

<b>Institution:</b> University of Birmingham		
<b>Unit of Assessment:</b> UoA 28, History		
<b>Title of case study:</b> New Histories of Homelessness in Modern Britain since 1880s		
<b>Period when the underpinning research was undertaken:</b> 2008–present		
<b>Details of staff conducting the underpinning research from the submitting unit:</b>		
<b>Name(s):</b>	<b>Role(s) (e.g. job title):</b>	<b>Period(s) employed by submitting HEI:</b>
Professor Nicholas Crowson	Professor of Contemporary British History	1997–present
<b>Period when the claimed impact occurred:</b> August 2015–December 2020		
<b>Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014?</b> No		
<p><b>1. Summary of the impact</b></p> <p>Crowson has challenged how homelessness is framed and discussed through collaborations with national stakeholders (NGOs, policy-makers, heritage organisations and theatrical companies). Stereotypes have been confronted to ensure that contemporary homelessness debates are conducted with an attentiveness to their own historical lineage and, ultimately, to <b>give voice to a historically marginalised group</b>. Specifically, impact has been achieved by:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Informing national policy debate and NGO campaigning messages</b> around the 1824 Vagrancy Act;</li> <li>• <b>Co-producing new cultural theatrical artefacts</b> that change how stories of homelessness are told and received;</li> <li>• <b>Changing how heritage and museum practice</b> represents, preserves and interprets homelessness;</li> <li>• <b>Reshaping public understanding and values</b> surrounding homelessness.</li> </ul>		
<p><b>2. Underpinning research</b></p> <p>The impact is underpinned by research insights that transform understanding of who the homeless are and their experiences of homelessness, how organisations and individuals have sought to help and campaign on behalf of the homeless and how homelessness policy has been shaped in the political, media and NGO sectors. The research also reveals that the success of others (charities, the judiciary, journalists, politicians etc.) speaking and advocating on behalf of the homeless, has meant the voice of homeless populations has been lost.</p> <p>Crowson has sought to restore the voice of people who experienced homelessness in the past. He has revealed experiences of vagrancy from the 1870s by using genealogical methods to reconstruct the life-stories of individuals prosecuted under the 1824 Vagrancy Act. (RO4, S2) He has also examined the widespread squatting of military camps 1946–1949 to understand individuals' motivations, and the policy-making consequences, of this action. (RO3) An earlier Leverhulme-funded project explored the role of NGOs as socio-political actors in post-1945 Britain and specifically how, as those organisations campaigned for homelessness (such as Crisis, Shelter and the Simon Community), they emerged as a new form of expert activist, attracting mass support which provided them with resources and legitimacy. (RO1–RO2)</p> <p>Key research findings come under two broad headings:</p> <p><b>1. Why people become homeless and their experiences of homelessness</b></p> <p><b>RF1.</b> 'Vagrants' become homeless for a mix of structural (e.g. unemployment, housing need, economic downturn) and personal reasons (e.g. family disputes, health and learning difficulties). (RO4)</p> <p><b>RF2.</b> "Vagrant" geographical mobility is often determined by very personalised reasons which only become apparent from understanding their life-story. (RO4)</p> <p><b>RF3.</b> Post WW2 military camp squatting was motivated by acute housing need rather than political activism. (RO3)</p>		

**RF4.** Popular historic constructions of what it means to be a tramp, beggar, vagrant are myths that are deeply engrained in the socio-political psyche which make it harder for politicians, the media and the public to move away from attributing blame and poor life choices to the homeless. (RO4–6)

## **2. How NGOs' understanding and campaigning on homelessness has changed**

**RF5.** Many homelessness NGOs owe their foundational origins to religious faith, which is fundamental to how they understand their ethos and values, and how today they use their history to explain their modern-day mission. (RO1)

**RF6.** The homeless lobby have, since the 1970s, as seen with the 1977 Housing (Homeless Persons) Act, been successful at gaining political and public support for legislation and setting the parameters for debate. (RO1, RO2)

**RF7.** Homeless NGOs can draft legislation for MPs to introduce but have only limited control to shape matters during the parliamentary process meaning that their original objectives can be diluted. (RO1, RO2)

## **3. References to the research**

**RO1.** N.J. Crowson, M. Hilton, J. McKay, and J. Mouhot. *The Politics of Expertise: How NGOs shaped modern Britain* (Oxford University Press, 2013). ISBN: 978-0199691876

**RO2.** N.J. Crowson. 'Revisiting the 1977 Housing (Homeless Persons) Act: Westminster, Whitehall and the Homelessness Lobby', *Twentieth Century British History*, 2013, 24 (3): pp. 424–447. DOI: 10.1093/tcbh/hws027

**RO3.** N.J. Crowson. 'A history of homelessness', 22 November 2018. *BBC History Extra*.

**RO4.** N.J. Crowson. 'Tramps' Tales: Discovering the Life Stories of Victorian and Edwardian vagrant', *English Historical Review*, December 2020. DOI: 10.1093/ehr/ceaa256

## **4. Details of the impact**

Impact was achieved by empowering homeless activism through informing the practice of national homelessness NGOs as they lobbied for policy change and realising the need to challenge the historical biases in policy framing. Whilst change in understanding, more widely, has been achieved through creating empathy and understanding for homelessness in cultural, heritage and media spheres by unsettling established narratives. Taken together these provide the homeless (both historic and contemporary) with recognition and voice.

### **1. Informing national policy debate and campaigning strategy for homelessness advocates**

How national homelessness NGOs and parliamentarians seek to advocate for homelessness reform is now underpinned with understanding of the historic socio-political construction of homelessness as a result of collaborations with Crowson. (RO1, RO2, RO4) Using history has enabled them, as the CEO of Crisis has noted, to 'learn from the success and failure of recent history' in working towards ending homelessness. (S5, p. 1)

#### **1a. Stimulating national policy debate to repeal the 1824 Vagrancy Act**

The Government are on the verge of reforming the 1824 Vagrancy Act. Specifically, the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government **completed a review of the 1824 Vagrancy legislation as a direct result of the Crisis' Scrap the Act campaign** (2019–2020) in which Crowson was a 'key partner'. (S3–S5, specifically S4) A ministerial announcement, originally expected in late March 2020, has been delayed by Covid (*Hansard: Lords*, vol. 803, 23 April 2020, Advocate General for Scotland). (S10) Crisis have subsequently presented the Government with a draft repeal bill, alongside a good practice guide for police. (S4)

Crisis' policy lead cited Crowson's input as critical, stating that 'research findings inflected the campaign with a new and vital element that contributed directly to the policy recommendations we made for the case for repeal' to parliamentarians, civil servants, the police and legal professionals in June 2019. (RO4; S4) Crisis' *Scrap the Act* report (June 2019) explicitly cited Crowson's research findings in the recommendations for policy reform, acknowledging that the Act's legal longevity rested upon a low evidential threshold and that to succeed reform needed to challenge historically entrenched responses to the beggar. (S3) Ultimately Crowson's input has meant **Crisis 'has been able to more effectively engage with politicians, policymakers and campaigning members of the public'**. (S4)

Political and policy discourse on the case for scrapping the Vagrancy Act has also been shaped through Crowson's engagements in a range of forums aimed at parliamentarians and policy-

makers. (RF1–RF2, RF4, RF7) This has allowed NGOs to develop proposals for new legislation and advocate for repeal by building an historical-evidence-based case for reform. This includes expert oral testimony to a Vagrancy Act evidence-gathering event (Supreme Court, April 2019), University of Birmingham *Homelessness and Roughsleeping Roundtable Report* (October 2019), an invited *Vagrancy Act briefing* (October 2019) for a leading Liberal Democrat MP who champions repeal, an article in *The House Magazine* (29 January 2020) and a Crisis ‘expert’ blog (December 2020). (S9)

### **1b. Influencing the campaigning and professional values and practice of national homelessness NGOs**

Shelter acknowledged the importance of its own organisational history when reviewing its legacy and future direction in 2015–2016 as part of its fiftieth foundation anniversary. How an organisation represents its past is important to understanding its contemporary ethos and mission. (RF5) Consequently, Shelter recognised the past importance of youth support and the innovative media strategies previously employed, as well as the value of reviewing its historic campaign messages, policy advice and their reception by policy-makers and publics to inform modern day campaigns. (RO1, RO2; S6) Since 2017, Crisis has also acknowledged the strategic importance of historically underpinned campaign messages and recognises this in its wider professional practice: working with Crowson has led to ‘the recognition that our reference points around homelessness policy are often derived from longer term historical moral value based assumptions’. (S3–S5, specifically S4)

## **2. Co-creation of theatrical cultural artefacts enabled the telling of complex stories about homelessness which overturned stereotypes**

Cardboard Citizens theatre company (CC) has been empowered to **revive, and enact, the stories of those it had assumed were beyond recovery**. It has used these stories to underline the complex reasons for homelessness and **challenge and overturn socio-political understandings** of subjects, such as squatting and the 1824 Vagrancy Act, so helping fulfil its campaigning mission. CC’s founder and Creative Director observed that ‘Nick’s rich tapestry of vagrant life-stories threaded together presented CC with an opportunity to tell alternative stories of the homeless that gave voice to people we had assumed left little trace. It allowed us to experiment with the different artistic ways we could deliver their narratives that extended both audience reach and understanding.’ (S2) CC are a theatre group that works with, and for, the homeless, and in doing so have pioneered the “theatre of the oppressed” methodology in Britain. In a long-standing relationship dating back to 2015, CC and Crowson have co-created a series of cultural theatrical artefacts (S1, S2) utilising his research (RO1–RO4) as part of the *Vagrants Act* and *Home Truths* projects, with Crowson regularly providing additional underpinning historical insight for audiences. This has enabled audiences to locate performances appropriately, provoking observations such as Crowson ‘really helped contextualise’ and provided a ‘fantastic way to communicate the historical context.’ (S2)

### **2a. Empowering marginalised homeless communities (both historical and contemporary) by performing co-created theatrical artefacts**

These theatrical artefacts have foregrounded stories of homeless experiences previously obscured from history. The plays have enabled their voices to be heard and narrated. Rather than being heard through third parties in power-positions, these stories are acted by those with current, or lived, experiences of homelessness, as members of CC’s acting panel. Performing the plays challenged these actors to reflect on how the historic nature of homelessness and housing offered narratives that both mirrored and diverged from their own lived experiences. **This has empowered participants to become advocates, to learn how history and the homeless experience inform the performing-art process.** For example, one panellist ‘in some part’ saw similarities in their own life experiences to that of their character, admitting that they had ‘learnt something new [but] hated and feared the perspective allocated with people of my illness or ethnicity.’ Another saw it as ‘very interesting to find out that many of the tricks used back then are still in use today’. One concluded ‘if we cannot bring to life, and give voice to the past, how can we expect the future to listen to us in the present!’ (S2)

### **2b. Humanising historic homelessness: *The Vagrants Act* (June 2018–present)**

Through performance, CC was able to **show for the first time how vagrancy affects individuals at different moments across their lives**. (RF1–RF3) By producing a series of life-story

reconstructions of individuals prosecuted under the Vagrancy Act, using Crowson's verbatim archival source materials, CC have transformed how audiences receive, and respond to, vagrancy. This took CC in a fresh dramaturgical direction (although necessitated by Covid restrictions) away from the traditional theatre space into digital form. The platform resonated with the audience, **changing their understanding, and heightening their empathetic responses** with the life-story format. Before the performances, 46% were unaware that rough sleeping remains a fineable offence. Audience feedback stated that it 'provoked me to think about the wide-ranging complexities of the act', that it 'helped to stimulate my mind as to what life must have been like', and others observed the 'striking similarities between then and now'. Respondents repeatedly noted how the reconstructions **humanised the vagrants**, observing they 'really felt I got to know the character', this was 'the first time I've connected with a character that much through Zoom', that 'it was good to see these people as people, with emotions' and were struck 'how people's footprints still remain on this earth' and 'their stories are being told, watched, heard and listened to because of his [Crowson's] research [...] a priceless experience!' (S2) The performances, and associated expert discussions, were undertaken in collaboration with Crisis' Scrap the Act campaign. The project ultimately culminated in CC, in collaboration with Jonx Productions, in July 2020, winning a commission to produce a BBC Radio 4, 56-minute play (for broadcast in September 2021). (S2) This marks the endpoint of a process that included a proof-of-concept phase (June–December 2019) and then a series of experimental Zoom public performances (December 2020), testing methods that will be employed in the radio play. (S2)

**2c. Home Truths** (2015–2017) revealed an **alternative and discontinuous history of housing** from the 19<sup>th</sup> century to modern day, through nine new commissioned plays, that showed the historic prevalence of housing need. It facilitated 'creative flexibility' and encouraged 'creative risk'. (S1) The plays successfully reached **diverse and under-represented audiences** (1,691 attended — one-third identified as BAME, 10% with lived homelessness experience). Feedback showed that the plays convinced audiences that housing crises, of one kind or another, have always been with us and that homelessness has been a constant, to recognise the historical parallels with the modern rhetoric of the hardworking vs the scrounger and to question how to define "home" and the term's shifting meaning. (S1) Performed in three cycles over a twenty-three-night residency (April–May 2017), the play-cycle was an innovation for CC producing nine separate, but inter-linked plays performed in a triptych format, an alternative form of artistic delivery that CC had not conceived before, which was recognised by a Best Ensemble nomination at The Offie (Off West End) awards 2018. (S1)

In the view of CC's creative director and founder, Crowson's research was 'critical to the success' of the dramaturgical process. As historical advisor, Crowson's role was three-pronged — determining subjects for commission, providing extensive research material packs, plus follow-on advice for four plays — and was described as 'incredibly helpful'. (S1) All plays were reviewed and critiqued by Crowson with a final layer of co-production with CC utilising Crowson's visual and audio research to create "stiches" as fillers between each play, a feature that drew praise from critics. The collaboration also brought **economic gain for CC** in the form of £48,000 National Heritage Fund grant for the play productions and the associated *Home Truth's Festival*. (S1)

### **3.Changing heritage and museum practice in representing, preserving and interpreting homelessness**

Museums have presented new narratives about experiences of homelessness across lifetimes and have included the voices of marginalised groups supposedly lost to history.

**3a.** The Museum of Homelessness (MoH), a new venture launched in 2016, has adopted **new collection policies** (March 2019) and **accepted new bequests** having co-opted Crowson to join its Collections Panel (from 2016). (S7) MoH secured the transfer of the Simon Community's archive (summer 2019) after its Trustees saw the outcomes of a Crowson-led review of the *Dosser's Bible* (a key item in the MoH's collection). This changed the MoH's understanding of the object, enabling them to appreciate the profound faith-based influence on the organisation's foundations and the unappreciated American and European influences, thus **enabling the MoH to rethink how it locates and utilises** this within its collections and client/community engagements. (S7)

**3b.** **Shifting of homelessness narratives which reveal the human experience and challenge stereotypes of personal fault and poor lifestyle choices** were made evident in the *Missing*

*Pieces: Homeless History of Newcastle* community project. Led by a professional archivist working with Crisis Skylight (Newcastle), homeless service users and community volunteers researched the City's homelessness past. It adopted the methodology utilised in RO4, at the recommendation of the MoH, to reconstruct the life-stories of the homeless. The methodology, proving it was possible to rescue the lost stories of these people, was 'instrumental' in the project **securing Heritage Lottery funding**. The approach enabled the research team to 'gain a better understanding of the multi-faceted nature of homelessness in history and to build a robust picture of the different experiences people have faced.' (S8) A six-week public exhibition installed across five high-profile City venues (February–April 2019) reached an audience of 7,000. Crowson collaborated with the archivist from the outset and helped co-produce the reconstruction of Sabina Forbes' life-story, whom 'featured prominently' in exhibition outputs and publicity and demonstrated the 'shifts and continuities in language used towards homeless people.' (S8)

#### 4. Shaping public attitudes and values to homelessness (historic and contemporary)

Public interest and engagement with homelessness has been stimulated by challenging stereotypes, giving voice to the homeless both past and present, and ensuring that contemporary homelessness debates are not conducted in a vacuum that ignores its historical lineage. (RO1–RO4) This has been achieved by **engaging publics to enable new understandings** that challenge assumptions about the causes of homelessness and show who has experienced it. This has taken place through a prolonged series of public engagement activities (*Home Truth's Provocation Day*, February 2017; *Tramps' Tales* lecture, June 2017, Youtube, 1.3k views; *Home Truth's* post-performance *Squatting* talk, May 2017; *Home Truth's Festival* lecture, July 2017; Historical Association lectures nationally and branch level; CC 'Vagrancy Debate', December 2018; *Taking Place* day debate, Foyles London, February 2020; Guild of One-name Studies seminar, May 2020); whilst national media interventions also provide important **correctives to public misunderstandings about the homeless** (Radio 4, May 2018; *BBC History Magazine Extra*, September 2018; *BBC History Magazine*, October 2018; World Service 'Food Programme', May 2019; *Guardian* letter to editor 'history lesson for homeless minister', June 2019, reach of 1,944,288; Facebook Live broadcast on 1824 Vagrancy Act, June 2019, 6.2k views; World Homeless Day University of Birmingham podcast, October 2019, 5k views; Crisis 'Expert' Blog 6, December 2020).

#### 5. Sources to corroborate the impact

**S1.** Cardboard Citizens *Home Truths* evidence pack: summary of Provocation Day (video feedback); Creative Day (questionnaires); Reviews of Home Truths; Creative Director testimonial statement *Home Truths* (2017)

**S2.** Cardboard Citizens: *Vagrants Act* evidence pack: Cardboard Citizens Theatre Company, *The Vagrancy Act: Health and Wellbeing*, performance, 1 December 2020; Cardboard Citizens Theatre Company, *The Vagrancy Act: Engaging History Theatre*, performance, 8 December 2020, testimonial from Creative Director for *Vagrants Act*; Audience feedback and actor testimonies from December 2020 Zoom plays.

**S3.** Crisis: *Scrap the Act: The case for repealing the Vagrancy Act (1824)*, June 2019 Policy Document

**S4.** Testimonial from Crisis Director of Policy and Research (Wales) and Campaign Lead for Scrap the Act, November 2020.

**S5.** Crisis *Not Yet Home: A History of Britain's Attempts to Tackle Homelessness* (London: 2018)

**S6.** *Shelter: At 50* (London: February 2016)

**S7.** Museum of Homelessness: Founding Co-Director factual statement

**S8.** *Missing Pieces: Homeless History of Newcastle project*: Project Lead factual statement, June 2019

**S9.** Policy Briefings: Crisis: Vagrancy Act Evidence Gathering roundtable (Supreme Court, April 2019); University of Birmingham *Homelessness and Roughsleeping Roundtable report* (October 2019); *Vagrancy Act Briefing* for Liberal Democrat MP (October 2019) addressing the Act's history and past attempts at reform

**S10.** *Hansard: Lords*, vol. 803, 23 April 2020, Advocate General for Scotland