



UNIVERSITY OF  
CAMBRIDGE

# **SOCIAL ATTITUDES TO HOMELESSNESS**

A Student Survey of Cambridge Residents

| March 2014

## **Attitudes to Homelessness: A Survey of Cambridge Residents Wednesday 19th February 2014**

This report presents the findings of a social attitudes survey exploring public attitudes towards people experiencing homelessness in Cambridge.

Second year undergraduate students from the Department of Geography at the University of Cambridge conducted the survey as part of a course examining the contemporary politics of urban exclusion and marginalisation. The questions put to the public emerged from an initial consultation workshop conducted with representatives of Cambridge City Council, CHS Group and Jimmy's Cambridge.

The survey involved 275 interviews conducted by 53 students at several locations across the city, with survey respondents chosen using a random sampling methodology. The survey explored a wide range of issues relating to the public perception of homelessness, including:

- General attitudes towards people experiencing homelessness
- The extent of certain representations of the homeless (for example, related to drug and alcohol abuse)
- The extent of knowledge about the scale of homelessness in the city
- Whether the public makes a distinction between people who have become homeless for different reasons, or between different kinds of homeless people
- Responsibility for dealing with homelessness in the city

This report explores how views vary between different groups of residents in Cambridge, and assesses how far public attitudes to homelessness are in tune with the direction of local and national government policy.

## The 2014 Social Attitudes to Homelessness Survey

This report presents the results of the second social attitudes to homelessness survey conducted by students at the Department of Geography. The 2013 survey produced findings that illuminated Cambridge residents' attitudes towards homelessness and the position of homeless people in the city. The survey showed that while many people were sympathetic to the situations homeless people found themselves in, a number of preconceptions remained as barriers to understanding.

The 2014 survey worked with and beyond the findings of the previous survey by attempting to better understand public perceptions of the scale of homelessness in Cambridge. In particular, the survey aimed to identify those local, Cambridge-specific issues that were perceived to influence the scale and nature of homelessness in the city. The survey concluded by sampling the opinions of residents on how best to allocate responsibility for tackling homelessness in the city.

A total of 275 respondents completed the survey on the afternoon of Wednesday 19th February 2014. Respondents were selected via random sampling conducted at 11 locations across the city. A demographic breakdown of the sample is included in Figure 1.

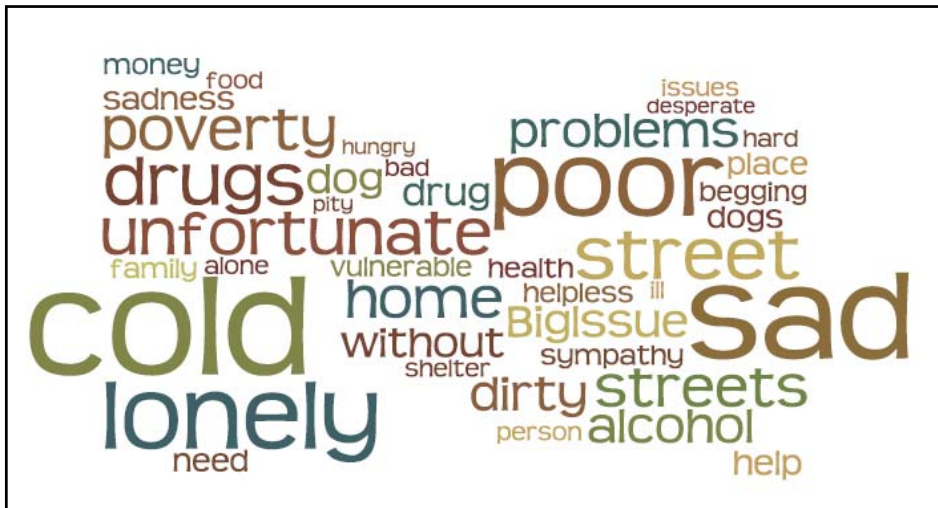
	<b>Male</b>	<b>Female</b>	<b>Total</b>
<b>Under 25</b>	53	54	107
<b>25-50</b>	49	40	89
<b>Over 50</b>	43	36	79
<b>Total</b>	145	130	<b>275</b>

**Figure 1: A breakdown of the sample of respondents**

## What words come to mind when you think of a 'homeless person'?

How do Cambridge residents visualise the complex issue of homelessness in the city today? To unearth the dominant representations of homelessness in Cambridge, the survey began with a simple word association exercise. The 30 most common words used by survey respondents to describe the situation of a homeless person are included in Figure 2 at the bottom of the page.

The most common representations of the homeless in the city were associated with rough sleeping and the visible street-level manifestations of homelessness. 82 percent of respondents made reference to environmental and social factors closely associated with life on the streets (such as 'cold', 'streets', 'begging'). Although a minority of homeless people end up on the streets, the problem of homelessness affects a much greater number of people who are in need of a permanent home. A mere 23 percent of survey respondents referenced wider issues associated



**Figure 2: A proportional word cloud of the most frequently used words to describe a homeless person**

with homelessness – such as precarious housing arrangements – perhaps reflecting the invisibility of such issues within the everyday experiences of the majority of local residents.

When the 2014 responses were compared to answers from the same question in the 2013 survey, a number of important trends emerged. There was a significant decline from the 2013 survey in the number of references to addictive and anti-social behaviours, with only 58 percent (down from 75 percent in 2013) of respondents referencing 'drugs', 'alcohol' or 'violence'. There were also fewer references made to the demographics of the homeless population, although the middle-aged male remains the archetypal homeless figure for the majority of respondents. Another significant trend that emerged from the 2014 survey findings was an overall increase from 2013 in the number of references to psychosocial descriptions of the homeless, most notably descriptions of loneliness, depression and desperation.

Of particular note, and echoing the findings of the 2013 survey, local residents made few references to organisations or schemes acting to alleviate problems encountered by the homeless in the city. Aside from numerous references to the visibility of 'Big Issue' vendors at points across the centre of Cambridge, only 10 percent of respondents made direct reference to local organizations working in the city to provide services to the homeless (such as Jimmy's and the Salvation Army).

### **Who would you categorise as 'homeless'?**

When challenged to define who should be included in the category of 'homeless', many local residents recognised that homelessness is, in the majority of cases, not the 'fault' of an individual and is rather the result of

wider socio-economic pressures and individual circumstances.

Given the opportunity to define homelessness, the majority of respondents referred to absence of shelter as a key indicator. 85 percent of respondents initially limited their categorisation of the homeless to rough sleepers and, in the words of one respondent, 'those who have no place at all to go'. Closely associated with this category were transient residents of homeless shelters in the city.

The remaining 15 percent of respondents defined 'homeless' to include those in precarious housing situations or in sheltered accommodation. The majority of respondents in this category made reference to the phenomena of 'sofa surfing' and long-term 'Bed and Breakfast' accommodation. 70 percent of those respondents referencing precarious housing arrangements were under 25 years of age. These respondents expressed concern that their low incomes, insecure employment contracts and difficult family situations made them acutely aware of the realities of precarious housing.

When specifically asked to consider the issue of the precariously housed, only 30 percent of those who had initially limited their response to rough sleepers were

'The homeless are those people that do not have access to shelter at night. If you are on a sofa or in a B&B you have a roof over your head. I slept on sofas in my youth, and I never thought of myself as homeless. It's not the Ritz, but you have a roof over your head'.

**Cambridge Resident (Male, 25-50 years old)**

prepared to expand their definition of the homeless to include other vulnerable groups.

The majority of survey respondents continued to define homelessness as the absence of a 'roof over their head' and, despite the lack of permanence associated with 'sofa surfing' and other forms of precarious housing, there was a general reluctance to include such vulnerable individuals within the category of the 'homeless'.

### **How many people do you think sleep rough in Cambridge every evening?**

The predominance of rough sleeping in residents' representations and definitions of the homeless fed into a widespread concern over the scale of rough sleeping in Cambridge. When asked to estimate how many people slept rough on the streets of Cambridge, a town with a population of approximately 120,000, the mean estimate of respondents was 809. The median estimate from the sample was 100 sleepers. Cambridge City Council counts estimate the average nightly number of rough sleepers to be approximately nine.

The sizeable discrepancy between the official count and the survey estimates points to homelessness being a highly visible issue in the city, and one that many local residents believe to be on a much larger scale than official figures suggest. Indeed, there was a widely held perception among respondents that official statistics failed to accurately capture the extent of homelessness in the city. The majority of respondents suggested that official statistics might have been manipulated to conceal the 'true' scale of homelessness in the city. One respondent said: 'It's all deliberately massaged so that cuts to services can be made on the sly'. Others noted that rough sleepers in the city may have been concealing

themselves from local government officials as part of a deliberate strategy to avoid being harassed or moved on.

### What do you think causes homelessness in Cambridge specifically?

The close proximity of wealth and poverty in the city was a central theme that emerged in discussion of the causes of homelessness in Cambridge. The presence of relatively affluent students and tourists was considered by some to propagate begging and rough sleeping. The absence of visible homelessness services in the centre of the city was seen by several respondents to increase the visibility of rough sleeping in the city. For one survey respondent: 'At least the old parish workhouse system kept people off the streets'.

When asked to comment on the local pressures that could significantly influence homelessness in the city, 80 percent of respondents suggested that high local house prices and the lack of affordable housing in the city were a root cause of homelessness. The majority of respondents blamed the presence of highly paid workers from the Cambridge Science Park and the University of Cambridge for inflating house prices beyond the means of the majority of local residents. As one respondent suggested: 'Without college accommodation it is almost

'I was nearly homeless when I injured my knee and could not work. My husband had to stay off work to look after the children, and I know see how close we were to being homeless back then. You only need a couple of bad things to happen and then you are on the streets'.

**Cambridge Resident (Female, 25-50 years old)**



impossible to live anywhere in the city without a very highly paid job'. This fed into a perception that low wage or unemployed residents were unable to pay high rents and were more likely to enter into precarious housing arrangements or rough sleeping.

A further 56 percent blamed the local consequences of national government housing policy changes, most notably the so-called 'bedroom tax' intended to reduce under-occupation of housing. In particular, respondents suggested that this would have a negative impact on those seeking accommodation in the area by artificially increasing the price of available local housing stock. This was considered to be a significant issue for younger individuals, often without families or dependents, who would be unable to rent or purchase accommodation in the local area.

### **Who do you think should have responsibility for tackling homelessness in Cambridge?**

Respondents fell into three distinct groups when asked to suggest those who should be responsible for tackling homelessness in the city. 52 percent of respondents were of the opinion that Cambridge City Council should be responsible for homelessness, 36 percent concluded that charities and other non-governmental groups should be responsible, and a further 12 percent believed that the wider community should take responsibility for homelessness in their city. The proportion of these responses was consistent across the different age and gender cohorts of the sample.

The majority of respondents considered Cambridge City Council to be the organisation with the greatest responsibility for tackling homelessness in the city. The

Council does have a duty to accommodate those found to be eligible for local assistance within the city. While many respondents applauded the efforts of the Council to provide accommodation during a period of uncertain local government funding, respondents were concerned that the lack of a visible Council presence on the streets meant that some rough sleepers were not getting support that they were entitled to.

For those identifying charities as those that should be responsible for homelessness, there was a widespread perception that, in the words of one respondent: 'They exist to care, and people give them money to care, so they should be the place that people go to'. 57 percent of all respondents were able to name at least one organisation working with the homeless in Cambridge. 86 percent of those able to name an organisation working with the homeless named Jimmy's, and cited coverage in the local media as their main source of information on the organisation. However, less than 10 percent of respondents were able to outline services offered by Jimmy's. This suggests that while a sizeable number of respondents believed that charities should be responsible for homelessness, respondents had little comprehension of the capabilities of such organisations.

While the majority of respondents recognised that attempts to tackle homelessness had to involve an element of cooperation between agencies, only 12 percent of respondents considered themselves to be a potential agent of change. For one respondent, 'I would not know where to begin. Do you start with broken families or housing the people already on the streets?' It appears that while many local residents understood the multi-faceted causes of homelessness, few considered themselves capable of taking responsibility for the issue.



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The Department of Geography would like to thank the local organisations that gave thought-provoking presentations, practical advice and a generous amount of their time to the initial project consultation workshop with students. To find out more about these organisations and their work with the homeless in Cambridge, please use the contact information below.

**Cambridge City Council**

Tel: 01223 457000

Email: [enquiries@cambridge.gov.uk](mailto:enquiries@cambridge.gov.uk)

Web: <http://www.cambridge.gov.uk>

**CHS Group**

Tel: 0300 111 3555

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

**Jimmy's Cambridge**

Tel: 01223 576085

Email: [info@jimmyscambridge.org.uk](mailto:info@jimmyscambridge.org.uk)

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

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