



UK COLLABORATIVE  
CENTRE FOR  
HOUSING EVIDENCE

# Homeless mothers: Key research findings

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# 1. Introduction

## 1.1. Background to the study

This study was undertaken in response to an identified gap in research and policy evidence. It was funded by the Collaborative Centre for Housing Evidence (CaCHE) and Sheffield Hallam University. Previous homelessness research conducted by the study team had identified neglected issues related to the maternal experiences of homeless women. For example many homeless women who are categorised as 'single' (i.e. without dependent children) and are supported by services for 'single' people are, in fact, mothers, whose children are temporarily in the care of others (Reeve 2017; Reeve et al 2009; Reeve et al 2006). The challenges of parenting whilst homeless has also received surprisingly little attention despite the potential consequences for family and child well-being. With limited understanding and evidence about the needs and experiences of homeless mothers and families, policy interventions may be ineffective and inappropriate.

The gendered impacts of welfare reform, as well as women's social and economic position more broadly strengthens the need to recognise the challenges faced by mothers who become homeless. Women remain, overall, more likely to be responsible for childcare, and more economically disadvantaged or dependent as they undertake less paid labour outside of the home and more unpaid labour within the home. This makes mothers vulnerable to changes in family circumstance, such as separation from partners, as well as to situations such as domestic abuse and violence. When considering that two thirds of households hit by the benefit cap are single parents with children under the age of five, the 'welfare to work' policies which underpin welfare reforms bear significant impacts for women who make up 90 per cent of single parent households (Gingerbread n.d.).

Responding to an identified gap in evidence and, we would argue, a need to appreciate the differential experiences of homeless women, this research set out to explore and make visible the experiences of homeless mothers and their interaction with housing and other social services. It is intended as a starting point for a much needed research focus on homeless mothers. As such, there are limitations. The voices of children, practitioners and policy makers are missing, for example, and would add an important layer of understanding. The study was also based exclusively in (the north of) England. Homelessness is a devolved responsibility, resulting in different national legislative contexts. The experiences of the homeless mothers in this study may not, therefore, transfer to other nations, particularly to Scotland where no distinction is made between families and single people when determining the housing duty owed to them.

## 1.2. Policy context

In English homelessness legislation, people with dependent children have 'priority need' for housing. The same is true in Northern Ireland and Wales but not in Scotland where all homeless people, subject to meeting other eligibility criteria, are owed a housing duty. Rights to homelessness assistance have recently been extended in England and Wales through the Homelessness Reduction Act (2017) and the Housing Wales Act (2014), placing obligations on local authorities to prevent and relieve homelessness for all eligible people, regardless of priority need. However, though the application of 'priority need', parents do retain greater entitlement to accommodation.

Yet within the English context, parents living apart from their children are generally assessed as being 'single'. Research has highlighted the detrimental consequences of this for non-resident parents (see Clarke and Muir 2017 for the impact of shared housing allowances on non-resident fathers) but, as the findings from this study will show, a temporary separation can also see parents defined as 'single' and so with no entitlement to rehousing. Furthermore, increasingly restricted housing and financial support that is available for parents with dependent children may also create and reinforce situations of isolation and poverty.

## **Women, mothers and homelessness**

The emergency housing options available for homeless people include services such as hostels, refuges and supported accommodation, as well as less supported forms of temporary accommodation in B&Bs, private hotels and other shared private housing. These housing options can represent intimidating and unsuitable spaces, especially for people who might be more vulnerable to harm, including women (Reeve, 2006). For refugee and asylum-seeking women and children with no recourse to public funds, housing welfare is even more limited, and issues have been raised about conditions in housing provided by contracted asylum housing providers (Grayson, 2017).

In the late 1970s, with the introduction of the 1977 Housing (homeless person's) Act in England, a statutory obligation was placed on local authorities to provide housing for people with dependent children. The priority the 1977 Act gave to families is widely acknowledged as benefiting women in particular by virtue of their common role as primary or sole carer of children (Mayock et al., 2016; Fitzpatrick and Pawson, 2016; Pascall, 1991). The introduction of Housing Benefit, meanwhile, can also be seen to have mitigated the economic vulnerability of women who are more likely to undertake unpaid caring duties rather than paid labour. However, in practice, these policies are not always well equipped to accommodate fluid or non-traditional family forms such as women who temporarily live apart from their children during a period of homelessness, and housing benefit and wider welfare entitlement for single-parent households - most of which are female-headed - has reduced. Post-2010 benefit caps and other welfare reforms have increased the economic insecurity faced by mothers in particular, who are overall less likely to be able to take up work or increase employment due to maternal responsibilities or pregnancy (Hudson-Sharp et al. 2018).

Even when entitlement to housing is established, for example through priority need for families, the availability of secure or suitable accommodation has become increasingly limited. There was a 77 per cent increase in the placement of households in temporary accommodation between 2010 - 2019, representing 84,740 households at March 2019 (Wilson and Barton, 2019), as well as an increase in the use of bed & breakfast accommodation (Fitzpatrick et al. 2019). When considering the safety and quality of unsupported temporary accommodation in particular (Maciver, 2018), and the impact that this may have for homeless families, this increase is especially significant. For mothers who have been separated from their children during periods of crisis, parenting across distance and family reunification is especially difficult.

Research has also shown how out of borough placements that are common in some London boroughs have disproportionate and detrimental impacts for women with dependent children, where non-working households have been moved away from schools, family and support networks, and trapped in insecure housing (Hardy and Gillespie, 2016). This phenomenon is less common outside of London and the South East of England. However, being moved out of local authority area is a routine solution for the victims of domestic abuse across the country (Miller, 2019).

## **Homelessness and domestic violence**

In 2002 the priority need categories in England were extended to include people escaping violence. Local authorities in England have a statutory duty (subject to other criteria being met such as not having made oneself 'intentionally homeless') to provide accommodation to anyone who falls within this priority need category.

Official statistics for 2017/18 report that 1.3 million women, and 695,000 men experienced domestic abuse, which for some represents both cause and consequence of homelessness (Miller, 2019). Research has found that a significant proportion of homeless women (61 per cent compared to 16 per cent of men) have experienced violence or abuse from a partner (Mackie and Thomas, 2014)

The housing needs of people experiencing domestic abuse in England has received recent scrutiny through an All Party Parliamentary Group report for Ending Homelessness, funded by Crisis, as part of the introduction of a draft Domestic Abuse Bill. While domestic abuse is a priority need category in England and Wales (Scotland has removed priority need distinctions), research with campaigning organisations and women's services has found that women seeking support in critical circumstances have been sent away with a list of phone numbers, or in some cases told to return to unsafe housing situations (Miller, 2019).

The barriers presented by housing policy and practice also contribute to existing barriers to the criminal justice system for the victims of domestic abuse. People may avoid reporting abuse for fear of reprisal from the perpetrator, or due to their financial dependency on the perpetrator, as well as mistrust of the police and children's social services, whose involvement could lead to the removal of children from parental care. Research has shown that people who have reported domestic abuse to police feel that they are not taken seriously and that risk is not adequately assessed, and that coming into contact with perpetrators and the cross-examination of victims within court room settings undermines the potential for prosecutions (Victim Support, 2018). For people without settled immigration status, the fear of reporting domestic abuse may be greater still.

### **Child protection**

Child protection practice in England (and Wales) is underpinned by the Children's Act 1989, introduced to comprehensively safeguard children, and ensure that the welfare of the child is prioritised. Thirty years on, some social work professionals and academics suggest that the principles of protection that underpin the Act are not always supported (for example Featherstone et al 2019; Bywaters et al, 2015). It has been suggested that the Act can be a blunt instrument where the last resort of care proceedings becomes more common. A report from the Chief Social Worker for Children and Families, for example, argued that an over-reliance on court interventions where a case for child removal 'could go either way', has removed the scope for family support and substantially reduced the chance to avoid children being taken into care (Trowler, 2018). Indeed, the number of children taken into care has dramatically increased in England over the last decade, with the number of new-born babies being removed by court order doubling between 2007/8 and 2016/17 (Broadhurst et al. 2018). An increase in children taken into care can be observed in Wales and Northern Ireland, whereas Scotland has seen a decrease (NSPCC, 2019).

Some research has found that an emphasis within child protection practice on culpability and care proceedings rather than collaborative working has contributed to a culture of mistrust between parents and social services (Featherstone et al., 2016). It has also been argued that responses to substance abuse, poor mental health and domestic abuse is reflected in court actions rather than additional support provided for families in need of help, often located in the most deprived neighbourhoods and local authorities (Featherstone et al., 2019). Picking up on this last point, academics have suggested that harm to children caused by poverty is often overlooked at best, or misinterpreted as parental neglect at worst (McGhee and Waterhouse, 2017; Gupta et al 2017)

The 2018 Working Together to Safeguard Children guidance in England and the 2014 Social Services and Wellbeing Act in Wales go some way to address the need for early, preventative and multi-agency work. Recently published guidance from the British Association of Social Workers (BASW, 2019) acknowledges the importance of recognising the impact of poverty when making decisions about parenting, and has advocated for a poverty rather than purely risk-based approach when considering responses to child welfare (BASW, 2019). Yet, whilst there is growing consensus that a combination of poverty and austerity has led to an increase in care proceedings, and that domestic violence is one of the most common reasons for children being taken into care (LGA 2019), there is little acknowledgement of the centrality of housing to those other issues. This research addresses the lack of connection between these policy areas, through the experiences of homeless mothers and their interaction with housing and social services.

## 2. Methods and participants

This was an exploratory study to uncover and scope issues of relevance to homeless mothers as a starting point for an emerging research agenda. The study team aimed to use the evidence gathered through the study to shape a more focused future research. As such, qualitative methods were used and research tools designed to be open-ended and give scope for issues to emerge from participants. However, based on previous research and the interests of members of the study team, there were a number of particular areas of interest that the research hoped to explore with homeless mothers. These were:

- the maternal identities of homeless mothers and the relationship between homelessness and identity
- the experience of parenting while homeless
- the experiences of women living apart from their children

This report draws primarily on the accounts of 26 homeless mothers who were interviewed face-to-face between April - August 2019. However, prior to participant recruitment the project team engaged with eight services commissioned to provide housing or social support to women and/or to homeless people. The purpose of engaging with these professionals was twofold: first, to seek help with recruiting homeless women; and second, to derive insights on the issues and challenges faced by service providers and their clients that would help inform the focus of data collection and the design of research tools. These discussions were also useful for exploring the local context in which subsequent participants were living. The team also held discussions with academics and local practitioners with in-depth knowledge of specific areas of social policy and practice in England, including domestic abuse, housing law, and social work. The primary purpose of these discussions was to enhance knowledge of the research team in the policies and procedures of relevant policy areas but they were also useful for helping interpret some of their experiences reported by the homeless mothers interviews. At the end of the study a symposium was held, attended by 30 academics, practitioners and policymakers. The draft report was circulated to all delegates, the key findings presented and comments invited. These were taken into account when finalising this report.

Some of the organisations engaged in the developmental phase of the study supported the team with recruitment of mothers who had experienced homelessness. Information flyers were distributed, emphasising that participation was entirely voluntary and that withdrawal from the research could take place at any time without giving a reason (and without prejudicing the £20 voucher that we gave to each participant). Participants were under no obligation to talk about anything they preferred not to. Women were interviewed face-to-face in their homes (refuges, hostels) and in the offices of organisations they were working with. Women were usually interviewed on their own but in a small number of cases women asked to be interviewed in a pair, or a small group.

Overall, interviews sought to understand the circumstances and events that led to women's homelessness, the impact of homelessness on parenting and maternal identity, and interactions with housing, social and other public services during and around periods of homelessness. A biographical approach was taken which invited participants to talk through the circumstances that had led to their first experience of homelessness, going as far back in their history as they wished. A focus on personal histories in the interviews gave space for participants to prioritise the experiences that they viewed as most important. Key interview questions were then loosely allocated to encourage women to describe their housing and family histories, with prompts for information about engagement with housing and social services. Interviews were recorded and transcribed, subject to consent (in a small number of cases women preferred not to be recorded and so notes were taken) before being thematically analysed.

The 26 women interviewed all lived in the north of England, in a range of locations from large towns to medium and large cities in the regions of Yorkshire and Humber, East Midlands, and the North West. They were mothers of between one and six children. At the time of interview, 18 mothers were living apart from at least one of their children although most had been full-time carers of children shortly before, or at the time they became homeless. Some of the women's children had been adopted or placed into foster care, and just under half were in kinship care. In situations where children were in kinship care, whether informally or as a result of child protection proceedings, their mothers generally regarded the separation as temporary, albeit with varying degrees of optimism about whether their children would be returned.

All the mothers interviewed were homeless at the time of their interview, either living in temporary accommodation (including refuges, hostels and supported housing), staying with friends or family, or sleeping rough. A few women had long histories of homelessness and insecure housing, including periods of time in institutions (prison, psychiatric hospital) while others were interviewed during their first, relatively recent episode of homelessness.

Whilst there were multiple and intersecting reasons for homelessness 23 out of the 26 women described domestic abuse as a key trigger.<sup>1</sup> Whilst participant relationships were heterosexual in this study, the high incidence of violence against LGBTQ people by partners or family members also needs recognition, and presents distinct implications for further research (Cochran et al., 2002; McCoy, 2018; Whitbeck et al 2001).

Domestic abuse was also a trigger for child removal in many cases (13 of the 18 mothers living apart from their children). When asked to explain the circumstances that had brought Nicola (not her real name) to her current situation, for example, she needed only a few words:

I was in a domestic violence relationship and then my kids got took into care and then I ended up getting me house took off me. (Nicola)

In these cases, the experience of domestic violence, of homelessness and of separation from children were intrinsically connected. For example, several women became homeless when they left their partners to escape violence and it was deemed in the best interests of the child (by social services, the mother, or the child) for them to live elsewhere because her housing was not stable or because they remained at risk from the perpetrator. In other cases, women's children were removed to protect them from the effects of domestic violence in the home, prompting respondents to leave their partners (in all cases to a situation of homelessness) or triggering events that resulted in eviction - reduced housing benefit and associated arrears, declining mental health, escalating drug and alcohol use and associated ASB or arrears.

For the vast majority of the women interviewed, poverty was a defining circumstance, although many had managed to make ends meet for years, raising their children and maintaining a home. Some respondents reported negative mental health, ranging from depression to psychosis, and substance addiction in relation to their experience of homelessness, domestic abuse or separation from children. In some cases such issues predated these experiences but typically they were causally related, or deteriorated significantly when faced with violence, homelessness or the loss of their family.

<sup>1</sup> No generalisations can be drawn from this as some participants were recruited through two organisations that provide refuge accommodation alongside other self-contained accommodation for homeless people.



## 3. Key findings

This section is organised around eight key findings. It focuses on issues that emerged most prominently in the study and which have relevance to, and implications for policy. Pseudonyms are used throughout.

### 3.1 The distinction between ‘family’ and ‘single’ homelessness in English homelessness policy fails to take account of homeless mother’s complex family circumstances

In English homelessness policy and practice homeless people are defined as ‘single’ if they have no dependent children, a category that stands in direct contrast with ‘family’. These categories confer certain rights, eligibility for, and access to housing and support. Local authorities, for example, have a statutory duty to house homeless families because they are deemed to have ‘priority need’ under the terms of the homelessness legislation.<sup>2</sup> Single people, meanwhile, will only be awarded priority need if they meet certain vulnerability criteria. The Homelessness Reduction Act 2017 placed greater obligations on English local authorities to assist homeless people in the prevention and relief of homelessness and this has enhanced protection for single people. Local authorities now have a duty to take reasonable steps to prevent threatened homelessness and relieve homelessness by helping an applicant secure accommodation, regardless of priority need status. However, it remains the case that local authorities only have a statutory obligation to house people if they are in priority need (and meet other eligibility criteria). Homelessness services such as day centres and hostels are also often funded to work only with single people, or only with families, and so access to those services can be determined by family status. However, not all ‘single’ homeless women are childless, with studies about single homeless women consistently finding mothers in their sample (Reeve et al, 2006; Mayock, et al 2015; Reeve, 2017).

Eighteen of the 26 homeless mothers interviewed for this study were living apart from at least one of their children.<sup>3</sup> Two women had one child in their care and others living elsewhere, while 16 were living apart from all of their children. For some, homelessness or precarious housing was the main trigger for placing children with other carers while for others it was just one of many difficulties the women faced, often including domestic abuse. Either way, the circumstances under which women separated from their children were complex and the permanence or otherwise of the arrangement often ambiguous.

Roxanne, Harriet and Aaliah, for example, placed their children in kinship care when they became homeless through escaping domestic abuse. Their children chose to stay with relatives rather than move to refuges in other cities away from their friends and school or, in Roxanne’s case, into a hostel she described as ‘dirty’ and where drugs were prevalent. For these women, a lack of appropriate housing was the main reason for (temporarily) living apart from their children. Tracy and Emma, meanwhile, separated from their children before they became homeless. Tracy was experiencing domestic abuse and, in response, she started drinking excessively and her mental health deteriorated. Recognising that she was not coping, and wanting to protect her daughter, she asked the child’s father to look after her temporarily. She subsequently left her violent relationship, becoming homeless in the process, and moved into a refuge alone. Emma, similarly, was struggling with alcohol dependence. She had begun drinking heavily when she realised a little late in the day that she had significant rent arrears (accrued because of non-dependent deductions from her Housing Benefit for her adult children) and was likely to be evicted. A brief period of separation was suggested by social workers to allow Emma time to resolve her housing and alcohol problem and her children were temporarily placed with a relative. She was evicted soon after and offered a place in a hostel for single homeless people (see Emma’s case study in 3.6 below for further details).

<sup>2</sup> As noted in section 2, unlike in England, Wales and Northern Ireland, Scotland does not operate a policy of priority need. Local authorities in Scotland therefore have a duty to provide accommodation to all people who are not intentionally homeless.

<sup>3</sup> No generalisations can be drawn from this as we recruited some participants through organisations working with women who had been subject to child removal and we actively sought to include women in the sample who were living apart from their children.

Some of the mothers interviewed had long ago had children removed and adopted but in many cases - like those recounted above - women considered their separation from children to be a temporary arrangement while they resolved their housing (and sometimes other) problems. They considered themselves to be a family, temporarily separated by circumstances that, with the right support or the right housing could be resolved. Many still regarded themselves as primary carer of their children. Yet, once children were physically absent, even if only temporarily, these women were rarely recognised as mothers within the terms of the homelessness legislation or housing allocation systems. If they were offered temporary accommodation it was in hostels for single people, often some distance from where their children were living, children were often prohibited from being in the building, or there were strict rules about visitors.

We see in these examples how a binary distinction between 'single' and 'family' that relies heavily on current residency arrangements (see 3.2.) fails to appreciate the complex reality of family form for some mothers facing homelessness. The needs of mothers whose circumstances at a point in time did not fit systems norms of 'the family' were not met (see 3.5 for further discussion). We also see that through the application of this distinction, temporary placement of children with relatives or foster carers can risk more permanent situations of family separation. It is to this that we now turn.

### 3.2 Homeless mothers' separation from their children is reinforced through the inflexible distinction between 'family' and 'single' homelessness in English homelessness policy

There is scope within the homelessness legislation to classify people temporarily separated from children as a 'family' and therefore as having priority need. The Homelessness Code of Guidance stipulates that 'applicants have a priority need if one or more dependent children is living with them or *'might reasonably be expected to live with them'* and that *'there must also be actual residence or a reasonable expectation of residence'*<sup>4</sup> (emphasis added). However, none of the mothers without children in their care interviewed for this study reported being eligible for family hostels or to bid for family sized housing through local choice-based lettings systems and, as far as we could establish, this was because they had not been defined as a 'family' by the local authority homelessness departments. We saw in the examples above that the circumstances of women's separation from their children were often so complex that decisions about where children might 'reasonably be expected' to live is not always straightforward and could change over time, often after a short period of crisis. Nevertheless, women's accounts of their interactions with housing professionals raise doubts about whether any such process of deliberation had occurred. It seemed that if women had children permanently in their care at the moment of making a local authority homelessness application or a social housing application, they were defined as a family and, if no children were currently in their care, they were assessed as 'single'.

This categorisation then determined the access and eligibility (or not) of mothers to housing. Now defined as 'single', they were not automatically awarded priority need for housing (although some were given priority under others categories of vulnerability) and were only considered eligible for housing suitable for a single person. This, in turn, reinforced family separation: without family housing, they could not live with their children.

<sup>4</sup> See <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/homelessness-code-of-guidance-for-local-authorities/chapter-8-priority-need>

At the time of their interview, for example, Tracy and Emma both reported having worked through their period of crisis, addressing some of the underlying causes of their alcohol consumption and mental health issues. Both reported feeling able to care for their children again, subject to securing suitable housing, and their daughters had expressed a preference to live with them. However, both women were now considered as 'single' and so without priority need and only eligible to bid or apply for one-bed properties. As Emma explained:

I'm only entitled to a one-bedroomed flat, so I'm going to have to convince a court to allow me to sleep on a sofa in the living room and use the bedroom for the girls, and you're already then running into problems...how can the children come back to be housed with me if I can't have a big enough house and they won't give you anywhere until the children are back? It's catch 22 (Emma)

Other women were in very similar situations

Even though I've got full parental care, he's only in foster care, he's not adopted, and I want him to come home, and he wants to come home, but how am I going to do that in a one-bedroom flat? And they don't take that into consideration which I think is unfair (Sandra)

... we were following everything they said, did a domestic violence course, he [partner] was on drugs heavily so he had to do drug courses and do drug tests, make sure we weren't drinking, make sure I weren't drinking, but even after we passed the social services course and [the] PLO<sup>5</sup> was gone and everything, I was told I was allowed the children back but cos I was in [a hostel], obviously I couldn't have them back cos I had nowhere to go again. (Roxanne)

Roxanne had approached her local authority for help with a social worker present, who also advocated for the family to be allocated housing so that the children could live with their parents. Roxanne reported initially being sent away and told that nothing could be done before being allocated housing once her local MP became involved in her case. Yet this level of intervention was not available to Sandra or the other mothers in this research.

### 3.3. Homeless mothers are situated at the intersection of several policy domains that are not sufficiently aligned to prevent them falling through the gaps between

The situations in which the mothers interviewed for this study found themselves would have been significantly improved if housing, social services, and the numerous other agencies involved had been better coordinated, to accurately assess and quickly respond to their needs. Women's experiences and their associated needs left them requiring support from a bewildering array of services, as their lives were subject to multiple, and sometimes incongruent policies, practices and expectations.

For example: children's social care services are focused on the needs of the child, as is their remit; domestic abuse services were most concerned with women's safety, as is their remit, and statutory housing and homelessness services, while focused on women's apparent housing needs (as is their remit), employed narrow assessments of women's circumstances that often left them with no access to family housing (including seeing only their current 'single' status, or not taking account of the circumstances in which housing debt had accrued) With little complementarity - and sometimes conflicting expectations - no agency appeared able to support respondents holistically as: a mother, in need of safe housing, that is suitable for a family. Nor were these policy areas sufficiently coterminous to prevent homeless mothers falling through the gap in between, where they struggled to access housing and keep their family together. This is an area that would benefit greatly from further research, to explore the barriers facing service

<sup>5</sup> A PLO is a Public Law Outline sets out the duties of a Local Authority that is concerned about the welfare of a child, before a case goes to court.

providers in delivering holistic, integrated care.

Nevertheless, the importance of housing to women's capacity to care for (i.e. keep safe) their children in the context of domestic violence, for example, seemed rarely to be recognised by children's social care. Kelly's daughter was removed at birth to avoid her being taken home to a situation of domestic violence. Here, we see those responsible for child protection fulfilling their remit to keep children safe. But Kelly articulated her reasons for returning to her violent partner as housing-related, reporting feelings of powerlessness to do anything other than go back to the home they shared:

He wouldn't leave my house that I'm in. I couldn't [wasn't allowed to] bring my little girl to that house cos he wouldn't leave, so there was nowhere else for me and my little girl to go to so they had to take my little girl and I had to go back to there which were absolute arse ache (Kelly)

Nicola's children were also fostered and then adopted because they were witnessing domestic violence in the home. Now in a refuge where she sees mothers and children together, she questions why she was not offered safe accommodation with her children.

...they could have done that sooner for me, they could have moved me here with the kids and I would have had them still (Nicola)

Like Kelly, Nicola is describing her needs in housing terms, suggesting that breaking her housing dependence on her partner might have allowed her to protect, and therefore retain care of her children.

Because the remit of children's social services is to focus on the child, and housing appeared not to be recognised as a fundamental component of maternal care (or, perhaps, resource constraints do not allow practitioners to venture beyond their core remit), Kelly and Nicola - and many of the other mothers interviewed - apparently did not receive housing assistance until they became homeless and presented to a local authority. By this point many had been separated from their children through formal child removal or informal kinship placement. While women had been recognised as mothers by children's social care but not as being in housing need, local authority homelessness departments now saw their housing problems but did not recognise their maternal needs. Now defined within the terms of the homelessness legislation as 'single' rather than a 'family' they had no statutory entitlement to housing (see 3.2). This was in direct conflict with the child protection plans drawn up by children's social services that often include a requirement to secure family sized housing before children would be returned. For example:

Also one of the stipulations of maybe getting my children back is that I'd have a three bedroom house but being here as a single person you only got offered a one bedroom flat so it leaves me in a position where how am I supposed to do that? (Rosaline).

Respondents with and without children in their care encountered other aspects of housing and homelessness policy that undermined their capacity to provide a stable family home to meet the expectations of children's social care. Some were disallowed from bidding for housing because of debts or found to be 'intentionally homeless' by leaving previous accommodation or for rent arrears. The burden of debt that prevented women's access to housing had often been left by violent partners but such historic context was apparently not taken into account by housing providers.

Meanwhile, the way in which the needs of victims of domestic abuse are addressed by housing and domestic abuse services was found to undermine women's capacity to maintain family life. With benevolent intent, those supported to escape domestic violence were placed in refuges out of the area, often isolating them from family and important support networks and sometimes prompting kinship placements to minimise the impact of such a move on children (see 3.1). Here we see that women are supported to find a safe space (i.e. away from the perpetrator of violence) but that this can conflict with family needs such as children's schooling and stability. It was also found to create barriers to securing permanent housing in some cases.

Harriet's situation is a good illustration of the way in which efforts to keep her safe from domestic abuse, to protect her child from risk, and to provide her with housing were so distinct from one another that they directly conflicted. Harriet was in danger of either having her child removed, or losing her priority for housing. Her experiences are recounted in detail in the case study below

### **Case study: Harriet**

Harriet has a seven year old child from a previous relationship and a baby whose father was violent to her. She ended the relationship but he pursued her, threatening and committing acts of violence wherever she was, including at her home. Social services became involved because of concerns for the safety of Harriet's baby. For Harriet's safety, and with the assistance of a support worker, Harriet was placed in a refuge in a different city. Her eldest child was resistant to such a move and Harriet was concerned about the disruption to his schooling, so he spends the week with his grandmother and his father.

Harriet's priority is reuniting with her eldest son and securing family housing in her original city of residence. However, as it is only the youngest child who is currently deemed at risk, the circumstances and well-being of the elder child appear of little concern to Harriet's social worker. To fulfil their responsibility to protect the younger child, social services have been clear that Harriet must not return to her city of origin unless she has a court order against her ex-partner (probably a non-molestation order, although Harriet did not specify). Harriet does not know how to obtain such an order and she does not feel this is a priority:

My biggest concern is getting rehoused and getting settled with me (sic) kids but that never seems to be, to them, a priority. They want me to get an Order...but to me that's not really a priority. Getting me home and getting me settled is more, but things like that [the Order] to them are more a priority than how it's affecting me eldest.

If Harriet does return to live or spend time in the city, she is under the impression that she risks her youngest child being taken into care on the grounds that she would be putting him at risk. Steps have already been taken to this end, including a Public Law Outline (PLO), or pre-proceedings meeting:<sup>6</sup>

At the minute, with social services, which is one step before court proceedings, they've had to ask me mum to fill out some forms so they can see who's suitable to give the kids to if they remove them...

That many times I've sat here and thought 'I'm gonna go back to me house...' and thought 'sod you' but they've said if I do that they're gonna fetch police and come and take me kids so what do I do?

The present situation appears, therefore, to be that one of Harriet's children is in a city that she cannot live in without losing custody of her other child.

In terms of her housing situation, Harriet reported having been 'refused band B priority for fleeing DV' and currently has band C priority (her support worker is appealing this decision). She has been offered temporary accommodation in her city of origin but cannot accept this because of the risk of child protection proceedings. However, she reported having been told that she risks being assessed as 'intentionally homeless' if she refuses offers of accommodation and will lose her statutory right to housing.

So I've had to refuse it but then they make it hard for you cos if you refuse it and you're down as homeless it's like you're making yourself intentionally homeless so you can't win.

<sup>6</sup> These meetings are held when a local authority is considering making a child protection application

### 3.4 The support offered to homeless mothers and the expectations placed on them can fail to acknowledge situations of poverty

The mothers interviewed were, to varying degrees, economically disadvantaged before they had become homeless and so rarely had the financial means to find quick solutions in situations of crisis. Women escaping domestic abuse had often left their homes suddenly, and so were starting a new life with little or no money or possessions.

Yet, at this crucial point, women described their frustration at housing and support services that acted insensitively to their immediate financial circumstances and associated constraints. For example, the help they reported being offered was sometimes contingent on travel only possible for people with ample funds. Women experienced these situations in terms of further barriers, creating stress and anxiety at a time of extreme vulnerability. Sandra, for example, described how she had approached a local authority housing department without any means to locate or travel to emergency or temporary accommodation but being expected to do so:

Yeah, [LA officer] said 'the security's going to meet you there, that's the address but you've got to be there by six so I had 40 minutes. I didn't have any money, I was running round and thought I'm just going to jump on the tram, jump off at [location], try and get on somebody's Google and ask them to Google it for me and see where it is and I'll just walk when I get there and hopefully it's within distance and I get there at six. (Sandra)

When women escaping violence are placed out of local authority area, as most are (Bowstead 2015), mothers must manage the financial as well as emotional implications of separation from family and social networks, and distance from their children's schools. For mothers who lived apart from their children, the cost of maintaining contact across divides was great. Cost and distance of travel from temporary accommodation to schools, contact centres and family also made limited opportunities to parent even more difficult. Even for parents living within a local authority with their children, restrictions on bus pass provisions meant that taking their children to school could cost over £8 per day. Charlie and Anna highlighted the difficulties they had in attending important meetings and taking their children to school.

For you to apply for a bus pass it has to be over three mile away from your address and like me, they could be going to [location], which is, comes under the restriction that they're only going to give me one bus pass for one child, I still have to pay for the other three (Anna)

I've got a meeting at half 9 on Friday but it's in [X area] so she's expecting me to get from here to [location] for half 9 with a child with no money, she says she's going to sort out a bus pass and post it and it's still not arrived. (Charlie)

The restrictions on financial support available and expectations that women can travel to necessary meetings and appointments were experienced by mothers as a burden, not as support, and as having further barriers placed in their way. It is also worth noting that failure to attend meetings or maintain school attendance can impact on assessments made by social services about women's ability to parent. Failure to attend housing and other support-related appointments (drug and alcohol, mental health) can be interpreted as lack of motivation and may result in women's eligibility for housing and support being suspended.

Some women were provided with a taxi or bus ticket to access refuges, hotels and hostels, but described new situations of hardship upon entry to temporary housing. Many reported having no money to buy food or other essential items, contributing to an already frightening situation:

I don't know how to get to this hotel, they gave me a bus pass to bus it to the hotel, but I just starved myself for two days and I had to end up asking someone, and I didn't want to ask anyone because people these days do laugh at your situation, and I don't want no-one to know my situation, so I was just hiding away (Aabida)

Aabida, who was pregnant at the time, highlighted the shame that she experienced and the reliance on friends after having to break all ties with her wider family when she fled abuse from a family member. Like Aabida who described having to depend on donations from Greggs at the refuge she moved on to, Iram highlighted the additional complications experienced by Muslim women in her situation.

cos obviously I eat halal meat cos I'm Muslim, there was no halal meat- forget me, what am I supposed to feed my daughter? I can do with bread and cheese but I was so upset I couldn't feed my daughter proper food. (Iram)

Where food parcels were not provided in temporary accommodation, participants described their dependence on food banks - especially when women had been subject to benefit sanctions. For Lina, Emma, Nicola and Kat who had been sanctioned for months at a time, the limit placed on accessing food banks left them in prolonged periods of destitution. Furthermore, where women had fled violence and had not had time to find identification documents, getting benefits set up could be a difficult and lengthy process.

Whilst the women interviewed had, in varied circumstances, received help with emergency and temporary housing, situations of poverty remained, compounding or exaggerating the deprivation that some experienced prior to homelessness. Participants described situations where the help offered and expectations placed on them by housing and social services in some instances failed to acknowledge their economic circumstances. Without local authority crisis loans, limited use food banks have become a means for survival for people facing destitution, including people waiting lengthy periods for benefit payments to be set up or reinstated after sanction.

### 3.5 The way in which temporary housing is delivered to homeless women presents significant challenges for parenting

At a time of crisis, temporary accommodation such as refuges provided vital housing (and safety) to the mothers interviewed. However, women also described being unable to 'perform' their mothering role in ways they felt necessary, in such spaces. A loss of maternal agency was evident, as they became subject to a range of rules about conduct and behaviour. Given the heightened focus on risk factors where child protection interventions are in place, the mothers living with dependent children in temporary accommodation and those living apart from their children, found themselves in difficult situations.

The rules and restrictions that commonly exist in temporary accommodation for homeless people restricted the movements of the women housed and, in turn, their access to vital family support networks. This included restrictions on overnight stays where residents were not permitted to stay away from their accommodation. This was particularly problematic for women who had been placed out of their local authority area, away from their families.

You're only allowed to spend the whole day out, imagine if it's raining, where do we go, just the shopping centre? So isn't that easier for me to ask you kindly if I can book a couple of days to go visit my mum or my nan... (Hannah)

When told that she was not allowed to stay overnight with family, who lived too far to travel to and from in a day, Hannah described feeling like she was on 'lock down'. She compared her feeling of entrapment to the abusive home she had fled, a feeling shared by other participants in this study. Many of the women interviewed received important parenting support from their extended families. Being distanced from practical and emotional support for parenting in this way, families under scrutiny from social services felt isolated and less able to carry out meaningful activities with their children.

There are also commonly restrictions on movement *within* temporary accommodation, particularly in relation to visitors. After being told that visitors were not permitted in communal areas and expected to stay in individual rooms, Sandra described how the rules in the temporary accommodation she lived in meant that visits from her older daughters and grandchildren were difficult.

It would be nice to just sit in the garden when it's sunny, kids can run round and we can have a chat like you was at home. (Sandra)

The refuge rules reinforced the limited potential for Sandra to engage in basic contact with her family and emphasised feelings of entrapment where women are commonly advised to stay in their rooms. Women with children living elsewhere explained that, as 'non-residents', their children were classed as visitors in hostels and refuges and so subject to these rules (which varied - some were only allowed visitors in communal areas, others only in their rooms). Emma, who is not allowed to have her children visit at all, suggests that such rules are made in the interests of children; to protect them from the sometimes chaotic environment of her hostel - that's one of the reasons why they won't allow children in, because it's not the right environment for them to begin with. However, this left Emma with no domestic space in which to be with, and parent her children.

Maternal agency was also reportedly undermined through micro-governing practices, such as curfews for cooking or kitchen use, and for TV after a certain time. Room inspections and mandatory cleaning chores in communal areas as well as individual rooms were also described in terms of a loss of dignity and independence.

The second week the staff didn't even ask me if I was alright, she was more concerned about 'have you done your chores, I've not seen you cleaning...' (Iram)

Iram felt that her capabilities as a mother were measured by these tasks. Taking her child to a family member for hot meals rather than cooking at the hostel (she could not afford to buy food at this time) was judged as a failure of parenting capacity by hostel staff. Clearly, the examples provided by Iram and other women represent individual actions, rather than something common to temporary accommodation management. However, what these examples do reflect is the tendency for indicators of poverty to be misrecognised as indicators of poor parenting (Swift and Parada 2004).

It was clear from interviews that temporary accommodation provided a vital means for women and children to escape abusive situations. However, the restrictions placed upon day to day living and freedoms in and out of refuges, supported housing and hostels for women and families sometimes ran counter to the interests of those individuals and to family life.



### 3.6 Homeless mothers experience barriers to accessing housing and support, leaving them feeling 'forgotten' by the services designed to help them

All the mothers interviewed were homeless and all had engaged with housing and/or support services. All had been offered temporary accommodation in B&Bs, hostels, or refuges (through local authorities or social services). Most had presented as homeless to the local authority, or sought help to escape abusive partners. But, along the way, the mothers interviewed had also encountered consistent barriers to accessing housing. Regardless of pathways into emergency or temporary accommodation, participant accounts highlighted a range of issues with the housing support available to homeless mothers at points of crisis as well as in the longer term. It is worth remembering here that many of these women were at their most vulnerable when they became homeless: commonly escaping violence, having lost their homes and sometimes their children, with very few resources and sometimes distanced from vital support networks. Thus, although many had led relatively stable lives, this did represent a point or crisis.

We have already, implicitly, reported some of the barriers respondents faced to accessing housing. We have seen, for example, that at the time of their interviews many women were barred from bidding for permanent social housing because of rent arrears (in one case as little as £250), or the local authority had discharged its housing duty on the grounds that they had made themselves 'intentionally homeless'. We have also reported that many mothers living temporarily apart from their children had not been awarded the 'priority need' status given to homeless families, and so the local authority had no statutory responsibility to house them. Emma's situation (see Case Study below) is a clear example of the barriers encountered by many of the mothers interviewed.

Women also recounted long periods of time spent in refuges or hostels uncertain how their housing application was progressing only to be told months later that they needed to clear some arrears before they could be considered. Charlie had been living in a refuge for over three months with her seven year old and reported feeling trapped within a system that she was powerless to negotiate or understand. When approaching her local authority for updates on her housing case, she described being told by HOS officers that her bids on local housing lists would be overlooked due to her arrears, even after a payment plan had been arranged.

I agreed to do a payment plan with them for £35 a month but they're still bypassing me on housing so at the minute I don't know what's going on, I don't know when I'm going to get housed or if they want it paid back full before I do, but they can't expect me to pay £600 upfront (Charlie)

### Case Study: Emma

Unaware that her Housing Benefit was affected by the regular changes in her household as her older children moved in and out, and paying little attention to letters received (*when the letters come, as you know, you don't always open them because it's usually just the yearly circular to say you don't have to pay anything*) Emma accrued £2,000 rent arrears. By the time this came to her attention she had been served a notice of eviction. This prompted concerns about the welfare of her children and *'I had social services involved because I was losing the house'*.

Emma explained that she had always been a regular drinker but carefully managed her consumption - *'coz I didn't go out in the evening I used to drink a bit once they'd all gone to bed'*. This escalated when she became *'stressed out'* by the impending eviction and she *'took to drinking and getting stupid and it just spiralled'*.

At this point, Emma's children were placed into foster care with a family member elsewhere in the UK. Emma and her daughters were under the impression that this was to be a six month care placement to give Emma time to *'get off the drink and get myself sorted out'*. Emma was evicted two weeks later and offered a place in a hostel. When she was interviewed a one year on, Emma is was in recovery and felt capable of caring for her daughters, who wanted to return. The reason that Emma has not reunited with her children is because she cannot access suitable housing. This is because:

- she has been deemed intentionally homeless on the grounds of accruing rent arrears. She is appealing this decision which, she has been informed, takes 59 days.
- she cannot be considered for housing until she has made a number of consecutive payments against her rent arrears.
- she is being defined as 'single' by the local authority housing department, because her children are not currently living with her. She is, therefore, not entitled to accommodation suitable for a family.

Several other women interviewed described situations where they had been denied support to move on from emergency or temporary accommodation, by being held accountable for the mismanagement of rent. Harriet reported having been denied access to permanent housing due to rent arrears, as well as issues relating to a court order that she was advised to apply for against her violent ex-partner.

It was not only access to permanent housing that was problematic - women also reported not being adequately assisted at the initial point of crisis.

I went into the homeless place, she put me on the housing list but I didn't want to go back to that property that night and they sent me away saying 'can you not just go back there for another night?' Well yeah, I could but then he could kill me tonight. So she's give me a number to ring round. (Sandra)

Sandra is reporting here that her local authority housing options service (HOS) advised her to return to her sister's house, where she was staying temporarily to escape a violent partner who had now located her. She reported also being provided with a list of telephone numbers. This extract raises questions about the implementation of the homelessness legislation - about the scope for interpretation of law, and accountability in cases of misapplication. People fleeing domestic abuse have 'priority need' under the terms of the homelessness legislation. And if there is reason to believe a person might have priority need, the local authority has a duty to provide them with temporary accommodation while a formal assessment is conducted. We do not know the full details of Sandra's case, or the information at the local authority officer's disposal, but it certainly appears that she was not considered as homeless due to domestic violence.

While the professionals in the services designed to support vulnerable women are struggling with funding cuts, increased needs of their clients due to welfare reforms and austerity impacts, and higher caseloads, these problems filter down and were experienced by the mothers interviewed as being forgotten or abandoned. Harriet, for example, described feeling abandoned by the workers who were assigned to support her.

...that's what's worrying me now that when I finally do get to that stage [moving on], am I going to get that help to do it all? 'Cos I'm not getting no help now so I don't see any light at end of tunnel telling me they're going to help me any more than they're helping me now. Like me family support worker, I was seeing her every week, I haven't seen her for three, four weeks, I don't even hear from them anymore, nobody rings me, nobody checks in, nothing. (Harriet)

Alana also felt like she had no choice and that she had been forgotten.

I had all my meetings and it was like we can't help you with the housing, we can put you in a hostel and that's about it, but that's not suitable still, you put me in a hostel is not helping me with my needs, and that's what they do, put you in a hostel and leave you there. (Alana)

Like Harriet, Nadine had also spent around nine months living in a women's refuge and had no idea when she might be supported to find permanent accommodation for her and her children who lived with her. This created feelings of entrapment and a loss of independence for the family. Nadine had been studying for a masters degree and working during the evenings, both of which she had to give up after her placement in a refuge.

I can't do paid [work] cos it's [rent] £480 odd a week. They'll say to you there's no point cos if you work you can never afford that which means you'll get into debt here, so don't work. So what am I supposed to do? I've gone working 16 hour night shifts to nothing. I'll go to education- you can't because nobody else can drop you [the children] off at school, *you* have to be the one that stays with them (Nadine).

Whilst offering a means to escape violent situations, this extract demonstrates how temporary accommodation can limit day to day activities, including the potential for employment and future financial independence.

### 3.7 Homeless mothers feel stigmatised by some of the policies and professionals they encounter

Almost all of the women interviewed for this study reported feeling unsupported during periods of severe hardship (see above) and, in some cases, felt actively stigmatised by professionals, or by the policy frameworks they necessarily encounter. Mothers described examples where they felt that judgments made by professionals about their mental health, addictions, debt, 'complicity' in domestic violence, or being a teenage mother had influenced decisions made about access to housing or to support to maintain access to their children. We do not know how accurate their assessments are, because we did not interview the professionals involved, but it is noteworthy that so many participants expressed these views.

The case study below (Kat) demonstrates some ways in which homeless mothers with intersecting social support needs may experience stigma, and sometimes discrimination, which in turn mitigates the possibility of positive life changes. We pick up some of the points illustrated by Kat's experience here.

The birth of a child whilst serving a sentence in custody was a particularly traumatic event for Kat and another homeless mother interviewed, who felt that they were viewed as unworthy of any form of after care. The lack of support following child removal was not confined to these women- it was common to all mothers interviewed. It was clear that the separation of a mother from her child was often the start or relapse of a spiral of events which, if left unsupported, may sustain and recur.

Several mothers described instances of eviction resulting from debt and drug use, and subsequent ineligibility for local authority housing lists. Once prevented from applying for housing in one local authority, Kat and other mothers were unable to access housing support in other areas due to having no local connection, becoming trapped in homelessness. Subsequent street homelessness and stays in hostels is inseparable from the drug use, poor health outcomes and imprisonment that came to define significant periods of several women's lives.

Like Kat, Lina had a long history of homelessness, debt, child separation, addiction, short jail sentences and mental health issues. Both women described the impact of having unmanaged mental health problems and reported the view that their deteriorating mental health (in Kat's case because she was not given her medication in prison) was interpreted by professionals in behavioural terms, resulting in dismissal and stigmatisation.

Similarly, Malia who had significant and historic problems with both mental health and substance addiction described feeling that she had been repeatedly written off by housing and social services when she needed help. Malia reported a number of incidences where she felt her calls for help were ignored on the basis that she was a 'junkie'. This included her local authority housing department, described by Malia as failing to respond to reports of harassment against her in her council house, where she was broken into and sexually assaulted. They reportedly later advised her that giving her keys up to leave the property would make her intentionally homeless. Rosaline, who had spent a short period in a psychiatric ward, also reported that she felt abandoned by social services on the basis that she was 'just crazy'. She reported that her children had been placed with her violent ex-partner.

Kat and others described decisions made by individual housing and social services professionals in terms of 'punishment'. The perceived emphasis on deservedness within housing and welfare was also evident in reports of social services and child protection, where teenage mothers, mothers with previously separated children, and other histories of social support issues felt that they would never be allowed to have another chance at being a mother-even after demonstrable periods of settled living.

**Case study: Kat**

Kat is a 28 year old woman who was homeless and living in a hostel at the time of interview. She had been homeless on and off since she was 15 years old, living in hostels and sleeping rough. Kat had served short prison sentences for shoplifting.

Kat has three children. All have been removed, the third at birth, and two have been adopted. Kat has bi-polar disorder and described experiencing periods of depression and anxiety linked to homelessness and the removal of her children.

A few years ago, Kat was evicted from her tenancy for rent arrears and started sleeping rough. She started to use hard drugs for the first time with some other homeless people, which led to her eviction from her next tenancy. Kat then served six months in jail whilst pregnant, and returned to rough sleeping on release.

During that period in jail, Kat had a baby and was sent back to custody after the baby was removed by social services. Hospital staff would not permit Kat to contact her boyfriend so that he could be with her for the birth. She reported being told that she didn't deserve that support as a prisoner. She also described how two male prison officers stood behind a curtain during the labour, and then stood in the small room where Kat was placed to recover and have time with her baby before it was removed. Kat described having no privacy or dignity, and felt humiliated by the constant presence of the prison officers whilst she tried to manage leaking breast milk and have sleep. Kat also reported being handcuffed to the bed, which made contact with her baby and basic self-care extremely difficult.

Upon return to prison, Kat received no after-care or support following her traumatic experience. She also did not receive her anti-psychotic medication for bi-polar when she was admitted to custody, which meant that her mental health was unmanaged during that time. Kat described how her behaviour presented as aggressive to others, leaving her feeling more frustrated and misunderstood.

When Kat returned to homelessness from prison, she had to manage concerning gynaecological problems which had not stopped since the birth of her child. Whilst rough sleeping with no sanitary facilities, Kat risked infection. Due to having no ID or address, local GP's would not accept her registration for medical attention, until a local women's charity helped her to navigate these difficult systems.

Another local charity was helping Kat access housing, which was proving difficult given her history of arrears, drug abuse and eviction. Kat described her frustration upon finding out that a local authority housing officer had warned a private landlord against accepting her as a tenant, due to her history. A charity had put in a complaint and attempted to mediate between them and the landlord. Kat felt that she faced insurmountable discrimination from housing officers, due to her past as well as her bi-polar which, due to lost medical records, was still unmanaged five weeks after release from prison. In addition, Kat felt further discrimination from social services, who were trying to move her baby away from the temporary custody of her boyfriend's mother.

### 3.8 Homeless mothers bear the consequences of the actions of others - usually male partners

There were a number of ways in which the homeless mothers interviewed appeared, implicitly, to be held responsible for the actions of others - usually violent male partners - with detrimental consequences.

We reported above, for example, that some women's children were removed because of domestic abuse in the home. Typically, children were removed on the grounds of neglectful or abusive parenting by the *mother*, for allowing a situation of domestic violence to continue (for example by remaining in the home) or allowing children to witness that violence in the home. In a couple of cases children had been removed from women who had separated and were living apart from the perpetrator because they had 'failed' to prevent their ex-partner from locating and being violent towards them. Others reported having been told they risked child removal if they returned to the area where the perpetrator still lived. For example:

I went back [to the area] cos they told me I wasn't allowed to go back to but I did, said 'I can't do this' [be in the refuge] so I went back to mum's and they said 'now you've come back [your child is] going to have to go into care'...I had a major breakdown, I went from busy mum to nothing and I just felt so wrecked. (Marianne)

I did everything legally that I was supposed to do as a parent but cos they couldn't protect me [from violent ex-partner], I then had to leave, why? 'Cos if not we'll look at taking your kids', 'What cos I can't look after them?' 'No, because you can't stop him [perpetrator] from coming to you'. (Nadine)

In these examples the male perpetrator is not bearing the consequences or being blamed for harming the child by abusing or stalking the mothers. It is the mothers who are made accountable. Thus, in this study, as in others, *'the protection of children from various forms of maltreatment more often than not falls on the shoulders of the mothers, regardless of the gender of the perpetrators'* (Davies and Krane, 2006, p414). Rather than being seen as vulnerable women at risk, they were cast as abusive parents. Rather than being seen as 'in need of help' they appeared to be viewed as 'perpetrators of risk'.

The definition of 'harm' was expanded in the Adoption and Children Act 2002 to encompass harm that arises from witnessing ill-treatment of others. This is reported to have resulted in increasing numbers of children being taken into care on the grounds of 'emotional abuse' (Hester 2011). And, indeed, mothers interviewed for this study spoke in precisely these terms. For example:

It was emotional abuse they [social services] said it was, because apparently *I were letting them* [children] see me getting beat up all the time (Nicola - emphasis added)

basically they're saying I've not protected myself and [daughter] for the past 10 years through domestic violence when I thought I'd done everything I could to protect her. (Maggie)

Once homeless, the women interviewed encountered barriers to rehousing within homelessness policy that mirrored these experiences of children's social care services. In other words, they found they were being held accountable for the actions and behaviours of others. We have mentioned above that women's access to housing through the local authority was sometimes denied or restricted because of rent arrears, other debts on previous tenancies, or 'intentional homelessness'. Women were often carrying the burden of debt on the home left by violent partners, including for damage to the property during violence. In situations where rent arrears result in eviction – regardless of who accrued those arrears – local authorities may (and often do) deem the tenant to have made themselves 'intentionally homeless' and can discharge a statutory duty to rehouse. This was a reality for some of the mothers interviewed. As the legal tenant they were held responsible. They were barred from accessing social housing until they resolved housing debts, or had their statutory right removed altogether in cases of intentional homelessness.

Nicola and Corey were both held responsible for debt left by violent ex-partners.

Yeah so they said they couldn't help me with the house cos I had to pay this debt off but I shouldn't have even had the debt. (Nicola)

There's a lot I didn't know, I didn't know he was claiming child benefit, child tax, everything, that was in my name, but through him, going into his bank, I've just been billed for everything and I don't even know where he is now, I don't talk to him, last I heard he were homeless. (Corey)

Many of the women interviewed therefore felt punished by the systems and services that exist to help and support them at a time of crisis. Harriet articulated well a sentiment expressed by several of the mothers interviewed:

When you're in somewhere like a refuge you're at the lowest point in your life, you're not in the best part of life as it is, you're classed as homeless, you've got nowhere to come home and when they put something like that on to you, to threaten to take your kids it's like kick in teeth, cos I don't know what I'd do without my kids, I honestly couldn't believe how many women in that refuge, it pissed me off in a way coz you're supposed to be helping these women cos they're vulnerable and they're fleeing from some kind of domestic violent situation and if anything they're making it worse cos you're blaming them and taking their kids off them. The man never gets any repercussions, you just take the kids off the women to punish them even more than they already have been. (Harriet)

## 4. Conclusion

This research set out to understand the experiences of mothers who have become homeless, and the ways that English housing and social policy interventions respond within existing legal and policy frameworks.

Based on interviews with 26 homeless mothers living in various forms of temporary accommodation in the north of England, and consultation with organisations that offer housing and other support to women and families, the research findings raise questions about whether policy and legislation is adequately protecting and supporting this group of women. Many of the women in this study lost their homes and their children in quick succession during periods of intense vulnerability- often including domestic abuse. Their capacity to prevent these losses and to rebuild a family home was then significantly hampered by the (sometimes conflicting) policies and procedures they encountered in the housing and social work systems. Crucially, these failings reinforced family separation, with consequences for the welfare of the homeless mothers interviewed. The disadvantage faced by many of the women interviewed was therefore reinforced, rather than resolved by support services, potentially perpetuating cycles of trauma and poverty.

Several **cross cutting observations** emerged from the study.

A principal observation is the way in which **the maternal status of the women in this study became invisible once they lived apart from their children.** The distinction made between family and single homelessness within housing policy, and housing assessments made at a single point in time, often failed to acknowledge the family status of participants, even in cases where family separation had occurred to avoid children having to enter temporary accommodation considered unsuitable by mother or child. From this position as a 'single' person, rebuilding a family home could be an insurmountable challenge for participants - 'priority need' was denied by the implementation of the homelessness legislation, eligibility for family-sized housing was denied by allocation policy, entitlement to housing benefit was denied by welfare policy, and reunification with children was denied by child welfare policy on the grounds of inadequate housing. The mothers living apart from their children were, therefore, negatively impacted upon by apparently inflexible policy definitions.

**Questions about the adequacy of the temporary accommodation offer to homeless mothers - whether living with or apart from their children - are also raised by the research findings.** Many of the mothers interviewed (and sometimes their children) had lived in unsatisfactory temporary accommodation for lengthy periods of time, often with limited contact from housing authorities. Most of those escaping violence had to move out of the area, isolating them from crucial support networks, and others were often placed some distance from schools and family. The absence of a whole family approach was evident with the location, environment and regulations of temporary accommodation (including family temporary accommodation) found to undermine women's efforts (and indeed maternal responsibilities) to get children to school, to visit non-resident children, to attend appointments at contact centres or with social services, or to access important practical, emotional and financial support from family. Such challenges were often compounded by lack of financial resources, especially when women had left their homes suddenly to escape domestic abuse. Temporary accommodation has a vital role to play at times of crisis, and some of the women interviewed are likely to have slept rough without it, but there are questions about the suitability of the current offer to this group of homeless women.



The research did not involve case reviews or interviews with practitioners so we do not know the full details of participants' circumstances or interactions with key professionals. Never the less, it is of real concern that **the women interviewed for this study largely felt punished, blamed, and abandoned, rather than protected and supported by the services, policies and legislation designed to help them.** At times this was expressed in terms of a lack of support at key points of vulnerability. This included women experiencing domestic violence reporting feeling they had no choice but to remain in an unsafe situation through lack of housing assistance. It also included mothers who had experienced traumatic events such as the removal of a child at birth reporting no follow-up (physical or emotional) support. This is not to imply that participants had always asked for such support and that it had been denied, but it is of concern that such needs went unidentified by professionals with whom women were engaged. Others felt they were being blamed and punished by services that should be assisting them. They were held accountable for 'mismanagement' of tenancies (arrears, property damage, abandonment) that occurred during periods of intense vulnerability including domestic abuse and child removal, by being denied access to housing by virtue of being 'intentionally homeless'. The application of the 'intentionality' criteria in the English homelessness legislation to this group of women can, therefore, arguably be seen to perpetuate disadvantage of vulnerable people. They also felt they were being punished for the domestic abuse perpetrated against them, through child removal on the grounds of emotional abuse.

When aspects of social policy are not just failing to meet the needs of homeless mothers but are in conflict, undermining women's capacity to access housing and maintain their family, then urgent scrutiny of policy and practice is needed. And there are some clear **policy and practice implications from these findings.**<sup>7</sup> Crucially, we suggest that that housing, children's social services, and domestic violence services require greater integration to ensure that priorities and resources are aligned. Housing provision and access to alternative housing must also be better recognised as a critical factor within child protection proceedings, particularly where domestic violence is present. Within homelessness services, the definition of 'family' needs to take better account of dynamic family circumstances, applying the homelessness code of guidance accurately, so that women are not permanently separated from their children because of a period of crisis. Given that the number of children being taken into care has increased significantly since 2010, we suggest that the role housing plays in family separation requires particularly attention. It seems that scrutiny of the way in which the homelessness legislation is applied generally - for example with regard to assessing 'intentionality' and its application to women experiencing violence - is needed. There are also lessons for the design and delivery of temporary accommodation to homeless mothers - accommodation (location, rules, access) that better supports the maternal needs and responsibilities of women living with and apart from their children.

<sup>7</sup> Future policy briefing(s) from this research will be available Spring/Summer 2020

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