**Anti-Social Behaviour among Homeless People: Assumptions or Reality?**

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**Introduction**

Historically, the visible engagement of homeless people in activities considered to be ‘anti-social,’ such as drunkenness and begging, have made them the target of government action on public disorder; engendering antipathy, as much as sympathy, from policymakers, key regulators and the wider public (Takahashi, 1997; cited in DeVerteui, May and von Mahs, 2009: 647). Governments have long been keen to blame increases in homelessness on individual failings, resulting from wilful idleness and dangerous criminal/anti-social tendencies (Humphreys, 1999: 167), with policy responses underpinned by the principles of enforcement and exclusion, rather than care and support. During the period 1997 to 2010, the New Labour governments demonstrated a more nuanced understanding of the causes of homelessness, giving increased recognition to the importance of factors beyond the control of the individual. At the heart of government policies towards homelessness was the idea of balancing rights with responsibilities. However, even under this more ostensibly sympathetic approach, concerns to tackle social exclusion among homeless people existed in tension with a perception that their anti-social behaviours needed to be addressed. Following a historical discussion of the key interventions designed to tackle wilful idleness and anti-social behaviour among homeless people, this chapter will focus on policy developments since 1997. It will then draw on recent empirical research in the North East of England, where data collected from homeless people and relevant stakeholders challenged the popular assumptions which have often underpinned policy responses to homelessness. It is argued that such policies have often produced counter-productive effects; reinforcing exclusion and increasing the likelihood that homeless people will be involved in further anti-social acts.

**The Historical Problem of Homelessness**

Although Lund (1996: 83) argues that the concept of homelessness as we know it today did not exist before the twentieth century, statutes have recognised the status of vagrancy – with the implication of people wandering from place to place – for many centuries. Matthews (1986: 100) suggests that the term ‘vagrant’ is closely linked with the word ‘casual’. The Casual Poor Act 1882 defined a casual pauper as ‘any destitute wayfarer or wandered.’ Other names given to this class of pauper included tramp, beggar, loafer and vagabond. Humphreys (1999: 167) notes that throughout history, governments have tended to blame increases in homelessness on the individuals concerned and to ignore ‘the factors which at that particular time were causing more of their citizens to wander around poverty-stricken.’ The view expressed by Murray (1990: 24), that homeless people are part of an underclass marked by laziness and criminal tendencies (among other factors), reflects a longstanding and influential line of thinking.

Fears about the wilfully idle, and the dangers and costs of providing relief to them, date back to the Medieval period. In some cases, these fears specifically related to vagrancy. The first vagrancy statute of 1349 made it a crime to give alms to someone who was unemployed but of sound mind, due to the risk of incentivising people to survive by begging rather than employment (Beier, 1985: 4). In 1351, a punishment of 15 days imprisonment was introduced for anyone who left the town where they had worked during the winter if work was available during the summer (Chambliss, 1964: 68). The level of punishment had escalated considerably by 1535, where repeated vagrancy became punishable by the death penalty (Chambliss, 1964: 72-73). According to Chambliss (1964: 74-75), this escalation reflected the loss of goods being transported around the country to vagrants (or ‘highwaymen’) and completed a shift in perception of homeless people from being merely idle to being criminal. Adler (1989: 209-213), although believing that Chambliss over-emphasises the criminal element, similarly notes that vagrancy statutes stopped describing vagrants in terms of their lack of employment and instead began to discuss them as ‘lusty rogues’, beggars and thieves.

Almost five centuries later, the Poor Law report of 1834 continued to reflect concerns about vagrancy being a lifestyle choice rather than a situation arising from destitution. Whether the result of perceived laziness or anti-social tendencies, the punitive approach taken by the Poor Law to all who sought assistance was escalated for those who were homeless; extremely harsh conditions were maintained throughout the Victorian period. Vagrants were required to live in the causal wards of workhouses and to work breaking stones (Strange, 2011: 245). The two Poor Law reports of 1909 differed little on their treatment of vagrants; the Majority report favoured ‘semi-penal institutions,’ while the Minority report recommended labour colonies where vagrants could be ‘kept to work under discipline’ (Matthews, 1986: 110). Matthews (1986: 108) notes two counter-productive impacts of this punitive approach: ‘professional’ vagrants were encouraged to beg for money in order to stay in common lodging houses rather than workhouses and men who honestly desired work were quickly stripped of self-respect and became habitual vagrants.

Alternative perspectives on homelessness developed in the late Victorian era as it became clear that poverty was much more widespread than had previously been assumed; it began to be questioned whether low moral standards among the most destitute arose from their housing conditions rather than vice versa (Fraser, 1984: 132-137). The housing experiments of Octavia Hill (Thane, 1996: 25-26), charitable provision for homeless people (Strange, 2011: 246) and special measures for areas where there was widespread long-term unemployment (Thane, 1996: 172-173) were all signs of a less harsh response emerging.

However, assumptions that homeless people, particularly single homeless people, were lazy and/or anti-social had by no means disappeared. The significant pieces of homelessness legislation from the post-World War Two period – the National Assistance Act 1948 and the Housing (Homeless Persons) Act 1977 – concentrated on providing protection to families with dependent children, with single homeless people offered accommodation in ‘resettlement units’. While they did emphasise resettlement rather than punishment, section 17 of the National Assistance Act 1948 reflected historic concerns that homeless people may deliberately choose a path of laziness and dependency by insisting that those who persistently used resettlement units must undertake work or risk imprisonment (Watson and Austerberry, 1986: 52). Following the units’ closure in the 1980s and 1990s, commentators argued that the alternative provision that replaced them reflected continuing negative assumptions about homeless people by focusing on their assumed housekeeping deficits (Deacon, Vincent and Walker, 1995) and their inability to live in a social manner (Garside, 1993: 321).

A similar focus on individual causes of homelessness was evident in the Rough Sleepers Initiative implemented by the Conservative governments of 1979 to 1997, in response to an increasingly visible problem of rough sleeping in Central London. The initiative was launched with claims that local housing shortages affected central London only and that the real causes of homelessness were individual, such as 'the breakup of families and other social ties' (quoted in Anderson, 1993: 23). While the initiative originally sought to provide accommodation to single homeless people, Cloke, May and Johnsen (2010: 31-32) highlight a change of approach when anticipated reductions in levels of rough sleeping did not materialise. Ordered to clear a ‘hard core’ of rough sleepers from the streets of Central London, action by the Metropolitan Police increased the number of people arrested under vagrancy acts from 192 in 1991 to 1445 in 1992. Later, Conservative Prime Minister John Major criticised ‘homeless’ beggars and Peter Lilley (Secretary of State for Social Security) suggested that sellers of the Big Issue magazine should not receive state benefits. The Housing Act 1996 went on to give legal backing to the exclusion of homeless people and others from local authority housing registers for factors such as anti-social behaviour; there was a fourfold increase in such exclusions during the following 12 months, although the large majority were introduced for rent arrears (Butler, 1998).

**Homelessness and Anti-Social Behaviour since 1997**

In contrast to their predecessors, the Labour governments were largely reluctant to blame social problems solely on individual factors, giving greater acknowledgement to the role of structural disadvantage. As such, there was a concern to balance ‘rights’ and ‘responsibilities’; offering disadvantaged people opportunities to improve their situation, while insisting that it was their responsibility to accept those opportunities (Deacon, 2003: 131-2). However, balancing rights and responsibilities was difficult, as was tackling homelessness and social exclusion while also acting strongly in the area of anti-social behaviour.

The Homelessness Act 2002 restored rights to apply for social housing (housing owned by not-for-profit bodies, such as local authorities and housing associations) by taking away the powers of local authorities to issue ‘blanket’ exclusion policies against certain classes of applicant (particularly, ex-offenders or people with chaotic lifestyles). Instead, a place on the housing register could only be denied to individuals who had neglected their responsibilities through severe cases of anti-social behaviour (whereby a court, if presented with the evidence, would have granted a full Possession Order on the property and where the applicant could not provide evidence of change (Harding and Harding, 2006: 148)). In addition, the 2002 Homelessness (Priority Need for Accommodation) (England) Order provided greater legal protection to particularly vulnerable groups of homeless people, including 16-17 year olds, those leaving prison and those fleeing domestic violence (Crisis, 2013).

The rights and responsibilities theme was clearly evident when the newly formed Rough Sleepers’ Unit (1999) outlined six key policies to tackle rough sleeping. These included focusing on those in greatest need and not giving up on the most vulnerable. However, there were also direct and indirect indications of the responsibilities of rough sleepers, including that rough sleepers would be expected to engage with services in support of lifestyle normalisation.

Policies to improve services for homeless people were developed alongside the first specific legislation on anti-social behaviour; the Crime and Disorder Act 1998 created Anti-Social Behaviour Orders (ASBOs). Anti-social behaviour was never clearly defined and Parr (2009: 371) pointed out that many academics ‘are highly critical of the dominant discourse of anti-social behaviour, particularly because of the way it demonizes those accused of such conduct’, on the basis that those accused are often the most vulnerable in society and themselves victims of multiple disadvantage. Brown (2004) suggests that anti-social behaviour policies focused on behaviour; motivation and intention were considered largely irrelevant, as were personal mitigating factors such as mental health problems.

The impacts of New Labour’s policies on homeless people were diverse. For example, Harding and Harding (2006: 148) suggest that, despite the intentions of the Homelessness Act 2002, informal blanket bans on the allocation of housing continued to operate, with a particularly severe impact on homeless people who had spent time in prison. However, effective provision was made for the housing of the most serious offenders through Multi-Agency Public Protection Arrangements. Cloke, May and Johnsen (2010: 37-39), in evaluating the impacts of policy towards single homeless people, suggest that, initially at least, there was an emphasis on welfare and care, involvement of the voluntary sector and prevention which led to a number of successes. Most notably, it was estimated that the numbers sleeping rough fell by two thirds between 1999 and 2001 (Randall and Brown, 2002). Similarly, Homeless Link (2010; cited in Whiteford, 2013) reported that policy and practice moved towards disrupting the flow of new rough sleepers on to the streets through the development of more assertive outreach models, alongside more personalised services for homeless people. The government also sought to provide homeless people with opportunities for education, work and training in order to boost self-esteem, build skills and provide connections with mainstream social networks (Whiteford, 2013: 13). It was hoped that, through the combined efforts of the statutory and voluntary sectors, homeless people could be transformed into fully engaged citizens (Jordan, 2001; cited in Whiteford, 2013: 13).

However, there is a consensus that the focus of policy changed during Labour’s second term of office (2001-5). The creation of ASBOs had a limited impact until 2003, when the Anti-Social Behaviour Act 2003 extended the powers available to tackle anti-social behaviour (Millie, 2008: 379) and the number of ASBOs issued increased sharply, reaching a peak in 2005 (Ministry of Justice, 2011). Furthermore, from 2003, the Home Office’s Anti-Social Behaviour Unit was asked to tackle ‘problem street culture.’ Begging was subsequently made a recordable offence (Cloke, May and Johnsen, 2010: 37) and anti-social behaviour legislation was used disproportionately against homeless people (Whiteford, 2013: 14-15). These changes coincided with the establishment of ‘Business Improvement Districts,’ which created new ways of policing urban spaces. The focus of policy appeared to move away from tackling the social exclusion experienced by homeless people and towards a concern to ‘take control of the streets’ (Cloke, May and Johnsen, 2010: 37-39) by removing those whose behaviour was considered problematic.

Despite this apparent change of focus, it would be a mistake to suggest that the later stages of the Labour governments simply marked a return to the punitive approaches of previous eras. Money continued to be made available to the voluntary sector to substantially improve the quality of services for homeless people through a range of programmes (Cloke, May and Johnsen, 2010: 242-243). For example, a continuing acknowledgement of multiple causes of homelessness, and a belief in the rights of homeless people to be given opportunities to improve their situation, was reflected in the rhetoric of the Hostels Capital Improvement programme. Launched in 2005, it aimed to make hostels ‘places of change’ where: ‘By encountering good services, they [homeless people] will find routes into education, employment and, ultimately, sustained independent living in their own home’ (DCLG, 2006: 5).

In 2010, the Labour Government was replaced by a Conservative-led coalition. Whiteford (2013: 26-27) notes that many of the coalition’s policies on homelessness are a continuation of those that began under New Labour. For example, the Government’s key consultation paper on homelessness, while not using the language of social exclusion, discussed the need to improve access to housing, healthcare and employment services for homeless people, while also drawing attention to their perceived anti-social tendencies by discussing the ‘negative impacts on communities and industries such as tourism from visible rough sleeping and associated activities, such as begging and street drinking’ (HM Government, 2011: 13). Homelessness services have been spared some of the most severe cuts to public spending, although reduced funding for the Supporting People programme is, at the time of writing, beginning to have a major impact (Harding, Irving, Fitzpatrick and Pawson, 2013).

The above analysis suggests that homelessness policy under New Labour was initially sympathetic, acknowledging complex causes of homelessness and seeking to give homeless people rights to housing and employment opportunities, in order to tackle their experiences of social exclusion. Despite a later shift towards addressing perceived anti-social behaviour such as begging, these elements remained in place throughout the Labour governments’ period of office. The twin concerns to provide access to better services while taking action in cases of anti-social behaviour have been maintained under the coalition. There have been positive evaluations of the development of services for homeless people during the periods of the Labour governments at both national (Fitzpatrick, Pawson, Bramley and Wilcox, 2011) and local (Harding, Irving, Fitzpatrick and Pawson, 2013) levels. However, the focus of the empirical material that follows is to evaluate, specifically, the partial shift away from historical assumptions of laziness and criminal/anti-social tendencies as the reasons for people being homeless, which date back to Victorian times and beyond.

**Homelessness and Anti-Social Behaviour in the North East of England**

This section draws on a number of studies[[1]](#endnote-1) conducted in the North East of England which involved interviews with staff of statutory and voluntary organizations dealing with homelessness, and homeless people themselves, in a range of contexts. The studies provided ample evidence of anti-social behaviour on the part of homeless people, with high incidences of drug and alcohol abuse, mental health problems, violent behaviour, familial breakdown, negative social networks, unemployment and dependency on benefits, begging, sex work and crime. The recollections of the homeless people interviewed included: ‘I got kicked out [of my last home] for noise’, ‘If I don’t do the sex work, I’ll go out and commit crime and shoplift and stuff while, if I go out and make money for like just having sex with someone…it’s easy money’ and ‘The assault was because some lad was picking on my pal’s girlfriend and he didn’t have the bottle to do anything so I done him in’. Staff working in hostels confirmed that there was a group of particularly chaotic homeless people who were involved in (often violent) crime and anti-social behaviour. These individuals were reported to be difficult to manage, particularly when their behaviour was linked to addictions.

In some cases, the anti-social behaviour of the homeless people interviewed was a direct trigger or risk factor for many of the problems they experienced, such as being evicted from the parental home, the marital home, rented accommodation and hostels. Talking about his relationship breakdown, one respondent said: ‘What I would do, I would get a half bottle of vodka and drink it neat in like twenty seconds and pass out and then wake up and do the same thing again. See, no wonder, she hoyed us out and divorced us.’

Consistent with historical assumptions, it was clear that some homeless people had deeply ingrained anti-social tendencies and struggled to accept any form of responsibility. Almost half of those interviewed reported that they had rarely attended school and gained few, if any, qualifications. A significant proportion had experimented with drugs and alcohol in their early teens, socialised with negative peer groups and exhibited violent behaviours, saying, for example: ‘I got thrown out of school when I was 11...I broke a teacher’s nose. I was getting home tutoring for about six month but I hit him with a pool cue so I have basically learnt myself as the years went on.’

Some homeless people also had very limited experience of work. Approximately one quarter of those interviewed had never worked, with a focus on employment often replaced by prolific offending. Problems of addiction were a frequently cited reason for losing jobs. Furthermore, when asked about their hopes for the future, employment did not always feature in respondents’ aspirations.

However, the data also provided much evidence to refute simplistic assumptions that homelessness is a result of moral, individual failings. Assumptions about the inherent laziness of homeless people were challenged by a strong ideology of work among the majority interviewed and the lack of indications of a sense of entitlement to welfare or a dependency culture. The motivation of the homeless people to work was evidenced by comments such as, ‘I need employment – It’s a big problem in my life,’ ‘I’ve always worked…this is the longest that I haven’t worked’ and ‘I really, really want to get my own job, stability, my own wages…’. A number of respondents were engaged in voluntary work or completing training courses to improve their employability. Securing paid work was linked to a positive sense of identity, the rebuilding of relationships (particularly with children) and continued attachment to mainstream values and cultural norms.

Policy undertones that homeless people are inherently anti-social, as outlined earlier in the chapter, could also be questioned when considering the broader life histories of respondents. Some of the homeless people interviewed had lived ‘normal’, unproblematic lives, with high levels of educational attainment, positive family relationships, long periods of stable employment and no pattern of substance misuse or criminality. For these people, the pattern of their lives had typically been radically changed by a significant life event – such as bereavement, relationship breakdown or redundancy – which triggered addiction, followed by eviction or the repossession of a home. In one case, a respondent had lived with their partner for six years in rented accommodation; they explained that, following the breakdown of the relationship: ‘I just cracked up...I basically just left it...packed all my stuff, rang the council and says I don’t want it and walked away.’ Another respondent explained that he had always been in employment and had owned several homes throughout his adult life. However, after the death of his wife, he became depressed and stopped paying household bills, which resulted in his home being repossessed.

The life experiences of respondents also demonstrated that long histories of anti-social behaviour was often linked to traumatic childhood experiences, including parental addiction, bereavement, going into local authority care, neglect and physical and sexual abuse. Descriptions of childhood included: ‘I can remember loads, but it is not very good stuff. My dad was a heroin addict. He used to beat [my mam] up and that and then she left him, so we had to leave a go to a refuge,’ ‘I had a pretty crap childhood...in and out of care...foster homes...since about the age of six. Mother, she was an alcoholic’ and ‘My brother dying, my granddad dying, my Da dying...unhappy times.’ One homeless person reported being set on fire at the age of 12, while another witnessed a murder at a young age. A number of respondents directly attributed their perceived anti-social behaviour to the impact of these events. For example, one said of a life of homelessness, sex work and exclusion: ‘If I didn’t get abused, I don’t think I’d have went on that path.’ Another who experienced domestic violence in early childhood said that drugs ‘made all my problems go away, especially on the coke.’

A further objection to the idea that homelessness is caused by the anti-social tendencies of the individual concerned was that this pattern of cause and effect was reversed in many cases. A number of respondents reported engaging in begging, sex work and crime as part of survival strategies to secure money and food while living on the streets. Typical comments here were: ‘I was going into sandwich shops and being sly and just taking stuff. I wasn’t happy about it, but I had to survive somehow’ and ‘Shoplifting, begging, things like that, you know...just to get by.’ In addition, drug and alcohol abuse were commonly reported as coping mechanisms while living on the streets, for example: ‘Drink, drugs...when you drink, you don’t feel the cold…they don’t warm you up, it just numbs the feeling.’ In some cases, homeless people reported committing crimes in order to avoid sleeping rough, with prison often seen as a short term housing solution. One respondent said that, after a conviction, he negotiated through his solicitor for a custodial sentence because he had nowhere to live. Another explained:

I was dossing on couches like couple of nights here, couple of nights there but people get sick, do you know what I mean, you can’t keep putting yourself onto people and, in the end I just thought right, I am just going to go to jail, get myself to court and get myself sent to jail.

Despite the historical reluctance of governments to accept structural explanations for homelessness, it was clear from the interviews with homeless people that structural barriers, in the areas of housing, welfare and employment, often reinforced the cycle of homelessness and anti-social behaviour. A history of rent arrears, offending or violent behaviour (often linked to mental health problems and addictions) prevented many homeless people from accessing housing, despite the measure taken by New Labour to reduce the number of exclusions. Voluntary sector respondents expressed frustration that social housing landlords were often unwilling to consider applications from homeless people. In other cases, the level of evidence of change required before applications would be considered was felt to be unrealistic:

We have somebody who’s been abstinent for a year, he had quite a considerable criminal record, a lot of offences related to alcohol, he had mental health issues as well...he was still barred from housing because of his alcohol related activity [...] the guy said ‘well I want to see two years [of change].’ It’s absolutely ridiculous.

A number of homeless people held similar views, saying, for example: ‘it’s a waste of time applying to the council.’ The private rented sector was similarly viewed as difficult to access.

It was noted above that some respondents regarded prison as a short-term solution to housing problems. It was clear, however, that such an approach was unlikely to produce benefits in the longer term; one respondent who worked for the local authority noted that being released from prison remained one of the most common causes of rough sleeping. This area has long been acknowledged as a weakness in service provision (Harding and Harding, 2006). Almost half of the homeless people interviewed who had been to prison reported receiving little, if any, support upon release, greatly reducing their likelihood of finding any form of accommodation. Indeed, many returned to rough sleeping or could secure accommodation only in a direct access hostel on leaving custody.

The lack of permanent housing available to respondents was resulting in lengthy stays in hostels run by voluntary sector organisations. Although some of this accommodation is of a high standard, having been refurbished as part of the Hostels Capital Improvement Programme, many respondents discussed difficulties associated with addressing problems of addiction while living in this type of environment. Comments included: ‘I’m struggling with my drug problem and they’ve put me in a place where people are going ‘do you want this?,’ ‘do you want that?’ and I’m struggling.’ Indeed, several reported returning to substance misuse while living in hostels. Nonetheless, some respondents discussed developing positive relationships in this environment, finding benefits from sharing accommodation with those who had had similar experiences and were keen to make positive changes to their lives.

There was also evidence of structural factors presenting barriers to employment following homelessness. Where respondents were sleeping rough, lack of sleep and difficulties in accessing hygiene facilities presented obvious difficulties. Other problems included offending histories and a lack of identifying documents, references and/or a bank account. These problems were compounded by the nature of the job market in the North East of England, with high levels of unemployment reduce the likelihood of homeless people securing employment when in competition with those with less problematic lives and fuller employment histories. Criminal records were a particular barrier, as one voluntary sector respondent explained: ‘In some cases, you need to do CRB [criminal records bureau] check working on building sites, which is crazy…it stops being about the rehabilitation of the offender and more about risk management from the organization.’ Homeless people also reported that the high cost of hostel accommodation often meant they were unable to accept work as they would be unable to afford the rent if they lost access to benefits. Their benefits could also be cut for being involved in voluntary work, where this was perceived to affect their ability to apply for paid work.

**Conclusion**

The data collected during recent studies in the North East of England highlights a number of reasons for questioning historical assumptions prevalent during the Victorian era that homeless people have inherent lazy and anti-social tendencies. There was undoubtedly substantial experience of anti-social behaviour on the part of the majority of the homeless people interviewed. However, the data supports the assertion of DeVerteuil, May and von Mahs (2009) that the experiences of homeless people are diverse. Some had lived normal, unproblematic lives, reflecting widely upheld social norms, until the occurrence of a disruptive life event.

There was also evidence to support criticisms of New Labour’s anti-social behaviour policies (see Parr, 2009 and Brown, 2004), particularly in relation to their impact on vulnerable groups such as homeless people. The anti-social behaviour of respondents was often a coping mechanism for sometimes major traumatic events. Despite assumptions that homelessness is caused or prolonged by anti-social tendencies, there was evidence that activities such as crime and substance misuse were frequently responses to, rather than causes of, homelessness.

The data supported the view of Jordan (1996; cited in Scanlon and Adlam, 2008: 534) that, despite fewer personal capacities and societal resources, many homeless people are able to manage their behaviours and participate usefully in a society which offers them effective protection and meaningful opportunities to participate. The policies of the Labour governments in seeking to provide opportunities for homeless people are therefore to be applauded. However, measures that sought to enhance the rights of homeless people often did not produce the benefits envisaged due to a range of structural barriers. The data confirmed that structural factors play a much bigger role than has historically been acknowledged. The willingness of some respondents to use prison as a short-term housing solution is a particularly striking example of the impact of structural difficulties. It is unfortunate that, in Labour’s later years in office, the desire to improve services to homeless people existed in tension with more traditional concerns to control their perceived anti-social tendencies, presented as concerns over the exercise of responsibilities.

While it may seem inappropriate to evaluate policy assumptions dating back to the fourteenth century using evidence collected over the last few years, the data suggests that assumptions that homeless people are inherently anti-social carry similar risks of counter-productive policy responses today to those noted in previous eras by Matthews (1986: 108). Attempts to punish and exclude homeless people tend to create and reinforce the very tendencies that are feared most.

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**Laws, Acts, Statutes**

1349 Vagrancy Act

1882 Casual Poor Law Act

1948 National Assistance Act

1977 Housing (Homeless Persons) Act

1996 Housing Act

1998 Crime and Disorder Act

2002 Homelessness Act

2002 Homelessness (Priority Need for Accommodation) (England) Order

2003 Anti-Social Behaviour Act

**Keywords**

anti-social behaviour; homelessness; New Labour; social exclusion,; vagrancy

**Abstract**

Historically, the visible engagement of homeless people in activities considered to be ‘anti-social,’ such as drunkenness and begging, have made them the target of government action on public disorder. Governments have been keen to blame increases in homelessness on individual failings, such as wilful idleness and dangerous criminal/anti-social tendencies, with policy responses underpinned by the principles of enforcement and exclusion. During the period 1997 to 2010, the New Labour governments demonstrated a more nuanced understanding of the causes of homelessness, giving recognition to the importance of structural factors and seeking to balance rights and responsibilities. However, even under this more ostensibly sympathetic approach, concerns to tackle social exclusion existed in tension with a perception that their anti-social behaviours needed to be addressed. A number of recent studies of homeless people have challenged assumptions that homelessness can simply be attributed to the failings on the part of the individual. Instead, these studies point to structural barriers that prevent homeless people from accessing housing and employment. Policies that fail to address these needs often contribute to precisely the type of anti-social behaviour that has been feared by policy makers for centuries.

**Index words**

addictions

alcohol

anti-social behaviour

assumptions

begging

crime

drugs

employment

homelessness

hostels

housing

individual factors

New Labour

prison

resettlement units

rough sleeping

social exclusion

structural factors

vagrancy

workhouse

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1. The chapter draws on four studies, undertaken between 2011 and 2014. The first study was peer-led research into the pathways to exclusion experienced by a sample of 82 homeless people accessing direct access accommodation and day centres in Newcastle. The second study was a cost-benefit analysis of the value of housing-related support for homeless people, using a local homelessness charity as a case study. The project involved interviews with 5 staff and 14 service users, quantitative analysis of 238 client outcomes records from 2011-2012 and a cost-benefit analysis of services. The third study was peer-led research into the experiences and service needs of sex workers in Tyne and Wear; interviews with 36 sex workers and 15 stakeholders were completed. The fourth study was an evaluation of a peer mentoring scheme, involving 39 interviews with offenders suffering problems of addiction. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)