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Exposure to Urbanized Poverty and Attitude Change: A Longitudinal Case Study on Service-Learning with Rural Undergraduate Criminal Justice Students

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ABSTRACT

Criminal justice departments recognize the value of connecting students to real-world problems through service-learning activities. Yet, challenges exist in exposing students to diverse populations. The current study stepped outside the classroom, involving an extra-curricular group of criminal justice students, in a unique service-learning project. Students from a rurally located university traveled to the most poverty-stricken area in Los Angeles, California, known as Skid Row. Students partnered with *The Burrito Project*, making and serving 950 burritos to people living on the streets. To assess the impact on exposure to poverty, students completed a pre and post-test utilizing the Undergraduate Perceptions of Poverty Tracking Survey. Four years later, follow-up interviews were conducted. Survey results suggest no significant changes pre/post project completion while longitudinal interviews yielded rich data on the project impact. Future directions including criminal justice students within service-learning projects are discussed, especially considering inclusion of students early within their academic careers.

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Service-learning; criminal justice; exposure to poverty; rural students

The pedagogy is increasingly being used by those in the discipline to offer students real-world experience, optimize classroom outcomes, and prepare graduates for the diversity of complex careers in criminal justice. (Davis, Cronley, Madden, & Kim, 2014, p. 158)

Experiential-learning is a broad set of pedagogical practices that captures a range of processes whereby students learn from connecting experience to classroom learning (Kolb, 1984; Penn, 2003). These processes are different than community volunteerism as reflection is key (Burke & Bush, 2013). Reflection is valuable for gaining career insight, applying academic theory to real-life experiences, and reducing stereotypes (Blair, Brown, Schoepflin, & Taylor, 2014; Burke & Bush, 2013). While experiential-learning is an umbrella pedagogical term, service-learning serves as one example of this unique form of learning. Community service-learning acts as a vehicle for universities to contribute to broader social issues (Butin, 2010; Cipolle, 2010). Not only do students

contribute to community change directly, but also their involvement in such projects impacts them on a personal level.

Numerous quantitative studies have evaluated the impact of service-learning on students through different lenses. Some scholars have quantitatively assessed academic learning (Eyler, 2000), personal and interpersonal development (Eyler & Giles, 1999; Eyler, Giles, Stenson, & Gray, 2003), and civic engagement (Eyler et al., 2003; Gallini & Moely, 2003). Other scholars have qualitatively examined the influence of service-learning on stereotypical attitudes (Eyler & Giles, 1999; Hirschinger-Blank & Markowitz, 2006) as well as multicultural competencies (Boyle-Baise & Kilbane, 2000; Root, Callahan, & Sepanski, 2001). Yet, studies on criminal justice students involved in service-learning are not quite as prevalent (see Hirschinger-Blank & Markowitz, 2006) and many times, lacking in analysis of personal attitudinal changes. Research suggests that rural culture may also lead some to holding traditional beliefs (e.g. stoicism and gender norms) about forms of oppression (see Terry & William, 2019); yet, service-learning with criminal justice undergraduates has not focused on the impact on rurally located students. Additionally, nearly all prior research has included students from within specific courses, not from extra-curricular department involvement similar to the current study. Lastly, studying longitudinal impact of service-learning is also nearly absent in the literature.

Literature review

Service-learning

Service-learning has been utilized across a range of academic disciplines, including such fields as social work (Mtawa & Wilson-Strydom, 2018) sociology (Mobley, 2007), English (Lupton, 2008), business and management (Garrett, Sharpe, Walter, & Zyweitz, 2012), and even physics (Guerra, 2005). Many scholars adhere to Kolb's (1984) seminal piece on experiential-learning. This process includes concrete experiences, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation. Concrete experiences are created by newly encountered situations resulting in reinterpretation of existing experiences. Reflective observation is key as students process inconsistencies between previous experience and current understanding. Abstract conceptualization gives rise to new ideas, modifying previous schemas. Lastly, active experimentation allows students to apply their ideas to the real world (Kolb, 1984).

Working under Kolb's (1984) conceptual process, students gain deeper awareness for social issues (Sparks, 2007) through collaborative work and shared experiences on collaboration (Rhoades, 1997; Starks, Harrison, & Denhardt, 2011). In one literature review spanning from 1993 to 2000, Eyler, Giles, Stenson, and Gray (2001) found five key benefits for students. These impacts included personal development, social outcomes, learning outcomes, career development, and an enhanced relationship with the home university (Eyler et al., 2001). While this review may be slightly dated, more recent studies have highlighted similar benefits for students (Costandius & Bitzer, 2015; McMillan, 2013). Although definitions of service-learning vary slightly, overall, the key points include addressing a community issue/need and integrating learning through experience and student reflection (Eyler & Giles, 1999; McCrea, 2004).

Criminal justice service-learning

Higher education programs in criminal justice have provided education and training to undergraduate students, helping them to address every day challenges presented to field workers (Davis, 2015; Eskridge, 2003). Many programs either suggest or require students to complete internship experiences to further develop skills; yet, traditional internships have been found to be insufficient in providing students real-world experiences alongside academic connections (Burke & Bush, 2013; Hirschinger-Blank & Markowitz, 2006). While internships may focus primarily on the applied aspects of the experience, criminal justice programs offering service-learning opportunities benefits not only the student, but also future employers (Davis et al., 2014) and communities (Cronley, Madden, & Davis, 2015).

Service-learning in criminal justice education first surfaced around the late-1990s (Lersch, 1997; Situ, 1997; Swanson, King, & Wolbert, 1997). While studies have continued, they remain limited. In a 2006 review of the literature, Hirschinger-Blank and Markowitz located only six articles related to service-learning with undergraduate criminal justice students. The nature of each course and specific activity varied, but all six studies documented self-reported receptivity of the program by the students (Lersch, 1997; Penn, 2003; Pompa, 2002; Situ, 1997; Swanson et al., 1997; Vigorita, 2002). Positive impacts were noted on increased intellectual development for all programs. Two studies found service-learning was helpful for students' careers (Penn, 2003; Situ, 1997) while five studies suggested students' sensitivity towards intolerance of others was heightened (Lersch, 1997; Pompa, 2002; Situ, 1997; Swanson et al., 1997; Vigorita, 2002). Years later, Davis et al.'s (2014) article outlined a review of service-learning within criminal justice programs, identifying nine earlier publications. There was minimal overlap with Hirschinger-Blank and Markowitz (2006) review—suggesting an original pool of manuscripts to be around a dozen. These studies, and others, call for faculty to expose criminal justice students to culturally diverse populations.

Each discipline identifies what they hope to achieve by involvement in a service-learning activity. For some, there is a focus on increasing comprehension, intellectual development, and critical thinking skills (Abes, Jackson, & Jones, 2002). Criminal justice instructors also cite the importance of influencing career aspirations (Hirschinger-Blank & Markowitz, 2006; Vigorita, 2002) and providing students with a means to thinking critically about differing criminal justice models (e.g. restorative justice) (Pompa, 2002). Faculty also aspire to reduce stereotypes of offenders (Hirschinger-Blank & Markowitz, 2006; Pompa, 2002). Providing students with a transformational learning experience may also be a goal (Love, 2008; Starks et al., 2011). Transformational learning occurs when a student changes their attitudes and beliefs about the world by reflecting on their previous assumptions (Felten & Clayton, 2011; Le & Raven, 2015). There may be differing outcome goals but what remains static is having an impact on the student, the university, and the community partner (Celio, Durlak, & Dymnicki, 2011; Davis, 2015). Studying the impact of service-learning long-term, through the perception of students, is an area of focus yet to be explored.

Exposure to poverty

Evidence suggests that community-based experiences involving interactions with people living in poverty can foster positive changes in beliefs and attitudes about poverty. (Blair et al., 2014, p. 10)

According to Blair (2010), faculty may acknowledge the importance of teaching about poverty, but they do so in a diffused and scattered manner. Yet, when preparing criminal justice professionals, understanding *multiple* forms of oppression should be embedded throughout their academic careers—we are to prepare them to serve diverse populations. However, most studies focus on in-class projects, targeting specific course topics, rather than engaging students from other modalities such as extra-curricular department or university clubs or organizations. Cultural-based service-learning expands upon social disparities associated with diverse communities (Boyle-Baise, 2005; Waldstein & Reiher, 2001). Preparing students to work across the discipline remains central to the field of criminal justice (Eyler & Giles, 1999; Hirschinger-Blank & Markowitz, 2006).

To hold positive attitudes towards the poor, research suggests one must be directly exposed to those living in poverty as this helps to break down distancing (Clark, 2007; Lott, 2002). More recently, Blair et al. (2014) found consistent results arguing most people in the United States, including undergraduate students, hold strong opinions about those living in poverty while many have no direct experience on which to base their attitudes and beliefs. Additionally, beliefs are likely molded from indirect experiences of poverty as well as cultural values (Terry & Williams, 2019)—suggesting students from rural locations may hold different attitudes about poverty as it “looks” different in rural places. Qualitative studies (e.g. focus groups) have confirmed students’ preexisting opinions about why someone is poor—admitting their limited exposure to poverty. After exposure to poverty-stricken conditions, many of these same students recognized their preconceptions about poverty were not consistent with the realities of poverty (Zygmunt-Fillwalk, 2009). With these findings in mind, educators have been encouraged to include class activities that directly expose students to people living in poverty (Blair et al., 2014). For criminal justice students, the desire to broaden students’ world view, and their place in it, is central to service-learning involvement (Love, 2008; Starks et al., 2011).

Current study

Service-learning is a theoretically and academically supported means for expanding student learning through hands-on problem-solving and reflection. Literature exists on the engagement of service-learning with undergraduate criminal justice students but is still mostly an underrepresented area of research. Longitudinal studies focused on the impact service-learning has on students are also nearly absent. This study sought to add to this limited body of knowledge while targeting freshmen and sophomores in the major with a focus on social justice issues. The current study aimed to explore the perceptions of poverty held by underclassman from a rurally populated location, by exposing them to one of the United States’ most poverty-stricken areas, Skid Row. This was accomplished by utilizing quantitative data pre/post the service-learning

project and then qualitative interview data four years later. Specifically, the primary questions being assessed were:

1. Do service-learning activities exposing undergraduate students to an extreme example of poverty raise the level of empathy and commitment of the students who will later serve their communities?
2. What is the long-term impact of service-learning projects with undergraduate criminal justice students?

Method

Participants

Seven students (two men and five women) participated in the service-learning experience during the spring 2016 semester. All were full-time students enrolled in a Midwestern university's living and learning community (LLC) and all students were criminal justice majors. Six of the seven students were freshman while one student, an LLC mentor, was a sophomore ($Mage = 18.86$, $SD = .69$). Although there was a smaller sample size, identified race/ethnicity was diverse, and consistent with the university's mostly Caucasian population. Specifically, four identified as Caucasian, one identified as African American, and two identified as Hispanic.

As noted above, all students were involved with a living and learning community associated with the university's criminal justice department. The LLC is unique in that students self-select to live and learn with other majors while provided additional opportunities outside of the classroom. These added benefits vary for each LLC but may include attending educational conferences, going bowling, or even completing a service-learning activity half-way across the country. To further describe this group of students, three had never been on an airplane, five of the seven believed they had never "seen" homelessness before, and one had never even traveled outside of their rural state. Yet, in this study, students were given the option to travel to Los Angeles, California for an educational trip.

To further describe the students, additional demographic information was collected four years after completing the project, when the interviews were conducted. Of the students, one remained enrolled as an undergraduate student at the same university, two students were enrolled within a graduate program at the current university, and four had completed their education and were employed within the field. Of those currently working, one worked within the justice system while the remaining three worked in fields outside of the social services as they all changed majors during their undergraduate path. The three students who changed majors (e.g. construction management, finance, and informatics) indicated a switch for a variety reasons, but all reported a positive experience with the service-learning project not offered within their new majors.

Project and site

Skid Row has the highest concentration of Los Angeles' population of people experiencing homelessness. The area is less than one mile wide but is home to nearly 2,000

people residing on the streets (Union Rescue Mission, 2020). With an intentional effort in scheduling, the primary researcher coordinated with *The Burrito Project*, a group of people who meet monthly to commune with one another and share quality food with the people of downtown Los Angeles and surrounding areas. The students were able to work side-by-side other volunteers, cutting and cooking food, washing dishes, and assembling 950 burritos over the course of three hours. At 11:00 pm, when many individuals in Skid Row are most active, the group of students and volunteers traveled to the heart of the one-mile stretch. For the next two hours they passed out food, clothing, and hygiene items—some to those passing by and requesting items, and others, intentionally approached. *The Burrito Project*, “offers an extended burrito without judgment” (theburritoproject.org).

Materials and procedures

The current study utilized the Undergraduate Perceptions of Poverty Tracking Survey (UPPTS), an updated and expanded version of the Attitudes about Poverty and Poor People originally developed by Atherton et al. (1993) (see Appendix A). The UPPTS is measured on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree; 5 = strongly agree), consisting of 39 questions with six factors (Welfare Attitude, Poor Are Different, Do More, Equal Opportunity, Fundamental Rights, Lack of Resources) that meet empirical standards for validity and reliability (Blair et al., 2014). This scale provides information on students’ perceptions of those living in poverty in three main areas: 1) general attitudes towards those living in poverty, including a sense of the student’s ability to explain why someone may be poor; 2) understanding of empathy for those living in poverty; and 3) commitment to addressing poverty either through direct action or support of services that aid those in poverty. With all students residing in a rural state, where poverty “appears” much differently, this was an excellent tool to examine changes pre and post-completion of the service-learning project.

The researchers developed a self-created list of qualitative interview questions (see Appendix B) to assess long-term impact of the service-learning project. The researchers felt qualitative means would be more invaluable and allow previous students a platform to speak about their experiences—a process not available in survey implementation. Questions were developed with the spirit of the five sub-scales of the UPPTS (Welfare Attitude, Poor Are Different, Do More, Equal Opportunity, Fundamental Rights, Lack of Resources) in mind. Provided, are examples for each of the five sub-scales: Welfare Attitude: “Do you think able-bodied people on welfare are “ripping off the system?” Poor Are Different: What similarities between yourself and the individuals living on Skid Row did you notice? What differences?” Do More: “With the trip in mind, think of the most pressing issue you noticed among those living on Skid Row. What do you think is the first step in making a change to improve this issue?” Equal Opportunity: “Do you think the individuals living on Skid Row or in poverty could find jobs if they tried hard and wanted to?” Fundamental Rights: “Should everyone have a place to live, regardless of circumstance? Why or why not?” Lack of Resources: “What about education? Do you feel those living in poverty have access to a good

education?" Additional questions were created to inquire about the long-term impact of the project.

Results

Quantitative findings

First, the researchers examined overall differences between pre-completion attitudes and post-completion attitudes. No significant difference was found between pre-completion overall attitudes ($M=2.87$, $SD = .37$) and post-completion overall attitudes ($M=2.85$, $SD = .34$) on poverty, $t(6) = .50$, $p = .63$. Students scored near the midpoint of the scale both before and after completion of the service-learning project.

Next, paired-samples t-tests were run to assess pre/post-completion differences on each of the six sub-scales. No significant difference was found between the pre-completion Welfare Attitudes factor ($M=3.32$, $SD = .41$) and post-completion Welfare Attitudes factor ($M=3.23$, $SD = .43$; $t[6] = 1.17$, $p = .29$), the pre-completion Do More factor ($M=2.62$, $SD = .62$) and post-completion Do More factor ($M=2.33$, $SD = .67$; $t[6] = 1.65$, $p = .15$), or on the pre-completion Fundamental Rights factor ($M=2.00$, $SD = .77$) and the post-completion Fundamental Rights factor ($M=1.90$, $SD = .76$, $t[6] = .42$, $p = .69$).

A difference approaching the significance level was found between the pre-completion Lack of Resources factor ($M=2.28$, $SD = .53$) and the post-completion Lack of Resources factor ($M=2.75$, $SD = .79$; $t[6] = -2.32$, $p = .059$). Though not significant, this trend suggests students' belief that poverty results from lack of resources became less prominent among students following the service-learning project. Last, a significant difference was discovered on the Poor Are Different items, $t(6) = -2.92$, $p = .03$. Students' perceptions became less empathetic between the pre-completion survey ($M=2.44$, $SD = .47$) and the post-completion survey ($M=3.04$, $SD = .30$).

Qualitative findings

To further assess the impact of the current service-learning project, four years post-completion, the primary researcher conducted interviews with all seven students. All interviews were completed and recorded on the telephone and then transcribed. Using a semi-structured interview guide, based on the five UPPTS sub-scales, the researcher spent approximately 30 minutes with each student—assessing for overall changes in perceptions of poverty and impact of the project engagement. However, the researchers also acknowledge previous research indicating saturation cannot be met with a small ($n = 7$) sample size (Guest, Bunce, & Johnson, 2006); therefore, qualitative findings are only exploratory. Overall, the findings from the longitudinal qualitative follow-up contradict the immediate pre/post-test given at the time of the project.

Welfare attitude

Researchers assessed students' attitudes and perceptions regarding the underlying causes of poverty and their beliefs about welfare and government assistance programs. Six of the seven (85.7%) students believed most individuals appropriately use

government assistance and the nature of such programs is necessary. Several mentioned the “extreme” views some hold when falsely believing most welfare assistance is misused:

I think the majority of them [the poor] need the services. As a society, some people take things to the extreme and assume everyone is misusing the services.—Student 1

Students were asked to discuss how those receiving government assistance should manage their money. All students initially referenced spending their resources on the “necessities” such as food, clothing, and shelter. Approximately half (57%) of the students acknowledged the need to provide more than just basic necessities:

I would say, first, obviously things like food and hygiene products. But I also think the money they get could go to entertainment because they don’t have that. Especially if they have kids.—Student 4

Obviously taking care of the necessities should come first. So, groceries, paying for bills, and things like that. If they are given the opportunity to have a little extra, I think they need to have regular fun. Why can’t they every once in a while?—Student 5

Students were empathic of the situation of others as observed by their desire to provide the poor with basic life necessities. While they recognized the need to have basic needs met, they also saw the importance of giving the poor the same opportunities they have—to seek fun and entertainment.

Poor are different

Students were asked to discuss their opinions of those residing in Skid Row prior to completing the service-learning project. Many students admitted to holding false beliefs about the poor prior, including misconceptions related to mental illness and greed:

Back then I did have the mentality that a lot of them are crazy and that they’re scary and they commit crime and that sort of thing. I think some of my previous stereotypes of homelessness were that they’re dirty and they’re mean, that sort of thing.—Student 5

I hadn’t been exposed to it before and thought they may want to take everything. But most were really grateful and who knows how long they had gone without eating. The majority of them said thank you, and they weren’t greedy, which was another thing that I thought back then, like, oh, they’re not thankful for what little we can give them, but that changed after doing the Burrito Project. They were happy for what we gave them.—Student 6

While quantitative results suggested students saw themselves as less like those in Skid Row post-activity completion, qualitative findings were different. Students identified characteristics within themselves and those living in Skid Row. For most, they did not believe poverty was a choice, but rather, based on systemic failures:

I do not think poverty is a choice. I think if you’re born into poverty, it’s difficult to come out of it because you’re more than likely in an environment that doesn’t give you the resources necessary to get out of poverty.—Student 1

I don’t think it [poverty] is a choice. Some people just grow up and are already living in poor communities and they know they don’t have the money to go to college or a trade school to advance themselves.—Student 2

Students were surprised by their experience as it did not align with their previous experiences and expectations that the poor are different from them at a core-level—lacking a desire to achieve or improve their conditions. Most students were able to see how their attitudes about the poor changed after the project—recognizing their negative stereotypes such as the homeless being “crazy, lazy, and ungrateful.” Students could see how the homeless were similar to themselves, but lacking in opportunity.

Do more

All seven students identified the project as having an impact on them—many pointed to wanting to complete a similar project, and encouraged the primary researcher to provide future students with a similar activity. Students focused on the most current pressing need, while others sought out broader cultural changes as well as place and time-specific issues:

Since we use social media so often, we should use social media to shine a light, within our own community, and within the United States, that people need help. Not to take away from other countries, but I think people forget that there are people who live a couple miles away from them who need just as much help, if not more.—Student 2

It [knowing some do not have homes] definitely makes me sad, but it also makes me want to work harder to help. I know I'll never be able to give people money and nice jobs and stuff like that. But even when we did the Burrito Project, that was something we did to help them and we knew at least they had food for a little while.—Student 1

All seven students felt a need to do more by either seeking intentional social service employment, or engaging in other volunteer-related activity. Their beliefs about the poor became more positive after completing the service-learning project. They quickly identified the added challenges of being poor, without homes, and a lack of access to resources. Some were not sure where to begin, but they all knew changes were needed.

Equal opportunity

When asked about the root causes of homelessness, students identified the lack of equity in sectors such as education and even access to childcare services. Students were aware of the poor's inability to seek services due to financial burden:

Those already living in a part of the community that's already impoverished, more than likely go to a public school that doesn't have the same resources as a public school that's in a higher income area, where people make more money. So, they probably don't know of the resources like grants or scholarships that they can get in order to go to college.—Student 6

In the education system, in areas that have higher poverty, the budget is not as high as areas that are pretty well off. In the rich communities, you have top notch teachers who are really pushing for college. In poverty communities, they're not really pushing towards college, nor are they for opportunities or scholarships. So, if students finish high school, they just get a job and try to survive.—Student 1

Some people just don't work because it's cheaper for them to stay home than it is for them to go get a job where they have to pay for childcare for like three kids. But then if they stay home, then they don't have rent money.—Student 2

Students expressed feelings of conflict surrounding the ability of individuals to overcome obstacles due to a lack of opportunity. They could see barriers preventing the poor from succeeding; barriers, they themselves had never experienced.

Fundamental rights

Students were asked to discuss their thoughts on their knowledge that some individuals do not have places to live, food to eat, or access to basic healthcare. Several students were concerned about the community's willingness to allow a mass of individuals to live in unclean conditions, finding this to be acceptable:

I'm not sure if they [people on Skid Row] have regular food sources, but I think food is a pressing need and something they deserve to have. A main concern is that they may only have one meal a day. That saddens me.—Student 4

I think we need to help clean these areas [Skid Row and the like]. Or, they could be moved to places that are being cleaned as regularly as they should be.—Student 5

One student was attuned to the modern-day issues associated with the coronavirus (COVID-19), and how being poor negatively impacted one's basic right to health and safety measures. A second student viewed these issues as systemic, focusing on the redistribution of wealth:

Right now, the most pressing issue is the Coronavirus. They all live in close proximity and they don't have the same safety measures as people that are locked in their homes.—Student 4

I feel like spreading resources equally is important. I know it's not feasible just because we don't have all the money in the world, but I feel if resources were spread out to more areas that are poverty-driven, as opposed to like areas that are pretty well off, we could do better.—Student 1

Students were cognizant of wealth providing an avenue to cleaner and safer living conditions, and ultimately, better health outcomes. Without intentional questioning, students also offered their concerns about the right to be free of discrimination; yet, numerous students believed employers would discriminate against the visibly poor:

It's a stereotype that if the poor were to go into a business and try to get an application, I think they would be discriminated against, without legally calling it discrimination.—Student 1

I feel if they're already homeless, and they don't have access to showers to clean themselves up to go to an interview, the more likely an employer is to not hire them since they look rough, and don't look like they take care of themselves.—Student 5

Even under the mentality of "pull yourself up by your bootstraps," students realized stigmatic views would likely prevent some poor from securing employment. Students may not have used the language of "fundamental rights" but their comments were obvious—they believe everyone deserves basic life necessities. For some, the focus was on broad issues related to discrimination, for others, concern centered on food insecurity and housing. Lastly, some were concerned about current-day health and safety measures.

Lack of resources

Students were asked questions to gauge their sense of whether being poor meant having fewer resources or lack of ability to secure said resources. All students mentioned the importance of social supports—noting many poor do not have family or friends able or willing to help them in times of need. While they saw themselves as similar to those residing in Skid Row, they were also self-aware of the unlikely odds they would end up homeless, due to familial support:

I don't think that they have access [to education or employment]. Even if they had the same access, they didn't have the same type of support, like family or community, compared to other people.—Student 3

If they don't have family or close relatives, I would say it's extremely hard for anybody to find childcare, if they don't have money. If they did find childcare, it probably wouldn't be very good childcare because money talks when it comes to daycare providers or stuff like that.—Student 1

A resounding theme was students were given more opportunity and support than most living in poverty. While at the time of the service-learning project they were not as self-aware of their inherent privilege, long-term reflection on the experience shed light on this:

It's sad because I sit here and try to put myself in their position. I probably wouldn't survive. I wouldn't know what to do if I didn't have resources to help me. A lot of them are out there by themselves. They don't have family to turn to like me and it saddens me.—Student 6

They are people too, you know? They're no lower than you. They also deserve to be treated with respect and they'll respect you, too. Some have had unfortunate things happen, and there's nothing they can really do about it. I feel like those people have tried to get out of it [poverty], but they just don't know how, or really what to do, but some of us have had more opportunity.—Student 3

I had the opportunity to do life differently [than Skid Row residents]. The ones I talked to said they hit hardship and couldn't turn their lives around. This made me realize how easy it would be for something in my life to happen if I didn't have a good support system.—Student 5

The awareness of self-privilege, money, and familial support, this finding was most prevalent—with all students recognizing equitable access to services would not be possible when generational poverty continues. Lack of resources can be observed throughout all of the sub-scales. Few students observed resources available to those in Skid Row. They were happy and appreciative to work with the *Burrito Project* but also saw this as a temporary short-term fix for hunger.

Lastly, the researchers uncovered an additional theme, consistent with previous rural literature. We identify this as, "We aren't in the Midwest anymore." All seven participants agreed the level of poverty they witnessed was not similar to anything they had seen before. While all participants were provided with information about Skid Row prior to departure, several students spoke to their inability to really appreciate the severity of the conditions. For example, several mentioned the geographic spread of the area—noting Skid Row was much larger than they anticipated. "It went on for blocks and blocks and blocks and blocks" (Student 6). Five participants mentioned

“seeing” poverty differently. Most depicted poverty as a lone man sitting next to the local interstate with a sign. This man was described as a transient just “looking for a ride” and not a local person suffering from poverty:

Homelessness is vastly different there [Skid Row]. Everything’s closer together so you notice it a lot more compared to where we live, where maybe one person is by the highway.—Student 4

I’m from an average town. There are no homeless people. So, I’ve never been exposed to that. You know, there are people in town every once in a while, that are off the overpass, but Skid Row was entirely different.—Student 7

My town has poverty, but it’s not like severe poverty. We don’t have any homeless people here, really. There may be one person occasionally.—Student 2

Students seemed to interpret poverty as that which could be visibly seen by asking for food, sitting with signs, or hitchhiking. Yet, in all communities, including rural areas, poverty is prevalent—it just presents itself differently. Only one student noted the small-town differences for those living in extreme poverty:

For all of the homeless people I’ve seen in our state, the small towns tend to just pass them onto the next County so they’re no longer our problem. But at Skid Row, they had nowhere else to go. They couldn’t move that many people, even if they wanted to.—Student 1

The students’ experiences with poverty were based mostly on media depictions. None of the students discussed those living on the fringe in their local communities or those struggling to eat, find shelter, or secure other basic daily necessities. While the project helped expose them to the lifestyles of those living in extreme poverty, they remain mostly unaware of the hidden poverty in their own rural backyard.

Limitations

The study is not without limitations. First, the case study involved a small sample size of only seven students. Group sizes are likely smaller in service-learning projects and while this does not diminish the impact, it makes it more difficult to generalize the overall effect and find a saturation point within the qualitative interviews. The longitudinal piece was also based on the smaller sample size, with questions derived from the UPPTS but self-created to measure long-term impact. Without validity of the qualitative interview, some may question whether specific questions answered what they were intended to measure. The study can also not account for exposure to poverty occurring between the completion of the project and the interview four years later, nor can the study assess additional education or general maturation that may have influenced perceptions of poverty. In short, the current study serves more as a case study than a large-scale research project on service-learning with criminal justice undergraduate students. A second limitation involves the community partner and sustainability. Specifically, the community partner in the current project was located more than 1,300 miles from the home university. It is not necessary to travel such a distance, but in remote rural locations, the appearance of poverty presents much differently. Yet, others before us have also noted the nature of short-term service-learning

projects (Tyron & Stoecker, 2008). Overall, the structure of the study was unlikely to be sustainable, due mostly to financial barriers. As such, the study does not include several cohorts of students to further add to the analysis.

Discussion

Literature on service-learning with undergraduate students exists, but still remains mostly limited within the field of criminal justice. Some scholars have emphasized the importance of exposing undergraduate criminal justice students to diverse populations (see Boyle-Baise, 2005; Waldstein & Reiher, 2001). Still, most previous scholars have focused their projects on specific criminal justice classes, no studies could be located focusing on criminal justice majors participating in extra-curricular experiences. Additionally, to the best of the researchers' ability, no studies have attempted to understand the long-term impact of such service projects. The current study stepped outside of the traditional classroom project, involving an extra-curricular group of undergraduate criminal justice students, in a unique service-learning project. The study utilized the Undergraduate Perceptions of Poverty Tracking Survey to measure post-experience attitudes and a self-created interview guide to assess long-term impact four years after completion of the service-learning project. Overall, no significance was found on the perceptions of poverty pre and post-completion of the service-learning project when measured with the quantitative instrument. Two sub-scales, Lack of Resources and the Poor are Different neared significance pre and post-test; however, both trended in a direction of implying less empathy and more blame at the individual-level explaining poverty. This may be partially explained by the rural "blindness" that influenced students' previous indirect exposure to poverty. Students reported the conditions to be far worse and widespread than their rural experiences have crafted; thus, when faced with extreme poverty, students were compelled to blame the individual and feel less empathetic for their condition.

While the findings were surprising, longitudinal follow-up contradicted the pre/post-test survey results. Students suggested the significant impact the project had on them personally, at times academically, and for a few, professionally. While survey responses indicated students felt only neutrally toward poverty experiences, or showed no significant shift in perceptions, students were able to identify their pre-service-learning attitudes as mostly negative and individualistic in explaining poverty and homelessness when explored through interview. Their current reflections indicated a sense of awareness—that they are not much different than those living in extreme poverty, lacking fundamental rights and basic amenities.

The current researchers encourage further exploration into the impact of service-learning on criminal justice majors with a heightened attention on exposing students to extreme human conditions. Given the current unfortunate economic hardships associated with the COVID-19 pandemic, many lives have been negatively impacted. It would be interesting to understand the living conditions of the already homeless prior to the pandemic. Scholars should consider further delving into these issues with students as the criminal justice system regularly interacts with those in socially oppressive conditions.

In sum, studies have found many positive outcomes associated with criminal justice students' involvement with service-learning (e.g. personal and interpersonal development and civic engagement). While the current study did not find quantitative significance in attitudes towards those living in poverty, scholars should not be discouraged from continuing these experiences with students. Qualitative analysis, completed years post-activity completion, suggests the project did have a significant impact on students. Additionally, engagement in service-learning opportunities outside of the traditional classroom may create more student opportunities. As one example, the current study focused on freshman who self-selected into a living and learning community. The opportunities students experience as part of this cohort lead many directly into our department's criminal justice club. This club is university-known for its extensive involvement in service work, including various forms of experiential-learning, extended to the broader university. Experiential-learning is truly an evolving pedagogy—one centered on student success and community impact. We encourage instructors to keep an open-mind and be comfortable with adapting to new and exciting service-learning opportunities.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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Appendix A: Undergraduate perceptions of poverty tracking survey

| | Strongly agree | Agree | Neutral | Disagree | Strongly disagree |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------|-------|---------|----------|-------------------|
| 1. There is a lot of fraud among welfare recipients. | | | | | |
| 2. Welfare makes people lazy. | | | | | |
| 3. Poor people use food stamps wisely. | | | | | |
| 4. The government spends too much money on poverty programs. | | | | | |
| 5. Benefits for poor people consume a major part of the federal budget. | | | | | |
| 6. Welfare mothers have babies to get more money. | | | | | |
| 7. Welfare recipients should be able to spend their money as they choose. | | | | | |
| 8. I would support a program that would result in higher taxes to support programs for poor people. | | | | | |
| 9. People in welfare should be made to work for their benefits. | | | | | |
| 10. A person receiving welfare should not have a nicer car than I do. | | | | | |
| 11. Some poor people live better than I do considering all their benefits. | | | | | |
| 12. An abled-bodied person using food stamps is ripping off the system. | | | | | |
| 13. Poor people act differently. | | | | | |
| 14. I believe poor people have a different set of values than do other people. | | | | | |
| 15. Poor people are different from the rest of society. | | | | | |
| 16. Poor people generally have lower intelligence than nonpoor people. | | | | | |
| 17. Most poor people are dirty. | | | | | |
| 18. Most people who are poor waste a lot of their time. | | | | | |
| 19. Being poor is a choice. | | | | | |
| 20. I believe poor people create their own difficulties. | | | | | |
| 21. Individuals should do more to help the poor. | | | | | |
| 22. Businesses should do more to help the poor. | | | | | |
| 23. Society has the responsibility to help poor people. | | | | | |
| 24. Charities should do more to help the poor. | | | | | |
| 25. I feel that I could personally make a difference in the lives of the poor. | | | | | |
| 26. It upsets me to know that people are poor. | | | | | |
| 27. The poor have the same opportunities for success as everyone else. | | | | | |
| 28. If poor people worked harder they could escape poverty. | | | | | |
| 29. Any person can get ahead in this country. | | | | | |

(continued)

| | Strongly agree | Agree | Neutral | Disagree | Strongly disagree |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------|-------|---------|----------|-------------------|
| 30. The poor face challenges that are the same as everyone else. | | | | | |
| 31. Unemployed poor people could find jobs if they tried harder. | | | | | |
| 32. Poor people are satisfied receiving welfare. | | | | | |
| 33. Everyone regardless of circumstances should have a place to live. | | | | | |
| 34. Everyone regardless of circumstances should have health care. | | | | | |
| 35. Everyone regardless of circumstances should have enough food to eat. | | | | | |
| 36. Lack of social support is a major challenge for the poor. | | | | | |
| 37. Lack of Child Care is a major challenge for the poor. | | | | | |
| 38. Lack of education is a major challenge for the poor. | | | | | |
| 39. Lack of Transportation is a major challenge for the poor. | | | | | |

Appendix B: Qualitative interview guide

Service-learning phone prompts

1. To begin, what is your current schooling or employment situation?
 - a. If in school, where and for what degree?
 - b. If employed, where?
2. What do you remember most about our visit to Skid Row?
3. Prior to participating in this project, what was your general attitude or thoughts about those living on Skid Row or in poverty in general?
 - a. How, if at all, did that change after completing the project?
4. How did you feel prior to visiting Skid Row?
 - a. Did this change while engaged in the project?
5. What most stood out to you about the people on Skid Row?
 - a. How did you feel when talking with them and giving them supplies?
6. What similarities between yourself and the individuals living on Skid Row did you notice?
 - a. What differences?
7. What do you recall about the resources or opportunities available to those living on Skid Row?
8. Do you think able-bodied people on welfare are “ripping off the system?”
 - a. Why or why not?
9. Do you believe people living in poverty create their own difficulties or that being poor is a choice?
 - a. What could/should they do differently?
10. How did the poverty experiences you saw while visiting Skid Row compare to those in your Kansas or your home state?
 - a. How were they similar?
 - b. How were they different?

11. Do you think the individuals living on Skid Row or in poverty could find jobs if they tried hard and wanted to?
12. How accessible do you feel childcare is for those living in poverty? Do you think it is a challenge?
 - a. Why or why not?
13. What would you tell a group of individuals considering taking a trip to Skid Row or another location where individuals face extreme poverty?
 - a. Would you recommend this same experience to other students?
14. Describe how the knowledge that some individuals have no place to live makes you feel. Should everyone have a place to live, regardless of circumstance?
 - a. Why or why not?
15. How do you feel welfare recipients should spend their money?
16. Describe your general attitude or thoughts about those living on Skid Row or in poverty in general.
17. What about education? Do you feel those living in poverty have access to a good education?
18. What was your biggest take-away from the trip?
19. How did this experience influence your academic path?
 - a. If so, in what way(s)?
20. How did this experience assist you in completing your academic courses?
21. How did this experience alter your career aspirations?
 - a. In what way?
22. With the trip in mind, think of the most pressing issue you noticed among those living on Skid Row. What is it?
 - a. What do you think is the first step in making a change to improve this issue?
23. What other information can you share regarding this experience—either positive or negative?