

Practitioner article

Public attitudes to homelessness: findings from a Scotland-wide survey

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Public attitudes to homelessness

Rachel Ormston outlines the results of a survey identifying attitudes to homelessness among the public, commissioned after a prior survey suggested that practitioners working in the homelessness field thought they would find their jobs easier if public attitudes were more positive. Findings indicate that many people did indeed hold critical opinions on the causes of homelessness and on people who find themselves homeless. The article concludes with a round-up of suggestions for how practitioners can take practical steps to try to alter these negative attitudes to more positive ones.

Why should we be interested in public attitudes to homelessness?

Scotland has some of the most progressive homelessness legislation in Europe. The provisions of the **Housing (Scotland) Act 2001** and **Homelessness etc. (Scotland) Act 2003** were widely praised by charities working with homeless people.

However, a 2006 study for the then Scottish Executive found that some front line staff and managers working with homeless people were more lukewarm to these legislative changes:

- 55 per cent did not think that the abolition of priority need was fair – although this may reflect concerns about limited resources.
- 72 per cent of those surveyed said that better understanding of homelessness amongst the general public would make their job easier.

At the time of that study, however, relatively little was known about public attitudes to homelessness.

The Scottish Executive therefore funded a set of questions in the 2006 Scottish Social Attitudes (SSA) survey to explore public attitudes to homelessness. This survey was established by the Scottish Centre for Social Research (ScotCen) and runs annually with a sample of around 1,500 adults across Scotland. The article that follows summarises some of the key findings from the questions on attitudes to homelessness. The full report is available to download at <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Publications/2007/11/13153139/0>.

General attitudes to homeless people

The survey showed that the public is divided in its beliefs about whether homeless people are responsible for their situation, or for finding a new home:

- 48 per cent agreed with the broadly sympathetic statement that ‘most homeless people have just been unlucky in their lives’, 28 per cent disagreed and 22 per cent neither agreed nor disagreed.
- 45 per cent agreed with the more ‘critical’ statement that ‘most homeless people could find somewhere to live if they really tried’, while 33 per cent disagreed.

The survey also found that individual people could be ‘sympathetic’ in one respect (perhaps viewing someone becoming homeless as simply bad luck), but hold ‘judgemental’ attitudes in others (for example, thinking homeless people could get out of their situation if they really tried).

Groups who were particularly likely to express more ‘critical’ views about homeless people included:

- **Men:** 51 per cent of men, compared with 41 per cent of women agreed that ‘most homeless people could find somewhere to live if they really tried’.
- **Those with lower levels of education:** 33 per cent of respondents qualified to Higher Education level agreed that ‘most homeless people could find somewhere to live if they really tried’, compared with 58 per cent of those with no qualifications.
- **People who are generally more ‘authoritarian’ in their social and political outlook:** as measured by a set of questions tapping attitudes to things like freedom of expression, the law, discipline and tradition.

Older people (aged 65 plus) were more likely than younger age groups to agree that ‘many people say they are homeless just to try and get a house from the council’. Both young people (18-24) and older people (65 plus) were more likely than middle-aged people to think that ‘most homeless people could find somewhere to live if they really tried’.

Belief in ‘myths’ about homelessness

One common ‘myth’ about homeless people is that most sleep rough. Only a tiny proportion of homeless people are on the street and many have (often precarious) arrangements to stay with friends or family. However, this is clearly a myth that resonates with the public – 61 per cent agreed that ‘most homeless people sleep rough outside at some point’.

Other myths the survey explored are perhaps better described as ‘preconceptions’ about people experiencing homelessness:

- Around 1 in 5 agreed that 'most people end up being homeless simply because they drink too much'.
- A similar proportion agreed that 'most homeless people use hard drugs'.

The groups of people who were most likely to agree with these two statements were similar to the groups who were more likely to hold 'critical' attitudes towards homeless people in general.

'Deserving' homeless people?

The survey also explored public support for the abolition of priority need by asking people whether all homeless people are equally deserving of help.

- Around 6 in 10 thought that some homeless people are more deserving of help than others.

The people the public thought should get most help are already covered by the current priority need definition¹. Those considered most deserving included:

- victims of domestic abuse
- people experiencing family break up
- those with mental health problems
- young people leaving children's homes.

Similarly, the **kinds** of households the public thought should get most help are all covered by current definitions of priority need and included:

- young single parents with children
- married couples with children
- people aged over 65.

The groups considered least deserving included:

- prison leavers (who are actually classed as in priority need)
- people who have just moved to Scotland
- people evicted for being noisy neighbours

With the exception of prison leavers, these groups would not be considered a priority unless they were vulnerable for other reasons.

¹ Assuming that those who experience family break up have dependent children.

Ways to challenge or change public attitudes

These findings highlight the fact that a substantial proportion of the Scottish population holds fairly 'critical' attitudes towards homeless people. Misconceptions and stereotypes about homelessness are also widespread.

So what can be done to address some of these issues? The research report made a number of recommendations including:

- Challenging the widely held misconception that homelessness involves sleeping rough.
- Highlighting the background and situation of different homeless people, to challenge more 'critical' views of the motives and behaviour of homeless people.
- Targeting future campaigns/work particularly at those groups who hold the most negative views at the moment.
- Working to increase understanding of the circumstances and needs of particular groups of homeless people commonly seen as 'less deserving' in order to help build support for the 2012 target.

Workshops on the survey findings at the 2008 Shelter and Scottish Council for Single Homeless Conferences also discussed various possibilities for action with a range of housing and homelessness practitioners and policy makers.

One view was that the public should be encouraged to see individual people rather than 'the homeless'. The need to challenge any misconceptions that local councillors hold about homelessness was also identified.

A number of positive examples of local authorities engaging with local communities on homelessness were highlighted:

- Workshops with new councillors to try and engage them with the 2012 agenda.
- Involving churches in local homelessness forums and helping to spread awareness of the reality of homelessness among congregations.
- Peer education - young people who have experienced homelessness being invited to speak in schools.
- A community day to engage with councillors, tenant representatives and local people about the reality of homelessness.

There were also examples where the local press had covered 'good news' stories about projects working with homelessness people, as well as more negative examples of local press coverage of homelessness in the area.

Further information

You can find out more about the Scottish Centre for Social Research at:

<http://www.scotcen.org.uk/>

If you would like any further information, please send an email to

practicescotland@shelter.org.uk in the first instance.