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**Intenzioni prosociali verso le persone senza fissa dimora in
Italia: Siamo disposti ad aiutare?**

**Willing To Help? Understanding Prosocial Intentions Toward Homelessness
in Italy**

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Abstract

Homelessness is a complex and multidimensional social issue that continues to affect millions of individuals across Europe. While much of the existing research on this topic originates from the United States, interest and empirical work within the European context have been steadily increasing. This thesis explores the willingness of Italian citizens to engage in prosocial actions that contribute to reducing homelessness, with a focus on identifying the key antecedents that may shape such intentions. Based on data from a questionnaire developed within the EU-funded *Homelessness as Unfairness* (HOME_EU) project, the study examines the relationship between prosocial intentions toward homeless people and a range of individual and socio-cognitive factors: social class (measured through educational level), personal and familial experience, perceived exposure to homeless individuals in daily life, and beliefs about the causes of homelessness. Using a regression model, the research seeks to contribute to a deeper understanding of what drives prosocial intentions to help mitigate homelessness in the Italian context, offering contributions to the theoretical understanding of prosocial intentions on social issues and to broader reflections on how homelessness is perceived and addressed.

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0. Introduction

Homelessness represents one of the most visible and persistent forms of social exclusion in contemporary societies. Much of the research on this topic is concentrated in the United States, where approaches to homelessness often reflect specific cultural, political, and institutional frameworks. This thesis aims to contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of the factors that encourage individuals to support people experiencing homelessness, with a particular focus on the Italian context. Drawing on data from the European project *HOME_EU – Homelessness as Unfairness*, it examines how variables such as social class (measured through educational level), exposure to homelessness, personal or relational experience with the issue, and beliefs about its causes relate to intentions to help address the phenomenon.

The thesis is structured into four main chapters. Chapter one introduces the phenomenon of homelessness, with particular attention to its characteristics in the Italian and European contexts. It introduces key definitions and classifications, explores the main institutional responses, and presents data on the prevalence of the issue as well as the living conditions of homeless individuals. The chapter also outlines dominant services available or approaches, such as the Housing First model, and reflects on the cultural and political narratives that shape public discourse around homelessness.

The second chapter reviews the theoretical and empirical literature relevant to the study, discussing the role of social class, exposure, personal experience, and causal beliefs as potential predictors of helping intentions. It also presents the main conceptual frameworks used to interpret prosocial behaviours and public attitudes toward homelessness, including *Attribution Theory*, *Intergroup Contact Theory*, and the *Social Distance Theory of Power*.

Chapter three outlines the empirical component of the research. It describes the methodology and the main results of the statistical analyses, focusing on the relationships between the key variables and participants' prosocial intentions. Finally, chapter four offers a critical discussion of the results in relation to the main objective of the study, in light of the literature presented earlier. It highlights the limitations of the study, including

methodological and contextual constraints. The chapter concludes by proposing directions for future research and reflecting on the potential for fostering greater public engagement in addressing homelessness.

Chapter 1.

The homelessness issue

Homelessness is a major social issue that affects people across the world. It comes with great exclusion from society, as well as poverty and many implications for physical and mental health (Gaboardi et al., 2021). Homelessness has progressively spread, first in the Global South of the world and slowly in high-income countries as well (Toro, 2007). In recent decades, homelessness has become not only a humanitarian concern, but also a political and social issue that raises fundamental questions about citizenship, dignity, and the right to housing. This chapter aims to provide a foundational overview of the homelessness phenomenon, with particular attention to its current state in Europe and Italy, setting of the present thesis. It will first address definitional challenges, outlining the conceptual frameworks that guide research in the European context. It will then discuss the main causes and risk factors, present the most recent data available on the phenomenon in Europe and Italy, and examine the institutional responses to address it. Finally, the chapter will consider how homelessness is perceived by the general public and put the focus on prosocial attitudes and behaviors towards homeless people.

1.1 What is homelessness

The phenomenon of homelessness is founded on the absence of a home. In general, homelessness can be defined as a condition where an individual does not have access to minimally acceptable living conditions (Busch-Geertsema et al., 2016). However, the concept of *home* can extend beyond shelter to include feelings of safety, connection, stability, and a space for emotional support and meaningful relationships (Somerville, 2013). Given the multidimensional nature of this phenomenon, many attempts of definitions have arisen capturing different aspects of the concept. A comprehensive classification that encompasses more dimensions of homelessness is the *European Typology of Homelessness and Housing Exclusion* (ETHOS). This approach

provides both a definition and classification of homelessness. It was developed by the European Federation of National Organisations Working with the Homeless (FEANTSA) and the European Observatory on Homelessness. ETHOS responds also to the need to investigate more deeply and systematically the nature and the extent of the phenomenon across different contexts. It identifies three core dimensions of what can be intended as living in a *home*: a physical dimension (a place that meets appropriate standards of habitability), a legal dimension (being legally entitled to occupy the dwelling), a social dimension (living in a space that ensures personal privacy and social connections). According to this classification, a person is considered homeless when their living situation fails to satisfy at least two dimensions out of three (Edgar & Meert, 2005). The ETHOS approach identifies four main categories:

- Rooflessness: complete lack in all three domains. Roofless “sleep rough”, often live and sleep in public spaces or in night shelters;
- Houselessness: a houseless person has a suitable place to live, but no title to have an exclusive space, no privacy or space for relationships (e.g., temporary accommodations, women's shelters, refugee centers);
- Insecure housing: the social domain is satisfied, but the physical and legal domain are not ensured. It includes involuntary living arrangements, situations of forced eviction, lack of legal rights to live in a house or cases of domestic violence;
- Inadequate housing: legal occupation of a dwelling is ensured, but the housing conditions are unfit or overcrowded, lacking in physical and social adequacy (Edgar et al., 2007; Edgar & Meert, 2005).

This approach has increasingly spread across Europe and has been used in Italy as well, in the official national data collection carried out by Istituto nazionale di statistica (ISTAT, 2015).

Many studies stress the importance of what living in an unsatisfying space entails. People without a home often lack access to a safe and stable, and adequately equipped space that meets their basic needs for rest, hygiene and protection. In terms of the legal dimension, individuals lacking a home may live without formal tenancy, property rights or legal recognition of their residence, making them vulnerable to eviction, insecurity, and institutional invisibility (Edgar & Meert, 2005). From a relational point of view, individuals without a home miss a whole dimension of having a secure place for

themselves and where to cultivate care and affective relationships (Somerville, 2013). Homelessness is seen as a condition of deprivation in different domains that can often result in being connected between each other. Regarding this, some scholars suggest that people experiencing homelessness often face social isolation, limited support systems, and difficulties in maintaining interpersonal relationships, all of which may negatively impact their health (Hwang et al., 2009).

A dimension that is important to consider in the analysis of the homelessness phenomenon is the criteria of time. Under this category, homelessness can be defined on the basis of the number of episodes in which oneself falls into inadequate living conditions, as chronic, intermittent and crisis or transitional homelessness (Fazel et al., 2014; Kuhn & Culhane, 1998). Homelessness is chronic when a person finds oneself homeless for more than a year; it can be defined as intermittent when a person has different episodes of homelessness and transits from one institution to another; crisis homelessness regards the case of becoming homeless after experiencing a crisis like losing a job, getting a divorce or evicted (Fazel et al., 2014). People without a home, either roofless, houseless or living in insecure spaces, have a series of difficulties due to their living conditions. Poor nutrition, low personal hygiene and unsafe place to keep their personal things and themselves are only some of the conditions of a homeless life (Busch-Geertsema et al., 2010). Very precarious living conditions or lacking shelter exposes homeless people to higher chances of dying prematurely, experiencing harm, making use of substances, developing mental health issues or physical diseases (Fazel et al., 2014; Lee et al., 2010). Homeless people seem to be more exposed to risks of episodes of physical and sexual violence (Busch-Geertsema et al., 2010; Lee et al., 2010).

As complex as it is, homelessness can be viewed and studied from multiple perspectives as it comes together with a series of determining factors and consequences. It can be studied as a health concern, a safety concern, a relational and emotional deficit, or in the broader framework of structural inequalities, but it is not always easy to discern causes and effects.

1.2 Causes and risk factors

The nature of homelessness lies in many different factors, making it difficult to recognize clear causes. Part of this complexity is because some conditions may contribute to a person becoming homeless, while others may emerge as consequences of the homeless experience itself. An example of this case is substance use, a behaviour that can both contribute to cause homelessness and reinforce this condition (Busch-Geertsema et al., 2010; Fazel et al, 2014; Pleace, 2016).

A common method to gather data on homeless people is to examine the characteristics of individuals at the point of entry into emergency services, such as shelters or hospitals (Kuhn & Culhane, 1998), or to analyse fluctuations in homelessness rates following broad societal changes (Fazel et al., 2014). In recent decades, efforts to study the causes of homelessness in western research have shown that this phenomenon can be understood as the result of specific interactions between structural and individual factors (Fazel et al, 2014; Fitzpatrick et al., 2000; see also Gaboardi et al., 2021).

Structural factors can be attributed to broad societal dynamics that are beyond the control of the single individual yet have an impact on their lives. Examples include reduction of wages and shifts in job market (Pleace, 2016; Somerville, 2013;), increased housing costs, economic disparity, demographic changes (such as growing proportion of elderly population), changes in the welfare system and policies, such as lack of access to subsidies for healthcare, housing, mental health services, basic income support and limited support for homeless people (Fazel et al., 2014; Lee et al., 2010; Pleace, 2016). All these factors can have a direct negative impact on people's way of living. Also, political and cultural forces are part of structural factors and seem to play a role: they can exacerbate systemic form of discrimination such as racism and sexism and contribute to set the stage for homelessness to emerge (Pleace, 2016).

Pertaining to this, there is some evidence that shows the weight of structural arguments for homelessness. It has emerged that nations characterized by higher income disparities tend to exhibit greater levels of homelessness (Shinn, 2007). Along similar lines, it has been seen that countries with more accessible welfare systems and more affordable housing policies show lower rates of homelessness (Busch-Geertsema et al., 2010; Pleace, 2016). A Danish study studied this difference more in detail, examining two different contexts. In comparison with the USA, a country with a very different welfare

system when contrasted with the Danish one, it was seen that a homeless condition that is linked only with a lack of financial resources is less typical in the Danish society. On the same note as this evidence, it is observed that during periods of economic crisis higher rates of homelessness are detected (Pleace, 2016).

Individual factors concern personal vulnerabilities such as mental health issues, substance abuse (Fazel et al., 2014; Kuhn & Culhane, 1998), stressful or violent life events happened during early stages of life, shifts in family dynamics (Fazel et al., 2014). Other important individual conditions that may take part in the process of generating the circumstances leading to homelessness are physical pathologies or disabilities, exposure to crime or violence and drug addiction (Pleace, 2016). Specifically, abuse and violence in the domestic context have been identified as considerably more common causes of homelessness among women than among men; however, this difference has roots in the broader and complex issue of gender-based discrimination (Pleace, 2016). Moreover, a recurrent key aspect that must be considered is economic deprivation or poverty which appears to be a widespread determinant of risk (Fazel et al., 2014; Fitzpatrick et al., 2000).

A widely endorsed view is that structural and individual factors interact to create homeless conditions. A framework called The New Orthodoxy theorizes this path into homelessness (Pleace, 2016; Somerville, 2013). Structural factors are seen to create systemic conditions for homelessness to emerge, while individual vulnerabilities influence the chance of being affected by those conditions and ultimately falling into homelessness (Fitzpatrick et al., 2000; Lee et al., 2010; see also Somerville, 2013). Homelessness seems to arise in situations when unfavourable structural conditions – whether cultural, economic or social – intersect with insufficient personal resources – social support, financial means, health or mental stability – leaving the person unable to cope with those adverse circumstances (Pleace, 2016).

Protective factors

In contrast to this interaction between individual and structural risk factors, certain characteristics are shown to protect individuals from experiencing homelessness, such as a strong social support network (Fazel et al., 2014). Consistent with the idea that both structural and personal factors play a role in the phenomenon, both institutional and personal support can make a difference in the likelihood of remaining with no housing. In some cases, when institutional support is lacking, personal relationships can act as a

buffer, helping individuals avoid the risk of homelessness (Pleace, 2016; Somerville, 2013). On a more structural level, inclusive welfare regimes can be a protective factor for people at risk of homelessness (Busch-Geertsema et al., 2010).

1.3 The state of homelessness in Europe and in Italy

Assessing the prevalence of homelessness across countries or regions remains a methodological challenge. Individuals experiencing homelessness are often difficult to reach and may be underrepresented in official records or surveys. As a result, reliable global estimates have a very high variability (Busch-Geertsema et al., 2016). Nevertheless, available data indicates that homelessness is on the rise in many parts of the world, including Europe (Baptista & Marlier, 2019; Fazel et al., 2014). The USA seem to have counted around 2.5-3.5 million homeless people per year, the European Union seems to have counted around 4.1 millions (Fazel et al., 2014; Loubière, 2020). The difficulty in assessing the number of homeless people comes also from the fact that each country has a different system of counting or defining them. The difficulties are amplified when also considering low-income countries (Amore et al., 2011; Somerville, 2013). The 2005 estimates carried out by the United Nation Commission on Human Rights claim an approximate number of 100 million people are roofless and more than 1 billion individuals live in a place without basic living conditions (Busch-Geertsema et al., 2016). Among European Union member states, there is no common or systematic approach to identifying homeless individuals. While some countries conduct periodic moment-in-time counts, others rely on service usage data to estimate the number of homeless people (Fazel et al., 2014).

In Italy, the national counting of homeless people in 2021 amounted to 96.197 people (ISTAT, 2022) versus the 50.724 homeless people detected in 2014 (ISTAT, 2015). Homelessness results doubled in Italy in only five years. This data collections are characterized by strong limitations because they only take into account homeless people that are officially registered as residents – whether at a fictitious address or at a real one (Busch-Geertsema et al., 2010). Notably, the population detected of individuals without a home is made by 96.167, whose 38% is represented by foreign people and with a gender ratio characterized by a prevalence of men (with 212,4 males per every 100 women). The

total average age is 41,6 years old when foreign people are counted. Foreign homeless people are generally younger with a mean of 35,2 years old, while if only Italian homeless are considered, the average age is 45,5 years old (ISTAT, 2022).

1.4 Services for homeless people

Many researchers and policymakers have long debated on how to effectively address homelessness and how to lessen the extent of the phenomenon. In many countries, homelessness strategies often foster collaborative actions between multiple institutions, social services and organisations. It appears that strategies to tackle homelessness which are found to be effective often guarantee that a person who exits temporary accommodation is not left without stable housing; this helps to prevent a return to homelessness (Busch-Geertsema et al., 2010). The importance of having a home – not merely as shelter, but as a foundation for autonomy and stability – is frequently highlighted in recent discussions about addressing homelessness. In line with this, a modern approach known as Housing First (HF) was developed in the United States in the 1990s and later adopted in Canada and gradually in Europe. It was created as a solution to treat homeless people with mental disorders. The concept at the foundation of the Housing First approach is that access to permanent, independent housing should be the starting point, not the outcome, of support interventions. It emerged as a response to traditional ways to address the issue, which assume that a homeless person must first overcome addictions – often accompanied by mental health issues – then find a job, and only afterward be considered ready for housing. With this approach, having a home is considered as a fundamental right and as a first step for recovering (Loubière, 2020; Pleace, 2016; Woodhall-Melnik & Dunn, 2016).

Alongside programmes and strategies that attempt to solve this issue, a crucial role is held by services available for homeless people's immediate shelter and daily primary needs. For example, in Italy there are (Edgar, 2009):

- Basic needs support such as meals and groceries, clothing, medicines, showers, and occasional financial aid;
- Accommodation options including emergency shelters, dormitories, part-time and full-time residential accommodations, protected and independent housing;

- Opportunities for leisure and community engagement;
- Assistance with administrative tasks, legal mailing addresses, and residency documentation;
- Personal support covering individualized psychological guidance, educational support, healthcare access, financial aid, and employment re-entry support.

Overall, Non Governmental Organisations (NGOs) and non-profit organisations play an important role in delivering services that meet the basic needs of homeless individuals (Busch-Geertsema et al., 2010; Ministero del Lavoro e delle Politiche Sociali, 2021). In Italy, the provision of services for homeless people is carried out by a connected network of public and private subjects, with national coordination primarily managed by the Ministry of Social Policies. At the local level, essential services are predominantly provided by faith-based and non-profit organisations, such as Caritas (Ministero del Lavoro e delle Politiche Sociali, 2021). These organisations, which oversee essential resources aimed at supporting homeless populations, largely depend on volunteer efforts. For this reason, the following section will focus on the role of citizens, exploring public perceptions and their potential contributions in this context.

1.5 The role of public perceptions and prosocial attitudes and behaviors

Homelessness does not affect only those directly experiencing it, but in a broader sense, has implications for society as a whole. At the same time, the surrounding community can play a significant role in shaping the conditions that contribute to, or help alleviate, homelessness. Public attitudes about homeless individuals are particularly important, as community-based organisations often take on the responsibility of addressing the basic needs of vulnerable populations and implementing projects or services aimed at improving their living conditions. Furthermore, public perceptions and attitudes toward social issues influence how society responds to people facing hardship. The way homeless individuals are perceived can affect both their access to resources and the quality of interactions they experience within their communities. One relevant

example can be public stigma. Homeless people are often victims of stigmatization, intended as the process of attributing degrading or devaluing characteristics to a social category (Hogg, 2003). It was seen that even though homelessness was viewed publicly as a social issue that needs to be solved, homeless people face negative judgements or social stigma (Belcher & DeForge, 2012). Studies conducted on European countries show that people in a homelessness condition, particularly the ones who live on the streets, can face barriers to health due to stigmatization: perceived stigmatization can lead to not seek for help and access to health services (Busch-Geertsema et al., 2010; Reilly et al., 2022). In addition, homeless people can be excluded from job opportunities because homelessness is often considered as directly associated with drug abuse. Another disadvantage that can come from stigmatization is housing exclusion. Landlords and organisations offering assisted accommodation and social housing are sometimes hesitant to work with individuals who have experienced street homelessness. This hesitation often arises from the common belief that such individuals require intensive, ongoing care, resulting in an overly demanding relationship with a tenant. There is also concern that they might behave in disruptive or unusual ways. Furthermore, housing providers may worry that placing many formerly homeless individuals – especially those facing economic hardship – in the same neighborhood could disrupt the social and economic composition of the area. In some European Union countries, until a few years ago, sleeping on the streets was considered a legal offence – a situation that persists today to some extent with countries like Hungary still enforcing criminalising measures against homeless individuals (Busch-Geertsema et al., 2010; FEANTSA, 2024).

Analysing differences between countries, it emerges that public attitudes toward homelessness can vary (Toro et al., 2007). In particular, populations in countries like Italy, Germany, and Belgium tend to show greater support for compassionate and rights-based approaches, whereas less empathetic views are more common in the United Kingdom and the United States. For instance, Italian respondents scored higher than their American and British counterparts on measures related to economic support, social compassion, and recognition of public responsibility in addressing homelessness (Toro et al., 2007).

As we have seen, perceptions of homeless individuals can influence societal attitudes and responses to their situation. Addressing homelessness effectively requires the involvement of multiple stakeholders. The present work focuses specifically on the

participation of ordinary citizens – the broader public – and examines how they engage with and situate themselves in relation to homelessness.

A meaningful way to take part in addressing the issue is volunteering. Considering that many services which offer the fulfillment of basic needs for homeless people rely on the help of volunteers, volunteer work is a very important contribution. Across Europe, around 20% of the population engages in voluntary work annually. A recent poll revealed that one in four young Europeans takes part in structured volunteering initiatives each year. People of all ages and life paths contribute their time daily to support others or protect the environment, playing a role in fostering social cohesion and long-term sustainability (European Economic and Social Committee, 2022). Volunteering is one example of many possible helpful acts that a person can carry out to contribute to reducing the phenomenon. In general, it is important to understand and study why and how people decide to act for the cause, to take part in prosocial actions aimed at reducing the phenomenon or at offering aid to homeless people for their basic needs. Prosocial behaviours refer to intentional actions aimed at improving the well-being of others. These behaviours can take various forms; in the context of contributing to the reduction of a social phenomenon such as homelessness, relevant actions include volunteering, making donations, or supporting public policies through measures like increased taxation (Weinstein & Ryan, 2010).

The present chapter has defined homelessness and their determinant factors and described the conditions of homeless people mainly in the European and Italian landscape, setting of the present research. Finally, it provided a description of services and strategies to address this social issue and pointed out the role of people's perceptions of homeless people. With the aim of understanding what shapes the willingness of engaging in prosocial behaviours towards homeless people, the next chapter will present the antecedents of prosocial behaviours towards homeless and disadvantaged people.

Chapter 2.

Antecedents of prosocial behaviour toward homeless people

Understanding what drives individuals to act in ways that benefit others is essential for examining willingness to engage in efforts to reduce homelessness. This chapter introduces the psychological and social foundations of prosocial behavior. Prosocial behavior refers to voluntary actions intended to benefit others – including helping, donating, cooperating, and volunteering – and can be interpreted differently depending on the theoretical lens applied. For example, an intentionalist perspective defines prosociality by the actor’s motivation to improve someone else’s well-being, emphasising an altruistic will to help. In contrast, a consequentialist perspective focuses on behaviour’s cost-benefit structure: an action is prosocial if it benefits another person while imposing a cost on the actor. From a societal perspective, prosocial behavior is often framed in terms of social norms: acting in accordance with what society expects and values (Pfattheicher et al., 2022).

This chapter examines both prosocial behavior – actual helping actions – and prosocial intentions, which refer to individuals’ self-reported willingness to engage in helping acts. Although conceptually distinct, much of the existing literature relies on the measurement of prosocial intentions. This thesis focuses on understanding what leads individuals to help and what drives their intentions to engage in supportive actions toward people experiencing homelessness. The review of empirical studies therefore draws on findings related to both behavior and intentions, in order to provide a comprehensive understanding of the factors that facilitate or hinder civic engagement in the field of homelessness.

Prosociality towards homeless individuals is examined through four key categories of antecedents: education (measured as a proxy of social class), beliefs about the causes of homelessness, personal and familial experience, and exposure to homelessness. These factors are examined in relation to theoretical frameworks and

empirical findings that explore how and why individuals develop prosocial intentions. In particular, this chapter draws on *Attribution Theory* (Weiner, 1985), *Contact Theory* (Allport, 1954), and social cognitive models of class and power (Kraus et al., 2012) to explain how people interpret the causes of homelessness, perceive those affected, and translate these beliefs and perceptions into prosocial responses, whether intended or enacted.

2.1 Social class and educational level

This section explores how educational level – as an indicator for social class – is associated with individuals’ tendency to behave in ways that benefit others.

Education is a multifaceted construct that encompasses individuals’ experiences within formal schooling, shaping their behaviors, attitudes, and belief systems. It operates at both cultural and ideological levels (Phelan et al., 1995), transmitting dominant norms and values, while also serving a developmental function by supporting cognitive growth and socialisation processes (Luo et al., 2023; Moya & Alcañiz-Colomer, 2023). In social sciences, education is frequently treated as a component of socioeconomic status (SES) and, by extension, as a key determinant of social class (Korndörfer et al., 2015; Kraus et al., 2012; Moya & Alcañiz-Colomer, 2023; Piff et al., 2010). Indeed, educational attainment is routinely used alongside income and occupational prestige in composite SES measures, such as the MacArthur Scale of Subjective Socioeconomic Status (Kraus et al., 2012; Moya & Alcañiz-Colomer, 2023). In this context, education may serve not only as a way to improve one’s economic condition, but also as a marker of social status and material privilege. This section focuses on education as an indicator of social class, examining its relationship to expressions of willingness to help – particularly in relation to homelessness.

Although much research has explored how socioeconomic status (SES) relates to prosocial behavior, findings remain mixed. One line of evidence suggests that individuals from higher social classes are more likely to engage in prosocial actions such as donating, volunteering, and helping strangers. In a large-scale series of international studies, Korndörfer et al. (2015) observed that individuals from higher socioeconomic backgrounds were more inclined to engage in prosocial behaviors relative to their lower-

class counterparts. Specifically, they were more likely to donate to charitable causes and contributed a larger proportion of their household income, showed higher rates and frequency of volunteerism, demonstrated greater helpfulness in daily social interactions, and displayed higher levels of trust and trustworthiness in a point-allocation game. Further analyses detected a positive relationship between social class and prosocial behavior across all three indicators of social class: income, educational attainment, and occupational status.

A widely cited explanation for the greater prosocial tendencies observed among higher-status individuals is rooted in a consequentialist perspective (Pfattheicher et al., 2022). This view emphasises access to resources: individuals with greater financial means can more easily afford to be generous and are less burdened by the opportunity costs associated with helping others. In contrast, the perceived costs of helping others or donating money could be more elevated for individuals with less financial means. Research shows that the likelihood of engaging in prosocial behavior tends to decrease as the personal costs associated with such behavior increase. Accordingly, elevated costs of helping may diminish the propensity of individuals of lower socio-economic status to act prosocially (Korndörfer et al., 2015).

However, this narrative is challenged by a substantial body of research suggesting that individuals from lower social classes are more inclined to undertake prosocial actions and are in general more open to welcome and interact with other people compared to their upper-class counterparts.

Lower socioeconomic status is associated with diminished access to resources and social prestige (Piff et al., 2010), as well as greater exposure to instability in occupational and domestic environments, which can strain both economic security and emotional wellbeing (Piff & Robinson, 2017). Individuals from lower socio-economic backgrounds also report lower perceived control over life events and their outcomes, greater exposure to environmental stressors, and increased dependence on others (Piff et al., 2010; Piff & Robinson, 2017). These factors appear to foster a stronger outward social orientation, with lower-class individuals observed to be outwardly focused and to direct their attention to individuals around them (Piff & Robinson, 2017). This tendency has been supported by studies on lower-class individuals and patterns of visual attention. In an eye-tracking

study, participants who identified as belonging to a lower social class devoted significantly more visual attention to people within urban scenes than those who perceived themselves as higher class (Dietze & Knowles, 2016). Similarly, in a study involving brief interactions with strangers, participants from lower socioeconomic backgrounds (measured by self-reported income and education) displayed more nonverbal indicators of attentiveness and engagement, such as sustained eye contact and responsive listening. In contrast, higher-class participants were more likely to show behaviors indicative of disengagement, including manipulating nearby objects, averting their gaze, and checking their mobile phones (Kraus & Keltner, 2009). This increased attentiveness to others appears to translate into action. Several studies suggest that the heightened social sensitivity among lower-class individuals may help explain their greater tendency to engage in prosocial behaviors. Consistently with this view, and in contrast to cost-benefit theory, many studies have found that lower class individuals engage in more prosocial actions than their higher-class counterparts (Kraus et al., 2012; Piff et al., 2010; Piff & Robinson, 2017). For instance, a U.S.-based survey found that individuals with lower incomes contribute a greater proportion of their earnings to charitable causes than those with higher incomes (Toppe et al., 2002). Moreover, research conducted with children supports the view that individuals from lower socioeconomic backgrounds display stronger prosocial tendencies. In studies conducted in both the United States and China, children from lower-income households were more likely than their higher-income peers to give up small rewards such as prize tokens and stickers – for the benefit of friends or unknown peers (Piff & Robinson, 2017). On the same note, Piff et al.'s studies (2010) provided robust empirical support for the association between lower social class and increased prosocial behavior. Across a series of studies, they found that individuals from lower-class backgrounds consistently demonstrated greater generosity, trust, and responsiveness to others. In their first study, participants from lower socioeconomic backgrounds were more likely to allocate a greater number of points to an anonymous partner in an economic game rather than their higher-class counterparts, indicating greater generosity. In a second study, findings showed that when individuals were led to view themselves as occupying a subordinate socioeconomic position, they endorsed significantly more generous charitable givings. This suggests that prosocial orientations among individuals from lower social classes may be shaped not only by

material conditions but also by internalised perceptions of one's place within the social hierarchy.

Another study used a similar economic game involving point transfers and found that participants from lower socioeconomic backgrounds gave a greater proportion of points to their partner, reflecting higher levels of trust and prosocial tendencies. In the fourth study, participants were assigned tasks and paired with a partner who expressed signs of distress. Under these conditions, individuals from lower social classes were more likely to take on a larger share of the assigned tasks, seemingly in response to their partner's discomfort. This study pointed to an emotional explanation for class-based differences in helping behavior, highlighting the role of compassion as an emotional determinant driving individuals' willingness to engage in prosocial behaviors. This last study showed that when compassion was experimentally elicited – by encouraging participants to consider the needs of others – the gap in helping behavior across social classes significantly narrowed, with individuals from higher socioeconomic backgrounds displaying helping behaviors comparable to those of lower-class participants (Piff et al., 2010). These findings are consistent with prior research indicating that emotional states such as compassion and empathy enhance individuals' sensitivity to others' needs and contribute to motivating actions aimed at promoting their well-being (Batson & Shaw, 1991; see also Piff et al., 2010). The observation that compassion induction neutralised class-based disparities in prosocial responses suggests that these differences may not be attributable to an inherent divergence in prosocial inclinations. Rather, they appear to reflect unequal emotional baselines, with individuals from lower social classes displaying a greater predisposition toward compassion (Piff et al., 2010). This supports the view that prosociality is grounded in specific emotional processes – most notably, compassion and empathy (Batson & Shaw, 1991; Kraus et al., 2012; Lee et al., 2004).

Compassion – defined as “*a strong feeling of sympathy with another person's feelings of sorrow or distress, usually involving a desire to help or comfort that person*” (American Psychological Association, n.d., p. 219) – has been shown to vary across social hierarchies. Research indicates that individuals in positions of power tend to exhibit lower levels of compassion (Piff et al., 2010; van Kleef et al., 2008). For example, studies conducted by Stellar et al., (2012) found that, in response to others' suffering, individuals

from lower social class backgrounds reported feeling more compassion than those from higher social classes.

As noted above, empathy is also a key predictor of prosocial behaviour (Batson & Shaw, 1991; Kraus et al., 2012; Piff & Robinson, 2017; Wang et al., 2024).

Empathy can be defined as the ability to understand and share others' emotional and behavioral experiences, and it includes both cognitive and affective components (Kraus et al., 2012; Wang et al., 2024). While conceptually distinct, cognitive and affective components of empathy show positive correlations (Kraus et al., 2012; Wang et al., 2024). Empirical evidence suggests that individuals from lower socioeconomic backgrounds demonstrate higher levels of *empathic accuracy*. This ability represents the cognitive aspect of empathy, which reflects the capacity to accurately recognize and interpret others' emotional states (Kraus et al., 2012; Wang et al., 2024) and is found to be a commonly recognised antecedent of prosocial behavior (Kraus et al., 2012; Piff & Robinson, 2017). In one study, university staff members with only a high school education outperformed their college-educated counterparts in correctly recognising emotions from facial expressions (Kraus et al., 2012). Similarly, in a representative study, participants without a college degree were significantly more accurate than their college-educated counterparts in identifying emotional expressions based solely on photographs of individuals' eyes. Additionally, when processing emotionally rich narratives, lower-class individuals – identified through a composite index of household income and parental education – showed greater neural activation in brain regions associated with social cognition and mental state inference, compared to those from higher socioeconomic backgrounds (Piff & Robinson, 2017). Furthermore, Batson & Shaw (1991) found that higher levels of empathy were significantly associated with heightened helping tendencies – except in cases where feelings of overstress took over, resulting in decreased help. Similarly, Lee et al. (2004) showed that individuals who expressed more favorable emotional responses toward people experiencing homelessness – along with perceiving them as non-threatening and supporting policies that advocate for their rights and wellbeing – were more likely to donate money. In contrast, a lack of empathic concern was linked to a lower likelihood of donation. The relationship between empathy and social class also appears significant: individuals from lower social classes seem to show more empathetic ability than those belonging to higher social classes (Wang et al., 2024).

Beyond strictly emotional explanations for the heightened prosocial inclinations observed among individuals from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, alternative interpretations have been proposed. For instance, Piff and Robinson (2017) suggested that such behaviour may function as a response to adapt to environmental conditions characterised by uncertainty and threat. While individuals in higher social classes are less likely to be confronted with daily adversities in their social context and tend to perceive greater personal control, those in lower social positions may rely more heavily on interpersonal relationships to navigate frequent challenging circumstances. In this context, behaviours aimed at affiliating with others and enhancing their wellbeing likely serve to build and sustain interdependent support networks – critical sources of emotional and material aid during periods of vulnerability.

Lastly, Kraus and colleagues (2012) offer an interpretation of lower-status individuals' prosocial tendencies through a social cognitive theory about social class. According to this perspective the daily lives of individuals with disadvantaged socioeconomic conditions are affected by contextual constraints – such as living in unsafe neighbourhoods, holding precarious employment and facing limited access to education. These conditions reduce personal control and restrict possibilities for social opportunities. Building on these premises, the theory proposes that lower-status individuals develop a social-cognitive orientation grounded in *contextualism* – a worldview in which behaviour is understood as shaped primarily by external and uncontrollable forces. These forces may include structural factors (such as systemic inequality, inefficiencies in public services) – or anticipated social constraints (such as expecting to experience social bias or discrimination based on class). Consequently, individuals with this orientation are more likely to interpret actions through situational lenses rather than based on individual control, place greater attention on the perspectives and behaviors of others, and rely more heavily on contextual cues in interpreting social action. This theory also incorporates and endorses related hypotheses – namely, that lower-class individuals tend to exhibit more compassion and empathy and are more likely to attribute behaviour to external factors (Kraus et al., 2012). These propositions are endorsed by multiple studies cited above (Batson & Shaw, 1991; Lee et al. 2004; Piff et al., 2010; Stellar et al., 2012; van Kleef et al., 2008; Wang et al., 2024). Kraus et al.'s theory of social class also addresses individuals from higher social classes. Having access to abundant resources affords these

individuals greater decision-making autonomy and the ability to pursue personally meaningful goals (Johnson & Krueger, 2005; Lachman & Weaver, 1998), encouraging a focus on the self. Within this context, higher-class individuals are more likely to develop social-cognitive orientations rooted in a solipsistic perspective. Originating in philosophy, solipsism advances that an individual's mind constitutes the central reference point for understanding the external world, shaping both cognition and action in everyday life (Kraus et al., 2012).

In conclusion, when used as a proxy for social class, education offers valuable insights into broader dynamics of prosocial behavior and intention. While some studies associate higher rank levels with increased charitable giving and volunteering, often attributed to increased access to resources, a substantial body of research suggests that individuals from lower social backgrounds tend to exhibit stronger emotional alignment, compassion, and empathy – factors that foster prosocial behavior. This heightened social attunement appears to be rooted in their everyday experiences of vulnerability and interdependence, which foster stronger communal tendencies and affiliative behaviors. Theoretical frameworks such as Kraus' social cognitive perspective on social class help contextualise these differences, by linking contextual hardship to greater attention to others. As such, education not only reflects access to material privilege but also appears to shape individuals' worldviews, emotional orientations, and responsiveness to others. Understanding these dynamics can be useful for interpreting how class-based experiences influence the willingness to support vulnerable populations – such as people experiencing homelessness – and for informing strategies to foster inclusive civic engagement.

2.2 Forms of contact with homelessness: exposure and experience

This section examines two distinct antecedents of prosocial behavior toward homeless individuals: the experience of homelessness (direct or indirect) and the self-reported exposure to the phenomenon. Although both involve a certain level of contact with homelessness, they represent qualitatively different forms of interaction.

Experience refers to having lived through homelessness personally or having a close, sustained relationship with someone who has – such as a family member, friend, or acquaintance. Exposure, by contrast, refers to encountering homeless individuals in public spaces, such as in one’s neighborhood or on daily commutes. Exposure is typically visual or superficial and does not involve a personal relationship. Both forms of contact can be understood within the framework of *Contact Theory* (Allport, 1954), which suggests that different types of interaction with stigmatised groups elicit distinct psychological and behavioral outcomes.

2.2.1 Direct and indirect experience of homelessness

Direct and indirect experience with homelessness – such as having personally faced it or knowing someone close who has – can significantly shape attitudes and behaviors toward homeless individuals. In an international study involving participants from Italy, Belgium, United Kingdom, the United States and Germany, those who reported personal experience with homelessness exhibited higher levels of compassion towards homeless people compared to participants without such experience (Toro et al., 2007). A study by Smith and colleagues (2024) investigated whether people living in unstable housing conditions or with past experiences of homelessness held more positive attitudes toward people experiencing homelessness. The results revealed a positive association between both housing instability and prior experiences of homelessness and more favourable perceptions of homeless individuals. Specifically, the study found that participants living in insecure housing conditions were more likely to view homelessness as a circumstance beyond individual control. These individuals also expressed greater sympathy in their interactions with unhoused people. The findings suggest that individuals who are currently experiencing, have previously experienced, or are at risk of homelessness may be more inclined to challenge the discourse that attributes homelessness to personal failings.

In terms of prosocial behavior, a study by Tsai et al. (2019) found that participants with prior experience of homelessness expressed stronger endorsement for government initiatives aimed at assisting unhoused individuals, as well as greater confidence in the effectiveness of such measures to address the issue.

Regarding individuals' motivation to take an active role in addressing homelessness, it is worth mentioning a study by Marinucci and Riva (2025) employed virtual reality technology to simulate the lived experience of homelessness, enabling participants to adopt the perspective of an unhoused person. Compared to participants in the housed control condition, those who virtually embodied a person experiencing homelessness reported stronger feelings of social marginalisation, greater perceived threats to core psychological needs, and more intense negative emotional states. These responses were observed to correlate with decreased stigmatising attitudes toward homeless individuals and increased prosocial behavioral intentions, such as willingness to donate to charity. Importantly, these correlations remained stable at follow-up, with the 3D embodiment condition yielding more pronounced changes in both attitudes and behavioral intentions than the 2D condition. This suggests that a more vividly simulated experience of homelessness can foster stronger real-life intentions to help individuals experiencing homelessness.

With regard to indirect experiences of homelessness, *Intergroup Contact Theory* – originally developed by Allport (1954) – provides a valuable framework. The theory posits that interaction with members of a stigmatised group can lead to reductions in prejudice. Although originally conceptualised to explain intergroup dynamics in relation to racial and ethnic groups, this framework has since been increasingly applied to further contexts of marginalisation such as homelessness. The contact hypothesis further suggests that these interactions reduce perceived threat and inter-group anxiety, thereby fostering more positive attitudes (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006). In this context, cross-group friendships have been extensively studied. A large body of research across groups marked by cultural, social, racial, and ethnic differences indicates that individuals who form friendships with outgroup members are more likely to express sympathy and score low levels of prejudice (Pettigrew, 1998).

Similar findings have emerged from research on sexual orientation. A national survey on attitudes toward sexual minorities conducted by Herek and Capitano (1996) highlighted the crucial role of interpersonal contact in reducing stigma. Heterosexual participants who reported close personal relationships with gay men – characterised by emotional closeness, multiple connections, or direct disclosure – expressed significantly more favorable attitudes than those without such ties. These findings persisted over time

and extended to attitudes toward lesbians as well. The study also revealed a reciprocal effect: positive attitudes encouraged more intergroup relationships, which in turn further reduced prejudice. While focused on sexual orientation, these findings support Allport's contact hypothesis and suggest that close personal relationships with stigmatised groups can effectively reduce negative stereotypes and social distance – often a first step towards supportive behaviors.

Moreover, subsequent research indicates that indirect contact, such as having a friend or relative who has experienced homelessness, can counteract social stigma and reduce prejudice (Paolini et al., 2004). These experiences can thus serve as a "vicarious" form of contact.

2.2.2 Exposure to homeless people

While direct or indirect experience with homelessness involves meaningful or personal contact, exposure refers to more incidental or superficial encounters with homelessness in everyday environments. Drawing again from *Contact Theory* (Allport, 1954), the nature and quality of contact with stigmatised groups seem to influence attitudes and behaviors toward them. Whereas sustained, meaningful contact often reduces prejudice and fosters prosocial behavior, mere exposure may yield mixed effects, depending on factors such as perceived threat, social norms and personal characteristics (Pettigrew, 1998; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006). Exposure to homelessness typically occurs through repeated and frequent sightings of unhoused individuals in public spaces – such as on neighbourhood streets or transit routes. Although this form of contact lacks personal depth, it may nonetheless influence public attitudes and perceptions (Lee et al., 2010).

Drawing on the contact hypothesis, a number of studies suggest that contact with members of an outgroup correlates with reduced stigmatising attitudes toward them (Smith et al., 2024). For instance, an analysis of U.S. national survey data conducted by Link and colleagues (1995) revealed that individuals reporting more frequent weekly encounters with homeless people were more inclined to undertake helpful actions towards them, even when doing so involved a personal cost. Their responses reflected high levels of empathy and compassion, low support for measures that impose limitations on homeless individuals and a greater willingness to forfeit their compensation for participating in the study (Link et al., 1995). Conversely, some research highlights that

frequent exposure to homelessness – particularly through direct observation – may reach a threshold beyond which empathy declines, and avoidance behaviors increase. Additionally, media portrayals of homelessness, when not balanced by meaningful personal contact, can contribute to more negative attitudes toward homeless individuals (Lee et al., 2004).

Pre-existing attitudes appear to have an impact on the outcomes of contact with homelessness. In the United States, this dynamic is evident in the “Not In My Backyard (NIMBY)” phenomenon, which refers to the opposition of local residents to the establishment of homeless shelters in their area. NIMBY sentiments were found to intensify when residents voiced concerns about potential declines in property values, perceived threats to safety, or risks to public health. These objections appear tied to a deeper fear that the social stigma surrounding homelessness could symbolically or materially contaminate the neighborhood (Lee et al., 2010). These findings suggest that exposure to homelessness can foster more supportive attitudes, increased willingness to help and greater support for interventions – but they also highlight the impact of specific conditions and individuals’ pre-existing beliefs about homelessness in shaping these outcomes. A possible explanation for these mixed outcomes is provided by *Intergroup Contact Theory*. Allport (1954) originally proposed that contact between groups can reduce prejudice and stigma, but only under favorable conditions – such as equal status between groups, institutional support, and intergroup interactions based on cooperation (Pettigrew, 1998; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006). When these conditions are not met, the potential for positive outcomes may be diminished or even reversed (Lee et al., 2004; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006).

This section has examined both experience and exposure to homelessness as distinct factors in shaping attitudes, beliefs and prosocial inclinations towards homeless individuals. Direct and indirect experiences seem consistently associated with greater empathy, reduced stigma, and increased support for intervention. Exposure yields mixed outcomes depending on the quality of contact, context and prior beliefs. As *Intergroup Contact Theory* suggests, the potential for contact to reduce prejudice relies on the presence of specific, favourable conditions. Recognising the different ways in which people encounter homelessness offers valuable insight into how supportive attitudes and actions can be cultivated and fostered at the societal level.

2.3 Beliefs about the causes of homelessness

Another important antecedent of prosocial tendencies toward homeless individuals is how people interpret the causes of homelessness. These interpretations are closely tied to emotional reactions, social attitudes, and willingness to help (Družić Ljubotina et al., 2022; Santos-Olmo et al., 2024; Yúdica et al., 2021; Zucker & Weiner, 1993). In this context, the construct of *causal attributions* is used to describe the cognitive process by which individuals assign causes to social phenomena. When applied to issues such as poverty and homelessness, causal attributions reflect the frameworks individuals use to explain why some people experience economic hardship and housing instability. These attributions involve evaluations and judgments about the extent to which the causes of poverty are internal and dispositional characteristics (such as a lack of motivation or ambition) versus external and structural conditions (such as inadequate wages or systemic corruption). Such attributional tendencies influence whether responsibility is placed on the individual or the broader social environment (Yúdica et al., 2021).

This section examines how beliefs about the causes of homelessness shape public responses to individuals experiencing housing deprivation – both in terms of attitudes they elicit and the likelihood of engaging in prosocial behavior.

The way society explains the causes of homelessness can be relevant to how it responds to the issue. Public beliefs about what leads individuals to become homeless can have an influence in shaping attitudes, willingness to help, and support for interventions (Santos-Olmo et al., 2024; Yúdica et al., 2021). For instance, individuals who attribute homelessness to substance or alcohol use tend to hold stigmatising beliefs toward homeless people, often assuming they have a heightened propensity for criminal behavior and excessively rely on public assistance (Santos-Olmo et al., 2024). These negative attitudes often stem from individualistic attributions, which imply that people are responsible for their own homelessness. In contrast, structural causal attributions – which link homelessness to systemic factors such as economic inequality or lack of affordable housing – are associated with more positive attitudes. Housed individuals who support such explanations may demonstrate greater willingness to engage in supportive actions – such as offering employment or housing – compared to those who endorse individualistic

explanations, such as attributing homelessness to a lack of agency or unwillingness to work (Yúdica et al., 2021). Consistently, research revealed that individuals who explained homelessness in terms of structural or external causes were more likely to express feelings of pity toward people experiencing homelessness (Zucker & Weiner, 1993; Yúdica et al., 2021).

A study by Da Costa and Dias (2014) highlights differences in beliefs about the causes of homelessness between nations with different levels of economic prosperity. Conducted across 15 different European countries, the study revealed that people living in countries with more limited economic resources were more likely to attribute poor living and economic conditions to systemic injustices and societal failures. This study suggests a potential association between a country's level of economic development and the dominant explanatory frameworks its population adopts – indicating that economically constrained societies may be more attuned to structural or systemic interpretations of poverty and homelessness. Consistently, a substantial body of research on causal attribution for poverty suggests that individuals from higher socioeconomic backgrounds are more likely to hold poor individuals personally accountable for their disadvantaged circumstances. In contrast, those from lower social classes are more likely to attribute poverty to broader societal and systemic factors that impact on individuals (Yúdica et al., 2021; Družić Ljubotina et al., 2022).

Causal attributions regarding homelessness have also been identified as key antecedents of influencing prosocial responses toward people experiencing homelessness. According to Weiner's *Attribution Theory* (1985), individuals' willingness to help is influenced by how they interpret the causes of another person's need – particularly whether the individual is perceived as responsible for their situation and the degree of control they are believed to have over it. Their evaluation of specific circumstances also plays a role: the theory posits that these cognitive appraisals exert influence on the likelihood of engaging in helping behavior (Družić Ljubotina et al., 2022). In the context of help directed towards disadvantaged people, a study by Tagler & Cozzarelli (2013) examined the role of causal attributions in relation to support for direct help – aid provided personally by individuals – and indirect help – a form of support delivered by institutions. The study found that attributions regarding the causes of poverty tended to influence participants' decisions about allocating welfare resources. However,

these attributional beliefs did not significantly predict participants' self-reported intentions to volunteer or the number of hours they committed to volunteer, although correlations aligned with the hypothesised direction. These outcomes suggest that people's support for large-scale policy interventions may depend on whether they perceive that the recipient deserves help, while decisions about more personal or local forms of help appear less directly influenced by attributional reasoning.

Within the discourse on direct and indirect forms of help, the role of emotions emerges as particularly important. Research suggests a relationship between causal attributions and emotional responses, which may help explain their varying effects on different types of prosocial behavior. Both direct and indirect forms of prosocial behaviors are associated with structural attributions and emotions, but the strength of these relationships varies. Personal helping behaviour (such as direct aid and face-to-face assistance) appears to be more strongly predicted by emotions, particularly compassion and pity, than by attributional reasoning (Yúdica et al., 2021; Zucker and Weiner, 1993). These behaviours are also associated with emotional responses of empathy, compassion, and reduced anger (Yúdica et al., 2021). In contrast, support for institutional or governmental forms of assistance – such as welfare policies – is more directly linked to structural attributions and political ideology (Yúdica et al., 2021; Zucker & Weiner, 1993). The weaker connection with emotional responses may be due to the impersonal nature of government aid, which typically involves limited social proximity between the benefactor and the recipient. Consistent with earlier theoretical work (Weiner, 1985; Zucker & Weiner, 1993), affective processes tend to have a stronger influence in situations involving close social interactions, whereas cognitive appraisals – such as causal attributions – tend to play a more prominent role in distant, policy-oriented contexts (Yúdica et al., 2021; Zucker & Weiner, 1993). Overall, research shows that attributing poverty to structural factors is typically linked to positive emotional responses, whereas explanations emphasising individual responsibility and control tend to correlate with anger and aggressive tendencies (Yúdica et al., 2021).

Finally, some research suggests that there are many more variables that could influence individuals' ability to offer personal aid, like practical constraints such as time availability (Tagler & Cozzarelli, 2013).

In summary, beliefs about the causes of homelessness – commonly referred to as *causal attributions* – are found to be associated with different types of public attitudes and prosocial behaviors. Structural attributions tend to foster empathy and compassion, positive attitudes, and support for both personal and institutional aid, while individualistic attributions appear to be linked to stigma, anger, and reduced willingness to help. The research also distinguishes between direct, personal help and indirect, policy-based support, highlighting the complex interaction between cognition, emotion, and social behavior in responses to homelessness and poverty.

2.4 The Social Distance Theory of Power

The preceding sections explored four potential antecedents influencing individuals' willingness to engage in prosocial actions aimed at alleviating homelessness: social class, causal beliefs, and both direct experience and exposure to homelessness. Each of these factors has been shown to relate, to varying degrees, with individuals' motivation to contribute personally toward addressing the issue. The *Social Distance Theory of Power* (Magee & Smith, 2013) offers a framework that may help provide one possible explanation for these relationships. Drawing from *Construal Level Theory* (Trope & Liberman, 2010), this model seeks to understand how asymmetric levels of power influence social and emotional processes between individuals. Integrating several widely accepted definitions, the *Social Distance Theory of Power* conceptualises power as unequal access to and control over socially and materially valuable resources within society (Magee & Smith, 2013; Rucker & Galinsky, 2017).

According to this theory, differences in power between individuals or groups create asymmetries in *social distance* – the perceived psychological gap one feels in relation to another person or group. Specifically, those in higher power positions tend to experience greater psychological and social distance from others compared to individuals with less power (Magee & Smith, 2013).

Social distance has been conceptualised in various ways, including the extent to which individuals differentiate their identity from others, recognise differences between their own group and out-groups, and feel unfamiliarity with members of other groups. Magee and Smith build on this framework by emphasising perceived emotional closeness

as an additional dimension of social distance. According to the *Social Distance Theory of Power*, individuals with greater power are generally less motivated to form close social connections with others than those with lower power. This increased social distance is thought to arise from a reduced concern for others' feelings. High-power individuals tend to exhibit weaker empathic responses toward those who differ from them, and are more inclined to help when the recipient is someone with whom they share close interpersonal ties. They also tend to be less accurate in perceiving and understanding others' emotional states – a phenomenon referred to as *empathic accuracy* (Kraus et al., 2012; Wang et al., 2024).

Empirical evidence supports these claims. For example, individuals experimentally primed to feel powerful were significantly less accurate in identifying emotional content through facial expressions than those in a control group or primed to feel less powerful (Galinsky et al., 2006; see also Magee & Smith, 2013). In contrast, low-power individuals – who experience greater interdependence and motivation to affiliate with others – show enhanced empathic concern compared to high-power individuals.

Although social class and power are conceptually distinct constructs, they are often closely intertwined. Social class can shape an individual's perceived access to resources and control, which in turn influences their subjective sense of power. Drawing on this connection, scholars have suggested that theoretical frameworks developed to understand power can shed light on the psychological effects of social class (Rucker & Galinsky, 2017). Because power and status are embedded within the broader concept of social class, the *Social Distance Theory of Power* offers a valuable theoretical lens through which understand how individuals from different class backgrounds relate to more disadvantaged groups, such as people experiencing homelessness. This perspective is consistent with findings reviewed above, which indicate that individuals from higher social classes tend to exhibit lower levels of empathy than their lower-class counterparts (Kraus et al., 2012; Piff & Robinson, 2017; Wang et al., 2024). Another main implication of asymmetries in social distance and reduced motivation to connect is an imbalance in emotional experiences. Magee and Smith (2013) argue that high-power individuals are more likely to experience what they term *socially disengaging emotions* – such as anger – which are self-focused, whereas those with lower power are more inclined to feel

socially engaging emotions like compassion, which are oriented toward others. This asymmetry helps explain why individuals of higher social standing tend to show reduced compassion toward disadvantaged groups, including those experiencing homelessness – a pattern supported by the studies reviewed in paragraph 2.1 (Piff et al., 2010; Stellar et al., 2012; van Kleef et al., 2008).

Another core principle of the *Social Distance Theory of Power* is that individuals in positions of power tend to process information at a higher level of abstraction, which can heighten perceived *social distance*. One notable consequence of this abstract thinking is a greater reliance on stereotypes, which are simplified and generalised cognitive representations that encode assumptions about how members of a social group typically behave across various contexts (Judd & Park, 1993).

This perspective also offers insights into the role of indirect experiences with homelessness. From the standpoint of *Social Distance Theory of Power*, having close relationships with individuals who are currently or formerly homeless may reduce both the abstract perception of homelessness and the *social distance* associated with it. Magee and Smith (2013) argue that *empathic accuracy* and *empathic concern* are enhanced in the context of close relationships or perceived similarity with another individual. As such, meaningful indirect contact with homeless individuals may help counteract the distancing effects typically associated with social power.

This chapter examined the literature on how social class, personal and familial experience, exposure to homelessness, and beliefs about the causes of homelessness relate to individuals' willingness to engage in prosocial behavior. The majority of the reviewed studies suggest that individuals from lower social classes are generally more inclined to hold positive attitudes, express greater empathy and demonstrate a stronger willingness to engage in helping behaviors toward homeless individuals – for example, through charitable giving or volunteering – compared to their higher-class counterpart. In particular, holding structural attributions for the causes of homelessness is associated with increased support for prosocial actions, especially in the form of endorsing inclusive public policies. Similarly, direct experience with homelessness, as well as indirect experience through close relationships has been shown to positively influence willingness to help. These effects can be interpreted through the lens of both *Contact Theory* and the *Social Distance Theory of Power* (Kraus et al., 2012). Finally, exposure to homelessness

was found to increase compassion in some cases, but its effects appear to depend heavily on context and contact conditions (Allport, 1954). Taken together, these findings underscore the complex interplay between social, cognitive, and emotional factors in shaping public responses to homelessness.

This chapter laid the theoretical groundwork underlying the core variables of the present study. The next chapter presents the empirical investigation on the relationship between these factors and individuals' willingness to engage in supportive actions toward homeless people. It describes research objectives, methodology and results.

Chapter 3.

Empirical investigation

3.1 Objectives

The previous chapter has reviewed the existing literature on several psychological and social factors that shape individuals' responses to homelessness, with a particular focus on social class, causal beliefs, personal and indirect experience, and exposure. Drawing on theoretical frameworks such as Kraus et al.'s cognitive model of social class (2012), *Intergroup Contact Theory* (Allport, 1954; Pettigrew, 1998; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006) and the *Social Distance Theory of Power* (Magee & Smith, 2013), the chapter highlighted how these factors are associated with variations in empathy, attitudes toward homelessness, and willingness to engage in helping behaviours. Most of the literature reviewed suggests that individuals from lower social classes, as well as those who attribute homelessness to structural causes, tend to show a greater inclination to engage in prosocial behaviour. On a similar note, both direct experience of homelessness and indirect experience through close relationships appear to foster intentions to help, particularly when such encounters are perceived as meaningful. By contrast, incidental exposure to homelessness in public settings has shown mixed effects, also depending on whether the conditions for positive intergroup contact are fulfilled.

Against this backdrop, the present chapter presents the core empirical component of the research conducted and its findings.

The primary objective of this study is to explore how social background, causal beliefs about homelessness, and different types of contact with the phenomenon influence individuals' willingness to engage in prosocial behaviours aimed at addressing homelessness as a social issue. More specifically, the study examines the role of four core factors: education (as an indicator of social class); beliefs about the causes of homelessness (such as economic or health-related beliefs); and different types of contact with homelessness. These factors are analysed in relation to intentions to help homeless individuals, measured through the following behaviours: paying higher taxes to contrast

the phenomenon, volunteering, and supporting the establishment of homeless shelters in one's own neighbourhood.

This research represents an original contribution to the literature on homelessness by examining the influence of this specific set of variables on prosocial intentions toward homelessness. In addition, it seeks to contribute to a more context-sensitive understanding of these dynamics within the Italian context, where empirical research on such relationships remains limited.

Beyond its immediate aims, the research also aspires to enrich the broader discourse on civic and prosocial engagement toward disadvantaged groups, offering insights into how individuals from relatively privileged backgrounds relate to those in more precarious social conditions. In doing so, the study seeks to deepen our understanding of the psychological processes that underlie support for initiatives addressing homelessness. It also aims to contribute empirical evidence to the growing body of literature at the intersection of social psychology, socioeconomic inequality, and the public's orientation toward social intervention and policy-relevant action in the Italian context.

3.2 Procedure

This cross-sectional study draws on data from the *Homeless as Unfairness (HOME_EU)* project, funded by the European Union under the Horizon 2020 programme. As part of this initiative, a standardised questionnaire was administered across eight European countries (France, Ireland, the Netherlands, Portugal, Spain, Poland, Switzerland, and Italy), collecting data on participants' attitudes, experiences, knowledge, and preferences regarding homelessness. The survey was conducted via telephone interviews, using both landlines and mobile phones, between March and December 2017. Interviews were facilitated through Computer-Assisted Telephone Interviewing (CATI) software. Prior to participation, respondents were briefed on the aims of the study, the use of the data collected, and the anonymity of their responses. They were then asked to provide verbal consent and were reminded of their right to withdraw from the interview at any point. Each participating country aimed to recruit a sample of

2,500 individuals to ensure at least 700 completed interviews. Participants were randomly selected and were all adults aged 18 years or older.

The University of Aix-Marseille, that was responsible for the Work Package on citizens' attitudes, gave ethics approval for this study through their Ethics Committee (reference number: 2016-01-02-01).

3.3 Participants

The present study focuses specifically on the Italian sample, which included a total of 713 participants. However, only the data from the 636 respondents with complete and valid information for the key variables of interest were included in the description and the analyses.

The sample of 636 participants is fairly balanced in terms of gender, with 50.5% identifying as male. The participants' average age was 47.95 years ($SD = 15.0$), ranging from 19 to 84 years old. Regarding education, 1.9% of the 636 respondents reported having completed primary school, and 18.9% had finished middle school. Additionally, 7.4% of participants who provided a valid response had attended but not completed high school, while 28.8% had obtained a high school diploma. A further 15.4% reported completing a 2-year higher education programme after high school. Finally, 12.7% had obtained a bachelor's degree (or an equivalent qualification) and 14.5% reported a master's degree as their highest level of education. Compared to national data, the sample appears more highly educated, with fewer participants having only lower secondary education and more holding tertiary qualifications (ISTAT, 2017). While this comparison provides a general indication, national statistics refer specifically to individuals aged 25–64, so they are not directly relied upon to assess the representativeness of the present sample.

Respondents were also asked to report their annual household income. However, this question was answered by only 446 participants. The majority of those who responded (42.2%) reported earning less than €5,000 annually. An additional 17.9% fell within the €15,000–€20,000 bracket, and 16.4% reported earnings between €20,000 and €30,000. Only a small minority reported higher income levels, with less than 2% earning more than €50,000. Compared to official national data (ISTAT, 2018), the reported

income levels are considerably lower, suggesting that the sample ($n = 446$) is not representative of the Italian population in terms of income levels.

Respondents who declared to have done volunteering in the past are 86 (13.5 %) out of 636 respondents.

Variable	Mean (SD)	Min	Max
Age (years)	47.9 years (15.0)	19	84

Table 1: Age of participants.

Variable	Category	Frequence	Percentage
Gender	Male	321	50.5%
	Female	315	49.5%
Social class (educational level)	Primary school	12	1.9%
	Middle school	120	18.9%
	High school	47	7.4%
	High school diploma	183	28.8%
	Higher education	98	15.4%
	Bachelor's / equivalent	81	12.7%
	Master's degree	92	14.5%
	Did not go to school	3	0.5%
	Total	636	100%
Annual income	< 5,000	188	42.2%
	€5,000 – €10,000	21	4.7%
	€10,000 – €15,000	28	6.3%
	€15,000 – €20,000	80	17.9%
	€20,000 – €30,000	73	16.4%
	€30,000 – €40,000	37	8.3%
	€40,000 – €50,000	12	2.7%

	> €50,000	7	1.5%
	Total	446	100%
	Other / Not specified	190	-
Past volunteering	Done	86	13,5%
	Total	636	100%

Table 2: Gender, educational level and annual income of participants.

3.4 Measures

This section outlines the variables included in the present study and describes how each was measured and operationalised. It includes the dependent variable – *intentions to help* – alongside the independent variables – *social class (educational level)*, *exposure, personal and indirect experience*, and *causal beliefs about homelessness*. Finally, age, gender, and prior volunteering experience were included as control variables. For each, this section specifies the original survey items used, the coding procedures applied, and any composite measures created.

3.4.1 Dependent variables

Intentions to help

The dependent variable, *intentions to help*, was created by summing three dichotomous items assessing participants' willingness to engage in prosocial actions towards homeless people. These items were adapted from Tompsett and Toro's questionnaire (Tompsett et al., 2006) and ask: "To reduce the phenomenon of homeless people would you...": "Pay more taxes?", "Do volunteering?", and "Have a dormitory for homeless people near your house?". Responses were recoded into binary values (0 = No, 1 = Yes), and the three items were summed to create an index ranging from 0 to 3 (no prosocial intentions endorsed) to 3 (all prosocial intentions endorsed). Internal consistency among the items was evaluated through Pearson correlations, which supported the decision to compute a composite score.

Specifically, paying more taxes was significantly correlated with both volunteering ($r = .20, p < .01$) and support for having a dormitory nearby ($r = .32, p <$

.01); in turn, volunteering was also strongly correlated with support for having a dormitory nearby ($r = .48, p < .01$).

3.4.2 Independent variables

Social class (educational level)

Educational level – as a proxy variable for social class – was included in the analysis as an independent variable. It was originally measured on an 11-point Likert scale and subsequently recoded into 8 categories ranging from 0 to 7. The value 0 includes individuals who reported never having attended school. Values from 1 to 7 indicate progressively higher levels of formal education, with 1 indicating completion of primary (elementary) school, and 7 corresponding to a master’s degree, PhD, or four or more years of postgraduate study.

Exposure to homeless people

The indicator of participants’ exposure to homelessness was measured through a composite index. It was calculated by averaging the scores from the two exposure items. The first item asked participants to estimate the presence of homeless people in their local area on a four-point scale (adapted from Eurobarometer, 2010). The second item, adapted from Tompsett and Toro (2006), assessed direct exposure by asking respondents how many different homeless individuals they typically encountered in a week, also on a four-point scale (1 = none, 4 = more than 10).

To align both items in the same direction, the item about perceived presence of homelessness in one’s local area was reverse-coded so that in both items, higher scores reflected greater exposure. The two items showed a strong, significant correlation ($r = .61, p < .001$), supporting their aggregation into a single index. The resulting composite variable ranged from 1 to 4, with higher scores indicating greater overall exposure to homelessness.

Experience of homelessness: personal and familial experience

Respondents’ direct and indirect experiences with homelessness were assessed using two binary items. The first measured personal experience (“Have you ever been

homeless?”), while the second assessed relational experience (“Has it ever happened that a member of your family, a friend, or an acquaintance was homeless?”). Both items were adapted from Tompsett and Toro (2006) and were preceded by a shared definition of homelessness, based on the ETHOS typology, referring to individuals who are either roofless or houseless (Edgar et al., 2007). Responses to both items were recoded into dichotomous format (0 = No, 1 = Yes), and non-responses were treated as negative. Since the two items were only moderately correlated ($r = .30$, $p < .01$), they were kept as separate variables in the analysis to distinguish between different types of lived experience with homelessness.

Beliefs about the causes of homelessness

Beliefs about the causes of homelessness were assessed using a set of items adapted from the Eurobarometer (2010). Participants were presented with a list of 11 possible causes – and three open-ended "Other" options – and were asked to select up to three that they believed most contributed to homelessness. Each response was recoded into a dichotomous format (0 = No, 1 = Yes). The list of causes included: *job loss*, *insufficient income*, *housing loss due to a catastrophic event*, *excessive debt*, *physical illness or disability*, *addiction*, *separation* – which includes divorce or bereavement –, *mental health issues*, *lack of access to social support services*, *illegal immigration*, and *personal choice*. These items enabled an analysis of how respondents attribute responsibility for homelessness. Each belief about the causes was included in the analyses as a separate variable.

3.4.3 Control variables

Age and Gender

Age and gender were included in the regression model as control variables (covariates) to account for their potential influence on the dependent variable: *intentions to help*.

Volunteering service

Previous volunteering experience was also included as a control variable (Dawson et al., 2019). Adapted from Tompsett & Toro (2006), this item asked respondents whether they had volunteered in the past year in a charity or nonprofit organisation supporting homeless individuals (response options: yes/no). From a methodological standpoint, prior engagement in volunteering may influence both intentions to help and attitudes towards homeless people, warranting its inclusion in the analysis.

3.5 Data analysis

All statistical analyses for this study were conducted using R software. Descriptive statistics were computed for the sample considered and for each variable included in the study. For the variables included in the regression model, bivariate correlations were computed using Pearson's correlation coefficient to explore associations between predictors and the outcome variable. Subsequently, a linear regression analysis was performed to assess the relationship between the dependent variable – intentions to help – and four key independent variables: *social class (educational level)*, *exposure to homelessness*, *personal and familial experience with homelessness*, and *beliefs about the causes of homelessness*. The results of these analyses are presented in the next section and discussed in the final chapter.

3.6 Results

This section presents the results of the statistical analyses conducted for the study. It includes descriptive statistics, bivariate correlations, and the outcomes of the linear regression model.

3.6.1 Descriptive statistics

This section presents the descriptive statistics for the key variables examined in the study, including *intentions to help*, *exposure to homelessness*, *personal and familial experience*, and *beliefs about the causes of homelessness*.

Intentions to help

The variable *intentions to help* captures participants' willingness to support individuals experiencing homelessness by endorsing up to three prosocial actions. The mean score was 1.16 ($SD = 1.07$), indicating a generally low to moderate level of willingness to engage in helping behaviours. In terms of distribution, 232 participants (36.5%) expressed no intention to carry out any of the proposed actions, 155 (24.4%) endorsed one action, 163 (25.6%) endorsed two, and 86 participants (13.5%) endorsed all three.

Exposure to homelessness

Across the total sample of 636 participants, the mean score was 2.31 ($SD = 0.93$), indicating a moderate level of exposure to homelessness. The most commonly reported values were 2.50 (22.0%) and 2.00 (21.9%), followed closely by 1.00 (21.7%). Fewer participants reported higher levels of exposure: 11% scored 3.00, 11.6% scored 3.50, and 7.7% reached the maximum value of 4.00. Only 4.1% of the sample reported a score of 1.50. These findings suggest that, while a majority of participants experience low to moderate levels of exposure to homelessness, there is a non-negligible portion of the sample that reports relatively high levels of contact with the phenomenon.

Personal Experience

All 636 participants provided valid responses. The mean score was 0.06 ($SD = 0.23$), and the median was 0.00, indicating that personal experience with homelessness was uncommon in the sample. Specifically, 600 participants (94.3%) reported never having been homeless, while 36 participants (5.7%) indicated that they had experienced homelessness at some point in their lives.

Familial Experience

All 636 participants provided valid responses about whether a close contact had experienced homelessness. The average score was 0.09 ($SD = 0.28$), with a median of 0.00, indicating that most participants did not report such experience. Specifically, 579 respondents (91%) reported no close contact with someone who had been homeless, while 57 participants (9%) indicated that someone close to them had experienced homelessness.

Beliefs about the causes of homelessness

Variables	Frecuence	Percentage% yes
Belief that the cause of homelessness is:		
Job loss	346	54.4
Insufficient income	163	25.6
Housing loss due to a catastrophic event	27	4.2
Excessive debt	93	14.6
Physical illness or disability	57	9.0
Addiction	284	44.7
Separation or divorce	165	25.9
Having a mental disorder	74	11.6
Lack of access to social support services	62	9.7
Illegal immigration	198	31.1
Personal choice	59	9.3

Table 3: Frequency and percentages of beliefs about the causes of homelessness.

Participants were asked to indicate which factors they believed could explain why people become homeless. All 636 participants provided valid responses. The most frequently endorsed cause was job loss, cited by 346 participants (54.4%; $M = 0.54$, $SD = 0.50$). This was followed by addiction ($n = 284$, 44.7%; $M = 0.45$, $SD = 0.50$) and illegal

immigration ($n = 198, 31.1\%; M = 0.31, SD = 0.46$). Other moderately endorsed causes included separation or divorce ($n = 165, 25.9\%; M = 0.26, SD = 0.44$), insufficient income ($n = 163, 25.6\%; M = 0.26, SD = 0.44$), and excessive debt ($n = 93, 14.6\%; M = 0.15, SD = 0.35$). Less frequently endorsed causes included mental illness ($n = 74, 11.6\%; M = 0.12, SD = 0.32$), lack of access to support services ($n = 62, 9.7\%; M = 0.10, SD = 0.30$), personal choice ($n = 59, 9.3\%; M = 0.09, SD = 0.29$), and physical illness or disability ($n = 57, 9.0\%; M = 0.09, SD = 0.29$). The least commonly endorsed factor was loss of housing due to a catastrophic event, selected by only 27 participants ($4.2\%; M = 0.04, SD = 0.20$).

3.6.2 Correlations between study variables

This section presents the results of bivariate correlations between each predictor and the dependent variable, intentions to help.

Variables	Intentions to help
Gender (F)	0.04
Age	-0.07
Volunteer service in the past year	-0.03
Social class (educational level)	0.09*
Personal experience of homelessness	0.19**
Familial experience of homelessness	0.14 **
Exposure to homelessness	-0.21**
Belief that the cause of homelessness is:	
Job loss	0.26**
Insufficient income	0.14**
Housing loss due to a catastrophic event	0.06
Excessive debt	0.04
Physical illness or disability	0.10*
Addiction	-0.08
Separation	0.18**
Mental health issues	-0.03
Lack of access to social support services	0.00

Illegal immigration	-0.30**
Personal choice	0.04

Table 4: Pearson correlation index between independent and dependent variables.

* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level.

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level.

A preliminary bivariate correlation analysis was conducted to explore the relationships between the dependent variable *intentions to help* and the independent and control variables under investigation.

Regarding the three control variables – *gender*, *age* and *volunteer service in the past year* –, no association was found with the outcome variable.

As for the independent variables, a weak positive correlation was found between *social class (educational level)* and *intentions to help* ($r = .09, p < .05$). Both personal experience ($r = .19, p < .01$) and indirect experience with homelessness ($r = .14, p < .01$) were positively associated with a greater willingness to engage in prosocial actions. In contrast, *exposure to homelessness* was negatively correlated with intentions to help ($r = -.21, p < .01$).

With regard to *beliefs about the causes of homelessness*, several attributional beliefs showed positive correlations with intentions to help. The strongest association was found for the belief that job loss is a cause of homelessness ($r = .26, p < .01$), followed by the belief in separation or divorce ($r = .18, p < .01$), insufficient income ($r = .14, p < .01$), and illness or disability ($r = .10, p < .05$). Other attributions – such as excessive debt, loss of one’s home, or one’s own choice – were not associated with *intentions to help*. As well as the belief that mental health issues cause homelessness and the belief that homelessness is caused by addiction did not show any correlations with the outcome variable. Instead, the belief that illegal immigration is a cause of the phenomenon was negatively correlated with prosocial intentions toward homelessness ($r = -.30, p < .01$). Finally, no significant association was observed for the belief that homelessness stems from a lack of social support or services ($r = .00$). These results offer an initial overview of the direction and strength of associations between the predictors and prosocial intentions, to be further explored in the subsequent regression analysis.

3.6.3 Regression analysis

This section reports the results of a linear regression analysis which examines the relationship between the independent variables, control variables, and the dependent variable, intentions to help. Regression analysis allows for the assessment of the specific contribution of each predictor to the outcome variable, while statistically controlling for the influence of all other variables in the model. Standardized regression coefficients (β) are presented alongside their corresponding p -values and the model's coefficient of determination (R^2), providing an overview of the strength and significance of each predictor.

Independent variable	β	p-value
Gender (F)	0.05	0.16
Age	-0.09	0.02
Volunteer service in the past year	-0.03	0.47
Social class (educational level)	0.11	0.00
Exposure to homelessness	-0.14	0.00
Personal experience of homelessness	0.13	0.00
Familial experience of homelessness	0.10	0.00
Belief that the cause for homelessness is:		
Job loss	0.18	0.00
Insufficient income	0.09	0.01
Housing loss due to a catastrophic event	0.07	0.05
Excessive debt	0.03	0.42
Physical illness or disability	0.10	0.01
Addiction	-0.02	0.51
Separation	0.11	0.01
Mental health issues	0.02	0.52
Lack of access to social support services	0.04	0.31
Illegal immigration	-0.14	0.00
Personal choice	0.00	0.81

Table 5: Results of linear regression model with standardized coefficients (β)

A multiple linear regression analysis was conducted to examine the extent to which demographic factors, personal and familial experiences, exposure to homelessness, and causal beliefs predicted participants' *intentions to help* homeless individuals. The model included 18 independent variables and accounted for approximately 20.4% of the variance in the dependent variable ($R^2 = .20$). The overall model was statistically significant, with a residual standard error of 0.95.

To better understand the relative influence of each predictor on participants' intentions to help homeless individuals, a linear regression analysis was conducted using standardised coefficients.

The results show that several predictors are associated with *intentions to help*. Notably, the strongest positive association emerged in relation to personal experience of homelessness ($\beta = 0.26$), followed by familial experience ($\beta = 0.18$), suggesting that both direct and indirect personal involvement with homelessness is associated with higher willingness to engage in supportive action. Among the belief-based variables, the perception of job loss as a cause of homelessness showed a positive association ($\beta = 0.21$), followed by beliefs in separation ($\beta = 0.15$), insufficient income ($\beta = 0.14$), and illness ($\beta = 0.13$). These results suggest that individuals who attribute homelessness to structural or life-related factors tend to report higher levels of prosocial intentions. In contrast, exposure to homeless individuals in public spaces was negatively associated with intentions to help ($\beta = -0.15$), indicating that frequent but impersonal encounters with homelessness may correspond to lower support for prosocial engagement. Educational level, conceptualized as a proxy for social class, was positively associated with intentions to help ($\beta = 0.11$), supporting the idea that higher educational attainment, as in higher social rank, may relate to increased civic engagement. Finally, the belief that homelessness is caused by illegal immigration showed a negative association with intentions to help ($\beta = -0.15$). Other predictors, including age, gender, past volunteering experience, and additional causal beliefs (e.g., addiction, mental illness, personal choice), showed no association with prosocial intentions in this model.

Chapter 4.

Discussion of results

4.1 Main findings and interpretations of results

This study examined certain social and psychological factors that may influence individuals' willingness to engage in prosocial behaviours toward people experiencing homelessness. This thesis originates from an interest in understanding the processes underlying individuals' intentions to contribute to addressing homelessness and supporting people living in such conditions.

While there is extensive literature on attitudes toward poverty and marginalised groups, relatively few studies have simultaneously explored the influence of social class (education), exposure, personal or relational experience, and causal beliefs on helping intentions – particularly within the Italian context and with a representative sample. By integrating these dimensions, this thesis aims to offer a more holistic understanding of the factors shaping prosocial engagement, thereby contributing to an underexplored area of research.

The empirical investigation focused on the dependent variable of helping intentions, operationalized as individuals' willingness to engage in three forms of prosocial behaviour aimed at reducing homelessness: supporting to pay higher taxes, volunteering for related initiatives, and accepting the presence of a homeless shelter in their residential area. The analysis explored the extent to which these intentions were associated with four key factors: social class – measured through participants' level of education; exposure to homelessness in one's environment; personal or familial experience with homelessness, and beliefs about the causes of homelessness.

The regression analysis revealed that higher educational attainment – used to measure social class – was moderately associated with stronger intentions to help homeless individuals, while greater exposure to homelessness showed a negative association. The most robust predictor was personal experience of homelessness, followed closely by having a close relationship with someone who had experienced it.

Among causal beliefs, attributing homelessness to job loss was most strongly linked to prosocial intentions. Other significant positive predictors included beliefs that homelessness results from relationship breakdown, insufficient income, or physical illness. In contrast, attributing homelessness to illegal immigration was associated with lower intentions to help. Finally, age showed a modest negative relationship, with older individuals expressing slightly lower willingness to engage in helping behaviors.

Some of these findings were in line with the literature reviewed in chapter two – especially those concerning personal and familial experience – while others deserve a deeper discussion.

These findings address the main objective of this thesis by offering an overview of the relationships between key factors and individuals' intentions to help people experiencing homelessness.

4.1.1 The role of social class and education

This thesis found that attaining a higher level of education is positively associated with stronger intentions to help individuals experiencing homelessness.

In the present study, educational level was used as an indicator of social class, based on the premise that a higher educational level corresponds to belonging to a higher social rank (Korndörfer et al., 2015; Kraus et al., 2012; Moya & Alcañiz-Colomer, 2023; Piff et al., 2010). This methodological choice is supported by numerous studies that have used educational level as an indicator of social class within composite measures of socioeconomic status (SES), reflecting the common practice in the literature where social class is assessed through both economic and educational indicators. Importantly, some studies have assessed social class using either education or income as indicators, given the correlation often observed between the two (Moya & Alcañiz-Colomer, 2023). Building on this rationale, the results of this thesis suggest that belonging to a higher social class is modestly associated with a greater intention to engage in prosocial actions addressing homelessness.

While the effect size was small, findings suggest a link between education, as an indicator of social class, and prosocial tendencies and civic engagement. This result is in contrast with the majority of the studies found and gathered in chapter two – which suggested a link between low social class and prosociality. On the other hand, this effect

is consistent with other research showing that individuals with higher social status tend to engage more in helping behaviours. A commonly cited explanation for this is *the cost-benefit hypothesis* (Pfattheicher et al., 2022), which proposes that individuals with greater resources face fewer constraints and can more easily support others through donations, volunteering, or prosocial behaviours in everyday interactions (Korndörfer et al., 2015).

However, the relationship between social class, education, and prosocial intentions appears to be more complex. Preliminary analyses conducted for this study showed no association between income and educational level, and income was not found to correlate with prosocial intentions. Additionally, the income data collected in this study were not fully representative of the broader population, as they deviated substantially from official national income distributions (ISTAT, 2018). This lack of representativeness further justified the methodological decision to exclude income from the primary analyses, thereby focusing solely on education as a proxy for social class. Given the absence of a significant relationship and the limitations of the income data, the cost-benefit explanation – which emphasises the availability of material resources – may not directly apply to education. This suggests that the association between education and prosocial intentions observed in this study may be better explained by factors intrinsic to the educational experience itself.

Education is a rich construct, and findings in the literature are mixed. Some studies report that higher education is associated with increased conservatism (Gelepithis & Giani, 2022), while others suggest that it is linked to openness and progressive values (Isen et al., 2024). The present research appears to align with the latter stream of findings, supporting the idea that higher levels of education are associated with stronger prosocial intentions. The divergent findings across studies suggest that education should not be treated as a uniform or monolithic construct.

It is also plausible that educational experiences vary significantly across academic disciplines. For instance, students in the Italian university system – particularly within the humanities and social sciences – may be exposed to critical perspectives on structural inequality and themes of social justice. Such exposure may foster more inclusive attitudes toward marginalised groups and strengthen prosocial inclinations to support individuals within these populations. Differences across fields of study may therefore shape students' values in meaningful ways or attract individuals who already hold similar orientations.

In a similar vein, the university experience may vary across institutions. Some Italian universities, for example, host large numbers of international students and promote multicultural learning environments that offer students opportunities to engage with diverse populations and worldviews, broadening their perspectives and fostering greater social awareness.

The present findings suggest that, in the Italian context, social class – measured through educational attainment – is modestly associated with a greater willingness to support individuals experiencing homelessness. Although no causal claims can be made, this association highlights the need to further explore education not as a monolithic variable, but as a multidimensional domain – comprising field of study, institutional characteristics, ideological exposure, and values – that constitutes a component of social class. These components may each play a role in shaping students' beliefs, attitudes, and prosocial orientations.

4.1.2 The complex effects of exposure

In this study, exposure appears to play a different role. Regularly encountering homeless individuals or living in a neighborhood with a higher visible presence of homelessness was associated with decreased intentions to act in a prosocial manner. This suggests that individuals who frequently observe homelessness in their environment may not necessarily respond with increased empathy or willingness to help (Lee et al., 2004). These findings do not fully match previous research on exposure to homelessness and prosociality, which has produced mixed results. On the one hand, some studies suggest that frequent exposure – such as regularly seeing homeless individuals in one's environment, even without close interaction – can promote prosocial behaviour (Link et al., 1995).

On the other hand, exposure – superficial contact lacking closeness or meaningful interaction – does not fulfill the conditions outlined in Allport's *Intergroup Contact Theory*, which identifies key criteria for positive intergroup outcomes (Allport, 1954; Lee et al., 2004; Pettigrew, 1998; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006). A similar argument can be made using the *Social Distance Theory of Power* (Magee & Smith, 2013), which posits that close relationships can reduce social distance between individuals occupying different positions of power. Repeated exposure without meaningful interaction may also reinforce

pre-existing negative attitudes – such as prejudice and stigma – thereby reducing the likelihood of prosocial behaviour. In such cases, stereotypes may be strengthened, and the perceived psychological distance from homeless individuals may grow.

In summary, the effects of exposure to homelessness are complex and not straightforward. While familiarity can reduce stigma, these findings caution against assuming that mere visibility fosters empathy. In some cases, it may instead reinforce social distance, particularly when there are no structured opportunities for meaningful contact.

4.1.3 The impact of personal and indirect experience

Personal and indirect experiences with homelessness were positively associated with participants' intentions to help, with both types of experience showing positive relationships with prosocial intentions.

The strongest association with prosocial intentions emerged for those who had experienced homelessness firsthand. This finding is consistent with prior research showing that personal experience of homelessness significantly predicts one's willingness to contribute to its reduction (Marinucci & Riva, 2025; Tsai et al., 2019). Drawing on research into empathy, scholars have found that empathic responses are often associated with a greater likelihood of helping behaviours (Batson & Shaw, 1991; Lee et al., 2004). It is therefore plausible that individuals who have personally faced homelessness may empathize more readily with those currently experiencing it, having lived through similar circumstances.

Furthermore, Magee and Smith (2013), authors of the *Social Distance Theory of Power*, argue that perceiving similarity with another person enhances empathic accuracy and concern, both of which are positively associated with prosocial behaviour (Batson & Shaw, 1991; Lee et al., 2004).

A similar pattern is observed for indirect experiences: individuals with close relationships to someone who has experienced homelessness also tend to express a stronger willingness to help. This finding supports Allport's (1954) *Intergroup Contact Theory*, which posits that meaningful interactions – such as friendships – with marginalised individuals reduce prejudice and foster positive engagement. It is also consistent with studies suggesting that indirect contact, such as knowing a friend or family

member who has experienced homelessness, can contribute to reducing stigma (Paolini et al., 2004).

Additionally, the *Social Distance Theory of Power* (Magee & Smith, 2013) suggests that close, personal relationships and personal involvement between individuals who hold different levels of power – such as housed and homeless people – can diminish the effects of power disparities. This can narrow social distance and challenge abstract stereotypes, creating conditions for empathy to arise and, in turn, increase the likelihood of prosocial behaviour.

4.1.4 The influence of causal beliefs about homelessness

The present findings indicate that causal beliefs about homelessness are differentially associated with individuals' willingness to help. While some attributions showed no significant link to prosocial intentions, others emerged as significant predictors, underscoring the potential influence of belief systems on responses to social issues.

Participants who endorsed structural explanations – such as job loss or separation – were more likely to express a willingness to help homeless individuals. Conversely, those who attributed homelessness to more individualistic and stigmatising causes – such as illegal immigration – reported lower levels of prosocial intention.

These results are partially consistent with *Attribution Theory* (Weiner, 1985), which posits that individuals' attitudes and behaviours are influenced by how they explain the causes of others' circumstances. Structural attributions assign responsibility to systemic or external factors, while dispositional attributions place blame on the individual. The latter tends to support social distancing and reduce prosocial engagement, often reinforcing stigma (Družić Ljubotina et al., 2022; Feagin, 1972; Yúdica et al., 2021). The finding that structural causes such as job loss and family breakdown were found as positively associated with intentions to help suggests that people are more inclined to offer support when homelessness is seen as the result of external, uncontrollable events. This reinforces the value of public narratives that frame homelessness in systemic rather than individualistic terms.

However, the results reveal a more nuanced picture. The belief that individuals become homeless due to job loss was not only one of the most frequently endorsed

explanations among respondents, but also showed the strongest and most significant association within the entire model. Yet, when considered through the lens of *Attribution Theory*, this economic causal belief occupies an ambiguous position: while job loss can be interpreted as a structural factor – resulting from situational and external circumstances – it can also be viewed as the consequence of personal actions, such as being dismissed due to individual behaviour or choosing to leave a job. This ambiguity extends to other causal beliefs. For example, attributing homelessness to undocumented immigration is linked to a lower willingness to help. While illegal immigration has a structural dimension – driven by poverty, conflict, or limited opportunities – it can be seen as an individual fault, perceived as a personal choice and frequently associated with criminality and social stigma (Larchanché, 2012; see also Brouwer et al., 2017).

Based on these results, it is plausible that illegal immigration is perceived as an individual causal attribution – implying that individuals are personally responsible for their condition of homelessness. A positive and significant association also emerged for another economic-related causal belief: having insufficient income. Like job loss, this attribution may be viewed both structurally – as a reflection of economic inequality – and individually, as a consequence of poor financial management or choices. Higher intentions to help were also significantly associated with attributing homelessness to separation or divorce – an explanation typically regarded as situational and external. Similarly, physical illness or disability emerged as a significant predictor of prosocial intentions, consistent with Attribution Theory’s classification of such factors as structural and beyond individual control. A small but statistically significant positive association was also found for attributing homelessness to loss of housing due to a catastrophic event. While none of these causes are purely structural or purely individual, factors such as job loss, separation, and illness could be generally perceived as external events, events that “happen to you.” In contrast, viewing homelessness as the result of undocumented immigration can be perceived as a personal fault, something one “brings upon oneself.”

An interesting observation is that, even among structural causes, not all explanations had the same impact. For instance, health-related causes (e.g., physical illness) or lack of access to social support services were less frequently endorsed but were not significantly associated with intentions to help. This suggests that in Italy there may

be nuanced or complex views regarding the role of public and institutional support for individuals at risk of homelessness.

4.2 Limitations of the study

This thesis presents a number of limitations that must be considered to contextualise the findings. The first limitation concerns the sample and methodological approach. This study relied on a cross-sectional survey, where all data were collected at a single point in time. This procedure limits the ability to infer causality between variables. While the analysis reveals associations, it cannot determine the directionality or temporal sequence of these relationships. Longitudinal or experimental designs would be more effective to understand how these attitudes and intentions develop or change over time.

Several challenges were also encountered in the operationalization of key variables. For instance, intentions to help were used as a proxy for prosocial behaviour. While widely accepted in psychological and social research, intentions do not always translate into actual behaviour (Ajzen, 1991). Thus, the study captures what participants *declare* they are willing to do, but not necessarily what they *would* do in real-life situations. The reliance on self-reported intentions – although necessary for the scope of this work – may introduce social desirability bias and should be complemented in future research with behavioural or longitudinal data.

Furthermore, operationalizing social class solely through educational level represents a limitation of this study. As discussed above, if education has often been used as a proxy for social class or socioeconomic status (SES), this choice is increasingly contested. As recent literature suggests (Bastías et al., 2019; Moya & Alcañiz-Colomer, 2023), education alone does not fully capture the complexity of social class, particularly in contemporary societies where higher education is more widespread but does not necessarily correlate with high income or occupational status. This is especially relevant in the Italian context, where obtaining a university degree does not guarantee upward social mobility or financial stability (ISTAT, 2017).

Moreover, comparisons with official Italian statistics reveal a noteworthy mismatch in educational levels between the present sample and the general population. However, as national statistics refer to the 25–64 age group, their comparability with the present sample is limited, offering only a general indication of potential sampling bias (ISTAT, 2017).

A further limitation involves the cultural and geographic dimension of the research. Most theoretical frameworks and empirical studies employed as references this thesis derive from English-speaking Western contexts, where socioeconomic structures, welfare systems, and public attitudes towards homelessness may differ from those in Italy.

It is plausible that cultural norms influence how homelessness is understood and how responsibility for social issues is assigned. For instance, perceptions of inequality and the concept of social class may not hold the same meaning across different cultural or national contexts (Moya & Alcañiz-Colomer, 2023). These possible differences suggest that caution is warranted when applying theoretical frameworks developed in one sociocultural setting to another, as assumptions may not universally hold.

Another related point is the categorization of causal beliefs about homelessness. In this study, participants were asked to select up to three perceived causes from a predefined list. This forced-choice format may not fully capture the complexity of individual belief systems, particularly since many causes (e.g., job loss, illegal immigration, insufficient income) encompass both structural and individual attributions. An additional limitation concerns the operationalization of causal beliefs about homelessness; the items did not strictly differentiate structural from individual attributions but reflected a blend of both perspectives. This may have introduced interpretive ambiguity, making it more difficult to clearly assess the influence of purely structural versus purely individual beliefs on prosocial intentions.

4.3 Directions of future research

Building on the current study, several avenues can be identified to guide future research on prosocial behaviour toward homeless individuals, with particular attention to the Italian context. Future investigations should prioritise longitudinal or experimental

studies that could better illuminate causal mechanisms between education, beliefs, and helping behaviours. Intervention-based research – for example, through community contact programs or public education campaigns – could assess whether and how targeted strategies promote prosocial engagement.

To more accurately assess prosocial intentions, future studies could compare self-reported intentions with actual prosocial behaviours measured at a later time point (e.g., one month to one year after initial data collection), thereby capturing the intention-behaviour link over time.

Moreover, the role of education within broader SES constructs should be studied in greater depth. Future research should further examine how education relates to values, ideological orientations, emotional sensitivity, and political views. It would also be useful to explore in greater depth the extent to which prosocial tendencies can differ across fields of study, types of institutions (e.g., public vs. private universities), or levels of specialisation. This more nuanced understanding of educational experience could shed light on possible differences and better explain the role of education in relation to prosocial behaviour.

Another promising direction involves examining the interactions between the key variables studied. Beliefs about the causes of homelessness are often intertwined with social class, experience and exposure to homelessness. A systematic analysis of these interrelations – especially within the Italian cultural context – would enhance the explanatory power of current models and broaden the understanding of public attitudes, beliefs and behaviours towards homeless individuals.

Future studies should account for cross-cultural variability in beliefs about homelessness and social responsibility. Comparative research across countries with different welfare models, public discourses, and socio-political structures could yield deeper insights into the relationship between contextual factors and the public's willingness to help marginalised groups.

An additional suggestion for future investigation is to explore the mediating role of emotions in the relationship between the variables of this thesis and prosocial behaviour. While this study primarily focused on socio-psychological predictors, emotional responses – such as empathy, compassion, anger, or discomfort – may serve as key psychological mechanisms that explain why certain beliefs or levels of exposure

translate into helping intentions. Understanding these mediating processes would not only deepen theoretical models but also inform emotion-based intervention strategies.

From an applied perspective, the present study may suggest that designing interventions that move beyond superficial exposure – such as participatory community programs – could reduce stigma and increase the public’s willingness to engage in supportive action. Based on these premises, future research could explore how urban policies and public outreach programs can foster constructive contact between the public and people experiencing homelessness.

4.4 Conclusions

This thesis investigated the social and psychological factors that influence individuals’ intentions to support people experiencing homelessness. By examining the associations between helping intentions and variables such as education, exposure to homelessness, personal or relational experience with homelessness, and causal beliefs, the study attempts to offer insights into the dynamics shaping prosocial intentions toward homeless individuals within the Italian context.

This research contributes to an area of study that has seen limited exploration – particularly in the Italian context – by examining this particular combination of variables together. By considering these factors within a single framework, the thesis seeks to provide a layered perspective on the social and psychological dynamics underlying prosocial engagement toward homelessness in Italy.

One of the findings of this study revealed that social class – operationalized through educational attainment – emerged as a modest but significant predictor of prosocial intentions. In this sample, the educational dimension of social class appeared to function independently of the financial dimension, as preliminary analyses showed no significant association between education and income. This disconnect highlights the need to interpret these results mostly in light of education's social and cultural implications. These findings are consistent with previous research suggesting that higher education is often linked to more progressive values, greater openness, thus an increased sensitivity to social inequalities.

In contrast, impersonal exposure to homelessness – such as simply seeing homeless individuals in one’s surroundings – was negatively associated with helping intentions. This suggests that visibility alone does not promote empathy and may even reinforce social distance when not accompanied by meaningful interaction. These findings indicate that the effects of exposure are complex and may depend on the quality of contact.

Moreover, the strongest positive associations emerged in connection with personal or indirect experience with homelessness. Individuals who had personally experienced homelessness – or had a close relationship with someone who had – expressed significantly greater willingness to help, hinting at the importance of personal or relational proximity to the issue in shaping prosocial attitudes. These findings regarding experience and exposure align with the predictions of *Intergroup Contact Theory* (Allport, 1954) and the *Social Distance Theory of Power* (Magee & Smith, 2013).

Certain causal beliefs were also found to correlate with prosocial intentions. Participants who endorsed structural explanations – such as job loss or relationship breakdown – were more likely to express a willingness to help, whereas those who attributed homelessness to factors like illegal immigration were less inclined to engage.

These results are consistent with *Attribution Theory* (Weiner, 1985) and underscore the importance of framing social issues in ways that emphasise systemic causes rather than individual blame. However, the findings also reveal complexity, as causal beliefs in this study were often mixed in nature, rather than strictly structural or individual.

It is important to consider the practical value of these findings.

While further research is needed to fully understand the role of education – particularly in relation to social class – these findings suggest that educational settings can serve as important spaces for critical reflection and debate around social issues. Schools and universities are not only places of knowledge transmission but also environments where individuals can learn to question dominant narratives, deconstruct stigma, and develop more nuanced, empathetic responses to complex social problems like homelessness. As such, the educational system itself deserves deeper investigation, not just as a background factor, but as a context in which values, civic engagement, and prosocial attitudes can develop.

Additionally, these results point out the importance of deeper, more meaningful interaction with homeless individuals, as well as the possible risks associated with superficial contact. Being exposed to people experiencing homelessness – without the chance to establish genuine engagement – could lead to the reinforcement of pre-existing negative or stigmatising attitudes and prevent opportunities to challenge them.

These findings also point to the need for more effective interventions and public policies directed at creating the conditions for direct, positive, and authentic contact between privileged individuals and people experiencing homelessness. Such initiatives can help reduce social distance, challenge prejudice and stigma, and foster more positive attitudes and stronger intentions to help.

The observed relationships concerning beliefs about the causes of homelessness show that Italian participants tend to emphasise economic and health-related factors. These were commonly identified as root causes of homelessness and were associated with higher prosocial intentions toward homeless individuals. Moreover, these findings underscore the importance of raising awareness about the structural causes of homelessness. Framing this phenomenon within a discourse of systemic socioeconomic inequalities may encourage citizens to be more supportive of initiatives aimed at giving aid to people in homelessness conditions.

In summary, exploring the antecedents of prosocial intentions offers relevant insights for both policymaking and community-based interventions. Understanding the social and psychological factors that drive public engagement can help develop more effective policies, awareness campaigns, and initiatives with the purpose of reducing homelessness and promoting inclusive citizenship. Ultimately, investigating what encourages prosocial engagement enriches our understanding of how to foster supportive behaviours, especially in contexts where individual attitudes can influence collective responses to complex social issues like homelessness.

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