

doorway

Moving on from Homelessness in North Wiltshire

The Face of Homelessness

Report on findings from the guest survey completed
November 2010 – December 2010

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Introduction:

Doorway conducted a guest survey in the months November and December 2010. The aim of this survey was two fold. First, to provide a profile of our guests, with the possibility of comparing the results with our previous survey completed in 2008. Second, to provide statistics to be used as evidence for funding bids.

The survey was based on the 2008 format but was expanded to include questions on local services; Housing Options and Homes for Wiltshire, and to cover issues surrounding prison, education and employment. I also added a section on voting issues relating to housing status due to a personal interest in that topic.

We had a very good response to the survey, with 42 respondents and only 1 refusal. The majority of surveys were completed through one to one discussion between a guest and volunteer, with the remainder being filled in by guests themselves. This allowed us to collect quite detailed information but due to shortage of volunteer time in a busy drop-in session did not allow us to collect a very broad sample.

In collating the information from these surveys I have noticed aspects of the survey that could be improved. Many of the issues discussed could be explored in greater detail, however the document was kept at a particular length so as to hold guests' attention. In retrospect there are also questions which could be phrased differently in order to present more specific information.

Results:

When first examining the information gleaned from the surveys the results were broadly what one would expect from an open access drop-in centre. 50% have been to prison, 63% suffer or have suffered from mental health problems requiring treatment, 90% are unemployed. But, when I began to further analyse the results I noticed pertinent connections between issues and also revealing results about specific problems.

'Homelessness' is very often used as a broad term to describe housing status, but in reality it describes a state of multi-deprivation, experienced by too many in our society. The issues explored in this survey and report are not stand alone problems but a set of interconnected issues that make up the obtuse meaning of homelessness. It is this interconnectivity between issues that makes homelessness a hard cycle to break and one that the state and society seems to fail to fully address. In this report I will focus on the issues of substance misuse, prison, mental health, employment and education and attempt to show the connection between them and the failure of the state and society to the homeless.

Substance misuse:

Our survey showed high levels of addiction to either alcohol, illegal or prescription drugs or both. 63% of respondents said that they were or had been addicted to alcohol and 44% said the same of illegal or prescription drugs. The subsequent question brought an interesting result in regards to treatment to these addictions. 85% of those with a one time addiction to alcohol sought treatment, whereas the result was higher with regards to illegal or prescription drugs, 94% had sought treatment for this addiction. It is possible to infer here that the normative approaches, of both individuals and society, towards alcohol and drugs affects people's response to their addiction. As alcohol is legal and culturally acceptable it could be the case that people find it more difficult to recognise a problematic relationship with drink as an addiction which requires treatment. The illegality of 'drugs' however enforces the belief that they are dangerous substances to be avoided. This cultural difference could explain why a larger percentage of our guests admitted a problem with alcohol but a higher percentage of those with prescription or illegal drug addictions sought treatment.

The second issue raised through the survey was the link between substance misuse and homelessness. Although often regarded as common knowledge, the relationship between the two still requires investigating. The survey showed that 71% of those who have been homeless have or have had an addiction to drugs or alcohol. The question that arises then is, is the use of substances a cause of or response to homelessness? When discussing this issue further with guests some commented that they could understand the use of drink and drugs as a coping mechanism to life on the streets but that their own problems had arisen due to already existing problematic substance misuse. If we explore the idea that substance misuse is a response to housing problems then investing in social housing would save lives from drug abuse and also save the state large amounts of money from cost to the NHS and the criminal justice system (90% of those who had been to prison have had an alcohol or drug addiction). If substance misuse is a cause of homelessness then drug and alcohol policies need to be reviewed and preventative measures put in place to stop people falling into the cycle of drug use and homelessness. Although these are crude analyses of problems based on a small set of statistics it is worth exploring the role drug and alcohol use and homelessness play in relationship with each other, and the consequences that follow.

Prison:

We asked our guests if they had ever been to prison, how many sentences they had served and at what age did they first go to prison. 50% of guests had been to prison, and 59% of these had served more than one sentence. This is a high rate of recidivism, although not disproportionate to the national average of 54%. 75% of the guests who had been to prison served their first sentence when they were 25 or under. And of these respondents 67% of them went on to reoffend. I suggest that these recidivism rates, in particular for

young people, shows a need for reform in the prison system. 100% of the respondents who had served more than 10 sentences were under 16 when they were first incarcerated. This suggests a failure of the prison system, and society in general, to offer young people an alternative to crime and re-offending. Prison appears to have become a system that institutionalises crime rather than offers reform.

However, as well as alluding to the failures of the prison system itself which leads to such high re-offending rates, we must also consider the broader picture. 90% of those who had served sentences have or have had substance misuse problems, 70% of those who have been incarcerated have or have had mental health problems and although not unusual for information taken from a homeless drop-in centre, 100% had been homeless. When considering this as the background to crime we can perhaps more fully understand the recidivism rates. When people's needs are not met and will not be met in society crime is often the outcome. It is this cycle of the obtuse meaning of homelessness that can lead to high rates of re-offending. When the alternative to prison is not really an alternative, there is no great incentive not to re-offend.

Employment:

90% of respondents to the survey were unemployed and 95% of these were surviving on benefits. Again, this is not an unusual result as we conducted the survey at a homeless drop in centre, but the further analysis provided more pertinent information. Of those 90% who are unemployed, 63% have a trade. Many of our guests are skilled workers, who in many cases are desperate to work. 33% of those with a trade are on Job Seeker's Allowance benefit, so actively seeking work. But 46% are on some kind of disability benefit. Society often propagates the stereotype of the 'benefit scrounger'. Although sometimes true, there are also many on benefits who are desperate to work. For example, J was a butcher by trade and really wanted to get back into work. However, he had serious health problems, was on disability benefit and was told that he couldn't work again. Both being long term unemployed and being told that you cannot work will impact not only financial situations but also mental health, another example of multiple deprivation.

Mental Health:

63% of respondents have suffered or are suffering from mental health problems which require treatment with 46% of the respondents currently receiving treatment. Although mental health is a broad term and this is an area where accuracy could be improved in the survey, these results are high. As with the issue of substance misuse, it is unclear whether mental health problems are a cause of or a response to homelessness. Out of the respondents who said they suffered from mental health problems 85% have been homeless. Of those who are currently homeless, 65% have experienced mental health problems. These figures could provide two conclusions, that

being homeless worsens your mental health or that there is not enough provision made, both through policy making and specialist housing, for those with mental health problems to stay housed. These conclusions are not necessarily mutually exclusive. It is obvious that being homeless for any amount of time affects mental health in a negative way, as do most of the other issues this report deals with. But housing providers also have a responsibility to ensure that their services are accessible to those with varied mental health problems and that adequate support is given to allow their service users to successfully manage their properties.

As the survey was conducted in a drop-in centre for the homeless and vulnerably housed it was likely that we were going to find a strong connection between mental health and homelessness. However, I did not expect to find such interconnectivity between different issues addressed in the survey. 77% of those with mental health problems have or have had an addiction to illegal or prescription drugs. 70% of respondents who have been to prison have experienced mental health problems, and this rises to 73% for those who first went to prison when they were 25 or under. These connections show that there is a section of society which experiences multiple deprivation. Citizens needs are not met or responded to by the state and there is a lack of alternatives and opportunities available to break this cycle of homelessness.

Education:

Research shows that education very often provides the alternative to any cycle of deprivation. Our survey suggests however that the state is failing to provide this education adequately, and in a way that offers opportunities to progress.

I was shocked to find that 56% of our respondents did not have GCSEs or the equivalent. 20% also said that they were not confident with their current literacy and numeracy skills. This lack of education is not acceptable in our society. When you take into consideration the level of education gained by our guests, the unemployment rate of 90% is not surprising.

It is not just the obvious effects of this failure in education that are pertinent. Out of those without GCSEs 68% had experienced addiction to alcohol or drugs. 59% had suffered from mental health problems. 82% had been homeless and 50% had been to prison. Once again the interconnectivity between issues is apparent. A greater investment in education may prevent the experience of multiple deprivation.

Voting Rights:

Due to personal interest I conducted research on housing and voting rights. 19% of respondents claimed that they were currently unable to vote because of their housing situation. When discussing voting with the guests it became clear that most did not vote and felt indifferent towards politics. The general

opinion seemed to be that there was no point in voting as nothing would change anyway. I did not foresee this level of apathy and to questions on whether housing situations had affected their voting rights the response was very often just 'I don't vote' regardless of whether they were limited in voting because of their current housing.

I would like to conduct further research into the definition of citizenship and the role being able to vote plays in this. This subject has been widely discussed over the last year with reference to the debate surrounding prisoners' voting rights and the recent census which also required an address in order to be accounted for. If those with no address cannot vote or feel disengaged from politics, and those without an address are not recorded through the census it is very easy to perpetuate the cycle of homelessness as their needs will never be heard let alone met.

Conclusion:

Although the survey was a simple piece of research from a specific sample of people it still provides an account of those experiencing multiple deprivation and suggests both causes and effects of homelessness. The survey shows that our guests encounter many interlinked issues including lack of education, substance misuse, unemployment, mental health problems and prison time. These issues are all part of the cycle of multiple deprivation, described as homelessness, which many people in British society experience.

I believe that education could be the answer to breaking this cycle but that currently our education system is not offering the opportunities it should. On a recent episode of the Channel 4 show 'Secret Millionaire' the entrepreneur Piers Linney volunteered within the education section of a young offenders institution. He was shocked to find that 50% of all offenders leaving prison cannot read. With 90% of all employment in the UK requiring literacy, the high levels of unemployment amongst our respondents are not surprising in light of their level of education. I also strongly suggest that with a better system of education many of those issues experienced by the respondents of these surveys could be avoided, and that the cycle of deprivation may be prevented or at least intercepted.

With the current swathe of cuts to public sector organisations, and the subsequent competition for other funding resources it is unlikely that this cycle of deprivation will be improved in the near future. In fact, cuts are likely to increase deprivation and affect many organisations that are working with the homeless. Already guests at the drop-in centre are feeling powerless in response to unemployment, benefit cuts and the closure of local services. This current economic situation is likely to deepen the deprivation felt by many and perpetuate the cycle of homelessness.