

# **Situation or Social Problem: The Influence of Events on Media Coverage of Homelessness**

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*Despite a strong interest in media coverage of social problems, sociologists have failed to examine when and why news outlets present issues as problems in need of public action within short time periods. Through content analysis of 475 newspaper articles and negative binomial regression, I show that coverage of homelessness varies in the extent to which it presents homelessness as a social problem. The fact that not all news coverage discusses social problems challenges the claim that social problems necessarily compete for attention in a zero-sum game. I also examine the effects of three types of events (events promoted to the media by their actors and high- and low-profile events not promoted by their actors) on newspapers' likelihood of describing homelessness as a social problem. While previous researchers predicted that events not promoted by their actors would lead to media coverage that challenged the status quo, I find that actor-promoted events are much more likely to do so. This finding highlights the importance of institutionalized action in calling attention to social problems. Keywords: media, news, homelessness, social problems, agenda setting.*

Not all adverse conditions are perceived as social problems—that is, as negative situations that are matters for public action (Blumer 1971; Gusfield 1981; Spector and Kitsuse 1977). When the media portray a situation as a social problem, it rises on the public and policy agendas, with important consequences for public opinion, social policy decisions, and collective action (Dearing and Rogers 1996; Iyengar and Kinder 1987; Linsky 1986; McCombs and Shaw 1972). Therefore, it is vital that we understand the conditions under which the media portray specific events, arrangements, or situations as social problems.

Only some newspaper articles present situations as social problems, since to do so, articles must link events to broader patterns and portray them as matters for public action. Despite a long-standing interest in media coverage of social problems, sociologists have not examined this day-to-day variation in the extent to which news outlets present issues as social problems. Using a novel operationalization of social problem coverage, this article asks when newspapers portray homelessness as a social problem.

I focus on coverage of homelessness for several reasons. Homelessness is broadly recognized as a serious problem but is not always presented as a problem requiring societal action (Bogard 2003; Jencks 1994). A long and productive tradition of studying media coverage of homelessness provides a valuable context for this study, but existing research has not addressed short-term variation in the extent to which news outlets present homelessness as a social problem (Buck, Toro, and Ramos 2004; Center for Media and Public Affairs 1989; Lee, Link, and Toro 1991; Lind and Danowski 1999; Penner and Penner 1994).

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Using content analysis of 475 newspaper articles, I ask what types of events spur journalists to present homelessness as a social problem. Previous research on media coverage of social problems (Lawrence 2000; Molotch and Lester 1974) suggests that high-profile events that are not promoted to the media by their sponsors would make the media most likely to present issues as social problems, implying that exogenous shocks are the best way to draw attention to existing problems. However, using more appropriate methods, I find that events sponsored and publicized by organizations triggered articles that were much more likely to present homelessness as a social problem. My findings suggest that institutionalized action by governmental and advocacy organizations can call attention to social problems more consistently and effectively than high-profile unplanned events.

### **When Do the Media Present Issues as Social Problems?**

Research on the social construction of social problems tracks the process by which situations become identified as "matters of public activity and targets for public action" (Gusfield 1981:3; see also Blumer 1971; Spector and Kitsuse 1977). Similarly, research on agenda setting begins with the insight that of many undesirable conditions, only some make it onto the agendas for media and political attention (Baumgartner and Jones 1993; Cobb and Elder 1972; Dearing and Rogers 1996; Kingdon 1995). Researchers in these traditions have studied variation in the coverage of social problems in three main ways, as described below. None of the three strategies can adequately explain why a single newspaper's articles sometimes describe issues like homelessness as social problems and sometimes do not.

Studies in the first strand of research track attention to an issue over a long time period to explain when, how, and why the issue was first defined as a social problem (Aronson 1982; Best 1990; Johnson and Hufbauer 1982; Markle and Troyer 1979; Nelson 1984; Troyer and Markle 1984). For example, Cynthia J. Bogard (2003) argues that although there had been substantial numbers of people lacking housing for several decades, homelessness was only constructed as a problem in need of societal action through the activities of claims makers during the late 1970s and early 1980s. For these researchers, the object of study is the crossing of the threshold between situation and social problem with little consideration of variation once the threshold has been crossed. Thus, these studies can explain why more articles described homelessness as a social problem in 1999 than in 1969, but do not ask why some 1999 articles about homelessness present it as a social problem and others do not.

Scholars in the second research tradition look for variation in the coverage of issues already broadly recognized as social problems. Instead of asking when the issue is presented as a social problem, they ask how the social problem is framed (Ferree et al. 2002; Gamson and Modigliani 1989; Gusfield 1981). For example, when studying coverage of homelessness, researchers have asked whether the media focus on structural or individual causes of homelessness, whether the coverage is sympathetic or stigmatizing, and which solutions are discussed (Buck et al. 2004; Center for Media and Public Affairs 1989; Lee et al. 1991; Lind and Danowski 1999; Penner and Penner 1994). By focusing on the types of causes and solutions presented, these studies often take the recognition of the issue as a social problem for granted, since researchers can only study the types of causes and solutions mentioned in articles that refer to causes and solutions. When an issue is not presented as a problem requiring societal action, journalists are unlikely to discuss its causes or potential solutions.

The third main approach to studying media attention to social problems is to measure a problem's prominence on the media agenda by counting the number of media texts referring to the issue (Bunis, Yancik, and Snow 1996; Funkhouser 1973; McCombs and Shaw 1972). For example, Philip O. Buck and associates (2004) show that the number of newspaper articles with homelessness-related keywords increased dramatically during the mid-1980s and then leveled off during the 1990s. This method tracks the amount of attention being paid to

the situation, but not necessarily to a social problem, since not all articles about the situation will present it as a problem requiring public action. Thus, despite much research on variation in *how* the media cover social problems, we remain in the dark about *when* and *why* the news media define potentially problematic situations as social problems.

While previous research has not studied day-to-day variation in the extent to which the media present issues as social problems, theorists have suggested that various types of events might affect the type of coverage of social problems. In their discussion of media coverage of events, Harvey Molotch and Marilyn Lester (1974) focus on the actors who create events and the promoters who call media attention to events. They distinguish between events where the actors and the promoters are one and the same (e.g., press conferences or protest marches) and those where the people promoting the event to the media were not responsible for creating the event (e.g., crimes or natural disasters). While they break down each of these categories further by distinguishing between planned and unplanned events, their main predictions concern differences between the coverage of events that are promoted by their actors and those that are not. In this article, I refer to events where the actors and promoters are the same people as actor-promoted events (APEs) and events where the actors and the promoters are different as nonactor-promoted events (NAPEs).

Molotch and Lester (1974:107) suggest that news coverage of APEs tends to favor elites. While anyone can sponsor and promote an event, “high government officials” and “major corporate figures” are more likely to have “habitual access” to the media. This access stems from journalists’ assumption that these people’s activities and pronouncements are newsworthy: elites can hold press conferences with the assurance that journalists will show up. Additionally, APEs sponsored by nonelites are less likely to be covered as their sponsors intended, with journalists often focusing on the potential disruptive consequences of the events rather than the issues their sponsors hoped to illuminate (Molotch and Lester 1974; see also Gitlin 1980). In general, therefore, coverage of APEs will present messages favorable to elites and the status quo. In comparison, coverage of NAPEs tends to challenge the status quo, since NAPEs foster “revelations which are otherwise deliberately obfuscated by those with the resources to create [APEs]” (Molotch and Lester 1974:109).

Later researchers focused on high-profile NAPEs in particular, arguing that they might be especially likely to reshape social problem coverage (Benson and Saguy 2005; Birkland 1998; Gamson and Modigliani 1989; Lawrence 2000); however, these theories have not been adequately tested. William A. Gamson and Andre Modigliani (1989:11) argue that “with continuing issues such as nuclear power, journalists look for ‘pegs’—that is, topical events that provide an opportunity for broader, more long-term coverage and commentary.” Since they are interested in patterns within this expanded coverage, Gamson and Modigliani sample articles from times immediately after high-profile events. However, this sampling strategy leaves them unable to compare post-peg coverage to pre-peg coverage, making it impossible to test the theory that pegs change the coverage of social problems. Rodney Benson and Abigail Saguy (2005) come closer to testing the influence of events by comparing media coverage of social problems before and after events, but their study’s time frame makes it difficult to isolate the events’ effects. They compare coverage of sexual harassment in France and the United States over two decades, dividing their sample into three time periods with boundaries determined by the timing of French legislative debates and the Paula Jones lawsuit. However, these time periods are insufficiently fine grained to attribute changes in coverage to these events; many other variables could lead to differing coverage of sexual harassment in the early and late 1990s. Finally, Regina G. Lawrence (2000) argues that high-profile events encourage more critical coverage of social problems. She shows that the increased coverage of police brutality following the Rodney King beating and other high-profile incidents included increased numbers of “systemic claims” about police brutality and more “thematic reporting” (Lawrence 2000:94). However, the fact that these types of coverage increased along with the number of articles does not mean that the overall mix of claims changed. To test Lawrence’s

hypothesis that events affect the types of claims that are made requires modeling changes in the *distribution* of claims or the number of claims per article.

Thus, we lack empirical confirmation of theorized differences between coverage of NAPEs and APEs. Testing the theory that high-profile NAPEs change the quantity and quality of coverage of social problems requires directly comparing pre- and post-event coverage. Testing the theory that APEs trigger news articles that maintain the status quo requires comparing the coverage of APEs and NAPEs. Previous researchers have not carried out either comparison. Thus, this article provides the first systematic exploration of the effects of high-profile NAPEs, low-profile NAPEs, and APEs on newspapers' likelihood of presenting homelessness as a social problem.

## Data and Methods

### Sample

I analyze coverage of homelessness in Denver's two major newspapers, *The Denver Post* and *The Rocky Mountain News*,<sup>1</sup> from 1998 through 2001. Most previous studies have focused on the effects of high-profile events on national or international media coverage (Benson and Saguy 2005; Lawrence 2000). However, only a small subset of events make it onto the national media agenda, and may be less likely to dominate coverage of a social problem when they do, limiting the number of events available for analysis. Studying a single city yields more freedom in selecting events for analysis and allows me to isolate the effects of events with fewer intervening variables. Additionally, more Americans read local papers than national ones: over 90 percent of print newspaper readers and approximately 50 percent of online newspaper readers read local papers (Pew Research Center 2006). Therefore, while national papers may be the best data source for some research questions (e.g., studies of media influences on public policy), local papers are a more convenient data source for studies of the effects of events on social problem coverage, and are more representative of the news most Americans read. Denver was selected because it has a substantial homeless population and is a major city that is fairly isolated in its region, meaning that its newspapers' coverage of homelessness focuses almost exclusively on local events and situations. The time period was chosen because it includes a series of murders of homeless men in the fall of 1999.

Using the Access World News database,<sup>2</sup> I retrieved all articles in the two papers from November 1998 through December 2001 with "homeless," "homelessness," "transient," or "transients" in either the headline or index terms. Here, "article" refers to any text in the paper with a headline or index terms, including columns and editorials.<sup>3</sup> Letters to the editor were not included. Of an original 498 articles in the sample, 23 articles were dropped because they had nothing to do with human homelessness (for example, articles about homeless animals). This yielded a total of 475 articles.

### Dependent Variables: Social Problem Coverage

The first step in studying the extent to which articles present homelessness as a social problem is operationalizing the difference between social problem and nonsocial-problem coverage. To present a condition as a social problem, newspaper articles must (1) link the

1. *The Rocky Mountain News* folded in 2009 after almost 150 years as one of Denver's major newspapers.

2. Like Proquest and Lexis-Nexis, which are more commonly used by researchers, Access World News provides the full text of newspaper articles. I selected this database because unlike Proquest and Lexis-Nexis, it includes the *Rocky Mountain News*.

3. All analyses were run with a variable indicating when the article was a column or editorial. The results were substantively unchanged, so this control variable is not included in the final models.

events they cover to a broader pattern in society (thematic coverage) and (2) suggest that the pattern is a problem society should address. I created a series of variables to capture these two key aspects of social problem coverage.

*Thematic Coverage.* Many newspaper articles describe isolated events; the first step in social problem coverage is linking the event to a broader pattern. Shanto Iyengar (1991:13) distinguishes episodic coverage, which focuses on “concrete instances,” from thematic coverage, which “places public issues in some more general or abstract context.” He finds that thematic news stories encourage respondents to attribute responsibility for solving the problem to society, a sign that the story has called their attention to a social problem instead of an isolated incident. I take thematic coverage as the first step in covering an issue as a social problem and operationalize it in two ways. First, I code for whether articles discuss causes and solutions anecdotally or in general. Anecdotal causes and solutions (e.g., “John Smith got off the streets after he stopped drinking”) describe causes of and solutions for individual people’s homelessness. General causes and solutions (e.g., “cities that provide alcohol and drug treatment programs have lower rates of homelessness”) are presented as common or effective for many or all homeless people. I use the number of general-level causes and solutions included in an article as my first indicator of thematic coverage.<sup>4</sup> As a second marker of thematic coverage, I code each time an article presented a statistic about the size or growth of the homeless population. Like articles with many general causes and solutions, those that include statistics cover homelessness thematically by calling attention to a broader pattern underlying individual instances of homelessness. Therefore, my second indicator of thematic coverage is the number of times an article presents statistics.

*Making Patterns Targets for Public Action.* The next step in presenting a condition as a social problem is identifying it as a “[matter] of public activity and [a target] for public action” (Gusfield 1981:3). To call a situation a social problem, articles must make “statements about conditions that *ought not* to exist” or suggest that “something *ought* to be done to improve conditions” (Spector and Kitsuse 1977:86, emphasis in original). Therefore, I code for suggestions that not enough is being done about homelessness, or that more ought to be done. For example, one article quotes an advocate for the homeless who says, “Today, our economy is so good that having homeless people is simply unacceptable” (Sinisi 1999). My first indicator of “target for public action” coverage is the number of statements in an article implying that not enough is being done about homelessness.

In addition to implying that more should be done, articles that problematize homelessness specify that *public* action is required. Deborah A. Stone (1989) argues that difficult conditions become social problems when people believe them to be “caused by human actions and amenable to human intervention” (p. 281). I retain Stone’s focus on “causal stories” but adopt Joseph R. Gusfield’s (1981) narrower definition of social problems as “targets for *public* action,” a subset of targets for human intervention (p. 3, emphasis added). With this narrower definition in mind, a more specific type of causal story is required to transform conditions into problems. Lawrence (2000) argues that conditions are “problematized” when they are “understood as something caused by systems, not merely by individuals” (p. 36). Thus, the news media present conditions as social problems when they attribute causality to society as opposed to individuals. Articles implying that homelessness is primarily

4. Another possibility would have been to use the proportion of causes and solutions at the general level instead of the raw count, coding articles as more thematic when smaller proportions of the causes and solutions they discussed were at the anecdotal level. However, I concluded that anecdotal discussions of causes and solutions do not detract from general-level discussions; prefacing a lengthy discussion of the general causes and solutions of homelessness with an anecdote about a homeless person does not diminish the fact that the article is linking its coverage to a broader social problem. Therefore, I use the number and not the proportion of general-level causes and solutions as an indicator of thematic coverage.

**Table 1 • Cause Types**

<i>Causes</i>	<i>Percent of Articles Mentioning Cause</i>
Structural	
Economic (including housing prices, lack of jobs, and low wages)	16
Government related (including war)	5
Individual level	
Health related (including mental health, physical health, and disability)	12
Problems with or insufficient support from family or friends	9
Luck	11
Drugs or alcohol	12
Choice	8
Individual characteristics	3

caused by structural forces present homelessness as more of a matter for public action than articles focusing on individual-level causes. Therefore, I coded for a list of causes of homelessness adapted from Buck and associates (2004), adding several causes so as to include virtually all causes mentioned in the articles and then grouping causes into those that were structural and individual level (see Table 1 for a list of all causes discussed in the sampled articles). To measure the prominence of structural causes relative to nonstructural causes, my second indicator of “target for public action” coverage is the proportion of structural causes in an article.<sup>5</sup>

Thus, my operationalization of the extent to which an article presents homelessness as a social problem consists of four variables: the number of general causes and solutions mentioned, the number of statistics presented, the number of statements that not enough is being done, and the proportion of structural causes.

### ***Independent Variables: Event Types***

***High-Profile Nonactor-Promoted Events.*** Researchers have suggested that high-profile NAPEs related to a social problem encourage coverage that is more thematic or that challenges the status quo (Gamson and Modigliani 1989; Lawrence 2000). I test this theory by examining coverage of a high-profile NAPE: a series of seven murders of homeless men in Denver in 1999. The deaths occurred in quick succession in a neighborhood that had previously been the city’s skid row and was now the showpiece of a successful urban renewal program. The first four deaths, all in September, were reported in the newspapers but not extensively covered. The discovery of the fifth body on October 22 brought considerable media attention to the deaths. On November 17, the headless bodies of two more homeless men were discovered, drawing even more attention. Coverage increased after October 22 and peaked in the last two weeks of November. I call the time period of peak murder coverage (October 22 through November 30) the “murder month.” To observe the effects of the murders on the papers’

5. For all other dependent variables, I use raw counts per article, since I am concerned with how much emphasis the articles give to each marker: I code for how often the articles refer to general causes or solutions, invoke statistics, or suggest that not enough is being done. However, for the structural causes indicator, I chose to model the proportion of causes that were structural as opposed to the raw number of structural causes mentioned. Here, my concern is not the number of times the article refers to structural causes but the overall impression the article creates as to what kind of problem homelessness is. An article that mentions individual choice as a cause of homelessness four times and mentions economic problems once presents homeless less structurally than an article mentioning economic causes four times and individual choice once. The proportion of causes that were structural captures this distinction in a way that the number of structural causes mentioned does not.

**Table 2 • Event Types**

<i>Triggering Event (if any)</i>	<i>Percent of Articles Triggered by Event Type</i>
Nonactor-promoted events (NAPEs) (total)	(61)
Death, violence, or crime with homeless victim	24
Crime with homeless person as accused perpetrator	14
NIMBY conflicts <sup>a</sup>	11
Conflicts over the visibility/effects of homelessness <sup>b</sup>	6
Accident or disaster destroying homes <sup>c</sup>	6
Actor-promoted events (APEs) (total)	(14)
Government activity	5
Event created by advocates for the homeless <sup>d</sup>	5
Release or start of study	4
No external trigger (total)	(25)
Feature on charity or volunteer	22
Feature on individual homeless person	3
Unclassified	3

Notes: Percentages sum to over 100 percent due to rounding.

<sup>a</sup>Conflicts over where shelters, affordable housing, or soup kitchens should be located.

<sup>b</sup>Includes efforts to criminalize homelessness (panhandling bans, debates over where people should be allowed to sleep in public).

<sup>c</sup>Included in the “other” category for analyses.

<sup>d</sup>I.e., rally or press conference.

coverage of homelessness, I compare articles published during the murder month to the rest of the sample.<sup>6</sup>

Coverage of homelessness has been shown to increase during the holiday season (November and December), and researchers have speculated that coverage also becomes more sympathetic during this time period (Buck et al. 2004; Bunis et al. 1996). Since the peak of the murder coverage occurred in November, I include a control for the holiday season to distinguish the effects of the murders from the effects of holidays.

In addition to the murders, I examine the effects of more mundane events by creating a set of dichotomous variables for the type of event that “triggered” each article, taking advantage of the fact that the text of most articles focused on a single event, such as a press conference or a crime. During coding, the list of triggers was continually updated to include almost all sampled articles. The entire sample of articles was subsequently recoded to include the final list of triggers. Fourteen articles were uncategorized (3 percent of the sample). For the analysis, I put these uncategorized articles in an “other” category along with articles triggered by fires and natural disasters. Table 2 shows the complete set of “triggering” events and their frequencies. Testing Molotch and Lester’s (1974) theory required that I classify articles into those triggered by NAPEs, those triggered by APEs, and those without apparent external triggering events.

*Other Nonactor-Promoted Events.* I coded for NAPEs in two main categories. (1) *Crimes and accidents:* Articles triggered by crimes and accidents with homeless victims or perpetrators are NAPEs since criminals do not generally seek media attention for their crimes. Coding rules excluded crime-related APEs from this category. For instance, a rally protesting homeless people’s

6. An alternative approach would have been to compare articles about the 1999 murders to articles on other topics. However, if I took this approach and found that articles about the murders were more likely to present homelessness as a social problem than other articles, it would be difficult to attribute causality for the change to the murders. If journalists had chosen to write about the murders because they wanted to do social problem coverage, the murders might be the vehicle for but not the cause of social problem coverage. Comparing articles published immediately after the murders to articles at other times provides stronger evidence of a causal effect of the murders.

vulnerability to crime was coded as an advocates' event (see below) and not a crime story, since the immediate event triggering the article is the rally and not any particular crime. (2) *Conflicts*: The papers covered several "not-in-my-backyard" (NIMBy) conflicts (related to the locations of organizations providing services to the homeless) and several conflicts about the effects and visibility of homeless people in various downtown locations. As with the crime articles, coding rules placed obvious APEs in other categories. For instance, if the article described a press conference in which shelter organizers argued that they should be allowed to build a shelter in a given neighborhood, the trigger was coded as an advocates' event (see below) and not a NIMBy conflict. Alternatively, an article focusing on the details of a government policy for providing public toilets would be coded as government activity (see below), even if the article included some indications of conflict, such as a few quotes from neighborhood residents arguing that the actions would not adequately address the effects of the local homeless population on neighborhood cleanliness. Since the conflict articles do not refer to events like press conferences or rallies, the conflicts appear to be NAPEs, covered without promotion from the actors.<sup>7</sup>

*Actor-Promoted Events.* I coded for articles triggered by three types of APEs. (1) *Advocates' events*: Articles describing events sponsored by advocates for the homeless (such as rallies or press conferences) were categorized as being triggered by advocates' events. (2) *Government activity*: Articles primarily describing government actions were coded as being triggered by government activity. This category does not include articles primarily focused on conflicts surrounding government policies (which were categorized as conflict stories) or advocates' responses to governmental actions (which were categorized as advocates' events). (3) *Studies*: The final category of APEs is the release or start of studies of homelessness. Articles devoted to reporting study results were classified as study triggered even if advocates or the government conducted the studies. I present results separately for each type of APE, revealing some differences by event sponsor.

*"Feature" Articles.* Each paper occasionally published a "feature" article on a single charity or homeless person. The text of these articles revealed no apparent external triggering events, suggesting that journalists and editors may have pursued these stories without prompting from other actors. However, as with the conflict stories, the articles themselves cannot prove that no outside actors promoted these stories to the media; a feature story on a shelter could have been set in motion by the journalist or prompted by a press release from the shelter. Due to this uncertainty, my analysis and discussion focus on the differences between the articles I can classify as triggered by APEs and NAPEs.

### Coding

For each article, I coded for the date of publication and the triggering event. Additionally, I tallied each cause, solution, presentation of statistics, and statement that not enough is being done.<sup>8</sup> I used these counts to create my dependent variables: the number of general causes and solutions mentioned in an article, the number of statistics included, the number (or proportion; see below) of structural causes, and the number of statements that not enough is being done about homelessness. Often, researchers only record whether a given element is present or absent

7. Excluding identifiable APEs from the conflict category makes it likelier that the remaining conflict articles are NAPEs. However, I cannot rule out the possibility that actors in the conflicts promoted the stories to the media in ways that did not leave written evidence in the resulting articles. I call these conflicts NAPEs, but I present all results separately by trigger so that readers can distinguish between crimes, which are clearly NAPEs, and conflicts, which have a more uncertain status.

8. Each attribute was coded only once per paragraph; paragraphs were generally short, approximately two sentences. Consecutive paragraphs repeating a similar idea are counted as separate mentions to measure the varying emphasis given to different ideas; thus, an article with three consecutive paragraphs about economic causes of homelessness and one paragraph about alcoholism is counted as more structural than one where the percentages are reversed.

in an article (e.g., Benson and Saguy 2005). Counts, however, contain more information than dichotomous codes, allowing for more sensitive measures of the extent to which articles present homelessness as a social problem. For instance, instead of simply reporting that an article included both structural and nonstructural causes, I can report the percent of causes mentioned that were structural. Researchers who want more detail sometimes use coder ratings of the level of emphasis given to a topic (Buck et al. 2004). However, these measures may be subjective, and do not provide the same level of detail that counts do. Counts provide more information than dichotomous codes and more precision than subjective codes, allowing for more sensitive measures of the extent to which articles present homelessness as a social problem.

I developed and revised the coding scheme during coding of the first 100 articles, which I subsequently recoded to account for the revisions. After I recoded these 100 articles, I trained a second coder (a graduate student in sociology). Coder training lasted approximately one hour and consisted of reviewing and discussing the codebook and coding three articles together. The second coder then coded a subsample of 30 articles independently. Next, I compared our ratings, calculating the percentage of intercoder agreement for each variable. Despite the fact that most variables are ratio variables (counts of the number of times attributes appeared in articles), I only counted exact matches as agreement. Only one variable (a count of mentions of the hardships and dangers of homelessness) failed to achieve 90 percent intercoder agreement; it was dropped from the coding scheme. Intercoder agreement for all remaining variables ranged from 90 to 100 percent.

### ***Analysis***

My four dependent variables are the number of general causes and solutions, the number of statistics, the number (or proportion; see below) of structural causes, and the number of statements that not enough is being done about homelessness.<sup>9</sup> Using counts as dependent variables necessitates moving beyond linear regression. The simplest model for count data is the Poisson regression model, which constrains the variance to equal the mean. However, in most of my models, the dispersion parameter was significantly greater than zero, indicating that the data are overdispersed and the negative binomial model—which allows the variance to exceed the mean—is more appropriate than the Poisson (Long 1997).

For general causes and solutions, statistics, and statements that not enough is being done, I use counts per article as dependent variables since my concern is the extent to which readers are exposed to these ideas. However, for the structural causes dependent variable, my concern is the relative prominence of competing causal stories about homelessness. Therefore, instead of modeling the number of structural causes per article, I wanted to use a measure of the proportion of causes that were structural. However, using the percent of causes that were structural as the dependent variable was unacceptable, since the total number of causes per article is relatively small and varies by article. Proportions with small denominators tend to have nonnormal error distributions and proportions with varying denominators have heterogeneous error variance, violating the assumptions of least squares analysis (Osgood 2000:22). To solve this problem, I use the number of structural causes as the dependent variable, but I include the natural logarithm of the total causes mentioned as the exposure variable (that is, its coefficient is constrained to one).<sup>10</sup> In the negative binomial model, this procedure is comparable to modeling the *proportion* of causes that are structural, but retains the advantages of using the negative binomial model for count data (Clogg and Eliason 1987:33; Osgood 2000:27).

9. All analyses were run with a control variable for the total number of paragraphs in the article, but the results were subsequently unchanged, so this variable is not included in the final models.

10. Since the logarithm of zero is undefined, I replaced zero totals with .000001. As recommended by Clogg and Eliason (1987:33), I also ran the model allowing the coefficient on the logged exposures to vary freely as a test of the model specification. As predicted, the resulting coefficient was not significantly different from 1.

## Results

In this section, I present descriptive statistics on the frequency with which articles cover homelessness as a social problem (see Table 3). Next, I use negative binomial regression to measure the effects of NAPEs and APEs on four measures of social problem coverage; results are shown in Table 4.

### *Frequency of Presenting Homelessness as a Social Problem*

Previous researchers have used the number of articles referring to a potentially problematic issue in their headlines or index terms as measures of the level of attention a social problem receives (Bunis et al. 1996; Funkhouser 1973; McCombs and Shaw 1972). This strategy assumes that all or most articles about issues present them as social problems. However, I find that most articles about homelessness do not present it as a social problem. Table 3 presents descriptive statistics for the four indicators of social problem coverage. The first column shows the mean number of times each indicator appeared in an article, and the second column shows the percent of articles including at least one of each indicator. Most coverage was episodic; only 34 percent of articles mentioned any causes or solutions at the general level, and only 7 percent included at least one statistic about homelessness. Therefore, most articles did not link their content to a broader pattern of homelessness. Additionally, most articles did not present homelessness as a matter for public action. Only 18 percent referred to a structural cause of homelessness, and only 11 percent included a statement suggesting that not enough was being done about homelessness (see Table 3). Thus, even by the most generous measure (referring to any general causes and solutions), only a third of articles about homelessness present it as a social problem. Therefore, researchers who use the number of articles referencing an issue as a measure of how much attention a social problem is receiving risk overestimating the extent to which the media actually problematize the issue by a factor of three.

### *High-Profile Nonactor-Promoted Events*

Research on agenda setting has consistently found that high-profile events can put a social problem higher on the media agenda (Dearing and Rogers 1996). As predicted, the 1999 murders dramatically increased the papers' coverage of homelessness. Regression analyses with the month as the unit of analysis demonstrate that during November 1999, the month in which the last two bodies were found, the papers published four times as many articles about homelessness than they did in typical months during the holiday season (results not shown).

Gamson and Modigliani (1989) argue that journalists respond to high-profile events by providing broader commentary on ongoing problems, and Lawrence (2000) argues that coverage of high-profile events is more likely to challenge the status quo. Therefore, we could

**Table 3 • Descriptive Statistics for Markers of Social Problem Coverage**

Marker	Mean Number per Article	Percent of Articles Including at Least One
<b>Thematic coverage</b>		
Causes and solutions at the general level	1.1	34
Statistics about homelessness	.1	7
<b>Target for public action</b>		
Structural causes	.5	18
Statement that not enough is being done	.2	11

**Table 4 • Negative Binomial Regressions of Social Problem Markers on Time Periods and Event Types (SE)**

	Thematic Coverage		Public Responsibility	
	General Causes and Solutions	Statistics	Structural Causes	Not Enough Being Done
Time periods				
Holiday season	.30 (.22)	.026 (.42)	.27 (.17)	.80* (.38)
Murder month	1.01** (.34)	.88 (.67)	-.56 (.29)	.98* (.47)
Triggering events (omitted category: no external trigger)				
Homeless vic. of crime/accident	-1.24*** (.33)	-1.09 (.68)	.092 (.29)	.90 (.60)
Homeless perpetrator of crime	-2.74*** (.52)	-2.00 (1.10)	-1.85 (1.02)	-.53 (.91)
NIMBy conflict	.29 (.34)	-.32 (.73)	1.02*** (.26)	1.75** (.68)
Conflict over effects/visibility	.47 (.41)	-15.9 (1690)	.063 (.40)	-.38 (1.22)
Government activity	.72 (.42)	.78 (.69)	.51 (.39)	1.75* (.77)
Advocates' event	.85 (.44)	1.34* (.61)	.53 (.27)	2.90*** (.68)
Release or start of study	1.72*** (.44)	2.69*** (.56)	.79*** (.21)	2.89*** (.74)
Other	.40 (.34)	-15.8 (1365)	-1.06** (.33)	2.17*** (.60)
Total causes			(exposure)	
Constant	-.21 (.21)	-2.50*** (.41)	-1.27*** (.17)	-3.65*** (.53)
N	475	475	475	475
Dispersion parameter	2.71*** (.35)	2.25*** (1.06)	.046 (.075)	3.53*** (1.03)

Note: Standard errors in parentheses.

\* $p < .05$  \*\* $p < .01$  \*\*\* $p < .001$  (two-tailed tests)

expect that in addition to putting homelessness on the agenda, the high-profile murders might make reporters more likely to present homelessness as a social problem. To examine changes in the coverage of homelessness during the murder month, I use the article as the unit of analysis and conduct negative binomial regressions of the four indicators of social problem coverage. The columns in Table 4 present the results for each dependent variable: the number of general causes and solutions, the number of statistics presented, the proportion of structural causes, and the number of statements that not enough is being done. The following sections discuss the results for each independent variable in turn, meaning that each of the following sections discusses a row or group of rows of Table 4.

First, I examine the effects of the murder month on all four dependent variables. The first step in social problem coverage is linking an article's content to a broader problem. Controlling for the holiday season and the type of triggering event (i.e., accounting for the fact that most articles during the murder month were about crimes), articles during the murder month discussed more than twice as many general causes and solutions. There was no significant effect on the inclusion of statistics about homelessness (see Table 4,

columns 1 and 2). Next, I ask whether articles during the murder month were more likely to present homelessness as a matter for public action. Here, findings were mixed. Articles during the murder month included *smaller* proportions of structural causes, a finding that approached significance. However, articles during the murder month included more than twice as many statements that not enough is being done about homelessness (see Table 4, columns 3 and 4).<sup>11</sup>

Including triggering events in the models controls for the fact that most of the articles during the murder month were about crimes against homeless people. Therefore, these models reveal differences between the way these high-profile murders were discussed and the way crimes against the homeless were generally covered. The positive results for general causes and solutions and statements that not enough is being done indicate that coverage of the 1999 murders was more likely to present homelessness as a social problem than were other articles about homeless victims of crimes. For instance, the murder month included the only articles about homeless crime victims to include statistics about homelessness, indicating that the murderers were treated as symptoms of a social problem in a way that other crimes were not. For example, one article begins:

Denver's recent string of homeless killings has prompted Washington advocacy groups to question the growing lack of affordable housing nationwide and how it puts street people at risk.

"Living in public places makes them easy targets," said Laurel Weir, policy director for the National Law Center on Homelessness and Poverty in Washington, DC. "Homeless are at increased risk for violence being committed against them."

Nationally, the homeless population is growing, especially in Colorado, where the number of people without homes has grown 218 percent since 1989, according to state officials (Anderson 1999).

In this example, the murder story provides an opportunity for an advocate to direct focus to the general risks of homelessness.

Molotch and Lester (1974) and Lawrence (2000) predict that coverage of NAPEs will disrupt journalists' usual reliance on elite-created news events. As predicted, in responding to the 1999 murders, both Denver papers sent reporters out to conduct investigations, creating news without the aid of press releases or other prepackaged sources of news. However, lacking this external guidance, the journalists did not become more focused on structural causes, as Lawrence (2000) predicted. In fact, articles during the murder month focused disproportionately on the idea that homelessness is the result of individuals' choices. At other times, choice was rarely invoked as a cause of homelessness, mentioned only in 4 percent of articles. Yet, choices to be homeless were referred to in 26 percent of articles in the month of peak murder coverage ( $\chi^2(1) = 42; p < .001$ ).<sup>12</sup> In front-page articles, both papers focused strongly on individuals' choices to sleep on the streets. A *Rocky Mountain News* headline reads "Now I Lay Me Down to Sleep: The Stories of Denver's Homeless, Who Choose to Live a Perilous Life on the Streets," implying that *all* of the homeless people in Denver have chosen their situation (*Rocky Mountain News* 1999). Similarly, a *Denver Post* article states that homeless people "live free from most of society's expectations and many simply resist the idea of bunking down in a shelter on principle" (Hughes and Blevins 1999). This focus on individuals' choices not to use shelters misses the fact that there was a shortage of shelter in the Denver area, with fewer than half as many shelter beds as people requesting shelter (D'Alanno 1998). Focusing on individuals' choices not to use shelters implies that homelessness does not require further public action, running counter to presenting homelessness as a social problem.

11. Throughout the article, I transform negative binomial regression coefficients into predicted proportional changes in the expected counts by exponentiating the coefficients (Long 1997).

12. Findings not presented in tables; contact author for details.

### ***Lower-Profile Nonactor-Promoted Events***

As described above, Molotch and Lester (1974) distinguish between what I have termed actor-promoted events (APEs) and nonactor-promoted events (NAPEs). In this section and the next, I explore the characteristics of articles triggered by various types of events in each category.<sup>13</sup> The negative binomial regressions in Table 4 include a set of dummy variables for the type of event that triggered the article. In each model, the omitted category for the set of trigger dummy variables is the “feature” articles without apparent triggers.

This data set includes articles triggered by several types of NAPEs. Two crime-related categories are clearly NAPEs: accidents or crimes with homeless victims<sup>14</sup> and crimes with homeless perpetrators. Molotch and Lester’s (1974) work would suggest that news coverage of NAPEs would tend to challenge the status quo, since accidents and scandals reveal truths hidden by the elite sponsors of APEs. However, articles triggered by crimes with homeless victims or perpetrators discussed significantly fewer general causes and solutions than the feature articles (70 percent and 90 percent fewer, respectively) (see Table 4, column 1). Crime triggers had no significant effects on the other markers of social problem coverage.

My sample also includes articles triggered by two types of conflicts: clashes over where shelters, affordable housing, or soup kitchens should be located (NIMBy conflicts) and controversies over the effects and/or visibility of homeless people. These conflicts may be an intermediate category between NAPEs and APEs. They are not as clearly nonactor promoted as crimes—it is possible that parties to the conflicts promoted the stories to the media. However, conflict articles were not triggered by formal events like press conferences, making them less clearly actor promoted than the events discussed in the following section. Articles triggered by effects and visibility conflicts did not differ significantly from the feature articles on any of the measures of social problem coverage (see Table 4). Likewise, articles triggered by NIMBy conflicts included no more thematic coverage than the feature articles. However, the NIMBy conflict articles included significantly higher proportions of structural causes and significantly more suggestions that not enough is being done about homelessness than the feature articles (see Table 4, columns 3 and 4). Thus, conflict articles, triggered by events that are likely to be NAPEs but may have included some APEs, were somewhat more likely to present homelessness as a social problem than the crime articles.

### ***Actor-Promoted Events***

Molotch and Lester (1974) argue that since elites are more successful in promoting their events to the media, APEs will tend to present messages that reinforce the status quo. My findings, however, reveal the opposite pattern: the three types of APEs (government activities, events sponsored by advocates for the homelessness, and the release or beginning of studies) triggered the articles that most consistently presented homelessness as a social problem. By a wide margin, APE-triggered articles provided the most thematic coverage in the sample. Articles triggered by studies discussed the most general-level causes and solutions and included the most statistics (6 and 15 times as many as the feature articles, respectively). Articles triggered by advocates’ events also included significantly more statistics than the feature articles (four times as many). (Articles triggered by government activity were not significantly more thematic than the feature articles; see Table 4, columns 1 and 2). On the measures of presenting

13. We should be somewhat cautious about attributing causality to these “triggering” events, since unlike the 1999 murders, my information about these events comes from the articles themselves. The fact that my sample is from two newspapers helps address this concern. Most events led to articles in both papers; this makes me more confident that changes in the coverage are caused by the events and not the editors’ preexisting desires to do social problem coverage.

14. This category includes articles on the 1999 murders, but their effects are controlled for by the inclusion of a variable for the murder time period in all regressions. Therefore, this variable should be interpreted as showing the effects of lower-profile crimes.

homelessness as a matter for public action, articles about studies included higher proportions of structural causes, and articles triggered by all three types of APEs included between 6 and 18 times as many statements that not enough is being done as the feature articles (see Table 4, columns 3 and 4).

## Discussion

This article provides the first systematic analysis of short-term variation within media outlets in the extent to which an issue is presented as a social problem. Contradicting the expectations of previous research traditions, I find that articles about homelessness rarely present homelessness as a social problem. This pattern casts doubt on the traditional practice of using the number of articles with homelessness in their index terms or headlines as a measure of the attention being paid to homelessness as a social problem (Buck et al. 2004; Bunis et al. 1996). At the month level, the number of articles and the number of social problem markers are highly correlated, suggesting that the number of articles per month can be safely used to describe changes in attention to a single social problem over a short time period. However, if the proportion of articles that present an issue as a social problem varies across issues, media outlets, or longer time periods, the article-counting technique will misrepresent trends in attention to problems and their relative prominence. The new operationalization of social problem coverage presented here can serve as a jumping-off point for studies that accurately describe trends and draw comparisons by using measures of the extent to which articles present issues as social problems.

This article also provides the first empirical test of Molotch and Lester's (1974) prediction that coverage of NAPEs will be more likely to challenge the status quo than coverage of APEs. Contrary to their predictions, I find that articles triggered by NAPEs (crimes and conflicts) were the least likely to present homelessness as a social problem. The high-profile NAPE in my sample (the 1999 murders) encouraged somewhat more social problem coverage than other NAPEs, suggesting that Molotch and Lester's predictions may be more accurate when referring to high-profile events. However, my results also suggest that predictions about coverage of NAPEs should consider journalists' news-gathering strategies, which in this case may have predisposed them against presenting homelessness as a social problem. To investigate why homeless people were on the streets and vulnerable to violence, both papers sent journalists to spend a night downtown asking the homeless people they met why they were not in shelters. Interviewing individuals meant presenting causes and solutions at the individual level, without thematic context. The lack of expert sources or longer-term research meant not presenting statistics. Finally, asking why people are not in shelters predisposed journalists to focus on individual choices instead of structural causes of homelessness. Thus, compared to other ways of answering the question of why people are on the streets (e.g., examining data on local housing costs, incomes, or shelter availability—all data that might be provided to journalists by APEs), this investigative strategy made it difficult for journalists to cover homelessness as a social problem.

Overall, APEs consistently triggered the articles that were most likely to present homelessness as a social problem. This unexpected pattern suggests that Molotch and Lester's (1974) theory does not apply directly to contemporary media coverage of homelessness. One reason for this discrepancy is the fact that the Denver newspapers covered almost as many events sponsored and promoted by advocates as by government actors. Therefore, one reason why articles triggered by APEs were more likely to cover homelessness as a social problem than Molotch and Lester would have predicted is that a significant proportion of them (more than one third) were sponsored by organizations pushing for social change. This pattern may represent a historical shift since the time Molotch and Lester were writing. Habitual access to the media may have been limited to government and corporate elites in the 1970s, but this is certainly no longer true in the case of media coverage of homelessness.

However, the pattern cannot be completely explained by government's declining share of APEs, since my analyses showed that coverage of government-sponsored events was also more likely to present homelessness as a social problem than coverage of NAPEs and feature articles. In light of this finding, we should reconsider the assumption that government elites always have a vested interest in covering up social problems. Government officials may also emphasize social problems to gain support for expanded government intervention or to highlight their rivals' failures.

While it contradicts Molotch and Lester's (1974) hypothesis, the high density of social problem coverage in articles triggered by APEs is consistent with Malcolm Spector and John I. Kitsuse's (1977) original focus on the role of agents in constructing social problems as well as recent research on the "meaning work" of social movements (Benford and Snow 2000). APEs allow advocacy and social movement organizations to influence the news and draw attention to social problems. The favorable coverage of APEs demonstrates that the media can serve as a site for the construction of social problems, not only an outlet for elite attempts to minimize them.

Future research is needed to confirm and extend my findings. This study only included one high-profile NAPE, and since a NAPE's effects on media coverage of social problems may be affected by the characteristics of the event, my findings concerning high-profile NAPEs require replication by other studies. Additionally, this study compared high- and low-profile NAPEs but did not study any APEs that became major media events. Given my finding about the importance of APEs, future research might fruitfully test whether the pattern of denser social problem coverage applies for high-profile APEs as well as quotidian APEs.

These data are about homelessness, and events may have different effects on coverage of other issues. By the late 1990s, an active community of advocates and researchers had developed around the issue of homelessness in the Denver area. These actors had become experienced at holding press conferences and getting their messages into the news media. Compared to other social problems, homelessness may now be the subject of more common and more effective APEs; emerging social problems without institutionalized advocate communities may be more reliant on high-profile NAPEs to gain media attention. This could explain the instrumental role that high-profile events often play in the initial construction of a social problem (Dearing and Rogers 1996). However, APEs may also play this role. Barbara J. Nelson (1984) highlights the importance of the release of studies in the construction of child abuse as a social problem. Additionally, the extent to which events encourage social problem coverage may vary across issues, with some social problems being more event-driven than others (Kingdon 1995). Previous studies of the effects of events on social problem definition have focused on nuclear disasters, police brutality, school shootings, and oil spills—all issues where the event itself is the problem (Gamson and Modigliani 1989; Lawrence 2000; Lawrence and Birkland 2004; Molotch and Lester 1975). Compared to these event-driven problems, ongoing problems like poverty and homelessness may be better illuminated by studies and press conferences. Furthermore, government officials may be more inclined to highlight some social problems than others, and my finding that government-sponsored events lead to articles that present homelessness as a social problem might not apply to all social problems. Future research should test the effects of advocates' organizational capacity and problem characteristics by studying the effects of APEs on the coverage of other social problems.

This study demonstrates that potentially problematic issues are sometimes covered in the media without being presented as social problems. This finding suggests revisions to Stephen Hilgartner and Charles L. Bosk's (1988) landmark theory of social problem competition. They argue that social problems compete with each other in arenas with limited carrying capacities, making the competition a zero-sum game. For example, since column inches are limited, the more a newspaper covers one social problem, the less room it has to cover others (Hilgartner and Bosk 1988). They imply that there is no way to increase the total amount of attention paid to social problems, making the competition between them zero-sum by definition. However,

I find that social problem coverage does not take up all of newspapers' carrying capacity, and not all social problem coverage is equally dense. Therefore, the competition between social problems is not necessarily the zero-sum game that Hilgartner and Bosk (1988) predict. If advocates hold more events or researchers release more studies, a social problem's gain in attention can come at the expense of nonsocial problem coverage. Social problems may often compete with each other, but my results suggest that this competition is not automatically zero-sum.

If the competition between social problems were as rigidly zero-sum as Hilgartner and Bosk's (1988) predict, or if high-profile NAPEs were necessary to push the media to focus on social problems, there would be little anyone could do to encourage the media to pay more attention to social problems. My finding that the coverage of APEs is much more likely to present issues as social problems offers an empowering exhortation to advocates and researchers. When advocates and government officials hold press conferences or release studies, they can trigger articles that focus more on social problems than the articles that would otherwise have filled the column inches. These actions can increase the overall density of social problem coverage in the media, calling more attention to the problems facing our society.

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