoholism, drug addiction, unemployment, transiency, and mental illness. The homeless, according to a classical perspective, are a reproachable group of derelicts. Conversely, a positivist school argument is that the homeless are a disparate group of unfortunate, indigent people whose social condition is attributable to macro-societal forces such as a changing economy, not personal inadequacies. The homeless, according to a positivist perspective, are unfortunate victims of social forces.

Investigations of homeless criminality generally occupy four categories: (a) whether the homeless involvement in the criminal justice system is legitimate or the result of police harassment (Aulette & Aulette, 1987; Irwin, 1985), (b) whether a real relationship exists between mental illness and homeless criminality (Belcher, 1988; Benda, 1987; Simons, Whitbeck, & Bales, 1989; Snow, Baker, Anderson, & Martin, 1986; Wright, 1988a), (c) whether a relationship exists between drug and alcohol abuse and homeless criminality (Snow, Baker, & Anderson, 1989), and (d) whether homelessness itself is criminogenic (McCarthy & Hagan, 1991, 1992).



International Journal of Offender Therapy and Comparative Criminology, 44(1), 2000 59-69
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PRIOR HOMELESS CRIME RESEARCH

Some researchers (Aulette & Aulette, 1987; Irwin, 1985) contend that the homeless are victims of unnecessary police harassment, which helps explain their disproportionately high arrest rates. Consider this passage from Aulette and Aulette (1987):

[According to the police] finding a place to sleep and urinate is trespassing. Waiting to eat and sell blood are looked upon as loitering. Trying to get cigarettes or a free bus ride is panhandling. And carrying around one's belongings is "squatting" or carrying concealed weapons. In short, staying alive is a crime. (p. 253)

According to these authors, homeless criminality is the outcome of the unjust criminalization of transient life.

The homeless also have disproportionately high incarceration rates. Irwin (1985) argues that jails function to manage detached and disreputable transient social misfits called "rabble." Rabble are social nuisances who commit petty, not dangerous crimes. Indeed, a majority of arrests for the homeless are for public intoxication, theft/shoplifting, violation of municipal ordinances, and burglary (Snow et al., 1989). Thus, some (Aulette & Aulette, 1987; Irwin, 1985) determine that high criminality among the homeless is an artifact of unnecessary police harassment or susceptibility to arrest, not actual criminal offending.

A common lay perception is that the homeless are a population plagued by severe mental illness. Researchers disagree about the prevalence of mental illness among the homeless. Snow et al. (1986) claim that the notion of pervasive mental illness among the homeless is a myth. In a study of 1,000 homeless adults in Texas, Snow et al. (1986) offered four reasons for the homeless-mental illness misconception. First, they contend that too much causal emphasis is afforded to de-institutionalization as the main cause of the growing homeless phenomenon. Second, they argue that the heightened visibility of homeless people who are mentally ill contributes to the belief that all homeless people are mentally ill. Third, the medicalization of the homeless is premature. Fourth, studies that found high rates of mental illness among the homeless are methodologically invalid. The authors found that only 10% of the Texas homeless in their sample could be classified as having legitimate psychiatric problems. However, Wright (1988a) replicated the Snow et al. (1986) study and determined that 33% of the Texas homeless were mentally unhealthy.

Belcher (1988) developed a typology that ranked the extent of mental illness among the homeless. Category I is people with chronic mental illness and an extended period of transiency. Category II is people with minor affective disorders who are still able to retain employment despite being homeless. Category III is people whose homeless condition is due to personality disorders often aggravated by substance abuse. Category IV is intentionally homeless people with severe substance abuse problems. Implicit in this typology is the idea that some

people are justifiably homeless whereas others are not. Zapf, Roesch, and Hart (1996) reported that 10% of homeless jail inmates suffered from severe mental illness whereas nearly two thirds suffered from some lesser form of mental illness. However, the only statistically significant difference between homeless and domiciled jail inmates in their study was that the homeless were more likely to suffer from negative psychotic symptoms such as emotional withdrawal, motor retardation, and blunted affect.

Some have found homelessness to be inherently criminogenic. In tests of Gibbons's (1971) situational explanation of crime, McCarthy and Hagan (1991, 1992) found that crime was a recourse for homeless people in that adverse situational conditions (hunger, lack of shelter, and unemployment) lead to theft of food, serious theft, burglary, and prostitution. The authors contend that involvement in crime is positively correlated with length of time on the streets. Finally, Snow et al. (1989) reported several important findings in the epidemiology of homeless crime. First, 83% of the homeless in their study perpetrated Part II Index crimes, which were victimless. Second, 37% of the homeless perpetrated Part I Index crimes involving a nonhomeless victim. Third, less than 6% of the homeless perpetrated Part I Index crimes involving a homeless victim. Fourth, 56% of the homeless perpetrated Part I Index property crimes involving a commercial establishment as victim. Although a majority of homeless-perpetrated crimes were relatively benign Part II Index offenses, the homeless posed a danger to nonhomeless people and commercial establishments.

For the current study, homeless jail inmates are defined as offenders without a physical domicile for more than a year prior to arrest. One year of homelessness is referred to as chronic homelessness or chronic transiency. Of the homeless sample, 82% ($n = 82$) reported chronic homelessness for the entirety of their adult lives, that is, they had never had a domicile. Domiciled jail inmates are arrestees with a domicile for at least a year prior to arrest. Of the domiciled sample, 4% ($n = 4$) had ever experienced a period of homelessness. None of the 100 domiciled offenders ($n = 0$) in this study ever reported a period of chronic homelessness. Consequently, interchange—offenders alternating between periods of chronic transiency and stable, domiciled residency—did not occur between the two samples.

HYPOTHESES

Several classical school–positivist school debates remain when studying the homeless (and comparing them to domiciled people). Are the homeless more dangerous than domiciled people? Are the homeless plagued by mental illness, or is that a myth? Do homeless people abuse drugs and alcohol more than non-homeless people? Are the homeless more dangerous, more violent, and more prone to use weapons than domiciled people? Do homeless people have greater criminality than domiciled people? This article compares homeless to domiciled

jail inmates in a large adult county jail facility in Colorado. The current study's hypotheses are the following:

Hypothesis 1. Homeless people are more likely to be arrested for violent offenses than domiciled people.

Hypothesis 2. Homeless people are more likely to be arrested for nuisance offenses than domiciled people.

Hypothesis 3. Mental illness is more prevalent among the homeless than among the domiciled.

Hypothesis 4. Homeless people are more likely to be alcoholics than domiciled people.

Hypothesis 5. Homeless people are more likely to be addicted to illicit drugs than domiciled people.

Hypothesis 6. Homeless people have more extensive criminal histories than domiciled people.

Hypothesis 7. The criminal histories of homeless people will include more arrests for crimes of violence, crimes involving the use of a weapon, and crimes involving drugs and alcohol than domiciled people.

DATA AND METHODS

Official and self-report criminal history data were used from a pretrial services unit at a large adult county jail in Colorado. Official data include national, state, and local records measuring all of the respondents' recorded criminal history. Self-reported criminal histories were taken from official bond interviews between the pretrial services unit and arrestee-respondents. Interviews were conducted from January through September of 1998. Due to severe underreporting of prior arrest histories (see Hindelang, Hirschi, & Weis, 1979), self-report histories were used only to supplement the more valid official arrest records.

SAMPLING

Since its inception in 1989, the pretrial services unit in this study has conducted 48,883 bond interviews. Due to multiplicity, the sampling frame included about 40,000 different arrestees. Two independent simple-random samples yielded 100 homeless respondents and 100 domiciled respondents. This sample size ($N = 200$) was selected because it was sufficiently large, under the Central Limit Theorem, to accurately portray the parameters of the total criminal offender population (see Babbie, 1995, pp. 195-203). About 5% to 15% of the 40,000 valid cases were homeless; the remaining majority were domiciled arrestees. Records were available for all 200 respondents; thus, none were omitted from the study. Data collection occurred in September 1998.

MEASUREMENT

Six demographic and six criminal history variables were used. Mental illness, alcoholism, and drug addiction were determined by official records indicating mental illness/criminal insanity and whether respondent was a registered drug offender, as well as respondents' self-reported treatment for chronic mental illness, alcoholism, and drug addiction and referrals from local mental health and substance abuse treatment facilities. Crimes of violence included harassment, assault, sexual assault, child abuse, brawling, public fighting, and disorderly conduct. Nuisance crimes included all municipal ordinances often associated with people of transient status. Examples of municipal offenses included possession of alcohol in public, camping without a permit, aggressive begging, vagrancy, use of offensive words in public, indecent exposure, and public intoxication. Property crimes included forgery, any theft or larceny, burglary, trespassing, and any type of fraud. Traffic crimes included driving under the influence of alcohol, driving without a license or insurance, vehicular eluding, habitual traffic offender, and driving under restraint. Drug crimes included possession or sale of marijuana; hashish; hallucinogens such as psilocybin mushrooms and LSD; powder and crack cocaine; heroin; methamphetamine; and inhalants such as paint, glue, and other noxious chemicals. Weapons offenses included the use of any firearm, knife, bat, and martial arts weaponry. Demographic and criminal history variables with coding appear below.

Sex: males (0), females (1)
Race: White (0), Hispanic (1), Black (2), Native American (3)
Age at current arrest: 18 through 79
Mentally ill: No (0), Yes (1)
Alcoholic: No (0), Yes (1)
Drug addict: No (0), Yes (1)
Current arrest type: Violence (0), Nuisance (1), Property (2), Traffic (3), Drug (4)
Number of prior arrests: 0 through 108
Number of prior arrests for violence: 0 through 27
Number of prior arrests for alcohol: 0 through 27
Number of prior arrests for drugs: 0 through 11
Number of prior arrests for weapons: 0 through 9

DATA ANALYSIS

Because of dichotomous or dummy dependent variables (likelihood of violent arrest, likelihood of nuisance arrest, presence of mental illness, presence of alcoholism, and presence of drug addiction), logistic regression was used. Ordinary least squares regression was used for the continuous criminal history dependent variable. Because of paucity of arrests and resultant insufficient sample size, com-

parison of means was used to test hypotheses comparing prior arrest for crimes of violence, crimes employing weapons, and crimes involving drugs and alcohol.

RESULTS

Substantial differences existed between the homeless and domiciled arrestees in this study. The average homeless jail inmate was a 33-year-old White male. Most homeless jail inmates were not mentally ill or addicted to drugs; however, almost half (43%) were alcoholics. The average homeless jail inmate had a substantial criminal history, including nearly 19 prior arrests. The average domiciled jail inmate was a 30-year-old male. A majority of the domiciled jail inmates were White (59%); however, a large percentage (32%) were Hispanic. Most domiciled arrestees were neither addicted to drugs or alcohol, nor were they generally plagued by mental illness. More than half (53%) of domiciled jail inmates were arrested for traffic charges such as driving under the influence. For an overview of the descriptive statistics of homeless and domiciled jail inmates, see Table 1.

Homeless jail inmates were 2% more likely than domiciled jail inmates to be arrested for a violent offense ($e^{0.02} = 1.02$). This difference was not significant. Mentally ill jail inmates were significantly more likely (278%) than non-mentally ill jail inmates to be arrested for a violent offense ($e^{1.33} = 3.78$). Alcoholics were significantly less likely (59%) than nonalcoholics to be arrested for a violent offense ($e^{-0.89} = 0.41$).

Homeless jail inmates were significantly more likely (169%) than domiciled jail inmates to be arrested for a nuisance offense ($e^{0.99} = 2.69$). Mental illness was more prevalent among homeless jail inmates than among domiciled jail inmates. Indeed, homeless arrestees were 222% more likely to suffer from mental illness than domiciled arrestees ($e^{1.17} = 3.22$). Of the homeless sample, 12% suffered from mental illness. Age demonstrated a significant positive relationship to mental illness.

Homeless jail inmates were not more likely than domiciled jail inmates to be drug addicts. However, nearly half of the homeless sample (43%) were alcoholics, compared to 28% of the domiciled sample. The homeless also had significantly more prior arrests for alcohol offenses than domiciled people. Relatively few homeless (8%) or domiciled people (7%) were arrested for drug crimes. Similarly, only 15% of the homeless sample and 12% of the domiciled people were registered or self-reported drug addicts. Homeless people averaged about one prior drug arrest, whereas domiciled people averaged less than half a prior arrest for drugs. Age demonstrated a significant relationship to being alcoholic. Each year of aging increased the likelihood of being alcoholic by 7%.

Homeless arrestees were more likely than domiciled arrestees to have an extensive prior arrest history. Predictably, age was positively related to criminal history. Older arrestees had more extensive criminal histories than younger arrestees. Being alcoholic was significantly and positively related to criminal history.

TABLE 1
DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS: HOMELESS AND DOMICILED OFFENDERS

<i>Variable</i>	<i>Homeless</i>	<i>Domiciled</i>
Age (<i>M</i>)	32.9	30.5
Sex (%)	90 male 10 female	80 male 20 female
Race (%)	78 White 15 Hispanic 5 Black 3 Native American	59 White 32 Hispanic 7 Black 2 Native American
Alcoholic (%)	43	28
Drug addicted (%)	15	12
Mentally ill (%)	12	4
Prior arrests (<i>M</i>)	18.6	4.2
Prior arrests (range)	0-108	0-26
Alcohol arrests (<i>M</i>)	3.8	1.2
Alcohol arrests (range)	0-27	0-10
Drug arrests (<i>M</i>)	1.1	0.5
Drug arrests (range)	0-11	0-8
Weapon arrests (<i>M</i>)	0.5	0.2
Weapon arrests (range)	0-9	0-5
Current arrest (%):		
Violence	22	21
Nuisance	27	11
Property	25	8
Traffic	18	53
Drug	8	7

NOTE: *N* = 200 (100 homeless and 100 domiciled).

The average criminal history of the homeless had 4 times as many prior arrests for violence than the average history of domiciled arrestees. Furthermore, homeless people had significantly more prior arrests for use of weapons than domiciled people. See Table 2 for difference in means between homeless and domiciled offenders.

The criminal histories of the homeless offenders absolutely dwarfed the criminal histories of domiciled jail inmates. The average domiciled person had 4 prior arrests; the average homeless person had nearly 19 prior arrests. The range of prior arrests for domiciled people was 0 to 26. The range of prior arrests for homeless people was 0 to 108.

Regression analyses indicated that the homeless jail inmates were more likely than domiciled jail inmates to be arrested for nuisance crimes, were more likely to be mentally ill, and had more extensive criminal histories. Regression analysis yielded no differences between homeless and domiciled jail inmates in terms of

TABLE 2
DIFFERENCE IN MEANS FOR HOMELESS AND DOMICILED OFFENDERS

	<i>T Value</i>	<i>Levene's Test</i>
Age	1.48	1.35
Race	2.15*	5.02*
Sex	1.99*	16.84**
Alcoholic	2.23*	17.10**
Mentally ill	2.10*	19.13**
Drug addicted	0.62	1.54
Prior arrests	5.28**	86.19**
Alcohol arrests	3.77**	47.88**
Violent arrests	4.27**	44.20**
Weapon arrests	2.37**	16.21**
Arrest type	2.81**	1.71

NOTE: $N = 200$ (100 homeless and 100 domiciled).

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

TABLE 3
LOGISTIC REGRESSION COEFFICIENTS FOR VIOLENT
OFFENSES (1), NUISANCE OFFENSES (2), MENTAL ILLNESS (3),
ALCOHOLISM (4), AND DRUG ADDICTION (5)

<i>Independent Variable</i>	<i>1</i>	<i>2</i>	<i>3</i>	<i>4</i>	<i>5</i>
Age	0.02 (0.02)	0.01 (0.02)	0.04* (0.02)	0.07*** (0.02)	-0.01 (0.02)
Race	-0.04 (0.27)	0.28 (0.27)	0.24 (0.36)	0.15 (0.23)	0.14 (0.31)
Sex	-0.82 (0.60)	-1.96 (1.05)	-0.01 (0.81)	-0.85 (0.51)	-7.49 (18.15)
Homeless	0.02 (0.37)	0.99** (0.41)	1.17* (0.61)	0.48 (0.33)	0.10 (0.43)
Mentally ill	1.33* (0.59)	-0.60 (0.83)			
Alcoholic	-0.89* (0.44)	0.35 (0.43)			
Drug addicted	0.14 (0.53)	-0.80 (0.68)			
Chi-square (pseudo) R^2	13.16 0.06	17.99 0.08	8.48 0.04	27.90 0.12	9.82 0.05

NOTE: $N = 200$ (100 homeless and 100 domiciled).

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

being arrested for a violent crime, being alcoholic, or being addicted to illicit drugs. See Table 3 for regression results.

Comparison of means analysis indicated that, with the exception of drug addiction prevalence, all hypotheses were supported by the data: The homeless were significantly more dangerous, violent, prone to use weapons, alcoholic, mentally ill, and criminally active than domiciled jail inmates.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

In this study, homeless and domiciled jail inmates were equally likely to be arrested for a crime of violence. This supported prior research (Zapf et al., 1996). The criminal histories of the homeless included significantly more crimes of violence. The homeless in general were more likely to use weapons than domiciled people. Perhaps, exposure to the streets makes the homeless employ weapons for survival and self-defense.

Homeless offenders were more likely than domiciled offenders to be arrested for a nuisance crime. Indeed, the largest group of homeless offenders in this study (27%) were arrested for nuisance crimes. However, homeless offenders were nearly as likely to be arrested for property crimes such as burglary (25%) and crimes of violence (22%). This contradicts Irwin (1985), who reported that jails were filled with rabble incarcerated for harmless public order crimes. Mental illness was more prevalent among homeless jail inmates than among domiciled jail inmates, although only 12% of the homeless sample suffered from mental illness. This seems to indicate that although mental illness is not characteristic of homeless people in general (Simons et al., 1989; Snow et al., 1986), mental illness is prevalent among alcoholic homeless with mammoth criminal histories. This notion affirms Snow et al.'s (1986) idea that the heightened visibility (via a cantankerous public arrest) of mentally ill homeless men creates a public perception that all homeless people are mentally deranged drunkards.

Drug addiction was not prevalent among homeless or domiciled offenders in this study. This was counter to Zapf et al. (1996), who found that one third of domiciled offenders and one fifth of homeless offenders were addicts arrested for drug crimes. Alcohol seemed to be the drug of choice for all members in this study: More than half of domiciled people were arrested for traffic offenses such as driving under the influence of alcohol.

These results should be considered with caution for three reasons. First, the sample was limited to Colorado and not generalizable to other regions. Second, the racial composition of this sample was disproportionately White (68%) and Hispanic (24%). Perhaps, the criminal differences between homeless and domiciled offenders is different for other racial and ethnic groups. Similarly, the suburban homeless and domiciled offenders in this study might be significantly different in criminal offending and affective disorders than urban or rural homeless and domiciled offenders. Third, the homeless represented about 5% to 8% of the total

jail inmate population (and 5% to 15% of the total arrest population) in this Colorado sample. Perhaps, the criminal activity of the homeless offenders is different in cities where the homeless make up a larger proportion of jail inmates (e.g., Dallas, Denver, Portland, Atlanta, Los Angeles) than in cities where the homeless compose an exceedingly small proportion of jail inmates (e.g., Cleveland, Detroit, Birmingham, St. Louis, Philadelphia) (U.S. Department of Justice, 1998). Police enforcement and community tolerance for the homeless probably vary with criminal-homeless population size.

In this study, the homeless offenders were generally more violent, had more extensive criminal records, were more prone to use weapons, and were more likely to be arrested for nuisance offenses and to be plagued by mental illness than domiciled offenders. Counter to popular belief, a majority of homeless offenders were not dangerous, mentally disturbed alcoholics, although their criminality was significantly greater than domiciled people. A sizable component of the homeless population in this study (all of them about 40-year-old White males) were violent alcoholics with documented histories of mental illness and extraordinarily lengthy criminal histories. No causal predictions were made that could support or refute classical or positivist explanations for homeless criminality. However, 13% of the homeless offenders in this sample were not harmless nuisance offenders unfairly harassed by police (Aulette & Aulette, 1987; Irwin, 1985), but instead yet another disenfranchised group in this society with a rather nefarious involvement in crime. Criminal justice practitioners could benefit from this epidemiological information by channeling specific elements of the homeless population to the most appropriate destination: (a) substance abuse care facilities, (b) mental health facilities, (c) detoxification centers, (d) homeless shelters, and (e) jails.

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Matt DeLisi

Graduate student, Department of Sociology
University of Colorado
Boulder, CO 80309-0327
USA