



Fighting for hope for  
homeless people

# Homeless Women

March 2008

Most research about homelessness is not explicitly gendered, but is inadvertently dominated by the experiences and views of homeless men. In 2006 Crisis set out to examine the current situation around the particular experiences of homeless women.

We commissioned research from the Centre for Regional Economic and Social Research, Sheffield Hallam University who produced two influential reports. Surveys and in depth interviews were used to collect information about women's housing situations, their needs, and use of services. These were conducted with 144 single homeless women across 19 towns and cities in England.

This policy summary highlights the key points from that research and suggests recommendations on how the lives of homeless women can be improved.

## 1 Homeless women are particularly vulnerable

Homeless people, regardless of gender, share many common experiences. However, failing to understand the distinct and unique situations of homeless women ultimately results in a failure to develop appropriate responses and prevent homelessness amongst women. There are high levels of vulnerability within the female homeless population – mental ill-health, drug and alcohol dependencies, childhoods spent in care, experiences of sexual abuse and other traumatic life experiences are all commonplace. Over 20% of those we interviewed became homeless to escape violence from someone they knew.

*"Oh, it was horrible [prison]. But I enjoyed it because I wasn't having to have sex and that. I really enjoyed that I wasn't letting people abuse me, you know. It was so nice."*

***We need to recognise that gender does influence homeless women's situations and address situations where services are not sensitive to the experiences and needs of women. We need to increase the availability of women-only services.***

## 2 Women's homelessness is caused by a culmination of complex experiences and events

While homelessness for both men and women is often caused by the culmination of events, the causal experiences of women tend to be of a distinct nature. Traumatic life experiences, such as sexual abuse, neglect and abandonment, reproductive health issues and violence, regularly feature in the causes of women's homelessness.

Many women become homeless directly from the family home or soon after their transition to independence. Abuse in childhood, particularly when this has not come to the attention of others, can directly lead to homelessness. Women's role within the family (homemaker, child carer) and related financial dependence can increase the likelihood of homelessness following the break-up of a relationship. A negative or very traumatic experience within one particular service can deter women from using any other service of this kind.

***Homelessness and non-homelessness service providers need to be aware of the potential long-term consequences of their actions with regard to homeless women. A 'think twice' approach is required.***

### 3

#### Homeless women have very negative experiences of local authorities

The majority of homeless women report negative experiences of approaching local authorities, with many being 'turned away at the door' or deterred by front-line staff from making an application. As a result many women are reluctant to seek support. Over a third of homeless women do not approach their local authority or could not remember doing so. Of those who do make an application less than one third are awarded "priority need" status and 28 per cent are found to be "intentionally" homeless. Nearly one third of homeless women classed as "single homeless" are not childless, many had children not living with them who they hope to reunited with once they secured settled accommodation. Yet they are treated by services, particularly local authority housing departments, as childless women, with no consideration or acknowledgment given to their potential 'family' status.

*"The housing officer went to see the manager and came back and said 'You're not priority'. But they hadn't checked any of the information – they said they could tell just on face value, by looking at me. They said if I had to sleep rough, I wouldn't fair any worse than anyone else, so I wasn't vulnerable enough."*

*"They gave me a piece of paper with hostels and the numbers to ring ... they said 'You can ring them and try them', but I didn't get no help from them – they were either full up or something."*

***Homeless women's traumatic life experiences need to be considered and appreciated by local authority homelessness departments and service providers. In particular, this should be better recognised in assessments of priority need, and in determining whether a woman is 'intentionally homelessness' or vulnerable.***

### 4

#### Many homeless women end up sleeping rough

The majority of homeless women will resort to sleeping rough due to the lack of options available and the difficulties faced in engaging with local authorities. Rough sleeping is extremely dangerous for homeless women – many have been physically attacked, verbally abused and sexually assaulted. Women respond to these dangers by making efforts to 'remain invisible', choosing places to sleep which are hidden from view and disguising their homeless status in some way. Many do not come to the attention of rough sleeper teams: over 60 per cent of women interviewed had slept rough but only 12 per cent had been found by rough sleeper teams.

*"the men tended to be in the shop fronts, which I would never contemplate doing ... for me it was a safety thing."*

*"There are places where we used to go, car parks where, you know, they were closed in and that, and nobody would see you there. So I wouldn't feel as unsafe there."*

***Signposting and provision of information by services coming into contact with homeless women need to be improved. A homeless woman should never be turned away from a service without being provided with, at the very least, a leaflet, telephone number, or information about another organisation which might be able to assist her. Those responding to the needs of rough sleepers should work harder in finding, supporting, and delivering services that meet the needs of homeless women.***

## 5 Women's homelessness is particularly hidden

It is likely that, at any given time, there are many women staying in 'hidden', informal and marginalised homeless accommodation situations. Many women remain in 'hidden homeless' situations, more likely staying with friends or contacts than in hostels. An alarming number of the women are engaging in unwanted sexual liaisons (paid and unpaid) in order to secure accommodation.

*"I'm hoping my situation is temporary and I know I'm lucky to have friends helping, plus savings etc. But, the sheer strain of moving from friend to friend's, always in their space."*

***We need to develop ways of ensuring that information about homelessness reaches women who are in hidden accommodation situations. Every woman should be in possession of knowledge about where to turn if she finds herself homeless or threatened with homelessness. This might include increased provision of leaflets and posters in public places and services such as libraries, GP surgeries, hospitals, supermarkets, community centres, job centres and the Benefits Agency as well as education in schools and colleges.***

## 6 Homeless women face a variety of barriers to accessing services

Homeless women fail to access the support and assistance they require to help them secure accommodation (temporary and permanent) and meet other, often complex, needs. Almost 40 per cent of homeless women do not seek assistance from an agency when they first became homeless and many rely instead upon informal advice from friends and family. The bureaucratic and inflexible nature of services, male-dominated environments and unwelcoming physical layouts also deter women from using services.

*"I didn't know there were agencies to help. I didn't think about it at all. I wasn't aware that anyone could help."*

*"Oh, there's loads of things that you can't get help with because everything's for men really. Hardly anything for women."*

***We need to address gaps in service provision in order to prevent and resolve homelessness amongst women. A more integrated approach to meeting women's needs is required, joining-up services which homeless women would benefit from including sexual and domestic violence, substance misuse and mental health services.***

## 7 Homeless women require services that are responsive to their particular needs

Homeless women often only engage with services which are informal, feel 'safe', provide women-only spaces, and are staffed by 'caring' and 'non-judgemental' workers. Women are more likely to use temporary accommodation provision if it resembles their notion of 'home'. Many need emotional support whether through formal counselling or just 'someone to talk to'. Day centres are an important resource and provide many daily necessities of life. Public buildings and facilities provide opportunities for keeping warm, resting, sleeping, washing and eating.

*"Having that women's group there ... I wouldn't be coming here if there hadn't been this group – without any doubt, having that space, sometimes just to get over the overwhelming impact of men."*

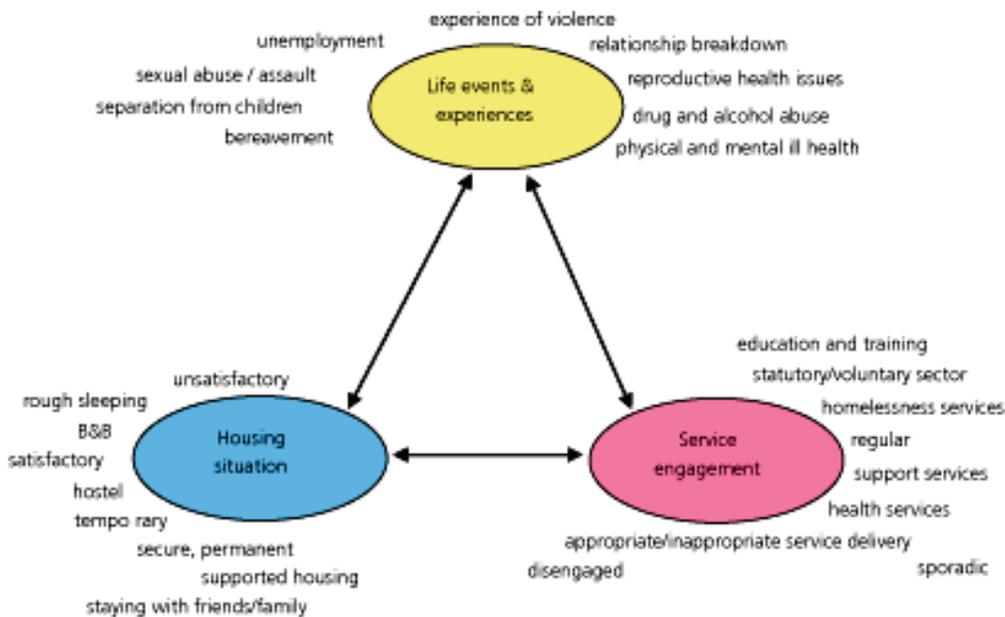
***Homelessness agencies should ensure that they provide friendly reception areas and women only spaces to increase the accessibility of their services for homeless women. The important role that public spaces and facilities play in the daily lives of homeless women and raise awareness of why homeless women use these spaces should also be recognised. Public facilities and other non-homelessness agencies should be supported to develop homelessness-related initiatives, and homelessness agencies should be able to deliver services within 'non-homelessness' spaces.***

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## Homeless Women's Landscapes - Everything Interacts Together

Homelessness is a dynamic and non-linear process. The trajectories women take into, out of, and through homelessness are influenced by a complex range of processes, events, actions and interactions. They encounter structural forces (the housing market, employment); institutional bodies (housing legislation, service provision); personal issues and experiences (substance misuse, divorce). These forces often combine to make homeless women's situation worse.

Our research focused on three key realms of homeless women's lives – their housing situations; their interactions with services; and experiences and events in their personal lives – and showed the ways in which these combine, interact, and influence each other to form a landscape of homelessness. These three realms co-exist and interrelate, with an experience, situation or event in one impacting on another.



***Services need to be developed that can track women through their homelessness journey, possibly through provision of a 'link worker'. This worker would be a contact point for a homeless woman and for the services working with her, would have a relatively complete 'picture' of her life, and be in a position to identify when she is at risk so that relevant interventions can be put in place.***

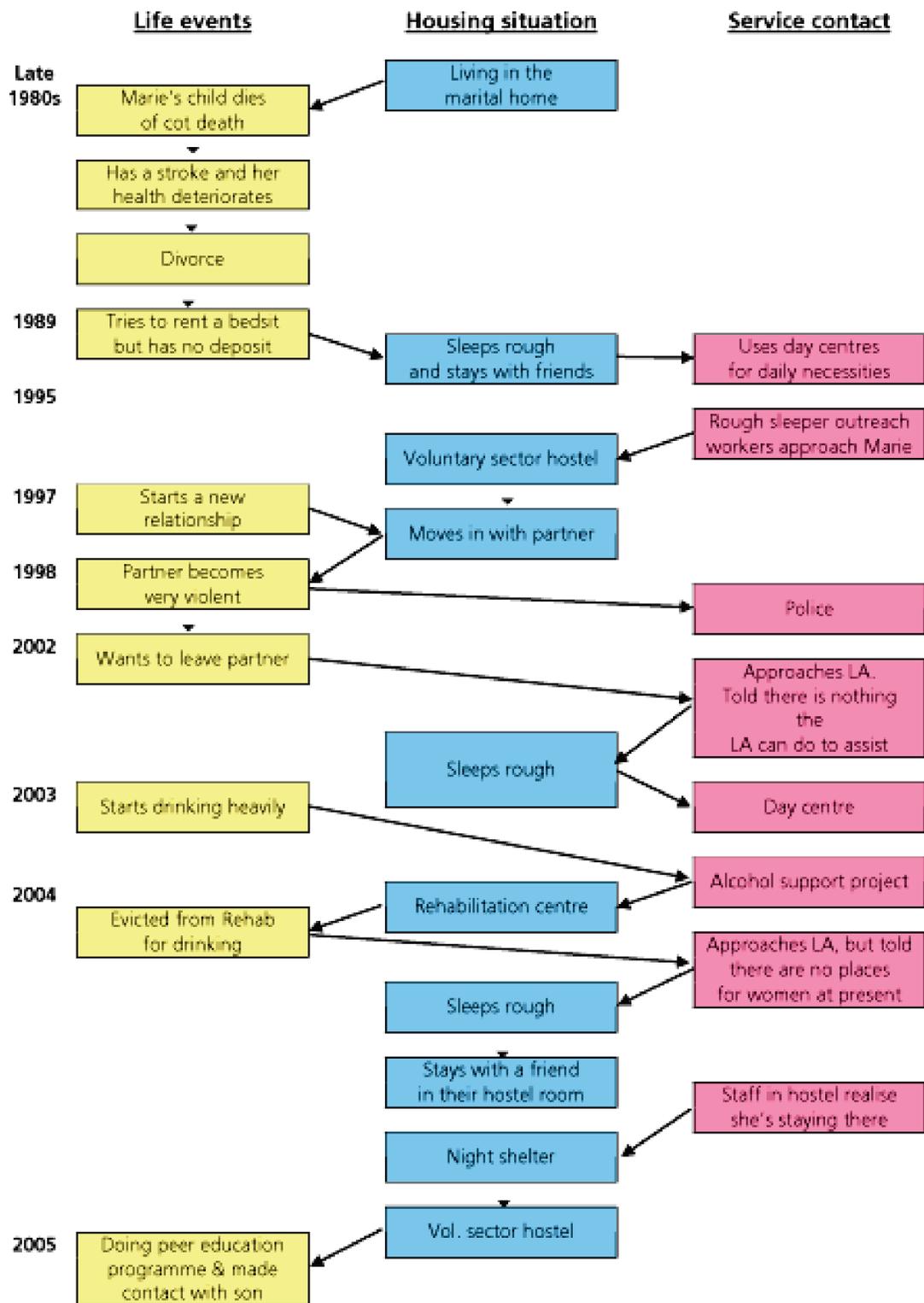
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## Homeless Journeys: A Pictorial Recommendation

In an effort to build-up a picture of this homelessness landscape and demonstrate the ways in which women negotiate their way through their homelessness, our research presented a type of 'life map', or homelessness journey, of homeless women. These maps illustrate pictorially the interactions, situations and events of the women and show how these are interrelated. They also highlight the impact that positive and negative service interventions have on homeless women and their journeys through homelessness.

The map of the homelessness journey of Marie, one of the homeless women interviewed, is presented below:

## Marie's Homelessness Journey



(arrows indicate causality)

*Despite significant advances in policy and legislation, homeless women continue to endure traumatic situations and are not getting the help they require urgently. More effective services should be created that respond to homeless women's needs and resolve the gaps in service provision, such as establishing women only accommodation and making more daytime services available.*

*Crisis believes that by paying attention to the particular needs of homeless women and following the recommendations mentioned above, we can go some way towards helping homeless women to rebuild their lives and integrate back into society. Our research revealed that there are many services that are thinking about the needs of women and delivering services that are genuinely helping them leave their homelessness behind.*

*"It was run in a really nice way, it wasn't like someone was checking up on you . . . and they'll be really friendly and they'd sort of clock whether you were coming in and out but they wouldn't keep notes but they were aware if they hadn't seen you for days, they'd sort of say 'where've you been, what've you been up to' it was nice because I felt cared for but not observed."*

*"Having that women's group there... I wouldn't be coming here if there hadn't been this group - without any doubt, having that space, sometimes just to get over the overwhelming impact of men."*

All the statistics and quotations used in this policy summary are drawn from Crisis' two reports on Women's Homelessness – "Homeless Women: Still Being Failed, Yet Striving to Survive" (2006) and "Homeless Women: Homelessness Careers, Homelessness Landscapes" (2007). These reports and further information on Crisis Policy and Research are available to download from our website <http://www.crisis.org.uk/page.builder/researchpage.html>.