

A photograph of a dilapidated room. The walls are heavily damaged, with large sections of white plaster peeling away, revealing a darker surface underneath. A window with a dark frame is set into the back wall, letting in bright light. In the foreground, a bed with a blue and white striped mattress and a patterned headboard is positioned against the left wall. To the right, a dark, simple chair stands on a floor covered in debris and trash. The overall atmosphere is one of neglect and poverty.

The hidden truth about homelessness

Experiences of single homelessness
in England

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Report summary, May 2011

Background and Key Findings

Key Findings

This study explored, in detail, the experiences and circumstances of single homeless people. It found that the majority are 'hidden', staying in squats, sofa surfing, or sleeping rough and with no statutory entitlement to housing. In total, 62 per cent of respondents were hidden homeless on the night they were surveyed and 92 per cent had experienced hidden homelessness.

The key conclusion to emerge from this study, then, is that single homelessness and hidden homelessness are synonymous. In other words, to be a single homeless person in England in the main is to be 'hidden' (from support, advice and statistics).

Several consequences were found to flow from this:

- Single homeless people resort to desperate measures to put a roof over their head. The study uncovered evidence of people engaging in sex work to pay for a night in a hotel, committing crimes in the hope of being taken into custody, and forming unwanted sexual partnerships to secure a bed for the night.
- People who could have promptly exited homelessness, had they received the right assistance, join a population of long-term homeless people with increasing support needs.
- Vulnerable people whose needs should be met through existing systems of

support (rough sleeper teams, hostels and such like) are being left without assistance in circumstances severely detrimental to their health and well being.

'Hidden homelessness' and the consequences which flow from it can be traced to the lack of assistance single homeless people receive from local authorities.

Evidence emerged that single homeless people who may be entitled to accommodation are deterred from applying, many are misinformed about their entitlements, not all are given the opportunity to make a homelessness application, local authorities do not always fulfill their duty to 'advise and assist' homeless people, and that when advice or signposting is offered it is of little or no use.

The conclusions from this study point to a need for local authorities to improve advice and assistance as well as a broader need to reconceptualise homelessness.

Homelessness is not just about people sleeping rough and the thousands of statutory homeless people in temporary accommodation. There is a sizeable group hidden from view in squats, with friends, in police cells, with strangers, or sleeping rough in less visible locations. They are as vulnerable, and their housing situations as precarious as their more visible counterparts.

Background

This report summary presents key findings from a study commissioned by Crisis and conducted by the Centre for Regional Economic and Social Research at Sheffield Hallam University in response to concerns that single homeless people are failing to access the support and assistance they require to escape homelessness. Many single homeless people are not entitled to housing within the terms of the homelessness legislation and do not access the temporary housing available to them. This study found that living outside mainstream homelessness provision in squats, on friends' sofas and anywhere else they can find temporary shelter, many single people are hidden from support and advice services, absent from homelessness statistics, and rendered invisible by their housing situations. They have not been the focus of policy and are rarely the subjects of research. This study sought to shine some light on this neglected group of people, exposing 'hidden homelessness' as a very real and contemporary social problem.

Methods

The research was conducted between June 2010 and January 2011. It comprised: a survey of 437 single homeless people, conducted during one week in July in day centres for the homeless in 11 towns and cities in England¹; and in-depth, biographical interviews with 27 single homeless people who are, or have been, 'hidden'.

There is no agreed definition of hidden homelessness and the term is inconsistently applied². For the purposes of this study, hidden homelessness was defined as '*non-statutory homeless people living outside mainstream housing provision*'. That is:

- Those who meet the legal definition of homeless but to whom the local authority owes no duty to house (because they have not approached or do not meet the criteria in the homelessness legislation), and;
- Whose accommodation is not supplied by a housing/homelessness provider.

"I'd stay there only for one night at a time but it would be once a week with different friends so I weren't in the way. I used to meet up with different friends different nights, go back and early morning I'd be gone. I used to tidy everywhere, to say thank you, coz I never had no money or any income...one night and that's it, leave a thank you summat like two bowls of cornflakes and milk for 'em."

(Harvey, aged 33, talking about his late teens)

¹ These comprised: London, Birmingham, Oxford, Stockport, Newcastle, Blackpool, Manchester, Southampton, Newton Abbot, Sheffield and Brighton.

² For a fuller discussion on definitions employed and entitlements under the homelessness legislation see full report of 'The hidden truth about homelessness'.

What is the scale and experience of hidden homelessness?

The majority of single homeless people are in fact hidden: 62 per cent of those surveyed were hidden homeless according to the definition adopted for the study (see **Figure 1**).

62% of respondents were hidden homeless on the day they were surveyed and 92% had experienced hidden homelessness

Exploring respondents' housing careers further suggests that hidden homelessness affects an even greater proportion of single homeless people *over time*. Many spend most of their homelessness careers hidden, failing to negotiate access to hostels and supported housing or doing so sporadically before returning to hidden homelessness once again. For example:

- Nearly all (92 per cent) survey respondents had experienced hidden homelessness.
- Survey respondents were more likely to have slept rough and stayed with friends than to have stayed in a hostel, and squatting was more common than temporary housing arranged by a local authority or support agency (see **Table 1**).
- Most survey respondents had never stayed in a hostel (57 per cent) or in temporary housing arranged by a local authority or support agency (75 per cent). This included respondents with a long history of homelessness (43 per cent of those homeless for more than 6 years had never stayed in a hostel or temporary housing arranged by the local authority or support agency).
- Only six (out of 24) interview respondents had spent more of their homelessness career in hostels and other homelessness provision than in hidden homelessness situations.

- For every month interview respondents had (collectively) spent in formal provision they had spent over three months sleeping rough, in squats, with friends or in other hidden situations.

In addition, most respondents had moved through a number of precarious, hidden homelessness situations with some having spent years moving between friends, squats and rough sleeping. This is demonstrated in **Table 1**, which presents information about all the housing situations in which survey respondents had ever stayed.

Table 1 – Have you ever lived in any of the following housing situations?

	%
Sleeping rough	76
Staying with friends temporarily	70
Hostel	43
B&B	41
Squatting	39
Staying with family temporarily	37
Night shelter	36
Prison	33
Temporary house/flat arranged by the Local Authority or support agency	25
Refuge	16
Other	7

n=364³ (non statutory respondents only)

Nancy's housing career, presented in **Figure 2**, (page 6) illustrates some of the findings presented in this section. She has, for example, spent her entire homelessness career hidden, never accessing a hostel. Most commonly Nancy relies upon friends but she has moved through many forms of hidden homelessness including sleeping rough, in a tent, squatting and with family members.

Figure 1 – Scale of hidden homelessness (where single homeless respondents spent the previous night)⁴



Hidden lives

- The majority of respondents had spent most of their homeless careers 'hidden'.
- Nearly all interview respondents stayed in a hidden homeless situation when they first became homeless and even those who went on to access formal provision (ie hostels, night shelters, refuges and accommodation provided by local authority or support agency) returned to hidden homelessness.
- Respondents who had been homeless longer were no more likely to access formal provision than those recently homeless.
- For every one month interview respondents spent in formal provision they spent over three months sleeping rough, in squats, with friends or in other hidden situations.

³ Only non-statutory respondents are included because, by definition, statutory respondents are not hidden homeless regardless of their accommodation situation.

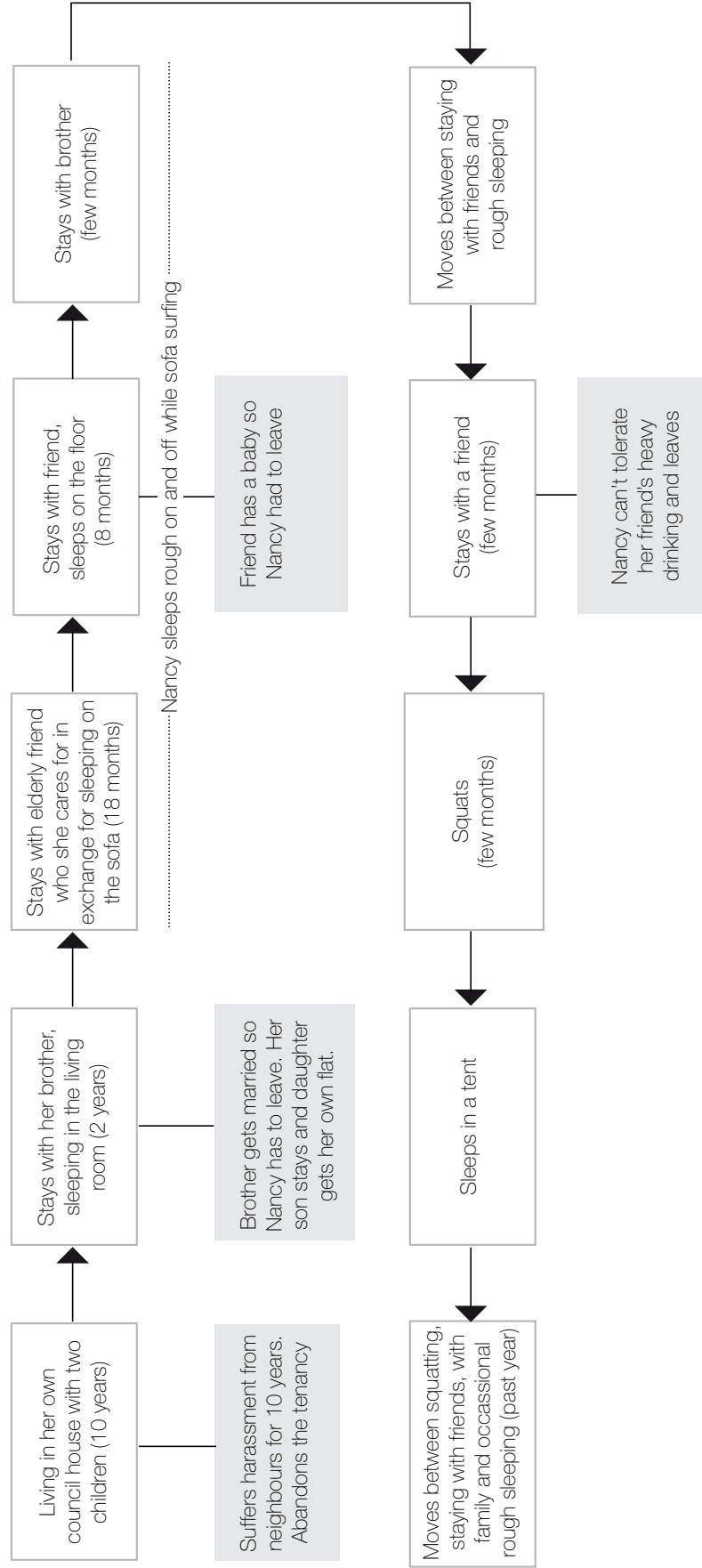
⁴ This figure derives from where 364 non-statutory respondents reported staying on the night prior to being surveyed.

⁵ 37% of survey respondents were non-hidden on the night before the survey.

⁶ Transitional housing includes temporary housing arranged by a local authority or support agency and can include B&Bs if the local authority has provided it.

⁷ 62% of survey respondents were hidden homeless on the night before the survey.

Figure 2 – Nancy’s ‘hidden’ homelessness career



Forms of hidden homelessness

This study found that single people, finding themselves homeless, not entitled to temporary accommodation through the local authority, and unable to access hostels typically sleep rough or rely on friends. Squatting and staying with family are also relatively common.

Rough sleeping

- Rough sleeping was the most common experience of homelessness: 76 per cent of survey respondents and 25 interview respondents had slept rough.

Nearly half the homeless people interviewed had slept rough within three months of becoming homeless

- The majority of respondents had endured sustained periods of rough sleeping. More than half (59 per cent) of the rough sleepers surveyed had been sleeping rough continuously for more than one month and 31 per cent for more than six months. Jason was one of several interview respondents who suffered extended periods of rough sleeping. He described his experience:

“My mates, they gave me a tent and I put the tent up in [common land] and that’s where I was for about a year and a half... when the snow was on the floor and everything, on a grass verge.” (Jason)

- Single homeless people resort to rough sleeping early in their homelessness careers: seven interview respondents (out of 25) slept rough on their first night of homelessness and 12 had slept rough within three months.
- It was more common for survey respondents to have slept rough than to have lived or stayed in any other temporary or permanent housing situation.

Nearly half the rough sleepers surveyed had not been in recent contact with a Rough Sleeper Team

- Rough sleeping is thought to be the most visible manifestation of homelessness. However, evidence from this study suggests that a significant proportion remain invisible. In total, 44 per cent of the current rough sleepers surveyed had not been in contact with a rough sleepers’ team in the past month. Many reported sleeping out of sight, for example in tents, garages or in less visible locations.

Hope for example explained that:

“We had a tiny tent that was hidden by bushes so you couldn’t even see it”. (Hope)

and Neil reported:

“I was sleeping on scaffolding, it was out of the way, nobody bothered me up there”. (Neil)

Squatting

- Squatting is not a marginal tenure amongst the homeless population. In fact, ten (of 26) interview respondents and 39 per cent of survey respondents had squatted.

Squatting is not a marginal tenure — 39% of survey respondents had squatted

- A small number of squatters described reasonable conditions in their squat and talked positively about their experiences. For many, however, the distinction between squatting and rough sleeping was difficult to discern, with respondents describing dereliction, discomfort, and life with no amenities or furniture.

Douglas for example explained that:

"It was rat infested, water everywhere, needles, urine, smashed ceiling, freezing cold in winter, candles, tin foils, needles, cans, drugs". (Douglas)

- Squatting is not always entered into later in respondents' homelessness careers once all other options have been exhausted. Squatting was the first port of call for some.
- Once a person has squatted they tend to return to squatting a number of times—respondents rarely squatted just once.

Staying with friends and family

- Friends and family are heavily relied upon by single homeless people: 70 per cent of survey respondents and 24 interview respondents had stayed with friends while homeless; while 37 per cent of survey respondents and nine interview respondents had stayed with family.
- The majority of respondents turned to friends when they first became homeless. Eleven (of 25) interview respondents stayed with friends on their first night of homelessness and a further three stayed with family members.
- Most commonly, respondents only stayed with friends for a few nights at a time. This was sometimes a condition imposed by the host but concerns to maintain friendships prompted respondents to move on quickly of their own accord.

As Andrea explained:

"When you start living with friends the friendship deteriorates... so not to end any friendship on a bad note we always stay a day or two". (Andrea)

- Sofa surfing represents an insecure and precarious housing situation. This is

illustrated clearly by the fact that respondents often slept rough following a stay with a friend (one quarter of the rough sleepers surveyed had last been accommodated by friends or family). Nancy's description of a house in which she stayed temporarily emphasises this point further:

"I slept on the couch there for a while on and off but then she's too heavy a drinker for me, couldn't cope with it". (Nancy)

- Some respondents were only able to rely on others for temporary accommodation by offering services in **exchange for a roof** (this included cooking, cleaning, personal care, and interpreting) and this often led to a risk of exploitation.

A range of other hidden homelessness situations were also revealed. These were:

- Privately run homelessness hostels, offering extremely poor conditions.
- Caravans and tents, pitched in woods, wasteland or friend's and family's gardens.
- Hotels, B&Bs and backpacker hostels, as a private, paying guest.
- In prison or hospital, due to be released or discharged with nowhere to go (this also sometimes included people seeking to be hospitalized or given custodial sentences in order to secure accommodation).

It was clear from respondents' accounts of their time spent in squats, with friends, in caravans or private hotels that all forms of hidden homelessness offer extremely insecure, vulnerable and precarious accommodation. The immediate prospect of rough sleeping always looms large, frequently becoming a reality, and the experience of hidden homelessness can increase a person's needs and vulnerabilities. Harvey's story (see opposite page) illustrates these points well.

Case Study: Harvey

Harvey ran away from home at the age of 14 to escape abuse. Family friends agreed to accommodate him until he left school so, at the age of 16, Harvey found himself homeless with no income (he was too young to qualify for benefits and did not know about hardship payments). He stayed with friends, spending just one night with each so as not to strain the relationship, and slept rough the rest of the time.

Harvey approached the local authority, a 'form' was completed on his behalf (Harvey is illiterate) but he heard nothing further. Harvey returned to the Local Authority to pursue his application but still no response was forthcoming. He approached the two direct access hostels in the city but was ineligible due to his age.

Harvey spent the next ten years sleeping rough, squatting and staying with friends. He engaged in sex work on several occasions when he was 16 and 17 so he could buy food and pay for a night in a B&B. The houses he squatted were usually derelict and he described them in the following terms:

"You find empty buildings where you're not going to bother anyone... doesn't matter if the windows are put through, you're going to make your own little cardboard bed...and put paper down your trousers."

When Harvey was 19 he spent a year and a half sleeping in a large upturned wheelie bin which a kindly restaurant owner cleaned for him and lined with cardboard. He developed physical and mental health problems, being diagnosed with schizophrenia and hospitalised with fluid on the lung. He explained that when he was discharged from hospital:

"I came out in the jeans they cut off me...back to mark one, staying in the wheelie bin for about two days sick as a dog."

After a brief two year interlude spent living with a partner Harvey returned to rough sleeping, squatting and sofa surfing. Assuming no help would be forthcoming from the local authority he didn't approach them.

Now in his late 20's Harvey revisited the City's hostels. Spaces were scarce and he would queue each night in the hope of securing a bed for that night. It was only when Harvey got in touch with a local housing association which offers a range of services to homeless people that he finally accessed the help and support after nearly 20 years of hidden homelessness.

Who are the hidden homeless and what are their needs?

The diversity in the sample of single homeless people who are hidden is striking. People of all ages and approximately 30 nationalities were represented in the survey sample, and 55 per cent were from a minority ethnic group. Amongst the homeless people interviewed were those with multiple needs, a history of offending, and addiction as well as those who led stable lives until becoming homeless because of job loss or relationship breakdown.

Hidden homeless respondents can be characterised into two main groups:

- People who could have exited homelessness promptly with the right assistance but who are at risk of joining the population of long-term homeless people with complex needs if their hidden homelessness endures.
- Vulnerable people with high support needs for whom a system of support exists (rough sleeper teams, supported housing, hostels for particular client groups) but who are not accessing this assistance.

Some respondents with no history of homelessness had led relatively stable lives until their circumstances changed. When her relationship broke down, Marie for example, moved from a situation of having been adequately and securely housed for 58 years to sleeping on a park bench. Another respondent, Basia, a highly skilled professional, was made redundant and gave up her expensive rented flat so she did not fall into arrears. Basia had been hidden homeless for eight months when she was interviewed, a situation she never anticipated:

“My plan was to find a contract that I can be sure I will have a regular income and get somewhere that I can rent....it was never planned....I told myself it would be one month, a month and a half [staying with my friend]” (Basia)

Table 2 – Indicators of support needs

	%
Has spent most of their adult life unemployed	36
Has mental ill health	34
Has experienced drug dependency	32
Has a physical health problem or disability	35
Has experienced alcohol dependency	34
Was excluded or suspended at school	29
Has experienced violence/abuse from a partner	23
Has experienced violence/abuse from other family members or family friends	25
Has been in local authority care	25
Has children being looked after by someone else	26
Has literacy problems	21
Sometimes self harms	17
Has suffered the death of a long term partner	6
Has been in the armed forces	7

n=261⁸

Some respondents, then, just needed to gain a foothold on the housing ladder or adequately paid employment to exit homelessness while others required high levels of support. Some had owned their own homes and some had never had settled housing. Notwithstanding this diversity, the prevalence of certain characteristics and needs are noteworthy and include:

⁸ This table refers only to those respondents who were hidden homeless on the day they were surveyed as we were interested in the support needs of hidden homeless population.

- **Multiple exclusion**—Many respondents were vulnerable, with significant support needs. Long-term unemployment, mental and physical ill health, poor literacy, experience of care, disrupted education and substance abuse were common amongst those surveyed (see Table 2). Abuse, isolation, contact with the criminal justice system and bereavement featured prominently in the life stories and homelessness careers of interview respondents.
- **Mental ill health**—34 per cent of survey respondents reported mental health issues and the interaction between mental health and homelessness was clear in the biographies of those interviewed. Deteriorating mental health had sometimes triggered homelessness and at other times sustained it (see Lorna’s case study below).
- **Repeat and youth homelessness**— Respondents had commonly experienced homelessness young (42 per cent by the age of 20), and did so more than once (69 per cent had been homeless more than once and 27 per cent five times or more).
- **A8 nationals**⁹—A significant proportion (17 per cent) of survey respondents were from an A8 country. Unemployed A8 nationals are not entitled to Housing Benefit and can currently only claim Job Seekers Allowance if they have been continuously employed for the past 12 months. Without employment most cannot cover housing costs (including the costs of temporary accommodation). A8 nationals are therefore particularly vulnerable to hidden homelessness.

Case Study: Lorna

Lorna, a single parent, first experienced homelessness ten years ago at the age of 29 following a mental health breakdown. Lorna has been sectioned under The Mental Health Act several times and, each time, her eight year old daughter was placed in temporary care. On this occasion she was placed into care permanently. Lorna explained that *“the last time they took her off me altogether, I was left in the family home on my own and from there it [mental health] deteriorated and I ended up homeless”*.

Lorna was not coping in her home and an NHS mental health team placed her in a residential facility for people experiencing mental ill health. After a few weeks Lorna was asked to leave for not accepting the support on offer. Lorna explained that *“my mental health was too poor to talk to*

anybody.” Lorna slept rough for a while and then squatted in some disused flats which had been emptied pending redevelopment. When work began on the flats she returned to the streets.

Lorna was in occasional contact with a mental health outreach team during this time. In 2007 they found her a place in a supported housing project but a year later she was asked to leave for failing to engage with support: *“I wasn’t accessing support, I wasn’t getting on with living there, I was too poorly, I suffered with hearing voices”*.

Lorna returned to the (now redeveloped) flats where she had squatted and found a bin cupboard where she has spent much of the past two and a half years sleeping. During this time she has also served two short prison sentences for ‘personal’ shoplifting.

⁹ A8 nationals include nationals from the eight Eastern European countries that joined the EU in 2004 - Czech Republic, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Hungary, Poland, Slovakia and Slovenia.

Causes and consequences of hidden homelessness

This study found hidden homelessness to be a very real and highly prevalent feature of single homelessness. It also found that being hidden homeless was characterised by insecurity, risk, and personal danger, with respondents' accounts of their time spent sofa surfing, squatting or in other hidden situations revealing a host of detrimental consequences. These included:

- **Insecurity**—Hidden homeless people have no right to remain in their accommodation and rarely know how long they can stay there. Respondents were often only able to stay with friends for a night or two and when arrangements came to an end they could do so suddenly and without notice. The threat of eviction, similarly, always loomed for squatters.
- **Poor living conditions**—Were a key concern, particularly for rough sleepers and squatters. Many respondents lived without access to basic amenities (they were sleeping rough, or friends insisted they stayed out during the day, or their squat had no running water or electricity). Lorna described life without access to basic necessities such as shelter and washing facilities:

“Not being able to get washed, you need to get washed. Being out in the rain and if you scrape your skin you can feel dirt on you. Just to be stood there freezing in soaking wet clothes.” (Lorna)
- **Criminalisation**—Several respondents had been arrested or imprisoned for offences relating to squatting, others reported shoplifting to buy food (at least one had been imprisoned for this) or to pay for a night in a hotel, and others had engaged in sex work for the same reason.
- **Exploitation**—Several respondents felt they had been financially exploited by friends

with whom they stayed. Douglas for example, reported that his friends, *“...kept ripping me off for money all the time. I was the only one that was working, I'd decorated the house for them, bought them a bed, bought them meals...in the end they just bled me dry”*. (Douglas)

- **Risk to personal safety**—Hidden homelessness had exposed respondents to significant dangers. Several had been attacked whilst sleeping rough:

“I've been stabbed, I've had a gun to my head...sleeping rough, people coming up beating you up.” (Harvey)

Others described being accommodated by friends whose homes were frequented daily by drug users, and the risks associated with structural decay in squats were pointed to. Fire safety was a concern for squatters, particularly in properties with no electricity where candles were frequently used. Eric's account of his first episode of homelessness at the age of 13 highlights the risks to which hidden homeless people can be exposed:

“In the early hours of the morning I met this girl...she ran away from her foster parents...the first night we slept round this schizophrenics house and then she ended up becoming a prostitute and getting heavily involved in crack. So we'd sleep round her boyfriend's places or her friend's places.” (Eric)

- **Health impacts**—The detrimental health consequences of hidden homelessness, particularly rough sleeping and squatting, were clearly evident. The effects of exposure to cold, poor living conditions and of walking all day or night was reported by many respondents and included chronic asthma, hypothermia, infections, and frostbite.

A clear correlation emerged between periods of hidden homelessness and deteriorating personal and health circumstances. Correlations were evident, for example between periods of hidden homelessness and increased criminal activity; deteriorating health; increased drug or alcohol consumption; and victimisation. These stood in contrast to respondents' life trajectories while in settled housing or formal temporary accommodation.

Jason's housing career illustrates the shifting fortunes of homeless people as they move in and out of hidden homelessness, (see **Figure 3 overleaf**). Each time Jason slept rough or stayed with friends his circumstances deteriorated. His drug use escalated, for example, and he started committing petty crime. When he stayed in a hostel for two years his circumstances improved markedly, taking on volunteer work and accessing a methadone programme.

Particularly striking in Jason's housing career, and in the housing careers of most respondents, was the lack of engagement with housing and support services during episodes of hidden homelessness. Respondents made extensive use of day centres but contact with other support services was rare. As a result, few were receiving any housing advice or support for other issues (drug use or mental health, for example).

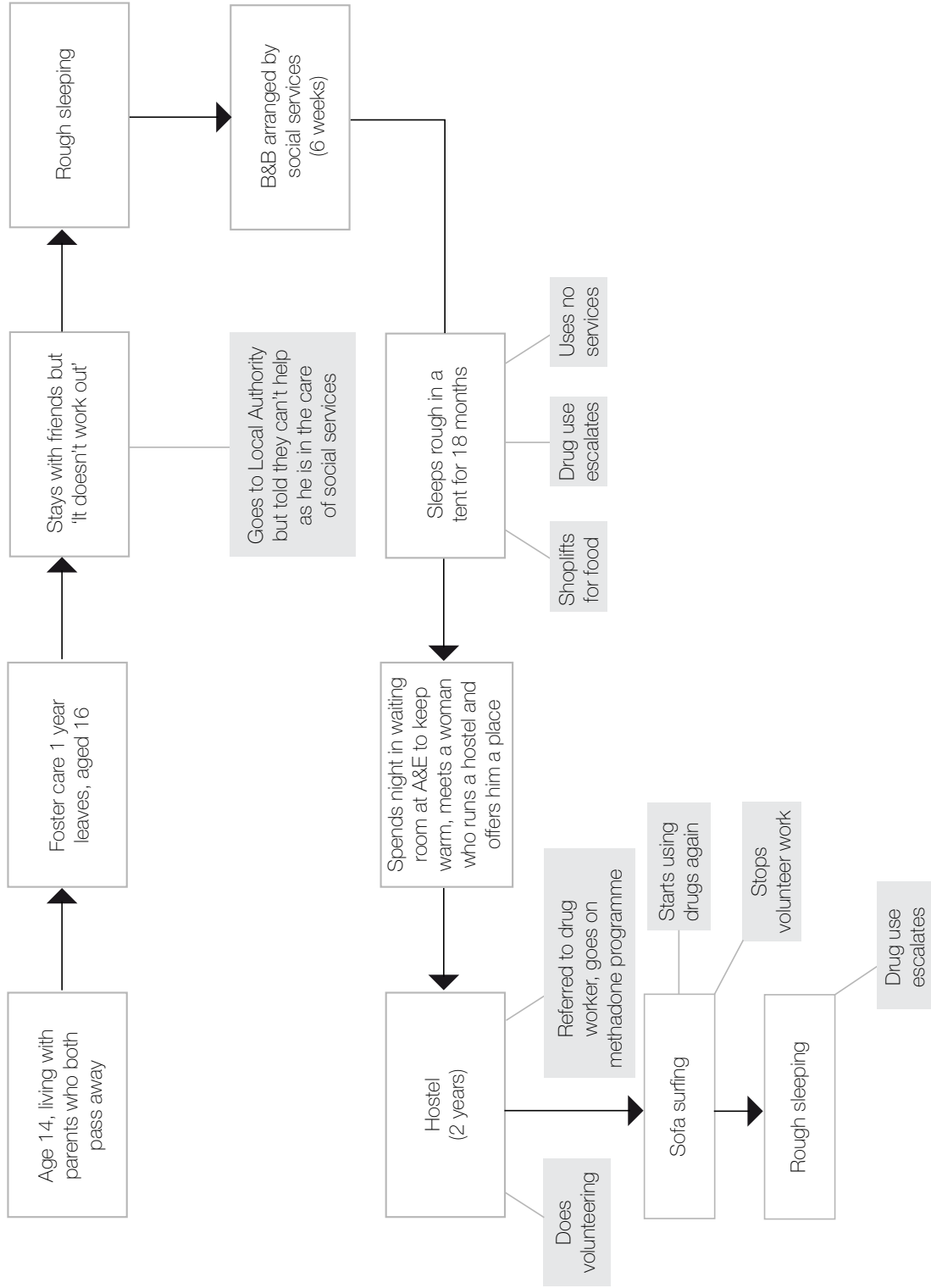
It is here that the full impact of hidden homelessness becomes clear. Without access to advice and support respondents' prospects for resolving their homelessness were bleak. And when issues such as drug use, mental ill health, trauma, and disengagement from the labour market go unresolved they intensify or deteriorate. The eventual consequences which flow from this are:

- **Hidden homeless people start resorting to desperate measures to accommodate themselves:** in the absence of assistance to secure housing, some respondents

had resorted to sex work in order to fund temporary accommodation (20 per cent of women and 3 per cent of men), or to shoplifting (30 per cent). Respondents had spent the night or formed an unwanted sexual partnership with someone to obtain a roof over their head for the night (28 per cent of women and 14 per cent of men). In desperation, many had also looked to institutions such as hospitals, police cells and prisons for shelter. For example, 28 per cent had committed a crime in the hope of being taken into custody for the night, 20 per cent had avoided bail or committed an imprisonable offence with the express purpose of receiving a custodial sentence as a means of resolving their housing problems; and 18 per cent had presented at A&E for the same reason.

- **People who could have promptly exited homelessness join a population of long-term homeless people with increasing support needs.** With the right help, or access to the right resources (work, housing, income or access to specialist support) many of those interviewed would have quickly exited homelessness and sustained independent living. But those who could exit homelessness promptly risk joining the ranks of those with complex needs if their hidden homelessness endures. In other words, the experience of hidden homelessness (poor conditions, insecurity and limited engagement with the necessary support services) may serve to bolster the numbers of chronically homeless people.
- **Vulnerable people whose needs should be met through existing systems of support (rough sleeper teams, hostels and such like) are being left without assistance** in circumstances severely detrimental to their health and well being. As a result, issues such as mental ill health, disengagement from the labour market and drug use intensify or deteriorate.

Figure 3 – Jason's housing history



Why are single homeless people hidden?

Hidden homelessness can be traced, to a significant degree, to single peoples' lack of entitlement to accommodation within the terms of the homelessness legislation, and to the limited assistance many apparently receive from local authorities. There was evidence that:

- **Many single homeless people do meet the priority need criteria.** Of the survey respondents recognised as being homeless (most of those who made an application), 45 per cent were accepted as being in priority need. However, nearly half of these were found to be intentionally homeless and so not entitled to accommodation.
- **Single homeless people often leave local authority offices without receiving meaningful advice and assistance.** Local authorities have a statutory duty to provide 'advice and assistance' to homeless people yet one third of respondents recognised as homeless did not see an advisor. Others were given unhelpful advice, signposted to hostels which were full or given useless written material. Jason, for example explained that *"they just gave me leaflets what I already had before"*.
- **Single homeless people are not always given the opportunity to make a homelessness application.** It is the outcome of a homelessness application that establishes a person's right to assistance (if only in the form of 'advice' rather than provision of housing) yet 20 per cent of survey respondents left council offices without making an application.
- **Single homeless people are deterred from approaching local authorities** because of previous negative experiences of doing so or low expectations about the outcome. Chris's comment was typical - *"didn't even bother going [to the council], I knew I'd get the same old bullshit, just get sent away, get used to it. They don't care, they're not interested"*.

- **Single homeless people are misinformed about their entitlements,** serving to deter them from approaching a local authority or pursuing a homelessness application. Respondents were under the impression, for example, that being employed, being in temporary housing, or having prior rent arrears rendered them ineligible for assistance.
- **Single homeless people who may meet the priority need criteria are not approaching local authorities.** More than one quarter of the single homeless people surveyed had never sought help from a local authority. Yet many had significant vulnerabilities (29 per cent suffered mental ill health for example) and may have met the priority need criteria.

The local authority was the key route through which respondents sought to address their housing problems, particularly in the early phase of homelessness. This request for assistance, then, represents a key opportunity to facilitate access to appropriate support and housing services. A failure to grasp this opportunity can (and did, for many participating in this study) result in long spells of hidden homelessness. Subsequent opportunities for re-engaging with single homeless people can be few and far between.

Chris is a case in point (**following page**). His story illustrates how inadequate advice or signposting can render someone hidden homeless for many years. Chris ran his household competently for 15 years, carrying out all domestic and administrative chores. With adequate assistance he would have exited homelessness and sustained his own tenancy. Instead, he has been hidden homeless periodically for five years, his physical and mental health are slowly deteriorating and he faces the additional barrier of being an 'ex offender' due to offences relating to squatting.

Chris's story

Chris went to live with his grandma when he was aged 15, following problems at home. He cared for his grandma, who suffered poor health, doing all the cooking, shopping and cleaning. In 2005, when Chris was 30, his grandma passed away. He went to the council and was told he could not succeed the tenancy.

One day, Chris returned home to find the locks had been changed. He may have been served with an eviction order but Chris cannot read due to severe dyslexia. He returned to the council offices and presented as homeless but was told he did not fit the criteria and:

“all they did was give me a booklet which I can't read.”

Estranged from his parents and with few friends, Chris walked around until he came across an empty flat and squatted there for a week. Facing harassment from local kids he moved on to a disused warehouse.

After a month he was arrested, charged with breaking and entering and given a 12 month prison sentence. Chris had some juvenile offences on his record from 15 years ago but nothing since.

On release six months later Chris was given the same 'home finder pack' he had been provided with by the council and his discharge grant of £47. He informed the prison that he was

homeless but no further assistance was offered. Chris went to the council and was given his third home finder pack. He squatted in another empty flat. After a few weeks he met a local woman, embarked on a relationship with her and moved into her flat.

Over the next four years Chris and his partner separated and reunited many times. Each time they separated Chris found an empty building and squatted. He was arrested and imprisoned for breaking and entering a further three times during these years (he was given sentences of six months, five months and two months).

He returned to the local authority twice more, each time on release from prison, and was given yet more copies of the starter pack and told he did not fit the criteria for rehousing. His relationship irretrievably broke down when he came out of prison two months ago. He did not return to the local authority. He has been sleeping rough since, too scared to squat because to do so would breach his license. He uses a local day centre for food and washing facilities but has no contact with other services.

Other factors contributing to hidden homelessness included:

- **Scarcity.** Places in hostels, transitional and emergency housing are limited. Direct access places are scarcer still. Respondents reported approaching hostels but repeatedly finding they were full, or of having to queue for hours in the hope of securing a bed for that night.

Douglas, for example, explained:

“Since 1999...we’ve lost [X] night shelter, we had [X] day centre which was run by social services where you could get breakfast and dinner, that closed. We lost [X] night shelter, that shut, now we’ve lost [X hostel]. We’re losing bit by bit our options are getting narrower.” (Douglas)

- **Eligibility and exclusion criteria.** Eligibility and exclusion criteria also render some ineligible for the temporary housing available in their local area. Respondents had been excluded from hostels by virtue of their age, support needs, or because they were recently arrived in the area. Joseph for example, reported that:

“Got eventually told where the night shelter was...and at my age they wouldn’t allow me in coz I was too young. (Joseph then aged 16)

Douglas also reported:

“We found a night shelter, we stood there for nearly three hours waiting to get in...we were first in the queue but when they opened the door they refused to let us in, they said ‘we only let in the locals’ so we spent the night behind some shops. The next day we found there was a main hostel but they wouldn’t accept us, ‘the place is full.’” (Douglas)

- **Ineligibility for welfare benefits.** Entitlement to welfare benefits is key to accessing temporary housing. Those ineligible for benefits - including many A8 nationals, some other foreign nationals, failed asylum seekers, young people under the age of 16 and some under the age of 18 - were simply unable to meet any housing costs.

Basia, an A8 national reported:

“When I basically lost the job I was still paying [rent] for maybe a month or so but then I couldn’t anticipate how long I would be out of work and because I was not entitled for the benefits either, so luckily I had friends.” (Basia)

- **Lack of knowledge.** Many respondents had little awareness of the assistance available to single homeless people. This was particularly true in the early stages of homelessness but not all accrued knowledge over time. Unaware of local hostels, advice agencies or support services, these respondents were not finding their way into the system.

Marie, for example, had very little money, no prior experience of homelessness, no family nearby and no knowledge of hostels and other homelessness services so she started sleeping in a local park. She explained that:

“I haven’t got family down here and I was literally on the streets. I didn’t know what to do, I didn’t know where to go.” (Marie)

Recommendations

Despite statutory duties placed upon local authorities to provide advice and assistance to single homeless people and a valuable sector offering support and accommodation, many apparently remain marginalised, unable to negotiate access to basic assistance, housing and support. This includes vulnerable people experiencing multiple exclusion. The consequence is a population vulnerable to deteriorating health, personal danger, criminalisation, and enduring homelessness.

These conclusions point to a need to challenge common conceptualisations of homelessness. The focus of attention on rough sleepers, the statutory homeless and those in hostels fails to capture the full range of precarious situations in which single homeless people find themselves.

There is a sizeable population hidden from view in squats, with friends, in police cells, with strangers, or sleeping rough in less visible locations, and this population is as vulnerable, and their housing situations as precarious and detrimental as their more visible counterparts.

These findings point to some important issues worthy of consideration by service providers and policy makers.

Drawing on this evidence a series of recommendations are made:

For Central Government

- Central Government must take concrete actions to improve local authority compliance with the statutory duty to advise and assist all homeless people which could include strengthening the duty placed on them.
- It is essential that services for single homeless people are given continued financial support, particularly those offering temporary and transitional housing. Any reduction in an already scarce resource could have catastrophic consequences for single homeless people. Hidden homelessness will certainly escalate if there are cuts to the number and quality of these services.
- There is a need to gather statistics capable of generating robust estimates of the scale of single homelessness and of hidden homelessness. As a starting point local authorities should be required to collect information about the housing circumstances of all single homeless applicants.
- There is a need to acknowledge that rough sleeping remains a significant problem across the country. The population may be significantly larger than we know it to be, and people are still sleeping rough for extended periods of time, interspersed with periods of other hidden homelessness. The commitment to end rough sleeping can only be achieved if renewed efforts are made to engage rough sleepers and other hidden homeless people who are not being reached and make housing and support services available to them.

For Local Authorities

- No vulnerable homeless person should be left without support. People who are found to be homeless but to whom the local authority owes no duty (for example because they are not in priority need or are intentionally homeless) should always be referred to relevant agencies able to help them resolve their housing problems.

- Consideration should be given to ways in which the advice and assistance offered by local authorities can be made more effective to achieve positive housing outcomes.
- Better links, relationships, and referral routes should be established between local authorities and relevant homelessness and support agencies. The point at which a homeless person approaches a local authority represents a key opportunity for early intervention which is not being maximised.
- All homeless people should be provided with accessible information on their rights and entitlements and about the application of the homelessness legislation. There is a need to eradicate misinformation, myths and misunderstandings.

For Service Providers

- Day centres should be better supported to assist homeless people into accommodation or to signpost them to relevant housing providers. Hidden homeless people disengaged from services do access day centres so these organisations represent a key opportunity for resolving hidden homelessness. Funding housing caseworkers would be one way of achieving this.
- There is a need for support and outreach services targeted specifically at squatters. This population may be more sizeable than previously thought with many squatters living in dire conditions.
- It is essential that homelessness provision (hostels, transitional housing, night shelters) in every locality is available to all age groups so that no-one is prevented from accessing temporary accommodation by virtue of their age.

About this project

This report was written by Kesia Reeve from the Centre for Regional Economic and Social Research at Sheffield Hallam University. The research involved a survey of single homeless people in 11 different cities and towns in England and in-depth, biographical interviews with single homeless people who are, or have been, 'hidden'.

For more information

The full report, *The Hidden Truth about Homelessness* by Kesia Reeve, with Elaine Batty, is published by Crisis. It is available as a free download from www.crisis.org.uk

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About Crisis

Crisis is the national charity for single homeless people. We are dedicated to ending homelessness by delivering life-changing services and campaigning for change.

Our innovative education, employment, housing and well-being services address individual needs and help homeless people to transform their lives. We measure our success and can demonstrate tangible results and value for money.

We are determined campaigners, working to prevent people from becoming homeless and advocating solutions informed by research and our direct experience.

We have ambitious plans for the future and are committed to help more people in more places across the UK. We know we won't end homelessness overnight or on our own. But we take a lead, collaborate with others and together make change happen.

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Homelessness ends here

Sheffield Hallam University

The hidden truth about homelessness: experiences of single homelessness in England - report summary

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