

AGEING AND HOMELESSNESS: IS THERE AN AGEING CRISIS FOR STATUTORY HOMELESSNESS SERVICES IN THE UK?

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This data insight explores the ageing of homeless populations using aggregated data on people applying to local authority housing teams in Scotland.

What we did

This research looked at all homelessness applications to local authorities in Scotland. As published figures on statutory homelessness in Scotland relate to all household types, and Culhane's analysis mainly related to adult single homeless shelter users, a request was made to Scottish Government for aggregated age-breakdowns of applications made by single people, split by gender.

Data for 2002/03 and 2018/19 are used in order to emphasise any possible changes in the age profile of homeless applicants, given that the age bands provided in the aggregate data were non-standard and large.

By plotting the age breakdowns of homeless applicants during two time periods, we can explore whether the age profile of homeless individuals changes. This method of 'cohort analysis' has the benefit that it can be used with de-identified and aggregate data, as it does not require the same individuals to be linked over time. If, as was the case in the United States, there are particular birth cohorts who are disproportionately affected by homelessness, then there should be an ageing profile of homeless applicants.

Background

At the Administrative Data Research conference held in Cardiff in December 2019, Dennis Culhane presented work from the United States examining an emerging 'ageing crisis' amongst homeless populations¹. Using demographic methods applied to 20 years of data from homeless shelters in several major US cities, Culhane explored changes in the age composition of single homeless shelter users over time. Peaks in the age profile of shelter users suggested that certain birth cohorts, namely post-1950s 'baby boomers' (born roughly between 1954 and 1967), were at an increased risk of homelessness, and that this risk persisted over time². Culhane's findings suggested that a large group of single people currently in the 46 to 57 year old age range were likely to become homeless, with the average life expectancy amongst homeless people being 64 years, meaning that age related problems were likely to become 'a substantial problem' amongst single homeless populations.

Inspired by Culhane's analysis, this data insight explores the situation in Scotland.

¹ See conference proceedings with abstracts at:
<https://ijpds.org/issue/view/14>

² Culhane, D.P., Metraux, S., Byrne, T., Stino, M. and Bainbridge, J. 2013. The age structure of contemporary homelessness: Evidence and implications for public policy. *Analyses of Social Issues and Public Policy*. 13(1):228-244

What we found

Figure 1 plots the overall proportion of applications made to statutory services by single adult males, broken down by age. The peak of the population profile in both 2002/03 and 2018/19 belongs to the 25 to 34 year olds. However, from 2002/03 to 2018/19 there appears to be some shift in the age profile line to the right that could support a 'cohort effect' hypothesis in the Scottish context. Those in Generation X, born from the middle of the 1960s ending in the early 1980s, may be at a sustained risk of homelessness; however, as the age bands are not uniform, we cannot conclusively state this.

For single female applicants, there was variation in the age profile of single female applicants, illustrating that homelessness varied with age (Figure 2). Specifically, it was women in the lowest age band, those 18 to 24 years old, who dominated the distribution in both 2002/03 and 2018/19. The proportion of women within the older age bands declined at both time points, in contrast to the distribution for men, which had more of a 'peak'. As the proportion of people in each age band declines over time, this may suggest that the cohort effect is less prominent than amongst women when compared to the single male homeless population, if it exists at all.

Figure 1: Age profile of single males applying for statutory assistance in Scotland, 2002/03 and 2018/19

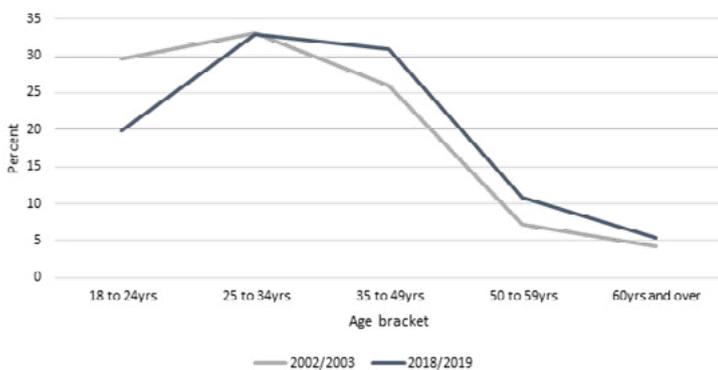
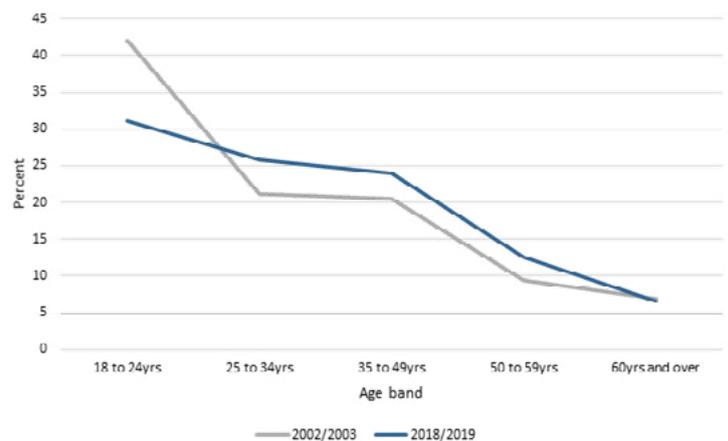
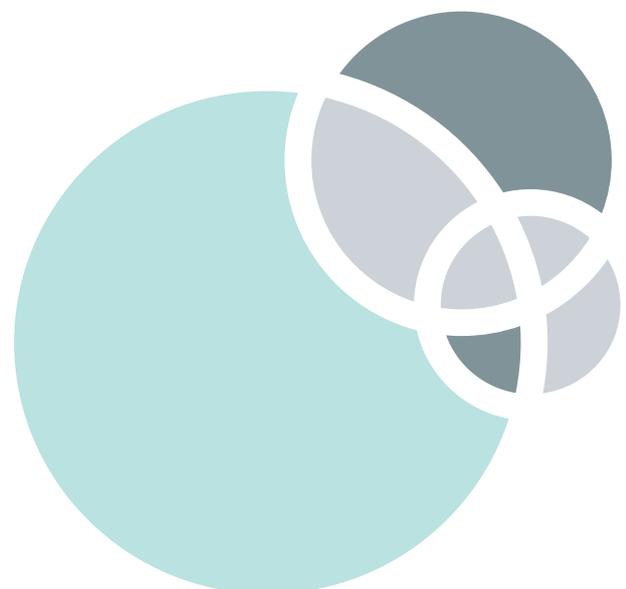


Figure 2: Age profile of single females applying for statutory assistance in Scotland, 2002/03 and 2018/19



Why it matters

A tentative conclusion for policy and practice drawn from this analysis is the need for greater attention to the intersection of ageing, gender, and household structure in the design of services and policy. We may potentially see a homeless population in Scotland increasingly defined by older single men, with a seemingly persistent period of risk at younger ages for single women.



What next?

In order to further explore ageing and cohort effects amongst homeless people in Great Britain, more detailed age data is required to customise smaller age band widths, ideally to 5 year increments. Exploring the reason for seeking assistance might also provide insight into whether cohorts persistently experience the same causes of homelessness, or whether the cause evolves over time as people age. National level data with the required detail and data collection time-frame are not available in Northern Ireland, Wales, or England. Scotland therefore provide the only source of information on homelessness in the United Kingdom which can enable cohort and ageing effects to be explored.

Additionally, data tentatively implies that in Scotland Generation X (1966 to 1980) is at increased risk of homelessness, whilst in America, it is the baby boomer generation (1946 to 1965). This international difference is something that needs further unpacking.

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