

Beggars, Blaggers And Bums? Media Representations of Homeless People

As part of her British Academy Postdoctoral Fellowship (1998–2001), Dr Rebekah Widdowfield has been examining media representations of homelessness and homeless people in the local, regional and national press. This has been a wide-ranging study examining the type of article, content, approach, language and, where possible, the use of photographs and other visual imagery.

I began the research on the somewhat simplistic premise that there existed a stereotypical and caricatured representation of homeless people as – in the words of my PDF application to the Academy – ‘beggars, blaggers and bums’. Historically, such constructions have been the preserve of the tabloid press and selected columnists in the right-wing broadsheets. While undoubtedly these kinds of crude stereotypes continue to make an occasional appearance, particularly in the tabloids, my research suggests that the press have found new ‘folk devils’ on which to focus their outrage – notably asylum seekers, paedophiles and drug dealers (all of whom, it is interesting to note, may be simultaneously homeless and are certainly vulnerable to becoming so).

However, while newspapers nowadays predominantly avoid the blatant caricaturing of the past, media coverage still serves to promote or reinforce a particular understanding of homelessness and homeless people. In this short article, I want to examine how the national press represent or, perhaps more accurately, misrepresent homeless people. It is first necessary however to clarify what is meant by the term ‘representation’.

Traditional discussions of representation have centred on whether the depiction of an issue (such as AIDS) or a group of people (such as women) is an accurate or distorted reflection of reality. More recent arguments stress that events and things do not have any one fixed ‘true’ essential meaning against which distortion can be assessed. This alternative view gives representation a much more active and creative role in relation to the way people think about the world and their place within it. As Stuart Hall (1997) emphasises: ‘Representation is a very different notion from that of reflection. It implies the active work of selecting and presenting, of structuring and shaping; not merely the transmitting of already-existing meaning, but the more active labour of making things mean’. This has obvious implications for the present study. As Norman Fairclough (1995) notes ‘journalists don’t only

recount events, they also interpret and explain them, try to get people to see things and to act in certain ways’. What appears in our daily newspaper then ‘is not an unmediated “window-on-the-world” but a selected and constructed representation, constitutive of reality’.

My study looked at coverage of homelessness in five major national daily newspapers (the *Daily Mail*, *Mirror*, *Guardian*, *Times*, and the *Daily Telegraph*) over a five-year period (from 1995 to 1999 inclusively). All articles containing the word homeless or homelessness were identified using CD-ROM search facilities and examined for their relevance. A large number of these homeless ‘hits’ referred to natural disasters and war where the number of people made homeless seems to combine with the number of deaths to provide a common journalistic yardstick of the scale of a tragedy. There were also a considerable number of references to homeless institutions such as the Royal Opera House and various football clubs as well as a surprising number of articles devoted to homeless pets.

In terms of stories relating to homelessness in the UK – the focus of my research – key contexts included reports on charity and fund-raising events and campaigns; details of grants and other monies received; royal, ministerial or celebrity visits to projects; and policy launches or reports. The word ‘homeless’ was also recorded in reviews of books, films and plays; in accounts of legal proceedings and in obituaries to people who had been involved in ‘helping the homeless’.

A close reading of these articles revealed a number of dominant ways of seeing homeless people. Here I want to examine three particular media representations namely: homeless people as ‘other’, homeless people as criminals (or as otherwise undeserving) and homeless people as victims.

The national press supports and sustains the idea of homeless people as ‘other’. This is reflected in the language used. Articles often set up binary oppositions between ‘us’ and ‘them’; ‘we’ and

'they'; normal and abnormal. Homeless people are contrasted with 'the more conventional community' (*Times* 29/4/99) 'the law-abiding, tax-paying majority' (*Mail* 8/1/97), 'ordinary people' (*Mail* 8/1/97) and, 'the rest of us' (*Mirror* 13/1/97). 'The homeless' are variously 'these people', 'they', 'them'. They are an 'army of outcasts' (*Guardian* 7/3/98), 'a species apart' (*Telegraph* 13/1/95), part of the 'citenry of the street' (*Telegraph* 13/1/95) inhabiting some different 'other' world, whether 'the world of soup kitchens and day centres, where policy dictates that workers ask no questions' (*Times* 14/4/96), or 'that netherworld of the homeless alcoholic and drug addict, where bottles are smashed on heads to settle scores, rapes are commonplace and a principal daily occupation is rummaging in dustbins' (*Telegraph* 13/1/95). The image of homeless people as fundamentally different from others is reinforced through the use of the generic term 'the homeless'. This designation demonstrates a lack of appreciation of the basic human character of individuals and is both dehumanising and homogenising: As Gerald Daly (1996) notes: "'They" become an amorphous, remote, alien mass lacking individuality or even humanity'.

Closely linked with ideas of 'otherness', is the representation of homeless people as fraudulent or criminal. Especially prevalent are articles reporting the supposed easy money to be made living on the streets. The *Daily Mail* is particularly keen on this kind of story which it reports under such headlines as: 'Homeless on £100 a day' (5/8/96), 'He gets £80 a day – so why work?' (19/11/98), and 'Five meals a day on easy street' (15/12/99). These articles express consternation, not only that people are making money without working, but that they are deceiving 'decent law-abiding citizens'. The *Mirror*, for example, is one of a number of the tabloids to report the death of 'super-scrounger' John Rowlands who 'drove his disabled father's leased Vauxhall to a site in Sheffield, changed out of his ordinary clothes and begged in rags claiming to be hungry and homeless' (22/8/95). As if to add insult to injury, not only are people on the street acquiring money through fraudulent means, but they are seen as using the money for unworthy or immoral purposes. Both the *Daily Mail* and the *Daily Express*, for instance, ran a front page story reporting the case of a Newcastle father who 'named and shamed' his homeless daughter as a 'fraud' in the local press, asking the public not to give her money which he claimed she would use to buy heroin.

The representation of homeless people as criminal is further reinforced by the use of 'homeless' as an adjective applied to defendants in various court cases and in the frequent linking of homeless people with – often extremely – violent crime. For example, in one three month period alone, the *Mail* (14/9/98) reported that a 'homeless man' had been 'charged with the murder of three people found hacked to death in a flat'; the *Mirror* (1/12/98) told how two homeless men had 'tortured, stabbed and battered Parvez Masih for less than £100 then dumped him in the freezer of a homeless hostel where they were staying'; while the *Telegraph* (10/9/98) reported the case of 'a homeless loner with violent fantasies' jailed indefinitely for stabbing a train passenger through the head.

The association of homeless people with both low-level and more serious crime, sustains a related media representation of homeless people as fundamentally undeserving. These stories tend to focus on homeless people apparently unjustifiably rejecting proffered help – such as the claim that, 'Edinburgh's homeless are so choosy about where they want to live that they are prepared to reject houses offered to them and wait until a truly desirable property comes along' (*Mail* 17/9/97) – and are often related to criticisms about an alleged squandering of 'taxpayer's money'. Other stories present the homeless as feckless and irresponsible. The *Daily Mail*, for example, reports how a mother living in a hostel for the homeless, 'abandoned her five children after asking social workers to provide emergency help because she wanted to go out for the evening' (23/12/99).

Yet at the same time, the media exhibit considerable sympathy for those who find themselves with nowhere to live. This tends to lead to a representation of homeless people as victims, which at times veers towards the sentimental. The *Mirror* talks about 'countless lost souls' in 'filthy, freezing doorways' (13/1/97) and 'the destitute with their sad, dead eyes' (20/12/98); the *Times* reports on 'Life and death on streets of despair' (1/12/96); while the *Daily Telegraph* – in an article entitled 'Broken lives on cracked pavements' – relates 'tales from the dishevelled army of sad souls living in shop doorways' (10/12/95). A focus on (particular) individuals adds to the poignancy. These profiles paint a pitiful picture of life on the street as demonstrated, for example, in Matthew Parris's description of a Big Issue seller: 'He was an undernourished spotty youth with ill-fitting clothes, trousers an inch too short. His arms and

wrists were painfully thin ... and his pale, knotted face bore an expression of permanent anxiety, old before his time... One of those youths that had never had a youth, but moved from a neglected, abused childhood into some wretched travesty of independence as an adult' (*Times* 8/3/95). While this kind of reporting may elicit sympathy and support for 'the homeless', by personalising homelessness in this way, the media contribute towards a depoliticisation of homelessness in which the personal obscures the political. In the words of Eungjun Min (1999): 'News reports (then) become dramatic documentaries about unfortunate individuals. The real issue is lost in the midst of humanism'.

More generally, the representation of homeless people as victims and a focus on the circumstances of particular individuals, tends to support somewhat simplistic explanations, which see homelessness as rooted in personal failings or misfortunes – most commonly an addiction to drink or drugs, family break-up, sexual abuse or mental health problems – rather than a product of structural disadvantages such as poverty, unemployment or a lack of affordable housing.

Representations of homeless people as victims also highlight the stereotypical way in which the media continue to portray homelessness. This is a land of blankets and sleeping bags, doorways and dogs, cardboard boxes and cans where homeless people

are found 'huddled' in 'freezing doorways' (*Mirror* 17/2/98), 'over cups of tea' (*Guardian* 29/4/99) or, 'beneath a blanket' (*Times* 15/1/99) and within insalubrious surroundings – whether 'the gloomy undercroft' of the Bullring with its 'stench of urine' (*Guardian* 23/2/98); 'the grimy doorways and darkened alleys off the Strand' (*Times* 11/11/99) or 'slumped in a doorway among discarded McDonald wrappers, cigarette butts and empty beer cans' (*Mail* 27/11/99).

As the above discussion suggests, the media have a particular view of homeless people and their situation which, while not a fabrication, fails to tell the full story. Homelessness is about much more than people sleeping rough in shop doorways but this 'other' homelessness seldom makes it onto the pages of the national press. My research suggests that while the national media nowadays largely avoid the crude stereotyping of the past, dominant constructions of homeless people as 'other', as criminals or as victims serve to reinforce a particular understanding of what homelessness is, where it occurs and why. These representations are not without consequence and further work is required to assess how media representations of homeless people affect public attitudes, behaviour and policy-making.

Since August 2001 Dr Widdowfield has been a Senior Research Officer in the Scottish Executive. This article was written prior to her taking up post.