

The links between begging, rough sleeping and *The Big Issue* in Glasgow and Edinburgh

Begging is one of the most apparent symbols of social exclusion in modern British society, but has been little researched. This study, by Suzanne Fitzpatrick and Catherine Kennedy of the University of Glasgow, explored the links between begging, rough sleeping and *Big Issue* vending in Glasgow and Edinburgh city centres. They found:

- f** There was a high degree of overlap between begging, rough sleeping and selling *The Big Issue*, with half of those interviewed having engaged in all three activities. In particular, people's experiences of rough sleeping almost invariably preceded their involvement in begging.
- f** Almost all of those interviewed had experienced severe trauma in their lives. Many interviewees developed problematic drug or alcohol use from a young age as a means of coping with these painful experiences; this substance misuse was often central to both their experiences of homelessness and of begging. Many stressed their need to address their substance misuse; however, most emphasised that the issue was more complex than the availability of detoxification services.
- f** Begging was a survival strategy and was overwhelmingly driven by 'need' not 'greed'. Whilst many of the people interviewed begged to support their substance misuse, others cited the expensive nature of surviving on the streets as their reason for begging.
- f** Begging was experienced as degrading, risky and uncomfortable. Most of those who begged chose it over other unattractive means of making money because it was a lawful and 'honest' activity.
- f** *The Big Issue* provided a viable alternative to begging for some people, particularly in Edinburgh. Most interviewees were in agreement that, as with begging, selling *The Big Issue* offered a significant alternative to crime.
- f** Most of those interviewed were desperate to move away from begging and rough sleeping, but the complexity of the problems they faced meant that they needed extensive support to achieve this.
- f** While there were many common features, the research emphasised a number of important differences between Glasgow and Edinburgh, suggesting that national strategies need to allow for local responses.

Background

The apparent growth of street begging in recent years is one of the most palpable and controversial symbols of social exclusion in modern British society. However, there is a paucity of contemporary empirical evidence on the experiences, characteristics and motivations of people who beg. Research with homeless people has suggested that begging is far more closely associated with rough sleeping than other forms of homelessness. However, there has been no in-depth examination of this association to date.

A further important dimension has been introduced to this debate by the emergence of *The Big Issue*, a street paper launched in London in 1991, and sold by people who are homeless, ex-homeless or 'vulnerably' housed. The fundamental aim of *The Big Issue* is to provide an opportunity for homeless people to earn an income, and thus help to build their self-esteem and confidence. An important rationale for the establishment of *The Big Issue* was to offer homeless people an alternative to begging. However, its impact on begging has not, until now, been investigated.

This study aimed to address these gaps through qualitative research with people begging, sleeping rough or selling *The Big Issue* in Glasgow and Edinburgh city centres.

The people in the study

Sixty-six people were interviewed: 24 men and nine women in both cities. The research revealed a high degree of overlap between experiences of begging and rough sleeping and, to a lesser degree, selling *The Big Issue*. Almost all of those interviewed had slept rough; four-fifths had begged; and two-thirds had sold *The Big Issue*. Half the interviewees had experiences of all three activities at some point.

Most interviewees had a family background characterised by disruption and trauma. Almost half had been in residential care/school or foster care and over a quarter reported drug or alcohol misusing parents. A number of interviewees, particularly women, reported being abused as children; their experiences included rape, sexual assault, incest, beatings and mental cruelty. Other traumas endured by many of those interviewed were bereavement, domestic violence, and family or relationship breakdown.

Many interviewees also had experience of institutional living. Two-thirds had received custodial sentences, often for relatively minor offences such as non-payment of fines. Many of these interviewees had no criminal record or experience of prison prior to becoming homeless. One-fifth of the sample had received psychiatric care, but seldom for a sustained period. Only a small

number of interviewees had served in the armed forces.

One-third of the sample reported that they had alcohol dependencies and over one-fifth were current heroin users. Many had developed these substance dependencies early in life as a means of coping with traumatic experiences, and several interviewees reported that their habits had worsened as a result of life on the streets or in hostels. A range of physical and mental health problems were also reported by those interviewed, including musculoskeletal and respiratory illnesses and depression.

Whilst the majority of interviewees had received a mainstream education, few had gained school qualifications. Four-fifths of the sample had previous experience of employment, usually in casual or short-term employment in unskilled or semi-skilled jobs. None were currently employed in a conventional job. Almost four-fifths of those interviewed were currently receiving state benefits. Whilst few interviewees reported difficulties in making a successful claim for benefits, some commented on the humiliation or obstacles encountered in the process.

The links between begging and rough sleeping

People's involvement in begging almost always followed their experience of rough sleeping. Indeed, only seven interviewees who had begged were not sleeping rough when they started.

A range of closely interrelated routes into homelessness were identified in the research, namely: running away from home/care before the age of 16; leaving home/care; the death of a parent or relative; relationship breakdown; redundancy or job loss; the lack of support to sustain a tenancy; the loss of accommodation; and leaving prison. Specific reasons for rough sleeping included: lack of appropriate accommodation; moving city; being barred from or rejecting hostel accommodation; and, for some older interviewees, a sense of community on the streets. The long-term impacts of traumatic experiences and the difficulties of coping with problematic substance use were overarching factors underpinning the experiences of almost all of those interviewed.

Many people began to beg due to an absence of state benefits when they started to sleep rough. Although the majority did eventually secure benefits, they often continued to beg because this income was not adequate to support the expensive nature of life on the streets. For most, though not all, this was linked to their need to support their problematic substance misuse.

Interviewees often chose begging over other unattractive means of making money because it was a lawful and 'honest' activity. Many had served

prison sentences for shoplifting and other 'survival' crimes they had used to 'get by' on the streets before turning to begging. The decision to begin begging was often linked to a desire to stay out of trouble and, more particularly, prison. Attempts to stop people begging without addressing the reasons why they engage in this activity seem likely to force at least some of them back into criminal activities.

The experience of begging

People resorted to begging out of sheer desperation. It was overwhelmingly driven by 'need' not 'greed', and the vast majority of those who begged simply generated the particular sum of money they needed to survive, and did not attempt to maximise income. Thus, the length of time spent begging broadly depended on how long it took them to make that amount. Night-time begging was commonly considered to be more lucrative than day-time begging but was generally undertaken at considerable personal risk by those in the most desperate circumstances. Several people interviewed were unable to estimate how much money they made from begging, either because they 'pooled' the money as part of a group, or spent it as they went along on food, drink or drugs, and thought of it, for example, in terms of cans of beer or 'bags' of heroin rather than cash sums. Some interviewees also indicated receiving 'gifts in kind' from members of the public, such as food, clothes and cigarettes.

The majority of interviewees found begging an embarrassing and degrading experience. Whilst people begging reported acts of kindness from the public, they also frequently experienced harassment and verbal abuse and, in many cases, physical and sexual assault. The perpetrators included both members of the public and other 'street people'. An additional risk reported by people begging in Glasgow was 'hassle' from the police. Indeed, many interviewees in Glasgow were under the impression that begging was illegal in the city, and several reported regularly being moved on, having their money taken off them, or being fined or 'jailed' for begging (with the offence cited as breach of the peace). This impacted upon the 'style' of begging in the city: whilst people begging in Glasgow were usually standing or walking about with a cup in order to avoid police attention, those in Edinburgh generally begged sitting down on a 'pitch' with a blanket and a card.

Begging was primarily a solitary activity, although older street drinkers would sometimes beg in pairs and women often begged with their partners keeping watch. However, almost everyone begging was known to other 'street people' in the city centres.

Friendships between street people were vigorously defended by some interviewees, but were viewed by many others as superficial, transitory and often exploitative. Nevertheless, for many people these networks provided the only regular social contact they had, and thus loneliness was a key factor preventing them from moving on from begging and rough sleeping.

Most of those currently begging were in contact with a number of homelessness agencies, such as drop-in centres and soup kitchens. These were used predominantly as a source of food, clothing and sleeping bags, and sometimes for additional advice relating to housing, benefits and personal problems. Interviewees' perceptions of helping agencies tended to be largely negative beyond the immediate practicalities of food and clothing. However, many recognised that agency workers generally did their best, although there was often not a lot they could do to help. Specific problems highlighted by interviewees included restrictive 'local connection' and 'intentionality' criteria in relation to housing services and difficulties in gaining help for drug or alcohol misuse.

The Big Issue

Forty-five people with experience of selling *The Big Issue* were interviewed, of whom 26 were currently selling the magazine. This research was not an evaluation of *The Big Issue* as an organisation but rather an examination of the relationship between *The Big Issue* vending and begging in two cities.

The research demonstrated that *The Big Issue* had provided an alternative to begging for some people, particularly in Edinburgh where several interviewees had ceased to beg once they were introduced to the magazine. However, one-third of those who had begged had never sold *The Big Issue* and would not consider doing so; these were often older street drinkers who felt that it just wasn't for them. In addition, several interviewees had returned to begging after trying to sell *The Big Issue*, while *Big Issue* vending preceded a move into begging for others. These interviewees often found the magazine too difficult to sell or moved over to begging because of the perceived decline in the amount of money to be made through vending. Contextual factors in Glasgow city centre, including high levels of intravenous heroin use and the police response to begging in the city, led to *The Big Issue* sometimes being used as a 'cover' for begging.

It is also important to stress that there were 11 *Big Issue* vendors in the sample who had never begged. These vendors often drew a strong distinction between begging and selling *The Big Issue*, seeing

vending as being 'like a job', and in some cases preferable to the sort of low-status, poorly paid work which they could obtain in the formal labour market. For some, begging was quite simply something they would not consider doing.

Vending provided an alternative to claiming social security benefits in some cases. However, many vendors continued to claim benefits due to the insecure nature of income generated by selling *The Big Issue* and, for some, the additional need to support their substance misuse. Most interviewees were in agreement that, as with begging, *The Big Issue*, offered a significant alternative to crime. While some vendors reported receiving valuable support from *Big Issue* staff, many said that they received little or no support from *The Big Issue* or other homelessness agencies.

The research suggests that *The Big Issue* is a very valuable resource for many people 'getting by' on the streets: it offers them an income, increased self-esteem, and a structure and purpose to their days. However, *The Big Issue* cannot be expected to provide a solution for all of those begging and nor could any single initiative.

Conclusions

This research emphasises the multiple, and interconnected, needs of people 'getting by' on the streets. The vast majority of those interviewed wanted to move away from begging and homelessness, and aspired to have a 'normal life', but highlighted a range of issues which would need to be addressed in order for them to achieve this. As well as access to appropriate accommodation and work opportunities, most required help to overcome drug and alcohol misuse, social isolation, mental and physical health problems, and deep-seated low esteem. The researchers stress that these needs can only be met in an integrated way through effective policy co-ordination at both national and local levels, with responsibilities accepted by all the key players and the necessary resources attached. They recommend individualised, flexible support provided through key workers as one way of promoting a 'holistic' approach at service delivery level. The sharp contrasts between Glasgow and Edinburgh revealed in the study serve to emphasise the need for localised strategies which respond to the particular set of problems in each location.

About the study

The research was conducted in Glasgow and Edinburgh city centres. The principal stage of fieldwork comprised 66 in-depth, biographical interviews: 24 with people witnessed begging on the street; 22 with rough sleepers contacted through homelessness agencies; and 20 with *Big Issue* vendors. Each of these 'sample groups' were contacted separately to allow the degree of overlap between them to be examined. The fieldwork also involved interviews with agency workers; focus groups and informal discussions with users of homelessness services; and structured observation of people begging.

How to get further information

The full report, **Getting by: Begging, rough sleeping and *The Big Issue* in Glasgow and Edinburgh** by Suzanne Fitzpatrick and Catherine Kennedy, is published for the Foundation by The Policy Press (ISBN 1 86134 237 3, price £12.95).

