

CSI 29: Homelessness in the UK

Summary

- The number of people sleeping rough in England more than doubled between 2010 and 2015
- Hidden homelessness is a more prevalent but less well understood experience
- Following declines, rates of statutory homelessness have risen over the past six years
- The UK has higher levels of rough sleeping and hidden homelessness than other countries

How many people are homeless in the UK?

Homelessness is an escalating social problem facing the UK. In response to these concerns, the Homelessness Reduction Act – which strengthens and broadens duties on councils and other public authorities in England and Wales to prevent and relieve homelessness – received royal assent in April 2017. The term ‘homeless’ has a range of meanings: it does not refer to a single experience and is instead used to describe the situation of several overlapping groups with different characteristics and reasons for homelessness. In decreasing order of severity these groups are rough sleepers, hidden homeless, and statutory homeless. Below we explore these three main groups – presenting time trends where possible – alongside factors influencing the onset and persistence of homelessness.

Rough sleepers



Figure 1: The number of people sleeping rough in England more than doubled between 2010 and 2016. Source: DCLG

Rough Sleeping returnsⁱ

Rough sleepers are people who live visibly in the open air – on the streets, in doorways or bus shelters – but also in other places not designed for habitation – such as cars or stairwells – although they may not do so every night. Rough sleepers are the most vulnerable but also the smallest group of homeless people. Their number is estimated annually through street counts of the number of people spotted sleeping rough on

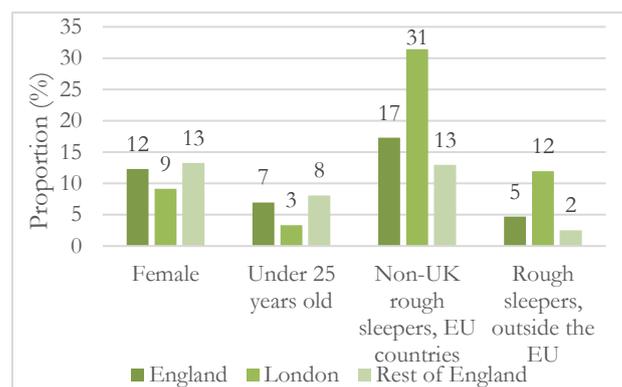
a single night. These street counts reveal considerable growth in the number of rough sleepers since 2010 (Figure 1). The rough sleeping rate doubled from 3.4 to 6.5 rough sleepers per 100,000 people between 2010 and 2016ⁱⁱ. However, high turnover means that these figures underestimate the total number of people who sleep rough over a period of time. For example, 9 per cent of 16-25 year-olds in 2014 reported ever sleeping roughⁱⁱⁱ, suggesting that the problem is considerably larger than suggested by the street counts. Episodes of rough sleeping are commonly interspersed with periods spent in hostels or temporary shelters, with Census data identifying 21, 574 people in England and Wales being housed this way in 2011^{iv}.

Measurement issues

Homelessness data have several limitations, and a 2015 review by the UK Statistics Authority concluded that the trustworthiness, quality, and value of these data required improvement. Rough sleeping data are not designated National Statistics, meaning that they are not considered robust estimates. Street counts are only used by local authorities with known or suspected rough sleeping problems; estimates are used elsewhere. Even direct counts are limited as they will miss people who sleep in out-of-sight locations. Figures on statutory homelessness and homelessness prevention and relief (not reported here) only include people seeking assistance, so present an incomplete picture of prevalence. No official data are collected on hidden homelessness.

Figure 2: Rough sleeping in 2016 was disproportionately higher among men and people from EU countries. *Source: DCLG Rough Sleeping returnsⁱ*

Data on the characteristics of rough sleepers is scarce and only available for 2016. Figure 2 reveals that rough sleeping was concentrated among men (88 per cent of rough sleepers, compared with 49 per cent of the 2015 population^v), and was disproportionately high among people from the EU (17 per cent of rough sleepers, compared with 5 per cent of the population). Rough sleeping was conversely less common in young adults (7 per cent of rough sleepers, compared with 11 per cent of the adult population^{vi}) and people from outside the EU (5 per cent of rough sleepers, compared with 4 per cent of the population). Some regional variation is apparent, where rough sleepers from outside the UK are concentrated in London. These figures should be interpreted with caution because rough sleeping data do not distinguish between transient and persistent rough sleepers, who might well have different characteristics^{vii}.



Hidden Homeless

The hidden homeless – also known as ‘sofa-surfers’ – refers to people who live informally with family or friends because they have no home of their own. No official data are collected on this group. Results from the 2012 Poverty and Social Exclusion Survey suggests that the hidden homeless outnumber rough sleepers, with 15 per cent of adults in Britain reporting hidden homelessness at over their lifetimes^{viii}. It is concentrated among young people: 20 per cent of 16-25 year-olds in 2014 reported sofa surfing in the past year^{ix}. Hidden homelessness may also be a more persistent experience than rough sleeping: a 2003 survey in England found that people spent an average of 6 months with friends and 3 months with family^x. The hidden homeless and rough sleepers are overlapping groups, where it is common for people to intersperse experiences of hidden homelessness with periods of rough sleeping. These groups are also similar with respect to risk factors such as spending time in care or prison, and complex needs including physical and mental health problems, drug and alcohol use, and learning difficulties^x. However, there is little understanding of the risk and protective factors of moving between hidden homelessness and rough sleeping, so these dynamics are poorly understood.

Statutory Homeless

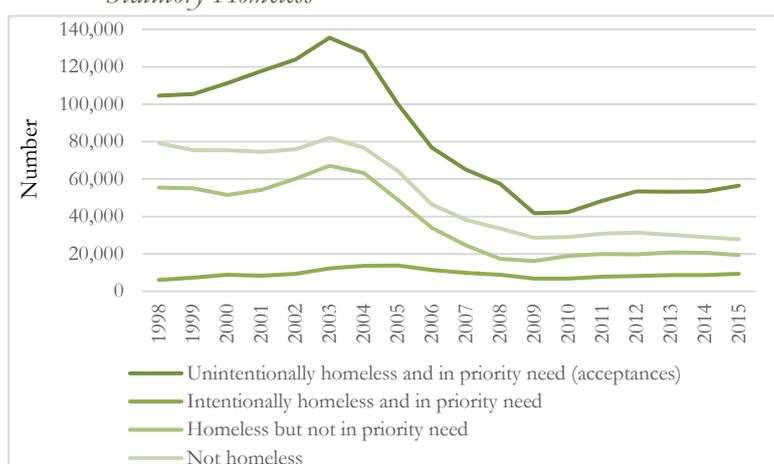


Figure 3: The number of households assessed as homeless and in priority need is smaller than in the 1990s and 2000s but is increasing. *Source: ONS^{xi}*

The statutory homeless are those who are eligible for assistance from their local authority because they are judged to be both unintentionally homeless and to meet criteria of priority need^{xii}. Such households are generally facing a loss of their home and are rarely without a roof over their heads. Figures are collected on households identified as statutory homeless alongside those who seek help but are not eligible for

assistance because they are considered not to be homeless, are intentionally homeless or do not fall into categories of priority need. Figure 3 illustrates local authorities' decisions under the homelessness provisions of the 1996 Housing Act, broken down according to intentionality and need. The number of households classed as statutory homeless increased in the early 2000s, then reduced to one-third of its 2004-05 figure by 2009-10, before increasing again through to 2015-16. These changes are not well understood and may reflect changes in local authority practices, making it difficult to draw definite conclusions about statutory homeless trends.

Despite recent increases, statutory homelessness appears to be far less prevalent today than a decade ago. However, these figures must be interpreted with caution. They only include people who are formally assessed under the 1996 Housing Act, and the shift to lighter-touch ‘prevention and relief’ – which emphasises avoiding homelessness and helping households secure alternate accommodation – means that the proportion of households needing help who are captured in the official figures may be declining. A reduction in the number of assessments therefore does not reliably indicate that need is falling. Indeed, over one in five young people seeking assistance are reported to receive no local authority help, and will thus be excluded from these figures. As a supply-side measure, those who do not seek help are also excluded. Reports that councils discourage applications or provide inadequate support – potentially dissuading applicants – could further reduce the coverage of these figures^{xiii}.

How does homelessness prevalence in the UK compare with other countries?

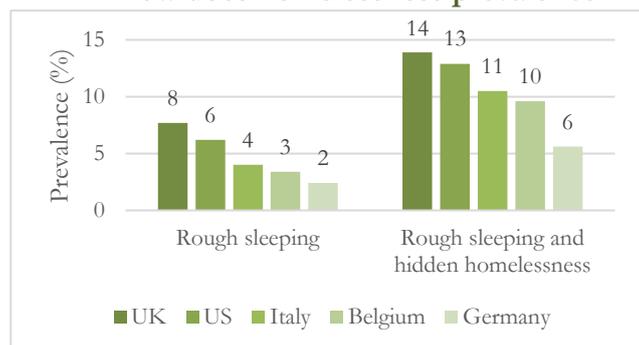


Figure 4: The lifetime prevalence of rough sleeping and hidden homelessness is higher in the UK than elsewhere, 1999-2003. *Source: Toro et al. (2007)^{xiv}*

International data on homelessness prevalence are scarce, and no recent data are available. Figure 4 shows that at the turn of the century, both rough sleeping and hidden homelessness were more prevalent in the UK than the US and Europe. It should be noted that there exists no internationally agreed definition of homelessness, so these figures may not be truly comparable between countries.

What are the causes of homelessness?

The causes of homelessness include the structural issues of poverty and housing costs alongside societal issues of personal and social problems. The relative importance of these factors is likely to vary between the different homeless groups. Looking first at structural factors, the growth in rental costs has served to intensify precarity for low-income households and may increase statutory homelessness. In 2015, the end of an assured shorthold tenancy accounted for 30 per cent of households accepted as homeless in England^{xv}. Private rents are rising faster than household resources, and even where landlords are willing to accept housing benefits, these households have a typical monthly payment shortfall of £250^{xiii}. These issues are not confined to the private rented sector, as average local authority rental costs in Britain more than doubled from £40.79 per week in 1998-99 to £84.12 per week in 2012-13^{xvi}. The absence of affordable housing for low-income households could partly explain why the proportion of households accepted as homeless due to the end of a tenancy has doubled since 1998. Some research also suggests that austerity measures have played a part^{xvii}. Issues with housing affordability will however not be fully reflected in statutory homelessness figures: people who lose their home due to housing arrears are classed as intentionally homeless so are not eligible for statutory support. In this situation, housing affordability might therefore contribute to other forms of homelessness.

Social problems commonly propel vulnerable people into homelessness. Household disputes account for 60 per cent of first and 32 per cent of recent homeless experiences^{xviii}. Nearly one in four homeless people have been in care, and the vulnerability of this group is recognised: 18-21 year-old care leavers are identified as a priority group for statutory homelessness support. Likewise, poorly co-ordinated support means that ex-offenders are often released from prison with no housing provision^{xiii}, so may quickly become homeless.

Health problems are highly prevalent as both the causes and consequences of homelessness. A 2014 survey revealed that 80 per cent of rough sleepers, hidden homeless, and hostel users reported mental health problems, while 73 per cent reported physical health problems^{xix}. US research found that currently or previously homeless people had higher levels of psychological distress and were more likely to report alcohol use or have a diagnosed mental health problem, compared with poor adults who had never been homeless^{xx}. These characteristics may therefore increase the risk of homelessness, independent of poverty.

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Why do people remain homeless?

A major difficulty in understanding homelessness is distinguishing between its causes and effects. US research exploring the characteristics of rough sleepers found that chronically homeless people were more likely to report substance abuse and mental health problems than those experiencing transitional or episodic homelessness^{xxi}. Recent UK research has also begun to identify the sequence of events leading to initial and ongoing homeless episodes. Early experiences of relationship breakdown and drug and alcohol abuse were typically followed by mental health problems, hidden homelessness, and spells in prison, after which the transition to street lifestyles was reached through rough sleeping, injection drug use, and begging^{xxii}. This sequence demonstrates that the onset and persistence of homelessness have different causes. A better understanding of these causes could be effective in helping people out of homelessness. This information is likely to be helpful to the government's No Second Night Out strategy (2011), which aims to provide immediate support to new rough sleepers and prevent entrenchment of rough sleeping^{xxiii}.

Conclusions

Homelessness is a complex economic and social issue with several overlapping causes and consequences, only some of which have been discussed here. The catch-all term 'homeless' also obscures large differences between homeless experiences, and the extent to which the three groups discussed above are separate or inter-related is poorly understood. More detailed research is needed to better understand these issues and inform suitable policy responses. Broadly speaking, problems related to incomes and housing present risks of statutory homelessness. An increase in statutory homelessness seems inevitable in light of ongoing pressures on the housing market, stagnating wages, and the widening shortfall between housing benefit and housing costs. People who do not receive support – either because they are ineligible, or support is absent or inadequate – may find themselves hidden homeless. Mental health problems and poor social support are also common triggers of homelessness. Once people have lost their homes they typically churn between hidden homelessness and rough sleeping. These experiences can compound more serious problems and consequently undermine attempts to exit homelessness. The problem of homelessness is likely to continue: although homelessness spending has increased by 13 per cent since 2010, local authority spending on housing has fallen by 46 per cent^{xxiv}. Unless these changes are reversed, a rise in homelessness seems inevitable.

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ⁱ DCLG Rough Sleeping tables.

ⁱⁱ Our World in Data: Homelessness.

ⁱⁱⁱ Clarke, A., 2016. The Prevalence of Rough Sleeping and Sofa Surfing Amongst Young People in the UK. *Social Inclusion*, 4(4), pp.60–72.

^{iv} Census table QS421EW - Communal establishment management and type - People

^v The most recent population estimates refer to 2015.

^{vi} Proportion based on the adult population, defined as age 16 and over

^{vii} Hulchanski, J.D., 2000 *A New Canadian Pastime? Counting Homeless People*.

^{viii} Lansley, S. & Mack, J., 2015. *Breadline Britain: The rise of mass poverty*, London: Oneworld.

^{ix} Robinson, D. & Coward, S., 2003. *Your Place, Not Mine: The experiences of homeless people staying with family and friends*, London: Crisis.

^x Reeve, K., 2011. *The hidden truth about homelessness*, London: Crisis

^{xi} DCLG Live table 784.

^{xii} Priority need includes households containing children or pregnant women, people who are vulnerable due to mental or physical illness, care leavers, young people aged 16-17, and people forced to leave their homes due to violence or an emergency.

^{xiii} House of Commons, 2016. *Homelessness: Third Report of Session 2016-17*

^{xiv} Toro, P.A. et al., 2007. Homelessness in Europe and the United States: A comparison of prevalence and public opinion. *Journal of Social Issues*, 63(3), pp.505–524

^{xv} DCLG Live table 774.

^{xvi} DCLG live table 701.

^{xvii} Loopstra, R. et al., 2016. The impact of economic downturns and budget cuts on homelessness claim rates across 323 local authorities in England, 2004-12. *Journal of Public Health*, 38(3), pp.417–425.

^{xviii} Mackie, P. & Thomas, I., 2014. *Nations apart? Experiences of single homeless people across Great Britain*, London: Crisis.

^{xix} Homeless Link, 2014. *The unhealthy state of homelessness: Health audit results 2014*, London: Homeless Link.

^{xx} Toro, P.A. et al., 1995. Distinguishing homelessness from poverty: A comparative study. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*, 63(2), pp.280–289.

^{xxi} Kuhn, R. & Culhane, D.P., 1998. Applying Cluster Analysis to Test a Typology of Homelessness by Pattern of Shelter Utilization: Results from the Analysis of Administrative Data. *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 26(2), pp.207–232.

^{xxii} Fitzpatrick, S., Bramley, G. & Johnsen, S., 2013. Pathways into Multiple Exclusion Homelessness in Seven UK Cities. *Urban Studies*, 50(1), pp.148–168.

^{xxiii} DCLG, 2011. *Vision to End Rough Sleeping: No Second Night Out Nationwide*, London: DCLG.

^{xxiv} Crisis, 2017. *The homelessness monitor: England 2017*, London: Crisis.