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'A TIDE OF HOMELESS, DRUG- ADDICTED AND MENTALLY ILL PEOPLE': REPRESENTING PEOPLE EXPERIENCING HOMELESSNESS IN *MailOnline* CONTENT

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Abstract

This paper considers how homeless individuals and homelessness are represented in the biggest UK online news brand, *MailOnline* (PressGazette, 2021). Using corpus-assisted critical discourse analysis, it unveils the consistent dehumanisation, criminalisation and pathologisation of people experiencing homelessness in articles published in 2021. Through a micro-linguistic analysis, it uncovers the discursive strategies used by journalists to represent homeless people negatively, such as functionalisation, individualisation, the use of statistics, and metaphors of natural disaster. The paper argues that these representations could contribute to a moral panic surrounding homelessness at a time when one might expect greater understanding due to the predicted rise in homelessness. More research is needed to understand the ways in which these discourses map onto homelessness policies and are received by members of the British public.

KEYWORDS

Homelessness; corpus-assisted critical discourse analysis; mental health

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'A tide of homeless, drug-addicted and mentally ill people': Representing people experiencing homelessness in *MailOnline* content

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1. Introduction

The language used to describe homeless people can pigeonhole individuals negatively and have implications for social responses to homelessness (Daly, 1996). As Daly (1996) notes, people tend to deal with people experiencing homelessness by distancing themselves to minimise fear, guilt, or shame. This is never more evident than in the discursive divide between “us” and “them” or the dehumanising collectivisation of the noun phrase “the homeless”. Through the third person pronoun ‘they’, people experiencing homelessness ‘become an amorphous, remote, alien mass lacking individuality or even humanity’ (Daly, 1996: 8). In other words, language can become a ‘tool of manipulation’ (Daly, 1996: 9). This is especially problematic in the case of media accounts of homelessness, which are a key source of information for many people (Schneider, Chamberlain and Hodgetts, 2010; Power, 1999). It is more concerning given that ‘even when members of the general public are already familiar with homelessness in their own communities, media help them make sense of their experiences and prescribed strategies for their responses to the homeless’ (Hodgetts, Cullen and Radley, 2005).

Despite recognising the power of language to influence how we, as a society, conceptualise and respond to homelessness, there is very little recent linguistically oriented critical discourse analytical research on representations of homelessness and homeless people in media texts (except for Gomez-Jimenez and Bartley, 2023). This is arguably surprising, given that the aim of critical discourse analysis is to ‘denaturalise the role discourses play in the (re)production of noninclusive and nonegalitarian structures’ and to challenge ‘the social conditions in which they are embedded’ (Wodak, 2015: 1). Even where research on homelessness does exist, such as Pruitt, McKinsey and Barile’s (2020) content analysis of media representations of homelessness in Hawaii, or Bowen and Capozziello’s (2022) visual content analysis of photographs in U.S. media coverage about homelessness, it often does not systematically account for the linguistic and discursive strategies through which people experiencing homelessness are framed. The present paper seeks to build on work on media representations of homelessness, providing systematic linguistic evidence for the way that homeless individuals are represented socially. It does so by considering representations of homelessness during a time when the Coronavirus pandemic was raging and the cost of living in the UK was rising; it questions whether these contexts affect

discourses about homeless individuals, or whether the representations found in the early literature remain consistent.

Examining a corpus of articles published by *MailOnline* in 2021, the article asks the following research question: How are people experiencing homelessness and homelessness represented in *MailOnline* content and how might this contribute to social exclusion? The corpus-assisted critical discourse analysis uncovers the representation of homeless individuals in the USA as criminals to be feared through the discursive strategies of functionalisation and individualisation (van Leeuwen, 1995), and the use of statistics and quotations from housed communities. The paper also reveals the pathologised portrayal of homeless people as mentally ill through metaphors of natural disaster and explicitly pejorative lexis such as ‘zombified’ and ‘washed up’. The article argues that these linguistic devices threaten to produce a moral panic that contributes to the stigmatisation of this heterogeneous social group.

2. Homelessness: some context

Homelessness is a multifaceted phenomenon that can be described in various ways (Daly, 1996) and can be characterised in terms of *accidental* (caused by outside events), *structural* (related to health problems or poverty), *economic* (unemployment-fuelled homelessness), *political* (e.g., refugees from areas of conflict) or *social* (groups who are marginalised such as single mothers) causes or problems (Daly, 1996). Homelessness can also be considered in terms of its duration, the degree of vulnerability, or the needs of an individual who lacks shelter (Daly, 1996). Crisis, a charity for homelessness in the United Kingdom, outlines different types of homelessness, including rough sleeping, in temporary accommodation, hidden homelessness, and statutory homelessness (Crisis, n.d.). In short, although rough sleeping is the most *visible* form of homelessness, it is not the only situation that exists.

In addition to problems defining homelessness, it is difficult to estimate how many people are homeless at any given point, not least because people experiencing homelessness live in various situations, including shelters, cars, friends’ houses, and on the streets (Heinz, 2005). Nevertheless, the Housing Monitor for England 2022 predicts that as COVID-19-related support from the Everyone In scheme¹ is withdrawn, there will be a ‘substantial rise’ in core homelessness² in England (Watts et al., 2022.: ix). In fact, in the first quarter of 2022, 74,230 English households were homeless or threatened with home-

1 In March 2020, the UK Government asked local authorities in England to ensure that people sleeping rough or ‘in accommodation where it was difficult to self-isolate’ were safely accommodated in, for example, hotel rooms or other en-suite accommodation (Cromarty, 2021: n.p.). This scheme was referred to as “Everyone In”.

2 Core homelessness refers to the most acute and immediate forms of homelessness, including rough sleeping and staying in places not intended as residential accommodation (Watts et al., 2022).

lessness, representing an increase of 1.3% on the previous year (Department for Levelling Up, Housing & Communities, 2022). Alongside rising homelessness, the UK has experienced a fall in real disposable incomes since late 2021 (Institute for Government, 2022). According to Shelter (2022), almost 2.5 million renters are behind on paying or constantly struggling to pay rent. Equally, 89% of adults in Great Britain report an increase in their cost of living (Office for National Statistics, 2022). This economic situation is often labelled ‘the cost-of-living crisis’. The crisis poses a risk that more people will sleep rough for the first time (St Mungo’s: n.d.). This information is important because it provides the context in which British readers of *MailOnline* will be encountering discourses about homelessness and so is relevant to considerations of the potential reception of those discourses. Given the rising cost-of-living and predicted increase in homelessness in England, a critical discourse analysis of representations of homelessness in a UK media outlet is a timely contribution to existing research on political discourses in contemporary Britain.

2.1. Media representations of homelessness

It was not until the mid-1980s that the mass media began to focus on homelessness (Buck, Toro and Ramos, 2004; Shields, 2001). As a result, much research into media representations of homelessness tends to focus on data collected in the late 1980s and 1990s (Pruitt et al., 2020). For example, research shows that between 1980 and 1990, less than 50% of New York Times articles about homeless people mentioned deviant characteristics (Lee, Link and Toro, 1991). Similarly, between 1982 and 1987, media articles often focused on mental illness sympathetically, and the terms ‘vagrant’ and ‘vagrancy’ were replaced by the less pejorative terms ‘homeless’ and ‘homelessness’ (Buck et al., 2004). However, the media shifted towards a more negative frame for homeless people in the late 1980s and early 1990s (Blasi, 1994). This finding is supported by more recent work by Widdowfield (2001), who looked at coverage of homelessness in *Daily Mail*, *Daily Mirror*, *The Guardian*, *The Times*, and *Daily Telegraph* between 1995 and 1999. She located three common media representations of homeless people as ‘other’, as criminals, and as victims. Linguistically, she highlighted the use of personal pronouns such as ‘us’ and ‘them’ as well as the use of the collective noun phrase ‘the homeless’ as contributing to the othering of homeless people. Importantly, ‘homeless’ was applied to defendants in court cases in articles which linked homeless people with violent crime (Widdowfield, 2001).

Updating these studies through a content analysis of four Canadian newspapers, Schneider et al. (2010) demonstrated that all four papers asserted a need to control and regulate homeless people to maintain social order; the researchers problematised these frames by highlighting their implications for the social inclusion of homeless people and suggested a need for changes to the way that homelessness is framed in the Canadian press. Meanwhile, a content and qualitative analysis of quotations from sources in Canadian newspapers on homelessness found that journalistic representations that focused on

the hardships of individuals promoted what Jacobs, Kemeny and Manzi (1999) refer to as a minimalist discourse of homelessness, which blames the individual for their homeless state (Schneider, 2011).

In a UK context, an analysis of ITN segments on homelessness found that people experiencing homelessness were cast as pitiful objects and their own accounts of their situation were 'explained, matched, or contextualised through accounts from journalists, artists, politicians and charity representatives who view homelessness from the outside' (Hodgetts et al. 2005: 40). In such a way, the homeless individuals were 'displaced from their own stories' (Hodgetts et al., 2005: 45). This tallies with Torck's (2001) work on street newspapers, which found that homeless voices were given limited space. A more up-to-date study examining a cross-genre corpus of texts about homelessness through critical discourse analysis, corpus linguistics and participant observation revealed that people experiencing homelessness were politically marginalised through a semantic association with dirtiness, drugs, and danger (Toft, 2014). More generally, it has been found that the media typically divides homeless people into the deserving and the undeserving; the deserving are framed as victims while the undeserving are portrayed as scroungers (Platt, 1999). This dichotomy has been used to justify punitive approaches to homelessness in the UK since the late 19th century (Spruce, 2022).

3. Methods

The data for this research project were collected from the online news repository, LexisNexis. Articles were downloaded if they included the word 'homeless' or 'homelessness' in the headline and were published by *MailOnline* between 1st January 2021 and 31st December 2021. *MailOnline* is the website of the *Daily Mail* tabloid newspaper – a right-wing national newspaper published in the UK. I decided to focus on *MailOnline* for several reasons. Firstly, it was the most-read online UK newspaper brand in 2021, with 518 million page views in July 2021 (PressGazette, 2021). This means that the representations of homeless people produced by *MailOnline* were likely to reach a wide audience. Secondly, tabloid newspapers – like *Daily Mail* – are 'social educators' which contribute to 'the normalisation of certain modes of social belonging' (Conboy, 2006: 9). Despite the general decrease in readership of physical newspapers, 'the Daily Mail has [...] adapted confidently to the changing [newspaper market] environment with its spectacularly successful *MailOnline* website' and although tabloid newspapers might not be so widely read as in previous centuries, their 'values and approaches [...] continue to define' the twenty-first century (Bingham and Conboy, 2015: 231-232). Ultimately, then, tabloids – especially *MailOnline* – are likely to play a role in shaping public opinions towards homelessness in the UK.

Equally, to my knowledge much existing critical discourse analytical research into representations of people experiencing homelessness has focused on television news or

printed news, even though readership levels are declining for printed newspapers and readers are moving to online news sources (Ofcom, 2022). This paper adds a new dimension to existing research by demonstrating how people experiencing homelessness are framed in online news. The results on LexisNexis were grouped by 'high' similarity to reduce duplicates, and remaining duplicate articles were deleted manually when converting the text files from RTF to TXT format. In total, I collected 364 articles, producing a specialised corpus of 371,629 words.

To analyse the data, I employed the 'methodological synergy' (Brookes and Baker, 2021: 33) of corpus linguistics and critical discourse analysis. Corpus linguistics, broadly speaking, refers to 'a set of methods, but also a field of research, which analyses linguistic patterns in large collections of naturally occurring language' (Brookes, 2021: 4). Critical discourse analysis, in contrast, is 'a problem-oriented interdisciplinary research programme' united by a shared interest in 'the semiotic dimensions of power, injustice, and political-economic, social, or cultural change in society' (Wodak, 2014: 302). The benefit of using corpus linguistics in critical discourse analysis is that it enables a 'systematic and thus replicable form' of analysis (Mulderriig, 2011: 564, original emphasis). That is, corpus linguistic methodologies allow researchers to demonstrate that the patterns of representation they identify in qualitative analysis 'occur frequently enough to be significant' (Hart and Kelsey, 2019: 44).

More specifically, I adopted the method of key semantic domain analysis (Rayson, 2008). As Parnell (2022: 50) notes, 'key semantic domain analysis establishes statistically significant, i.e., key, semantic fields by comparing the relative frequencies of words automatically tagged as belonging to a semantic domain in the target corpus with those in a reference corpus'. The tool is available through the online web-based programme suite, Wmatrix (Rayson, 2008). Wmatrix allows researchers to set a cut-off for the log-likelihood value, log-ratio value, and frequency. Log-likelihood values measure the confidence that a difference in relative frequencies is not due to error or chance, while log ratio is an effect size measure, which examines the size of the difference in relative frequency between the target and reference corpus (Gabrielatos, 2018). I combined both measures to identify statistically significant differences between realisations of the semantic domains in each corpus.

Using the UCREL Semantic Analysis System in Wmatrix, I compared the relative frequencies of words associated with the semantic domains in the *MailOnline* corpus with their relative frequencies in the British National Corpus (BNC) Informative Sampler, which consists of 779,027 words. Following Parnell (2022), I chose this reference corpus because it consists solely of informative writing and therefore highlights instances of more evaluative language use in news content that purports to be more objective. I sorted the semantic domains by effect size and looked closely at domains which had a log-ratio

value above 1.0, a log-likelihood value above 6.63, and a frequency value above 50. This process generated 38 key semantic domains.

Semantic domain	Frequency in the MailOnline corpus	Frequency in the BNC Written Informative Sampler	Log-likelihood	Log ratio	Words tagged as belonging to this domain
Crime	1782	383	2338.31	3.31	crime (413) crimes (118), suspect (92), felony (89), criminal (78), robberies (52), robbery (50), guilty (48), theft (35), rape (24), illegal (33), arson (31), stolen (28), fraud (24), offenders (23), unlawful (23), assailant (23), arsonist (23), stole (20), suspects (20)
Law and order	3967	2068	2881.81	2.03	police (686), arrested (261), court (228), cops (127), bail (109), security (103), arrest (97), law (91), judge (86), prison (72), attorney (71), legal (69), jail (64), arrests (62), trial (56), custody (56), rules (48), lawsuit (47), police officers (46), convicted (41), prosecutors (40), ordinance (34), lawyer (33), cop (32), laws (32), sentenced (30), defendant (29), witnesses (28), sheriff (28), detectives (27), police officer (27), police department (26), lawyers (24), witness (23), parole (20), coroner (20)
Violent/ Angry	1911	1170	1168.4	1.8	attack (137), assault (135), violent (134), hit (131), violence (110), stabbed (97), assaults (89), attacked (73), attacks (61), force (49), abuse (42), rampant (32), assaulted (31), punched (25), punch (24), threatened (23), threat (22), madden (20)

Semantic domain	Frequency in the <i>MailOnline</i> corpus	Frequency in the BNC Written Informative Sampler	Log-likelihood	Log ratio	Words tagged as belonging to this domain
Damaging and destroying	818	620	377.06	1.49	victim (161), victims (91), destroyed (39), damage (32), broken (30), harm (23), crash (21)

Table 1: Semantic domains grouped into the criminal activity theme

Semantic domain	Frequency in the <i>MailOnline</i> corpus	Frequency in the BNC Written Informative Sampler	Log-likelihood	Log ratio	Words tagged as belonging to this domain
Health and disease	183	95	133.49	2.04	mental health (97), health (79)
Disease	1088	868	463.24	1.42	pandemic (263), mental illness (49), injured (48), cancer (44), addiction (38), mentally ill (37), injuries (29), crazy (23), pain (22)
Sad	468	489	117.86	1.03	suffered (54), suffering (41), desperate (30), depression (24), sad (24), tragic (22)

Table 2: Semantic domains grouped into the health and disease theme

I then grouped the key semantic domains into three key themes: criminal activity, health and disease, and residence. Due to limited space, in this paper I focus on one key semantic domain from the criminal activity and health and disease themes respectively. The semantic domains belonging to each thematic group are presented in Tables 1 and 2.

Following the thematic groupings, I examined the concordance lines for each semantic domain to identify the social actors and actions (who committed crime and who had crime committed upon them, for example). I then performed a manual, micro-linguistic analysis of examples, focusing on van Leeuwen's (1995, 2008) frameworks for social actor and social action representation. Specifically, I drew on discursive strategies such as functionalisation (the representation of a social actor based on what they do), individualisation (focusing on a single individual), and assimilation (the homogenisation of

a group) (van Leeuwen, 1995). I chose these frameworks because they are useful for identifying how people and social groups are linguistically represented collectively, as Koller (2012) demonstrates. I also drew upon a broader critical discourse analytical toolkit, influenced particularly by studies that have examined the representation of other marginalised social groups such as immigrants (e.g., Gabrielatos and Baker, 2008). Practically, this meant considering the use of statistics and dehumanising metaphors, as well as quotation patterns. I focused on quotation patterns because Schneider (2011) had previously shown these to be significant in shaping the way that homeless individuals are represented in the media.

Below, I analyse in close linguistic detail examples from two of the key semantic domains – Crime and Disease – illustrating how homeless people are criminalised, dehumanised, and pathologised in *MailOnline* content from 2021. I selected these semantic fields out of all the available key domains because they allow me to enter into a dialogue with existing work on media representations of homelessness, which found that people experiencing homelessness were framed as Others and associated with addiction (Min, 1999). Examining these domains, then, would allow me to update existing research in this area, and to determine whether the Covid-19 pandemic (which saw greater government support for homeless people in the UK) and the cost-of-living crisis emerging towards the end of 2021 had an impact on representations of homelessness.

4. Analysis

4.1. 'Crime' semantic domain

As Table 3 demonstrates, there are almost ten times as many references to crime in the target corpus as in the reference corpus. This indicates that discourses about crime are characteristic of the *MailOnline* articles about people experiencing homelessness. The association between crime and homelessness in the media is well documented in early research papers (Widdowfield, 2001); that this discursive frame is identified in the present paper demonstrates that the criminalised stigma of homelessness persists into the 2020s. That is, despite decades of research uncovering pejorative representations of homeless people in global media outlets, little has changed in journalistic practice. It should be noted before the analysis begins that almost all the *MailOnline* articles that associate crime with homelessness are in a US context, despite the fact that *MailOnline* is a UK-based online news outlet associated with the British tabloid, *Daily Mail*. The focus on the US context provides a distancing effect for British readers who are seemingly viewing homelessness from outside; this outsider lens increases the Othering of homelessness as a social phenomenon. That the focus is on homelessness in the USA perhaps gives the impression that homelessness is less of a UK phenomenon. This could downplay the extent to which homelessness is being experienced in the UK, despite rising figures. Equally, the pejorat-

ive representations of people experiencing homelessness identified in this paper could act as a warning for UK readers of what might occur if homelessness continues to rise. In short, then, that the examples do not reference the UK context does not mean that the representations will not have any relevance to British readers' perceptions of homelessness.

Relative frequency per 100,000 in the <i>MailOnline</i> corpus	Relative frequency per 100,000 in the BNC Written Informative Sampler	Log-Likelihood	Log ratio
480	49	2338.31	3.31

Table 3: Statistical information for the 'Crime' semantic domain

A manual concordance analysis focusing on representations of social actors (that is, who is positioned as the perpetrator of crime and who is the victim) found 174 explicit associations between crime and a homeless social actor, or the phenomenon of homelessness more generally. In contrast, there were only 18 concordance lines in which the homeless person was positioned as a victim of crime. Given the incremental effect of discourse (Baker, 2006), the preponderance of articles associating homeless people with crimes is likely to cement this discursive association in the minds of regular readers and contribute to the social fear of homeless people. This is especially the case given that the crimes focused on in the articles are violent: instances of assault, rape and attempted kidnapping are much more prevalent than theft in the corpus, for example.

There are several important discursive strategies used in the association between homelessness and crime across the articles. One such strategy is individualisation (van Leeuwen, 1995). In his study of immigration discourses, van Leeuwen (1995) finds that elite social actors are typically individualised in contrast to immigrants who are assimilated (represented as a homogenous group). This suggests that individualisation is more likely to be associated with the framing of powerful people. However, this is not always the case in the *MailOnline* corpus – in these articles, the individualisation of people experiencing homelessness acts only to provide a specific example of a broader homogenous association between homelessness and crime. In instances where the homeless social actor is individualised (van Leeuwen, 1995), they are often rendered through functionalisation (van Leeuwen, 1995). Examples (1) and (2) illustrate this linguistic strategy:

- (1) Police in California are on the hunt for an arsonist they say set fire to a Christmas tree in Oakland's Jack London Square, just days before a Fox News tree was set ablaze by a homeless drug **offender** in New York City.

- (2) Back on the streets in de Blasio's New York: Mentally ill homeless **arsonist**, 49, who set fire to Fox News tree is free again - a day after being arrested on no-bail charges.

In these extracts, people experiencing homelessness are defined by the crimes they have committed as 'a homeless drug offender' and a 'mentally ill homeless arsonist'. Homeless people tend to be only individualised in the context of committing a crime and are assigned agency only in relation to criminal activity, as the verb phrases 'set ablaze' and 'set fire' demonstrate. Personal details other than age in Extract (2) are backgrounded (van Leeuwen, 1995) in the articles, contributing to the broader dehumanisation of the individual as little more than the product of their behaviour and homeless state. In the article from which Excerpt (1) is taken, a name for the 'drug offender' is only provided later in the functionalised (van Leeuwen, 1995) noun phrase 'accused arsonist Craig Tamanha' which frames the individual in relation to a second crime, compounding the criminalised representation. The voice of Tamanha comes through in a quotation ('Tamanha [...] told a detective: "I have been thinking about lighting the tree on fire all day long"'), but this direct speech merely confirms the culpability and obsessiveness of the individual and therefore contributes to the criminalised framing. In other words, homeless voices are represented in *MailOnline* when they support the marginalisation of the broader social group (see Schneider, 2011). There is no attempt across these examples to provide a human-interest lens or to explain the social factors that contribute to homelessness; rather, the premodifier 'homeless' acts as a stigmatising label that adds to the otherness of the supposed criminals. The adjectival phrase 'mentally ill' in Extract (2) has a similar function – while it has the potential to evoke empathy, its combination with the adjective 'homeless' and the noun 'arsonist' supports the othering of the individual.

Note the mention of 'de Blasio' in Extract (2), who was the mayor of New York City at the time of publication. Several articles in the corpus include a representation of a person experiencing homelessness in relation to de Blasio's policies. For example, an article published in June 2021 addressed the move to vacate hotels that homeless people had been lodged in during the Covid-19 pandemic, stating that 'Blasio's administration faces mounting pressure to curtail an alarming surge in **crime** in the section of Manhattan that the NYPD has linked to the high number of homeless people being housed there by the city'. De Blasio was a member of the Democratic Party meaning his views were likely to be ideologically opposed to the *MailOnline's* (as a right-wing news outlet). In these examples, then, representations of homeless people constitute what Gabrielatos and Baker (2008) refer to as political rivalry discourse: homeless individuals are reduced to evidence of the supposed failure of American (Democratic) homelessness policies and so are portrayed as little more than an issue to be addressed. Indeed, to support this reading, the adverbs 'back' and 'again' frame the act of letting homeless people out of prison as a recurrent policy decision by de Blasio.

The dehumanised rendering of people experiencing homelessness as part of political rivalry discourse is also evident in further discursive strategies often found in representations of other marginalised social groups (e.g., immigrants), such as the use of statistics and natural disaster metaphors:

- (3) There have been 16,899 felony **assaults** in NYC this year through October 3, with multiple terrifying examples carried out by homeless people, according to the most recent data from the NYPD.
- (4) The president's son appears to have moved out of the \$5.4million home amid a **crime** and homelessness wave that has hit the beach-front Los Angeles city.

While statistics or 'data' might have the veneer of objectivity and provide legitimisation, in Example (3) they are evidently calculated to generate fear of people experiencing homelessness among readers. The journalist fronts the sentence with the '16,899 felony assaults' that have taken place in New York City up to October 3, 2021. It is imperative to note the deagentialisation (van Leeuwen, 1995) of 'there have been', which frames felony assaults through existentialisation (van Leeuwen, 1995) as merely occurring without cause. This discursive strategy evokes a sense of helplessness towards the number of crimes. The journalist then goes on to introduce the 'multiple terrifying examples carried out by homeless people'. The adjective 'multiple' is not numerically specific, which is important as it contributes to the perception that homeless people have perpetrated a vast number of the 16,899 assaults. This is compounded by the fact that the only social actor positioned as the agent of crime is 'homeless people'. Through the aggregation (that is, representing groups of people as statistics or numbers; van Leeuwen, 1995) of 'homeless people', this heterogenous social group is framed as a homogenous and faceless threat. Finally, the adjective 'terrifying' – which recurs across the two examples – implies that crimes by people experiencing homelessness are particularly heinous, contributing to the induced fear of a supposedly barbaric social group. Ultimately, then, Example (3) demonstrates a scaremongering approach to the depiction of homeless individuals as criminals. A similar approach is achieved through the metaphor of natural disaster in Example (4). Both crime and homelessness are depicted metaphorically as a 'wave', which frames both phenomena as powerfully uncontrollable, unknowable, and threatening.

There is a particularly striking discursive contrast established in Extract (4): we are introduced to the 'crime and homelessness wave' through the eyes of the 'president's son' who is individualised (van Leeuwen, 1995) and reported to own a '\$5.4 million home'. The privileging of elite or at least housed individuals' perceptions of homelessness is common in the corpus (particularly in articles about the Venice beach area of Los Angeles, where school children and the elderly are allegedly too scared to leave home). Journalists often draw on the indirect speech of 'residents' and 'communities' who have taken issue with homelessness in their neighbourhoods, as Extracts (5) and (6) show:

- (5) For months residents living near the hotels where around 8,000 homeless people have been housed have implored the city to relocate the homeless people who they blame for rising levels of **crime** and drug use.
- (6) The petition asserts that the proposed camps are not a solution to homelessness and would bring the problems of drugs, mental illness, **crime** and danger into the communities where the tent cities would rise.

Media outlets speak both to and for the public; in this dialectical way, media discourses introduce and sustain public framings of marginalised social groups. In these two examples, *MailOnline* attributes stigmatising associations between homelessness and crime to ‘residents living near the hotels’ and ‘the petition’. Arguably, the third person pronoun ‘they’ and the personification of ‘the petition’ perform ideological distancing between the journalist and the represented view of homelessness as related to crime. In short, this stigmatising view is clearly assigned to aggregated others. This discursive strategy serves as a so-called “reputational shield” (Sobolewska and Ford, 2020) in that it allows *MailOnline* journalists to make claims about the association between crime and homelessness without footing the blame for the brazen criminalisation of potentially vulnerable people. Instead, the corporation can argue, if needed, that it is acting merely as mouthpieces for “ordinary people”. Despite this, if these views are indeed held by members of the public and readers, the discursive association of homelessness with ‘drugs, mental illness, crime and danger’ merely reinforces this negative perception of people experiencing homelessness and contributes to their social exclusion.

The social exclusion of people experiencing homelessness is enacted discursively in Examples (5) and (6). In the first instance, residents ‘implore’ city officials to ‘relocate the homeless people’. The verb ‘relocate’ is remarkable ideologically, in that rather than advocating for solutions to homelessness, it evinces the perception that ‘homeless people’ should simply be moved elsewhere. The solution, so to speak, is to make homelessness someone else’s problem rather than to redress systemic inequalities or try to support homeless individuals. Extract (6) makes a similar suggestion in its claim that ‘camps’ for people who are homeless ‘are not a solution’. The verbal phrase ‘bring [...] into [the communities]’ suggests that people experiencing homelessness are located outside of the container of the community – they are, discursively and socially, outsiders. Together, the two examples make a case for making the visible (homelessness) invisible – as though homelessness and its associated ‘danger’ can continue as long as they are not visible to people who own \$5.4 million homes. This reading is further supported by descriptions of Venice Beach as the ‘once-elite beachside neighbourhood of Venice’ and the ‘once-desirable beachside suburb of Venice’, where the presence of homeless people is subtly framed as devaluing the properties and the neighbourhood.

To recapitulate, this section of the analysis has revealed that people experiencing homelessness continue to be demonised and criminalised in *MailOnline* content in 2021. Homelessness is linked to crimes such as arson and drug offences in explicit and subtle ways. There is an elicitation of fear towards homeless people which arguably acts as a moral compass for readers, encouraging them to believe the “common sense” ideology that people experiencing homelessness are dangerous and should be feared. Despite acknowledging some of the complexities related to homelessness, including addiction and mental illness, examples tend to provide only one solution: that people experiencing homelessness be moved on and rendered invisible to wealthy residents. While invisibility can be cultivated by people experiencing homelessness (Stewart and Sanders, 2022), in this context it is being imposed by institutions for the sake of the housed communities. The linguistic and discursive strategies used to produce these depictions are similar to those employed to represent other socially marginalised groups, such as immigrants, suggesting that there may be systematic discursive devices for the exclusion of social actors in media texts.

4.2. 'Disease' semantic domain

As the *Disease* domain has the greatest number of concordance lines out of the three domains in the health and disease theme, I have decided to focus on representations realised by this semantic domain. As Table 4 indicates, there are over two times as many words tagged as belonging to this domain in the *MailOnline* corpus compared to the Informative Sampler, and these are unlikely to be due to chance or error.

Relative frequency per 100,000 in the <i>MailOnline</i> corpus	Relative frequency per 100,000 in the BNC Written Informative Sampler	Log-Likelihood	Log ratio
293	111	463.24	1.42

Table 4: Statistical information for the 'Disease' semantic domain

There are two key representations of homelessness and people experiencing homelessness within the concordance lines. The first is the discursive association between homelessness and mental illness, and the second is the depiction of homelessness as worsening during the COVID-19 pandemic. Beginning with the former representation, the most common linguistic representation of ill health and illness is through the adjectival phrase 'mentally ill':

- (7) As New York City's tourist and business districts overflow with **mentally ill** homeless people – and street violence spirals out of control – mayoral candidate Andrew Yang is sticking by his comments that people with psychological problems need to be swept of [sic] the streets.

In Example 7, as in the examples from the Crime semantic domain, the focus is on the effect which 'mentally ill homeless people' have on 'tourist and business districts' rather than the social circumstances leading to mental health problems, or the psychological support required. Readers are encouraged to view homelessness through the eyes of tourists, businesses and 'mayoral candidate Andrew Yang' rather than from the perspective of the homeless individual. There is no sense of empathy conveyed in the example, despite the acknowledgement that people might have 'psychological problems'. Instead, a metaphor of natural disaster ('overflow') is used to give the threatening impression that the number of 'mentally ill homeless people' on the streets is overwhelming. Mental illness is then spuriously associated with 'street violence' through parentheses which discursively link the two phenomena, illustrating that representations of homelessness, mental illness and criminality are interlinked. It is also worth noting the second metaphor and its sibilance – 'swept of [sic] the streets' – which is problematic because it is a reductive representation of the intricacies of finding solutions to homelessness, and seems to equate homelessness entirely with rough sleeping, something which all previous cited examples from *MailOnline* also do.

The adjectival phrase 'mentally ill', while most common, is by no means the only linguistic rendering of mental illness in homeless people. As Examples (8) to (10) reveal, homeless people are described as having 'mental health problems', being 'ill', and, perhaps most shockingly, as 'crazed':

- (8) Transition money away from homeless shelters to affordable housing, so vagrants – including those with **mental health problems** – have somewhere permanent to live.
- (9) 'And residents deserve to raise their kids without fear of witnessing drug use and homeless individuals who are **ill** screaming day and night yelling obscenities on every corner.'
- (10) A Brooklyn mother-of-two was stabbed to death on Saturday by a **crazed** man enraged that she and her male companion got too close to his tent at a Bedford-Stuyvesant homeless encampment as they bar-hopped after a birthday party in the area.

Excerpt (8) is perhaps the clearest example of a solution to homelessness being articulated and would appear to be a somewhat neutral rendering of people with mental health problems, if it were not for the (arguably pejorative) epithet 'vagrant', which has connotations of criminality. As mentioned earlier, Buck et al. (2004) claim that in the early to mid-1980s, 'vagrant' became replaced by the less pejorative word 'homeless' in media repres-

entations of people experiencing homelessness. The *MailOnline* corpus suggests a reversal of this trend – the noun ‘vagrant*’ is used 36 times, often in conjunction with verbs which position individuals as dirty (such as ‘defecating’ and ‘urinating’) or as a social plague (‘harassing’). Extract (9) is no less perturbing in its moral legitimisation strategy, with the claim that ‘residents deserve to raise their kids without fear’. Homeless individuals who are ‘ill’ are framed in the quote not as people who require support and empathy, but as a threat to ‘kids’ and ‘residents’. The verb ‘deserve’ is arguably coercive, as it suggests that simply by existing people experiencing homelessness are depriving housed communities of their basic rights – this encourages readers to feel personally affronted. Equally problematic, agency is ascribed to homeless individuals through the verbal processes ‘screaming’ and ‘yelling’, which produce a stereotypical image of a raving madman. Finally, the mental process ‘witnessing’ (Halliday, 1985) feeds into the broader suggestion – as we found earlier – that homelessness should be something that cannot be seen. Notably, there seems to be little interest in establishing whether people who are mentally unwell are becoming homeless or whether homelessness is leading to mental illness; ultimately, then, the link between homelessness and mental illness remains superficial and stereotypical.

If the adjective ‘crazed’, with its connotations of wildness and lack of control, seems somewhat dehumanising, it is nothing compared to the extended account of ‘disturbing scenes in San Francisco’ where ‘zombified people’ urinate on pavements:

- (11) Last year I reported on the disturbing scenes in San Francisco - a city with more billionaires per capita than any other on the planet - where a tide of homeless, drug-addicted and **mentally ill** people had washed up by glittering shops selling luxury goods. Residents told me society seemed to be falling apart as we watched dealers sell drugs beside police patrol cars, zombified people urinating on the pavement, and dishevelled addicts smoking fentanyl - an opioid 50 times stronger than heroin.

An extended metaphor of natural disaster once again underpins this example, through the lexical choices of ‘tide’ and ‘washed up’. This discursive strategy positions people experiencing homelessness as the debris or unwanted reminders of a tidal wave, cluttering the streets and waiting to be removed. Again, the journalist provides a discursive juxtaposition between the rich and homeless individuals through the noun ‘billionaires’ and noun phrase ‘luxury goods’, and the collectivised noun phrase ‘homeless, drug-addicted and mentally ill people’. Arguably, this juxtaposition *could* have served to comment on the unequal distribution of money in society, providing a structural, so-called “maximalist” (Jacobs et al., 1999; Bevan, 2022) understanding of homelessness. Instead, the journalist resorts to dehumanising tropes and a tripartite list of stigmatising noun phrases that are associated through apposition and the connective ‘and’: ‘dealers’, ‘zombified people’ and ‘dishevelled addicts’. The noun phrase ‘zombified people’, alongside the dehumanising verb phrase ‘washed up’, contributes to the representation of homeless people as unnat-

ural, which is bolstered by the transgression of performing a private act ('urinating') in a public place ('the pavement'). Seemingly, this behaviour means that homeless people are less-than-human.

The above analysis shows that articles from *MailOnline* dehumanise homelessness and people with mental health problems through various discursive strategies. As mentioned above, at the time the articles were being published, the COVID-19 pandemic was prolific and there was a rising cost of living in the UK. Since most of the articles published about homelessness in the corpus are set in a US context, the cost-of-living crisis does not figure much – if at all – in framings of homelessness (although it will inevitably provide the background to the potential reception of the discourses among British readers). In terms of mentioning COVID-19, there is not much of a focus on the measures used to support people experiencing homelessness. On the contrary, COVID-19 simply appears to provide a contextual background to claims that homelessness has 'spiked':

- (12) The reclusive Australian actor, 81, lives in the once-desirable beachside suburb of Venice, where crime and homelessness have spiked in recent months during the Covid-19 **pandemic**.
- (13) During the Covid-19 **pandemic**, around 200 tents have been erected on the boardwalk according to local residents. 'Venice's world famous beach and boardwalk are crippled,' hundreds of locals said in a letter pleading for help from city and county officials. 'Local children are refusing to come to the beach because they're frightened by what they've witnessed. Seniors who live on or near the boardwalk are terrified of walking in their own neighborhoods.'

The examples above provide *some sense* that the Covid-19 pandemic might have exacerbated the social factors that contribute to homelessness, which at least provides some context to the representation. However, this is backgrounded against the continued focus on how rising homelessness affects housed communities. The emotive lexis in Excerpt (13) ('crippled', 'pleading', 'frightened', 'terrified') contribute to the construction of people experiencing homeless as a threat, which the focus on 'children' and 'seniors' as some of the most vulnerable people in society makes especially pernicious. Meanwhile, the noun phrase '200 tents' backgrounds the people who are living in them – they are presented as little more than the accommodation in which they reside. Thinking, then, about what linguistic choices *could* have been made in the context of what is actually said, *MailOnline* content seems to choose to polarise between housed and homeless communities rather than electing to highlight the humanity of those without a home.

To summarise, homeless people are framed as mentally unwell and this is positioned as a threat to housed communities, particularly children and elderly people. Those who are mentally unwell are dehumanised as zombies, described in terms of natural disasters, and depicted pejoratively as 'crazed'. Although there is some acknowledgement that the

Covid-19 pandemic might have contributed to a rise in homelessness, this context is downplayed in favour of sensationalist representations.

5. Discussion and conclusion

This study has revealed a consistent dehumanisation, criminalisation and pathologisation of homeless people in *MailOnline* content published in 2021, demonstrating that the pejorative representation of homeless people as Others found in the 1990s and early 2000s persists some twenty years later (at least in this publication). This is somewhat surprising given the context of the cost-of-living crisis in the UK and the Covid-19 pandemic, which I hypothesised might lead to more empathetic or humane representations of homelessness, or at least a better contextualised understanding of the factors that contribute to homelessness. I based this hypothesis on the finding that people are more likely to take contextual factors into account as reasons for poverty when the economy is in crisis (Van de Mierop, 2011). Perhaps one explanation for why this amelioration did not take place is that all the examples cited in this paper are from articles talking about the USA, despite *MailOnline* being a website for the *Daily Mail*, a UK tabloid. The extent to which *MailOnline*'s homelessness content focused on the US is surprising, given that the news value of proximity dictates that events which take place in the newspaper's country are more likely to be covered than those that occur at a distance (Shoemaker, Lee, Han and Cohen, 2007). Nevertheless, as mentioned above, I suspect that this distancing effect for British readers is only likely to increase the Othering of the homeless individuals by positioning them as both geographically remote and socially different.

Through discursive strategies such as functionalisation and individualisation (van Leeuwen, 1995), metaphors of natural disaster such as 'overflow', 'tide' and 'washed up', the use of statistics ('16,899 felony assaults'), direct speech of housed communities, and explicitly negative epithets and premodification, *MailOnline* portrays homeless people as mentally ill criminals who should be removed from the sight of the residents and tourists they supposedly threaten. This depiction of people experiencing homelessness has the potential to contribute to a moral panic around homelessness which only increases the stigmatisation of individuals without a home and the likelihood of their social exclusion. As the examples in this analysis indicate, little demographic information about people experiencing homelessness is provided. Where individualisation is employed, homeless individuals are defined solely as criminals ('drug offender', 'arsonist'); where assimilation is used, people are dehumanised as 'waves' or depicted through the nominalisation 'homelessness'. Together, the criminalisation and dehumanisation equate homelessness with an amorphous threat. This threat is explicitly directed towards society's most vulnerable ('kids', 'seniors') as well as 'tourists', 'residents' and 'business districts', suggesting that no one is safe. There is a consistent juxtaposition between privileged housed communities and people experiencing homelessness, with the recurrent subtle suggestion that home-

less individuals have led to the degeneration of ‘once-elite’, ‘once-desirable’ areas and are somehow atavistic in their behaviours – urinating in public, screaming on street corners, and generally appearing ‘zombified’. These portrayals of people experiencing homelessness are unlikely to foster positive social relations and engender social inclusion between readers and homeless people they may encounter. On the contrary, at times – with commentary about what residents ‘deserve’ – it appears to be explicitly intended to polarise.

Although the social actors described in the articles are not referred to as “rough sleepers”, *MailOnline* representations of homelessness mainly focus on one group of homeless individuals: those who sleep in ‘tent cities’ (during Covid-19). People who are in temporary accommodation or are at threat of homelessness are discursively excluded from stories, perhaps because they do not fit the stereotype of the scary, mentally ill criminal realised through the two semantic domains analysed in this paper. This is just one way in which the *MailOnline*’s representation of homelessness is problematically oversimplified. People experiencing homelessness are only represented in the examples above when they become ‘a problem to mainstream community’ (Calder et al., 2011: 6). There is a striking use of verbs of seeing (‘witnessing’, ‘watched’) which undermines Kramer and Lee’s (1999) argument that homeless individuals are invisible. On the contrary, people experiencing homelessness appear to be consistently made visible by *MailOnline* in order to argue for their invisibility; often, the only solution provided in the articles is to move the homeless people to areas where they cannot be seen by the wealthy. This, of course, does nothing to redress the factors that lead to homelessness, but merely absolves residents from the guilt and shame of viewing others in a state of need.

Then there is the framing of homeless people as mentally ill. Making a link between homelessness and mental illness is not in itself problematic. After all, among homeless people, there are increased rates of mental illness, suicidal behaviour and completed suicide (Windfuhr and Kapur, 2011). However, consistently associating homelessness with mental health problems, as Shields (2001) finds in an earlier study of television representations of homelessness, likely overstates the problem. Furthermore, these depictions are not empathetic – they draw on stereotypes of mentally ill people as violent and threatening. The result is a reductive representation not just of homelessness but of mental illness, too. If we are to live in a more inclusive, empathetic society, it is crucial that these stigmatising representations are deconstructed and contested, and that there is a more informed construction of homelessness available in the public sphere that accounts for the nuances and complexities of the phenomenon.

I turn now to the limitations of this research. Focusing only on one online news outlet, albeit the most widely read one in the UK, is clearly not enough to address the broader stigmatisation of people experiencing homelessness. It may well be that broadsheet newspapers, or left-wing newspapers, do not describe homelessness in the same way. Perhaps street newspapers like *Big Issue* provide a necessary rebuttal of these stereo-

types. Future studies could consider the wider construction and reception of homelessness discourses in the UK in the context of the cost-of-living crisis, taking into account the degree to which media discourses of homelessness map onto policies and/or citizen understandings of homelessness. It could ask, for example, whether there is a dominant narrative of homelessness being disseminated in public discourses, and whether these discourses are taken up by citizens. This would provide a better understanding of how homelessness is conceptualised and could begin to challenge some of the more negative stereotypes identified in this paper.

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The authors have no competing interests to declare.

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