

Summary report

On the streets: an
investigation into rough
sleeping

December 2018

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CHAPTER 1: KEY FINDINGS

Individuals and families told us about the many different journeys to street homelessness. What is common across all experiences is that people lose their settled home – for example due to eviction or relationship breakdown – and then find themselves unable to find a new home. This may be because they don't have the money for a deposit, they are unable to access support from the local authority, or they have no friends and family to turn to. For some people we spoke to mental health problems, drug and/or alcohol misuse or leaving an institution played a role in their street homelessness.

Who we spoke to:

- We spoke to 12 people who have experience of street homelessness, all of whom are or were being helped by Shelter.
- The current and former rough sleepers were based in London, Dorset, Birmingham and Manchester.
- The people we spoke to had slept in many different places such as disused buildings, shop store rooms, tents, car parks, and bus stations.
- Although only one of the people we spoke to was currently rough sleeping, seven of the people we spoke to were still homeless, living in temporary accommodation or voluntary sector hostels.
- Everyone we spoke to was aged between 32 and 71 with most people in their 40s and 50s.
- Although most of the people we spoke to were men, five of the participants were either women or families who had slept rough with their children.

Official statistics indicate that almost 5,000 people (4,751) sleep rough on a given night in England. This has more than doubled in five years and increased by 15% in the last year alone. However, it is a number that does not reflect the full extent to which rough sleeping impacts lives across the country. Many people may be missed by street counts and estimates, sleeping in concealed locations or trying to avoid bedding down at night at all, instead riding public transport or walking the streets to feel safer.

Many more people have their lives touched by rough sleeping over the course of a year – something that can have a profound impact even when the experience may be short-lived. CHAIN statistics show that in London alone nearly 7,500 people were found sleeping on the street for at least one night over the course of a year – a number that is more than six times higher than the number recorded sleeping rough on a given night.

We also talked to people about their experiences of rough sleeping and the impact it has had on their lives. People told us that they found it difficult to access services, they lost possessions, were at risk of abusive behaviour, and regularly felt stigmatised. There was a common feeling of being judged or looked down on.

Being street homeless had significant impacts on people's lives, particularly in terms of their physical and mental health. Rough sleeping also had a significant impact on people's relationships with friends and family, often leading to relationship breakdown and feelings of isolation. The people we spoke to told us that it was virtually impossible to get a job whilst rough sleeping.

CHAPTER 2: INTRODUCTION

In 2018 no one should be living on the street. But government statistics show that there are over 4,700 people living on the street on a given night in England. They also show that the number of people found rough sleeping has more than doubled in the last five years.¹ This is not inevitable and should be prevented.

The journey to rough sleeping is complex, often including several stages such as being evicted from a settled home, not being able to stay with friends or family and the local authority not providing support.

The experience of living and sleeping on the street can impact on people's physical and mental health, their self-esteem, their relationships with friends and family, and their ability to keep or find a job. It also puts them at risk of violent behaviour and abuse.

In the last year there have been some significant policy developments relating to street homelessness. In April the Homelessness Reduction Act was implemented which gave local housing authorities new duties to assess, prevent and relieve homelessness for anyone who is eligible for assistance, including street homeless people. The government also published its Rough Sleeping Strategy in August. This set out the Government's plans to make good on its manifesto pledge to halve rough sleeping in this Parliament and to end it by 2027.

This investigation² explores the reasons why people become street homeless, their everyday experiences of being street homeless with nowhere to go at night, and the impact this has had on their lives, in the hope that it will raise awareness of this national emergency and shed some light on how we might solve it.

“I’ll tell you what, being homeless is a million times worse than you think it is.”

¹ The number of rough sleepers in England has increased by 106% in the last five years. MHCLG, [Rough sleeping statistics](#), Table 1

² This is a summary report. The full report includes the methodology, full investigation findings, policy context and examples of support provided by Shelter.

CHAPTER 3: JOURNEYS TO ROUGH SLEEPING

People's journeys to rough sleeping are complex and often include several stages. There are many reasons why individuals and families end up on the street. What is common across all experiences is that people lose their settled home – for example due to eviction or relationship breakdown – and then find themselves unable to find a new home.

Why do people lose their settled home?

10 of the people we spoke to told us that they lost their settled home due to being evicted or asked to leave. The majority of the people who were evicted were evicted from a private rented home.

*"I've been homeless a few times after I've been evicted. I was illegally evicted... That was when I first became homeless and slept on the street."
Man, 70s*

Whilst eviction was the overriding reason for the loss of a settled home for most of the people we spoke to, this is often the last stage in a complex process which can include triggers such as relationship breakdown, loss of a close family member, drug and/or alcohol misuse and mental health problems.

Five of the people we spoke to suggested that relationship breakdown was an important precursor to them losing their settled home. They could either not return to their shared property or could no longer afford to stay there because they couldn't afford their housing costs alone.

"I then became homeless because I couldn't afford the rent for the 3-bedroom place by myself." Woman, 50s

Just less than half of the people we spoke to told us that the death of a close family member helps to explain why they lost their settled home and subsequently ended up on the street.

This manifested itself in different ways, such as the family home being sold, not being able to take on a council tenancy, and the costs associated with a funeral pushing people over the edge financially, so they can no longer afford the rent. The grief and its impact on people's mental health are common across all experiences.

"We were finding it hard to live. Then my dad died, I came back [from abroad] and couldn't afford my bills. And then we had to sleep outside." Man, 30s, with dependent children (5 and 3 years old)

“I lost my girlfriend last year, I found her dead and I went off the rails a bit. I lost my accommodation... they gave me 24 hours-notice to leave the premises. So, I was going to be homeless.” Man, 40s

Relationship breakdown, loss and grief can have both practical and emotional implications which mean that individuals and families lose their settled home.

What are the barriers to find a new home?

Seven of the people we spoke to told us that when they lost their settled home, they approached the council for support but were turned away. Reasons for this include households being classed as ‘intentionally’ homeless and not having a local connection to the local authority.

Almost half of the people who were turned away by the council were families with children. This is particularly worrying because families with dependent children have priority need so should be accepted as homeless by the local housing authority. If a family is found to be intentionally homeless, or there is an issue with eligibility³, the family should still be supported by the council through Children’s Services.⁴

One person we spoke to was turned away by the council and then spent a night on the street with his wife and children. The next day the family went to Shelter for help and were placed in emergency accommodation.⁵

Another man was forced to sleep on the street with his three children because the family were evicted, and the council did not provide support.

“The reason we slept on the street is the council didn’t support us... The council told us to bring the eviction letter that very day we were evicted but we weren’t let in the building.” Man, 50s, with dependent children (7, 5 and 3 years old)

1 in 4 of the people we spoke to suggested that they experienced discrimination when trying to find a new home, all of whom are women and/or families with dependent children.

“There was ‘no DSS’ discrimination definitely. They didn’t want to let to me because I was on housing benefit... It’s another prejudice against the homeless.” Woman, 50s

“Landlords didn’t want families. They didn’t want to rent to us because we had kids. They said, no you have children. I tried a lot...but they said, no, you have

³ Eligibility relates to immigration status.

⁴ Under section 17 of the Children Act 1989, social services have a general duty to safeguard and promote the welfare of children in need in their area. This includes providing accommodation. However, the council has discretion as to whether or not to accept or refuse the duty.

⁵ To find out more about this family’s story, please read [Michael’s case study](#)

a family, we can't rent to you." Man, 50s, with dependent children (7, 5 and 3 years old)

The majority of the people we spoke to told us that not having enough money for a deposit was another significant factor in explaining their street homelessness. This created a barrier to entering the private rented sector, alongside other barriers such as discrimination and the lack of a guarantor and reference.

Half of the people we spoke to ended up rough sleeping because they had nowhere else to turn. This could be because they didn't know anyone who was able to accommodate them, or they had burned bridges with friends and families due to drug and/or alcohol misuse.

"I've been on the streets because basically I lost my mum when I was 27 and I had no one to go to if I had a problem or anything like that." Man, 30s

What else plays a role in ending up on the street?

Four of the people we spoke to told us that leaving an institution, or the military was important in explaining their journey to street homelessness, largely due to the lack of support they needed to find a settled home.

"When you come out of prison, it's very hard. There's no support." Man, 40s

Five of the people we spoke to told us that their drug and/or alcohol misuse acted as a complicating factor in their street homelessness. One man told us that his alcohol misuse played a role in his relationship breakdown and therefore the loss of his settled home.

"I was with my girlfriend then but because of the alcohol she didn't want me there. It just spiralled from there." Man, 40s

Half of the people we spoke to told us that their mental health problems played a role in their street homelessness. This could be because their mental health problems, without sufficient support, made them less able to deal with difficult situations, such as eviction or the loss of a close family member.

Mental health problems can also play a more direct role in ending up on the street. One man told us that his depression meant that he was less able to keep up with rent payments and was subsequently evicted.

"Twelve, thirteen years ago, I had a four-bedroom detached place I was paying £1,200 [a month] for but you never know when depression's going to strike" Man, 40s

CHAPTER 4: EXPERIENCES OF ROUGH SLEEPING

We also talked to people about their experiences of street homelessness. There are some common experiences among the current and former rough sleepers we spoke to, such as the difficulty of accessing services, the loss of possessions, abusive behaviour and stigma towards people who are street homeless.

The people we spoke to also told us that rough sleeping has impacted on their physical and mental health, their relationships with friends and family and their ability to keep or find a job.

What are the everyday experiences of rough sleeping?

Half of the people we spoke to told us that they experienced difficulties accessing services when they were street homeless, such as a bank account, benefits and registering with a doctor. Whilst many people still managed to access these services, it was common to experience significant challenges, such as being sanctioned. One man we spoke to gets his post sent to a homeless day centre which is a few hours away by train.

“If I don’t turn up in a couple of days, he [an employee at the day centre] sends my post back and that’s how my benefits got sanctioned, because he sent my post back.” Man, 50s

Five of the people we spoke to told us that losing possessions was a common experience when rough sleeping. This was both in terms of people’s belongings being stolen when they were street homeless, as well as not being able to bring all their possessions with them when they had to leave their accommodation.

“I lost all my contacts and old photos... I had a picture of my mum, all these things, they’re irreplaceable... Because I was homeless, and the council said I had to go, where was I going to take it?” Man, 70s

Several of the people we spoke to told us that they were regularly at risk of violent and abusive behaviour, often by members of the public. This abusive behaviour included being threatened with a knife, being urinated on and being hit – even being set on fire.

“I’ve been urinated on, set fire to... hit with a baseball bat.” Man, 50s

Half of the people we spoke to told us that feeling stigmatised is common among street homeless people. This stigma and prejudice often leads to feelings of embarrassment. One woman told us that she is embarrassed about being known as “the homeless person”.

“I was her mum and she knew me getting up at 6 in the morning, going to work. She used to see me in a suit every day, going to work and getting in at half 7 every night. I was a professional mum to her, and for her to look at me now. I get embarrassed... I’m embarrassed because I’m not the person I’m supposed to be because I’m the homeless person.” Woman, 50s

How does rough sleeping impact on individuals and families?

Eight of the people we spoke to told us that being street homeless has had an impact on their physical health. Reasons cited for the deterioration of their physical health include being outside and vulnerable to the elements, including extreme cold, sleep deprivation, drug and/or alcohol misuse, a lack of food, and the difficulty of accessing doctors.

“My health deteriorated, I went down to nine stone. I looked as you would look if you lived on the street, being cold all the time... I was in and out of hospital 24/7” Man, 40s

The impact of rough sleeping on mental health was a universal experience among the people we spoke to. This was true for people who had spent one night on the street as well as those that had spent several years rough sleeping. One man told us that his anxiety and depression got so severe when he was rough sleeping that he would intentionally go to prison as a way of escaping his street homelessness.

“With anxiety and depression, it’s just sometimes I just want it to stop. My old point of view used to be, ‘Go back in prison,’ sometimes it’s quieter in prison.” Man, 40s

It was quite common for people to lose contact with friends and family, either due to stigma and feelings of embarrassment, or the practical difficulties of maintaining contact when living on the street. There was a common feeling of resentment towards family members who did not provide support.

“I was very resentful when I was on the street, you know, against family members because of what had happened... Was it of my doing? Not all of it was.” Man, 40s

The breakdown of relationships with friends and family often resulted in people feeling isolated. One woman told us that she preferred to isolate herself rather than tell people that she was rough sleeping. This isolation can act as a barrier to accessing support.

“I was very isolated... My daughter would make sure my phone was topped up but sometimes I’d just switch it off because I just really didn’t want to tell people what a rubbish day I’d had again. I didn’t want to tell people that I’d just been on the bus again.” Woman, 50s

Over a third of the people we spoke to told us that they lost their job due to their housing situation and becoming street homeless. One man we spoke to told us that he was able to keep his job for a few months whilst street homeless and living in a disused bungalow. He lost his job because he broke his ankle and ended up in a wheelchair.

None of the people we spoke to were able to find a job when they were living on the street. This was due to not having an address, as well as not having anywhere to wash, not being able to buy new clothes, not having easy access to computers and a lack of self-esteem and confidence.

“Without a home you have no address, you can’t get a job.” Woman, 50s

Where are people living now?

Only one of the people we spoke to was currently rough sleeping. The remaining 11 individuals and families were no longer sleeping on the street. However, of these 11, seven are still homeless and living in temporary accommodation or voluntary sector hostels.

Since rough sleeping one man had lived in six different types of emergency accommodation with his wife and two children. This has had an impact on his work and his children’s education.

Some of the people we spoke to are now living in more secure accommodation. One woman is now in private rented accommodation arranged by the council but is concerned that she won’t be able to keep up with rent payments and will be evicted again. She lives there with her four children.

*“I’m worried that we won’t be able to pay again, and we will get kicked out.”
Woman, 50s, with dependent children (13, 11, 9 and 3 years old)*

Another woman is living in supported accommodation arranged by the council after she was accepted as homeless.

“This place is like a little gem really... It has a shared garden and it’s so nice. It’s about getting back into life, about joining in with life again.” Woman, 50s

Although this woman was very happy with her new home, she recognised the long-term impacts of being street homeless, particularly on her physical and mental health.

For those who are in more secure accommodation, their housing situation can still feel precarious and the long-term impacts of street homelessness are evident.

CHAPTER 5: CASE STUDIES

Eviction, landlord discrimination and relationship breakdown

Imogen is in her 50s and was street homeless for 18 months. Before this she was living in a private rented home with her friend. When her friend moved out Imogen was no longer able to afford the rent, so her landlord asked her to leave. She then moved in to a homeless hostel where she lived for a few months before becoming street homeless.

Another friend offered to pay her deposit, but Imogen couldn't find a home due to landlord discrimination against housing benefit claimants.

When Imogen was street homeless she was able to spend 5 hours every night in a shop store room.

“It was a saviour that I had a few hours a day that I knew I could be safe.”

Imogen was able to use the address of the shop store room to register at the local doctors. It also meant that she could access her benefits, so she could use this money to buy food. She recognised that she was relatively lucky to be able to use the shop address – many street homeless people do not have a fixed address they can use.

Being street homeless has had a significant impact on her mental health. Her depression and anxiety were exacerbated by living on the street. Imogen's depression also acted as a barrier to getting help.

“I had 18 months not joining in society... my depression had set and I felt like I'd screwed up my opportunities.”

Whilst Imogen was street homeless she lost contact with her family. This made her feel very alone. Imogen distanced herself from her daughter because she was embarrassed to tell her where she was living.

This feeling of embarrassment and low self-esteem is still there for Imogen. Although she is now living in supported accommodation, being street homeless has had a long-term impact on her self-confidence and mental health. Imogen is still suffering from anxiety and depression and finds it difficult to leave the safe haven of her new home.

“I'm embarrassed because I'm not the person I'm supposed to be because I'm the homeless person.”

Eviction, loss of family members and the council not providing support

Michael is in his 30s and was living in a private rented home with his wife and two children. His father died suddenly which meant that he had to fly abroad to organise and attend the funeral. The cost of the flight and the funeral caused financial difficulties for the family.

“I lost my Dad and within three months I had to travel to help bury him. When I came back I found myself in financial difficulties.”

The family were struggling to pay the rent so were asked to leave. Michael, his wife and their two children moved into his aunt’s council property. Michael’s aunt died soon after they moved in, and the council evicted the family as they were not able to inherit the property.

Michael and his family were not able to rent privately due to various barriers, including the deposit, landlord discrimination and the lack of a reference or guarantor. This meant that they were not able to find a new home.

The family then went to the council for help but were turned away. They were told to ring the out of hours service, but Michael and his children were unable to find emergency accommodation.

“They just told us that we had been blacklisted. They had made us homeless.”

The family had nowhere to go that night so had to spend a night on the street. This was terrifying for both the parents and children. They spent the night wandering around cafes until they closed and then tried to sleep in shop fronts.

“I sobbed that night, all of us were in tears. The kids were cold and shaky.”

The next day the family were placed in emergency accommodation with the help of Shelter. Since then the family have lived in six different types of emergency accommodation. The process of being evicted, rough sleeping, and living in temporary accommodation has had significant impacts on the parents’ jobs and the children’s education.

Difficulty accessing services, losing possessions, impact on physical health and relationship breakdown

John is in his 70s and has been street homeless on multiple occasions, often after being evicted from private and social rented homes. In the last year alone, John has spent three months living on the street. Over this time, he has slept in a tent in a car park and on the edge of a lake.

John has cancer, mild dementia and mobility issues which made the experience of being street homeless particularly difficult.

John experienced significant difficulties accessing services, in particular getting to the doctors. When he became street homeless he was told that he was no longer able to go to the same doctors to pick up his medication because he had no fixed abode. This meant that he went a few weeks without any medication.

“It’s impossible to keep the same doctor and get medications to the same place.”

John has lost lots of possessions due to being evicted and having to leave his home suddenly, and things being stolen when he was street homeless. When John was evicted he had to leave items such as photo albums of family members, clothes, furniture and appliances. He also regularly had things stolen from his tent, such as a stove and a kettle.

As a result of being street homeless, John lost contact with his daughters. This was largely because he was not able to charge his phone and they did not live nearby. The relationship breakdown with his daughters made him feel lonely.

“I lost contact with my daughters as well... when I needed them I couldn’t get in contact with them.”

John’s physical health rapidly deteriorated when he was street homeless. He was regularly bitten by gnats when sleeping outside. He also often had cuts which became infected. This added to his existing health problems and meant that he regularly had to go to the hospital.

John is now living in temporary accommodation so is still homeless.

“I’ll tell you what, being homeless is a million times worse than you think it is.”

Being at risk of abusive behaviour, loneliness and the impact on physical and mental health

Kate is in her 30s and was street homeless for about three years. Before she was street homeless she owned her own business. She became street homeless when she left rehab and was unable to turn to her family for help.

“I'd reached a point where I'd burnt all my bridges.”

During this time, she slept in garages, disused buildings and car parks. She chose to sleep in more enclosed spaces to protect herself from other people and to keep warm.

Kate was regularly at risk of abusive and sometimes violent behaviour. She was using drugs at the time, so felt particularly vulnerable. One time Kate was threatened with a knife and another time she was attacked in a disused building where she was sleeping.

She spent most of her time rough sleeping by herself which made her feel very lonely. She lost contact with her friends and family, in part due to her drug misuse.

As a result of previous trauma and her current situation, Kate developed psychosis whilst rough sleeping. This made her feel even more alone. She became afraid and distrustful of everyone.

Kate went down to about six stone and developed various physical health problems whilst sleeping on the street. Street homelessness has also had a long-term impact on her confidence and self-esteem.

“Rough sleeping massively affected how I am. I'm a completely different person now.”

Kate is now living in supported accommodation for former drug users.

CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSIONS

This investigation has explored the scale of rough sleeping, why people end up on the street, and their experiences of rough sleeping more widely. Although most rough sleepers are lone men, at Shelter we know that women and families are also affected. Indeed, more than a third of the people we spoke to were either women or families with dependent children.

Our research with 12 individuals or families with experience of rough sleeping has found that the overriding cause of street homelessness is the lack of access to an affordable and secure home and support to sustain the tenancy. The people we spoke to told us that the most common reason for losing a settled home was eviction, most often from a private rented home.

The people we spoke to then experienced difficulties finding a new home, with not having enough money for a deposit the most common reason. Other barriers cited include the council not providing support and landlord discrimination. For some people leaving an institution, mental health problems and drug and/or alcohol misuse had played a role.

The experience of rough sleeping is diverse but there are some common themes. The most common experiences are feeling stigmatised and finding it difficult to access services. The people we spoke to told us that being street homeless can impact on your physical and mental health, your relationships with friends and family, and your ability to find or keep a job.

Even when the people we spoke to were able to escape rough sleeping, they were unlikely to go straight into secure accommodation. Seven are still homeless and living in temporary accommodation or voluntary sector hostels. For those who have been provided more secure accommodation there are often long-term impacts of being street homeless, such as a lack of confidence and mental and physical health problems.

There is rightly political impetus to end rough sleeping. This includes a greater focus on models such as Housing First. Housing First is a useful model that provides housing to people with complex needs who are street homeless. But it still requires access to suitable private or social rented homes and intensive support for as long as needed.

Most importantly, we need to prevent people from rough sleeping in the first place. This approach will take many forms but could include: providing real security to private renters to prevent unnecessary eviction, making sure that councils are providing their legal duties to prevent and relieve homelessness, ending discrimination against housing benefit claimants, and building more social housing so that people can live in permanent homes they can truly afford.

To avoid homelessness, people must have access to a safe, secure and affordable home. No one should be homeless – on the street or otherwise – in 2018. It isn't inevitable.