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## Homless Communities: The Las Vegas Strip

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*“Something is Everything to Someone with Nothing”*

HOMELESS COMMUNITIES: THE LAS VEGAS STRIP

By:

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Honors Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment

for the designation of Research and Creative Honors

Sociology

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## **Abstract**

Homelessness is defined as having no set place to sleep. It includes those sleeping literally outside, those staying in a shelter or vehicle, and those living at a friend's home, or in a daily, weekly, or month to month rental. The number of homeless in the United States is staggering; there were 630,840 declared homeless people in the United States in 2012 (Utah 2012), a figure that doesn't include the less visible homeless, such as those staying with friends or in unstable rentals. This study aims to bring more attention and understanding to the homeless community on the Las Vegas Strip. What is its demographic makeup? What creates social capital among its members? Why do people prefer this location to many others like it in the area? Preliminary findings suggest that there may be less diversity and social cohesiveness in this "neighborhood" than previously thought. I've also observed a lack of positive interaction between the homeless and the housed. This opens the door to a plethora of additional questions for further study.

## **Introduction and Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study is to examine the homeless community on the Las Vegas Strip, with the goal of learning more about what draws different populations of homeless people to the area. By examining the importance of peer groups and supports to survival and obtaining a general overview of the community, I aim to shed light on an area about which there is limited research.

This study is significant because there is no real body of literature about this particular homeless community in Las Vegas. While there have been researchers who have studied the homeless corridor in the Downtown area, there seems to be a lack of literature focusing on those who live in the Las Vegas Strip area. The goal of this study is to bring more attention to the diversity within the subclass of homelessness with the hopes that it will allow for the creation and modification of more specialized, targeted programs to assist the homeless in becoming rehomed.

## **Literature Review**

The city of Las Vegas sits nestled in a valley in southern Nevada. Roughly 135 square miles, Las Vegas is home to over 110 casinos - 45 of which are on the Las Vegas Strip (Las Vegas 2016). Countless movies feature the city, with plot lines that almost always show people from out of town visiting and doing outrageous, scandalous things. Las Vegas is the epitome of

an adult playground with the freedom to drink, gamble, and access adult entertainment at any time of day. Because of this, the Las Vegas Strip attracts big players with lots of money to spend and adults with disposable income looking for an escape from the monotony of their daily lives. Visiting Las Vegas is a unique type of vacation destination. While some people come to see shows, visit restaurants, and see the sights, spending thousands upon thousands of dollars frivolously through gambling and excess is something that people from all over the world come to Vegas to do.

Census data from 2014 shows that there are roughly 9,500 homeless people in the city of Las Vegas (Agreda 2014). These people live on the sidewalks, in shelters, in flood tunnels, and in abandoned buildings. Due to the transient and hidden nature of most homeless people, the actual number is usually higher than census data suggests. This number also does not generally include people who are living in unstable housing or with friends. This juxtaposition, between the ultra-wealthy who visit to party and gamble, and the ultra-poor who are trying to survive, is evident to anyone who cares to notice while walking the Las Vegas Strip. Outside of all of the opulent major casinos and in nearly every intersection in the city, one can see homeless people. Everywhere one looks, visible, obviously homeless people are struggling to survive in one of the harshest climates in the country with summer temperatures averaging 110 degrees (Vegas.com 2017). It is interesting to observe the interactions of the vacation crowd with the homeless, particularly on the Las Vegas Strip, the epicenter of glitz and glam and adult-themed freedom.

The Utah Comprehensive Report on Homelessness estimated that there were 630,840 declared homeless people in the United States in 2012. It is important to remember when looking

at that number that it is exclusive to those who have “declared” themselves homeless - that is, people who use assistance programs. This means it leaves out a large number of the homeless population who were not available or inclined to participate in the census (Utah 2012).

Homelessness and housing instability has been around for as long as history has been recorded (Trattner 1999).

### *Historical Background*

There are currently four categories of homelessness recognized by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD): the literally homeless; those in imminent risk of homelessness; persons fleeing or attempting to flee domestic violence; and those homeless “under other federal statutes” (Utah 2012). Literally homeless means having no fixed, consistent, or adequate nighttime residence. It includes those sleeping outside and in shelters, and those exiting an institution where they have stayed 90 days or less. People who are going to be literally homeless in 14 days or less are considered the imminently homeless. “Other federal statutes” include unaccompanied youths (under 25) or families with children who are not yet homeless or imminently homeless, but who have unstable housing and those who have moved two or more times in the past 60 days or are not on a lease and do not own a home (Utah 2012).

Homelessness has not always been handled or viewed the way it is today. During the colonial era, the poor were viewed as a natural part of society; those who found themselves homeless or in need were assisted by the community. For example, a common practice was placing widows with other members of the town. They would spend time divided between several households to prevent putting strain on any single family. Orphans were typically placed

in apprenticeships, where they were provided guidance and training until they were old enough to go out on their own (Trattner 1999). People like this were considered the “deserving poor,” in a bad situation due to no fault of their own, as opposed to the “undeserving poor,” or people who had made poor choices and “deserved” the life circumstances that they found themselves in.

As the country grew and views shifted, poor houses and work houses began to open. Almshouses (poor houses) were places where the poor, both adults and children who would otherwise be literally homeless, worked long hours in the hopes that they would be “converted into industrious, functional citizens” (Kirst-Ashman 2013). This practice continued in one form or another until the early twentieth century, completely segregating the poor and the homeless from the rest of society. As social work developed as a profession and there were more people to advocate for the rights of the poor, almshouses were phased out and children were once again placed in apprenticeships and situations similar to that of foster care programs of today (Trattner 1999; Kirst-Ashman 2013).

Up until this point, care for the poor and homeless had remained an issue of the town or the state, relying heavily on the private sector for funding. The Great Depression, however, forced almost all American citizens below the poverty line, leading to such large-scale unrest that people began pleading for the federal government to intervene (Trattner 1999). With the passing of the New Deal in 1933, which included numerous federal programs for social relief and welfare, President Roosevelt took some of the responsibility for the poor and destitute off of the states and placed it on the shoulders of the federal government. This move helped to lay the groundwork for most larger-scale, modern day relief programs (Trattner 1999; Kirst-Ashman 2013).

### *Findings in Modern Literature*

There are two common extremes in rhetoric about the homeless and the issues surrounding them. Many researchers and reporters tend to either blame the poor for their situation, or blame the social structure for failing those who need help most. Often researchers view homelessness as caused by the issues of those who are homeless; some character flaw and/or poor decision must have lead these people to the place that they are (Borchard 2000). Another common stance in the literature regarding homelessness is that those who are homeless are victims of the economy, society, or other unfortunate circumstances. These stances reinforce the belief in a difference between a “deserving” and “undeserving” poor (Trattner 1999).

More conservative views on homelessness emphasize that homeless people are responsible for their homelessness. Borchard, the primary researcher on the homeless in Las Vegas, believes that this conclusion is determined by examining the leisure activities of the homeless, as observers try to determine whether people have chosen to be homeless or not. He argues that these attempts at questioning the situation of others are the result of the observer trying to understand the situation, while simultaneously passing judgements about the character of those who are homeless (Borchard 2010). He mentions that many of the leisure activities enjoyed by the homeless are the same activities enjoyed by those who live indoors; it is their social stature that determines these practices deviant. The term “blaming the victim” applies here. This mindset implies that those who are homeless are deserving of their homelessness, and helps to separate the circumstances of the homeless from those in better life situations. This view



is common in our society as there is personal comfort in it - “It happens to them, not to us.” Oftentimes non-poor citizens rely on anecdotal observations to explain homelessness, emphasising the negative. For example, they may regularly see a homeless person drunk outside of a liquor store and decide that this means that all homeless people are drunks. This strengthens the dominant belief that all homeless people are such because they are lazy, addicts, or mentally unwell (Wagner 2012).

Kolata (1989) wrote an article claiming that unnamed advocates for the homeless stated that there is a larger proportion of homeless people who are drug addicts than are mentally unwell, or disabled. In it, she mentions a study by Gounis (1988) in which men entering the McKenna House shelter were surveyed for drug use and job history. This study found that 70% of the men surveyed had held a job within the last year, and 75% of them reported drug use or addiction. Two articles citing this study were widely publicized by *The New York Times*, with neither mentioning that the focus of the shelter in which the research was conducted is a place that specializes in addiction recovery and intervention.

The belief that all homeless are drunk, lazy, addicts, or mentally unwell contributes to community members’ opposition to the construction of homeless shelters and low income housing. The result is a sentiment that has been referred to as “Not in My Backyard,” or NIMBY. NIMBY thinking has prompted protests, and ordinances that criminalize the homeless. Proponents of NIMBY argue that an increase in affordable housing and/or homeless shelters would result in a decrease in property value, accompanied by an increase in crime, litter, thefts, and violence (HomelessHub 2016). Charlie Mack, a homeless man in San Francisco, states, “...

we've got enough people here that they can't run us out of town just for being poor, you know. Some of the smaller towns, you stick out straightaway and they come for you" (Gowan 2010).

More liberal perspectives tend to lean towards the idea that the homeless are a demonstration of the failure of the state and federal governments and the current economic system. They suggest, rather strongly, that the current structure both creates homelessness and fails to assist people in climbing out of it (Borchard 2010). A lack of programs to prevent homelessness, for example, and the restrictions of the welfare system, paired with capitalist society, the high cost of education, and the cost of living result in a society in which a major portion of the population is living paycheck to paycheck. Once someone is homeless, they have limited options, and homeless shelters are usually full and have waitlists. Christian and Abrams (2003) write that homeless people are likely to have suffered rejection from authorities in some way, often through eviction or court orders, which leads to a distrust of formal social support programs. Researchers and reporters looking at the situation from a liberal perspective tend to argue that there are major flaws in the system and tend to fight for better state-funded programs for the poor and near poor (Shinn 2010).

Researchers operating under this assumption often cite conflict theory, the Marxist theory which states that individuals and groups have access to different commodities, and that nearly everything, including people, can be viewed as a commodity. Using this theory, researchers argue that in a capitalistic society, developers see no profit in providing low cost housing to the poor and homeless, so they pursue higher income residents while caring little about what happens to those they displace (Wagner 2012). In a capitalist society, those who have more money are often backed by formal authority, leaving the destitute feeling powerless. Elmer and

Reicher (1987) concluded that the main difference between “delinquents” and “non-delinquents” isn’t that they have a weaker moral compass, but that they have different views on authority, and in the case of “delinquents,” higher levels of distrust.

Borchard (2000) repeatedly found that those who conduct research regarding class tend, whether deliberately or not, to label people as either deserving or undeserving. Many of these researchers suggest that men are less likely to be categorized as deserving poor. Trattner (1999) cites traditional gender norms and roles as a possible reason for this trend.

The truth, it appears, is often some combination of these extremes. In one study, Martino et. al (2010) interviewed 50 homeless youths in Los Angeles to determine how they became homeless. A homeless youth is defined as anyone under the age of 25 living outside and unaccompanied by a guardian. In this study, which focused on youth accessing social service programs and those panhandling in outdoor areas of L.A., found that over three-fourths of those interviewed left home under circumstances that were out of their control. This means that only 25% of those interviewed became homeless of their own accord, claiming that they wanted to travel and explore new opportunities (Martino et al 2010). It is important to remember when looking at any information on the homeless that there are many different subgroups of homelessness, and that much of the research focuses on one group or another. The study by Martino et al. is focusing on homeless youth, and more specifically, migratory homeless youth.

A study analyzing victimization of the homeless found that homelessness was usually some combination of a choice and an uncontrollable event. Through a survey of homeless youth, researchers found that nearly 75% of respondents left home due to emotional, physical, or sexual

abuse from their families. This abuse resulted in them running away, therefore making homelessness a “choice,” but one made from self-preservation (Witbeck and Simmons 1990). Another ethnography, conducted by Gowan (2010) in San Francisco, detailed a story of two homeless men who disagreed on the causes of homelessness. One of them, named Charlie, believed that his homelessness was a product of a terrible housing market, combined with a variety of social forces, including systemic racism and a few stints of personal bad luck. Another man, named Lee, who slept on the same street as Charlie, attributed his homelessness to his unwillingness to contribute to the style of life that mainstream America has been socially pressured to live. The researcher does note, however, that he noticed many of the homeless he spoke with felt one way or another depending on their current mood, situation, activities, or location. The same person who claimed to choose homelessness while on the street may change his or her tune while utilizing outreach services (Gowan 2010). One could argue that a claim to have chosen homelessness, or the active choice to become homeless to flee abuse, could be viewed as an attempt at feeling in control in a very out of control, unstable point in one’s life.

### *Further Analysis*

Communities are characterized as groups of people who live in the same area, such as a city, town or neighborhood, and/or groups of people sharing similar interests, goals, etc. (Merriam-Webster 2016). In community psychology, community is defined as: “the perception of similarity to others, an acknowledged interdependence with others, a willingness to maintain this interdependence by giving to or doing for others what one expects from them, and the feeling that one is part of a larger dependable and stable structure” (Sarason 1974).

Communities can be close knit, where the members are socially and/or economically connected to one another, or distant, such as in neighborhoods where one is surrounded by neighbors, but doesn't know any of them (Putnam 2000). One of the things that ties communities together is social capital. Social capital is the networks and relationships of a community - how the people within the "neighborhood" act with each other and function as a group. It includes things such as reciprocity and following social norms (unwritten and often unspoken "rules" dictating behavior), and allows a community or society to operate smoothly (Putnam 2000). This idea of community extends into the homeless subculture. With the homeless, there are often communities within a community; the homeless in a given area do not regularly interact with or become a part of the community or culture of those who aren't homeless, even if they live on the same block. Those who are homeless in an area build a community of their own, and just like any other community, these small "neighborhoods" consist of people in the "same" social and economic class, but their communities are unique in their own ways as well.

Every neighborhood or community has its own social norms. Norms can be customs, conventions, roles, identities, institutions, or cultures (Horne 2001). These norms are often flexible, depending on the situation and the members of the community involved. For example, individuals may not care what the everyday norm is if the people with them agree with their behavior. Additionally, when communities are in a state of flux or when a member is newer, people may not understand the costs or benefits of a particular route of action (Horne 2001). A transient community, such as a one consisting primarily of the homeless, is often in a constant state of flux.

Some homeless people utilize social services regularly. They use drop in centers, which are places they can go for the day to shower, do laundry, and receive food and sometimes casework with a social worker. Some homeless people use bad weather shelters or other programs designed to help alleviate the difficulty of their situations, while others avoid such places altogether. Social identity and the norms of the communities to which a homeless person belongs to tend to dictate whether they will access outreach services or not (Christian and Abrams 2003), which suggests there are complex communities within the subculture of homelessness, with their own rules and norms.

Those who are “down and out” develop an identity and culture separate from the identity and culture they were previously a part of. This new individual and cultural identification has meaning within the social framework of the homeless community of which they find themselves part (Orwell 1934). More contemporary research, such as the study on migrant youth by Martino et al. and another by Snow and Anderson on social structures of the homeless, backs this theory. Literature suggests that homeless people use multiple methods to define their social identities, and that these strategies and identities tend to change depending on the length of time that a person has been homeless. The more recently homeless tend to embrace their homelessness more than those who have been homeless for longer than 4 years. People who are recently homeless may tell extravagant stories about their personal histories and often deliberately made distinctions between themselves and those who are not homeless. Meanwhile, those who were chronically homeless have a tendency to put emphasis on distinguishing themselves from those who are homeless due to being mentally ill, and are less likely to tell embellished stories about their travels and experiences (Snow and Anderson 1987).

Other distinctions exist between homeless communities and mainstream America, as well as between homeless communities themselves. A farming community in Iowa is very different than a surfing community in Hawaii, which are both very different from an academic community at a university. Likewise, there are notable differences between different groups of homeless people in terms of their community values, norms, and both social and physical capital. For example, a homeless community in Downtown Los Angeles cannot be expected to be the same as a homeless community in rural Mississippi.

## **Methods**

This study is intended to examine a subgroup within the subgroup of homelessness in Las Vegas. There are several main areas in the city in which homeless people congregate with apparently little to no cross interactions with one another. This study focuses on those living primarily on Las Vegas Blvd. between Harmon and Flamingo. What makes people stay in the areas they do? What attracts and keeps them there? What makes this neighborhood unique? These questions and similar ones will be answered in this research.

There are two primary research styles in the Social Sciences. Qualitative and quantitative research methods are the main spheres under which most researchers work. Qualitative research methods aim to both describe and explain patterns in social relationships, which can be done only after researchers categorize data into specified analytical categories (Denzin & Lincoln 1994). It is an exploratory method generally employed to learn about underlying ideas, motivations, and opinions (Wyse 2011). Qualitative research styles are usually more

unstructured, and focused on learning about a lived experience from the perspective of the research subject (McLeod 2008). Quantitative research focuses on a broader, more generalized view of a given area of research. The data gathered in quantitative measures can be used to numerically describe demographics and attitudes of a given population (Wyse 2011). Quantitative data can be easily turned into data that can be used for comparative or analytical purposes (McLeod 2008).

I embarked upon this study using a Mixed-Methods approach. This means that I am utilizing both qualitative and quantitative methods to answer complex questions about the population I am studying in an effort to create a more complete picture (Denscombe 2008). Mixed-Method approaches are an efficient way to meld together data from both qualitative and quantitative sources (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie 2004). A major tenant of this style of research is to use the main paradigms from both styles of research to compliment the other (Denscombe 2008). I employed a concurrent embedded strategy of Mixed-Methods research, meaning that the quantitative data and qualitative data were collected at the same time as opposed to individually (Creswell 2009). The qualitative data collection was embedded within the quantitative data collection, looking to answer different questions about the population. By combining survey answers (quantitative data) and conversations that I had with participants (qualitative data), I can offer a more complete view of the community on the Las Vegas Strip at the time of this study.

The survey used to collect quantitative data consists of 68 questions. There are sections asking about general quality of life and demographic data, questions about trust and peer relationships, and questions about perceptions and interactions with the police. A group of questions involving trust in peer groups was used to create an index titled “Trust Index” which is



rated on a 40-point scale. Similarly, the section about police and police relations was used to create an index titled “Police Index,” which is rated on a 35-point scale. These index measures have been used in previous studies and have been shown to be reliable. Most of the survey is a modified neighborhood satisfaction survey that has been used in other research.

I applied a standpoint theory methodology, understanding that those living in a vulnerable, deviant population, are the ones who understand it best (Borland 2016). Standpoint theory is a theoretical orientation that is a more recent development in the social sciences. It asserts that knowledge is always produced within a sociopolitical context, and that one cannot separate the knowledge producer from the knowledge. Standpoint states that one’s own personal sociopolitical experiences, one’s past, present, and expected interactions within society, shape the way that one sees the world and the way that one shapes knowledge and knowledge production (Smith 1997). Creating knowledge through conversations and surveys driven by the homeless population on the Las Vegas Strip leads to information that is valid and directly applicable.

I used a grounded theory model to analyze both the conversations that I had with subjects of this study as well as survey responses. Grounded theory is a sociological framework in which the researcher gathers as much data as possible, looking for repeated patterns and ideas in the information. That data is then grouped into concepts and theory is developed from there (Charmaz 2003).

What I was looking for was a snapshot in time, information about the current state of the community of people who live on the Las Vegas Strip and the struggles they face. The goal was

to give meaning to the interactions and experiences of the people who live in the area and to better understand the meanings of homelessness and the lives of those facing it. For this reason, both standpoint theory and grounded theory were the best frameworks to use to examine this community.

A lot of the information being gathered is non-generalizable. Each answer to the questions being asked by the researcher are unique to the person being surveyed. However, by using grounded theory and analyzing patterns, one can make some basic assumptions by the regularity with which certain ideas and observations occur throughout the research period (Charmaz 2003). The survey asked pointed questions, with conversation leaving room for elaboration. Although these methods increase the generalizability and reliability of the data collected, the information will still only be useful to those looking to learn about this area in Las Vegas. This study is not intended to answer questions about any other urban homeless communities.

I approached people panhandling, begging, or busking on the Las Vegas Strip and notified them of the project at hand before asking their participation. In this study, I define panhandling as holding a sign to solicit money, food, or other necessities from passersby. I define begging as actively, verbally asking people for money or other things that are needed without the use of signage. Busking is defined as an individual playing an instrument for tips or donations. Everyone that I identified as a potential participant was given a dollar whether they were interested in completing the survey or not.

I went out five different times to gather data and conduct surveys. Each survey day was very different from the ones before. Towards the end of my time visiting the Las Vegas Strip, I

began to feel I had built rapport with several of the participants and was able to say hello and check up on them during my walk. I began surveying at a different place each day, hoping to diversify my sample as much as possible. On the first day I parked at the LINQ, which is just at the far end of the Flamingo Casino, and walked on the west side of Las Vegas Blvd (LVB) toward the airport. On the next day, I went out an hour and a half later, starting at the Cosmopolitan Casino and traveling down the east side of LVB before making a loop back towards where I had started. I covered the same area and the same distance every day, but by changing my start and end points, I was able to document a more complete representation of people living in the area (See Table 1). Names of people and organizations have been changed to pseudonyms in order to protect the privacy of those involved.

Convenience sampling, or obtaining subjects based on availability and accessibility, is a common method to recruit subjects for this type of research. Sociologist Linda Foreman used this same strategy in downtown Las Vegas. She introduced herself as a student who was writing a paper on the homeless and asked if they would be willing to participate (Foreman 1990). Kurt Borcard, the primary researcher on the homeless in Las Vegas, used a similar recruitment method. For one of his studies, he interviewed 48 individuals in public parks, public libraries, soup kitchens, and bus depots (Borcard 2000). Leslie Irvine, from the University of Colorado, approached homeless pet guardians in a downtown park and asked to interview them as part of her research on pets in the redemption stories of the homeless and downtrodden (Irvine 2013). Martino and colleagues (2011) recruited migratory youth for a study on risky behavior by approaching them on the street and in drop-in centers (Martino et.al. 2011).

## **Data Analysis & Results**

Some of the people that I spoke with did not wish to participate in the survey at all. Their reasons were varied; some did not have time, while others did not feel comfortable signing a consent form despite my reassurances that their information would remain confidential. Others expressed that there had been people out on the Strip conducting surveys previously, and that information had been used in ways that they did not agree with. I was lucky to get 36 people willing to participate, though I documented a total of 72 individual homeless people in the 5 days I was there.

Out of the 36 people that participated in the study, 74% were male. Most respondents were white and nearly half were over 50 years old. 31% had not finished high school, while 45% have at least some college education, if not a degree from an institute of higher learning. 64% of the people that I spoke with sleep outside with no roof or physical housing. 18% are able to obtain enough money to stay in a daily or weekly rental. Additionally, 44% of survey respondents have been living on the Las Vegas Strip for less than a year. Table 1 provides more detailed descriptions on demographic data and sample characteristics.

### *Financial Issues*

During my conversations with the homeless, I found themes within their concerns. We spoke about a variety of things including the past, future, and everything between. The

conversation was really driven by the participants, with the survey acting as a guideline. One of the biggest concerns that the homeless had was with the cost of living and money. 58.4% of people reported panhandling at least once a day, if not more, for periods of time ranging from 30 minutes to 10 hours. Despite these efforts, many of those I spoke with talked about experiencing significant trouble in obtaining basic necessities. Understandably, money and money problems came up consistently throughout my conversations and many of the homeless voiced a desire to be indoors but an inability to afford to live that way. During my time in the field, I only witnessed two of the women I sat with receive money, and one of the men.

Chris, one of my first participants, was hanging out with two friends when I came across him. Chris and Nick were sitting on a ledge listening to Rob play guitar for tips. All three were middle age white men, visibly homeless, dirty and sunburnt, but they seemed happy. Chris told me that the weekly rental properties in Las Vegas had recently increased in cost, jumping from \$150 a week to over \$200 in most places, and that this was too much for them to handle, even as a group. The three of them had previously been able to stay indoors, working together to make ends meet, but were now back outside adding to the number of literally homeless. Paul, an older black man whom I met with another busker, expressed similar concerns. He said, *“It bothers me when they jack up prices on hotel rooms when there are events in town. It goes from \$40 a night to \$120 and I can’t afford that!”* 53.8% of my sample was experiencing literal homelessness, sleeping outdoors with no shelter.

Only 16.7% of the overall sample, men and women included, report that they are able to get the things they need. This problem is exacerbated in the case of homeless men. Most of the homeless men that I spoke to experience difficulties making enough money to survive through

panhandling or busking. Daniel, an older white man with long hair and tattoos, sits on a bridge by the Cosmopolitan Casino for up to 12 hours every day. He thanked me repeatedly for the dollar that I had given him, telling me, *“I watch a billion dollars go by me every day and I’m lucky to get \$5.”* He also shared his experience with a local shelter, the Salvation Army. Daniel stated that they charge men \$10 a night to stay there, and while they are there, each meal costs \$4 in EBT (food stamps). He was frustrated because of the difficulties he has coming up with the money, though he prefers to be inside at night where he feels he would be safer. *“Just feeding people isn’t helping them,”* he tells me. As we talked, I learned that he had made a total of \$2 in over 8 hours that day, but that he had been given leftovers, donuts, and water so he felt that he would be ok.

I met Ryan on the Bellagio Bridge one night. He is in his late 20s and was sitting on a skateboard with a medium sized backpack. It was pretty cold that night. He was holding a sign asking for food, and told me that he feels like his parents’ generation really messed up the economy and now he has to struggle. We sat together for about 20 minutes, during which time I did not witness him receive any type of help. He said, *“If every person walking by gave me a quarter, I would never have to struggle again. But nobody wants to help me.”* He seemed understandably frustrated, and left shortly after he completed the survey.

I came across Adam, a young white man in his early 20s carrying a hiking backpack with a Grateful Dead necklace while walking across the bridges by Caesars Palace. He also made reference to the wealth in Las Vegas. He said, *“Vegas is the richest city in the world. Could you imagine the economy if money wasn’t absolute?”* We spoke for about half an hour, during which time he told me of his desire to establish a secure, long-term tent city somewhere approved by

the city so that there would be a place for the homeless to be. *“There is nowhere that homeless people are allowed to exist!”* he told me. Adam has been arrested and ticketed for sleeping in unapproved locations multiple times. He believes the reason that homeless people aren’t given help is that those who are not homeless feel as if helping those in need will take something from them. He also told me about his efforts to secure housing.

Some of the people I spoke with receive government assistance and still find themselves sleeping outside. Peter, a white man in his 50s, told me that he has been working his whole life and now that he is no longer able to, he is homeless. He receives social security, but says social security isn’t enough to live on. He told me, *“The government is failing on the promises they made to me when we were growing up. I paid into (social security) my whole adult life.”*

19.4% of those surveyed reported receiving any type of monetary assistance from the government. This includes 8.3% who are both veterans and are receiving services from the VA. It also includes 11.1% of the population, who are both disabled and are receiving benefits in the form of SSI for their disabilities. Not all respondents who reported disabilities or veteran status are receiving assistance. The remaining 80.6% of people who are living on the Las Vegas Strip are surviving solely on the donations of passersby.

### *Community Groups*

One of the other topics that seemed to generate a lot of conversation was community groups. I asked a question in the initial survey about whether the respondents were aware of any groups that work to improve the area of the Las Vegas Strip. A lot of people feel like there are no effective community groups nearby, though many mentioned that there are some downtown.

64.7% of people who I spoke with stated that they would be willing to report both personal and locational problems to a community group, if there were one that they felt would be willing to listen.

A handful of groups were mentioned, but the overwhelming majority of people that I spoke with had only heard of an organization called Homeless Helpers, and preferred to avoid it. Two individuals also spoke of a woman named Meredith who goes out to the Strip on her own time and brings people sandwiches. She also allows people to receive mail at a PO box she has set up for that purpose.

Stephanie, a disabled woman in her early 30s, spends her days and early evenings panhandling under a bridge on the Strip. She has a boyfriend who suffers from Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), and the two of them share a service animal. While we were talking, their dog climbed into my lap and curled up to snuggle. She was one of the two people who told me about Meredith, the woman who allows people to receive mail at her PO box. Stephanie told me that it is a really big deal that she has set this up, and that it has allowed her to obtain items she needs in order to obtain a new ID. The other person who mentioned Meredith was Daniel, who said that she is helping him obtain housing. He told me that her support helps him do better. He explained, *“She believes in me and has never let me down so I will never let her down and will always follow through.”*

Homeless Helpers got overwhelmingly negative reviews from the homeless that I surveyed. Chris was the first person to talk about them, stating, *“Homeless Helpers will throw you in jail. If you get stressed out and tell them no during their programs, they will report you to the police and have them show up where you are to watch you.”* This belief that Homeless



Helpers reports the homeless to the police when they decline to continue utilizing their services seems to be widespread in the homeless community on the Las Vegas Strip. Adam stated, *“Homeless Helpers is the biggest joke. They have giant hoops to jump through. They offer assistance which is nothing and treat us like criminals. They bring the police around to bust people who say no.”*

An older black woman named Carol told me something similar. She said, *“Homeless Helpers puts people in the system to help police harass people. They don’t actually give help.”* She also expressed frustration with being on a list for supportive housing for over 2 years. She surmised that individuals at Homeless Helpers do really want to help, but they go about it in all the wrong ways.

Nick, who I had met with Chris, said, *“Homeless Helpers is trying to change SOMETHING. Not sure what though. They’d lie to help their program and you should never have to press the envelope on what’s good.”* He feels that there is something happening that shouldn’t be happening, and that people who really mean to help others would be more transparent than he views Homeless Helpers as being.

Vickie, a black woman in her 50s used to live downtown. She had recently moved into a tunnel by the strip and was panhandling on a bridge when I met her. She had a tiny puppy she was excited about and had also had negative experiences with Homeless Helpers. When asked about community groups in the area that help the homeless, she told me how frustrated she feels, because a lot of these places require ID, which she cannot get. She was also the first person to mention a group called Dogs of the Homeless to me. Dogs of the Homeless is an organization that is designed to assist homeless people and their animals. They provide spay/neuter,

vaccination, and emergency services to the pets of the homeless. Vickie had experienced a situation with them recently that brought her to tears. She said that they had paid for her to stay in a hotel room and treated her, *“like royalty.”* While at the hotel, one of her dogs was attacked by another dog on the property and died. She told me that she called Dogs of the Homeless for help and they came by the next day to take her other dogs to the vet to be vaccinated and checked out. *“They stole my dogs!”* she sobbed, *“They never brought them back. I waited for days and called and called and they wouldn’t answer the phone. Eventually someone else called back and told me that my dogs weren’t my dogs anymore.”* Vickie told me that she now does not trust any programs that offer help to the homeless.

### *Police and Authority*

There is a section in the survey focusing on the police and the interactions people have had with them. This section was used to create the Police Index (see table 2). Out of all of the pages in the survey, the one that had people talking the most on average was the section on the police. Overall, the stories that I was told were predominately negative.

The Police Index rates attitudes towards police on a 35-point scale. The mean score was 20.62 with a range of 28. This indicates that participants hold opinions that are more positive than negative regarding the police. The minimum score was a 7 and the maximum was a 35. The minimum score possible was a 7, indicating that a participant has little to no trust towards the police, while the maximum score possible was a 35, which would indicate that someone trusts the police fully. The index was created using a series of 7 questions about opinions regarding the police and reactions to personal police interactions. Questions were rated on a scale of 1-5, with

5 being the most trust for the police, and 1 being the least. Two people who completed the survey chose to skip the section on police.

Nick, who was sitting with Chris on my first day, told me that he has had more run ins with the Las Vegas Metro Police Department (LVMPD or Metro) than he could count. He said that they, *“often use derogatory terms, like bum, to talk to us. They even write that on tickets!”* He expressed gratitude for the cameras at the casinos, believing them to be the only thing that really prevents the police from becoming violent with the homeless. Both Nick and Chris told me that they only panhandle in places where they can see the police coming from both directions. They stated that they are often harassed and ticketed if the police see them holding signs and panhandling.

Jack was one of the youngest participants. He had an air of confidence around him and was on the move, carrying multiple signs. One of them said, *“Save a train, ride a traveler,”* which I told him was funny. He let me take a picture, insisting on being in it. He stopped the survey halfway through, losing interest, but was able to tell me several stories before he left. One was of how he came to be in Las Vegas. *“I would have left (Vegas) over a month ago but I got pulled over and caught with weed. Not even that much, like an ounce. I spent 20 days in jail, man, and I lost my car. Couldn’t pay impound fees.”* Jack said that he is now on probation for his infraction and is not allowed to go anywhere despite having nowhere to stay here. He describes himself as a traveler, someone who travels from place to place rather than staying homeless and stagnant in one area. *“The justice system is about money. Especially in Vegas, it’s all about money and it gets so corrupt,”* he said.

Jack wasn't the only person I spoke with who described being stuck in Las Vegas due to legal issues. Adam, the younger guy who wanted to establish a tent city, said, "*The police breed homelessness.*" He told me that he had been passing through Las Vegas when he got ticketed for sitting on the sidewalk. His court date was three months out from the infraction and he stayed to appear in court, but due to transportation issues he missed that court date, getting another ticket for failure to appear. He finally resolved that issue, and just a few days later he found himself stuck again. Frustrated, he said, "*Now I'm stuck here for 'failure to walk on sidewalk.' It's a \$500 ticket.*" He explained that the police treat the homeless very differently from how they treat the tourists. In explaining his "failure to walk on sidewalk," ticket, he said, "*(The officer) sat there for an hour holding me up and talking shit and people were jaywalking and he didn't say not a word. He even politely told one guy where the crosswalk was.*"

Stephanie, the woman I met under the bridge with her large dog, described her system of categorizations of the police that she sees on the Strip. She feels that she can predict how she will be treated based on the color of their uniform, which describes their rank. She is currently working with a lawyer to press charges against the LVMPD for allegedly violating her rights under the ADA. She told me about when she was arrested and released without the wheelchair she had been in at the time that she was arrested, despite being physically unable to walk. They provided her with one owned by the police station, though it did not have big enough wheels for her to move on her own. "*I'm a human being! I deserve to be treated like a human being,*" she said, visibly upset. Unfortunately, this treatment was not surprising to her and she explained that it was not the first or the last time her rights had been violated by the police.

I met Kristina on the Bellagio bridge. She was a cleaner, younger, white woman, visibly pregnant. She was packing up to leave when I saw her and thankfully was willing to stay for a bit to take the survey and speak with me. She said that the buskers (people playing instruments for tips) are usually left alone by the police while people who are panhandling are not. She told me, *“If the cops ever show up and tell you to go and you don’t, they’ll take you to jail and hold you overnight without ever pressing any charges. They just let you go the next day like nothing happened.”* While we were talking, two police walked by. One of them looked at me with his hand on his weapon and said in a more aggressive tone than I am used to hearing, *“Time to go.”* We stood up and continued talking as we watched them move down the bridge, Kristina insisting that if we are standing, they should leave us alone. After I left her, I ran into an older black man by the elevator. He said he had just gotten ticketed for sitting and needs to run. He doesn’t want to go to jail.

David was a very unique person to speak with. He is an older black man who is a disabled marine veteran. He sits with an American flag and a chair at the bottom of the Bally’s bridge, where he said he is rarely bothered by police, despite his large set up. *“I try to act as a liaison between the homeless and the police,”* he informed me - he believes this is why they leave him alone most of the time. In the same breath, however, he said, *“Cops won’t let the homeless do anything. Vegas would like to see them all dead.”*

I ran into Patricia while she was making palm roses to sell for tips. She was an older white woman, very skinny. Her sign said, *“Hungry, please help.”* I was able to sit with her for a while and watch her work while going over the survey. She told me about multiple run-ins with the police, during which she had experienced bodily harm. *“An officer threatened to slap me. He*

*threw me against the cruiser and hit my head in a paddy wagon door,” she described. She was being detained for a failure to appear for a loitering ticket. She expressed gratitude that she is able bodied, “(the police) are especially bad to people who are handicap.”*

Daniel, the tattooed man who spoke with me about Meredith, said, *“(The police) pick on the homeless all the time! If you have your bag, they can charge you with storage in a public walkway. If I sit with my legs out, they charge me with obstruction.”* He expressed frustration that they don’t go after “*gangbangers,*” but instead seem to go after the homeless. He said, *“I’m not hurting anyone. I’m not even asking anyone for anything.”* He also told me about how difficult it is to find a safe and comfortable place to sleep because of the police. *“They don’t want the homeless tucked away in corners and under bridges. They kick you out of spots like that. They want us all sleeping in the open in dangerous places. That’s not right.”* Daniel talked about being jumped and beaten so badly by strangers while he was sleeping in a spot designated by the police, that his eye had fallen out and he now has a metal plate in his face. He feels like the police don’t care if the homeless are safe, as long as they can monitor them at all times.

Carol, an older black woman who spoke with me about Homeless Helpers, also had a lot to say about the police and the way she is treated by them. She stated, *“It’s the police’s job to protect the city, but I don’t agree with how they do it.”* She described being jailed for sleeping, despite suffering from documented narcolepsy. She feels that “*Sit/Sleep Laws,*” which are often disguised as loitering laws, are unconstitutional. Carol said, *“The police treat people who are stuck out here like shit. They target us and profile, and they eavesdrop on us and harass us.”* She told me about being arrested and then released without her driver’s license. She believes that this is because she can be detained and taken to the station in the future for not identifying herself.

She feels that the treatment she has received is, “*deliberate oppression.*” Carol also described witnessing “*a few*” people “*get roughed up*” by the police. She said that she sleeps on the Strip because of the cameras and the police presence, “*though the police and security pick and choose what to respond to.*”

Sandra, a younger white woman who I met holding a sign reading, “Anything Helps,” said, “*We’re just out here trying to survive.*” She told me that she feels looked down upon and demeaned by the LVMPD. She said, “*Metro likes to profile. They stereotype and profile and make judgements on people and it’s not fair.*” Sandra had previously found herself in situations in which she was not safe and needed help. She called the police and they did not come once she told them that she was at a homeless encampment. She described an additional time where she was assaulted on the Strip in front of the police and they did not respond. Sandra, looking dejected, said, “*I got a ticket the other day for ‘destructive use of public sidewalk,’ I kid you not. I swear they just giving out tickets for nothing, to meet a quota.*”

Despite these reports involving harassment and abuse by police officers, a chi-square test revealed that participants would still call the police in crisis. I examined a survey question reading, “I have personally had a bad experience with Metro,” with “I would call the police if needed,” and there was no correlation with an alpha set at 0.05. I then ran a test of, “I have personally had a bad experience with Metro,” and “Metro police treat people fairly,” and again found no correlation with an alpha set at 0.05. This demonstrates that whether or not people feel harassed and abused by the police, and despite recalling stories and adamantly expressing dislike for Metro, they still believe that the police treat people fairly overall, and would call them if they were in need of assistance.

Paul, an older black man who spoke to me about hotel room price inflation, described a general unease around the police. He said, *“I tend to be nervous around cops even when I’m doing nothing wrong.”* He told me that he has been ticketed and told to leave while panhandling, and expressed frustration that people in costumes are left alone; *“In my opinion they’re doing the exact same thing except they’re not holding a sign.”*

I met an older man whose company I really enjoyed, sitting outside of Caesars Palace. Alexander, a self-described Gypsy in both the hereditary and lifestyle sense, had some issues with the police. He told me, *“I know they (are) doing their job. I know that. But sometimes they go over (their) job.”* While he expressed appreciation for having them around, he was also frustrated with a lot of the things he has experienced with them; *“The police go after you for nothing, stupid things. They go for easy because the homeless don’t fight back.”* Shortly after leaving Alexander, I ran into a man named Scott who took the survey in silence. At the very end, when asked if there was anything that he wanted people to know, he said, *“Yeah, tell the police to stop harassing us!”*

On Thursday as I left the Flamingo Casino to begin my walk, I observed the police telling a homeless man with a sign to go. Three of them were standing over him with their hands on their weapons. The man did not appear to be doing anything other than holding a sign. I went to the other side of the Flamingo and ended up surveying a younger white man in a wheelchair with red hair. While we were sitting there the cops came by. Someone had yelled at a tourist, so they grabbed him and sat him on the curb. While he was sitting on the curb with handcuffs on, I observed them knock him down into a laying position. They had two other people in handcuffs



in the area. All three people who were handcuffed appeared to be homeless or very close to homelessness.

### *Peers and Group Survival*

Most of the people that I saw and documented, whether I spoke with them or not during my time on the Las Vegas Strip, were alone. There were a few groups of two, maybe three people, but the vast majority of the homeless on were by themselves. Despite this, I did hear a few stories regarding the importance of others and thanks to the section in the survey involving peers, I was able to gather some data about the relationships between individuals in the community.

On my last night on the Strip I met a man named Ben. He was a middle age white guy with a beard and a positive attitude. He said that homelessness isn't a good thing for anyone, but *"If you're homeless but you have a good place to sleep and good people around you, its bearable."* Peers and support were repeatedly cited as being very important to people facing homelessness. Nick seems to agree with Ben. He told me that he has limited friends, because *"Friendship is a serious word. Friendship to me is on a level like marriage. If I leave the streets, I can't take these people with me, so I choose to be homeless."* Paul, the black man I met with the busker, said that he doesn't feel like anyone listens to more important, deeper things. He told me repeatedly how important his friends are to him and how they work together to try to meet their needs, expressing a heavy reliance on peer groups to survival. Vickie, the woman with the puppy, told me that she doesn't associate with too many people and that can be difficult for her.

She also said, *“When you’re homeless and you have no one, a dog makes a difference. It fills that emptiness.”*

The Trust Index is based on a series of questions in the survey based on peers. The index is composed of 8 questions which were rated on a scale of 1-5, with a lower score indicating less trust for peers and a higher score indicating more trust. The mean score is a 23.14 on a 40-point scale, with a range of 27. The minimum score possible was 8, whereas the highest score possible was 40. A score of 8 shows that the participant has little to no trust for peers, whereas a score of 40 indicates full trust for those around them. The minimum score was an 8, and the maximum was a 35. Since no one had a score of 40, no one in the community of the Las Vegas Strip fully trusts their peers. The mean score of 23.14 indicates that most people are relatively neutral on the trust/distrust spectrum when it comes to the people around them.

Only 22.3% of respondents indicated that the interests and concerns of others in the area are important to them, while only 8.3% said that they like to help others when they are able. 80.6% of individuals stated that they do not feel safe with the people around them. Interestingly enough and in contrast to many of my findings regarding peers, only 41.7% of those who took the survey indicated that they would trust authority figures over those around them. Despite an apparent culture of individualism and distrust, 47.3% of participants stated that they feel like they live in a close-knit community, and 41.7% of people believe that if there were an issue within the community, people would get together to solve it.

## *Lived Experience & Situated Knowledge*

Many of the homeless I spoke with told me stories of their experienced as a homeless person on the Las Vegas Strip. They ranged from little pieces of their lives to more general things that they have learned about the world from their position in it. Some also offered observations about society as a whole.

Chris, who I met with Nick, told me that he believes that the vast majority of people are ignorant and don't care about others. He said, "*... the options for that ignorance are to either burn down society or to educate it.*" This was following a story he told me about how he is banned from most of the casinos on the Strip because he carries his belongings and is obviously homeless. Nick stashes his belongings and usually appears cleaner, which he believes is the reason he has not experienced being kicked out of a casino.

Chris and Nick weren't the only ones who talked about facing discrimination. I met Mark, Nancy, and their uncle, George, while they were sitting with a young dog on one of the bridges one night. They had one large and one small backpack between them. Just a few hours before we met they had been robbed by someone in front of security at the Venetian. They had a backpack and a smaller bag stolen, and in that smaller bag had been greyhound tickets to reach and stay with family in New York. Nancy had just found out that she was pregnant and they wanted to do whatever they could to make a better life for the baby. While they were screaming and yelling at their robber, security approached and "*treated us like we were the problem! Everyone treats you like you're a drug addict or something when you're a traveler. We're over 8 months completely sober, but everyone treats us like we're addicts. We don't even drink!*" Nancy

expressed aggravation that they aren't usually allowed to use even public facilities such as restrooms or water fountains. She said, *"We're second class citizens. When people see us, general human courtesies go out the window."* Mark chimed in at this point and added, *"When you become homeless, you become subhuman. Everywhere we go we're invisible. People don't even see us as people. They don't see us at all."* Nancy, looking significantly more unhappy than when we started this conversation, said, *"Consistent negativity drives you down so much that you forget why it is you're trying to get up sometimes."* Nick seemed to have some experience with constant negativity as well. He said, *"I'm a piece of garbage. I just feel like a piece of garbage."*

## **Discussion and Further Study**

This study began by asking several different things about the homeless community on the Las Vegas Strip. What is its demographic makeup? What creates social capital among its members? Why do people prefer this location to many others like it in the area? I have successfully determined the answers to some of these questions, and made discoveries about the population that I hadn't anticipated going into the research.

The area in which I chose to conduct my research is unique. It is the country's epicenter of adult themed entertainment and gambling. It is a completely transient area; nobody has their homes on the Las Vegas Strip. People visit for days, during which time they stay in hotels and casinos. There is no other place in the country like the Las Vegas Strip. It is a privileged space; the people who occupy it are predominantly people who have earned and saved and have money

to spend frivolously. Homeless people may regularly interact with people who work in the tourism industry, but for the most part the people that they see are unique every single day. This is very different from the experiences of homeless people in neighborhoods where they are known by the locals and residents living indoors.

In a study by Gowan (2010), one of his participants stated that he has experienced being run out of town for being homeless. One of the reasons that people may gravitate towards the Las Vegas Strip may be for the anonymity that comes with a transient non-homeless population. Gowan (2010) talks about NIMBY, or Not in My Backyard, and how many of his homeless participants chose to stick to major cities rather than face the discrimination they've struggled with in smaller towns. In an area that is occupied by people who do not live there, the homeless may experience less pushback from residents who live indoors. In all of my research, the homeless described facing discrimination from various sources, but not from private individuals who live nearby.

Throughout my time surveying and speaking with the community on the Las Vegas Strip, I was told a lot of thoughts, opinions, and beliefs generally reserved for more closely connected people than strangers. I got the feeling that speaking about their lives, hardships and experiences helped participants to feel more human. This aligns with the data I've gathered suggesting that individuals who are experiencing homelessness can often feel like they're not treated as human, or as good or worthy as other people around them.

Many of my conversations started with, "I'm a student from UNLV. Will you take my survey? I can give you a dollar either way." Participants may have originally started talking to me because I was giving them money, but I feel like most of my interactions ended up being

something more meaningful and deep. I got the sense from quite a few that they did not want me to leave. For example, Stephanie did not want me to leave and kept stalling when I made moves to go. Raymond also did not want me to leave, stating during his survey that it meant so much that I was listening to him and respected him. This was a trend to the point where it took 5 hours to get just a handful of surveys one day. The total number of participants is about 50% of the documented population not because of lack of availability of subjects, but because it was just so valuable to people that I was seeing them as people and not as their socioeconomic status.

There was a sense of obvious distress and often hopelessness when people were talking to me about their financial struggles. The mood was dark and frustrated when I asked what they panhandled for most often. Men seemed to have the most difficulty gaining any monetary assistance from passersby, though women also expressed difficulties obtaining the things that they need. There was something profound in the statement by Ryan; *“If every person walking by gave me a quarter, I would never have to struggle again.”* It brings me back to the idea of deserving and undeserving poor; programs that have operating costs and selectively aid those in need receive monetary donations regularly, while people who are literally begging for help obtaining basic necessities are left by the wayside.

There seems to be a general disconnect between the homeless on the Las Vegas Strip and the community groups that exist to help them. The homeless voiced a lot of distrust for the groups and an overall feeling of betrayal. It might be interesting to consider the social structure of homelessness and the gender inequalities involved. Preliminary data suggests that “income” gaps and other disparities may trend in a different direction than they do in mainstream American society.

It is interesting to think about the way homeless people are handled, particularly by city officials, not just in Las Vegas, but elsewhere as well. Adam stated, “*There is nowhere that homeless people are allowed to exist!*” This sentiment is also apparent in Daniels frustrations about being required to sleep in less than subtle places. By providing assistance in the way of food and gear, such as blankets, clothing, and tents, the city may see more of the homeless population able to obtain access to services to help them out of homelessness. If there were a place the homeless felt as if they were not criminalized for being homeless, that stability would make a difference in the lives of the homeless on the Las Vegas Strip.

A suggestion for further study would involve analyzing the laws and codes that set the rules dictating where the homeless can sleep, while looking at the sociological reasoning for communities’ desire to keep the homeless in the public eye at all times. Why are people apparently frightened or threatened by those who are facing homelessness? Is homelessness seen by others as a dangerous social deviance or an unavoidable temporary state?

It is also interesting to consider the different types of homelessness and how the experience of being without a home may vary between them. The experiences of the people living on the Las Vegas Strip, for example, are undoubtedly very different from the experiences of people who are living in the Downtown area of Las Vegas, and very different from the experiences of squatters, people who are living in abandoned or otherwise unoccupied buildings.

Based on the information I was given regarding Homeless Helpers and other community groups, it seems that it would be a good idea to have a community action group comprised of individuals who were willing to work with the homeless directly to determine how to best help them. Community policing is a style of policing in which the officer conducts their day by

communicating and socializing with the community, staying in touch with their needs, issues, and successes (US Department of Justice 2014). This style of policing results in a stronger connection between the police and those they serve; a similar style of community modeled homeless aid may lead to a more inclusive, accepted, and therefore successful community group.

The quantitative data regarding the police may be slightly skewed because the people that I surveyed didn't know me very well and didn't want to select anything indicating negative attitudes towards the police. I had two people who completed the rest of the survey opt out of participation in that section. Due to the conversations I had claiming such negative interactions with the police, and a few people voicing discomfort with police presence, it would be fair to posit that subjects may have felt unease with documenting any sort of negativity when it comes to authority. However, not everyone seemed to have that fear, and many of the responses seem entirely valid and legitimate. There is really no way to know without establishing further rapport and re-administering the survey. I suspect that this may be an issue when collecting this type of data with any type of vulnerable population. The overall feeling was that the police should be there to serve and protect everyone, whether homeless or not, but that the homeless often feel as if the police are there to serve and protect everyone but them.

One of the things that I found most noteworthy was the lack of clusters of homeless people in the area. While a few people voiced the importance of friends and companions, survey answers revealed an individualistic attitude towards survival. It would be interesting to take the survey used for this study and apply it to other homeless communities in areas less dominated by money and tourism. Would the results be the same? Or would researchers find that homeless communities are varied and fluid?



This community is unlikely to change without a change in the treatment of the homeless in the City of Las Vegas and an adjustment to the current power structure and police relations. The biggest fear and source of discomfort expressed by the homeless in the area between Harmon Ave and the Flamingo Casino on the Las Vegas Strip was the police. Even when it came to distrust of community groups, a large part of that distrust came from their connections with the Las Vegas Metro Police Department.

There are very limited resources for both the police and the homeless in improving their interactions. Because there are not many programs to help the homeless, the police have access to limited aid to offer the homeless. Because it is a highly trafficked, tourist area, police officers seem to be very aware of those who are panhandling and living on the streets though it is a very small part of their overall job to protect the area. Sensitivity training, and less pressure to keep the homeless both visible while they are sleeping and invisible when they are attempting to gain assistance from passersby, may decrease tensions between the groups and improve quality of life for both.

## **Conclusion**

The homeless community on the Las Vegas Strip between Harmon and Flamingo is comprised of individuals from many backgrounds with different histories and stories to tell. It is predominately made up of men, with women a minority. Most of the people living there are white, and nearly half have obtained at least some college education. The majority of people

panhandling on the Las Vegas Strip are literally homeless, meaning they are sleeping outside with no shelter.

The body of literature on the homeless in Las Vegas is very limited. This is the only social science research on the homeless community on the Las Vegas Strip at this time. This study provides an in-depth view of the demographic composition, primary concerns, and personal experiences of people who are experiencing homelessness in the area. By employing a mixed-method research style, I have presented a rounded, more complete view of the residents than an exclusively qualitative or quantitative research study could have provided.

Participants have expressed a wide range of experiences, and spoke candidly with me about many things. Themes included financial issues, community groups, lived experiences and situated knowledge, police issues, and peers and group survival. The theme “financial issues” focuses on data and stories suggesting that the homeless have a difficult time obtaining the things they need. Most of them receive no monetary assistance from the government, but even those that do are still struggling. When speaking about community groups, many people voiced concerns about a group called Homeless Helpers, and their motivation for interacting with the homeless. The majority of people who took the survey did say that they would be willing to report to a group that they felt were there for the right reasons. Lived Experiences included a lot of conversation about class discrimination. Many of the homeless individuals that I spoke with had stories about being blocked from entering facilities due to their dirty appearances. The topic that generated the most conversation was interactions with the police. There was a lot of talk about abuse and discrimination at their hands, though whether someone reported issues with the police or not was not predicative of whether they would call them if they needed help. The final

theme was peers and group survival. Survey data suggested that the community members on the Las Vegas Strip largely distrust one another, though conversation revealed that social circles seem to be very tight-knit, but small.

I have discussed my findings and suggested policy ideas and suggestions for further research. The community reports having a strained relationship with law enforcement and authority figures. Despite this, they are willing to call the police if they find themselves in crisis. They would also be willing to report both personal and locational issues to a community group if there were one that they felt were there to help them. A community style approach to offering this assistance and aid may be the best policy going forward.

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Table 1. Descriptive Statistics & Demography of the Homeless Community on the Las Vegas Strip

	Mean	Percentages
<b>Trust Index</b>		
Feelings of trust for peers (40-point scale)	23.14	
<b>Police Index</b>		
Feelings of trust for police (35-point scale)	20.62	
<b>Safety</b>		
Feeling safe in the area		86.10%
Feeling unsafe in the area		13.90
<b>Panhandling</b>		
Several times a day		6.00
Daily		56.00
Several times a week		21.80
Weekly		9.37
Less than once a week		6.00
<b>Gender</b>		
Male		73.50
Female		26.50
<b>Race/Ethnicity</b>		
Black/African American		20.60
Hispanic		5.90
Native American		5.90
White		61.80
Multiracial		5.90
<b>Age (in years)</b>		
18-25		20.60
26-35		14.70
36-50		20.60
Over 50		44.10
<b>Educational Level</b>		
0-11 years, no diploma		31.40
High School Graduate/GED		22.90
Some College, no degree		31.40
Bachelors Degree		11.40
Graduate or Professional Degree		2.90
<b>Sleeping Arrangements</b>		
Outdoors		63.60
Daily or Weekly Rental		18.20
Monthly Rental or Lease		9.10
Squat (abandoned building)		3.00
Somewhere Else		6.10
<b>Time Living on the Las Vegas Strip (in years)</b>		
0 to 1		44.10
1.01 to 3		8.80
4 to 6		29.30
7 to 10		11.70
Over 10		5.80
<b>Total N = 36</b>		

Table 2. Means of Sociodemographic Variables on Peer and Police Trust

	<b>Trust Index</b>	<b>Police Index</b>
	<i>Mean Score</i>	<i>Mean Score</i>
<b>Sample</b>	23.14	20.62
<b>Gender</b>		
Male	24.21	20.17
Female	21.56	23.33
<b>Race/Ethnicity</b>		
Black/African American	21.86	17.57
Hispanic	25.50	17.00
Native American	27.00	22.50
White	23.30	21.25
Multiracial	23.48	33.50
<b>Age</b>		
18-25	22.00	21.33
26-35	24.80	24.40
36-50	23.00	27.86
Over 50	21.36	15.67
<b>Educational Level</b>		
0-11 years, no diploma	24.81	22.90
High School Graduate/GED	20.00	18.88
Some College, no degree	22.91	19.27
Bachelors Degree	25.67	22.50
Graduate or Professional Degree	21.00	19.00
<b>Sleeping Arrangements</b>		
Outdoors	24.05	21.50
Daily or Weekly Rental	20.50	14.67
Monthly Rental or Lease	19.00	19.67
Squat (abandoned building)	20.00	31.00
Somewhere Else	25.00	21.00
<b>Time Living on the Las Vegas Strip (in years)</b>		
0 to 1	22.53	26.93
1.01 to 3	17.00	15.00
4 to 6	22.90	22.67
7 to 10	24.67	19.75
Over 10	23.33	22.00
<b>Total N=36</b>		



Table 3. Descriptive Statistics for Dependent and Independent Variables

	Male	Female
<b>Sleeping Arrangements</b>		
Outdoors	65.21%	55.56%
Daily or Weekly Rental	21.74	11.11
Monthly Rental	8.69	11.11
Squat/Abandoned Building	0.00	11.11
Somewhere Else	4.35	11.11
<b>Feelings of Safety</b>		
Very Safe	24.00	44.44
Fairly Safe	56.00	55.56
Not Very Safe	16.00	0.00
Not at All Safe	4.00	0.00
<b>Frequency of Panhandling</b>		
Several Times a Day	4.17	11.11
Daily	58.33	44.44
Several Times a Week	25.00	22.22
Weekly	8.33	11.11
Less Than Once a Week	4.17	11.11
<b>N=</b>	<b>24</b>	<b>9</b>

Table 4. Descriptive Statistics for Dependent and Independent Variables

	<b>Black/African American</b>	<b>White</b>	<b>Other</b>
<b>Sleeping Arrangements</b>			
Outdoors	28.57%	68.42%	83.33%
Daily or Weekly Rental	57.14	10.52	0.00
Monthly Rental	14.28	10.52	0.00
Squat/Abandoned Building	0.00	5.26	0.00
Somewhere Else	0.00	5.26	16.67
<b>Feelings of Safety</b>			
Very Safe	57.14	19.05	33.33
Fairly Safe	42.86	66.67	33.33
Not Very Safe	0.00	9.52	33.33
Not at All Safe	0.00	4.76	0.00
<b>Frequency of Panhandling</b>			
Several Times a Day	0.00	5.00	50.00
Daily	28.57	60.00	33.33
Several Times a Week	42.86	20.00	16.67
Weekly	28.57	5.00	0.00
Less Than Once a Week	0.00	10.00	0.00
	<b>N=</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>19</b>
			<b>6</b>

Table A.1. Selective Demographic Characteristics of Participants by Name

<b>Name</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Race</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Sleeping Arrangements</b>
Adam	m	White	26-35	Outdoors
Alexander	m	White	Over 50	Outdoors
Ben	m	White	Over 50	Outdoors
Carol	f	Black/AA	36-50	Outdoors
Chris	m	White	36-50	Outdoors
Christina	f	White	18-25	Outdoors
Daniel	m	White	Over 50	Outdoors
David	m	Black/AA	Over 50	Daily Rental
Donna	f	Black/AA	Over 50	Outdoors
Ethan	m	White	Over 50	Outdoors
George	m	Multiracial	36-50	Outdoors
Jack	m	Native American	18-25	Outdoors
Jerry	m	White	Over 50	Outdoors
James	m	Black/AA	18-25	Monthly Rental
John	m	White	18-25	Weekly Rental
Ken	m	Black/AA	18-25	Weekly Rental
Kristina	f	White	26-35	Outdoors
Mark	m	Native American	18-25	Outdoors
Mary	f	White	26-35	Friends Houses
Michael	m	Hispanic	18-25	Outdoors
Nancy	f	White	18-25	Outdoors
Nick	m	White	Over 50	Outdoors
Patricia	f	White	36-50	Abandoned Building
Paul	m	Black/AA	Over 50	Outdoors
Peter	m	White	Over 50	Monthly Rental
Ralph	m	Hispanic	Over 50	Friends Houses
Richard	m	White	26-35	Weekly Rental
Raymond	m	White	36-50	Outdoors
Rob	m	White	Over 50	Outdoors
Roy	m	Black/AA	36-50	Friends Houses
Ryan	m	White	18-25	Outdoors
Sandra	f	White	36-50	Weekly Rental
Scott	m	White	26-35	Outdoors
Stephanie	f	Multiracial	26-35	Outdoors/Tent
Tommy	m	White	Over 50	Missing Data
Vickie	f	Black/AA	Over 50	Outdoors