

Competing attitudes about the homeless complicate public policy

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Research has shown that policies designed to help the homeless are more popular with the public than those aimed at helping other social groups, including immigrants. But that hasn't stopped policies that target the homeless and make their lives more difficult, such as banning lying down in public or making it illegal to feed the homeless.

Scott Clifford, a [political scientist](#) at the University of Houston, says [public opinion](#) plays an important role in support for these conflicting sets of policies.

"We see people are really concerned about homelessness. They want government to spend a lot of money on it, and government does spend a lot of money on it," Clifford said. But he said the counterproductive policies also have support. "If you throw homeless people in jail for doing what they have to do to survive, it works against the goal of helping them get off the street."

Support for these policies isn't just tough love - people seem to know that they work against the goal of helping people get back on their feet, said Clifford, lead author on a paper describing the research in *Political Behavior*.

Many people support both sets of policies, and Clifford and coauthor Spencer Piston, a political scientist at Boston University, suggest that [disgust](#) - an emotion that functions to protect us from disease - helps to explain why.

Because homeless people have less access to health care and to sanitation, they have higher rates of illness than the population at large and can appear to be a risk for disease. Policies such as banning panhandling "serve an exclusionary purpose, serving a common desire for the public to maintain physical distance from homeless people," the researchers wrote.

The research shows that disgust motivates support for those exclusionary policies. However, it does not undermine support for policies intended to help, including providing subsidized housing.

And that dichotomy, the researchers said, can have a profound impact on support for a holistic solution.

"While disgust does not undermine the public's willingness to support aid to [homeless people](#), it may create substantial barriers to enacting these policies," they wrote, including opposition to housing projects near their own homes or neighborhoods.

Those attitudes aren't just "aesthetic preferences," the researchers said. "They are deeply rooted (and likely implicit) concerns about one's own health. Thus, policymakers ought to take seriously how disgust may motivate opposition to local housing projects."

The findings help resolve an apparent contradiction in both [policy](#) and public opinion, Clifford said. They also have implications for public policy in a wider arena.

Other research offers evidence that "disgust" can predict support for anti-immigration policies, Clifford said. The effect is driven by concerns about contamination, separate from concerns about crime and job losses connected to immigration, he said.

Clifford notes that disgust can be useful. "It keeps us healthy."

But disgust did not evolve in our modern environment, he said, and so may not always lead to desirable attitudes and behaviors.

Provided by University of Houston

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