Attitudes to homelessness in Australia

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Abstract

There has been very little research to date investigating attitudes to homelessness in Australia. Such research is important as public opinion can influence both political will to act and the viability of different policy responses. Attitudes also shape the way the community responds to those who are disadvantaged.

Using data collected through the 2007 Australian Survey of Social Attitudes on homelessness, this study investigated attitudes of the Australian community about the perceived causes of homelessness and responsibility for addressing it.

Exploratory principal component analysis revealed an underlying structure to participants' responses. Three components or response patterns emerged, with participants viewing homelessness as a problem: with external causes requiring government solutions; of collective responsibility; with individual causes, where individuals and their families are responsible for resolution. This finding is consistent with some studies from the United States and United Kingdom that show that attitudes to homelessness are complex and do not necessarily align with the structural/individual dichotomy in a straightforward way.

Demographic factors such as age, sex, class, educational attainment and political affiliation were explored as predictors of attitudes. While some significant relationships were found, multiple regression analysis revealed that these factors explained very little of the overall variance in attitudes to homelessness. This has implications for public opinion research on homelessness, which has focused largely on demographic attributes as predictors of attitudes.

Keywords: attitudes; homelessness; predictors; cause; responsibility

1   Introduction

Having to tell people, 'I am homeless' is embarrassing as it makes me feel like I'm some lazy bum with a drug and alcohol problem who doesn't do anything to help themselves. I overhear people talking and this seems to be a common opinion. (Client comment in Hanover Client Survey 2008)

Hanover Welfare Services is a leading Melbourne-based agency that provides services to people experiencing homelessness or housing crisis. Hanover's mission is to empower people who are homeless, or at imminent risk of becoming so, to enable them to take greater control over their lives, and to stimulate and encourage change in Australian society to benefit people experiencing homelessness. Understanding the public's attitudes to homelessness is critical to achieving our mission.

Attitudes about homelessness matter. Perceptions shape the way the public treat people experiencing homelessness and their support for particular policy responses (Lee, Lewis & Jones 1992; Lee, Link & Toro 1991; Link et al. 1995; Tompsett et al. 2006). Many authors cite evidence that public opinion influences public policy and legislative change (Barnett, Quackenbush & Pierce 1997; Lee, Jones & Lewis 1990; Tompsett et al. 2006). Lee, Link and Toro (1991) argue that public opinion is an important component of the favorable policy environment needed to address homelessness. Further, Toro and colleagues (2007) argue that the public's attitudes toward people experiencing homelessness at the very least tracks public policy, if not influences it directly. Understanding community attitudes to homelessness is an important part of addressing homelessness.

Until recently, homelessness has been largely missing from the national social policy agenda. That all changed with the 2008 release of the Australian Government's White Paper on Homelessness: *The Road Home: a national approach to reducing homelessness*. *The Road Home* maps out an ambitious and long-term reform agenda consisting of a three-pronged approach: early intervention and prevention; expanding and improving services; and specialist interventions for people with high needs who have had long-term involvement with the service system. *The Road Home* also sets targets for addressing homelessness—most notably halving overall homelessness by 2020 and being able to offer supported accommodation to all rough sleepers who seek it by 2020. *The Road Home* has been widely endorsed by the service sector Australia wide.

While government and the service sector see the clear need for action on homelessness, public understanding and support for policies to address homelessness is critical. Government policy requires community support and coherence with community norms, if efforts to address homelessness are to be successfully implemented and maintained over time. It is especially important when policy changes require significant expenditure of public funds. Policy does not exist in a vacuum.

A significant amount of research has been undertaken on homelessness, people's experiences of homelessness and, in particular, the causes of homelessness. Debate continues over causes—about the weight given to structural factors (such as poverty, housing affordability and discrimination) and individual factors (such as mental health issues, family breakdown

and substance abuse). While the emphasis on structural versus individual factors in explaining homelessness has shifted over time and across nations (Fitzpatrick & Christian 2006), there is consensus among the research community on a mix of both structural and more individual causes (see, for example, Commonwealth Advisory Committee on Homelessness 2003; Fitzpatrick & Christian 2006; Horn 2002; Mallett et al. 2009; Pleace 2000). Broadly, there seems to be agreement that individual factors make certain groups more susceptible to changes in the housing market—making it more difficult for them to successfully compete for low cost housing. This view has been referred to as 'the new consensus' (Pleace 2000) and informs the Australian Government's approach to addressing homelessness in *The Road Home*.

In contrast, little research has been undertaken on community attitudes to homelessness. There are a handful of international projects and only a few Australian studies. Some research suggests that people have mixed views about the perceived causes of homelessness depending on the way they emphasise individual issues (such as 'choice' and 'laziness') and structural factors (such as a shortage of affordable housing) (see Blasi 2001; Lee, Link & Toro 1991). However, other studies suggest that people have a mixture of views where multiple causes are acknowledged as important and people's beliefs are not restricted to either individual or structural causes (see Lee, Jones & Lewis 1990).

A national telephone survey of 1,000 Australians commissioned by Hanover Welfare Services in 2006[1] showed that participants tended to focus on the individual attributes or behaviours of people who experience homelessness rather than on broader social, economic or political causes. Drug addiction, mental illness, domestic violence and drunkenness were the main four attributions assigned to homeless individuals, or reasons given for homelessness by participants; however, they did agree with a variety of other causes.

Consistent with Hanover's 2006 research, another Australian research project that conducted a national telephone survey with 400 people (Mission Australia 2002) found that survey participants tended to emphasise personal issues, rather than housing costs and unemployment, as causes of homelessness. This study also found that there were important gender differences in the nominated causes of homelessness, likewise, age affected responses especially for those aged 35 or younger.

The importance of sex and age is supported in other studies. For example, women and younger participants (Toro & McDonell 1992) saw few personal deficits among homeless people, and perceived lack of employment as a key underlying cause.

International research has suggested that other demographic factors influence people's attitudes to homelessness. For example, an individual's educational attainment (Lee, Jones & Lewis 1990), political orientation or affiliation (Pellegrini et al. 1997; Tompsett et al. 2006) and religious views (see Lee, Jones & Lewis 1990) can shape the emphasis placed on individual compared to collective solutions to homelessness. One study from the United Kingdom found that older and conservative-leaning participants were more likely to endorse individualistic explanations of the cause of homelessness (Lea & Bulewski 2000). This finding is supported by some literature from the United States (for example Lee, Jones & Lewis 1990), but disputed by others (for example Toro & McDonell 1992).

In line with previous research, the present study investigated:

◆ Australian community attitudes about the causes of homelessness and responsibility for addressing it

◆ the relationships between perceived causes of homelessness and responsibility for solutions, and whether there are underlying response patterns

◆ whether, and to what extent, community attitudes could be predicted by a range of demographic and other factors.

This paper presents findings from the 2007 Australian Survey of Social Attitudes (AuSSA). The results from the AuSSA presented here are exploratory in nature. Nevertheless, the large randomly-selected sample provided a great opportunity to investigate community understanding and attitudes to homelessness.

2   Data source

The Australian Survey of Social Attitudes (AuSSA) is a biennial national mail-out survey, and is the official Australian survey in the International Social Survey Program (ISSP). The survey is administered by a team at the Australian National University.

The 2007 survey was organised into 13 categories: leisure time and sports; crime and criminal justice; the law and authority; magistrates court; industrial relations; place of residence; religious attitudes; government regulation; homelessness; loneliness; politics and society; personal background; and your partner. Additional demographic items were included such as: sex, year born, income, educational attainment, employment, union membership, language spoken, birthplace, household composition and religion, as well as additional items on the participant's partner.

Data were collected over a five-month period. The survey was mailed out to 6,666 people randomly selected from the Australian electoral role. A total of 2,769 people completed the survey, representing a response rate of 41 per cent (Phillips et al. 2007; Phillips et al. 2008).

We submitted two questions on homelessness (with multiple parts) for inclusion in the 2007 survey. These questions asked about perceived causes of homelessness (including structural and individual causes) and responsibility for addressing homelessness.

The first question asked about causes of homelessness. Participants were presented with a pre-selected list of possible causes of homelessness. They were asked to rate the extent to which they agreed with each possible cause on a five point scale, with 1 being strongly agree and 5 being strongly disagree. The second question asked about responsibility for addressing homelessness. It asked people to rate how much responsibility different groups had in 'solving' or responding to homelessness on a five point scale, with 1 being all responsibility and 5 being no responsibility. These items are included in the Appendix. We were provided with the responses

to the questions we submitted and responses to a range of demographic and other variables to enable our analyses.

The design of the AuSSA, and the cost involved in purchasing additional questions, meant that we were only able to include two questions with a limited number of options. This affected the range of 'causes' of homelessness, and agents to whom responsibility could be attributed and to a certain extent predetermined our results.

However, the questions posed were purposively informed by the questions asked in other research so to ensure a degree of comparability. Specifically items on the causes of homelessness were informed by Gallup, Inc. (2007), Lee, Link and Toro (1991), Tompsett et al. (2006), and by both the qualitative and quantitative work done in our 2006 study. Responsibility items were informed by Toro and McDonell (1992) and in part by our 2006 research findings.

Unfortunately, different studies have asked slightly different questions and used slightly different answer formats. Some surveys asked participants to rank items as the most important or least important cause of homelessness. Others have asked people to answer yes/no questions concerning causes, and others have asked the degree to which people agree that a particular factor is a cause. Not all of the original items used could be sourced from publications.

Because of this we selected the items that we thought were most relevant to the Australian context that gave us good data in our previous research (Hanover Welfare Services 2006). We also selected items that gave us a spread of possible causes—specifically we wanted to ensure that not all items could be classified as structural. Participants did not have to select just one cause or agent of responsibility and could agree that many or all were equally important.

We chose to ask the degree of agreement/disagreement with the items as it enabled a more complex analysis to be undertaken. It was also required for consistency with other items in the AuSSA survey.

Limitations

A number of limitations apply in interpreting the findings:

▸ This study only examined two questions concerning attitudes to homelessness—one on cause and one on responsibility.

▸ The selection of items of each question was limited.

▸ As a result of only being able to include a limited number of possible causes, 'mental illness, substance/alcohol abuse' were collapsed into one category, as were 'individuals and their families'.

Thus these findings need to be interpreted with caution and the findings should be considered indicative.

Analysis strategy

The AuSSA presented a unique opportunity for detailed analysis exploring attitudes around homelessness. Three stages of analysis were undertaken:

1. Descriptive analysis—perceived causes and responsibility

2. Principal component analysis—examining the structure of attitudes to homelessness

3. Further correlational and multiple regression analysis—to explore demographic predictors of attitudes.

First, basic descriptive analyses were undertaken to examine the overall responses to our questions and compare them with our previous research. This also involved exploring the correlations between items across both questions. This was done to address our first research interest—simply finding out more about the Australian community's attitudes about homelessness.

A principal component analysis was then undertaken to determine the underlying structure of participants' responses to these questions. This analysis works by grouping together items that participants respond to in a similar way into 'components' that are essentially response patterns. This addressed our second and third research interests—exploring the relationship between perceived causes of homelessness and attributions for responsibility for addressing homelessness, and exploring whether there was an underlying structure to participants' responses.

The third stage in the analysis addressed our fourth research interest—whether attitudes to homelessness could be predicted by demographic factors, and to what extent. To do this, correlational analyses were undertaken exploring the relationship between demographic variables and the components. Regression analyses were then undertaken to determine what combination of demographic factors were predictive of the components or response patterns discovered in stage 2, and how well they explained participants' responses overall.

More detail on each stage of the analyses is provided throughout the results section.

3   Results

Stage 1: Perceived causes of and responsibility for addressing homelessness

Causes of homelessness

Table 1 below outlines the extent of agreement with six causes of homelessness included in the survey. Using the percentage of survey participants 'agreeing to some degree', mental illness, substance/alcohol abuse (89 per cent) was the most commonly perceived cause of homelessness. Closely following were family breakdown (86 per cent), and economic problems (80 per cent). Although still high, there were comparatively fewer participants agreeing that homelessness was caused by a shortage of affordable housing (66 per cent).

Less than half of those surveyed (47 per cent) thought that poor decision making and lack of effort was a reason for becoming homeless, although this is still quite a considerable number. Further, the AuSSA survey found that 26 per cent of respondents were ambivalent as to whether poor decision making and lack of effort were a cause. These figures, however, are considerably lower than those found in earlier research by Hanover Welfare Services (2006), which found that 74 per cent of those surveyed believed that poor individual decisions were a cause for homelessness, with 59 per cent also believing that lack of individual effort contributed to homelessness.

Less than half the participants (45 per cent) considered government failure to provide for people to be a cause of homelessness, while 29 per cent were ambivalent. This is consistent with earlier research by Hanover Welfare Services (2006) exploring public perceptions, which found that 43 per cent of people thought that government failure to provide for people contributed to homelessness.

Interestingly, fewer participants saw government failure to provide for people (45 per cent) as a cause of homelessness than saw a shortage of affordable housing as a cause (66 per cent). This may indicate that people see a shortage of affordable housing as determined at least in part by market failure in the housing market rather than something solely within the control of government. However, Table 2 shows a moderate correlation between these two items, suggesting that participants see them as related.

Table 1:   Extent of agreement with various causes of homelessness

	Agree to some degree (%)	Neither agree nor disagree (%)	Disagree to some degree (%)	Valid n
Mental illness, substance/alcohol abuse	89.1	8.8	2.2	2,678
Family breakdown	85.6	10.5	3.9	2,673
Economic problems	80.4	11.8	7.8	2,669
Shortage of affordable housing	65.5	17.6	16.9	2,659
Poor decision making, lack of effort	47.1	26.4	26.5	2,658
Government failure to provide for people	44.9	29.3	25.8	2,659

Note: Due to rounding, totals may not add to 100 per cent exactly.

We also wanted to know if participants' agreement on one item was related to their agreement or disagreement with other items. To do this, correlation matrices were produced and are summarised in Table 2. The coefficients show the strength of the relationship between 'causes' (the closer the number is to 1 the stronger the relationship) and the direction of association— which is indicated by either positive or negative coefficients (a positive correlation meaning that agreement on one item was related to agreement on another, while a negative correlation meaning that agreement on one item was related to disagreement on the other item).

Table 2 shows that most of the items assessing the cause of homelessness were statistically significant, although some relationships are quite small. A shortage of affordable housing, government failure to provide for people and economic problems were all positively associated, with these relationships being moderately strong. For example, those who saw a shortage of housing as a cause were also likely to report government failure to provide for people ($\rho=0.49$, $p=0.001$), economic problems ($\rho=0.42$, $p=0.001$) and family breakdown ($\rho=0.31$, $p=0.001$) as causes.

Poor decision making, lack of effort was negatively associated with most items except for mental illness, substance/alcohol abuse. This means that participants who thought that poor decision making, lack of effort caused homelessness were also likely to nominate mental illness, substance/alcohol abuse ($\rho=0.12$, $p=0.001$) as a reason, although the correlation is small. Conversely, those who saw homelessness as caused by poor decision making, lack of effort were also less likely to nominate government failure ($\rho=-0.10$, $p=0.001$) or economic problems ($\rho=-0.09$, $p=0.001$) as causes, but again these correlations are small.

Interestingly, family breakdown was moderately correlated ($p=0.60$) with economic problems, suggesting participants saw these as connected.

Responsibility for solving homelessness

Survey participants were asked to rate how much responsibility for solving homelessness they assigned to each of four different agents: government and public services; charities; homeless individuals and/or their families; and all members of the community. The five points on the scale were 'no responsibility', 'a little responsibility', 'some responsibility', 'most responsibility', and 'all responsibility'.

As illustrated in Table 3, relatively few participants attributed complete responsibility for solving homelessness to any one of the four agents. Only 3 per cent assigned all responsibility to charities while 17 per cent designated government and public services. Combining the two categories, 'all' and 'most' responsibility, shows that a common response was to hold government and public services to account (70 per cent) for solving homelessness. This was followed by the homeless individual and/or their families (42 per cent) and the whole community (20 per cent). Only 11 per cent thought that charities should shoulder the bulk of the responsibility ('most' or 'all'), although around two-thirds of participants (62 per cent) reported that they had 'some responsibility'.

Despite these patterns, many participants saw all agents listed as having 'some responsibility' for addressing homelessness. While a small number of participants consider that all members of the community have 'all or most responsibility' for homelessness (20 per cent), just under half (48 per cent) saw the community as having 'some responsibility'.

These results were generally consistent with earlier research by Hanover on public perceptions, with survey participants most likely to regard government (85 per cent) and public services (74 per cent) as responsible for solving homelessness. However, compared to our earlier research, participants in the AuSSA were less likely to see 'homeless individuals and/or their families', charities, and all members of the community as responsible for addressing homelessness.

Table 2:   Correlation coefficients for the relationships between different causes for homelessness

	Poor decision making, lack of effort	Shortage of affordable housing	Mental illness, substance/alcohol abuse	Government failure to provide for people	Economic problems	Family breakdown
Poor decision making, lack of effort	1					
Shortage of affordable housing		1				
Mental illness, substance/alcohol abuse	0.116 n=2,641	0.176 n=2,648	1			
Government failure to provide for people	−0.100 n=2,633	0.490 n=2,638	0.159 n=2,647	1		
Economic problems	−0.089 n=2,637	0.420 n=2,644	0.264 n=2,656	0.409 n=2,647	1	
Family breakdown		0.307 n=2,639	0.371 n=2,659	0.302 n=2,644	0.601 n=2,655	1

Notes: Non-significant results have not been reported.
All coefficients are significant at $p < 0.001$.
Spearman's p was used to generate these statistics.[2]

Table 3:   Degree of responsibility of various 'agents' for solving homelessness

	All responsibility (%)	Most responsibility (%)	Some responsibility (%)	A little responsibility (%)	No responsibility (%)	Valid n
Government and public services	17.4	53.0	26.7	2.1	0.8	2,690
Charities	2.6	8.2	62.1	19.9	7.3	2,664
Homeless individuals and/or their families	10.0	31.5	47.3	10.0	1.3	2,666
All members of the community	7.1	12.8	48.3	23.0	8.8	2,669

Note: Due to rounding, totals may not add to 100 per cent exactly.

As with the questions on 'causes' we also wanted to know if participants' agreement on one item was related to their agreement or disagreement with other items. To do this, correlation matrices were produced and are summarised in Table 4.

Table 4 shows how participants' attributions of responsibility to the four 'agents' were, in the main, positively related. Although all correlations are weak (≤0.30) they nevertheless indicate some relationship between participants' attitudes. For example, the only weak negative correlation in Table 4 shows that the more responsibility people thought homeless individuals and their families had for solving homelessness, the less responsibility they attributed to government and public services ($\rho=-0.05$, $p=0.001$).

Table 4:   Correlation coefficients for the relationships between different 'agents' of responsibility and the degree of responsibility attributed to them for solving homelessness

	Government and public services	Charities	Homeless individuals and/or their families	All members of the community
Government and public services	1			
Charities	0.164 n=2,657	1		
Homeless individuals and/or their families	−0.050 n=2,660	0.147 n=2,652	1	
All members of the community	0.209 n=2,663	0.347 n=2,654	0.101 n=2,656	1

Notes: All correlations are statistically significant at $p<0.001$.
            Spearman's ρ was used to generate these statistics.

Relationships between causes and between agents of responsibility

We were keen to explore the relationship between causes and responsibility further, given that solutions are necessarily shaped by perceived causes.

The research literature suggests that people who perceive homelessness as the result of an individual's poor decision making are more likely to consider that individuals rather than government should solve homelessness. Conversely, if a greater preference is given to social and economic causes of homelessness, such as the lack of affordable housing, it is more likely that people will turn to government as one of the main agents to solve homelessness. These trends are borne out by the AuSSA survey results.

As outlined in Table 5 (correlation matrix), a number of statistically significant relationships were detected between participants' agreement with various causes of homelessness and the extent of responsibility they believe different agents had in 'solving' homelessness. However, these relationships were only weak to moderate. The strongest correlation in Table 5 is between mental illness, substance/alcohol abuse and homeless individuals and/or their families as having responsibility for solving homelessness. This suggests that mental illness and/or substance/alcohol abuse tended to be interpreted as a private matter for those experiencing homelessness rather than something for which the government should be responsible. However, this finding is difficult to interpret as it is impossible to separate the two causes in this item.

For example, Table 5 confirms that participants who agreed that poor decision making, lack of effort was a reason for homelessness also saw homeless individuals and/or their families as responsible for solving homelessness. Further, the small negative correlation shows that these participants were less likely to see government and the public service or all members of the community as responsible for 'solving homelessness'.

Government was seen to be responsible in areas where survey participants considered it had some influence, namely, in rectifying previous government failure, addressing the shortage of affordable housing and responding to economic problems. Family breakdown and mental illness, substance/alcohol abuse also had small positive correlations with government and public service responsibility. As expected, poor decision making and lack of effort was negatively correlated with government and public services responsibility.

Table 5: Correlation coefficients for the relationships between causes of and responsibility for solving homelessness

Causes of homelessness	Responsibility for solving homelessness			
	Government and public services	Charities	Homeless individuals and/ or their families	All members of the community
Poor decision making, lack of effort	−0.101 n=2,647		0.267 n=2,629	−0.167 n=2,632
Shortage of affordable housing	0.265 n=2,648	0.105 n=2,630	−0.095 n=2,633	0.127 n=2,636
Mental illness, substance/ alcohol abuse	0.096 n=2,665	0.062 n=2,646	0.580 n=2,648	0.081 n=2,650
Government failure to provide for people	0.416 n=2,649	0.140 n=2,634	−0.150 n=2,633	0.204 n=2,638
Economic problems	0.240 n=2,658	0.140 n=2,646	−0.047* n=2,644	0.169 n=2,649
Family breakdown	0.171 n=2,662	0.120 n=2,646		0.193 n=2,652

Notes: All correlations are statistically significant at $p<0.001$, unless marked with an *, which denotes significance at $p<0.05$.
Spearman's ρ was used to generate these statistics.
Cells where correlations were not significant are not reported.

Stage 2: The structures of attitudes towards homelessness

The correlations in Tables 2, 4 and 5 showed that relationships exist between a number of the items for both causes of and responsibility for solving homelessness. To investigate these relationships further, a principal component analysis was undertaken to determine if there were overall patterns in the way participants responded to these questions.[3] This analysis looks at the pattern of relationships between items, and groups together items that participants responded to in similar ways. If the relationships between the variables are strong enough and enough of the 'variance' in responses is explained, each of these groups of questions is separated out into a 'component'. A number, similar to a correlation coefficient, is given to indicate the strength and direction of the association or relationship between the item and the component.

Table 6 shows how responses to the questions on homelessness are clustered into three dominant response patterns, with the first component being the strongest as it explained the most variance (26 per cent).

Table 6: The three underlying 'components' of attitudes to homelessness

	Component		
	1	**2**	**3**
	External causes and government solution	**Collective responsibility**	**Individual causes and responsibility**
Reasons for homelessness			
Poor decision making, lack of effort	−0.044	−0.156	0.733
Shortage of affordable housing	0.682	0.044	−0.133
Mental illness, substance/alcohol abuse	0.515	−0.033	0.455
Government failure to provide for people	0.684	0.169	−0.266
Economic problems	0.766	0.125	−0.027
Family breakdown	0.731	0.102	0.166
Responsibility for homelessness			
Government and public services	0.412	0.399	−0.268
Charities	0.081	0.771	0.129
Homeless individuals and/or their families	−0.162	0.387	0.666
All members of the community	0.148	0.777	−0.087
Eigenvalue	2.548	1.588	1.400
Variance explained (%)	25.5	15.9	14.0
Valid n	2,564	2,564	2,564

Notes: Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis. Rotation Method: Varimax with Kaiser Normalization.
Total variance explained by this model: 55.4 per cent.
Shading shows the items loading the most strongly onto each factor.

We have called the first response pattern 'external causes and government solution'. It concerns causes of homelessness outside or external to people's control such as economic problems, family breakdown, government failure to provide for people, shortage of affordable housing and, to a lesser extent, mental illness/substance abuse. This is matched with an emphasis on government responsibility to address homelessness.

While initial correlational analyses presented in Table 5 suggest that mental illness and substance/alcohol abuse tended to be interpreted as personal matters for individuals and their families to resolve, its loading with other items here suggests it may also have been interpreted as something beyond the immediate control of the individual. It is possible that people could view

one or both of these causes as either outside a person's control—for example, as medical/psychological conditions, but as something individuals can partly address by themselves. On the other hand, people may have seen one or both of these 'causes' as within the domain of individual responsibility—possibly as personal weakness. Given that this item loaded on two components it may be that participants were thinking about this same item in two distinct ways. It may also have been the case that participants thought about this item the same way and some still felt government and public services had a role in the solution and others did not.

This result may also reflect that mental illness, substance/alcohol abuse was the most commonly identified 'cause' and this result may reflect that a majority of participants saw this as a cause.

Unfortunately, because these two causes were combined, it is impossible to know more about what was going on here.

The second response pattern we have called 'collective responsibility'. It indicates a perception that all members of the community, including charities, are responsible for solving homelessness. Interestingly, a focus on collective responsibility seems relatively independent of either internal or external attributions for the causes of homelessness. Both government and public services and individuals and their families also had moderate loadings on this component.

The third response pattern we have called 'individual causes and responsibility'. It involves a more individualistic approach to homelessness. Here there is a greater emphasis on individuals (and their families) taking responsibility for solving their homelessness while the perceived causes are also seen to be in the domain or control of the individual.[4]

The first and third components—external causes and government solution, and individual causes and responsibility are consistent with previous research that explores structural versus individual analyses of homelessness and social problems more broadly (Lee, Lewis & Jones 1992; Skitka et al. 2002; Wilson 1996).

However, the second component, collective responsibility, was of particular interest. We had expected to find that people who selected structural causes for homelessness would see the whole of the community as responsible for addressing homelessness. But instead, seeing the whole of the community as responsible for addressing homelessness was not related to any particular perceived cause. This suggests that a focus on structural explanations of homelessness will not necessarily foster a sense of collective responsibility. It suggests a more complex underlying structure to attitudes towards homelessness. This complexity is consistent with some previous research (Lee, Jones & Lewis 1990; Lee, Link and Toro 1991; Tompsett et al. 2006).

It is noteworthy that the item for mental illness, substance/alcohol abuse as a cause loaded well on both the first and third component.

Stage 3: Demographic predictors of attitudes

Previous literature has shown relationships between attitudes to homelessness and a number of demographic and other variables (Lea & Bulewski 2000; Lee, Jones & Lewis 1990; Pellegrini et al. 1997; Tompsett et al. 2006; Toro & McDonell 1992). We were keen to understand whether these relationships could be found in the AuSSA data set and which, if any, were associated with our three components or response patterns. To do this, initial calculations of correlations were undertaken between a number of demographic variables and the three components or response patterns from the second stage of the analysis—external causes and government solution; collective responsibility; and individual causes and responsibility.

Demographic and other possible predictors considered included: age, sex, locality (urban versus rural), self-identified social class, income, educational attainment, political orientation and political party affiliations.

Some research has investigated the perceived trustworthiness of people experiencing homelessness and its relationship to attitudes (Link et al. 1995; Toro et al. 2007). While no items were included in the survey that asked this question, there was a general question included on trust in other people. As the present study was exploratory in nature we decided to include this variable in analysis.

A number of weak but significant correlations were found between various demographic and other variables and our three response patterns (detailed below). These demographic variables were then loaded into a multiple regression analysis to determine how strongly the combination of all of these demographic variables predicted the three response patterns.

Correlational analysis

There were no significant relationships found between age and locality (urban versus rural) and any of the three components. However, there were weak relationships found with sex, social class and education.

Women were slightly more likely to put a greater emphasis on structural causes of homelessness and identify government as having prime responsibility ($\rho=-0.15$, $p=0.000$) than men.

The survey included three items measuring 'social class' (gross annual household and individual income and class identification), all of which showed small correlations with the three components. Gross annual household and individual income were both negatively correlated with external cause and government solution ($\rho=-0.09$, $p=0.000$ and $\rho=-0.14$, $p=0.000$ respectively). So the lower participants' incomes, on either measure, the more likely they were to perceive homelessness as caused by external factors that required a government solution.

Class identification (lower class, lower middle, upper middle and upper class) was associated with the collective responsibility stance ($\rho=0.07$, $p=0.001$) whereby the higher the class identification the more likely participants were to identify with the collective responsibility

perspective, while lower class identification was associated with the structural causes and government solution stance ($\rho=-0.08$, $p=0.000$).

Educational attainment (as measured by a five-point scale: less than Year 12, Year 12, Trade/Apprenticeship, Certificate/Diploma, Bachelor degree or above) was weakly associated with two of the three patterns of responses. Participants with high levels of education were more likely to respond in the collective responsibility pattern ($\rho=0.10$, $p=0.000$). In contrast, participants with lower levels of education were more likely to perceive that homelessness had individual causes and was the responsibility of individuals to solve ($\rho=-0.10$, $p=0.000$).

Participants were asked to rate their political orientation on a spectrum of 'left' to 'right' with 0 being left and 10 being right. The average response was a 5, with most participants clustered in the centre. There was a small negative correlation between political orientation and seeing homelessness as caused by external factors with government and public services being responsible for solving it ($\rho=-0.20$, $p=0.000$). That is, the more 'left' someone rated themselves on the scale the more likely they were to respond to this pattern. A smaller but still significant negative correlation was also found between political orientation and the collective responsibility stance ($\rho=-0.08$, $p=0.001$). Again, the more 'left' someone rated themselves, the more they were likely to see homelessness as a collective or community responsibility. A positive correlation was found between political orientation and the individual cause and responsibility stance with participants more likely to respond in this pattern if they considered themselves to be more right wing ($\rho=0.20$, $p=0.000$). There were also a number of small significant correlations between political party affiliations and the three components.

Trust in other people was weakly associated with two of the stances. The more trust a person had in others (as rated on a four-point scale) the more they were likely to respond in a manner consistent with the collective responsibility stance ($\rho=0.07$, $p=0.000$), and the less likely they were to respond to the individual causes and responsibility stance ($\rho=-0.10$, $p=0.000$).

Multiple regression

Despite these correlations being relatively small, we wanted to know how well all of these variables collectively would predict our three components. We also wanted to know which combination of these variables would best predict responses on the three components. In order to do this a multiple regression was undertaken. Given that the regression model was exploratory, a 'backwards' multiple regression was undertaken. This method selects the optimum items based on their mathematical importance in predicting the dependent variable, excluding those variables whose contribution to prediction is accounted for by other variables. For the purpose of this analysis the three components were treated as dependent variables and a separate analysis conducted for each.

Political affiliation, class identification and educational attainment were all recoded into dummy variables for this analysis. This was done because these variables were all ordinal level variables that were not suited to a regression analysis in their current form. As such, each level of these variables was recoded into a yes/no dichotomous variable and each level was entered into the

regression analysis as a separate variable. The models that were best able to account for the three factors are summarised in Table 7.

Rather than follow convention and present comprehensive statistics explaining the models, we have shown only the variables used as predictors and the R^2, which gives a figure for the variance explained, and the adjusted R^2, which gives a figure for generalising the model.

What is particularly interesting about these results is that, despite the multiple predictors included in these models (which were selected using a mathematical criterion), very little of the variance in these three response patterns could be explained. Indeed the most variance that could be explained was: 11.6 per cent of the variance in the first component, external causes and government solution; 3.3 per cent for the second component, collective responsibility and; 7.4 per cent for the third, individual causes and responsibility. This leaves almost 90 per cent of the variance in the first component unexplained and more in the others.

In other words, while some significant relationships were found between attitudes to homelessness and variables such as age, sex, class, educational attainment, political affiliation and trust variables, these relationships did not go a long way in predicting differences in people's attitudes to homelessness.

Table 7: Best predictive models (using multiple regression) with the variance explained for each of the three response patterns for homeless attitudes

	Predictors	R^2	Percentage of variance explained	Adjusted R^2

Component 1: external causes and government solutions	Highest level of education:
	     Less than Year 12
	     Year 12
	     Trade/Apprenticeship
	     Certificate/diploma
	 Sex
	 Trust
	 Individual income: gross annual (4 categories)
	 Household income: gross annual (3 categories)
	 Social class: working class
	 Political party affiliation:
	     Family First
	     One Nation
	     Shooting Party
	     Christian Democratic
	     National
	     Liberal
	     Greens
	     None
		0.116	11.6	0.105

Table 7: Best predictive models (using multiple regression) with the variance explained for each of the three response patterns for homeless attitudes (continued)

	Predictors	R²	Percentage of variance explained	Adjusted R²

Component 2: collective responsibility	Sex
	Individual income: gross annual (4 categories)
	Household income: gross annual (3 categories)
	Social class:
	    Upper middle
	    Upper
	Highest level of education:
	    Less than Year 12
	    Year 12
	    Trade/Apprenticeship
	    Certificate/diploma
	    Bachelor degree or above
	Political party affiliation:
	    Family First
	    None
	    Other
	    One Nation
	    Christian Democratic
	    National
	    Liberal
	Left–right spectrum on a 10-point scale
		0.033	3.3	0.022

Component 3: individual blame and responsibility	Highest level of education:
	    Less than Year 12
	    Year 12
	    Trade/Apprenticeship
	    Certificate/diploma
	    Bachelor degree or above
	Sex
	Trust
	Individual income: gross annual (4 categories)
	Household income: gross annual (3 categories)
	Social class:
	    Working
	    Upper middle
	    Upper
	Left–right spectrum on a 10-point scale
	Political party affiliation:
	    Greens
	    Liberal
	    One Nation
	    None
	    Communist Party
	    Shooting Party
	    Family First
		0.074	7.4	0.064

4 Discussion

This paper presented findings from the AuSSA about community attitudes towards homelessness. It was an exploratory examination of Australians' attitudes about the perceived causes of, and responsibility for addressing, homelessness, and explored three main questions:

1. What do the Australian public believe are the causes of homelessness and who do they think is responsible for addressing homelessness?

2. What is the relationship between perceived causes of homelessness and responsibility for addressing homelessness?

3. Can these attitudes be predicted by a range of demographic and other factors?

Consistent with previous research conducted by Hanover Welfare Services (2006), the results showed that participants believed in a range of individual and structural causes of homelessness—most commonly mental illness, substance/alcohol abuse; family breakdown; and economic problems. Interestingly, there was a moderate correlation between family breakdown as a cause of homelessness and economic problems ($\rho=0.60$). Further investigation is needed to understand how people believe these causes are connected. While more participants agreed that a shortage of affordable housing was a cause of homelessness than those agreeing that government has failed to provide for people, these two items were moderately correlated—suggesting participants saw them as related.

While the most commonly perceived cause of homelessness was 'mental illness, substance/alcohol abuse', in the main, participants saw government and public services as carrying most of the responsibility for addressing homelessness. This is consistent with the current approach by the Australian Government which sees a lead role played by government, in partnership with the community and business, in addressing homelessness.

Just under half of all participants (48 per cent) saw all members of the community as having 'some responsibility' in addressing homelessness. This suggests that many people see themselves as having some role—albeit a limited one—in addressing homelessness. This may in part reflect a perception that people have a limited ability to intervene in a larger social problem. Nevertheless, it indicates a degree of community ownership of what is essentially a community problem. If accurate, this is good news for any government implementing policy responses to homelessness as it indicates community members' willingness to participate in government action on homelessness.

Our analysis indicates that participants' attitudes are complex. For example, principal components analysis revealed responses on a number of items clustered together into three response patterns or 'components': external causes and government solution; collective responsibility; and individual causes and responsibility. This clustering suggests that people's attitudes are more nuanced than a simple dichotomy of individual versus structural causes. In particular the findings show that a willingness to attribute responsibility collectively is relatively independent of both individual level and structural level (perceived) causes of homelessness.

We had assumed that the individual versus structural dichotomy was analogous to the left–right political distinction, with the structural and more left analysis subsuming collective responsibility for homelessness. However, the principal components analysis did not support our assumption about a dichotomous structure to attitudes to homelessness. Further, the multiple regression and preliminary correlations with demographic variables also failed to support this assumption in relation to attitudes to homelessness. Only a small correlation was found between participants' rating of themselves along a political spectrum, their political party affiliations and attitudinal variables.

Additionally, our analysis suggests that demographic factors only partially explain attitudes to homelessness. Items measuring class, educational attainment, political affiliation, trust and sex yielded some significant results; however, the correlations were small with only a small amount of variance explained. Clearly, explanations of attitudes to homelessness in terms of demographic factors alone are insufficient. These findings are consistent with research from the United States that disputes that participant background characteristics predict beliefs, attitudes and knowledge about homelessness (Toro & McDonell 1992).

The findings are consistent with other research that suggests people tend to have quite complex beliefs about the causes of homelessness (Lee, Jones & Lewis 1990; Lee, Link & Toro 1991). This complexity is further underscored by the fact that only 55 per cent of the variance in attitudes to homelessness was explained by our three-component model. Perhaps participants' attitudes in part reflect the complexity of homelessness as a social problem—with multiple causes requiring complex solutions.

Obviously our decisions about the items included in the survey and the format of these items affected our results. More could have been revealed in the analysis if a distinction was made between mental illness and alcohol and drug abuse for the attribution of homelessness items. For example, participants may have considered mental health to be something that is out of the control of the individual, whereas alcohol/drug abuse may have tallied with the stereotype of the alcohol-affected homeless man and therefore be seen as an individual responsibility.

The good news from our results is that many Australians see government as having primary responsibility for addressing homelessness along with the broader community. Government and the service sector clearly recognise the significance of homelessness as a social problem and understand the need to act—this is evidenced by recent government policy, including *The Road Home*.

An analysis of social attitudes to homelessness is not solely an interesting academic exercise for those in the community sector. Specialists working in the homelessness field (like Hanover) need to stimulate and encourage change in Australian society to benefit people experiencing homelessness. To do this we need to understand community attitudes to homelessness. It is relevant to social marketing strategies, and advocacy work with politicians, policy makers and with the broader community. The challenge for us is to keep teasing apart attitudes to understand the community's views more clearly.

Appendix: Questions on homelessness

Causes of homelessness

Thinking about homelessness, please say whether you strongly agree, agree, disagree or strongly disagree with each of these statements.

The reason people become homeless is...

	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree or disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
Poor decisions/lack of effort					
Shortage of affordable housing					
Mental illness, substance/alcohol use					
Government failure to provide for people					
Economic problems (i.e. financial hardship, unemployment)					
Family breakdown (i.e. marital discord, relationship difficulties, domestic violence)					

Responsibility for solving homelessness

How much responsibility do you think each of the following groups should have for solving homelessness?

	All responsibility	Most responsibility	Some responsibility	A little responsibility	No responsibility
Government and public services					
Charities					
Homeless individuals and/or their families					
All members of the community					

Endnotes

1   In 2006 Hanover commissioned Roberts Research Group in conjunction with the law firm Maurice Blackburn, on a pro bono basis, to undertake the first study on public perceptions of homelessness. This project consisted of six focus groups (with a total of 53 participants), which was then validated by a national telephone survey of 1,000 participants.

2   As the data mildly violated assumptions of normality, and given that transformations seemed overly intrusive, Spearman's ρ was used to calculate all correlations because it does not rely on normally distributed data.

3   It was noted earlier that the data were not normally distributed and so a Spearman's ρ was used for correlations. However, examination of the distributions showed that while they were skewed, they were not sufficiently skewed to require transformation before the principal component analysis was undertaken, as a mild violation of normality with a large sample size is not considered fatal to analyses. For information on mild violations of normality in principal component analysis, see Tabachnick and Fidell (1996), page 640.

4   It is noteworthy that government and public service responsibility, and mental illness, substance/alcohol abuse as causes have reasonable coefficients on two components. This is consistent with the figures reported earlier showing these two items as the most common reason and responsibility items respectively, with many participants agreeing to some degree.

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