King's Research Portal

Citation for published version (APA):
Chauhan, A., & Foster, J. (2025). *Homelessness and the Language of Stigma.* Centre for Homelessness Impact.

Homelessness
and the Language
of Stigma

Centre for
Homelessness Impact

Contents:

Foreword

Language is power. It can build or destroy, heal or wound. And when it comes to homelessness, our words too often perpetuate the very problem we seek to solve. With homelessness rising, and stigma continuing to be a major barrier to progress, it's never been more critical to confront the language that fuels this crisis.

Language also represents what it means to be human. Our ability to communicate not merely with sounds but with vocabulary and grammar, and within a system of rules, is unique to our species. The rules that govern and shape language can be subtle and multi-layered and should be treated with respect and care.

We know that words, phrases, intonation and even the omission of these can cause harm, intentionally and unconsciously. Each of us is occasionally guilty of causing unintended upset or hurt with our words. It might be a truism that thoughts become things, how we speak doesn't just shape our understanding of the world and its problems, it also shapes our responses.

This is particularly pertinent when we consider the language that surrounds homelessness. Too often, language choices fortify the assumptions, misunderstandings or stigma linked with losing the roof over your head, or at best leaves these unchallenged. Stigma and false narratives obstruct recovery and undermine support for effective solutions. From casual dehumanisation to the subtle use of labels, our language too often 'others' those without a home, stripping them of their humanity and reinforcing societal divisions. Making it harder to build public support for the measures that we know could make things better.

I am therefore particularly pleased to share his important analysis which interrogates the language we use - from the way that people experiencing homelessness are 'othered' by how we speak, to the methods by which they are too often prescribed lower status than society at large.

This report pioneers a powerful methodology, using data scraping and lived experience expertise to expose the mechanisms of stigmatising language at scale . The authors looked at more than 5,000 messages posted on social media that related to homelessness, and worked with people who have lived experience of homelessness to understand how many of these posts might be stigmatising. This in turn enabled them to look at how the language of stigma worked.

→ Back to Contents

Many of those original social media posts are reproduced within this report, and they make for uncomfortable but crucial reading. Some are openly offensive, but some use the common phrases and ideas that we all hear far too often and might even participate in ourselves. A number were expressed as jokes. Only by approaching how we discuss this topic with honesty and candour can we hope to address our language and make change.

Importantly, following this meticulous process, this project built on these findings to provide an evidence-based checklist on how we can alter our language and seek to make change. By following its advice, we can ensure that we don't contribute to the harmful assumptions and stigma that so frequently affect people experiencing homelessness and we can instead add to a positive, inclusive new way forward. We hope it will be of particular relevance to journalists when reporting on homelessness for public audiences.

Often, we look to government or other public bodies to prevent and tackle homelessness - this report allows each and every one of us to be a small part of the change we need in the movement toward a world without homelessness.

Lígia Teixeira is Chief Executive of the Centre for Homelessness Impact

**Centre for
Homelessness Impact**

Homelessness and the Language of Stigma

Dr Apurv Chauhan, Lecturer in Social and Cultural Psychology,
King's College London

Professor Juliet Foster

King's
College
LONDON

About the Centre for Homelessness Impact

The Centre for Homelessness Impact champions the creation and use of better evidence for a world without homelessness. Our mission is to improve the lives of those experiencing homelessness by ensuring that policy, practice and funding decisions are underpinned by reliable evidence.

Person-first language
This report uses person-first language, putting a person before their circumstances. This is to avoid defining an individual by homelessness, which should be a temporary experience.

→ Back to Contents

What is stigma?

The concept of stigma is widely used and refers to a broad range of things (Pescosolido & Martin, 2015). In its most elementary version, stigma refers to the discrediting of people or groups due to certain attributes or characteristics. Stigmatised people or groups are considered "less than" others in society (Pescosolido et al., 2008, p. 431). Attributes that have been, and to varying degrees remain, stigmatising include mental health conditions, HIV, sexually transmitted infections, drug use, and sex work. Stigma involves affording a lower status to groups and individuals, associating them with negative stereotypes, and engaging in both direct and indirect discrimination. It is important to recognise that no attribute inherently serves as a basis for stigma. Stigma originates from societal perceptions of certain characteristics or attributes, leading to the formation of negative ideas surrounding them.

→ Back to Contents

How language matters – the stigma of homelessness

As stigma is produced in the social world, language plays a crucial role in its development and propagation. A more direct aspect of stigmatising language involves using negative terms and descriptors – terms such as "bums," "tramps," and "hobos," reduce individuals experiencing homelessness to harmful stereotypes and imply that they are lazy, shiftless, and lacking in moral character. The use of such language reinforces the idea that homelessness is tied to individual-level characteristics rather than a systemic issue that requires intervention and support. Moreover, using such terms can make it harder for people affected by homelessness to seek assistance from others, as they may feel ashamed or embarrassed by the negative connotations associated with them. Another way that language can stigmatise individuals who experience homelessness by using descriptors that reduce them to their homelessness status, rather than acknowledging their individuality and humanity. Referring to people impacted by homelessness as "the homeless", "homeless people", or "the homeless population" can homogenise a diverse group of individuals with unique experiences and backgrounds. This language reinforces marginalisation and impedes access to resources and services that can help improve their situation.

→ Back to Contents

However, language is important beyond the issue of people using problematic terms, labels, and descriptors when talking about homelessness. Language is inextricably linked to the processes of stigmatisation which refer to how stigma around an attribute, group membership, or characteristic develops and gets communicated. According to sociologists Link and Phelan (2001), stigmatisation involves four interrelated processes. The first and second involve highlighting individuals or groups as different based on one or more characteristics and associating them with negative attributes. People differ from one another on a range of characteristics but not all differences between people are relevant to stigma. It is through processes of social selection that certain differences become the basis of stigma. The language we use to discuss homelessness and people experiencing homelessness can unintentionally highlight and amplify differences and associate them with negative ideas. Understanding and reducing stigma, therefore, requires paying attention to which differences we select and highlight when talking about homelessness in everyday circumstances; and what negative attributes we associate with those differences. The third constitutive process involves separating the stigmatised people or groups ("them") from others ("us") creating an ingroup–outgroup situation. The language choices we make when talking about homelessness can create the impression that individuals impacted by homelessness are different to other people in the society, often on the basis of the differences we label through the language we use. Finally, language on homelessness contributes to the fourth component of the stigmatising process – it can assume or suggest a lower status for people who experience homelessness and also describe or suggest discrimination against them.

Therefore, improving the language we use in the context of homelessness requires us to understand how our language can highlight differences and associate them with negative attributes to create stigma. Similarly, we should appreciate how our everyday language can portray people experiencing homelessness as the outgroup without a social standing.

→ Back to Contents

Examining everyday language – the method behind this language guide

This language guide is based on analysis of language used by people from the UK. The research team committed to using naturally occurring everyday language and therefore created its data corpus from the language people use on Twitter (now 'X'). Twitter was chosen purposefully as people generally have their real identities and/or social networks associated with their Twitter accounts. Compared to other internet platforms such as Reddit, it is not as anonymous and allowed the research to examine the language people were likely to use not only on the internet but also in public. Unlike a research interview where people tend to be more mindful of the language they use, messages posted on Twitter tend to have a very high degree of naturalism.

The data generation phase of this work involved creating a corpus of messages users from the UK had posted about homelessness between 1st January 2019 and 31st December 2021. After removing repeated messages (retweets), replies, quotes, non-English texts, and messages posted by suspected bots, the final corpus of everyday language on homelessness contained 4,505 messages posted by British citizens. Additionally, 916 sentences featuring phrases commonly used in the homelessness charity sector and newspapers were incorporated into the corpus.

The dataset of 5,421 sentences was divided in sets of about 200 sentences each and were shared with 25 pairs of people with lived experience of homelessness who read each sentence and considered if people experiencing homelessness were described in a negative manner in the sentence. 943 sentences were rated as negative by both people in the pair forming the basis for the empirical research underpinning this language guide.

The research team (AC & JLF) examined all 943 sentences in depth with two goals informed by Link and Phelan's framework on the process of stigmatisation. The first goal was to identify the different ways in which people experiencing homelessness were being labelled as different. This was crucial as without the labelling of people experiencing homelessness as different in the language people use, stigmatising ideas about homelessness cannot develop or take hold. The second goal was to identify the communicative context in which stigmatising language about homelessness was used. In other words, the aim was to examine the specific situations and conversational goals where such language arises.

→ Back to Contents

The review of scientific literature on the stigma of homelessness suggested three bases of difference: appearance and hygiene, personal deficiencies, and substance use and addiction. These formed the starting point of this research's codebook. Each statement was reviewed individually and categorised according to the implied differences.". When a stigmatising statement did not fit in these existing categories AC and JLF analysed it and developed an appropriate category for the implied differences. This led to the creation of five more categories: "deviant behaviour", "social, relational, and sexual undesirability", "germs, diseases, and lack of human qualities", "bad life choices", and "status". The category of "bad life choices" was fused with "personal deficiencies" as both pertained to a lack within the individual. The final codebook had seven kinds of differences that get labelled when people use stigmatising language:

Appearance and hygiene

Deviant behaviour

Social, relational, and sexual undesirability

Germs, diseases, and lack of human qualities

Personal deficiencies or bad life choices

Substance abuse and addiction

Status

Figure 1: Percentage of comments by label

- Low Status — 25.4%
- Appearance or hygiene — 18.32%
- Deviant behaviour — 15.89%
- Personal deficiency or poor life choices — 15.89%
- No clear labelling or differences — 10.32%
- Social or sexual undesirability — 8%
- Substance abuse or addiction — 5.26%
- Germs, diseases and dehumanisation — 0.92%

→ Back to Contents
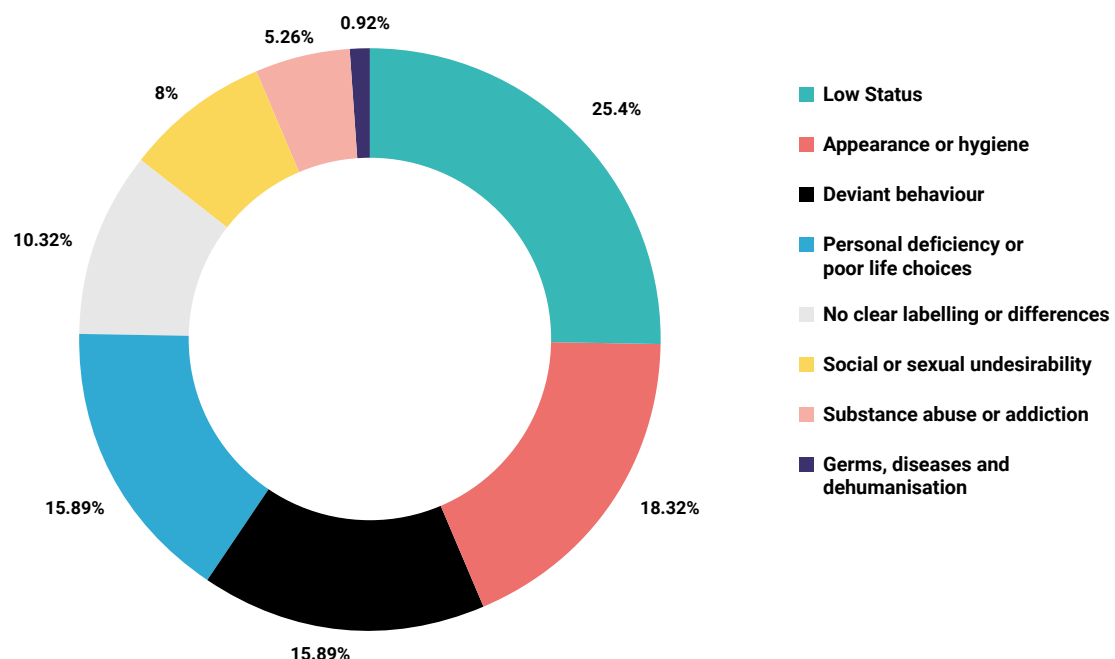
In labelling these differences, the language people used to express their ideas about homelessness was stigmatising in four ways.

In labelling differences in appearance, hygiene, and deviant behaviour (differences i and ii), the language used created and communicated stigma through highlighting that people experiencing homelessness do not fit in with the norms and expectations of the society. This was stigmatising language highlighting deviance.

In labelling people who experience homelessness as sexually, relationally, and socially undesirable, and associating them with germs and diseases (differences iii and iv), the language used created and communicated stigma by suggesting a need to keep a distance from them. This was stigmatising language suggesting desire for social separation.

In labelling individuals as having undesirable traits and characteristics, and discussing substance misuse and addiction, the language used created stigma by attributing individual responsibilities. Such language blames people affected by homelessness for their own plight and can be considered as the language of blame.

Finally, when differences are not explicitly labelled, the language used on homelessness can still be stigmatising by presenting people impacted by homelessness as different in status to others. This was stigmatising language communicating lower status.

→ Back to Contents

Avoiding language suggesting deviance from social norms

For over one in three instances where people who experience homelessness were labelled as different to others, the language used highlighted how they failed to meet social norms related to appearance and hygiene (18.32%), and behaviour (15.89%).

Appearance and hygiene: In the first category, the language used can label individuals as not meeting social norms around appearance by referring to their clothes, shoes, hair, skin, face, teeth, body art, piercings, or other body modifications. Similarly differences in hygiene, cleanliness, and body odour can get labelled as not meeting the normative demands of the society. Such language is stigmatising for several reasons.

First, it suggests that all people who experience homelessness have a shared appearance which is different from people who do not. Take statement (1) for example. The person making this statement is suggesting how "hipsters" are unusual in that they are indistinguishable in their appearance from people experiencing homelessness. Such language implies that the appearance of people going through homelessness is fundamentally different from others and "hipsters" are noteworthy for blurring this difference. Stereotypical language is not restricted to general appearance but as the real-world data from the empirical work underpinning this language guide shows, it can refer to specific aspects such as comments about thin bodies (5), lack of makeup (6), hair (7 - 9), clothes (10, 11), or several of them together (12). Hygiene is another difference people labelled routinely when talking about individuals impacted by homelessness. References to cleanliness, needing a bath, and odour get labelled. Messages such as (13) and (16), for example, imply that there is a unique body odour and smell associated with homelessness which is identifiably different from others and associates it with disgust and unpleasantness.

→ Back to Contents

Deviant behaviour: Using language that highlights the behaviour of people who experience homelessness as unusual can also imply their deviance from conventional social norms. This may include references to verbal (shouting, singing, arguing etc.) and non-verbal (posture, facial expression etc.) behaviours or actions, physical activities (urinating, running, having intercourse) or actions (robbing, stealing, abusing etc.) that may be considered deviant when done in public.

Data used to develop this language guide show that people highlight actions and behaviours that threaten the physical safety of others. This included threatening with physical violence (22), running around with a knife (23), trying to break and enter (24), and pushing people (25). Similarly, mentions of people impacted by homelessness verbally abusing others (26 -29) and engaging in anti-social behaviour such as shouting obscenities (31 and 34) and fighting on the streets (33) were also mentioned. Accounts of stealing (35 – 38) were also present in the data. Similarly, talking about sexually deviant behaviour (19 and 20), engaging in inexplicable and hard to understand behaviours such as throwing money (40), asking for a frozen pizza (39), sweeping a car park (41), wrestling one's own sleeping bag (43) use language that instils individuals with an element of strangeness that sets them apart from other people.

To summarise, when language used to talk about homelessness involves highlighting differences, it others people who experience homelessness as fundamentally different from other people in our society. It also homogenises these individuals by suggesting that there is a general appearance shared by everyone going through homelessness. Such language stereotypes individuals and ignores the reality that not all persons experiencing homelessness share common attributes. Similarly, language referring to deviant and dangerous behaviour imbues homelessness and individuals affected by it with strangeness, threat, and danger. A further point to consider is whether the housing status of a person engaging in deviant behaviour is an essential detail, necessary to our conversational goals. In instances where it is not, just as with ethnicities and sexuality, it is best to refrain from speculating or mentioning that the person concerned was experiencing homelessness. Associating individuals and groups with threat is a well-understood pathway for identifying them as separate from others (Chauhan & Foster, 2014; Foster, 2006) and it implies that avoiding contact and association with the said group is necessary to maintain one's well-being and safety.

→ Back to Contents

Avoiding language suggesting social separation

Language can create and reinforce stigma by suggesting that a social distance needs to be maintained from people experiencing homelessness. The desire to avoid contact with a particular group and preserve social distance from them is considered to be the core component of stigma (Jorm & Oh, 2009). This gets expressed in language that portrays people impacted by homelessness as undesirable in any context. In its milder version, it takes the form of suggesting people who experience homelessness as sexually and relationally undesirable, and their presence being undesirable in a social space. In the more extreme form, language can create stigma by associating them with diseases and describing them in ways that imply a "less than human" status in society. The research uncovered language suggesting both kinds of social separation.

Undesirability: Data used to develop this guide reveal that people often describe the presence of people experiencing homelessness as an indicator of the area being run-down, unsafe, and generally undesirable. There was a common tendency to describe cities and towns as having degraded and become unpleasant because of an increase in the number of people sleeping rough. For example, the language used in message (109) describes a city centre going "downhill" because "mostly tourists, druggies, and the homeless [are] left on the street. Very similar language is used in messages (111 – 113) to describe other towns and cities as run-down.

Language can create social distance even when the content of the message is empathetic and considerate. In message (110) the author takes an empathetic stance towards "a homeless man camping in the park near to my home" but then proceeds to suggest that despite being "mostly harmless", his presence is "intimidating for people". Similarly, in message (114), the author proclaims their support for "help[ing] homeless veterans" but continues to suggest that the ones housed in a hotel near them have "no respect whatsoever for the local community". In both these illustrative cases, despite being empathetic, on the whole the language used stigmatises people experiencing homelessness by suggesting that their presence in an area was undesirable. Such language portrays people experiencing homelessness as social outcasts.

→ Back to Contents

When people compare themselves with individuals affected by homelessness in an ostensibly humorous manner to suggest their own relational (103 -107) or sexual undesirability (99 – 102), the overall assumption underpinning the language is that people who experience homelessness are well-understood to be undesirable in these contexts. Language that uses such individuals as foils for comparison involves portraying them as the bottom-of-the-pile (Kim et al., 2021) and represents them as the lowest status group in society from which people should preserve their distance.

Germs, diseases, and dehumanisation: In perhaps the most extreme form of labelling of differences, language can make negative associations between people affected by homelessness and germs and diseases. Previous research has shown that deeply stigmatising beliefs tend to link a certain group with diseases, as was the case with gay people and HIV/AIDS (Joffe, 1995, 1998, 2003). Language used in an ostensibly funny message (45) links homelessness with AIDS. Message (46) suggests more directly that people who experience homelessness have unique germs that other people do not, and similar to the HIV/AIDS example, appears to suggest that homelessness creates these germs.

Language used to label perceived differences in health and well-being of people experiencing homelessness can result in infrahumanisation of people who experience homelessness. Infrahumanisation involves perceiving the out-group as lacking uniquely human attributes relative to the in-group (Haslam & Loughnan, 2014). During the Covid-19 pandemic, the language used while questioning why people who were sleeping rough were not getting seriously ill despite lacking washing and cleaning facilities (49, 52), ended up questioning if they were even vulnerable to the virus. Infrahumanisation also happens when people affected by homelessness are presented as curiosities. For example, message (151) refers to the "guided tour of the homeless of Nottingham" – such language implies that instead of being human beings, people are objects of perverse attraction in the city.

In the extreme, language talking about homelessness can also dehumanise individuals directly when it compares them to non-human species. Message (47) calls people impacted by homelessness "vermin" whereas message (53) describes them akin to stray dogs. Language can also dehumanise individuals in an indirect manner through evoking disgust towards them. Research has shown that describing outgroups in manners that evoke disgust results in dehumanising its members (Buckels & Trapnell, 2013). Data in this study show several examples of such language use. Take for example, message (50) which, on the face of it, does not intend to stigmatise those going through homelessness. Yet, in describing the person with wounds infested with maggots, the resulting image is one that provokes disgust. Similarly, references to hygiene, body odour, and smell (96-98; also discussed in the previous section) evoke disgust and create stigma by presenting people as lacking qualities that human beings are generally associated with.

→   Back to Contents

Avoiding the language of blame

What we say about social problems such as homelessness reveals our ideas about their causes. In other words, through our language choice, we communicate who or what is responsible for the social problem – this is called causal attribution. Assigning an individual's personal qualities or traits as the explanation of their behaviour or the situation they find themselves in, involves making dispositional attributions. When we make dispositional attributions, we identify the cause of the behaviour or the situation to be internal to an individual and under their control. This is the opposite of when we make situational attributions where we regard the causes to be outside an individual's control (Bridger et al., n.d.). A strong body of research suggests that when people make dispositional attributions, they are less likely to consider the person or group with sympathy or be in favour of helping them (Rudolph et al., 2004). Blaming people for their own condition suggests that they have failed themselves and in doing so, discredits them and creates stigma. Our data captured several examples of the language of blame. The ideas broadly pertained to either personal deficiencies and bad life choices or highlighted substance abuse and addiction.

Substance abuse and addiction: Talking about people who experience homelessness in the context of intoxicating substances and drug use, or indeed using language that discusses addiction issues can create stigma. Stigmatisation is very direct when substance and drug use descriptors are used for people impacted by homelessness. For example, data show that people commonly tend to use descriptors such as "a crackhead homeless man" (117), "two homeless junkies" (118), "full on crackhead" (123), and "pissed homeless fellas" (121). Each of these stigmatising descriptors communicate a dispositional attribution that associates people experiencing homelessness with blame for their situation. At the same time, as message (126) shows, talking about drugs and substance abuse in relation with people experiencing homelessness can also involve indirect language. What is more, language used in sympathetic messages can also create stigma when they assume that all people experiencing homelessness misuse alcohol and drugs. Take for example message (127). The author is encouraging people to help people experiencing homelessness by providing them with water and notes "substance and alcohol misuse doesn't suit this weather". Unnecessary and non-topical references to substance misuse when communicating about people experiencing homelessness underlines the idea that through their addiction, they share the blame for being homeless.

→ Back to Contents

Most importantly, however, we must refrain from making causal associations between homelessness and substance use. It is very difficult to ascertain whether a specific person is experiencing homelessness as a consequence of their substance use and addiction. Equally, we must recognise that drinking and using drugs can often be a coping mechanism for people dealing with extremely difficult living situations.

Personal deficiency or poor life choices: The language of blame involved expressing a number of personal deficiencies pertaining to the character or conduct of people experiencing homelessness. Directly stigmatising language of blame involves using phrases such as "so called homeless" which suggests that the problem is non-existent, and people merely pretend to be homeless (69, 75). The language used in both (69) and (75) directly questions whether homelessness is real and implies that people lacking in desirable qualities pretend to be homeless to exploit the good will of others. The same stigmatising idea that people fake homelessness is also communicated without using any specific phrase or expressing the idea directly. Using inverted commas around the word homeless in message (70), and a range of rhetorical and linguistic tropes in messages (71 – 82) achieve the same stigmatising representation indirectly. In the extreme, the suggestion that people choose to be homeless or that people sleeping rough on the streets are doing it by choice can be highly stigmatising and reduce sympathetic attention on the problem. Similarly, language that describes homelessness as a choice (78), or suggests that people are "outdoorsy" (82) or "prefer to sleep in the streets" to escape the rules and regulations of social housing (79) creates the representation that homelessness is not a social or structural problem.

Even messages that are sympathetic can use a language of blame. The phrase "homeless through no fault of their own" provides an excellent illustration. People tend to use this phrase as a sympathetic descriptor for people experiencing homelessness. Consider sentences (54) and (55) – while both messages express sympathy, they also imply that the specific people being talked about are different from those who become homeless through their own fault. Such language inadvertently reinforces a highly stigmatising distinction around deservingness where some people are regarded as responsible (and therefore "deserving" of their plight).

The language of blame can also be direct and similar to stigmatising language used in other contexts. References to negative traits of people experiencing homelessness can achieve stigma in this manner. Data show this can be through allusions to a lack of desirable qualities, laziness (61), pushiness (60), greediness (62), that they do not work hard enough to avoid their homelessness (81), or that they were not grateful for the help they received (60 – 68). Data in the project show that people also comment on individuals experiencing homelessness wearing what look like expensive shoes (83) and clothes (86), and spending money on hairstyling (84) and drugs and alcohol (87). Describing people experiencing homelessness as injudicious with their expenditures can also create a language of blame due to the underlying dispositional attributions of not being careful with money and thus responsible for their homelessness.

→ Back to Contents

Avoiding the language that associates people going through homelessness with a lower status

As discussed at the start of this guide, stigma results in lowering the status of the stigmatised individual or group. Language used on homelessness can be stigmatising if it describes people experiencing homelessness as lower status people. Data for this project show that such language can take many forms.

The most common form of such stigmatising language involves using homelessness as an example of personal failure. Take for example message (132) – the language used presents becoming homeless as an exemplar of an unpleasant life outcome and suggests it to be a state of failure. Interestingly, it also associates bad financial management with homelessness and uses the language of blame. Phrases such as "I'd rather be homeless than…" to suggest the undesirability of the alternative can also create stigma by implying homelessness to be the lowest state of existence. Messages (133) and (134) provide illustrations of such language and respectively take the forms of "rather be homeless in Iraq" and "rather be homeless in another country". Phrases such as "screams homeless", "shows that you/he/she/they are/is homeless" (135) communicate a shared assumption of discredited and lower social status of those experiencing homelessness. Such language propagates the idea that homelessness is undesirable and in doing so propagates stigma.

At the same time, the idea of homelessness as low status can be implicit in our language. It can involve comparisons with people experiencing homelessness that assume homelessness to be a lower and undesirable social status. In message (136) the author suggests that they would be romantically interested if a woman had "a pretty face" and overlook "small things, like, she is homeless". Language can also (137, 138) suggest lower status of people experiencing homelessness when people compare their own poverty with being homeless. Similarly, language can portray the lower status by using people experiencing homelessness as exemplars of people lacking credibility (139, 140), or describing being mistaken for someone experiencing homelessness (message 142), or indeed, erroneously judging someone to be homeless (message 141) as embarrassing events.

→ Back to Contents

Language that describes those experiencing homelessness as not having enough social status to criticise, judge or indeed evaluate others in any context is acutely stigmatising. Similarly, suggesting that seeking help from people experiencing homelessness, or receiving kindness or sympathy from them is a low point in one's life is also stigmatising (143 – 150). In all these instances, stigma is not tied to the use of specific phrases but with the underlying assumption that homelessness is a discredited state.

Understanding contexts in which we use stigmatising language on homelessness

Our work identified five conversational contexts in which language used on homelessness was stigmatising. While not all instances of these conversational contexts involve stigmatising language, it is important to recognise these as the likely ones where we need to be careful about the language we use. These include instances when we joke about people experiencing homelessness or use them as reference points for social comparison; when we are describing our interactions or encounters with them; and when we comment on homelessness or refer to it while talking about something else. These are discussed in detail below.

Figure 2: Comment share by conversational context
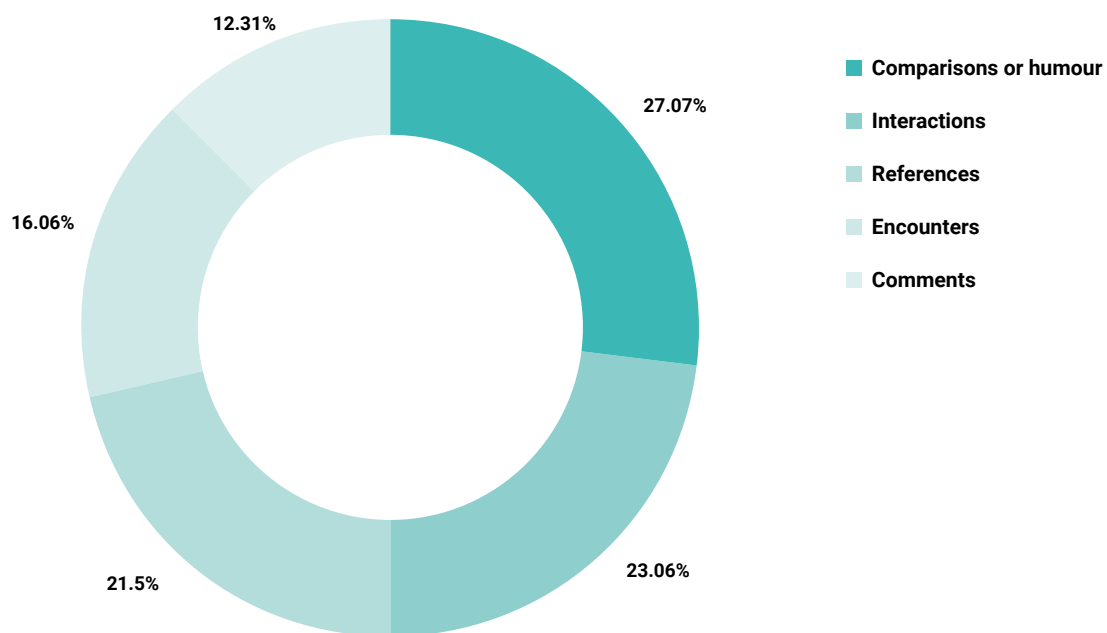
Comparisons or humour: The most common context involved individuals comparing themselves or others to those experiencing homelessness or making humorous remarks about homelessness. Over a quarter of instances of stigmatising language occurred in this context. As figure 3 demonstrates, in this context, mentions of appearance and hygiene, and status are the primary basis of stigmatising labels. Other differences do not tend to be labelled as frequently in this context.

→ Back to Contents

Figure 3: Labels used in different conversational contexts

Comments
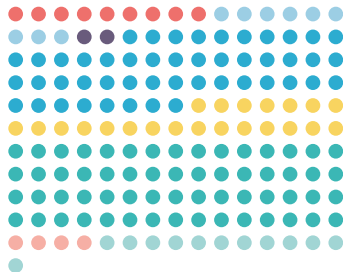
Each **circle** represents an instance of labelling
151 differences in 124 instances of such
conversational context.

Comparisons or attempted humour
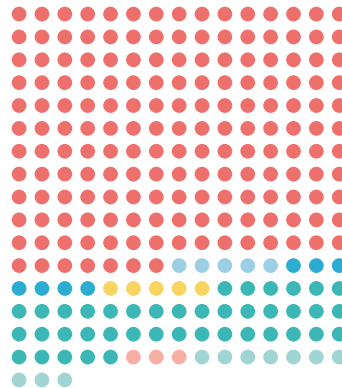
Each **circle** represents an instance of labelling
228 differences in **209** instances of such
conversational context.

Making references
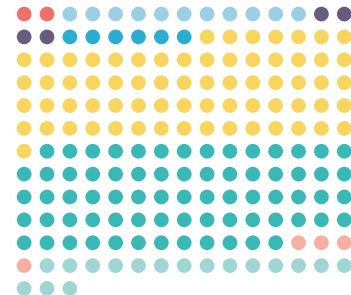
Each **circle** represents an instance of labelling
183 differences in **166** instances of such
conversational context.

Encounters
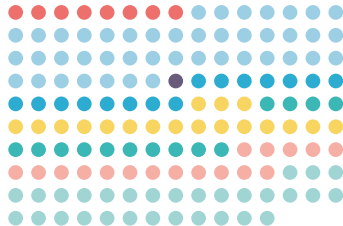
Each **circle** represents an instance of labelling
147 differences in **95** instances of such
conversational context.

Describing interactions
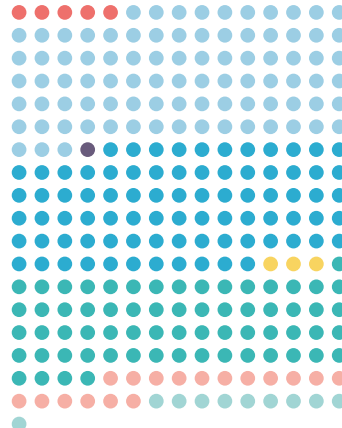
Each **circle** represents an instance of labelling
271 differences in **178** instances of such
conversational context.

- 🔴 **Appearance and hygiene**
- 🔵 **Behavioural**
- 🟣 **Disease**
- 🔵 **Life choices or personal deficiency**
- 🟡 **No clear labelling of differences**
- 🟢 **Status**
- 🔴 **Substances use and addiction**
- 🟢 **Undesirability**

→ Back to Contents

Data show that stigmatising language on homelessness tends to compare the self with those experiencing homelessness to achieve self enhancement or denigration. Consider the conversational goal achieved by message (153). Here, the language used by the author achieves self-denigration by using a person going through homelessness as the foil for comparisons. Similarly, language that attempts to disparage a person or group by comparing them with those experiencing homelessness assumes the latter to be discredited. Message (154) provides an example of this from the data where the author compares a British MEP with people experiencing homelessness. Such comparative use of language perpetuates the stigma of homelessness.

Data also show that people tend to use stigmatising language as tropes to deliver a humorous message, or indeed, in jokes about homelessness. For example, the joke in message (153) describes a person sleeping rough doing something unusual (sleeping in a tyre) and proceeds to use wordplay on puncturing the tyre to give the person a flat. Messages (156) and (157) are also jokes which make fun of people experiencing homelessness and their disadvantages. Such language mocks the social status of people sleeping rough and trivialises the seriousness of the problem.

Interactions and Encounters: The second most common context in which stigmatising language tends to be used was describing interactions with people experiencing homelessness. 23% of stigmatising language was used in this context where people described meeting, talking, or otherwise interacting with people experiencing homelessness. Figure 3 provides a very important insight from the data – when people describe interactions with people experiencing homelessness, stigma predominantly comes from language highlighting behavioural deviance, personal deficiency, or their lower status. Other bases of difference are much less frequently used in this context. Data show that stigmatising accounts of interaction with people experiencing homelessness can encompass a wide range of behavioural issues such as stealing (35), dangerous actions (48), disgust provoking behaviour (96), and abusive (56) or violent (25) behaviour. Further, accounts of interaction contain ideas around people experiencing homelessness being greedy in asking for help or trying to deceive or take advantage of others (60 – 66) end up stigmatising them for the lack of desirable qualities. Finally, description of interactions can also refer to the lower status of people experiencing homelessness in a stigmatising manner. For example, in (150) the author discredits the homeless status of a person who rejected their offer of help.

→ Back to Contents

The context of encounter is different insofar as it does not involve a direct interaction but direct observation of people experiencing homelessness. This is the language describing encounters with homelessness that are short of interactions. Like the context of interactions, stigmatising labelling of behavioural deviance and language of blame tends to be common in this context also (see Figure 3). Proportionally, the undesirability of people experiencing homelessness (100; 109 – 114), and observations about substance abuse and addiction (115 – 122) were highlighted more in this than any other conversational contexts. Examples include noting a "fit lad" on the bus whose desirability was less because of assumed homeless status (100), observations of drug use (115, 116, 119, 120 -122), personal deficiencies (83 – 85), criminal actions (23 and 38), deviant sexual behaviour (20), and anti-social behaviour (31 – 33).

In both these contexts, stigma develops and propagates from the interaction or encounter coming across as a negative or dangerous experience. Therefore, in both these contexts, it is important to avoid unnecessary references to people's homeless status or make assumptions about personal deficiency.

Comments and References: The final two contexts of language use pertained to streams of consciousness thoughts about homelessness (comments) or instances where people make references to homelessness and people experiencing homelessness while talking about a different issue altogether. 16% of messages fell in this category and in most cases the stigmatising language involved noting or implying a lower status to people experiencing homelessness (Figure 3). This included suggesting that people experiencing homelessness are undeserving of nice things in life (158), have pets (160), or indeed everyday necessities like mobile telephones (159) and basic human needs such as haircuts (84). Unsurprisingly, comments also tend to use a language of blame highlighting life choices or personal deficiencies.

Referencing homelessness as a foil for comparison when talking about other issues can be stigmatising. Over one in five (21.5%) of the messages identified by people with lived experience fell in this category. Data show that people tend to use language that pits people experiencing homelessness against migrants and refugees while arguing that the latter two are less deserving of help (161 – 164). It is also worth noting that language speaking specifically about "ex-service" (161), "ex veterans and elderly" (162), "soldiers homeless" (163) implicitly portrays these subgroups of people experiencing homelessness as more deserving than other people who experience homelessness. Further, references to British homelessness are also made in racist and Islamophobic contexts (163), party politics in the UK (165 – 167), and general social commentaries on the UK (168 – 174).

→ Back to Contents

References

Bridger, E. K., Tufte-Hewett, A., & Comerford, D. A. (n.d.). Dispositional and situational attributions for why the rich live longer than the poor. Journal of Applied Social Psychology, n/a(n/a). bit.ly/Bridger-Why-Rich-Live-Longer-Than-Poor

Buckels, E. E., & Trapnell, P. D. (2013). Disgust facilitates outgroup dehumanization. Group Processes & Intergroup Relations, 16(6), 771–780. https://bit.ly/Buckles-Disgust-Outgroup

Chauhan, A., & Foster, J. (2014). Representations of poverty in British newspapers: A case of 'Othering' the threat? Journal of Community & Applied Social Psychology, 24(5), 390–405. https://bit.ly/Poverty-In-British-Newspapers

Foster, J. (2006). Media presentation of the mental health bill and representations of mental health problems. Journal of Community & Applied Social Psychology, 16(4), 285–300. https://bit.ly/Foster-Media-Mental-Health-Bill

Haslam, N., & Loughnan, S. (2014). Dehumanization and infrahumanization. Annual Review of Psychology, 65, 399–423. https://bit.ly/Haslam-Infrahumanization

Joffe, H. (1995). Social representations of AIDS: towards encompassing issues of power. Papers on Social Representations, 4(1), 29–40. https://bit.ly/Joffe-Social-Representations-AIDS

Joffe, H. (1998). Social representations and the AIDS field. Psychology in Society, 24, 21–39.

Joffe, H. (2003). Risk: From perception to social representation. The British Journal of Social Psychology / the British Psychological Society, 42(Pt 1), 55–73. https://bit.ly/Joffe-Perception-Social-Representation

Jorm, A. F., & Oh, E. (2009). Desire for Social Distance from People with Mental Disorders. Australian & New Zealand Journal of Psychiatry, 43(3), 183–200. https://bit.ly/Jorm-Social-Distance-Mental-Disorders

Kim, N. J., Lin, J., Hiller, C., Hildebrand, C., & Auerswald, C. (2021). Analyzing U.S. tweets for stigma against people experiencing homelessness. Stigma and Health, No Pagination Specified-No Pagination Specified. https://bit.ly/Kim-US-Tweets-Homelessness

Link, B. G., & Phelan, J. C. (2001). Conceptualizing Stigma. Annual Review of Sociology, 2, 363–385. https://bit.ly/Link-Conceptualising-Stigma

Pescosolido, B. A., & Martin, J. K. (2015). The Stigma Complex. Annual Review of Sociology, 41(1), 87–116. https://bit.ly/Pescosolido-The-Stigma-Complex

→ Back to Contents

Pescosolido, B. A., Martin, J. K., Lang, A., & Olafsdottir, S. (2008). Rethinking theoretical approaches to stigma: A Framework Integrating Normative Influences on Stigma (FINIS). Social Science & Medicine, 67(3), 431–440. https://bit.ly/Pescosolido-Influences-Stigma

Rudolph, U., Roesch, S., Greitemeyer, T., & Weiner, B. (2004). A meta-analytic review of help giving and aggression from an attributional perspective: Contributions to a general theory of motivation. Cognition and Emotion, 18(6), 815–848. https://bit.ly/Rudolph-Help-Giving-Aggression

→ Back to Contents

Appendix

Selected real world examples of stigmatising language use

Appearance and hygiene

(1)   Always so hard to distinguish homeless from hipsters outside Shoreditch High St overground station.

(2)   Big game today.... just about to transform me self from homeless to presentable. Hopefully i make it on time 😥

(3)   Just saw DJ Khaled's snaps man looks homeless.

(4)   Having a serious self-care night tonight. Already showered, washed my hair and shaved my legs, just cleansed and popped a face mask on, next it'll be a nice blow dry and popping a load of fake tan on 👌 At that point where I'm looking legitimately like homeless scruff 🤷‍♀️

(5)   Riding around town on Monday trying to find a homeless friend, David. They all look so similar: weather-beaten, missing teeth, skinny, old beyond their years. I didn't find David but met three men just like him in a quarter-mile stretch.

(6)   Love how I don't actually own a foundation that I can wear when I have 0 tan on. Homeless look it shall be

(7)   Need to get my lid cut, starting to look homeless.

(8)   How do you do a messy bun without looking like a homeless potato?
Asking for a friend

(9)   I need a trim. Urgently. Out here looking homeless.

(10) Always wonder why no one wants to be my friend in Brum then I remeber it's cus I dress homeless 24 fucking 7

(11) How much spare change did it cost pep for that hat ffs. 🎩 I wunt be worried about result just get that back to the homeless geezer soon as, its fakin freezing man. 👍

(12) Having a serious self-care night tonight. Already showered, washed my hair and shaved my legs, just cleansed and popped a face mask on, next it'll be a nice blow dry and popping a load of fake tan on 👌 At that point where I'm looking legitimately like homeless scruff 🤦‍♀️

(13) I really detest the smell of the homeless 😭

→ Back to Contents

(14) In Tesco... why is some smelly homeless looking man saying hello to me this time.... 😭 Smelly Gav strikes again. Thank fuck for social distancing. I spent half an hour taking longer so I'd lose him.

(15) Bolllox! I'm feeling that horny, I might go into town and get a homeless bird, give her a bath and shag her....😂😂😂

(16) Feel homeless, look homeless and probably smell homeless. Happy Monday

(17) I look actually homeless like I know everyone at uni looks a little bit like they could have a wash but honestly no matter what I do I look like I've not slept since March

(18) Why does the bus smell of a homeless person 😭

(19) Colbert on Corbyn: "Homeless man you bathed and bought a suit but you know it's only going to last a week." Spot on.

Behavioural Deviance

Sexual deviance

(20) There's two homeless people shagging under the tunnel near the station btw

(21) A homeless man just asked to suck me off in the bin area next to my work 🤢 hows ur day going?

Behaviour threatening physical safety

(22) heads up to anyone walking around oxford road in manchester, in particularly at the spar area PLEASE be cautious, just had some homeless man approach me threatening me to take £10 out for him or he was gonna batter me, be safe people xx

(23) There's a sort of half way house up the road that accommodates people made homeless through drug abuse. Apparently there was a chap from there running up and down the road with a 12 inch knife completely off his face last night. Scary as fuck.

(24) homeless guy just tried opening my room door. fucking nitty

(25) homeless woman in pigeon park just walked over to me and pushed me without saying a word😂😂😂😂😂 wot

Verbal abuse

(26) Homeless guy told said "F off away from me" earlier. I was probably 50 yards away from him. I was so shocked I said "pardon?" and he said it again. Charming chap! Didn't get a ride out of me like he probably wanted though.

(27) This morning a homeless man shouted at me, called me selfish and said I was what is wrong with the world after I bought him some food. He said he would have rather had the money - after pleading with people and saying he was starving.

→ Back to Contents

(28) Only in Canterbury would a drunk homeless fella tell you the only reason you have a nose ring is because you like taking it up the arse, yeah course that's why I have it bud fuckin hell 🤣

(29) At the town bus station! Single crewed male officer on foot wakes up a homeless guy! Homeless guy is not happy and begins to become very very verbally abusive and makes personal comments about officer's mum! 30 members of the public watching this officer walks off..............

Self-harm

(30) Weeeell....a karma buster. Lomond Shores. Encountered a homeless bloke with scissors trying to cut himself then set himself on fire with a bottle of vodka. Police called and on the scene. Civic Duty done. Offski. Have a grand evening.

Anti-social behaviour

(31) Homeless man shouting obscenities at some shopkeepers, calling them terrorists and telling them to go back home. Might've been oblivious, but I don't remember this London when I lived here three years ago

(32) Angry homeless man in the churchyard gardens

(33) Homeless people are fighting outside my house, this sums up my area

(34) Thoughts please? There's a homeless man camping in the park near to my home. He's mostly harmless, but now and again he shouts aggressively at people passing on the local path. I don't want to make his life worse, but it can be really intimidating for people. What would you do?

Stealing, robbing, and other criminal behaviour

(35) I'm actually crying poppy told me last night she invited homeless people back to hers and they have stolen her clothes and phone chargers😭😂

(36) I was in Norwich the other day two police officers saw an offence being committed by three homeless people and they just walked past just about says it all they just don't a shit to much paperwork this is the police for you

(37) Living in Oxford I have learnt the phrase "Honour amongst thieves " is a lie. Homeless people will be the first to steal from another homeless person. Homeless sector in Oxford is quite frankly a circus full of discrimination and hate.

(38) Only in London do you see a homeless person trying to cut a bike lock off with a bunch of tools stored in a Deliveroo bag 🤦‍♂️🤦‍♂️

→ Back to Contents

Unusual behaviour

(39) Being asked by a homeless person to buy them a frozen pizza has spun my head. But who am I to deny them that? Goodfella

(40) ever seen a homeless dude throw out money cause i have just now and i'm honestly so fucking pissed

(41) There's a homeless man living in our work car park ... Yesterday I watched him shoot up in his sleeping bag, today he's parading round with a broom trying to pass as a member of staff.... Who sweeps a car park?

(42) All this shit because of Msc. The stress I'm going through now errr, since morning been roaming like a homeless person.

(43) Homeless man full on wrestling with his own sleeping bag in the street..... SPICE

(44) Homeless man and woman having a domestic in the middle of town… what are they arguing about? It's not about who's doing the washing up is it?!?!?!

Germs, Diseases, and Dehumanisation

(45) David De Gea could bang a tribe of homeless Africans and still keep the aids out 🤮 👏🏻👏🏻👏🏻

(46) Is it just me that doesn't touch hand rails in Birmingham because I'm afraid of the homeless people germs I'll get

(47) Well it's safe to say blooming human vermin are back on the Overground and Underground with their 'Any spare change for the homeless' mantra. As with before - Just don't give them anything or encourage

(48) I just got spat on by a homeless man, coronaaaa

(49) How come the homeless are not dead on the streets with Covid shop staff must be immune at work wake up

(50) Attended 3X peri-arrest calls (of which one turned into an arrest, and 2 were within the first 2 hours is shift), 1 GCS 3/15, a man with sodium 100, and a homeless man with burns/maggots needing ITU admission. All these on top of ward work. What a day!!! 😵

(51) Big up all the hotel chains housing homeless folk incl those discharged from hospital after being treated for CV19. But do hotel staff have sufficient PPE? After reading about how our care home staff were let down, I'm wondering what is being done to protect hotel staff?

(52) Still waiting to hear an explanation why homeless people (with limited access to hand and washing facilities) all appear to be immune to this supposedly deadly virus 🤔

(53) Me and my pal thought we'd Netflix party the Kardashians for a laugh (for a laugh! I swear!) & 7 episodes in they've "adopted" a homeless man. They "found" him by the dumpster. Bruce said stop bringing in "strays". Godddddd 🤢🤢🤢🤢

Personal deficiency and/or poor life choices

(54) The spending pledge was made as legal changes come into force today guaranteeing the right to long-term accommodation for anyone made homeless through no fault of their own.

(55) Just had a chat with a homeless lad outside Liverpool Street. On the street through no fault of his own. Despite everything, he could smile& look for positives. Hope our contribution of food & water gets him through the night & he's off the street soon

(56) Just got called an f-ing n***er monkey by a homeless dude. Happy Monday!

(57) Just bought a homeless woman a McDonald's then she proceeded to be immediately racist after and tell a man to go back to his home country

(58) Giving homeless people money feels so good. Even though they probably gonna buy foolishness smh.

(59) RT @TheIndyNews Chaotic lives underlie troubles of homeless - Home News, UK - The Independent http://t.co/ayojaOt

Pushy / Greedy / Trying to take advantage

(60) I had 2 new jackets never worn. Paid around £40 each for them. Went to my local supermarket there was a homeless guy .so I said " here you go mate .2 brand new jackets their. Keep them or sell them ..he said "Thanks.Have you also got any spare change ? 😳😳😳

(61) "I see the real Manchester is being shown on Channel 4 now. He's a reporter pretending to be homeless. Some of them are making over £100 a night, all for being lazy gets, praying on people's good will. It's just full of Spice heads comatosed . Not nice 🙄"

(62) Homeless guy asked me to buy him a new pair of trainers. Aye mate Nike or Adidas?

(63) Just walked past a homeless woman and she asked if I had any change, told her I don't carry cash and she has the bollocks to turn around and say 'your card will do' aha

(64) Just gave this homeless girl £5 and she Sade I can't get fuck all with that . OMG 😮 why do I bother

(65) I just got harassed by homeless person again in McDonald's.... It's too much now. I'm not condoning homeless people at all just I don't deserved to have a guy in my face breaching my privacy and having to tell him 3 times to leave me alone

→ Back to Contents

(66) one homeless man asked me for 50p i pulled out £2.50 and gave him £2 cause i wanted a KA as you do. the man turn round and asked for the 50p as well uno. what a fucjin cheek

Not grateful for help

(67) Wait til y'all hear this one....needed change of a note and saw a homeless guy outside on the street, so instead of buying shit, I decided to get the homeless guy a coffee....a good deed y'know - the guy had the audacity to say he would have preferred hot chocolate....wtaf!!!

(68) I just bought this poor homeless woman warm food & drink (as I always do) whilst people walk by her in their suites and fancy shoes. and for the first time ever, instead of a thank you, I get met by complaints and demanding money? Anyway, Remember to do your bit if you can 👊

Fake homelessness and choosing to be homeless

(69) So called homeless man sat outside of Sainsbury's smoking at nearly tenner a packet 🤔

(70) Only in London will a "homeless" man ask for spare change wearing Off White dunks

(71) Yo the homeless woman outside Iceland in leve drives a fucking bmw

(72) So homeless chap with sign he wanted money to go home has changed to has wife , 3 children in a laminated sign, perfect English, considering he couldn't speak a word of it ...

(73) The amount of liars this world has and the ones who accept so little to lie or in laziness. The lies we are up against is too much to handle. Even homeless people are lying in exchange for money.

(74) This guy on the train giving out tissues and bit of paper written out saying "his homeless and three daughters to look after" but how the fuck can afford to get on the train with a full bag of tissues fucking wanker.

(75) It seems almost all the so called homeless in Cardiff have disappeared amazing how a virus has sent them back to their homes

(76) You can always tell if someone is really homeless or just scamming by their shoes

(77) Just fyi. There is a homeless couple outside Aldi chelmsford atm. The dude pointed out a trolley so I didnt have to walk to the trolley station. Bought them a meal deal to say thanks. They arent homeless. Have a car. I got duped trying to do a ice thing. Fuck those cunts.

→ Back to Contents

(78)   Becoming homeless is a choice. Just like living with your parents until eventually make them bankrupt, is a choice. I'm tired of hearing that people who are homeless have no other choice. That's Bullshit.

(79) There is no term like Homeless in the UK. What we have, is Rough Sleepers. This are people that prefer to sleep in the streets, instead of given home. In homes given to them, there are does and don't. Meaning, rules and regulations

(80) Eva Durham Moss just said people choose to be homeless 🙀👀

(81) I see homeless people on the streets and they're the same faces I've seen for the last five years, where the hell *did* it all go wrong.... surely they'd wanna try their best to not be on the streets

(82) Maybe homeless people are just outdoorsy

Injudicious spending and luxurious purchases

(83) I've seen it all now...Homeless man in manny wearing Vapormax's........ 🙃🙃🙃

(84) All I know is that if I was so destitute that i couldn't afford a roof over my head and had to resort to begging on the street for change, I'm sure I wouldn't be spending money on hairstyling or cigarettes.

(85) I'm concerned as there is a "beggar / homeless "guy on the street in the city of London with a French Bulldog ... how can you own such a dog and be on the streets?

(86) Why am I giving a homeless women a fiver because I have had a few drinks & she's giving it a sob story in a new Nike hoodie

(87) Good deed.... Complete. Seen a homeless lad, only on a couple of occasions. Thought on giving him money.. I'm not o e to judge, but he may or may not have used that for drugs or alcohol. So bought him a hot meal instead.

Refusing help

(88) Can you believe it , just past a homeless person sitting outside Tesco's so I've stopped and bought him a meal deal my daughter took it over to him and he refused it as he's a fussy eater and didn't like the sandwich she'd bought 🤦

(89) I'm not saying Urban Outfitters is a bad store but I just offered a homeless man anything he wanted in the store and he said, "no thanks..."

(90) How have I just heard a homeless person ask a woman for money for food and she had a bag of dates so offered them to him . He went nah 😂😭

(91) Imagine the one time I decide to give a homeless person some change (25p) and they refused it. I see how it is in these streets. Never again though... You just ruined it for all your pals mate

→   Back to Contents

(92) We've been given loads of free food at work that goes out today so I took loads of the sandwiches and fruit to give to the homeless and no one would take it 😭😂

(93) So yesterday I was trying to be a good Samaritan and give a homeless man food. He asked if I ate from it and I said "yes". He denied the food and asked for money. NEVER AGAIN

(94) Saw a homeless man outside Aldi, I had no money on me so I offered to buy him food. He told me what he wanted, so i went in got it, came back out and he was gone, looked around and waited but nothing 🤦 Now I've got a bag with food and drinks that I didn't even need myself🤔🙃

(95) i hate it so much when homeless people don't accept my food because i know what they'd do with the money but cmon just accept the food u need it

Undesirables

Disgust

(96) Nah I'm crying.. Luis came out of Lidl and a homeless man lifted his arse off the ground to fart and then held out his cup for Luis to give him money 😂😂😂😂

(97) I'd lick a homeless man's foot rn for a nandos.

(98) Waiting for the tram outside New St and it stinks of eggy farts. First I thought it was a homeless person farting but it's been a constant stink now for like 5mins.

Sexual undesirability

(99) Bolllox! I'm feeling that horny, I might go into town and get a homeless bird, give her a bath and shag her....😂😂😂

(100)   " seen a fit lad on the bus today but I think he was homeless" 😂😂😂

(101)   I'd legit shag a homeless man for a pint right now

(102)   What must u be going through to have sex with a homeless man???? But then again, some of u niggas do fuck crackheads, humanity is finished

Relational undesirability

(103)   You know how you read stories about people meeting the loves of their lives in Tesco down the canned goods aisle reaching for the same tin of beans... HOW?! Only looks I get off men when I'm in Sainsbury's is a look of "How the fuck can she afford to shop here she looks homeless"

(104)   Walking through town with your work clothes on as a painter is the fattest ego killer I swear , look homeless

(105)   On Saturday I drunkenly bought a homeless man brioche (that he chose), butter and some brunch bars. Then I told him I loved him 🤷

→ Back to Contents

(106)   I'll never forgot the day in first year when my friend was drunk and brought a homeless man back to our accommodation 😭😭we were trying to get him out for ages

(107)   Only way I'd be in a relationship is if I was homeless 😭😭😭🙇🏾‍♀️

Presence socially undesirable

(108)   today my manager kicked a homeless man out of our shop and told him not to come back, because he didn't want him loitering around the shop 🙃

(109)   Even walking through the city centre at 9 on a late night shopping night you can sense it's gone downhill a lot from a decade ago. Few shoppers, shops closing earlier. Mostly tourists, druggies and the homeless left on the streets.

(110)   Thoughts please? There's a homeless man camping in the park near to my home. He's mostly harmless, but now and again he shouts aggressively at people passing on the local path. I don't want to make his life worse, but it can be really intimidating for people. What would you do?

(111)   Newport town centre is so depressing... homeless, junkies & crackheads

(112)   King Street seems to have become a run of aggressive chuggers and homeless people shouting

(113)   Peterborough City Centre.... grim today in the sunshine... homeless, chavs and assorted wasters mostly. Grim

(114)   I support help for homeless veterans big time, but this bunch of low life scum that have been housed in a vacant hotel opposite me can fuck off. No respect whatsoever for the local community....and choose the ghetto life whatever help is offered......wasters 😡

Substance abuse, addiction, or related labels

(115)   Boarding the coach now after a lovely night stay in Leicester. The highlights include the road out, the homeless shooting up in KFC and the fact I'm leaving. Shit hole

(116)   Wow can't go seeing some homeless guy injecting at 5:40am !! Don't think he heard me walking past 🤢

(117)   Had such bad anxiety today I literally cried when I got into work this morning, come out of work exhausted and sad and had a crackhead homeless man shout at me as I walked down the road because I wouldn't give him any money.

(118)   Just overheard 2 homeless junkies arguing because one had set up his wee camp in the other ones usual spot hahaha

(119)   Who says where not a caring community anymore...I've just seen 4 homeless guys giving each other the COVID vaccine under a bridge, it warmed my heart 🤔

→ Back to Contents

(120)   Saw a homeless guy do a perfect pour of his can of Fosters this morning, might go back and ask if he wants a job

(121)   Four pissed homeless fellas sat in park, playing Elvis very loud. Silas watches them for a bit, then turns to me; "they all look just like you - why don't you go and sit with them, dad" Swiftly followed with a warning to ensure social distancing should I decide to do so 😞

(122)   I've just watched a homeless man in a wheelchair smoke crack at the bus stop. hahah love you Rusholme

(123)   I'm never helping homeless again. Turned out the guy I helped last week is a full on crackhead who now keeps turning up at my house in the middle of the night/ sending other literal crackheads to my house at 1am to ask for money FUCKS SAKE I walk right into it Don't I?

(124)   Britain is down to a hard core of people sleeping rough and I suspect that we are down to that as well -people who are entrenched in homelessness perhaps due to alcohol, drugs or mental health problems.

(125)   Hope that homeless boyo in Liverpool makes the most of that 50 bar 💉

(126)   I'm more addicted to fortnite than a homeless man is to crack

(127)   A tough couple of days at and around out hostel. If you're out and about and come across some homeless guys, treat them to a couple of litres of water if you can. Substance and alcohol misuse doesn't suit this weather. 👍 A small gesture can make a big difference

(128)   Some junkie coming in ur face asking for money pretending to be homeless while dressed in brand new clothes 😹😹

(129)   Feeding a homeless guy,,"Let me get you some food" No no no got plenty, 👀 'Okay' Guess you'll have to get off your face then £9.95 ✌🏾

(130)   ffs homeless guy outside my local sainsbury's singing "I need some crack cocaine can you help me please" I hate bermondsey

(131)   How's this homeless man asked me for spare change, when I said no, his next question was "You got any drugs?" 😂

Status

(132)   If I keep buying makeup im literally gonna be homeless

(133)   Imagine living in America?! Place is fucking bonkers, would rather be homeless in Iraq

(134)   me n leyla gonna run Away ! cba w it anymore i wld rather b homeless in another country than exist in edinburgh for one more moment

(135)   Shocking patter the people that put their spoons table number up on snapchat. Screams homeless.

(136)   A pretty face will have me overlooking all the small things, like, if she's homeless and that

(137)   Can I just be rich pls sick of having the same amount of money as a homeless

(138)   Having an empty fridge makes me feel homeless 😭

(139)   Who are you going to believe more? Reputable journalists and their reports or a homeless man giving his information to some people to spout off on their YouTube videos?

(140)   Quality of football commentary in descending order: Sky, Amazon, BBC, Antonio Gubba on Chanel Neus, My Wife with no knowledge of football, the drunk homeless bloke who wanders around our town shouting at things, BT Sport.

(141)   When you try to give spare change to someone who's homeless, but then realise they're actually not, and just sat outside because there's shade...

(142)   Summer 2021 you'll see me outside so often that you'll think I'm homeless

(143)   A homeless person just looked me up and down because of my pink crocs 😭

(144)   Neil Lennon critiquing us is like a homeless guy slagging yer curtains

(145)   The rat catchers slagging us tonight is like a homeless man making fun of your curtains

(146)   When you spend a fuck ton of money on branded clothes so you have to validate it by sticking the plastic bags on the wall; there are homeless people with better decor than you

(147)   i just got given food by a homeless guy and im just so confused how that even happens

(148)   Just had to borrow a nicker off the homeless man for a trolley a new low 😔

(149)   You know it's bad when the homeless guy asks if you ever have a day off!! 😳

(150)   Some homeless man in London just rejected my money because he thinks I'm taking the piss. Wtf. You homeless mate.

(151)   Lovely evening out for dinner and a spot of mini golf with a guided tour of the homeless of Nottingham 👌😂

(152)   The least they deserve is support and a roof over their heads while they try to deal with the complex and turbulent challenges in their lives.

→ Back to Contents

Understanding contexts in which we use stigmatising language on homelessness.

(153)   Homeless guy sat outside Spar has a better phone than me. Fml.

(154)   Anne Widdecombe in Brussels is like one of those homeless people high on Spice or booze who starts incoherently shouting at people in the street.

(155)   Met a homeless guy the other day he was sleeping in a tyre. Being a nice Henge I punctured it so now he's got a flat.

(156)   What's the best thing about dating a homeless person? You can drop them off anywhere.

(157)   I asked a pretty, young, homeless woman if I could take her home, and she said yes with a big smile. The look on her face soon changed when I walked off with her cardboard box.

(158)   Homeless people getting Armani tracksuits for free?

(159)   Mobile Phones for homeless people - how will phones be charged?

(160)   Where do homeless people get there dogs 🐶?

(161)   Why dont all our homeless n ex service living on the streets club together n hire rubber dingies. Float out into to sea n then come ashore. Station Hotel Hull awaits you

(162)   Why Cannot we say to migrants you are entitled to nothing we look after are homeless ex veterans and elderly first.When will people stand up to this abuse from minority's

(163)   We have injured soldiers homeless and potless on our streets. What happens, jack shit. That rat Shamina Begun, who fucked off to fight for isis, is after legal aid. WHAT A FUCKING DISGRACEFUL COUNTRY WE LIVE IN. IF IVE PISSED YOU OFF WITH THIS, TOUGH SHIT..

(164)   If Councils say they have room for refugees why have we got homeless sleeping on the streets? Puzzled.

(165)   How on earth can the English working class vote for Tory bastards like Johnson and Rees-Mogg? It's cunts who bought their council house and think they are middle class despite being one argument away from their boss from being homeless, if you ask me....

(166)   Tories. Instead of torturing and making people homeless why not just send to jail that's where we'll End up

(167)   "Aw, don't you just feel sorry for Theresa May?" Nah do I hell! I'll show her as much compassion as she has towards the homeless, the wind rush generation, grenfell... good riddance to one of the worst PM's in history 💁🏼‍♀️

→   Back to Contents

(168)   "PeOpLe BuLlY mE fOr BeInG a ToRy" yes babe that's because people are homeless, children are relying on food banks, there's been an increase in descrimination and we're gonna lose the NHS because of the party you support. Cry me a fucking river

(169)   Today's Times: "Britain is now one of the most dynamic economies in Europe." Tell that to the homeless, beggars, hungry, unemployed, casual workers, those who are dependent on foodbanks & the kids living in poverty. This is a typical London-centric view of the state of Britain.

(170)   We are delusional if we think the UK is OK.. next year we will have food shortages.. more foodbanks .. rent/mortgage defaulters.. more homeless.. more hungry kids.. but people will still think the increase in zero hour contracts is going to solve the problem as people have a job

(171)   Yo you can actually tell that they let the homeless back on the street. This country is so fuckery.

(172)   Homeless man dies in Glasgow last night but the headline is a friend of a convicted paedo steps back from his privileged role

(173)   So this gov telling people to self isolate if feeling unwell,are they gonna pay these peoples wages,rent,energy bills,shopping ect as for me if im not in work im not getting paid and after the first week would probably be homeless and in the second week dead from pneumonia

(174)   It's mad how some people thought leaving an economically beneficial community was more important than homeless people dying in the street and people being insulted by their prime minister on the race, religion, gender, sexual orientation, being from a single mother etc

A short checklist for using better language on homelessness

Language shapes how we understand and relate to the world, including our views on homelessness. The way we speak about homelessness can either help shift perspectives toward empathy and support, or reinforce damaging stereotypes. This checklist is designed to encourage the use of more inclusive, respectful language and to avoid inadvertently perpetuating harmful assumptions about people experiencing homelessness. We recognise that our perceptions of homelessness are influenced by how it is framed in conversation, the media, and public discourse. By being mindful of our words, we can challenge stigmatising views and contribute to a more nuanced understanding of homelessness.

This guidance was developed by Dr Apurv Chauhan and Professor Juliet Foster at King's College London, funded by the Centre for Homelessness Impact (CHI). For a more in-depth exploration of these principles, you can access their full research and analysis below.

→ Back to Contents

1. **Focus on the person, not their housing status.** People experiencing homelessness are individuals with unique experiences, strengths, and challenges. Refer to "people experiencing homelessness" or "people sleeping rough" rather than a "homeless man" or "rough sleepers", to avoid defining them solely by their housing status.

2. **Mention homelessness when relevant.** We often add that a person is homeless even when this detail is not pertinent. For example, that the person was experiencing homelessness is not necessarily a pertinent detail in the following sentence and must be avoided wherever possible: "A homeless man was questioned by the police in relation to the incident."

3. **Respect the dignity of people affected by homelessness** Using homelessness as a point of comparison, whether for humour or to illustrate failure, reinforces harmful stereotypes and trivialises a complex issue. Phrases like "I'd rather be homeless than..." or "...at least I am not homeless." perpetuate the belief that homelessness is a state of personal failure. It is important to acknowledge that homelessness arises from systemic issues such as poverty, lack of affordable housing, and insufficient support services.

4. **Steer clear of negative stereotypes about hygiene, appearance, or behaviour.** Avoid equating homelessness with a particular look or set of behaviours, as this reinforces harmful stereotypes. Language such as, "A woman who was clearly homeless...", dwells on stereotypical beliefs about the appearance of how people experience homelessness. It is useful to remember that homelessness covers people in a wide spectrum of situations, ranging from overcrowding to rough sleeping. People experiencing homelessness from temporary accommodation, overcrowding to rough sleeping do not have common characteristics related to their appearance or other person-level variables.

5. **Make clear that homelessness is much broader than rough sleeping.** Street homelessness is the most visible form of homelessness but is not the only, and certainly not the biggest, form of homelessness. Family homelessness is far more prevalent, if often unseen. A statement such as, "The city centre is full of homeless people and their numbers increase everyday" incorrectly implies that homelessness is only about those living in the streets or sleeping rough and ignores that many people experiencing homelessness (for example, those sofa-surfing and in temporary accommodations) are not visible in the city centres.

→ Back to Contents

6. **Avoid implying that homelessness makes places unsafe or undesirable.** Language can inadvertently create social distance and portray people experiencing homelessness as undesirable elements in a community. Language that suggests people experiencing homelessness are dangerous or unclean perpetuates stigma and social exclusion. Statements like "Homeless people are making the park unsafe" create unnecessary fear and reinforce negative stereotypes, rather than addressing the real challenges of homelessness.

7. **Check facts first if linking substance use with homelessness.** Not all people who are experiencing homelessness use drugs and alcohol. It is important to avoid assuming or implying a causal relationship between substance use and homelessness. For example, instead of using phrases like "drug-addled homeless," which directly connect substance use with homelessness, consider the systemic factors that contribute to both issues, such as lack of affordable housing and limited access to mental health and addiction services.

8. **Recognise that substance use may be a coping mechanism rather than the root cause of homelessness.** While substance abuse may have contributed to a person's homelessness in some cases, it is important to recognise that in many cases, people may have started a problematic use of alcohol and drugs to cope with their homelessness. For example, instead of necessarily framing substance misuse amongst those experiencing homelessness as a personal failing, where appropriate, consider framing it as a symptom of larger societal issues and lack of support systems.

9. **Be cautious in representing responses to the challenge of rough sleeping as failing to meet social norms.** It's important to exercise caution when labelling the actions or behaviours of people sleeping rough as departing from social norms. What may seem like inappropriate behaviour could be an understandable response to the challenging circumstances of homelessness, such as a lack of access to basic resources. For example, someone washing in a public fountain might not have access to proper sanitation facilities, and this behaviour, though unusual in a different context, is a practical response to their situation.

→ Back to Contents

How to cite this paper: Chauhan, A. & Foster, J. (2025)
Homelessness and the language of stigma
London, United Kingdom: Centre for Homelessness Impact

Centre for Homelessness Impact