

Framing homelessness: A corpus-assisted critical discourse analysis of *BBC News UK*

Abstract

Media representation is crucial in shaping public perception of social issues such as homelessness. This is particularly the case for those who lack direct contact with the issue, since for such people news coverage can provide the primary means to learn about such issues. While some discourse-based research has looked at the representation of homelessness in partisan news sources, the present study offers the first such analysis of *BBC News UK* – a non-partisan and the most widely consumed news provider in the UK. Drawing upon a specialised corpus comprising 358 online news articles published in 2022-2023 (totalling 157,854 words), we conducted a keyword-driven framing analysis, closely reading 100 concordances of each keyword obtained by comparing this corpus against the BE21 corpus. Our findings demonstrate that the BBC predominantly foregrounds responses to and experiences of homelessness rather than its causes, mirroring a long-standing trend amongst partisan news media. However, our analysis also identified housing and polycrisis discourses that could help readers to understand the issue from structural perspectives, as well as a ‘nuisance’ discourse that may stigmatise people experiencing homelessness. Notably, political actors in the central/devolved governments are far less salient than local councils and charities in the corpus.

Keywords: homelessness, UK press, news media discourse, Corpus-assisted critical discourse analysis (CACDA), keyword-driven framing analysis, representation

1. Introduction

The UK faces the highest rate of homelessness in the Global North, with 1 in every 200 households living in a statutory homeless state (Burn-Murdoch, 2024). Despite the widespread nature of this problem, research suggests that public awareness surrounding homelessness is often limited and fails to comprehend the scale and complexities of the issue. For example, a survey by the Centre for Homelessness Impact demonstrated that the public holds the stereotype of ‘homeless people’ as being rough sleepers (Lowe, 2023). Yet, people who sleep rough are only a part of the total population experiencing homelessness, as Watts et al. (2022) estimate that sofa-surfing constitutes the largest proportion of ‘core homelessness’ in Great Britain, outweighing the number of people sleeping rough, in hostels, shelters, and B&Bs. Indeed, public awareness of the so-called “hidden homeless” – that is, people who stay in temporary accommodation, vehicles or overcrowded houses, as well as with friends or family members – has not increased much over time (Homewards, 2023; Marshall & Albiston, 2025; Nichols et al., 2018). Although many people understand homelessness to be a structural issue caused by factors that typically sit beyond individual control, advocates recognise the necessity to increase such awareness and thereby reinforce this perspective.

As mass media represents one of the primary forces shaping public perceptions of all manner of social issues (including homelessness), some non-governmental organisations have attempted to reframe homeless issues in news media (e.g. Wesley Mission, 2018; Crisis & FrameWorks Institute, 2020). Media depictions of homelessness and people experiencing it take on an even more pronounced importance, then, when we consider that those lacking direct contact with people in a homeless state often rely on knowledge gained through such coverage (and the representations of the issue that it offers). Research addressing how homelessness is represented in such contexts can thus contribute to the kinds of advocacy efforts noted above, for example by providing evidence that can be used in support of initiatives designed to improve media practice surrounding this pressing social issue.

Spurred on by this motivation, in this article we present an analysis of the ways in which the issue of homelessness is framed in articles published on the *BBC News UK* website. To do this, we take a corpus-assisted approach to analysis, drawing also on concepts from Critical Discourse Studies and framing analysis. The next section provides a more detailed, though necessarily concise, introduction to the issue of homelessness in the UK, including reviewing previous research on media representations of this issue. Section 3 outlines the corpus-assisted approach taken in this paper, addressing data collection and the analytical approach. The results of the analysis are presented in Section 4, before Section 5 concludes the article by discussing the findings and reflecting on the study's implications and limitations.

2. Homelessness in the UK: The context and research on representation

Homelessness is a complex issue that arises when the economic system and government policies culminate to create a social structure that is not capable of embracing individual vulnerability (Fitzpatrick, 2005; Koegel, 2004). Structural factors of homelessness are something beyond individual power, affected by the economic climate, such as recession, unemployment and inflation, and often politically controlled. In the recent UK context, researchers raise several structural forces of homelessness: regional poverty due to the long-term recession; housing trends such as a shortage of affordable rental properties and social housing, surging eviction; and insufficient social security payments amidst the cost-of-living crisis and rent rise (Bramley & Fitzpatrick, 2018; Fitzpatrick et al., 2020; Watts et al., 2022). Under these economic and political conditions, personal circumstances may trigger homelessness. Interpersonal factors concern relationship breakdown, domestic violence, exclusion by the original household, such as family and friends who allowed sofa-surfing or double-up, a lack of social relationships that may support one under financial pressure; and individual factors include adverse life events, institutional care, street culture activities, various forms of vulnerabilities (Fitzpatrick et al., 2013, 2020; Watts et al., 2022). Several strong pieces of evidence in the UK demonstrate that childhood destitution and trauma, substance misuse and mental health issues tend to precede

(young) adulthood homelessness (Bramley & Fitzpatrick, 2018; Fitzpatrick et al., 2013). However, crucially, the factors above are potentially interrelated and indivisible, and some can be both causes and consequences of homelessness.

News media representations of homelessness have been explored from various angles: visibility, naming, portrayal and inclusion (Bray, 2024). The majority of previous research on Anglophone news media examines the portrayal of homeless experiences, causes and responses, in addition to studies dealing with coverage of the issue (e.g. Buck et al., 2004), naming practices (Tsai et al., 2023) and sourcing practices (Gómez-Jiménez & Bartley, 2023; Roberts & Steinkopf, 2022; Schneider, 2012).

News media portrayals have broadly been found to focus more on negatively evaluated behaviours attributed to people experiencing homelessness. In US and UK press, this has not changed much in four decades, and those experiencing homelessness continue to be portrayed as committing such negative behaviours, with other social ills frequently being attributed to them: e.g. begging, criminality, substance use, alcoholism, unemployment and mental health issues (Buck et al., 2004; Gómez-Jiménez & Bartley, 2023; Parnell, 2023). Widdowfield (2001: 52) shows that right-leaning UK newspapers in particular weave individual stories into articles about homelessness, such as cases of people earning money without working, spending money for unreasonable purposes, and declining social services, all of which are used to qualify the attribution of negative qualities; namely, being “criminal, fraudulent, feckless and irresponsible”. Hodgetts et al. (2005) reveal that the most typical characterisation of ‘homeless people’ on television news in the UK is of them roaming the street without purpose or inactively sitting at building entrances. However, such characterisations only represent a limited portion of the full spectrum of homelessness issues and, consequently, public perceptions of people experiencing homelessness overestimate the proportion of people who are drug and alcohol-dependent (Lowe, 2023; Nichols et al., 2018). Through these negative representations, news media has constructed a dichotomy between people experiencing homelessness and non-homeless people, namely *Othering* (Broadly, 2020; Schneider et al., 2010; Shields, 2001; Toft, 2014). Metaphors for people experiencing homelessness, such as ‘return to / bring back to the society’, contribute to this sense of the person experiencing homelessness as the ‘Other’ by locating ‘them’ outside of society (i.e., positioning ‘them’ away from ‘us’) (de Melo Resende, 2020; Foster, 2021).

News media have also been complicit in demarcation amongst those experiencing homelessness, i.e., between people who are ‘deserving’ or ‘undeserving’ of social security. Since the 1980s, the British news media has been found to mark out a particular class of people experiencing homelessness as the ‘undeserving homeless’, with people belonging to this category construed as not being worthy of public support, particularly after the Housing (Homeless Persons) Act 1977 legislation with the ‘priority need’ scheme (Platt, 1999). This depiction has also been observed in news media in recent years, as Widdowfield (2001) considers that associating criminality and

low monetary skills with people in a homeless state contributes to the judgment of them as ‘undeserving’. In the US media, Cowal et al. (2023) identified the sympathising representation of ‘houseless people’ as ‘evacuees’ from wildfire in contrast to ‘homeless people’ who had been experiencing homelessness before the disaster. The underpinning ideology common to these representations and the social welfare system is neo-liberalism, which promotes self-responsibility for homelessness (Broady, 2020; Pleace & Bretherton, 2023; Roberts & Steinkopf, 2022).

Regarding the representations of causes of homelessness, several studies show that news media has gradually shifted to downplaying the structural factors behind homelessness and instead focused on individual issues after the late 1980s (Buck et al., 2004; Pascale, 2005; Schneider et al., 2010). The disconnect between homelessness and the economic and political conditions in news media remains an overwhelming trend (Calder et al., 2011; Gómez-Jiménez & Bartley, 2023; Richter et al., 2012), although evidence of some improvement can be found (Foster, 2020; Parnell, 2024; Pruitt et al., 2020). Lyons and Smedley (2021) found that domestic and family violence is the theme most associated with female homelessness in Australia, rather than structural factors such as housing trends, economic inequality and homelessness policies. In the US, Borum Chattoo et al. (2021) identified a paucity of news articles covering the causal relationship between homelessness, affordable housing and gentrification. One means by which the structural factors of homelessness can be backgrounded in such representations is through the use of metaphors which elide agency, such as the use of WATER metaphors like ‘tide’, ‘wave’ and ‘overflow’, which represent homelessness as a natural disaster (Parnell, 2023).

In terms of responses to homelessness, news media has been found to have a tendency to represent non-profit organisations as the actors that are most suitable to address homelessness issues. Gómez-Jiménez and Bartley (2023) found that *The Guardian* and the *Daily Mail* in the UK tend to portray charity organisations as actors who actively cope with homelessness. In the US and Australian news media, the most frequently mentioned solution for homelessness was philanthropy (Borum Chattoo et al., 2021; Roberts & Steinkopf, 2022; Simpson Reeves et al., 2022). Mass media does not necessarily discuss responsibilities and responses. Huckin (2002) argues that news media could adopt ‘manipulative silence’: only eluding to the underlying causes, which they are reluctant to admit, and avoiding addressing possible solutions not aligned with their political stance.

The representation of homelessness in news media has been well-studied, then. However, methodologically most of these studies have adopted content analysis approaches. Only a very limited amount of this work has adopted a linguistic or discourse-based perspective, going beyond *what* is said about homelessness (i.e., content) to address *how* it is said (i.e., discourse). Adopting such a discourse-based perspective, the present study aims to add to this small body of work that focusses on news representations in the UK (see Broady, 2020; Gómez-Jiménez & Bartley, 2023; Parnell, 2023, 2024).

The present study seeks to add to the insights provided by this existing work by examining, for the first time, how homelessness is framed, not in newspaper data, but in an online, widely read source of news in the UK – *BBC News UK*. The BBC’s coverage of homelessness has not yet been studied, yet there is value in doing so; as well as being the most popular source of news in the UK, the BBC is also the most trusted news provider in the country, regardless of readers’ political leanings (Newman et al., 2022). Moreover, as a public news service, it might reasonably be expected that the BBC covers the diversity of homelessness widely across the UK in a way that has not been observed in coverage by private, partisan news providers. In the section that follows, we describe the data and methodology used in this study.

3. Methodology

This study is based, as noted, on a corpus-assisted approach to Critical Discourse Studies (e.g. Baker et al., 2008; Brookes & Baker, 2021). In CDS, discourse is broadly considered to be a social practice through language that helps interpret the status quo, (de)legitimise responses to problems, and sustain power relations, in which political intentions are embedded (Wodak & Meyer, 2015). Corpus linguistics broadly refers to a set of methods, but also a field of research, that involves analysing linguistic patterns as represented by large collections of naturally occurring language use (i.e. ‘corpora’, singular ‘corpus’). The corpus analysed in this study is a specialised one, purpose-built to frame the issue of homelessness in articles published on the website of *BBC News UK*¹. Articles containing at least one mention of either ‘homeless’ or ‘homelessness’ were searched for and manually collected from the site www.bbc.co.uk (*BBC News UK* articles are currently absent from major academic databases). The publication period searched was between January 2022 and June 2023 (inclusive). This represented the 18 months leading up to the point of data collection (with this period being judged, by the researchers, to yield an amount of data that was manageable for the purposes of our analysis). Articles introducing broadcast programmes and reels were excluded, as were results that were judged by the researchers, on the basis of manual inspection of the results, not to concern the topic of homelessness (i.e., ‘false positives’; for example, one article mentioned a racing horse named ‘Homeless Songs’). The resulting corpus comprises 358 texts (totalling 157,854 words). This corpus was uploaded to AntConc (Anthony 2024) for analysis.

Our analysis of the corpus comprised a quantitative and a qualitative component. The quantitative part was driven by the keywords technique (Baker, 2023b). Keywords are words whose normalised frequency is greater in one corpus (the target) compared against another (the reference), where the difference in frequency is typically statistically significant. The target in

¹ It should be noted that the BBC clarifies their stance on avoiding the expression ‘the homeless’ as taking into account the diversity of homeless situations. The BBC News style guide addresses in the section of ‘homeless’ that “[t]here are many different forms of homelessness, so try to be as specific as possible and avoid language that over-generalises. “[T]he homeless” implies a homogeneous group not individuals” (BBC, n.d.).

this study is the corpus of BBC news articles introduced above, while the reference against which it is compared is the BE21 corpus of samples of written British English texts (including newspapers and other genres) published during the year 2021 (Baker, 2023a). A statistical test of significance (log-likelihood) was carried out on the keywords, while also taking into account their distribution across the texts of the corpus. Specifically, it was stipulated that keywords should occur in at least 5 per cent (i.e., 18) of the texts in the corpus, and that they should have a log-likelihood score of at least 15.13 ($p < 0.0001$, with Bonferroni correction applied) (see: Brookes 2019; Clarke et al. 2022). This gave a total of 52 keywords, which then formed the focus of our subsequent qualitative analysis.

The qualitative component of our analysis involved framing analysis, following Goffman's approach. Goffman (1986) explains that framing is one's subjective involvement in organising an experience according to the person's principles, namely a 'frame', which functions in "rendering what would otherwise be a meaningless aspect of the scene into something that is meaningful" (p.21). Frames are necessarily employed in any representations by language; i.e., to construe and represent a reality, some are foregrounded, and others are backgrounded (Fairclough, 1995). In news media, framing is a common practice based on journalists' and editors' beliefs, values, assumptions, and ideologies (Fowler, 1991). Therefore, framing analysis essentially involves attempting to deconstruct text producers' oft-conventional(ised) process of representation (Entman, 1993; Gamson & Modigliani, 1989; van Dijk, 1988). Since frames can become conventionalised through their repetition – thereby often attaining 'common-sense' status in a society (Goffman, 1986) – corpus approaches based on frequent and statistically salient patterns of language use can be advantageous for identifying frames that are, by dint of their repetition and likely more common-sense status, likely to be especially influential (e.g., Baker et al., 2020; Curry & Brookes, 2024).

Rather than undertake a full framing analysis of this data, in the present study we focus on the three frames of homelessness. These are: (i.) *experiences* of homeless; (ii.) *causes* of homelessness; and (iii.) *responses* to homelessness. The three forms of frames were informed by our review of the literature and Entman (1993, p.52), foregrounding homeless experiences ("problem definition"), causes and risks for homelessness ("causal interpretation"), and responses and initiatives to homelessness ("treatment recommendation"), respectively. We conducted close reading of 100 randomly selected uses of each keyword (or all cases where the total frequency of a given keyword was 100 or less), resulting in analysis of 3,848 uses in total. Each case was manually coded for the particular frame that the use of the keyword invoked (where applicable), with the coding of specific frames being developed inductively and based on engagement with previous research on representations of homelessness (including work adopting frame-based and other approaches – see Section 2). This part of the analysis initially involved reading concordance lines but typically moved minimally to the sentence level and often it was necessary, for the interpretation of frames, to extend this window further to include surrounding

sentences. We also examined strong collocations of keywords (span: L5-R5), as measured by Mutual Information scores, to illustrate the typical use of keywords in their frame.

In this article, we report on cases in which at least 10% of uses of a given keyword contribute to a particular frame. As such, some keywords can be attributed to multiple frames (e.g., the keyword *risk* was most often used in the *experiences* frame, but also the *causes* frame). Our findings are reported in the next section and then discussed in Section 5.

4. Findings

Table 1 presents the frames in which the top 52 keywords appear. The bold keywords indicate the ‘primary frame’, in which the keyword is the most frequently used. Appendix 1 presents the number of instances of each keyword in the three frames. The analysis identified 1,828 cases in the *experience* frame, 715 in the *causes* frame, and 1,971 in the *responses* frame (Table 1). Overall, most of the keywords are used to frame the experiences of homelessness (48 keywords) and responses to the issue (41), whilst fewer are employed in framing its causes (32). When looking at the primary frame, this tendency is more evident. Merely 7 keywords are primarily used to frame the causes of homelessness. Furthermore, it is ascertained that the search terms are less frequently used in the *causes* frame; causal representation appears in less than 20%² of uses of ‘homeless’ (12%) and ‘homelessness’ (18%) cases. In contrast, roughly 50% of the cases of both keywords are employed in the *experiences* (54% of ‘homeless’, 56% of ‘homelessness’) and/or *responses* frame (46% of ‘homeless’, 61% of ‘homelessness’); Example 1 shows these two frames. Given the proliferation of keywords that tend to contribute to these frames and the relative paucity of keywords contributing to the framing of causes, it could be argued that the BBC during this period is characterised as foregrounding the experience of people in a homeless status and responses to the issue, while focusing less on, and perhaps even backgrounding, its causes. In the following subsections, we mainly focus on the keywords in their primary frame.

- (1) Her sister Lee-Maria Hughes said Catherine House was critical for women dealing with **homelessness**. (16-03-2023)

Table 1: Frames and associated keywords.

Frame	Keyword	n	n: primary frame
<i>Experiences</i>	accommodation (529), addiction (49), <i>affordable</i> (84), <i>borough</i> (38), <i>charities</i> (72), <i>charity</i> (466), <i>council</i> (682), <i>councillor</i> (60), <i>councillors</i> (30), <i>councils</i> (85), crisis (173), drug (75), <i>emergency</i> (134), <i>eviction</i> (62), experiencing (45), <i>flats</i> (40), <i>homeless</i> (1,072), <i>homelessness</i> (697), <i>homes</i> (261), hostel (69), hotel (98), hotels (61), <i>house</i> (243), households (108), <i>housing</i> (646), <i>landlord</i> (53), <i>landlords</i> (75), <i>levelling</i> (26), mental (88), <i>outreach</i> (30), <i>properties</i> (92), <i>property</i> (100), <i>rent</i> (147), <i>rental</i>	48	21

² Henceforth, the proportion of instances in which a keyword fitted within a frame was calculated by dividing the number of such cases by the total number of cases under analysis.

	(49), <i>rented</i> (37), residents (95), risk (122), rough (357), <i>shelter</i> (161), <i>shelters</i> (33), sleep (69), sleepers (118), sleeping (285), sofa (41), streets (142), surfing (31), temporary (260), <i>volunteers</i> (51), vulnerable (120)		
Causes	<i>addiction</i> (49), <i>affordable</i> (84), <i>borough</i> (38), <i>charities</i> (72), <i>councils</i> (85), <i>crisis</i> (173), <i>drug</i> (75), eviction (62), <i>flats</i> (40), <i>homeless</i> (1,072), <i>homelessness</i> (697), <i>homes</i> (261), <i>hotel</i> (98), <i>house</i> (243), <i>households</i> (108), <i>housing</i> (646), landlord (53), <i>landlords</i> (75), <i>mental</i> (88), <i>properties</i> (92), property (100), rent (147), rental (49), rented (37), rents (39), <i>residents</i> (95), risk (122), <i>shelter</i> (161), <i>sleeping</i> (285), sofa (41), streets (142), surfing (31), <i>tenants</i> (46)	32	7
Responses	<i>accommodation</i> (529), <i>addiction</i> (49), <i>affordable</i> (84), borough (38), <i>charities</i> (72), charity (466), council (682), councillor (60), councillors (30), <i>councils</i> (85), <i>crisis</i> (173), donations (25), <i>drug</i> (75), emergency (134), <i>eviction</i> (62), flats (40), homeless (1,072), <i>homelessness</i> (697), <i>homes</i> (261), <i>hostel</i> (69), <i>hotel</i> (98), <i>hotels</i> (61), house (243), <i>households</i> (108), housing (646), landlord (53), <i>landlords</i> (75), levelling (26), <i>mental</i> (88), outreach (30), <i>properties</i> (92), property (100), rent (147), rental (49), rented (37), rents (39), <i>residents</i> (95), risk (122), rough (357), shelter (161), shelters (33), sleep (69), sleepers (118), <i>sleeping</i> (285), streets (142), sofa (41), surfing (31), temporary (260), tenants (46), volunteers (51), vulnerable (120)	41	24

Note: The number in the brackets indicates the raw frequency of the keyword.

4.1 Experiences frame

The *experiences* frame corresponds to the instances in which a keyword is employed to frame who experiences homelessness, and how. This includes the number and demographics of those experiencing homelessness, including their gender, ethnicity, relationship status or family; their actions, attributes, hardships, thoughts, or feelings; the area and the form of places in which they stay/sleep; the length of time they have been homeless; the treatment they receive from others; and further problems as the consequence of becoming homeless, represented by deteriorating their mental health.

Of the 21 keywords most frequently used in this frame, the majority concern where people experience homelessness. Roughly 80% of the uses of ‘**rough**’ frame homeless experiences by collocating with either ‘**sleep**’ (MI score: 5.7), ‘**sleepers**’ (8.8), or ‘**sleeping**’ (8.3). Likewise, 85% of the instances of ‘**streets**’ are used to frame rough sleeping. In Example 2, a mother remarks on her son’s fear of exacerbating their homeless situation. Meanwhile, ‘**temporary**’ and ‘**accommodation**’ (MI score: 7.9), and ‘**sofa**’ and ‘**surfing**’ (11.9) strongly collocate. ‘**Hotel**’ and ‘**hotels**’ tend to be used to frame not only where people experience homelessness, but also feature in descriptions of unreasonable treatment by authorities, and the difficulties of their hotel life in terms of the period of time they needed to stay there, the distance of the hotels from their original communities, or the standard of the hotel facilities (Example 3). Distinguishing it from other accommodation-related keywords, ‘**hostel**’ is frequently associated with violent crimes, corresponding to 24% (10 cases) of the keyword’s instances framing *experiences* (41 cases). Most of these cases represent those in a homeless status as victims (Example 4), with a few cases of them being depicted as perpetrators (Example 5). In sum, the BBC represents various forms of

homelessness, including some types of ‘hidden homelessness’. However, notably, ‘hidden’ itself does not occur as a keyword in this corpus, which is perhaps unexpected, since advocates have attempted to increase the visibility of hidden homelessness with this term to challenge the stereotype that people experience homelessness on streets, as noted in Section 1.

- (2) “He had a nightmare the other night because he thought he was going to be on the **streets**. (11-03-2023)
- (3) “‘Ceri, who has asked for her surname not to be used to shield her identity, was housed in a **hotel** without any cooking facilities or a place to wash her clothes for four months as she waited for a home. (29-10-2022)
- (4) Nelson-Roux: Teen attacked at **hostel** before death, inquest told (24-11-2022_3)
- (5) Nottingham attacks: CCTV shows suspect outside homeless **hostel** (14-06-2023)

The second group of keywords is used to denote people who are homeless. ‘**Residents**’, in the *experiences* frame, is used to indicate those who live in temporary housing, or who have lost their homes primarily by accident (Example 6). ‘**Households**’ is typically accompanied by the number of those who are homeless. ‘**Vulnerable**’ and ‘**risk**’ are used in the majority of cases to paraphrase people experiencing homelessness (Example 7), or to broadly define them as the target of services (Example 8). ‘**Risk**’ is also employed to present the potential adverse effects on those who have been homeless (Example 9). ‘**Experiencing**’ fits in this group since ‘people’, ‘those’ and ‘women’ are frequently found on the left hand of the node, and typically ‘homelessness’ on the right.

- (6) Basildon house fire leaves **residents** homeless (27-03-2023)
- (7) Progressives and advocates for the homeless, however, believe that linking homelessness to crime only further stigmatises a **vulnerable** population. (06-05-2023)
- (8) “We provide support to anyone who is homeless or at **risk** of homelessness. (16-03-2023_7)
- (9) ‘Homelessness can increase the **risk** of sexual exploitation’ (08-03-2022).

The third set of keywords relates to health conditions; namely ‘**mental**’, ‘**addiction**’ and ‘**drug**’. More than 50% of the instances of these keywords are used to attribute mental health or substance misuse issues to people with a homeless status. More specifically, the keyword ‘**drug**’ is more frequently attributed to individuals as a part of their homelessness experience than the whole homeless population, whilst ‘**mental**’ and ‘**addiction**’ are used in individual and collective stories in approximately equal proportion. ‘**Addiction**’ and ‘**drug**’ collocate strongly with each other (MI score: 9.0), as does ‘**mental**’ with ‘health’ (10.1). It should be noted that these three keywords are frequently employed simultaneously in the *responses* frame, where these are attributes that are to be targeted by remedies as part of the support for people experiencing homelessness (see Example 10).

- (10) Herefordshire Council’s rough sleeper outreach team placed him in emergency accommodation and helped with his **drug addiction** and **mental** health problems through the government’s “Everyone In” initiative. (01-10-2022_2)

Lastly, 73 instances of the keyword ‘**crisis**’ fit in the *experiences* frame, with 47% of these simultaneously framing the causes of homelessness. In terms of the form of crises, the cost-of-living crisis is the most frequently found (37% of the instances in the *experiences* frame). The

instances primarily deal with the escalating scale of homelessness in the UK (Example 11), with the few that highlight the individual struggles amidst the crisis, such as job losses and uncertainty over the future independent living. Another prominent crisis is the housing crisis (23%), which is generally understood in the UK as “the long-term failure to build sufficient homes to keep up with newly arising demand”, in which homelessness is “the most visible manifestation” (Wilson, 2017: para. 1). In the minority uses of this keyword, the exacerbating homelessness is presented as the homelessness crisis (18%), with the phrases of ‘crisis on the/our streets’ or ‘homelessness crisis’, in addition to intensified rhetoric such as in the notions of a ‘national homelessness crisis’ and a ‘homelessness disaster’ (Example 12). This rhetoric emphasises the perception that homelessness in the UK is itself at a crisis level instead of regarding it as a part of the housing crisis. As such, it could be argued that homelessness is constructed as the consequence of or in relation to multiple crises; namely, it is a polycrisis (Parnell et al., 2024).

- (11) Young people face a “surge in homelessness” amid the cost-of-living **crisis**, a leading charity has warned. (10-11-2022)
- (12) “We are rapidly turning from a homelessness **crisis** into a homelessness disaster,” (19-12-2022_3)

4.2 Causes frame

The *causes* frame is invoked when keywords are used to represent the factors that increase the number of people experiencing homelessness, make one homeless or put people at risk of homelessness. All 7 keywords in Table 1 that primarily occur in the *causes* frame relate to housing issues. Approximately half of the instances of ‘**rent**’ (53%), ‘**rents**’ (67%), ‘**rented**’ (47%) and ‘**rental**’ (53%) respectively are used to frame the causes of becoming homeless, such as the cases where people became unable to afford their rent or to find an affordable rental property, or were evicted due to Section 21 notice or rent arrears. Forty-eight per cent of uses of ‘**eviction**’ frame causes of homelessness (Example 13). In some eviction cases, ‘**landlord**’ is foregrounded in the causal description, as shown in Example 14, corresponding to 50% of its uses. ‘**Property**’ is the most frequently used in the *causes* frame (42%), typically in the context of eviction or housing crisis (Example 15). These findings imply that the BBC relies on a housing discourse in causal representations of homelessness. Since a discourse promotes a particular interpretation of reality (See Section 3), we could argue that the BBC primarily construes homelessness as a housing issue, which corresponds to the news producer’s focus on the relevant responses, as the following analysis shows.

- (13) Some 100,000 renters could be at risk of **eviction** when universal credit payments drop next week, homelessness charity Crisis has warned. (01-10-2022_4)
- (14) But the father-of-two was given notice to evict by his **landlord** after seeking advice from the council about the property. (24-01-2023)
- (15) He added the average rent was £700 per month, adding “if indeed you can even find a **property** to rent”. (15-06-2023)

4.3 Responses frame

The *responses* frame is found in instances in which keywords are used to represent initiatives, policies and plans to practically improve homeless issues, in addition to ideational responses such as calling for measures and stating thoughts on homelessness. In this frame, a certain

number of instances in which the given response is critically depicted, from the perspective of the ‘voice’ of the article, are found, corresponding to 23% (450 instances): e.g. the cases where the drawbacks of a resolution are discussed; the established services are terminated; and the responding charity is overwhelmed with an increasing number of clients. Such critical uses of the keywords were identified alongside linguistic signs such as conjunctions (Example 16) and negative forms (17), or when considering the context of the whole article.

- (16) The Department for **Levelling Up**, Housing and Communities said it had allocated £150m funding to councils across the UK to support Ukrainian refugees to move into their own homes and reduce the risk of homelessness. But many Ukrainians still face a struggle to secure private rental homes without employment or credit history in the UK. (19-12-2022_3)
- (17) "There's not enough council housing, there's not enough help for people that are being made **homeless** and the system is broken." (17-03-2023)

Of the 24 keywords primarily found in this frame, some housing-related keywords tend to be associated with policies, regulations, and measures by authorities, rather than causes of homelessness. Example 18, which contains a use of the keyword ‘**tenants**’, concerns the prevention of homelessness. Example 19, of ‘**landlords**’, frames governmental response in a negative way. Similarly, Example 20, ‘**properties**’, critically presents Prince William’s homeless initiative, pointing out a perceived irony of someone of his means calling on others to address this issue. ‘**House**’, ‘**homes**’ and ‘**flats**’ are typically used in descriptions of concrete resolutions to homelessness, often to specify the amount of funding allocated for these housing policies. ‘**Affordable**’ strongly collocates with ‘**homes**’ (MI score 7.7) and ‘**housing**’ (6.8). Example 21 corresponds to an ideational response: the quoted speaker states the importance of affordable housing. As such, the housing discourse is found in the representation of responses as well as causes.

- (18) More **tenants** to get eviction protection in Wales (14-11-2022)
- (19) Ministers resisted calls for a rent freeze last year, saying they did not want to drive **landlords** away from the sector. (06-09-2023_3)
- (20) Let's be honest, there will be some cynicism about a wealthy landowner, with several **properties**, calling on others to tackle homelessness. (26-06-2023_6)
- (21) "Safe, clean **affordable housing** is the cornerstone to helping families get their lives back on track. (14-02-2023)

Subsequently, keywords concerning homelessness services frequently contribute to the *responses* frame. ‘**Outreach**’, ‘**emergency**’, ‘**shelter**’ (Example 22) and ‘**shelters**’ - most of the keywords indicate a form of accommodation. They are more frequently employed to foreground responses to homelessness, rather than to frame homelessness experiences.

- (22) The **shelter** will reduce the cost to the local homelessness service, **councillor** Clare Golby said. (07-06-2023_2)

All the keywords indicating governments and charities tend to be used to highlight who responds to homelessness. The keywords which refer to local government, e.g., ‘**borough**’, ‘**council**’ and ‘**councils**’, occur as a responding agent (Example 23) or service provider (Example 24) in approximately two-thirds of their respective instances. ‘**Councils**’, which of 62% is used in the *responses* frame, tends to be associated with funding. ‘**Councillor**’ and ‘**councillors**’ tend to be

used in legitimization of the planned or introduced response by these social actors (Examples 22). ‘**Levelling**’, the sole keyword in the corpus that indicates the UK government department at the time (i.e., the Department of Levelling Up, Housing and Communities), is most frequently used to describe the responses of this department to homelessness, corresponding to 85% of the uses of this keyword (however, the frequency is low; 26). In Example 16, the use of the adversative conjunction ‘but’ implies that the response is insufficient, leading to a critical prosody. It should be noted that none of the instances of ‘**levelling**’ is used in the *causes* frame, which means that this keyword is not associated with causal explanations of homelessness. Regarding ‘**charities**’ and ‘**charity**’, approximately 65% of the uses of these keywords frame the responses. This figure includes critical cases which represent the charity’s struggle with responding to the growing demand for their services (Example 25) and the charity’s critical evaluation of the governmental responses. Most of the uses of ‘**donations**’ (96%) and ‘**volunteers**’ (86%) are associated with charitable initiatives. To sum up, although a keyword denoting the central government is found, local councils and charities are relatively foregrounded in the representation of homelessness responses.

- (23) Colchester **Borough Council** has asked the government to "immediately extend the hotel stays". (23-06-2023_2)
- (24) While living under CCP's care, she said staff helped her develop financial skills and after she gave birth, the charity helped her to secure **council** accommodation. (28-01-2023)
- (25) But spiralling rents mean more people are needing help and the **charity** is being forced to turn some people away. (13-10-2022)

Notably, in some cases of the *responses* frames, people with a homeless status are represented as a nuisance in association with accommodation for them. Those cases are particularly found around the keywords ‘**hostel**’ (4 instances), ‘**properties**’ (3) and ‘**residents**’ (4) in the way that the stakeholder states counterview on the response under planning. Those instances frame temporary housing for people experiencing homelessness in a ‘nimby’ way (‘not in my back yard’; Example 26-28), implying the negative evaluation of those who will be accommodated. Example 26 concerns the plan to convert a historic hotel into affordable housing, and Example 28 concerns the proposals for new temporary accommodation. In Examples 27 and 28, people experiencing homelessness are metaphorically treated as rubbish by “dumping zone”, as prisoners by “concentration camp” and as drug dependents by “drug-dealer's-paradise”. Here, people living in a homeless state are homogeneously assumed as a bothering population with substance issues and criminal potential. We could argue that the nuisance discourse underlies these stereotypes, which are constructed through negative assumptions about homelessness accommodation rather than directly on people experiencing homelessness.

- (26) "The owners are long-term, local, and do not wish to be associated with either poor development or nuisance **properties**," it added. (05-04-2022)
- (27) "More 100 residents joined me in putting objections into the building becoming a **hostel**. We don't want Tuebrook to become a dumping zone for any **hostel**." (27-02-2023)
- (28) But those proposals were unanimously refused by the council's area south committee in August, with **residents** likening the designs to a "concentration camp" and a former police officer describing it as "a drug-dealer's-paradise". (07-11-2022_2)

5. Discussion and concluding remarks

Drawing upon a keyword-driven approach to framing analysis, this study has explored the representation of homelessness on *BBC News UK*. Our analysis of the characteristic language use in this coverage has revealed a tendency for this news producer to foreground responses to and experiences of homelessness. Meanwhile, the causes of homelessness take up decidedly less focus in the coverage. This feature of the coverage is aligned with the long-standing tendency of traditional Anglophone news media, wherein the coverage of people experiencing homelessness and solutions tends to outweigh the causes of homelessness (Buck et al., 2004; Pruitt et al., 2020; Schneider et al., 2010). Put differently, in this respect it could be argued that the BBC seems to operate in a manner resembling that of commercial and partisan news producers.

Nevertheless, this does not mean that the BBC did not provide causal explanations of homelessness at all. When portraying this issue in the *causes* frame, the news media focuses on the structural perspective of the housing issue – what we have referred to as a ‘housing discourse’ (See Section 4.2). Our qualitative analysis revealed that all seven keywords that are primarily used in the *causes* frame concern industrial trends and issues in the housing sector, such as high rent, a shortage of affordable rental property and eviction. These factors are typically considered structural conditions where homelessness arises (See Section 2). Correspondingly, it was found that the housing discourse is also salient in the *responses* frame, emphasising the perception that homelessness is to be addressed as a housing issue. Some might not be surprised at the presence of this housing discourse in the media discussion of homelessness issues, but there have been alternative discourses of homelessness in UK tabloids that highlight individual responsibility (Broady, 2020; Parnell, 2024). In the present research, the keywords invoking individual vulnerabilities that may trigger homelessness, such as ‘drug’ and ‘addiction’, are not primarily used in the *causes* frame, which implies that these factors tend not to be depicted as the cause of homelessness on *BBC News UK*.

The characteristic that the BBC foregrounds the structural factors of homelessness as something beyond individual controls is also found in the majority use of the keyword ‘**crisis**’ in the *experiences* and *causes* frames. The BBC frequently represents individual and collective experiences of homelessness as a consequence of the cost-of-living and housing crises. In several instances, the scale of homelessness is presented as having reached a crisis level, namely as a form of crisis, through rhetoric such as ‘crisis on our streets’ and ‘national homelessness crisis’ (See Section 4.2). These representations are likely underpinned by the discourse that homelessness is a polycrisis, which, according to Lawrence et al. (2024: 2), is “the causal entanglement of crises” in multiple social systems in the way of significantly harming the lives of a large population. The interrelation of the cost-of-living, housing, climate and homelessness crises has been observed in *The Guardian* (Parnell, 2024), suggesting that the BBC appears to align with left-leaning traditional news media in constructing the polycrisis discourse. Nevertheless, the polycrisis discourse on the BBC seems to understate other factors, such as political decisions, that are considered to contribute to homelessness. Krzyżanowski et al. (2023) emphasise that crisis or polycrisis emerges as a narrative that blends who and what is (not) to blame for an experienced crisis, which is constructed with political motives. We will discuss below the effects of this discourse and the possible intentions of the news producer.

The dependence on the housing and polycrisis discourses may fail to help readers understand the underlying issues of homelessness more comprehensively. Homelessness is a complex issue intertwined with economic and political contextual factors, such as unemployment and social security policies, as we discussed in Section 2. As such, some advocates recommend that news

media attempt to convey these (and other) various factors when reporting on homelessness (e.g. Council to Homeless Persons, 2022; Crisis & FrameWorks Institute, 2020). Indeed, most of the keywords relevant to councils and the UK government in the data we analysed are not employed in the *causes* frame. That is, our analysis shows a scarcity of political perspectives in the causal descriptions of homelessness on the BBC, despite social scientists having long pointed to plausible political causes such as austerity measures and insufficient housing benefits in their analyses of the causes of homelessness (Watts et al., 2022). This seems, to us, to be a marked absence.

Indeed, Westminster features far less prominently in the present corpus than local councils and non-governmental organisations do. The words denoting the central/devolved governments and political parties, such as ‘government’, ‘MP(s)’, ‘Tory’, ‘Labour’, did not statistically occur as keywords, implying these political actors are not salient in the BBC’s homelessness reporting, at least during the period studied. This finding is unexpected given the recent survey presenting that the public considers the UK government and devolved administrations as the most responsible for this issue (Marshall & Albiston, 2025). Instead, it was found that the BBC tends to foreground local councils and charities as prominent actors who address homelessness, which somewhat differs from several studies that have found that Anglophone news media tends to portray charities as the primary contributor (e.g. Roberts & Steinkopf, 2022; Simpson Reeves et al., 2022). The absence of the UK or devolved governments may reflect the BBC’s status as a public news service. In other words, it might be the case that the BBC’s lack of focus on political actors results from an attempt, by this news producer, to avoid assigning or even implying blame, in an effort at political neutrality (such is the expectation of the BBC). However, it is important to also note that studies such as Gómez-Jiménez and Bartley (2023) show that more partisan British news media also tend to omit governmental responsibility and accountability for homelessness issues, so this alone is not likely to explain our findings. Another – not mutually exclusive – possible explanation is that the BBC’s focus on local as opposed to national powers reflects its more recent emphasis on local journalism (BBC, 2020). Likewise, this feature of the BBC’s coverage could also reflect the present legal system of homelessness in the UK, which entitles more authority to local councils (Bevan et al., 2024). We are forced to hypothesise a little here, regarding these explanatory factors, and it might be the case that what we are seeing is an effect of multiple of these factors all bearing on the coverage at once. We will return to this question at the end of this section.

Whatever the factors driving this focus in the coverage might be, the choices regarding what the BBC foregrounds – and backgrounds – seem to shape audiences’ perceptions of the issue of homelessness. Two surveys conducted after the timeframe covered by our BBC data highlight that the public tends to view homelessness as something that is beyond individual control, and caused by multiple factors (Homewards, 2023; Marshall & Albiston, 2025). The majority agree with two main causes: unaffordable housing and poverty, both of which somewhat align with the housing discourse and the prominence of the cost-of-living crisis in the BBC. Meanwhile, we also found a notable inconsistency between public perception and the representation by the public news media. The recent surveys above indicate that a substantial proportion of the public still holds the false belief that rough sleeping is the most common form of homelessness in the UK (Homewards, 2023; Marshall & Albiston, 2025), which advocates have attempted to rectify. Our analysis has identified the BBC attempts to represent a broad range of homelessness, not limited to rough sleeping, although this news producer does not frequently use the term ‘hidden

homelessness' that has been advocated by charities (See Sections 1 and 4.1). In sum, the BBC, as a prominent news source in the UK, has likely helped to cultivate structural interpretations of homelessness among the public, while even the most widely consumed news media seems to have insufficient effects on correcting some misperceptions.

Additionally, the qualitative analysis shows that merely 23% of the instances in the *responses* frame deal with the given response critically. From the remaining 77%, we could argue that the BBC tends to frame responses without explicit evaluation or any analytical perspective. Repeated over time, such relatively value-free kinds of reporting could have the function of normalising (and so in turn, legitimising) the policies and responses to homelessness being reported (Fetzer, 2014). Yet, at present at least, the majority of people consider current responses to homelessness to be insufficient (Lowe, 2023), and advocates have called for more fundamental solutions which go far beyond current measures, such as increasing social housing and a pro-tenants bill. Given these views, it could be contended that the BBC's relatively uncritical reporting – while arguably a function of its commitment to objectivity – is indeed an ideology-laden one, and one which is likely to contribute to maintaining the status quo of homelessness, including the enabling role that is played by the deeply uneven power relations that exist between the establishment and people experiencing homelessness.

Another finding regarding the *responses* frame is that the BBC could represent people experiencing homelessness as a nuisance. The nuisance discourse, in which the population is treated in a nimby way, has also been found in previous studies (e.g. Pruitt et al., 2020; Toft, 2014). In the present data, we found that the discourse is constructed through the expression of negatively balanced assumptions about hostels and temporary housing for those experiencing homelessness, presented by community members (See Section 4.3). These stereotypes were often articulated through the use of negative and dehumanising metaphors for homeless accommodation, such as 'dumping zone', 'concentration camp' and 'drug-dealer's-paradise', implicitly homogenising people with a homeless state as a nuisance for the community. Metaphors can have "a pragmatic role that aims to provide evaluations" by invoking a particular emotion, often facilitating readers to accept underlying stereotypes (Charteris-Black, 2004:24). As such, these linguistic choices contribute to the propagation of established stereotypes, including around substance misuse and criminality (See Section 2), and, subsequently, to distancing those experiencing homelessness from those not experiencing it. Notably, negative stereotyping and the separation of 'them' from 'us' can lead to the stigmatisation of those experiencing homelessness (Link & Phelan, 2001). Given the likely adversarial effects of the linguistic choices we have observed, we would argue that such reporting would be more effective at garnering sympathy and challenging stigma if journalists avoided the kinds of tropes noted above. This endeavour would also be supported by reporting that adopted a more balanced approach to quoting; sharing the perspectives and first-hand lived accounts of experiences of homelessness, rather than just quoting housed citizens describing people experiencing homelessness as, among other things, a nuisance.

We conclude this article by reflecting on some of the limitations of our approach, and by considering how future research could address such limitations or otherwise develop on the findings presented in this paper. Supported, though our analysis was, by our engagement with the socio-political and institutional contexts in which the news texts we analysed were created and consumed, a limitation of our analysis is that our textual analysis cannot reveal audiences' responses to the representations we have identified. In inferring likely responses, we have been

forced to hypothesise somewhat. So, a way of developing this analysis further would be to triangulate our textual analysis with something akin to audience response measures, as a means of buttressing our claims in this regard. Likewise, though our knowledge of the (changing) discourse practices of *BBC News UK* was helpful in terms of explaining our findings (e.g., regarding the greater focus on local as opposed to national political actors), further work could provide empirical evidence for such interpretations, for example by directly comparing the representations by news producers with distinct discourse practices, or by adopting a diachronic perspective trained on how evolving socio-political and institutional contexts in turn change the shape of the discourse around homelessness in the news.

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Appendix 1. Number of instances of the 52 keywords in the three frames

	<i>Experiences</i>	<i>Causes</i>	<i>Responses</i>	<i>Other</i>
accommodation (529)	77	8	71	1
addiction (49)	26	7	17	14
affordable (84)	19	36	51	1
borough (38)	10	5	22	2
charities (72)	20	12	49	6
charity (466)	35	7	62	21
council (682)	23	8	61	13
councillor (60)	15	4	42	7
councillors (30)	11	2	20	2
councils (85)	29	8	62	5
crisis (173)	73	42	40	8
donations (25)	1	0	24	1
drug (75)	40	7	17	24
emergency (134)	33	5	72	8
eviction (62)	26	30	20	3
experiencing (45)	36	4	4	2
flats (40)	11	5	25	1
homeless (1072)	54	12	55	2
homelessness (697)	46	18	61	2
homes (261)	17	13	62	9
hostel (69)	41	2	35	0
hotel (98)	60	11	36	9
hotels (61)	31	4	25	5
house (243)	15	19	51	15
households (108)	73	13	33	1
housing (646)	21	21	56	6
landlord (53)	13	27	14	10
landlords (75)	10	34	35	10
levelling (26)	6	0	22	1
mental (88)	47	9	40	7
outreach (30)	10	2	19	1
properties (92)	21	34	44	10
property (100)	28	42	30	9
rent (147)	28	53	38	15
rental (49)	7	26	9	8
rented (37)	8	18	9	4
rents (39)	1	26	12	3
residents (95)	51	20	50	6
risk (122)	81	31	47	10
rough (357)	79	9	57	0
shelter (161)	38	12	62	1
shelters (33)	12	1	22	2
sleep (69)	39	3	33	1
sleepers (118)	92	3	56	2
sleeping (285)	75	5	51	0
sofa (41)	35	6	5	0
streets (142)	85	15	47	4
surfing (31)	27	6	6	0
temporary (260)	76	7	55	1
tenants (46)	7	15	18	12

volunteers (51)	13	3	44	1
vulnerable (120)	96	5	73	2
Total	1828	715	1971	288

Note: The number in the brackets in the first column indicates the raw frequency of the keyword.