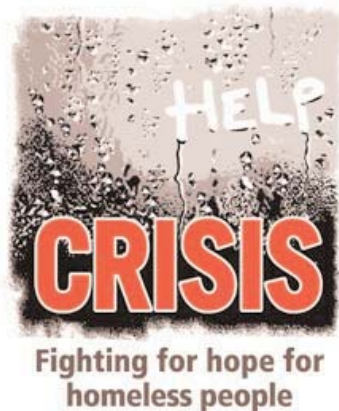


A Future Foretold

New approaches to meeting the long-term
needs of single homeless people

Gerard Lemos
with research by Gill Goodby



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Foreword

Few, if any, of the homeless people I meet at Crisis became homeless because of a shortage of housing.

Having worked in the housing movement for 20 years, I have seen the nature of homelessness change. From being very clearly a supply-side problem as recently as the 1980s, the causes of homelessness are no longer to do with the availability of housing, although access to social housing remains a thorny issue. Instead, government, local authorities and organisations like Crisis are trying to answer new questions about why resettlement can so easily break down for a minority of homeless people.

Most of these have ended up on the streets as the result of a series of what Gerard Lemos calls 'interacting agents' – drugs or alcohol, mental health problems, violence or abuse or the experience of leaving an institution such as prison, the armed forces or the care system. In other words, being homeless is a symptom of a range of problems rather than the cause of the problem itself.

In this situation, housing alone is not a solution. For the failure to tackle these 'interacting agents' at root-cause can result in the so-called revolving door syndrome, in which vulnerable people are unable to sustain tenancies and find themselves back in hostels or even on the streets.

Of course homeless people do need decent homes. But housing itself is the capstone of the support structure that homeless people need. The bricks and mortar are provided by the environment in which that housing is built. Leaving vulnerable people to fend for themselves on the margins of failing social-housing estates is likely only to compound their problems. Instead, we must find ways of providing homeless people with supportive environments in which they can begin to confront their problems and regain control of their lives. And with the decline of social institutions such as the church and the extended family, that means we must find new ways in which mutual aid and mediation can flourish within our communities.

In this challenging and thought-provoking study, Gerard Lemos demonstrates how homelessness can become 'a future foretold' for vulnerable people who experience a life crisis. His ideas go to the heart of the question of how we can prevent those vulnerable people ending up on the streets or among the ranks of the 'hidden homeless'.



Shaks Ghosh

Chief Executive, Crisis

Summary of proposals

Single homelessness is not a new phenomenon, but its causes, characteristics and consequences change very frequently, so innovative solutions are always required. The exact numbers of single homeless people are difficult to establish, but they are certainly counted in thousands. Also, the absence of a statutory duty on local authorities to assist single homeless people in a similar way to the expectation on them to assist homeless families, makes tracking the extent and nature of the problem extremely difficult.

Single homeless people are from all age groups, but there is a significant concentration between the ages of 18 and 25. Our research has shown that single people are likely to have become homeless as a result of the interaction of three or more of the following reasons:

- drug or alcohol abuse;
- long term relationship breakdown;
- mental health problems;
- unemployment;
- leaving prison or in trouble with the police;
- being forced to leave the parental home;
- eviction or abandonment of former home;
- leaving care;
- violence or harassment;
- bereavement;
- inappropriate housing;
- sexual abuse.

When a few of these factors occur hard upon one another, a decline into homelessness can be precipitate. Being homeless is the symptom not the cause.

Escaping homelessness is not straightforward. Our research showed that although many people valued the work done by individual social workers, resettlement workers and supported housing projects, few had anything good to say about the process for seeking permanent rehousing in social housing. Many were turned away on the grounds that they were not in priority need. Even more felt they were treated in a rude or unhelpful way. Frequently they had a long wait for housing and were given little information. If they were rehoused, they were given little choice about property or area, nor did they receive much support in that rehousing. The quality of the places offered was often poor, both the housing and the neighbourhood. Even in areas where social housing is in surplus, single people are finding it difficult to access it. All in all the rehousing system is failing single homeless people.

Homelessness is a people problem, not a building problem. This report proposes a 'triangle' of approaches to the needs of single homeless people, incorporating access to social housing and professional and voluntary support. Specific recommendations are given below.

1. Local authorities should ensure that single homeless people are housed.

Current policies on excluding people from the housing register because they have no local connection or because they have a history of antisocial behaviour, drug dealing, rent arrears or mental health problems need to be interpreted with great sensitivity in cases where a draconian interpretation will lead to that individual becoming homeless. The Housing Act 1996 led to a considerable number of exclusions, many of whom went on to become homeless. In the short run there is a case for a 'millennium amnesty'. People who have been excluded from consideration for social housing should be given a 'clean break' and reconsidered, as long as they are willing to give the appropriate undertakings not to repeat the behaviour that led to the original exclusion.

This would certainly improve the chances of the Government reaching its target of reducing rough sleeping by two thirds by 2002.

2. **All single homeless people who request it and are accepted on to the housing register should have a multi-agency assessment of their needs, including needs relating to housing, health, social services and the probation service.** A support plan should be drawn up covering the services to be offered, the agencies to be involved, a named key worker and a planned schedule of reviews. There should be a consistent national standard for assessments taking in abuse of drugs and alcohol, mental health problems, ties to friends and family, prospects for work and training, as well as housing need.
3. **Family mediation services, mentoring and befriending services should be available to single homeless people in all the main towns and cities.**
4. **'Virtual vouchers' should be given to single homeless people enabling them to gain access to social housing anywhere in the country.**

Introduction

Homelessness, particularly amongst young people who have not yet had a chance to make much of their lives, is perhaps one of our society's most dispiriting aspects. People having to resort to sleeping rough on the streets, as if nothing had changed from the conditions on the medieval city streets or as if we lived in some of the poorest places on earth, is not just dispiriting, but disfiguring too. As the Prime Minister observed in his Foreword to the Social Exclusion Report on Rough Sleeping (SEU, 1998):

The sight of a rough sleeper bedding down for the night in a shop doorway or on a park bench is one of the most potent symbols of social exclusion in Britain today. It is a source of shame for all of us that there are still about 2,000 people out on the streets around England everyday... and 10,000 people sleep rough over the course of a year.

How can it be that, despite everything that has changed for the better in our society, enabling a majority of people to live in comfort and prosperity, we still have people sleeping on the street? Why are we still seemingly unable to find adequate or effective responses? To be sure there are hostels, though there may not be enough of the right quality, but there have been hostels since Victorian times. At least we can happily report an improvement in standards since George Orwell sampled in the 1930s in *Down and Out in Paris and London* (Orwell, 1940), the book which first recounted the reality of being single and homeless for the benefit of the unseeing and unknowing, the contented many.

At the Twopenny Hangover, the lodgers sit in a row on a bench; there is a rope in front of them and they lean on this... A man humorously called the valet cuts the rope at five in the morning... At the coffin you sleep in a wooden box with a tarpaulin for covering... The best are the Rowton Houses... The only objection to them is the strict discipline, with rules against cooking, card-playing, etc... They are always full to overflowing... The Salvation Army hostels would only appeal to people who put cleanliness before anything else. The numerous restrictions stink of prison and charity... The ordinary common lodging housing are squalid dens, but some kind of social life is possible in them... As for the dirt it is a minor evil. The really bad fault of lodging-houses is that they are places in which one pays to sleep, and in which sound sleep is impossible.

The rise of homelessness

If cause and context is to be understood so that real, lasting solutions to homelessness can be found, a little of the story of how the current situation has arisen must be recounted. The screening of the television drama documentary *Cathy Come Home* in 1966 charting how one family had lurched from disadvantage and poverty into homelessness awoke public concern to a little known phenomenon: despite the millions of new council homes built since 1945 many young parents and their children still had nowhere to live.

Within a few days of the film's broadcast, Shelter was established to conduct a national campaign against homelessness. Crisis was founded in 1967 following a candlelit vigil in Hyde Park attended by 3,000 people to demonstrate their support for homeless people. A decade later the campaigning by the new organisations bore fruit. The Homeless Persons Act 1977 became law. The legislation ensured that Cathy and those like her would for the first time have some assurance of being given a high priority for council housing, even though she and her family would not necessarily be housed straight away.

Being homeless carried some people to the top of the waiting list. But it did not move all homeless people to the top of the list. The emotional power of the argument was deployed in favour of families. The consensus formed was that parents and children sleeping on the street was entirely unthinkable. Theirs, it was decreed, must be the first call on public housing. The well-documented and widespread phenomenon of single homelessness was not seen – for reasons that seem cruel and scarcely rational now – to be so troubling a problem. This cause was less of a priority for utilisation of public resources. As a result, local authorities have no general obligation to help single homeless people except those thought by the local authority to be vulnerable. To them they are expected to offer assistance.

Notwithstanding these limitations, the new law had a powerful impact on the way that local authorities prioritised their housing. In 1980, three years after the homelessness legislation was passed, 76,342 households were accepted as homeless. Local authorities accepted they had an obligation to house them. By 1992 this figure had risen to a peak of 178,867. It has since fallen every year. By 1998 it had fallen to 103,000 households. Although the problem appears to be diminishing, by any standards a formidably large mountain is still to be climbed in housing homeless families, particularly as the numbers languishing in the cramped indignities of bed and breakfast started

to rise once more in the late 1990s. And that mountainous figure does not, as has been mentioned, include the single homeless who are not thought vulnerable and those who sleep rough – ‘the people you step on when you leave the opera’ as a former housing minister, Sir George Young, described them. His intended irony was lost on the then Opposition and lost too on many housing professionals.

Single homelessness and rough sleeping are not synonymous. Many single people are, for practical purposes, homeless though they do not sleep on the pavement or in the park. They sleep on the sofas of friends; they stay for short periods with new-found companions; they move in and out of the family home and so on. Conversely there are people who do not, in fact, sleep out, but they spend a great deal of their time on the streets, a considerable amount of that time being given over to begging.

Many either never approach the local authority or, if they do, they are turned away without being recorded on any statistics. As one person interviewed for this report commented,

I moved in with my fiancé and that ended. I had a really bad cocaine and heroin problem. I was out on my arse. I went to the Council. I told them I was 23 years old and I needed their help. Basically they told me to go and get pregnant and come back when I had a child – they’d be able to help me. I was not high on their list. I sat there all day, waiting for them to help me and the outcome of it was that they had nothing to help me.

Although people who have this kind of experience do not get regularly recorded on any statistics, data on vulnerable people accepted by local authorities to be in priority housing need is recorded (see Table 0.1).

For reasons already given, the data in Table 0.1 presents a far from complete picture. Nonetheless it does reveal important trends. The numbers of disabled people and people with mental health problems who are homeless have increased markedly. The numbers of old people have fallen. Even though many other studies show a considerable increase in the number of young people becoming homeless (as discussed in Part 1 of this report), the numbers of young people being accepted has also fallen. A large number of young people do not approach local authorities for assistance, perhaps in the belief that they would not receive any help, or maybe because they have no pressing wish to live on their own on a council estate. These were the views of many people interviewed for this study as will be reported later.

Many single people who approach a local council for rehousing and are deemed vulnerable are offered temporary hostel accommodation whilst waiting to be offered a permanent home. Others find their own temporary housing in the form of bed and breakfasts, staying with friends and relatives, or sleeping rough. A short-term need may be met but only until the next crisis – losing a job, being asked to move on by the friends you are staying with or splitting up with a long-term partner. At that point single people may decide not to return to the council to seek housing.

There are a fantastic number of single homeless people who disappear from the system. (Council employee, Direct Access Unit, interviewed in our survey)

Research published by CHAR, now the National Homeless Alliance (McCluskey, 1997), noted that:

The official homeless population is the tip of a much larger iceberg of people experiencing

Table 0.1 Numbers of single homeless people accepted as vulnerable by local authorities (number of households)

Vulnerable member	1990	1991	1992	1993	1994	1995	1996	1997
Old age	6570	5860	6230	5920	6050	5890	5510	4230
Physical handicap	3950	4430	5400	5400	6050	6550	6250	5400
Mental illness	4220	4750	6070	6490	7100	7430	8180	7050
Young	–	–	4460	4470	4090	3760	3580	3440
Domestic violence	–	–	6470	7060	7370	8430	8220	7040
Other	9460	12610	4930	4250	4170	4550	4410	5180
Homeless in emergency	2300	1820	1270	1150	980	1160	1090	1350
Total	26500	29470	34830	34740	35810	37770	37240	33690

Source: Joseph Rowntree Foundation, Housing Finance Review 1998/9 (Table 89 Homelessness – Categories of need).

severe housing need. Many of these would, under any common sense view, also be accepted as homeless. Such people are the hidden homeless.

At the sharpest end of the spectrum of homelessness are people who sleep rough. The most recent and accurate figures available are from street counts produced by the Social Exclusion Unit (SEU, 1998) which estimated 1,850 people were sleeping rough in England on any single night, including 621 in Greater London (see Table 0.2).

A very widespread consensus exists that 1991 Census figures were a gross underestimate. For example, the Census encountered only five people sleeping rough in Birmingham. A local survey a year later in 1992 found 61 people sleeping rough.

Table 0.2 Estimates of rough sleeping in England, June 1998

Local authority district	Street count estimate
Westminster	237
Camden	59
Birmingham	56
Brighton and Hove	44
Bournemouth	44
Bristol	42
City of London	41
Oxford	39
Tower Hamlets	31
Manchester	31
Brent	29
Exeter	27
Croydon	25
Ealing	24
Kensington & Chelsea	23
Southampton	22
Portsmouth	21
Leicester	20
Lambeth	20
Hounslow	20
Worcester	20
Stoke-on-Trent	20

Source: Social Exclusion Unit 1998 (Local authority areas with an estimated 20 or more rough sleepers per night).

Many people quickly find their way into hostels or other temporary accommodation. Others drift in and out of rough sleeping for longer periods. Scores are out every night for months.

Hearteningly the numbers of rough sleepers have dropped dramatically since the early 1990s as a result of the Government's Rough Sleepers Initiative, but the problem has not been eradicated. Louise Casey, the head of the London Rough Sleepers Unit, established in May 1999, commented (Casey, 1999):

After 10 years of the rough sleepers initiative we still have people sleeping on the streets and we have people becoming homeless. Something isn't right.

George Orwell (1940) set out this breakdown for numbers of single homeless people in his time:

The following figures published by the LCC from a night census taken on February 13 1931 will show the relative numbers of destitute men and destitute women: Spending the night in the streets, 60 men, 18 women. In shelters and homes not licensed as common lodging-houses, 1,057 men, 137 women. In the crypt of St Martin's-in-the-Fields Church, 88 men, 12 women. In LCC casual wards and hostels, 674 men, 15 women.

Evidently single homelessness is not a new problem. It is disturbing to note so little improvement in nearly 70 years. Instead things have plainly got a good deal worse in London.

Outside London the figures are harder to establish. Counts taken in 1998 showed that the largest concentrations of rough sleepers outside London are in Birmingham, Brighton and Hove, Bournemouth, Bristol, Oxford, Manchester and Cambridge.

Social attitudes to single homeless people

As this report shortly demonstrates, little foresight is needed to recognise those in danger of becoming homeless. But too many people slip, trip, speed and spiral downward into homelessness without any prevention or intervention. Modern day tragedies unfold as people leave the care system; leave the armed forces; embark on a drug or an alcohol habit; experience relationship breakdown; their family life crashes; or mental health deteriorates.

Of course not everyone is tolerant of homeless people. Some say it is their own fault, or the fault of their

parents. If it is their fault, it follows that it is their responsibility, and theirs alone, to do something to find somewhere to live and get their life together. They may even, according to some people, have chosen to be homeless. All of this is prejudice untroubled by evidence. George Orwell (1940) noted the prejudices attached to what were then known as tramps:

In childhood we have been taught that tramps are blackguards and consequently there exists in our minds a sort of ideal or typical tramp – a repulsive, rather dangerous creature, who would die rather than work or wash, and wants nothing but to beg, drink and rob hen-houses.

With the exception of robbing hen-houses, the prejudice remains more or less intact. As long as it is their fault or their choice, the responsibility on the rest of us is diminished, perhaps even non-existent.

Those who are more tolerant hope, without much expectation, that the latest casualty at the street corner, at the station, or being stepped over outside an expensive shop or restaurant, will not turn out to be a modern day tragedy. Their situation may not be intractable and irreversible. They may instead be a contemporary Parsifal. In Wagner's eponymous opera, Parsifal spends many unhappy years wandering, confused, isolated and unloved, but he is the possessor of secret and redemptive knowledge; knowledge with which he can redeem himself and many others besides.

It is secretly feared nonetheless, whatever the hope, that redemptions amongst homeless people are few. The fear is that homelessness is part of a congenital condition, that homeless people are, as they say in the United States, 'low-functioning'. Despair attends the observer as, of course, it much more chronically might afflict many a homeless individual. Other people's feelings about homelessness are a miniature mirror of the feelings of homeless people themselves: anxiety, anger, fear, sadness, verging now and again into despair. Perhaps these feelings are now collective, prompting repeated Government initiatives during the 1980s and 1990s. There are other more positive feelings too. Enough people come off the streets to make everyone – homeless people and those that watch – feel defiant, even hopeful. As a result many people are willing and able to help homeless people – volunteers and paid staff. They know it is possible to make a difference. Some have turned their feelings into responsibilities.

The report

The title of the report

This report has been entitled *A Future Foretold* for three reasons. In the first instance, I shall be arguing that multiple causes can make homelessness a future foretold for some people. Secondly, the report has some suggestions to make about how escaping homelessness might also be foretold. Lastly, there are recommendations and some plans for implementation (set out towards the end of the report) which give some clues to foretelling the kind of work I believe will be needed in the future.

The purpose of the report

The first and most important purpose of this report is to record carefully the voices, feelings and insights of single homeless people themselves. The experiences of a wide range of single homeless people have been gathered, qualitatively rather than quantitatively, in order that the texture of their lives may be felt and the complexity clearly understood, at least in a small way. The second goal is to draw on those experiences to inform new approaches. It is not just the right to a home that should be established, but also the rigorous and effective enactment of that right. Single homeless people might then have a home, not just for comfort and warmth, but a home fit for the human spirit; a home in which consolation can be found when it is needed and aspiration built when it is possible.

This report seeks to look beyond immediate and emergency help for single homeless people. Instead we are looking for longer-term sustainability – the arrangements that will go beyond getting people off the street and help them to live a life well-rounded; a life in all its aspects worth living, a life in which the lid of abbreviated aspirations has been lifted off.

In all areas of social policy there is accepted received wisdom. Where necessary I am going to question that by seeking out the changed social context that causes and attends in the present case single homelessness. There is something durable and persistent on the phenomenon making it unsusceptible to current prophylaxes, diagnoses or cures. It is that underlying and changing social context that I seek to uncover here and there in this report to better explain what is going on and what might be done about it.

The new insights and suggestions in the report will hopefully lead quickly to action by voluntary agencies, by local authorities and the Government. Action

needs to be engendered, not just research. As Reg Revans – Britain’s first professor of business administration and author of the *ABC of Action Learning* (Revans, 1998) – put it:

There can be no learning without action, and no (sober and deliberate) action without learning.

The implementation of new action on homelessness is the third goal. The best ideas, as Revans implies above, always build on what already exists. Rarely is something entirely new needed. Even more rarely does something entirely new completely work, at least to begin with. It is not the shock of the new that is needed, but the shock of new learning. Much, though not all, of what is proposed here is already working somewhere in the country. Nowhere, however, is all that is proposed working in the same place. What works must be adapted and replicated wherever the problem exists. Each new adaptation will be new in some ways. No two situations are the same, though they may be similar. So the final goal of the report is to indicate how some of the ideas and

innovations suggested here can be put in train locally and nationally.

The structure of the report

The report starts with the heart of the matter – the lives of single homeless people, drawing on the survey undertaken for this report and other previous studies. A little of their life stories, using their own words wherever possible, is set down. We seek to find out what caused them to become homeless. In Part 2, people’s experiences of trying to escape homelessness are discussed, including the need for temporary housing, supported housing and permanent housing. In Part 3, the efforts of single homeless people to seek permanent housing from the social sector are considered. In Part 4 I look to the future and set out recommendations for the government, for local authorities and for housing associations and the voluntary sector. The report concludes with a summary of recommendations – suggestions for how change could be implemented in the near future.

Part I Experiencing homelessness

*... it is not news that we live in a world Where
beauty is unexplainable And suddenly ruined
And has its own routines. We are often far
From home in a dark town, and our griefs Are
difficult to translate into a language Understood
by others*

Charlie Smith, *The Meaning of Birds*

The phenomenon of single homelessness is fragmented. Lives are often chaotic. Changes on the street and elsewhere happen fast. Generalisations, against this backdrop, are rarely meaningful or helpful. Since the time of Orwell, and further back, single homeless people have had in common the simple fact of having nowhere to live. But other aspects of the problem have changed more or less constantly. The widespread use of drugs was rare until relatively recently; marital breakdown has grown enormously; young people were in the past not likely to leave home until they got married, and so on. An absolute prerequisite of any useful study of single homelessness as it exists currently is to seek to reflect the multi-layered and mutable nature of the problem and the multiplicity of complex causes. These causes interact and coalesce in different ways at different times to produce a persistent level of need, even as the nature of the need keeps changing.

For the purposes of the survey and this report a single homeless person is taken to mean anyone who does not have security of tenure in a home in which they can permanently remain. So this includes people staying in temporary housing, those who are living indefinitely with friends or family and those who are sleeping rough.

Methodology

People of all age groups and from different parts of the country participated in the survey, as did people with a range of experiences of becoming and being homeless. It was also important to interview people who had accessed and used many different services; hence the range of types of projects visited.

Seventy-nine interviews were held with single homeless people living in Cardiff, Edinburgh, Exeter, Guildford, Hull, Leicester, London, Manchester, Newcastle, Nottingham and Peterborough. Two focus groups were held in London and Exeter to consider qualitatively how people described their experiences when in discussion with others who had similar experiences.

In all 95 people's first hand experiences of single homelessness were sought. The projects visited included:

- 'wet' and 'dry' day centres;
- housing advice centres;
- night shelters;
- short stay hostels;
- refuges;
- supported and shared housing projects;
- Rough Sleepers Initiative projects;
- projects for women;
- projects for people under 18;
- projects for black and minority ethnic people.

Interviews were carried out in February 1999. Focus groups were held in March 1999. The projects visited are listed in the Appendix.

We also spoke with housing and health professionals about the support needs of the most vulnerable, people whose needs were generally least effectively met – those with mental health problems, drug or alcohol users, refugees and asylum seekers, ex-offenders, those previously in the armed forces, rough sleepers, care leavers and those under the age of 25. A wealth of information was also gathered from project and outreach workers, resettlement and day centre staff working to rehouse and support single homeless people in the projects visited.

Gender and ethnic origin

Sixty-one interview respondents (77 per cent) were male (Homeless Network suggests that 90 per cent of rough sleepers are male) and 67 (85 per cent) were White British. According to the Social Exclusion Unit report on rough sleeping five per cent of rough sleepers are black or from an ethnic minority, though there are higher proportions in hostels. In this survey rough sleepers, as well as users of hostels, day centres, night shelters and other projects were interviewed. The disparities between the people in our survey and studies of rough sleeping may be a reflection of the wider range of environments in which this survey was conducted. Admission statistics to Centrepoin hostels in London show that just under half the young people are black or from minority ethnic groups, compared with 20 to 25 per cent of London's population as a whole.

Age

According to Homeless Network few rough sleepers are under 18 years old. Around 25 per cent are between the ages of 18 and 25. Six per cent are over 60. In this survey, the proportion between 18 and 25 is rather higher at just above 40 per cent (see Table 1.1). Several studies confirm that, although single homeless people are spread across a range of ages, there is a disproportionately large group of single homelessness people in their early twenties.

Young homeless people

Because so many single homeless people are young and because being homeless when young can so easily blight life chances thereafter, perhaps permanently, a closer examination of the characteristics and needs of this group is justified.

In 1998 half of all newly homeless young people arriving at Centrepoin's emergency shelters in London were aged 16 or 17, 10 per cent up over four years. Forty per cent of these 16 and 17-years-olds had slept rough, seven per cent up on the previous year. Vulnerability early in life can magnify problems later. Fifty-two per cent of those who had left the parental home before the age of 16 had slept rough. By comparison 37 per cent of those who had not left home before the age of 16 had slept rough.

Admission statistics also show that a third of the young people who came to Centrepoin's hostels had no income at all. The likelihood of poverty being a key contributory factor in young people becoming homeless has been established in other studies.

It is not just that young people become poor once they are homeless, but very often they also come

Table 1.1 Age of respondents

Age group	Respondents	
	Number	Percentage
16–17	2	2.5
18–25	32	40.5
26–35	22	27.8
36–46	10	12.7
47–55	10	12.7
Over 55	2	2.5
Total	78	100

Note: One respondent did not disclose their age.

from a poor background. A recent study (Safe in the City, 1999) looks at the 'risk factors' often leading to homelessness. It notes that young people who became homeless were twice as likely to have shared a bedroom and lived in a non-car owning household at the age of 12. Only one third of the young people in the study had lived in a two earner household. Since the vast majority of people still turn to family in the first instance for assistance, financial and other kinds, coming from a poor family seriously restricts access to help if life becomes chaotic or the young person becomes vulnerable.

Two thirds of the young homeless people in a Mental Health Foundation study (Craig, 1996) had left school without educational qualifications (a figure only exceeded by the number of care leavers whose school career ended without any qualifications: 75 per cent). Two thirds of the young homeless were also suffering mental health problems and one third had attempted suicide. Over a quarter reported 'chronic' substance abuse, with over a half having had problems with substance abuse in the last year. Young single homeless people were more likely to be experiencing serious health problems but less likely to be in touch with a GP.

Even when young people are living away from their families but are not sleeping rough, they are much more likely to be in less secure accommodation renting from a private landlord (18 per cent). Far smaller proportions were renting from a housing association (eight per cent) or from a local authority (five per cent) (ONS, 1998).

So young people who have had a poor start in life, perhaps due to the breakdown of the relationship between their parents, are much more likely to become homeless as discussed below in the section 'Leaving the parental home'. They may also have not achieved much at school. When they do become homeless they have fewer people to turn to and those to whom they can turn for help do not have much to give. Having become homeless they are at extreme risk of exacerbating the problem of being without a home by taking drugs or drinking too much (although they may already have these problems) and they are then more likely to become physically and mentally ill. Added to all that, they encounter significant difficulties in accessing decent appropriate housing as will be described later in this report.

How do people become homeless?

Seventy-nine people interviewed gave a total of 264 contributing factors towards their homelessness. So on average the people interviewed each experienced

Table 1.2 'Push' factors leading to homelessness

Factors	Respondents	
	Number	Percentage
Drug or alcohol abuse	43	16.3
Long-term relationship breakdown	34	12.9
Mental health problems	32	12.1
Unemployment	31	11.7
Leaving prison/in trouble with police	29	11.0
Forced to leave parental home	22	8.3
Eviction or abandonment of home	21	8.0
Leaving care	18	6.8
Suffering violence/harassment	15	5.7
Bereavement	11	4.2
Inappropriate housing	5	1.9
Sexual abuse	3	1.1
Total	264	100

more than three 'push' factors. The multiple causes of homelessness are amply demonstrated in Table 1.2.

Only 21 (8 per cent) out of the 264 reasons given were specifically housing related. The vast majority, more than 90 per cent, of the causes can be separated into three other categories:

- personal difficulties leading to support needs (drug or alcohol abuse, mental health problems, unemployment);
- problems with relationships (bereavement, relationship breakdown, family breakdown, violence/harassment, sexual abuse);
- those with an institutional background (in care, prisons, armed forces).

The findings in the survey for this report are in line with other national homelessness statistics, such as those published by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation (see Table 1.3).

In the sections that follow each factor in Table 1.2 is discussed in more detail. The factors most commonly cited are taken first. The rest then proceed in descending order of frequency of mention by those

Table 1.3 Reasons for homelessness (percentages)

Reason for homelessness	1987	1997
Parents, relatives or friends no longer willing or able to accommodate	41	26
Breakdown of relationship with partner	18	26
Loss of private dwelling	15	22
Mortgage arrears	9	6
Rent arrears	4	2
Other	13	18

Source: Joseph Rowntree Foundation, Housing Finance Review 1998/9 (Table 88 Reasons for homelessness).

interviewed. In each section the findings of other studies are first noted before the responses to our survey and in our focus groups.

Drug or alcohol abuse

Alcohol abuse amongst poor and homeless people is not new. In contemporary Britain, there is plenty of evidence on the streets of the centres of our towns and cities. The use and abuse of drugs is a more recent and very fast-growing phenomenon. The misuse of illegal Class A drugs has grown alarmingly, particularly amongst young people. Recent research by the Standing Conference on Drug Abuse revealed that up to 20,000 pupils are suspended from school per year because of incidents of drug abuse (*Inside Housing*, June 1999).

The Government strategy to tackle drugs (Home Office, 1998) acknowledges that drug problems do not occur in isolation, but are often tied to wider social problems such as school exclusions, truancy, rough sleeping and poor housing.

Drug use amongst single homeless young people is depressingly common. Research in West London (Hungerford Drug Project, 1996/7) found that 17 per cent of young homeless people interviewed aged between 16 and 25 were using heroin or other opiates, compared with two per cent of those with a permanent home. Other surveys suggest that between 76 and 89 per cent of young people who are homeless or vulnerably housed use drugs. By comparison the British Crime Survey in 1996 reported that 24 per cent of people aged between 16 and 29 admitted using an illegal drug in the previous year.

Heroin, crack and amphetamines are all apparently easily available and widely used on the streets and in temporary housing. Many of the staff at the projects visited for this survey reported that 50 to 90 per cent of their clients were users. The young, newly homeless, those trying to kick a habit and those recently out of rehab or detox often feel pressured into drug and alcohol misuse within this environment.

Project staff reported that the problem can be perpetuated when people are offered flats in undesirable and deprived neighbourhoods. In areas where there are large concentrations of 'hard-to-let' properties, an intimidating and violent drug culture is common. Vulnerable new arrivals become easy prey for local drug dealers. Violence, intimidation, vandalism and theft of possessions can make tenancies unsustainable. Abandonment or eviction often follows.

Over half of those interviewed acknowledged they had a substance addiction. For many, the 'habit' or addiction stemmed from a personal tragedy.

Life was fine. I'd had a good upbringing, had my own business. Then my mum died and everything fell apart. I lost the business and got into heroin for six years. I couldn't face up to her dying.

My mum's boyfriend used to sexually abuse me ... I started drinking when I was thirteen.

I moved down from Scotland after my girlfriend died and took drugs for the first time. I had a £300 a day heroin habit and loads of money and clothes because of dealing – but I got in trouble with local dealers and got my head kicked in.

Abuse of drugs or alcohol can exacerbate family tensions, in some instances leading to eviction from the family home.

I'd been doing drugs for ten years when my parents asked me to leave. I was on the streets for a while, went to London for six months and sold The Big Issue but I came back because I missed my family and friends.

I left home – living with my parents as a teenager – and that was through an undenied alcohol problem at the time. And obviously, because of that problem, everywhere I went from then on, which was like bed and breakfast and rented accommodation, I was only there for a short time because the people wouldn't put up with the problem, which was the alcohol you see.

I couldn't stay in my parents' house. They knew what my behaviour was like, the stealing and affecting my younger brother and sister.

Those seeking help to 'get clean' were often homeless before going into a rehabilitation programme, creating difficulties in making housing arrangements for when they came out.

I'm going into rehab so I can't claim for any housing benefit. When I get out I'll still be homeless.

I've stopped before but when I came out of rehab they put me back into a hostel where everyone is using. So what's the point?

I went in for a detox because I had an alcohol problem, but you're only allowed seven to ten days. Now obviously at first, you're not even fit to do anything, never mind look around for anything else and again there isn't the contact between the hospital, it's just there to get you better, but as soon as you're better they say, 'Alright we can't keep you any longer, goodbye', which is fine, but you're out on the street again, and if you're out on the street again, and if you're under pressure – you're already under pressure from withdrawal, which is not too bad – it's worn off actually a little bit – if you have to spend a night out on the street the first thing you're going to turn to is the drug you were on in the first place. You need to be helped direct from there into somewhere with a roof over your head, otherwise you're certainly not going to kick your addiction.

Many people had become involved with crime to feed their habit. The involvement of the police and the courts sometimes meant people were bailed to a new city where they had no support from family or friends and no access to anywhere to live.

I got bailed to Newcastle to go into a rehab programme as the doctor told me I had six months to live and wouldn't survive prison. I knew no one, had no clothes, family or support.

Conviction for a criminal offence that affects a property is a statutory ground for repossession by the landlord. Eviction is the inevitable outcome for tenants found guilty of misusing and dealing drugs or allowing others to do so in their home.

In a study I conducted in North Kensington (Lemos, 1998) I heard of dealers preying on vulnerable ex-prostitutes and ex-drug users and turning their homes into crack houses. Inevitably persistent police raids

followed. Eventually, in an effort to take the drug dealers off the street, the tenants of the crack houses, who were generally not big time dealers themselves, were evicted, taking once more to the street and now possibly excluded from access to social housing.

Alcohol misusers who have been resettled in permanent housing can also find themselves evicted because other long-term drinkers in the area have taken over their home and moved in off the streets. Difficulties then arise for neighbours and for the landlord as a result of antisocial behaviour, which can lead to eviction. Following eviction local authorities can exclude users of drugs and alcohol from access to social housing. This exclusion often extends beyond permanent housing and into supported and temporary housing. Staff at Inclusion, which supports professionals working with young people who use drugs, commented (*Inside Housing*, April 1999):

Drug users and non-users alike are liable to get angry, have mood swings, damage property, get into fights, steal, or present problems to workers in other ways. Attempts to exclude potential trouble-makers by excluding all drug users are therefore unlikely to succeed.

The law as it relates to single homeless people is discussed later in this report.

Relationship breakdown and bereavement

A study for Help the Aged and Crisis (Crane, 1997) found that older homeless people, if they had been married at all (and many had not), were five times more likely to be divorced than other people. Of those who had children from a previous relationship, over half had no contact with them for more than five years. The insecurity of these relationships may in part reflect the childhood experiences of the individuals in question. Homeless people are much more likely to have experienced a disruption in their family. Over half of the older homeless people in the 1997 study had experienced broken or disturbed homes in their childhood.

The patterns do not seem very different for younger people. The study for the Safe in the City partnership programme, whose aim is to tackle the root causes of homelessness, found that young single homeless people were much less likely to have lived with two birth parents throughout their childhood and much more likely to have lived with step or foster parents. Over half of the respondents to our survey ascribed their

homelessness, at least in part, to the breakdown of a relationship or to losing a partner. Many had made themselves 'intentionally homeless' by walking away from their own or a rented home, unable to cope any longer. Their access to social housing in the future would therefore be restricted.

When we got divorced I didn't want a fight so I just left her everything, including the house we owned. I've been travelling looking for casual work for the last eight years – staying in B&Bs, hostels and sleeping rough sometimes.

I gave up my council flat to look after my partner who was severely disabled. When he died they said I couldn't stay in the flat. His social worker tried to sort things out but I had to leave. The council wouldn't rehouse me again as I'd given up my other flat.

Me and my girlfriend had been together for over two years when we decided to move to Wales. When we split up I left my job to move back home but I had nowhere to live. I've been homeless just over a year now.

I owned my house and had my own milk round franchise but I just had to get away. My best mate had died in a car crash and then my dad died a month later. It was all too much.

As single people without primary responsibility for child care, displaced partners are unlikely to receive priority in seeking access to social housing. Most social landlords are reluctant to create two tenancies from one when a relationship breaks down. It is seen as 'queue-jumping'. There may be people who are in greater need or have been waiting longer who deserve to be rehoused more quickly than the newly displaced partner. They, it is felt, must wait their turn. And single people who are displaced partners will only get a turn at all for social housing if they are considered vulnerable. They may not be young enough, suffering mental illness or be in other ways sufficiently vulnerable to be accepted on to the register at all. So, if they are turned away altogether, or endure a long wait, they are more prone to the stacking up of causes of homelessness. They may become depressed, start drinking too much and so on. Ironically, the act of declaring them not vulnerable may in due course lead them to manifest some or all of the vulnerabilities thought to be previously absent.

Mental health problems

Research undertaken for Crisis in 1995 and 1997 suggests that some 30 to 50 per cent of people sleeping

rough also have a mental health problem. The great majority (88 per cent) had already become ill before becoming homeless. Few had previously been in long stay hospitals, contrary to the widely held stereotype of someone supposedly receiving 'Care in the community' but in fact out of control and a danger to others. However, fewer than a third of single homeless people with mental health problems were receiving treatment.

For some respondents to our survey, a personal tragedy was responsible for their mental health deteriorating and then leading to them becoming homeless.

I'd been living in Aberdeen with my girlfriend, had a good job and plenty of savings. When our baby son died I cracked up and ended up losing everything, moving back home and sleeping rough. Male pride stopped me from getting help before I had the breakdown and lost everything.

Although the notion that there are many ex-mental patients dangerously roaming the streets with nowhere to live is a tabloid fantasy, that should not conceal the difficulties of resettlement and rehabilitation after a long spell in a psychiatric hospital. This will not be assisted by being inadequately rehoused far away from relatives and friends.

I was sectioned after my breakdown and spent five weeks in hospital. I was moved straight into a beautiful flat which my social worker had got me with a warden to help me, but it was in another council area to where my children lived. I got depressed and suicidal and eventually got admitted back into hospital.

Mental health problems ranging from clinical depression to schizophrenia and psychotic disorders can contribute to people losing privately owned or rented homes. Without support or medical diagnosis and treatment, people abandon the responsibility of a tenancy, a mortgage and/or their relationship at the same time. Those with serious conditions who end up being sectioned or admitted to hospital for a substantial period can be discharged to find that the building society or the landlord had repossessed their home. Even if they still have the home they may have huge rent arrears to be repaid by the time they return to it.

Mental health is not only a factor likely to lead to homelessness. It also makes it more difficult to escape homelessness. Mental health problems may make seeking and keeping employment a challenge, thus restricting housing and other choices. For many respondents to our survey who were waiting to be rehoused, independent living was not a realistic

option in the near future because of long-term, ongoing mental health problems. Loneliness and isolation was a great and understandable fear.

It would be impossible for me to be alone now.

I lie in bed waiting for the postman to come so I don't get up too early. Time drags when you're on your own, you can get only and depressed. I still visit my old hostel every day for my medicine, which stops me getting too down.

Many single people talked of the difficulties of being resettled into permanent housing even with varying degrees of support from community psychiatric nurse and social workers.

I left my foster parents when I was seventeen, spent a month in a hostel and ended up in hospital for eighteen months with depression. The social worker found me a flat, helped me get furniture and everything. I lasted seven months – I was surprised I lasted that long. I couldn't cope, set fire to the flat and was sent to prison for a month for arson.

Supported housing was an important transitional step for some who felt they were 'on the edge' and prone to behaviour which might jeopardise an independent tenancy.

More supported housing is needed to take you through the ups and downs.

Many have such high support needs that they may never be able to live wholly independently and sustain a tenancy. Poor coordination of community care, housing and social services contributes to these difficulties.

Unemployment

Being out of work is a critical factor in becoming homeless for many people, often tied up with some of the other changes in personal circumstances already described. Our sample included 11 people who were homeless as a result of moving to seek work but were of 'no fixed abode' in the place they had arrived in.

I got offered a permanent job in London for £130 a day plastering, but I couldn't get anywhere to live, no hostels had vacancies, so I couldn't take it. I'd spent my £500 savings already the month before on B&Bs and food while I was looking for work.

I'm a qualified chef but the last time I worked was two years ago. I can't get a job without a fixed address.

Many of those under 25 had no formal qualifications or work experience to offer prospective employees. Some had done infrequent casual work, heard about through friends and family, to top up their benefits.

I don't know what I want to do. I'm selling The Big Issue in the city centre, usually make about £6 a day

A large proportion of the people interviewed led chaotic lifestyles as a result of sleeping rough or being in temporary housing as well as dealing with a drug or alcohol problem and mental health or emotional problems. They were not, in the current jargon, 'work ready'. Many had been signed off work and were dependent on benefits. Some were unemployable in their current circumstances by their own admission.

The New Deal

There is some evidence amongst rough sleepers of wishing to participate in schemes designed to train and prepare people for employment, such as the New Deal, the statutory employment and training scheme for 18 to 24-year-olds who have been unemployed and claiming benefit for six months or more. A quarter of winter shelter residents surveyed in 1995 said they would like help in finding work. Only 40 per cent of this group had received any help (SEU, 1998).

But the New Deal has proved unworkable for many young homeless people. Those living chaotic lifestyles often have breaks in their claims as a result of moving about or from taking on casual work. As a consequence they will not, according to the official records, have been claiming Job Seekers allowance for six months. The stigma attached to being homeless and living in temporary hostel accommodation adversely affects the ability to undertake work, training or educational commitments. In some cases their lifestyles are so itinerant they are not claiming benefits at all. High hostel rents also act as a disincentive to low paid training or employment for those receiving housing benefit.

The 16-week gateway period allowed to successfully resettle people into safe and secure accommodation is unrealistic for many young homeless people. 'Many young people are being set up to fail because a regular lifestyle is difficult to maintain from temporary accommodation' (*Housing Today*, 15 October 1998).

Leaving prison or in trouble with the police

Living on the street is closely entangled with crime, resulting in frequent contact between homeless people and law enforcement agencies. Eighty-five per cent of people sleeping rough have committed offences while on the street and almost four out of five have been victims of crime (*Crisis Policy Position Paper 4: Street Living and Crime*, March 1999, p. 4). By comparison, 34 per cent of the general population are victims of crime. Eighty-eight per cent of rough sleepers have frequent contact with the police.

Around half of rough sleepers have been in prison or a remand centre. Those leaving prison typically experience serious problems obtaining both housing and jobs. These problems are, in the ways already described, adversely affected by problems with drugs, alcohol, etc. Research amongst people in prison showed that 40 per cent of prisoners would be homeless on their release. Another study found that less than half of prisoners were able to return to their previous address at the end of their sentence. Some find, as with people who have had long stays in psychiatric hospitals, that large rent arrears have built up or the landlord or building society has repossessed their home. If their home was socially rented and it has been repossessed for rent arrears, they may have made themselves intentionally homeless and therefore ineligible for further help from the local authority.

Many people interviewed in this survey had fixed tenancies prior to being convicted but found themselves homeless on leaving prison. In some cases, probation officers had provided ex-offenders with details of temporary hostels or bed and breakfast accommodation, or had arranged temporary hostel accommodation. Others found their name had been removed from the council housing waiting list. Single ex-offenders are often released with nowhere to go, often having lost touch with family and friends. Support from the probation service can be limited and poorly coordinated with other support services.

Violent and drug related crime appear to be the most common amongst the people we interviewed. Those familiar with the system were able to avoid being struck off the register for social housing.

When I found out I was going to prison I handed in the keys for my council flat. That way I knew I could apply again when I got out.

Others were not so lucky and assumed they would be automatically entitled to rehousing.

I'd been on the waiting list for seven years before I went to prison. When I came out no one told me they'd taken my name off the waiting list and that I'd have to sign on again.

Some felt that as an ex-offender the council would not want to help them.

I didn't bother signing on with the council, not at my age and with a criminal record.

Relocation is a common condition of bail and many young offenders on probation find themselves moving to a new town, separated from family and friends for the first time. They are often bailed to temporary hostel accommodation until permanent housing becomes available.

It was hard when I was first bailed here as I didn't know the city or anyone who lived there. I was bailed to a hostel and got a place in supported housing after seven months.

Without a job or a secure place to live many return to crime and re-offend within the first six months after release.

Some local authorities exclude ex-offenders from the housing register 'as long as the rehabilitation period is in force', with others refusing to rehouse those who have served sentences over two and a half years. Such blanket bans can lead to exclusion for those people whose crimes pose no significant risk to the community.

Even long after sentences have been served, people can find themselves stigmatised and hounded as 'ex-cons':

Coming from a very small town the criminal record's limited so much what you do because everyone knew me... 'No thank you. He's bad news.' I was bad news 'cos I was in a situation where I couldn't get out of it, so to run away from it I indulged myself more with my habit, so I could run away from it and I didn't have to deal with it. I just kept running and running till people said 'Well he's alright' because I was out of sight and no one knew where I slept, 'cos they couldn't see me at three o'clock in the morning freezing cold saying, 'Jesus wept'.

Leaving the parental home

Many young people are homeless in part because relations with their family have broken down as already mentioned. Nearly a third of the young people in the Safe in the City study reported continuous

arguments within their family. Twenty-three per cent of young people who became homeless said arguments frequently involved hitting. Forty-five per cent of the young people who became homeless experienced violence more than once. Relations are not likely to have been made easier by the fact that the mothers of the young people who became homeless were on average younger than mothers of children of similar ages.

In the Safe in the City study, young people who subsequently became homeless were more likely to be living with step-parents, with foster parents or with relatives at the age of 12 than other young people were. This increases the likelihood of conflict and decreases the likelihood of amicable resolution.

Research by Centrepont (Centrepont, 1999) across the country found that 86 per cent of homeless young people in their survey had been asked or forced to leave home rather than choosing to. This phenomenon prompted Sheila McKechnie, the former Director of Shelter, to ask the controversial but pertinent question 'Are these young people runaways or throwaways?' A survey in Scotland found that a quarter of young homeless people had a step-parent compared with the four per cent average for Scotland as a whole. Physical and sexual abuse lie behind a significant minority of family conflicts.

The conflicts at home may be about the behaviour of the parent or the parent's partner in the eyes of the young person.

I actually got forced out of home. My mum used to beat me up and then she just decided she didn't want me and she actually forced me out. I actually got put into a home after Social Services got involved with me so they found me a place in [name of hostel]... and I got kicked out last October.

My stepdad sexually abused me and I kicked him out on Christmas Eve. When my mum came home and found out she battered me and told me to leave. He moved back in not long after, I stayed with friends.

Many young people also recognised that their own behaviour may be a source of conflict.

It starts from right early on, don't it? It stems back to the family; some people are just forced out. From whatever goes on in that family or problems they've created themselves, people like myself drinking... I didn't realise at the time. I wasn't aware of what I was getting into.

I am 35. I left home when I was 19. I was asked to leave by my parents because they could not put up with it anymore. It was up to me to sort it out. I had been warned often enough.

The situation is particularly difficult for those young people who wish to be reunited with parents but are faced with a shortage of housing in the area they wish to return to.

I stayed with friends for six months when I gave up my job and room in a hotel. I'm trying to move back to near my friends and family but the Council aren't hopeful as there isn't much property around. It's been over a year already.

Young people forced to leave the family home or those who leave the family home voluntarily will not receive benefits if they are under 18. Many do not want to live on their own in a council flat and they do not seek the assistance of the local authority. So they may have no money and nowhere to live. In the first instance, many seek accommodation with friends or contacts. In many cases these temporary arrangements are not a great distance from the family home. Some young people interviewed had gravitated to the big cities in search of work. There they faced some of the most acute difficulties in getting housing, in the social or the private sector. They also found it very expensive.

Leaving care

Between a quarter and a third of rough sleepers have been looked after by local authorities as children. Some young people run away from care repeatedly. One survey in London found that half had run away from previous care arrangements. Sixty per cent of those in care at the age of 16 are no longer being supported by the age of 18. By comparison, the average age for leaving home in the population as a whole is 22 (SEU, 1998).

Young people leaving care are likely to be leaving with few contacts in the wider world and, if they have been in care for a long time, poor contact with family members. In theory, the Children Act 1989 places a continuing responsibility on the local authority for their welfare, and housing would certainly be a part of that responsibility. In practice, however, many soon lose contact with carers and with the local authority. Such arrangements as are made for their continuing support may quickly break down.

I've been homeless since I left the children's home at 17. I rented a private flat but that only lasted

two weeks. I was in prison for six months, came out, got involved in an abusive relationship, started using drugs... I'm three months pregnant, sleeping out with nowhere to go.

I got kicked out by social services at 16. I was given £640 to sort myself out but I screwed up.

I went to the council when I was 16 to find somewhere to live and they just told me to go home [to foster parents] – but I couldn't.

I've filled in my application to the council but haven't submitted it yet as I'm not ready for my own flat. Here if you're 16 to 18 they have to offer you a flat within twenty-eight days.

Where temporary and permanent housing is available, it is often inappropriate for vulnerable young people.

I moved out of my foster parents' and lived in hostels for a while. Then the council put me in shared housing with a load of druggies who were much older than me. I got evicted after a few weeks and am back in the old hostel where they look out for me.

Under the homelessness legislation a local authority has a duty to accommodate someone who is unintentionally homeless and has a priority need, which would include most care leavers. The assessment rests with each local authority. Despite these obligations councils are often reluctant to grant tenancies to 16 and 17-year-olds in the perhaps well-founded belief that they would be unable to sustain them. As a consequence, young people often end up in temporary housing. Quality is variable here also. Isolation and boredom make the young particularly vulnerable to exploitation and abuse and, to put it in a rather old-fashioned way, the negative influence of bad company.

Eviction or abandonment

Many respondents had been homeless on and off for a number of years with short spells in temporary accommodation or with a partner, friends or family. Those interviewed were asked how long, in the current spell, they had been without a permanent home (Table 1.4).

A significant proportion of homeless people have become recently homeless for the first time, or homeless again. The push factors are clearly the important ones as has already been noted. If it was simply shortage of housing, one might expect to see a large number of people stuck in the queue for a number of years. A hard core of people remain homeless for an

Table 1.4 Period of homelessness

Length of homelessness	Respondents	
	Number	Percentage
6 months or less	21	28.0
6 months–1 year	16	21.9
1–2 years	8	11.0
2–3 years	8	11.0
3–4 years	5	6.8
4–5 years	3	4.1
Over 5 years	12	16.4
Total	73	100

Note: The remaining six respondents had such a chequered housing history, they could not really respond to the question in a meaningful way.

extended period, but they are a small minority of the total.

Mobility

The numbers of people that were homeless in their home town (38 respondents) and those homeless in a new area they had moved to (36 respondents) were roughly equal. Many currently living in their home town had previously set up house in more than one area elsewhere. The 36 respondents who were homeless outside their home town gave a number of reasons for moving to a new city or town (Table 1.5).

Table 1.5 Reasons for moving

Reason for moving	Respondents	
	Number	Percentage
A new start	17	33.3
In search of employment	11	21.6
Looking for housing	7	13.7
Conditions of bail/probation	7	13.7
Escaping violence	5	9.8
To join family/friends	4	4.8
Total	51	100

Note: Of the 36 respondents homeless outside their home town, a number gave more than one reason for moving area.

Ex-offenders and those who had split up with a partner frequently cited the need to move away from their home in order to make a fresh start for themselves. For those out on bail, often for drug-related crimes, moving away was a condition of their probation as has already been mentioned and a means for them to 'get clean' of their addiction. Others were escaping harassment or violence.

I was badly assaulted in Ipswich and the police couldn't offer me protection so I had to move. I had a housing association flat there too.

Many people were seeking casual employment such as labouring although many had a trade that they were unable to use without a permanent address to give employers. Those who moved to an area where they knew relatives or friends were often escaping problems at home. They did not want to be dependent on the people they knew in the new area. Many people kept moving in the hope of finding somewhere they could permanently settle.

Other respondents who had moved around the country felt unable to settle down and take on the responsibility of a tenancy. Respondents expressed concerns around moving into independent housing and giving up the support services readily available in temporary or supported housing. Key workers were crucial for many of the homeless people we interviewed, whom they were reluctant to lose when they became permanently resettled. Social and community care services were in place for some individuals in more than one local authority area.

The social housing exchange scheme demonstrates the limited opportunities for tenants who wish to move to other parts of the country, in order to be nearer relatives or for employment opportunities. Between April and December 1998, only 5,319 of the 33,000 people who had applied to the tenancy mobility scheme HOMES were rehoused (*Housing*, 1999).

Many single homeless people are not estranged from their families. In our sample, 43 respondents were in contact with one or more family members. They often wish to be rehoused nearby so that they can maintain contact and support without living under the same roof.

I've been to see some council places but they're too far away. I need to be near my sister.

A myth should be corrected: single homeless people are often said to have no contact with their families. In our survey, more than half the people interviewed were still in touch with family members. Nor is it true

that most homeless people have travelled far from home. The stereotypical boy or girl from Glasgow or Newcastle selling sex around Piccadilly in London with no other source of money and nowhere to live is by no means the whole picture. In our survey, 38 people were homeless in their home town and 36 were away from home. Amongst the later group, many had moved to a place where they knew family or friends. The move was a way of strengthening an existing tie of mutual aid, not moving away from these bonds. Many single homeless people are in fact neither far from home nor far from someone who has at some point cared for them. The Safe in the City study found that homeless young people were, contrary to the stereotype, keener to remain in the area in which they had grown up and where they had family than other local young people.

Interacting agents

From the above evidence it would seem that homelessness, for most people, is not in the first instance about housing. Little wonder then that, whether housing is available in a particular area, is not the only or the most important indicator of the likelihood of becoming homeless. Some of the areas with the largest numbers of single homeless people, for example Birmingham, also have substantial surpluses of social housing. Little wonder also that solely providing housing or giving support wrapped around the provision of housing does not meet the needs of many people.

On the basis of the evidence above, the solutions needed are ones that help people to sort out their personal difficulties, to re-establish old relationships with friends and families or to form new friendships and partnerships and to earn a decent income. Those three positive factors taken together are the ones likely to lead to people being able to find a decent home and to keep it.

The scenario described to us over and over again was not one of a linear progress or a direct relationship between cause and effect. Unemployment did not always lead to drinking too much; drinking too much did not always lead to family or marital breakdown. Associating with people who take drugs did not always result in an individual taking too many drugs. So a difficult question, often fought shy of arises: How does it come to be that these factors – family and relationship breakdown, unemployment, drugs, alcohol and so on – lead to some people becoming homeless but do not have that consequence for most others?

The answer may lie in taking a more sophisticated approach to the relationship between cause and effect, looking as well at the relationship not just between cause and effect, but, much more importantly, between effect and effect. The answer is something akin to the mathematical concept of interacting agents. Small events or changes produce predictable changes over the short term. However if several events occur simultaneously or hard upon one another, the consequences become less and less predictable. The greater the number and frequency of changes or untoward events, the more unpredictable the outcome, to the point of almost infinite variety. Nearer the point of infinite variety the effects appear totally random, fuelling the belief in others that there is something inherent or of their own making in this individual which has brought them to the state they're in. There is no discernible cause and no logical relationship to the effect. 'They're just like that. You could see it coming' it is said. So a small event of little consequence in the short term can have huge eventual consequences, when buffeted by many other seemingly small events.

We are, as the theorists say, all living at the edge of chaos. 'Chaotic' is how the lifestyles and behaviour of single homeless people are often described – random, unpredictable, explosive, lachrymose – and that is the general conversational sense in which the word 'chaotic' is used. Scientists have however given the word a different but related meaning, and it is a meaning which helps to explain the apparently confusing and self-destructive behaviour of some single homeless people. Chaotic dynamics can very often mask the fact that seemingly random behaviour is, in fact, extremely well-organised, but organised at a level of complexity that the logic or the sequencing of events is difficult, perhaps impossible, to discern from the outside. But there is a pattern – and understanding the pattern of a problem, its underlying architecture, is a critical first stage in solving it.

For some people a negative sequence of events can turn a shallow and short-term decline to a precipitate falling off of self-esteem, quality of life and financial and social well-being. If their well-being were plotted on a graph, the curve would descend at quite a shallow gradient, but suddenly tip into a much steeper fall. The point where the curve dipped more steeply is the point where they are likely to become homeless, unless help is readily at hand, and it must be help of an effective and sensitive sort.

In essence these interactions come about as a result of 'positive and negative feedback'. This is the reaction that makes everyone likely to emulate behaviour

witnessed in others if that behaviour is perceived to produce short-term benefits to the individual actor, often quite small benefits. So a young person may be aware of the dangers of taking drugs in general terms, but they still take drugs when they see others enjoying the immediate short-term tranquillising or hedonistic effects. Concerns about long-term consequences are suppressed in pursuit of the short-term benefits and the wish to be part of the group. The result of this feedback system is that, after a precipitate decline, a new level of stability emerges, different from the previous way of life, but durable for some time.

A single homeless person may lose their job, and lose touch with their family and friends, but they will find their way to new networks of people with different lifestyles and 'clubs' which they can join so long as they adopt certain habits – having a dog being a common and visible habit amongst people who appear to be living on the street. Owning a dog might gain you 'club' membership, but it may also mean you are debarred from hostels and supported housing. A short-term gain leads to a long-term loss. The influence of some members of the new network may not be benign. Another decline may then be precipitated, until a new lower level equilibrium emerges.

An appropriate metaphor would be a staircase. A sharp decline brought on by interacting causes of homelessness is followed by a period of equilibrium, almost certainly at a lower level of well-being. That equilibrium may in turn be disrupted by a new crisis or by the influence of others and then settles at a new equilibrium. And so on.

Risk and addiction

It is not simply peer group pressure and a lack of strong resolve that results in people indulging in self-destructive behaviour with potentially disastrous long-term consequences. The wish to try the new, expand the horizon of experience, break free of traditional constraint, ignore the restraining parental hand, is rooted in the deeply ambivalent attitude to risk that pervades our society. Time was when there was no such thing as risk. Things happened to people at the whims of the fates and the furies. Passively, with no preparation and little forethought, people apprehensively awaited events they could not control. Resistance was futile. The only refuge lay in following the rules, doing what had always been done, seeking by obedience and acceptance always not to unleash the forces of nature and destiny. But now, risk is valued and encouraged. It is the wellspring of capitalist

economic endeavour; the route to self-expression and self-realisation. Breaking free from who you have been told you are and becoming all that you might be is actively encouraged – and it involves taking risks.

So the injunction to do as you're told; do it unquestioningly the way it's always been done, has been qualified. Take risks; fulfil your potential; seek out new experiences, we are now told. There is an implication that only the right risks should be taken; only certain conventions overturned, some old habits die hard, others should not die at all. 'I must, therefore I can' has been transposed into a new cultural instruction: 'I can, therefore I must'. Being told to 'just do it' by Nike commercials is crossed with 'just say no' to drugs and confusion follows. Little wonder, faced with these contradictions, that people do many things they must not, only realising they must not when it is too late. It has been done and the consequences have flowed. It cannot be undone. Or perhaps it can.

Little wonder also that self-destructive behaviour, such as the abuse of alcohol or drugs, is not resisted, but becomes compulsive. Addiction is not just chemical. Anthony Giddens explained this phenomenon in his 1999 BBC Reith lecture on tradition:

'Like tradition, addiction is about the influence of the past upon the present; and as in the case of tradition, repetition has a key role. The past in question is individual rather than collective, and the repetition is driven by anxiety. I would see addiction as frozen autonomy. Every context of de-traditionalisation offers the possibility of greater freedom of action than existed before. We are talking here about human emancipation from the constraints of the past. Addiction comes into play when choice, which should be driven by autonomy is subverted by anxiety. In tradition, the past structures the present through shared collective beliefs and sentiments. The addict is also in thrall to the past – but because he or she cannot break away from what were originally freely chosen lifestyle habits.'

Nor is this a wholly new insight identified solely with the condition of modernity. William Hazlitt, the early nineteenth century political essayist, quoting Shakespeare's Hamlet on the 'toys of desperation', pointed to the 'fascinating' power of addictive self-destructive behaviour (Paulin, 1998):

Objects of terror often haunt the mind: and by their influence in subduing the imagination, draw the will to them as a fatality. Persons in excessive and intolerable apprehension fling themselves into the very arms of what they dread, and are

impelled to rush upon their fate, and put an end of their suspense and agitation. These are said to be the 'toys of desperation': and fantastical as they may appear, Legislators ought to pay more attention to this than they have done; for the mind, in those extreme and violent temperaments which they have to apply to, is not to be dealt with like a mere machine.

The converse of negative small changes having long-term disastrous consequences is, of course, that positive small changes can equally produce exponential positive changes if they too are the subjects of positive feedback in this strictly behavioural definition. If an individual can see someone else behaving in a way different to their own which appears to bring benefits

they might emulate it, if they feel they can. And that change may lead to another positive change, and then another, until an individual is going up the staircase, not down.

Homelessness may be prevented through contact with and assistance from others before the chaotic effects take hold preventing a decline into isolation, homelessness and vulnerability. Or such contact may throw down a guy-rope to someone who is already homeless and who feels that the climb out of homelessness is as vertiginous as scaling a sheer, high cliff. Without support they feel they are in constant danger of freefall. Support needs to come from professionals, certainly, but other kinds of positive feedback are also needed from old and new friends and family members.

Part 2 Escaping homelessness

For most homeless people temporary, supported and privately rented housing are the early ports of call, before determined efforts are made to find a lasting solution in permanent housing.

Accessing support

Many of the people we interviewed were receiving support from a homelessness service in their area, particularly with mental health problems or because they were young and vulnerable. (See Table 2.1.)

A number of people affirmed that staff in homelessness projects, in voluntary agencies and in social services were a lifeline.

My social worker has been brilliant over the years and supported me through everything. I moved back to Aberdeen for four days but things didn't work out with my family, so she helped me to move back and get myself sorted again.

Staff really helped me come to terms with the depression after losing the baby and all my emotional problems after falling out with my parents. Now I'm happy and settled in my own place.

The centre is my home, without this place I'd be lost. I wait all day in the freezing cold until 10 [pm] when it opens for the night.

The interpersonal support, although that too sometimes breaks down, is clearly held in high regard. But sometimes it does not work so smoothly. Many single

people interviewed, repeatedly access temporary housing and support over a number of years without graduating to a more permanent solution. For some, the prospect of two years in temporary hostels waiting for a place in supported housing or their own flat becomes too much and they leave.

It's difficult to move on because we don't do anything all day – just sit around the hostel waiting for something to happen.

They might sleep rough for a while or try their luck in another area before once more seeking assistance from service providers. The current system loses track of people with this kind of lifestyle. It therefore becomes impossible to offer any continuity of support as they move in and out of homelessness and from one area to another. Resettlement staff are often in the dark about previous attempts at rehousing because they are reliant on what the individual chooses to tell them. This adds to the difficulty of judging a person's readiness for independent living.

I tell people what they want to hear, so nothing ever gets sorted. I went back before [to permanent housing] but it was too soon.

The bureaucratic and complex nature of the system described in Part 3 of this report puts some people off making an application for permanent housing, especially those with learning difficulties. 'Priority' definitions, criteria rules and procedures vary enormously between local authority areas. Understanding the procedures of one local authority is difficult enough. Moving between local authorities, as nearly half the people in the survey had, is likely to be a bewildering experience.

Table 2.1 Access to support

Type of support	Number of recipient respondents
Homelessness service: day centre, hostel, shelter, voluntary organisation	21
Key worker in supported housing	16
Housing advice centre	15
Social worker	15
Community Psychiatric Nurse	15
Community worker or rehab/detox programme	8
Probation Officer	4
Local GP	1

Note: A number of respondents were receiving support from more than one source.

Accessing supported housing

Housing associations are in many areas the main providers of supported housing. Many of the increasing number of vulnerable single homeless people with high support needs felt this was the best option for them.

It means you can move forward at your own pace and if things go wrong you don't end up back at square one living on the streets.

Having the flat has given me the confidence to get back in touch with my family – I can invite them round so they can see I'm OK. I still use the hostel in the day so I don't get lonely and they make sure I take my medicine.

All the staff here say I need support so I'm moving into supported housing. I don't think I do but I sort of know they're right really.

They've helped me with my budgeting so that when I get my money the first thing I do is get in my food and electricity tokens.

I see her [the support worker] every week. I have got my own room, my own bathroom. I share a kitchen. I can come and go as I please, but there's support there if I need it.

Move-on

Even if people have managed to get decent supported housing, the now well-established problem of lack of 'move-on' accommodation soon rears its head. In London, there are 25,000 hostel bed spaces. Theoretically that should be more than enough to get people off the streets and on their way, eventually to permanent housing. But hostels and shared accommodation up and down the country report that they are taking in few new people because of the difficulties of accessing good quality move-on accommodation. The absence of adequate move on accommodation sits ill with the number of empty homes. Three quarters of a million properties are empty, a third of which have been empty over a year. For every household accepted as homeless there are seven empty properties. Strategies to bring empty properties into use can have dramatic financial benefits. New Forest District Council cut its bill for temporary accommodation from £170,000 in 1995 to £26,000 in 1999 by improving its use of empty properties. As one respondent told us:

For a start there should be temporary accommodation and support available as well as more permanent housing accommodation straight away from temporary to permanent. People are caught up and they rarely get out of it because there's no links between agencies.

Private renting – a realistic alternative?

Following years of decline, the private rented sector has revived during the late 1980s and the early 1990s. In 1986 there were 1.6 million privately rented homes. This figure had risen to 1.7 million in 1991 and to 1.8 million by 1996; just under nine per cent of housing in England and nearly half the total of social rented housing. The deregulation of the sector and increased renting by owner occupiers probably

accounts for this upturn. The *Guardian* commented on 6 May 1999, 'For most, it seems, the shadow of Rachmanism – exploitation of tenants by unscrupulous landlords – is history.' The Chartered Institute of Housing reports that 'significant numbers' of social housing tenants are leaving to become private tenants. With council housing often served by schools with a poor academic record, they are choosing to move into catchment areas where educational standards are higher. The need not to segregate poor and rich, gifted and less gifted children in education has long been recognised. In light of that it is remiss that nobody appears to have noticed that segregating social housing, willynilly, has the consequence of segregating education. But whatever the other benefits, moving into a privately rented flat or house is not likely to be an unalloyed blessing.

The property in the private rented sector still tends to be old, over half was built before 1919. Typically privately rented dwellings are converted flats and terraced houses. The relatively poorer quality of much privately rented housing is not reflected in low rents. A huge gulf has opened up between private and public sector rents. In 1978 average weekly rents in both sectors were almost the same – £6.70 for the private rented sector and £6.49 for council rents. By 1996/97 average weekly rents in the private sector were almost double council rents, standing at £76.49 and £40.05 respectively. Together with restrictions on housing benefit, these higher rents rule out private renting as an option for many single homeless people. Nevertheless, the private rented sector has over the same period played an increasing role in housing 'disadvantaged groups'. Twenty-five per cent of households containing unemployed people rent in the private sector compared with 16 per cent in 1991. Twelve per cent of lone parents rent in the private sector compared with seven per cent in 1991. Those who rent in the private sector tend to be much younger than those in social housing. Two thirds of private renters were under 45 in 1996-97, compared with half in 1984.

Despite the growth in the popularity of the private rented sector, for a large proportion of our respondents private renting was no longer an option because rents were too expensive and a deposit was required. It was viewed as a less preferable and secure option to council or housing association accommodation, even given the difficulties of going down that road. Many had bad experiences of private renting in the past.

The biggest problem I've had in London is having to have two months rent up front as

a deposit. It is possible to get a deposit as a loan. This needs to be more widely known and recognised as a decent thing.

When you leave the landlord just rips you off and takes off money for all these different reasons.

I got evicted when the landlord sold the property.

My landlady was harassing me when housing benefit got behind on my rent, so I ended up leaving before she evicted me.

The landlord gave me notice as the house was under-occupied and he wanted to get more people in. Before I'd moved out the landlord came and changed the locks so I can't get all my belongings, the lease agreement and paperwork for the housing benefit. I can't find anything else to rent which I can afford.

Experiences of single people varied greatly between areas, depending on the quality and amount of housing available. Private renting may be the only option

for those who are no longer eligible for social housing. Schemes such as 'SmartMove', which help people to locate and resettle into affordable, good quality privately rented housing and act as rent guarantors, have been successful. The Edinburgh Crisis Smart Move Project Successfully resettled 52 homeless people into private accommodation in 1998 and only two of those abandoned their properties. Other rent/deposit schemes are in operation in Exeter and elsewhere in the country.

Escaping homelessness requires access to services to which people can refer themselves, as well as, for many people, assistance from professionals who are knowledgeable both about what is available as well as about the needs of the individual. Temporary supported housing takes people beyond direct access services to a more settled way of life where a new equilibrium can be established. This new calm, even if it needs the support of paid professionals, might then be a threshold for greater independence in permanent housing. It is to that I turn next.

Part 3 Access to social housing

*Whatever is given can always be re-imagined,
however four-square, Plank-thick, hull-stupid and
out of its time*

Seamus Heaney, *Whatever is Given, Seeing Things*

In Evelyn Waugh's *Decline and Fall* the prison chaplain, Mr Prendergast, is at a loss to understand people's difficulties with believing in God and the Christian church. Provided he can overcome his doubts as to why God has made the world at all, he could see that 'everything else follows – Tower of Babel, Babylonian captivity, Incarnation, Church, bishops, incense, everything.' So, regardless of whether you believe in God, you might recognise what I might call the Prendergast Principle – if you accept a controversial basic tenet without the need for incontrovertible evidence, a great deal else follows as if it were also the truth.

In social housing there is such a Prendergast Principle – that social housing is in infinite demand and ever restricted supply. An enormous amount of data about the persistence of homelessness reflecting an even more enormous amount of need and a great sum of human misery is constantly called into evidence to support the belief in never-ending shortage and the need for never-ending building. That conviction, only ever partially supported by the facts, has governed the actions of every Government since the war. Michael Foot (1996), elected for the first time on that brave, confident morning in 1945, later summed up the widely held view:

The housing shortage caused more anguish and frustration than any of the nation's manifold problems... every MP and every councillor was being besieged by the endless queue of the homeless.

And, as with Mr Prendergast, the rest follows: the need for strict rationing even in the face of its disruptive consequences to family and community life despite the corrosive impact of ghettos of poverty on local social capital. People are given little or no choice about where they can live. Restrictions are placed on living space – 'under-letting' is regarded as selfish and inefficient. There are long waits and restricted criteria for transfers. Because of the tight restrictions, the waits are sometimes never-ending. Much more draconian arrangements are in place for the repossession of people's homes in the social sector than pertain in any other sector. Apparently the need for house building is endless – between 60,000 and 100,000 units a year in the social housing sector alone we are told.

The Prendergast Principle, that there is insufficient social housing for insatiable demand, has produced

a social housing system, backed up by law, designed to say 'No', or at least to greatly restrict the number of people to whom the system might say 'Yes'. And that system is enshrined in a complex, sometimes contradictory and now rather ramshackle legal edifice.

Access to housing under the Housing Act 1996 and homelessness legislation

Local authorities are responsible for allocating tenancies in their own housing stock and in a large proportion of housing association homes, to which they have nomination rights. The Housing Act 1996 requires authorities to allocate tenancies only to people included on a housing register (previously known as a waiting list) and in accordance with a published allocation scheme. Some people are excluded from the register by law (people subject to immigration controls, for example). Over and above statutory exclusions, local authorities have a great deal of discretion in deciding who does and who does not qualify for the register. The allocation scheme must give priority to certain specified households – those in unsatisfactory, insecure or temporary accommodation; those including dependent children, pregnant women or people who need housing for medical or welfare reasons; low income or non-working households; and homeless people with a priority need for accommodation.

By law, local housing authorities must assist people who apply to them for help because they are homeless, or about to become homeless. Where people applying for assistance have become homeless through no fault of their own (they are not 'intentionally homeless' in the jargon) and they fall within a 'priority need' group, the authority must either help them to obtain suitable accommodation from a private landlord in the area or, if this is not available, secure suitable accommodation for them. People in priority need includes families with dependent children, pregnant women, people who are vulnerable in some way (as a result of old age, disability or mental illness) and those made homeless by an emergency (such as flood or fire).

Notable in the above is the frequent reference to giving priority to households with children. No reasonable person would argue against this for we know that a childhood poor in money and poor in spirit will often produce an adulthood even poorer in every department. On the ground, however, the need to give priority to families has been interpreted as the need to deny not just priority, but also access to single people. And all this is done in the name of

meeting housing need, or to put it more bluntly, to ration a scarce good.

The Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions and the Department of Health's 1997 Code of Guidance on Allocations and Homelessness makes suggestions of groups of people local authorities could exclude from the housing register. Paragraph 4.27 says 'such groups might include people with a history of anti-social behaviour, people who have attacked housing staff, or tenants with a record of rent arrears' and goes on to include disqualifications relating to 'residency in the authority's district or ownership of a property'. Over and above this, local authorities have considerable discretion in the area of exclusions too, so many authorities have, for example, decided to exclude drug dealers and ex-offenders. A Shelter survey found a four-fold increase in households excluded from housing registers in 1997. If the figures were projected nationally, they would imply the exclusion of 200,000 households.

From the point of view of single homeless people, the impact of these arrangements is that they may only be accepted on to the register at all if they are vulnerable and if they have a local connection. The assessment of their vulnerability will very often be made by a junior housing professional with few qualifications to make the judgment. If not, they will be turned away. Even if they are accepted on to the register, they may receive lower priority than the groups mentioned above who are deemed to be in priority need. They may therefore face a long wait, particularly in areas such as central London where social housing is still in short supply. They may also be excluded because of events in the past such as anti-social behavior, rent arrears or drug dealing.

Impact of the legislative framework on single homeless people

Research (Bunnin and Paterson, 1994) into access to advice services by single homeless people in London showed that only eight per cent of those who had sought advice then made a formal application to a local authority and only 0.2 per cent had been accepted and rehoused. This suggests a very precipitate falling off between the point when someone feels they need housing and when they find out how difficult it will be to get it.

The majority of our sample had approached more than one council and often on several occasions. Project workers and single homeless people felt that advocacy by resettlement and other support workers increased the likelihood of success. In many cases,

single people who went on their own left without having their name put on the housing register and without housing staff identifying what their specific support needs were.

Councils are only interested in housing single parents. I went to see them on a couple of occasions but if you're on your own they just give you a list of B&Bs and basically tell you 'Sorry, we can't help you, goodbye'.

I only stayed in the flat a few months because I was sick of living in hostels and needed my own space. But I didn't have enough support to last it.

Many felt they had been treated insensitively and without respect or understanding by staff in homeless persons units and housing advice departments. But in many cases, this was due to an immediate decision being taken on the person's initial visit that they were 'voluntarily homeless'. Time spent with candidates is limited and therefore the right questions are not always asked. Many people commented on how long they had to wait to be seen, the apparent indifference of the staff, the fact that the staff were poorly informed about local services, providing them with out of date written information. Communication between local authority departments was often poor. It is a familiar and depressing litany. Few people interviewed really seemed to understand how the system worked and how it was supposed to help them. 'They pass you around' was a frequent and heartfelt comment.

They don't communicate with each other. If they would all work together... the female hostel, the Social Services, the Job Centre. If they would all work together we could form a process of what happens... there could be like a process back into society... but they just don't. There's just a breakdown of communication.

They think we'll take anything because we are single and homeless.

Even if single homeless people are admitted on to the housing register it does not automatically follow that they will be made offers of housing. They may be given a low preference under the allocations scheme or have their applications suspended. According to project staff, single homeless people seem to fare better in areas that operate Single Homeless Persons strategies.

To be accepted for rehousing applicants also need a 'local connection'. Without this they will not be eligible for the register.

I lived in Waterloo's cardboard city for years and when they evicted us all they told me to go back home [to Scotland] – so I did.

Those people who have moved to a new area for a fresh start may be offered little help as they do not have employment or relatives connecting them with the area.

Unless you've got a local connection it's pointless applying. They just tell you to look for a private flat and don't even put your name on the waiting list half the time. I know – I've been on the move since I was 16 and never had a tenancy.

There is no obligation to place on the waiting list a household that has been found to be 'intentionally homeless', either as a result of antisocial behaviour, accrued rent arrears or abandonment of a property. Therefore some of those living in temporary accommodation are ineligible for the register giving access to a permanent home because some past event has been deemed to render them 'intentionally homeless'.

The council won't help me because of unpaid arrears on my last flat. I'd been there about a year but my Gran got ill so I stayed with her for a bit and got some temporary work. While I was away my flat got petrol-bombed – I lost everything.

Other legislation with housing duties

Under the Children's Act 1989 accommodation must be provided for any child reaching the age of 16 whose welfare is considered to be 'seriously prejudiced' without the provision of accommodation.

Under the National Health Service and Community Care Act 1990 social services are required to carry out an assessment plan of any person who may have a need for community care services, including housing. Appropriate housing should be offered in accordance with need on the basis of a coordinated approach developed for individual clients.

Housing benefit changes

Many people commented on the slow, inefficient administration of housing benefit.

When I moved into my flat it was really quite nice, but I lost my job and changed to DSS and housing benefit. First of all they paid 37 quid of it for starters and I appealed and they managed to put it up to 40. It took so long to come through that my landlord got really fed up. One week I missed my sign on date and of course they signed me off. So that was it and I was kicked out.

Reductions of housing benefit entitlement for those aged 25 and under from October 1996 have had a significant impact. Single people claiming benefit as a 'one-person unit' are only entitled to a maximum amount calculated with reference to the average local rent for non-self-contained accommodation – a single room rent – rather than a sum based on the average rent for all private housing as was previously the case. It is thought that 400,000 tenants living alone in self-contained accommodation will be affected by this change, either when they decide to move or when their benefit is next reassessed.

People under 25 find it significantly more difficult to seek and maintain privately rented accommodation. Tenancies break down and arrears accrue because the single room rent is too low to meet high rents determined by unregulated private landlords. Because of this restriction, private landlords often refuse tenancies to young people. Research by the National Rent Deposit Forum has shown that this is a national problem.

The evidence of fraud in the housing benefit system is now mountainous. Successive governments have sought to act against fraudsters. The latest raft of measures includes the need to provide evidence of identity. In principle this should be unproblematic, but, as in so many areas of social policies there are unintended consequences. The need to furnish two pieces of identification has led to people being turned away by direct access hostels. Cathy Havell of Centrepoin comments (Havell, 1999): 'A lot simply don't have the ID if they've run away or were thrown out. This is affecting a group it was never intended to make trouble for.' The result is that the very people who need direct access are being turned away; not just an unintended outcome, but a perverse and counter-productive one.

And even if you get housed...

This panoply of legislation, regulation and bureaucracy still leaves many single homeless people with no entitlement to assistance of any kind. Many single people approach the council who are not in priority need. They are turned away and no record is kept of where they went next. Others who appear to meet the criteria set down in legislation and in policies are refused assistance for reasons that seem inexplicable and, more to the point, inexcusable. In addition, many of those who are vulnerable are under the age of 21, or receiving care in the community, and not getting the assistance they need. This is not for the want of asking. Others are deterred from even putting their name on the housing register as in some

parts of the country there are so many priority cases above their own, or so they imagine. Others do not apply because they fear they will be rehoused on a sink estate, affording them an intolerably poor quality of life, worse indeed than remaining in temporary accommodation.

The council made me an offer in five months of being registered, after two years of sleeping rough. I turned down a two-bed flat as it was on a dangerous estate. The next and last offer they made me was two doors down from the place they offered me before but I had no choice to accept it. Since I moved in it's been vandalised and broken into three times.

These restrictions on access are compounded by limitations on choice. If you are accepted on the waiting list you may not get permanent housing, but even if you do, you are unlikely to have much choice about where it is. If you want to be housed in a different local authority area to the one in which you are staying temporarily or sleeping rough, the system is unlikely to provide it. You may be told you have no local connection in the area to which you want to move. Even if you are housed in the local authority area of your choice, your wish to be near family and friends or to an educational or training institution is unlikely to feature in the decision about what accommodation you are offered or where it is. Considerations of proximity to support or opportunity are not given points. Lastly, if you turn the offer down, because it is in the wrong place or because it is poor quality or, most crucially, because you would not feel safe there, you may well have forfeited your chance to another offer. Many authorities still operate policies that restrict the number of offers that are made to homeless people.

I'd just got out of prison and wanted to be near my sister who was helping me to get things together. But the council made two offers – both are miles away from her.

There are obstacles and barriers at every stage in this system: access is restricted; waiting times can be long; choice is denied and the quality of what is on offer is frequently poor and in unsafe neighbourhoods. The comparison with the way that the private rented market operates is instructive. If you want to rent or buy privately, you can keep looking at flats until you find the one you like in the neighbourhood of your choice. If you are willing to share or are over 25, housing benefit will pay the rent, so long as it is at a reasonable level compared to the local market. Given the greater openness, the greater choice and the availability of benefit making price a fairly irrelevant consideration

for those not in work, it should not be thought surprising that many opt for the greater freedoms of the private rented sector. It might offer you the opportunity to live in the centre of town or city with friends in a flat you have chosen, as opposed to living on your own in a flat on a peripheral estate far from the social action, far from your friends and family and far from opportunities for training and employment.

A great weight of bureaucracy presides over social housing – 20 per cent of the nation's housing stock and 40 per cent of the housing stock in cities – seeking to assert and enforce rules that would have felt more familiar in the former Soviet Union and Warsaw Pact countries. Rules are maintained that are out of line with the contemporary notions of geographic and social mobility and consumer choice. These rules hark back to the age of deference. Deference as a social convention is dead, put out of its extended misery, but its existence continues to be fondly imagined by housing professionals. The belief persists that people will do as they are told about how long they must wait and where they must live. It is even foolishly believed that they may, having waited and been told where they can live, express some gratitude. Sadly for the paternalistic professional, no longer.

But, just as in the former Soviet Union, we now know that the extent of need, even if it is need the system fails to meet, is not in fact evidence of the extent of demand for social housing. That those who are homeless will accept and be grateful for what is made available to them has proved an evanescent fallacy akin to demand for Trabant cars the night before the Berlin Wall came down in 1989. A long queue thought to stretch many years into the future simply and suddenly vanished at the first awakening of choice. Something similar is happening in social housing.

Low and high demand for social housing

The Prendergast Principle of social housing, that the demand for social housing will never end, is being comprehensively challenged. Despite persistent denials it is now clear that many local authorities and housing associations have an increasing amount of housing that nobody wants to live in. They cannot let it. Sixty-one per cent of local authorities and housing associations reported low demand problems (Murray and Weaver, 1999). In one year alone, 1996/7, local authority voids increased by two per cent; 1,600 more voids. Housing management vacancies rose by 2,200 (4.6 per cent). The situation for housing associations, which have built most of the social housing through

the late 1980s and early 90s, is even worse: 13.6 per cent of their stock is empty, 3,200 units.

The numbers on housing registers are also falling. Turnover in social housing stock, along with the average duration of tenancies, has also fallen. Since the early 1980s the number of homes let to new tenants in England has remained roughly constant. At the same time, however, the number of council homes contracted by a third, largely as the result of the Right to Buy. Annual additions to the stock through building new homes have fallen from 28,000 to less than 1,000. The re-let rate has therefore in reality risen by 60 per cent. Since the 1970s the rate of re-lets has doubled. Tenants appear increasingly to view social housing as temporary – a tenure of last resort, providing shelter for a few months or a couple of years.

The authorities at the top of the list for surplus housing are, according to Glen Bramley of Heriot-Watt University, Newcastle, Oldham, Manchester and Blackburn. The top 22 local authorities account for a total annual surplus of 35,000 units per year, 66 per cent of the national total. All the top 22 are in the North of England or the Midlands, or, in a few cases, are in declining industrial/mining areas. Altogether 90 authorities appear on the list as showing a surplus and a further 58 appear on other lists using alternative measures of surplus.

Greater insecurity in employment, the frequency of divorce and starting new relationships, and the fluctuations in family household income that follow both employment insecurity and fragmenting family structures, may all be playing a part in the growing phenomenon of low demand. Notable evidence for this is offered in Glasgow and Liverpool. Both cities have experienced the decline of previously labour-intensive industries. Unemployment is the obvious and well-known consequence. But in the medium term, if jobs are not quickly replaced, depopulation follows. Both these once great cities have experienced and continue to experience reductions in population. At the same time employment in the South and South East of England continues to rise. It would seem that many people have 'got on their bike'. Migration from the North of England to the South has increased during the 1990s from just under 10,000 people a year in 1991/93, to nearly 24,000 a year in 1994/97 (Holmans, 1999).

In the West End of Newcastle an apotheosis was reached at the beginning of 1999. An estate of houses with gardens, newly built by North British Housing Association, could not be let. Nobody wants to move into those houses in Scotswood. It is perceived to be too dangerous a place to live. The new

estate, it is suggested, will have to be demolished, but there are still people living rough on the streets of Newcastle.

Low demand for social housing is however not general across the country. Social housing is still in insufficient supply in many places in the country, for example in the London Boroughs of Westminster, Tower Hamlets and Newham. Nor should the balance between low and high demand be seen as simply a case of more housing being needed in the south and less in the north. In cities such as Bradford there are areas of acute shortage of housing in the city centre and in Manningham, whilst an overall surplus exists in the city. In other cities, such as Cambridge, some social housing cannot be let at the same time as there is an acute shortage of housing in the city as a whole, in part, it is thought, because of high social housing rents and the availability only of poorly paid work in the service sector, the classic combination that we have come to know as the 'poverty trap'.

Even where there is a surplus of available social housing, homeless people will not necessarily be content to live there. The fact that people have nowhere to live does not, understandably, make them willing to accept anything. They would be foolhardy to land themselves out of the homeless frying pan into the fire of a violent, crime-ridden sink estate, where the atmosphere is one of a barely contained Hobbesian law of the jungle. Their distaste for such places is likely to be greatly increased by the knowledge that this may be the one and only chance they are going to get of a decent home.

Other factors are reducing demand for social housing: it is perceived as undesirable and badly managed. Its denizens are stereotyped as drug dealers, joy riders, ram raiders; in short feckless ne'er-do-wells. An estate in Blackburn is a case in point, researched for a previous study (Young and Lemos, 1997). Couples described how they could never go out together because a house left empty, even briefly, was likely to be broken into. If you reported the crime you were more likely to have another break-in. Many people numbered the break-ins they had experienced in double figures. You did not look people in the face when you left the house because you did not know who were your friends and who were your enemies. The decision was taken to build a wall around the entire estate to exclude miscreants. The estate, beset like a medieval town, had become a fortress. And the saddest thing of all was that the residents still did not feel safe.

For the first time in Britain we are seeing the abandonment of neighbourhoods. In a major study of this

soul-destroying phenomenon, Anne Power and Katharine Mumford (1999) observe:

The neighbourhoods that are depopulating most rapidly create a feeling of lifelessness in spite of the efforts of residents and landlords as well as most other agencies in the city. The abandoned buildings look like graves; the new railings, lighting, planting, play areas like flowers on gravestones, a lingering farewell to something loved now lost. The signs of care survive but many of the people have gone.

And it is to areas such as this single homeless people are asked to move.

So the Prendergast Principle of social housing is dead. In some places, at least there is ample social housing, some of it undesirable but some of it brand new, and at the same time many homeless people and rough sleepers. If housing shortage was the cause of homelessness, no one would be homeless in Newcastle, Manchester, Oldham and all the other 90 areas already mentioned. The conclusion is stark. Homelessness is not going to be eradicated by the building of more and more social homes. Nor is a great weight of bureaucratic restriction and rationing going to do the trick. Something else needs to be done.

These complex conundrums and the final slaying of the Prendergast Principle has led the incoming Labour Government to recognise the need for a new approach to single homelessness, at least at the sharp end of rough sleeping. The Social Exclusion Unit, established in the summer of 1997, was asked to consider a new and appropriate response to the problems of rough sleepers as one of its first priorities.

The report of their work, published in 1998, was a breakthrough. Rough sleeping was described for the first time not in terms of housing, but in terms of people. The report noted the key factors that caused people to sleep rough. They noted many of the factors that were mentioned by respondents in our survey. The single most common reason for embarking on rough sleeping is the breakdown of a relationship, either with parents or a partner. Many also have an institutional background, in the care of a local authority, in prison or the armed forces. A history of problems with mental and physical health and the misuse of drugs and alcohol are also contributory factors. Rough sleepers are disproportionately likely to have missed school and to have achieved little in qualifications. In addition to all these factors, Government policy has also led some people to become homeless. The abolition of grants for rent deposits and furniture, board and lodging payments and income support to

people between the ages of 16 and 18, have also had a negative impact.

It has been known for a long time that the loss of a home is not the sole cause of homelessness, and therefore the provision of a home is unlikely to be the sole solution. But this not especially obscure insight has now gained greater currency not a moment too soon. A new impetus has gathered to search for new solutions that are built around people, not built in bricks and mortar. The Government has taken the brave step of setting a target. Rough sleeping is to be reduced by two thirds by 2002. And it is somebody's job, at least in London. Louise Casey is the head of the London Rough Sleepers Unit and has £145 million to spend to solve the problem between 1999 and 2002.

The need for a new legislative framework

The permanent rehousing system received an almost universal thumbs down, even from those who had been rehoused. Partly because of the legislative restraints; partly because of the perceived need to ration; partly because of the disrespectful attitudes of staff; partly because of the diverse interpretations of the law and regulations and partly because of the lifestyles of some single homeless people. The system, to put it bluntly, is not working. Too many people are excluded from consideration – people over the age of 21 who are said not to be vulnerable, people with a history of drug and alcohol misuse, people with mental health problems. These restrictions need to be removed. Single homeless people should have the same entitlements as homeless families. Local authorities should at least have the same duty to all homeless people, although I argue in Part 4 that a great deal more needs to be done than just putting people on the housing register. That would, however, be a start. None of the foregoing argues against this duty. It argues instead for the proper fulfilment of current obligations and, furthermore, the extension of these obligations to those currently denied. Without these changes to the law and the system supposedly designed to implement it we can contemplate a despairing future for many single homeless people. That would, in the context of a housing surplus in many areas, be an unforgivable dereliction.

A Millennium amnesty

Even if the policy of excluding so many people from the housing register and from rehousing was to be

reconsidered, those already excluded would be better off. In pursuit of the Government's target to end rough sleeping and in the spirit of optimism that the Millennium will hopefully usher in, an amnesty on previous exclusions could be declared. A signed agreement could be made with each person previously

excluded about future conduct. On the basis of that agreement and with the necessary support as set out in the next part of this report, a fresh start could be made by some single homeless people and by our entire society.

Part 4 For the future

'Do not condescend to us in your heart,' Miss Maharaja replies. 'Do not mistake the abnormal for the untrue. We are caught in metaphors. They transfigure us, and reveal the meaning of our lives.'

Salman Rushdie, 'The Firebird's Nest', *New Writing*

The persistence of the belief that single homelessness is a housing problem, a belief reflected in the name given, is evidence that we have ignored Miss Maharaja's advice. We have mistaken the 'abnormal' fact of having nowhere to live and given rise to the false 'truth' that the overriding need is only for somewhere to live. Homelessness is not in fact the simple truth of having nowhere to live. It is a metaphor for many other problems besides, as I have been at pains to show. And if we understand homelessness as a metaphor for so many interacting agents, then we may reveal the real meaning of the current lives of many single homeless people.

One of the features of single homelessness that we have already noted is its mutable qualities, so what was previously a housing problem as Michael Foot saw it in 1945, is now a problem, of drugs and alcohol and relationship and family breakdown. This is not just a matter of definitions and labels. Whilst it is surely true that alcohol, relationship and family breakdown have always been contributory factors in people becoming homeless, it is also almost certainly true that the growing numbers of families which break down, or which never get formed in the first place, in the conventional two parent way has grown. It is also beyond dispute that the availability and use of drugs has increased exponentially in recent decades.

This underlying change in the nature of the problem needs to be reflected in the way that services are planned and organized. In very many cases it has been the voluntary sector who have been the first to spot changing patterns and to develop services, often as prototypes rather than large-scale providers, which have been subsequently adopted by mainstream health, social services and housing providers. With the onward march of contracting out and the increasing use of funds raised directly from the public to contribute to the cost of mainstream services, the research and development of prototype new services traditionally done by the voluntary sector should not now be lost in the rush for growth. As voluntary organizations become much more oriented towards service provision and away from campaigning and research and development, they need to take care to nurture their capacity; to learn, change and develop their services. Otherwise they will find themselves manifesting what sociologists call 'isomorphism'.

They will begin to manifest the very qualities of the organizations that they have taken over from. They will, in their turn, become coercive, bureaucratic, insensitive, institutionalising or abusive – all of the charges laid at service providers currently.

The Government's Best Value framework for local authorities intends to bring about a culture of continuous improvement in service delivery. Like its predecessor, compulsory competitive tendering, it is likely to be only partially successful. Shifting the focus away solely from price, as it was in CCT to quality and value for money, is surely welcome. The reason it may not work, however, is that the commissioner or, in the jargon, the purchaser, is not the end user. It is not, in the conventional sense, a market. Third parties take decisions about the needs and services for end users who have little say in how services are planned, few opportunities to provide feedback and little choice about alternatives. The key requirement for the successful operation of a market in improving quality, developing new products and services and reducing price by improving efficiency are not there. The end user does not have the choice and the purchaser does not have a sufficiently up to date sense of how the end user feels about what they are receiving and what they might want instead.

An annual plan

In order to rectify this structural or systemic deficiency the Government should change two aspects of the system. Firstly, all local authorities should have to undertake an annual survey, involving primary research with services users, of the needs of single homeless people, taking into account their views about the services they currently receive, or perhaps more importantly, do not receive.

Secondly, on the strength of that survey, each local authority should publish an integrated service plan, prepared jointly between social services, housing, probation and health services, particularly the soon to be formed primary care groups.

The feedback from people working with single homeless people was that service provision was often extensive, but poorly planned and coordinated across a locality. So for example, it was not obvious why some places had a greater preponderance of direct access services, rather than longer-term provision of support services or temporary supported housing. In other places the converse was true. The new funding arrangements proposed in *Supporting People* (Department of Health, 1998) will give local authorities a single budget out of which to plan, commission, deliver and monitor services. This is greatly to be

welcomed and will go some way to improving the patchy and inconsistent services that currently exists in too many places.

The causes of homelessness, as has already been stated, occur at three levels, above and beyond the question of having nowhere to live. The first level is personal problems (drugs and alcohol, mental health, unemployment, etc). The second level is the debilitating experience, often over an extended period, of living in an institution or a semi-institutional environment – prison, care, psychiatric hospital, rehab or detox. The third level is the breakdown of relationships – bonds and ties of support and safety – the generic connections of help often described as mutual aid, organised in the informal ways that people who are described as independent organise them. (In truth, of course, no one is really independent; some people, however, are more individually resourceful and much better supported than others are.) This third level includes the breakdown of relationships with partners, parents or family and bereavement. The dispensation of services for single homeless people proposed in this Part of the report would address these different levels of need, alongside the need to get a decent home which, under the arrangements just described, has been so attenuated.

- Structured support provided by professionals for serious, deep-seated personal problems, including the need for professional resettlement support with, for example, understanding and claiming benefits.
- The restoration of informal support from friends and families or, when there are no friends or family around, support from volunteers and mentors in establishing new connections and relationships.
- Access to decent housing in a place and of a type of an individual's choosing.

One mark of a prosperous and civilised society (for we know it is possible to be the former without being the latter) is the ability to eradicate homelessness. If that is an ethical obligation on the whole society, and it is one that the state has in varying ways accepted since the late 1970s, as already argued, it follows that, on the other side of the scale, the people suffering the depredations of homelessness have some entitlements. They are as described above:

- an entitlement to professional support when needed;
- an entitlement to the opportunity at least to make friends, from relationships and maintain family ties;
- an entitlement to a decent roof over their heads.

Triangle of support

These three types of support can be seen, not as one on top of the other, but as triangular, because the absence of any one side of the triangle will leave the other two sides in danger of collapse. (See Figure 4.1.)

Professional support for vulnerable people

The Government has set out new proposals in the consultation document, *Supporting People*, published in 1998. Many proposals contained in this document are to be welcomed. Given what has been said about the social obligations above, one of the traditional manifestations of that social obligation – a statutory duty – would be welcome and appropriate. As already described, the statutory obligations that currently exist towards some homeless people is to place them on a register for appropriate housing. Whilst nobody wants these obligations reduced, these current arrangements have few advocates. The restrictions and exclusions are too many; the opportunities for support too few. But, because homelessness is not only about the lack of housing, a simple extension of this statutory duty to all single homeless people, not just those who are vulnerable as is currently the case, would not suffice. The Government has proposed:

To enable local authorities to implement the proposals most efficiently and effectively, they would be provided with a new statutory power. This would be a corporate function. It would complement other existing statutory responsibilities such as social services functions, housing duties towards people and probation services' role in resettling ex-offenders... It would enable support to be provided to vulnerable people in more flexible ways, tailored to individual needs and preferences.

Such sentiments are welcome, but the pragmatist will always ask the question, 'How?' And the first issue to consider in this regard is access to support services. On this subject, *Supporting People*, has the following to say:

Any assessment processes should take a broad and anticipatory view of people's needs in order to promote independence. For some purposes, such as alleviating crises, individuals will need to be able to access services very quickly and easily, either directly or through immediate referral.

The current arrangements for assessment of whether people are vulnerable and therefore entitled to some

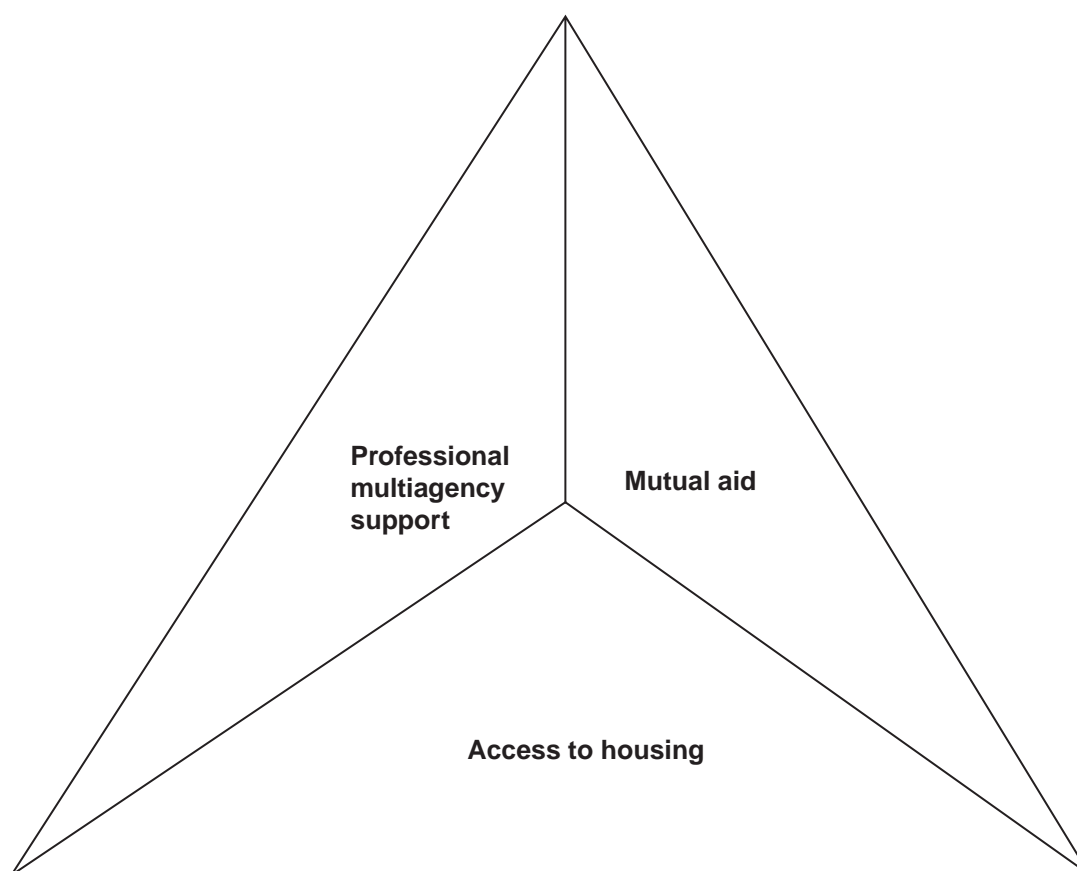


Figure 4.1 Triangle of support.

priority for housing are wholly inadequate as has hopefully been demonstrated. Few housing professionals would continue to defend their fairness or effectiveness. There is little evidence from this study or, from any others before, that the duty to assist vulnerable single homeless people is working very well anywhere. Judging by the responses of the people we interviewed, being accepted for social housing, even if it is what you want and you know how to go about applying for it, is a random affair. And even if you get housed, the lack of support from social services, health services, probation, etc, as well as the common difficulties with accessing benefits promptly, will make sustaining the markedly more difficult. The Social Exclusion Unit's comment in their report on rough sleeping, 'the homelessness safety net works less well in some places than others' is putting it mildly.

A consistent approach to assessment is urgently needed and the right to that assessment should be a statutory duty on local authorities. It should be evidence-based and as the Government has suggested, anticipatory. Given the need for consistency, the view expressed by the Government in *Supporting People*, is regrettable:

Local authorities, in consultation with service users and providers, should decide what service access arrangements would best address individuals' needs and preferences.

Presumably the case for continuing local discretion in the manner and the matter of assessments is predicated on the notion that there is significant local variety. In the survey undertaken for this report, more or less the same patterns appeared in all the places visited and they were all over Britain. The differences were in quantum, in the numbers of people affected, and in the diversity, extent and nature of the services provided. The evidence is now enormous of the risk factors that might lead to homelessness or a return to homelessness and these are the factors that should feature in the assessment of all single homeless people:

- abuse of drugs and alcohol, or risk of abuse;
- mental health problems, or risk of mental health problems;
- ties to friends and family;
- prospects for work or training;
- housing needs.

Because of the range of causes of homelessness cited above, that assessment needs to involve several agencies, some or all of which may also have an ongoing support role. These agencies would include housing, social services, health and probation; there may be others, for example local voluntary organisations. The responses to the survey show clearly that when there is a timely assessment, followed up by appropriate professional support, homeless people see that it makes a real difference to their lives. That is why multi-agency assessments are so important. Whether such an assessment takes place should not be at the discretion of a junior official of the housing department, as is very often currently the case if people apply to the local homeless persons unit. Even if their needs are assessed, it will very often only be housing needs that are assessed with no regard given to the need for other kinds of support.

If the assessment proposed above shows that they are at risk or in need of support in any of the four areas mentioned, they should have a support plan covering these areas, the services to be offered, the agencies to be involved, a named key worker and a planned schedule of reviews.

Mutual aid

The second level of the service triangle proposed for single and homeless people is the restoration of mutual aid – support and care freely given and received between family members, friends, neighbours and volunteers – to people with lives from which it may have disappeared.

The evidence of this and other studies seems to show that single homeless people are well aware that any solution to single homelessness or indeed meeting the needs of any group of vulnerable people cannot reside solely in services paid for by the state. This has never been the case and is unlikely ever to become true. The most cynical reason that this is not credible is the cost. The welfare state has never been able to afford to make universal provision. The facts of the current disposition were established in a 1996 survey that drew on the General Household Survey. If care currently provided by friends, neighbours, family members and volunteers were to be provided by paid carers the additional cost would be of the order of £34 billion.

Sir Roy Griffiths in his report (Griffiths, 1986) to the previous Government on community care made the point about the need to balance formal and informal care and support, paid for and voluntary, from within and without the family, from within and without the neighbourhood,

Publicly provided services constitute only a small part of the total care provided to people in need. Families, friends and neighbours and other local people provide the majority of care in response to needs which they are uniquely well-placed to identify and respond to. This will continue to be the primary means by which people are enabled to live normal live in community settings. The proposals (for community care services) take as their starting point that this is as it should be, and that the first task of publicly provided services is to support and where possible strengthen these networks of carers. Public services can help by identifying such actual and potential carers and tailoring the provision of extra services (if required) accordingly.

Nor, for other reasons, would it be desirable that all care should be provided by paid professionals, even if it could be afforded. Helping one another, the need to do which is now believed to have been programmed into our genes, is part of the stuff of life; it is the richness of life. There is intrinsic worth in what is given for free. Since Richard Titmuss's famous study of the best arrangements for giving blood, *The Gift Relationship* (Titmuss, 1976) it has been recognised that some services on which the community relies are best provided by volunteers – and giving blood is one:

[Voluntary blood donors] acknowledged that they could not and should not live entirely as they may have liked if they had paid regard solely to their own immediate gratification. To the philosopher's question, 'What kind of action should we perform?' they replied, in effect, 'Those which will cause more good to exist in the universe than there would otherwise be if we did not so act.' For most of them, the universe was not limited and confined to the family, the kinship, or to a defined social, ethnic or occupational group or class; it was the universal stranger.

The Samaritans is another service felt to be most effectively offered by volunteers; the Lifeboat service is a third. The Citizen's Advice Bureaux have found that bureaux run exclusively by paid staff present more managerial difficulties than those with many volunteers. Nor is there any evidence that the paid staff provide a better service.

Voluntary mediation services

For the vast majority of people in our society the family, parents and siblings as well as extended family members, is the first bulwark against need. Family

members are the first people to whom people turn if they need money, if they fall ill or if they need emotional support.

Many single homeless people are still in touch with their families. For pragmatic as well as emotional reasons it is in everyone's interest to strengthen those contacts and ties if possible. The growth of mediation services, though they are still thinly spread and are primarily focused on relationships between spouses, is a most welcome development. It acknowledges that relationships can be repaired and, if not fully restored to their previous condition, a new equilibrium can be established. The fact that many people have fallen out with their families has contributed to them becoming homeless. Many others still have some contact with their families. In the light of both of these facts, a network of mediation services in all our main towns and cities to work with single homeless people to restore or at least strengthen ties with families and friends would be a very good thing. Forty-one per cent of the young people who became homeless in the Safe in the City study thought that a family mediation service could have helped them, so there is clear evidence of demand.

Mentors and befriending

Although it would help some, it would be naïve to ignore the fact that, for others, no amount of mediation will help. Their relationships with their family and friends are rent asunder and will not be put back together. They too need the informal support of mutual aid. But they may not get it from the usual sources – family and friends. They must then find other people to help. Single homeless people talk of their 'street mothers' or 'street sisters'. It seems the model of the family still pervades the minds even of those now far distant from its conventional forms. So, if the original network of family and friends are not available, a new one needs to be established.

Some good work is already occurring here. Community Service Volunteers has a pilot mentoring scheme for young people, many of whom will certainly have had some experience of homelessness and sleeping rough. Only launched in 1996, it is still too early to judge success. But the early indications are good. The mentors are not professionals, nor are they paid anything other than their expenses. Steve Massey, who at the age of 28 is one of the oldest mentors, gave this account (Massey, 1999):

It's tough. I'm working with heroin addicts and two young sex offenders ... The problem with

these kids is that they never leave their neighbourhood. They have no idea of life in the wider world. That's where I come in – to try to show them that there is something else ... This lad I am working with was 13 when he was done for sexually assaulting two women. His parents are evangelical Christians and won't allow him out in the evening. He goes to an all-boys school and he's just sexually screwed up. I take him to basketball training and ice-rinks and try to talk to him normally.

Another of Steve's friends is a 14-year-old heroin addict who pays for his habit by dealing drugs to prostitutes.

His family can't speak English. He can't read or write. I don't know if I can help, but it's worth the try.

The most recent study from the United States of mentoring compared 500 mentored children with a control group and found that they were 46 per cent less likely to use illegal drugs, 27 per cent less likely to develop an alcohol problem and 52 per cent less likely to play truant.

Mentors offer guidance and help from a perspective of greater experience and the wisdom gained thereby. But guidance and help is given more informally, as an adjunct to the affectionate ties of friendships. Affection is its own reward. It is also a root to the getting of security and stability. A study of people who moved around frequently (undertaken for the Joseph Rowntree Foundation and published in 1999) concluded that these frequent movers were 'looking for love', a remarkable and remarkably simple conclusion.

Up and down the country children's charities have recognised this need for affection, friendship and love, particularly amongst those for whom it is not readily available, such as children without family ties in the care system, or those young people leaving it after an extended period of being in foster care or living in a children's home or special school. Befriending projects have been set up to recruit volunteers to become friends with young people who are often deeply troubled and capable of being deeply troublesome to others. Strong and lasting relationships are formed and sustained. Something similar is needed for homeless people as they move towards resettlement and perhaps into permanent housing. The benefits might be counted in more prosaic currency than affection and love. These ties might be the way back into work and into financial stability, particularly for younger people. Much research shows that the 'strong ties' of family and neighbourhood are a rich

vein of care and support, but when it comes to getting work, a larger network of 'weak ties' and contacts are needed.

The fragmented nature of the modern urban economy, particularly at the lower paid end, makes accessing work difficult without a range of contacts. So, if we are to participate fully in society and the economy, if we are to be socially included, as far as contacts are concerned, we need our lives to be diamond-shaped (see Figure 4.2). Single homeless people may have fallen outside the diamond and may need help to get back in.

Access to a home

The third side of the proposed triangle of services for single homeless people is access to housing. But we

know from our survey a lot needs to change in the way that people get access to social housing. It is not just that people have been hitherto denied access to social housing by legal constraints and by pressures of limited supply and supposedly limitless demand. The further problem is that, even when they have gained access to the housing register, they may have to wait a long time. They may also not get any choice about what they are offered, so they may not get offered anything they like. If they take what they are offered they may not have any chance to get out of it for a long time.

Some suggestions have already been made for arranging the legislative framework to improve access to social housing for single homeless people. But a roof over one's head is not the whole story; not even the half of it. Houses, if they are to be homes, have come to have many meanings over and above

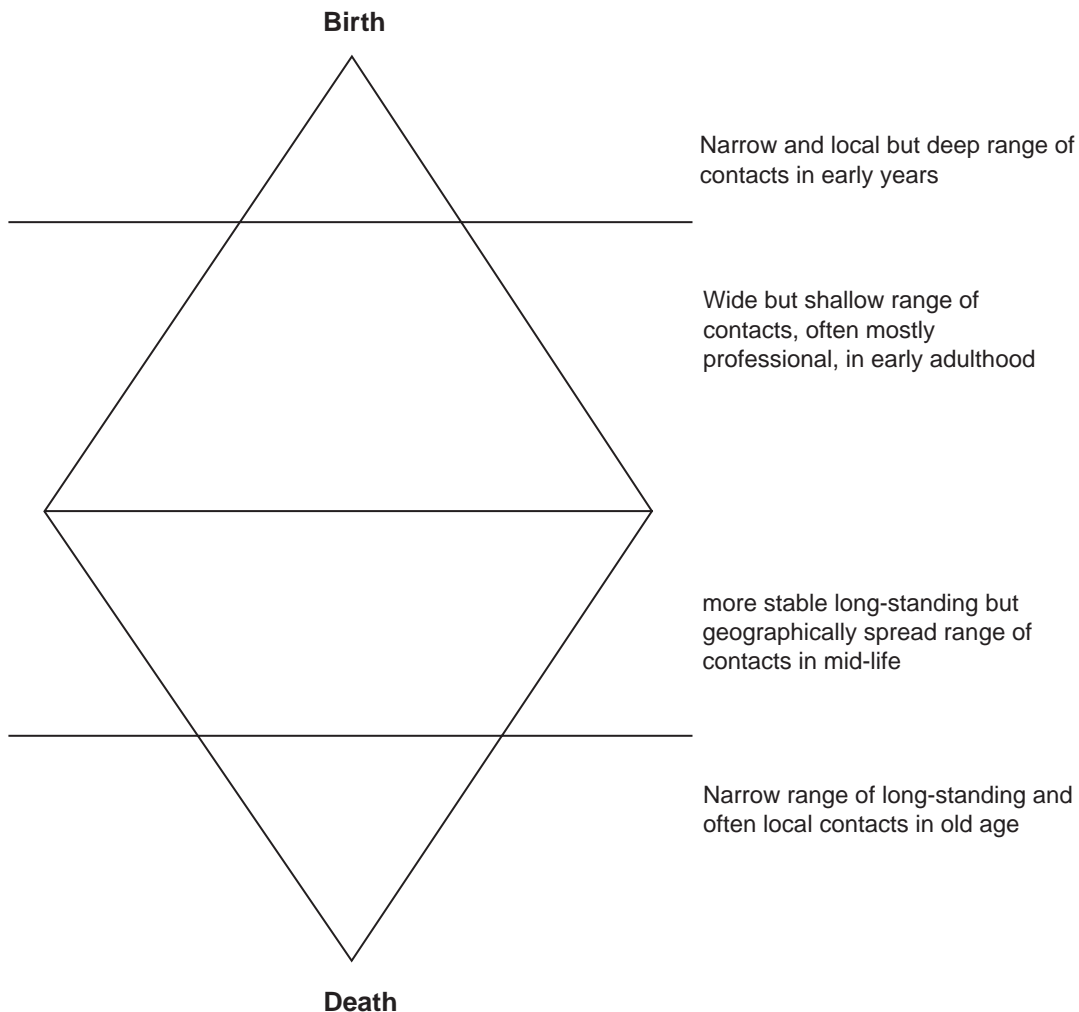


Figure 4.2 Contact networks through the lifecycle.

the getting and keeping of shelter and warmth. The poet Louis MacNeice suggests we look a little below the surface:

Under the surface of flux and fear there is an underground movement

Under the crust of bureaucracy, quiet behind the posters

Unconscious but palpably there – the kingdom of individuals.

For the first half of this century poor and working class people lived a good deal of their time in public spaces. Working class life had to be largely public because the private space was so inadequate. Even the housewife, still likely to be imprisoned behind four walls, shared in the public life of the market. Young men and women met, danced and courted away from home. Men socialised in pubs, not called public for nothing. Until the radio and then the cinema, which transformed the lives particularly of working class women, all forms of entertainment had to be in public, including, in the early years, watching television. From football matches to political meetings or holiday outings, life was experienced en masse.

The combination of a long post-war economic boom, full employment and the ready availability of cheaper versions of 'consumer' goods, previously only available to the rich, such as cars and cameras as well as television and radio, have transformed the lives of working class people and that transformation continues. It is no longer even necessary to watch television or listen to music as a family. Many children and young adults have a TV and CD player in their rooms. Research by Sonia Livingstone at the London School of Economics (*Guardian*, 4 March 1998) found that two thirds of British children have a TV in their bedroom, double the number of other European children.

Television has made it unnecessary, even though it is still pleasurable, to go to a football match. Twenty-six million people watched England go out of the World Cup in 1998, losing a penalty shoot-out to Argentina. The vast majority watched it at home. Videos have made it unnecessary to go to the cinema. Perhaps most significant of all, telephones, now almost universally used, have made it possible to talk to friends and family without going out. It is not even necessary to live near people you talk to all the time. Finally, cars, which two thirds of social housing tenants do not own, have meant, for those that have them, that visits can be made far and wide and still be home by evening. All of these factors have combined in a retreat to an expanded, secure private space by most people.

These social changes have transformed the way that people see the domestic interior. From being an overcrowded barrack, a place of intrusion, coercion and sometimes violence to be escaped from at the first opportunity, it has become a domain of leisure, privacy and individuality – all things we have over recent years come to place an enormous value on. The consequence of this is inevitable. People ceased to find what the novelist Laurie Lee called 'the honeyed squalor of home' acceptable.

This profound reconfiguring of family and social relationships, more complex than can be fully expounded here, can be expressed visually as shown in Figures 4.3, 4.4 and 4.5.

If they are to envisage the new place as a home in the contemporary sense, applicants for social housing will consider how it would feel to spend time on their own or to have friends round to visit. Or might it be somewhere they could see their partner moving into at some future hopeful time? Maybe they might want to bring up children there, or perhaps work from home. They will be quietly asking themselves if they can see themselves laughing or loving here, contemplating and discussing. In short, they will be asking how does it *feel*?

And it will not be simply matters of individual concern that will be considered. The question of relationships with others outside the home will also arise. What kind of a community is this? A house is a statement, as if in a kind of social body language, of the great issue before any society: what should be the balance between the individual and the collective? A house is also a home to which, of all the places in the world, the fortunate members of society most assuredly belong; something about which we may from time to time feel some ambivalence, even an active distaste, but none of which normally diminishes the sense of this being our place on the earth. For most of us the home is person sized. It is highly individual on the inside, every possession signifying meaning and personal memory. It confers the only primary privacy that a citizen in a modern global world can contrive.

This privacy is also dependent upon a hundred other privacies not intruding on one's own. For one house stands next to another; one flat immediately above another in which other people may be noisily expressing their individuality to everyone's exasperation but their own. The issue about the kind of relationship you have with your neighbour is inescapable and inescapably moral. A Robinson Crusoe does not need ethics because he does not need others. There cannot be a community of one.

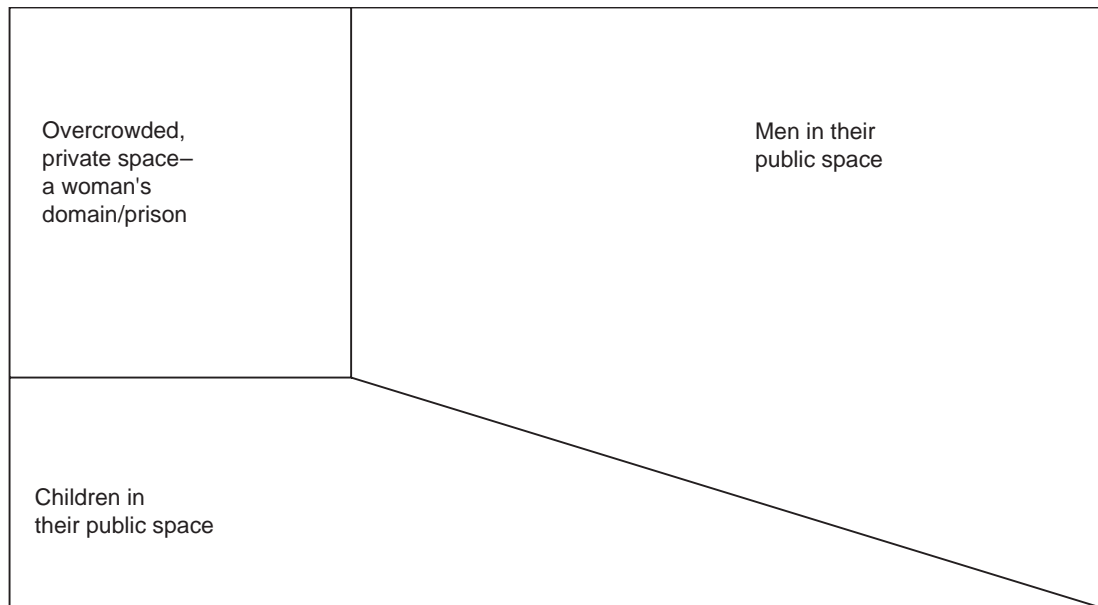


Figure 4.3 The changing use of public and private space: until the 1960s.

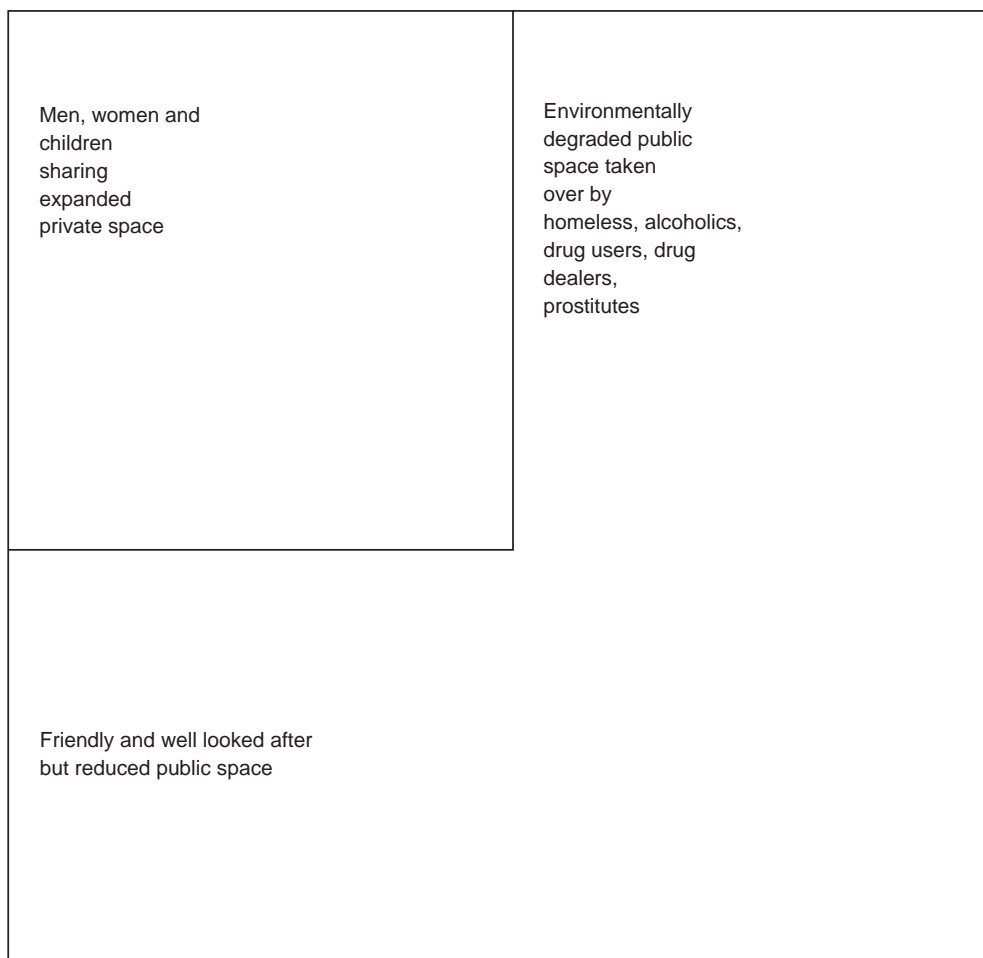


Figure 4.4 The changing use of public and private space: 1960s–1990s.

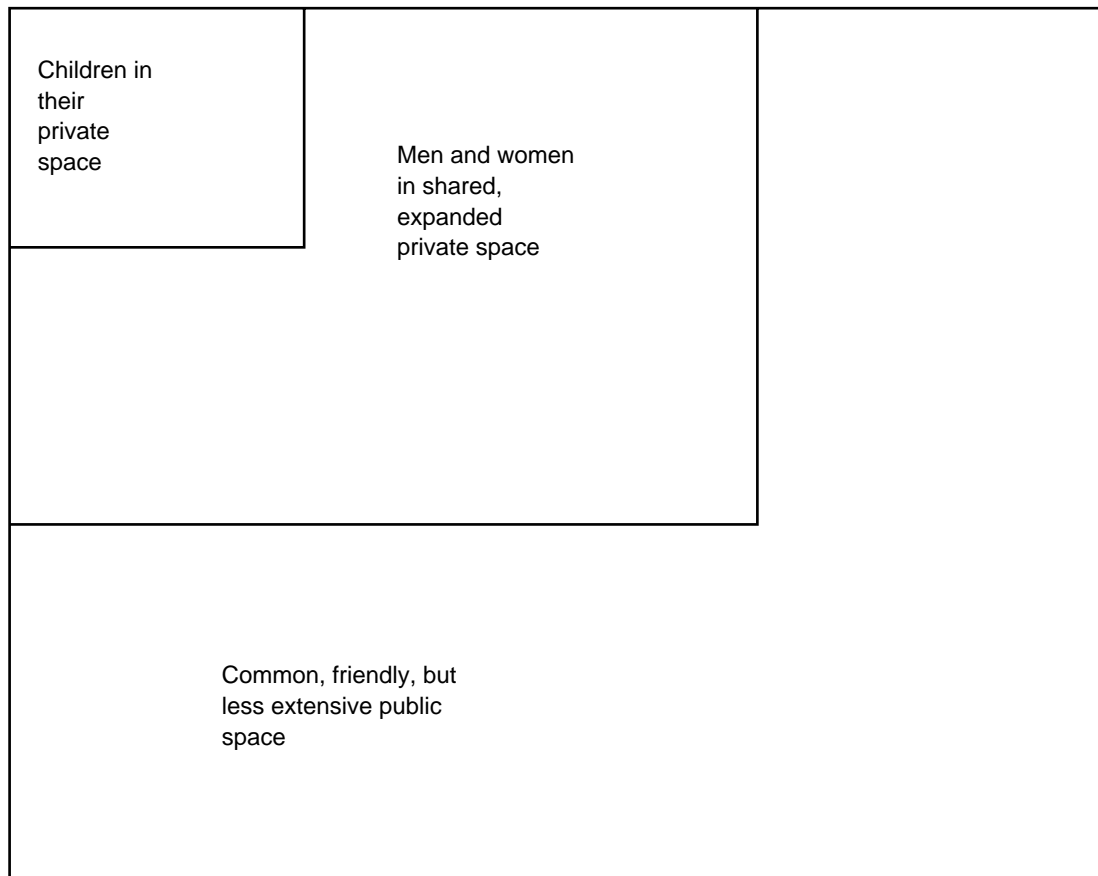


Figure 4.5 The changing use of public and private space: 1990s.

And it is not just the home itself, linked to the immediate neighbourhood and all the meaning with which it is furnished that goes to define whether or not people are happy about where they are being asked to live. A little further distance from the neighbours are other things about which we are concerned. Our next concern is that the neighbourhood should be safe. As Jane Jacobs noted in her book, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, 'The bedrock attribute of a successful city is that a person must feel personally safe and secure amongst all these strangers.'

We are also concerned that the neighbourhood is not one, to use Galbraith's famous formulation in *The Good Society* (Galbraith, 1995), in which the benefits of private affluence, even if it is subsidised by state benefits, are greatly attenuated or undermined by the depredations of public squalor.

The private living standard... is the beneficiary of enthusiastic, often relentless advocacy... By contrast, the public living standard – schools, parks, libraries, law enforcement, public transport,

much else – has no such support. The consequence, one that is wholly familiar, is expensive television and meagre schools, clean houses and dirty streets.

For many recently single homeless people the meagre schools and dirty streets may be accompanied not by expensive televisions, but a spartan, barely functional interior. Not for them private affluence and public squalor, but instead private deprivation and public squalor.

The public and private services accessible nearby will also be a concern. This is particularly true for people in social housing who are one third as likely to own a car as a home owner is. Access to shops, schools, leisure facilities, places of worship, training and work opportunities all play a part in the consideration of the suitability of the place we want to live.

Even for those considered in priority need the current arrangements for the allocation of social housing facilitate few of these considerations. No consideration is

routinely given to the need for proximity to friends, family, work, transport, shops, and places of worship, community or leisure facilities. Nor is much consideration given to whether people will feel safe or will like the environment surrounding the home they will be allocated. As to their private feelings about the home and the extent to which it chimes with their lifestyle and aspirations, most housing allocators would feel more confident of finding a needle in a haystack than trying to match those requirements. More than changing the law; more even than the removal of the many barriers to access. A new mindset, a new technology and a new system is needed.

Virtual vouchers

'Virtual vouchers' for homeless people would facilitate a far greater degree of choice. Once a homeless person had been accepted as being in housing need and a support plan had been drawn up of the sort outlined above, they would be given a virtual voucher. Using this, which in fact would be a password to many computers in council offices around the country, they could seek access to social housing wherever

they wished in the country – according to what they wanted to be near to. They could do this on-line, where they might find information, not only about housing available but also about waiting times, local health and leisure facilities, job opportunities and so on. Staff would be available to advise them on these choices. Once they had joined the on-line system, they could track their own progress regularly, because the system would be transparent and not mediated through a member of staff. They could also change their preference if their circumstances changed. In the place they moved to they would also have access to a joint multiagency assessment and support plan, perhaps a family mediation service and a voluntary befriending or mentoring service.

Not only would this approach be more transparent, it would also provide far greater choice and more sensitive, person-centred and joined-up decision-making. The greatest benefit would be empowering single homeless people to take control of their own lives and their own housing choices – and that is the most rehabilitating thing of all. That may do more than any housing allocator ever could.

Afterword – A future foretold

Portia: If to do were as easy to know what were good to do, chapels had been churches, and poor men's cottages princes' palaces.

The Merchant of Venice

Throughout all that has already been here set down, I have been at pains to point to the personal and complex nature of the problem of homelessness. I have, I hope, in my exposition both of the problem and of the solutions, argued strongly that people who are the opposite of homeless need more than simply a roof over their head. If the opposite of hopeless is hopeful and the opposite of homeless is more than a roof over one's head, if I may be permitted a neologism, the thing sought is being *home-ful*. Of course that means having shelter and warmth. But it means also being near to the people you need and love and the services you need, some of them paid for and others not. It means having a private space that expresses identity and aspiration. It means living in an ethical relationship with other people nearby. All of that I have sought to address. But there is more that needs to be done.

Having a home is, for most people, a prerequisite for having a hope. Hope is not for most of as an objective assessment of our current state. It is, as Vaclav Havel has commented (Havel, 1990):

a state of mind, not a state of the world. Either we have hope within us or we don't; it is a dimension of the soul, and it's not essentially dependent on some particular observation of the world or estimate of the situation... It is an orientation of the spirit, an orientation of the heart; it transcends the world that is immediately experienced, and is anchored somewhere beyond its horizons... I feel that its deepest roots are in the transcendental, just as the roots of human responsibility are.

Not everyone would think it wise to stray unwarily into matters of the transcendental when writing of the hard, encrusted world of public policy. But

because hope is what is sought by single homeless people and, not just by them, by all those with that hopeful orientation of the spirit, its importance must not be denied. Any solution that cannot deliver on this personal and defining matter of transcending one's current state will be transitory. It will be a stopping place towards a further destination which may not be clearly defined even in private. It will certainly be little discussed around the tables of decision-making. Let us make no mistake: our job is the getting of hope for each and all of us.

And even beyond hope, identity expressed through creativity is sought. Herbert Read, in his classic study on *The Meaning of Art* (Read, 1972), noted that:

Art is an escape from chaos. It is movement ordained in numbers; it is mass confined in measure; it is the indetermination of matter seeking the rhythm of life.

Some artists, such as the painter Henri Matisse, sought to substitute a conscious subjectivity for the illusion of objectivity. This may, in some ways, be said to be the defining characteristic of twentieth-century painting which draws its validity essentially from the painter's own visual and emotional responses. About this instinct, Matisse commented:

I found myself or my artistic personality by considering my early works. I discovered in them something constant which I took at first for monotonous repetition. It was the sign of my personality, which came out the same no matter what different moods I passed through.

We are not all destined to be great artists, but we all have a conscious subjectivity, which is valued more in our times than ever before and it certainly influences our satisfaction with our home, or whether we feel 'home-ful'. One may say of the universal wish to make a home that it is not like art the indetermination of matter, but the determination of matter, in the physical building, in search of the rhythm of our own life.

Recommendations

Planning services

1. Local authorities should undertake an annual survey of the needs of single homeless people in their area.
2. Each local authority should publish an annual integrated service plan for meeting the needs of single homeless people agreed jointly between social services, housing, health and probation.
3. The triangle of support – professional multiagency support, mutual aid and access to housing – should be the policy framework in which services for homeless people are planned and delivered.

Assessment of needs

4. A national framework for assessment of need should be established incorporating abuse of drugs and alcohol, or risk of abuse, mental health problems or the risk of them, ties to friends and family, prospects for work or training, housing needs. The assessment should be multiagency – housing, social services, health, probation, housing associations and voluntary organisations.
5. Where there is evidence of need in the assessment a support plan should be drawn up covering the services to be offered, the agencies to be involved, a named key worker and a planned schedule of reviews.

Mutual aid

6. A national network of family mediation services should be established for single homeless people set up and run by the voluntary sector.

7. Mentoring and befriending projects to recruit, train and support volunteers to work with single homeless people should be established in all the key population centres by voluntary organisations.

Access to housing

8. Local authorities should have the same statutory duty to single homeless people as they do to homeless families.
9. The impact of current exclusions from the housing register should be researched and reviewed. Exclusion should not be enforced where there is a grave consequent risk of homelessness.
10. In seeking to achieve the Government's target to reduce rough sleeping by two thirds by 2002, an amnesty should be granted from 1 January 2000 for those who have been excluded from housing registers to have their cases reconsidered. If they are willing to give written undertakings not to repeat the past behaviour that led to their exclusion and to undertake a multiagency assessment leading to a support plan being drawn up they will be put on the housing register once more.
11. A national system of 'virtual vouchers' for people accepted as being in priority need for social housing (subject to the legislative changes proposed above) should be developed.

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Appendix

Outlets used for interviews and focus groups held with single homeless people

Name of outlet	Service visit	Area
Biker Bridge Housing Association	Supported housing project Short-stay hostel	Newcastle
Canal Street Night Shelter (Nottingham Help the Homeless)	Night shelter	Nottingham
Cowgate Centre (Edinburgh Council for the Single Homeless)	24-hour centre for the homeless	Edinburgh
Direct Access Unit (Manchester City Council)	Male and female short-term hostels	Manchester
Exeter Homeless Action Group	Day centre and advice service	Exeter
Frontline	Housing advice to young people from minority ethnic groups	London
English Churches Housing Association	Rough Sleepers Initiative	Guildford
Handel Street Day Centre (Nottingham Help the Homeless)	'Wet' day centre	Nottingham
Haven Nightshelter	Night shelter	Peterborough
Homeless & Roofless Project (HARP)	Temporary hostel	Hull
Lancaster Homeless and Housing Action Service	Housing advice centre	Lancaster
Norcare	Supported housing project	Newcastle
Terry Street (English Churches Housing Group)	Supported housing project	Hull
The Matthews Project (<i>SmartMove</i>)	Rent guarantee scheme to resettle homeless people in the private rented sector	Edinburgh
The Stopover (Edinburgh Council for the Single Homeless)	Supported housing for 16- to 21-year-olds	Edinburgh
Wallich Clifford Hostel	Temporary hostel	Cardiff

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Our greatest gratitude is reserved until last. It is owed to the people, some currently and some previously homeless, whom we interviewed and who attended the focus groups. Theirs has been the greatest contribution. I thank them immensely for that in the hope that something of what is written here will assist them and people who, in the future, find themselves facing similar challenges and disadvantages.

Whilst many people have contributed to this work and I am grateful to all of them, the responsibility for any mistakes remain mine and mine alone. Only I should be held to account for the views expressed. If the reader feels them to be ill-informed or misguided, or just plain wrong, that is nobody's fault but mine.

Gerard Lemos