

> GUIDED BY THE STREETS:

an evidence-informed educational practice to promote positive attitudes toward people experiencing homelessness

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> INTRODUCTION

Homelessness represents one of the most extreme forms of social exclusion and marginalization in contemporary society (Lachaud et al., 2024; Everdingen et al., 2021), severely undermining life expectancy, physical and mental well-being, and overall quality of life (Nusselder et al., 2013; Heerde, Kelly & Toumbourou, 2023; Mejia-Lancheros et al., 2021). Although social workers promote social justice, research indicates that stereotypes towards individuals experiencing homelessness undermines engagement and social service access (Kryda & Compton, 2009; Canham et al., 2024). Social work curricula have the potential to shape students' attitudes toward homeless individuals (Gallup et al., 2022; Buchanan, 2004; Southworth & Brallier, 2021). We developed an educational intervention informed by intergroup contact, in which students learned directly from individuals with lived experience of homelessness.

THE EDUCATIONAL INTERVENTION:

First-year social work students spent three hours venturing into the city in small groups, guided by individuals with lived experience of homelessness. Using locations in the city center as a backdrop, the guides shared their life stories and answered students' questions. A week later, students participated in a reflective group discussion with a certified lived-experience professional and a person with lived experience of homelessness. The intervention was developed in collaboration with a non-profit organization founded by people with lived experience of homelessness.



METHODOLOGY

Pre-test questionnaire measuring students' attitudes toward homelessness (2024-2025, $n=133$)

Educational intervention: street route guided by individuals with lived experience of homelessness and group discussion with a certified lived-experience professional and a person with lived experience of homelessness

Post-test questionnaire measuring students' attitudes toward homelessness ($n=59$) and observations during the group discussions (5 group discussions in 2023-2024).

thematic analysis in AtlasTI



Table 1

Demographic Characteristics of the Explorative Factor Analysis (EFA) and Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) cohort

Variable	EFA cohort ($n=144$)	CFA cohort ($n=133$)
Age in years (M, SD)	19.9 (2.0)	19.9 (2.7)
Female (%)	108 (75.0%)	98 (74.8%)
Male (%)	36 (25.0%)	33 (25.2%)
Study program	Social Work (first year)	Social Work (first year)
Year of study	2023-2024	2024-2025

RESULTS FROM THE QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS

Theme 1: Challenging stereotypical beliefs about homelessness

The educational intervention revealed that addiction is not a defining characteristic of homelessness.

'I used to think that if you were homeless, you must be addicted to something, but now I think that this is not necessarily the case. A lot can happen in life that can lead to homelessness, like a woman with two children ending up on the streets. I have now also thought about the many different ways in which someone can become homeless.' (group discussion 1)

Theme 2: A perceptual shift from insights to awareness

Student became aware of the presence of people experiencing homelessness in public spaces by the combination of experiential learning and newly acquired knowledge.

Theme 3: Open to interaction through reduced intergroup anxiety

Students described that a reduction in intergroup anxiety was a reason why they felt able to make contact.

'Before this, I was unaware and fearful. At home, I was taught to be on my guard, based on an image that was conveyed to me of people being addicted and unstable. Now I see them as ordinary people, like you and me, who can be approached.' (group discussion 1)

Theme 4: Students' recognition of the humanity of homeless individuals

Students increasingly recognized the humanity of people experiencing homelessness, often attributing this shift to hearing individual stories. The phrasing *'ordinary people'*, *'just people'* and *'real people'* appeared frequently in the group discussions and in response to the open-ended questions.

Theme 5: Growth in empathy toward people experiencing homelessness

The qualitative data revealed signs of cognitive and affective reflections while keeping the self and the other distinct. Ekland and Meranius (2021) conclude in their umbrella review that empathy consists of four elements: understanding, feeling, sharing, and maintaining a self-other distinction (2021).

'When I came home yesterday, I looked at the news and saw that three homeless people had died in Rotterdam. That hits a bit harder when you've just walked the street route.' (group discussion 2)

Sometimes reflection sparked an emotional chain of empathy between students and the facilitators with lived experience of homelessness.

'During the group discussion, a student mentioned that he had talked at home about the street route.'

One of the facilitators found this so moving and said it touched him, knowing that he didn't have these kinds of conversations at the dinner table in the past. That, in turn, moved me.' (open-ended question, student 96)

RESULTS FROM THE QUANTITATIVE ANALYSIS

Table 2

Pre-and Post- Intervention Differences in Attitude Scales

Variable	Pre-test M (SD)	Post-test M (SD)	z	p	r (direction)
Advocacy scale*	3.77 (0.55)	3.97 (0.47)	-3.53	<.001	.46 (increase)
Discomfort and avoidance scale**	2.84 (0.80)	2.68 (0.76)	-2.01	.044	.26 (decrease)

Note. $n=59$. Wilcoxon signed-rank tests were conducted

*The Advocacy scale captures awareness of the need for greater societal and professional attention to people experiencing homelessness, recognition of their circumstances, and empathy and willingness to advocate on their behalf.

**The Discomfort and Avoidance scale captures feelings of uneasiness and perceived lack of safety, as well as tendencies to avoid eye contact when interacting with individuals experiencing homelessness.

> Conclusion

This study demonstrates how students developed more positive attitudes – and a decrease in negative attitudes – toward people experiencing homelessness through this co-produced educational practice. The integration of the street route and group discussion provides an accessible entry point for reflection and awareness among students with limited prior contact with people experiencing homelessness.

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