

## Section of Psychiatry

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### Homeless Men

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#### A London Survey

A section of society that lacks even the minimum possession of civilization, a home, might be expected to attract attention from a variety of disciplines, but in this country there have been few studies, and that of the National Assistance Board (1966) was outstanding for this reason as well as for its thoroughness.

Any proposed survey of the homeless population must take into account a number of factors associated with homelessness which may or may not rank as causes. At a time when the population was tied to the land, those living unsettled lives were often criminal – an observation preserved in the expression 'rogues and vagabonds'. Public consideration, at least since the fourteenth century, often had a penal character; and corresponding attitudes still persist (cf. Dumont 1967: 'Homeless men cling to the underside of every major city . . . (like) . . . a parasitic blight'). This suspicion of homeless men is not altogether without reason. Edwards *et al.* (1968), surveying the patrons of a reception centre, found that 59% had been in prison at sometime or another and 18% had been incarcerated within the six months prior to their survey. A recent survey at Pentonville (Sewell 1969, personal communication) confirms the impression of a close association between homelessness and petty criminality, especially in those receiving sentences of less than three months. On the other hand, Whiteley (1958) found only 20% with an admitted criminal record in a reception centre, and Laidlaw's (1956) figure was even lower (3%).

A much more general association of homelessness is with social factors of many kinds: poverty, for example, and its varying economic causes. In the sixteenth century, legislation aimed to provide work, and an income, with the intention of mitigating poverty and therefore homelessness. At the end of the last century, William Booth, founder of the Salvation Army, recorded the same obvious association between homelessness and poverty in London (1890). He observed many hundreds of both sexes sleeping out of doors, in all weathers, especially along the Embankment; death from starvation among the homeless was not uncommon. Since the Welfare State and high employment, the relationship of homelessness and poverty has presumably changed, and other causes and associations have become more significant.

Levinson (1965) has suggested that the homeless man can be regarded as one who cannot find a suitable role in this society – in former times he might have worked as a builder of railroads or a trapper – but now, without such a role, he can be regarded as 'the waste product of urbanization'. Bogue (1963) comments that 'our system seems to create a residue of chronic (though not necessarily culpable) losers, and Skid Row is the home of many of this group'. Study of the available or actual roles is likely to be of interest in a group of low ascribed status, and, by definition, with no conjugal role.

In American studies, among which Bogue's is outstanding, the association of alcoholism with homelessness is taken for granted. Skid Row is thought of as 'a kind of social sewer through which the dregs of society flow on their way to alcoholic oblivion' (Blumberg *et al.* 1966). Straus (1946) estimated that 80% of homeless men drink to excess; at the other extreme,

Laidlaw (1956) claimed that only 4.8% of Glasgow lodging-house patrons were 'alcoholics'. Edwards *et al.* (1968) found that 10% had received hospital treatment for alcoholism (in- or out-patient) and nearly half had at some time been arrested for drunkenness. He points out that, whatever the strength of the association may be, it cannot be said whether alcohol is cause or effect of a rootless way of life.

The association with actual mental illness is illustrated by Whiteley's (1955) survey of psychiatric patients admitted to an observation ward; 8.4% of these admissions came from a reception centre, i.e. much in excess of the expected figure. In a further survey of 100 men living at a reception centre, he found that 22% were 'mentally abnormal' although not all had been admitted to hospital, and a further 24% were alcoholic. From a psychiatric viewpoint this seems to have been the most sophisticated survey so far conducted in London. The numbers of cases found in the detailed NAB survey were comparatively low, since it was conducted by workers without psychiatric training. They thought that of lodging-house and hostel users, 5% were mentally abnormal and in reception centres 21% were of inadequate personality and poor mixers. It was unfortunate that this survey made no distinction between observations in town as against the country.

Other associations or subgroups among the homeless might emerge in any survey, for example, the retired and the physically disabled. But it is also possible that the homeless hold in common certain personality factors that contribute to the homeless state. This relationship might be expected to be conspicuous in single persons. Homeless families such as those investigated by Shelter (1969) or by the London County Council (1962) obscure the individual's peculiarities in the complexities of the marital bond. Homelessness in families is ascribed to a concatenation of factors - low wages, shortage of housing and so forth. But 'domestic friction' was listed in 34% (in 1959), presumably the outcome of personality factors in one or both partners.

The possession of a home carries with it the fulfilment of a number of roles, often of a sexual character. We might postulate that the homeless man is one who is incapable of fulfilling those roles and seeks to evade them and, further, that this incapacity might be the consequence of various childhood traumata. A defect of this kind might be found more often where men had chosen their way of life rather than where their accommodation was thrust upon them, the same

distinction, that is, that prevails between lodging-houses and reception centres. The survey of the NAB has already shown that the populations found in lodging-houses and reception centres were to some extent distinguishable from each other, e.g. in the percentages of those who sometimes slept rough.

A further distinction between men who choose to live in common lodging-houses, and those directed to reception centres, was made by Whiteley (1955). Among the former (when admitted to an observation ward for the first time) he found 'many psychopathic traits', lacking in the latter group. That is to say, men who choose to live a particular kind of homeless life may show certain specific abnormalities of personality missing in other homeless groups. For reasons of this kind a survey must specify the population studied, and generalizations may not be warranted.

#### *Method and Material*

The present survey was conducted in two Salvation Army Hostels in Central London (Westminster 101 cases and Blackfriars 22 cases). The interviews were all conducted by the same psychiatrist, lasted up to 1½ hours, and were based on a questionnaire of 64 items. The transiency of the population, its odd habits and reticence, and the administrative needs of the hostels, made for difficulties in sampling, which will not be considered here. Attempts were made to overcome these, but the ultimate bias probably meant that the elderly, stable, and co-operative are over-represented. On the other hand, it may have been the transient, criminal, the more unstable, and perhaps those with marked sexual deviations, who accounted for the refusal rate of about one in five.

The hostel mainly used accommodated 560 men. Originally a billiard-table factory, it had been modified to provide large dormitories accommodating about 100 men. Though always clean, there was no privacy, and no room for personal possessions: no 'home' in any personal sense. The lack of communal facilities meant that men used the hostel for little more than the clean bed. Social life was therefore minimal. Many men booked their beds by the week and thereby gained some stability within the hostel: a few men had occupied the same bed for years. Most of the occupants moved their beds within the hostel, were transient, or spent periods elsewhere.

Within the hostel, about 20% of the places were regularly filled by men directed by the National Assistance Board, to whom they had

applied as destitute. The remainder in contrast, had come of free choice, although the reasons they actually gave for their way of life were various and by no means showed that they were uniformly satisfied. The reliability of the information – necessarily very ‘soft’ indeed – is inevitably suspect. An attempt was made to assess the apparent reliability at the end of each interview. Only 3 (2.4%) seemed wholly unreliable as informants, though 37 (30.1%) were reckoned as only partly reliable. For some who were well known, enquiry was made from the staff; in a few cases, confirmatory information was sought from mental hospitals.

### Findings

*Social class:* Using the Registrar General's Classification (1960) the distribution showed a marked clustering in Social Classes 4 and 5, much as might be expected in a group of men of often poor education. Their status was based upon their best sustained work in the past, not necessarily their present or recent occupation. This showed a significantly poorer level than their father's ( $P=0.00003$  – Wilcoxon's matched pairs test) and suggested not only a downward drift but a failure at any time to retain their class of origin, presumably by reason of factors within their personality. As compared with the general population the fathers themselves were clustered in the lower social classes.

*Age:* It seems likely that in any cheap, single accommodation, there would be a high proportion of elderly or widowed men. Those actually retired and receiving the old age pension numbered 15 men (12.2%). In the Registrar General's distribution for the male population of London in 1964 11.1% are over the age of 60; in the sample 21.9% were over the age of 60 ( $P=0.00007$ ). There is therefore an accumulation of elderly above the expected figure, but the excess is not great. The mean age is 46.7 years (s.d. = 13.7).

*Origin:* Nearly half the men had been born and brought up outside London or its immediate surroundings. The proportion of native born (69%), however, was less than the national figure at the 1961 census (83.2%). A significant figure was the excess of Irish (25.2% as against 4.8% in the 1961 census), presumably accounted for by their employment as unskilled workers, seeking convenient cheap accommodation. The majority, giving reasons for leaving their birthplace, could be said to have migrated for realistic motives, e.g. leaving depressed areas in search of work. However, some (25) had left home early for reasons that themselves suggested sociopathy,

e.g. quarrelling with parents, or trouble with the law.

*Psychiatric diagnosis:* The finding that so many of the men were still of an age to work suggests that they might have become homeless and hostel-dwellers through disability and a diminished earning capacity. The physical diagnoses, though often conspicuous and disabling, will not be considered here. A high proportion of psychiatric illness might be expected both as an explanation of homelessness, as well as an association with life in the centre of a city.

There were 18 schizophrenics, all gross and unequivocal cases; 14 of them had been in psychiatric hospitals and discharged under ‘liberal’ policies, and only 3 were receiving any current treatment or after-care. In the conditions prevailing within the hostel, most passed unrecognized as psychiatrically ill. Given the necessary observation, some classified as abnormal personalities might have added to the number of schizophrenics. Of the depressed men, 3 were already receiving treatment; the remaining 7 were all sufficiently ill to be referred to a local psychiatric clinic, and some were actually suicidal.

The social difficulties of epileptics may have made them reluctant to be interviewed: they were probably under-represented in this sample (only one).

The diagnosis of personality disorder is particularly vexed in any survey because of difficulties of definition. Where men live under unusual circumstances, or appear odd, it is easy to take disorder of personality for granted. In this survey the clinical diagnosis was based upon four criteria: (a) Occupational history (in the light of the man's origins, educational background, and intelligence). (b) Interpersonal difficulties. (c) Sexual adjustment. (d) The presence of minor psychiatric symptoms.

‘Personality disorder’ was recorded only when deviations appeared under two or more heads. Using these crude criteria, half the men were reckoned as ‘abnormal personalities’ quite apart from their homelessness. It was apparent, however, that many had seemed stable enough so long as they had been in the Services – often for many years, and sometimes (they claimed) with commissions. Their social failure had become apparent only in civilian life.

One aspect of this abnormality was alcoholism; 25 (21.1%) admitted to heavy drinking or addic-

tion, a further 30 (24.4%) to moderately heavy drinking. Only one man admitted to drinking methylated spirits.

Of these four criteria of personality disorder two will now be considered in more detail.

#### *Occupational History*

The questionnaire included four items relating to occupation, namely: (1) Employed or unemployed at interview. (2) Longest job. (3) Consistency of work record (4-point scale). (4) Best level of work (Registrar General 1960).

At the time of interview 57.7% had no job, although many men professed to be starting a job within a few days. Although a quarter of the men had been directed to the hostel by the National Assistance Board, their only source of income, the level of unemployment was still high. This figure alone presumably reflects the unstable work record of this group.

*Longest job:* In a group of largely unskilled men (such as builders' labourers and kitchen porters), the predominance of short-lived jobs is much as might be expected. However, even by these standards, the record of consistency seemed poor.

*Past consistency:* Twenty-seven men (21.9%) had held a job for longer than 10 years and 28 men (22.7%) had not had a job lasting longer than a year. In a group of unskilled men (such as kitchen porters and builders' labourers) the predominance of short-lived jobs is only to be expected. Even so, the record of consistency seemed poor; nearly half, 48 (47.2%), were grossly erratic, repeatedly moving or losing jobs within days or weeks. The best level of sustained work was an aspect of the employment record which correlated strongly with homelessness: the lower the employment level, the greater the proportion of adult life that had been spent in hostels, under 'homeless' conditions ( $\chi^2=9.224$   $P<0.01$ ). This measure of established homelessness also correlated significantly with the longest job ( $\chi^2=9.952$   $P<0.05$ ): the longer the time spent in hostels, the shorter the time spent in jobs. None of the criteria relating to employment bore any significant relationship to past educational experience.

#### *Sexual Adjustment and Attitudes*

Of the sample 69.1% had never married, a figure that compares with that of 25.2% of the 1961 census (Registrar General 1961) for males aged 20 and over.

A second aspect of sexual adjustment lay in the sexual orientation, expressing the predominant interest, whether in fact or fantasy.

The heterosexual group (52.1%) indulged in fantasy and transient physical contact; stable relationships with the opposite sex were less common, and many of the marriages had broken by separation, rather than by death. Many men referred to the homosexuals in the hostel; they may have attracted more comment than their numbers deserved, or have declined interview, but the figure seems an underestimate (5.7%).

Two groups seemed unusual, perhaps characteristic of homeless men. The first (21.5%) were those who averred that they had no sexual interest, although some admitted past experiences without much emotion. The other was the ambivalent group (20.7%) who admired women from afar, and in an idealized aura. They envied the comforts they provided, but as consorts women were regarded as predatory, rapacious - or an unattainable luxury.

#### *Discussion*

This survey fulfilled some of its initial expectations. There was a distinct group of elderly men, commonly widowed, showing evidence of personal stability greater than most in, for example, their occupational history. However, they were not great in number, and were not clearly marked out in every respect. The bulk of the men were still of an age to work, the mean (46.7 years) corresponding to those already found in reception centres (46.1 years, Edwards *et al.* 1968, and 42.8 years, Whiteley 1955).

The geographical origins of the men (75.7% from outside London and its immediate surroundings) and their social class as compared with their fathers, support the hypothesis of a drift into a homeless urban life. Nevertheless, the reasons given for the overt start of this way of life, in their leaving home, seem superficially acceptable in 2 out of 3 cases. Perhaps this is the sort of retrospective information that can be relied on least of all.

The figure for the mentally ill is high, and presumably reflects the social incapacities of chronic illness, as well as the familiar correlations with life in the centre of cities. The high figures as compared with those obtained by the National Assistance Board may be explained by the closeness of the psychiatric scrutiny, as Roth & Luton (1943) suggest; Edwards *et al.* (1968) found psychiatric cases in numbers intermediate be-

tween these and the NAB, using observers who were not psychiatrists.

Many of the schizophrenics represent simply failures of 'community care'. They seemed to have been discharged (or perhaps absconded) from hospitals without further provision for treatment. The only surprise was that they had not yet re-entered the revolving door, presumably because of the tolerance of this kind of society and the minimum supervision that they received. None the less, in the course of the interviews other men often complained about their schizophrenic neighbours in the hostel beds. Although the figure for schizophrenia is high, it obviously only accounts for a minority who adopt this way of life; much the same observation was made (Noreik 1965) amongst a vagrant population in Norway.

The low figure of only 14 'normal' men (11.4%) corresponds to the high (but perhaps debatable) proportion with disorders of personality (62, i.e. 50.4%), a number that is likely to have been increased further by those who refused interview.

Sexual orientation and marital status reflect aspects of personality that seem characteristic of many of these homeless men. It is understandable that some men with highly ambivalent or 'uninterested' sexual attitudes will fail to establish or sustain a home. What is unknown, however, is the frequency of such attitudes among single men *with* homes, or the additional factors that contribute to a homeless way of life. Presumably they include amongst others, the anonymity, the support of the institution and its staff, and the tenuous character of personal relationships.

These attitudes towards women, apparently characteristic of homeless men, are reflected in the high proportion of those who had never married, 69.1%, that matches closely the 70% found by Edwards *et al.* (1968).

There are various practical implications of such a survey. The hostel population obviously consists of several subgroups for which particular provision must be made. This would be better achieved with, as has already been suggested (Edwards *et al.* 1968, *British Medical Journal* 1966) a national hostel service, into which the valuable contribution of voluntary bodies such as the Salvation Army is incorporated. To regard the homeless man as a 'blight', however, is to miss the cardinal point that he is not simply one who happens not to have a home, he is also a man who is incapable of sustaining one, and may

be incapable of any other way of life than that which he has adopted.

He is himself likely to be the established product of an earlier generation's sexual and parental attitudes, or sometimes broken homes. There will always be such products of any society, who will have to be provided for, if only to ensure their employability, social stability, and continued existence outside prison.

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#### A USA-UK Comparison

The term 'Skid Row' derives from Skid Road in Seattle, Washington - 'the route along which the ox-teams skidded logs to Yesler's Hill . . .' (Morgan 1962). The area that is characterized by 'flop-houses', taverns and missions is still known as Skid Road in Seattle, and lies adjacent to the original. Elsewhere in the United States the equivalent area of town is usually known as Skid Row.

Bogue (1963) has identified such areas in 45 large American cities, i.e. almost every city of 500,000 or more and some under 200,000.

A recent survey (National Assistance Board 1966) identified approximately 30,000 homeless single persons in Great Britain; less than a thousand were sleeping rough, and about 1,200