

What's in a Homelessness Course? Findings from a Content Analysis of BSW and MSW Course Syllabi

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Abstract: *Little is known about if and how social work programs are preparing students to work with people experiencing homelessness or in homelessness-related macro and policy spaces. This study identified 18 programs that offer a BSW and/or MSW homelessness course, which yielded 22 unique course syllabi. Using content analysis, the primary aim was to understand how homelessness is taught across programs, including the course objectives used, topics and populations addressed, and to what extent courses focused on micro, macro, and policy topics. Course objectives most often addressed background knowledge on homelessness and related service offerings. The most common topics addressed in course descriptions and sessions/modules were non-housing-specific policy issues; describing the size, scope, and nature of homelessness; and services, service delivery, and service models. Topics receiving the least attention included race/racism, oppression, and social justice. Recommendations include reflecting on how an existing or potential course fits within the program's curriculum, aligning course content with the new CSWE competencies, and ensuring consistency between descriptions, objectives, and session/module topics.*

Keywords: *Homelessness; social work education; content analysis; teaching; syllabus*

Social work educators have argued for increased curricular attention to homelessness within social work education, especially since the adoption of ending homelessness as one of the grand challenges for the profession (Henwood et al., 2015; Larkin et al., 2016). The Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) does not require a homelessness course or specific content related to homelessness. However, preparing students to work within the homeless services sector and policy space aligns with the CSWE accreditation standards that require social work programs to orient their educational objectives toward the professional priorities of eliminating poverty, pursuing social justice, and adopting a rights-based, anti-racist, and anti-oppressive approach to practice (CSWE, 2022).

Since the adoption of the grand challenges, some social work programs have increased homelessness education, research, and policy advocacy, including the creation of new courses and experiential learning opportunities (Henwood & Aykanian, 2020; Larkin et al., 2016). However, few social work programs offer a specialized course in homelessness, and little is known about what existing homelessness courses teach students about the topic. In fact, a search of both EBSCO Host and ERIC showed no studies examining homelessness course syllabi within or outside of social work. This deficit raises questions about how

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adequately the profession is preparing social workers for work in this sector. With these needs in mind, the current study aimed to conduct a content analysis of homelessness courses offered across CSWE-accredited programs at the BSW or MSW level to understand what is taught within these courses. The analysis focused on describing course objectives, topics and populations covered, and to what extent courses focused on micro, macro, and policy issues.

Literature Review

Homelessness as a Social Work and Social Justice Issue

Homelessness has deep roots in systemic racism, poverty, and the failure to ensure access to safe and affordable housing. These factors continue to be evident in consistent disparities in who experiences homelessness, with overrepresentation of Black, African American, Indigenous, and transgender people (de Sousa & Henry, 2024). Ending homelessness requires using research evidence to further develop and scale up best practices, engaging interdisciplinary and cross-sector partners, and driving policy change through advocacy (Henwood et al., 2015). These goals require a well-trained workforce, which can be accomplished in part through social work education (Henwood & Aykanian, 2020; Henwood et al., 2022).

Recently, concerns have been raised about the adequacy of the overall size of the workforce—pointing to worker shortages in many communities (Apgar, 2023; KPMG & United Way of Greater Los Angeles, 2022; Rios, 2018; Sweeson & Lang, 2023). Additionally, the rate of homelessness has been increasing steadily since 2015, with an 18% increase from 2023 to 2024 (de Sousa & Henry, 2024). This concerning trend further underscores the need for a well-trained homeless services workforce that includes clinical social workers who can meet client needs and facilitate exits into stable housing, as well as macro practitioners who can address root causes, system disparities, and policy needs. Further, people experiencing or at risk of homelessness interact with a range of mainstream service settings in which social workers are employed outside of homelessness-specific programs and agencies, including community health centers, mental health clinics, hospitals, schools, public benefit agencies, and child welfare (Mullen & Leginski, 2010) further solidifying the importance of exposing social work students to content on issues of homelessness.

Teaching Students About Homelessness

Several strategies have been suggested for introducing homelessness content into social work education (Aykanian et al., 2020; Aykanian & Ryan-Dedominicis, 2021; Cronley et al., 2020; Gallup et al., 2020). One approach is to shape an existing course's content around homelessness by including a course activity or discussion designed around a homelessness-related reading or case study (Aykanian & Ryan-Dedominicis, 2021) or by designing an entire course around the topic of homelessness. For example, Smith-Maddox et al. (2020) led a graduate policy advocacy and social change course in which the content and assignments centered on homelessness as the policy issue of focus. A similar approach

could include the addition of experiential learning components to an existing course, such as learning (Aguiniga & Bowers, 2018), volunteer opportunities (Charlesworth & Metzger, 2020), or interprofessional learning experiences in collaboration with a community partner (Bender et al., 2020; Petrovich & Navarro, 2020). Other approaches have included offering specialized field placements in homelessness (Aykanian et al., 2020; Gallup et al., 2020) and creating opportunities for students to participate in research projects related to homelessness (Cronley et al., 2020; Moore & Plitt Donaldson, 2022).

The strategies described above offer unique opportunities for students to engage with homelessness content, as well as interact with homeless service agencies and people with lived experience of homelessness. However, in most cases, these strategies are unlikely to reach a large number of students due to several factors: (1) they are commonly one-off or pilot projects that are not consistently offered each semester or year; (2) they are highly dependent on faculty and community partner interest—and many, such as experiential learning classes—carry a high demand on faculty time to coordinate; and (3) some examples, such as a faculty member shaping an existing course around homelessness, means that only students who happen to take that faculty member's class are exposed to that experience. Consistently offering a homelessness course, as a way to supplement but not replace other strategies, could increase student exposure.

Benefits of Teaching Students About Homelessness

Studies across multiple disciplines, including social work, nursing, and medicine, have shown that increasing attention to homelessness in curricula presents multiple benefits for students (Bender et al., 2020; Gardner & Emory, 2018; Kornbluh et al., 2020; Petrovich & Navarro, 2020; Zeien et al., 2021). Exposing students to homelessness course content and homelessness-related educational experiences outside of the classroom can improve knowledge about homelessness and attitudes towards people experiencing homelessness. It can also increase students' empathy for and comfort with working with people experiencing homelessness (Bender et al., 2020; Buchanan et al., 2004; Gallup et al., 2020; Gardner & Emory, 2018; Jacob et al., 2020; Petrovich & Navarro, 2020; Siegel et al., 2020). Additionally, depending on the focus of the educational experience, students may learn valuable skills that will translate into their future careers, such as policy advocacy, assisting with public benefit applications, case management, intervention implementation and evaluation, and interdisciplinary collaboration (Gallup et al., 2020; Kornbluh et al., 2020; Lery et al., 2020; Plitt Donaldson et al., 2020; Smith-Maddox et al., 2020). Thus, increasing attention to homelessness in curricula has the benefit of both homelessness-specific outcomes (e.g., attitudes, empathy, knowledge of the problem) as well as practice and policy skills that can be applied in homeless services and more broadly.

Goals of the Current Study

The adoption of ending homelessness as one of the profession's grand challenges asserts that the topic be prominent in social work education. While research has highlighted multiple educational strategies for teaching students about homelessness, little is known about how common this is and specifically how common it is to offer a dedicated course

on homelessness. Homelessness is a broad topic that can be taught from multiple angles. Assessing how many social work programs offer a course on homelessness and what is taught in those courses is valuable for several reasons. First, it establishes a baseline that can then be used to track progress toward increasing curricular integration over time, which is a goal of the Grand Challenge to End Homelessness (Henwood & Aykanian, 2020). Establishing a baseline will allow future research to assess if and how the content taught in these classes changes over time, including to what degree the content reflects timely issues. Second, it is a proxy for understanding the degree to which programs acknowledge this wicked and rapidly growing social problem as relevant to the social work profession. Third, it can aid in understanding to what extent social work graduates are being prepared to work with people experiencing homelessness and in homelessness-related macro and policy spaces. Finally, it can be a tool for those interested in advocating for more attention to the topic in their program, region, or state as a way to strengthen social work education and address homeless services workforce challenges.

The goals of this study were to identify social work programs that offer a BSW and/or MSW course on homelessness and examine what content is taught across those courses. The current study began with a review of the websites and course catalogs of 590 accredited social work programs in the U.S. to identify which programs offer a BSW and/or MSW homelessness course. This article presents a content analysis of 22 course syllabi identified through this process. The goals of the analysis were to describe course objectives, topics and populations covered, and to what extent courses focused on micro, macro, and policy issues.

Methods

Identifying Courses

As part of a larger study examining social justice messaging on social work program websites (Aykanian et al., 2022), we identified programs that offer a BSW and/or MSW course on homelessness. First, we used CSWE's website to create a spreadsheet of accredited programs ($n = 590$) as of May 2021. The list did not include programs that had closed or that were in the process of accreditation withdrawal. Then we reviewed the websites for all programs that offer a BSW ($n = 253$), MSW ($n = 58$), or both ($n = 279$) to identify whether the program offered a course on homelessness as part of either degree program. To do this, we reviewed degree overview pages, curriculum and course offering descriptions, and online course catalogs. For each program, we indicated whether a homelessness course was listed, which could include it being offered as an official course (i.e., having its own course number) or under a "special topics" (or similar) course number. We coded programs as "yes" if they offered a course, "no" if they did not offer a course, or "unclear" if there was not enough information available. Of the 590 program websites reviewed, 22 had a homelessness course listed.

Data Collection

For each of the 22 programs, we gathered the course number and title, course description, and the name and contact information for the current or most recent instructor. If the most recent instructor was not listed, we recorded the name and contact information for the program director. In October of 2021, we emailed the instructor or program director for all 22 programs to explain this project and request the most recent copy of their syllabus. Two programs did not respond to the emails, four programs notified us that a homelessness course was no longer offered, and 16 provided at least one syllabus. If a program provided more than one syllabus from the same instructor, we included the most recent one in our analysis. If a program provided syllabi from more than one instructor, we included the most recent one for each instructor. After this process, the lead author learned of two additional schools who had developed a course that would be offered in an upcoming school year; these were included, bringing the total to 18 social work programs represented in this analysis. These 18 programs provided a total of 22 syllabi that were included in the final analysis sample; 14 programs provided one syllabus, two programs provided two syllabi from two different instructors, one program provided two syllabi for two separate courses offered as a sequence, and one program provided separate BSW and MSW syllabi.

Content Analysis Procedure

Our coding method and analysis was guided by previous content analyses of course syllabi (Maschi et al., 2018; Mehrotra et al., 2017; Pieterse et al., 2009) and focused on describing course objectives, topics and populations addressed in course descriptions and sessions/modules, and to what extent courses focused on micro, macro, and policy issues. All data management and coding was done in Dedoose, which is an online tool for managing and analyzing data sources for qualitative and mixed methods research. First, the lead author inductively coded the course descriptions and sessions/modules to capture the topics and populations included. An inductive approach was used to ensure that the resulting codes were based on the content within the syllabi and not by predetermined expectations of what a homelessness course could or should cover. Once coded, a second research team member reviewed these codes for completeness, accuracy, and clarity, and codes were adjusted as needed. The lead author then refined the codes to create a final coding structure and codebook. As a final validity check, another research team member randomly selected five syllabi and reviewed coding decisions and code descriptions. Suggested code changes were discussed and decided on collaboratively with all team members. The final coding structure used for the course descriptions and sessions/modules had 14 parent codes that were then grouped into four themes. A formal measure of inter-rater reliability was not used.

Second, the research team tested multiple approaches for coding course objectives, including inductive coding and coding based on whether the objective addressed knowledge, values, skills, or cognitive and affective processes. Because the quality and specificity of objectives varied considerably, the research team chose a deductive approach of using the CSWE Curricular Guide for Addressing Homelessness (CSWE, 2019) as a foundation for developing a coding structure. This guide describes homelessness-related

learning objectives across the nine 2015 CSWE competencies. The lead author used this guide to create a codebook of 36 codes and the competencies they align with—some codes aligned with more than one competency. The team reviewed the codebook for clarity and redundancy and tested it on a small set of objectives. Once it was determined that the codebook was feasible to apply, the team coded all syllabus objectives. Objectives were coded independently by researcher team members in chunks of roughly 20, with the team meeting after coding each chunk to review coding decisions and update the codebook as needed. A formal measure of inter-rater reliability was not used. Any objective, or objective excerpt, that did not fit cleanly within the codebook was coded as “other.” Objectives coded as “other” were later reviewed in a team meeting and grouped into new codes if appropriate. All codes were then grouped into six topics.

Findings

A total of 22 homelessness course syllabi from 18 social work programs, representing 19 individual courses, were included in the analysis. Five of the syllabi were from BSW courses, eleven were from MSW courses, and six were from joint BSW and MSW courses.

Social Work Programs Offering Homelessness Courses

Of the 18 programs that provided at least one syllabus, more than half were in the New England ($n = 2$), Northeast ($n = 5$), or Mid-Atlantic ($n = 3$) regions of the U.S. The remaining programs were located in the West Coast ($n = 4$), Southeast ($n = 2$), Northwest ($n = 1$), and Great Lakes ($n = 1$) regions (CSWE, 2020). Unsurprisingly, given relative homelessness rates, four syllabi were from programs in California and four were from programs in New York. The remaining syllabi were provided by programs in Florida, Maryland, New Hampshire, New Jersey, North Carolina, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, Washington, and Wisconsin. Also notable is that 17 out of 18 programs were located in urban communities (U.S. Census, 2023).

Course Objectives and Competencies

Of the 22 syllabi included in this analysis, 19 included course learning objectives. In total, there were 156 course objectives across syllabi. As shown in Table 1, all 19 syllabi had at least one objective that addressed background topics, such as knowledge of service offerings, causes of homelessness, and diversity of the homeless population. Background topics were the most common topic addressed in objectives and was included in 98 objectives across the 19 syllabi. Fourteen syllabi had at least one objective related to policy issues, 11 had at least one objective related to direct practice skills and values, 11 had at least one objective related to research and evaluation, and 10 had at least one objective related to ethical and bias issues. Nine syllabi had at least one objective related to macro practice skills and values. Table 1 presents the six objective topics (and a list of the codes within them) in two ways—how many syllabi included that topic and the total frequency (i.e., how many objectives address that topic across syllabi).

Table 1. *Frequency of Content Topics Reflected in Course Objectives Across Syllabi*

Categories	Code Description	# of Syllabi	Overall Frequency
Background on Homelessness and Service Offerings	Knowledge of service offerings, causes of homelessness, diversity of the homeless population, systemic/macro factors, consequences of homelessness, defining and measuring homelessness	19	98
Policy	Policy landscape, the policymaking process, bias in policy making	14	31
Direct Practice	Intervention planning and implementation, client assessment, recognizing client diversity	11	43
Research and Evaluation	Research-informed solutions, state of research knowledge, importance of evaluation	11	20
Ethics and Bias	Ethical issues/applying the code of ethics to practice, personal bias	10	11
Macro Practice	Advocating for social change, community assessment, addressing root causes, awareness raising	9	13

Table 2 presents the frequency of each competency across syllabi. The most common competencies reflected in course objectives across syllabi were Competency 1 (demonstrate ethical and professional behavior) and Competency 2 (engage diversity and difference in practice). All 19 syllabi with course objectives included an objective tied to these two competencies. The least common was Competency 9 (evaluate practice with individuals, families, groups, organizations, and communities), which was only reflected in the objectives of 2 syllabi.

Table 2. *Frequency of CSWE Competencies Covered Across Syllabi*

Competency	# of Syllabi
1. Demonstrate ethical and professional behavior.	19
2. Engage diversity and difference in practice.	19
3. Advance human rights and social, economic, and environmental justice.	13
4. Engage in practice-informed research and research-informed practice	10
5. Engage in policy practice.	18
6. Engage with individuals, families, groups, organizations, and communities.	13
7. Assess individuals, families, groups, organizations, and communities.	10
8. Intervene with individuals, families, groups, organizations, and communities.	15
9. Evaluate practice with individuals, families, groups, organizations, and communities.	2

Topics and Populations Addressed

All 22 syllabi had a course description. Table 3 presents course description topics in two ways—how many syllabi included that topic and total frequency (i.e., how many times that topic is mentioned across syllabi). The most common topics included in course

descriptions were non-housing-specific policy issues (e.g., local, state, and federal policy issues and political dynamics, as well as the cost of homelessness to society) and describing the size, scope, and nature of homelessness, including causes and risk factors, specific populations impacted, and methods for defining and counting homelessness. Nineteen syllabi included these topics in their description. Other common topics included services, service delivery, and service models ($n = 18$) and historical and future views ($n = 14$). The least common topics were COVID-19 ($n = 0$); the value of lived experience ($n = 2$); inter-related systems ($n = 3$); homeless service systems ($n = 3$); oppression, power, discrimination, and social justice ($n = 4$); and race and racism ($n = 5$).

Table 3. *Frequency of Content Topics Reflected in Course Descriptions and Session/Module Topics Across Syllabi*

Code Categories	Course Description		Sessions/Modules	
	# of Syllabi	Overall Frequency	# of Syllabi	Overall Frequency
General Knowledge				
The size, scope, and nature of homelessness	19	21	20	96
Historical and future views	14	15	9	18
Theory/frameworks for understanding homelessness	9	9	6	6
Personal and public attitudes	8	10	14	21
Population characteristics and non-housing needs	6	6	17	32
International contexts/cross-national comparison	6	6	5	8
Value of consumer voice	2	2	7	8
Macro-level Knowledge				
Poverty, inequality, unemployment	6	6	14	30
Race and racism	5	5	10	14
Oppression, power, discrimination, social justice	4	4	5	5
Inter-related systems (e.g., criminal justice)	3	3	14	24
Homeless service systems	3	3	11	18
COVID-19	0	0	8	15
Other macro factors (e.g., gentrification, food insecurity)	7	10	4	4
Policy Knowledge				
Policy issues not specific to housing	19	21	20	44
Housing (e.g., policy, market)	6	8	17	66
Micro-level Knowledge				
Services, service models	18	19	19	74
Social work and social work skills	8	8	12	39

Table 3 also presents session/module topics in two ways—how many syllabi included that topic and total frequency (i.e., how many times that topic is mentioned across syllabi).

Of the 22 syllabi, 21 included session/module topics. The most common topics addressed in sessions/modules included non-housing-specific policy issues ($n = 20$); describing the size, scope, and nature of homelessness ($n = 20$); services, service delivery, and service models ($n = 19$); housing, including housing policy, market dynamics, and housing subsidies ($n = 17$); and population characteristics and non-housing needs ($n = 17$). The least common topics were other macro factors (e.g., gentrification, food insecurity); oppression, power, discrimination, and social justice ($n = 5$); and international contexts/cross-national comparisons ($n = 5$).

Specific populations or groups within the larger homelessness population were not commonly mentioned in course descriptions. The only populations mentioned were families/ women and children ($n = 2$), older adults ($n = 2$), youth and young adults ($n = 1$), chronic homelessness ($n = 1$), people with disabilities ($n = 1$), people living with HIV/AIDS ($n = 1$), other or unspecified LGBTQ groups ($n = 1$), and women ($n = 1$). While some syllabi included specific populations in session/module topics, many did not. The most common populations included in session and module topics were youth and young adults experiencing homelessness ($n = 14$) and families/women and children ($n = 12$).

Micro, Macro, or Policy Focus

To assess the overall focus of each syllabus, we relied on the session/module topic codes, which were grouped into four topic categories: general knowledge, micro-level knowledge, macro-level knowledge, and policy knowledge. The codes within each category are shown in Table 3. We excluded the course description and objectives coding from this step for three reasons. First, the number and quality of objectives varied substantially across syllabi, which made using them for comparison across syllabi or as an indication of overall course focus challenging. Second, the academic freedom typically provided by institutions of higher education gives instructors flexibility in how they interpret a course's description and pursue the course objectives. Finally, it is common for course descriptions and objectives to be unchanging at an institution, rather than being specific to an iteration of the course or a specific instructor's focus. With these factors in mind, we believe session and module topics provide a more accurate indication of the content delivered in that course iteration.

Of the 21 syllabi that included session/module topics, the most common topic area addressed was general knowledge about homelessness, such as causes of homelessness and the needs or characteristics of people experiencing homelessness. Twelve of the 21 syllabi had this as the most frequent topic addressed. Of the remaining nine syllabi, four had policy knowledge topics as the most frequent topic, three had micro knowledge as the most frequent topic, and one had macro knowledge as the most frequent topic. The final syllabi had a tie between policy and macro knowledge.

While the above information is helpful, it is a bit simplistic. To provide a more detailed view of the focus of each syllabus, we grouped them based on the frequency of all four topic categories: general, macro, policy, and micro. This resulted in four primary syllabus groups: 1) those with a primary focus on general and micro knowledge ($n = 5$), 2) those

with a primary focus on general and macro knowledge ($n = 4$), 3) those with a primary focus on general and policy knowledge ($n = 3$), and 4) those with a blended approach that incorporated fairly equal attention to at least three of the four topic areas ($n = 5$). The remaining four syllabi did not fit into one of the groups. They had 1) a primary focus on general knowledge only, 2) a primary focus on policy knowledge only, 3) a primary focus on micro and policy knowledge, and 4) a primary focus on macro and policy knowledge.

Alignment between Objectives, Descriptions, and Session/Module Topics

Through the coding and analysis process, we were able to identify areas where objectives, course descriptions, and session/module topics were not well aligned. While this was not the intended focus of our analysis, we include it here because of its implications for course design and promotion. Comparing course objectives with the content in sessions/modules, 13 syllabi had session/module content not reflected in objectives. For example, one syllabus had no direct practice objectives but had multiple sessions related to social work skills, service provision, and specific intervention models. Additionally, 12 syllabi had session/module content that was not reflected in the course description. For example, the course description for one syllabus did not mention micro or policy content while the session/module topics reflect interventions as well as both housing and non-housing specific policy content.

Discussion

Given that no previous studies have examined homelessness course syllabi, this study provides a baseline understanding of how many programs offer a dedicated homelessness course at the BSW or MSW level, as well as the topical focus of those courses. Before addressing the key findings and implications of this study, it is important to keep in mind that a course on homelessness may be offered as a general elective, as an advanced or specialized course intended to fulfill a specific requirement (e.g., advanced policy), or as part of a specific specialization or track. This is likely one reason why the competencies addressed in each syllabus differed. Thus, we do not presume one “right” way to teach this topic nor do we expect all syllabi to look similar. Instead, we aim to present a snapshot of how the topic is taught within programs and a discussion of the implications of what is taught and is not taught.

Interpreting Key Findings

We found 18 programs that offer a homelessness course—just 3% of the 590 programs reviewed. An examination of the most common objectives and session/module topics shows that a large focus of these courses is to provide an overview of who experiences homelessness, the prevalence and nature of homelessness, the needs of people experiencing homelessness and how those needs are met through service delivery, and the policy factors that intersect with homelessness. This is a reasonable foundation for an introduction to the topic, and it is understandable to think a class may touch on all of these topics but choose to focus on one area in more depth. This approach is reflected by the groups we identified

based on the session and module topic codes that showed that more than half of the syllabi had a primary focus on general knowledge and one additional content area. This approach also makes sense given that the topical focus likely aligns with how that course fits into the program's broader curriculum. However, we also note that macro factors, such as poverty, racism, and homeless service system features, are less represented. Other content analyses of social work and counseling course syllabi have found a similar pattern, where courses focused primarily on knowledge acquisition, with authors noting the need to move beyond knowledge and into skill building and demonstration (Maschi et al., 2018; Mehrotra et al., 2017; Pieterse et al., 2009).

One topic omitted from many of the syllabi is content on race and racism. Only 10 included the topic in sessions/modules. This is a concerning omission given that homelessness has deep roots in systemic racism and racist policy that continue to play out today, with Black, African American, and Indigenous groups consistently over-represented in the homeless population (de Sousa & Henry, 2024). Additionally, issues of oppression, power, discrimination, and social justice, which were topics addressed in only five syllabi. Together, this is concerning given the guiding values and ethics of the social work profession that require social workers to understand and challenge social injustices. Additionally, the CSWE (2022) educational competencies encompass racial diversity and the oppressive processes that produce human rights violations and other injustices. Therefore, we see this as an area for expansion, as racial dynamics and issues of social justice are critical for understanding who experiences homelessness, policy decisions and their impacts, macro processes, and disparities in service access and outcomes.

We also found that only six syllabi had a strong focus on micro-level knowledge presented in session and module topics, and only 11 had at least one course objective related to direct practice. While most syllabi included content on services and service models, direct practice skills were less common. As noted above, this could be reflective of where these courses fit within a program's curriculum—an advanced policy course would not be expected to address micro skills. Because of this, we do not necessarily see this as a problem, but it does raise a question about how well these courses prepare students to work with people experiencing homelessness or within the homeless services sector specifically.

While not the focus of this study, a secondary finding was misalignment between course objectives, course descriptions, and course session/module topics. In other words, the course session/module topics in a syllabus did not always reflect the scope of the objectives and course description, and vice versa. We see two likely explanations for this. First, many higher education institutions retain a high degree of academic freedom, which gives instructors flexibility and may mean there is little internal auditing to assess this alignment. Second, course objectives and descriptions are typically not revised often, so they can become out of date, while the content covered in course sessions/modules may be more current. Although some misalignment between objectives, course descriptions, and session/module topics is expected, significant differences warrant attention. This is especially true given that course descriptions are typically the only information about a course that a student has easy access to when deciding what classes to take.

Implications for Social Work Programs

We hope all programs will consider whether a course on homelessness would be a valuable and feasible addition. Whether currently offering a homelessness course or simply open to creating one, we recommend programs reflect on that course's purpose within the broader curriculum. Because there are many facets to the topic, it is important to know what focus will best serve your program's educational goals. As programs evolve and grow, the answer to this question may change, so repeating this process periodically can be valuable for keeping course descriptions and objectives relevant to the program and the CSWE competencies. Such a process could also include a periodic audit to ensure alignment between descriptions, objectives, and session/module topics. Additionally, a homelessness course can be aligned with a program's mission, such as being designed around a specific group (e.g., children and families, youth and young adults, older adults) or topic area (e.g., housing, health equity, rural communities) and even offered as part of a specialization or track. It is also critical to consider this course in relationship to the curriculum more broadly, which could happen at the individual school level or across programs (Mehrotra et al., 2017).

Regardless of the focus of the course, we recommend all programs intentionally align their course's content with the new CSWE (2022) EPAS. For example, the new competencies mandate attention to racial justice and using rights-based, anti-racist, and anti-oppressive lenses (CSWE, 2022), which were lacking in the syllabi reviewed here. There are many resources available to instructors for this task, including materials on pathways into and barriers to exiting homelessness for people of color (Olivet et al., 2021), racial equity in homeless services systems (U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, n.d.), and historical overviews (Padget et al., 2023). Similarly, the syllabi reviewed here did not commonly address macro practice skills (e.g., advocating for social change, addressing root causes, awareness raising) objectives or macro-level knowledge (e.g., poverty, inter-related systems, gentrification). We see this as another opportunity for growth. For example, some of the syllabi we reviewed used Matthew Desmond's (2016) *Evicted* or *The Scarlett E* podcast (Gladston, 2019) to cover the relationship between eviction and homelessness. While the amount and type of macro content included in a syllabus will vary depending on a course's focus, there are many opportunities to integrate the topic into any course.

We recognize that there may be many barriers to offering a homelessness course consistently, if at all, including the lack of a faculty member with interest and relevant expertise. We hope this is one reason why this study will be useful for programs without an existing course as it provides some illustration of what can be taught. We think it is especially important for programs in communities with high rates of homelessness to offer a course, especially given the homeless services workforce shortages faced by many communities (Apgar, 2023; KPMG & United Way of Greater Los Angeles, 2022; Rios, 2018; Sweeson & Lang, 2023). While identifying a faculty member to teach the course may be challenging, programs might consider hiring a community expert as an adjunct faculty member to develop and teach the course. Another option is to collaborate with other programs in their region to offer a joint course, which may help maximize the impact of

one school having an expert on faculty. If offering a specialized course is not feasible, programs can explore curriculum integration strategies (Aykanian & Ryan-Dedominicis, 2021) as a way to strengthen attention to the topic.

Implications for Social Work Research

While there is existing research on the impact of educational experiences related to homelessness, in social work and other helping professions, most of the research is on experiential or service-learning opportunities rather than traditional courses. Thus, there are many opportunities for evaluating the impact of a course on homelessness. Such research might focus on competency-based skills or knowledge, changes in student attitudes towards homelessness, changes in student interest in working in homeless services or within related policy areas, and student preferences for specific curricular or pedagogical approaches. There are also existing measures that can be used to assess student attitudes, such as the Attitudes towards Homelessness Inventory (Snow-Hill & Kloos, 2022). Additionally, efforts to document the process of developing and implementing a course are also valuable. While not an extensively studied area, multiple studies have focused on the implementation of homelessness curricular content (Bender et al., 2020; Siegel et al., 2020; Smith-Maddox et al., 2020).

Limitations

We want to acknowledge three limitations. First, data collection focused on programs with accredited BSW and/or MSW programs as of May 2021. Therefore, our data does not reflect programs that were accredited after that date or homelessness courses introduced after that date. Second, we relied on information available on degree program websites and in online course catalogs. It is possible that some programs offer a homelessness course that is not included in online materials. These two limitations result in a sample that is likely not inclusive of all homelessness courses offered, which limits the generalizability of the findings. Similarly, just because a course is listed on a website does not mean that the course is currently offered. Finally, we focused only on homelessness-specific courses. We did not conduct a comprehensive review of curriculum to assess the extent to which homelessness is addressed across courses, field placements, community-based and service-learning opportunities, and other hands-on experiences offered to students. Thus, we cannot speak to the broader degree of how homelessness content is integrated across the curriculum.

Conclusion

Homelessness fits squarely within the professional and ethical responsibilities of social work. Additionally, its links to historical racism, oppression, and human rights further justify its inclusion in social work curriculum, considering the new CSWE (2022) EPAS. However, this study shows that dedicated courses on homelessness are not commonplace in BSW and MSW programs. Thus, the purpose of this study was to provide a foundational understanding of the content addressed in these courses and their general focus—micro,

macro, or policy. Homelessness rates continue to rise (de Sousa & Henry, 2024), between 2023 and 2024, the rate of homelessness increased in 43 states and Washington, D.C. As the profession addresses these increases by making progress towards the grand challenges (Barth et al., 2022), it is imperative that social work programs prepare students with knowledge and skills that they can translate into working with people experiencing homelessness or working in careers in homeless services. Better preparing social work students for this work in all states may contribute to ending homelessness by growing and strengthening the homeless services workforce.

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