

Understanding Public Perceptions and Attitudes to homelessness in Australia

Deb Batterham
Hanover Welfare Services

www.hanover.org.au
Timely Support - Lasting Solutions



ACN 004 922 712 ABN 89 742 307 083

I'm Deb Batterham, I work with Andrew at Hanover where I'm based in the Research unit.

As the title suggests I'm going to talk about public perceptions and attitudes to homelessness in Australia.

I'm going to start by talking briefly about Hanover, about homelessness in Australia, and why public perceptions and attitudes are important.

Then in the main part of this paper I'll summarise the key findings from some questions we placed in the Australian Survey of Social Attitudes in 2007 – run by ANU.

About Hanover



Hanover is an independent welfare agency established in 1964

The name comes from its first location – Hanover street in north Fitzroy in Melbourne

Hanover has no structural links to governments, churches or institutions

We provide housing and support services to people experiencing homelessness or housing crisis at 7 sites across Melbourne.

We also do research and advocacy work – which, as I said, is where I fit in

Research agenda

4 main themes:

- Issues and impact
- Practice and programs
- **Perceptions and attitudes**
- Human rights and citizenship

We work to a research agenda which is organised around 4 main themes.

The first two themes concern the political, social and economic context that we operate in; and program evaluation and best practice. Context and service delivery

The second two themes broaden Hanover's research activity by challenging stereotypes and presenting alternative ways of thinking and talking about homelessness through human rights and citizenship.

This research fits into the perceptions and attitudes theme.

About homelessness in Australia



105,000 Australians homeless on any given night.

Figures from service providers:

- More women than men
- Indigenous people are overrepresented
- One in every 3 is a child
- Half of all people using homelessness services are parents with children
- The most common cause of homelessness is domestic violence
- Two thirds of children presenting at services are with their mothers escaping domestic violence

As some of you will no doubt know Homelessness is complex and the people who experience it are not a homogenous group

Public perceptions of homelessness and the reality of homelessness don't line up.

Nation wide figures from homelessness services show that:

More women than men access homelessness services

Indigenous people are overrepresented (while they make up 2% of the Australian population, they make up 18% of people in homelessness services)

One in every 3 people in a Homelessness service is a child (under 17, the majority under 10)

Half of all people using homelessness services are in family units (parent/s with children), they're also the most difficult to accommodate and most likely to be turned away

The most common cause of homelessness in Australia is Domestic Violence – Which is overwhelmingly men's violence.

Two thirds of children presenting at services are with their mothers escaping domestic violence

Financial difficulty, and Accommodation issues such as eviction, leases ending and overcrowding, are also reasons that people become homeless.

Problematic drug and alcohol use and mental health are issues, but they are not the most common issues.

* Problematic drug and alcohol use is an issue in 12% of periods of support.

Mental health issues are an issue in about 19% of periods of support

Yesterday Guy Johnson and Chris Chamberlain presented some research showing that mental health was just as often caused by homelessness as it was a pre-condition

About perceptions and attitudes

- Not just facts and figures – its the stories we tell with them and its *values*
- The way we think about a social problems determines the kinds of policy solutions on offer



Perceptions and attitudes are important

It's not just about facts and figures! It's about stories and it's about values.

Facts and figures are a necessary starting point – but it doesn't matter how many people are homeless – nothing will change if we think the problem is them and that it's their own fault.

People tell stories about homelessness, and these stories include beliefs about the causes of homelessness, what it means to be homeless, and who's responsible for it.

These stories, these perceptions and attitudes are important because they determine the way we think about social problems. And the way we think and talk about a social problem determines the kinds of policy solutions on offer.

Is homelessness a problem caused by a lack of affordable housing?

Is it the consequence of the complex intersection of economic and social policy

Is it a result of individuals making bad choices?

Is homelessness some kind of chronic disease, a problem located solely within the individuals who experience it.

the policy responses will be different in each case.

I think that Homelessness is a human rights issue.

At Hanover we're keen to reframe homelessness within this context and challenge the stereotypes and beliefs that keep homelessness within a moralistic welfare frame. But before we can challenge people's attitudes we first need to understand them, know what they are.

Which is why we did this research.

2007 Australian Survey of Social Attitudes (AuSSA)

- AuSSA conducted by ANU
- National mailout survey
- 2769 people across Australia participated

We were fortunate to get some questions into the Australian Survey of Social Attitudes which is conducted by a team at Australian National University (ANU)

Our questions were part of a **national mail-out survey**. Almost 3000 people across Australia participated.

After each survey ANU release a book with chapters discussing the findings – we've submitted a chapter to be included so the results presented here will hopefully be available in more detail in the next book.

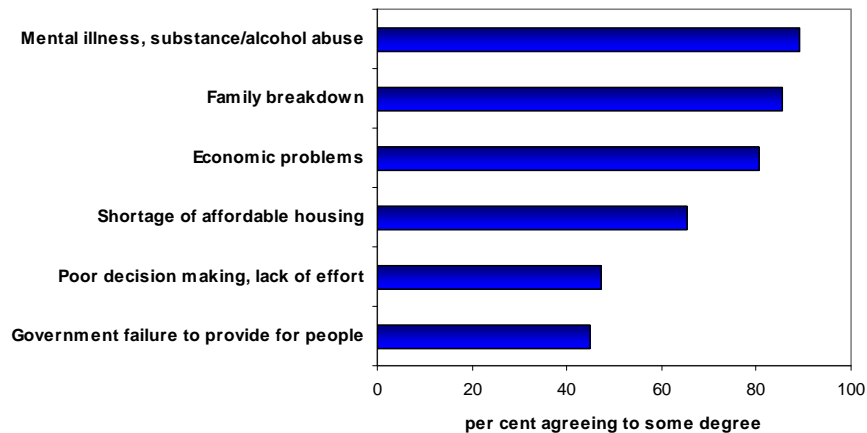
AuSSA 2007

- 2 questions on homelessness
 - What are the *causes* of homelessness
 - Who is *responsible* for 'solving' homelessness

Our two questions asked people to rate the extent they agreed with a list of causes of homelessness,

and to rate how much responsibility different groups had in 'solving' or responding to homelessness.

Perceived causes of homelessness



Participants thought that the most common cause of homelessness was Mental illness, substance/alcohol abuse (89%, n = 2678).

Followed by family breakdown (86%, n = 2673) (this included domestic violence, marital discord, and relationship difficulties and as examples)

And economic problems (80%, n = 2669)

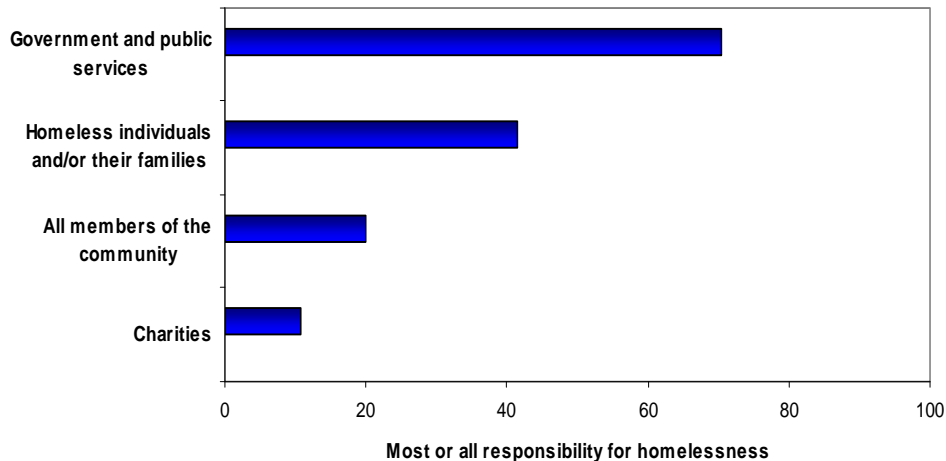
Two thirds thought that a shortage of affordable housing was a cause.

Just less than half (47%) of those surveyed thought that poor decision making or lack effort was a reason for homelessness – but it still around half of all those who responded

Only 45% thought that government failure to provide for people was a cause of homelessness.

Importantly, public perceptions on the 'causes' of homelessness don't line up with the data we have. In particular beliefs about mental health and drug and alcohol abuse.

Perceived responsibility for solving homelessness



Overwhelmingly, people thought that most or all responsibility for solving homelessness sat with government and public services (70%, n = 2690)

Only 20% of people believed that all members of the community were responsible (n = 2669)

Still 41% believed that most or all responsibility rested with the individuals who were homeless and/or their families.

These results highlight a lack of personal engagement with and ownership of the issue – its still seen as a problem for individuals, their families and government's. Not for the general community.

That's important for us.

Framing homelessness as a human rights issue involves fostering a sense of responsibility and involvement within the general community.

Because human rights are everyone's responsibility.

Further analysis

Focused on the relationship between
causes and responsibility

We wanted to know whether responses to the items on the causes of homelessness and responsibility for addressing homelessness were related.

For example we wanted to know whether people who think homelessness is caused by poor decision making or lack of effort are more likely to also think that homeless individuals and/or their families are responsible for 'solving homelessness'.

It's fairly intuitive and research undertaken in the United States suggests this would be the case.

We started out by creating a correlation matrix to have a look at the relationships between items and to our delight there were some relationships, but there were a lot of them. We were keen to understand whether there was a significant pattern to these relationships.

To do that we undertook a Principal Components Analysis.

The next slide has a table summarising the results of this analysis - I'm not sure whether people here speak fluent stats or not, or whether we have anyone in the audience whose likely to have a severe allergic reaction - flashbacks to stats lectures at uni, needing to leave the room, or nap (I've seen some of these reaction in social workers before)..

Anyway, I wasn't quite sure what assumptions to make so I'll do some explaining as I go and I think it should make sense to everyone.

The structure of attitudes towards homelessness



	Component		
	External causes, government solution	Collective responsibility	Individual blame, Individual responsibility
Reason – poor decision making lack of effort	-.044	-.156	.773
Reason – shortage of affordable housing	.682	0.44	-.133
Reason – mental illness, substance/alcohol abuse	.515	-.033	.455
Reason – government failure to provide for people	.684	.169	-.266
Reason – economic problems	.766	.125	-0.27
Reason – family breakdown (including domestic violence)	.731	.102	.166
Responsibility - government and public services	.412	.399	-.268
Responsibility - charities	.081	.771	.129
Responsibility – homeless individuals and/or their families	-.162	.387	.666
Responsibility - all members of the community	.148	.777	-.087
Eigenvalue	2.548	1.588	1.4
Variance explained	25.5%	15.9%	14.0%
Valid n	2564	2564	2564

- Extraction method: Principal Component Analysis. Rotation Method: Varimax with Kaiser Normalisation.
- Total variance explained by this model: 55.4%

A Principal Components 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 in a particular group are strong enough, if enough of the 'variance' in responses is explained, that group of questions is separated out into a 'component'.

So a component is essentially a response pattern. Sometimes they are referred to as factors

A number, similar to (but not the same as) a correlation coefficient, is given to indicate the strength and direction of the association or relationship between the item and the component. (which is what the numbers are in the table)

To make it a little bit easier to look at, I've highlighted in yellow the items that make up each component. And I've named the components given the items that are included in them.

The important thing to take from this analysis is:

That 3 components or response patterns emerged

The structure of attitudes towards homelessness



3 components emerged from the analysis

- External causes, government solutions
- Collective responsibility
- Individual blame, Individual responsibility

These were:

External causes, government solutions

Collective responsibility

Individual blame, Individual responsibility

What's interesting about this result is that there were three rather than 2 components that emerged.

We had assumed (as others have before) that external causes and collective responsibility were part of the same 'response pattern'. That once people thought that homelessness had causes external to the individuals involved, that people would also feel a sense of collective responsibility for the solution.

Sort of like being left or right wing

Not so.

Demographic predictors



- Highest level of education
- Gender
- Trust
- Individual income
- Household income
- Social class (self identified)
- Political Party affiliation
- Left - right spectrum – self rating

Previous research has typically analysed attitudes towards homelessness in terms of demographics. They've asked questions like: do women have more favourable attitudes than men? Do people of certain political persuasions? People of certain ages or classes?

We were keen to see if **our three components** could be predicted by demographic factors.

Example: Are people who respond in the 'collective responsibility pattern' more likely to have higher levels of educational attainment, be of a certain age or a particular income bracket?

The survey contained a number of demographic items which we used to test this hypothesis: and they are listed on the slide here.

We found a number of small correlations between components and particular demographic items – but the correlations, while significant were very small.

And we wanted to get a sense of how well all of these demographic items together predicted each component or response pattern.

Demographic predictors of attitudes?



Best predictive models using backwards multiple regression	R ²	Percentage of variance explained	Adjusted R ²
Component 1 – External causes, government solutions	0.166	11.6%	0.105
Component 2 – Collective Responsibility	0.033	3.3%	0.022
Component 3 – Individual blame, Individual responsibility	0.074	7.4%	0.064

We used a backwards Multiple Regression to test this, which basically means we asked a computer to tell us the optimum combination of demographic variables needed to predict each response pattern. This table summarises just one aspect of the results

The most interesting thing that emerged from this analysis is that there is only a small amount of variance explained.

Despite having a number of predictors in the regression model, at best we could only explain 11.6% of the variance in the first component: external causes, government solutions. That leaves 88% of the variance unexplained. And results were worse for the other components

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

Conclusion

- A more sophisticated understanding required that moves beyond:
 - Collectivism / individualism
 - Demographic predictors of attitudes

Apart from the finding that perceptions and reality don't line up – as other research has shown as well.

I think the two key findings – the take home messages are:

The structure of attitudes towards homelessness cannot simply be reduced to a dichotomy between individualism versus collectivism that corresponds to the left-right political spectrum.

These findings also suggest that focusing on the demographic predictors of these attitudes, as so much public opinion research has done, is a bit of a waste of time. These variables can't explain that much of what is actually going on.

Where to from here?



- More exploratory qualitative work
- Some experimental work
- Tweaking and fine tuning the items we have

So what's next?

In terms of further research in this area I think we need some more exploratory qualitative work. What reasons and causes do people nominate of their own accord?. And what strategies do people use to support their beliefs, what narratives do they use to express their beliefs about homelessness?

Once we have a deeper understanding of these things we can do some social psychological research into what kinds of interventions shift people's attitudes. How can we influence the narratives that people use. How can we get people's perceptions to match up with reality. And how can we get people to think about homelessness as a human rights issue. As something that everyone has a responsibility to do something about.

Thanks for your time

Thanks for your time!



Relationship between reasons and responsibility



Reasons for homelessness	Responsibility for homelessness			
	Government and public services	Charities	Individuals and/or their families	All members of the Community
Poor decision making/lack of effort	-.101 n = 2647		.267 n = 2629	-.167 n = 2632
Shortage of affordable housing	.265 n = 2648	.105 n = 2630	-.095 n = 2633	.127 n = 2636
Mental illness, substance/alcohol abuse	.096 n = 2665	.062 n = 2646	0.58 n = 2648	.081 n = 2650
Government failure to provide for people	.416 n = 2649	.140 n = 2634	-.150 n = 2633	.204 n = 2638
Economic problems	.240 n = 2658	.140 n = 2646	-.047* n = 2644	.169 n = 2649
Family breakdown	.171 n = 2662	.120 n = 2646		.193 n = 2652

• all correlations are statistically significant at $p = .001$ or less unless marked with an * which denotes significance at $p < .05$

Only show this slide if questions come up in question time.