

THE FORGOTTEN PEOPLE

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The homeless often attend the Accident and Emergency department as it is the only place that they can obtain health care. Hence I was used to seeing homeless people attend the large inner city A&E departments in which I did my training. I was surprised to find that it was a significant problem in this area. In this paper I will outline the national problem and then describe the local work that is being done.

Scope of the Problem

The question of how many single homeless people there are is not a simple one, because people sleeping rough are not a fixed group. Many sleep rough occasionally between stays in insecure temporary accommodation.

The legal definition of homelessness in the 1985 Housing Act covers people who have no right to occupy any accommodation and those likely to lose their home within 28 days.

It is extremely difficult to arrive at an accurate picture of the numbers of people sleeping rough. Such people tend to look for places where they will be dry and unmolested by the city's low life (young drunks).

During the 1991 census special enumerators were recruited to count people sleeping rough. In England and Wales there were 2,703, of whom 1,275 were in London and 1,426 in the rest of the U.K. The sites in London where people sleep rough tend to be larger, averaging nine people per site and are well known to voluntary agencies, whereas in places like Lancaster they would be in one or twos only. The census undoubtedly underestimated the problem outside London and as luck would have it poor weather on the census night also probably affected the overall numbers. There are other factors that cause one to discount these figures; for example, for some inexplicable reason no people sleeping rough were counted in Birmingham. All that we can be sure of is that there is a problem and it appears to be getting worse. It is estimated that 7,500 people were turned away from hostels during September 1992 in areas outside London.

The Stereotype

The general public's stereotype of a homeless person is a white middle-aged alcoholic. Although this group accounts for a number of the semi-permanent rough sleepers in the U.K. they are unrepresentative of homeless people as a whole (see Figure 1). Of the hostel population 44% are young people aged under 26 years. There are also large differences in the sex of the different age groups. In the 46 to 65 age group 93% are male; however in the under 18 years group 55% are female.

The Lancaster Chamber of Commerce recently organised a meeting with the police and the Homeless Action Service.

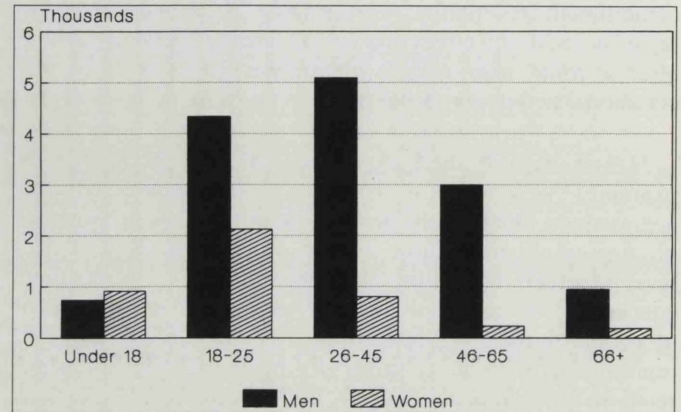


Fig 1 - Sex and Age of Hostel Residents Outside London

They were concerned about the number of "homeless" individuals begging in Lancaster. The police records showed that five or six individuals were constantly being arrested for this offence and indeed one had a permanent address. These individuals are not representative of homeless people and yet reinforce the general public's stereotype of the homeless. Generally I would discourage giving money to such people on the street as it is invariably spent on alcohol. In Seattle U.S.A. the city council provides food coupons that people can give instead of money to try to overcome this problem.

Permanent Accommodation

There is undoubtedly a desperate need for permanent "affordable" housing. Single homeless people, however, often need ongoing support to ensure their placement is successful. Some have never had a home of their own or have been unsettled for many years. Support ranges from practical help with furniture and budgeting to more intensive counselling and help.

Financial Problems

The availability of money to pay rent in advance, deposits and basic household items can be critical in determining the success or failure of an attempt to settle into a permanent home.

In the 1980's there were no fewer than fourteen separate cuts in benefit entitlement targeted at young people and aimed at reducing the DSS budget. Some of the most important changes were:-

- Payments for the purchase of essential furniture and for deposits for private landlords were replaced by discretionary loans and grants from a limited Social Fund. These loans then have to be repaid out of the claimant's weekly benefits even though those are meant to cover only day to day living expenses.

- b) The transfer of board and lodging payments for private lodgings to the Housing Benefit system, with loss of income for many claimants.
- c) The removal of entitlement to Income Support from the great majority of 16 and 17 year olds, on the presumption that unemployed people in this age group would be on a YTS course.

LANCASTER AND DISTRICT HOMELESS ACTION SERVICE

The Christmas Shelter

Since 1987 a Christmas Shelter at the Youth Centre of Our Lady's High School has provided food and accommodation over the Christmas period (23rd to 27th December). The first year the shelter was staffed by two volunteers and cost £35 to run. In 1991 50 volunteers helped and the cost had risen to £1,400. Accommodation was provided for 37 people and a further 20 people came on a day only basis. At the end of the shelter accommodation was negotiated for eight people.

Night Support Team

The problem of homelessness does not go away after Christmas and there was an obvious need for work to be continued throughout the year. In January 1990 the Night Support Team Service began to address some of the issues of homelessness in the local area. The nightly sessions offer an informal contact point for those needing advice and assistance with welfare benefits, negotiating accommodation, referral to the Lancaster Night Shelter Project, City Council housing applications, liaison with other welfare agencies, food and bedding. Whilst enabling those using the service to deal with the practical difficulties facing them, the service also provides the essential and on-going emotional support. In 1991 there was a total of 5069 visits by 174 individuals (see figure 2), 126 people were referred for emergency accommodation and 64 people were successfully placed in permanent accommodation.

A letter of recommendation from the service enables clients to obtain clothing from the W.R.V.S. The St. Vincent de Paul Society has been able to offer assistance to those who have found accommodation with a number of basic necessities including furniture, cooking utensils, crockery etc.

The service employs two part-time workers funded by

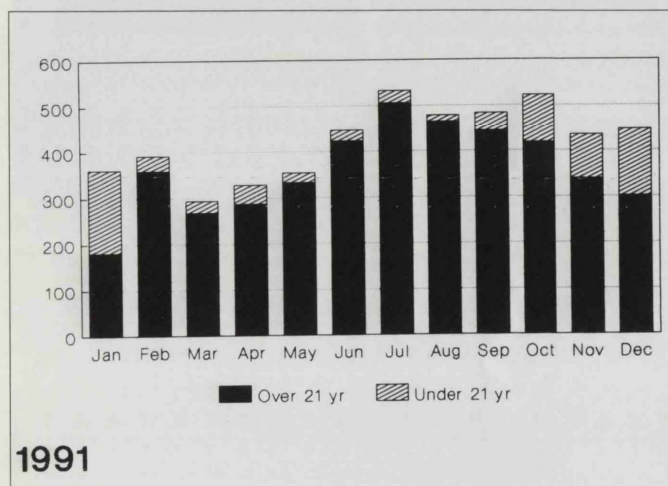


Fig 2 - Visits to Night Support Team
Storey Institute

the Catholic Housing Aid Society and the Department of the Environment. The funding from the D.O.E. is for a maximum of three years only. The commitment of the voluntary staff is what underpins the Night Support Team - without this the service could not operate.

The service currently operates from the Storey Institute (rear entrance - opposite the castle gates), but a new purpose built Day Centre should be open on Edward Street from March 1993. It is open Monday to Wednesday 7 p.m. to 10 p.m. and Thursday to Sunday 10.15 p.m. to 11.15 p.m. Tel: 847984. When the new centre is open these hours will be extended and specific sessions will be set up for women and young people. The centre will provide washing and shower facilities as well as storage lockers for personal belongings. The funding for the new centre (£80,000) was from local fund raising and grants from charitable trusts. In October 1990 the Lancaster and District Homeless Action Service was constituted and received charity status at the end of 1991.

EMERGENCY ACCOMMODATION

Lancaster Night Shelter (Portland Street)

This offers overnight emergency accommodation for up to four homeless people who have been referred by agencies such as Night Support. This facility is available to individuals for a maximum of three nights in any week. This short term, safe accommodation affords some breathing space which allows people to think through the options available to them whilst receiving assistance through the Night Support Team.

Christ Church, Church Hall

During the cold winter months the parish allow people to sleep in the Church Hall. Opening hours are between 9.30 pm and 7.30 am. Meals are provided by volunteers.

Negotiating Accommodation

Finding and securing accommodation can be very difficult in this area. Over the next few years the student population is projected to increase from 6,000 to 12,000 and this will undoubtedly make the situation worse. The increased accommodation at college and university halls of residence will not cater for this increase in numbers and the City Council is looking into alternative plans such as developing the Royal Albert Hospital site.

The service has had regular contact with a considerable number of owners of rented accommodation in the area and positive relationships have been established. This has enabled the service to negotiate accommodation on clients' behalf.

Health Needs

Lancaster Health Authority is funding a part-time worker for three months to study the health needs of the homeless in the area. The F.H.S.A. has accepted that individuals with no permanent address can have difficulty registering with general practitioners and hence have agreed that the new Day Centre can be used as a contact address. Further local initiatives will depend on the work funded by the Health Authority.

Morecambe

The homeless in the Morecambe area tend to be a different group to that in Lancaster. In Lancaster there is a high percentage of young single homeless and rough sleepers, whereas in Morecambe there are more single parent families in insecure temporary accommodation. Two local initiatives

try to support the homeless in Morecambe.

- a) **Morecambe Homeless Action** Operates from St. Barnabas Church and is open 9.15 p.m. to 10.30 p.m. Saturday to Tuesday.
- b) **Trinity Drop in Centre** operates from Trinity Church Hall and is open from 10 a.m. to 1.30 p.m. on Tuesdays.

The Future

Once the new centre in Edward Street is open the work of

the service will undoubtedly expand as there is an obvious need. More volunteers will need to be recruited and trained and even more money raised to support the service.

The Executive Committee has been encouraged to develop the service by the support we have received from the City Council, Social Services, Health Service, Welfare Rights and non-statutory organisations, including all the churches. Even more important is the support we have received from so many individuals living in the Lancaster and Morecambe area.

