



*Housing Homeless People with Complex Needs*

# **The Housing Needs and Experiences of Homeless People with a History of Violent or Offending Behaviour in Stoke-on-Trent**

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

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# Executive Summary

## About the Research

On July 3rd 2007 a fire engulfed a derelict warehouse in Stoke-on-Trent resulting in the death of two young homeless people. This tragedy prompted the City Council and partners to closely scrutinise provision for homeless people in Stoke-on-Trent and consider ways in which this could be improved. As part of the drive to reduce homelessness and rough sleeping, Stoke-on-Trent City Council commissioned research exploring the housing needs of homeless people with complex needs. This focused on client groups thought to be particularly marginalised and vulnerable to rough sleeping including people with a history of violent behaviour, female street sex workers, and people with drug and/or alcohol dependencies, and. This report presents the findings relating to homeless people with a history of violent behaviour.

The research was conducted between July 2007- June 2008 and involved a questionnaire survey of 80 people with a history of violent behaviour who were homeless or at risk of homelessness, and in-depth interviews with 24 homeless people with a history of violent behaviour. These activities were supplemented with interviews with housing and other relevant service providers including those working with offenders. A series of interviews were conducted with the explicit aim of exploring housing providers' approach to accommodating people a history of violent. These interviews explored in some detail organisations' risk assessment policies and procedures and their eligibility, allocations and exclusion policies.

## A Profile of Homeless People with a History of Violence

Building a profile of homeless people with a history of violent behaviour in an effort to better understand their housing and support needs requires appreciation of, and consideration to **the diversity evident within this population**. The final sample of individuals participating in this research included: people with a long history of homelessness and chaotic and aggressive behaviour, known to most service providers but with convictions for relatively minor offences only; people who had served one lengthy custodial sentence for a violent crime but with no prior experience of homelessness or contact with homelessness or support services; and people not well known to criminal justice, homelessness or support services who had never been convicted of a violent crime but who did have a long history of violence and aggression.

All respondents had a history of violent behaviour but not all had related criminal convictions. In total **63 per cent reported having been convicted for violent offences**. The survey results suggest **it may be rare for people who display violent behaviour not to have an offending history relating to other forms of criminal activity**. The vast majority (90 per cent) had a criminal record, most commonly for shoplifting (63 per cent) and burglary (45 per cent). Despite prolific offending careers, **many respondents had avoided a custodial sentence**, with less than half having served a prison term.

Analysis of the life experiences of the homeless people with a history of violent behaviour surveyed shows that a disrupted education was very common, as was an unsettled childhood, and drug use, alcoholism and mental health issues were relatively prevalent. Specifically:

- 61 per cent reporting having had an **unsettled life** while growing up
- 56 per cent had experienced **drug dependency** and 48 per cent **alcohol dependency**
- 55 per cent had been **excluded or suspended from school**
- 46 per cent had experienced **domestic violence** and 45 per cent had experienced **'other' forms of abuse**
- 40 per cent reported **mental ill health**
- 36 per cent had been in the **care of the local authority**
- 29 per cent reported **self harming**
- 21 per cent had **literacy difficulties**

A significant proportion of interview respondents reported **strikingly similar offending histories**. Their stories typically began in early adolescence, with petty crime, anti-social behaviour, truanting, drinking and smoking, sometimes drug use (glue and gas rather than heroin, crack or cocaine,) and running away. Breach of the peace, drunk and disorderly, and shoplifting were common early convictions and school attendance virtually ceased. As relationships with parents became increasingly strained, offending behaviour escalated in both extent and severity, and (sometimes) Class A drugs entered the equation, homelessness and the criminal justice and Care systems loomed. Increasingly secure residential environments usually formed part of the picture. The onset of such behaviour was sometimes triggered by a distressing event or was a response to distressing experiences within the familial home such as abuse or parental alcoholism. Amongst those whose offending took a different trajectory were those for whom violence was alcohol or drug related, and those who were involved in gangs and violent sub-cultures.



## Access to and Exclusion from Housing

**The housing options for homeless people with a history of violence in Stoke-on-Trent are limited**, there being little specialist provision for this client group in the City. There is some supported housing for offenders but these service providers reported being generally unable to accept high risk offenders. Much of the generic supported housing is targeted at people deemed low to medium risk with low to medium support needs, appropriate for some but not many of the homeless people with a history of violence participating in this study.

Most of the housing providers interviewed for this study reported that they **did not operate an exclusion policy** but assessed each application on a case by case basis. **However, it was common for housing providers to cite violent or high risk offenders amongst those most likely to be refused access to the waiting list** and people with drug dependencies, convictions for drug related offences or rent arrears were other groups commonly reported to be excluded.

Whatever the exclusion and allocation policies of local housing providers there was a **perception amongst many of those interviewed and some service providers working with them that offenders and people who have been subject to ASB measures are actively excluded from social housing**. The consequence is that individuals were 'self excluding', assuming (sometimes erroneously) that they were not eligible. This is partly attributable to the history of allocations in Stoke-on-Trent. Local Authority managers acknowledged that until a few years ago allocations policies and practices were exclusionary and partly unlawful. The Local Authority has worked hard to develop more exclusionary policies but the evidence from this study suggests that these changes may not have been communicated to those excluded under the old regime.

The homeless people participating in this study had **not encountered the same difficulties accessing hostel accommodation** as they had accessing general needs or medium term supported housing. Many had been evicted or temporarily excluded as a result of specific incidents but most had been readily accepted into at least one of the hostels at some point. Drawing on the reported experiences of interview and survey respondents a series of key **barriers preventing homeless people with a history of violence accessing adequate accommodation** were identified. These are:

- **criminal convictions**, particularly for violent or drug related offences and particularly if they were recent (within the past 5 years)
- the requirement placed on applicants by many social landlords to provide **a record of previous convictions** and the lack of clarity about what this entails and how the information would be used.
- **lack of tenancy support.** Housing providers were far more reluctant to accommodate homeless people with a history of violence if a comprehensive package of tenancy support was not in place.
- **lack of assistance in accessing and negotiating access to housing**, particularly amongst those serving prison sentences who are in no position to arrange accommodation themselves.
- **lack of expertise, staffing, and specialism.** The housing exclusion of homeless people with a history of violence is not always a reflection of unwillingness amongst service providers to work with them but of recognition that they have neither the expertise nor the staffing levels required to support them and minimise the risk they pose.
- **problems accessing information.** Many housing providers reported that a lack of information from other agencies hindered their ability to carry out risk assessments, inevitably leading them to err on the side of caution and reject an application.
- **avoidance of inappropriate accommodation.** Some of the people with a history of violent behaviour interviewed reported actively avoiding certain accommodation (shared, located in particularly neighbourhoods) in an effort to manage their aggression. This was reflected in their housing choices and decisions but served to limit their housing options considerably

**The ability (or otherwise) of housing providers to assess risk emerged as a significant factor in the apparent levels of housing exclusion faced by homeless people with a history of violence.** The study team interviewed a range of housing providers in Stoke-on-Trent about their policies and procedures with regard to assessing risk, and the consequence for their capacity to accommodate people with a history of violent behaviour. The results of these interviews suggest that many housing providers (general needs providers in particular) do not have risk assessment policies in place which are adequate for

assessing risk in relation to this client group, and lack the expertise to do so. The consequence is a tendency toward caution and the effective exclusion of some individuals who pose few risks, are likely to sustain their tenancy, and for whom the accommodation could be entirely suitable.

## **Housing and Homelessness Careers**

The evidence from this study suggests that **the homelessness careers of people with a history of violence begin young, typically in early adolescence**. Nearly half of those surveyed had experienced homelessness by the age of 16 and over two thirds by the time they were 18. First experiences of homelessness often coincided with both the development of anti-social or violent behaviour and with being taken into care, with entry to the care system representing both a trigger and a consequence of the development of anti-social behaviour.

**Rough sleeping was very common**, with 89 per cent of survey respondents reporting having slept rough during an episode of homelessness and 39 per cent having slept rough in the past month. This is likely to reflect a range of other features of the housing careers of people with a history of violence including their early entry to homelessness and their apparently frequent, if temporary, eviction and exclusion from hostels.

**The homelessness careers of some of those participating in this study were lengthy and characterised by very frequent mobility**, moving quickly through a wide spectrum of temporary accommodation situations, with some having no history of settled housing at all.

**The policy of most temporary housing providers in the City not to impose permanent bans on individuals who have been evicted for aggressive or anti social behaviour is to be welcomed but this does have the effect of contributing to a chaotic yo-yoing in and out of hostels** as individuals 'sit out' their ban at friends houses or on the streets, returning to the hostel again subsequently. With their underlying issues still not addressed, repeat incidents and eviction were common.

**repeat homelessness was very common** amongst those participating in this study, with 87 per cent of the survey sample having experienced multiple episodes of homelessness. One third had experienced homelessness five times or more.

**prison featured prominently in the housing careers of the people with a history of violence surveyed and interviewed.** The majority of interview respondents either became homeless or sustained their homelessness (i.e. were homeless when they went into prison and remained so on release) while in custody, regardless of the length of their sentence. No respondent moved from a position of homelessness to settled accommodation while in custody, suggesting that although prison can represent an opportunity for services to engage with homeless people to help resolve their housing problems this usually does not occur.

## Meeting Support Needs

**Many of the homeless people surveyed had been in contact with services providing support or treatment for aggression** with just over half reporting having received some assistance in this regard. Anger management courses and counselling were the two most common forms of assistance provided to respondents

The survey evidence suggests that **homeless people with a history of violent behaviour do benefit from the support and intervention available:** survey respondents were mostly positive about the help they had received, with the majority (70 per cent) reporting that this had helped a lot or a little. Nearly half (44 per cent) found the intervention they received had helped 'a lot'.

Not all respondents had benefited from the assistance available and **a significant proportion (40 per cent) of survey respondents reported never having received assistance to manage their aggression.** Evidence from the in-depth interviews suggests that many also cope (or fail to cope) with aggression management problems for many years before receiving formal assistance.

The homeless people with a history of violence participating in this study presented with a wide range of support needs in addition to problems with anger management and aggression. Drug and alcohol abuse, mental ill health, coping difficulties and such like were also commonplace (see 'a profile of homeless people with a history of violence' above). Survey respondents were asked to specify those issues for which they had never received assistance, despite wanting such help or support and the results suggest that **homeless people with a history of violent behaviour are experiencing difficulties accessing emotional support - someone to talk to, counselling - as well as practical forms of assistance such as housing advice and help with budgeting.** Access to mental health services emerged as particularly problematic.

**In the absence of appropriate intervention and support, some respondents tried to manage their own risk, often unsuccessfully,** using a range of strategies such as avoiding association with other people (for example in hostels)



# Introduction

On July 3rd 2007 a fire engulfed a derelict warehouse in Stoke-on-Trent resulting in the death of two young homeless people. The couple had been sleeping in the premises when the fire took hold and were unable to escape in time. This tragedy prompted the City Council and other local agencies to closely scrutinise provision for homeless people in Stoke-on-Trent and consider ways in which this could be improved to reduce the number of people having to sleep rough in the City. To this end a Task and Finish Group was established, which sought to understand the causes of rough sleeping and identify priority issues to be tackled.

As part of this drive to reduce rough sleeping in Stoke-on-Trent, and to better understand and meet the needs of homeless people like those sleeping in the warehouse in July 2007, Stoke-on-Trent City Council commissioned the Centre for Regional Economic and Social Research at Sheffield Hallam University to carry out research exploring the housing needs of homeless people with complex needs. The study was focused on several distinct subsections of the homeless population - client groups thought to be particularly marginalised and vulnerable to rough sleeping. These were female street sex workers; people with drug and/or alcohol dependencies; and people with a history of violent behaviour. The research culminated in a series of reports: one focused on each of the client groups; and an overarching report summarising key issues, linkages between drug and alcohol dependency, street sex work, violent behaviour and homelessness; and using case study material to explore respondents 'homelessness journeys'. The focus of this report is the housing needs of homeless people with a history of violent behaviour

## Context

The past decade has witnessed significant government investment in tackling homelessness and rough sleeping, driven by a stated commitment to homelessness prevention. The Rough Sleepers' Unit, tasked with reducing the number of rough sleepers by two thirds, was established in 1999 and by 2003 had met its targets. Legislative changes in the form of the 2002 Homelessness Act confirmed the Governments commitment to tackling homelessness by placing new obligations on local authorities to offer assistance to all homeless households and to produce homelessness strategies, as well as extending the main housing duty to additional vulnerable households. The importance of understanding the underlying causes of homelessness was acknowledged in the 2003 government report *'More than a Roof: a report into tackling homelessness'* and a target of halving the number of households in temporary

accommodation by 2010 was set out in the national strategy for tackling homelessness published in 2005 (*Sustainable Communities: settled homes; changing lives*). Meanwhile the challenges and importance of meeting the housing needs of the multiply excluded, including offenders, have been recognised through the development of PSA 16 (the Public Service Agreement relating to socially excluded adults such as care leavers and offenders), and by the government's new rough sleeping strategy, launched in November 2008, which aims ambitiously to eradicate rough sleeping altogether by 2012. And non-governmental homelessness organisations and charities continue to highlight to needs of homeless people with complex needs. 'Making Every Adult Matter', for example, is a new coalition seeking to improve the way in which services are delivered to the most excluded, and which has developed a clear Manifesto for change.

Locally, Stoke-on-Trent city council and their partners have been responding to the challenges of understanding and tackling homelessness and rough sleeping, particularly amongst those with complex and multiple needs. There are housing and support providers working with rough sleepers, with street sex workers, with offenders, drug user and problematic drinkers. In 2009 Stoke-on-Trent City Council was named as one of 15 'ending rough sleeping' champions in England and in 2008 was awarded Enhanced Housing Options trailblazer status. In recognition that more needs to be done new services are being, or have recently been developed including a one stop shop for women offenders, a family Intervention project, and a new outreach service for young men and women at risk of sexual exploitation. These new services are likely to have a significant impact on tackling many of the issues and problems highlighted in this report.

## **Chapter Structure**

Following a description of the methods employed for this study in Chapter One, Chapter Two profiles the population of homeless people with a history of violent behaviour, offering insight regarding the life trajectories and offending histories which culminate in homelessness and other support needs. Chapters Three and Four turn attention to issues relating specifically to housing, identifying the options available to homeless people with a history of violent behaviour, the key barriers they face accessing accommodation, and the consequences for their housing and homelessness careers. Finally, Chapter five provides information on the extent to which homeless people with a history of violent behaviour are accessing the services they require to meet their support needs.



## Methods

This study was conducted between July 2007- June 2008 with data collection focused on three principle tasks:

- a questionnaire survey of people with a history of violence in Stoke-on-Trent who are homeless or at risk of homelessness
- In-depth interviews with people with a history of violence in Stoke-on-Trent who are homeless or at risk of homelessness
- interviews with housing and other relevant service providers

The 1996 Housing Act states that a person is homeless if they have no accommodation they are entitled to occupy or that it is reasonable for them to continue to occupy and this definition was applied, although not interpreted as rigidly as is sometimes the case. People sleeping rough, in squats, hostels, staying temporarily with friends or family, and in all other forms of temporary accommodation were included. People with a history of homelessness who were living in interim, or 'medium-term' supported accommodation were also included in the sample. Interim supported accommodation refers to provision intended to provide a longer-term and more stable solution than emergency homelessness accommodation but from which people are expected (and assisted) to move on, usually within a specified timescale. A small number of housed were also included in the research on the grounds that they had a history of homelessness and deemed 'at imminent risk of homelessness', for example because they were under threat of eviction and had nowhere else to go.

### ***The survey of homeless people with a history of violent behaviour***

A total of 80 homeless people with a history of violence were surveyed using a questionnaire which collected information about their housing situations, homelessness careers, personal characteristics, and histories. Of these, 24 were known to have a history of violence and were targeted for inclusion in the study. The remaining 56 respondents were drawn from a wider survey of homeless people (which included 41 people with known drug or alcohol dependencies, 22 women known to be involved in street prostitution, and 69 respondents

about whom nothing was known beyond their circumstance of homelessness). Respondents with a history of violent behaviour were selected from the wider survey sample if they responded positively to the question 'do you have a history of violent or aggressive behaviour?' or if they indicated that they had a criminal conviction for a violent offence. Many other respondents indicated criminal convictions for non-violent offences but these individuals were not drawn into the final sample of homeless people with a history of violence.

Respondents were accessed through hostels, the rough sleepers' team, specialist support and treatment services, and temporary supported housing projects. Surveys were completed in the following ways:

- face-to-face with a member of the research team
- face-to-face with a project worker
- self-completion

In total, 62 per cent of the survey sample was male and 38 per cent female. Table 1.1. shows that all age groups were represented although few respondents were over the age of 40. The majority (73 per cent) were single but nearly one quarter were in a long term relationship. Very few respondents were of an ethnic minority with just over three quarters recording their ethnicity as 'White British'. A further 17 per cent were White Irish and 3 per cent were of an 'Other White' background. A total of 5 per cent recorded their ethnicity as Mixed Heritage (White and Black Caribbean). With the exception of 3 per cent of survey respondents who recorded their sexuality as bisexual, all were heterosexual.

**Table 1.1. Age:**

	<b>No.</b>	<b>%</b>
<20	16	21
21-30	22	29
31-40	28	37
41-50	8	11
>51	1	1
<b>Total</b>	<b>75</b>	<b>100</b>

The homeless people surveyed were living in a range of housing situations but more were living in hostels (56 per cent) than in any other form of accommodation. This partly reflects that hostels represented a key route through which research participants were accessed. People squatting, living in interim supported housing, sleeping rough and staying with friends

were, however, also represented in the sample. A small percentage (4 per cent) had their own tenancies but were under threat of homelessness.

### ***In-depth interviews with homeless people with a history of violent behaviour***

A total of 24 in-depth interviews were conducted with homeless people with a history of violent behaviour. Interviews were flexible and informal, lasting approximately one hour, and took a biographical approach, exploring respondent's life histories, their homelessness careers, and contact with services. Respondents were accessed through organisations working with or accommodating offenders and through generic homelessness services. All interviews were transcribed verbatim.

Just over half (13) of those surveyed were male and 11 were female. Most were aged between 20-39 although four were teenagers and three were aged between 40-49. Four respondents recorded their ethnicity as White Irish and the remainder as White British. Only four were currently in relationships and all but one were heterosexual (one described themselves as bisexual and the sexuality of three respondents was unknown). The majority of respondents were staying in a hostel when they were interviewed but two were rough sleeping, three were living in interim supported accommodation and one was staying temporarily with a friend.

### ***Interviews with local stakeholders***

The study team conducted a series of face to face, telephone, and email interviews with service providers. This included in- depth interviews with agencies working with offenders and other key organisations. A series of interviews were also conducted with housing providers in Stoke-on-Trent exploring their approach to accommodating offenders and those with a history of aggressive behaviour. These interviews explored in some detail organisations' risk assessment policies and procedures and their eligibility, allocations and exclusion policies. Social housing landlords, voluntary sector providers, those targeted at particular client groups (including offenders), general needs providers, temporary and medium term supported accommodation providers were included in this exercise. Some were interviewed face-to-face, others by telephone and some responded by email to a set of written questions.



## A Profile of People with a History of Violence in Stoke-on-Trent

This study was concerned with exploring the housing needs of people with a history of violent behaviour regardless of whether they had criminal convictions, were known to have a history of violence, and regardless of whether their offending was contemporary or prolific. Applying a relatively broad definition allows us to identify and assess the relative importance of factors impacting on this client groups' housing experiences. It allows us to ask questions, for example, about whether the presence of a criminal conviction significantly disadvantages people with a history of violence with regard to accessing accommodation, or whether housing providers are more concerned with the type or frequency of aggression displayed, than whether they have been convicted for the consequences of it.

The consequence of employing an inclusive approach to researching homeless people with a history of violent behaviour is, inevitably, a final sample comprising a relatively disparate grouping of individuals. On the one hand this does reflect the very real diversity within the population but it also raises challenges with regard to pinpointing and discussing collective characteristics, experiences, needs, and barriers to accessing adequate housing. The final sample, then, included people with a long history of homelessness and chaotic and aggressive behaviour, known to most service providers but with convictions for relatively minor offences only; those having served one lengthy custodial sentence for a violent crime but with no prior experience of homelessness or contact with homelessness or support services; and those not well known to criminal justice, homelessness or support services who have never been convicted of a violent crime but who do have a history of violence and aggression. In some respects the only thing binding respondents together was their shared history of violent or aggressive behaviour. The form of violence in which respondents had engaged varied widely too. This included domestic violence, gang violence, drunken pub brawls, and assaults in the course of committing other crimes such as robbery and burglary.

Building a profile of this client group in an effort to better understand their housing and support needs requires appreciation of, and consideration to this diversity. To this end we have drawn up two distinct 'typologies' of people with a history of violence in the final section of this chapter following, and based upon, an examination of the profile of this population group.

## 2.1. Profile Characteristics and Experiences

All those participating in this study had a history of violent or aggressive behaviour but not all had related criminal convictions. In total, 63 per cent of survey respondents had been convicted for violent offences. These included convictions for Actual Bodily Harm, Grievous Bodily Harm, Assault, Common Assault, Racially Aggravated Assault, Battery, Section 18 with intent and Section 47 with intent. Drawing on the offending histories of interview respondents, some of the remaining 37 per cent of survey respondents will have been charged but found not guilty of a violent offence but some will never have been arrested at all. Harry for example, a 'skinhead' in the 1970's, spent many years in his late adolescence and early 20s seeking out people with whom to fight every weekend, and usually inflicting some harm. This activity ceased but he has since assaulted a number of people who, for various reasons, have triggered sudden anger in him. Until recently he had never been arrested for any crime, explaining that *"I was lucky, I never got caught"*.

The survey results suggest that it may be rare for people who display violent or aggressive behaviour not to have an offending history relating to other forms of criminal activity: although 63 per cent of survey respondents had a criminal conviction for violence, nearly all (90 per cent) had a criminal record. Convictions for shoplifting were as common as convictions for violent offences. Full details are as follows:

- 63 per cent of survey respondents had at least one conviction for shoplifting
- 45 per cent of survey respondents had at least one conviction for burglary
- 31 per cent of survey respondents had at least one conviction for drug offences
- 14 per cent of survey respondents had at least one conviction for fraud
- 13 per cent of survey respondents had at least one conviction for an 'other' offence, mainly criminal damage and 'Twocking' ('taking without owners consent', or commonly referred to as joyriding)
- 13 per cent of survey respondents had at least one conviction for robbery
- 3 per cent of survey respondents had at least one conviction for arson
- 1 per cent of survey respondents had at least one conviction for sexual offences

Despite prolific offending careers many respondents had so far avoided a custodial sentence, with less than half having (49 per cent) having served a prison term.

Table 2.1 presents information about survey respondents' life experiences, providing a useful overview of the profile characteristics of homeless people with a history of violence and an indication of the issues and needs they present with. It shows that (unsurprisingly), contact with the criminal justice system is extremely common, as is a disrupted education. The majority reported an unsettled childhood, reflected also in the relatively high proportion of respondents who reported having little contact with their family, and drug use, alcoholism and mental health issues are relatively prevalent.

**Table 2.1.**

	<b>People with a history of violence (%)</b>	<b>People with no history of violence(%)</b>
has a criminal record	90	67
has been on probation	69	51
had an unsettled life while growing up	61	52
Sometimes find it difficult to cope	57	51
Has experienced drug dependency	56	56
has little contact with family	56	44
Excluded or suspended from school	55	33
has been in prison/YOI	49	56
has experienced domestic violence	46	36
Have forms of abuse other than domestic violence	45	34
has experienced mental ill health	40	30
has been in local authority care	36	22
has experienced alcohol dependency	48	40
has literacy problems	21	16
Sometimes self harms	29	18
has a learning disability	17	14
has a physical disability	12	7
has been the subject of an ASBO	7	7

n = 80

These are, of course, characteristics recognised as common amongst the homeless population. Comparison between the experiences of survey respondents with a history of violent behaviour and those reporting no history of violence allows issues of relevance to this particular sub section of the homelessness population to emerge and suggests that people with a history of violence were more likely than those without to:

- have been on probation (69 per cent compared with 51 per cent)
- have been in the care of the local authority (36 per cent compared with 22 per cent)
- have been excluded or suspended from school (55 per cent compared with 33 per cent)

- self harm (29 per cent compared with 18 per cent)
- have experienced mental ill health (40 per cent compared with 30 per cent)

The issues and experiences detailed in Table 2.1. also featured prominently in the personal biographies of interview respondents, many of whom talked extensively about their experience of the care system, the relationship between their drug or alcohol use and their violent behaviour, and of deteriorating family relationships intrinsically bound up (as both cause and consequence) with their increasingly problematic and offending behaviour.

A significant proportion of interview respondents reported strikingly similar offending histories, particularly with regard to the way in which, and age at which their violent behaviour developed. Their stories typically began in early adolescence, with petty crime, anti-social behaviour, truanting, drinking and smoking, sometimes drug use (glue and gas rather than heroin, crack or cocaine,) and running away. Respondents described this variously as 'going off the rails', becoming 'uncontrollable' or being 'a tearaway'. Breach of the peace, drunk and disorderly, and shoplifting were common early convictions and school attendance virtually ceased. As relationships with parents became increasingly strained, offending behaviour escalated in both extent and severity, and (sometimes) Class A drugs entered the equation, homelessness and the criminal justice and Care systems loomed. Increasingly secure residential environments usually formed part of the picture, typically failing to abate respondents' aggression or other problematic behaviours. Mickey's assessment and summary of 'where it all started', accurately describes any number of respondents' early adolescence:

*"I was always bobbing school and pinching...I was in trouble with the law when I was about 10 for shoplifting and I got put into care, and I ran off from the children's home and burgled some shops and some houses, when I was about 13 I got put back into care...and then I got a detention centre order when I was 14 and then I came out and went back to me parents, got in trouble when I was 15 and went Borstal." (Mickey)*

In a few cases the onset of such behaviour was triggered by a particular event (the death of a parent, parents divorce) or was a response to distressing experiences within the familial home such as abuse or parental alcoholism. Glen, for example, explained that when his mother died unexpectedly he *"just rebelled against everything, school, and me dad couldn't cope"* and Louise reported an horrific childhood coping with her violent alcoholic mother and incidents of sexual abuse. The impact of 'abandonment' was also clear with several respondents perceiving a relationship between their behaviour and their mothers leaving them. Ian's mother, for example, separated from her husband to move in with a new partner,



taking Ian's sister with her but leaving him behind with his grandparents. Ian barely saw his mother again. David's mother walked out of the family home when he was 14 years old and never returned leaving him living alone in the house until the local authority obtained possession of the property on the grounds of rent arrears. And when Heidi was 12 years old she made a request to enter temporary respite care following on-going arguments with her mother and stepfather but her stay was extended indefinitely when her mother refused to take her back. Heidi explained that *' I agreed to go at first...and then at the end of the six weeks I wanted to go home cos I hated it but me mum didn't want me home so I ended up staying there.'*

But identifiable triggers were not always present. The influence of older teenagers in the neighbourhood was relevant and several respondents pondered whether they had undiagnosed Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD). Violence as a means of winning friends and achieving status within a peer group or neighbourhood was also evident. Chris, for example, came from a stable family home and had loving parents. When trying to explain why he became involved in regular violence at a young age he said:

*"something else critical I'd have to say...I became pretty well know around the area and that, like as a bit of a tough nut. So obviously people used to come looking for us [for a fight] and obviously I accommodated them...wrong kind of status looking back at it, it was the wrong kind of status"*

In each case entry to the Care and/or youth justice system seemed inevitable, although precise trajectories varied. In some cases the parents of young people in relatively stable family circumstances could apparently cope no longer with their 'out of control' teenagers and requested the intervention of Social Services. In other cases respondents' offending or anti-social behaviour reached a level where they were placed in (depending on the era) secure units, Borstal, approved schools or what respondents described as 'boarding school for kids with behavioural problems' and 'special housing for children with badly behaved difficulties'. Others were taken into care (or requested this themselves) for their own protection when their family circumstances came to the attention of social services.

The results from this study suggest that experience of the care system may be particularly common amongst homeless people with a history of violence. Table 2.1 shows that more than one third of survey respondents had been in the care of the local authority. This figure was higher amongst interview respondents, more than half of whom had been in care. They had generally entered care relatively late in their childhood (age 10 or older) but had a very mobile and chaotic care experience, moving from place to place (or being moved in

response to their behaviour or absconding). In the main, interview respondents' experience of care was in children's homes rather than foster placements: all had lived in children's homes but only a couple had (additionally) been placed for a time with foster parents. This was also broadly true of survey respondents, nearly as many of whom reported having lived in a children's home (30 per cent compared with 10 per cent of survey respondents with no history of violent behaviour) as reported having been in Local Authority Care (36 per cent). Time spent moving between care homes was also interspersed with time in other (secure) residential environments provided through the youth justice system.

Not all respondents began offending or displaying aggressive and anti-social behaviour at such a young age nor did they all fit this profile of a young person 'going off the rails'. For some, violence was alcohol and drug related, and for others it stemmed from involvement in gangs and violent sub-cultures (including 'skinhead' gangs in the 1980's and football hooliganism). That drugs and/or alcohol had a part to play is not surprising. Drug and alcohol use (or a history of) was relatively prevalent amongst those participating in the study. For example over half (56 per cent) of survey respondents had experienced drug dependency and nearly half (48 per cent) had experienced alcohol dependency. Heroin was the most common drug of choice (49 per cent of those who had experienced drug dependency were heroin users) and 21 per cent were current users of crack cocaine. It is worth noting, however, that the homeless people with a history of violence surveyed were no more likely to have experienced drug dependency than those respondents with no history of violence, although alcohol dependency was slightly more common.

These broad brush figures do mask a more complex picture. Although drug and alcohol dependencies were common, levels of sobriety (i.e. neither drug nor alcohol dependent) were also higher amongst the homeless people with a history of violence surveyed than amongst those with no history of violence, suggesting a high degree of variation within the sample. This is confirmed by the profile of in-depth interview respondents where very stark differences were evident with regard to use of drugs and alcohol and the role this plays (if any) in anti-social or violent behaviour. Some respondents had a long history of chaotic drug use or alcoholism, around which their lives had revolved, while others were vehemently opposed to illicit drugs, actively avoiding any contact with users. A few had drifted into Class A drug use and/or excessive alcohol consumption (usually in early to mid adolescence) but managed their habits, often sustaining employment and long-term relationships with non users while dependent on heroin or drinking heavily. A distinction can perhaps be drawn here between 'chaotic' drug or alcohol users, whose lives were very much focused on obtaining and consuming drugs or alcohol, and those for whom drug or alcohol dependency

was problematic, assuming more than a purely recreational role, but where it did not shape or control their lives to quite the same degree.

Distinctions were also evident with regard to the relationship between respondents' drug or (more commonly) alcohol consumption and the violence or aggression they display. In some cases violence was fuelled by alcohol or drugs (usually alcohol). Put simply, with no drink there was no violence. As Anton explained:

*"Pretty much everything I've done I've been drunk. I don't think I would have done it soberly and thinking straight" (Anton)*

The link between drug use and violence was a little more tenuous than between alcohol use and violence. Some respondents did report increased aggression when under the influence of substances (this was truer amongst those reporting a history of misusing substances such as glue or gas rather than heroin or crack cocaine) but the violence inflicted by respondents whilst on drugs was usually a by-product of other criminal activity such as burglary, robbery, or as part of drug dealing gang warfare.

There was a significant cohort of interview respondents whose behaviour was fuelled by neither drugs, nor alcohol or any other substance (although substance use sometimes exacerbated it) and who reported general, but relatively constant anger management issues. They articulated this variously as having 'a short fuse', 'snapping' easily or having 'rage'. These individuals were likely to have convictions for assault – typically not premeditated – and were regularly evicted from temporary accommodation or ejected from other buildings and areas because of their aggressive behaviour. There was usually a trigger for a violent or aggressive incident but this could be unpredictable, seemingly trivial, and with a response apparently out of proportion to the trigger event. Respondents talked about feeling annoyed or aggravated by others easily and reacting quickly and aggressively if someone '*looked at me funny*'. Being told what to do was a common trigger, particularly but not exclusively by people in authority. One young woman reported that when living in a supported housing project she became aggressive towards a member of staff because they had insisted she tidy her room. She also explained that she had destroyed her room, punching and kicking the walls and causing considerably damage because she had been allocated a support worker she did not like. Jade explained that she quickly transgressed from 'normal' to 'total loony' reporting *that 'sometimes I'm normal and then sometimes I'm a total loony really...they were trying to say I was on drugs so I just went mad...fighting the security [guard]'* (Jade). Ian and Nicola reported similarly:

*“I can’t help me anger. I’m a nice lad but when people wind me up...I don’t mean to do it, I don’t plan to be angry, I just snap...I don’t like authority as I’ve been through it all me life. I’m 21 and people still telling you what to do and I don’t like it at all” (Ian)*

*“All they had to do was look at me in the wrong way and that would be it then, I’d go off my head” (Nicola)*

There is evidence of significant mental health problems, and associated unmet needs, amongst the homeless people with a history of violent behaviour participating in this study. Few perceived that the anger they felt or the violence they inflicted stemmed from their mental health issues but many believed the two issues to be interlinked, a relationship made even more complex by the interaction of mental ill health and drug/alcohol use. In total, 40 per cent of the survey sample reported having mental health problems but 57 per cent also reported feeling unable to cope and nearly 30 per cent sometimes self harmed. Several interview respondents had been sectioned under the Mental Health Act and spent time in psychiatric hospitals. A few had recognised, diagnosed conditions (Personality Disorder, Schizophrenia, Psychosis) while others had experienced what they expressed more generally as a ‘mental breakdown’ resulting in hospitalisation (usually triggered by a traumatic incident) and ongoing mental health fragility.

## **2.2. A Typology of People with a History of Violent Behaviour**

It is clear from the discussion above that the sample of homeless people with a history of violence participating in this study was diverse. Mental health issues, experience of the care system, and disrupted educations were common experiences across the sample but in other respects the differences were as many as the similarities. Examining the differences and similarities across all respondents, two typologies emerge. It is important to make clear that these typologies make use of generalisations and, as such, do not provide an accurate description of any one respondent. They do, however, provide a useful tool to help make sense of and discuss some of the findings presented in subsequent chapters relating to housing experiences.

*The first group* are those whose history of violent behaviour is an intrinsic component of a chaotic life characterised by homelessness and (often) drug or/and alcohol dependency. They are likely to have long offending histories and associated convictions but not necessarily for violence. They are often considered to be ‘anti-social’ or aggressive rather than ‘violent’, although some will have convictions for violent offences such as assault or

GBH. Many will have served prison sentences but these will often have been short term, reflecting the diverse nature of their offending histories and the petty crime in which they are often involved. They will probably be known to (and have been evicted or excluded by) many homelessness and support services and have a reputation for aggressive behaviour. They will usually have experienced persistent homelessness, with some never having experienced settled housing and others rarely sustaining tenancies for long. Their childhood is likely to have been unsettled, sometimes characterised by conflictual or abusive familial relationships, and the relationships they form in later life are usually with other homeless and/or drug or alcohol dependent people. If they have children these will typically be in the care of someone else (the Local Authority or a relative other than the co-parent). Some of the individuals within this group will have been victims of violence themselves, either from parents or partners or both.

*The second group* are those who, despite experiencing homelessness, drug or alcohol misuse, and offending careers, could be described as a more 'stable' population. Alcohol dependency will be more common than drug dependency and likely to be a trigger of violent behaviour for some. Many will have misused drugs, or developed dependencies, but this will have been managed, been intermittent, or not have become an overriding need. Sobriety will be more common than it is amongst those characteristic of typology 1. They are likely to have been brought up in relatively stable home environments with supportive parents, although these relationships will have been tested to the limit (sometimes resulting in permanent estrangement but usually not). They will often have enduring, if sometimes turbulent personal relationships, typically with people who are not themselves substance misusers or homeless or offenders. Many will have been in paid employment, some sustaining this despite substance misuse issues and convictions. The offending profile of this group is somewhat varied but where they have criminal convictions these are likely to be for violent offences. The common exception to this would be regarding offences committed as a juvenile, prior to the escalation of violent behaviour. Some will have only one conviction, while others will have a long criminal record, but the number of convictions held for violent offences will rarely relate to the prolificacy of the offending. Individuals within this group are more likely to engage in violence purposively than those in typology 1 (for example through gang activity), who tend to commit acts of violence or aggression spontaneously in response to a trigger. Many will have served custodial sentences (again, some just once while others will have spent most of their adult life in prison) and, reflecting the nature of the offences, these will often be for a term of several years. Despite having significant anger management or aggression issues, a minority are likely to have no convictions at all. This group are less likely to be known by homelessness and support services (with the exception of criminal justice providers) primarily because they are less likely to have a long history of

homelessness. Amongst our sample, more male than female respondents displayed characteristics fitting this typology.

These typologies generalise from a relatively heterogeneous group but they allow us to appreciate and acknowledge the diversity within the population, a diversity which impacts significantly on respondents' needs, housing requirements, and homelessness experiences. Those with supportive parents and a stable long term partner, for example, find homelessness easier to avoid or escape, particularly on release from prison. On the other hand it can be difficult to escape homelessness if the prison term one has just served is for a serious violent crime. Amongst those characteristic of the first group described, convictions may not be considered serious enough to warrant exclusion from housing but they may have difficulties sustaining accommodation and their reputation amongst homelessness service providers can act as a barrier to accessing temporary accommodation. Another way of expressing this dichotomy is that for the first group, a life generally characterised by insecurity and disruption *manifests* in homelessness and offending, whereas for the second, the difficulties and insecurities in their life *stem* from their offending and homelessness.

### **2.3. Conclusion**

The analysis presented in this chapter suggests that homeless people with a history of violent behaviour are a vulnerable population, presenting with a wide range of support needs and often displaying prolific offending careers. In the following chapters we consider how these issues impact on the housing situations of people with a history of violent behaviour and their access to adequate accommodation.

## Housing Homeless People with a History of Violent Behaviour: Issues of Access and Exclusion

The housing options for homeless people with a history of violent or aggressive behaviour are limited. Local stakeholders described this population as *"really excluded and marginalised from housing"*, reporting that *"There is massive intolerance [by housing providers], they are seen as having less rights"*. Interview respondents pointed repeatedly to experiences of being refused access to housing, with one woman clearly articulating the reluctance of housing providers to accommodate her as the main cause of her homelessness. Specialist housing provision is scarce, general needs housing providers can be reluctant to accommodate people with recent convictions, and a history of relatively exclusionary allocations policies and practices by the local authority has left its legacy. According to stakeholders working with this client group they are *"a very excluded group, marginalised even within the socially excluded"*.

This chapter explores some of these issues further and in doing so highlights some of the key barriers facing people with a history of violent behaviour in their attempt to avoid or escape homelessness and rough sleeping.

### 3.1. Housing Options and Housing Exclusion

The housing options for homeless people with a history of violence in Stoke-on-Trent are relatively limited, there being little specialist provision for this client group in the City. Some medium-term supported housing provision for offenders exists but these agencies are generally unable to accept high risk offenders and so only serve a particular segment of the population (i.e. those who are classed as offenders, or in contact with criminal justice agencies, and not deemed high risk). These supported housing providers also reported

problems with availability due to difficulties securing move-on accommodation for their existing clients. Floating support, provided by an RSL operating across Staffordshire and the Midlands, is available to a limited number of high risk offenders, including those with convictions for violent offences but they have no housing stock in the City. Much of the generic supported housing in the city is targeted at people deemed low to medium risk and with low to medium support needs, appropriate for some but not many of the homeless people with a history of violence participating in this study. Much of the supported housing in the City, including that for people with complex or high support needs, is shared and the nature of the risk posed by some people with a history of violence is such that shared environments are deemed inappropriate. Social housing allocation and exclusion policies and local practice in relation to offenders and people with a known history of anti-social behaviours (particularly those subject of an Anti-Social Behaviour Order) renders it difficult for people with a history of violent behaviour to access general needs housing.

Interviews were conducted with many of the general needs and specialist housing providers in Stoke-on-Trent, including the local authority, and most reported not operating an exclusion policy as such (i.e. not operating blanket exclusions of particular groups) but assessing each application on a case by case basis. Never the less, when asked if particular groups or types of people were likely to be judged inappropriate or too high risk for the service it was common for housing providers to cite violent, or high risk offenders amongst those most likely to be refused access to the waiting list. People with drug dependencies, convictions for drug related offences, or rent arrears were other groups commonly excluded. If we refer back to the two typologies suggested in Chapter Two this rules out the majority of people interviewed for this study. Those characteristic of Typology 2 would find themselves excluded because of the risk they are thought to pose or the nature of their offending, while those characteristic of Typology 1, if not excluded because of a conviction for violence, are likely to face barriers on the basis of their drug use or previous rent arrears.

It proved very difficult to establish how many people with a history of violence were currently excluded from temporary or permanent accommodation in the City. Most housing providers interviewed reported having excluded only a very small handful of applicants (sometimes no more than one or two) on the grounds of violent behaviour or offending histories in the past year. The Local Authority reported that very few people were currently excluded from the waiting list because of a criminal conviction. But this is incongruent with the experiences of the homeless people participating in this study and with the experiences of service providers with a role in accessing move-on accommodation for people with a history of violence, a disjuncture likely to reflect that:



- many homeless people with criminal convictions do not apply for social housing, assuming that they will be ineligible or excluded, or are deterred by the requirement to produce a formal record of their previous convictions (see below)
- homeless people with a history of violence who are not excluded from waiting lists find they never the less fail to reach the top of the list and interpret this (sometimes rightly) as a form of back door exclusion
- people with a history of violence are excluded from, or deemed unsuitable for, housing for reasons other than their aggressive or offending behaviour (drug use, rent arrears, high support needs which the provider cannot meet). These exclusions are not recorded as being related to a history of violent behaviour but are never the less particularly relevant to this population group.

The records of housing providers with regard to exclusions does not necessarily, then, reflect the true extent of the 'exclusion' (used in its broadest sense) experienced by this client group. Mickey's experience provides a good illustration of the way in which people with a history of violence can find it extremely difficult to access general needs housing (and ultimately fail to do so), without having been actively excluded. A couple of years ago Mickey applied to a housing association and received a letter informing him that he was on the waiting list. He provided all the required documentation, including a full record of his previous convictions, and waited. Seven months later he was offered a flat which he viewed and accepted. Having made an appointment to collect the keys and sign the tenancy agreement he then received a telephone call informing him that the offer had been withdrawn. Despite being assured that he remains on the waiting list and is high priority he has never received another offer. In his own words:

*"they said they were withdrawing their offer...because they'd had an anonymous tip off...so I went down the offices and asked what it was all about. Then they said it wasn't an anonymous tip off, it was me criminal record was too bad. So then I appealed and I didn't get a clear answer then...then I appealed somewhere out of the area and...I never really got a straight answer. When I asked about me record they said it wasn't that, it was an anonymous complaint and when I asked about the complaint they said it as me record....[the manager] said 'we're not taking you off our list we're just saying you're not suitable for these certain properties...but you are still top priority'. I never heard nothing from them since [1 year ago]" (Mickey)*

Mickey is convinced that he has been effectively excluded from this accommodation even though this is not the official position. Mickey was not the only respondent who had offers of accommodation withdrawn by social landlords (including the local authority) without being provided with an explanation they trusted was accurate. Service providers working with offenders and with a role in accessing accommodation (or move on accommodation) for them were adamant that general needs social housing providers were operating informal exclusion policies, or that their reluctance to accommodate people with a history of violence results in very long spells on waiting lists, producing exactly the same outcome as an outright exclusion but without recourse to appeal. For example:

*“They do get accepted eventually but it can take much longer than it should....’John’ is a good example. He was finally accepted [by the LA] after five months but he then kept getting rejected for properties.” (supported housing provider working with offenders and people with complex needs)*

General needs housing providers vehemently deny this (although Local Authority housing managers acknowledge that unlawful policies and practices were operating some years ago), arguing that they operate according to their policies and that decisions with regard to exclusions are transparent. They also point out that additional considerations are present when assessing applications (or bids for properties) from people with an offending or violent history, which will limit the number of properties available to them, inevitably increasing waiting times. A Local Authority manager, for example, explained that they would generally avoid allocating a tenancy to someone with a history of violence near to known associates, or near to a victim of their offending.

Ascertaining the accuracy of either viewpoint is complicated by a considerable lack of consistency, or pattern, with regard to respondents’ experiences of applying for housing (general needs housing in particular). There is no doubt that having a criminal record, particularly for violent offences, being the subject of an ASBO, or known to have a history of violent behaviour was presenting significant barriers to accessing accommodation. And this was compounded for respondents with drug and alcohol issues, a history of rent arrears or previous evictions. But where some respondents reported extreme difficulties, effectively finding themselves unable to secure any medium or long term housing, others (sometimes with a long history of violence and associated convictions) reported no problems whatsoever. The contrasting experiences of Ian and Richard is a case in point. Richard has an extensive criminal record, including convictions for violent offences (armed robbery, GBH), has spent more of the past 13 years in prison than out, has a heroin dependency and an alcohol problem. Ian, in contrast has a long history of anti-social behaviour (and

homelessness) and was subject to an ASBO for three years but has no criminal convictions for violence and has never served a custodial sentence. He does not misuse drugs or alcohol. They explain:

*"I've never had a problem with it before [applying to the LA] so now I'm waiting for the police to send my records back so I can send them into the council to get a property. So I can bid for a property and I know people that have done worse things than I've done and they've got a house from the council. (Richard, age 33)*

*"I got in the Salvation Army but no housing association would let me bid or go on the register while I was on an ASBO...I couldn't bid on my own property, nothing, nobody would look at me cos of me ASBO... Basically [it was] the Salvation Army or the streets" (Ian, now aged 22, who was subject to an ASBO between the age of 17 and 20)*

The suggestion of one service provider that social landlords can be more reluctant to accommodate people with a history of (persistent) anti-social behaviour, than a history of violent offending finds some resonance in Richard and Ian's experiences. Anti-social behaviour can be thought more relevant to a tenancy, those with a history of anti-social behaviour deemed more likely to 'offend' in their property and local environment. On the other hand, this doesn't chime with the reports of many registered social landlords that they are most likely to exclude people with convictions for violence, or the reports of interview respondents and their key workers that RSLs advertising through the Choice Based Lettings system will (formally) exclude applicants with convictions for certain offences.

Whatever the exclusion and allocations policies of local housing providers, there is a *perception*, amongst homeless people with a history of violence and the stakeholders working with them, that offenders (particularly those with convictions for violence or drugs offences) and people who are or have been subject to ASB measures are actively excluded from social housing in Stoke-on-Trent. The consequence is that people were found to effectively 'self-exclude', assuming they were not eligible. Until recently Susan has never applied to the local authority. Her key worker has recently assisted her with making an application but Susan is not optimistic:

*"Quite a few people I know who've been in prison can't get a council property...the council probably think when you've been done for violence I'm some type who'll fight with the neighbours or something, that stops you from getting a council house. They*

*might not but that's what I'm thinking, I think it will stop me from getting somewhere, being in prison" (Susan)*

A history of relatively exclusionary allocations policies and practices by the local authority has left a legacy and the extent of 'self exclusion' evident is partly attributable to this. There was a consensus, acknowledged by local authority managers, that until a few years ago allocation policies and practices were exclusionary and partly unlawful. It was reported that a blanket exclusion was applied to people subject to ASBOs and with certain convictions, and that *"Local Lettings Policies were used as exclusion policies"*. The local authority has worked very hard to develop more inclusive policies and implement lawful practice in relation to allocations but this may not yet have been communicated to those who were excluded under the old regime. There is also evidence to suggest that practice may be lagging a little behind this policy shift, with some front-line officers not acting in accordance with new allocations policies and procedures. Respondents' reports could not be corroborated but their reported experiences of recently approaching the local authority suggests variable practice with regard to responding to applications (or requests to make an application) from people with an history of violence. Several interview respondents, for example, reported recent experience of being informed that they were not eligible *to make an application* until they could produce a record of their convictions (see below for further details) or that they were ineligible because they were subject to an ASBO. This serves to reinforce a generally held view that offenders are excluded from council housing.

One stakeholder suggested that the conflation of RSL and local authority housing may also be deterring people eligible for local authority housing from bidding through the Choice Based Lettings System. He reported that more stringent eligibility criteria are applied to some advertised RSL properties and that having been informed they could not be allocated the property for which they had made a successful bid on the basis of their criminal record, his clients often assumed the same was true of all properties advertised and ceased bidding. The findings of this study lend some support to this. The homeless people interviewed did not always appreciate the distinction between local authority and RSL housing, assuming that the policies of both arms of the social housing sector were identical and that an experience of approaching one for assistance would be replicated by the other. In several cases this had served to deter respondents from applying to the full range of social housing providers in the City.

Harry, for example, approached the local authority as homeless but *"I was told that I would need to get a piece of paper from the police before I could apply and there was no way I was going to go into the police station"*. He thought he was being asked to obtain a reference

from the police confirming his suitability for housing (in fact he was probably being asked to obtain a record if his criminal convictions). Assuming that all social housing providers would exclude him without such a 'reference', and that he had no chance of obtaining one from the police, he only applied to only one housing provider - the one whose application form asks 'have you had a criminal conviction in the past five years'. He could truthfully answer 'no' to this question on the basis that his last conviction was more than five years ago, even though he has only recently been released from prison having served a seven year sentence for a violent offence. Glen also decided not to pursue his application to the Local Authority for similar reasons, opting instead to apply to a local housing association "*because if it's five years, if you haven't been in trouble for five years it doesn't matter with [that HA]...it says on the form have you had any criminal convictions in the last five years?'. Well, I haven't so I can tick it so no questions are asked"*. Glen was last released from prison in about 2004 having spent '*half my life*' in jail.

Generally speaking interview respondents did not encounter the same difficulties accessing hostel accommodation in the City as they did accessing general needs social housing or (to a lesser degree) medium term supported housing. Many had been evicted and temporarily excluded from hostels as a result of specific incidents (aggressive behaviour whilst resident) or circumstances (known associates or victims were currently resident and the respondent could not be accommodated until they had moved on) but most had been readily accepted into at least one of the hostels at some point in their homelessness careers. Hostel places are, however, limited, particularly for women over the age of 25 (one hostel is for men only and one for people under the age of 25).

There were a few circumstances under which respondents did seem better able to access settled accommodation. The experiences of those interviewed for this study suggests, for example, that offenders and people with a history of violence are more likely to secure long-term accommodation if they are able to demonstrate that they have successfully sustained a tenancy and behaved appropriately for a period of time. Medium term supported housing plays a key role here, effectively providing people with a 'reference'. Supported housing workers did comment, however, that even under these conditions it can take considerably longer to find move-on accommodation for offenders than for other clients. The presence of support (housing support workers, mental health support workers, contact with drug or alcohol agencies) may also be a key factor facilitating access to accommodation, particularly for people classed as 'violent offenders'.

### 3.2. Barriers to Accessing Housing

The discussion above has alluded to some of the key barriers preventing homeless people with a history of violence accessing adequate housing. Here we make these explicit, spotlighting some of the factors, characteristics, and practices which emerged as particularly influential with regard to respondents' exclusion from, or difficulties accessing housing.

These include:

- **criminal convictions**, particularly but not exclusively for violent or drug related offences and particularly if they are recent (within the past 5 years). We reported above that violent offenders were the group most commonly cited by housing providers as likely to be excluded and many respondents reported that once details of their criminal record were known they encountered increased resistance from the housing provider to whom they had applied, or a withdrawal of a tenancy offer. Stakeholders working with offenders and people with a history of violent behaviour were clear in their view that it is often the presence of a conviction, rather than violence itself which acts as the exclusionary force. The presence of a criminal conviction is being used by housing providers as a 'signal' to investigate an applicants history in more detail. This client group therefore come under increased scrutiny when making an application for housing and when scrutiny begins from a position of suspicion (as it does in this case) then exclusion is more likely regardless of the nature and extent of offending. There was some evidence that **being subject to anti-social behaviour measures** such as ASBOs was serving the same function as criminal convictions and that this group may face a similar level of exclusion.
- **a requirement to provide a record of previous convictions.** The local authority and all the RSLs and supported housing providers we interviewed reported rarely, if ever, conducting Criminal Record Bureau (CRB) checks on applicants. Information regarding criminal convictions was sought (via questions on application forms and from referral organisations) but CRB checks were not common practice. It does, however, seem to be common practice for applicants to the local authority and some RSLs who indicate having a criminal conviction to be asked to obtain a formal record of their convictions from the police. This is having a significant impact on offenders' access to local authority housing for a number of reasons . Firstly, this requirement was found to deter respondents with convictions from pursuing their application, assuming that once their record was known they would be excluded, or not wishing to have any further contact with the police. Secondly, there was a degree of confusion (or lack of clarity) about what information or documentation the housing provider was

demanding. Several respondents reported having been asked for a 'reference from the police'. Glen for example explained that "*they just said 'you've got to go to the police station and get a police reference'*". Under the impression that they were being required to obtain a statement from the police confirming their suitability for housing, again, respondents tended to drop their application. Glen, for example, explained that "*they ask you on the forms have you got any criminal convictions and you try to be honest, say 'yeah' and the next thing they say 'oh well we want police reference'... I won't walk into a police station and say 'can I have a reference?' cos they'll laugh at me*". Thirdly, Stakeholders reported that obtaining a record of one's criminal convictions was far from straight forward because of data protection concerns but that without it respondents would not be considered. He offered the view that "*The lack of proof of pre-cons is a significant obstacle to being accepted on the housing register*" This chimed with the experiences of interview respondents several of whom reported being told they could not submit their application until they could produce an official record of their previous convictions.

- **lack of support.** Having a criminal record or a history of known violent or anti-social behaviour is a barrier to accessing accommodation but the *combination* of this and a lack of contact with support services can clinch it. One supported housing provider explained that "*We have no problem taking people with complex needs, including violence, not a problem in principle if we can get the right support*". Housing providers can be reassured by the presence of a comprehensive support package for high risk clients, recognising that this reduces the risk they pose (or risk of re-offending) and introduces expertise to draw upon should problems with the tenancy occur. It was notable, for example, that a provider of floating support to high risk offenders (many of whom are subject to MAPPA and so have involvement with many agencies) reported that most of their clients are living in their own tenancies, having moved in relatively soon after being released from prison. However, service providers and the homeless people interviewed reported that the 'right support' can be difficult to obtain unless the client is on a Criminal Order. Access to voluntary or statutory sector mental health services, for example, and anger management courses can be difficult and there are few support providers able to work with high risk individuals.
- **lack of assistance.** The homeless people interviewed often found it very difficult to negotiate access to housing, not being fully cognisant of the provision available, eligibility criteria, application or appeal procedures. This was particularly true for those serving prison sentences who were in no position to arrange accommodation. The level of assistance offenders receive on release (for example entitlement to a



probation officer) depends partly on the length of the sentence served, whether it has been served in full or whether they have been released on licence or parole. It will depend on whether they are being supervised under MAPPA (which in turn will be partly determined by the nature of the offence and the sentence) or have been referred to the Prolific Offenders Group operating in Stoke-on-Trent. And it will also depend on the facilities and services available in the prison in which they are serving their sentence. Without assistance there can be no referral, no advocacy, no information and advice regarding options. Those receiving less (or no) assistance finding and applying for accommodation were at considerable risk of rough sleeping and experienced the most difficulties accessing housing.

- **lack of expertise, staffing, and specialism.** The absence of specialist provision for people with a history of violent behaviour has been noted above. Some homeless people with a history of violence will be accepted by services providing accommodation to offenders or to people with complex needs but those who are deemed higher risk are likely to be excluded from virtually all housing provision in the City. In the case of some services (particularly supported housing for homeless people and those with complex needs) this is not a reflection of reluctance to work with this client group but an acknowledgement that they have neither the expertise nor the staffing levels required to support them and minimise the risk they pose.
- **problems accessing information.** Issues regarding information sharing featured prominently in interviews with local stakeholders. Many housing providers reported that a lack of information from other agencies hindered their ability to carry out risk assessments, inevitably leading them to err on the side of caution and reject an application. This was as true of specialist organisations as it was of general needs housing providers. One provider of supported accommodation for offenders, for example, reported that *“we don’t take people if we don’t get the proper information. We have to say no”*. Information about potential applicants was reportedly both difficult to obtain and partial when it was obtained. A hostel provider, for example, reported that *“the worst bits from someone’s history can get left out...we’ve been stung a few times by other originations leaving out some vital information”*. In particular, non statutory agencies reported difficulty obtaining information from statutory services and information from agencies in other Local Authority areas was also reportedly very problematic. Although various protocols are in place (reports on the success of these were varied) there was some evidence that *“It comes down to the person involved. Some [officers] are quite prepared to share information, other [officers] there’s a barrier there”* (Supported housing provider)



- **avoidance of inappropriate accommodation.** Some of the people with a history of violent behaviour interviewed reported actively avoiding certain accommodation in an effort to manage their aggression. They had come to understand the triggers of their behaviour and, in an effort to avoid these triggers, generated circumstances under which they better managed their aggression. This was reflected in their housing choices and decisions. Respondents with ongoing anger management issues frequently referred to the heightened sense of aggression they felt when living in shared accommodation, for example, amongst people they did not know, and the greater level of control they needed to exercise in such an environment. Thus some reported refusing a hostel place if there was not sufficient privacy and space for them to avoid other residents. Others accepted a place but remained in their rooms to avoid mixing with others and minimize the risk that they would become 'annoyed'. This could present problems, however, when their behaviour was perceived by providers as non-engagement. Many respondents were seeking more solitary accommodation and environments. Louise, For example, explained that she was seeking *"somewhere that's out in the country so if I get annoyed I can just go for a run, have no cars or anything like that"*. She explained that, *"I manage fine on me own, I love it more on me own, when there's no-one to bug me, I can just lay there and think, or draw and paint"*. One man was actively seeking a property at the top of a high rise block because the sense of space you have 'from the top of the world' improved his sense of well being. Other respondents felt the key to success in managing their behaviour was to stay away from known associates, prompting them to seek accommodation in areas to which they had no connection. This was serving to limit their housing options considerably, some housing providers having properties concentrated in the very areas they wish to avoid. Nicola, for example, explained that there was no point applying to a particular housing provider because if she was offered a property she would *"be hanging around with all the people I used to hang around with and getting arrested every day."*
- **inadequate risk assessment.** The ability (or otherwise) of housing providers to assess risk emerged as a very significant factor in the apparent levels of housing exclusion faced by homeless people with a history of violence. This is explored in detail Section 3.3. below

### 3.3. Assessing Risk

The study team interviewed a range of housing providers in Stoke-on-Trent about their policies and procedures with regard to assessing risk, and the consequence for their capacity to accommodate people with a history of violent behaviour. The results of these interviews suggest that many housing providers (general needs providers in particular) do not have risk assessment policies in place which are adequate for assessing risk in relation to this client group. Crucially, many also appear to lack the expertise to conduct adequate risk assessments for this client group. The consequence, understandably, is a tendency toward caution with one support provider suggesting that *“They are concerned and frightened and so they would rather just say no”* The result is the effective exclusion of many people who might pose few risks, are likely to sustain their tenancy, and for whom the accommodation could be entirely suitable.

The way in which risk is assessed, and the decisions arising from such an assessment were found to often focus on the ‘wrong’ (i.e. less relevant) factors. Housing providers sometimes concentrated, for example, on the length of an individual’s criminal record, or the fact that they have one at all, rather than whether the trigger factors of that persons offending/violent behaviour are present. It was apparently common for housing providers to refuse accommodation because of an applicants’ history rather than the risk they currently pose. So some providers ask whether an applicants *past* behaviour is deemed unacceptable, rather than whether their recent behaviour has been unacceptable. This chimes with the experiences of supported housing providers who reported that once a client had been accommodated with them for some time with no problems whatsoever, move-on accommodation remained difficult to secure, with general needs housing providers still focusing on their clients past behaviour. A persons’ history is certainly relevant but is not a sound basis for a risk assessment without additional information about their past and present circumstances (what were the circumstances under which they were violent? Are they still present? How long has it been since the applicant offended? Do they have support in place? Have they addressed the issues which were relevant to their offending? And so on). Louise, for example, has a relatively recent history of violence, aggression, and criminal damage linked directly to drug abuse. She has addressed her drug dependency and is confident she is not likely to relapse. Her ‘risk’ has all but disappeared - *“now that I’m off drugs and everything I won’t be smashing it up, because I used to smash my places up really bad”*. - but her ‘past behaviour’ is certainly unacceptable.

Using 'time' as a measure of risk can also have the converse effect. We reported earlier that some housing providers only ask whether an applicant has been convicted of an offence in the past five years and this is to be welcomed. As a result applicants who left offending activity behind long ago will not be disadvantaged by their history. However, it cannot be a primary measure of risk. We interviewed a number of people who had no recent convictions (or no convictions at all) but who acknowledged the difficulty they had managing anger and reported that in certain environments and certain circumstances they do pose a current risk to others.

Limited consideration to (or understanding of) the nature and direction of the risk an individual poses and the factors likely to trigger violent behaviour was found to be further hampering organisations' ability to adequately assess risk, and their willingness to accommodate people with a history of violence. An experienced stakeholder working with high risk offenders explained that *"Most high risk offenders aren't a danger to most people. Lots offend within families or very specific circumstances"* (Floating support provider). This understanding enables them to offer one-to-one floating support in the homes of high risk offenders because *"a person who has only ever offended against children is very low risk to my adult support workers who visit them in their home"*. Another stakeholder with extensive experience of working with this client group made a similar comment, suggesting that many people with a history of violence who are deemed high risk actually pose little risk in most circumstances. He suggested that:

*"of all the people who would be described as high risk offenders, 75 per cent could probably be housed in general needs housing. Actually it's probably higher than that, 90 per cent could probably be housed in general needs housing. Then there's the 10 per cent who need a specialist service but there is no differentiation [amongst housing providers] between these two groups. No-one can evaluate risk so as to differentiate"*

Specialist housing providers (i.e. those accommodating offenders and people with complex needs) do tend to have comprehensive risk assessment policies and the expertise to adequately assess risk in a way which enables them to accept and accommodate some offenders and people with a history of violent behaviour. A key feature of their risk assessments is identifying how and whether the risk could be managed, and what measures could be put in place to do so (such as no lone working, additional support, removal of any trigger factors) in order that the applicant could be accommodated. A hostel worker explained similarly that they identify trigger factors and only exclude an individual when those trigger factors are present. If alcohol, for example, is considered to significantly increase a residents risk they would not be admitted to the hostel if they return drunk. Or if

an individual is violent towards young women they would only accept them during times when no young women are resident. One supported housing provider explained that the emphasis of their risk assessment was not on the risk posed by the individual but the capacity and resources of the organisation and staff to meet their needs (which includes managing their risk). This way, the onus is placed on the service, rather than the client. However, the expertise of some housing providers to adequately assess the risk posed by people with a history of violence can also be the very thing which serves to (in this case rightly) exclude them from the service. As several stakeholders explained:

*"High risk offenders need higher levels of monitoring and management....If I can't offer the right support or the right housing I shouldn't be doing it....if we house this client group and can't manage the risk then we fail them"*

*"we are limited in who we can take by staffing. Staff are not 24 hour and they are not on site".*

The consequences of a lack of expertise in assessing the risk posed by people with a history of violence evident amongst some housing providers are significant, compounded by the limited capacity (staffing, nature of environment) of those agencies well equipped to assess risk and willing, but unable, to work with high risk individuals. These are:

- individuals who could be accommodated in general needs housing are excluded because of the minority who would pose a risk or for whom that accommodation would not be suitable (i.e. because they need a greater level of support, a more structured environment, or a supervised environment).
- conversely, individuals who pose a serious threat to themselves and/or others can end up in the least supervised and supported environments
- a lack of consistency in housing people with a history of violence/offending behaviour. Some individuals with a long history of violence who reported existing issues with anger management were accessing temporary or move on accommodation, while people with no recent history of violence or offending were finding that a criminal conviction was acting as a significant barrier to escaping homelessness.
- people with a history of violence are prevented from accessing accommodation because of the inadequacies of service providers rather than characteristics relating to their own behaviour or circumstances. Homelessness and rough sleeping are the consequences.

### **3.4. Conclusion**

The housing options for homeless people with a history of violence are very limited. There is little specialist provision and general needs housing providers can be reluctant to accommodate them. This risk they pose or are through to pose, and the inability of many housing providers to meet their support needs effectively renders homeless people with a history of violence ineligible to or excluded from much of the City's housing provision. In the following chapter the consequences of this are seen, in the housing careers of homeless people with a history of violent behaviour.



## Homelessness Careers

This chapter explores the homelessness careers of homeless people with a history of violent behaviour, identifying common trajectories into homelessness and the situations on which they rely whilst homeless. Key features of the homelessness careers of people with a history of violent behaviour are discussed.

### 4.1. Housing and Homelessness Situations

Survey respondents were asked to indicate all the housing situations in which they had ever lived, providing a broad indication of some key features of the housing careers of people with a history of violence and of the accommodation they tend to rely on whilst homeless. . The results are presented in Table 4.1. and show that:

- rough sleeping was the most commonly experienced housing situation, with more survey respondents reporting having slept rough than having lived or stayed in any other accommodation situation.
- people with a history of violent behaviour in Stoke-on-Trent are accessing hostels. Rough sleeping aside, hostels were the most commonly relied upon form of homelessness accommodation amongst those surveyed. There may be a relationship here between rough sleeping and staying in hostels, with many respondents reporting that the rough sleepers' team facilitated their access to a local hostel.
- a significant proportion, however, had also spent much of their homelessness careers in 'hidden homelessness' situations (i.e. those not provided by an organisation) such as staying with friends, with family, and squatting. The proportion of respondents who had squatted as a response to their homelessness is particularly high.
- experience of homelessness accommodation was more common than experience of settled housing amongst the people with a history of violence surveyed. More

respondents had slept rough, stayed in hostels, and stayed temporarily with friends than had lived in their own private rented tenancy; and more had slept rough, stayed with family, friends or partners temporarily, in hostels and B&Bs, and in squats than had held a social rented tenancy.

**Table 4.1. The accommodation situations in which survey respondents have lived**

<b>Accommodation situation</b>	<b>%</b>
<b>Homeless Accommodation</b>	
Rough sleeping	89
Homeless hostel	80
Temporarily with friends	58
Squatting	43
B&B	42
Temporarily with family	36
Temporarily with a partner	25
Night shelter	21
Bail / probation hostel	16
Refuge	6
<b>Settled accommodation</b>	
Private rented tenancy	45
Social rented tenancy	25
Owner Occupied	8

n= 80

We saw in Chapter 2 that mental ill health was relatively common amongst the homeless people with a history of violence surveyed. Exploring the housing situations of survey respondents reporting mental ill health suggests that some of the most vulnerable people are living in the most insecure and detrimental homelessness accommodation situations. Respondents reporting mental ill health were, for example, significantly more likely to have squatted than those not reporting mental health issues (71 per cent of those reporting mental ill health had squatted compared with 24 per cent of the remainder of the sample of people with a history of violence). They were also more likely to have stayed in night shelters (32 per cent compared with 13 per cent) and B&B accommodation (52 per cent compared with 35 per cent). Virtually all had slept rough (97 per cent compared with 83 per cent of those without mental ill health).

## **4.2. Routes into Homelessness**

There was a clear coincidence of transitions to adulthood or adolescence and first experiences of homelessness amongst the people with a history of violent behaviour interviewed. The majority had been living in the parental home or a children's home prior to their first episode of homelessness. This was true for 13 of the 22 respondents whose routes



into homelessness were known. Drawing on the personal biographies of these interview respondents we suggest that early experiences of homelessness were often precipitated by a deterioration in family relationships, stemming sometimes from the behaviour of parents (violence, abuse, alcoholism, neglect) and sometimes from the behaviour of their children (obstructive, difficult, anti social and increasingly criminal activity - see Chapter Two). Often, the two went hand in hand, with children and young teenagers 'lashing out' as a response to their domestic circumstances and experiences, increasing in intensity as more time passed. This is encapsulated well by Louise (now aged 18) who first became homeless when she ran away from home at the age of 11, had been excluded from at least one school by the same age, went into Local Authority care at the age of 12, moved into temporary accommodation at the age of 16 and who, by the age of 17, was serving a prison sentence for assault. The 'anti-social' and aggressive behaviour she started displaying in early adolescence was a response to her situation at home, illustrated by her description of an incident which occurred when she was approximately 11 years of age:

*"I got kicked out of my other school cos I trashed the classroom...they locked me in a classroom and...they says 'we're waiting for social services'. I says 'I'm not going home, I don't want to go home, me mum keeps hitting me' and they don't believe you, no-one would believe me, even when I told Social Services they didn't believe me and then me and my mum started fighting and I'd knock her out and she's try and knock me out but it wouldn't work cos I've got used to it so I don't feel pain anymore" (Louise)*

Some respondents moved between the parental home, children's homes, and homelessness until they reached the age of 16 and left altogether. No respondent who had been in the care of the local authority moved from their care accommodation into settled housing although some did move into temporary accommodation (for example a hostel) arranged by Social Services. It was rare, however, for those placed in hostels and other temporary accommodation to subsequently move on to more settled or secure housing. Approximately one year ago, when Heidi was 16, a hostel place was arranged for her by her Social Worker. She described how her housing career progressed over the next six months:

*" I went from [Hostel A] to [Hostel B] and then back to [Hostel A]and then back to [Hostel B] and then I was homeless [rough sleeping and staying with friends] for about two months and I got [interim supported] accommodation and I got kicked out and I was homeless for about three weeks then I moved in the hostel again, then I got kicked out again.(Heidi)*

On the afternoon we interviewed Heidi she had no idea where she was going to sleep that night.

Only five of the 22 respondents whose routes into homelessness were known had been living in their own homes (i.e. rented or owner occupied) prior to becoming homeless for the first time. In most cases respondents had left this accommodation because they separated from the partner with whom they were living. Four respondents had become homeless for the first time following a prison sentence. The role prison plays in the homelessness careers of people with a history of violence is discussed in more detail below.

### **4.3. Key Features of the Homeless Careers of People with a History of Violent behaviour**

Exploring the homelessness careers of the people with a history of violence interviewed suggests a common pattern of frequent moving between friends, squats, rough sleeping, and formal provision such as hostels. Institutional and other residential environments also featured prominently including prisons, children's homes and, to a lesser extent, psychiatric hospitals and residential rehabilitation centres. Once homeless, people with a history of violence can find it extremely difficult to resolve their housing crisis, access to appropriate settled housing being particularly difficult to secure (see previous chapter). As a result, they can find themselves 'stuck' in temporary housing or revolving around the temporary homelessness provision in the City.

This general picture does mask a high degree of variation between respondents, reflecting the diversity in the population discussed in Chapter 2. Those characteristic of 'typology 1', for example, (see Chapter Two for further details) tended to have longer and more chaotic homelessness careers, sometimes punctuated by settled accommodation but where this was the case, tenancies were rarely sustained for long. In contrast, some of those characteristic of 'typology 2' had experienced relatively long periods of settled housing (albeit sometimes interrupted by lengthy prison sentences) in between episodes of homelessness and did not move through quite the same range of homelessness accommodation situations with quite the same rapidity. Notwithstanding these differences, it is possible to identify some key features of the homelessness careers of people with a history of violence. These are presented below.

***The homelessness careers of people with a history of violence begin young, typically in early adolescence*** with some respondents first experiencing homelessness as young as

11 years of age. Nearly half of survey respondents had experienced homelessness by the age of 16 (compared with 39 per cent of those not reporting a history of violence) and over two thirds by the time they were 18 (compared with 51 per cent of survey respondents not reporting a history of violence). We have discussed elsewhere that first experiences of homelessness for people with a history of violence often coincided with both the development of anti-social or violent behaviour and being taken into care, with entry to the care system representing both a trigger and a consequence of the development of anti-social behaviour.

***Rough sleeping was very common***, with 89 per cent of survey respondents reporting having slept rough during an episode of homelessness and 39 per cent having slept rough in the past month. This is likely to reflect a range of other features of the housing careers of those participating in this study including their early entry to homelessness. People who become homeless before the age of 16 have very limited housing options, being too young to access most services and provision for homeless people. They are often entirely reliant on the goodwill of friends, but very few of their friends have their own accommodation. Anton's first experience of homelessness illustrates this problem. At the age of 15 he was asked to leave the parental home following what he described as 'going off the rails'. He spent most of the following two months sleeping rough before coming to the attention of Social Services and being taken into Care. He described his housing situation during those two months:

*"I'd go and meet me mates from school, walk home with them, used to go to me mates house from school and he'd always feed me, he'd let me have a bath and that, and then I'd just doss round the streets all night til all me mates had gone home. Whoever the last person was who'd gone home I'd walk 'em home hoping they'd say 'you can stop here' but they never would. So I'd just walk the streets more and then get me head down on a bench in the cemetery most nights or there was a public toilet what I used to get me head down in there. And then get up and do the same again, walk me mates to school." (Anton).*

The prevalence of rough sleeping amongst homeless people with a history of violence is also likely to reflect their apparently frequent, if temporary, eviction and exclusion from hostels. Many of those interviewed had been evicted from hostels (as illustrated very well by Heidi's early homelessness career, discussed in section 4.2. directly above) because of aggressive behaviour towards other residents or staff. No resident is permanently barred, however, and people can (and do) reapply or appeal and are often provided once again with a hostel place. In between times, rough sleeping is common.

***The homelessness careers of some of those surveyed and interviewed were lengthy and characterised by very frequent mobility.*** Respondents' homelessness careers could be very chaotic and insecure, as they moved quickly through a wide spectrum of temporary accommodation situations, with some having no history of settled housing at all. Finding themselves excluded from (or ineligible for) much housing provision, securing accommodation could prove a difficult and lengthy process (see Chapter 3). As a result they were frequently accommodated in the least secure temporary housing situations, and experienced long episodes of homelessness. One stakeholder working with offenders reported that violent offenders are usually to be found *"dotted through the hotels if they can get in, sofa surfing, staying with friends."* and that *"Many have no history of being housed"*. This chimes with the housing histories of some respondents (particularly those with drug or alcohol dependencies, or who are classed as 'violent offenders'), illustrated by Matt who has been homeless since he left the parental home ten years ago and reported that *"no, I've never had a flat or a house that's been in my name"*. He has spent periods of time in settled accommodation with partners but his name was never on the tenancy agreement. At the age of 43, Mickey similarly has never had a tenancy in his name, although he has spent time living with partners. The fragility of his situation is exposed in his comment that *"the bad thing about that is if I fell out with me girlfriend I hadn't got a leg to stand on"*. On the many occasions he was 'kicked out' *"I'd usually sleep rough"*

The policy of most temporary housing providers in the City not to impose permanent bans on individuals who have been evicted for aggressive or anti social behaviour is to be welcomed but this does have the effect of contributing to a chaotic yo-yoing in and out of hostels as individuals 'sit out' their ban at friends houses or on the streets, returning to the hostel again subsequently. With their underlying issues still not addressed, repeat incidents and eviction were common. It was not uncommon for individuals to have spent long periods of time moving around the hostels, staying with friends, in squats or rough sleeping in between. Accessing formal homelessness provision, then, did not always result in increased stability in the homelessness careers of those interviewed, or provide a route out of homelessness.

There was some evidence that people with a history of violent behaviour/offending can face eviction or exclusion from hostel accommodation on the basis of the actions of aggressive associates. Once an individual is known to have a history of aggressive or anti-social behaviour then the behaviours of those associated with them tends to increase the perception that they are 'trouble', in turn increasing the likelihood that they will be evicted and have to move on. This is illustrated by Carly's very recent experience below and all the

more concerning for the fact that on this occasion she was very clearly the victim of violence and not the perpetrator. Carly is only 16 years old:

*“He [ex boyfriend] found out that I was staying in ‘ere [hostel] so he came up with about 20 of his mates, like, trying to kick off and that. So I went outside on my own to try and get rid of him and he swung at me with an axe, so everybody from in ‘ere came running out and then there was just a big massive riot, big fight, and I was that far [indicates a couple of inches] from being hit across the head with an axe but just as he was swinging at me the police gripped him and got the axe off ‘im. Nearly got kicked out [of the hostel] cos of that, cos he said he was going to come back and the owner of ‘ere [hostel] said that if he comes back then I’ve got to be kicked out” (Carly aged 16)*

The housing insecurity which many homeless people with a history of violence experience is reflected in the short term nature of their housing 'placements' or arrangements. In total, 30 per cent of survey respondents had been in their current accommodation situation for less than 4 weeks (compared with 19 per cent of those without a history of violence). Nearly half (49 per cent) had no idea how long they could stay in their current accommodation and 35 per cent knew they had to leave in the next 6 months (compared with 20 per cent of homeless respondents with no history of violent behaviour). 70 per cent of those reporting having to leave their accommodation in the relatively near future had nowhere else to go.

**Repeat homelessness was very common** with 87 per cent of the survey sample having experienced multiple episodes of homelessness. One third had experienced homelessness five times or more. Repeat homelessness, and the 'tenancy failure' of which it is symptomatic, is likely to reflect:

- the difficulties sustaining accommodation whilst in prison and securing accommodation on release (see below)
- an association between anti social, aggressive or criminal behaviour and eviction: 32 per cent of survey respondents had been evicted from housing for aggressive behaviour (compared with only 2 per cent of those without a history of violent behaviour).
- the reliance of some people with a history of violence on partners for settled housing. There was a particular cohort of respondents (usually those characteristics of 'typology 2' outlined in Chapter 2) who had a long-term partner or a series of long term partners not involved in criminal activity, or dependent on drugs and alcohol , and without a history of homelessness. These relationships could be turbulent, however, and

disrupted by prison sentences. A temporary or permanent breakdown in the relationship tended to result in homelessness for the (usually male) respondent.

***Prison featured prominently in the housing careers of the homeless people with a history of violence participating in this study.*** Those who had served more than one prison sentence tended to have spent a significant proportion of their adult life in custody with some having spent more time in prison than out. Richard for example served his first prison sentence at the age of 20. He is now 33 and reported that one year is the longest period he has spent out of jail since (most of his sentences have been for breaching Probation and other Community Orders). Mickey, similarly, reported that *"I'd be in jail most of the 80's...most of me 20s was in prison"* moving on later in the interview to explain that *"the 90's I was in prison till...1995"*. And Glen estimated that he had been in prison *"about half my life"* explaining that he served his first sentence at the age of 18, was out at the age of 21 but within a year or so, in about 1992, was serving five years for offences relating to drug dealing and gang rivalry (which resulted in several shootings, although Glen's role in this is not clear). He *"got parole in '94, did another robbery on an off-license and I got another four for that. I've had 18 months as well, and just times I've been on remand and got found not guilty"*. Those who had served prison sentences, then, tended to have done so prolifically.

There were a number of ways in which respondents' experience of prison and their experience of homelessness were closely related: entering prison was a trigger of homelessness; it was an escape from the hardships of homelessness; and it was an opportunity (usually not maximised) for services to resolve an their homelessness. The majority of interview respondents either became homeless or sustained their homelessness (i.e. were homeless when they went into prison and remained so on release) while in custody, regardless of the length of their sentence. No respondent moved from a position of homelessness to settled accommodation while in custody, suggesting that although prison can represent an opportunity for services to engage with homeless people to help resolve their housing problems this usually does not occur. Jack notes a certain irony to this:

*"Every time I've been in prison I've always been released with no fixed abode. Winds me up really because if you get arrested and you haven't got a house they remand you, you see. I always say 'you'll lock me up if I've got nowhere to go but you'll let me out with nowhere to live?'" (Jack)*

Most interview respondents reported receiving little assistance in prison with securing accommodation (temporary or settled) for their release, and little useful assistance once released. Several were provided with inaccurate information by services operating within the

prison regarding their opportunities for accommodation on release, being led to believe that they would be assisted and that accommodation would be readily available. The experiences of Darren and Susan, quoted below illustrate this point clearly. Darren was led to believe that a process was in place through which he would be automatically provided with temporary accommodation, and Susan, who had been placed in a bail hostel so she could comply with the requirements of a Tagging Order, was led to believe that processes were in place to assure her accommodation once her tag was removed.

Interviewer: *when you get released from prison do they give you any housing advice before you get released*

Darren: *just tell you to go to your local council really...they always say when you get released from prison got to your local council and they'll sort you somewhere that day or try find you somewhere but they never do. They say they can't help you*

*"I was told by a woman [professional] in prison that soon as me tag's off they [Bail Hostel] should find me somewhere but they don't. Soon as you tag comes off they give you seven days and you have to find your own place...[so] I was stopping with a friend. He had a one bedroom flat and I was stopping in his living room" (Susan)*

In a small minority of instances, respondents sustained settled accommodation while serving custodial sentences. However, the only circumstances under which respondents retained housing while in prison was where they were living with a partner who remained in the family home while they served their sentence. This was a key feature of the housing careers of several respondents, a number of whom only became homeless once these relationships failed. Glen for example had an offending history dating back more than 15 years but was always able to return to the family home where he lived with his children and his partner who *"stood by me, money every week, visits and everything"* It was only when his relationship broke down after 15 years that Glen first experiences homelessness.

As well as precipitating or sustaining homelessness, prison sometimes represented a way of escaping the hardships of homelessness. Respondents pointed out that in prison you are assured of a bed, a roof over your head, warmth and hot meals, and basic necessities which can be hard to come by whilst homeless. Darren is a case in point:

*"I realise it's better being in jail than being homeless and I just kept getting out and then breaching my license and get sent back in, and then just did the same for a couple of years" ( Darren)*

#### **4.4. Conclusion**

In Chapter Three the barriers homeless people with a history of violence face accessing accommodation were highlighted. In this chapter the consequences are seen: persistent and repeat homelessness, frequent rough sleeping and reliance on informal and insecure situations removed from the assistance of formal service providers characterise the housing careers of homeless people with a history of violence behaviour..



## Meeting Support Needs

In the preceding three chapters we have seen that homeless people with a history of violent behaviour have a range of housing and support needs. They are a vulnerable population, many of whom have mental health issues, drug or alcohol dependencies, and anger management problems, who face significant barriers to accessing accommodation. Housing providers are apparently reluctant to accommodate people with a history of violent behaviour - because of the risk they pose or are thought to pose, or because their support needs cannot be met within the organisation. Yet accessing the help required to resolve the very issues (aggression, drug use and so on) which contribute to their exclusion, can prove difficult. In this chapter, then, we examine the extent to which homeless people with a history of violence are accessing the support they need in order to escape homelessness and sustain independent living.

### 5.1. Access to help Managing Aggression

Many of the homeless people surveyed had been in contact with services providing support or treatment for aggression with just over half (52 per cent) reporting having received some assistance in this regard. One quarter (26 per cent) were currently in receipt of support and half had received assistance in the past. Some had benefited more than once from intervention. Anger management courses and counselling were the two most common forms of assistance provided to respondents (see Table 5.1) although some had also benefited from group therapy, specialist prescribing and drop-in services. Most of those reporting having received some 'other' form of assistance were referring to informal help from their Probation Officer.

It is not known whether those who had previously availed of services supporting people with aggressive behaviour were homeless at the time, but far fewer were currently receiving support than had done so previously, particularly with regard to anger management and

counselling: 19 per cent of those who had received help addressing their aggressive behaviour were currently benefiting from counselling and 37 per cent from anger management support whereas 43 per cent and 54 per cent respectively had done so in the past

The survey evidence suggests that homeless people with a history of violent behaviour do benefit from the support and intervention available. Survey respondents were mostly positive about the help they had received, with the majority (70 per cent) reporting that this had helped a lot or a little. Nearly half (44 per cent) found the intervention they received had helped 'a lot'. Only 18 per cent reported that it had not been beneficial at all or had made their situation worse. The remaining respondents had only recently begun a programme or treatment and felt it was 'too early to tell' how beneficial this would be. Positive and negative comments were relatively evenly distributed across different types of service (proportional to use of those services)

**Table 5.1. Access to help to address aggressive/violent behaviour**

<b>Assistance received</b>	<b>% of those who have accessed assistance</b>
Anger management	54
Counselling	43
Group therapy	26
Specialist prescribing	20
Day programmes/drop-in service	20
Other structured treatment	11
Other assistance	23

n= 35

That services supporting people with a history of violent behaviour are viewed relatively positively is further reflected in the expressed aspirations of survey respondents regarding future service use. Nearly one third of survey respondents said they would like to receive counselling and the same proportion sought anger management classes. Some of these had benefited from such interventions in the past and, based upon their experiences of doing so, were keen to do so again. Other forms of support were less popular (although this is likely to reflect the limited experience of using such services amongst survey respondents) but some respondents reported a keenness for drop-in services (16 per cent)

It would seem, then, that when homeless people with a history of violent behaviour engage with support services they generally benefit from the intervention offered, with counselling and anger management viewed particularly positively by both those who have, and those

who have not previously availed of such services. But not all homeless people with a history of violence benefit from the assistance available. A significant proportion of those surveyed had not been subject to any help or intervention with 40 per cent reporting never having received any assistance to manage their aggression. In addition, evidence from the in-depth interviews suggests that homeless people who do access services often cope (or fail to cope) with these difficulties for many years before receiving formal assistance. Several interview respondents who had experienced difficulties managing anger and aggression came to the attention of services only when their aggression resulted in violent offending or persistent anti-social behaviour and they come into contact with the criminal justice system. And in some cases support was not offered (or taken advantage of) despite regular contact with the criminal justice system. After 15 years of (intermittently) perpetrating violence, and with an acknowledged problem controlling aggression, for example, Dave was eventually offered support to address anger management issues but not because of contact with the criminal justice system. Dave had what he described as 'a mental breakdown' in his 30's and it was through his subsequent contact with mental health professionals that he accessed anger management support.

## 5.2. Meeting other Support Needs

We saw in Chapter Two that homeless people with a history of violence present with a wide range of support needs in addition to problems with anger management and aggression. Drug and alcohol abuse, mental ill health, coping difficulties and such like were also commonplace. Survey respondents were asked to specify those issues for which they had never received assistance, despite wanting such help or support, The results are presented in Table 6.2 and suggest that homeless people with a history of violent behaviour are experiencing difficulties accessing emotional support - someone to talk to, counselling - as well as practical forms of assistance such as housing advice and help with budgeting.

**Table 6.2. Unmet Needs: Wanting help but not receiving help with**

<b>Help wanted but not received</b>	<b>%</b>
Finding a home	49
Someone to talk to	32
Mental health	30
Budgeting	24
Counselling	23
Returning to education	20
Drug use	20
Domestic violence	18
Alcohol use	17
Claiming Benefits	16
Financial issues	11

n= 79

We would expect the figures in Table 6.2 to be relatively low: respondents who had never experienced domestic violence or drug dependency, for example, are unlikely to have ever wanted assistance with these issues and so would not record a positive response to this question. The figures rise somewhat if we look only at those respondents to whom such assistance would be most relevant. For example:

- 35 per cent of drug abusers with a history of violence reported having wanted help with their drug use but not having received that assistance
- 25 per cent of alcohol users with a history of violent behaviour had wanted but not received help with this issue
- 63 per cent of those experiencing mental ill health had wanted but not received help with this issue
- 33 per cent of those who had suffered domestic violence had wanted but not received help with this issue

These figures suggest that access to mental health services is proving particularly difficult for homeless people with a history of violence (who were significantly more likely than those without a history of violence to report having wanted but failed to access help with mental health issues). This chimes with the experience of interview respondents, many of whom lived with mental ill health or with issues related to psychological and emotional well-being for many years without any help or support. Susan, for example, recounted the years she has spent self-harming.

*“I’ve been self harming for 12 years and never got any help. I do need help...when me ex boyfriend used to start beating me up, that’s what made me do it and from then on it’s just carried on...I need someone to talk to.” (Susan)*

Susan has only even received informal support from family to help her deal with this issue. She has never approached relevant services to request help but her support needs have come to the attention of a range of services during her years of homelessness and drug and alcohol abuse. Susan is not alone in never having actively sought help or disclosed her self-harming to staff in services. Non-disclosure, particularly of mental ill health, was relatively common and there was some evidence to suggest that this is sometimes driven by a fear (probably unfounded) of being excluded from temporary accommodation as a result.

Others had requested assistance but, facing waiting lists and delays, failed to pursue applications or referrals. Jennifer is a case in point. Desperate for counselling to help her deal with a range of issues including experience of rape she finally approached a counselling services and requested help. She explained what happened next:

*“they [the counselling service] rang me up a couple of... months ago, and asked me that they’d got an appointment for me [on Wednesday]...I d said I’d be at college on a Wednesday and they said they’d get back to me but they haven’t (Jennifer)*

In the absence of appropriate intervention and support, there was evidence of individuals trying to manage their own risk, although how reliably they did so is open to question. The strategy of one respondent who required but was not receiving help with anger management was simply to avoid association with other residents of the hostel in which he was staying, to minimise any chance that he might become angry and violent. The discussion went as follows:

Danny: *I tend to go in my own room and spend a lot of time....don't associate much....because sometimes I feel like punching one of 'em...*

Interviewer: *so do you remove yourself from situations, recognise situations where you might behave badly and get out before that happens?*

Danny: *Yeah*

Interviewer: *Do you think there is still a risk that you could hurt someone or explode?*

Danny: *Yeah..... At the moment I'm managing meself. If there's a risk there I'll piss off.*

Ironically, many respondents only accessed assistance to address a range of support needs (drugs, education, escaping violence) when they entering a situation that in other respects was detrimental to them - i.e. prison. We have seen in previous chapters that prison plays a key role in triggering and sustaining homelessness but it also represented an opportunity for intervention. Louise, for example, described prison as *“my escape”*, explaining that entering prison enabled her to escape her violent partner. She also addressed her drug dependency and availed of their 'listener' system, a facility she now misses greatly and has struggled without:

*Didn't really care [that I was in prison] because I didn't have to put up with the daily bullshit of being off my face. I used to have listeners in there...prisoners*

*that are trained to go round...and they can sit and listen to your problems...I wish I had something like that here" (Louise)*

Receiving a custodial sentence was similarly described by Chris as providing an opportunity to 'sort himself out' and he too accessed a range of services whilst inside:

*"I think getting sentenced and going to prison has done me good actually. I think that's what I needed for meself.....to shake meself up. Since I've been in prison I've come off my tabs [antidepressants] and everything...got meself loads of qualifications" (Chris, aged 44, recently released from prison).*

Of course the fact that homeless people with a history of violence access assistance in prison, managing to addressing their drug dependencies, avail of counselling and anger management, obtain qualifications and so on, often after many years of receiving no help whatsoever is as much a reflection of the difficulties accessing help as it is a reflection of the virtues of the prison system.

### **5.3. Conclusion**

Many homeless people with complex needs are failing to access the support they need, particularly in relation to their mental, psychological and emotional health and well-being. Yet without this support their access to housing is more restricted, the likelihood of sustaining accommodation is reduced and the risk they pose increases. As one experienced stakeholder commented: *"There are a lot of people out there that need support and aren't getting it. That makes them a much higher risk than the people who are getting the support"*

# Recommendations

The evidence presented in this report has provided detailed insight into the housing needs and experiences of people with a history of violence behaviour who are homeless or at risk of homelessness. It has highlighted the detrimental housing circumstances in which many homeless people with a history of violent behaviour live and revealed the many barriers they face accessing housing and support services. These findings point to some important issues worthy of consideration by service providers, commissioners, and policy makers. This research was commissioned with the express aim of identifying ways in which the housing and related needs of people with a history of violent behaviour could be better met. This section presents a series of recommendations for ways in which this could be achieved<sup>1</sup>.

Drawing on the evidence gathered and presented in this report, it is possible to identify a series of broad principles which should guide service development:

1. develop models of service delivery capable of providing clear **pathways** through services to independent living, and of **tracking** individuals at risk
2. develop **flexible** supported housing provision, offering a range of accommodation and levels of support within a single service
3. Provide **direct and fast access** housing, support and advice services
4. develop **specialist housing services** which are explicitly targeted at, and understand the needs of people with a history of violent behaviour
5. develop **outreach and in-reach** services in recognition that homeless drug or alcohol users will not always make independent efforts to seek help, or know how to go about doing so
6. twin the development of specialist services with **improved access to mainstream housing**.

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<sup>1</sup> A full set of recommendations for better meeting the needs of homeless people with complex needs can be found in the allied report, '*The Homelessness Journeys of Homeless People with Complex Needs in Stoke-on-Trent*'. Here, only those recommendations of particular relevance to homeless people with a history of violence are presented

7. **acknowledge that homelessness and related issues such as substance misuse and criminal activity are faced before people reach adulthood** and that services must adapt to address this fact.
8. develop a programme of **preventative initiatives**, including building organisational capacity to respond rapidly to emerging indicators of 'risk'.
9. acknowledge that **meeting the welfare and support needs of people with complex needs is as important as meeting housing need**

Specific ways in which services can be developed within these broad principles are presented in the 14 recommendations which follow.

**Recommendation 1. The work of the Priority Needs Group should be built on and extended and efforts should be made to ensure that homeless people with a history of violent behaviour are benefiting from it.** This could take the form of a multi-agency panel, comprising representation from different services who come together at set intervals to discuss individuals known to be particularly vulnerable and homeless or at risk of homelessness. Current issues pertaining to these individuals could be discussed, emerging needs and problems identified, and appropriate responses actioned. Particular attention could be paid to clients experiencing transition (from care, from custody, from rehab, into independent living). Ideally the panel would be co-ordinated by someone whose explicit role it is to do so; would be established as a formal initiative rather than an informal gathering of interested parties; and would be fully multi-agency to span the broad spectrum of needs which homeless people with a history of violent behaviour present with. The benefits of such an intervention include: providing a means through which people can be tracked through housing and other life changes; enabling early intervention to prevent homelessness or rough sleeping; and providing a means through which tailored packages of support can be delivered.

**Recommendation 2. Consideration should be given to ways in which provision of temporary accommodation can be increased.** This could be achieved by increasing the number of direct access hostel bed spaces available, by providing emergency accommodation, or by increasing the number of local authority 'owned' hostel bed spaces to help fulfil statutory obligations towards priority need single people



**Recommendation 3. Consideration should be given to developing supported housing provision targeted at high risk 'offenders'** (or people deemed high risk because of their violent behaviour but regardless of their offending profile). High risk offenders require housing provision targeted at them and staffed by people who understand their needs and can manage the risk they pose. The ideal model of supported housing provision for would be one which: combines different levels and intensity of support (from 24 hour staffed environments to single tenancies with floating support); can provide for people who prefer more solitary environments; allows respondents to move around within the service (moving residents between more and less supported environments); and which builds in a facility for residents to re-contact or remain in contact with the service acting as a safety net in the event of a change of circumstances.

**Recommendation 4. Update training should be provided to all Local Authority housing staff** so they are fully cognisant of the policies and legislation to ensure compliance. Alternatively, a review or audit of Local Authority front-line housing practices could be carried out to ensure all staff are complying with the homelessness legalisation and local policies.

**Recommendation 5. The onus placed on applicants for social housing to produce a record of their criminal convictions should be reconsidered.** Applicants should be fully guided and supported through this process and provided with extensive information regarding the purpose and use of such information. Consideration should also be given to meeting the costs of obtaining a record of previous convictions.

**Recommendation 6. Social housing providers should purchase training/advice regarding improving their risk assessment procedures.** This should also include 'myth busting' training about offenders and related groups (NACRO provide such training and some organisations operating in the city such as ARCH have excellent risk assessment policies and procedures which could be rolled out).

**Recommendation 7. Information sharing protocols should be reviewed and, if necessary, strengthened** to ensure that social landlords have sufficient information on which to base allocations decisions.

**Recommendation 8. Meaningful housing advice should be available to all people in prison.** No-one should be released from prison without being offered extensive assistance with their housing and the outcome should be followed up on release. Assistance should also be available on entry to prison so that homelessness can be prevented. A housing link worker or similar post would be beneficial – liaising between prison officials, prisoners,

housing and support agencies, and drug and alcohol treatment services to ensure smoother transitions from prison to independent living.

**Recommendation 9. Support should be made available to people leaving prison and other institutional environments who are at risk of homelessness.** This could take the form of a floating support service targeted at people making this transition.

**Recommendation 10. Steps should be taken to develop services for homeless minors and adolescents** such as emergency housing provision and drug and alcohol treatment. Such provision currently falls within the remit of 'adult services' but is needed by many young homeless people with a history of violent behaviour.

**Recommendation 11. There is a need for greater support for the carers of young offenders and those displaying violent behaviour.** A service offering practical and emotional support (and which stand separately to family mediation) to parents and other carers would be beneficial and could help tackle youth homelessness.

**Recommendation 12. Efforts should be made to educate and raise awareness amongst all relevant service providers (including schools) of common trigger points, risk factors, and indicators of impending homelessness.** Training, or written information sheets are two ways in which this could be achieved. A programme of activity **educating young people** about homelessness and related issues would also be beneficial. Peer education initiatives are worth exploring in this regard (some peer mentoring already exists in Stoke-on-Trent)

**Recommendation 13. Social Services and the Housing Department should explore whether closer joint working and additional protocols need developing.** Assertive efforts to engage reluctant care leavers in after-care support would also be of benefit in this regard, as would work exploring the reasons why some young people disengage from this support.

**Recommendation 14. There is a need to better understand and meet the needs of those with dual diagnosis.** The significant relationship between the two issues needs acknowledging and building into service planning and delivery. Options might include: training for mental health workers to educate them about substance misuse issues and vice versa; funding a dual diagnosis worker to support staff in mental health and substance misuse services; establishing a dual diagnosis working group; and joint planning, strategic development, and commissioning.

# Sheffield Hallam University

*The housing needs and experiences of homeless people with a history of violent or offending behaviour in Stoke-on-Trent*

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