



Original research article

A comparative study of prosocial attitudes towards homelessness among secondary school students

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Abstract

Introduction: Negative stereotypes and prejudices towards people experiencing homelessness persist even in the adolescent population, which may influence their attitudes, behavior, and level of acceptance towards this marginalized group.

Goal: To analyze prosocial attitudes and the level of willingness to help people without homes among students of different types of secondary schools in the Dolná Orava region, identify factors influencing their readiness to provide help, and verify differences in these attitudes by type of school, age, and gender.

Methods: Quantitative research ($N = 639$; age 14–20 years old; 56.5 % girls) used the adapted Attitudes Towards Homelessness Inventory (ATHI-SK; $\alpha = 0.82$) measuring tool. Willingness to help was measured on a Likert scale. Data were analyzed using the Kruskal–Wallis test and the Mann–Whitney U -test. This is a pilot study and regionally limited to a set of students from Dolná Orava; therefore, the results cannot be directly generalized to all Slovak secondary school students.

Results: Students from the medical school demonstrated the highest willingness to help (Mean Rank = 385.23), while students from the polytechnic school showed the lowest level of willingness (266.05; $\chi^2 = 37.21$; $p < 0.001$). Girls declared higher compassion and lower fear ($p < 0.001$). Older respondents (18–20 years old) reported less fear than younger respondents (14–15 years old; $p < 0.01$). More than 40% of students believe that most homeless people are addicted to addictive substances, but 53% agree that financial assistance improves their situation.

Conclusion: The professional focus of the school and the age of students significantly shape prosocial attitudes towards homelessness. Educational programs that provide direct contact with marginalized groups can help reduce stereotypes and foster empathy. The conclusions are preliminary; the primary contribution of this thesis is to verify the feasibility of measuring attitudes in regional conditions and to outline adjustments that improve assessment.

Keywords: Adolescents; Attitudes; Homelessness; Prosocial behavior; Secondary school students

Introduction

Homelessness is a form of social exclusion and negatively affects physical and mental health, employability, and access to services (Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs, 2022). Despite European commitments to achieve a state in which “no one will be forced to sleep on the streets” by 2030 (Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs, 2022), the number of homeless in Slovakia remains consistently high and public debate is influenced by stereotypes. Research indicates that the attitudes of the younger generation can significantly influence the future direction of social policy (Petit et al., 2019). “Homeless” became an established term in Slovakia after 1989; it refers to a person without stable housing and background and with an increased risk of social exclusion (Průdková and Novotný, 2008). For research purposes, we base our work on the European

Typology of Homelessness and Housing Exclusion (ETHOS), which distinguishes four basic situations: homelessness without a roof, homelessness without a place to stay, precarious housing, and inadequate housing (Hartl and Hartlová, 2015). The family is one of the basic subjects of social work and a “roof to sleep under” is one of its key protective factors – the absence of stable housing signals a high risk of social exclusion (Fričová, 2024). The availability of protective factors is crucial from the perspective of an individual’s ability to cope with a burden (Barnová et al., 2023) – which homelessness undoubtedly is.

In Slovakia, as in other countries, addressing homelessness is often complicated by the lack of accurate statistical data. Officially recorded data primarily focuses on secondary homeless individuals, i.e., those living in temporary forms of accommodation. There were 71,076 people in 2021. In the Dolná Orava region, 338 secondary homeless people were recorded in the

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same year, indicating this is a regional problem that also inevitably affects the younger generation (Statistical Office of the Slovak Republic, 2021). Although there are analyses of public attitudes towards homelessness in Europe (Petit et al., 2019), we have minimal systematic data on the views of Slovak adolescents. The research focuses on the current situation and verifies differences in attitudes and willingness to help a homeless person among students from five types of secondary schools, identifying how these attitudes are related to the age and gender of the respondents.

Secondary school students (14–20 years) are intensively exposed to social and media representations of marginalized groups. The author's pilot study from the Dolná Orava region demonstrates that the majority of students (67%) perceive homeless people as "victims of circumstances", but at the same time, half of them consider homeless people as potentially dangerous.

These attitudes reinforce negative stereotypes associated with a lower willingness to help, especially when personal experience is lacking or school programs that support contact with the at-risk population are absent (Vágnerová et al., 2013).

Homelessness represents one of the most visible forms of social exclusion; its consequences go beyond the individual level and affect the entire society. This issue requires an interdisciplinary approach that includes social work, healthcare, economic mechanisms, and legislative measures aimed at preventing and supporting long-term integration.

As already mentioned, combating homelessness is a priority in social policy within the European Union. Its member states have committed to improving the issue by 2030 within the framework of the European Platform against Homelessness. However, despite these initiatives, homelessness remains a serious health and social problem that requires not only institutional solutions but also a change in social discourse and the development of prosocial attitudes among the public, especially young people (European Union, 2016).

Homelessness is an undeniable public health problem, and access to health care for homeless people is often limited (Kominski, 2013). Several studies indicate that homeless people have a higher risk of infectious diseases, chronic health problems, and psychiatric disorders, which can affect their overall health and quality of life. Adverse living conditions, insufficient access to healthcare, and high levels of stress contribute to a reduction in the average life expectancy of this population by up to 15–20 years compared to the general population (Průdková and Novotný, 2008).

Although homelessness has multifactorial causes, health determinants play a key role in its development. According to Kominski (2013), homeless people's access to healthcare is limited, which can deepen their social exclusion. Other research initiatives suggest that adverse health problems can be a contributing factor to job loss and worsening of an individual's social situation. Conversely, secondary factors such as job loss, addictions, or family problems can contribute to further deterioration of health status (Oláh, 2016).

Public attitudes towards people without housing are a significant factor influencing the effectiveness of social policies and the level of integration of this particular group. Young people are in a developmental stage during which social attitudes are formed, and the educational environment can significantly impact their perception of marginalized groups (Hroncová et al., 2016; Lajčin, 2021). The influence of the school and the teacher from the perspective of inclusion was also confirmed by research conducted by Barnová et al. (2020) in secondary vocational schools in Slovakia.

Further empirical findings from Slovakia prove that multidisciplinary school teams (School Support Teams) purposefully create a supportive and safe environment for students and coordinate the cooperation of the school with the family and the community. This framework is used in the prevention of risky behavior and supports an inclusive school culture (Salimova and Rusnáková, 2024). In Slovakia, since May 2023, a school social worker has been part of the professional staff team in schools and school facilities, thereby strengthening the school's capacity for prevention and relational support in everyday practice (Kohútová et al., 2024).

Research by Ručková and Varečková (2012) also suggests that educational programs focused on social issues can support students' prosocial behavior and their engagement in community activities. Schools can implement interactive programs that enable students to understand the social determinants of homelessness better, thereby breaking down stereotypes and prejudices (Beňová, 2008).

Specific study fields, particularly those in health and social sciences, can significantly contribute to the development of empathy and engagement among young people. According to research by Janková (2021), students from these schools exhibit a higher level of social responsiveness, and their willingness to help homeless people is also higher than that of students in technical fields.

The primary objective of this research is to analyze prosocial attitudes and the level of willingness to help homeless people among students from various types of secondary schools in the Dolná Orava region, identify factors influencing their readiness to assist, and verify differences in these attitudes by type of school, age, and gender. The presented research represents a pilot verification of the procedures for collecting and measuring attitudes in a single region. The ambition of the study is not to formulate prescriptive recommendations, but to prepare the basis for subsequent, broader verification on expanded sets.

Materials and methods

The authors selected high school students from the Dolná Orava region for a pilot quantitative cross-sectional research design. The questionnaire was distributed electronically between February and April 2024 at all five high schools founded by the Žilina Self-Governing Region, each of them with a different type of study. Since all participating schools belong to one founder (Žilina Self-Governing Region) and this is a regionally selected sample, the external validity of the findings is limited.

Of the total number of 1,509 students surveyed, 639 responded (return rate 42.35%). The sample consisted of 278 boys (43.5%) and 361 girls (56.5%) aged 14–20. The age range of 14–20 years old is one analytical unit, because the maturation of socio-cognitive functions in late adolescence proceeds smoothly until the end of secondary school age (Steinberg, 2005), and all respondents are simultaneously in the same curricular environment of ISCED 3–4, which methodologically justifies their summary analysis.

The largest group was students aged 16–17 years old (49.1%). In terms of place of residence, 32% of respondents came from urban areas and 68% from rural areas. According to their study focus, respondents were divided into five categories: business academy ($n = 171$ respondents), secondary medical school ($n = 101$ respondents), secondary vocational school of trade and services ($n = 119$ respondents), secondary voca-

tional polytechnic school ($n = 130$ respondents), and grammar school ($n = 118$ respondents).

The authors used an adapted version of the Attitudes Towards Homelessness Inventory (ATHI-SK). The questionnaire was constructed with 13 items, divided into three main sections:

- 4 demographic questions (gender, age, type of school, residence);
- 4 statements assessing attitudes on a Likert scale;
- 5 closed-ended items assessing emotional reactions and declared willingness to help.

The internal consistency (reliability) of the questionnaire was high (Cronbach $\alpha = 0.82$).

The questionnaire does not contain a formal definition of homelessness or identify definitions constructed by respondents. However, before administration, the theoretical foundations of the ETHOS concept were briefly presented to the students. Attitudes towards homelessness were operationalized using a set of 9 items from the shortened ATHI-SK scale, with four statements reflecting the value (cognitive) component and five emotions (compassion, fear, uncertainty, helplessness, and tendency to ignore) representing the affective dimension of the attitude. The focus was on those components of the attitude that are relevant in terms of reflection and emotional experience of social reality.

Secondary school principals facilitated access to students during selected lessons. Incomplete, duplicate, or speedy answers were excluded from the evaluated set. The data were processed in IBM SPSS. In the first step, descriptive statistics (arithmetic mean, median, SD, frequencies) were processed. Since the variables did not meet the criteria for normality (Kolmogorov–Smirnov, $p < 0.05$), we used the Kruskal–Wallis test for inferential comparison to evaluate differences in attitudes and willingness to help between the five types of schools, followed by Mann–Whitney U -tests for pairwise comparisons.

Results

In the following section of the thesis, we present the results of our analysis of secondary school students' prosocial attitudes toward the homeless. The results are arranged according to the variables studied and provide an overview of the differences in attitudes between individual groups of respondents. The authors emphasize the identification of statistically significant differences between the types of schools, gender, and place of residence of the respondents.

Attitudes towards homelessness

The total ATHI-SK score indicates a moderate prosocial attitude of the students who participated in the research (median 2.8/4). The statements "Homelessness can affect anyone" and "Financial assistance can improve the situation of the homeless" received the highest agreement ($\geq 70\%$). On the contrary, 40.6% of respondents (somewhat + definitely) believe that "most homeless are mentally ill".

Emotions when meeting a homeless person

As shown in Table 1, the highest prevalence of prosocial emotions was observed for compassion (73.3%), followed by insecurity (71.9%). The lowest prevalence (49.3%) was recorded for helplessness. The percentage distribution of responses on the Likert scale indicates a slightly positive emotional attitude among the population. However, up to 60.5% of students admitted to feeling fear, which suggests an ambivalent relationship among adolescents towards homelessness.

Table 1. Emotions when meeting a homeless person

Emotion	"No"	"Rather no"	"Rather yes"	"Yes"
Compassion	5.9%	20.8%	37.1%	36.2%
Fear	10.3%	29.1%	33.6%	26.9%
Insecurity	7.7%	20.5%	41.5%	30.4%
Helplessness	17.8%	32.9%	31.8%	17.5%
Ignoring	13.9%	33.2%	33.8%	19.1%

Declared willingness to help

Table 2 presents the basic outlines of the variables, "Willingness to help a homeless person" with respect to "school".

Based on the analysis of the data presented in Table 2, we conclude that the largest group of respondents (ranging from 33.85% to 50.00%, depending on the type of school) stated that when meeting a homeless person, they would rather experience an emotion associated with a willingness to help in a particular form. This trend suggests that secondary school students exhibit a relatively high level of social empathy, although several factors, including the educational environment and professional orientation, influence their willingness to help.

The most significant willingness to help the homeless was declared by respondents from the secondary medical school, where up to 81.18% of students stated that they experienced an emotion leading to the need for active help. This result aligns with expectations, as students with a medical focus are

Table 2. Willingness to help a homeless person by school type

Share of answers	Respondents					%			
	No	Rather no	Rather yes	Yes	Total	No	Rather no	Rather yes	Yes
School									
Secondary medical school	1	18	48	34	101	0.99	17.82	47.52	33.66
Polytechnic secondary vocational school	22	41	44	23	130	16.92	31.54	33.85	17.69
Secondary vocational school of trade and services	4	27	56	32	119	3.36	22.69	47.06	26.89
Business academy	9	42	85	35	171	5.26	24.56	49.71	20.47
Grammar school	7	40	59	12	118	5.93	33.90	50.00	10.17
Total	43	168	292	136	639	6.73	26.29	45.70	21.28

encouraged to develop empathy, prosocial behavior, and altruistic values, which are essential for their future professional practice.

In the complete sample, 73.8% of students answered “rather yes/yes”. When comparing individual schools, there are significant differences present (Table 3).

The Kruskal–Wallis test ($\chi^2 = 37.211$; $df = 4$; $p < 0.001$) confirmed a significant effect of the type of school on the willingness to help; the highest average rank sum was achieved by students at secondary vocational school (Mean Rank = 385.23), the lowest by the polytechnic secondary vocational school (266.05). The trend shows a gradient of prosociality from humanities to technical fields.

Based on the results of the Kruskal–Wallis test, it can be stated that there is a statistically significant difference in the level of willingness to help a homeless person between at least two types of secondary schools, with the most pronounced difference between the secondary medical school and the secondary vocational school. Given that the analyzed data subgroups did not meet the assumptions of a normal probability distribution of the investigated characteristic, it was necessary to apply the non-parametric Mann–Whitney *U*-test in the next step, which allows for a more precise comparison of individual pairs of subgroups of respondents broken down by school type.

Table 3. Declared willingness to help by type of high school

School	<i>n</i>	Mean Rank	% “(yes/rather) yes”	Post-hoc vs. SZŠ	Post-hoc vs. SOŠP
Secondary medical school	101	385.23	81.2 %	–	$p < 0.001$
Secondary vocational school of trade and services	119	351.58	75.6 %	$p = 0.141$	$p < 0.001$
Business Academy	171	327.15	70.2 %	$p = 0.005$	$p = 0.002$
Grammar school	118	281.39	60.2 %	$p < 0.001$	$p = 0.307$
Polytechnic secondary vocational school	130	266.05	51.5 %	$p < 0.001$	–
Test	$\chi^2 = 37.211$; $df = 4$; $p < 0.001$				

The analysis of the results, which compared differences in willingness to help the homeless between subgroups of respondents by school type, as presented in Table 4, demonstrated statistically significant differences between individual secondary schools. The testing confirmed that students at secondary medical school show a statistically significantly higher level of declared willingness to help a homeless person compared to students of all other surveyed schools in the Dol-

ná Orava region. Specifically, students at the secondary vocational school of trade and services and the business academy demonstrated a statistically significantly higher willingness to help compared to students of the secondary vocational school of polytechnics and the grammar school. The overall results indicate a significant influence of study focus on the formation of prosocial attitudes of young people, with higher social responsiveness evident in students whose future profession

Table 4. Willingness to help a homeless person – RANKS and non-parametric tests (comparison of pairs of schools)

Schools comparison		Sum	Average rank	Mann–Whitney <i>U</i> -test	Wilcoxon test	Z	<i>p</i> -value
A	Secondary medical school	101	138.97	4245.000	12760.000	–4.843	0.000
	Polytechnic secondary vocational school	130	98.15				
B	Secondary medical school	101	116.85	5368.000	12508.000	–1.471	0.141
	Secondary vocational school of trade and services	119	105.11				
C	Secondary medical school	101	152.50	7019.500	21725.500	–2.786	0.005
	Business academy	171	127.05				
D	Secondary medical school	101	129.91	3948.500	10969.500	–4.650	0.000
	Grammar school	118	92.96				
E	Polytechnic secondary vocational school	130	109.55	5726.500	14241.500	–3.723	0.000
	Secondary vocational school of trade and services	119	141.88				
F	Polytechnic secondary vocational school	130	134.53	8973.500	17488.500	–3.031	0.002
	Business academy	171	163.52				
G	Polytechnic secondary vocational school	130	120.32	7126.000	15641.000	–1.023	0.307
	Grammar school	118	129.11				
H	Secondary vocational school of trade and services	119	152.24	9373.000	24079.000	–1.231	0.218
	Business academy	171	140.81				
I	Secondary vocational school of trade and services	119	132.36	5431.000	12452.000	–3.255	0.001
	Grammar school	118	105.53				
J	Business academy	171	153.77	8590.000	15611.000	–2.330	0.020
	Grammar school	118	132.30				

involves direct work with people. On the contrary, students from technically oriented schools and grammar schools show a lower level of declared willingness to assist the homeless, which may be related to a lower level of contact with socially disadvantaged groups within their vocational education.

Other findings include:

- place of residence: students from urban areas encounter homeless people significantly more often ($U = 39\,543$; $p = 0.019$), which did not translate into more benevolent attitudes;
- perception of dangerousness: there is no relationship between the frequency of encounters and the opinion that the homeless are no more dangerous than other people ($\rho = 0.07$; $p = 0.076$);
- school type is a predictor of prosocial reactions – humanities/health-oriented majors show higher empathy;
- gender differences are consistent across all emotions: girls have more compassion, but also more fear;
- place of permanent residence (city vs. village) affects exposure, but not the respondents' stereotypes.

Discussion

The research confirmed that the type of secondary school is a determinant of prosocial reactions towards the homeless: medical school students achieved the highest willingness to help (Mean Rank = 385.23) and polytechnic school students the lowest (266.05), with the difference between all five schools being highly significant ($\chi^2 = 37.211$; $p < 0.001$). Gender differences were present in all analyzed emotions — girls more often felt compassion, but also fear, while boys tended to be neutral (ignoring). Age had a more negligible, but still significant, effect: older respondents (18–20 years old) reported less fear and more willingness to help than 14–15-year-olds (U -tests, $p < 0.01$). These results should be interpreted as preliminary as this is a study pilot and regionally limited.

Research results support the “contact hypothesis” (Allport, 1954; Pettigrew and Tropp, 2006) – vocational and humanities-oriented schools provide more opportunities for real-life contact with vulnerable clients, which reduces social distance and fosters empathy.

These findings support our hypothesis that educational environment and professional orientation have a significant influence on attitudes towards socially marginalized groups. Significant differences between individual types of schools can be determined not only by the focus of the study field, but also by the degree of direct contact with people within the education system. This applies to all levels of formal education. For example, Dickinson's (2015) research demonstrated that interior design students who worked on projects for individuals affected by poverty experienced a significant shift in their perception of the causes of poverty and homelessness. After completing a semester with projects such as designing a temporary shelter for the homeless, renovating spaces for low-income families, and designing low-cost housing, students were less likely to attribute poverty to individual failures and more likely to perceive it as a complex problem with various structural causes.

Medical school students are exposed to situations during their training that require empathy, care and helping others, which can increase their sensitivity to social problems such as homelessness (Oláh, 2016). Practical experience with socially disadvantaged groups can significantly strengthen students'

prosocial behavior. Research by Malenfant et al. (2024) shows that young people with experience of homelessness often perceive community support and mutual assistance as key factors for social integration. Activism and direct involvement in solving homelessness problems strengthen their sense of self-efficacy and ability to influence their own future. This experience suggests that students who engage in prosocial initiatives within educational programs can also gain a deeper understanding of social problems and strengthen their empathetic attitudes towards the homeless.

Similar findings can be found in research by Hocking and Lawrence (2000), who researched the impact of direct contact with the homeless on students' attitudes. The research revealed that students who completed 15 hours of work at a homeless shelter exhibited significant positive changes in their attitudes and a greater willingness to help. Specifically, it was shown that volunteers perceived the homeless as less responsible for their situation, evaluated them more positively, and were more motivated to engage in further assistance compared to students who did not have such an experience. Research by American scientists led by Kaligotla et al. (2024) demonstrated that community engagement in the education of students in the health professions leads to increased empathy and social responsibility. For secondary school and technical students who do not have similar community initiatives as part of their curriculum, the space for developing these skills may be more limited.

Other research also highlights the importance of community initiatives in the educational process. Mahamud et al. (2024) analyze the role of social organizations within public-private partnerships, emphasizing their responsibility in managing financial resources and effectively providing social services. Research suggests that collaboration among government, the private sector, and social organizations can positively impact the resolution of social problems, such as homelessness and youth unemployment. Hudani et al. (2024) analyze the importance of effective coordination between emergency shelters for homeless youth and health systems in Toronto. The study highlights the importance of enhanced collaboration between sectors and the implementation of more effective information and funding mechanisms to support homeless youth. These findings may also be relevant to the broader discussion on the possibilities of linking educational institutions and social services. However, some foreign research also suggests that different factors influence the social responsiveness of young people, such as family background, religious values, or social climate (Hartl and Hartlová, 2015). According to Yarvis et al. (2023), society often perceives homeless people negatively and blames them for their situation instead of reflecting on the decisions of the government and community that contribute to homelessness. Stigmatization plays a significant role in maintaining this problem and can have a profound impact on solving homelessness. Therefore, it is important for future students to be educated about the prejudice and stigmatization that homeless people face and to understand the factors that increase the risk of homelessness, such as mental illness, poverty, domestic violence, or systemic discrimination. Stroud et al. (2024) analyze the role of educational institutions in preventing youth homelessness and point to the importance of research as a tool for influencing policies in this area. Research suggests that schools can play a vital role in mitigating the risks associated with youth homelessness. However, systemic barriers such as teacher burnout and limited resources can undermine the effectiveness of these initiatives.

The results of our research, therefore, suggest that the education system can play a key role in shaping young people's prosocial attitudes. However, professional orientation alone is not the only factor determining social responsiveness. Key areas that can contribute to the development of positive attitudes towards homeless people include educational programs with an emphasis on social inclusion, volunteer activities, and direct experience working with socially disadvantaged groups (Janková, 2021). Research by Proulx et al. (2023) suggests that prosocial programs in the real world can be associated with higher psychological well-being in students. Students who completed a specific year in a senior home, where they had the opportunity for both planned and spontaneous help, showed a strong association between the meaningfulness of these interactions and their psychological well-being. Additionally, students participated in an experiment where they packed necessities for homeless or impoverished children. Students self-rated their happiness levels before and after the activity. Their happiness levels increased after the activity. Peoples and Ubel (2025) analyze the impact of student-led clinics on the formation of professional and social competencies of future medical professionals. Their research demonstrates that practical training within these clinics can strengthen medical students' social responsibility and their ability to work in community-oriented programs.

Methodological implications for improving attitude assessment

Our findings are primarily aimed at modifying and refining the assessment of attitudes among secondary school students:

- 1) expanding data collection to other Slovak regions and school types to verify the stability of effects across settings;
- 2) validating a multi-item index of willingness to help (instead of a single declarative item) and assessing its internal consistency;
- 3) verifying the sensitivity of the instruments to changes in experimental design (e.g., service-learning vs. lecture) with pre- and post-intervention measurements;
- 4) considering the declared self-report bias, considering adding control items of social desirability in future measurements.

The authors perceive the following as primary limitations of the conducted research in terms of interpreting its outputs. The main limitation is the regionality of the study (Dolná Orava) as results cannot be generalized to the whole of Slovakia. The fact that all the involved schools are from one region and under a single founder may reduce the variability of curricular approaches and student exposure, and thus further limit the generalizability of the results. The cross-sectional design does not allow for assessing causality between the educational form and attitudes. Additionally, self-report bias (socially desirable response) could overestimate the declared prosociality; the anonymous online collection minimized but did not eliminate this bias. The authors perceive the potential of the conducted research in terms of setting up further studies to expand the scope to other Slovak regions, testing the effectiveness of specific educational interventions (service-learning vs. classic lecture) in a randomized order, and validating the multi-item index of willingness to help.

Conclusion

Through this regional study we have shared preliminary findings on differences in attitudes and declared willingness to help homeless people across different school types. Based on the presented results, we conclude that adolescents' prosocial attitudes towards homeless people are influenced by the type of secondary school, and to a lesser extent, by age and gender. The greatest willingness to help comes from students in medical schools. In contrast, the lowest comes from students in technical fields, which confirms the importance of professional orientation and possible contact with socially disadvantaged groups within education. The results therefore support the hypothesis that systematic education and practical experience with marginalized individuals strengthen empathy, reduce social distance, and lead to more positive attitudes among adolescents towards homeless people.

Ethical aspects and conflict of interest

The authors have no conflict of interest to declare.

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