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Title: Compassionate Violence? The Weaponization and Absence of Environmental Discourse in News Media and a Portland, Oregon Government Plan to End Homelessness

Abstract:
In Portland, Oregon, an estimated 4,000 people experience houselessness on any given night. The government has been trying to “end homelessness” since the 1980s by employing things such as 10-year plans to end homelessness, building housing, enacting camp sweeps, and placing houseless people in jails. Despite varied efforts by the government, the number of people living unsheltered remains largely unchanged. News media and housed people frequently figure unhoused people as nuisances that must be removed and hidden to increase the city's livability. My research adds to a small, but growing literature that situates homelessness as an environmental justice issue. People living unsheltered are more vulnerable to environmental hazards, lack critical sanitation infrastructure, and are routinely described as dirty, unsanitary, or otherwise unhygienic.

By conducting a literature review to reconceptualize the problem of homelessness, and by performing a content analysis on a Portland county’s spending plan for tax dollars earmarked for homeless services, I build an understanding of the differences between news media and official government discourses on homelessness. I found that official government discourses do not weaponize environmental discourses against unhoused people as many news articles do. But the absence of environmental discourse implies a power imbalance: the government doesn’t need to situate unhoused people as “dirty” because they already control the material infrastructure of homeless services. From my findings, I argue that Portland’s persistent securitarian responses to homelessness—at odds with their discourse in official plans—perpetuate constructions of homelessness that are rooted in racialized criminality and that posit poor people as waste in a capitalist society.