The hidden truth about homelessness

Experiences of single homelessness in England

Kesia Reeve
with Elaine Batty

May 2011

CRESR
Centre for Regional Economic and Social Research

Crisis

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.

About CRESR

The Centre for Regional Economic and Social Research was established in 1990 and is one of the UK's leading academic research centres specialising in social and economic regeneration, housing and labour market analysis.

Crisis Head Office
66 Commercial Street,
London E1 6LT
Telephone: 0844 251 0111
Facsmile: 0844 251 0110

Crisis UK (trading as Crisis). Registered Charity Numbers:
E&W1082947, SC040094. Company Number: 4024938

© Crisis 2011
ISBN 978-1-899257-67-6

This report is available to download free of charge from www.crisis.org.uk

Foreword

Crisis commissioned this research in response to our continuing concern that single homeless people are not accessing the housing support and assistance they need to escape homelessness. This report provides a shocking review of the experiences of single homeless people and the extent to which they are hidden from support and advice as well as statistics.

The clear message from this report is that to be single and homeless in England is, effectively, to be hidden. Staying with friends, squatting and rough sleeping emerge as precarious scenarios in which homeless people accommodate themselves away from the reach of support and advice services and often in insecure and dangerous conditions. The fact that for every one month that individuals spent in formal provision they spent over three months sleeping rough, in squats, with friends or in other hidden situations indicates that despite the systems of existing support we have – statutory and non statutory, voluntary sector, hostels and outreach teams – homeless people are not accessing the sustained help they need.

Those in hidden accommodation are clearly just as vulnerable as their more visible counterparts. This research is fresh support for the need to rethink homelessness. Homelessness is not just about the visible rough sleepers or those in temporary accommodation but the large population hidden in squats, with strangers, in police cells, with friends or sleeping rough in invisible situations. The evidence of 'last resort' survival strategies this report provides such as engaging in unwanted relationships, crime or presenting at A&E in order to secure a bed for the night is absolutely shocking.

Why are so many single homeless people hidden? Pointing to the failure of local authorities to provide advice and assistance as well as issues of scarcity and lack of entitlement, this research sheds light on the often lengthy periods of homelessness these individuals face. If they had accessed the right support, at the right time, a lifetime of homelessness could have been avoided.

This is a call to action to local authorities to fulfil their statutory duty to provide advice and assistance to all homeless people as well as to encourage central government to take concrete actions to improve compliance with this duty.

Crisis is committed to making the experiences of single homeless people visible and ensuring they access the advice and assistance necessary to escape homelessness.

We are at a time when large scale reforms to housing benefit and welfare may jeopardise the housing and income of a large number of people. An increase in the risk of homelessness means more could be joining these hidden ranks.

This report serves as a timely reminder that single people still remain marginalised, unable to negotiate access to basic assistance, housing and support and this report challenges all of us, funders or providers, to do more.

Leslie Morphy, Chief Executive, Crisis

Contents

Acknowledgments vi
Executive Summary 1

1. Introduction 7

2 Methods 8

3 What is hidden homelessness? 10

4 The scale of hidden homelessness 12
4.1 Key findings 16

5 Profile of the hidden homeless 17
5.1. Demographic profile 17
5.2. Support needs 18
5.3. Housing histories 20
5.4. Diversity 21
5.5. What distinguishes hidden homelessness from single homelessness? 22
5.6. Key findings 22

6 Experiences of hidden homelessness 23
6.1. Staying with friends and family 23
6.2. Squatting 29
6.3. Sleeping rough 34
6.4. Other forms of hidden homelessness 38
6.5. Key findings 40

7 The consequences of hidden homelessness 41
7.1 Desperate measures for accommodation 45
7.2. Long term homelessness and complex needs 45
7.3. Vulnerable groups and existing support 46
7.4. Key findings 46

8 Hidden homelessness: spotlighting key themes 47
8.1. Multiple exclusion 47
8.2. Health 47
8.3. Gender 48
8.4. A8 Nationals 49
8.5. Key findings 50

9 Reasons for hidden homelessness 51
9.1. Inadequate signposting and advice 51
9.2. Issues of entitlement and eligibility 53
9.3. Scarcity 57
9.4. Eligibility and exclusion criteria 58
9.5. Limited knowledge 59
9.6. Reasons for hidden homelessness: a case study 60
9.7. Key findings 62

10 Recommendations 63
Central government 63
Local authorities 64
Service providers 64

List of tables and figures

List of tables

Table 4.1. Where did you spend last night? 13
Table 4.2. Have you ever lived in any of the following housing situations? 13
Table 5.1. Gender 17
Table 5.2. Ethnic origin 17
Table 5.5. Indicators of support needs 19
Table 5.6. Where were you living prior to becoming homeless for the first time? 20
Table 5.7. Reason for leaving that accommodation 20
Table 6.1. How long have you been sleeping rough continuously? 35

List of figures

Figure 4.1. Scale of hidden homelessness 12
Figure 4.2. Nancy's hidden homelessness career 15
Figure 5.3. Age 18
Figure 5.4. Nationality 18
Figure 6.1. Emma's hidden homelessness career 24
Figure 6.2. Where did you sleep last night? 35
Figure 7.1. Michael's hidden homelessness career 42
Figure 7.2. Jason's hidden homelessness career 44
Figure 9.1. Andnej's referrals 52

List of case studies

Chris: A case study of squatting 33
Marie: A case study of sleeping rough 37
Lorna: The relationship between mental health and homelessness 49
Harvey: Exploring the reasons for hidden homelessness 61

Acknowledgments

We would like to thank Ligia Teixeira and Pam Vallance, the Research and Evaluation Managers at Crisis for their assistance, guidance and support but also to other colleagues at Crisis, including Thomas Say and Duncan Shrubsole. We are indebted to the many organisations across England who allowed us to conduct the survey in their day centres, distributed surveys for us and put us in touch with homeless people. Without these organisations the research would not have been possible. Particular thanks go to colleagues at Sheffield Hallam University for their involvement in the project including Steve Green, Rionach Casey, Jude Bennington, Mike Foden, Ryan Powell and Emma Smith. Most of all we would like to thank the homeless people who gave their time and talked openly to us about their experiences.

This report is based on research undertaken by the authors and the content does not necessarily reflect the views of Crisis or of any participating agencies. We do, of course, accept full responsibility for any inaccuracies or omissions.

Executive summary

The research on which this report is based was carried out by the Centre for Regional Economic and Social Research (CRESR) at Sheffield Hallam University and commissioned by Crisis 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 feature in reported homelessness statistics. There is a large single homelessness sector providing advice, support and accommodation but there are concerns, supported by the findings of this study, that many single homeless people fail to negotiate access to this sector, instead living outside mainstream housing and homelessness provision in squats, on friends' sofas and anywhere else they can find temporary shelter. This study sought to shine some light on this neglected group of people, exposing 'hidden homelessness' as a very real and contemporary social problem.

The research was conducted between June 2010 and January 2011. Data collection focused on a survey of single homeless people carried out during one week in July 2010 in day centres in 11 towns and cities in England; and in-depth interviews with homeless people who are currently hidden or have had experience of hidden homelessness. In total 437 single homeless people were surveyed and 27 were interviewed. For the purposes of the 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 (because they have not approached a local authority or because the local authority has decided they are not owed the main housing duty), AND
- whose accommodation is not supplied by a housing/homelessness provider.

Key Findings

The following key conclusions about the nature and scale of hidden homelessness emerged from this study:

1. **Hidden homelessness is highly prevalent. In fact, to be single and homeless in England is, in the main, to be hidden.** The majority of the single homeless people participating in this study were 'hidden', staying in squats, sofa surfing, or sleeping rough and with no statutory entitlement to housing. They could also be found in private hotels alongside backpackers and other guests, in caravans and tents pitched unlawfully; in privately (and reportedly poorly) run homeless hostels, and in prisons or hospitals, about to be discharged with nowhere to go. Key evidence includes:

- 62 per cent of the single homeless people surveyed were hidden homeless on the night they were surveyed and 92 per cent had experienced hidden homelessness
- The majority of survey respondents had never stayed in a hostel
- For every month that interview respondents spent in formal homelessness provision such as hostels they spent three months sleeping rough, in squats, staying with friends or in other hidden homeless situations
- Respondents moved in and out of hidden homelessness but the majority had spent most of their homeless careers hidden
- On finding themselves homeless, the single people participating in this research most commonly slept rough or relied on friends for temporary accommodation
- Many, however, had also squatted. Ten (out of 26) interview respondents and 39 per

cent of survey respondents had done so. Squatting is not, then a marginal tenure for this population group

2. **Rough sleeping may be more prevalent, enduring and 'invisible' than we think.** The majority of respondents had slept rough, often in 'out of sight' locations and with little contact with support services such as rough sleeper teams. Rough sleeping was not an emergency measure for a night or two until adequate shelter could be found. Rather, many respondents had endured sustained episodes of rough sleeping. Harvey is a case in point. He describes his experience:

   "There was a restaurant bloke, he used to get one of them wheelie bins, wash it out for me, put cardboard inside it and turn it upside down…I was in there for about a year and a half" (Harvey, then aged 16)

   Key evidence about the scale and invisibility of rough sleeping includes:

- 40 per cent of respondents had slept rough the night prior to being surveyed and 76 per cent had slept rough at some point during an episode of homelessness.
- Nearly half of the rough sleepers surveyed had not been in recent contact with a rough sleeper team.
- 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.
- Seven out of 25 interview respondents slept rough on the night they first became homeless and 12 slept rough within three months of becoming homeless.
- More than half of the rough sleepers surveyed had been sleeping rough continuously for more than one month and 31 per cent had been doing so for more than six months.

3. **Vulnerable homeless people are being left without housing support and assistance.** Many respondents were vulnerable and evidence of multiple exclusion was strong. Long-term unemployment, mental and physical ill health, poor literacy, experience of the care system, disrupted education and substance abuse were commonplace. Enduring mental health issues featured prominently in the life stories of several interview respondents.

   Marcia, for example is 47 years old and has been homeless periodically since the age of 16. She explained that "I didn't feel well, it [homelessness] always coincided with me not feeling well". Marcia has lived in numerous private rented bedsits, council and housing association flats, and supported housing projects but always leaves them, handing back the keys, when her mental health issues intensify. She is now reluctant to accept any accommodation because she recognises her pattern of behaviour and fears the cycle will continue. Three months prior to her interview she refused an offer of accommodation explaining that " I knew what would happen…I thought 'I don't want it' …only because I know the pattern, I was trying to avoid the pattern". The local authority discharged their duty to Marcia as a result, deeming her intentionally homeless. She has been sleeping rough since and has no immediate prospect of securing temporary or permanent accommodation. Nor is she receiving any support for her mental ill-health.

   Key evidence about the multiple exclusion facing hidden homeless people includes:

- 34 per cent of survey respondents reported mental ill health, 36 per cent had spent most of their adult lives unemployed, 25 per cent had been in local authority care, 29 per cent had been excluded or suspended at school, and 32 per cent had experienced drug dependency.

- 45 per cent of survey respondents who approached a local authority and were accepted as homeless were also accepted as being in priority need (most were then found to be intentionally homeless and so not owed the main housing duty)

- Many respondents became homeless young (42 per cent of survey respondents had experienced homelessness by the age of 20)

- Many of the women participating in the study had been victims of violence. For example, 54 per cent of survey respondents had experienced violence or abuse from a partner and 43 per cent from family members or friends of the family.

4. **Hidden homelessness has detrimental consequences which include:**

- **Insecurity**. Hidden homeless people have no right to remain in their accommodation, friends are often only able to accommodate for a night or two and when arrangements came to an end they can do so suddenly and without notice. The threat of eviction, similarly, always looms for squatters.

- **Extremely poor living conditions** was a key concern, particularly for rough sleepers and squatters, and many respondents lived without access to basic amenities. 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 reported having been financially exploited by friends with whom they stayed. Douglas explained 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".*

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

- **An increasing in the number of long-term homeless people with intensifying 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 support services) may serve to bolster the numbers of chronically homeless people.

5. **Hidden homelessness and the consequences which flow from it can be traced, to a significant degree to the lack of assistance single homeless people receive from local authorities.** 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 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.

   Evidence emerged that single homeless people who may be entitled to accommodation were deterred from applying, many were misinformed about their entitlements, not all were given the opportunity to make a homelessness application, local authorities did not always fulfil their duty to 'advise and assist', and when advice or signposting was offered it was of little or no use. Many respondents were deterred from approaching a local authority because of prior unsatisfactory experience of low expectations. Chris's comment, for example, 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".*

   Key evidence includes:

- More than one quarter of survey respondents had not approached a local authority as homeless. Many had significant vulnerabilities (29 per cent suffered mental ill health for example) and may have met the priority need criteria.

- 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.

- 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."*

6. **Without adequate help, support and access to temporary housing, some single homeless people are resorting to desperate measures to accommodate themselves.** This included:

- Engaging in sex work in order to fund a night in a hotel or bed and breakfast. (20 per cent of the women surveyed and 3 per cent of men). Harvey, for example explained why, at the age of 16, he engaged in sex work to pay for a B&B. Having left home to escape sexual abuse and not yet old enough to claim benefits (and unaware of the benefits available to people in his circumstances), Harvey was desperate: *"I had to sell my body…[for] B&Bs, just going down there and raise money in the way's I've done…just desperate for money, starving, things like that."*

- Shoplifting to fund a night in a hotel or bed and breakfast (30 per cent of survey respondents).

- Spending the night/forming an unwanted sexual partnership with someone to obtain a roof over their head (28 per cent of women and 14 per cent of men).

- Looking to institutions such as hospitals, prisons and police cells for temporary housing. For example, 28 per cent of survey respondents 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.

Recommendations

Drawing on the evidence from this research a series of recommendations are made for service providers and policy makers:

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.

1. Introduction

This report details the findings from a study commissioned by Crisis in response to concerns that single homeless people may not be accessing the housing support and assistance they require to escape homelessness. The research was conducted by the Centre for Regional Economic and Social Research (CRESR) at Sheffield Hallam University.

Many single homeless people are not entitled to housing within the terms of the homelessness legislation - they don't approach a local authority, they are deterred from applying or they do not meet the criteria. Without entitlement to housing, they are not recognised as statutory homeless and so do not feature in reported homelessness statistics. There is a large single homelessness sector providing advice and support, hostels, refuges, supported and transitional housing as well as emergency accommodation such as night shelters. It is thought that the needs of those not entitled to statutory assistance can be met by this network of services. But is this the case? There are concerns, supported by the findings of this study, that many single homeless people fail to negotiate access to this sector, instead living outside mainstream housing and homelessness provision in squats, on friends' sofas and anywhere else they can find temporary shelter.

Many single people are therefore hidden from homelessness statistics, hidden from support and advice services, 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. It explores the nature and scale of 'hidden homelessness', and the needs and experiences of hidden homeless people.

2. Methods

This study was conducted between June 2010 and January 2011. Data collection focused on two principle tasks: a survey of single homeless people; and in-depth interviews with homeless people who are currently hidden or have had experience of hidden homelessness (see Chapter 3 for the definition of hidden homelessness employed)[1]. These methods are detailed further below.

Survey of single homeless people

The survey was conducted in day centres for homeless people in 11 towns and cities in England. These were London, Birmingham, Oxford, Stockport, Newcastle, Blackpool, Manchester, Southampton, Newton Abbot, Sheffield, and Brighton. The character of, and services offered by each day centre varied considerably, from small organisations with a handful of regular clients with whom they work closely to large drop-in centres serving food and offering other basic facilities such as showers and laundry to 200+ people a day.

Survey locations were selected to ensure representation of different types of place and geography. Thus, small towns, large cities, different regions, coastal and inland locations were represented. The intention was not to generate a database which could be analysed by geography - the numbers would not have been large enough to do so - but to ensure that homeless people living in different housing, demographic and geographical contexts were included, and that the sample was not skewed unduly by specific or unique conditions in certain types of places (very high demand housing markets for example). Rural areas were excluded because issues pertaining to rural homelessness are very specific and we felt it would be too ambitious to attempt to accommodate this within the project. There is no doubt, however, that more attention needs to be paid to the experiences of homeless people in rural locations.

The survey was conducted during one week in July 2010 in an effort to generate a 'snapshot' of hidden homelessness. Snapshot data allow the generation of 'point in time' statistics - the proportion/number of single homeless people who are hidden at any one time, for example, or the proportion who are squatting. 'Snapshot' figures are typically lower than 'flow' figures (which record incidence over time) but are more useful for providing an indication of the size or scale of a particular population or issue at any given time. Women were significantly underrepresented in the final sample so a small number of surveys were conducted with women over the following month.

The research team visited each survey location and conducted the surveys face to face with respondents or checked surveys which had been self-completed. A very small number of surveys were conducted or checked by service providers and posted to the research team. The survey collected basic profile information as well as information about respondents' housing situations, history, and support needs.

In total, 437 single homeless people were surveyed, (about one third of these in London), 365 of whom were non-statutory homeless[2]. Case identifier questions (initials, date of birth and place of birth) were included in the survey to eradicate double counting. All survey respondents received a £5 'thank you' payment. Surveys were entered into and analysed using SPSS.

1 In addition, local authorities and advice agencies in each of the locations in which surveying took place were contacted for data relating to hidden homelessness. However, only two organisations responded to this request, generating data too limited to analyse or include in the report.

2 27 respondents were statutory homeless and in 41 cases it was not clear.

In-depth interviews with hidden homeless people

Interviews were conducted with 27 people who were, or had recently been, hidden homeless. Interviews were conducted in six of the towns and cities in which surveying had taken place. These were London, Birmingham, Brighton, Manchester, Sheffield and Stockport. Again, efforts were made to include southern and northern towns and cities, inland and coastal areas, and different housing market contexts. Interviewing was conducted in, and respondents identified through, the same service providers who had assisted with the survey.

Interviewing took place in Autumn 2010. In total 12 women and 15 men were interviewed. Efforts were made to include people of different ages (the youngest was aged 19 and the oldest aged 60) and with different experiences. For example people who had only recently become homeless were interviewed alongside those with a long history of homelessness. Efforts were also made to ensure that the sample included people who had lived in different hidden homeless accommodation situations (staying with friends, with relatives, squatting and sleeping rough for example). A8 nationals had emerged as a relatively large group in the survey (see Chapter 4) so concerted efforts were made to identify respondents from A8 nation states (three were interviewed). However, very little was known about most respondents prior to the interview, other than to confirm that they had experienced hidden homelessness.

The interviews were qualitative in nature, making use of a broad topic guide rather than a structured interview schedule. Interviews took a biographical approach, asking respondents to talk through their housing and life histories, picking up and talking in more detail about relevant issues as the interview progressed. Each interview was therefore different, with different issues explored in depth. Interviews were recorded with the permission of the respondent (only one refused) and fully transcribed. All respondents were given £15 to thank them for their time.

Respondents' housing careers and biographies (life events, contact with services) were then plotted using Excel and the interview discussion was coded using Nvivo.

3. What is hidden homelessness?

There is no agreed definition of hidden homelessness and the term is inconsistently conceptualised and applied. However, notions of 'exclusion', 'entitlement' and 'visibility' are often central to definitions of hidden homelessness.

Exclusion

A recent review of single homelessness notes that *'single people in a situation of housing exclusion'* are often referred to as hidden homeless (Jones and Pleace, 2010, p9). They are distinguished from two other categories of single homeless people - those who qualify for the 'main duty' on the one hand and those who meet the statutory definition of homelessness but do not qualify for the main duty on the other - by virtue of their housing exclusion. 'Housing exclusion' is an ambiguous term but the concept of exclusion is influential in conceptualising hidden homelessness, often referring to exclusion from homelessness care and provision. This, in turn, is rooted in 'entitlement'.

Entitlement

Definitions of hidden homelessness which consider a person's legal status are common with statutory homeless people (those who have entitlement, and so are 'included' rather than 'excluded') not generally regarded as hidden. A significant proportion of the single homeless population are not statutory homeless and so a correlation between single homelessness and hidden homelessness is established. This prompts some to adopt a broad definition of hidden homelessness, giving primacy to single homeless people's entitlement within the terms of the homelessness legislation. Crisis, for example, define hidden homelessness as those who meet the legal definition of homelessness but have not been provided with accommodation by the local authority (because they do not qualify or because they have not approached a local authority for assistance).

Visibility

A connection between inclusion and 'visibility' is also made. Somogyi and Tosics for example suggest that *"The birth of the concept [of hidden homelessness] was bound to 'visibility', triggered by the realisation that certain homeless groups stay invisible both for homeless care service providers, and for statistical studies or surveys (Somogyi and Tosics, 2005, p3).*

The term 'hidden' is also used to describe people on the margins of homelessness - those who are precariously housed in insecure and unsatisfactory conditions. This tends to incorporate people living in severely overcrowded accommodation, concealed households, and others whose accommodation is in very poor condition. It can also include those at risk of eviction. Certain types of accommodation are also commonly cited as examples of hidden homelessness, in particular squatting and sofa surfing.

Overall, then, there is little clarity or consistency about whether people are defined as hidden by virtue of their legal housing status, their physical invisibility, their residential situation, their exclusion from official statistics, or some combination of these. This study emphasises the exclusion that hidden homeless people face from homelessness provision in the definition of hidden homelessness utilised. It defines the hidden homeless as *'non-statutory homeless people living outside mainstream housing provision*'[3]. That is:

3 This definition also fits with categories 1, 6 and 8 of the European Typology of Homelessness and Housing Exclusion (ETHOS): "people living rough"; "people due to be released from institutions who are at risk of homelessness" and "people living in insecure accommodation (squatting, illegal camping, sofa surfing or sleeping on floors, staying with friends or relatives)".

- those who meet the legal definition of homeless but to whom the local authority owes no duty (because they have not approached a local authority or because the local authority has decided they are not owed the main housing duty), AND

- whose accommodation is not supplied by a housing/homelessness provider.

Whether a homeless individual has accessed the temporary housing available to single homeless people, and is therefore being assisted within that system of support, lies at the heart of this definition. Non-statutory homeless people are not, therefore, classed as hidden if they are staying in hostels, transitional supported housing, temporary accommodation arranged by local authorities or other housing agencies (including B&Bs if they have been placed their by a local authority), refuges, or NASS accommodation. People staying temporarily with friends or relatives, squatting or sleeping rough are classed as hidden on the basis that their accommodation does not form part of this formal system of housing support and provision.

Although families could fall within the definition adopted, the study focuses on single homeless people as it is this group with whom Crisis' work and campaigns are primarily concerned. Single homeless people are defined as 'adults without dependent children who have no accommodation they are entitled to occupy or that it is reasonable to expect them to occupy'.

4. The scale of hidden homelessness

Figure 4.1 — Scale of hidden homelessness (where single homeless respondents spent the previous night)[4]

In an effort to assess the scale of hidden homelessness survey respondents were asked a series of questions determining their homelessness status (statutory or non-statutory) and were asked where they had slept the previous night. The results suggest that the majority of single homeless people may be hidden. In total, 62 per cent of the 437 single homeless people surveyed were hidden homeless according to the definition adopted for the study: the local authority had no statutory duty to house them *and* they were living outside mainstream homelessness provision, staying with friends, in squats, sleeping rough or in other marginal accommodation (see Table 4.1 for information about where all the non-statutory homeless respondents spent the night prior to the survey).

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

These figures give an indication of the scale of hidden homelessness but converting the percentage into absolute numbers is problematic, there being no robust estimate of the total number of single homeless people. Single homelessness, and hidden

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 according to the definition for the study.

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 according to the definition for the study.

Table 4.1. Where did you spend last night?

	No.	%
Sleeping rough	145	40
With friends temporarily	49	13
In a hostel	49	13
In a night shelter	42	11
In a squat	22	6
In temporary housing arranged by council or support agency	19	5
In permanent rented or owner-occupied housing	14	4
With family or a partner temporarily	13	4
In a B&B	8	3
In a refuge	1	0
Other	3	1
Total	**365**	**100**

Table 4.2. Have you ever lived in any of the following housing situations?

	No.	%
Sleeping rough	278	76
Staying with friends temporarily	255	70
Hostel	156	43
B&B	149	41
Squatting	142	39
Staying with family temporarily	136	37
Night shelter	131	36
Prison	120	33
Temporary house/flat arranged by the LA or support agency	92	25
Refuge	59	16
Other	26	7

n=364

homelessness even more so, are notoriously difficult to estimate, perhaps explaining the lacuna of research on the subject of hidden homelessness and emphasising the urgent need for further research.

A recent review of single homelessness in the UK concludes that *"robust statistical information on single homeless people and on those potentially at risk of single homelessness is often sketchy or non-existent…"* (Jones and Pleace, 2010, p17).

In 2003 the New Policy Institute attempted to work with this sketchy data and estimated the scale of single homelessness to be between 310,000 and 380,000 at any one time (NPI 2003). The limitations of the data were acknowledged but this estimate, in any case, is now dated. These figures are not robust enough to generate an estimate of the total *number* of hidden homeless people in England today but if our survey offers any indication then hidden homelessness is certainly widespread amongst the single homeless population, whatever their number may be.

This figure (62 per cent of single homeless people are hidden) provide a useful snapshot. It tells us what proportion of the single homeless

For every one month that respondents spent in formal homelessness provision they spent three months in hidden situations

population may be hidden *at any one time*. Exploring survey and interview respondents' housing careers, however, suggests that hidden homelessness affects a far greater proportion of single homeless people *over time*. While 62 per cent of the survey sample was hidden homeless *on the night prior to being surveyed*, nearly all (92 per cent) had spent *some of their homelessness career* hidden. Table 4.2 presents information about the housing situations in which non-statutory homeless respondents had ever lived or stayed. It shows that respondents were more likely to have slept rough and stayed with friends than to have stayed in a hostel and that squatting was more common than temporary housing arranged by a local authority or support agency. More non-statutory respondents had slept rough than had been in any other accommodation situation.

That the majority of respondents had, at some point, experienced hidden homelessness is perhaps not surprising. On becoming

The majority of respondents had spent most of their homelessness careers "hidden".

homeless it can take time to negotiate access to temporary housing provision. It demands that people accrue knowledge about services, seek out advice and support, and wait for housing applications or referrals to be processed. In the meantime they might stay with friends or, in the absence of other options, sleep rough before moving into hostel or supported housing provision. But this was not the trajectory of most respondents' homelessness careers. Their hidden homelessness was not temporary or fleeting, nor was it concentrated in the early phase of their homelessness careers. In contrast, the majority had spent most of their homelessness careers 'hidden', failing to negotiate their way into the hostels and supported housing available for single homeless people, or doing so sporadically before returning to hidden homelessness once again. For example:

- Only six (out of 24[8]) interview respondents had spent more of their homelessness career in hostels and other homelessness provision than in hidden homelessness situations. Five respondents had never accessed formal provision at all.

- With one exception, all interview respondent stayed in a hidden homeless situation when they first became homeless and of those who went on to access formal provision, all returned to hidden homelessness.

- Nearly half of the current rough sleepers surveyed had not been in contact with a rough sleeper team in the past month. None of the interview respondents reported recent contact with a rough sleeper team, and many had never, or only occasionally been spoken to by a rough sleeper team despite years of periodic rough sleeping.

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

- The majority of survey respondents had never stayed in a hostel (57 per cent) or in temporary accommodation arranged by a local authority or support agency (75 per cent) (see table 4.2). One quarter had never accessed *any* accommodation provided by a housing/homelessness organisation (including night shelters, refuges and B&Bs[9]).

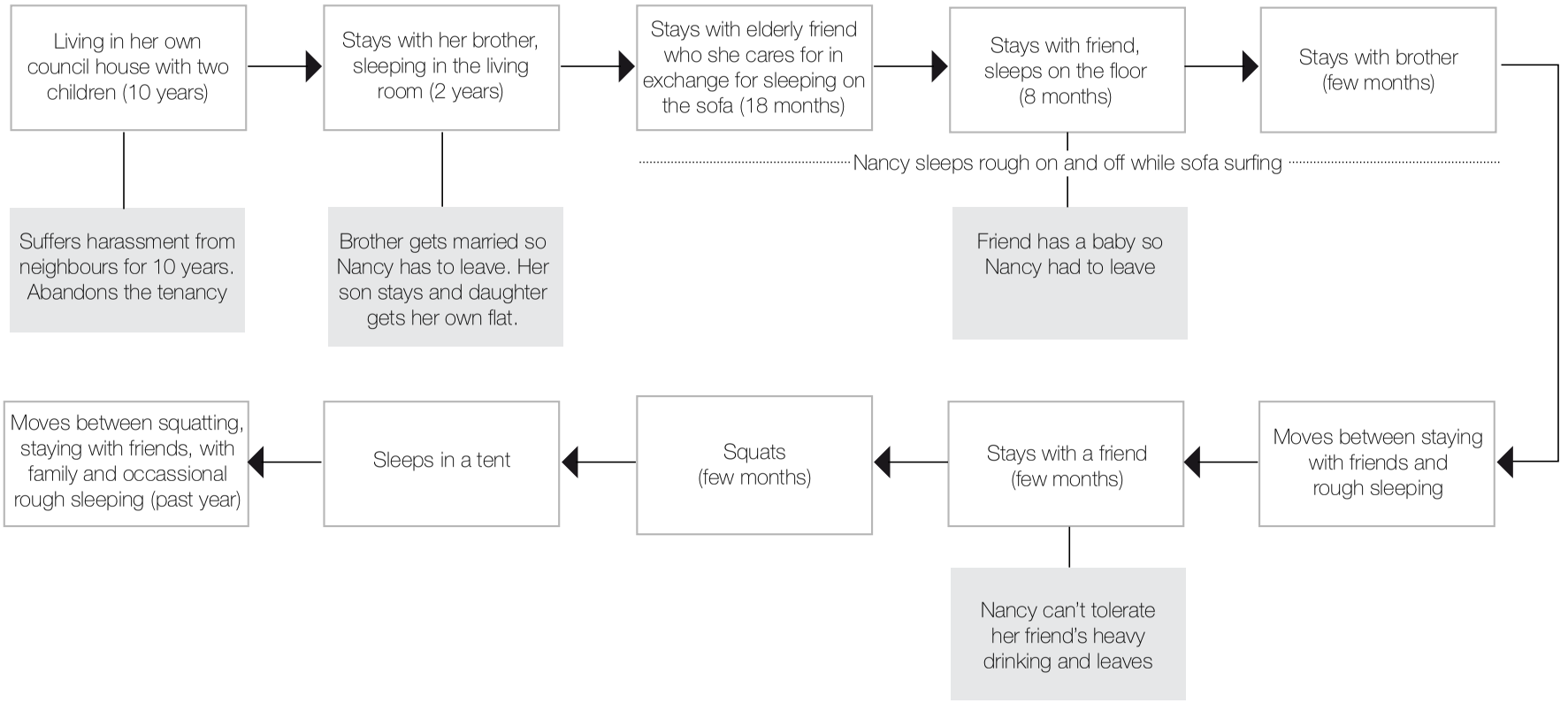
Respondents who had been homeless longer were no more likely to access temporary accommodation than those recently homeless

In some cases respondents had spent years moving between friends, rough sleeping, and other hidden situations having no contact with, or only minimal help from housing providers. Harvey, for example, had experienced nine years of homelessness during his lifetime but had spent just one year of that in hostels (in a series of short stays punctuating a five year period of sofa surfing, squatting and rough sleeping). Nancy's housing career, presented

8 It was not always possible to collect full information about respondents' housing careers and so qualitative findings are sometimes based on a partial sample - in this case 24 rather than 27 interview respondents. Some respondents could not recall aspects of their housing careers or the precise chronology. Where findings are based on a partial sample the total number is made clear in the text.

9 B&Bs have been included here because people are sometimes placed in B&Bs by local authorities. However, it is likely that some of these respondents will have accessed a B&B directly and paid privately for it, as reported in Chapter 6. Some respondents who had stayed in B&Bs had not stayed in any other type of homelessness provision. If B&Bs are removed from the calculation then 30 per cent of respondents had never stayed in accommodation provided by a housing/homelessness organisation.

Figure 4.2 — Nancy's hidden homelessness career



in Figure 4.2, illustrates this point well. She has spent her entire homelessness career hidden, never accessing a hostel. Although she most commonly relies upon friends, Nancy has spent years moving through many forms of hidden homelessness including sleeping rough, in a tent, squatting and with family members.

There was no correlation between the length of time respondents had been homeless and their likelihood of having accessed formal provision. Failing to access this provision, then, cannot be explained by reference to people having only recently become homeless. For example, 43 per cent of those who had been homeless for more than 6 years had never stayed in a hostel or temporary housing arranged by the local authority or support agency. In Chapter 9 the reasons why single homeless people are, and often remain, hidden are explored further.

4.1. Key Findings

- The results from this study suggest that the majority of single homeless people may be hidden: 62 per cent were hidden homeless on the night they were surveyed and 92 per cent had experienced hidden homelessness at some point.

- Respondents moved in and out of hidden homelessness but the majority had spent most of their homelessness career hidden.

- For every one month that respondents spent in formal homelessness provision such as hostels they spent three month sleeping rough, in squats, with friends or in other hidden situations.

- The majority of survey respondents had never stayed in a hostel (57 per cent) or in temporary accommodation provided by a local authority or support agency (75 per cent).

- There was no evidence to suggest that people are only hidden in the early stages of homelessness while they negotiate access to the system of formal support. Respondents who had been homeless for some time were no more likely to have accessed temporary accommodation than those recently homeless.

- There is evidence that a significant number of rough sleepers live outside the system of support built up over the past decade. Nearly half of the rough sleepers surveyed had not been in recent contact with a rough sleepers team.

5. Profile of the hidden homeless

This chapter presents information about the profile characteristics of the sample of single homeless people who were hidden surveyed. In doing so it attempts to draw out some key features of the single homeless population who are hidden. Evidence of multiple exclusion, of the impact of relationship breakdown, violence and employment shocks, and the presence of A8 nationals[10] emerge. However, like the single homeless population more broadly, it is diversity which apparently characterises hidden homelessness.

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.

5.1. Demographic profile

Tables 5.1 – 5.4 present the demographic profile of the sample of hidden homeless survey respondents. These tables show that:

- The majority were male (84 per cent),
- The majority were aged between 21 and 50, although 14 per cent were over the age of 50.
- Over half of respondents were White British but a significant proportion (45 per cent) were of minority ethnic origin. Most commonly, non-White British respondents recorded their ethnicity as 'Other White', a reflection, certainly, of the relatively high proportion of A8 nationals in the sample (17 per cent, see table 5.2).

Approximately 30 nationalities were represented in the sample

Table 5.1. Gender

	No.	%
Male	225	84
Female	44	16
Total	**269**	**100**

Table 5.2. Ethnic origin

	No.	%
White British	147	55
White Irish	18	7
Other White group	49	18
Black British	7	3
Black Caribbean	2	1
Black African	13	5
Asian British	2	1
Chinese	4	2
Mixed/Other ethnic group	23	9
Total	**265**	**100**

10 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.

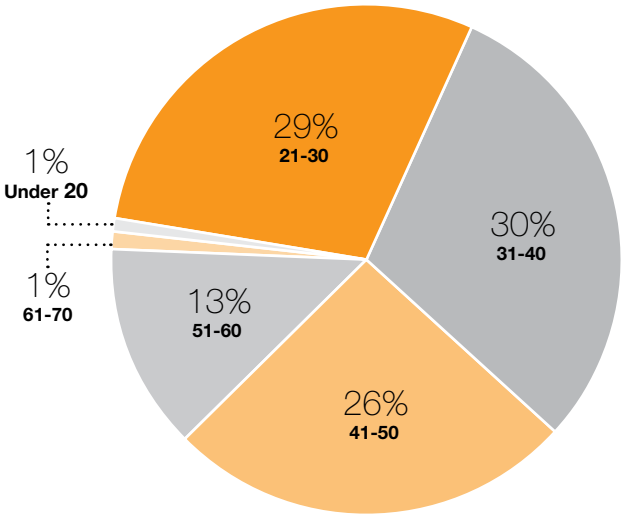


Figure 5.3. Age

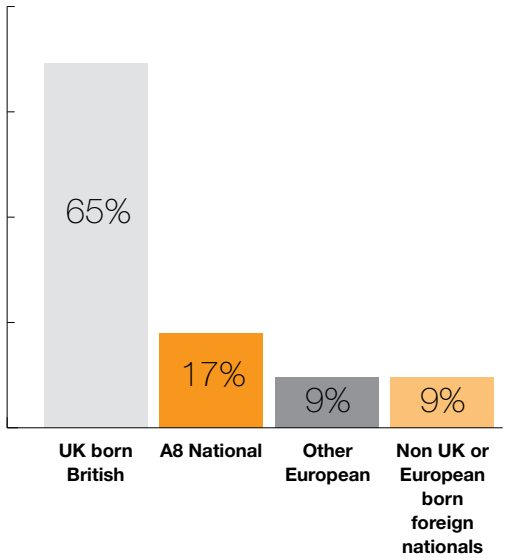


Figure 5.4. Nationality

5.2. Support needs

Some interview 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 interview 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)*

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, many had significant support needs and evidence of multiple exclusion and mental ill-health was strong in survey respondents (see table 5.5).

- **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. 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

Table 5.5. Indicators of support needs

	No.	%
Has spent most of their adult life unemployed	95	36
Has mental ill health	89	34
Has experienced drug dependency	84	32
Has a physical health problem or disability	92	35
Has experienced alcohol dependency	89	34
Was excluded or suspended at school	76	29
Has experienced violence/abuse from a partner	59	23
Has experienced violence/abuse from other family members or family friends	66	25
Has been in local authority care	66	25
Has children being looked after by someone else	67	26
Has literacy problems	56	21
Sometimes self harms	45	17
Has suffered the death of a long term partner	15	6
Has been in the armed forces	17	7

n=261[11]

triggered homelessness and at other times sustained it.

Table 5.5 also shows that long-term unemployment, mental and physical ill health, poor literacy, experience of care, disrupted education, and addiction was common amongst those surveyed.

Analysis of support needs suggests differential experiences by gender[12]. Men and women were equally as likely to have alcohol or drug dependencies, to have had a disrupted education, and to have experienced long term unemployment. However:

- Women were significantly more likely to have been victims of violence. More than half the women surveyed (54 per cent) had experienced violence or abuse from a partner compared with 16 per cent of men and 43 per cent had experienced violence or abuse from family member or friends of the family (compared with 22 per cent of men).
- The women surveyed were more likely to self harm (29 per cent compared with 15 per cent of men).
- Women were less likely to be care leavers (14 per cent compared with 27 per cent of men).
- Mental ill health was common across the sample but more so amongst women, nearly half of whom (45 per cent) reported mental health issues.
- More than one third of the women surveyed (38 per cent) reported having children who were being looked after by someone else[13].

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

12 These figures must be treated with a degree of caution. The sample of hidden homeless women was considerably smaller than the sample of hidden homeless men (44 women and 225 men).

13 The sample includes women who do not have children so the proportion of mothers whose children are being looked after by someone else will be considerably higher. The survey did not include a question asking whether respondents were parents.

5.3. Housing histories

Many of the people surveyed who were hidden homeless had first experienced homelessness relatively young (42 per cent by the age of 20), although 16 per cent were over the age of 41. Of the older people surveyed (aged 50+), 60 per cent had first experienced homelessness over the age of 41.

Prior to becoming homeless for the first time, respondents had been living in a range of accommodation situations, most commonly with parents but also in rented and owner occupied housing, in prison, children's homes and NASS accommodation (see table 5.6). Just under half (45 per cent) had been resident in their own independent accommodation, whether owned or rented, with 19 per cent having lived in the private rented sector immediately prior to their first episode of homelessness. Exploring interview respondents' housing careers suggests that most commonly, people stay with friends (11/25) or sleep rough (7/25) when they first become homeless. Only one respondent went directly into homelessness provision (a night shelter).

Table 5.6. Where were you living prior to becoming homeless for the first time?

	No.	%
At home with parents	62	25
House / flat rented from a private landlord	48	19
A council or Housing Association house / flat	33	13
Owner occupied flat / house	32	13
In your partner's home	23	9
In a children's home / with foster parents	14	6
In prison	16	6
In accommodation provided with a job	6	2
NASS accommodation	4	2
Other	11	4
Total	**249**	**100**

Homelessness had been triggered by a wide range of events and circumstances (see table 5.7). Rent arrears, relationship breakdown, familial conflict and eviction – all common known triggers of homelessness – were recorded as reasons for homelessness amongst the hidden homeless people surveyed. Nearly half the owner occupiers had left their accommodation to a situation of homelessness because of relationship breakdown. Of those who had become homeless from the parental home 34 per cent had been told to leave by their parents and a further 17 per cent left to escape abuse[14]. Respondents who had been living in the private rented sector had lost/left this accommodation for a range of reasons including:

- being unable to afford the rent (21 per cent);
- eviction for rent arrears (15 per cent);
- relationship breakdown (15 per cent);
- given notice for reasons other than anti-social behaviour or rent arrears (10 per cent).

Table 5.7. Reason for leaving that accommodation

	No.	%
Separation from a partner	52	20
Told to leave by parents	26	10
Evicted / repossessed for rent arrears	24	9
To escape abuse from someone other than a partner (e.g. a parent)	17	7
Accommodation was provided with a job which ended	12	5
Couldn't afford rent	12	5
Released or discharged from prison or hospital	10	4
Left to find work elsewhere	11	4

14 These figures must be treated with caution. Once the data are broken down by reason for homelessness and accommodation situation the numbers in each category are very small.

Given notice by a private landlord (other than for ASB/arrears)	9	3
Reached the age where you had to leave care	9	3
'Abandoned' a tenancy (e.g. walked out or handed the keys in)	7	3
To escape abuse from a partner	6	2
Evicted for anti-social behaviour	5	2
Failed asylum claim	5	2
General conflict within the HH (with parents, family, joint tenants)	5	2
Other	38	15
Don't know	10	4
Total	**258**[15]	**100**

Insufficient financial resources linked to limited employment opportunities or the loss of employment as a contributory factor in homelessness is worth noting. This is indicated by those evicted for rent arrears, those losing tied accommodation, moving to find work, and those unable to afford their rent (totalling 23 per cent of respondents). Service providers in one location in which surveying took place anecdotally reported seeing an increasing number of people, with previously stable lives, no history of homelessness and few support needs, joining the ranks of the hidden homeless as a result of redundancy and limited job opportunities. Concerns were expressed that this is likely to increase as the full impact of the spending cuts and changes to housing benefit come to the fore. It was reported that this group tend to stay with friends, expecting to find replacement work promptly and so delaying benefit claims and applications for housing.

Repeat homeless amongst participants was relatively common. Over two thirds (69 per cent) of survey respondents had experienced more than one episode of homelessness and one quarter (27 per cent) had experienced five or more episodes of homelessness. The experiences of interview respondents suggest that repeat homelessness is often triggered by similar events (relationship breakdown, violence, rent arrears) as first episodes of homelessness although failed tenancies are, perhaps, more common in repeat homelessness. Respondents had typically experienced a range of homelessness triggers during their housing career, with a first episode triggered by conflict in the family home, for example, but becoming homeless again because of a relationship breakdown or rent arrears.

5.4. Diversity

Similar issues and characteristics to those highlighted in the survey emerged in the personal histories and life circumstances of interview respondents, including evidence of multiple exclusion, the detrimental consequences of employment shocks, gendered differences, and the prevalence of repeat and youth homelessness. Certainly the presence of certain groups (A8 nationals, for example), the prevalence of certain characteristics (mental ill health, for example) and the shared experiences and consequences of hidden homelessness (see chapters 6-8) are noteworthy but it is the diversity of the sample of survey and interview respondents that is most striking. It includes:

- those who led stable lives until becoming homeless later in life because of job loss or relationship breakdown as well as people with multiple needs, a long history of chaotic homelessness, offending behaviour, and addiction;
- people who have owned their own homes as well as those who have never had settled housing;
- people requiring high levels of support to escape homelessness and sustain independent living and others with the cognitive resources to do so, but lacking adequately paid employment and/or the financial resources;

15 This number refers to those who gave a reason for leaving their last settled accomodation.

- people in all age groups and of a wide range of nationalities.

5.5. What distinguishes hidden homelessness from single homelessness?

At the outset, this study assumed that the hidden homeless population was a subset of the single homeless population, with distinct characteristics and experiences to be drawn out and exposed. Analysis of the survey, however, suggests this assumption to be fundamentally flawed. The lack of contrast between the hidden homeless respondents and the remainder of the sample (i.e. single homeless people who were not hidden when they were surveyed) was striking. No stark differences were evident, for example, in relation to the prevalence of various support needs (such as drug and alcohol problems, experience of care, literacy issues, mental and physical ill health) the likelihood of seeking assistance from the local authority, reason for becoming homeless and other aspects of housing careers (length of time homeless, age at which homeless is first experienced), or profile characteristics (age and ethnicity, for example).

The findings to emerge from this study, then, suggest that single homelessness and hidden homelessness are likely to be synonymous. This conclusion would concur with the findings presented in Chapter 4 suggesting that single homeless people spend most of their homeless careers hidden, sometimes accessing temporary accommodation but often not. A single homeless person currently in a hostel is very likely to have been part of the hidden homeless population in their recent history, or likely to become part of that population in the near future. In other words, to be a single homeless person in England is to be 'hidden'.

5.6. Key Findings

- The hidden homeless population is very diverse
- Notwithstanding this diversity, strong evidence of multiple exclusion amongst the hidden homeless people surveyed emerged
- Welfare needs such as mental ill health, drug and alcohol dependencies and long-term unemployment were relatively prevalent. Further analysis of support needs suggests differential experiences by gender, particularly in relation to experience of violence and mental health related issues
- Repeat and youth homelessness were very common amongst those surveyed
- The lack of distinction between the hidden homeless people surveyed and the remainder of the sample suggests that single homelessness and hidden homelessness are virtually synonymous. In other words, to be single and homeless is to be hidden

6. The experience of hidden homelessness

Exploring the housing careers of survey and interview respondents suggests that single people, finding themselves homeless, not entitled to temporary accommodation through the local authority, and unable, unwilling or unsure how to access hostels and other temporary housing typically rely on friends or sleep rough. Squatting and staying with family are also relatively common (see Table 4.2 in Chapter 4). In this chapter we explore the different accommodation situations on which hidden homeless people rely and their experiences of doing so. In considering homeless people's experiences of their 'hidden' accommodation, some of the consequences of hidden homelessness are highlighted. These themes are picked up and discussed further in Chapter 7.

6.1 Staying with friends and family

The evidence from this study suggests that single homeless people rely heavily on friends for accommodation during periods of homelessness. Exploring the homelessness careers of survey and interview respondents, the following key findings emerged:

- The majority of respondents (70 per cent of survey respondents and 24 out of 27 interview respondents) had stayed with friends during an episode of homelessness.
- Respondents' homelessness careers suggest that it is more common for single homeless people to rely on friends for temporary accommodation than on family although 37 per cent of survey respondents and nine (out of 26) interview respondents had done so.
- The majority of interview respondents stayed with friends when they *first* became homeless. Eleven (of 25) interview respondents stayed with friends on their first night of homelessness and a further three went to stay with family members.
- Respondents returned to friends time and time again during their homelessness careers whereas relatives were relied upon far less frequently. This partly reflects that friendship networks shift over time and new friendships are formed, providing further opportunities for places to stay. Kinship ties, in contrast, are more static.

Emma's homelessness career, presented below in Figure 6.1, illustrates the extent to which single homeless people rely on friends and family for accommodation. Despite periods of time in her own tenancy, and in refuges, Emma returned to friends time and again during episodes of homelessness. Her homelessness career also demonstrates that when friends and family have been exhausted, sleeping rough is often the only option.

There were no stark differences by gender, age group, or duration of homelessness to suggest that particular groups of homeless people rely on friends more than others, although A8 nationals were less likely to stay with friends than any other nationality grouping.

Some respondents were fortunate to have friends or relatives able to accommodate them for several months. This was most common where a friend or family member had a spare room and was not in receipt of benefits so the risks and inconvenience associated with accommodating a temporary guest were minimized.

Most respondents, however, were not so lucky and could only stay with friends for a night or two at a time. In some cases respondents *chose* to move on quickly so as not to outstay their welcome. A desire not to impose or be 'in the way' was a commonly expressed sentiment - *"it's their home at the end of the day and you don't want to invade their privacy"* (Andrea), *"I don't like become*

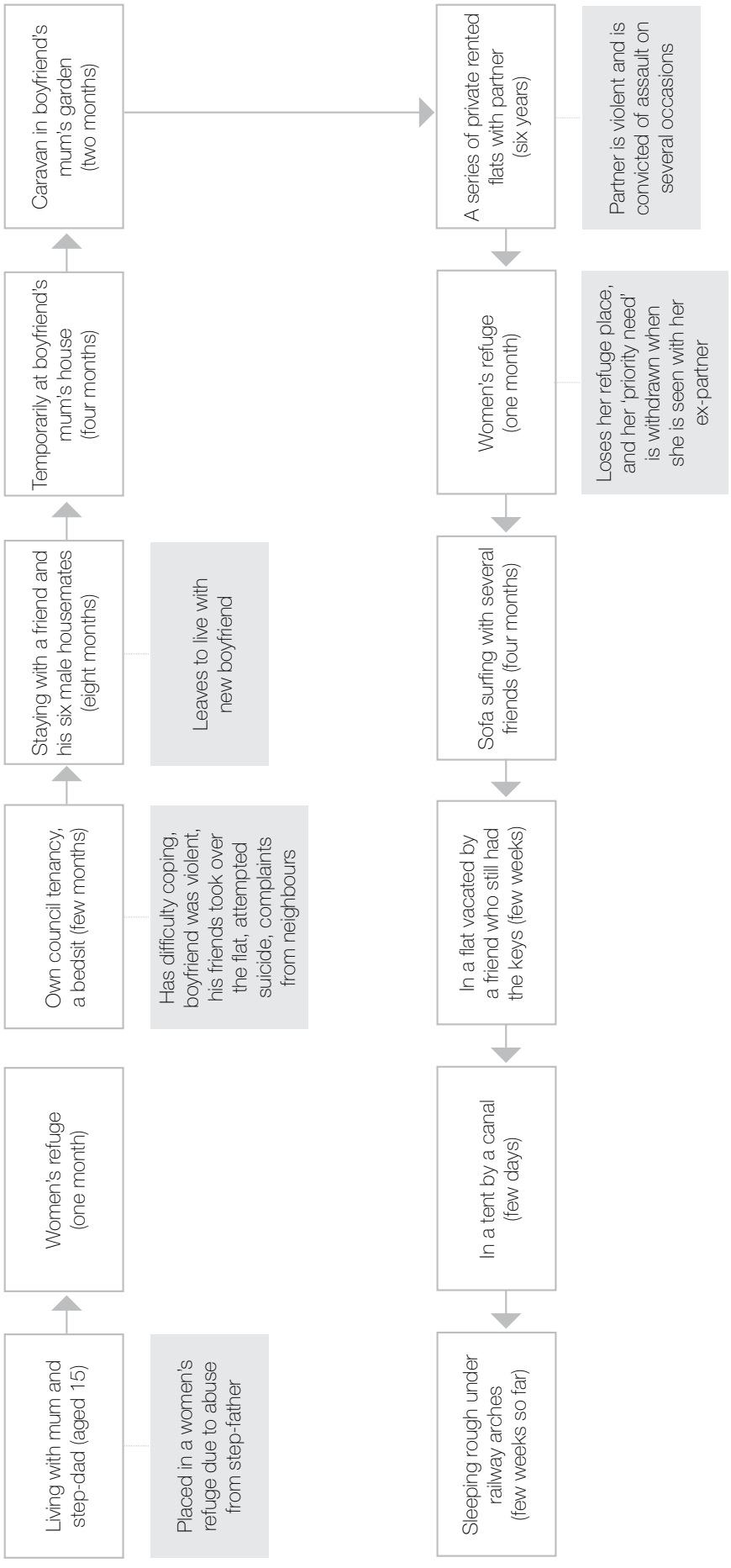


Figure 6.1. Emma's hidden homelessness career

a headache for people" (Derya). Concerns to maintain and protect the relationship, or a strategic decision that by not outstaying a welcome, one could keep the option open to return were also reasons for moving on. As Andrea explained:

> *"The thing is, it's good to have friends but when you start living with friends the friendship deteriorates. It's their home… so not to end any friendship on a bad note we always stay a day or two, then you're welcome to go back… Everybody says 'come and stay' but it soon wears off and it causes friction" (Andrea)*

Although staying with friends and family was common, not all homeless people have the option to do so. The extent to which homeless people can rely upon the generosity (and housing) of others depends upon them having social networks, friends who are in a position to assist, and good relations with relatives. Several respondents were very isolated, with few social relationships, and estranged from family (often because of abuse or because they had spent their childhood in care). Others had friends willing to help but *unable* to do so, for example because they lacked the space, still lived in the parental home, or were concerned about the affect on their benefits with another person temporarily resident.

6.1.1 Experiences and consequences of staying with friends and family

Temporary use of a friends' sofa or spare room can represent a safe, comfortable and familiar environment in which to stay. Such an arrangement can be preferable to a hostel or emergency accommodation such as night shelters, particularly for those with no prior experience of homelessness and for whom such environments can feel threatening and unfamiliar. Some in this situation do not even identify themselves as homeless, believing they will soon be on their feet again but need

Insecurity, poor conditions, risk, danger and exploitation characterised respondents experiences of sofa surfing

somewhere to stay briefly until they do so. Basia, for example, a highly skilled professional, was made redundant and gave up her expensive rented flat so she did not fall into arrears. She expected to find another job within a few months and had a friend with a spare room willing to let her stay. Basia had been 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, because I was going for interviews, that I told myself it would be one month, a month and a half [staying with my friend], and that is a period long enough in normal circumstances to find a job" (Basia)*

Basia is no longer staying with her friend but at the time it represented a viable, acceptable option. She had her own room, could use the facilities, the flat was comfortable, in excellent condition and she was spending time with a good friend.

Basia's experience, however, was rare. Respondents' accounts of their time spent staying with friends and family revealed a host of difficulties. Lack of space and privacy was a key concern, with most sleeping on the sofa in a living room or sometimes sharing a bedsit with a friend or, in one case, a couple. In the remainder of this section we spotlight some of the difficulties and challenges associated with relying on friends and family for temporary accommodation. These are:

- Some respondents reported **not being able to remain in the property during the day or use the facilities,** having to rely

instead on day centre's to meet their basic needs. Nancy, for example, explained that she used day centres for washing, meals and laundry, despite contributing financially to the household in which she was staying. *"I was only sleeping there really more than anything. It was just somewhere to get me head down at night".*

- **Insecurity was a key concern.** When an arrangement ends it can do so suddenly, without notice, and at any time of the day or night giving respondents no time to arrange other accommodation and no option but to sleep rough. In fact, one quarter of the rough sleepers surveyed had last been accommodated temporarily by friends or family. Those with a large network of friends and family could keep a roof over their heads most nights by moving around their social circle, not placing undue burden on any one individual. For many, however, the consequence of restrictions on their temporary residency was rough sleeping for much of the time. Harvey, for example, spent a night or two each week with friends and the rest of the time he slept rough:

  "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)

- **Managing financial expectations** also proved problematic. As temporary guests, respondents could not claim Housing Benefit but some were expected to contribute to housing costs. This was virtually impossible for those on benefits. Simon for example, handed over more than half his income (Job Seekers Allowance) to his friend even though the rent on the one bedroom flat was already covered by housing benefit.

- A small number of respondents described **extremely poor living conditions** or circumstances they found intolerable in their friend or relatives' accommodation. Douglas, for example, explained that *"I was sofa surfing in this vile terraced house, full of damp and rats in the back garden"* and several respondents recounted being temporarily accommodated by friends who were drug users or problematic drinkers and whose homes were frequented daily by other addicts.

  "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 and she wasn't that clean either and I couldn't cope with that either" (Nancy)

- Problematic living conditions in friends' houses were found to **impact on respondents capacity to sustain employment.** Michael, for example, had become homeless following separation from his partner and had full time employment. But holding down paid employment while sleeping in a living room where people were taking drugs late into the night was simply not sustainable and he lost his job.

  ".. where I was stopping there were people taking drugs and a lot of people coming...it wasn't good for me because I just needed somewhere where I could get my head round what just happened to me, plus working as well. It was very difficult indeed because there was times I was not being able to get enough hours sleep to go into

work and wasn't performing good at work…cos of no sleep and bad timekeeping I had to give the job up" (Michael)

- Several respondents expressed a keen sense of **embarrassment or shame**, and felt they were taking from their friends without the capacity to reciprocate, for example:

  "I'd try and chip in money for food and stuff and I could but sometimes I felt like they was giving me more than I was giving them" (Joseph)

  "They're there if I ask them, I've been embarrassed, I've been ashamed but I've asked and they have put me up, respect due to them" (Michael)

- The accounts of some respondents suggested that **homeless people sofa surfing can be vulnerable to exploitation**. Several respondents, typically those with income from employment or disability benefits, felt they had been financially exploited, having been required to contribute disproportionately to the household costs, lend (give) money to their friends and buy items for the house. This served to hamper their efforts to secure independent accommodation for themselves as all disposable income was being appropriated through one means or another. Others reported having possessions stolen. Douglas and Eric recall their experiences:

  "…they constantly 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 so I left." (Douglas)

  "I ended up meeting a guy in a day centre who had a flat…I was only there for about a week but he basically stole all my clothes from me, sold them…totally robbed me" (Eric)

- Evidence also emerged of **exposure to significant risks and dangers**. This was very apparent in Eric and Emma's accounts, their personal safety clearly compromised. The ages of these two young people make their depiction of sofa surfing all the more disturbing. Eric had run away at 13 from foster carers and made his way to London while Emma, a vulnerable young women traumatised by years of sexual abuse and who had recently attempted suicide had been evicted from her flat, which had been taken over by her (violent) partner's friends:

  "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, then aged 13)

  "I stayed with a friend but he was about 30 odd and he had like seven different people living there in a one bedroom flat and it was not very hygienic and it was all male and I was the only girl. They used to walk in the bathroom while I was in the bath, just use the toilet while I was in the bath. I didn't like it but I was there a good few months" (Emma, then aged 16)

6.1.2. Other forms of 'sofa surfing'

Homeless people who stay temporarily with friends or relatives are often referred to as 'sofa surfers'. The image conjured is of someone moving from friend to friend, sleeping on a sofa for a few nights or weeks before moving on to another friend or family member. This is certainly one way in which

homeless people use friends and family in times of housing crisis. But the term does not accurately depict, nor fully capture the range of ways in which homeless people rely on accommodation provided by other people. The experience of 'sofa surfing' is more wide ranging and nuanced. Amongst the homeless people interviewed for this study it included:

- **Exchanging 'services' for a roof.** Several respondents were able to stay temporarily with friends or acquaintances by offering a service in exchange. The line between temporary guest, lodger, and domestic employee becomes somewhat blurred here although in each case respondents paid no rent, they were paid no salary, the arrangement was temporary, and entered into in order to resolve their immediate housing crisis.

  Carla, for example, secured temporary accommodation in this way several times during her two years of homelessness. She agreed to clean for one friend and cook for another in return for a roof over her head. On both occasions she only stayed a few weeks.

  Nancy spent 18 months sleeping on the sofa at an elderly friend's house in return for taking on caring responsibilities. Her elderly friend was frail and needed assistance with personal and health care as well as domestic tasks.

  In a variation on these kinds of arrangements, Derya, a 60 year old Turkish woman, frequently accompanied friends to hospital or doctors appointments, offering support and translating for them. This 'bought' Derya a favour which friends would repay as soon as possible, allowing her to spend a night or two when their husbands were away (she slept rough the rest of the time).

  In several cases respondents reported these arrangements to be less than satisfactory, usually on the basis that their 'services' were assumed to be infinitely flexible. Carla, for example, found that she was acting as live-in counsellor to her friend, that the cleaning task she had agreed to take on was more extensive than anticipated, and that she was expected to contribute to the household budget despite thinking she had covered her contribution through domestic chores.

  > *"She wanted someone to go in and help her clean her home and in exchange she was going to feed [and house] me but it never kind of worked out that way. I ended up buying stuff and there was all this emotional stuff and I was cleaning this huge conservatory which was just mouldy and disgusting…" (Carla)*

- **House sitting.** At least two interview respondents had been allowed to 'house sit' for friends or acquaintances while they were away. One had moved from one house sitting 'job' to another, keeping a roof over her head for several months. There was some scope for misunderstanding the terms of such an agreement, however, and Douglas, for example, reported that his friend, who had agreed Douglas could house sit while he was on holiday for two weeks, requested £50 on his return for the privilege of staying there.

- **Insecure tenancies.** A couple of respondents described situations whereby a group of people shared a property and were informally deemed to have equal right to residence but legally only one individual held the tenancy. Occupancy fluctuated over time with people moving out for a while and returning again, or new friends joining the group. Sometimes the tenancy would terminate, a member of the group would take a tenancy elsewhere, and the arrangement would continue in a different property. Occupants were not always

clear which member of the group held the tenancy and whether it was them who did so. Martin, who moved through several such properties explained that:

> *"The idea was that everyone had somewhere to stay basically…There was a group of us, four people and if the fifth hadn't got anywhere to go, well, you would share" (Martin)*

Simon described even more flexible circumstances in a property he had been visiting and staying in temporarily since he was 15 and in which he later lived on a longer term basis (informally and as the legal tenant):

> *"It was a house, you could use whatever bedroom you wanted… there were one person claiming housing benefit and [others] just crashing out in the house…just invite your friends round who aren't getting on with their parents and that…we used to go in the early '90's when I were about 15…one of me friends used to live there, used to go and stay all the time…". (Simon)*

This arrangement worked well for Martin and Simon for several years. The relatively frequent mobility (Martin) and the absence of security of tenure were of little concern to them. The problem with such informal arrangements came to the fore, however, when the block of flats in which Martin lived was cleared for demolition and he had no right to rehousing. Simon had served a short jail term, assuming he could return to the property in which he had been living, to find it had been sold without his knowledge.

- **Staying with acquaintances.** The friends with whom homeless people stay are often people known to them over many years, people they are close to, grew up with, or other homeless people with whom they have formed a close friendships and who help them out once they secure permanent accommodation. The experiences of several of the respondents quoted above, including Simon, Eric and Emma, illustrates, however, that homeless people often have to rely on acquaintances, people they hardly know, or friends of friends. Safety of the person and the property cannot be guaranteed in such precarious housing situations.

6.2. Squatting

The evidence from this study suggests that squatting is a common way in which single homeless people accommodate themselves. In exploring the homelessness careers of survey and interview respondents, the following key findings emerged:

- Squatting is not a marginal or minority tenure amongst the homeless population. Ten (of 26) interview respondents and 39 per cent of survey respondents had squatted during an episode of homelessness. To put this in perspective, only 32 per cent of survey respondents had lived in a private rented tenancy, 36 per cent in a social housing tenancy, and 11 per cent in owner occupation (in total 55 per cent of respondents had lived in at least one of those tenures).

- Men were slightly more likely than women to have squatted (42 per cent) although nearly one third of women (29 per cent) reported having done so.

- There was some evidence to suggest that A8 nationals form a significant proportion of the squatting population - a relatively high proportion were squatting on the night they were surveyed (22 per cent compared with 6 per cent of the full sample and comprising more than half of those currently squatting), although they were no more likely to report having *ever* squatted (the same proportion

of A8 nationals reported ever having squatted as the full sample).

- Once a person has squatted they tend to return to squatting a number of times. Seven of the ten interview respondents who had squatted, for example, had done so more than once.

- Squatting was not always entered into later in respondents' homelessness careers once they had exhausted all other options. Squatting was sometimes the first port of call.

- Squats were usually found through social networks, or by walking around an area, identifying empty residential or commercial buildings. Respondents who found squats through social networks tended to live with other people and rarely had to 'open' a squat themselves, relying instead on being invited to move into an existing squat. Those who wandered the streets in search of an empty building were usually looking for emergency shelter, rather than a medium term solution to their rooflessness.

6.2.1 Experiences and consequences of squatting

Respondents' experiences of squatting, and the circumstances and conditions in which they squatted were extremely varied, making it difficult to identify shared experiences or generate generalised findings. In 2004, Crisis commissioned research to explore homeless people's experience of squatting which pointed to a similar diversity (Reeve, 2004). The study identified a series of distinctions between different kinds of squatting situations which is usefully employed here. These were:

- **Continuous squatters and intermittent squatters**. (the former tend to remain stable until evicted, often in households with people they have chosen to live with while the latter are more mobile, often using squatting as respite from rough sleeping).

- **Cohesive squats and non-cohesive squats** (the former comprising relatively static households of people considering themselves to be a unit and who chose to live together; the latter comprising a transient population, sometimes operating an 'open house' policy and sometimes associated with drug use)

- **Squatting as a medium term 'solution' and squatting as an emergency measure** (the former describing situations where people attempt to make a home for themselves on an ongoing basis; the latter describing squatting which represents little more than emergency shelter for a short period)

Squatting is not a marginal tenure amongst homeless people - 39% of respondents had squatted.

The evidence from this study broadly supports the typology presented in the 2004 report. Some respondents described reasonable conditions in their squats, a relatively 'cohesive' and stable household comprising people attempting to make their squat home for as long as they were allowed to remain there, and talking positively about their experiences. This was true of Eric, for example. Eric and his household moved through a series of squats over several years, moving on only when they faced eviction rather than by choice or because of dissatisfaction with their living conditions. Most of the squats he lived in had amenities such as electricity and running hot water, and Eric reported feeling safe.

Nancy similarly described good conditions in her squat. This was due to informal arrangements operating on the estate where she squatted whereby people terminating a tenancy would pass keys onto homeless people in need of temporary housing. By doing so, homeless people could 'inherit'

properties before amenities had been disconnected and properties had fallen into disrepair. It is not clear how widespread this practice is, but Nancy duly treated the property as her home, paying her bills as if she were a tenant:

> *"Oh yeah [we had] a cooker and everything in there, with hot and cold water…a flat would come empty or somebody would be moving out and just give you the keys and tell you to move in…I always paid my way as well, never wired it [electricity] up or anything like that coz it's too dodgy..you just put money on the [meter] card" (Nancy)*

Others participating in this study had very different experiences, however, and squatting was a far cry from the picture painted by Nancy and Eric. Indeed the distinction between squatting and rough sleeping was, in some cases, difficult to discern, as Harvey's account of squatting illustrates well:

> *"You just look round, you find empty buildings where you're not going to bother anyone and you go in. Doesn't matter if the windows are put through or whatever, you're going to make your own little cardboard bed and whatever, and put paper down your trousers through the night and even buy some Vaseline and rub it over your skin so it keeps in you body heat" (Harvey)*

Respondents reported a host of difficulties associated with squatting. These were very similar to those raised by respondents regarding temporary stays with friends or relatives, centring on insecurity, safety, property conditions, and concerns about other residents. In the remainder of this section we explore some of the difficulties and challenges associated with squatting.

- **Insecurity**. Squats were typically short lived. Some respondents squatted continuously for several years but very rarely in the same property. In some cases this reflected a combination of the transience of the respondent (mobile, moving from friend to squat to sleeping rough) and the conditions within the squat (poor living conditions, no facilities and an ever-changing household many of whom are drug users). In other cases however, short lived residency of a squat reflected the eviction cycle. Eric explained that it typically took three months for a property owner (private or council) to realise their property was squatted, for the legal process to work through, and an eviction order to be granted. Typically respondents moved on rather than defending themselves in a possession hearing or waiting for an eviction to take place.

- **Risk of criminalisation**. Respondents entered, or 'opened' a squat through broken doors or windows but reported sometimes having to break in. Unlike other forms of hidden homelessness, then, squatting exposes homeless people to the risk of arrest and imprisonment. Squatting is not a criminal offence but criminal damage, or 'breaking and entering' is[16]. So, while the act of squatting is not a crime, squatting can necessitate the committing of an offence. Chris' story, presented as a case study on page 33, is an illustration of this, and of the damaging consequences of squatting for some homeless people. Despite having no other criminal convictions, Chris has served four prison sentences for squatting.

- **Fire safety**. Fire safety was a concern raised by several respondents, particularly in squats without heating and electricity or those where residents may not be vigilant.

16 There are some circumstances in which squatting is illegal. This includes: squatting on embassy property; squatting in property that is currently occupied as someone's home (a 'displaced residential occupier') or in a property that someone is about to move into (a protected intending occupier); and continuing to squat more than 24 hours after an Interim Possession Order has been serviced.

As Douglas explained:

> *"I was always wary that something would go seriously wrong…They would either use candles or they would make a little camp fire, little bricks and they'd burn bits of paper to keep warm sometimes…one night I'm lying on my bed and just thought 'something's up' I could just sense something was wrong. I couldn't settle so I went down and one lad, he'd got a candle, put it on the carpet, it burnt the carpet, the carpet's now on fire and it's literally an inch away from his bed and he's off his face on vodka and heroin and cannabis, he's unconscious." (Douglas)*

- **Poor physical and environment conditions, including lack of amenities** also emerged as a key concern. For example:

> *"It was rat infested, water everywhere, needles, urine, smashed ceiling, freezing cold in the winter, candles, tin foils, needles, can's, drugs." (Douglas)*

> *"The ground floor is ruined, we think there was burning, but second floor is quite good. There is three rooms… in this room live with me three men." (Andnej)*

Andnej, quoted directly above, sleeps on the floor in a sleeping bag he was given by a local day centre. There is no electricity or running water in the squat. The residents have managed to obtain a few pieces of furniture and carpeting by finding things in skips but conditions are poor and basic. He has been living in a series of very similar squats for the past two years.

- **Other dangers**. The potential dangers of squatting were illustrated by Andnej's experience of a property being boarded up while he was inside, the owner having no idea someone was squatting there. Fortunately a friend was outside the property and able to help Andnej get out. Other respondents reported moving out of squats because it had come to their attention that the flats in which they were squatting were due for imminent demolition.

6.2.2 Squatting: a case study

Chris's story, outlined on p33, usefully illustrates many issues spotlighted in the preceding discussion about squatting and common in the accounts of other squatters interviewed including:

- Squatting can occur very early in someone's homelessness career. In Chris's case he went directly from long term settled accommodation to a squat.

- Squatting can represent the absence of other options. Chris had no friends or family, no knowledge about other homelessness services and the service from which he sought advice (the local authority) offered no meaningful assistance.

- Once a homeless person has squatted, they often return to squatting again when facing a housing crisis. In other words squatting quickly becomes an option readily considered during repeat episodes of homelessness.

- There can be a fine line between squatting and rough sleeping. Most of the properties in which Chris squatted had no amenities, he had no furniture or soft furnishings, and slept on the floor in a sleeping bag.

- Squatting potentially results in imprisonment (although Chris was the only interview respondent to have been imprisoned for crimes relating to squatting) and a criminal record, even when a homeless person is acting in desperation and has no other options for temporary accommodation.

Case Study: Chris

Chris went to live with his grandma in her 2-bed council flat when he was aged 15, following problems at home. Chris cared for his grandma, who suffered poor health, doing all the cooking, shopping and cleaning. They got on well and Chris, a solitary person, was happy there. 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. He was given a 'home finder pack' which he could not read.

Estranged from his parents and with no friends to rely on Chris walked around until he came across an empty flat, broke in and squatted there for a week. Chris had no knowledge of homelessness services other than the council ("I didn't know anywhere, didn't know anything"). Facing harassment from local kids who discovered him in the squat he moved on to a disused warehouse. After a month of squatting there 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 then 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 flat or building and squatted. He was arrested, convicted and imprisoned for breaking and entering a further three times during these years (he was given sentences of 6 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.

Chris' relationship irretrievably broke down when he came out of prison two months ago having served his last sentence. He did not bother returning to the local authority. When he was interviewed Chris had been sleeping rough for two months, too scared to squat because to do so would breach his license and he could be sent back to prison. He uses a local day centre for food and washing facilities.

6.3 Sleeping rough

The introduction of Rough Sleeper Teams in the early 1990's made a significant contribution to reducing rough sleeping and to helping rough sleepers' access hostels and similar provision. As support for rough sleepers has increased, their access to hostel accommodation has improved. Additional hostel and supported housing spaces were developed, and in many towns and cities, including several of those in which this study was conducted, a number of bed spaces are reserved in hostels for people referred through rough sleepers' teams. Despite this, it would appear that rough sleeping remains highly prevalent amongst the non-statutory homeless population and that people have to sleep rough for extended periods of time. Exploring the homelessness careers of survey and interview respondents, the following key findings emerged:

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

- The vast majority of respondents had slept rough. We reported in Chapter 4 that 40 per cent had done so the night prior to being surveyed and 76 per cent during an episode of homelessness (79 per cent of men and 66 per cent of women). Similarly, all but two (out of 26) interview respondents had slept rough.

- 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.

- Rough sleeping was not an emergency measure endured for a night or two until adequate shelter could be found. The majority of respondents had endured sustained periods of rough sleeping. More than half (59 per cent) of those sleeping rough when they were surveyed had been doing so continuously for more than one month and 31 per cent for more than six months. A total of 16 per cent had been sleeping rough for between six months and one year (see table 6.1, p35). Similarly, all but two interview respondents had endured periods of rough sleeping lasting more than a week and when respondents did sleep rough, most commonly they did so for at least one month. Harvey and Jason had both suffered extended periods of rough sleeping. They described their experiences:

  "There was a restaurant bloke, he used to get one of them wheelie bins, wash it out for me, put cardboard inside it and turn it upside down…I was in that for about a year and a half and he used to come and give me food. I was in a wheelie bin upside down…I probably would have died of hypothermia if it weren't for him… it was my igloo, I loved it, it was well warm" (Harvey, then aged 16)

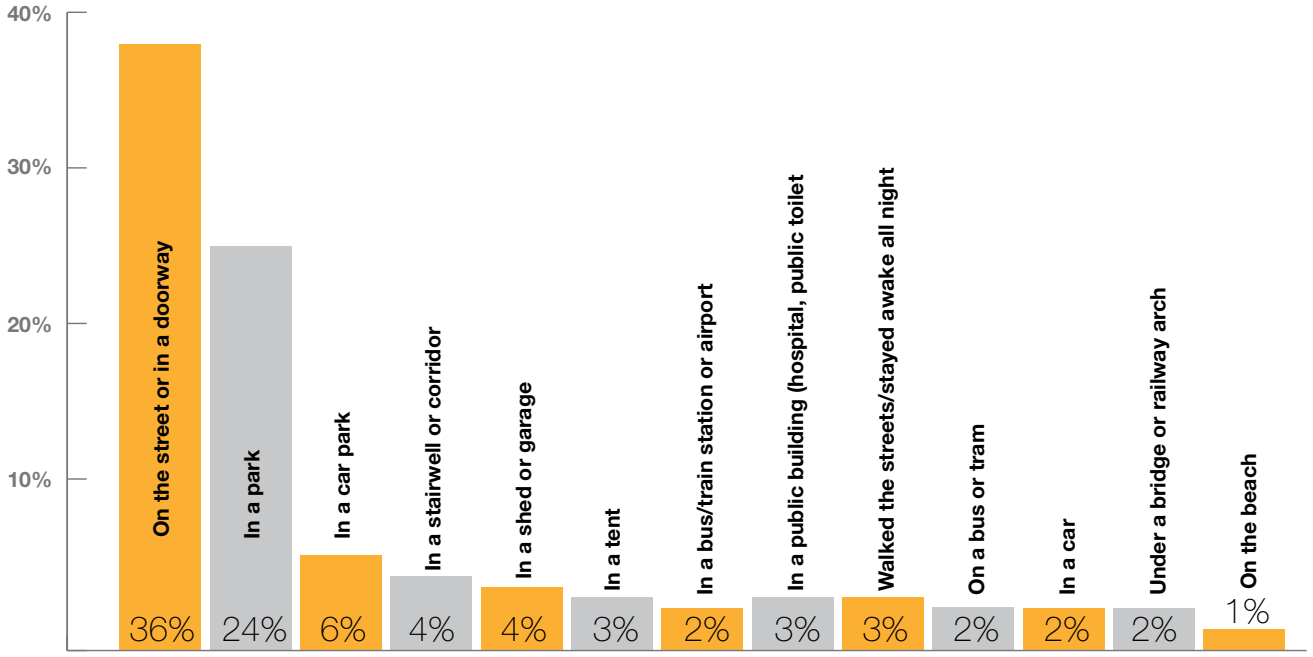
  "My mates, they gave me a tent and I put the tent up in [common land] and that's where I was for about a year and a half…when the snow was on the floor and everything, on a grass verge" (Jason, then aged 18)

- Respondents did not resort to rough sleeping only occasionally – most had slept rough more than once.

Rough sleeping, then, was common, frequent and enduring amongst those participating in the study. The evidence also suggests that single homeless people resort to rough sleeping very early in their homelessness careers. For example:

- seven (out of 25) interview respondents slept rough on the first night of their first episode of homelessness.

Figure 6.2. Where did you sleep last night? (current rough sleepers)



- 12 (out of 25) interview respondents had slept rough within three months of becoming homeless for the first time.
- 19 per cent of survey respondents currently sleeping rough said their last accommodation had been a private or social rented tenancy, suggesting they had moved directly from being housed to rough sleeping.

Table 6.1. How long have you been sleeping rough continuously? (Current rough sleepers)

	No.	%
Less than a week	31	19
1 week but less than 1 month	33	20
1 month but less than 6 months	46	28
6 months but less than 1 year	26	16
1 year but less than 3 years	14	9
3 years but less than 6 years	7	4
More than 6 years	4	2
Can't remember/don't know	2	1
Total	**163**	**100**

It was more common for respondents to have slept rough than to have lived in any other housing situation

Most commonly, the rough sleepers surveyed were sleeping on the streets or in parks but figure 6.2. (above) shows the varied locations in which respondents bedded down. Interview respondents reported sleeping in similarly varied locations but sleeping in tents (typically pitched on common or waste land) was more common than indicated by the survey findings. Walking through the night was also a way in which the rough sleepers interviewed coped with their situation. Lorna, for example, explained that *"I've done it where I've not slept at all and just walk the streets all night and day".*

It is of interest that nearly three quarters of respondents were sleeping in locations other than streets and doorways – locations which were more 'out of sight' (see Figure 6.2). This

may help explain why so many were apparently unknown to rough sleepers' teams and raises the possibility that rough sleeping is more prevalent and more invisible than it is thought to be. Visibility emerged as an issue in the interview data also with several respondents saying they chose places to sleep where they would not be seen. Neil, for example, explained that *"I was sleeping on scaffolding, it was out of the way, nobody bothered me up there"*. Other locations included a walk-in cupboard housing the rubbish bins in a block of flats, a beach hut, an upturned wheelie bin, or places some distance from known rough sleeper sites. A desire to remain out of sight was particularly common, although not exclusive to, women:

> *"It was actually in [X churchyard]…we had a tiny tent that was hidden by bushes so you couldn't even see it" (Hope)*

> *"I don't go by Trafalgar Square, the Strand and all that where lots of homeless people go, I avoid that area and I try to seek out places that are, you can't stay safe but relatively…" (Marcia)*

The implication of these findings is that there may be considerably more people sleeping rough than is acknowledged. This in turn could pose challenges for the GLA commitment to eradicate rough sleeping in London by 2012 and the 'no second night out' initiative in London which aims to ensure that anyone new arriving on the streets does not spend a second night sleeping rough.

6.3.1. Experiences and consequences of rough sleeping

Daily life was a struggle for all the rough sleepers interviewed. Meeting basic needs (warmth, shelter, food), staying safe and retaining essential possessions posed significant challenges. Lorna described the experience of rooflessness in the following terms:

> *"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)*

A similar sense of despair was expressed by Emma:

> *"I've got to sleep on the streets with old men, I'm only young, I'm not old yet, I've only just turned 23…it was freezing last night, I didn't sleep last night…I just can't do it anymore." (Emma)*

Those with no safe place to store their belongings, such as day centres (some offer this invaluable facility) or friends' houses had to stash possessions in bushes and bin bays. The risks were high and several respondents reported having had their belongings stolen, a disaster if this contained a sleeping bag and warm clothing.

Violence, exploitation, and the lasting effects of the harsh conditions associated with constant exposure to the elements were also reported.

> *"The cold has left me like this now [shaking]. You'd think I'd been drinking. I got wet last night." (Alan)*

> *"[Sleeping rough was] just horrible really. People, other people have probably been homeless longer, they saw that I was a bit vulnerable and easily led and stuff like that. I got involved with more crime through them and like more shoplifting, burgling." (Joseph)*

Case Study: Marie

In 2005 Marie, then aged 55 and living alone, formed a relationship and moved into her new partner's home. Marie did not work and was financially dependent on her partner. Three years later they separated and, with no right to remain in the property, she had to leave. Marie approached the local authority and made a homelessness application but was told she was not in priority need. Marie 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 took a small bag with her containing a sleeping bag and essentials - she has mobility problems and cannot carry much weight - and chose the park over other locations because it afforded a degree of safety, being some distance from other rough sleepers. She spent the days walking around and reading in the library.

Marie had a couple of friends that she could stay with occasionally for a couple of nights but their family commitments prevented them from offering a longer-term arrangement. Over the next three months Marie moved between the park and her friends' homes. She was informed by a friend of a local drop in centre which provided meals, washing facilities and advice. Staff there helped her claim JSA, helped her apply to go on the housing register and made an application to a local housing association with a scheme for the over 55s. In the meantime the willingness and ability of her friends to accommodate Marie dried up and she slept rough in the park continuously for a month. At the end of this month the Rough Sleeper's team finally found Marie, and secured her a place in a hostel.

Several respondents reported having suffered violent attacks:

> *"Yeah, mainly sleeping rough. I remember getting battered" (Eric)*

> *"I've been stabbed, I've had a gun in my head, I've been stabbed through the arm… sleeping rough, people coming up beating you up" (Harvey)*

In contrast to the reports above were some reports of kindness and generosity. Day centres were invaluable and most respondents only managed to survive by relying on these organisations and on the good will and kindness of others, including friends, strangers and local businesses. One respondent had friends willing to wash his clothes for him and others gave accounts of local shopkeepers, vicars, and strangers giving them food, hot drinks, clothing and, occasionally, money.

> *"Went to the market had a good hot wash [in the toilets], scrounged a towel off one of the women on the market stalls, come here [day centre] and had a shave" (Alan)*

6.3.2 Sleeping rough: a case study

Marie's homelessness career illustrates many of the issues raised in the preceding discussion about rough sleeping. Her story illustrates, for example, that rough sleeping can occur very early in someone's homelessness career and that 'out of the way' locations are preferred sites for bedding down. It also illustrates the way in which someone with no prior experience of homelessness and a relatively stable life can quickly find themselves sleeping rough when their circumstances change. When her relationship broke down Marie moved from a situation of having been adequately and securely housed for 58 years to sleeping on a park bench.

6.4 Other forms of hidden homelessness

Squatting and staying with friends and relatives are commonly acknowledged forms of hidden homeless as is rough sleeping. But a range of other, lesser known forms of hidden homelessness were revealed by interview respondents. These are detailed below and begin to show that hidden homelessness extends beyond sofa surfing and other known forms of 'hidden' accommodation into a range of precarious and marginal housing situations.

6.4.1 Privately run homelessness hostels

Respondents in one city described a network of small, privately run hostels offering direct access short term accommodation to homeless people. Residents were reportedly required to pay rent in addition to that covered by Housing Benefit, ostensibly to cover the costs of domestic services (cleaning and basic meals). Conditions were reportedly extremely poor and meals and cleaning services provided only occasionally.

> *"Housing benefit plus ten quid a week and you're living in squalor. You ever see that programme The Young One's? Worse than that. And I done that on and off for ages" (Alan)*

No support or assistance was made available and there was some suggestion that these were private enterprises established with the express purpose of generating profit at the expense of homeless people.

6.4.2 Caravans and tents

At least five interview respondents had spent some of their homelessness career in caravans or tents pitched unlawfully in woods, on wasteland or in friend's and family's gardens. In some instances respondents bought a cheap caravan or tent to use as a (static) structure in which to stay while others stayed in those belonging to their friends or relatives. In the latter case, this represented a way in which friends and relatives with limited space in their home could temporarily accommodate a homeless friend. In 2010, the Government extended the official definition of rough sleeping to include homeless people sleeping in tents and these people will now be included in the estimates and rough sleeper counts carried out by local authorities.

6.4.3 Hotels, B&Bs and backpacker hostels

Nine (out of 25) interview respondents had been private guests in hotels, B&Bs and backpacker hostels. Usually these were establishments with no specific remit for accommodating homeless people although a couple of respondents had directly accessed B&Bs in which all other residents were statutory homeless people placed there by the local authority. Thus Hope explained: *"it was a B&B that was technically run by the council but…I was one of the private renting people there, I was working".*

Some respondents had engaged in sex work and theft to pay for a hotel or B&B for the night

Some respondents, like Lorna, spent an occasional night in a B&B or cheap hotel as respite from rough sleeping:

> *"I've been to B&Bs, I've booked into hotels but I'm not doing that any more, it's too expensive, I can't afford it…..I suffer from mental health, it's not just mental health it's physical health as well. Don't forget I'm 39 now as well, I just wanted a break, I just wanted to watch telly, have a bath, jump on a bed [laughs]…one night's all I can afford… finding it hard to save my money up now." (Lorna)*

Others were resident for longer periods, from a few weeks to several months. Basia, who described her accommodation as an 'upmarket hostel', had lost her job, given up her rented flat as a result, and was surviving on money borrowed from her family. Basia is not eligible for benefits, being an A8 national who had only worked continuously for ten of the previous 12 months (she worked continuously for two years prior to that). She reported that many of the residents were using the hostel as a medium term solution to housing and financial insecurity and that these hostels offered a way for people like her, with no secure income, to manage the risks (and up front costs) associated with renting. She explained:

> *"they [hostels] are principally for travellers but there are other people as well so there would be weekly rates for those who stay on the mid to long term….there is a high per cent of those that are managing their risky situation and using this kind of lodgings for the mid to long term stay…because of the renting situation you avoid deposits, you avoid any problems and hassle with having the contract, it's not committing and all that, it's on a weekly basis." (Basia)*

One respondent was able to claim Housing Benefit for his short stay (in a B&B) but in all other cases respondents covered the cost of hotels, B&Bs and hostels themselves. They did so using savings, accrued benefits, credit cards, income from employment, and borrowed funds. Several were given reduced rates or free accommodation (an occasional night or on a longer term basis) in exchange for helping out, for example staffing the reception or undertaking domestic duties.

Alarmingly, some respondents had funded accommodation with money earned from sex work and shoplifting. Seven per cent of survey respondents (20 per cent of women and 3 per cent of men) said they had engaged in sex work to raise money for a hotel and 30 per cent reported having shoplifted to fund somewhere to stay. Harvey explained why, at the age of 16, he engaged in sex work to pay for a B&B. Having left home to escape sexual abuse and not yet old enough to claim benefits (and unaware of the benefits available to people in his circumstances), Harvey was desperate:

> *"I had to sell my body…[for] B&Bs, just going down there and raise money in the ways I've done…just desperate for money, starving, things like that." (Harvey)*

Harvey has only ever engaged in sex work to raise money for food and accommodation. He is not a drug user and has not been involved in prostitution at any other time, or to raise funds for any other purpose.

6.4.4. In prison or hospital, due to be released or discharged with nowhere to go

Eleven (out of 26) interview respondents and 33 per cent of survey respondents had been in prison or young offenders institutions. It was extremely rare for interview respondents to have been released into temporary accommodation and many pointed to the lack of housing advice and assistance in prison. Respondents were told to approach the council when they were released, or were given information packs, but very few were assisted to resolve their homelessness or given advice which helped them to do so. Chris's comments (see his case study above) were typical:

> *"I told them in prison I had no housing* [interviewer: can you tell me what help you got?] *None whatsoever, absolutely none… apart from 'go to the town hall.'" (Chris)*

Collectively, respondents had served 18 prison sentences during episodes of homelessness[17] and were released to a

17 A further six sentences had been served during periods of settled housing when respondents were able to return to the marital or parental home in which they were living when they were taken into custody.

situation of hidden homelessness 13 times. On seven occasions homelessness was precipitated by a prison sentence, with respondents losing settled accommodation whilst in custody. In a couple of cases the end of a relationship prevented respondents returning to the home in which they previously lived in but in others respondents were unable to maintain rental payments. Simon, who has served several prison sentences, was encouraged to surrender his council tenancy but was under the impression he would be offered another on release. He explained:

> *"When you're in prison you pay rent on the flat for a month or summat and then when your paid month is up a housing support person comes to see you in prison and says 'you might as well give your flat up coz you're going to get rent arrears'. So, 'fair enough, I'll give the flat up, I'll get one when I get out again', and they said 'yeah'. It's been two years now." (Simon)*

Most commonly, respondents stayed temporarily with friends or slept rough on release from prison and had no idea where they were going to spend the night when they walked out the prison gates. In fact, 7 per cent of all the survey respondents who had slept rough on the night of the survey reported that they had been in prison immediately before their current episode of rough sleeping.

Typically, respondents moving from prison directly into temporary accommodation were those in the care of social services or those released on Probation Orders, Curfew Orders or with an electronic tag and where their residency therefore remained the responsibility of the Local Authority or of interest to the criminal justice system. Once the term of the Order or tagging had come to an end, most respondents returned to hidden homelessness. Simon for example moved through a series of bail hostels following his release from prison in 1999. He explained what happened when his Probation Order ended:

> *"I finished me probation and they said 'you can go now'. I thought 'sound, where do I go?* [interviewer: where did you go?] *I were in a Ford Sierra…it were abandoned at side of road so I crashed in there for a couple of nights." (Simon)*

A similar picture emerged with regard to discharge from hospital. Four respondents reported having been homeless in hospital (for physical and mental ill health) and three of these slept rough the night they were discharged. Harvey describes that night:

> *"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." (Harvey)*

6.5. Key Findings

- When single homeless people are deemed not entitled to housing under the terms of the homelessness legislation and cannot access temporary accommodation they go to friends, family members, they squat, and they sleep rough. These are all very common ways in which single homeless people accommodate themselves. They can also be found in private hostels, alongside travellers and hotel guests, in caravans on wasteland or in people's gardens.

- Evidence emerged that, in desperation, some single homeless people resort to theft and sex work to pay for hotels and similar short-stay accommodation.

- A host of problems and challenges associated with being hidden homeless – staying in friends' houses or squatting for example – were reported by respondents. Concerns were raised in particular about risks to personal safety, poor housing and environmental conditions, insecurity, exploitation, risk of arrest and imprisonment, exposure to danger, and lack of access to basic amenities.

7. The consequences of hidden homelessness

In this chapter we examine the consequences of hidden homelessness, attempting to identify the way in which being 'hidden' has an impact over and above individuals' experience of homelessness. This is not straight-forward. Certainly respondents presented with a host of welfare needs and reported problems directly linked to their housing circumstances. But many of these (health problems, or unemployment, for example) have a known relationship with homelessness generally. Indeed respondents moved in and out of hidden homelessness, sometimes statutory homeless, sometimes not, sometimes living in hidden situations such as squats and at other times in hostels but the issues they faced, particularly in the form of support needs, often endured.

Disaggregating the effect of being 'hidden homeless' from that of being 'homeless' is, therefore, problematic. In addition, self-perpetuating relationships emerge (mental health issues may result in homelessness but the experience of squatting, with no prospect of securing accommodation, may prompt deteriorating mental health) such that attempts to attribute 'cause' and 'consequence' become extremely difficult.

Nevertheless, we can explore the immediate and direct consequences of respondents' living situations, and can also attempt to uncover *correlations* between periods of hidden homelessness and the onset or deterioration of particular issues.

Respondents' experiences of different hidden homeless situations were discussed in Chapter 6. In the course of that discussion some of the consequences of, or difficulties associated with hidden homelessness began to emerge. We need not repeat those in full here, but to recap, the consequences of hidden homelessness highlighted so far include:

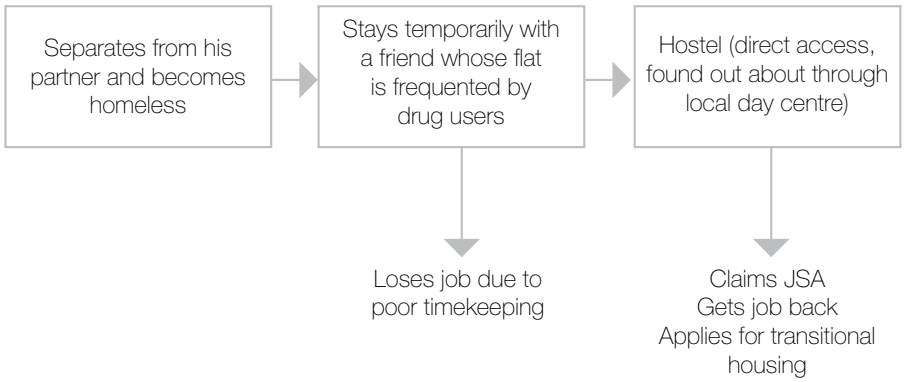
- **living in extremely poor conditions**, sometimes without access to basic amenities such as washing facilities (in squats, in the houses of friends or acquaintances, or rough sleeping);
- **danger or risk** (risk of fire in squats, structural decay, squats boarded up while inhabited, risk of violence from the general public while rough seeping, or risks associated with other guests at friends' houses);
- **exploitation** (from friends with whom people are staying, from other homeless people, exposure to drugs and sex work);
- **imprisonment or arrest** (for offences relating to squatting such as criminal damage, for shoplifting for food or sex work to obtain accommodation);
- **loss of employment** (holding down a job while sleeping on a sofa, or rough sleeping becomes impossible);
- impact on **mental and physical health**.

The health consequences of hidden homelessness, particularly rough sleeping and some forms of squatting, have been touched on but are also well documented in other studies (Homeless Link, 2010; ODPM, 2002). The findings of this research also echo those of other studies, with exposure to cold, the effects of living in poor conditions and of walking all day or night reported by many. For example:

> *"It was very, very cold time, I frost my feet… after a few days there start infection in my foot…I still have problem, cold destroyed my nerves in fingers." (Andnej, a squatter)*

> *"I've got health issues as well…because of the living circumstances…it's probably because I've been sleeping outdoors." (Andrea, an intermittent rough sleeper for ten years)*

Figure 7.1. Michael's hidden homelessness career



"It's affecting me now [squatting], I know that, I'm a chronic asthmatic…it's always dusty, I find it hard to breathe" (Chris, a squatter and now rough sleeper)

These experiences were directly linked to respondents' housing situations, and to their experience of hidden homelessness in particular, but it was not always so clear cut and respondents reported problems relating to most forms of homelessness accommodation. Night shelters afforded very insecure accommodation, for example (respondents could usually stay longer in a squat than in a night shelter), and some hostels were described in less than favourable terms. Some respondents started using drugs or alcohol as a mechanism for coping with hidden homelessness - "*It [rough sleeping] was hard, it [drugs] was like to keep out the cold, coz I weren't a drinker and it was like a comfort blanket" (Harvey)* – but others had been introduced to drugs by residents in hostels and transitional housing.

Nevertheless, correlations were apparent in the biographies of those interviewed between periods of hidden homelessness and a worsening of their personal or 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 their life trajectories while in settled housing or formal temporary accommodation.

We can illustrate this point using extracts from two respondents' homelessness careers (see figures 7.1 and 7.2). Michael lost his job whilst staying with a friend because the conditions in his friend's flat were not conducive to getting up early and remaining alert during the day (See Chapter 6.1). After several weeks Michael approached a direct access hostel he had heard about through a local day centre and was offered a place. While in the hostel Michael sorted out his benefits, got his job back, and was helped to apply for move-on accommodation (see figure 7.1).

Jason's housing career illustrates even more starkly the shifting fortunes of homeless people as they move in and out of hidden homelessness. Figure 7.2 shows that each time Jason slept rough or stayed with friends his circumstances deteriorated. His drug use escalated, for example, and he started committing petty crime. But when he stayed in a hostel his circumstances improved markedly, taking on volunteer work and accessing a methadone programme.

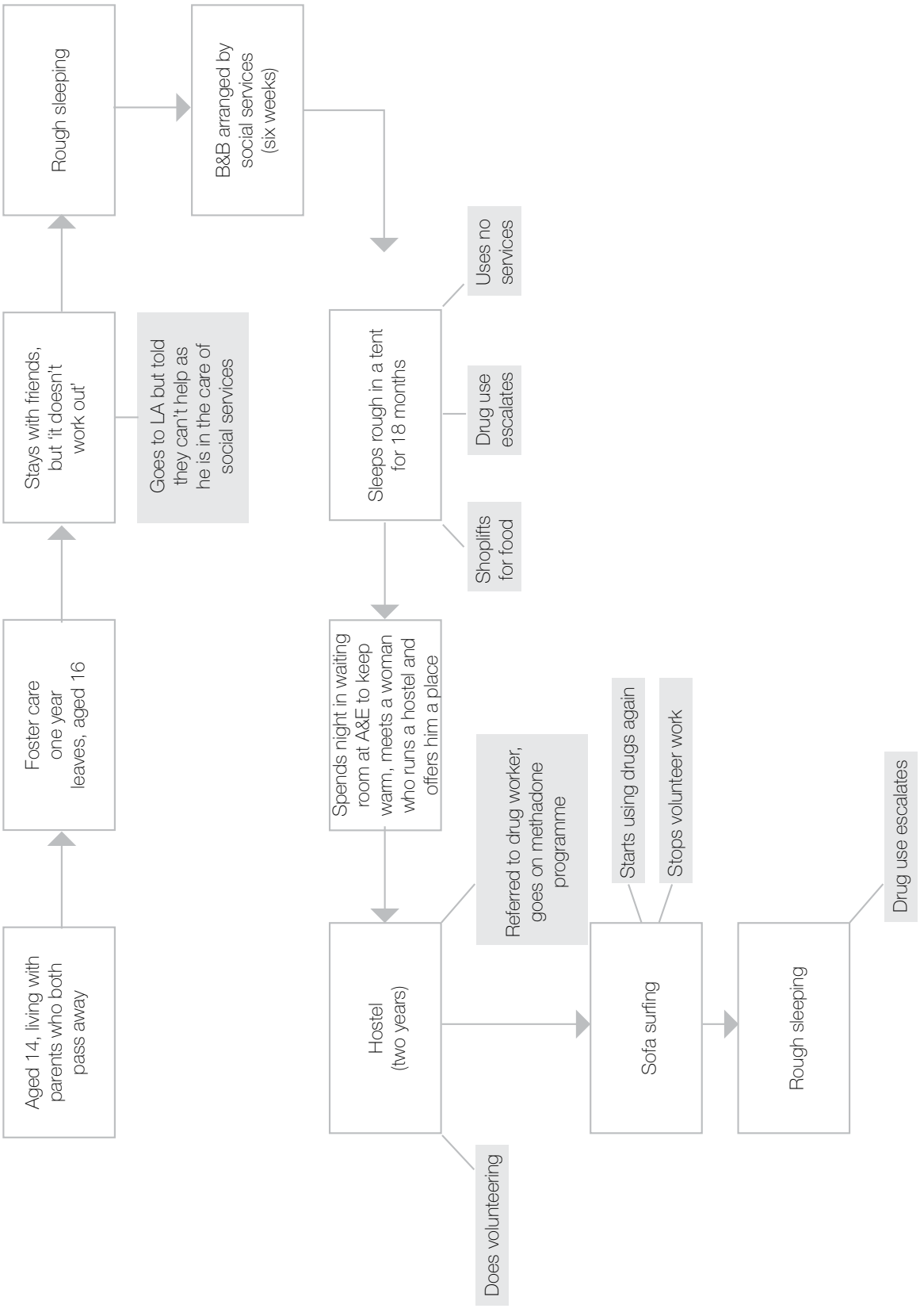
Particularly striking in Jason's housing career, and in the housing careers of most interview respondents, was the lack of engagement with housing and support services during episodes of hidden homelessness. Respondents made extensive use of day centres, and these did provide a route out of hidden homelessness for some, but contact with other support or services was extremely rare. As a result, respondents were typically receiving no housing advice during episodes of hidden homelessness and no help with other pertinent issues in their lives, including those mitigating against accessing accommodation (drug use, for example). Also striking was the contrast in this respect with periods of time spent in hostels and other temporary provision when, like Jason, respondents tended to access treatment and support services, rebuild family relationships or instigate contact with children, claim benefits and re-engage with housing organisations.

It is here, that the full impact of hidden homelessness becomes clear. If homeless people do not have the knowledge or resources to resolve their situation then they need help to do so. If they are not in contact with housing and support services then prospects for resolving housing problems and addressing other relevant issues (poor health, mental health, drug or alcohol use, employment and training opportunities) disappear. Those not waiting for the local authority to allocate them a tenancy, or to hear the outcome of an application to a landlord, or housing association, or rent deposit scheme basically held little hope of accessing temporary accommodation and very little prospect of being housed. And when issues such as drug use, mental ill health, trauma, disengagement from the labour market go unresolved they tend to intensify or deteriorate. The eventual consequences which flow from this are:

- some hidden homeless people start resorting to desperate measures to accommodate themselves;
- a group of people who potentially, and with the right, help could have promptly exited homelessness join a population of long-term homeless people with increasing support needs; and
- vulnerable people whose needs should be met through existing systems of support are being left without assistance

We will briefly explore each of these on pages 44-46.

Figure 7.2. Jason's hidden homelessness career



7.1 Resorting to desperate measures to obtain accommodation

We reported in Chapter 6 that, in the absence of assistance to secure housing, some respondents had resorted to sex work in order to fund temporary accommodation, or had formed unwanted sexual partnerships to obtain a roof over their head for the night. The survey findings suggest a range of other measures that single homeless people resort to in desperation, apparently looking to institutions such as hospitals, police cells and prisons to provide a roof over their head. For example:

- More than one quarter of survey respondents (28 per cent) reported having committed a crime or ASB in the hope of being taken into custody for the night
- 20 per cent said they had avoided bail or committed an impressionable offence with the express purpose of receiving a custodial sentence as a means of resolving their housing problems
- 18 per cent had presented at A&E for the same reason.

Within the context of sleeping rough or in squats, insecure and in poor conditions, prison begins to represent an adequate form of temporary accommodation. Lorna, who had been sentenced to six months in prison for shoplifting (food mainly) explained:

> *"Both times I went [into prison] I was homeless so I was glad I went…I loved it in prison…I just kept myself busy all day…it's a blessing in disguise, and then you can work while you're there, so you get up in the morning, go for your breakfast, come back, have exercise, come back, then you have your dinner, your tea, you can have showers, exercise…so apart from being locked behind your door it's like a youth hostel I think" (Lorna)*

7.2 Bolstering the population of long-term homeless people with complex needs

With the right help, or access to the right resources (work, housing, income or access to specialist support) many of those interviewed, when they first became homeless, would have quickly exited homelessness and continued with their lives. We have mentioned Chris, for example, who was not allowed to succeed the tenancy when his grandmother died (see case study in Chapter 6.2). He had run his household competently for 15 years, carrying out all domestic and administrative chores and would have done so in his own tenancy had he secured one. Or Michael, who had similarly lived in a family home for years, working and living a relatively stable life, and who became homeless following a relationship breakdown.

A recent review of single homelessness (Jones and Pleace, 2010) points to a body of US research, finding some resonance in smaller scale European studies, which distinguishes between 'chronically homeless' people - a relatively small group with complex needs - and those whose homelessness is related to economic conditions and welfare and housing provision. It is thought that the latter group will move in and out of homelessness relatively quickly whereas the process of exiting homelessness is more complex and difficult amongst those whose homelessness is linked to the presence of support needs.

However, we also need to consider the possibility that those who *could* exit homelessness relatively quickly and who do not have significant support needs hindering their capacity to do so may join the ranks of those with complex needs if their homelessness, and hidden homelessness in particular, endures. In other words, the experience and consequences of hidden homelessness - including poor conditions, insecurity and limited engagement with the necessary support services - may

serve to bolster the numbers of chronically homeless people. People who might otherwise, had they found their way into the system of housing support for single homeless people, have exited homelessness and continue with their lives. Chris and Michael demonstrate this; Chris's health and mental health are slowly deteriorating and he now faces the additional barrier of being an 'ex offender' because of offences relating to squatting. Michael, later in his homelessness career started taking heroin, has only sporadic contact with his children and has served a prison sentence.

7.3 Vulnerable people whose needs should be met through existing systems of support are being left without assistance

A number of respondents were vulnerable and had significant support needs (see chapter 5). Long term unemployment, mental and physical ill health, poor literacy, experience of care, disrupted education and substance abuse were common amongst those surveyed. Abuse, isolation, contact with the criminal justice system and bereavement also featured prominently in the life stories and homelessness careers of interview respondents.

Lorna's first episode of homelessness was triggered by a mental health breakdown. She then struggled to escape homelessness, her mental ill-health limiting her capacity to accept support which in turn resulted in evictions from temporary accommodation.

> *"I wasn't accessing support, I wasn't getting on with living there, I was too poorly, I suffered with hearing voices." (Lorna)*

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.

7.4 Key Findings

- Consequences of hidden homelessness include: restricted access to essential facilities and amenities; exposure to dangers and risk; exploitation; criminality and contact with the criminal justice system; loss of employment; and detrimental mental and physical health impacts.
- A clear correlation emerged in respondents' biographies between periods of hidden homelessness and deteriorating personal and health circumstances including deteriorating health, increased drug and alcohol consumption, victimisation, and increased criminal activity.
- The lack of engagement with housing and support services during episodes of hidden homelessness was striking. Respondents made extensive use of day centres but contact with other support services was rare. Few were receiving any housing advice or support for other issues whilst hidden homeless.
- Without access to advice and support respondents prospects for resolving their homelessness were bleak and their support needs intensified. Two consequences flowed from this; they resorted to desperate measures to accommodate themselves; and a group of people who could have exited homelessness risk joining the ranks of the long-term chronic homeless.

8. Hidden homelessness: spotlighting key themes

The purpose of this chapter is to spotlight some key themes which emerged in the data but which have been touched on only briefly in the report. The chapter draws together and summarises key findings in relation to multiple exclusion, health, gender, and A8 nationals.

8.1. Multiple exclusion

- Many of the hidden homeless people participating in this study were vulnerable and evidence of multiple exclusion was strong. Long-term unemployment, mental and physical ill health, poor literacy, experience of the care system, disrupted education and substance abuse was commonplace for respondents (see, for example, Chapter 5). Enduring mental health issues, abuse, isolation, contact with the criminal justice system and bereavement have also featured prominently in the life stories and homelessness careers of interview respondents presented in this report.

- That such vulnerable individuals should form an apparently significant proportion of the hidden homeless population is concerning. Such concerns amplify when we consider the findings presented elsewhere in this report that: many were very young when they first experienced homelessness (42 per cent had experienced homelessness by the age of 20); that many slept rough immediately or very soon after becoming homeless; and that many were disengaged from advice and support services.

- That the experience of hidden homelessness can apparently compound social and multiple exclusion is also of concern. We have seen, for example, that homeless people can become criminalised through their efforts to secure accommodation or basic necessities such as food (Lorna's story presented below is a case in point); can develop substance abuse problems; health problems; and can lose their jobs.

8.2. Health

The physical health impacts of exposure to cold, poor living conditions and inadequate shelter were raised in Chapter 7 and are seen in the biographies of interview respondents (see for example Harvey's case study in Chapter 9). The issue of mental ill-health, however, warrants further exposure.

The correlation between deteriorating mental health and deteriorating housing circumstances is evident throughout Marcia's housing history. Each time she experienced mental ill-health she ceased to cope in her rented accommodation and became homeless. She explained that, "*I didn't feel well, it [homelessness] always coincided with me not feeling well".* She is aged 47 and has been homeless periodically since the age of 16. She has lived in numerous private rented bedsits, council and housing association flats, and supported housing projects but always leaves them, handing back the keys, when her mental health issues intensify. She is now reluctant to accept any accommodation because she recognises her pattern of behaviour and fears the cycle will continue. She explained how she felt when, three months prior to her interview, she was offered transitional housing:

> *"I didn't want another council flat, or housing association, I didn't want anything, I didn't feel well, I didn't feel right, because I knew what would happen…I thought 'I don't want it, supported housing and then a council flat, I want to get well', so I couldn't stay…only because I know the pattern, I was trying to avoid the pattern, but obviously sleeping rough isn't the answer either." (Marcia)*

Following her refusal of this accommodation the local authority discharged their duty to Marcia, deeming her intentionally homeless. She has been sleeping rough since and has no immediate prospect of securing temporary or permanent accommodation. Nor is she receiving any support for her mental health issues.

A significant proportion of survey respondents reported having mental health issues and, amongst interview respondents, the impact of mental health on their homelessness careers was clear. In several cases, deteriorating mental health could be seen to have triggered, or sustained episodes of homelessness. Lorna's story is presented below. Lorna's first episode of homelessness was triggered by a mental health breakdown. She then struggled to escape homelessness, her mental ill-health limiting her capacity to accept support which in turn resulted in evictions from temporary accommodation.

8.3. Gender

This study did not set out to explore gendered experiences of hidden homelessness or to question what may be unique and distinct about the experiences of hidden homeless women. Nevertheless, issues emerged with clear gender relevance. These included:

- **Unwanted sexual partnerships**. We have already reported that some respondents had engaged in sex work to pay for a night in a hotel or B&B (see Chapter 6) and there was further evidence that single homeless people were sometimes exchanging sex for accommodation. This was not unique to women but it was considerably more common amongst them and was achieved in two ways: by forming an unwanted sexual partnership with someone, for example by making a casual acquaintance, propositioning someone and going home with them; or by engaging in paid sex work in the hope a client will allow them to spend the night. In total, 28 per cent of women (and 14 per cent of men) had spent the night with someone specifically in order to accommodate themselves and 19 per cent of women (3 per cent of men) had engaged in sex work because this offered an opportunity to spend the night with a client.

- **Experience of violence**. Many of the women participating in the study had been victims of violence. For example, 54 per cent of survey respondents had experienced violence or abuse from a partner and 43 per cent from family members or friends of the family (see chapter 5). Women respondents were significantly more likely than the men surveyed to have been victims of violence.

- **Mental health**. Mental ill health was also more common amongst the women surveyed and the two cases presented (Marcia and Lorna) illustrate well the way in which mental health and homelessness interact. They also serve to expose the fact there are vulnerable women in extremely poor health sleeping on the streets.

- **Motherhood**. Also highlighted in Lorna's story (p49) are the detrimental emotional, health, and housing consequences which can flow from women's separation from their children. It is of relevance here that 38 per cent of the women surveyed were separated from their children (see Chapter 5).

- **Economic dependency**. Whilst not prominent in the experiences of the women interviewed, the way in which some women's economic dependence upon their male partners can render them vulnerable to homelessness was evident and so it is worth noting. This was seen most clearly in Marie's story, presented in chapter 6. Dependent on her partner for income and for housing and with no immediate rights to access either when their relationship ended, she found herself sleeping rough.

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 and once the child had gone 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…to poor to be able to speak to them". 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 but she was generally reluctant to engage with support. In 2007 they found her a place in a supported housing project (a shared house with resident staff) but a year later she was asked to leave for failing to engage with support. Lorna explained that "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 ("when you go and get some shopping I used to steal the butter and cheese and buy everything else, it started off like that, but it's only personal shoplifting").

8.4. A8 Nationals

The presence of A8 nationals[18] in the sample, and their relationship with hidden homelessness is worth highlighting. A significant proportion of the homeless people surveyed (17 per cent) were from an A8 country. Most were Polish or Lithuanian but people from the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary and Latvia were also represented.

Insufficient financial resources were linked to limited employment opportunities as a contributory factor in homelessness (see Chapter 5). We suggested that this was evidenced by the relatively high proportion of respondents whose homelessness had been triggered by eviction for rent arrears, loss of tied accommodation, moving to find work, and being unable to afford their rent. The recent migration of A8 nationals to the UK is of direct relevance here.

Many of those reporting having become homeless following the loss of a job with tied accommodation were A8 nationals, as were most of those who had become homeless because they couldn't afford their rent. Several emphasized that they could not afford their rent because they had lost a job or couldn't find work. Those who had travelled to find work had only become homeless in the process because they had been unable to secure work, or adequately paid work, and seven out of 11 of these were A8 nationals.

18 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.

For many A8 nationals the absence of work equals the absence or loss of housing. Unemployed A8 nationals are not entitled to Housing Benefit and are currently only entitled to Job Seekers Allowance if they have worked continuously for the past 12 months. Without employment A8 nationals simply cannot cover housing costs unless they have independent means. A8 nationals, then, are not only vulnerable to homelessness but to *hidden* homelessness in particular. Temporary housing providers (hostels, refuges and such like) do not usually offer places to people who do not have the means, or entitlement to benefits, with which to pay rent and service charge.

Andnej's circumstances illustrate the inevitability of hidden homelessness for unemployed A8 nationals who lose their home. He had been homeless for two years when we interviewed him, having lost his job and given notice on his private rented flat because he could no longer afford the rent. He was squatting in a house with several others. Andnej's situation is not unique but his circumstances, and those of his housemates, are particular to their status as A8 nationals. All the residents are unemployed Polish nationals, several of whom (including Andnej) are professional, qualified people who had stable lives and homes in Poland. They have no entitlement to benefits so there is no income whatsoever coming into the household and none can cover the housing costs of temporary accommodation such as hostels, even if they found a place. Given these circumstances, this group have been squatting continuously for about 2 years - a relatively long time compared, for example, to most of the British respondents. Yet they have no resources to improve the conditions of their accommodation, for example by purchasing furniture and curtains, making basic repairs, or requesting that utilities are connected.

8.5. Key Findings

The hidden homeless population is diverse and experiences of hidden homeless people varied. Nevertheless, certain themes emerge prominently from their collective experiences. This chapter (or indeed this report) cannot hope to explore all the issues of relevance to hidden homelessness. It is important, however, to highlight issues such as the multiple exclusion faced by many hidden homeless people, the unique experiences of women who are hidden homeless and the greater vulnerability that some groups - such as A8 nationals - may have to hidden homelessness.

9. Why are single homeless people hidden?

Many single homeless people are not entitled to housing within the terms of the homelessness legislation. There is a large single homelessness sector providing advice and support, hostels, refuges, supported and transitional housing as well as emergency accommodation such as night shelters and it is thought that the needs of those not entitled to statutory assistance are being met by this network of services. The levels of hidden homelessness indicated by this study, however, suggest that many are not. Why is this the case, and why do so many single homeless people remain hidden? Exploring respondents' housing careers, a number of explanations, often acting in combination, emerge. These include:

- Inadequate signposting and advice
- Issues of entitlement and eligibility
- Scarcity
- Eligibility and exclusion criteria
- Limited knowledge

9.1. Inadequate signposting and advice

The local authority was the first port of call for most of those respondents who sought assistance when they became homeless, providing an opportunity to link them into the system of support for single homeless people. Even respondents ignorant of homelessness services and unsure what steps to take to resolve their housing crisis knew that the local authority has a remit for housing and homelessness issues.

No interview respondent sought help from an agency other than the local authority when they first became homeless. Some sought no help at all and one approached an advice agency (Citizens Advice Bureaux) but only once he had received a negative decision on his homelessness application. Some went direct to a temporary housing provider (often without success - see 7.2 above) and others were offered help by day centres once they started frequenting these services. But the local authority remained the key route through which respondents sought to address their housing problems, particularly in the early phase of a first episode of homelessness (although, as discussed in 6.1 above, the experience of doing so deterred some from asking for help during subsequent episodes of homelessness). As such this request for assistance represents a key opportunity for early intervention and/or for ensuring access to the 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, of sofa surfing, rough sleeping and squatting. Subsequent opportunities for re-engaging with single homeless people can be few and far between. Many apparently do not return to the local authority (see 7.1 above), and most of the hidden homeless people interviewed for this study were relatively disengaged from other services, with the exception of day centres. Some day centres help clients access housing and this did represent a key route through which respondents accessed hostels and (particularly) transitional housing later in their homelessness careers. But many exist to meet basic needs only, offering food, warmth, washing and other essential facilities, or are in such high demand (200+ clients a day is not uncommon) they cannot offer detailed housing advice and assistance to everyone.

Evidence suggests that, at present, the opportunity is not being sufficiently grasped, with many respondents reporting having left local authority without having received meaningful advice or assistance (31 per cent reported that the assistance they received had been 'useless' and a further 12 per cent said it had been 'unhelpful'). Some respondents had, at some point in their homelessness careers, been provided with

temporary, and indeed permanent, housing. But one third of the survey respondents who approached the local authority and were accepted as being homeless, reported not seeing an advisor (all should have done), and many of those who did were advised or signposted in ways which did not help them resolve their housing problems (such as being signposted to hostels which were full or required referrals for example), or given written material which they found unhelpful. Jason and Chris's accounts were typical:

> *"I went to X city council, did a homelessness thing, but they never got back in touch with me…just turned round and said they could help me fill in the form cos I was dyslexic…they just gave me the leaflets what I already had before." (Jason)*

> *"I went to the homeless place, see if they'd put me in a hostel or summat. They said I didn't fit the criteria. They said they had to give me a 'starter pack' and just kicked me out the door. They are supposed to be there to help the homeless, all they did was give me a booklet which I can't read, and go basically." (Chris)*

Provision of general information, rather than assistance, was apparently common. Of the survey respondents who had seen an advisor:

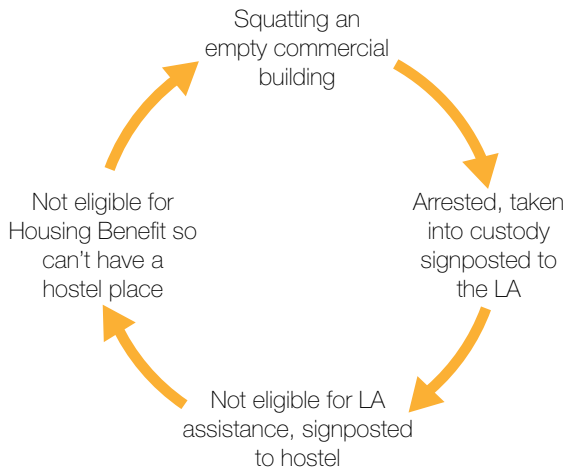
- 32 per cent had been given information about local hostels
- 24 per cent had been provided with a list of private landlords
- 23 per cent had received 'general advice' about finding a home.

Drawing on the experiences of interview respondents suggests that this type of information rarely results in the resolution of homelessness.

Others reported being advised to move elsewhere, a strategy which made little sense and was unlikely to help them resolve their homelessness. Carla has dual nationality and can live in the UK or in America. She has spent most of her life in a town in England, with some short visits to the USA (travelling rather than periods of residency) and some time spent out of town staying temporarily with friends and family while homeless. When she approached the local authority she was reportedly told she had no local connection and should consider returning to the USA. Marie was similarly advised to move to a different location where housing was cheaper:

> *"I've lived in [X town] since before my fourth birthday…the council just don't want to know, wasn't priority…the council said 'you could move out of [X town] and go somewhere else' I said 'this is my home, I've lived here for 50 years, why should I?'" (Marie)*

Figure 9.1 Andnej's referrals



Andnej's experience illustrates how futile and inappropriate referral or signposting can be (see Figure 9.1). He was arrested for squatting, kept in custody over night and advised by the police to approach the local authority when he was released the next day. As an unemployed A8 national he is not entitled to statutory homelessness assistance so the local

authority advised him to go to a local direct access hostel. But the direct access hostel could not offer him a place because he had no entitlement to housing benefit and so could not cover his housing costs. Andnej returned to the very same building he had been arrested in two days before.

Michael's situation was unusual amongst those interviewed but interesting for the fact that with the right help and advice his homelessness could have been immediately and relatively easily resolved. Michael was working when he became homeless and approached the local authority. Michael was given no advice about how to access the private rented sector, although he was willing to do so and it might have proved an affordable option, particularly if referred to a rent deposit scheme. He offered the view that:

> *"I think they [Local Authority] could have done more…because I was working I thought I could have gone and looked elsewhere, private accommodation, furnished private accommodation, but coz I didn't know how to go about it, coz I'd never been in that situation before…I ended up being with my friends" (Michael)*

The point at which a homeless person enters custody or prison provides similar opportunities for engagement and appropriate referral/ signposting to relevant agencies. Again, in the experience of those interviewed, this represented missed opportunities. We reported in Chapter 6 that the single homeless people interviewed rarely received housing assistance on release from prison (although some were advised to go to the council where it might have been presumed their housing issues would be taken up). Where an ingoing system of support was in place, for example through probation, the cessation of this support often represented an abrupt end to any support and temporary accommodation.

9.2. Issues of entitlement and eligibility

There are various ways in which restricted eligibility and entitlements can facilitate hidden homelessness, in particular:

- entitlement and interpretation under the terms of the homelessness legislation to housing;
- eligibility for state benefits which, in the absence of other income, permits payment of temporary housing and associated costs.

9.2.1. Entitlement to housing under the terms of the homelessness legislation

The hidden homelessness of all those participating in this study can be traced, partly, to their lack of entitlement to accommodation within the terms of the homelessness legislation. As such, this issue deserves close attention. Very few of the 465 single homeless people surveyed were accepted as being owed the main housing duty (whereby the local authority has a statutory duty to accommodate someone because they meet the criteria set out in the homelessness legislation). Just 6 per cent of the full sample was acknowledged as statutory homeless. This is not surprising - 'single homelessness' and 'non-statutory homelessness' have long been labelled as synonymous. Temporary (and permanent) accommodation provided by local authorities in line with their statutory homelessness duties is unavailable to many single people. With few exceptions, everyone is *eligible* to go on the housing register (the waiting list) but to be *entitled* to accommodation (i.e. owed a duty by law) a homeless person must be deemed in 'priority need'[19]. Although single homeless people can fall within the priority need categories, many do not, despite the extension of these categories in 2002.

19 In addition, applicants must not have made themselves homeless intentionally and if they are deemed to have done so the local authority can discharge its duty. If an applicant has no 'local connection' to the area in which they apply they can be referred to the authority where they do have a local connection, rather than being offered accommodation in the area to which they applied.

Before accepting that this is the legal position in England and shifting our attention to the question of why single homeless people apparently remain hidden despite the existence of a sector providing for them (in the form of hostels and transitional housing, for example) this issue deserves further scrutiny. There is evidence from this study that:

- homeless people who may meet the priority need criteria are not approaching local authorities;
- people who should be owed the main housing duty are being told they do not meet the criteria;
- many are failing to access the assistance to which they are entitled;
- homeless people are misinformed about their entitlements.

In the remainder of this section we attend to these issues, exploring the reasons why single homeless people fail to seek assistance from the local authority, and whether those that do are receiving the help to which they are entitled.

9.2.2 Single homeless people are deterred from approaching local authorities

More than one quarter (28 per cent) of the 437 single homeless people surveyed had *never* sought help from the Local Authority and a similar proportion (29 per cent) had not approached a local authority during their most recent episode of homelessness. So why are so many single homeless people apparently failing to seek statutory assistance? The accounts provided by those interviewed in-depth offer some explanation, primarily that people are deterred from approaching local authorities due to:

- prior unsatisfactory experiences of doing so and/or low expectations regarding the outcome of an approach
- misinformation or misunderstanding about their rights and entitlements

We can explore each of these explanations in turn.

Firstly, evidence from the in-depth interviews suggests that many single homeless people are deterred from approaching a local authority because of negative experiences of having done so previously and/or low expectations about the help they are likely to receive. Chris's comments were typical and echoed in the accounts of many others:

> *"Got out of prison this time didn't even bother going, I knew I'd get same old bullshit, just get sent away, get used to it. They don't care, they're not interested" (Chris)*

Harvey recounted a similar tale of receiving no assistance when he first approached a local authority, and being deterred from returning during a subsequent episode of homelessness. His story is presented in full later in this chapter but to summarise, Harvey was raised by neglectful drug dependent parents and sexually abused on a weekly basis by his uncle from the age of six. At the age of 14 he went to stay with friends of the family who agreed he could remain their only until he reached the age of 16, at which point they asked him to leave. Harvey duly went to the local authority for assistance. He explains:

> *"They wanted me to go and live with my parents which I couldn't do. I said 'I'm homeless, I need help'* [Interviewer: and what did they do?] *Nothing, they said 'fill out a form' and I didn't even hear from them" (Harvey)*

Harvey slept rough and engaged in sex work to pay for B&Bs. Several years later, following a two year period spent living with a partner and the breakdown of that relationship he found himself repeat homeless and started sleeping rough again. He explained that *"I didn't bother*

with the council…it was back to sleeping rough…only thing I knew what to do."

9.2.3 Single homeless people are misinformed about their entitlements

During the interviews it became apparent that respondents were under a host of misapprehensions about their rights to assistance and the application of the homelessness legislation. This served to deter many from approaching a local authority during a period of homelessness. In some cases respondents had apparently been misinformed by the local authority and in other cases the source of such mistaken beliefs was unclear. It included fallacies such as:

- **Fallacy:** homeless people are entitled to 28 days in a hostel every six months, so there is no point approaching the council if you have been homeless for less than six months, or have spent time in a hostel within the past six months – *"If you go to the housing every six months they've got to say 'it's been six months since we saw you last' and they've got to give you 28 days [in a hostel] but that's all they give you and after that you're homeless again for six months" (Lorna).* Lorna is 39, has mental health problems for which she has been hospitalised a number of times, and has spent a significant proportion of the past ten years sleeping rough and squatting.

  Fact: if a homeless person is statutorily entitled to accommodation then they are entitled regardless of how long they have been homeless. If they are not entitled to accommodation they do not become entitled simply because they have been homeless for six months.

More than one quarter of survey respondents had never approached a local authority as homeless

- **Fallacy:** homeless people cease to be classed as homeless by the local authority once they move into temporary accommodation such as a hostel – *"I presented myself as homeless…but the minute I'm in a hostel or a B&B you're not homeless." (Douglas)*

  Fact: people living in temporary accommodation are classed as homeless under the terms of the homelessness legislation.

- **Fallacy**: if you stay with friends your 'points' (and therefore level of priority) are reduced, and each time your temporary situation changes a new application must be submitted and assessed – *"if there's a change of circumstances, every time you move to a different friend's sofa you have to redo the points all over again…they have to keep taking the points off me and reassess my claim." (Emma)*

  Fact: a change of circumstances can result in a reassessment of an application as homeless or for the waiting list but a move from one friend to another should not, nor should a new claim have to be made.

- **Fallacy:** people in employment are not entitled to assistance or to accommodation – *"I went to the housing and they says I wasn't priority because I was working." (Michael)*

  Fact: a person's employment status has no bearing on their eligibility for or entitlement to housing.

- **Fallacy:** the only assistance the local authority can offer is access to the waiting list. It will be many years before a property becomes available and there is no point returning to the council until that period of time has elapsed. Simon, for example, approached his local council when he first became homeless at the age of 16 and was told the only help they could offer was to put

his name on the waiting list but that it would be ten years before he would be offered a flat. He saw no point in returning to the local authority in the intervening ten years.

Fact: access to the waiting list is not the only assistance the local authority offers - everyone has a right to advice and assistance and to make a homelessness application. In any case, a change of circumstances can change a person's entitlement and so it is worth returning to a local authority if circumstances change.

- **Fallacy:** previous rent arrears or eviction from a social housing tenancy renders you ineligible for assistance - *"I've got rent arrears so I can't get council accommodation anywhere* [interviewer: so you won't approach because you think, because of your arrears…?] *Well I know, because of those rent arrears I won't get anywhere, they can't offer you anywhere." (Bobby)*

  Fact: there are circumstances under which rent arrears can (for example if a person is judged to have made themselves intentionally homeless by accruing rent arrears) but rent arrears and eviction do not automatically exclude a homeless person from entitlement to housing.

9.2.4 Single homeless people may not be receiving the statutory assistance to which they are entitled

Many of those respondents who failed to approach a local authority as homeless had significant vulnerabilities and may have met the priority need criteria. This cohort included care leavers (27 per cent), people with physical health problems and/or a disability (31 per cent), with mental health issues (29 per cent), people who have experienced violence (28 per cent), and who have been in prison (35 per cent).

But regardless of whether any would have been accepted as meeting the priority need criteria, local authorities have a duty to '*advise and assist*' everyone who is homeless. These respondents had not, therefore, benefited from the statutory assistance and advice to which they would have been entitled and which could have resolved or alleviated their circumstances.

There are also questions to be asked about those respondents who did approach a local authority but who received a negative decision (i.e. were deemed not statutory homeless and so not entitled to housing within the terms of the legislation).

- *Firstly*, there is evidence that **not all were given the opportunity to make a formal application**. Everyone who approaches a local authority as homeless should be able to make a homelessness application. It is the outcome of this application that establishes an individual's entitlement to housing assistance (if only in the form of 'advice and assistance' rather than accommodation). Yet 20 per cent of the survey respondents who sought help from a local authority left without making such an application.

- *Secondly,* we know that the sample of non-statutory homeless respondents included **a significant number who did meet the priority need criteria**: of the survey respondents recognised as homeless (the majority of those who made an application), 45 per cent were recognised by the local authority as being in priority need. However, nearly half of these (46 per cent) were found to be intentionally homeless and so not entitled to accommodation[20]. Although local authorities are acting within the law here (if a person it deemed intentionally homeless

20 A further 17 per cent were unsure whether they had been judged intentionally homeless so only 36 per cent of those recognised as homeless and in priority need were definitely not deemed intentionally homeless

they are not owed a duty) it does raise questions about the number of vulnerable people who are being left without statutory housing assistance.

9.2.5. Ineligibility for welfare benefits and support

In the absence of other income (most respondents were unemployed), entitlement to welfare benefits was key to accessing temporary housing. Temporary accommodation such as hostels and transitional housing incurs a cost and respondents ineligible for benefits were unable to meet these costs through Housing Benefit. This applied to A8 nationals who had not worked continuously for the past 12 months[21], some other foreign nationals, failed asylum seekers, young people under the age of 16 and some under the age of 18. Basia explained that her lack of entitlement to benefits left her no option but to stay with friends (she later borrowed money to stay in a travellers' hostel):

> *"When I basically lost the job I was still paying it [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)*

The system of homelessness provision and support for single homeless people was, quite simply, unavailable to these groups and hidden homelessness was, perhaps, inevitable.

9.3. Scarcity

Places in hostels, transitional or supported housing projects and night shelters are limited. Interview respondents' experiences of trying to access temporary housing suggest a scarcity of provision relative to the population who require it. We reported in Chapter 4 that the majority of survey respondents had never accessed a hostel and three quarters had never stayed in other temporary accommodation arranged by a local authority or support agency. Not all these people will have attempted to secure a place in a hostel or other temporary housing but, drawing on the housing histories of interview respondents, many are likely to have done so, to no avail. Interview respondents reported approaching hostels but repeatedly finding they were full. For example:

> [interviewer: you've not stayed in any hostels have you? Or anything like that?] *"no, I've been to [X hostel] to see if they've got places but they never got places every time I go." (Chris)*

Others described queuing every evening, sometimes for hours, in the hope of being one of the lucky few offered a place for that night. To secure a bed for the following night involved queuing again and bed spaces allocated on this basis were not accompanied by the programme of support and move-on assistance typically offered to hostel residents[22]. This reveals how insecure single homeless people's accommodation situations can be, even when in formal homelessness provision. The synonymy of single homelessness and hidden homelessness is once again emphasised.

---

21 Since joining the EU in 2004, nationals of eight Central and Eastern European countries (or 'A8 nationals') have had restricted access to the UK benefits system and labour market. At the time of this study A8 nationals were still required to register under the government's Worker Registration Scheme before accessing income-related benefits such as income-based jobseekers allowance, housing benefit and council tax benefits. Once the restrictions end after 30th April 2011, A8 nationals will have the same rights as other EEA/EU nationals. Essentially what this means is that, finally, A8 nationals will be granted the same rights as other EU nationals to work and access support in the UK. However, some benefits still have a 'right to reside' test attached to them for EU nationals. These include Housing Benefit, Council Tax Benefit, Income Support, income-based Jobseeker's Allowance, income-related Employment and Support Allowance, Child Benefit, Child Tax Credit, Working Tax Credit and State Pension Credit as well as housing and homelessness assistance.Like other EU nationals, A8 nationals will still need to pass the Habitual Residence Test to show that they have the right to reside in the UK, and have an attachment here before they can qualify for social support.

22 Respondents were referring to hostels, rather than night shelters but it is possible that the hostels in question retained a number of places as emergency accommodation whilst also offering longer stay hostel places which were not allocated on this night by night basis.

Several respondents offered the view that hostel and supported housing places were reducing in number, pointing to hostels and night shelters which had closed in the past few years. Douglas, for example, reported that:

> *"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)*

The impact of the public sector spending cuts is yet to be seen but is likely to include closure or contraction of some homelessness accommodation services. It has been suggested that reductions in the Supporting People budget combined with the removal of ring fencing and overall cuts to local authority budgets could reduce the number of hostel spaces by one quarter (see, for example, reported findings from a survey of homelessness organisations carried out by Homeless Link survey in *'Spending cuts threaten quarter of homeless hostel beds'*[23]).

Temporary accommodation is limited but the number of *direct access* places is scarcer still. Many hostels cannot be accessed directly or reserve a number of bed spaces for those referred by other organisations. Harvey explained that one of the hostels in his local area had recently ceased offering any direct access spaces

> *"now we've got the situation, [X hostel] has shut down, the Salvation Army you can't queue up any more, you have to be referred." (Harvey)*

People not in contact with referral agencies are, therefore, disadvantaged. A key feature of the housing careers of many of the hidden homeless people interviewed was their very limited engagement with support services other than day centres. We reported in Chapter 6 that nearly half the rough sleepers surveyed were not in contact with rough sleeper teams.

This is concerning because of the emphasis placed on rough sleepers teams as the key means through which rough sleepers' access hostels. In some cities, a proportion of bed spaces are reserved for those referred through a rough sleepers' team. Whilst in many ways a positive move – rough sleepers have a clear access route into temporary housing – it presupposes that the majority of rough sleepers are identifiable by outreach teams and serves to reduce the number of direct access places for those people (apparently many) who are not accessing this support.

9.4. Eligibility and exclusion criteria

Compounding the problem of scarcity, eligibility and exclusion criteria rendered some ineligible for many of the temporary spaces available in their local area. Respondents found they were excluded from local hostels by virtue of their age, support needs, or because they were recently arrived in the area. Joseph and Harvey, for example, reported being turned away from hostels and night shelters because of their age:

> *"I tried to get in a hostel but they said I was too young…you had to be over 24, things like that, and I was 16 so I was [sleeping rough] in the [wheelie] bin." (Harvey)*

> *"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)*

23 http://www.homeless.org.uk/snap-2011

There are homelessness service providers catering specifically for young people (YMCA hostels and transitional housing projects, for example, are usually available only to those aged 16-25) but no such services were operating in the cities in which Harvey or Joseph were living. If a balance of services for younger and older people is not available then one group or another will be disadvantaged in their attempts to secure temporary accommodation.

Some respondents with support needs – drug and alcohol problems in particular – had found service providers reluctant to accommodate them. Jason explained that "*it's awkward to get in when you've got drug or alcohol problems…if these can't help you out there's no other choice but to stay on the streets" .*This was clearly Jason's experience of the service providers in his locality, although many temporary housing providers do accept people with drug and alcohol issues. It is also worth noting that other respondents said they preferred not to stay in hotels precisely because of the presence of drug or alcohol users or people with other support needs such as mental ill health.

The operation of local connection criteria had limited the options of several respondents, leaving them effectively ineligible for temporary housing including emergency accommodation such as night shelters. Joseph and Douglas recounted their experiences:

> *"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)*

> *"It was quite difficult at first because everywhere I went had this local connection policy." (Joseph)*

It is worth noting that some respondents 'self-excluded' from temporary accommodation. Averse to staying in hostels and night shelters, some preferred instead the relative comfort and privacy of friends' accommodation or of medium stay private hotels/hostels away from other homeless people. Some of these had previous poor experience of staying in hostels and wanted to avoid returning at all costs (one respondent, for example, had discovered the body of his friend). The presence of drug users in hostels and/or people with high support needs deterred some from using hostels. A small minority, however, preferred the freedom of moving around, without being reliant on others and with no expectations upon them to comply with a set of rules. Nancy and Eric explained:

> *"It's too confined a space and you've got rules and regulation, when you've got to be in for certain times and I can't be doing with all that…I like the way I live at the moment, freedom to do whatever I want, be whatever I want, go wherever I want." (Nancy)*

> *"I left [the hostel] because of the institutionalisation…I just didn't think it was right…searching my room all the time and I went back to live on the streets for a little bit and ended up squatting." (Eric)*

9.5. Limited knowledge

Many respondents described a complete lack of awareness of the assistance available to single homeless people. This was particularly true in the early stages of homelessness and amongst people with no experience of homelessness (via work, or friends for example) but not all accrued knowledge over time. Unaware of local hostels, advice agencies or support services and even less so of their location, these respondents were failing to negotiate access to the temporary housing and support available to them. Chris is a case in point (story was presented in

Chapter 6). He explained that when he first because homeless he *"didn't know anywhere, didn't know anything"* so, when a trip to the local authority didn't result in temporary accommodation he started squatting.

9.6. Reasons for hidden homelessness: a case study

Harvey's homelessness career, presented below, is useful for illustrating the way in which the various factors outlined in this chapter combine to render someone 'hidden' and to limit their opportunity or capacity to escape hidden homelessness. Single homeless people are not hidden just because they are not statutorily entitled to housing, or because they don't know where to go for help, or because the local hostel is full. Hidden homelessness is the product of a combination of institutional, personal and structural factors. Harvey's story demonstrates the way that these work together, serving to compound his problems and sustain his hidden homelessness. It also spotlights many of the issues raised in this chapter. For example:

- Harvey was a vulnerable young man when he first became homeless, yet was not considered vulnerable enough to meet the priority need criteria[24].
- He tried to access hostels, only to find he did not meet the eligibility criteria (he was 16 at the time).
- With limited entitlement to benefits because of his age, his housing options were severely restricted.
- His early experience of asking the local authority for help deterred him from approaching subsequently although by this time Harvey had diagnosed mental health issues and should have met the priority need criteria.
- He accessed emergency accommodation from time to time but had to queue each night for it.

There were opportunities for intervention right at the start of Harvey's homelessness career, when he approached the local authority for help, yet it took twenty years of sleeping rough, squatting and sofa surfing for Harvey to negotiate access to adequate accommodation in the form of transitional housing.

24 This occurred prior to the extension of the priority need categories in 2002. Also, Harvey may not have fully explained his family history so the extent of his vulnerability may not have been apparent.

Case Study: Harvey

Harvey first experienced homelessness in 1991 at the age of 14 when he ran away from home. He was neglected by his parents, both of whom were heroin addicts, and sexually abused on a weekly basis by his uncle. He stayed with a friend and then spent an extended period with some friends of his father who agreed to let him stay until he left school. Harvey left school 18 months later and, at the age of the 16, found himself with nowhere to live and no income (he was too young to qualify for benefits and did not know about hardship payments). He stayed with friends and slept rough, using a local drop-in centre during the day. He spent just one night at a time with each of his friends and always left early in the morning so as not to place undue burden on them or risk straining the friendship.

Soon after becoming homeless, Harvey approached the local authority and asked for help. A 'form' was completed on his behalf (Harvey is illiterate). The day centre agreed to provide a c/o address and the local authority officer advised that Harvey would hear from them promptly but he heard nothing further. Harvey returned to the Local Authority in an attempt to pursue his application but still no response was forthcoming. He also approached the two direct access hostels catering for single homeless people in the city but was told he was ineligible due to his age.

Harvey spent the next ten years sleeping rough, squatting and staying with friends. Desperate for food ("I was starving"), shelter and warmth 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. He also developed physical and mental health problems, being diagnosed with schizophrenia and hospitalised with fluid on the lung. He started taking drugs to cope with the conditions in which he was living ("it was hard, it was like to keep the cold out, and it was a comfort blanket") but, realising the potential consequences of long term drug addiction managed to cease drug use after a couple of months. When Harvey was a 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. Harvey was violently attacked on several occasions while rough sleeping (stabbed and threatened with a gun).

After a brief interlude of two years spent living with a female friend with whom he formed a relationship, Harvey returned once again to rough sleeping, squatting and sofa surfing. Assuming no help would be forthcoming from the local authority he didn't approach this time. Now in his late 20's Harvey revisited the City's hostels. Spaces were scarce and he would queue each evening in the hope of securing a bed for that night. He rarely secured a hostel place for longer. When a friend died in a hostel in suspicious circumstances and Harvey found the body he became reluctant to use them again.

It was only when Harvey got in touch with a local housing association which offers a range of services to homeless people (including health, mental health and tenancy support) that he finally accessed the help and support he needed nearly 20 years after first experiencing homelessness. When he was interviewed Harvey had just moved into a flat owned by the housing association and was receiving support from a key worker there.

9.7. Key Findings

- There is evidence that single homeless people are failing to access the advice, assistance and temporary accommodation to which they are, or may be, entitled.
- More than one quarter (28 per cent) of the 437 single homeless people surveyed had *never* sought help from the Local Authority. Many of these had significant vulnerabilities and may have met the priority need criteria.
- Low expectations about levels of assistance, prior unsatisfactory experiences, and misinformation about rights and entitlements had deterred respondents from seeking help from local authorities.
- Those who had sought help had rarely received meaningful assistance. For example 20 per cent left council offices without having made a homelessness application, a third of those accepted as homeless did not see an advisor and many reported being advised or signposted in ways which did not help them resolve their housing problems.
- Interview respondents' experiences of trying to access temporary housing suggest a scarcity of provision. The number of places available on a 'direct access' basis are fewer still, raising significant problems for people not in contact with referral agencies such as rough sleeper teams.
- Compounding the problem of scarcity, eligibility and exclusion criteria rendered some ineligible for many of the temporary spaces available in their local area.
- An approach to a local authority represents a key opportunity for early intervention and/or for ensuring access to the appropriate support and housing services. Evidence suggests that, at present, the opportunity is not being sufficiently grasped.

10. Recommendations

The evidence presented in this report has provided detailed insight into hidden homelessness. It has highlighted the scale of the problem and suggested that to be single and homeless in England is, effectively, to be hidden. 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 fail 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 homeless people. This 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 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. The population may be significantly larger than we know it to be, and people are still sleeping rough for extended periods of time. The commitment to end rough sleeping can only be achieved if renewed efforts are made to engage rough sleepers 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 and in priority need but to whom the local authority owes no duty (for example because they 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.
- Homeless people should be provided with accessible information 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.

References

CLG (2010) *Evaluating the Extent of Rough Sleeping: A new approach* London: Communities and Local Government Publications.

Homeless link (2010) *The Health and Wellbeing of People who are Homeless: evidence from a national audit – interim report* London: Homeless Link.

Jones, A. and Pleace, N. (2010) *A Review of Single Homelessness in the UK 200-2010*, London: Crisis.

New Philanthropy Capital (2008) *Lost Property: Tackling homelessness in the UK,* London: New Philanthropy Capital.

New Policy Institute (2003) *How Many, How Much? Single homelessness and the question of numbers and cost.* London: Crisis.

ODPM (2002) *Addressing the health needs of Rough Sleepers*, London: HMSO.

Reeve, K. with Coward, S (2004) *Life on the Margins: the experiences of homeless people living in squats* London: Crisis.

Somogyi, E., Tosics, I. in collaboration with Györi, P (2005) *Hidden Homelessness: an overview of the concept, statistics and policy implication,* Long Paper for CUHP, WP5 Metropolitan Research Institute.

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'.

© Crisis 2011
ISBN 978-1-899257-67-6

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.

Get in touch

Crisis
66 Commercial Street
London E1 6LT
Tel: 0844 251 0111
Fax: 0844 251 0110

www.crisis.org.uk

© Crisis 2011
ISBN 978-1-899257-67-6

Crisis UK (trading as Crisis). Registered Charity Numbers:
E&W1082947, SC040094. Company Number: 4024938

Homelessness ends here

Sheffield Hallam University

The hidden truth about homelessness: experiences of single homelessness in England

REEVE, Kesia <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-2877-887X> and BATTY, Elaine <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-7524-3515>

Available from the Sheffield Hallam University Research Archive (SHURA) at:

http://shura.shu.ac.uk/27405/

Copyright and re-use policy

Please visit http://shura.shu.ac.uk/27405/ and http://shura.shu.ac.uk/information.html for further details about copyright and re-use permissions.