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Department of Geography

Homelessness in Cambridge: A Social Attitudes Survey

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This report presents the findings of a social attitudes survey conducted by second year undergraduate students from the Department of Geography at the University of Cambridge.

As part of a course exploring contemporary understandings of citizenship, 63 students conducted a survey of Cambridge residents at various locations across the city. The aim of the survey was to explore social attitudes to one of the most pressing and visible social issues in the city today: homelessness. The questions put to the public emerged from an initial consultation workshop conducted with representatives of local homeless charities.

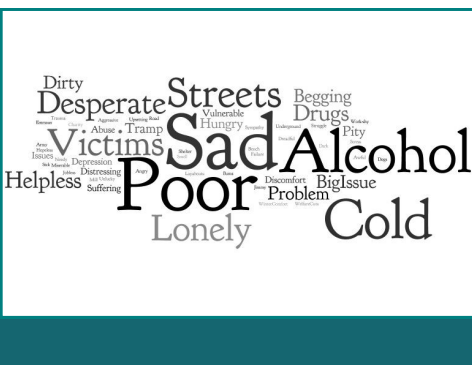


What words come to mind when you hear the word 'homeless'?

The survey began with a simple thought exercise, but one that is highly revealing of the ways in which local residents view the homeless. What adjectives come to mind; what are common words and phrases used when conversation turns to homelessness and homeless people in the city?

The responses to this question are represented visually on the cover of this report and at the bottom of this page. By far the most common words were those associated with marginal economic/social status ('poor', 'helpless', 'hungry', 'vulnerable'), addictive behaviours ('alcohol', 'drugs'), anti-social behaviour ('begging', 'drinking', 'violence'), and difficult living conditions ('cold', 'sad', 'streets', 'lonely'). Together these initial responses point to a general societal representation of the homeless as, in the words of one respondent, 'a social problem.'

Largely absent from these initial responses were words or phrases pointing to the demographics of the homeless population, their routes into homelessness, or attempts to alleviate problems encountered by the homeless in Cambridge. Only one respondent commented on the characteristics of an 'average' homeless person: 'a smelly man ... with a dog.' Numerous references were made to Big Issue vendors, a prominent point of social encounter that many associated



“Lots of people today are only a couple of paychecks away from becoming homeless.”
Cambridge Resident

with homelessness, however only three respondents chose to initially name schemes and organisations supporting the homeless in the city.

Who would you include in the category of homeless people?

While few respondents were able to comment on the demographics of the Cambridge homeless population, the vast majority of those questioned associated homelessness with living on the streets. For one respondent, the transient nature of street life was what defined homeless people: 'They are tramps on the streets ... people moving about like nomads.' Common associations with homelessness included those drinking alcohol in public places, and those with visible signs of mental illness.

10 of the 63 respondents were unwilling to categorise certain people as homeless. These respondents stated that vulnerability to homelessness was a more widespread phenomenon than most definitions of the homeless took into account. As one respondent noted, 'not everyone drunk on a street bench is a homeless person.' Several factors were suggested to be behind vulnerability to homelessness however, including affordability of local housing, ease of eviction, and the need to flee abusive relationships.

When asked to consider the status of 'couchsurfers' and long-term B&B residents, few respondents were aware of the scale of these phenomena and few considered these vulnerable groups to be homeless. Several respondents outlined their personal experiences of uncertain housing arrangements and refused to retrospectively label such experiences as periods of homelessness. For these respondents there was a difference between sleeping on the couch of a friend or neighbour, and those deemed to be in 'desperate need' as a result of life on the streets. For one respondent, 'if you have a roof over your head you should be grateful for what you have.'

How do the media represent the issue of homelessness in Cambridge?

Aside from occasional personal encounters with homeless people in the city, indifferent media representations of homelessness were found to play a key role in determining social attitudes for residents of Cambridge.

By far the largest number of respondents complained about the lack of local media coverage concerning the issue. The majority of respondents directly connected this media indifference to their own lack of knowledge about the scale of homelessness in the city and the challenges facing vulnerable groups on the streets and those in insecure housing arrangements.

For those respondents who were willing to comment on media portrayals of the homeless, the majority linked homelessness to negative images and news coverage. The portrayals of the homeless included in local newspapers were considered to be limited to stories highlighting drug and alcohol addiction, acts of vandalism, and anti-social behavior. Media accounts of the city's homeless largely consider them to be an invisible population, only warranting attention when their behaviour impinges upon the experiences of other city centre users.

For those respondents who noted positive media coverage of attempts to tackle homelessness in the city, feature articles on the activities of local organisations working with the homeless were referenced most. Several respondents noted the positive coverage that Jimmy's had received during the Duke and Duchess of Cambridge's visit to the city in November 2012. This was considered to be informative coverage, especially for outlining schemes available at Jimmy's and revealing aspects

of guests' everyday life. However, one respondent was quick to note that 'some of the coverage seemed to be more interested in what William and Kate had been up to, rather than exploring



homelessness itself.'

Do you know of any organisations working with homeless people in Cambridge?

Despite an apparent lack of media attention, 60 percent of respondents were able to give the name of at least one homeless organisation in Cambridge, and 75 percent knew of groups actively working with homeless people in the city.

90 percent of those able to name a homeless organization were aware of Jimmy's. The majority of those naming Jimmy's were aware of the organisation as a result of media coverage around the royal visit. CHS, FLACK, Wintercomfort, Emmaus, Centre 33, and a number of local churches also featured prominently with respondents. These organisations were largely known through personal contacts or through interactions with street vendors. National homeless support organisations with a degree of local presence - including the Salvation Army, Centrepoint, and Shelter - were also mentioned.

While a majority of respondents could name a homeless organisation, few were able to expand on the scale or focus of their specific operations. No respondents mentioned homeless activities supported by local government services.

Are you aware of the government's changing policy on housing? What do you think about these changing policies?

Very few survey respondents were aware of current housing policy changes being initiated by the government. This also translated into confusion concerning the role and responsibility of local government in the coordination of housing policy and efforts to tackle homelessness. Of those that did know about changes to housing policy, by far the most well recognised policy was the so-called 'bedroom tax' intended to tackle under-occupation. Of those respondents that mentioned the policy, few were able to expand upon what the policy meant for specific

home owners and those seeking housing.

When details of the changes to housing policy were explained to respondents, the majority suggested that this would have a negative effect on those seeking accommodation in Cambridge's competitive housing market. For one respondent: 'Governments have a fundamental responsibility to provide everyone with affordable housing, and they are failing in this respect.' Many suggested that the unavailability of affordable housing would push the most vulnerable sections of the local population into insecure housing arrangements.

Few respondents directly connected these changes in housing policy to the issue of homelessness in Cambridge, instead concentrating on the lack of affordable housing. While some predicted a greater number of younger people forced on to the streets through such measures, the majority had not associated government austerity measures with the issue of homelessness. The task of balancing housing demands and homeless support in an age of austerity was the source of uncertainty for many, including one respondent who noted: 'The government changes are good *and* bad. It's a Catch-22 situation. The government is stuck, they need money. At the same time it's unfair on the homeless people of Cambridge. Nobody can afford anything now. It's a total mess.'



'The government needs to be doing things to ensure that there is enough halfway housing for people who cannot get hold of their own. Not just throwing people onto the streets. This sort of thing needs to be talked about in the media.'

Cambridge Resident

The Department of Geography would like to thank the local organisations who gave thought-provoking presentations, practical advice, and a generous amount of their time during the initial project consultation workshop with students. If you are interested in finding out more about these organisations, or how you can support them, please use the contact information below.

CHS Group

Web: <http://www.chsgroup.org.uk/>

Tel: 0300 111 3555

FLACK

Web: <http://www.flackcambridge.org.uk/>

Tel: 01223 366532

Email: info@flackcambridge.org.uk

Jimmy's

Web: <http://www.jimmyscambridge.org.uk/>

Tel: 01223 576085

Email: info@jimmyscambridge.org.uk

For more information about this project contact;

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