

WHO ARE EDINBURGH'S BEGGARS AND ROUGH SLEEPERS?

The average rough sleeper has a life span of only 47 years which is 30 years less than average. This is a problem and with winter upon us the death rate is about to rise again throughout the season of goodwill.

Rough sleepers and beggars are drug addicts and drunks who beg for drugs and drink and make a lucrative living from doing so. Most are foreigners, especially Romanians, who beg in gangs and make good money from the gullible who put money in to their beaten up paper cups and forlorn one legged dogs. This is the perception.

A recent report however from homeless charity Shelter Scotland and the Edinburgh Community Safety Partnership looked in to rough sleeping and begging over a two year period to October 2018 and dispels some of this myth.



The report shows that in fact few make a living from begging and the principle use of monies received is to buy food. Most were found to have alcohol or substance abuse addictions and 43% were found to have both. Over 90% had underlying mental health issues including anxiety, depression and post-traumatic stress disorder and most suffered from physical illness. Many have been abused as children. Only 11% were non UK nationals, predominantly Romanians.

The report considers why people beg and found that whilst many needed money for drugs and drink, buying food was the principle reason for begging.

People often chose to beg rather than become involved in the criminal alternatives ie theft and begging was considered an honest way to earn money.

My own interest has developed over the last few years when, as a volunteer on Edinburgh's charity care van providing food and clothing.

Homelessness activist Tom Craig, is a former rough sleeper. He came from a broken home and spent his childhood in care 'people are not born as addicts or beggars but life events have led them in to this way of life' After leaving care Tom became a trainee nurse however he failed the course, had to leave the nurse's hostel and found himself living rough for four years having no job nor family to support him 'rough sleepers come from a wide range of backgrounds, usually they are very poor backgrounds. Most have experienced adverse childhood events: alcoholic fathers, broken homes, and mothers with abusive boyfriends you name it. Many are orphans who have been in care for all or most of their childhood. For others bereavement, divorce, financial problems and unemployed can lead them in to a downward spiral'. Tom is a youthful looking 43 year old with fresh ruddy skin ('it's all that fresh air' he jokes) but nicotine stained fingers are testimony to his age and long term heavy smoking habit 'social workers don't help -they administer the problem rather than helping it and psychiatrists actually add to problem' he pauses to see my reaction to this assertion 'psychiatrists diagnose mental health problems in almost all cases of rough sleeping , they then prescribe drugs which become addictive and which are traded on the streets. They are seen as little more than drug machines '.

Women present particular problems. Many, in search of a home and drugs attach themselves to men with criminal connections and often end up in prostitution. Others survive, some even when pregnant, such as Christine who I spoke to on North Bridge when she appeared looking for some large sized women's clothes. Christine was in her late twenties, well spoken, well educated with well kept Auburn hair but the pyjama trousers she was wearing on a freezing cold February night was a sure sign of her plight 'I'm 28 weeks pregnant but I cant get accommodation until I'm 30 weeks gone' she told me ' in the meantime I'm on the streets'.

The Bethany Trust run the city care van and winter care shelter as well as providing a whole of support services for the homeless. Care Shelter manager Ruth Longmuir is a young woman, a business like woman but one who clearly cares and empathises with her customers. She said that the street sleepers come from a very wide range of background 'many come from wealthy

backgrounds with good jobs. The main thing that they have in common is that somewhere in their lives they turned left instead of right'

I met Janie who is one such woman (picture insert). Janie had a job as a carer. She says that various problems including bereavement saw her life go 'tits up', she lost her home and ended up on the streets where she has been for several years and where drugs have over taken her. She was upbeat when I spoke to her at the Bethany care van ' things are on the up she says' as she rakes for a warm jumper amongst the sacks of donated clothes 'I've got a house now and I'm going to be ok' she said optimistically. She is petite, pleasing , and pleasant with an attractive personality that made me feel good as she donned an almost new lamb's wool M&S sweater and a pair of Schuh winter boots 'no bad at all' she said.



Sadly though for many getting a house is not the end of the problem Even when people are given houses they often don't stay in them for long 'more often than not they are given empty shells which they can't furnish without help and if they don't get help or don't ask for help they end up leaving quickly. Even arranging gas or electricity is a big problem for people who have never had to do this before so they give up and even if they do get these things sorted, as soon as their mates from the streets find out where they live they will pile in to

the house, drugs will appear and the whole mess continues' Craig explained.

But there is hope with some in support. Craig has found himself a job as an apprentice civil servant. He proudly showed me his competency assessment from his civil service interview scoring very highly for his 'very positive ' interview examples, 'the key thing is self belief' he said as he headed for the train and a new life.

The answer to my question has become quite clear now: who are the street sleepers? They're you and they're me.

How can I help?

The Bethany Christian trust operate a care van, food bank and the soon to open Diadem Night Shelter in Gorgie and donations of clothes and food are welcome.

Bethany Trust also operate a Buy a Bed scheme where you can sponsor a bed for the moles most the winter.

Volunteer for the lunch van for the homeless project at carevan@bethanychristiantrust.com

Most importantly says Tom Milligan 'try speaking to the rough sleepers'.