# Public Perceptions of Homelessness – a literature review

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## Context

Launch Housing's Strategy 2020-24 has a bold ambition to end homelessness.

A critical step in solving homelessness is challenging stigma. We know stigma inhibits effective large-scale action and contributes to the lack of effective homelessness policy. It is therefore one of the objectives of Strategy 2020-24 to challenge the stigma that exists by mobilising a community response to change attitudes and take practical action.

This paper summarises and evaluates the Australian and international (U.S., Canada, Europe, and U.K.) evidence on attitudes to and public opinion about homelessness. Understanding and challenging public perceptions of homelessness is not a new task for Launch Housing. As noted in this review of the seven Australian studies, four were undertaken either by or in direct collaboration with Hanover Welfare Services, a precursor organisation to Launch Housing.

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# Summary

- **Causes of homelessness viewed as both individual and structural** – In Australia, mental illness and/or substance/alcohol abuse are the most common perceived causes of homelessness, followed by family breakdown, unemployment or economic problems and a shortage of affordable housing. Increasingly, family violence is also seen as an important factor.

- **But stereotypes prevail** – People largely understand homelessness to be rough sleeping, with the typical profile of someone experiencing homelessness as a single older male with mental health and substance use issues. There is also awareness of a young cohort experiencing homelessness – perhaps the stereotypical 'street kid'.

- **For some, the homeless remain the 'other'** – It is often assumed that people experiencing homelessness are not from the local community and have moved from elsewhere. Disgust reactions (linked to ideas about disease and hygiene) seem important in understanding why some people support exclusionary policies such as banning begging (panhandling) and rough sleeping. *[These findings are from the U.S.]* It appears important NOT to trigger these associations.

- **Individuals are willing to help** – In Australia and elsewhere many are willing to donate or volunteer their time to help address homelessness, but some would like more guidance to ensure their efforts are effective.

- **Australians favour short-term responses** – Typically, Australians believe that short-term responses are the most important and effective in responding to homelessness including things such as: providing food, blankets and clothing, and more crisis and emergency accommodation. There is a general lack of understanding about the impact that the lack affordable housing has in causing homelessness and hampering efforts to address it.

- **Governments are seen as responsible and needing to do more** – In both Australia and internationally, people see governments and the public service as the main agents responsible for solving homelessness. Most do not believe that governments are doing enough to address homelessness.

- **However, there is an underlying scepticism** - Many Australians do not believe that homelessness can be ended.

- **People's attitudes are complex** - While there is a relationship between beliefs about the causes of, and solutions to, homelessness, evidence *[from the U.S.]* suggests that attitudes about solutions can be unrelated to beliefs about causes.

- **Attitudinal change is slow** - Public opinion on homelessness can change over time but does so extremely slowly (over decades rather than years), while media reports of compassion fatigue can be overblown.

- **But there are things that work** - Student placements, support with educational resources, volunteering, and the provision of expert opinion are likely important vehicles for attitudinal change. *[These findings are from the U.S. only]*

# Approach/Method

**Formal and Grey Literature was searched**

Google, Google Scholar, and the Swinburne University of Technology Library database were each searched for articles on attitudes to, and perceptions of, homelessness. Previously collected references from the grey literature, along with the organisations previous work on attitudes to homelessness, were also included. Reference lists for these studies were checked and used to add to the collection of studies in the initial pool.

Using this approach, fifty two studies were selected for review. Eight of these studies were deemed out of scope and were excluded but are peripherally relevant. For example, some studies examined the framing of homelessness in research or policy, or media representations of homelessness.  A list of these studies has been provided in the references section.

**A total of 44 studies in scope for this review**

Most the work documenting and exploring public perceptions and attitudes to homelessness is from the U.S. (30 studies, including two comparative pieces – one comparing with multiple European Countries and one comparing with Canada). Seven studies were sourced from Australia, four from the U.K., two from Europe and one from Canada.

*Of the seven Australian studies, four were undertaken either by or commissioned by Hanover Welfare Services or Launch Housing*.

**Studies were assessed for quality**

Studies lost points for small samples, unrepresentative or convenience samples, samples from only a small region, unclear method and sampling information, and poor or limited analysis of data. In all, eight studies were ranked low quality, 19 studies were ranked medium quality, and 17 studies were ranked high quality. Some of the lower quality studies were evaluations of community placements for teaching, nursing, and medical students which involved contact with people experiencing homelessness. These studies have been retained as they still provide valuable insights. Two studies were of unknown quality as no clear empirical data were presented – just the implications of findings.

In Australia, five of the seven studies were deemed high quality, with two of medium quality.

The studies reviewed were published over a thirty-year timeframe between 1990 and 2019. Please note: while many of the U.S. studies are high quality, some are 25-30 years old and do not necessarily reflect current attitudes. More weight has been given to more recent studies where possible.

# What is known about people's attitudes to homelessness?

## The characteristics of people experiencing homelessness

Many studies examined participants' beliefs about who is homeless and the characteristics of the homeless population. These perceptions were often then assessed for accuracy. The accuracy of the public's perceptions varied between studies, with U.S. studies reporting higher accuracy. However, this is likely because the U.S. uses a restricted definition of homelessness including only those sleeping rough and those staying emergency shelters for the homeless. Some studies also investigated participants' knowledge about the number of people experiencing homelessness and funding for services.

**Australia**

In Australia, most people think of homelessness as rough sleeping. Most people agree that people sleeping on the street or in cars are homeless, while many also think those staying in crisis services and refuges are homeless. Far fewer agree that people couch surfing, staying in hotels or motels and people in boarding houses should be considered homeless (Wesley Mission, 2018). This is despite Australia adopting a definition of homelessness that is broad by international standards.

In focus groups, the 'typical' homeless profile identified was a 40+ male living on the streets with a substance abuse problem or mental illness, who is less likely to accept assistance or seek it out (Forethought, 2006). A secondary profile identified was youth homelessness (Forethought, 2006).

In one recent Australian study, almost half the sample had likely experienced some form of homelessness (though presumably do not think of it as homelessness), while the majority agreed that more people are at risk of homelessness than in the past (Forethought, 2016).

**Other countries**

As above, in the U.S. people believe that most people experiencing homelessness are male, white and single, and are less aware of families and women experiencing homelessness (e.g. Lee, link and Toro, 1991). In addition, people in the U.S. commonly perceive people experiencing homelessness as depressed, alcoholic or drug addicted, not a high school graduate, and as having kids and receiving public assistance (e.g. Hobden et al, 2007). Interestingly, just under a third of Americans report being concerned they may become homeless, while just under half had taken in a family member or friend when they had nowhere else to go (Gallup Inc., 2007).

Another study from the U.S. highlighted people typically assume that people experiencing homelessness are not from their local communities (Yasutake, 2014). Around a third of respondents in this study (which included service providers) were concerned providing more homelessness services would attract more homeless people to the city. This is despite 17% of the sample having had an experience of homelessness themselves.

Compared with some European countries, respondents in the United States and the UK are more likely to see the average homeless person as having a criminal record and being a drug abuser and were less likely to talk with family and friends about homelessness (Toro et al, 2007).

Recent research from Europe suggests people typically have relatively poor knowledge of the number of people experiencing homelessness in their own countries (Petit et al, 2019).

## Causes of homelessness

**Australia**

Across all Australian studies, mental illness and/or substance/alcohol abuse are the most common perceived causes of homelessness, followed by family breakdown, unemployment or economic problems, and a shortage of affordable housing. Increasingly, family violence is also seen as important. The importance of affordable housing is always lowest amongst these causes though its importance varies substantially between surveys. In general, people do not seem to understand the shortage of social housing as a problem linked to homelessness.

Evidence from focus groups suggests that while people have more understanding of how a young person may become homeless, there is a lack of understanding of how this happens for adults given the resources and opportunities available in Australia (Forethought, 2006).

**Other countries**

In the U.S. people often attribute homelessness to a similar set of causes. With mental illness, alcoholism, drug abuse, deinstitutionalisation and unemployment/ job loss the most common reasons across studies. Insufficient income is also important. Across studies, participants selected multiple causes of homelessness suggesting

complex attitudes about the causes of homelessness. While some still believe that lack of effort or choice is involved in homelessness, when asked to apportion blame for homelessness the majority blame society rather than individuals for homelessness (Toro and McDonell, 1992). In the U.S. people are less willing to attribute homelessness to economic factors in times of economic prosperity (Tompsett et al, 2006).

In Europe, people perceive the causes of homelessness to be unemployment or loss of a job, debts and addictions, and lack of access to housing (Smidova and Vavra 2016; Petit et al, 2019). Other perceived causes of homelessness across Europe include divorce or the loss of family and rent arrears (Petit et al, 2019).

Across multiple European countries, the majority thought that homeless people had shorter lifespans than members of the general population, were the victims of violence, and were discriminated against when seeking employment. (Petit et a,l 2019). However, a sizeable proportion of respondents (48.3%) agreed with the statement that homeless people remain homeless by choice (Petit et al, 2019).

Despite their less sympathetic attitudes, residents of the Czech republic are more likely than in other European countries to see homelessness as getting worse and were more likely to be worried that they may become homeless (Smidova and Vavra, 2016).

## Compassion or sympathy for people experiencing homelessness

### Other countries

Some studies directly asked questions about sympathy or compassion for people experiencing homelessness. In examining attitudes to homelessness over a 25 year period, Tsai et al (2017) concluded that there has been an increase in compassion and liberal attitudes toward homelessness in the past two decades. Comparatively, in terms of both compassion and support for public rights for people experiencing homelessness, Italy, Germany and Belgium all had higher scores than the U.K. and United States (Toro et al, 2007). It is important to note, however, that the majority of European citizens hold positive attitudes towards people who are homeless (Petit et al, 2019).

Furthermore, sympathy is related to more structural explanations of homelessness, whereas fear or anger towards people experiencing homelessness is connected to more internal attributions for homelessness (such as laziness, criminality, addiction and mental illness) (Barnett et al, 1997).

One American study from 1995 investigated media claims that people were experiencing compassion fatigue in relation to homelessness and found no evidence to support this claim (Link et al, 1995).

Of concern, a minority of people in the U.S. report fear of the homeless. People in the U.S. were more comfortable having formerly homeless people as neighbours or colleagues but far fewer were comfortable with more intimate relationships, such as a formerly homeless person marrying into their families, or being teachers of their children (Phillips, 2015).

## Support for policies to assist

### Australia

In Australia, a majority of people think short-term interventions like food, blankets and clothing are the most necessary help for people experiencing homelessness. They are less aware of the critical need for housing and health supports (Department of Health and Human Services, 2018). People also tend to think that short-term interventions, such as providing safe places for people in crisis and supplying more refuge and crisis accommodation, are more effective than increasing the supply of affordable housing or providing financial counselling (Wesley Mission, 2018).

People believe that getting a job, getting an education and going to rehab are important in escaping homelessness. Far fewer people (20%) believe that getting a house would resolve homelessness (Homelessness Australia, 2014).

In terms of responsibility for addressing homelessness, typically people see governments and the public service as the main agents responsible for solving homelessness. Most do not believe that governments are doing enough to address homelessness (Forethought, 2006). When people were asked what should be the funding priorities for state governments, housing and homelessness ranked third behind healthcare and education (Forethought, 2006).

People are less likely to agree that government and public services are responsible for solving homelessness when they believed that homelessness was a result of poor decision-making and lack of effort. Although most still agreed that the government and public services had some responsibility (Forethought, 2006; Hanover, 2009).

Many people do not believe that homelessness can be ended. Younger people were more likely to believe that homelessness could be ended, with pessimism growing with age (Forethought, 2016). Children, particularly those under age 12, were seen as most deserving of people's financial support (Forethought, 2006).

**Other countries**

The majority of people support assistance for people experiencing homelessness in the U.S., Australia, Canada, the U.K. (including Scotland) and Europe. In Scotland, those deemed most deserving of help include victims of domestic abuse, people with mental health problems and young people leaving children's homes (Cleghorn, Given and Ormston, 2007)

Similar to Australia, Americans typically believe the federal and state governments need to do more to address homelessness, though they also typically believe that their local governments are doing enough. They are supportive of increased welfare payments, increasing low-cost housing and emergency shelters for people experiencing homelessness, and increased access to treatment for alcoholism and substance abuse (Link et al, 1995). Over time, Americans have become more supportive of increasing the supply of affordable housing, increasing shelter capacity and increasing the minimum wage (Tsai et al, 2017).

Across Europe there is strong support for increased government action and more effective solutions for Europe's growing homelessness crisis (Petit et al, 2019). The majority of people surveyed across countries agreed that the government should bear the main responsibility for the provision of emergency shelters and long-term housing and that current levels of government spending (local or central level) on homelessness were inadequate (Petit et al, 2019).

One study from the U.S. investigated the apparent contradiction of people supporting polices such as increasing the supply of low cost housing or shelter beds, while at the same time supporting exclusionary policies such as banning panhandling and sleeping in public places (Clifford and Piston 2017). They argue that people who are more sensitive to disgust (regardless of their other characteristics or support for homelessness) are more likely to support exclusionary policies. Disgust was primed with disease cues. This suggests it may be important when communicating about exclusionary policies to avoid triggering disgust reactions in the community. The authors comment: *"Similar to how one might react to a sick person, disgust motivates the desire for physical distance from the homeless, but does not necessarily cause people to desire to withdraw aid from them."*

## Willingness to volunteer, donate, or pay more taxes to assist people experiencing homelessness.

**Australia**

Nearly 50 per cent of Victorians in one survey were taking practical steps to help those experiencing homelessness – including giving food, clothing, making donations and volunteering. A further 28 per cent wanted better direction to make sure they were taking the right actions (Department of Health and Human Services, 2018). This latter finding suggests we may need to give people more information on how to help most effectively.

**Other countries**

A clear majority of people surveyed in Belgium, Germany, Italy, the UK, and the United States, would pay more taxes to address homelessness (Toro et al, 2007), though large numbers of respondents in countries such as the Netherlands, Italy and Poland were unwilling (Petit et al, 2019).

The majority of Americans report being willing to donate (money food or clothing) and/or volunteer their time to assist people experiencing homelessness (Phillips, 2015, Wisehart, Whatley and Briihl 2013; Toro and McDonell 1992, Gallup Inc., 2007).

People in the Czech Republic were least willing to give money directly to people experiencing homelessness (Smidova and Vavra 2016), they were more willing to make a donation to a charity but were still least likely of all countries to want to make such a donation.

*"Although there is a significant part of Czech society that sees homelessness as a consequence of growing social inequality following social change in 1989, the view of poverty in the form of homelessness being a result of individual failure or an individual's decision to live this way is frequent too,"* (Smidova and Vavra 2016).

## Relationship between perceived causes and support of various policies

Some research has examined the relationship between the perceived causes of homelessness and support for various policies to address homelessness

### Australia

When people see homelessness as a product of individual decisions and choices they think most responsibility for addressing homelessness sits with individuals and families. Conversely, when people see homelessness as the product of more structural causes they tend to see governments and the public service as responsible for addressing homelessness (Batterham, Hollows and Kolar, 2011). However, the majority of Australians support action on homelessness and believe governments bear most responsibility for addressing homelessness and need to do more.

### Other countries

In the U.S., while there is a relationship between attitudes about causes of homelessness and support for action on homelessness, it is not always strong. Despite strong support for government action to address homelessness and willingness to donate and volunteer, many still hold negative attitudes about homeless people and attribute their homelessness to individual causes.

## What predicts attitudes to homelessness? Why do people hold the views they do?

Most of the studies reviewed explored whether demographic and other characteristics predict people's attitudes to homelessness. Factors investigated included age, gender, racial background, educational attainment, class or socioeconomic status, political affiliation, trust, religiosity and religious affiliation.

### Australia

Some significant relationships can be detected (with the use of simple correlations) between attitudes to homelessness and variables such as age, sex, class, educational attainment, political affiliation and trust. However, these relationships do not go a long way in predicting differences in people's attitudes to homelessness when more complex techniques, such as multiple regression, are used (Batterham, Hollows and Kolar, 2011).

### Other countries

Women, including those of a younger age, those with left leaning political affiliations, those who hold less authoritarian beliefs, those who are more educated, those on lower incomes (in the U.S. but not Scotland), typically show more sympathetic attitudes to those experiencing homelessness. However the effects of education in the U.S. are mixed – those with higher education are more sympathetic but less supportive of increased government intervention (Phelan et al, 1995). Phelan et al (1995) argue *"Education is associated with greater tolerance for homeless people but less support for economic aid to the homeless." The authors conclude that education socialises students to value equal opportunity and equal respect but not equal outcomes.*

One U.S. study suggests the perceived racial profile of a group in poverty effects sympathy and causal attributions about that group (Wilson 1996).

Two European studies found no relationship between multiple demographic factors measured, including gender, age, educational attainment, employment status and marital status (Petit et al, 2019; Smidova and Vavra 2016)

## What changes people's attitudes about homelessness?

The Australian research base has focussed on documenting the attitudes and beliefs people hold about homelessness – not on what might change those attitudes and beliefs. In general, evidence from the U.S. suggests while public opinion shifts over time it does so slowly - over decades rather than years (Tsai et al, 2017). However, a number of studies suggest ways that people's attitudes may be changed. One study found that asking university students to write a persuasive essay about taking action on homelessness increased sympathy for people experiencing homelessness, however it did not change stereotypical views about who was homeless and why (Leibowitz and Krueger 2005). While another study found those receiving a short one-off educational program had more positive attitudes, were more likely to want to make a donation, were more likely to see homelessness as solvable and were less likely to attribute homelessness to personal causes (Wisehart, Whatley and Briihl 2013).

Some studies in the U.S. reported the greater people's exposure to homelessness the more willing they were to help and the more empathy they reported (e.g. Link, et al, 1995), though the opposite was the case in a study of attitudes in the Czech republic (Smidova and Vavra 2016)

Examining the role of contact an exposure in more detail, other studies have found that discussions with family and friends as well as casual contact with people experiencing homelessness in situations such as pan handling is associated with seeing homelessness as driven by individual level causes and problems. However, when contact is more equal (Wilson, 1996) where people can have longer informal conversations with people experiencing homelessness, or where people hear from experts, they tend to view homelessness more as a product of structural forces (Lee, Hinze and Lewis 1990).

**The impact of placements and volunteerism**

A body of literature exists which focusses on placements or service learning, and volunteerism (Buch and Harden 2011; Chung-Park et al, 2006; Gardner and Emory, 2018; Kim 2013; Knecht and Martinez, 2012; Morrison, Roman and Borges 2012; Pierangeli and Lenhart 2018). In terms of placements or service learning, this included students in the fields of nursing, psychiatry and emergency medicine, and early childhood teachers. Apart from the emergency medicine students (who may have already had contact with this population on previous placements and held generally positive attitudes already), placements (or service-learning experiences) had substantial positive impacts on students' attitudes to people experiencing homelessness. In general, these experiences helped to raise awareness about homelessness, helped address negative stereotypes, gave participants more nuanced understandings of the causes of homelessness, reduced fear and increased empathy.

Interestingly, while the experience had positive impacts on attitudes, one study noted despite improvement in attitudes, the experience did not change students' policy preferences for addressing homelessness. This was also the case in a study with a group of community volunteers (Knecht and Martinez 2009).

This research suggests that the students placements, support to students doing school projects on homelessness, volunteer programs and lived experience groups[1] will all have an impact in influencing people's attitudes and beliefs about homelessness.

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[1] Literature on the impact of peer education and lived experience on changing attitudes has not been reviewed here.

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