

Housing, Regeneration and Planning

Scottish Social Attitudes Survey 2006: Public Attitudes to Homelessness

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The Scottish Social Attitudes (SSA) survey was launched by the Scottish Centre for Social Research in 1999 in order to inform public policy and facilitate the study of public opinion in Scotland. This report summarises the key findings from a module of questions in the 2006 survey on public attitudes to homelessness. The module was funded by the Scottish Government and is the first time public attitudes to homelessness have been explored in detail in a large-scale, Scotland-wide survey.

Main Findings and Key Implications

- Public attitudes to homeless people appear to be widely divided. For example, 48% of people agree that *'most homeless people have just been unlucky in their lives'*, but 28% disagree and 22% neither agree nor disagree.
- At the same time, 45% agree with the more 'critical' statement that *'most homeless people could find somewhere to live if they really tried'*, while 33% disagree. Similarly, 35% agree that *'many people say they are homeless just to try and get a house from the council'*, while 29% disagree. The Scottish Government may wish to challenge these more 'critical' views in any future work to highlight the reality of homelessness.
- There is a widespread misconception that most homeless people sleep rough at some point – 61% agree that this is the case. Again, the equation of homelessness with 'rooflessness' is a key myth the Scottish Government may wish to challenge.
- Twenty-one per cent agree that *'most people end up being homeless simply because they drink too much'* and 18% agree that *'most homeless people use hard drugs'*. However, half disagree with each of these statements.
- Around six in ten think that some people who become homeless for different reasons are more deserving than others. A similar proportion think that some kinds of homeless people should get more help than others. Thus public opinion appears to be somewhat out of step with plans to abolish the distinctions between homeless people based on whether or not they are in 'priority need' by 2012.
- A majority of people (58%) think homeless people should 'sometimes' get homes before other local people on the housing waiting list.
- Only 1 in 10 (11%) believes that homeless people cause problems in their local area, while over half (52%) disagree that this is the case.
- When asked to consider how comfortable or uncomfortable they would feel with homeless people being re-housed near them, people are relatively evenly divided – around a third say they would be comfortable, a third uncomfortable and a third neither comfortable nor uncomfortable.

Introduction

These research findings summarise the key points from a report on public attitudes to homelessness based on a module of questions in the 2006 *Scottish Social Attitudes (SSA)* survey. The module was funded by the Scottish Government to inform the work of the *Awareness Raising and Best Practice subgroup* of the *Homelessness Monitoring Group*. It aimed to establish a baseline picture of public attitudes towards homelessness in Scotland.

Contact and personal experience of homelessness

The majority (67%) of people had not had either any personal experience of homelessness, or known anyone else who had been homeless. However, around a third had either experienced homelessness themselves (7%, compared with 4% according to the 2005 Scottish Household Survey) or knew someone who had been homeless. A significant proportion of people come across someone they think is homeless on a regular basis – for example, 16% come across someone ‘most days’, 19% at least ‘once a week’ and 14% ‘at least once a month’. However a sizeable minority (18%) of people say they ‘never’ come across someone they believe to be homeless.

Attitudes to homeless people

Public attitudes to homelessness are complex and widely divided. For example, while just under half (48%) think ‘*most homeless people have just been unlucky in their lives*’, around 3 in 10 (28%) disagree that this is the case and 22% neither agree nor disagree. Moreover, significant proportions appear to hold critical attitudes towards the motives and behaviour of people who say they are homeless. Forty-five per cent agree that most homeless people could find somewhere to live if they ‘really tried’ (33% disagree) and 35% that ‘*many people say they are homeless just to try and get a house from the council*’ (29% disagree).

Attitudes varied by sex, age, education level and the extent to which someone’s underlying beliefs and values are more libertarian or authoritarian:

- Women generally express more ‘sympathetic’ attitudes than men towards homeless people.
- Older people are most likely to express critical attitudes.

- Being educated to a higher level is strongly associated with holding less ‘judgemental’ attitudes towards the motives and behaviour of homeless people.
- People who hold more authoritarian beliefs in general (for example, towards freedom of expression, law, discipline and tradition) are more likely to express attitudes towards homeless people that could be described as ‘unsympathetic’ or more ‘judgemental’.

Myths about homelessness

Misconceptions about homelessness appear to be widespread. A majority of people (61%) believe that most homeless people sleep rough at some point. Belief in this myth does not vary particularly between different socio-demographic groups.

Around 1 in 5 believe that homelessness is closely associated with drink or drug problems – 21% agree that ‘*most people end up being homeless simply because they drink too much*’ and 18% agree that ‘*most homeless people use hard drugs*’. However, half disagree with each of these statements.

‘Deserving’ homeless people?

The Scottish Government plans to abolish distinctions between homeless people based on whether or not they are in ‘priority need’ by 2012. This will mean that the right to permanent accommodation will be extended to all people who find themselves unintentionally homeless, not just those considered particularly vulnerable because of their individual characteristics or situation. Our findings suggest that public opinion may have some way to go before it is line with this decision. Six in ten people believe that some homeless people are more deserving of help than others and that some kinds of homeless people should get more help than others. The view that some should get more help than others appears widespread across different social groups.

The groups people consider most and least deserving of help broadly reflect current guidance. Those with children, victims of domestic abuse and people with mental health problems are all commonly seen as among those who should get the most help. On the other hand, those who have just moved to Scotland, have drug or alcohol problems or have been evicted for being a noisy neighbour (none of whom would automatically be classed as ‘priority need’ under

current guidelines unless they were otherwise particularly vulnerable) are among those most commonly identified as 'least deserving'. Prison leavers are also among the groups commonly considered less deserving of help.

Attitudes towards 'intentionally homeless' people

Respondents were presented with a range of scenarios where a person could be considered to have become homeless 'intentionally' and were asked to say whether or not they should get help from their council with finding a new home. For many scenarios where a person might be considered 'intentionally homeless', a majority of people think the council should definitely or probably provide such help. For example, a majority think that the following should 'definitely' or 'probably' get help finding a new home:

- a 30 year-old who has moved out of their home after splitting up with their husband or wife (63%)
- a person who says they can no longer live in their flat because their neighbours are too noisy (63%)
- a 16 year-old girl who currently lives with her parents, but has a one year-old child and wants to move out (63%), and
- a person who has lost their home because they could not keep up with their rent payments (69%).

The key exception is where someone has become homeless because they caused problems for their neighbours (anti social behaviour) – over 8 in 10 think this group should definitely or probably not get help finding a new home. Attitudes are also somewhat more divided with respect to whether a 17 year-old who has left home after a serious argument with their parents should get help finding a new home or not – half (51%) thought they definitely or probably should, and half (47%) that they definitely or probably should not.

Attitudes towards helping homeless people find a new home appear to vary somewhat depending on both the sex and age of the person needing assistance – while the proportions who think a teenage boy and a teenage girl should get help are not significantly different, in relation to a 30 year-old who has experienced a marriage breakdown people are more inclined to think a woman than a man should get help. Views also vary significantly by respondents' socio-demographic characteristics, including sex, age, education and area deprivation, as well as the extent to which people hold underlying beliefs that are libertarian or authoritarian. It

appears that specific groups may need more convincing than others of the need to help particular 'intentionally homeless' people find new accommodation.

Homelessness in the local area

A majority of people (58%) think homeless people should 'sometimes' get homes before other local people on the housing waiting list. Only a minority (7% in each case) think homeless people should either 'never' or 'always' get homes first. Older people and those on low household incomes are more likely to think homeless people should 'never' or 'hardly ever' get homes before others, as are those who express more 'critical' attitudes towards homeless people in general.

Only 1 in 10 (11%) believes that homeless people cause problems in their local area, while over half (52%) disagree that this is the case. However, those who live in the most deprived areas of Scotland are more likely than those in the most affluent areas to think that homeless people cause problems locally (18% compared with 7%).

When asked to consider how comfortable or uncomfortable they would feel with homeless people being re-housed near them, people are relatively evenly divided – around a third say they would be comfortable, a third uncomfortable and a third neither comfortable nor uncomfortable. Older people, those living in the least deprived areas of Scotland and those on high incomes are most likely to say they would feel uncomfortable. People who are more 'sympathetic' to homeless people in general are also more likely to say they would feel comfortable with them being housed nearby. However, this is not always the case – a significant minority are sympathetic towards homeless people in general but still feel uncomfortable with them being housed nearby. This suggests that attitudes to homelessness are complex and may vary when people are asked to consider homelessness being addressed in their own local area.

Policy implications

Our findings suggest that a key myth which the Government may wish to challenge in their future work is the belief that most homeless people sleep rough.

Future work could also highlight the background and situation of different homeless people, to challenge more 'critical' views of the motives and behaviour of homeless people, as well as the belief that homelessness is usually associated with drink and drugs.

The findings suggest that some work may be needed to convey the rationale and desirability of abolishing distinctions between different homeless people if the Scottish Government wishes to ensure public support for the abolition of priority need by 2012.

The Scottish Government may also wish to increase understanding of the circumstances and needs of particular groups of homeless people who appear to be commonly considered 'less deserving' of help.

Methodology

The *Scottish Social Attitudes* survey involves c. 1,600 interviews annually, with respondents selected using random probability sampling to ensure that the results are robust and representative of the Scottish population. The 2006 survey, which was conducted between August 2006 and January 2007, involved face-to-face interviews and a self-completion questionnaire with 1,594 Scottish adults (aged 18+).

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The report, "Scottish Social Attitudes Survey 2006: Public Attitudes to Homelessness," which is summarised in this research findings is a web only document and is available on the publications pages of the Scottish Government website at <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Publications/Recent>

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ISBN 978-0-7559-6841-1

