

## Correspondence

*Letters for publication in the Correspondence columns should be addressed to:*

**The Editor, British Journal of Psychiatry, 17 Belgrave Square, London SW1X 8PG**

### THE HOMELESS PERSON AND THE PSYCHIATRIC SERVICES

DEAR SIR,

Priest's conclusion in 'The homeless person and the psychiatric services: an Edinburgh survey' (*Journal*, February 1976, 128, pp 128-36) that 'subjects presenting to the psychiatric services are a highly selected group quite unrepresentative of homeless single persons in general' seems unremarkable. Isn't it just what we would expect? What would be interesting would be if the two samples were alike, and isn't the same true of the general population? Priest doesn't seem to have tried such comparison, essential though it seems. He says 'it must be remarkable in any group of persons to find that schizophrenia is, if anything, more common in the population in question than in that subsection of it that is presenting to psychiatrists'. This may say more about psychiatric services than about that population. In spite of the article's title we learn nothing about these services in relation to homeless persons.

Priest states that the NAB survey *Homeless Single Persons* revealed 'approximately 30,000 such persons in Great Britain'. In fact it stated no such thing, instead stressing that many in lodging houses were in no sense 'homeless single persons'; of the latter there were about 13,500. Its definition was not Priest's or the one he attributes to it. It included those in lodging houses, hostels, reception centres, sleeping rough and applying for supplementary benefit when homeless who 'from time to time may sleep rough or use reception centres'. Priest, however, includes all those surveyed, thus taking as his criteria of homelessness what the Government used as locations when trying to measure it. Had Priest's sample been selected not from all residents but, like the Government's, only from those defined by some independent criterion, his findings might have been different.

This raises the whole issue of single homelessness's definition. There is a strong case for rejecting both these definitions for one which treats homelessness more at its face value, and in keeping with recent Government definition is related to the absence or

impending loss of accommodation. Priest's definition includes people actually in accommodation. He speaks of residents who have made their home in a lodging house—and neglects many more without homes, like those squatting, staying with family or friends, etc. Recent developments in this field seem to have been overlooked. Only one of his references is post-1970, in spite of the flood of research since then.\* The article does not seem to tell us anything new or interesting. Priest has told us of the psychiatric morbidity of a few lodging-house users. But to what purpose? He does not explain the nature—if any—of its relationship or causal connection with their lodging house use. Perhaps as he says 'there is room for much further investigation of this population'. The question is for what reason? It has long been apparent that lodging houses have more than their fair share of those identified as mentally ill. It is hardly surprising that such cheap accommodation would serve as a repository for those seen not to function properly. Their condition surely no longer requires inquiry or description, but change.

PETER BERESFORD

*University of Lancaster,  
Department of Social Administration,  
Fylde College,  
Lancaster LA1 4YF*

\* See my paper in: 'Report of the Proceedings of a Meeting held on 13th March 1975 to discuss research into the needs of Homeless Single People.'

DEAR SIR,

Many of your readers will know that I am as unhappy as Beresford with the term 'Homeless Single Persons'.

In my last review in the *News and Notes* section of the *Journal*, I described this term as cumbersome, potentially misleading, but better than 'tramps', 'vagrants' or 'bums', and probably 'the least unsatisfactory description in common use'.

I believe that most of Beresford's other criticisms of my paper stem from the fact that I was trying to