

What Does it Take to Be Less Ruthless on The Roofless?

A study on causal attribution of and concern for homelessness in the Netherlands

Master Thesis

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Abstract

Because the ongoing rise of homelessness in the Netherlands can objectively be laid down as an alarming trend - harmful to both the individual and society on all kinds of social and economic dimensions - the political inaction seems rather puzzling. Informed by political science theory, this study went to explore a range of possible social values, beliefs and etiological logics embedded in society that might explain why the public has refrained from outcry. This study has aimed to generate new insights on these individual level factors and their possible relation to the key variables of interest: concern for the issue, perceived urgency, support for political action and the causal attribution of homelessness. A survey was designed and distributed online to gather quantitative data on these specific concepts (N = 1172). After multiple hierarchical regression analyses, it was evident that a) causal attribution of homelessness is influenced by belief in meritocracy and concern for economic inequality, b) concern for the issue can in part be explained by considering the level of exposure, causal attribution of homelessness and concern for economic inequality, c) favoring political action is dependent on the level of concern for the issue and its causal attribution, and d) concern for the issue and support for political action both determine the issue's relative placement on the political agenda.

Keywords: homelessness, inequality, meritocracy, political action, public perception, social problem

The longer people live with a problem, the less pressing it seems. The problem may not change at all, but if people can live with it, it appears less urgent. It becomes less a problem and more a condition than it seemed at the beginning.

- John W. Kingdon (1973: 170)

Social problems are not the result of an intrinsic malfunctioning of a society but are the result of a process of definition in which a given condition is picked out and identified as a social problem. A social problem does not exist for a society unless it is recognized by that society to exist. In not being aware of a social problem, a society does not perceive it, address it, discuss it or do anything about it. The problem is just not there. It is necessary, consequently, to consider the question of how social problems arise.

- Herbert Blumer (1971: 301/302)

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1. Introduction

Why Homelessness is ought to be considered a pressing issue in the Netherlands

The circumstances around the tight and expensive housing market accompanied by large shortages in both social housing and emergency shelter facilities are bad enough as they are, but with the arrival of the COVID-19 pandemic these problems are further deteriorating (Middel, 2020; Trimbos, 2020). By doing so, this will result in more people being violated on an important human right, which is '*the right to housing*' (Farha, 2020: 1). Experts in the field stress the fact that the loss of (or inability to gain) a place to be housed is not only about the absence of a roof above one's head. It also means people are being deprived on a multitude of important life dimensions, such as: '*physiological (lack of bodily comfort or warmth), emotional (lack of love or joy), territorial (lack of privacy), ontological (lack of rootedness in the world, anomie) and spiritual (lack of hope, lack of purpose)*' (Somerville, 2013: 384).

Although these deprivations would seem more than enough reason to put a stop to people having to live without a home, ending homelessness would moreover serve society as a whole, as it is proven to improve the social and even economic conditions of society on the long run if everyone is provided with this basic human need (Aldridge, Story, Hwang, Nordentoft, Luchenski, Hartwell, Tweed, Lewer, Vittal Katikireddi & Hayward, 2018; Fenley, 2020; National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2018; Parsell, Clarke & Kuskoff, 2020; Perri, Dosani & Hwang, 2020). With this knowledge in mind, it is hard to rationalize how this issue was able to escalate and more than double in size within ten years' time, without causing much public outcry and drastic policy measures to be taken. Even though this might have been the most logical response to a phenomenon so harmful on an individual and societal level.

For many years now, municipalities in the Netherlands have been dealing with large shortages in overnight shelters to offer people experiencing homelessness (Huisman, 2020). The number of the registered homeless population has doubled since 2009, and was estimated around nearly 40 thousand individuals in 2018 (CBS, 2019). The 2020 measurement show a small drop in the factual homeless population compared to 2018, which was celebrated in the media as a long-awaited tipping point for the issue. However, it should be stressed this number was measured before the COVID-19 pandemic consequences were in full effect (Trimbos, 2020). According to experts in the field, the wide range of devastating social and economic effects are disproportionately felt by those in already precarious socio-economic

positions, forcing new people into homelessness and thus expected to making the earlier upward trend even more steep.

Charts from the Dutch Central Bureau of Statistics also show a big shift in composition of the Dutch unhoused population. Two subgroups, young adults between 18-27 and people with a non-western migration background, make up for a large part of the rising trend of homelessness, as they have been rising in threefold since the first measurements in 2009 (CBS, 2019). According to the national ombudsman more and more families are also losing their homes, in some cases even leading parents to be separated from their children due to a lack of family shelters (National Ombudsman, 2019). Some municipalities are able to come to an agreement with their local housing corporations to reserve living spaces that becomes available for people experiencing homelessness (Huisman, 2020). This is, however, often on the condition that personal supervision (for example with financial matters) will be guaranteed by the municipality. And it just so happens to be the case that the budget for social assistance was cut by 700 million euros with the decentralization in 2015, even though the demand for this kind of assistance has only been rising.

Even though the Netherlands might be known for doing well with regards of their social housing projects, they do not form a direct safety net for people at the verge of becoming homelessness. Especially in the larger G4 cities - Amsterdam, The Hague, Rotterdam and Utrecht - that are dealing with the largest numbers of people experiencing homelessness, the high demand can mean waiting up to over ten years to become eligible for a home through social housing (Panorama, 2020; Tuynman & Planije, 2006). Sometimes the necessary proximity to a social network, job or a child (in shared custody) can be a reason why moving to a different city might not be an option (NUL20, 2021). And even if moving is an option, applying for social/housing assistance is often bound to the region of registration or comes with a lot of bureaucratic complications. Initially implemented to prevent regions from 'offloading' their disadvantaged residents to other areas. Even though it is illegal for municipalities to refuse emergency aid to people experiencing homelessness based on a lack of 'connection' to the region, research institute Trimbos (2020) found out this is still common practice.

Due to the small capacity and budgets, aid organizations also have to deny the so called *self-reliant* or *financial homeless* from receiving assistance (Institute of human rights, 2020). This is a growing subgroup within the Dutch homeless population, and contains of people who often still have a job and do not have mental health or addiction problems, but just do not have enough money to pay rent or their mortgage. Experts in the field have raised

their concern for this group specifically, since the stress that accompanies an unhoused status might cause these mental and addictive problems to develop over time (Institute of human rights, 2020).

That fact that homelessness in the Netherlands is indeed a severe issue that needs more attention is acknowledged by the Secretary of State for Health, Paul Blokhuis, to which the issue of homelessness is currently assigned (Huisman, 2020). Blokhuis mentioned, in response to an earlier outcry for help by healthcare organisations and municipalities, an important part of the solution lays with creating more living space and providing better debt assistance. In order to realize this, however, Blokhuis states the department of Home Affairs and Social Affairs also need to take on their major responsibility in the issue (Huisman, 2020). To summarize, experts in the field, researchers, NGO's and government officials that have immersed themselves in the issue all point towards a nationwide and more structural approach to homelessness in the Netherlands. But up until now, this advice seems to be in vain. The question that remains then is how come?

When looking at some theoretical reminders from a public policy perspective, we are informed that *'policy interventions are never simply rational responses to objective social problems'* (Parsell, Clarke & Kuskoff, 2020: 4). The success rate of getting a policy intervention through a political organ is almost fully dependant on the presentation of the problem (Parsell, Clarke & Kuskoff, 2020; Kingdon, 2011). And these framing possibilities are, in turn, limited to *'prevailing political rationalities [...] assumptions, categories and aetiological logics'* (Parsell, Clarke & Kuskoff, 2020: 4). Aetiology, or etiology in U.S. English, can be defined as *'The investigation or attribution of the cause or reason for something'* (Oxford dictionary, n.d.). From the trend we have been witnessing in the Netherlands, these etiological logics have apparently not been working in favour of people living in precarious conditions. This line of reasoning insinuates there are certain social values and causal attributions at play that enable this crisis to fester. This study therefore aims to explore the nature of those etiological logics embedded in society, and to explore if they indeed seem to hold relationship with support for more political action to combat the issue. This research aim is condensed into the following broad research question: *'What are present-day public perceptions and attributions of homelessness in the Netherlands, and how might we explain them?'*.

In search for an answer to this question, data will be collected by use of a survey specifically designed to explore the concepts relevant to this subject, conducted among people living in the Netherlands. The hypotheses, as formulated throughout the theoretical

framework, will be tested to explore if there are differences in broader social values or specific reasonings behind homelessness that can help explain the lack of support for more political action. In doing so, this thesis has the potential to contribute to the scientific debate in a humble, but tangible way. This thesis hopes to find its social relevance in locating prominent loopholes in the rationale/rhetoric of those opposed to, or indifferent about, the political action that is so desperately needed.

2. Theoretical framework

Why Homelessness might not to be considered a pressing issue in the Netherlands

In the theoretical framework different theoretical explanations will be discussed as to why people, individually or collectively, might develop less concern for the issue of homelessness than might be expected when looking at the objective severeness of the issue as indicated in the introduction.

2.1 Social problem theory

This thesis follows the symbolic interactionist approach of looking at social problems. Following Blumer (1971: 300), *'a social problem exists primarily in terms of how it is defined and conceived in a society [...] The societal definition gives the social problem its nature, lays out how it is to be approached, and shapes what is done about it.'* Social problems thus only arise, receive recognition and legitimacy for political action when society collectively views and defines a problem as deserving of this status. This is not determined by any inherent attributes of the problem itself, like its objective severeness. Even after recognition there are still many obstacles with the ability to hinder a problem from going into its next stage: earning legitimacy for public action. If obstructed in its passage *'it flounders and languishes outside of the arena of public action'* (Blumer, 1971: 303). In his article from the early seventies, Blumer (1971) therefore pleaded for a new sociological approach to studying social problems. He argued the collective definition process needed to be put center stage in research, instead of trying to fathom a societal dysfunction once it had already emerged. Blumer (1971: 306) concludes the latter form of practicing sociology is *'essentially useless'*, he wanted to know how come some issues get to be concerned for and others do not.

Two authors that seem to have granted Blumer's request to explore the collective definition process are Hilgartner and Bosk (1988). They start their article, *The rise and fall of social problems*, by mentioning this collective definition process is a highly competitive one. One in which there is huge number of potential social problems, but since public attention is a scarce commodity the majority of these potential problems remain '*outside or on the extreme edge of public consciousness*' (Hilgartner & Bosk, 1988: 57). Hilgartner and Bosk (1988: 58) argue this process does not take place in '*some vague location such as society or public opinion*', but these problems are presented to the public through specific public arenas. To mention a few: social action groups, the research community, different levels of government and of course different media outlets. There are many ways to frame a problem, and which perception of "reality" takes over public discourse will determine the course of action for the future. The crux is, however, that simple and dramatic problem formulations have the upper hand in the competition: '*Stock explanations that draw on widely shared, stylized "political myths" are likely to triumph over sophisticated, subtle analyses*' (Hilgartner & Bosk, 1988: 62). While social problems are often highly complex in nature and thus in need of nuanced approaches.

In light of the aim of this thesis, there are a few takeaways from these theories. First, concern for a problem (defining it as a social problem) seems to be a condition for support for political action to be taken, although one does not automatically lead to the other. Second, both concern for the issue and support for political action seem necessary to get a social issue on the competitive political agenda. Translated in hypotheses, we would expect:

Hypothesis 1: Concern for the issue of homelessness increases the support for political action to combat the issue.

Hypothesis 2: Concern for the issue of homelessness increases the issue's relative place on the political agenda (perceived urgency).

Hypothesis 3: Support for political action to combat the issue of homelessness increases the issue's relative place on the political agenda (perceived urgency).

Hilgartner and Bosk (1988) suggest that public opinion should not be treated as a cause when trying to explain the puzzle of public concern and how come some issues are doomed to stay outside of public consciousness. Blumer (1971: 302) even speaks of a sociological platitude

when one believes that '*perception of social problems depend on ideologies or on traditional beliefs*'. There are, however, authors that theorize the contrary. Establishing causal relation is highly complex when it comes to these matters, but there is research available that was able to unveil how the two are related by means of longitudinal and cross-country data. The following paragraph is dedicated to research that underpins the added value of looking at beliefs and social values when trying to explaining why inequality - of which homelessness is a clear example - might be justified and thereby manages to survive in societies.

2.2 Beliefs about inequality

A theoretical explanation given as to why people might consent to the existence of inequalities, is the psychological tendency of humans to believe we live in a just world. This just world hypothesis '*posits a universal tendency to believe that inequalities reflect a meritocratic process*' which in turn '*allows people to maintain their belief that they live in a fair world rather than having to address inequities*' (Mijs, 2019: 5). This theory is underlined by research that demonstrates how people living in less equal societies tend to grow in their tolerance towards inequality. A phenomenon that thus seems to support '*Marx's claim that the ideological superstructure will follow society's material base*' (Mijs, 2019: 5).

Research shows how (income) inequality in the West has been rising, but surprisingly so without the company of an increase in concern for this growing inequality (Mijs, 2019). In his article, Mijs (2019: 2) argues this paradox can be explained by an increase in the popular belief that '*inequality is the outcome of a fair, meritocratic, process where societal success simply reflects talent, ambition and hard work*'. This meritocratic belief also fits the overarching neoliberal rationale present in western societies, a concept that we will come back to later in the theory section. Mijs (2019) proves his hypothesis to be true by showing his readers how beliefs about the nature of inequality (on both the individual and the country-level) are able to explain a significant part of the variance in people's concern for inequality. The author does note that, although concern for and consent to inequality seem to be related, they are not equivalent to a person's policy preference regarding this matter. The conceptions of how (and if) issues of inequality should be addressed by the government are namely more likely to be determined by '*citizens' political values, trust in government and other policy preferences, which may mediate the relationship between experiences of inequality, perceptions thereof and citizens' concerns*' (Mijs, 2019: 4). A rather complex web of interdependence.

On the base of these insights, we can hypothesize that - although support for political action is not likely to be directly linked to whether a person perceives economic inequality to be problematic and/or beliefs they live in a meritocratic society - they might help shape how a person interprets and thus causally attributes the issue of homelessness. Which is why the following hypotheses will be tested:

Hypothesis 4: Meritocratic belief decreases the level of concern for the issue.

Hypothesis 5: Meritocratic belief decreases the structural causal attribution of homelessness.

Hypothesis 6: Concern for economic inequality increases concern about the issue of homelessness.

Hypothesis 7: Concern for economic inequality increases structural causal attribution of homelessness.

Just like people might be distorted in the ways they perceive the severeness of income inequality by being misinformed, as '*evidence suggests that citizens greatly underestimate just how unequal a society they live in*' (Mijs, 2019: 2). The same mechanism may hold true for the issue homelessness. Although Hilgartner and Bosk (1988: 60) argue that a lack of concern for people experiencing homelessness can just be ascribed to the fact that public and individual concern is a scarce commodity, and, after their own daily concerns have been addressed '*there may be very little surplus compassion left over for social issues with less personal significance*'. Other scholars, like Blasi (1994: 563), reject the belief that the ongoing trend towards less public concern for and empathy with the people experiencing homelessness can be explained by this "*compassion fatigue*" and *moral failure*. Blasi (1994) argues this trend can be best described as a result of an inability to *see* and *understand* the (magnitude of the) problem. The next sections will therefore discuss these factors and how they might influence a person's tendency to understand the problem of homelessness in a certain way.

2.4 Problem Attribution: Sin, Sick and System Talk

In analyzing the social construction of homelessness to explain societal inaction, Cronley (2010: 324) points out how the cultural shift towards individualization has paved the way for an individual oriented interpretation of the emergence of homelessness: *'The individual interpretation of homelessness gains strong support within this paradigm of individualism and self-reliance'*. This helps support the social construction that *'Those without homes are either deviant or dysfunctional'* (Cronley, 2010: 324). This neoliberal construction of the issue has influenced public policy, which, according to Cronley (2010), is currently more grounded in public perception than it is in empirical knowledge.

Briefly put, this individual/neoliberal rationale is presenting the issue of homelessness as a personal problem, which thus points towards *'tailored support to address problematic behaviours and personal pathologies'* (Parsell, Clarke & Kuskoff, 2020: 4). In the literature also referred as *'sin talk'*, relating to deviant behaviour. This rhetoric is often combined with *'sick talk'*, pathologizing the problem. Keeping these neoliberal problem attributions in mind, the choice in policy: *'"fixing" individuals [...] rather than addressing their homelessness per se'* can also be better understood (Parsell, Clarke & Kuskoff, 2020: 5). The latter target, addressing the unhoused aspect of experiencing homelessness, would be more likely to result out of a *'system talk'* causal explanation for the occurrence of homelessness. *System talk* is based on the assumption that homelessness is the outcome of structural mechanisms and institutional context, like employment precarity and a tight and expensive housing market (Parsell, Clarke & Kuskoff, 2020). Which is actually the case (Cronley, 2010; Lewchuk et al., 2013). This theory underpins the relevance of looking into the public causal belief system regarding homelessness, as this might be a loophole where things are going wrong with regards of mobilizing political action.

As was mentioned in the introduction, insights from the political science discipline suggest political action is dependent on these etiological logics (i.e. causal attribution) that lay behind the public perception of the issue. And according to Lee, Jones and Lewis (1990), the level of concern for an issue is also determined by these causal beliefs that people hold. In light of the relations under investigation for this study, the following hypothesis will therefore be tested:

Hypothesis 8: Structural causal attribution of homelessness increases the level of concern for the issue.

Hypothesis 9: Structural causal attribution of homelessness increases support for political action to combat the issue.

Hypothesis 10: Structural causal attribution of homelessness increases the issue's relative place on the political agenda (perceived urgency).

2.3 Visibility: *Out of Sight, Out of Mind?*

Last but not least, the possible effects of exposure to the issue will be discussed to round up this theoretical frame around our variables of interest. Prior research on the topic shows how people who are (frequently) confronted with the fact that homelessness exists also view the issue of homelessness as more pressing (Benedict, Shaw & Rivlin, 1988). Levels of confrontation can be determined by living in areas where homelessness is more visible, or by consuming media that has relatively high coverage on the subject. It is, however, also brought to light that some people experiencing homelessness try to hide their homeless status from the public eye with the aim to *'move anonymously and more freely through public spaces'* (Fenley, 2020: 3). Hiding strategies include trying to keep up with personal hygiene and hiding of possessions so one does not have to carry them around. As these elements are both known to be signifiers of a person's homelessness status (Fenley, 2020). Aside from people's own tendency to hide their homelessness status, people are also pushed into invisibility by society more directly. Just think of cities and how they implement *hostile architecture* that prevents homeless people from using public space, on top of enforcing laws like a ban on panhandling and prohibiting people from sleeping in public spaces (Fenley, 2020; Kouwenhoven, 2016; Claus, 2019). From the perspective of Fenley (2020: 3), these bans and restrictions are problematic because *'they reinforce negative stereotypes and biases held by the broader community, solidifying unhoused citizens' status of "other"'*.

Kluegel and Smith (1986) describe in more technical detail why stereotypes can be problematic and play an important role in public perception. A stereotype can be defined as *'a link in memory between a person or a group and a particular trait'* (Kluegel & Smith, 1986: 16). Kluegel and Smith (1986) give the example of a subconscious link between the poor and the concept of laziness. The presence of such a link in the brain does not mean the perceiver will always view poor people as being lazy; *'But when an explanation for poverty is called for, the concept of laziness will become available in memory due to its associative link'* (Kluegel & Smith, 1986: 16).

In their chapter about social-psychological processes, it is mentioned that when a situation calls for judgement on "the cause" of an event, people do not spend time thinking of all possible, relevant explanations and then decide which is they think is the most logical one. Instead, people make use of salient that are readily available factors because they are *easily retrieved from memory* (Kluegel & Smith, 1986: 15). Moreover, according to this principle, *'perceptually salient attributes [...] may have disproportionate impact on social judgments'*. These stereotypical associative links about homelessness that have been engraved in our cognitive schemes may therefore cloud people's explanations and judgements of reality.

The literature, as summarized above, points towards different reasons why exposure to the issue of homelessness is important to take into account when studying the process that leads to judgements about the issue. In theory, it might influence both the perception of severeness and the judgement of what should be done about it. Therefore, it seems interesting to see if the following hypotheses hold true:

Hypothesis 11: Exposure to the issue of homelessness leads to higher concern for the issue.

Hypothesis 12: Exposure to the issue of homelessness leads to higher support for (more) political action to combat the issue.

2.5 Possible moderation effect

It is possible that causal attribution - theorized to be a rather fixed belief that comes before the *assessments* of the problem - also influences the way new information about the issue is perceived. Therefore, it is also imaginable this causal belief can alter the relation between exposure to the issue of homelessness and the judgement about level of concern/support for political action. To be more elaborative, when the occurrence of homelessness is attributed to the individual, being more exposed to the issue might look like a) more media consumption through media channels with a media logic that is likely match the respondents' beliefs about homelessness, as theorized by Hilgartner and Bosk (1988), b) seeing people who experience homelessness on the street but namely the negative stereotype 'kind', because this is the only type that fits the accompanying cognitive model, and c) having conversations about the topic possibly namely with people who are like minded when it comes to their rationale behind the existence of homelessness (as social circles have a tendency to be likeminded). It is then imaginable this type of causal attribution might result in more exposure leading to less

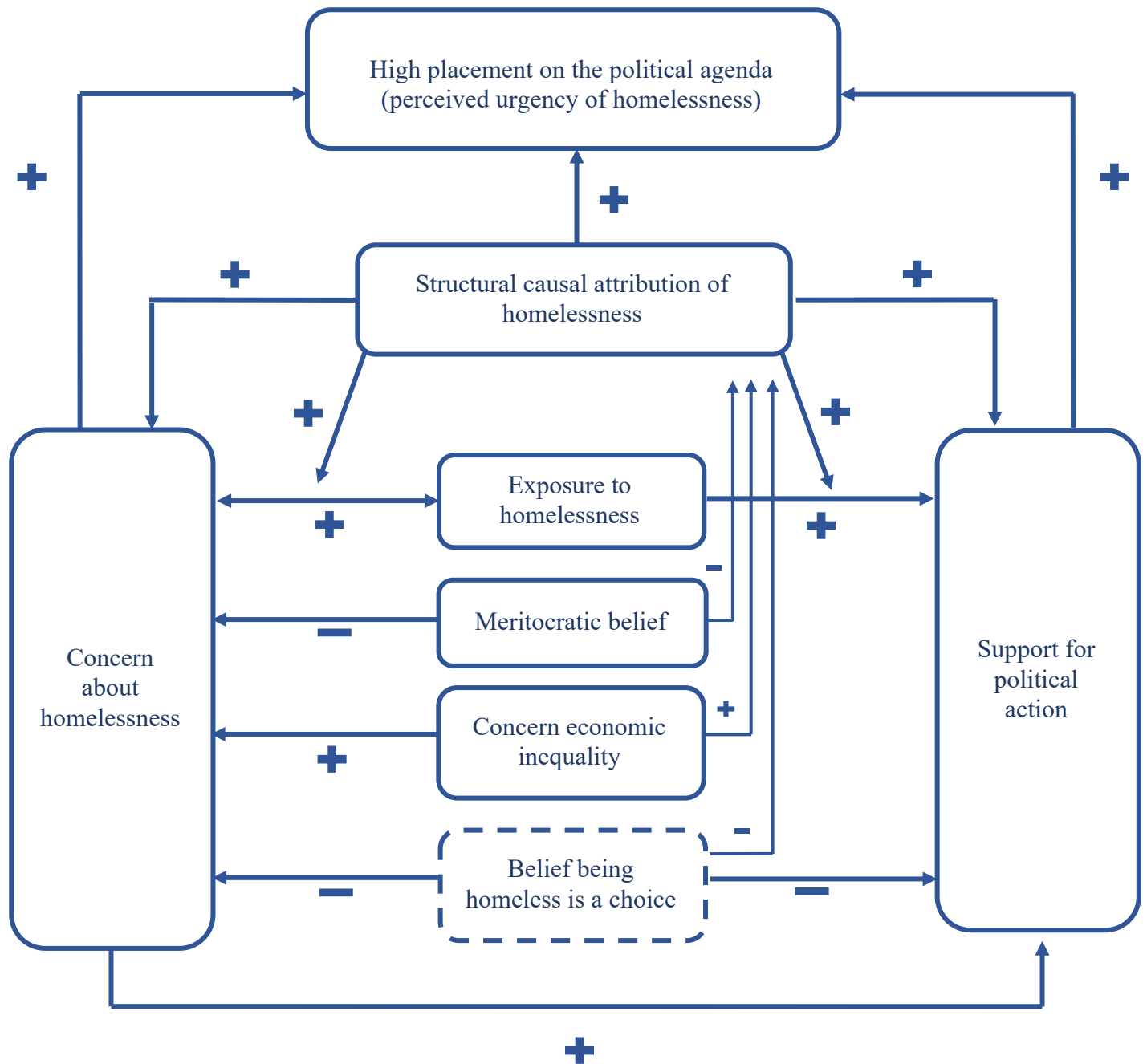
concern for the issue, as well as it might weaken the relationship between exposure and being in favor of political action. In this line of reasoning, the opposite might be true for people who attribute homelessness to structural causes. It is important to note that having more concern for the issue might also lead to more exposure, since awareness of (and sympathy for) the problem can lead to higher conscious recognition when being in public spaces, being more attentive to media coverage on the topic and having more conversations about the topic because of this high concern, which might all lead to strengthening the concern. But for the purpose of this thesis, the focus will be on the following moderation effects:

Hypothesis 13: Structural causal attribution of homelessness strengthens the relationship between exposure to the issue and concern for the issue of homelessness.

Hypothesis 14: Structural causal attribution of homelessness strengthens the relationship between exposure to the issue and support for political action to combat the issue.

2.6 Conceptual model

Figure 1. *Conceptual model - expected relationship between variables*



* 'Belief being homeless is a choice' was added to the model only after the data collection process. See Appendix 8.1 for more information on this decision.

3. Methodological approach

To test the hypotheses of this study, an online survey was designed containing 20 questions to measure the relevant constructs as summarized in the model above. Based on the literature reviewed for this thesis, the following social characteristics were identified as variables that might influence a person's perception of the issue of homelessness: gender, age, level of education, area size, income and political ideology (Toro & McDonnell, 1992; Petit, Loubière, Tinland, Vargas-Moniz, Spinnewijn, Manning, Santinello, Wolf, Bokszzczanin, Bernad, Kallmen, Ornelas & Auquier, 2019; Tompsett, Toro, Guzicki, Manrique & Zatakia 2006; Achterberg & Houtman, 2006). These items were therefore also included in the survey and later added in the regression analyses as control variables. A small pilot group of respondents was asked to evaluate the survey on overall comprehensibility/usability. After alterations, the survey was distributed among the research population. The research population of this thesis is defined by very few criteria, since it is interested in the (variance in) beliefs that exist in the Dutch society in general. Everyone above the age of 18, living in the Netherlands and capable of reading and understanding the survey questions was therefore considered to be an eligible respondent. This population was targeted via a non-probability but purposive sampling strategy that will now be discussed (Bryman, 2015).

First, the survey was shared via the social media application Facebook. On my personal page, as well as public and closed pages targeting different regions of the Netherlands to gain more variation in the sample. I joined multiple Facebook groups throughout the country, until the post was accepted in at least one group in every province. In some groups the response-rate seemed lower than others. This observation is based on the number of comments on the post and the number of respondents that was kept track by the survey website. This variance in response rate might partially have to do with algorithms changing the visibility to members, as they are influenced by the amount of attention the post gets within the first minutes/hours. The Facebook groups that had an unsuspectingly low response-rates were those targeting people living in The Hague and Rotterdam. By that time, the data had also already shown a large skew regarding the gender variable, with more than 80 percent being female. This is why a more targeted type of sampling was chosen. Posters (10) were put up in supermarkets and at subway stops in these two low-response cities, and

male respondents were targeted more specifically by the use of flyers (150) with a QR-code leading to the online survey. When the online survey was closed, 1383 people participated through the weblink and 35 people used the QR-code.

4. Operationalization

In this section the operationalization of the concepts will be discussed. For the purpose of the internal validity of the research instrument, survey questions were adopted, translated and in some cases slightly altered, from the Social Inequality questionnaire of 2018 constructed by the International Social Survey Programme (further referred to as ISSP), and the ESS-9 2018 questionnaire from the European Social Survey (ISSP, 2019; ESS, 2018). Study specific questions were constructed with the use of previous research in the field and designed in coordination with the supervisor of this thesis, dr. Braster. An operationalization summary of the dependent variables will be given below. The summary of the independent and control variables can be found in the Appendix.

4.1 Structural causal attribution

To determine the kind of causal attribution of homelessness, respondents were asked the following: *'What do you consider the most important reasons for why someone in the Netherlands can become homeless?'*. Which is followed with the instruction to pick four causes, out of a list of eight, in the box on the right. This question is designed in such a way that the minimum and maximum items in the entry box is four. The list to choose from contains the following items: 1. Alcohol/drugs addiction, 2. bad life choices, 3. housing shortages, 4. poverty (for example because of the annual reduction of social benefits), 5. Mental health problems, 6. Debts (for example caused by a divorce or bankruptcy) 7. Unemployment (for example because of a flexible labor market or low employment rate), 8. Lack of motivation/effort. The additional information, put in parentheses, is added to clarify the nature of the item and nudge the respondent to interpret the item in a structural manner. The final variable 'Causal attribution' is recoded into a score ranging from 0-4 to represent the number of structural causes picked. A higher score indicates a higher structural attribution of the issue of homelessness.

4.2 Concern about homelessness

Three statements ought to measure the same construct of 'Concern about homelessness' were proposed to the respondents, with possible agreement ranging from 0-10: *'Homelessness is a worrying problem in the Netherlands'*, *'People who are homeless choose this themselves'* (score reversed), and *'The issue of homelessness should be handled in a better way'*. After testing for scale reliability, it turned out leaving out the second statement would induce the internal consistency of the variable. Concern about the issue is thus measured with two indicators, with a Cronbach's alpha of .675. *'People choose to be homeless'* was included in the analysis as a separate variable (see Appendix for justification).

4.3 Political action

To construct the variable representing being in favor of more political action, three similar statements were presented: *'The government should spend [...] money on tackling homelessness'*, *'The government should facilitate [...] night shelters for people experiencing homelessness'* and *'The government should offer [...] social assistance to people at the verge of becoming homeless'*. Respondents were asked to insert one of the following answers: *much less, less, no more and no less, more or much more*. The three statements combined serve as the variable 'political action', with a Cronbach's alpha of .694. A high score on this variable indicates high levels of support for political action to be taken by the government with regards to the issue of homelessness.

4.4 Perceived urgency

The survey starts off by asking the respondent to rank five issues municipalities in the Netherlands might be dealing with today: *'Below you will find several problems lined out in a random order. You are asked to rank them: problems with the highest priority at the top, and those with the least urgency at the bottom. Which of these problems do you think deserve the most attention within the larger municipalities?'*. It was an informed choice to begin with this question specifically, since Barnett, Quackenbush and Pierce (1997) have pointed out the level of perceived urgency can increase in respondents by filling in a survey on the topic. Even if the survey does not contain any new information on the subject, the questions alone get people thinking about the phenomenon and this alters their perceived urgency.

The kind of measurement is derived from Lee, Jones and Lewis (1990), designed to measure the respondents' attitude towards the salience of homelessness. Lee, Jones and Lewis (1990: 259) used the issues of '*urban growth*', '*traffic*', '*crime*' and '*the schools*' as competing topics on the political agenda in their research. For this survey '*waste separation/collection/processing*', '*mobility (parking, public transport, cycling lanes, etc.)*', '*loneliness among the elderly*' and '*crime*' were chosen as competing issues next to the issue of homelessness. These issues were deemed relevant issues for the Dutch context today, based on a screening of some municipal budgets. A high score on the variable 'Perceived urgency' means the issue of homelessness was ranked high on the political agenda.

5. Results

5.1 Sample evaluation and external validity

While the sampling method did make it possible to obtain quite a large sample size for this quantitative study, there are some downturns to this sampling method as well. For instance, the likelihood of a self-selection bias is very high, and even more so because of the nature of the subject. People who are more familiar with the issue and people who have a high concern for the problem may have a higher willingness to take the time to fill in the survey, as they might deem it more important. The possibility of a self-selection bias in the sample was therefore anticipated and, as an attempt to counteract this bias and create more sample variety, the possibility of winning a gift voucher was included in the survey invitation. This way, some people who might not be motivated by the cause (either helping a student out or giving attention to the issue of homelessness) might have had a financial incentive to participate. Looking at some points of reference, this sample indeed turned out to be unrepresentative of the Dutch population.

First of all, when looking at some of the social characteristics, we can see 78.5 percent of the respondents identifies as female, while numbers close to a 50/50 distribution would be expected. The higher educated are also overrepresented in the sample, since this subgroup covers 64 percent of the sample while a 34.8 proportion would be expected, based on Eurostat data on the Dutch population (OIC, 2020). When looking at these gender and level of education distributions, it is not surprising the sample is also more politically oriented towards the left than is normally found in the Dutch population. Since women and higher educated people both tend to place themselves more on the left side of the political spectrum than their

male and lower educated counterparts (Ipsos, 2019). Fortunately, when it comes to age there seems to be quite a nice distribution and range, with the youngest respondent being 18 years of age, the oldest 86 and an average of 43.

The 67.0 average for meritocratic belief in this sample also turned out quite high in comparison to the representative Dutch ISSP survey sample used by Mijs (2019: 8) collected in 2009, which was 53.0. It could be that the respondents participating in this survey deviate from the general Dutch population when it comes to their meritocratic belief. Another possibility could be that meritocratic belief has been rising in the Netherlands over the past twelve years, which would mean this sample does not have to deviate from the general Dutch population on this item necessarily. Unfortunately, more recent data on the topic, to either reject or confirm this possibility, is not available since the Netherlands did not participate in the ISSP Social Inequality survey of 2019 (ISSP, 2021). Or at least, this data was not yet made available at the point in time this thesis was written.

Even though this sample does not seem to meet the criteria for being representative of the population due to its methodological flaws, it could be argued this study may still hold some external validity for the results on its most prominent effects. Since the survey design included quite a few possible confounding variables that were held consistent when adding the key variables of interest into the regression analyses, the relationship shown in the regression models are not impaired by this unrepresentative sample necessarily. The biased sample does refrain this thesis from drawing any general conclusions on the concepts, like the overall level of concern for the issue of homelessness. This also applies to the results discussed in the following paragraph, which interpretations should not transcend this research sample but are interesting to briefly discuss nonetheless.

5.2 Causal attributions

Respondents scored a 2.15 on average on the *structural causal attribution* variable, with a standard deviation of .907. This shows us the majority of respondents made a combination of both structural and individual causes of homelessness when enumerating the four most important causes of homelessness in the Netherlands. This is in line with the theory of Kluegel and Smith (1986), who emphasize people can make use of different types of causal reasoning at one point in time to interpret a phenomenon. These do not have to rule each other out when making sense of reality.

Table 1 presents the gathered data on this causal attribution variable in more detail. Debts, mental health problems, alcohol/drugs addiction and housing shortages were most popular among respondents. With mental health problems most often selected as the number one reason, chosen by 17.5 percent of the sample, and the presence of debts most often included in the top four. Namely in 70.6 percent of the time. Lack of motivation was picked least often, and only made *the four most important reasons* in 5.6 percent of the cases. Although the individual versus structural attribution theory was not presented as an equilibrium - and this is thus only an unverified observation - the causal attributions most popular among the research sample do all seem to gravitate a bit more towards the middle of the individual-structural equilibrium. The individual level causes that were most often picked - mental health and addiction problems - are the '*sick talk*' type of individual interpretation of homelessness, as mentioned by Parsell, Clarke and Kuskoff (2020). They have less to do with a persons' behaviour. Although for addiction problems the beliefs about a person's agency in the situation might differ. The structural causes most often picked, financial debts and housing shortages, seem the less structural choice out of the four options offered. Or at least, they might be more open to interpretation. This was illustrated by one of the respondents who commented to be confused with this particular question. Since, in his eyes, having financial debts or getting a divorce (and thereby entering the tight housing market) are the equivalent of bad life choices.

Table 1. *Frequency Table Causal Attribution 'most important causes of homelessness' ranked 1st/2nd/3rd/4th place (N = 1235) expressed in percentages*

	Debts	Mental Health Problems	Alcohol/Drugs Addiction	Housing Shortages	Poverty	Bad Choices	Unemployment	Lack of Motivation
#1	16.7	17.5	16.0	14.8	8.3	7.7	5.6	0.6
#2	19.5	17.4	13.8	8.3	10.1	6.9	10.4	0.8
#3	21.2	16.7	10.3	8.7	9.9	9.5	9.7	1.1
#4	13.3	11.8	15.5	12.6	11.6	12.2	7.1	3.0
Selected	70.6	63.5	55.6	44.3	39.8	36.3	32.7	5.6
Mode	3	1	1	1	4	4	2	4

Individual causal attribution: Mental Health Problems, Alcohol/Drugs Addiction, Bad Choices, Lack of Motivation

Structural causal attribution: Debts, Housing Shortages, Poverty, Unemployment

5.3 Multiple hierarchical regression analyses

In order to answer the hypotheses of this study, four multiple hierarchical regression analyses were run. The same control variables were included in all models to make sure these possible confounding properties would not blur the relationship between the independent and dependent variables central of this study. All variables, except dummy variable gender, are centered around the mean and missing data was excluded pairwise. In case missing data occurred within a variable consisting of multiple items, the mean of the remaining item(s) was computed to form the score on the scale. When testing for Pearson correlation between the independent and dependent variables of this study, all independent variables showed to be significantly correlated to the dependent variables, with the exception of *media exposure* and its relation to *structural causal attribution* (see Table 2).

Table 3. Structural causal attribution

The first regression analysis, summarized in Table 3, includes predictor variables for attributing homelessness to structural causes. This regression model was found to be a significant model with an adjusted R^2 of .060 in Model 1, and an adjusted R^2 of .155 in Model 2. This tells us that 15.5% of the variance in attributing homelessness to structural causes can be explained by the independent and control variables. Whereas the effect of level of education seemed significant in model 1, having a higher level of education no longer significantly influences causal attribution after the independent variables are added to the equation. Political ideology and financial hardship remain significant in Model 2, but at a lower significance level. All three independent variables - meritocratic belief, concern about income inequality and the belief that being homeless is a choice - are found highly significant ($p < .001$). The direction of these effects run as expected. These regression results thereby confirm the following hypotheses:

Hypothesis 5: Meritocratic belief decreases the structural causal attribution of homelessness.

Hypothesis 7: Concern for economic inequality increases structural causal attribution of homelessness.

Table 2. *Correlation Matrix*

	Structural causal attribution	Concern homelessness	Political action	Perceived urgency	Public exposure	Media exposure	Conversation exposure	Meritocratic belief	Concern income inequality	Belief homelessness is a choice
Structural causal attribution										
Concern homelessness	.276**									
Political action	.276**	.499**								
Perceived urgency	.190**	.407**	.306**							
Public exposure	.163**	.192**	.150**	.195**						
Media exposure	.027	.185**	.066*	.092**	.118**					
Conversation exposure	.131**	.280**	.173**	.204**	.428**	.390**				
Meritocratic belief	-.214**	-.144**	-.085*	-.177**	-.099**	-.055	-.122**			
Concern income inequality	.271**	.299**	.324**	.231**	.119**	.026	.077**	-.193**		
Belief homelessness is a choice	-.263**	-.254**	-.276**	-.265**	-.148**	-.071*	-.128**	.136**	-.159**	

* p < .05; ** p < .01

Table 3. *Hierarchical regression analysis of predictors for attributing homelessness to structural causes (N = 1172 - 1346)*

Variables	Model 1			Model 2		
	B	SE B	β	B	SE B	β
Constant	2.159***	.029		2.154***	.028	
Age	.001	.002	.008	-.002	.002	-.038
Education	.040*	.019	.068	.033	.018	.056
Gender	-.033	.064	-.015	-.008	.061	-.004
Size residence area	.014	.029	.015	.012	.027	.013
Political ideology	-.082***	.013	-.198	-.033*	.013	-.079
Financial hardship	.116***	.027	.139	.084**	.026	.101
Income	.015	.035	.014	.037	.033	.035
Meritocratic belief				-.006***	.001	-.137
Concern income inequality				.187***	.030	.183
Belief being homeless is a choice				-.082***	.012	-.189
Adjusted R ²	.060			.155		

*All variables are centered around the mean (except dummy Gender, reference = female), for mean see Appendix (Table 7). Significance level is indicated with * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$*

Table 4. Concern for the issue

To the second regression analysis, summarized in Table 4, includes predictor variables for the level of concern for the issue of homelessness. The first and second models are significantly contributing to predicting the dependent variable, with an adjusted R^2 of .048 in Model 1 and an adjusted $R^2 = .216$ in Model 2. The third block, in which the moderation effects were added to the regression, do not significantly improve the prediction of the DV, and lowered the adjusted R^2 to .215. Therefore, only the first and second model will be further discussed.

First of all, it is worth mentioning that, although significant in Model 1, the significance level of control variables *age*, *gender*, *political ideology* and *financial hardship* are explained away when the independent variables are added in Model 2. This means there seems to be a spurious relationship between social characteristics like gender - with male respondents having a significantly lower concern for this issue than female respondents in Model 1 - while this relationship can actually be explained by differences in the independent variables. Differences in beliefs. When looking at the correlation of these variables, we can observe a significant negative correlation between being male and concern for income inequality, or being male and media/public exposure. Independent variables that are all positively related to concern for the issue of homelessness.

Another intriguing observation is that the size of the area of residence turned out to be something that can be defined as a suppressor variable. In Model 1 the size of the residence area had no significant relationship with the DV. In Model 2 it suddenly appears as having a significant (negative) effect on concern for the issue. After reflecting on this effect and running a correlation matrix for area size to see which of the independent variables was likely to cause this effect, the arrows pointed towards public exposure. Running a sequence of regression analyses, every time removing one of the IV's, confirmed the expectation that the effect of area size is exposed through controlling for the variance in public exposure. Since the effect of area size only remained significant if public exposure was present in the model. It is also interesting that the direction of the effect of area size on level of concern turns out negative, when the level of public concern is accounted for. If anything, theoretically speaking, the opposite effect would be more logical. Although there are theoretical explanations available that might account for this suppressor effect (like the overload of stimuli people living in larger cities might have to deal with), the data at hand does not really lend itself for this type of ex post facto speculation.

Moving on to the independent variables, all concepts apart from *meritocratic belief* contribute to explaining the level of concern for the issue of homelessness on a significant level. With the three aspects of exposure (public encounters, media consumption and conversation about the topic) all having a positive effect on concern for the issue. As mentioned, the moderation effects (Model 3) do not significantly contribute to explaining the variance of concern for the issue. Together, variables in Model 2 explain 21.6 percent of the variance in the dependent variable concern about homelessness.

Summing up, the following hypotheses are confirmed on the base of the regression analysis:

Hypothesis 6: Concern for economic inequality increases concern about the issue of homelessness.

Hypothesis 11: Exposure to the issue of homelessness leads to higher concern for the issue.

Hypothesis 8: Structural causal attribution of homelessness increases the level of concern for the issue.

And led to rejecting the hypotheses that:

Hypothesis 4: Meritocratic belief decreases the level of concern for the issue.

Hypothesis 13: Structural causal attribution of homelessness strengthens the relationship between exposure to the issue and concern for the issue of homelessness.

Table 4. *Hierarchical regression analysis of predictors for level of concern for the issue of homelessness (perceiving homelessness as a social problem) (N = 1172 - 1375)*

Variables	Model 1			Model 2			Model 3		
	B	SE B	β	B	SE B	β	B	SE B	β
Constant	7.565***	.056		7.531***	.051		7.534***	.051	
Age	.010*	.004	.089	.002	.004	.020	.002	.004	.018
Education	-.030	.037	-.026	-.045	.034	-.040	-.046	.034	-.041
Gender	-.328**	.124	-.076	-.164	.114	-.038	-.165	.114	-.038
Size residence area	-.048	.056	-.027	-.116*	.054	-.064	-.116*	.054	-.064
Political ideology	-.131***	.024	-.165	-.022	.024	-.027	-.022	.024	-.028
Financial hardship	.193***	.052	.121	.056	.048	.035	.055	.048	.035
Income	.023	.067	.012	.049	.061	.024	.052	.061	.026
Structural causal attribution				.279***	.055	.146	.279***	.055	.146
Public exposure				.109*	.053	.064	.104	.054	.061
Media exposure				.161**	.059	.079	.158**	.059	.078
Conversation exposure				.293***	.058	.160	.300***	.058	.164
Meritocratic belief				-.002	.002	-.023	-.002	.002	-.025
Concern income inequality				.376***	.057	.192	.378***	.057	.193
Belief being homeless is a choice				-.123***	.023	-.149	-.121***	.023	-.146
Structural causal attribution x Public exposure							.040	.053	.022
Structural causal attribution x Media exposure							.030	.062	.014
Structural causal attribution x Conversation exposure							-.084	.061	-.042
Adjusted R ²	.048			.216			.215		

All variables are centered around the mean (except dummy Gender, reference = female), for mean see Table 1.

*Significance level is indicated with * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$*

Table 5. Favoring political action

All three blocks in the regression analysis with predictors for favoring more political action turned out significant. The second model was able to account for 29.3 percent of the variance in political action, and the moderation effects included in Model 3 added another 0.7 percent with a significance level of .004, bringing the total of explained variance to 30 percent.

Although Model 1 showed a significant positive relation between age and favoring political action, this relation was explained away when adding the key variables in Model 2. A negative effect of political ideology (being more oriented towards the right side of the political spectrum leading to lower levels of favoring political action) and a positive effect of financial hardship (having a hard time making ends meet leading to more support for political action) remained significant throughout all three models. Model 2 shows how structural causal attribution, concern about homelessness and belief being homeless is a choice all significantly contribute to explaining the variance in political action the way as expected, with a p value of <.001.

Interestingly, none of the exposure dimensions showed any direct effect on favoring political action. When implementing the moderation effects of causal attribution and the different exposures, two out of three did show to be of significant influence. However, the effect of structural causal attribution on the relations between public exposure and political action turned out differently than expected. Attributing the existence of homelessness to structural causes will actually lead higher levels of public exposure to having less support for political action. The opposite was predicted. This leads us to conclude that the following hypotheses should be rejected:

Hypothesis 14: Structural causal attribution of homelessness strengthens the relationship between public exposure to the issue and support for political action to combat the issue.

Hypothesis 14: Structural causal attribution of homelessness strengthens the relationship between media exposure to the issue and support for political action to combat the issue.

Hypothesis 12: Exposure to the issue of homelessness leads to higher support for political action to combat the issue.

The following hypotheses are confirmed:

Hypothesis 14: Structural causal attribution of homelessness strengthens the relationship between conversation exposure to the issue and support for political action to combat the issue.

Hypothesis 9: Structural causal attribution of homelessness increases support for political action to combat the issue.

Hypothesis 1: Concern for the issue of homelessness increases the support for political action to combat the issue.

Table 5. Hierarchical regression analysis of predictors for favoring more political action ($N = 1172 - 1375$)

Variables	Model 1			Model 2			Model 3		
	B	SE B	β	B	SE B	β	B	SE B	β
Constant	4.196***	.017		4.187***	.015		4.186***	.015	
Age	.003*	.001	.074	.002	.001	.045	.002	.001	.050
Education	.003	.011	.010	.001	.010	.004	.001	.010	.004
Gender	-.070	.037	-.054	-.025	.033	-.020	-.024	.033	-.019
Size residence area	-.007	.017	-.013	-.006	.015	-.011	-.006	.015	-.011
Political ideology	-.049***	.007	-.203	-.022***	.007	-.091	-.021***	.007	-.087
Financial hardship	.073***	.015	.151	.038**	.014	.080	.039**	.014	.081
Income	.013	.020	.022	.012	.018	.020	.010	.017	.016
Structural causal attribution				.057***	.016	.099	.057***	.016	.098
Concern about homelessness				.125***	.008	.413	.126***	.008	.416
Public exposure				.008	.015	.015	.011	.015	.022
Media exposure				-.027	.017	-.044	-.026	.017	-.043
Conversation exposure				.010	.017	.018	.004	.017	.007
Belief being homeless is a choice				-.032***	.007	-.126	-.033***	.007	-.132
Structural causal attribution x Public exposure							-.040**	.015	-.072
Structural causal attribution x Media exposure							-.006	.018	-.008
Structural causal attribution x Conversation exposure							.058***	.018	.096
Adjusted R ²	.061			.293			.300		

All variables are centered around the mean (except dummy Gender, reference = female), for mean see Table 1.

Significance level is indicated with * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

Table 6. Perceived urgency

The fourth and final regression analysis, summarized in Table 6, includes predictor variables for the level of perceived urgency in terms of the relative placement on the political agenda. Model 1 and Model 2 are both found to be significant models at predicting the dependent variable. Together the variables explaining 20.5 percent of the difference in perceived urgency among respondents. With political ideology as the only significant predictor in Model 1, and remaining so in Model 2. Looking at the independent variables, it is interesting to see that structural causal attribution does not predict perceived urgency in a direct manner. This effect seems to run almost entirely through the level of concern, which is confirmed by running the same regression model without concern about homelessness, now showing a model in which structural causal attribution predicts the perceived urgency at a p value of < .01. This result leads to a rejection of the hypothesis that:

Hypothesis 10: Structural causal attribution of homelessness increases the issue's relative place on the political agenda (perceived urgency).

Concern about homelessness and favoring more political action both predict perceived urgency with a p value of < .001, confirming the following hypotheses:

Hypothesis 2: Concern for the issue of homelessness increases the issue's relative place on the political agenda (perceived urgency).

Hypothesis 3: Support for political action to combat the issue of homelessness increases the issue's relative place on the political agenda (perceived urgency).

Table 6. *Hierarchical regression analysis of predictors for placing homelessness high on the political agenda (perceived urgency) (N = 1172 - 1418)*

Variables	Model 1			Model 2		
	B	SE B	β	B	SE B	β
Constant	3.513***	.042		3.492***	.039	
Age	.000	.003	-.002	-.004	.003	-.040
Education	.044	.028	.052	.049	.025	.057
Gender	-.086	.094	-.026	.018	.086	.006
Size residence area	.027	.042	.020	.040	.038	.030
Political ideology	-.116***	.018	-.193	-.065***	.017	-.108
Financial hardship	.029	.039	.024	-.046	.036	-.039
Income	-.056	.051	-.037	-.066	.046	-.044
Structural causal attribution				.054	.041	.037
Concern about homelessness				.251***	.023	.333
Favoring more political action				.282***	.007	.113
Adjusted R ²	.047			.205		

All variables are centered around the mean (except dummy Gender, reference = female), for mean see Table 1.

*Significance level is indicated with * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$*

6. Conclusion and implications for future research

6.1 Conclusion

Because the ongoing rise of homelessness in the Netherlands can objectively be laid down as an alarming trend - harmful to both the individual and society on all kinds of social and economic dimensions - the political inaction seems rather puzzling. Informed by political science theory, this study went to explore a range of possible social values, beliefs and etiological logics embedded in society that might explain why the public has refrained from outcry. This study has found, by means of multiple hierarchical regression analyses how a) causal attribution of homelessness is influenced by belief in meritocracy and concern for economic inequality, b) concern for the issue can in part be explained by considering the causal attribution of homelessness and concern for economic inequality, c) favoring political action is dependent on the level of concern for the issue and its causal attribution, and d) concern for the issue and support for political action both determine the issue's relative placement on the political agenda. After the beliefs were added to equation, the significant contribution of most social characteristics ceased to exist. Except for political ideology and financial hardship, that were often found to be of explanatory power for the variance in the dependent variables (with the exception of concern for the issue, and financial hardship also did not affect the perceived urgency). Remarkably, although financial hardship was a steady predictor in most regression models, income - an item that initially considered to be highly related to financial hardship - did not show a significant effect once.

Whereas all types of exposure showed a positive relation to concern for the issue, the moderation effect between causal attribution and exposure did not add any extra predictive power to the regression model. For political action none of exposure dimensions showed to be of significance in a direct way. When adding the moderation between them and causal attribution, however, attribution x conversation positively predicted support for political action, and attribution x public exposure had a significant negative influence on political action. This effect might be related to the limitations in the kinds of public encounters people have. For instance, if the only *conscious* encounters people have with people experiencing homelessness are with the stereotypical homeless person that are more salient in public space (causing nuisance, day drinking, and the like), then this might create discrepancies between their experience and their structural belief system. A high amount of these kinds of public encounters might compete with their original structural belief system, and therefore lower

either their confidence in the effectiveness of the specific political actions that were suggested - more money to tackle homelessness/more night shelters/more social assistance to people who are at risk of becoming homeless- as these might not correspond with the solutions people have in mind for the problems the stereotypical homeless person is presumably dealing with. Or it is possible the exposure might actually dampen their belief that more political action should be taken more in general. But of course, the mechanisms that may lay behind this confusing but interesting result should first be further examined before any conclusions can be drawn from it.

Even though the data did clarify some of the relationships under investigation - for instance lending itself to make evident the variance among the population in concern for the issue should not be ascribed to the social characteristics age, gender, political ideology or financial hardship. As their relationship is shown to be spurious, and explained away once the underlying beliefs are taken into account - There are still many loose ends that need more quantitative testing or qualitative exploration before a real, comprehensive answer can be formulated to the initial broad research question '*What are present-day public perceptions and attributions of homelessness in the Netherlands, and how might we explain them?*'. For instance, the likelihood of biases in the sample due to methodological flaws refrains this study from making any general claims about the present-day public perception and attribution of homelessness. This does not mean the results gathered are fruitless in any way, as they have raised new questions and form a different base to move forward from. A few implications for future research will now be discussed.

6.2 Implications for future research

When people around me heard about the topic of my thesis, I often got a reaction along the lines of: 'We live in such a rich country, are people really forced to sleep on the streets?' or 'If it would really be such a big problem, the Dutch government would have addressed it by now, right?'. During the respondent recruitment process, I also received emails and comments on Facebook from people asking about the state of affairs in their municipalities. One person for instance stated she always thought everyone that wanted help was able to receive it, which is why she always found it strange to see people sleeping in the park near her home. This line of thought appears to have similarities with the more general *belief in a just world*, as discussed in the theoretical framework. In light of this side observation, it might be interesting for future research to explore if Dutch residents seem hold a tendency to belief in 'a just country'.

Another new interesting research road to follow, would be to conduct in-depth

interviews and explore how people make sense of their own perceptions and attributions of homelessness. It would be interesting to consult people about the different causal attributions of homelessness. To inquire, for instance, if people who attribute homelessness to addiction and mental health problems indeed also classify these causes to be blameworthy to the individual. Or do some people also interpret these personal issues to have a structural base?

Once there is be more clarity about the way people interpret the different causes of homelessness through new qualitative research, a next step could be to design an experiment setting in which test groups would be presented with different kinds of information (maybe also presented in different ways) and to see if people's causal attribution regarding homelessness is open to change. Does receiving more information about the subject alter the participants' opinions about the topic? If so, which kinds of information is more effective in altering the perception of the problem/creating more empathy for the target group? Is this factual knowledge about the severeness, or is it this a personal story? And so forth. Since the belief that homelessness is a choice influences all variables that matter in terms of getting the issue of homelessness higher on the political agenda, if it would be possible to change this and other dispositions/beliefs, it would have major implications for accomplishing some real change in the course of events.

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8. Appendix

8.1 Operationalization of independent and control variables

Independent variables

Public exposure, Media exposure & Conversation exposure

Originally, the level of exposure to the issue of homelessness was designed to be a scale including multiple dimensions. However, since the Cronbach's alpha indicated a low internal consistency (.577), the different questions about exposure - encounters in public space, media coverage and topic coming up during a conversation - were included in the analysis independently.

Meritocratic belief

'Meritocratic belief' is determined by asking about the importance and relevance of 'hard work' to becoming successful in the Dutch society, following the research by Mijs (2019). Mijs (2019: 9) mentions it is best to 'look at the importance people attribute to hard work instead of a person's education or ambitions for the latter are reflective of that person's social background and family resources'. The variable is reversed and recoded to resemble a percentage range from 0-100, with a higher score indicating a higher belief in meritocracy.

Concern income inequality

Following the inequality questionnaire of ISSP (2019: 6), concern about income inequality is measured by asking the respondents about their level of agreement with the following statement: 'Income differences in the Netherlands are too large'. People were asked if they strongly agreed, agreed, neither agreed nor disagreed, disagreed or strongly disagreed. A higher score on 'Concern income inequality' corresponds to higher levels of concern about the income inequality in the Netherlands.

Belief being homeless is a choice

This item was circumstantially measured, expected to contribute to the 'concern for the issue/perceived social problem' scale in a reversed manner. The initial thought was if people believe being homeless is not a personal choice - but it is an alarming issue that needs to be (better) addressed - then it must be a social problem which raises concern. This contribution to the scale was however invalidated by a low Cronbach's alpha between these items. On second thought, it makes sense this item does not fit with the scale of concern for the issue, and was later considered to have (more) complementary value on its own. Since this variable measures the respondent's belief in the agency of people experiencing homelessness in a different (and more direct) way than measuring the importance of individual level causes of homelessness do. Although I am aware that this type of iterative process is quite unusual for this type of quantitative research, I have decided to include the variable in the analyses nonetheless. Since it would be a waste to not take this opportunity to explore the effect of this variable, and it is in accordance with the literature by Cronley (2010) and Parsell, Clarke and Kuskoff (2020).

Control variables

Age

Age is measured in years, asked as follows: *'What is your age? (Please fill in your age in numbers)'*.

Gender

Respondents were asked to indicate their gender, as 'Female', 'Male', 'Other, or prefer not to mention'. Because of the distribution of this variable, 78.5, 20.5 and 1.0 percent respectively, the latter category is not included in the analysis because of the small number of respondents. The variable is made into a dummy, with the female category serving as the reference category.

Size area of residence

The population size in the area of residence of the respondent is measured by asking where the respondent lives, options given: 'In a large city (more than 100.000 residents, like Den Haag or Haarlem)', 'In a medium-sized city (between 50.000 - 100.000 residents, like Amstelveen or Gouda)', 'In a small city or village (with less than 50.000 residents, like Vlissingen or Oostzaan)', 'In a rural area'. This variable is made into a quasi-interval variable, with a higher score indicating more residents in the area where the respondent lives.

Education

Level of education is measured by asking about the highest level of education of the respondent. With possible answers being: *primary education, vmbo, havo, vwo/gymnasium, mbo, hbo, university* and *other, namely*. When the option 'Other, namely' was filled in by the respondent, this answer was manually categorized into one of the other options. Or, in a single case, reported as missing data. The variable level of education is included in the analysis as a quasi-interval variable.

Political ideology

To measure the political ideology of the respondent, this survey made use of the line of questioning from the European Social Survey (ESS, 2018: 11): *'In politics people sometimes talk of 'left' and 'right'. Where would you place yourself on this scale? 0 = totally left, 10 = totally right.'*

Income

In order to get an insight in the income level of the respondents, without being too direct (as people are not always comfortable about sharing their income situation), the income question was phrased as follows: *'What is your income situation?'*. Possible answers being: *no income, minimum income, middle income, above middle income* and *high income*.

Financial hardship

The level of financial hardship is measured by asking: *'Do you ever have trouble making ends meet? Or, put differently, do you sometimes struggle paying for all necessary expenses with the income you have (as an individual or as a household)?'*. To which respondents could reply either: *always, often, sometimes, seldom or never*. This question is in line with the ESS questionnaire (2018: 12).

8.2 Descriptive statistics table

Table 7. *Descriptive statistics for dependent, independent and control variables*

Dependent variables	N	Mean	Mode	Min	Max	SD
Structural causal attribution*	1235	2.15	2	0	4	.907
Concern about homelessness*	1375	7.49	8	0	10	1.741
Favoring more political action*	1310	4.18	4	1.33	5	.526
Perceived urgency	1418	3.49	5	1	5	1.312
Independent variables						
Public exposure	1228	3.33	3	1	5	1.025
Media exposure	1225	2.91	3	1	5	.857
Conversation exposure	1224	2.67	3	1	5	.952
Meritocratic belief	1207	67.00	75.00	0	100	20.821
Concern income inequality	1202	4.17	5	1	5	.891
Belief being homeless is a choice	1346	2.64	1	0	10	2.099
Control variables						
Age	1191	43.55	24	18	86	14.755
Education	1179	5.54	6	1	7	1.379
Gender = dummy variable	1188					
Size area of residence	1188	3.29	4	1	4	.965
Political ideology	1178	3.91	5	0	10	2.191
Financial hardship	1175	2.32	2	1	5	1.090
Income	1172	2.92	3	1	5	.868

*Structural causal attribution, Concern about homelessness and Favoring more political action are also IV's