

# Exploring women's homelessness

What we know



Homeless Link

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### Contents

Introduction	3
Why is gender important?	3
Measuring women's homelessness	4
Terminology	4
How homelessness is measured	5
How many women are experiencing homelessness?	5
Rough sleeping	5
'Hidden homelessness'	5
Statutory homelessness and refuges	6
Understanding women's homelessness	7
Experiences of violence and abuse	7
Mental health	9
Separation from a child	10
Physical health	11
Diversity	11
Race, ethnicity and nationality	11
LGBTQ+	12
Disability	12
Substance Use	13
Age	13
Sex and sex work	14
Conclusion	15
References and further reading	16

## Introduction

This publication lays out the existing evidence on women's homelessness. It covers measurement and the main experiences of women facing homelessness. It is intended as an introduction to understanding women's homelessness and points towards resources that may be of interest for those wishing to explore further.

### Why is gender important?

The concept of being 'gender-informed' is often discussed but rarely examined in detail. Having a thorough understanding of how women's homelessness differs from men's homelessness is an essential pre-cursor to responding in the most effective way.

As this report shows, women enter homelessness for different reasons and experience homelessness differently to men. The tendency to focus on rough sleeping, underestimates the extent of women's experiences of homelessness, which often involves statutory homelessness support with children or informal arrangements with friends and families. By emphasising rough sleeping and single homelessness, we miss much of the homelessness experience of women.

Nonetheless there are a significant number of women who do experience rough sleeping and single homelessness. There may well be more than appear in official figures as women may be more likely to stay away from visible locations in order to keep safe.

Those women who experience rough sleeping and single homelessness may present with a greater degree of multiple disadvantage. Research shows that women are more likely to have experienced violence and abuse, mental ill health and separation from a child than men. They may also be younger than their male counterparts.

There is relatively little information on different groups of women including on race and ethnicity, sexuality and disability. However, based on existing research, it is likely that trans women and women who are black or with a disability are likely to experience homelessness as well as additional disadvantage when facing homelessness.

The existing research clearly demonstrates the need to tailor services more directly to the needs of women to ensure that women are given the best possible chance to move beyond homelessness into brighter futures.

# Measuring women's homelessness

## How homelessness is measured

The way homelessness is defined, measured and described impacts on how it is understood and can impact on the visibility of women (Bretherton and Pleace, 2018; Bretherton, 2017). There can be a tendency, particularly in the public consciousness, to equate homelessness with rough sleeping. Whilst women do experience this, the majority of people visibly sleeping rough are men. However, far more people experience homelessness in the form of sofa surfing, staying with friends and family, living in unsuitable accommodation or temporary accommodation and these types of homelessness see higher proportions of women than amongst those sleeping rough (Agenda, 2020). In reality, there are women present in all forms of homelessness although the proportions of men and women vary across different aspects of the homeless experience.

In England, data on homelessness is primarily measured by rough sleeping snapshot estimates and local authority submissions to central government detailing numbers of people who have submitted homelessness applications or have accessed services. While some information on gender is available, it is rarely presented in any detail in published reports, nor is it given any significant focus. This leaves us with a partial understanding of women's experiences at best (Bretherton, 2017; Agenda, 2020).

In this report we discuss research that examines different elements of women's homelessness. These papers may all define homelessness slightly differently. For the purpose of clarity the main definitions of different types of homelessness as referred to in this report are given below.

## Terminology

**Rough sleeping** includes people who are either sleeping in public spaces such as streets or parks or otherwise uninhabitable locations such as tents, sheds, stairwells.

**Single Homelessness** includes both people sleeping rough and those who may be in hostels or other temporary accommodation services as well as those who are sofa surfing or staying with friends on a temporary basis.

**Hidden homelessness** includes people who are often invisible to the public, services and authorities most notably those who are sofa surfing, staying temporarily with friends in an unsuitable short-term arrangement or in any other location where their lack of stable housing is not known.

**Statutory homelessness** includes those people who are being supported by the local authority either through a relief or main duty. This usually means that the local authority has accepted that they owe a duty to resolve their homelessness and has

placed them in temporary or long term housing. This includes both families and single people for whom the local authority has accepted responsibility.

### How many women are experiencing homelessness?

#### Rough sleeping

Rough sleeping in England is measured by snapshot estimates based on evidence from street counts and/or information from service providers. Although more men sleep rough than women, it is clear that women who are homeless are also experiencing rough sleeping. When women do sleep rough, they do so in less obvious locations and tend to have less contact with generic homelessness services (Bretherton and Pleace, 2018; Groundswell, 2020). It is therefore likely that current forms of measurement under-estimate the extent of women's rough sleeping.

The most recent snapshot estimate figures estimate that 13% of people rough sleeping across England on a typical night in 2021 were women. This represents 320 women out of 2440 people (DLUHC, 2022). In 2021-22 17.4% of people sleeping rough in London were female (CHAIN, 2022a). This represents a notable increase from 12% in 2012-13 (CHAIN, 2022b). Previous analysis of women sleeping rough found that this increase appears to involve younger women (Bretherton and Pleace, 2018). This is backed up by recent research by a London youth homelessness charity that found the proportion of young women aged 18-25 sleeping rough had doubled between 2019 and 2020 (New Horizon Youth Centre, 2021).

Whilst women make up only a small proportion of the total number of people seen sleeping rough, a detailed analysis of the life experiences of single homeless women<sup>1</sup>, found rough sleeping was a common element of women's experiences of homelessness: 62.2% of women in the study said they had slept rough at some point (Reeve et al, 2007). This suggests that rough sleeping is a common experience amongst single homeless women.

#### 'Hidden homelessness'

Crisis uses the concept of 'core homelessness' to describe people living and/or sleeping in unconventional spaces, hostels, unsuitable temporary accommodation and sofa surfing as well as those sleeping rough. They estimated that 203,400 households were experiencing 'core homelessness' in 2020. It is likely that more women are represented in this definition of homelessness. There is no breakdown by gender given in their analysis (Watts *et al*, 2022).

There is some evidence that women are more likely to try to find support from family and friends rather than approach services (Ava, 2020; Bretherton, 2017). An evaluation

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<sup>1</sup> In this study, single homeless women were included who lived in a range of different accommodation options.

of Crisis Skylight members found that 32% were women. Crisis Skylight members include people in a variety of housing situations including those who are staying with friends or in temporary accommodation as well as hostels and sleeping rough and are therefore more representative of the 'hidden homelessness' group (Bretherton and Pleace, 2016).

### **Statutory homelessness and refuges**

Statutory homelessness statistics include households who have approached the local authority for homelessness support and is usually defined as those households for whom the Local Authority accepts a relief or full housing duty.

Statutory homelessness is more gender-balanced. Part 7 of the Housing Act 1996 (alongside subsequent amendments) assigns priority need to households with dependent children. As a result, statutory homelessness is made up of a large number of families most of which include a woman or are female-headed households (Bretherton and Pleace, 2018). Agenda reported that 56% of statutorily homeless households in 2019 were women with dependent children or lone women (Agenda, 2020). In 2021-22, families with children represented 62.5% of households owed a main housing duty as well as 38% of those owed a prevention duty (MHCLG, 2021). Despite sharing information on ethnicity and disability, there is no breakdown of households with children by sex in statutory homelessness statistical releases.

Domestic abuse services such as refuges are often left out of homelessness statistics but are almost exclusively for adult women and their children. This form of homelessness is therefore often missing from discussions on homelessness (Bretherton, 2017).

### Understanding women's homelessness

Research into women's homelessness has identified clear themes that distinguish women from other groups experiencing homelessness. In many cases, women are having these experiences to a greater degree or in a different way to men. This is significant for service provision and design which may need to adapt to ensure that the needs of women are adequately met.

The causes of homelessness are always complex and involve a series of factors coming together to lead to homelessness. As with all forms of homelessness, poverty is a leading cause of women's homelessness. Child poverty in particular is predictive of homelessness and has been cited by women as both a cause of homelessness and a barrier to exiting (Bramley and Fitzpatrick, 2018; Bretherton, 2020). This interacts with structural issues such as inadequate housing supply and low benefit levels that may play a role in causing homelessness for women as for men (Bramley and Fitzpatrick, 2018).

Certain groups of women may then be at greater risk of homelessness due to further experiences of discrimination and/or disadvantage, such as racism, violence and abuse and ill health. An initial 'trigger' such as mental ill health or domestic abuse has been shown to have led to homelessness where women lacked personal, practical and financial resources, could no longer rely on support from family or friends and had either avoided or been rejected by services (Bretherton, 2020).

### Experiences of violence and abuse

#### **Violence and abuse as a cause of homelessness**

Abuse is a leading cause of homelessness for women with many women experiencing homelessness as a result of a violent relationship breakdown (Bretherton, 2017). In a recent analysis the main, self-reported, trigger events for homelessness for women were mental ill health, and violence, both domestic violence and abuse, and abuse from neighbouring households (Bretherton, 2020). This corroborates early research that found over 20 per cent of women became homeless because they were experiencing violence from someone they knew, whether a partner, family member or other local people (Reeve, Goudie and Casey, 2007).

Overall, women are twice as likely as men to experience interpersonal violence and abuse, and the more extensive the violence the more likely that it is experienced by women rather than men. About one in every 20 women in England has experienced extensive physical and sexual violence and abuse across their life course, compared to one in every 100 men (Scott and McManus, 2016).

Higher rates of abuse also lead to a higher risk of homelessness. Research by Agenda showed that 1.2 million women in England have experienced extensive abuse both as a

child and an adult. Of these 21% have experienced homelessness compared to 1% of women with little or no experience of abuse (Agenda, 2020). They also stated that “while statistics suggest women make up a minority of the rough sleeping population, rates of homelessness among women with extensive experience of violence and abuse are far higher than those for men overall, and comparable with that of men [who have experienced violence and abuse]” (Scott and McManus, 2016).

### **Intimate partner violence and abuse**

Several studies have reported an extremely high rate of violence and abuse in the life histories of homeless women. It has been reported that up to 70% of women sleeping rough have experienced violence from an intimate partner (Moss, K., & Singh, P. (2015) cited by Ava, 2020). A Crisis study of single homelessness found that 61% of women had experienced violence or abuse from a partner (Mackie and Thomas, 2014).

There is a notable difference between the experiences of women and men in relation to violence and abuse. The Crisis research of single homelessness cited above found just 13% of single men having experienced violence and abuse from a partner and amongst Crisis Skylight members<sup>2</sup> (including those staying with friends or in temporary housing) 26% of women had experienced domestic abuse compared to 7% of men (Mackie and Thomas, 2014; Bretherton and Pleace, 2016). Almost 50% of women in St Mungo’s services had experienced domestic abuse compared to 5% of men. One-third said domestic abuse had contributed to their homelessness compared to 8% men (St Mungos, 2014).

### **Experience of abuse during childhood**

Several studies of women’s homelessness have identified violence within the family home both in childhood and later in life as a key feature of women’s experiences (Groundswell, 2020; Mackie and Thomas, 2014). 19% of women in the St Mungo’s study had experienced abuse as a child compared to 8% of men.

Research into women experiencing single homelessness found that 75% of women recounted difficult or traumatic childhood experiences, ranging from violence from parents, to neglect, abandonment, bullying at school, bereavement, or conflicting relationships with parents or step-parents. Nearly one third of the women in the same study reported having suffered sexual abuse in childhood from male perpetrators (Reeve, Goudie and Casey, 2007).

### **Experiences of violence and abuse after becoming homeless**

These experiences continue once women become homeless. In a recent study by Groundswell 35% of women said physical or sexual abuse was currently affecting their daily life (Groundswell, 2020). A Crisis study of the experiences of people whilst homeless highlighted a number of issues of particular concern to women:

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<sup>2</sup> Crisis Skylight members include people in a variety of housing situations including those who are staying with friends or in temporary accommodation as well as hostels and sleeping rough.



- 30% of rough sleepers reported being deliberately hit or kicked in the past 12 months. Female rough sleepers (36%) were more likely than male rough sleepers (29%) to be a victim of violence
- 65% of women had been verbally abused in the last 12 months compared to 53% of male rough sleepers.
- Proportionally female rough sleepers (54%) were more likely in the last 12 months to have experienced a theft than their male counterparts (50%) (Crisis, 2016)

Homeless women can be particularly vulnerable to perpetrators of abuse. A study by DePaul, found that 19% of young women surveyed had suffered sexual assault while in a temporary living arrangement compared to 5% of young men (DePaul, 2018).

### **The impact of violence and abuse**

Abuse can have a significant effect on the lives of survivors. The resultant trauma that it can cause can impact on all areas of life from employment prospects to housing stability. Hidden Hurt reported that women with extensive experience of violence and abuse are more likely than women with little experience to describe their job as insecure, to have been made redundant or sacked from their job and to have struggled to find new work (Scott and McManus, 2016).

Violence and abuse and the potential trauma that results can have a knock on effect on building relationships and may also affect how people choose to interact with services (Homeless Link, 2017). It can also lead to adopting coping strategies such as the use of drugs or alcohol, mental ill health, or behaviours perceived by others to be 'challenging'. This in itself can lead to or exacerbate homelessness (Reeve, Goudie and Casey, 2007).

"The damage that this violence can do, and the disruption to women's lives that can result from it, brings a dimension to women's homelessness that is unique (Bretherton, 2017)."

### **Mental health**

Mental ill health has been consistently shown to be a significant feature of women's homelessness (Bretherton and Pleace, 2018). In some cases, mental health may interact with other factors, such as poverty to trigger homelessness and it may also affect the woman's ability to find a solution when threatened with homelessness (Bretherton, 2020).

Women who have mental ill health are more likely to experience long-term or repeated homelessness and have been found to be significantly more likely to sleep rough for more than three months (Agenda, 2020; Bretherton and Pleace, 2018).

## Homeless Link

Homelessness has a significant negative impact on the mental health of women. 64% of women surveyed by Groundswell expressed that mental ill health was currently affecting their day-to-day life compared to 20.7% of the general population of women (Groundswell, 2020).

The Groundswell study found the most commonly diagnosed mental health needs amongst homeless women were depression (45%), anxiety/phobia (29%) and posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) (18%). In many cases mental ill health existed before homelessness, however, other women developed mental ill health or additional mental health needs after their housing situation deteriorated (Groundswell, 2020).

Self-harming is common among women experiencing homelessness. 49% of women experiencing single homelessness report self-harming (Mackie and Thomas, 2014). In the Groundswell study, 27% of all women who had required an ambulance had called one due to self-harm or attempted suicide (Groundswell, 2020). Other research has highlighted that people who report domestic abuse (both male and female) report higher rates of mental health support needs (64% of survivors compared to 28% who had not experience domestic abuse) demonstrating a clear correlation between women's experiences of abuse and mental ill health (Bretherton and Pleace, 2016).

Women experiencing homelessness also report mental health support needs more often than men. 58% of women sleeping rough reported mental ill health compared to 44% of men. Women who are homeless with mental health problems are also more likely to experience long-term or repeated homelessness (Agenda, 2020). 70% of women accessing St Mungo's services reported mental ill health compared to 57% men (St Mungos, 2014).

Women who are experiencing single homelessness reported similarly high levels of mental health support needs (64% compared to 46% of men). They also report higher rates of self-harming (49% of women compared to 23% of men) (Mackie and Thomas, 2014).

### Separation from a child/children

A significant proportion of women who are rough sleeping or accessing services for single homeless people have children. A survey of people accessing St Mungo's services found that over 50% of women are mothers and of those 79% have had children taken into care (St Mungos, 2014). Additionally at least 6% of female clients had been pregnant, given birth or had a termination in the previous year. Of the 1% who had given birth, 50% of these had done so in the previous six months (St Mungos, 2014). A study of single homelessness found that 38% of female respondents had children who were being looked after by someone else compared to 9% of men (Mackie and Thomas, 2014). The traumatic impact of losing a child is a significant feature of the lives of homeless women.

### Physical Health

A recent study by Groundswell set out the extensive and significant health needs reported by women experiencing homelessness. Their study found that 74% of women interviewed had a current physical health need. The most commonly diagnosed physical health needs were joints, bones and muscles (40%), blood conditions (26%), problems with feet (21%) and stomach issues (19%). The conditions which showed the biggest increase upon homelessness concerned joints, bones and muscles, blood conditions, heart conditions and problems with feet. Participants also frequently talked about how their living situation affected their health and exacerbated their existing health issues. The stress of their situation resulted in headaches, hair loss, stomach pain, irritation in their eyes, rapid heartbeat, panic attacks, chest pain and early menopause (Groundswell, 2020).

The average age of death for a homeless woman is 41.6 years compared to 45.9 for men (ONS, 2021). This is almost 40 years younger than the average age of death for women in England. Between 2013 and 2017, the number of women dying on the streets more than doubled, rising from 32 in 2013 to 77 in 2017 – an increase of 140 per cent. This compared to a 15% rise in the number of men who have died (Agenda, 2020).

### Diversity

There is very little information on the experiences of different groups of women and how race, ethnicity, sexuality, gender identity and disability may play a role in their experience of homelessness.

#### **Race, ethnicity and nationality**

It is clear that black people are more likely to experience homelessness than other ethnicities (Ava, 2020). Analysis of CHAIN data for 2021-22 (information on rough sleeping in London) revealed that 21% of women sleeping rough were black compared to 12.5% of the London population (obtained from CHAIN 2022, unpublished). Whilst most data isn't broken down by gender, this is consistent with other data sources. Statistical data from local authorities shows that 9.7% of people owed a prevention or relief duty in 2020-2021 in England were black while black people make up just 3.5% of the general population (MHCLG, 2021). Whilst the nature of the causation is not specified, there is undoubtedly a connection between being black and an increased likelihood of experiencing homelessness (Agenda, 2020; Ava, 2020).

Women sleeping rough (in London) have been shown to be more likely to be UK citizens than men (48% compared to 43% of men) but less likely to define themselves as white European (61% of women compared to 68% of men) (Bretherton and Pleace, 2018).

### **LGBTQ+**

There is very little information on women who are LGBTQ+. However, research by Stonewall has shown 25% of trans people have experienced homelessness at some point in their lives, compared to 16% LGBT people who aren't trans<sup>3</sup>. 24% of non-binary people and 20 per cent of LGBT women have experienced homelessness (Stonewall, 2018). LGBT people make up 24% of the youth homelessness population (Agenda, 2020). These statistics would suggest that being LGBTQ+ presents an increased risk of becoming homeless although again the nature of the causation cannot be established.

A recent report by AKT shares research into LGBTQ+ young people who experienced homelessness aged 18-25. Whilst it isn't broken down by gender, there are some notable findings that resonate with our findings about women's homelessness more broadly:

- 25% of LGBTQ+ young people had experienced abusive relationships with an intimate partner with trans young people experiencing this more than those who aren't trans (26% compared to 15%).
- 17% of LGBTQ+ young people felt like they had to have casual sex to find somewhere to stay while they were homeless.
- 92% of LGBTQ+ young people surveyed said that being homeless had a negative impact on their mental health (AKT, 2021)

### **Disability**

In 2019, the number of ill and disabled people becoming homeless increased by 53% (Agenda, 2020). There is no gender breakdown given in this research, however this is another area that could be explored further in the future. The AKT research found that LGBTQ+ young people who were disabled had experienced higher rates of intimate partner violence (25% compared to 15%) and reported higher rates of a negative impact on their mental health (95% compared to 90%) (AKT, 2021).

### **Substance use**

Women sleeping rough have different experiences of drug and alcohol use than men. In recent research, 43% of men who were sleeping rough reported issues with alcohol compared to just 29% of women. There was a less pronounced difference in drug use with 27% of women reported as using drugs compared to 31% of men. Whilst the data is not complete, this indicates lower use of alcohol in particular (Bretherton and Pleave, 2018).

### **Multiple disadvantage**

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<sup>3</sup> This research by Stonewall (2018) and that cited by Agenda (2020) use the term LGBT.

Homeless Link research from 2018 showed that 2/3 of practitioners reported they had seen an increase in the number of women with multiple disadvantage presenting to their service over two years (Homeless Link, 2018 cited in Agenda, 2020).

Research by St Mungos found that women accessing their services tend to make contact at a later stage when issues have escalated and are less ready to begin their recovery journey than men. Women presented with a number of severe interrelated problems at a comparable rate to men with 27% reporting a combination of issues with mental health, physical health and substance use compared to 26% men (St Mungos, 2014).

Crisis research into single homelessness found that women experienced most areas of need to a greater extent than men with the only exception being having served a prison sentence (Mackie and Thomas, 2014). Women were more likely to have faced mental ill health (64% of women, 46% of men), violence/abuse from a partner (61% of women, 13% of men), their children being looked after by someone else (38% of women, 9% of men), and self-harming (49% of women, 23% of men).

This would suggest that there may be a greater degree of multiple disadvantage amongst women experiencing rough sleeping and single homelessness than amongst men.

### Age

Women rough sleepers tend to be younger (Ava, 2020). Analysis of data from CHAIN in London found that women sleeping rough are more likely to be under 25 than men (Bretherton and Pleace, 2018). This is backed up by research by New Horizon Youth Centre that found a 24% of rough sleepers accesses their services to be women (New Horizon Youth Service, 2021). This compares to 17.4% of all rough sleepers in London recorded on the CHAIN database (CHAIN, 2022a).

Research by DePaul found that there were numerous differences between the experiences of young men and young women that mirror some of the findings for women in general. Young women were more likely than young men to have become homeless due to a relationship breakdown (60% compared to 51%). They also more frequently experienced emotional or mental abuse (25% compared to 14%) and sexual abuse and exploitation as a cause of homelessness (3% of young women compared to 1% of young men). Young women were three times more likely to experience sexual abuse or exploitation once homeless. Young women were more likely to state that being homeless had had a negative impact on their mental and physical wellbeing than young men (DePaul, 2018).

### Sex and sex work

There has been significant discussion about the propensity of women to form unwanted sexual relationships to avoid homelessness. Some research suggests that some women may form a new relationship as a response to their homelessness (Bretherton, 2017). An early Crisis study reported that 28% of homeless women have formed an unwanted sexual partnership to get a roof over their heads, and 20% have engaged in sex work to raise money for accommodation (Crisis, 2006). More recent research by Crisis into single homelessness found that although women were more likely to have engaged in an unwanted sexual partnership or undertaken sex work (10% of women, 2% of men), the association was not statistically significant due to the low numbers of people who had reported this (Mackie and Thomas, 2014).

Overall the evidence about the extent to which women exchange sex for accommodation is mixed. It has also been argued that that there has been exaggerated attention paid to this aspect of women's homelessness that is not backed up by the research (Bretherton, 2020). It is clear that this has been reported by some women but this may not be as common an experience as some have previously reported (Crisis, 2006; Groundswell, 2020).

## Conclusion

It is clear from the available research evidence that women experience homelessness differently to men and other distinct groups. Fewer women are visibly sleeping rough but those that do may be experiencing a greater level of multiple disadvantage than their male peers. Amongst women experiencing single homelessness, there are often significant histories of violence and abuse both before and after losing their home. Women also experience mental health, separation from child and certain types of physical health needs to a greater degree or differently to men.

There is a need for a greater level of analysis of women's experiences. Existing data on both rough sleeping and other forms of homelessness rarely examines the impact of gender specifically. In addition there is very little or no data about specific groups of women who may experience additional disadvantage due to their gender-status, sexuality, race, ethnicity or disability. A greater understanding of the experiences of these groups of women would add to our ability to be truly person-led and gender-informed.

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## What We Do

Homeless Link is the national membership charity for frontline homelessness services. We work to improve services through research, guidance and learning, and campaign for policy change that will ensure everyone has a place to call home and the support they need to keep it.

## Homeless Link

Minorities House  
2-5 Minorities  
London  
EC3N 1BJ

[www.homeless.org.uk](http://www.homeless.org.uk)  
@HomelessLink

**Let's End Homelessness  
Together**

