



## Police use of handcuffs in the homeless population leads to long-term negative attitudes within this group



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### ABSTRACT

The police interact with homeless individuals frequently. However, there has been relatively little research on the attitudes of homeless individuals towards the police, and how police interactions may impact these. This is important since the attitudes of homeless individuals can impact how often they report crimes, and how well they support police when they are investigating crimes in this population. We interviewed 213 homeless individuals in a single city, representing approximately 10% of the total homeless population. They were interviewed at either homeless shelters, or events held specifically for the homeless population. Of these individuals, 75% were male, and 47% had interacted with a police officer within the past month. Self-reports suggested that 60% had a drug and/or alcohol issue and 78% had a mental illness. We found a highly statistically significant difference between the group that had been handcuffed and/or arrested compared to those that had not. This was across multiple domains and included how the individual regarded the police in terms of their empathy and communication skills, and how much they trusted the police. These changes were long-term, and if a homeless individual had been arrested or handcuffed (and verbal reporting suggested that being handcuffed was the by far the most important factor) then these negative attitudes lasted at least 2 years. The primary conclusion from this study is that when police handcuff a homeless individual, this can lead to long-term negative views about the police across several domains that appear to be long lasting, and were linked to feelings of not being respected by the police. It is therefore proposed that police officers should be made aware of the potential long-term negative consequences of this single action, and that police forces should consider providing specific training to minimize any unnecessary overuse of handcuffs.

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### 1. Introduction

Homelessness is a growing problem in Canada, with a recent study concluding there are at least 30,000 homeless individuals on any given night, with as many as 300,000 individuals homeless at some point in the last year (Gaetz, Donaldson, Richter, & Gulliver, 2013). A 2012 study in the city where this research was carried out suggested that in the previous year 0.3% of the population was homeless with the total homeless population being 2174 (Sorensen, 2013). One study found that homeless individuals have increased rates of psychiatric problems, with 30% of homeless individuals having a mental illness, a figure more than two times greater than that in non-homeless populations (Cougner et al., 2006). Another study suggested that 23% of 420 homeless individuals had a lifetime DSM-III diagnosis, with 46% of this population scoring high on a symptom checklist, although this group did not attempt to obtain a more specific psychiatric diagnosis (Toro

et al., 1999). Interestingly, another group suggested that 63% of mentally-ill research participants claimed to be homeless, and that 1 in 20 police interactions involve individuals with mental illness (Brink et al., 2011).

Police come into increased contact with homeless individuals because they are found to have both high arrest rates regarding trespassing, theft, and loitering (Fischer, 1988; Martell, Rosner, & Harmon, 1995; Tolomiczenko & Goering, 2001), and higher rates of victimization (Kushel, Evans, Perry, Robertson, & Moss, 2003; Lee & Schreck, 2005). The responsibility of a police officer is to enforce control, prevent negative occurrences, and maintain safety through intervention (Cordner & Scarborough, 2010). They do this by attempting to prevent crime and by supporting individuals in their designated policing communities. This role positions police to be the first-line emergency responders to those who have committed an offence, or who are in distress.

With these increased risks, it is to be expected that homeless and vulnerable persons have increased rates of interacting with police services. Research has been conducted concerning the perceptions and attitudes that officers have towards those with mental illness, and have found that officer's attitudes are similar to those held by the

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general public (Cotton, 2004; Finkelstein, Lapshin, & Wasserman, 2008; Krameddine, Demarco, Hassel, & Silverstone, 2013; Taylor & Dear, 1981). Additionally, mental health training programs for police officers have been established to improve interactions between these groups, with some reporting improved police attitudes (Compton, Bahora,

Watson, & Oliva, 2008; Corrigan, Morris, Michaels, Rafacz, & Rusch, 2012; Hansson & Markstrom, 2014; Pinfeld et al., 2003) and behaviour (Compton et al., 2008; Compton et al., 2014; Girard et al., 2014; Krameddine et al., 2013; Prenzler, Porter, & Alpert, 2013) towards those with mental illness.

**Table 1**

Homeless and vulnerable person survey.

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"Hello, I am from the University of Alberta and we are trying to find out how the Edmonton Police Service interacts with people, and then give feedback to them. To help us understand this better, may I ask you about 15 - 20 questions?"

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1) Sex:  Male  Female

2) Age: "How old are you?" [      ]

3) "Have you spoken to any police officer for any reason within the last 2 years? If yes, when?"

This past week  More than a year ago

This month  No, I have not spoken to any police officer within the last 2 years

Within the last 3 months  Other

More than 3 months but this year \_\_\_\_\_

4) "Thinking of the most recent police interaction only, how did you feel afterwards?" (Check ONLY ONE)

Completely satisfied/grateful for the help of the police  Dissatisfied

Satisfied  Completely dissatisfied, police are completely unhelpful

Not good or bad  Other \_\_\_\_\_

5) "What happened AFTER the police interaction? Were you taken anywhere or given a ticket?" (Check all that apply)

I was arrested (please share more) \_\_\_\_\_

I was taken to the Spadey/Boyle/Hope mission/other shelter

I was not taken anywhere, police interacted with me and then left but I received a ticket

I was not taken anywhere, police interacted with me and then left, no ticket given

I was taken to hospital. If you were, why? \_\_\_\_\_

Other \_\_\_\_\_

6) "Was any physical force used or were any weapons threatened or used?" (Open ended question, don't give examples)

Physical force: Baton used  Weapon force: Gun low ready

Physical force: Strike (with hand)  Weapon force: Gun pointed

Physical force: Take down  Weapon force: Gun shot

Physical force: Holding technique/ joint manipulation  No force was used

Weapon force: Taser out, low ready  Other

Weapon force: Taser pointed \_\_\_\_\_

Weapon force: Taser shot \_\_\_\_\_

7) "On a scale from 0 to 100, 0 being extremely bad and 100 being really good, how were police at being able to understand and share your feelings?" (ask them to score a percentage then translate to the scale below)

Police were not friendly \_\_\_\_\_ Police were very friendly

0      1      2      3      4      5      6      7      8      9      10

8) "On a scale from 0 to 100, 0 being extremely bad and 100 being really good, how were the police at communicating with you so that you knew what was happening and why?" (ask them to score a percentage then translate to the scale below)

Police were very poor at communication \_\_\_\_\_ Police were very good at communication

0      1      2      3      4      5      6      7      8      9      10

9) "On a scale from 0 to 100, how much did you trust the police officer after the interaction? 0 being no trust at all and 100 being lots of trust?" (ask them to score a percentage then translate to the scale below)

I didn't trust the police at all \_\_\_\_\_ I trusted the police a lot

0      1      2      3      4      5      6      7      8      9      10

10) "On a scale from 0 to 100, how did you feel after the interaction, 0 being really angry and 100 being very happy?" (ask them to score a percentage then translate to the scale below)

Angry \_\_\_\_\_ Happy

0      1      2      3      4      5      6      7      8      9      10

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