

**Perceived Harms and Policy Preference: How Community Attitudes Toward Visible
Homelessness Shape Policy Support in Seattle, Washington**

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION.....	3
CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF LITERATURE.....	8
CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY.....	15
CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION.....	21
APPENDIX.....	36

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

On the morning of July 1, 2024, the City of Seattle dispatched homeless response crews to clear an encampment of 30 people living beneath the West Seattle Bridge. The sweep, which was one of more than 2,800 conducted that same year, followed a swell of complaints from nearby residents and business owners who characterized the encampment as a public safety hazard and a nuisance (Real Change, 2024). In just a few weeks, many of the homeless individuals displaced had relocated to another part of the city, once again repeating the cycle. Although no one had been housed, the sweep was widely described as a necessary response to community concern by city officials. This pattern, in which visible homelessness produces tangible community pressure, community pressure produces punitive policy, and punitive policy displaces rather than resolves the problem, is exactly what this study strives to understand.

Homelessness is among the most visible and contested issues in public policy within the United States. Research has consistently demonstrated that structural conditions, such as housing costs and rental vacancy rates, serve as the drivers of homelessness across most urban environments. Colburn and Aldern (2022) find that these structural causes account for variation in homelessness rates far better than personal or micro-level explanations such as drug use or poverty. Despite this, public discourse surrounding homelessness is continually oriented around individual behaviors and the perceived effects of encampments on local communities rather than on the structural conditions that propagate homelessness in the first place. This clear disconnect between what research has consistently identified as effective and what communities perceive as appropriate holds significant consequences for what forms of policy are politically feasible at the local level.

Public perception of homelessness plays a significant part in shaping which policy responses gain traction. Research by Tsai et al. (2017) finds that over the past two decades, as Americans have grown more compassionate toward people experiencing homelessness, persistent demographic inaccuracies about who respondents take homeless individuals to be continue to influence attitudes, and by extension, policy preferences. A follow-up study by the same researchers found that personal exposure to homelessness was associated with more structural attributions and sympathetic attitudes. This finding raised the question of whether proximity to (visible) urban homelessness in a city produces a similar or different effect. Within the relevant literature, the mechanism linking perception to policy preference has been identified as attribution style: whether individuals explain homelessness through internal factors (personal factors like lack of effort) or external factors (like economic conditions). Srivastava et al. (2025) find that internal attribution consistently shapes support for punitive policy measures, while external attributions lead to greater support for structural interventions (after controlling for political ideology).

Seattle, Washington, stands at the pinnacle of the tension between structural understanding and community-driven policy. The city's engagement with homelessness spans nearly a century, with city records documenting residential petitions and legislative responses dating to the city's earliest decade (Seattle City Archives, n.d.). In 2005, King County and various partners launched a ten-year plan to address homelessness, attempting to make it rare and short in duration. The effort helped house over 40,000 people, but approximately 10,000 individuals remained homeless after the plan expired in 2015 (Seattle Met, 2017). Following the city's rising costs, homelessness grew at twice the rate of the general population, while

unsheltered homelessness grew eight times as fast (Cascade PBS, 2018). This escalation prompted Mayor Ed Murray to declare a state of emergency in 2015, which worked to reframe homelessness from a structural problem into a crisis meriting immediate enforcement (Seattle Met, 2017). By just 2023 alone, Seattle removed over 2,800 encampments. This represents a 207% increase over the prior year (Real Change, 2024). The magnitude of the new enforcement was driven in large part by an increase in community complaints, despite the lack of evidence that encampment sweeps reduce the rate of homelessness overall (The Urbanist, 2024). This punitive trend furthered following the U.S. Supreme Court's ruling in *City of Grants Pass v. Johnson*, 603 U.S. 520 (2024). This ruling removed preexisting legal protections for unhoused individuals (Washington State Standard, 2024).

Despite evidence of its effectiveness, community perceptions of visible homelessness continually drive enforcement-oriented policy responses (The Urbanist, 2024). This capstone seeks to examine this pattern. Even though national surveys have established a record of public attitudes toward homelessness, no existing study has examined the relationship between perceived community impacts and policy preferences among Seattle residents. Community attitudes toward homelessness can shape local policy decisions in consequential ways, but this dynamic remains virtually untouched in the context of Washington State. This study addresses that gap by asking: Which perceived community impacts of homelessness shape public support for punitive versus supportive homelessness policy responses among Seattle residents?

The significance of this question extends beyond superficial academic interest. Seattle as a city does not stand as a simple case study for urban homelessness. Instead, it is a city where the politics of visible homelessness have become a defining feature of public life. In a place where

encampment sweeps have tripled in just one year and where a Supreme Court ruling has rapidly recontextualized what cities are legally permitted to do, the gap between what evidence consistently recommends and what communities tend to demand has never been wider. It is in this light that understanding what drives community members toward punitive or supportive policy preferences has practical value. Law and policymakers who wish to produce realizable support, using evidence-based approaches, must first understand the perceptual barriers that stand in the way. This study takes a glance at an empirically grounded account of these barriers, sourced from the community itself.

To address this, the study tests two hypotheses: **H1:** Seattle residents who hold internal attributions of homelessness will express greater support for punitive policy measures than residents who hold external attributions; **H2:** Seattle residents who perceive greater negative community impacts from visible homelessness will express greater support for punitive policy responses than residents who perceive positive impacts. The study employed a cross-sectional online survey of adult Seattle residents (n = 62), measuring attribution style, perceived community impacts, and policy preferences using Likert-scale instruments. The data were analyzed through descriptive statistics and multiple linear regression in SPSS.

Research Question

Which resident attributions and perceived community impacts of homelessness (concerns about public safety, sanitation, and neighborhood character) shape support for punitive versus supportive homelessness policy responses among Seattle residents?

Sub-Questions

1. To what extent do Seattle residents attribute homelessness to internal factors (individual choices, lack of effort) versus external factors (housing costs, economic conditions)?

2. What perceived community impacts, across dimensions of public safety, sanitation, property values, and neighborhood character, do Seattle residents associate with visible homelessness?
3. To what extent do Seattle residents support punitive policy responses, such as encampment sweeps, versus supportive policy responses, such as Housing First?

Hypotheses

H1: Seattle residents who hold internal attributions of homelessness will express greater support for punitive policy measures than residents who hold external attributions.

H2: Seattle residents who perceive greater negative community impacts from visible homelessness will express greater support for punitive policy responses than residents who perceive positive impacts.

CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF LITERATURE

I. UNDERSTANDING HOMELESSNESS AND HOMELESSNESS POLICY

The academic literature surrounding homelessness has increasingly settled on structural explanations for why homelessness persists across American cities. Colburn and Aldern (2022) provide the most complete recent investigation of this question, finding that housing market conditions, such as rent levels and rental vacancy rates, explain the variation in homelessness rates across U.S. cities far better than individual-level explanations such as mental illness, drug use, or poverty. Their analysis is intriguing in its explanatory power. They found that cities with expensive and constrained housing markets consistently produce higher rates of homelessness despite other local characteristics. On the other hand, they found that cities with affordable and available housing maintain lower rates of homelessness (accounting for other risk factors present). This aids in the elucidation of why one of the most rapidly appreciating housing markets in the country over the past two decades, Seattle, has had one of the highest per capita rates of unsheltered homelessness in the United States, while other cities with comparable or even higher rates of poverty and drug use maintain lower rates.

Understanding this structural cause holds significant policy implications. Should it be the case that housing markets are the primary drivers of homelessness, then homeless intervention measures that target individual behavior such as encampment sweeps and enforcing anti-camping ordinances are unlikely to effectively produce lasting reductions in homelessness rates. The aforementioned evidence continually indicates that interventions that address housing availability and affordability are effective approaches that impact homelessness rates. Programs like Housing First, which provide permanent housing to individuals without requiring them to meet certain behavioral criteria, have demonstrated effectiveness at reducing chronic homelessness in multiple cities (Colburn & Aldern, 2022). This is not to mention that focused

programs such as these have also been endorsed by the U.S. Interagency Council on Homelessness as a best practice. Despite this evidence, public and political discourse in Seattle and across Washington State is continually oriented toward individual behavior and visible symptoms of homelessness rather than its structural causes. It is the central motivation of this study to understand why this gap exists and how it shapes policy.

II. PUBLIC PERCEPTION AND POLICY IMPACT

The body of literature on public attitudes toward homelessness has grown substantially over the past two decades. The focus is largely on national samples, which are unlikely to reflect locally distinct community attitudes and policy histories. Through their comprehensive and informative longitudinal study, Tsai et al. (2017) find that Americans have grown more compassionate toward people experiencing homelessness over the past two decades, even noting that U.S. citizens have become more supportive of government intervention. Within this sample, demographic misperceptions concerning who is homeless (who respondents take homeless individuals to be) were consistent with prior attitudes. In a follow-up study conducted by Tsai et al. (2019), they found that those who were personally exposed to homelessness associated its causes with more structural factors, while holding more sympathetic attitudes toward homeless individuals in general. This interestingly raised the question of whether proximity to visible urban homelessness produces similar effects. The connection between public perception and policy outcomes is not simply theoretical. Locally initiated narratives and stigma surrounding homelessness have been shown to transmute into policy at both the city and state levels (Community Solutions, 2023; Willison, 2023).

The avenue through which public policy translates into policy preference has popularly been identified in the literature as attribution style: whether individuals explain homelessness through internal factors like personal choices and lack of effort, or external factors like housing costs and economic conditions. Sahar's (2014) examination of attribution theory in political psychology finds that how people assign blame for a social problem consistently shapes policy responses they support (across domains such as housing, welfare, etc.). When taking a look at homelessness specifically, this essentially means that a community member who views homelessness as the result of individual failure is more likely to favor policies that remove homeless individuals from public areas, while a community member who views homelessness as the result of structural conditions is more likely to favor support for improvements in housing and housing services. This attribution-to-policy relationship has been demonstrated by Srivastava et al. (2025). In this survey, it was found that California residents who harbored internal attributions consistently predicted support for punitive forms of policy (after controlling for political ideology). Community Solutions (2023) and Willison (2023) further remark on how individual-level attitude-based patterns convert into community-level narratives that influence local policy decisions. Ultimately, these studies work together to establish attribution style as a key mechanism that connects how communities perceive homelessness to what they demand local governments to do about it.

III. KING COUNTY AND SEATTLE: POLICY CONTEXT

The literature specific to King County and its largest city, Seattle, also shows evidence that residents' attitudes impact homelessness policy (Seattle City Archives, n.d.). Seattle's engagement with homelessness has been extensive, spanning well over a century, and is

well-documented through both government reports and legislative responses (Seattle City Archives, n.d.). Resident petitions concerning homelessness are dated to the city's earliest decade (Seattle City Archives, n.d.). The consistent demand that residents expressed in their communities has been a push for physical and punitive enforcement. A prominent example from the 1990s involved City of Seattle Attorney Mark Sidran sternly holding to homelessness policy measures that made illegal many actions by homeless people, including panhandling, lingering around sidewalks, and accessing public parks for shelter (Seattle Times, 1993; Archives West, n.d.). Following these efforts, the early 2000s took a slightly different approach; an attempt at a more structural solution. Popular among Seattle residents, King County, and various community partners, launched a 10-year plan to address homelessness (Seattle Met, 2017). Policymakers sought to make homelessness rare and short in duration (Seattle Met, 2017). This measure is reported to have helped house over 40,000 people; however, there remained ~10,000 homeless individuals in 2015 (Seattle Met, 2017). As the area's housing costs continued to escalate, structural issues worsened the conditions of homelessness and the resources available to homeless individuals. Following closely behind the growth of King County's population (1.7% per year), homelessness was growing at a rate twice as fast, and unsheltered homelessness grew eight times as fast (Cascade PBS, 2018). The ten-year plan had fallen through. During this time, the tech-boom of Seattle's technological industry contributed to one of the most expensive rental markets in the country (Cascade PBS, 2018). By 2015, Ed Murray, Seattle's mayor of the time, declared that, as a result of the homeless crisis, Seattle was in a state of emergency (Seattle Met, 2017). This move initiated a period where political and community pressures demanded that individuals and encampments move off the streets (Seattle Met, 2017). This declaration of the

state of emergency once again recontextualized the issue of homelessness, shifting the once believed structural problem into a crisis, one demanding immediate action.

Punitive approaches to addressing homelessness increased after this time, with the volatile implementation of encampment sweeps initiated by Mayor Harrell across Seattle (The Urbanist 2024; Real Change 2024). OPB/InvestigateWest (2024) similarly remarked on the increased frequency of punitive policies across the Washington region, consistent with a fourfold increase in resident complaints. This punitive shift expanded following the U.S. Supreme Court's ruling in *City of Grants Pass v. Johnson*, 603 U.S. 520 (2024). This ruling overturned the Ninth Circuit's previous protections for camping on public property. The rule further held that ordinances imposing penalties for camping do not constitute cruel and unusual punishment under the Eighth Amendment. Finally, the public opinion report produced by the National Alliance to End Homelessness (2024) provides a national benchmark on public attitudes toward homelessness, including levels of support for government intervention and preferred policy responses, against which Seattle-specific findings can be compared.

In recent times, consistent political pressure caused by community complaints has continued to drive the city's enforcement despite evidence of its effectiveness. In the Seattle area, Katie Wilson, the newly elected mayor, as well as her administration, faced immediate pressure from both community members and business entities to continue the assault of aggressive encampment enforcement, demonstrating how, despite leadership changes, community-driven political dynamics persist (MyNorthwest, 2026). Polling conducted by the National Alliance to End Homelessness (2024) shows that despite the fact that a majority of Americans support increased government spending on homelessness, they also favor enforcement-style approaches

when homelessness is visible in their communities. This apprehension between sympathy for homeless individuals and enforcement-oriented local preference highlights the dynamic this study seeks to examine in Seattle.

IV. ATTRIBUTION THEORY

The primary theoretical framework guiding this study is Attribution Theory. Attribution Theory predicts that the policy options favored by an individual depend on whether they attribute the causes of homelessness to internal factors (such as personal factors) or external ones (such as socioeconomic conditions or housing costs), which strongly shapes the policy responses they favor. Through Sahar's (2014) review of research on attribution theory, as it is applied within political psychology, we find that judgments about causal responsibility saturate policy attitudes across an array of sociopolitical domains. Snow-Hill's (2019) validated Survey of Attitudes Toward Homeless People uses attribution theory, the stereotype content model, and integrated threat theory, contributing to a unified and empirically tested framework for examining community attitudes. The most applicable case comes from Srivastava et al. (2025), whose survey of California residents demonstrates the typicality of internal attribution in predicting support for punitive policy measures. Even after controlling for political ideology, Srivastava et al. (2025) found that external attributions led to stronger support for structural interventions. This study seeks to apply and extend that framework to Seattle, Washington, where the perception-to-policy relationship has not yet been empirically examined.

Taken together, these sources demonstrate that homelessness policy outcomes can be at least partly contingent on community attitudes. Additionally, they establish that the link between

perception and policy preference is influenced by attribution, the mechanism through which community-level discourse translates into political action. As the Seattle area has ample documentation surrounding this public discussion and decision-making on this topic, it serves as a promising case for examining these dynamics at the community level.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

This study employed a cross-sectional survey design to analyze the relationship between attribution style, perceived community impacts of visible homelessness, and policy preferences among adult residents of the City of Seattle, Washington. The appropriate design to examine this population is a cross-sectional design, as it allowed for the systematic collection of data from a sample of community members. This allowed for the collection and identification of associations between the relevant variables. Specifically, this study used a structured self-report survey instrument employed through online mediums.

This method aided in the collection of data from a geographically dispersed urban population. This design was inspired by and adapted from the methodological approach used by Srivastava et al. (2025), whose cross-sectional online survey of California residents examined how causal attributions of homelessness shaped support for punitive versus structural policy responses. National surveys of homelessness attitudes from Tsai et al. (2017, 2019) also served as additional comparative benchmarks.

DATA COLLECTION

Population and Sample Size

The target population for this study is adult residents of the City of Seattle, Washington. The unit of analysis is the individual adult resident. A convenience sample of 62 participants was recruited entirely through Nextdoor, a neighborhood-based social media platform that organizes by geographic area. Each recruitment post was shared across multiple Seattle neighborhoods, accessing geographically diverse Seattle residents across a myriad of demographic backgrounds. A second recruitment channel was identified in advance as a supplement should the initial

recruitment channel fall short of the minimum. The second recruitment channel would have been the crowdsourced research participation platform Prolific, filtered to Seattle ZIP codes.

Ultimately, this channel was not needed; the target sample was reached through just the first recruitment channel alone. Despite consisting of a convenience sample, it is acknowledged that a sample of this size is not statistically representative of the Seattle population.

Survey Instrument

Data were collected through a single online survey instrument administered via Google Forms or Qualtrics. The survey is organized into three sections that correspond to the study's three constructs. All items aside from exploratory questions used a five-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree, 5 = Strongly Agree). *Please refer to the Appendix for the complete survey instrument.*

MEASURES

Please refer to the Appendix for the complete survey instrument.

Attribution Style

(1) Attribution style: The section uses six questions adapted from Srivastava et al.'s (2025) study to measure how people explain the causes of homelessness. Three initial questions ask the respondent whether they think homelessness is the result of personal choices or individual failure. This line of questioning refers to the internal aspect of attribution. Following this, three more questions (included in the same section) ask whether respondents think homelessness is caused by structural factors such as housing costs or economic conditions. This line of questioning refers to the external aspect of attribution. The final score of the respondent is

calculated by finding the difference between their internal average and their external average. As a result of the Attribution Index being computed as the difference between external and internal mean scores, it is possible for the respondents to produce negative values. Should an individual score a negative value, that indicates that a respondent's internal attribution mean exceeded their external attribution mean. Simply put, they attributed homelessness more to individual factors than structural ones. This is why some scores extend into negative values rather than remaining between the 1-5 range of the Likert items.

Perceived Community Impacts

(2) Perceived Community Impacts: This section uses six questions to measure how much respondents think homelessness harms their community. The questions cover four areas: sanitation, public safety, economic effects (such as property values), and community responsibility. The respondents' answers regarding community responsibility are calibrated backwards, as agreement with the prompt implies a less negative view of homelessness. Afterward, all six answers are averaged into one score, with higher scores indicating that respondents perceive homelessness as harmful to their community.

Policy Preference

(3) Policy Preference: This category is the outcome this study seeks to explain. The study uses seven questions to gauge how much respondents support different policy responses to homelessness. The questions range from punitive measures such as encampment sweeps and anti-camping laws to supportive measures like Housing First and shelter expansion. Similar to the first construct, the final score of the respondent is calculated by finding the difference

between their average punitive score and average supportive score. A high positive score would indicate that the respondent prefers supportive policies, while a high negative score would indicate the opposite (preference for punitive policies). Similarly, because the Policy Preference scale is computed as the difference between the mean of supportive items and the mean of punitive items, individuals who strongly prefer punitive approaches will have negative scores. This accounts for the negative values present in Table 1.

Background Variables

The survey also collects background variables for descriptive purposes, such as age, general area of residency within Seattle, length of residency within Seattle, and frequency of encounters with visible homelessness. These variables were used to characterize the sample and as control variables for the regression model. As age, length of residency, and frequency of exposure have been identified by prior research as potentially associated with homelessness attitudes and policy preferences, these variables have been included as control variables. Age and length of residency may reflect generational differences or predispositions in how residents understand homelessness and evaluate policy responses. Frequency of exposure has been found to have some association with more structural attributions in some studies, indicating it may independently influence policy preference (Tsai et al., 2019). The inclusion of these variables in the regression model allowed this study to isolate the effects of attribution style and perceived community impacts on policy preference alone.

ANALYSIS

Data were analyzed in two stages using SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences)

Descriptive Statistics

In the first stage, descriptive statistics were used to display the distributions of each variable across the sample. Means, standard deviations, and frequency distributions were reported for all variables. Cross-tabulations were run to examine the relationships between categorical variables such as attribution style and perceived community impact, and how they varied across different demographics, such as age, length of residency, and frequency of exposure to visible homelessness.

Multiple Linear Regression

In the second stage, with the policy preference score (scale) serving as the continuous dependent variable, H1 and H2 were tested using multiple linear regression. Each model reported standardized coefficients, standard errors, and model fit statistics.

The Policy Preference scale (variable) served as the continuous dependent variable. The Attribution Index and the Perceived Community Impact Scale were utilized as the primary independent variables. Age, length of residency, and frequency of exposure to visible homelessness were incorporated as control variables. H1 predicts that residents with more internal attributions would show greater support for punitive policy. H2 predicts that residents who perceive greater negative community impacts would show greater support for punitive policy responses.

The model reported standardized regression coefficients, standard errors, p-values, and model fit statistics including R^2 . Statistical significance was evaluated at the $\alpha = 0.05$ level.

ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

This study involved no contact with individuals experiencing homelessness. This study was reviewed by the University of Washington's Human Subjects Division and determined to qualify for exempt status (IRB Study #STUDY00025933). All data collected from individuals were voluntary, and participants were presented with a full informed consent statement before participation. All participants were presented with a full informed consent statement before beginning the survey and provided consent by actively clicking to proceed.

Limitations

The most apparent limitation of the study is the use of a convenience sample, which limits the study's statistical generalizability of the findings. Second, all variables are collected through self-report, which makes it possible that respondents under/over-report variables, such as policy preferences, especially if those preferences are unpopular or stigmatized. Third, the cross-sectional design is not indicative of causal inference. The study can simply identify associations between attribution style, perceived community impacts, and policy preference, but cannot conclude that one variable causes the other.

CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This chapter presents the results of the quantitative analysis conducted to address the study's central research question: which perceived community impacts of homelessness shape public support for punitive versus supportive homelessness policy responses among Seattle residents? The descriptive statistics contextualize the sample and distribution of the key variables, and the multiple linear regression results are generated to test H1 and H2.

Sample Description

Table 1a. Sample Demographics: Age, Residency, and Exposure (N = 62)

Characteristic	N	%
Age		
18–24	2	3.2
25–34	8	12.9
35–44	13	21.0
45–54	10	16.1
55–64	10	16.1
65 or older	15	24.2
Prefer not to say	4	6.5
Length of Seattle Residency		
1–3 years	4	6.5
4–10 years	12	19.4
More than 10 years	46	74.2
Frequency of Exposure to Visible Homelessness		
Rarely (a few times per year)	1	1.6

Sometimes (a few times per month)	4	6.5
Often (a few times per week)	17	27.4
Daily	40	64.5

Table 1b. Sample Demographics: Neighborhood Distribution (n = 61 with responses)

Neighborhood	N	%
Ballard / Crown Hill / Loyal Heights	7	11.5
Beacon Hill / South Seattle	7	11.5
Downtown / Belltown / Denny Triangle	7	11.5
North Seattle	6	9.8
Capitol Hill / First Hill	5	8.2
Green Lake / Wallingford / Maple Leaf	4	6.6
Pioneer Square	4	6.6
Queen Anne / Uptown	4	6.6
Central District / Chinatown	4	6.6
University District	3	4.9
South Lake Union / SLU	3	4.9
West Seattle	2	3.3
Magnolia / Greenwood / Fremont	2	3.3
Outside Seattle / Other	3	4.9

After cleaning the data, the final analytical sample consisted of 62 adult residents of the City of Seattle, Washington. These individuals were recruited through neighborhood-based online communities (primarily via Nextdoor) between June and July 2026. The sample skewed toward older, long-term Seattle residents who had high daily exposure to visible homelessness. The largest age group was 65 or older (24.2%), followed by 35-44 (21.0%) and 45-55 and 55-64 (both 16.1%). A notable majority of respondents (74.2%) had resided in Seattle for more than 10 years. This suggests that this particular sample holds a deep familiarity with the city's homelessness landscape. The sample featured a wide geographic range of Seattle neighborhoods. The largest concentrations of which came from areas surrounding Ballard (11.5%), Beacon Hill and South Seattle (11.5%), and Downtown, Belltown, and Denny Triangle (11.5%). There was also meaningful representation from North Seattle, Capitol Hill, Pioneer Square, Queen Anne, and the Central District. Furthermore, 64.5% of respondents reported encountering visible homelessness on a daily basis, while an additional 27.4% reported encountering it often (a few times per week). Taken altogether, over 90% of the sample had encountered visible homelessness, at minimum, several times per week. This demonstrates the high visibility of homelessness in Seattle's urban environment.

Descriptive Statistics

Table 2 displays statistics for three composite scale variables used in the analysis.

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics for Scale Variables (N = 62)

Variable	Mean	SD	Min	Max
Attribution Index	1.12	1.92	-3.33	4.00
Perceived Community Impact Scale	3.75	0.75	1.67	4.83

Policy Preference Scale	0.43	2.18	-4.00	4.00
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The Attribution Index mean of 1.12 indicates that, on average, respondents leaned toward external attributions of homelessness. In other words, respondents were found to attribute the causes of homelessness more to structural conditions such as housing costs and economic factors than to individual choices or personal failure. On the other hand, the standard deviation of 1.92 and the wide range (-3.33 to 4.00) indicate substantial variation across respondents. This demonstrates that across the sample, respondents range greatly from holding strongly internal attributions to holding strongly external attributions.

The mean of the Perceived Community Impact Scale, 3.75 (on a 1-5 scale), indicates that individuals perceived significant negative community impacts from visible homelessness across the fields of public safety, sanitation, economic effects, and neighborhood character. Relatively speaking, this is a high mean with a moderate standard deviation ($SD = 0.75$), suggesting that there exists a fairly consistent perception of negative community impact across the sample.

The Policy Preference Scale mean of 0.43 indicates a small lean toward supportive policy preferences on average. Having said this, the wide standard deviation ($SD = 2.18$) and full range (-4.00 to 4.00) display considerable variation. Within the sample, some individuals strongly favored supportive approaches such as Housing First and shelter expansion, while others strongly favored punitive approaches such as encampment sweeps and anti-camping ordinances.

Bivariate Correlations

Table 3 displays Pearson correlations among key variables within the study. Both composite predictors were strongly and significantly correlated with policy preference.

Table 3. Pearson Correlations Among Key Variables (N = 62)

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Policy Preference	—					
2. Attribution Index	.841***	—				
3. Community Impact Scale	-.800***	-.689***	—			
4. Age	-.433***	-.340***	.319**	—		
5. Length of Residency	-.302**	-.281*	.314**	.411***	—	
6. Frequency of Exposure	-.152	-.157	.118	-.120	.277*	—

(*p < .05, **p < .01, ***p < .001)

The attribution index was strongly and positively correlated with Policy Preference ($r = .841$, $p < .001$), indicating that respondents who attributed homelessness to external structures tended to express stronger support for supportive policy responses. Second, it was found that the Perceived Community Impact Scale was strongly and negatively correlated with Policy Preference ($r = -.800$, $p < .001$), which indicates that individuals who perceived greater negative community impacts from visible homelessness tended to express strong support for punitive policy responses. It was also found that age was significantly negatively correlated with Policy Preference ($r = -.433$, $p < .001$). This suggests that older individuals trended toward more

supportive policy preferences. Lastly, frequency of exposure to visible homelessness was not significantly correlated with Policy Preference ($r = -.152$, $p = .119$).

Multiple Linear Regression

In order to test H1 and H2, a multiple linear regression model was generated via SPSS. Policy Preference was entered as the continuous dependent variable. The Attribution Index and Perceived Community Impact Scale were entered as primary independent variables, with length of Seattle residency, frequency of exposure to visible homelessness, and age serving as control variables as described in the Measures section. Table 4 displays the full regression results.

Table 4. Multiple Linear Regression Predicting Policy Preference (N = 62)

Variable	B	SE	β	p
(Constant)	5.215	1.362		<.001
Attribution Index	0.584	0.092	0.513	<.001
Community Impact Scale	-1.174	0.232	-0.405	<.001
Age	-0.208	0.090	-0.156	.025
Length of Residency	0.179	0.250	0.049	.476
Frequency of Exposure	-0.176	0.196	-0.056	.374
R ²	.817			
Adjusted R ²	.801			
F(5, 56)	50.141			<.001

Overall, the regression model was statistically significant and accounted for 81.7% of the variance in policy preference ($R^2 = .817$, Adjusted $R^2 = .801$, $F(5, 56) = 50.141$, $p < .001$). This

reflects a strong model fit, indicating that collectively, attribution style, perceived community impacts, age, length of residency, and frequency of exposure explained 81.7% of the variation in policy preferences across the sample.

H1 predicted that residents who hold internal attributions of homelessness will express greater support for punitive policy responses than residents who hold external attributions. This hypothesis was supported by the regression model. The Attribution Index was a significant positive predictor of Policy Preference ($B = 0.584$, $\beta = 0.513$, $p < .001$), suggesting that for each one-unit increase in the Attribution Index, individuals expressed significantly greater support for supportive policy responses. On the other hand, individuals with more internal attribution expressed significantly greater support for punitive responses. This was found to be the strongest predictor in the model.

H2 predicted that residents who perceive greater negative community impacts from visible homelessness will express greater support for punitive policy responses. This hypothesis was also supported by the regression model. The Perceived Community Impact scale was a significant negative predictor of Policy Preference ($B = -1.174$, $\beta = -0.405$, $p < .001$), indicating that respondents who perceived greater negative community impacts expressed significantly greater support for punitive policy responses. Higher Community Impact scores reflected greater perceived harm, and lower Policy Preference scores reflected greater support for punitive responses.

On the subject of control variables, age was the only significant predictor ($B = -0.208$, $\beta = -0.156$, $p = .025$), demonstrating that older individuals expressed greater support for supportive policy responses after accounting for the primary predictors (variables). Both length of residency

($\beta = 0.049$, $p = .476$) and frequency of exposure to visible homelessness ($\beta = -0.056$, $p = .374$) were not found to be significant predictors of policy preference in the final model.

FINDINGS AND POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

This chapter interprets the findings presented in Chapter 4. The discussion proceeds in three parts: an interpretation of the primary findings as they relate to H1 and H2, a consideration of secondary findings, and a reflection of what the collective results of the study may suggest about the relationship between community attitudes and homelessness policy in Seattle.

Primary Findings: Attribution Style & Policy Preference

The most significant finding of this study is the strength of the relationship between attribution style and policy preference. The Attribution Index was, by far, the strongest predictor in the regression model ($\beta = 0.513$, $p < .001$). Its bivariate correlation with policy preference was also among the highest observed in comparison to other relationships ($r = .841$). Simply put, whether individuals attribute homelessness to personal choices and individual failure, or to structural conditions like housing costs and economic inequality, is a strong indicator of the type of policy they will support (punitive vs supportive).

Similarly, this finding is consistent with the work of Srivastava et al. (2025), who surveyed California residents and found that internal attributions predicted support for punitive policies while external attributions predicted support for structural interventions. This study replicates this pattern in a Seattle context, further providing regional data and specificity to a finding that has previously been established in California.

The implications of this finding are significant for advocates and policymakers working on homelessness issues in Seattle. If attribution style is as predictive of policy preference as these results suggest, then efforts to shift public opinion toward supportive policy approaches may be most effective when they directly address causal narratives, challenging the perception that homelessness results primarily from individual failure and replacing it with accessible, evidence-based accounts of structural causes. Colburn and Aldern's (2022) finding that housing market conditions explain homelessness rates far better than individual characteristics provides the empirical foundation for exactly this kind of narrative reframing.

Primary Findings: Perceived Community Impacts & Policy Preference

The second hypothesis was also strongly supported. The Perceived Community Impact Scale was a significant negative predictor of policy preference ($\beta = -0.405$, $p < .001$), which indicates that respondents who perceived greater negative community impacts from visible homelessness expressed significantly greater support for punitive policy responses. This finding is consistent with the broader literature on how community-level stigma and locally initiated narratives translate into policy (Community Solutions, 2023; Willison, 2023), and provides the first empirical evidence of this dynamic among Seattle residents specifically.

Notably, the mean score on the Perceived Community Impact Scale was 3.75 out of 5, indicating that respondents generally perceived significant negative community impacts from visible homelessness. This high average, combined with the strong negative relationship between community impact perception and policy preference, helps explain a dynamic that has long been visible in Seattle's policy environment.

Even though evidence for punitive approaches such as encampment sweeps remains weak, community-level perception of harm continues to populate community discourse, thus generating political pressure for exactly those approaches. The quadruple increase in resident complaints and Seattle's corresponding 207% expansion of encampment sweeps in 2023 highlights precisely the mechanism this study identifies. That is, perceived community harm driving the punitive policy demand despite the evidence that says otherwise. This finding holds many significant implications, the most important of which is to guide policymakers and advocates to not only contend with the evidence itself, but with the community perceptions of harm that make punitive responses feel appropriate within the city.

One of the more interesting aspects of this finding is what it suggests about the relationship between attribution style and perceived community impacts. The two predictors were themselves found to be correlated ($r = -.689$, $p < .001$), which indicates respondents who attributed homelessness to internal causes also tended to perceive greater negative community impacts. This suggests that these two constructs are not fully independent. It may be the case that a resident who views homelessness as a product of individual failure may be predisposed to perceive its community effects as more severe or threatening. Snow-Hill's (2019) framework, which identifies dehumanization as a key mechanism linking individual stigma to community-level policy attitudes, offers an account of why these two variables move together. Both could reflect a broader disposition toward homelessness characterized by threat perception and moral disagreement.

Secondary Findings: Age & Exposure

Among the control variables, age stood as the only significant predictor of policy preference ($\beta = -0.156$, $p = .025$), with older respondents expressing greater support for supportive policy approaches after accounting for attribution style and perceived community impacts. This finding is interesting for several reasons. Older residents are often assumed to hold more conservative views on social policy; however, in Seattle, this pattern may reflect something specific to the city's history with homelessness. The longer older residents have stayed in Seattle, the greater the likelihood the resident has witnessed the full arc of the city's homelessness policy over several decades (from the Sidran-era civility law in the 1990s to the failed 10-year plan under Mayor Harrell). Having had this longer observation window, older residents who have observed punitive approaches continually fail over the years may be more skeptical of enforcement-based responses than younger residents who had not witnessed the same cycle of policy failure. Although this interpretation is speculative, it is consistent with the sample's demographic profile (74.2% of respondents lived in Seattle for more than 10 years).

Frequency of exposure to visible homelessness was notably not a significant predictor of policy preference ($\beta = -0.056$, $p = .374$), despite the fact that over 90% of the sample reported encountering visible homelessness at least several times per week. This non-finding is itself meaningful. It suggests that mere exposure to homelessness does not reliably shape policy preferences in one direction or another. Instead, it is how individuals interpret that exposure, through the lens of attribution style and perceived community impact, that determines their policy stance. This is consistent with Tsai et al.'s (2019) finding that personal exposure to homelessness is associated with more structural attributions and sympathetic attitudes under

some conditions, but suggests that the effect of exposure is mediated by attitudinal factors that considerably vary across individuals.

Conclusions and Policy Recommendations

This study set out to examine which perceived community impacts of homelessness shape public support for punitive versus supportive policy responses among Seattle residents. Guided by Attribution Theory as its primary theoretical framework, the study addressed three sub-questions: to what extent Seattle residents attribute homelessness to internal versus external factors; what perceived community impacts they associate with visible homelessness; and to what extent they support punitive versus supportive policy responses. The study generated clear and statistically robust findings in support of both hypotheses.

To remark on the three sub-questions that guided this research, it was first found that Seattle residents in the sample leaned toward external attributions of homelessness on average, attributing homelessness to more structural conditions like housing costs and economic inequality than to individual choices or personal failure. Second, perceived community impacts were found to be high across the sample, meaning respondents consistently report concerns about public safety, sanitation, property values, and neighborhood character with regard to homelessness. Third, although policy preferences were split, there was a slight average lean toward supportive approaches. The wide variation of this variable suggests that Seattle's community is relatively diverse when it comes to policy views, despite the fact that its political environment has trended punitively over time.

Altogether, these findings suggest that the political dynamic influencing Seattle's punitive policy trend may lie with community cognitive and perceptual frameworks when community

members make sense of a visible and contested social problem, rather than being produced via partisanship or demographics. Attribution style and perceived community impacts together explained 81.7% of the variance in policy preference. This indicates that how Seattle residents explain homelessness and how much harm they believe it causes their local spaces and community are strong predictors of what they want done about it.

Policy Recommendations

These findings carry relevant implications for policymakers and advocates working on homelessness in Seattle. Three actionable items that follow directly from the evidence are apparent for the aforementioned groups.

1. The City of Seattle and King County should prioritize and expand Housing First and structural housing investments

The study identified that residents who attributed homelessness to structural causes such as housing costs, economic conditions, and systemic failures were significantly more likely to support supportive policy responses. Along with this being the study's most direct finding, it is also the study's clearest policy implication. It appears that the most evidence-based path to reducing homelessness is also the one that residents with structural attributions already support. The City of Seattle and King County should expand Housing First programs and increase affordable housing stock. Aside from the evidence demonstrating that these approaches work, it is also clear that a significant share of Seattle residents already supports them. In this light, policymakers ought to clearly and consistently communicate that these investments are direct

responses to the structural conditions that research consistently identifies as the key drivers of homelessness.

2. The City of Seattle should invest in visible, community-oriented intervention that directly addresses the impact of homelessness instead of displacing it

This study established that residents who perceived greater negative community impacts such as safety concerns, issues with sanitation, and economic effects were significantly more likely to support punitive responses such as encampment sweeps. Although encampment sweeps have been known to reduce the visible symptoms of homelessness, it fails to address its causes. The evidence consistently shows that they do not reduce overall homelessness rates. Thus, a more effective approach to reducing punitive policy demand is to directly address the community impacts driving it. The City of Seattle ought to employ outreach teams such as sanitation crews and behavioral health responders to areas of high visible homelessness. This approach would work to address the specific community concerns (i.e. cleanliness, disorder) that this study correlates as drivers of punitive support. Ultimately, these interventions connect individuals to services rather than relocating them.

3. Homelessness advocates and researchers should disseminate findings on structural causes of homelessness to Seattle residents through public communication

This study found that attribution style (how residents explain the causes of homelessness) is the strongest predictor of policy preference. This means that residents who hold internal attribution of homelessness represent the population most likely to shift toward supportive policy preferences, should their understanding change. Organizations in line with homelessness advocacy, such as the King County Regional Homelessness Authority and other community based non-profit ought to invest in public communication that articulates the findings on

structural causes of homelessness from studies such as Colburn and Aldern (2022) into digestible formats for general audiences. Neighborhood and community meetings would serve as sufficient channels through which this communication could occur.

Limitations and Future Directions

This study has several limitations that should inform how its findings are interpreted and extended. Firstly, the convenience sample was recruited completely through Nextdoor. This limited the statistical generalizability of the findings to the broader Seattle population. As a result of this, the sample likely overrepresents older, long-term residents. Future research on this subject should utilize probability sampling methods to produce findings that are more constitutive of Seattle's full demographic range. Causal inference is not determinable between the key variables. In other words, this study cannot establish that changing attributions would change policy preferences. Finally, all variables were measured through self-report. This introduces the possibility of social desirability bias via selection.

Aside from these limitations, the study makes a meaningful contribution to a sector of literature that has not previously examined the attribution-to-policy relationship in Seattle or Washington State. The findings are as mentioned consistent with national and California-based studies. These findings altogether suggest that the mechanisms linking community attitudes to homelessness policy function similarly across geographic contexts. Future research on this subject might examine whether narrative framing approaches, directly targeting attribution style, can produce a significant shift in policy preference.

APPENDIX

A. Survey Instrument

The following questions were administered to participants via Qualtrics.

Part 1: Background and proximity

Q1: What is your age?

- 18-24
- 25-34
- 35-44
- 45-54
- 55-64
- 65 or older
- Prefer not to say

Q2: Generally, what Seattle neighborhood do you live or work in?
(Open Text)

Q3: How long have you lived in Seattle?

- Less than a year
- 1-3 years
- 4-10 years
- More than 10 years

Q4: In your daily life, how often do you encounter visible homelessness?

- Never
- Rarely (a few times per year)
- Sometimes (a few times per month)
- Often (a few times per week)
- Daily

Part 2: Perceived Causes of Homelessness (Likert Scale)

(The following statements ask about your beliefs regarding why people experience homelessness. Please rate your agreement with each statement on a scale of 1 to 5, where 1 = Strongly disagree and 5 = Strongly agree.)

Q5: Most people who are homeless could find housing if they made more of an effort.

Q6: Homelessness is primarily the result of personal choices, such as substance use or unwillingness to work.

Q7: Homelessness is largely caused by circumstances beyond individuals' control, such as job loss or a health crisis.

Q8: High costs of housing and lack of affordable units are a major driver of homelessness in Seattle

Q9: System failures (such as a lack of social safety nets and/or inadequate mental health services) contribute significantly to homelessness.

Q10: People who are homeless are largely responsible for their situation.

Part 3: Perceived Community Impacts

(The following statements ask about your beliefs regarding how homelessness affects your community. Please rate your agreement with each statement on a scale of 1 to 5, where 1 = Strongly disagree and 5 = Strongly agree.)

Q11: Visible homelessness makes me feel less safe in my neighborhood.

Q12: Homeless encampments create significant public health and sanitation problems in Seattle.

Q13: The presence of homeless encampments negatively affects property values in surrounding areas.

Q14: Visible homelessness harms Seattle's reputation and economic vitality, including tourism and business.

Q15: Homelessness is primarily a problem for other neighborhoods, not mine.

Q16: Seattle residents have a shared responsibility to support people experiencing homelessness in our community.

Part 4: Policy Preferences

(The following statements ask about your level of support for various policy responses to homelessness in Seattle. Please rate your agreement with each statement on a scale of 1 to 5, where 1 = Strongly oppose and 5 = Strongly support.)

Q17: Enforcing anti-camping ordinances that prohibit people from sleeping in public spaces.

Q18: Conducting regular sweeps to remove homeless encampments from parks, sidewalks, and public areas.

Q19: Increasing police presence in areas with high concentrations of homeless encampments.

Q20: Expanding low-barrier emergency shelter capacity across Seattle.

Q21: Investing in Housing First programs that provide permanent housing without preconditions.

Q22: Increasing funding for mental health and substance use services for people experiencing homelessness.

Q23: Requiring individuals to participate in treatment or services before receiving city housing assistance.

Part 5: Optional Reflection

Q24: In your own words, is there anything else you'd like to share about how you think Seattle should address homelessness? (open text box, optional)

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