



Understanding Public Perceptions of Homelessness in the UK Headline Summary

Background

Homewards will take a transformative approach to demonstrate that it is possible to end homelessness – making it rare, brief and unrepeated. It is a locally led, five-year programme with collaboration at its heart. Working with six flagship locations across the UK, the programme will provide new space, tools and relationships, to showcase what can be achieved through a collective effort, focussed on preventing homelessness in those areas.

Ending homelessness is a societal challenge that requires a societal response: we have seen through international success stories that public support and shared responsibility can play a pivotal role in helping to end homelessness. **Homewards** will raise awareness of the breadth and complexities of homelessness and inspire optimism for change through national campaigns, local storytelling and by placing those with lived experience at the heart of our work.

As a first step, we asked Ipsos UK to undertake independent research into public perceptions of homelessness, providing a better sense of the challenges and opportunities including how the public understand homelessness, what should be done to end it, and who needs to take action.

Our first Public Perceptions of Homelessness Survey was conducted in May 2023, and surveyed 3,473 adults aged 16+ across the UK. Technical details are provided at the end of this summary.

We will repeat this survey throughout the programme to understand how public perceptions of homelessness may change over time and to help us inspire greater optimism about the prospect of ending homelessness together.

Headline Findings

Most acknowledge homelessness is a serious issue, in need of more attention.

More than **4 in 5 people** (85%) think that **homelessness is a very or fairly serious problem** in the UK. Seven in ten (72%) believe homelessness in the UK has got worse over the past 12 months (just 4% think better) and a similar proportion think levels in the UK will increase in the next 12 months (69% say increase; 4% say decrease).

Most people believe that **more should be done to help** people facing homelessness in the UK. Nearly three-quarters (73%) think **that ending homelessness is not given enough attention by society** and almost half (47%) believe homelessness should be given **top priority**, versus three in ten (31%) who say there are other more important problems.

People believe homelessness can happen to anyone - one in five have experience of homelessness - and most understanding there are different types of homelessness and many different causes.

Eight in ten (80%) believe that becoming homeless ‘**can happen to anyone**’ and the same proportion believe it’s unfair to take a negative view of people who are homeless. It is clear that homelessness touches many people’s lives – **one in five people (22%) have experience of homelessness**, either themselves or through someone close to them.

The majority do not see homelessness as a choice: Most (68%) disagree that homeless people could find somewhere to live if they really tried, and six in ten (59%) agree that most people are homeless because of things outside their control, as opposed to bad choices they have made (20% agree).

Nine in ten (91%) recognise that there are **many causes of homelessness**. When thinking about the main causes, top ranking answers include both systemic issues such as poverty (49%) and a shortage of affordable housing (26%), as well as individual factors including alcohol and drug problems (48%) and mental and physical health problems (31%), indicating some awareness of the complexity of the issue.

Those most likely to be perceived as experiencing homelessness are **people leaving prison, the care system or the armed forces (75% think these groups are more likely to experience homelessness)**, those on **lower incomes (73%)**, those with a **physical or mental health** condition or disability (64%) and **immigrants** to the UK (48%).

Most people recognise that homelessness goes beyond rough sleeping. Nearly two-thirds (63%) tend to think of homelessness as including a range of different circumstances (e.g., staying in hostels/hotels, squatting and sofa-surfing) versus 29% who think mainly about people sleeping on the streets. Nevertheless, three in ten (29%) **incorrectly believe that street homelessness is the most common form of homelessness** and the same proportion say they don’t know (30%), showing that there is scope to improve awareness levels when it comes to what being homeless means.

There are reasons for hope; public desire to end homelessness is strong, efforts to end it are seen as benefiting society as a whole, and most believe there are a range of actions we can take, supporting holistic and preventative measures.

There is strong support for ending homeless: seven in ten (72%) support the aim of ‘ending’ homelessness when defined as making it rare, brief, and unrepeated¹.

Most people believe there are ways to achieve this aim – two-thirds agree that **as a society there are plenty of things we can do to end homelessness (65%)**.

The public support a variety of actions, from a wide range of organisations, with a focus on a holistic range of support including preventative measures: help with gaining or staying in **employment (89% support this)**,

¹ *Worded in the survey as ‘rare, brief and doesn’t happen again and again to the same people’*

access to **addiction or mental health services** (89%); **earlier identification** of people at risk of homelessness (84%), increased **investment to prevent** homelessness (76%) and **improving the situation for tenants** to reduce the risk of homelessness (75%)

Efforts to address homelessness are viewed as something that would benefit everyone – 70% agree that homelessness ‘affects the whole of society’. Over half think that tackling homelessness would alleviate pressures on public services a great deal or a fair amount (57%) and improve the sense of community (51%) in their local area. Other perceived benefits include improvements to the state of the economy, levels of crime and, overall, to the area where they live.

As well as common misperceptions about the types and causes of homelessness, **over 3 in 10 (34%) incorrectly believe that most people experiencing homelessness have been homeless before**. In addition, most **say they don’t know what’s being done** to tackle homelessness (68%), **just two in ten (21%) have seen or heard anything** in the last three months about actions taken to tackle homelessness and **four in ten think there is nothing they can do personally** to tackle (38%) or indeed end it (42%).

In conclusion

The public see homelessness in the UK today as a serious, and complex challenge, but one we can, and should, do more to address as a society.

An ambition to end homelessness is strongly supported by the public who believe there are ways to achieve this aim, through more holistic support and preventative interventions.

This research indicates that more can be done to boost the UK public’s understanding of homelessness, as well as what is being done to address it and how we can work together to end homelessness for good.

Technical note

A representative sample of 3,473 adults was achieved between 5-10 May 2023 by using the Ipsos UK KnowledgePanel. The data was weighted separately within England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland by age, gender, region, index of multiple deprivation quintiles, education, ethnicity and number of adults in the household, and then scaled proportionately to reflect the profile of the UK population as a whole. All polls are subject to a range of potential sources of error.