

# The Word On The Tweets

An investigation of the relationship between professional media's portrayal and public perception of Indigenous homelessness

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## BACKGROUND

1 in 15 Indigenous peoples is on the streets in major urban areas, which is 8 times more likely than a non-Indigenous individual (Head, 2019). Yet, these statistics either remain unknown or are mere numbers to the general public, which may never have the chance to converse with or even encounter an Indigenous homeless individual. Thus, professional media hold the power to spread narratives of the homeless population, playing a crucial role in impacting the public's perception of these communities in need. As the collective consensus on the Indigenous homeless community would greatly dictate social realities through civic actions such as voting and donation, it is important to understand the roots of personal sentiments found in the general public. However, the intricate histories of Canada's Indigenous peoples have deemed them a complex and multi-dimensional group to study. Reports regarding the needs of Indigenous homeless communities are lacking, not to mention the impacts of professional media's portrayal of them on the general public perception. This study systematically codes and analyzes a total of 500 newspaper articles and tweets between 2017 and 2021. With the software program NVivo, frequently mentioned themes in each source are coded as either being positive, negative and neutral. The frequency of themes in newspaper articles and tweets will be analyzed for their correlation or the lack thereof. I argue that Indigenous homelessness would be negatively addressed in professional media through newspaper articles due to the structural barriers built upon the existing judicial and social systems, which further perpetuates negative stereotypes of this community. Moreover, professional media would strongly impact public perception on Indigenous homelessness, meaning similar themes would be discussed in newspapers and Twitter sources in similar tones.

## RESEARCH QUESTIONS

**Research Question 1:**  
How is Indigenous homelessness being discussed by professional media, through newspaper articles and in social media, through Twitter? More specifically: what is the tone being used (positive, neutral or negative) and what are the topics Indigenous homelessness is being associated with?

**Research Question 2:**  
Is there a correlation between professional media's portrayal of Indigenous homelessness and public perception as expressed on the social media platform Twitter?



## HYPOTHESIS

**Hypothesis 1:**  
Indigenous homelessness would be negatively addressed in professional media through newspaper articles due to the structural barriers built upon the existing judicial and social systems, which further perpetuates negative stereotypes of this community.

**Hypothesis 2:**  
Professional media would strongly impact public perception on Indigenous homelessness, which would be reflected on Twitter; meaning similar themes would be discussed in newspaper articles and tweets, determined by a similar frequency of mentions.

## METHODOLOGY



"This project is delivered with sincere gratitude towards the Laidlaw Foundation and my research advisor, Dr. Mitchell McIvor for their invaluable guidance and support every step of the way."

## RESEARCH DESIGN

This study consists of professional and social media content analysis. The content analysis was focussed on contributing factors of Indigenous homelessness in its historical, political, social, and urban contexts. The collection of newspaper articles was sourced from the University of Toronto database, ProQuest, while tweets were directly sourced from Twitter. The search terms of "Indigenous OR Aboriginal OR First Nation AND Homelessness" are applied for newspaper article collection while the hashtags #IndigenousHomelessness and #AboriginalHomelessness was used to search Twitter.

## SAMPLE SIZE

Newspaper articles were sourced from 12 Canadian news publishers in the time frame of 2017-2021. This is a Canadian nationwide study, not restricted to any specific region, so newspaper publishers were inclusive of newspaper publishers located across Canada. These newspaper sources were chosen based on their highest total number of total published articles in comparison to other sources. Chosen newspaper sources include The Globe and Mail, Toronto Star, The Winnipeg Sun, The Brandon Sun, Calgary Herald, Edmonton Sun, Edmonton Journal, Vancouver Courier, Vancouver Sun, Times - Colonist, The Winnipeg Free Press, Waterloo Region Record. A total of 250 newspaper articles and 250 tweets are included and analyzed in this study.

## CODING SYSTEM

Keywords and phrases in newspaper articles and tweets will be categorized and coded as "themes", under positive, negative, and neutral sentiments according to the reactions. Positive themes in this study would lead towards the approach to sociologize the issue of Indigenous homelessness; it would elicit affirmative perceptions on the fact that Indigenous homelessness is a complex issue in need for understanding of a tremendous amount of historical and structural reasons behind it, and it should not be defined by the simple explanation of individual responsibility. Neutral themes include general causes of and information about Indigenous homelessness that the public would benefit from knowing. Lastly, negative themes include events and social phenomena that would lead the readers to associate the Indigenous homeless to that are generally labelled as criminal-like or unwanted, which would generate significantly negative emotions such as anger and disgust.

## DISCUSSION

Although positive themes are moving towards a decreasing trend going into 2019 for newspaper articles, the Covid-19 pandemic substantially increased the percentage of neutral themes and slightly increased the percentage of positive themes in 2020, revealing Canadian journalism's empathetic leaning reporting of this issue during a challenging and uncertain time in Canada. Professional media places a tremendous emphasis on the Canadian government's role in supporting Indigenous homelessness, especially in terms of finances and public policy, as well as the structural causes contributing towards Indigenous homelessness. Particularly, Colonial histories and systemic structures are often discussed to humanize the Indigenous homeless population and explain their overrepresentation of the homeless. The call for individual and NGO to act upon this issue is secondary in comparison to that of the government's. Shelters and the social groups involved in the issue of Indigenous homelessness dominate the neutral category, with Covid-19 related issues significantly taking up neutral themes dispute only being mentioned for 2 years after the pandemic began in 2020. Negative themes mainly discuss some of the negative causes of Indigenous homelessness, such as substances and addiction, along with negative consequences such as death and murder.

Twitter users who tweet regarding Indigenous homelessness mainly write about positive themes, similar to professional media. Tweets in this data set mainly discuss stories that humanize and support Indigenous homeless individuals against racism, but rarely address government responsibility in this issue. Tweets also tend to address Indigenous homelessness as part of the larger social context, including its general causes and different groups that interact with the Indigenous homeless. Negative themes are mentioned substantially less compared to positive and neutral themes. This, however, could be due to a less comprehensive sample size in this study.

Despite positive themes being discussed as the majority in both newspaper articles and tweets, trends of themes being discussed in these two mediums do not consistently match with one another. Professional media, thus, either insignificantly or inconsistently influences public perception on Indigenous homelessness. However, these results could be due to an incomprehensive sample size, as well as limited time and resources due to its singular researcher led nature. Therefore, the relationship between professional media's portrayal and public perception of Indigenous homeless must continue to be investigated in future studies, with a larger sample size of newspaper articles, tweets and a larger time frame.