



The Magazine of FEANTSA - The European Federation of National Organisations Working with the Homeless AISBL

# Homeless in Europe

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## Looks Can Be Deceiving: Perceptions of Homelessness



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## Looks Can Be Deceiving: Perceptions of Homelessness

The image, or images, of homelessness and homeless people in the collective psyche can be different from the way they are considered by professionals working in the field. People with experience of homelessness, the general public, researchers, social workers, journalists, to name but a few, may have very different views of what it means to be homeless and how homelessness should be perceived. The way they talk about homelessness can differ widely too.

In their presentation, *"You Can Judge them on how they Look...": Homelessness Officers, Medical Evidence and Decision-Making*, given at the 2012 European Research Conference on Homelessness, Joanne Bretherton, Caroline Hunter and Sarah Johnsen showed how first impressions and perceptions of vulnerability can even influence professional decisions taken about how best to offer support to a homeless person, used over and above medical evidence and actual circumstances.<sup>1</sup> Our attitudes, and even prejudices, can define our response to homelessness – and this applies to those working in the field as well as lay people.

FEANTSA sees defining homelessness as fundamental to making progress towards ending it. It developed the ETHOS Typology of Homelessness and Housing Exclusion to this end.<sup>2</sup> A working definition can go some way to dispelling prejudices about homeless people. But what are these prejudices, why are they there, and does everyone have them?

Moreover, what can the way homelessness is perceived tell us about the best way of going about ending it, and the best way of getting everyone – the public, governments, professionals in the field – on board to achieve that goal?

The articles that follow give examples of how homelessness and homeless people are perceived, remembered, written about, visualised, described, lexicalised, justified and vilified, and should give pause to anyone with an interest in the subject, or subjects...

J. David Hulchanski, from the University of Toronto, questions the usefulness of the term 'homelessness' and condemns its use as a catch-all term for a host of serious systemic social and economic failures. He says the lack of an actual definition for the term means that various observers, commentators and actors are free to use their imagination. He argues that the lack of definition encourages focusing on the individual to find a common factor that can explain homelessness, and thus leads to 'victim-blaming'. He also considers that the term is too broad and therefore hides the actual specific problems that specific groups face and allows for a diverse set of vague and general responses. He argues for clearly naming specific societal injustices as social problems requiring action.

Julien Damon, Visiting Professor at Sciences Po, France, also focuses on the semantics of homelessness, and assesses the use and usefulness of the term *'sans-abrisme'* (a technical term coined by FEANTSA to render the English term 'homelessness' into a French noun) in French political and journalistic discourse. He also addresses the evolution of other terms to describe the phenomenon in common usage in France. He points out that although French speakers are often quick to question and dismiss the term (on account, among other things, of its overly 'administrative' nature), it facilitates more comprehensive and intelligible debate on the issue with all other countries across the globe.

Girolamo Grammatico, head of La Casa di Cartone in Italy, argues for a new language with which to refer to homeless people so that we may perceive them differently and so that they may perceive themselves differently, thus giving them the possibility of becoming something other than the 'homeless' label assigned to them. He also argues that helping homeless people get out of homelessness should be a question of justice, not a question of charity. Thus homeless people will not have to ask for something that is already everyone's right – because it will be their right too.

### LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

We would like to give you the chance to comment on any of the articles which have appeared in this issue. If you would like to share your ideas, thoughts and feedback, please send an email to the editor, [suzannah.young@feantsa.org](mailto:suzannah.young@feantsa.org).

The articles in *Homeless in Europe* do not necessarily reflect the views of FEANTSA. Extracts from this publication can be quoted as long as the sources are acknowledged.



Lasana T. Harris, from Duke University, USA, gives the neuroscience explanation to people's dismissive or negative reactions to homeless people, describing research that attempted to understand the phenomenon and explore ways to change it. He explains that people's brains can spontaneously dehumanise homeless people and do not attribute them a mind – do not see them as a thinking being – and so they fail to empathise with them. He describes people's response as a socialised one which has repercussions on the brain – and says that it is possible to reverse people's negative reactions by allowing them to interact with a homeless person – they can therefore conceive of them as a thinking being and perceive them differently, even positively. The brain being very malleable, social context can radically change brain activation patterns and presumably how we perceive other people, so changing the cultural stereotypes surrounding homelessness (such as the assumption that it is their fault that they are homeless) might be a viable strategy for changing the perceptions of the homeless.

Bálint Miscetics, from the housing rights activist organisation, *A Város Mindenkié* (The City is for All), discusses the criminalisation of homelessness, its dangerous repercussions and the ways in which exclusionary political discourse in Hungary tries to justify it – by trying to single out homeless people as strange and different from mainstream society, referring to their presence as an invasion, dehumanising them and denying them citizenship and blaming them for their situation. He argues that this attitude must be countered so that the right to housing can be a reality for all, and that we have a moral imperative to do so because homeless people are our fellow citizens and fellow human beings.

Cameron Parsell from The University of Queensland and Mitch Parsell from Macquarie University explore the concept of homelessness as a choice, and the different meanings of and explanations for this, ranging from judgement and prejudice on the part of observers who assume homelessness is a deviant or poor choice or use the idea as a justification for a lack of political action, to homeless people saying they have chosen their homelessness in order to assert their agency and wish to belong to the mainstream

society that rejects them. They argue that in some instances it can be seen as a constrained choice – being the best of a selection of unattractive options.

Lise Grout, Cécile Rocca and Christophe Louis, from *Morts de la Rue* in France explain their struggle to raise awareness about and improve data on death among homeless people, in order to condemn the fact that the death of those living on the streets is an issue about which too little is known and which is insufficiently researched. Their aim is to better honour the dead and take better care of the living. They ask whether the lack of statistics surrounding the death of homeless people is a mere coincidence or, rather, intentional so as not to reveal the weaknesses of the housing, care and re-integration system.

Sonia Olea and Daniel Illescas present the Caritas Spain *Nadie Sin Hogar* (No-one Without a Home) campaign and its attempts to change people's perceptions of homelessness and campaign for the rights of homeless people. They describe the campaign's efforts to implicate the public in the campaign to condemn and question perceptions that are becoming ever more popular about who is entitled to social rights using slogans, school visits, campaign material, demonstrations and, more recently, social networks.

Jon Dean from Sheffield Hallam University, United Kingdom, explores the ethics of using (inaccurate) images of homelessness and homeless people in campaign advertising that aims to raise money for homeless services. He describes the moral dilemma faced by services that have a duty to report accurately the realities of those they are trying to help but are also compelled to compete in a crowded marketplace, and often resort to using hard-hitting advertisements to attract potential donors or political support. He describes including users of homeless services in debates about the appropriateness of images used to represent their situation and raise money for the services they use, asking what is most important to them – an accurate representation of the realities they face or the continuation of the services they use, if those two things are indeed mutually exclusive.

FEANTSA would like to thank all the authors who contributed to this issue of the magazine.

1 <http://www.feantsaresearch.org/spip.php?article25&lang=en>

2 <http://feantsa.org/spip.php?article120&lang=en>



## Homelessness, Whatever That Is, Is Not the Problem

By J. David Hulchanski, PhD,<sup>1</sup> *Factor-Inwentash Faculty of Social Work, University of Toronto, Canada*

The word “homeless” is clear and simple. The word “homelessness” is not.

In North America, the word “homelessness” is a relatively recent invention. In the 1980s it became a commonly used catch-all term for a host of serious systemic social and economic failures. The recent Occupy Movement successfully put on the political agenda the root cause of many of these failures – the huge and growing income and wealth gap. Until the 1980s, even Canada and the United States were creating slightly more equal societies as an increasing majority earned middle incomes. There has now been three decades of income polarisation – the decline of the middle-income group – as more people find themselves at the bottom and top of the income distribution.

Before the 1980s, people in the wealthier Western nations did not know what it was like to be unhoused. They had housing, even if that housing was in poor condition. Some transient single men in cities were referred to at times as “homeless.” But the term had a different meaning then. Confusion is created by not making the distinction between the notions of *house*, the physical structure, and *home*, the social and psychological place that a house should be. Prior to the 1980s, being *homeless* generally referred to people who were no longer associated with a family home. Some were unhoused but most lived in poor quality “skid row” housing.

For example, a 1960 report by Toronto’s Social Planning Council, *Homeless and Transient Men*, defined a “homeless man” as one with few or no ties to a family group, who was thus without the economic or social support a family home provides. The men were *home-less*, not *house-less*. They were housed, albeit in poor-quality housing, such as rooming houses or accommodation provided by charities. But they had no home. Being homeless referred at that time mainly to a social status – people unassociated with a family home – not to the place they were, or were not, physically housed on any given night.

Housing is the largest budget item for any household. As housing costs rose in the 1980s, as real incomes fell for many, and as many social support programs were curtailed, more people in wealthy nations found themselves periodically unhoused. In the immediate post-WWII era, *rehousing* processes were developed. Starting in the 1980s, the ethos of smaller government and freer markets, with the resulting growth in economic inequality, created numerous *dehousing* processes.

But this is analysis with the benefit of hindsight. At the time there was a need to give a name to the obvious rise in the number and diversity of people finding themselves unhoused. Unfortunately, the word “homelessness” filled that need. Adding the suffix “-ness” turns the adjective “homeless” into an abstract noun. To be homeless, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, is to have “no home or permanent abode.” The word “homeless” is clear and simple. The word “homelessness” is not.

“Homelessness” became the name for a set of diverse societal problems no one to this day manages to define precisely. Because it has no specific definition, commentators, researchers, politicians, and voters are free to imagine whatever they want. It tosses all sorts of societal injustices into one handy term. The term seems to make sense because it refers to one common fact shared by the people being defined, their lack of a stable, adequate place to live. By focusing on people affected, rather than the actual problems, it became easy to “blame the victim.”

It is therefore convenient, but not helpful, for governments and charitable organisations to lump a multitude of social problems under one general term, “homelessness”. What changed since the 1980s is that the groups that are disadvantaged because they face systemic economic inequalities, discrimination, and violence on the basis of gender, ‘race’, age, poverty, disability, sexual orientation, immigration or Aboriginal status, also face a new disadvantage, the possibility of becoming dehousing.

Lumping this new injustice with so many other injustices under one term is not helpful because it hides the actual specific problems that specific groups face. It especially hides the causes. It allows for a diverse set of vague and general responses, none of which actually help much. This leads to public despair that anything can be done about such a “complex” problem.

Homelessness, whatever that is, is not the problem. We need to clearly name specific societal injustices as social problems requiring action. Economic inequality is an injustice. Economic inequality exacerbated by prejudice and discrimination directed at certain specific groups is a more specific set of injustices. As we define more precise societal injustices we can better identify their characteristics, likely causes, and a range of possible responses. Aggregating many societal injustices into a catch-all term like “homelessness” is not helpful. We have a thirty-year history of doing just that. Who or what is better off today than in the 1980s?

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# The Semantics of Homelessness in France

By Julien Damon, Visiting Professor at Sciences Po,<sup>1</sup> France

The French term *sans-abrisme* is a literal translation of the English term 'homelessness'. It is a neologism which is still rarely used in France, except in certain expert circles, in universities or in government.

Rather than the term *sans-abrisme*, expressions such as *exclusion* (exclusion), *grande exclusion* (major exclusion), *errance* (vagrancy), *question sans-abri* (the homeless issue) or *question SDF* (those of no fixed abode) are instead used to refer to the phenomenon. In order to get an idea of just how rarely the term *sans-abrisme* has been used in France to date, we can refer back to the results of an exercise which involved counting the number of times certain terms appeared in the title of dispatches released by France's National Press Agency (AFP).

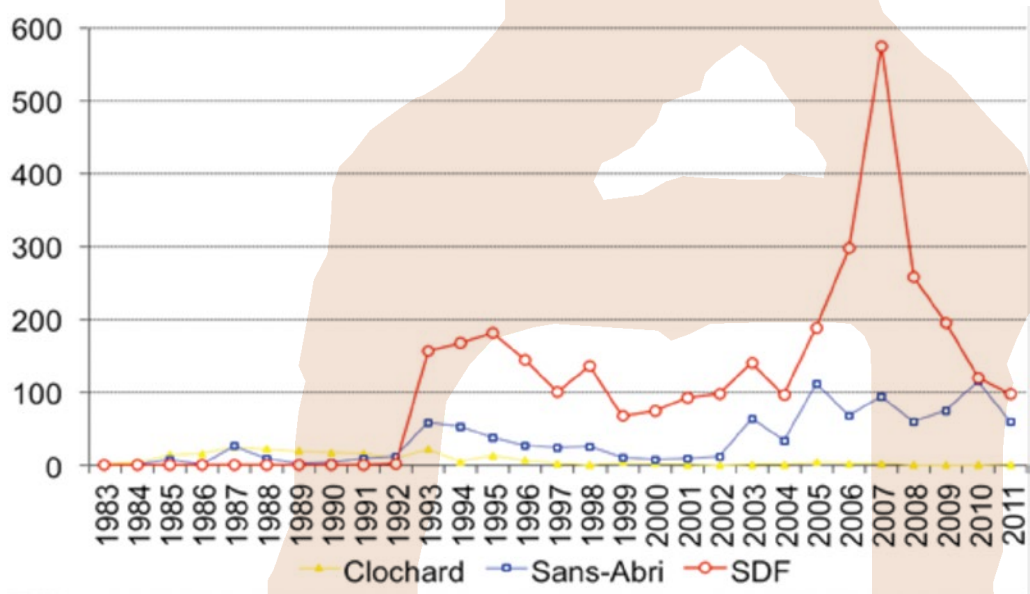
We can also conduct the same experiment with terms traditionally associated with homelessness, in this case *sans-abri* (homeless person), *SDF* (person of no fixed abode) and *clochard* (tramp). The graph produced is strikingly clear.

First of all, it creates a picture of the important place the issue occupies on both the French media and political agendas. Two peaks on the graph are particularly noteworthy. The first is in 1993 when the issue was the hot topic within the political arena, with two bitterly cold winters, an economic recession, a major political campaign and the entry onto the market of two street magazines, which catapulted the problem in to the spotlight. The second peak occurs in 2007. This spike is the result of the movement *Les Enfants de*

*Don Quichotte*, whose campaigns involved erecting tents across Paris. The movement and its political repercussions would be so far-reaching as to prompt the adoption of a law which saw the right to housing become '*opposable*.' The law declared that not only were local authorities obliged to ensure that decent housing was available to all, but that those who did not enjoy this right were now able to take the authorities responsible to court.

In addition to revealing how the importance attached to the issue in debate has changed over time, this graph also provides information on how the terms used to describe the phenomenon have themselves evolved. It is clear from the graph that the abbreviation *SDF*, which appears in police records from the nineteenth century onwards, only very recently established itself as a widely used term. It combines the meanings of the terms *sans-logis* (an absence of housing), *sans-abri* (literally 'a person without shelter,' or disaster victim), *clochard* (a person living on the outskirts of society who does not require assistance from the state), *vagabond* (someone who tends to inspire fear), and *mendiant* (beggar - a person who asks for money in public places). Until the early 1990s, the terms *clochard* and *sans-abri* were those most commonly used to refer to homeless people. However, from 1993 onwards, the three-letter abbreviation *SDF* has supplanted all other terms. The graph clearly shows that the term '*clochard*' has almost entirely disappeared from the French language, whilst the term *sans-abri* is still in use. As the issue of the homeless shoots back up to the top of the political

Appearances of the terms '*SDF*', '*clochard*' and '*sans-abri*' in the titles of wires from the French National Press Agency (AFP).



<sup>1</sup> [www.eclairs.fr](http://www.eclairs.fr)



agenda, the term *sans-abri* becomes proportionately significant once more. The fact that this term is also frequently used to refer to the victims of fires, earthquakes or floods should also be borne in mind.

Since 1993, the term *SDF* has appeared on average in more than 200 dispatch titles every year. The term *sans-abrisme* appeared only once, in 2009. On one occasion it appeared in the title of a dispatch, but this was in actual fact the only wire ever to use the term throughout the text (and not solely in the title). Therefore, to conclude that the term *sans-abrisme* has not yet firmly established itself in everyday language is to make something of an understatement.

Some will no doubt retort that this graph is only one specific source of information. This is indeed true, but this one, unique source provides information on everything which is said in the other media and in all of the speeches to emerge from the political arena. The total absence of the term from the press (with the exception of one dispatch) is a clear indication that the term is still only rarely used.

The fact remains that the term is gradually entering common parlance among both operators and experts. This development is notably linked to efforts made at a European level to coordinate develop joint initiatives and exchange of good practice. Nevertheless, the use of the term remains closely confined to a small circle of experts and has not yet received the recognition as a standard term which comes from widespread use. On the contrary, in fact, people are often quick to question and dismiss the term (on account, among other things, of its overly 'administrative' nature). The acronym *SDF* was met with the same reaction. It was a fairly controversial term in the early 1990s, accused of masking the reality of human suffering in bureaucratic jargon.

Ultimately, whilst in France, the term *sans-abrisme* has only emerged in certain circles, there is nevertheless no doubt whatsoever that it facilitates more comprehensive and intelligible debate with all other countries across the globe. These are countries which use the English term 'homelessness' or a literal translation thereof. It is highly likely that such translations must often closely resemble *sans-abrisme*, a term which is lexically bizarre but unmistakably clear in the message it conveys.



## Putting it into Words: From Talking Social to Doing Social

By **Girolamo Grammatico**,<sup>1</sup> *President, La Casa di Cartone, Italy*

*The word is the shadow of the deed.*

*Democritus*

Philosophers have often thought about how language shapes our world. We can confirm that, in today's world, a large number of people are adapting to new forms of communication, to new language use, following a kind of reverse process. In this process, the means of communication becomes central, introducing a specific way of communicating that, in turn, conditions the message and thus its content (for example, text messages or social network status updates).

However, in social worker-service user relationships – referring specifically to the problem of *homeless people* – we must maintain fixed reference points and put the etymological meaning, semantics and the purpose of our words at the centre of our communication. We should be especially aware of the limits of a language we take for granted, keeping in mind Wittgenstein's important lesson, which states that "*The limits of my language are the limits of my world*". Ending up in poverty means suddenly landing on an unknown planet with an unfamiliar language. Our homeless subject takes on parts of this language and begins to use them in order to construct his or her reality and his or her sense of self. We must therefore work on the assumption that language conditions action. If we want to combat *housing exclusion*<sup>2</sup> from a new angle, we might find useful Derrida's idea of *inhabiting language*, which is necessary for *inhabiting the world*.

Another premise that is useful for our reflection is considering the *homeless* "category" as an essentially urban phenomenon that is spreading in a haphazard manner. This is why our approach will look at a specific phenomenon within a specific communicative logic (i.e. that used by social services and Italian cities and national media).

It is useful to reflect on the language used in contexts of social disadvantage, especially by the media and by journalists, as well as by social workers and those working for volunteer organisations.

Let's start with the definition of "*homeless people*" which vests the destitute person with an image based on that which s/he does not have (a house), rather than what s/he is (a subject with resources that can be

used). The image someone who loses their job, their possessions and their house, and who ends up living on the street has of him/herself is already significantly damaged by this condition. The definition of *homeless*, once articulated, does not shape the person's behaviour, rather it defines his/her identity as a given. Thus, someone who is defined in this way will recognise him/herself in a group that s/he did not choose, that was forced onto him/her at that s/he will find difficult to shake off because it will be the basis of his/her interactions with social services and civil society. *Not having* becomes a way of being, of being in the world, of being in the eyes of the world. Parents are taught not to say to their children "You're stupid", because the child could identify with stupidity and find it more difficult to correct his/her own behaviour. We are taught that it is better to say "You did a stupid thing". Therefore, saying "You're homeless", defines a group of citizens by locking them in an image that bears no resemblance to the real possibilities they have of being something different.

Language like that constantly makes reference to something that seems to be perceived as a personal failure. It is a word that is linked to failure and, often, to *blame*. Feeling like we are to blame, or are somehow responsible for our own poverty means that it becomes more difficult to take up the opportunities to get out of it. Being blamed for having lost everything leaves space for a feeling of shame for being someone who has lost everything. Consequently, feelings of shame lead people to hide themselves away. From here, it is not such a stretch to thinking about another term - one that has helped many a television channel get rich. Italy has started using an adjective which, if made into a noun, identifies homeless people: *the invisible*. It should be clarified that *invisibility* is a characteristic intrinsic to objects (in the imaginary world of comic books, it has always been a super power), which is an integral part of the body. So, if we apply this to homeless people, the definition of the term *the invisible* leads us to consider them as possessing a characteristic that is specific to them. And yet how can we call the long lines of people waiting to be served at soup kitchens invisible? How can the bodies lying where people walk in the biggest stations in Europe be invisible? How can newspapers and television programmes define the very people

[S]aying "You're homeless", defines a group of citizens by locking them in an image that bears no resemblance to the real possibilities they have of being something different.

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<sup>2</sup> Translator's note: The term used in Italian is "disagio abitativo" – "disagio" being "unease" ("abitativo" is "related to housing"). It thus conveys a sense of distress that is missing from the English equivalent.



they write and make programmes about as invisible? It almost seems as if a sort of communicative schizophrenia has infected the way journalists use language. Of course, it may be that behind all that lies the provocative intention to raise the issue by tugging at people's heart strings, but if we examine the media success of such a poetically beautiful term as *invisible*, we are struck by the unconscious excuse that lies behind it – we wish to ease our guilty conscience. It may be fitting to think about the *social blindness* and *political blindness* that prevents us from having a clear picture of the situation. Talking of blindness would shift the focus onto us and away from them (if an “us” and “them” is still plausible) and would oblige us to decide whether or not to correct our visual “impairment” that stops us from seeing properly. If someone is invisible, how can I help him/her? How can I help someone who doesn't show him/herself to me? If that person does not come willingly to me, how can I get close enough to help him/her? To paraphrase the French psychoanalyst, Jacques Lacan: *language, before meaning something, first means something for somebody*. That means that we shouldn't just ask ourselves what a specific word means to us, rather we should ask what it means to the recipient of my message and for the somebody it refers to. That somebody, as we have already said, is a person who has lost everything, in a context in which *having* is valued.

They are also often defined as *solitary* people. And yet, solitude, when it is sought-after, longed for, is a virtue, an opportunity. To be exact, those who experience poverty live in *social isolation* that is only similar to solitude in its outward aspect. Anthropology teaches us that every human being, during the course of his/her life, takes on the *solitary* persona as a necessary experience. Solitude is a sign of our own individuality, whereas isolation is the enemy of our social being. Isolation brings to mind closed spaces, while people who live, or rather *survive* on the streets constantly have to put up with the public display of their own condition. In reality, isolation means that person necessarily has is no relationship with his/her context, in this case, other people. But who are these other people? We are not only talking about institutions, but above all about their fellow citizens. Because isolation is, at the same time, the product and the origin of the loss of *social capital*, understood as the quality of the relationships we maintain. Indeed,

if we keep in mind the fact that every person has qualities, resources (and, therefore, *human capital*) that can be tapped into, they cannot express themselves without that social capital that is necessary for integration. What is social capital made of? As we have said, it can be identified in the *quality* of relationships, which reach their peak when *confidence* (in the other and in the future) and the *capacity to cooperate* are activated in the individual. And it is here that we must return to our reflection on language. Victims of poverty must always think about their *basic needs*, remaining focused on themselves and on their own needs. Anchored in the present, anyone who has to think anew about food, hygiene and finding a place to stay every day, cannot entertain thoughts about the future. Slowly, they begin to see the future as an eternal present. Thinking about needs, from this perspective, implicates every player in the game: from poor people to the institutions, from organisations to the academic world.

It is also necessary and urgent to concentrate on people's desires. If needs are obstacles, things that are lacking, desires are a force leading to tomorrow, a leap into the future and towards other people. Desires activate man's intentions, which provide the necessary impetus for reaching a goal. In order to do this, we need to *shake up* social services (starting with the use of language) so that they no longer think only about destitute people's needs. Shaking up social services means, literally, grabbing something that needs to change, and giving it a shake, starting from the inside so that it improves its ways of working. It means breaking the deadlock that sees a shakeup as a sort of intentional, damaging trap and taking action so that it instead becomes a tool to help keep pace with the necessities of the sector. From there, the pathway followed by a person in difficulty is not limited to satisfying his/her needs, but becomes a process that leads from needs to desires. We thus transform *the homeless* from objects of assistance into active subjects in integration. However, there can be no integration without interaction and this is where we go back to the need to activate processes that create relationships between citizens, institutions and marginalised groups. It's with the word *relationship* that it really becomes important to get back to the real meaning of words. As well as the concept of creating links, the term brings with it the idea of *carrying together* (from the Latin, *re fero*, to





*bear, carry*) to the centre of the connection between people. It means *carrying together* problems, desires, thoughts. There are no solutions to a social problem considered as such if it is not shared and shouldered by both members in a relationship. So, supporting homeless people means combining necessary structural interventions (that we have intentionally avoided addressing here) with social action that is consciously the product of a language designed to foster healthy, long-lasting, stable relationships. This language must not only be well thought-out when used by policy makers or by social workers, but also when used by the general public and by the very people in difficulty in a constant exchange that is not only semantic but also emotional. When language does not inform, it evokes meaning, as explored above. It evokes metaphors that take root in our mind and conditions our actions. Metaphors, as well as being figures of speech, are often figures of thought, images that appear in our minds and stand for concepts. This is why using an appropriate language becomes imperative, but it becomes especially necessary to dare to use a new and creative language that can be the basis for new models of intervention. New metaphors. If we push the logic of metaphor, we could be bought to examine another term that the Italian media (and not only in Italy) often use to define homeless people: *the last (underdogs)*. The concept of “the last” comes from Matthew 20:16 from the so-called “Parable of the Workers in the Vineyard”. Without getting into the theological merit of the parable, we can use the metaphor as a measure for examining which images the word *the last* evokes in the mind of city-dwellers. Parables aside, the “last” are those who are at the back of the queue, who are at the bottom of the list of priorities, who are not among the winners standing on the podium. The last thing is the thing still left to do, the last one is the one who won’t make it. The last one is the one who didn’t come first. First compared to someone else? Before what? Perhaps, by defining some people as *the last*, we have “sentenced” them to staying there. If someone who loses his/her house is to be simply *last*, s/he will forget the situations in which s/he could still be first.

On the basis of these assumptions, we can work through one of the legal theorist Zagrebelsky’s hypotheses: *few words, few ideas*. We could say: unclear words, wrong ideas; new words, different

ideas. We must spread new words that conjure up new suggestions and new solutions. We have to take risks, trying out for neologisms that are proactive and shared, that raise awareness and that evoke new metaphors in order to supplant the old, negative ones. But this exercise – that may seem purely philosophical or conceptual – can only become real if it is linked to the direct experience of all those who are in that situation: an experience that links homeless people with citizenship through participation, not only in politics, but also in art and recreation – as well as participating in society, of course.

To do this, it is fitting to distinguish which areas charity should be responsible for and which areas justice should be responsible for. It is a common conception that helping poor people is purely an act of charity. This is the metaphor that associates social assistance with marginality. But charity, as an individual quality, is not a necessary one. I can be or not be a charitable man, but this certainly does not affect my being a citizen in a democracy made up of rights and responsibilities. Even “bad people” or rather the “uncharitable” can be citizens in a democratic state that requires people to respect its (fair? legitimate? this isn’t the right context to discuss that) laws. Fighting citizens’ impoverishment, helping those who are already poor, lifting those who have ended up in poverty back out of it – all this must be the responsibility of the justice system. The same justice system that everyone, without exception, must rely on and that the State and every citizen uses as a reference. It is only in this way that it won’t just be up to a few “chosen ones” to change things, rather it will become a cultural model shared by every inhabitant. Because inhabiting a territory also means inhabiting its values and ideas. And the idea of delegating to someone something that is everyone’s duty is a dangerous idea.

In conclusion, people who lose everything and end up on the street are not invisible, solitary homeless people, those who come last, looking for charity.

They are citizens with qualities that should be celebrated and who we “see negatively”, people we often isolate and who have a claim to justice. We must give them the possibility to be visible, to come first, to be something other than that which they don’t have.

**It becomes necessary to dare to use a new and creative language that can be the basis for new models of intervention.**



## The Brain on Homelessness

By **Lasana T. Harris, Ph.D.**<sup>1</sup> *Assistant Professor, Center for Cognitive Neuroscience, Psychology & Neuroscience, Arts & Sciences, Duke University, USA*

**It is possible that people dehumanise the homeless because they have no idea what the mind of a homeless person is actually like.**

As a social psychologist and neuroscientist, it has always been fascinating to me that people can pay more attention, extend more care, and feel more love, kindness, and human emotions to animals such as pets, but pass the homeless guy on the street corner without even sparing him a glance. Recent advances in neuroscience techniques begin to provide insight to this amazing phenomenon. These techniques such as functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) allow us a peek at how the brain responds to different types of people. Such research has shown that homeless people reduce activation in the brain regions that support social cognition. But what does this mean? My research described below attempt to explain and change this phenomenon.

Social cognition is a spontaneous response to other people; it allows us to figure out what someone else is thinking. Knowing what is on someone else's mind is a way of better understanding that person, and allows us to predict the behaviour of that person. Moreover, thinking about someone else's mind is a prerequisite for pro-social processes like empathy and altruism. Though not simply reserved for people (it is possible to engage social cognition to non-humans, like pets, organisations, even religious figures), social cognition is necessary to perceive another as a full human being. The fact that homeless people fail to engage brain regions underlying this most important psychological process suggests that people dehumanise the homeless. This phenomenon—dehumanised perception—is currently under scientific investigation to understand the contextual and culture factors that give rise to it, but also to discern the consequences of dehumanised perception for both the homeless and the person who views the homeless as such.

The first study to document this effect simply had participants at an America university view pictures of a bunch of different types of people, including the homeless, while they decided which emotion best captured how the pictured person made them feel. Previous social psychological research documented that the homeless made people feel disgust and contempt in contrast to a more complex, social emotion like pride, admiration, envy, jealousy, pity, or sympathy. Most other types of people elicit one of these later emotions, suggesting that even if their perception was somewhat negative, it was at best

mixed or ambivalent—it contained both positive and negative elements. Emotions like pride, envy, and pity can only be experienced in the actual, implied, or imagined presence of another person, making them *social* emotions. However, emotions like disgust are considered *basic* emotions because both people and objects could elicit these emotions. Furthermore, the homeless are perceived as low on trait warmth and competence, the two fundamental trait dimensions inferred when perceiving other people. In addition, participants use less social cognition language when describing a day in the life of a homeless person. This provides further evidence consistent with the brain imaging result. Therefore all this social psychological evidence suggested that people perceived the homeless very differently, inspiring the investigation of the brain's response to the homeless.

Subsequent neuroscience research has begun to delineate the boundary conditions of this dehumanised perception effect to the homeless. In another study, participants were instructed to guess the food preferences of the homeless or simply guess their age. Age judgments are categorical; they put the person in either an old, middle-aged, or young category. This categorisation does not require a consideration of person's mind. However, a preference judgment is a social cognition—it is near impossible to infer someone's preference without thinking about his or her mind. This research reveals re-activation of the social cognition brain network during the preference judgment, not during the age judgment. This result is important because it illustrates that even though brain activity reflects (the absence of) a process that does not mean that people are hard-wired to perceive others in this manner. The brain is very malleable, and social context, like having a different judgment goal when perceiving another, can radically change brain activation patterns and presumably how we perceive other people.

Other research underlines the malleability of dehumanised perception of the homeless. It is possible that people dehumanise the homeless because they have no idea what the mind of a homeless person is actually like. People may imagine the minds of the homeless to be extremely unpleasant, so they decide not to think about such minds to spare themselves the unpleasantness. But actual experience thinking

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about the mind of a homeless person—something that occurs naturally during a social interaction—may also ameliorate dehumanised perception. To test this idea, participants had an interaction with a homeless person at a soup kitchen in between brain scans. Though all participants showed a dehumanised perception brain response during the initial brain scan, results suggest that participants who had a social interaction with a homeless person changed their brain activation patterns during the second brain scan. A similar pre-post change was not observed in participants who simply watched a documentary on homelessness, suggesting that the social interaction was crucial for securing the change. Moreover, the extent to which participants spent more time interacting with a homeless person at the soup kitchen showed greater pre-post change in their brain activity. These results provide further support for the notion that dehumanised perception may result from a lack of experience or familiarity thinking about the minds of the homeless.

Another reason why people may dehumanise the homeless may surround the emotion disgust. As described above, disgust is a non-social basic emotion. Disgust signals avoidance of possible contaminants. Feeling disgust in the presence of a person may signal that the person is somehow contaminating and thoughts about their mind should be avoided. In another scientific study, participants underwent cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) aimed at changing their disgust response to homeless people. CBT is primarily used to change emotional responses in people with different types of phobias. It teaches people that their emotional responses are irrational, and they have the ability to change those emotional

responses by changing their thinking. This research study, run in New York City (a place with a high prevalence of homelessness), found that CBT was effective at changing the disgust response to homeless people and increased social cognition to the homeless.

Together all of this social psychological and neuroscience research suggests not only that people dehumanise the homeless, but this psychological response is malleable, and can be changed by simply thinking of their preferences, interacting with the homeless or regulating disgust responses. Dehumanisation of the homeless stems from cultural stereotypes; a perception of the homeless as moral degenerates responsible for their lot in life. In all the research described above, people that were not aware of the cultural stereotypes of homelessness did not show the effect. This suggests that changing the cultural stereotypes surrounding homelessness might also be a viable strategy for changing the perceptions of the homeless. One study attempts to do this by convincing people that not all homeless people are moral degenerates who became addicted to drugs; in other words, it is possible that some homeless people are not themselves responsible for their lot in life. Dispelling this stereotype also changes responses to the homeless. In today's society, the media is primarily responsible for perpetuating cultural stereotypes, suggesting that another possible solution would be to censor media portrayal of the homeless as dangerous, moral degenerates. Or, public education campaigns aimed at changing these stereotypes may also prove effective. In sum, dehumanised perception of the homeless, though spontaneous and validated with brain scans, is highly malleable and not a forgone conclusion.



# Criminalisation, Discourse and Symbolic Violence

By **Bálint Missetics**,<sup>1</sup> *A Város Mindenkié/The City is for All, Hungary*

The Hungarian Constitutional Court in its 12<sup>th</sup> of November decision held the provisions of the Act on Contraventions that criminalised the use of public spaces for 'habitual residence' and for 'the storage of possessions used for permanent residency' unconstitutional.<sup>2</sup> The Court declared that 'homelessness is a social problem which the state needs to deal with through the instruments of social administration and social provision, and not with punishment'.<sup>3</sup>

It might seem as though the struggle over criminalisation of homelessness has been won,<sup>4</sup> as the unconstitutional regulation has at last been repealed. Unfortunately, this is not the case, and not only because the prime minister held out the prospect of changing the constitution<sup>5</sup> to make the criminalisation of homelessness possible by preventing a similar Constitutional Court decision. Legislation is not the only issue at stake here.

The criminalisation of homelessness is of course a matter of crucial significance in itself: homeless people must be defended from arbitrary measures, humiliating police harassment, penal fines and incarceration, just as the principle of equal worth of citizens must be defended from unconstitutional, discriminative legislation. Furthermore, the criminalisation of homelessness can have the dangerous side-effect of forcing homeless people to seek out more hidden places, where it is more difficult for the—often lifesaving—help of concerned citizens or outreach workers to reach them. However, the only end goal truly worth embracing by social workers, sociologists, and human rights advocates alike is not to make rough sleeping legal again—but to make it unnecessary.

Criminalisation of homelessness is gravely harmful in this respect as well. The criminalisation of homeless and the exclusion of homeless people from public spaces would hide one of the most dire and most obvious consequences of flawed government policies and an unjust social system. This could be seen as a veil of ignorance, but one that is the reverse of the concept developed by political philosopher John

Rawls: 'Rather than imagining that we do not know our individual characteristics and life situation in order to develop principles of justice, this veil of ignorance ensures that we make political decisions without ever having to think about how they might affect differently situated persons'.<sup>6</sup> But what is important here is not only how the criminalisation of homelessness aims to make the visible signs of homelessness *disappear*, but also how the related discourse makes homeless people *appear*.

The discourse that aims to legitimise the criminalisation of homelessness does at least as much long-term harm by blaming, stigmatising and dehumanising homeless people and by redefining homelessness as an issue of aesthetics and order as criminalising itself does through the harassment, fining and incarceration of the homeless. The effects of the symbolic violence that has been perpetuated – and continues to be perpetuated – on homeless people by advocates of criminalisation cannot be quickly and simply repaired.

## BLAMING

Criminalisation can only be legitimised if the public is made to believe that homeless people remain homeless by choice.<sup>7</sup> An important component of the exclusionary rhetoric on homelessness is the assumption that social policies are adequate and generous and that homeless people will have somewhere else to go if they are expelled from public spaces. People are homeless precisely because they do not have a home or private property where they can freely exist. In an imagined society in which all space is private, homeless people could not legally exist. Consequently, where there is no adequate homeless assistance system, excluding homeless people from public spaces would mean the prohibition of their existence, as everyone needs to be somewhere (Waldron, 1991). No one argues in favour of this; even the proponents of criminalisation are not so cynical as to suggest the mere removal of homeless people from public spaces as a solution to homelessness. On the contrary, there are frequent references to the availability of shelters in their rhetoric.

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2 Decision II/1477/2012.

3 It is worth noting that the argumentation of the Court was not based on the lack of available shelter placements – as was the case in several of the related U.S. Supreme Court decisions that overturned anti-homeless statutes (see Daniels, 1997). Indeed, the Court explicitly argued that encouraging homeless people to make use of the shelters does not constitute a legitimate constitutional reason for the criminalisation of rough sleeping.

4 For a descriptive account of the recent history of criminalisation of homelessness in Hungary, see Missetics, 2013.

5 In Hungary, the constitution can be changed if there is a two-thirds majority of the members of parliament who wish to do so. Since 2010, the right wing governing party has such majority and used this possibility on several occasions.

6 Kohn, 2004, p.140.

7 Cf. Mitchell, 2003.



The claimed availability of adequate alternatives to homelessness leads us to ask, upon encountering homelessness, not 'Why is it that they don't have a home?', but 'Why aren't they going in the shelters?' – which, of course, is not only about curiosity, but about blaming. The assertion of the availability of adequate alternatives thus cultivates the perception of homeless people as different from the general public (they must be some kind of strange creatures that for some unknown reason prefer to remain outside in the cold and dirt), who are to be blamed for their own homelessness.

## SYMBOLIC EXCLUSION

As Hungarian cultural anthropologists Ágnes Török and Tessza Udvarhelyi (2005) argue with regard to the 'underpass-cleaning rites' of the Hungarian authorities: in the rhetoric that attempts to legitimise the spatial exclusion of homeless people, the notions of 'public' and 'society' become restricted along with the scope of legitimate users of public spaces, and homeless people become excluded from these ideally universal categories, parallel to their exclusion from public spaces. Rough sleeping is often framed as an issue which inconveniences the 'citizens' of a city, or simply the city. This is the semantics of asymmetrical counter-concepts as elaborated by Reinhart Koselleck: the collective self-definition of the speaker is such that it excludes the other from the possibility of recognition. Instead of looking at homelessness as a problem of the community, it therefore comes to be seen as a threat from the outside. Homelessness becomes a problem that occurs not within the public but a 'threat that appears from elsewhere'.<sup>8</sup> This is revealingly exemplified by a recent headline of one of the most read Hungarian news portals after the Constitutional Court decision, "The mayor fears a homeless invasion", or by an introductory note of a newsreader in a television program: "Will rough sleepers invade underpasses for good?"<sup>9</sup>

## DEHUMANISATION

Dehumanisation is a weighty term: but is it not a form of dehumanisation when facing such an extreme form of destitution that homelessness is, we come to be worried not about their suffering but about our own inconveniences? When politicians frame homelessness as an issue of aesthetics, something that harms tourism, as just another kind of urban nuisance alongside graffiti, stray dogs, potholes or illegal fly posting?

In fact, recent studies of neuroscience demonstrated through functional magnetic resonance imaging that the medial prefrontal cortex, the part of the brain which functions as an index of social cognition that activates whenever people are thinking about a person, is not activated upon visual contact with extreme out-groups, including homeless people.<sup>10</sup> This provides us with a striking insight of what is really at stake about what Bourdieu described as the worst kind of deprivation: 'that of the losers in the symbolic struggle for recognition, for access to a socially recognised social being, in a word, to humanity'.<sup>11</sup>

## CONCLUSION

This is why, among other things, it is of crucial importance to fight against measures that aim to exclude and segregate homeless people, and against the discourse that legitimises those measures. Such measures gain legitimacy from the dehumanisation and moral exclusion of homeless people, which makes empathy, as well as a sense of community and responsibility – the very preconditions of egalitarian reforms necessary to eliminate homelessness – impossible to develop. We will devise different policies depending on whether we are concerned about the suffering of homeless people or the inconvenience that their homelessness causes others. In this way, egalitarian social policies (along with the solidarity on which they are based) and exclusionary measures (along with the insensitivity to suffering of others in which they are rooted) are mutually exclusive.

Therefore, the stubborn insistence on the membership of homeless people in the community of citizens of equal worth and the defence of their basic civil rights can be an integral part of working toward the provision of the right to housing for all. Moreover, the radical denial of citizenship that the discourse of criminalisation entails might be what raises the awareness of many who have already lost their compassion for their homeless fellow citizens. Such a sacrilegious questioning of humanitarian imperatives might in fact provide a good opportunity to engage in the 'politics of need interpretation'<sup>12</sup> and to situate the issue of homelessness into the field of *housing* policies: in the end it is for the same reason that criminalisation and overcrowded shelters are both unacceptable answers to the plight of homeless people: because they are our fellow citizens and fellow human beings.

Rough sleeping is often framed as an issue which inconveniences the 'citizens' of a city, or simply the city.

8 Kawash, 1998, pp. 330–1

9 Right wing politicians as well as journalists have been arguing since the decriminalisation of homelessness that there would be a great increase in rough sleeping in busy underpasses, and more homeless people would die of hypothermia because of the Constitutional Court decision.

10 Harris and Fiske, 2006.

11 Bourdieu, 2000, p.242.

12 Fraser, 1987.



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## Understanding How Homelessness is a Choice

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Is homelessness a personal choice? A number of conservative politicians have answered yes to this question. Such a stance is politically expedient as it excuses the state from responsibility. Surprisingly, a number of people who are homeless also answer yes, but for very different reasons: as a means of asserting control of their lives and expressing their individual agency. In this brief article we rehearse the central themes from our recent paper in *Housing, Theory and Society* (Parsell and Parsell 2012). We look at a sample of literature and sentiment that proposes and assumes homelessness is a personally chosen state. We conclude by briefly canvassing some of the contexts and social processes that impact upon the choice people experiencing homelessness make.

Scholars have frequently pointed out that there is a long-standing and widely-held view that homelessness is a choice. Those reporting on the prevalence of the view often cite the statements of significant conservative political leaders. Former USA President Ronald Reagan, former British Prime Minister John Major, and opposition leader to the Federal Australian Parliament Tony Abbott, have all expressed the view that homelessness is chosen in policy discussions that advocate for punitive responses or measures to homelessness (Parsell and Parsell 2012). This absolves the government of responsibility for homelessness. If it is a personal choice, the state has no capacity to end homelessness. Beyond provocative political rhetoric, some social policy and local government initiatives are predicated on homelessness as a choice. In these contexts, state legislated responses are “implemented to change the deviant choices people who are homeless make” (Parsell and Parsell 2012: 420). These often include local strategies that ‘move on’ and aim to banish ‘homeless people’ from certain public places (Beckett and Herbert 2009), as well as policy that either excludes or does not prioritise services and housing assistance to people deemed to be intentionally homeless.

The proposition that homelessness is chosen resonates with historic, yet ongoing debates, about people’s deviant and problematic behaviours rendering them responsible for their poverty and disadvantaged position. As Pleace and Quilgars (2003) observe, the idea of homelessness as a choice is located within

long-standing assumptions about the deserving and undeserving poor. Jordan’s (1994) insights extend ideas about homelessness as a choice. He suggests that choice in this context is framed as either a poor choice with bad consequences or a rational, but immoral choice. The latter is framed in terms of homelessness constituting a desirable state. The view that homelessness is chosen as something positive, for instance, people ‘at home on the streets’ or people as members of a ‘supportive homeless community’ vis-à-vis the avoidance of ‘mainstream’ society is evident in some research and theorising about homelessness. We are drawn to Loic Wacquant’s (2002) position that describes such descriptions as neo-romantic portrayals of the urban poor. Such descriptions are romanticised as they gloss over negative aspects of homelessness as a means to demonstrate that those suffering from homelessness are just as acceptable as the middle class.

The proposition that homelessness is a bad choice, or outcome consequential to other choices, underpins some of the political rhetoric and policy in this area. As a choice of the individual, “homelessness is thus attributed to individual choices to not comply with expected norms relating to self-discipline and engagement with mainstream institutions such as the workforce” (Parsell and Parsell 2012: 423). This reasoning resonates with societal values of the autonomous individual.

In our *Housing, Theory and Society* paper we drew on empirical material from an ethnographic study with people sleeping rough in an Australian city to illustrate how the prevailing context and people’s individual circumstances not only shape the nature of the choice they make, but also make those choices meaningful. Our initial premise recognises that some people consciously decide to sleep rough rather than reside in homeless accommodation. Numerous researchers have identified that people do not necessarily enjoy sleeping rough nor do they freely choose it, rather rough sleeping is a calculated decision that is “deemed to be less undesirable than the more undesirable homeless accommodation” (Parsell and Parsell 2012: 425). Extending this, we found that people experiencing homelessness emphasised their choices in ways that encompassed more than their efforts to

[T]he view that homelessness is chosen]... absolves the government of responsibility for homelessness.

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avoid inadequate and undesirable temporary accommodation. We now briefly rehearse three of these expressions of choice.

First, the people sleeping rough largely appropriated the language and thinking of choosing homelessness. They expressed their state of homelessness – often extending over many years – as a consequence of other problematic actions. These other consequential choices were framed in terms of alcohol and illicit substance addictions, which were described as both important in entering as well as continuing to be homeless. Indeed, addiction was presented as fundamental to their homelessness, as it compelled them to choose to support their drug and alcohol use over paying rent. People spoke about their choices with reference to calculated reasoning about the implications of alternative decisions, such as the availability of outreach services, or what sleeping rough entailed. Addiction and avoiding rent were not simply presented as choices, but as choices people consciously entered into. For instance:

All people expressed a sound awareness of the services and resources available, and the costs and consequences of accessing them. Their choices often explicitly compared the costs and value of the services to the costs and value of illicit substance use to arrive at their preferred choice. (Parsell and Parsell 2012: 427)

Next, people's assertions about choosing homelessness were closely linked to their perceptions of the accessibility of stable housing. In response to comments about choosing homelessness, people sleeping rough were questioned whether they had chosen homelessness over their own housing. They articulated stories about how access to secure and satisfactory housing was inconceivable. Homelessness as a choice was thus constructed from a position where access to housing was not an option and perceived to be beyond their means. As Elster (1982) explains, people's preferences are not hardwired, but socially constructed and mediated by their life experiences. She refers to this process as 'adaptive preferences'. The people sleeping rough spoke about life histories whereby their homelessness formed part of broader life narratives where exclusion and disadvantage constitutes the norm. Positive experiences in secure and adequate housing were not common among people in the research. Their life histories, together with their rough sleeping, shaped what was perceived as realistically achievable and arguably influenced the choices they felt that they had control over.

Finally, by constructing homelessness as a conscious choice, people sleeping rough were expressing agency. In this respect, they did not want to be seen as passive and deficient 'homeless people' who had been made homeless by others. By constructing homelessness as a choice, they were highlighting their autonomy and normality (Parsell and Parsell 2012: 429). People's remarks about choosing homelessness were expressions of their commitment to 'mainstream' society: a society that they felt physically and symbolically disconnected from, but a mainstream society that they nevertheless identified with. While the specific choices described were stigmatised and problematic, they were used as a means to highlight self-efficacy, to emphasise autonomy and self-responsibility. Unlike Gowan's (2010) nuanced analysis of rough sleeping in San Francisco, we did not see expressions of agency as illustrating people's ability to survive on the jungle like streets. Nor did people express agency – their choices to be homeless – in terms that sought to convey their freedom or escape from conventional society. By describing homelessness as a choice, even though people did so to point out their problems in life, they sought to gain a degree of control over not only their circumstances, but also their sense of self.

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# Counting and Describing ‘The Homeless Dead’- A Vital Activity to Better Understand the Dead and Better Help the Living

By **Lise Grout** (*Epidemiologist*), **Cécile Rocca** (*Co-ordinator*) and **Christophe Louis** (*President*), *Morts de la Rue*,<sup>1</sup> France

The first person froze to death in November and the media were up in arms. What could be done for these poor homeless people dying in the streets? A few days later, another life was claimed and the newspapers ran the headline ‘a second homeless person found dead’.<sup>2</sup> A second? It is 2012, but nothing seems to be changing. In France, the homeless, those of no fixed abode, those without a home of their own, without shelter – call them what you like – continue to die young and in their droves and the phenomenon remains totally unknown. Unfortunately, the homeless do not only freeze to death and do not only die in winter. Unfortunately, Mr Karamo was not the second homeless person to lose his life in 2012 – we had already counted 313 before him.

## HOMELESS DEATH, A LITTLE-KNOWN PROBLEM

For ten years, *Le Collectif des Morts de la Rue* has condemned the fact that the death of those living on the streets is an issue about which too little is known and which is insufficiently researched.<sup>3</sup> There is not a single source, either institutional or from an association, able to put an (exact) figure to the number of people on the streets dying every year, or to the causes of death. The death of homeless people is like an enormous jigsaw puzzle. Each party involved (the government during its ‘winter watch’ of the homeless, medical and legal institutes, hospitals, associations, ...) holds a piece of this puzzle, but putting all of the pieces together to get a complete picture of the situation is no easy task. ‘Already placed in a vulnerable situation by the absence of official statistics attesting to their existence, homeless people cannot be traced in statistics relating to death either’.<sup>4</sup> Is this merely coincidence or, as Daniel Terrolle contends, the result of a desire not to monitor homeless deaths so as not to reveal the weaknesses of the housing, care and re-integration system in its current form?<sup>5</sup>

The first goal of *Le Collectif des Morts de la Rue* is to make it known that many people who either live or have lived on the street die from having done so. To achieve this goal, the organisation publishes a twice-yearly notice giving details of all those who were living or who had lived on the streets whose death has come to their attention in the last six months and organises a public service to mark their passing in

symbolic places throughout Paris. This list of names is far from exhaustive but it does at least raise awareness of the fact that the phenomenon exists and is far from anecdotal.

Another goal of *Le Collectif* is to design and develop the resources and initiatives necessary in order to research, debate and condemn the often violent causes of street deaths, without taking either the social or racial background of the victims, or their political or religious beliefs, into account. To do so, it collects data on those living on the streets who have died and publishes statistics on a regular basis.<sup>6</sup> It would appear that more than 90% of victims are men, and that 60% are between 41 and 60 years of age. It is thought that the deaths occur throughout the year, both in summer and winter, and that the number of deaths varies little from month to month. December and February, followed by March and July are believed to be the months where the highest number of deaths is recorded. Finally, it would appear that street deaths are sudden. The majority of the homeless victims - more than 80% - are thought to die suddenly, whether the cause of the death is natural or not. It is impossible to make any of these statements definitive, as we are aware that the deaths which we record are merely the tip of the iceberg. However, these initial figures, with all the imperfections they contain, have made a valuable contribution to shedding light on homeless deaths and to revealing the need for improved knowledge of this phenomenon.

## A DESIRE TO IMPROVE KNOWLEDGE...

In order to meet this need, a working group was created under the aegis of France’s National Poverty and Exclusion Observatory (ONPES) in order to consider how best to improve knowledge of homeless deaths in France. The first report produced by the working group examined the country’s various existing sources of data in order to investigate the issue and concluded that ‘the data currently available was not sufficient to produce either a more precise estimate of the number of homeless people dying every year in France, nor an overview of what characterised the victims or of the causes of death.’<sup>7</sup> In order to establish a comprehensive and continued monitoring mechanism, the report recommended

In France, the homeless [...] continue to die young and in their droves and the phenomenon remains totally unknown.

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2 [http://www.parisdepeches.fr/2-Societe/128-75\\_Paris/7625-retrouvC3%A9\\_mort\\_dans\\_arrondissement\\_Paris\\_html](http://www.parisdepeches.fr/2-Societe/128-75_Paris/7625-retrouvC3%A9_mort_dans_arrondissement_Paris_html)

3 Cécile Rocca ‘Les Morts de la Rue’, *Études sur la mort* 2/2002 (n° 122), p. 17-43.

4 Daniel Terrolle, La mort sociale des SDF à Paris : un révélateur social implacable. *Études sur la mort*, 2002, 122 (55-68).

5 Daniel Terrolle is an anthropologist. Since 1990, his research has focused on the homeless and, more recently, on ‘the poverty market.’ He was a member of the Urban Anthropology Laboratory at the CNRS until June 2011 and is now a member of LAVUE-AUS (UMR CNRS 7218).

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7 Cemka-Eval, Etude exploratoire sur les décès de sans abri. Phase I- Rapport final 04/02/2011. Can be accessed at the following address: [http://www.onpes.gouv.fr/IMG/pdf/Rapport\\_final\\_Phase\\_1\\_CemkaEval.pdf](http://www.onpes.gouv.fr/IMG/pdf/Rapport_final_Phase_1_CemkaEval.pdf)



that *Le Collectif des Morts de la Rue* be strengthened, as the tool in the homeless sector it deemed the most comprehensive data source, despite the limitations of this data. Alternatively, the report advocated the strengthening of the institutional mechanism which compiles and transfers data on homeless deaths during the winter.

It would appear that the first solution was the one initially selected, given that in 2012 *Le Collectif des Morts de la Rue* received a grant from the Directorate General of Social Cohesion. The purpose of this grant was to make the data collected on homeless deaths more exhaustive and to improve knowledge both of the causes of the deaths recorded and of the trajectories which had preceded these deaths. The work programme was breath-taking in its scope.

*Le Collectif* has consequently set to work, embarking upon a process to standardise data collection procedures and to improve the collection of data in selected areas: causes of death and victims' trajectories, in particular their housing history. Such a process first involves validating the new tools available over the course of a retrospective study into deaths which occurred in 2012. However, there is no point in conducting such a study if associations and institutions across the board do not themselves take action. The associations continue to act as the main channels which inform us of homeless deaths. However, in spite of their efforts we know that a significant number of the deaths which occur escape our attention. We continue to learn of a third of all deaths through the media. Some hospitals inform us of homeless deaths but this is far from standard practice. As for the institutions, such as the Paris Legal and Medical institute, they are not even worth a mention, as they provide us with very little information indeed.

This work also involves cross-fertilising our database with information gathered by some of our partners, in order to piece together the puzzle. Consequently, in 2012, a joint study was conducted with the CépiDc-Inserm (an epidemiological centre which researches the medical causes of deaths in France) in order to estimate the number of homeless deaths over a three-year period. It is not yet possible to give a precise figure as the study is still underway, but it would nevertheless appear that this number is significantly higher than the 350 to 400 deaths which we record

every year. This work has also shed new light on the causes of deaths among homeless people in France. However, the results produced are limited by the fact that certain bodies send us either only some of the information they have or none at all. They do so in spite of the fact that such information would serve to improve knowledge of the issue, in particular of the deaths occurring on highways and of violent deaths. This type of joint project can teach us many valuable lessons and we wish to extend the experiment to other partners on board, namely to the emergency service for the homeless, Samu Social, and the hospitals.

### **...TO BETTER HONOUR THE DEAD AND TAKE BETTER CARE OF THE LIVING**

We should not lose sight of the fact that efforts to count the victims and understand the circumstances surrounding their deaths is only a worthwhile exercise if it allows us to improve the support provided to those still alive. And this can be done both by raising politicians' awareness of the phenomenon and by issuing recommendations which will see changes made to the care of those living on the streets. The number of deaths on the streets occurring every year can also act as an indicator of the efficiency of the system which protects and integrates the most vulnerable members of society, and we can only hope that this number will decrease in the coming years. The fact remains that accurate estimates are still lacking.

Such efforts to better understand the homeless must not lead us to forget that these are people who are dying, lives that are coming to an end. Counting the deaths and producing demographical statistics on the victims, the causes of their death and their personal trajectories should not conceal the fact that we are talking about men and women, each of whom had their own story, friends and a family. *Les Morts de la Rue* is also there to ensure that each of these dead people is treated with dignity, that their memory is honoured. It also offers practical support to loved-ones (friends, family, associations...) as they deal with the death and work through their grief.

After having lived as a nobody, hidden or dismissed by many, these dead must not simply become figures in reports. Our knowledge of their death should also increase our respect for their lives.

***If you have been made aware of the deaths either of homeless people or of people who had been homeless, or if you were unfortunately to learn of such a death at any point in the future, please do not hesitate to bring it to our attention.***

**Collectif Les Morts de la Rue : [mortsdelarue@wanadoo.fr](mailto:mortsdelarue@wanadoo.fr) / 01.42.45.08.01**

***These people will be able to either appear in our twice-yearly notice or to simply form part of our data, according to your wishes, and can either be named or remain anonymous.***



# SPAIN: ENDING HOMELESSNESS: 1992-2012: Twenty Years of Helping Homeless People Access Their Fundamental Rights

By **Daniel Illescas Mateos** and **Sonia Olea Ferreras**,<sup>1</sup> *Social and Institutional Development, CARITAS SPAIN, Spain*



## SOME HISTORY

The first European Homelessness Day was held on the 27th November 1991 in Belgium, to mark the 100th anniversary of the "Vagrancy Act". This experience encouraged FEANTSA to suggest that, from 1992 onwards, the 5th of October should become Homeless People Day and should be celebrated at the same time in every European country. That year, the campaign was started in Belgium, Holland, Spain, Ireland and Luxembourg. The shared motto was "EURO SLEEP OUT 92" and some posters were made in Brussels that showed a bat flying over a city at night.



Even though a national campaign could not be launched in Spain, it was encouraged in Madrid by FACIAM (a Spanish federation of associations and centres working to integrate and help marginalised people) and events took place before mass media, and posters and other information materials were designed.

Since the beginning, and up to today, the Campaign has focused on accessing, keeping and guaranteeing fundamental rights and dignity for every human being. Slogans have helped us, such as: "Cada día son más los que no tienen nada. No podemos quedar indiferentes" 1992 (Each day there are more and more people who have nothing. We cannot remain indifferent) "Sin techo ni derecho" 1993 and 1994 (Without home nor rights); "Transeúntes, sin techo ni derecho" 1995 (The Homeless: without home nor rights), "¿Dónde dormir esta noche?, ¿dónde vivir mañana?" 1996 (Where can I sleep tonight? Where can I live tomorrow?), "Pobres entre los pobres: hombres y mujeres sin hogar" 1997 (The poor among

poor: homeless women and men), "Pintales otro futuro: un techo por derecho" January 1998 (Show them another future: a home as a right); "Ante todo, son personas" November 1998 (First and foremost they are people); "No tengo techo, pero sí derechos" 1999 (I do not have a home but I do have rights), "Mírame. Vivo en tu calle. En la calle" 2000 (Look at me, I live on the street, on your street); "¿Hasta cuándo en este plan?" 2001 (How long will this plan last?), "Tú, ¿para trabajar te escondes?" 2002 (Do you need to hide to work?); "La habitación de Juan, Eva, Omar... Personas sin hogar. Personas" 2003 (Juan, Eva and Omar's room... Homeless people); "Los dos viven en la calle, pero sólo uno es de piedra. Un techo por derecho" 2004 (Both of them live on the street, but only one of them is made of stone. A home as a right), "Necesito un techo y respeto, afecto, autonomía... Derechos humanos a tiempo completo" 2005 (I need a home and respect, care and autonomy... Full-time human rights); "Sin techo, sin derechos. Hoy también duermo en la calle... A la sociedad le falto yo" 2006 (Homeless and rightless, I will sleep on the streets again today. I am missing from society); "Por una salud digna para todos" 2007 (Decent Health for All), "No tener hogar significa mucho más que estar sin techo" 2008 (Being homeless is much more than not having a home); "Su historia es parte de la nuestra, todos contamos" 2009 (Their history is part of our history, we all count).



## 2010: WE JOIN THE 2010-2015 FEANTSA "ENDING HOMELESSNESS" CAMPAIGN

Caritas Española (organising and coordinating the campaign since 1993), FACIAM and most organisations from the federation of organisations supporting homeless people in Spain, are members of FEANTSA. Therefore, to join the aims and goals of both campaigns together has been an easy task: for 2015, no one should be sleeping on our European streets.

"NADIE SIN HOGAR" is the common motto for the five years (and is an adaptation into Spanish of the original European motto "Ending Homelessness")<sup>2</sup> and, every November, we want to give it a special focus, always related to the advocacy for the rights and visibility of

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<sup>2</sup> *Translator's note:* literally translated into English it would be "NO ONE WITHOUT A HOME"



homeless people. In 2010, it was “Nadie sin derechos. Nadie sin hogar” (No one without rights, no one without a home); in 2011, “Todos somos ciudadanos. Nadie sin hogar” (We are all citizens. No one without a home) and “Son derechos, no regalos. Nadie sin hogar” (These are rights, not gifts. No one without a home) in 2012.

### STRATEGY 2.0 (SOCIAL NETWORKS)

Over these last twenty years of campaigning, conventional media (newspapers, radio and television) have been the ones spreading the word. Nowadays, the focus is on online media, where Caritas Española has held a strong presence as an advocate since the 2010 campaign.

The aim, therefore, is to reach another audience, which could not be reached before. The user profile is mainly young people, who access our information through online newspaper editions or through social networks. This is how we have had an impact on society and created a common space where every user can contribute within their space and time.

Caritas Española, as part of its online communication, started two exclusive spaces to diffuse the Campaign: the *Nadie Sin Hogar* group (created on Facebook in November 2010) and the @NadieSinHogar profile (created on Twitter in May 2011). It is therefore fundamental for the members the feeling of a shared, supportive and unified work.

The acceptance of these profiles on social networks has become a reality over this short but work-intensive space of time. Thanks to the shared work, people feel like they are participating in the Campaign, which creates links between them. These people that will not meet, but by joining their efforts, they make the joint project move forward.

participants share their experiences during the event, and also photos and videos. The message is strengthened for the mass media covering the event.

The participation in those digital channels is permanent, all year round, but more emphasis is given the months from October to December. The idea is not to overload people, but to make them feel implicated in the joint project and to keep the space active throughout the rest of the year.

### RAISING AWARENESS, INFORMING AND ADVOCATING AMONGST POLITICIANS AND CITIZENS

With the aims of:

- **MAKING PEOPLE AWARE AND MAKING OURSELVES AWARE**, *the entire society, administrations, young people, adults, professionals...; of homeless people's situation. A ray of hope that encourages people to help others, who are, above all, people.*
- **CONDEMNING** and questioning perceptions that are becoming more and more popular amongst people in society, including ourselves, about who is entitled to social rights. **Rights are not gifts; they belong to every human being.**
- **PROVIDING TOOLS FOR ENCOURAGEMENT, AWARENESS RAISING AND CRITICISM** in schools, groups, communities, associations and social connections so they can understand homeless people's reality in depth, moving towards the construction of a society that is for everybody and in which everybody participates.

A Campaign Team (made up of more than 10 local Caritas Dioceses and representatives from the cooperating organisations: FACIAM, fePsh and *Xarxa d'atenció a persones sense llar* from Barcelona) works, year after year, on awareness-raising and advocacy for the Campaign in different ways: communication (appearing on radio and television programmes, in the press and on social networks, etc), producing working materials (for children, young people, users of residential services for homeless people, the general public – books, comics, leaflets, videos, films, songs (see [www.caritas.es](http://www.caritas.es))); and advertising the campaign (posters, T-shirts, key rings, magnets, stickers, etc).

Since 2009, several materials have been conceived and designed directly by homeless people (Campaign Manifesto, PowerPoint presentation, working material for service users...) and, at the same time, at the joint street event they give their voice and make their reality visible (Campaign Flashmob).

Follow us on Facebook “Nadie Sin Hogar” Group and on Twitter @NadieSinHogar



Bilbao, 2011

With an increasing presence on social networks generally, synergies between institutions can be forged, not only at national level but at international level, as happens with FEANTSA, which allows steps to be made in terms of advocacy and raising awareness regarding the situation of homeless people. A good example of what can be achieved thanks to joint working is the centralised action that Caritas Española coordinates with all the local Caritas Dioceses, social NGOs, local and

regional networks, etc. on Homeless People Day. Through the *Nadie Sin Hogar* Facebook group, a flashmob was arranged. This will be an event that will take place in the street in more than 30 cities with the presence of the strongest networks related to the support of homeless people existing in the State (*Bestebi* from Vizcaya, *Xarxa* from Barcelona and the *Grupo de Madrid*). In every participating city, the Homeless People's Manifesto, a document they wrote themselves, is read out. Through social networks, the





# The Representation and Perception of Need: The Moral Choices Facing Homelessness Fundraisers

By Jon Dean,<sup>1</sup> Sheffield Hallam University, United Kingdom

Charities and organisations which aim to tackle homelessness and its associated issues need to raise funds. The need to compete for both government grants and donations from individuals requires them to make tough choices about their investment in marketing. But, in trying to raise funds, charities have a series of moral decisions to make. They have a duty to accurately report the realities of those they are trying to help, while also compelled to compete in a crowded marketplace, often doing so using hard-hitting and eye-catching advertisements. This raises debates about the role of charities in using images to represent those they seek to help, such as after the Live Aid<sup>2</sup> concerts,<sup>3</sup> and the response to the earthquake in Haiti.<sup>4</sup>

Previous research of the (mis)representation of charity beneficiaries has focused upon the images of poverty in developing nations used in aid campaigns,<sup>5</sup> and those used in campaigns aimed at highlighting physical disability.<sup>6</sup> It has, perhaps unfortunately, been shown that the general public are more likely to respond to advertisements and donate to causes which demean sufferers, and present them as desperate, as opposed to those where charitable beneficiaries are shown in a more positive light, with the same rights and capabilities as everyone else.<sup>7</sup> Some have concluded that to produce more representative, hopeful and emancipatory advertising, with positive images of beneficiaries, may jeopardise a charity's chances of generating revenue.<sup>8</sup> However, it has proven rare for researchers to ask service users themselves about these moral decisions taken on their behalf.

In order to challenge this, my colleague Beth Breeze and I ran five focus groups with the users of services at homelessness charities across England. We found that these beneficiaries of charity care deeply about their representation in advertising. The 38 participants were shown images from 18 different campaigns aimed at raising money to fund homelessness services. Service users displayed a high level of reflexivity, demonstrating that they understood the issues involved with homelessness and the perceptions of them which existed in the consciousness of potential donors. While participants expressed a desire for more detailed campaigns, which told the stories of homelessness, they understood that maximising revenues must ultimately remain a key part of homeless charity fundraising.

## MAXIMISING MONEY VS ACCURACY

The overwhelming feeling our focus group participants expressed was that while they did not feel that many of the images used to raise funds for the homeless cause were either accurate or helpful representations, they reasoned that charities must use the images which raise the most funds. As people in receipt of services, they prioritised the continuation of those services, and their extension to others in need, above more thoughtful and less 'hard-hitting' campaigns:

*'Yeah, well when you're in the situation and you ain't got no money of your own, you ain't got time to be judgemental. So if the organisations haven't got their money in the first place to help you then the whole system breaks down, really and truly. Just get the money, hook or crook, y'know?'*

*'I think the money's the main thing, y'know what I mean? You can't have morals when you're homeless.'*

*'The images need to make as much money as possible.'*

Participants realised this was not a view to take lightly. Acknowledging that the most intense advertisements were the ones which presented homeless people in the most vulnerable and desperate light, which participants felt was rarely an accurate portrayal of their own experiences of being homeless, it was recognised that damage could be done as a result:

*'I suppose if they're making the money they're making the money, y'know, that's the important thing. [But] it's not actually dealing with the problem, just keeping people with their judgemental views.'*

They understood that as homeless individuals they often occupied a negative space within the public consciousness, and that these simplified and more emotional images would elicit 'sympathy payments' from donors, but little extra respect or understanding. However, the overall view put forward by focus group participants was that maximising charity income was the vital ingredient for any advertising campaign.

[I]n trying to raise funds, charities have a series of moral decisions to make.

1 Jon Dean is a Lecturer in Politics and Sociology at Sheffield Hallam University. To read the full report of 'User Views of Fundraising' by Beth Breeze and Jon Dean, from the Centre for Charitable Giving and Philanthropy, please visit [http://www.cgap.org.uk/uploads/reports/USER\\_VIEWS\\_OF\\_FUNDRAISING.pdf](http://www.cgap.org.uk/uploads/reports/USER_VIEWS_OF_FUNDRAISING.pdf).

If you would like to be sent a hard copy of the report, please email [j.dean@shu.ac.uk](mailto:j.dean@shu.ac.uk) with your contact details.

2 Live Aid consisted of a series of music concerts held in London and Philadelphia, aimed at raising awareness of and money to help the Ethiopian famine in 1985. They were tremendously high profile events, seen by over a billion people around the world, and have been credited with raising £150m for famine relief.

3 Dochas (2006) *Code of Conduct on Images and Messages*, <http://www.dochas.ie/code/default.aspx>.

4 BBC Radio 4 (2010) *Are Haiti pictures too graphic?*, [http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/today/hi/today/newsid\\_8478000/8478314.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/today/hi/today/newsid_8478000/8478314.stm).

5 Gaag, N., and Nash, C. (1988) *Images of Africa: The UK Report*. Oxford: Mimeo.

6 Poynton A. (1999) 'Out of the Closet: New Images of disability in the civil rights campaign', in B. Franklin (eds) *Social Policy, The Media and Misrepresentation*. London: Routledge.

7 Eayrs C B., and Ellis N. (1990) 'Charity advertising: for or against people with a mental handicap?', *British Journal of Social Psychology*, 29: 349-360.

8 Burman, E. (1994) 'Poor children: charity appeals and ideologies of childhood', *Changes: An International Journal of Psychology and Psychotherapy*, 12 (1): 29-36; Ramrayka, L. (2001) 'Charities struggle to find right balance with ad campaigns', *The Guardian*, June 15, 2001.



They took a reluctantly realist approach regarding the balance between accurate images and understanding that these may not necessarily be the ones which would inspire the most generosity from potential donors. Yet many expressed ideas for how advertising campaigns which were both successful and respectful could be developed.

### TELLING STORIES, AND DEFINING HOMELESSNESS

We asked the service users to create an advertising campaign, explaining what images should be used, and how they would address potential donors and encourage them to give. The approach most commonly put forward was one of homeless narratives, with participants suggesting that the general public needed to be 'told the stories' of homelessness and homeless people. Our participants expressed how homelessness 'could happen to anyone', stressing that they themselves had not expected to be in their current situation, feeling that this message would be a strong and powerful one, and would reduce the separateness between homeless people and the general public:

*'[O]ne day you can be sat in some nice gaff in Kensington, all the tea in China and something can happen maybe your loved ones die and you can lose the plot and with a short space of time you can be homeless just like anybody else. And it's right across the board no matter who you are or what you're doing anything can happen to you to change your life. [Clicks fingers]. Like that.'*

*'Adverts are better when you see someone's story and you see where they've come from and you can relate to them with a picture.'*

Further to this suggestion, participants felt that many adverts were only telling one side of the story of homelessness - focusing on those individuals who found themselves 'roofless' rather than on people who, like them, were in shelters and hostels. This lack

of representation of these more visually complex situations has been commented upon in previous literature.<sup>9</sup> The distinction between the different 'types' of homelessness was brought home in several focus groups when participants debated whether they were *actually* homeless, because they were not represented by the figures used in advertising campaigns. While recognising their use of homeless services, some also stressed that 'We don't look like *that*'. If there is confusion about the definition and conceptualisation of homelessness within those who experience it, expecting donors to fully grasp and understand the minutiae of detail and possible complexities in fundraising advertisements may be too complicated and risk losing revenue.

### IMPLICATIONS FOR FUNDRAISERS

Across the voluntary sector, charitable organisations have enormous power in being one of the principal actors in determining how users of services are understood in the wider public consciousness. This therefore entails a great responsibility. There is no right answer regarding the question of accuracy against maximising money (if, in fact, they are distinct), but a great deal of the realities of homelessness are not currently represented in charitable appeals, side-lining the aspects of homelessness which are complex and difficult to convey in single images.

However, the research presented above has hopefully demonstrated that involving service users in discussions and decisions about fundraising campaigns can be a rewarding and enlightening addition to a marketing strategy. Those working in homelessness and the wider charitable sector may indeed believe that there may be a moral requirement to do so. The homeless service users we spoke to in this study were eloquent, emotive and creative. They both cared deeply about the depictions of homeless people in advertising, but significantly they *got* advertising, able to see both the need for respect and accuracy, but also the necessity for simplification and strong messages which engage donors and encourage giving.

9 Swain J. (2011) 'Busting the myth', *Inside Housing*, November 25, 2011; Liddiard S, and Hutson, M. (1994) *Youth Homelessness: The Construction of a Social Issue*, Basingstoke: Macmillan.





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The Connection at St Martin's runs an art workshop called Art Space. This space has no boundaries and is user-led, giving homeless people the opportunity to express themselves and their identity through art. Every year The Connection holds two Art shows which give homeless people the opportunity to exhibit and sell their work.

The Connection: <http://www.connection-at-stmartins.org.uk>

Art Space: <http://www.facebook.com/homelessart>

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