

Research on single homelessness in Britain

A wealth of research evidence now exists on single homelessness. The Joseph Rowntree Foundation and CRASH identified a need to synthesise this material to maximise its usefulness, particularly to policy-makers and practitioners. They commissioned Suzanne Fitzpatrick and Susanne Klinker, of the University of Glasgow, to review single homelessness research in Britain in the 1990s. The researchers found:

- f** There has been a shift in the research literature away from explaining homelessness as a 'housing problem', to more complex analyses which weave together consideration of 'social and economic' factors, on the one hand, and 'individual' factors, on the other.
- f** The individual 'risk factors' and 'triggers' associated with homelessness are well understood, and provide a strong informational base for preventative work.
- f** The social and economic factors driving homelessness are less well understood, particularly with regards to their varying impact at the local level.
- f** The dominant trend is towards accommodating homeless people in self-contained, mainstream housing whenever possible, but there is acknowledgement of the continuing role of hostels and other 'less than ordinary' housing for certain groups.
- f** Resettlement services have been a developing focus of work in recent years, with good practice literature stressing homeless people's needs for social contact and purposive activity, as well as appropriate accommodation and support.
- f** There is widespread acceptance of the importance of strategic, multi-agency working in meeting single homeless people's needs, but inter-agency co-operation has proved difficult to achieve in practice.
- f** Some assumptions about causes and good practice prevail in the homelessness field in the absence of robust evidence to support them.
- f** The researchers recommend that:
 - resources should be consolidated to fund a smaller number of higher quality research projects on single homelessness;
 - longitudinal research tracking the progress of homeless people over time should be a priority;
 - efforts should be made to develop more reliable estimates of the scale of single homelessness.

Background

There has been a vast quantity of research conducted on single homelessness over the past decade. The sheer volume of material, and the forms in which it is published, can make some of it inaccessible to those working in the field. The central aim of this review was to produce a high quality and accessible summary of recent research and information about single homelessness in Britain for use by policy makers, practitioners and research commissioners.

The policy context

Statutory responses to homelessness have traditionally focused on families with children rather than single people. This division is reflected in both homelessness research and practice, and one result is that the relationship between family and single homelessness is little understood. The growing numbers of single homeless people sleeping rough in the late 1980s prompted central government to establish a series of Rough Sleepers Initiatives (RSI); first in London in 1990, and then elsewhere in England and in Scotland. The current Labour Government has pushed homelessness further up the political agenda with the establishment of the Rough Sleepers Unit and the Scottish Homelessness Task Force.

However, there are concerns that the emphasis on rough sleeping has detracted attention from other forms of homelessness, such as living in bed-and-breakfast hotels or staying 'care of' other households. There are also fears that the Government's 'tough love' approach may encourage punitive measures to be taken against rough sleepers who do not conform by, for example, accepting hostel places. In addition, the significant volume of research conducted on the London RSI has, to some extent, countered the recent decentralisation of single homelessness research. This London focus is problematic given the likelihood of significant geographical variations in the nature and causes of homelessness across the country.

The scale of single homelessness

There is no readily available, comprehensive and robust source of information on the numbers of single homeless people. This is due in part to the politically contested nature of definitions of homelessness, and in part to the 'hidden' and 'mobile' nature of many people's homelessness. The available figures on the number of statutory homeless households, rough sleepers, and hostel and night shelter users are all estimates and subject to important limitations. This limited evidence suggests that the scale of homelessness increased very significantly during the 1980s and early 1990s. There appears to have been some decline in homelessness in England and Wales, but not in Scotland, in recent years, though the available figures are still much higher than a decade ago.

Causes, predictors and prevention of single homelessness

There has been a shift in the research literature away from analysing homelessness as a 'housing problem'; to more complex analyses which weave together consideration of both 'structural' and 'individual' factors. The main structural factors which have been identified are: adverse housing and labour market trends; rising levels of poverty; and family restructuring. Cuts in social security entitlements are consistently highlighted as key to the escalation of youth homelessness in the late 1980s. However, there is a dearth of research which rigorously examines the relationship between these 'macro' social and economic processes and patterns of homelessness. In particular, the varying impact of these structural factors at the local level is little understood.

The 'individual' risk factors associated with homelessness are well established in the research literature. They include: poverty; unemployment; sexual or physical abuse; family disputes and breakdown; a background of local authority care; experience of prison or the armed forces; drug or alcohol misuse; school exclusion; and poor mental or physical health. The specific events which 'trigger' homelessness are also well understood, such as: leaving the parental home after arguments; marital or relationship breakdown; eviction; widowhood; discharge from the armed forces; leaving care; leaving prison; and a sharp deterioration in mental health or an increase in alcohol or drug misuse.

Preventative strategies are often argued to be most effective if targeted at individuals experiencing a range of these 'risk' factors, particularly at the potential 'trigger' points. Possible preventative interventions include: housing education in schools; tenancy support for young people; family mediation services; and resettlement programmes for people leaving the armed forces or prison. The extent to which preventative mechanisms are currently being put into practice is unclear, particularly outside London. Prevention strategies do seem better developed for young people than for other homeless groups.

Meeting single homeless people's accommodation and support needs

Research studies have established that a large proportion of single homeless people have significant support needs. At the same time, there has been a move away from institutionalised provision for homeless people towards accommodating them in self-contained, mainstream accommodation whenever possible. Thus a developing focus of work in recent years has been 'resettlement' services which help vulnerable homeless people move on to, and sustain, settled accommodation. The emerging good practice guidance in this area highlights that, in

addition to appropriate accommodation and support, homeless people require access to social contact and purposive activity if they are to be successfully resettled. However, it is acknowledged that for some homeless people the end point of a resettlement process may still be a hostel or some other form of 'less than ordinary' housing.

There is widespread acceptance of the importance of holistic solutions and multi-agency working in meeting the range of needs within the single homeless population. This trend has been reinforced by funding structures which require strategic, partnership working. However, significant difficulties have been experienced in establishing inter-agency co-operation in practice.

Wider aspects of single homeless people's lives

There is now ample evidence that single homeless people have much poorer physical and mental health than the general population. However, there is some controversy over whether homelessness (aside from rough sleeping) actually causes ill health. Some researchers have argued that the key threat to single homeless people's health - over and above the health disadvantages experienced by other socio-economically deprived groups - is inadequate access to health care services.

While alcohol misuse amongst homeless people and its health impacts are well understood, there is surprisingly little material on drugs in the health and homelessness literature. This gap urgently needs to be addressed as anecdotal evidence suggests that meeting the accommodation and other needs of dependent drug users, particularly those who inject, is one of the key challenges now facing homelessness services. Homeless people with a 'dual diagnosis' - both mental health problems and a drug and/or alcohol dependency - face particular problems in gaining access to appropriate services.

Employment and training schemes for homeless people have begun to emerge, and research in this area emphasises the need for programmes to be highly flexible and to focus on helping people to sustain employment in the longer term. The 'unemployment trap' created by the rapid withdrawal of housing benefit as income rises is a particular problem for homeless people living in supported or furnished accommodation where high rents are often charged to cover the additional costs.

The family relationships of single homeless people have received some research attention, particularly in relation to young homeless people. However, far less is known about homeless people's friendship networks, even though this is a key area of concern within resettlement work.

There are clear links between homelessness, particularly rough sleeping, and experience of the

criminal justice system. The Government is now developing measures to prevent ex-prisoners becoming homeless.

Conclusion

The quality of single homelessness research is highly variable; while there are numerous robust studies providing good quality data, there is also a significant volume of weak research in this area. In addition, significant gaps in understanding remain. These relate to:

- the experience and scale of 'hidden' homelessness;
- the structural processes underlying homelessness and their varying impact at the local level;
- longitudinal research to trace the experiences of homeless people over time, particularly to test the effectiveness of interventions;
- evaluations of preventative work;
- drugs and homelessness;
- the friendship networks of single homeless people;
- material specific to Wales;
- evaluations of furnished and/or shared flats and other non-institutional responses to single homelessness;
- systematic mappings of the patterns of support needs within the single homeless population;
- the cost-effectiveness of most types of initiatives.

Implications for research

A number of implications arise from the review for those who commission, fund or conduct research:

- Research resources should be directed as far as possible to those areas where gaps in understanding remain, although it must be borne in mind that studies do require updating.
- At the national level, there is a strong case for consolidating resources to fund a smaller number of higher quality studies on single homelessness. For example, a major longitudinal study of single homeless people would represent a substantial investment for the future.
- Some consideration should be given to how best to support small, local agencies in conducting and disseminating their own research in order to maximise its effectiveness. These agencies seem to have a particular need for advice on how to evaluate their own services.
- For ethical reasons, research directly involving homeless people should generally only be funded if it has clear policy aims. This may include studies designed to feed into broader social and economic debates, as well as 'practical' research aimed at developing or evaluating particular responses to homelessness.
- Efforts should be made to find ways round the current difficulties in 'counting' homeless people. For

example, non-homelessness sources of data, such as the Survey of English Housing, have been shown to be a useful means of estimating the prevalence of homelessness. Also, producing the statutory homelessness statistics in a consistent format across Scotland, England and Wales would facilitate comparisons of trends across all three nations.

- Integrating research on homeless families and single people would add value to both (currently divided) fields of study.

Implications for policy and practice

The need for further research in some areas must not be used as an excuse for delaying action on single homelessness. A wide range of recommendations emerges from existing research which the policy community should be seeking to address. These include:

- the need to address the structural causes of homelessness, not just the symptoms;
- the importance of preventative work and early intervention, aimed especially at those groups facing particular risks of homelessness or life crises which act as triggers for homelessness;
- the need to make mainstream services take responsibility for homeless people, rather than expecting specialist agencies to meet all of their needs;
- the importance of facilitating effective, inter-agency collaboration;
- the need for intensive support for some single homeless people, with an appropriate commitment of resources;
- the importance of focusing on the long-term outcomes of homelessness interventions, and developing appropriate resettlement services;
- the importance of encouraging evaluation and improvement in homelessness services. Evaluation exercises should be as constructive and meaningful as possible, emphasising outcomes rather than outputs.

On homelessness practice, the main themes to emerge from the review are:

- the need to consider the relevant research on 'what works' and what does not, and to avoid simply following fashions in service provision;
- the importance of flexible and holistic responses, tailored to meet the needs of individual homeless people;
- the importance of long-term resettlement, not just crisis intervention;
- most homeless people's preference for non-institutionalised accommodation as far as possible;

- the importance of continual improvement in the quality of services, and involving users in service development and evaluation.

About the study

This review of single homelessness research in Britain covers material published from 1990 till end November 1999. A systematic trawl was conducted for relevant material, including official statistics, 'formal research' and significant 'grey' literature. There were three principal outputs from the review which involved varying degrees of 'comprehensiveness':

- an overview report which draws together the main findings of the review;
- summaries of the 200 most significant pieces of research identified in the review; and
- a bibliography (structured by topic) including all relevant research identified in the review.

How to get further information

The following three reports have been published from this project by The Policy Press:

Single homelessness: An overview of research in Britain by Suzanne Fitzpatrick, Peter Kemp and Susanne Klinker (ISBN 1 86134 255 1, price £13.95)

A review of single homelessness research: Research summaries by Susanne Klinker, Suzanne Fitzpatrick, Fiona Mitchell, Jo Dean and Nicky Burns (ISBN 1 86134 236 5, price £16.95)

A bibliography of single homelessness research by Susanne Klinker and Suzanne Fitzpatrick (ISBN 1 86134 256 X, price £14.95)