

# **'I always kept one eye open': The experiences and impacts of sleeping rough**

## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

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# Foreword

Imagine not knowing where you are going to stay tonight. Where do you go, where will you sleep, how are you going to wash yourself and what are you going to eat? This is the reality for over three thousand people in England forced to sleep on our streets tonight.

Rough sleeping, the most visible form of homelessness, is increasing and shockingly more and more people have no choice but to sleep on our streets.

The new research detailed in this report makes for stark and upsetting reading. The fact that nine in ten people sleeping rough in England have experienced violence or abuse on the street is unacceptable.

Half of the people we spoke to have been physically attacked and one in five had someone urinate on or next to them. Sadly, violence, dehumanising verbal abuse, robbery, and harassment were unacceptably common experiences. Three quarters had been robbed and more than half had had items – including bricks and beer cans – thrown at them.

The fact that in the majority of cases, the perpetrator of the last incident experienced by respondents was a member of the public makes this more unsettling to read.

While these new findings are shocking and saddening, they are symptomatic

of a housing and homelessness system that has been neglected by successive governments for far too long. The chronic shortage of truly affordable housing, compounded by the three-year freeze on housing benefit while private rents soared, have hit those on lowest incomes the hardest.

People forced to sleep rough are the most visible, most acute, symptom of a systemic crisis: around half of those surveyed for this research had experienced struggles with the cost of renting and affording basics like food and heating prior to sleeping rough.

But it does not have to be this way. There are solutions that can reverse these trends which must start with everyone having a home of their own. The Government must commit to building the 90,000 new social-rented homes we need to address the housing crisis to ensure fewer people are pushed into homelessness. This will stop the injustice of homelessness and prevent more and more people's lives being put on hold.



**Matt Downie**  
Chief Executive, Crisis

# Executive Summary

## Numbers of people sleeping rough

Rough sleeping in England is increasing. Following several years of decline, between 2021 and 2022 the number of people sleeping rough over the last 12 months grew by 26% to a total of 3,069.<sup>1</sup> Increasing levels of rough sleeping can also be set within the wider context of rising homelessness in England. Almost 300,000 households last year (2022/23) received help from English councils because they were homeless or threatened with homelessness. This has increased by 7% over the last year and is higher than pre-pandemic levels.<sup>2</sup>

Recent policies adopted by the Westminster government such as Everyone In and the Rough Sleeping Initiative (RSI) showed it is possible to reduce the numbers of people who have no other option but to sleep rough. But with a lack of investment in longer term solutions to address all forms of homelessness in England, including building more social homes, alongside rapidly rising rents and increasing economic pressures squeezing households with the least, the number of people experiencing their first night sleeping on the streets is increasing.

Crisis conducted this research with 157 people who have slept rough within the last two years. Many participants were still

sleeping rough. The survey was completed face-to-face across homelessness services in a number of locations in England including the North West, North East, Midlands and London.<sup>3</sup> The survey was complemented by 20 in-depth interviews.

## Journeys into rough sleeping

The reasons people are forced to sleep rough are multifaceted, but are driven by structural causes rooted in the lack of affordable and accessible housing. As the findings of this research show, many had issues with mental and physical health alongside relationship problems and experiences of poor-quality accommodation, but the leading cause of being forced onto the streets was a lack of affordable accommodation.

When asked about specific events or issues they had experienced before sleeping rough, on average participants experienced 8 separate issues that individually could lead to them losing their home. Almost half (48%) had between 8 and 20 separate issues, which contributed to them becoming homeless. 6 out of 10 (61%/95) had had mental health issues. Half of participants (53%/83) had gone through family relationship issues and a similar proportion (52%/49) had experienced (personal) relationship breakdowns or issues.

- 1 Department for Levelling up, Housing and Communities (2022) *Annual Rough Sleeping Snapshot in England: autumn 2022*. Online: DLUHC. <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/rough-sleeping-snapshot-in-england-autumn-2022>
- 2 Department for Levelling up, Housing and Communities (2023), *Statutory homelessness in England: financial year 2022-23*. Online: DLUHC. <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/statutory-homelessness-in-england-financial-year-2022-23/statutory-homelessness-in-england-financial-year-2022-23#overview-of-homelessness-in-2022-23>
- 3 Proportion of participants from each location: Manchester 25%, London 24%, Sheffield 15%, Grimsby 15%, Birmingham 17% and Salford 10%.

Over half (52%/81) spoke to struggling with the cost-of-living crisis and being unable to afford food and bills. Just under half (47%/74) said that they had struggled with the cost of renting and had experienced rent arrears, difficulty with meeting rent increases or being able to afford deposits or rent in advance to secure somewhere to live. Seven of out 10 (69%/51) named the prohibitive costs associated with privately renting and/or trying to secure a new private tenancy as a leading cause of them having to sleep rough.

## First night sleeping rough

Many participants were extremely fearful on their first night of rough sleeping which included fear of the unknown, the vulnerability of having nowhere safe to go and dealing with the traumas that led to the situation. During the interviews participants were asked to talk about their experiences when they first had to sleep rough. They highlighted that they had often tried hard to find somewhere or someone to stay with, but no one could put them up. This left them with no option but to sleep rough, feeling lonely and afraid of what was to come next. They lacked belongings, especially the items needed for sleeping and protecting them from the cold and extreme weather. Participants rarely slept and highlighted just how far they walked on this first night, and throughout their ongoing experience of sleeping rough. They switched

quickly into survival mode, which led to them making short term decisions to look after their basic needs.

## Experiences of violence and abuse

Having no choice but to sleep rough makes people more vulnerable. Participants described one of the most dangerous parts of their experiences of sleeping rough being other people and the general public in particular. Overall, 9 out of 10 (141) people had experienced at least one form of violence, abuse or theft whilst sleeping rough. When considered in relation to participants' traumatic first night's rough sleeping, this shows that fears for their safety were not unfounded. Shockingly, half (51%) of research participants experienced being physically attacked whilst sleeping rough. Sixty-one per cent had been threatened with violence or intimidated and 72% had been verbally abused or harassed. Over half of participants (53%) had things thrown at them including bricks and beer cans, with 83% of participants experiencing having items thrown at them over three times.

These are not one-off incidents, either: more than 6 in 10 (66%) of those who had been physically attacked reported being attacked on more than three occasions; 83% had been

threatened with violence and 92% had been verbally abused more than three times. Sleeping rough exposes people to the vagaries in behaviour of others around them, especially the general public, with 70% of the last 738 incidents reported by people in the research perpetrated by a member of the public. Of those participants who reported having been physically attacked, the perpetrator of the last incident was a member of the public in more than three quarters (76%) of cases. Members of the public were responsible for 81% of instances when participants were threatened with violence and a similar proportion (80%) of cases in which they were verbally abused.

There were also more targeted attacks and abuse on participants due to their gender, race and religion. Sadly, we know people with protected characteristics are more likely to be victims of crime and abuse<sup>4</sup> and this is increased by the added vulnerability of sleeping rough. As with all areas of society, intersectionality is vital when looking at a social issue, as many people experience situations differently based on who they are and how society treats them because of their identity or background.<sup>5</sup>

Only a small proportion of participants (6%) stated that they had been sexually assaulted, interfered with, or attacked whilst sleeping rough. However, just under a third of those who had were female (28%). Also 33% of

female-identifying participants had been abused, harassed, interfered with, or attacked because of their gender. People sleeping rough are far less likely to be female or identify as female (11% of this sample). This is often because of how vulnerable sleeping rough makes a woman and often leads to women staying in extremely difficult or dangerous situations to avoid having to sleep rough.<sup>6</sup>

## Interactions with the police

Despite the ongoing and repeated nature of the crimes the people experienced, it was unlikely that they would report these to the police. Overall, out of 733 incidents only 109 (15%) of the last incidents experienced were reported to the police. The main reasons given by participants for not contacting the police following incidents was that they felt that the police would be unlikely to do anything (63%), because they feared repercussions from the perpetrator (9%), or because they dealt with the matter themselves (9%). This emphasises the point that the majority of the participants of this research did not feel like it was in their interest to report the - in some cases - very serious crimes they were victim of to the police.

In order to feel a degree of safety some participants kept to busy areas, where there are more cameras, police and security which can be reassuring and give people the

4 Office for National Statistics (2023) *Victims of Crime*. <https://www.ethnicity-facts-figures.service.gov.uk/crime-justice-and-the-law/crime-and-reoffending/victims-of-crime/latest>

5 Cole, E. R. and Duncan, L. E. (2023) *Better policy interventions through intersectionality*. Social Issues and Policy Review, Volume 7, Issue 1, pp. 62-78.

6 Sanders, B., Boobis, S., and Albanese, F. (2019) *'It was like a nightmare' The reality of sofa surfing in Britain today*. London: Crisis. Online: <https://www.crisis.org.uk/ending-homelessness/homelessness-knowledge-hub/types-of-homelessness/it-was-like-a-nightmare-the-reality-of-sofa-surfing-in-britain-today/>

feeling of safety so that they could rest. This, however, also brings people into more contact with the police and enforcement actions that are responding to calls from business about the presence and behaviour of people on the streets. Those who have no choice but to sleep rough can appear in opposition approaches to create safer neighbourhoods and town centres due to being seen antisocial and criminal, whether this is the case or not. This can then lead to people sleeping rough being pushed away from town centres and busy areas, making it more difficult for them to engage in support and making them more vulnerable.<sup>7</sup>

## Impacts on physical health

We all need a safe stable home to build our lives and thrive. Sleeping rough puts incredible strain on people's physical and mental health and can leave them with multiple illness and injuries that could have been managed or completely avoided if they had the foundation of a home.

Sleeping rough is traumatic and in too many cases leads to lives being cut short. Latest figures estimate that between 658 and 824 people died whilst homeless in 2021. The mean age of those who died was 45 for men and 43 for women. Suicide accounted for 13% of these deaths.<sup>8</sup> These shocking numbers

show the very brutal impact of homelessness. Participants were asked about a range of impacts from physical and mental health, loneliness, and more personal questions about how they view themselves and society.

The physical effects of sleeping rough are significant. A lack of sleep, walking thousands of steps, limited protection from sun, rain and cold, malnutrition and the impact of self-medicating with alcohol and drugs all contribute to a worsening or the development of physical health issues.<sup>9</sup> For many people experiencing homelessness these physical challenges are met with little support, rest or knowing when it will end.

*Every night I used to lay down and I used to think am I going to wake up in the morning*

Participants were asked about the impact sleeping rough had on their physical health, with 94% reporting at least one health issue, 78% reporting three or more health issues, and 39% having six or more. This shows just how damaging sleeping rough is on a person's physical health. The main physical health issues experienced by 70% of participants were those caused by extreme weather conditions, living in physical pain (69%) and issues with feet and legs related to walking (66%). These issues really highlight the strain placed on the body.

## Impacts on mental health

The stresses that lead to sleeping rough as well as the resulting abuse, uncertainty and anxiety led the majority of participants to experience a range of mental health issues. Of the 157 participants of this research, 86% had at least one or more mental health needs due to sleeping rough, 63% had three or more needs and 15% had six and over. This again shows that participants faced multiple and complex situations whilst sleeping rough.

The most common mental health impacts reported by participants were psychosis (experienced by 85% of participants), anxiety/generalised anxiety disorders and depression (both experienced by 75% of participants). Just over half (56%) of participants said that they experienced suicidal thoughts, while 29% experienced post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), 22% experienced antisocial/borderline personality disorder (ASPD/BPD), 17% experienced obsessive-compulsive disorders (OCD) and 13% experienced bipolar disorder.

## Accessing support

With the multiple physical and mental health needs exhibited by participants, being able to access the health services needed is vital to stop these issues from escalating and becoming more problematic.<sup>10</sup> However, for almost a quarter (23%/36) could only sometimes access the services they needed. Nearly half (47%) of participants said they were able to access the health services they needed, either all the time (31%) or most of the time (16%). For 1 in 10 (11%/17) they rarely had access and 15% said that they were never able to access the services that they needed. Almost half of participants could only sometimes, rarely or never access the health services they needed. Just over two-fifths (42%) of participants said that their experiences made them less likely to engage with support as they become less trusting of others and institutions around them, potentially prolonging their homelessness.

## Impacts on sense of self

While most individuals feel lonely at some point in their life, loneliness affects some people more than others.<sup>11</sup> Feeling isolated in our society and being unable to connect with other people can further exacerbate loneliness which can have its own long-term consequences. Loneliness cuts lives short,

7 Sanders, B. & Albanese, F. (2017) *An examination of the scale and impact of enforcement interventions on street homeless people in England and Wales*. London: Crisis. Online: <https://www.crisis.org.uk/ending-homelessness/homelessness-knowledge-hub/types-of-homelessness/an-examination-of-the-scale-and-impact-of-enforcement-interventions-on-street-homeless-people-in-england-and-wales-2017/>

8 Office for National Statistics (2021) *Deaths of homeless people in England and Wales*: <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/birthsdeathsandmarriages/deaths/bulletins/deathsofhomelesspeopleinenglandandwales/previousReleases>

9 Herzberg, D. and Boobis, S. (2022) *The Unhealthy State of Homelessness 2022: Findings from the Homeless Health Needs Audit*. London: Homeless Link. Online: <https://homeless.org.uk/knowledge-hub/unhealthy-state-of-homelessness-2022-findings-from-the-homeless-health-needs-audit>

10 National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (2022) *Integrated health and social care for people experiencing homelessness*: <https://www.nice.org.uk/guidance/ng214>

11 Sanders, B. & Brianna, B. (2015) *'I was all on my own': experiences of loneliness and isolation amongst homeless people*. London: Crisis. Online: <https://www.crisis.org.uk/ending-homelessness/homelessness-knowledge-hub/health-and-wellbeing/i-was-all-on-my-own-2015/>

increasing the risk of early mortality by 26%. It can also put people at greater risk of poorer mental health. Homelessness increases the likelihood of someone experiencing loneliness: 62% (97) participants said that they often felt isolated from others, compared to approximately 6% of the general population reporting that they often or always feel lonely, suggesting that those sleeping rough are much more likely to feel isolated.<sup>12</sup> This makes people sleeping rough some of the most isolated and lonely people in society.

Participants were asked about the impact that sleeping rough had on them as a person and their views of themselves and our society more widely. Two thirds of participants (69%) said that sleeping rough made them less trusting, feel invisible and negatively impacted on their relationships with family, children, and friends. Sixty six per cent felt that nobody cared about their situation. Shockingly, 64%/101 participants felt that sleeping rough meant that they were afraid for their lives or that they might die.

Sleeping rough can be deadly at worst, but will always be a trauma that can have a significant impact on a person's life. This is highlighted by over half (56%) of participants feeling that sleeping rough has made it hard to live a 'normal' life again.

Participants were asked whether sleeping rough had made aspects of their life harder and the results are stark. On all questions over half of participants felt that sleeping rough had made that aspect of their lives more difficult. It had the biggest impact on participants' ability to look after their basic needs and to stay physically healthy (both 80%/126). Participants also felt it had made maintaining their mental health (78%) and accessing support (77%) much more difficult.

As the research demonstrates, sleeping rough is dangerous, traumatic and has devastating impacts on people's health and wellbeing. It does not have to be this way. As with all forms of homelessness, rough sleeping can be ended through different policy choices, new approaches and more targeted funding.

## Ending homelessness

Ending homelessness does not mean no-one will ever lose their home again. It means it will be prevented where possible, and when it does happen there is a quick solution which helps everyone into a safe and settled home to build a decent life and meet their true potential. With the right political will and policy choices we can design a system which prioritises preventing homelessness first and ensures anyone experiencing it is helped quickly into secure housing. That is why Crisis recommends that.

In the short term the Westminster Government must remove the legislation from the Criminal Justice Bill that will criminalise people for being homeless, akin to the Vagrancy Act. Instead, genuine support should be put in place in the forms of prevention programmes and Housing First and enabling multi-agency working between local authorities and public institutions

The Westminster Government should scale up provision of Housing First in England so that it is available to all who need it, and alongside this to ensure access to specialist supported housing for the minority of people with complex support needs for whom Housing First is not suitable.

To address housing affordability in the short to medium term the level of investment in Local Housing Allowance rates must be maintained beyond 2024/2025 and kept in line with inflation. The level of benefit cap should also be reviewed so it does not cause homelessness and, at a minimum there should be exemptions from the benefit cap for people sleeping rough or who qualify for Housing First

Over the long term the Westminster Government should put in place a long-term plan capable of increasing the supply of social rent homes to meet current and future need – 90,000 social rented homes in England per year for the next 15 years.

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12 Department for Culture, Media and Sport (2023) Community Life Survey 2021/22: *Wellbeing and Loneliness*. Online: DCMS: <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/community-life-survey-202122/community-life-survey-202122-wellbeing-and-loneliness#:~:text=Overall%20in%202021%2F22%3A,%2F20%20and%202020%2F21.&text=A%20composite%20loneliness%20score%20was%20produced%20combining%20the%20three%20indirect%20loneliness%20measures>

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