



# “It’s no life at all”

Rough sleepers’ experiences of violence and abuse on the streets of England and Wales

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**Crisis**

## **Acknowledgements**

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## Foreword

Homelessness can be a devastating experience. Sadly, thousands of people are still experiencing homelessness today across England and Wales. Rough sleeping continues to be a pressing issue. The number of people rough sleeping in England has doubled since 2010.

We know the serious impact rough sleeping and homelessness can have on people's lives: poor health; social exclusion and the danger of becoming entrenched and struggling to move out of homelessness.

What this new research exposes is the shocking and unacceptable levels of abuse and violence rough sleepers have to endure on top of the already desperate position they find themselves in. Over three quarters of those surveyed in the last year have suffered violence or abuse. Many have been hit or kicked deliberately, almost half threatened with violence and over half verbally abused.

Equally shocking and worrying is that the majority of experiences of violence or abuse are caused by members of the public. Such acts largely go unreported to the police. Perhaps unsurprisingly homeless people surveyed think life on the street is getting worse.

Violent and abusive experiences can cause not only physical harm but can also undermine people's attempts to seek help and move on from homelessness. Too many rough sleepers are left living in fear and isolation.

This research shows that urgent action is needed by both the police and government. It is not acceptable that homeless people are put in harm's way on a daily basis. The police must act to reassure homeless people that their safety is paramount and crimes against them will be fully investigated. Attitudes to homelessness and rough sleeping also need to change. Crisis has done much over the years to campaign for change and improve the support homeless people receive.

Existing support from Local Authorities does not go far enough. That is why the Homelessness Reduction Bill going through parliament is the first opportunity in a generation to make a real change and improve the assistance to homeless people and those at risk of rough sleeping. This report shows just why it is so important.



Jon Sparkes  
**Chief Executive, Crisis**

## Key findings

Overall homelessness is increasing in England, and there has been a sharp upward trend in the most visible form of homelessness – rough sleeping. This report presents the findings from a face-to-face survey with 458 homeless people who had experienced rough sleeping across England and Wales in the 12 months prior to the research taking place. The research was undertaken in response to the growing concern around the treatment and potential victimisation of people experiencing street homelessness. The findings below show the high levels of abuse and violence experienced by people we spoke to and the impact this has on their health and wellbeing.

- The survey reveals the shocking scale of violence and abuse faced regularly by rough sleepers in England and Wales. Seventy seven per cent (353) of survey respondents reported anti-social behaviour and/or crime against them in the past 12 months.
- The majority (66%/302) of respondents think life on the street is getting worse.
- Three in ten (30%/139) rough sleepers reported being deliberately hit or kicked or experiencing another form of violence in the past 12 months (women proportionally more).
- Six per cent of respondents (25) had been sexually assaulted in the past 12 months.
- Furthermore, almost half (45%/206) of current or recent rough sleepers surveyed said they had been intimidated, or threatened with violence or force. Thirty per cent (31%/141) had had things thrown at them and in seven per cent (33) of cases rough sleepers had been urinated on.
- Adding to these experiences is the verbal abuse rough sleepers received. This was the most common form of anti-social behaviour experienced; with over half of respondents (56%/254) being verbally abused or harassed.
- Damage to, and theft of, their personal property was also commonly experienced. More than half (51%/234) of recent and current rough sleepers surveyed reported having personal belongings stolen. Deliberate damage or having personal items vandalised was experienced by 20 per cent (91).
- Members of the public, who the survey respondents did not know, were the leading perpetrators of incidences of violence and abuse. Perhaps equally troubling is that over half (53%/157) of the latest incidences of abuse and violence rough sleepers had experienced were unreported to the police. The main reason for this was due to the expectation that nothing would be done by the police.
- In-depth interviews with people experiencing crime and anti-social behaviour further highlighted the impact and consequences of these experiences. Rough sleepers reported how living on the streets meant living in fear and having to navigate constant risk and uncertainty about their safety. This was largely caused by the dilemma of who to trust and whether to remain hidden or close to busy areas.
- Fear and isolation affected rough sleepers' health and wellbeing. Those who shared their experiences with us often linked the incidences that took place with negative patterns of behaviour such as alcohol and drug abuse. For some people their experience of rough sleeping also affected their physical health.

- For many people who took part in the survey and interviews, their experiences took a toll on their mental wellbeing pushing some to question the relevance of their existence and undermining their confidence to move on from their circumstances.

## Introduction

### 1.1 The research

This report details the findings from research carried out by Crisis on the treatment and experiences of street homeless people in England and Wales. The research was undertaken to fill an evidence gap to understand more about this group and it is part of a larger project examining the impact of enforcement measures on rough sleeping which will be published early next year. This shorter research report focuses on the extent and impact of incidences of crime and anti-social behaviour among people who were either sleeping rough or had done so within the previous 12 months.

Over the summer of 2016, 458 people who were either sleeping rough or had done so within the previous 12 months completed a face-to-face survey which lasted between 20 and 40 minutes. Surveys were completed across 21 localities in England and Wales at a variety of homelessness services and organisations including day centres, advice services and supported accommodation. The survey data was supplemented with 15 in-depth interviews with current rough sleepers who had experienced crime and anti-social behaviour.

The sample surveyed closely represented the demographic nature of the wider rough sleeping population; 84 per cent (385) were male and 16 per cent were female. Just over a third (35%/160) were aged between 35-44 and over a quarter (28%/129) 25-34 years old. Seventy-three per cent (334) were UK nationals.

Support needs of those in the sample also reflected the wider rough sleeping

population.<sup>1</sup> Sixty two per cent (286) had a current mental health issue and a similar proportion (60%/274) had a current alcohol/drug issue. Forty seven per cent (213) said they were currently sleeping rough and 53 per cent (245) had slept rough within the last 12 months. Half of the respondents had been homeless for 12 months or less, 14 per cent of people we surveyed had been homeless for over three years.

We asked about people's experiences of rough sleeping in terms of crime and anti-social behaviour within the 12 months before the survey whilst rough sleeping and at any stage of their homelessness experience. We also explored their housing history and support needs.

### 1.2 Rough sleeping and homelessness in England and Wales

Rough sleeping is increasing in England. On any one night in 2015, 3,569 people were counted or estimated to be sleeping rough. This is a 30 per cent increase from the previous year and double the levels since 2010.<sup>2</sup> In Wales the last rough sleeper count that took place in November 2015 estimated that 240 people were sleeping rough over a two week period.<sup>3</sup>

Whilst these figures do not give the full picture and are only able to provide a 'snapshot' in time they can be used to show trend analysis.

In London – where a much more robust and comprehensive means of counting rough sleepers is in place – more than 8,000 people were recorded sleeping rough in the

<sup>1</sup> Homeless Link *Health Needs Audit* <http://www.homeless.org.uk/facts/homelessness-in-numbers/health-needs-audit-explore-data>

<sup>2</sup> DCLG Rough sleeping in England: Autumn 2015 <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/rough-sleeping-in-england-autumn-2015>

<sup>3</sup> Welsh Government homelessness statistics, national rough sleeper count <http://gov.wales/statistics-and-research/national-rough-sleeping-count/?lang=en>

year 2015/16. Since 2012/13 numbers have increased by 26 per cent.<sup>4</sup>

While visible homelessness – rough sleeping – has been rising, the number of households seeking assistance and making homelessness applications at local authorities has been increasing too.

In England, a total of 57,770 households were accepted as homeless in 2015/16 – a six per cent increase on the previous year. Overall, 114,760 households made a homelessness application to a local authority. This is a rise of 29 per cent since 2009/10.<sup>5</sup>

However, these figures do not tell the whole picture in England. When accepted homelessness applications are combined with those households that approached their local authority for assistance to prevent their homelessness, a total of 271,000 cases were recorded in 2015/16. This is a rise of 32 per cent since 2009/10.<sup>6</sup>

In Wales, the introduction of the Housing (Wales) Act 2014, which placed a far greater emphasis on prevention and relief duties owed to all eligible homeless households, has seen a decline in the number of households accepted as homeless whilst more homeless people are being given assistance at the prevention and relief stage. During 2015/16, 22,209 households approached local authorities for homelessness assistance. During this period there were 8,952 actions

of prevention or relief taken to address households homelessness.<sup>7</sup>

### 1.3 Impact of rough sleeping and homelessness

Being homeless can represent a range of risks to mental and physical health related to the exposure to poor living conditions, difficulty in maintaining personal hygiene, poor diet and high levels of stress.<sup>8</sup> Just over a quarter (27%) of homeless people report an alcohol problem and two fifths (41%) struggle with drug use issues which often develop whilst experiencing homelessness<sup>9</sup> and can compound the above difficulties. Very similar associations exist between homelessness and severe mental illness which may both predate and develop during homelessness.<sup>10</sup> Homeless people who are rough sleeping or are in homelessness accommodation are also more likely to die young, with an average age of death of 47 years old, compared to 77 for the general population.<sup>11</sup>

Homeless people are also, unsurprisingly, disproportionately affected by loneliness and have limited contact with those that matter to them. Many feel like second-class citizens and feel left out and isolated. This can undermine their attempts to seek help and move on from homelessness.<sup>12</sup>

Being on the street also places homeless people in harm's way. Previous Crisis research showed that compared to the

4 CHAIN annual bulletin Greater London 2015/16 <https://files.datapress.com/london/dataset/chain-reports/2016-06-29T11:14:05/GreaterLondon-bulletin2015-16.pdf>

5 Statutory homelessness and prevention and relief live tables: April to June 2016 [https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/562742/Statutory\\_Homelessness\\_and\\_Prevention\\_and\\_Relief\\_Live\\_Tables\\_2016\\_Q2\\_-\\_REVISED.xls](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/562742/Statutory_Homelessness_and_Prevention_and_Relief_Live_Tables_2016_Q2_-_REVISED.xls)

6 *The homelessness monitor*. London: Crisis. <http://www.crisis.org.uk/pages/homelessnessmonitor.html>

7 Welsh Government homelessness statistics <http://gov.wales/docs/statistics/2016/160824-homelessness-2015-16-en.pdf>

8 Jones, A. & Pleace, N. (2010) *A Review of Single Homelessness in the UK*. London: Crisis. [http://www.crisis.org.uk/data/files/publications/ReviewOfSingleHomelessness\\_Final.pdf](http://www.crisis.org.uk/data/files/publications/ReviewOfSingleHomelessness_Final.pdf) See also Homeless Link's *Health Needs Audit* <http://www.homeless.org.uk/facts/homelessness-in-numbers/health-needs-audit-explore-data>

9 Pleace, N. (2008) *Effective Services for Substance Misuse and Homelessness in Scotland*: Evidence from an international review Edinburgh: Scottish Government; Kemp, P.A. et al (2006) Homelessness among problem drug users: prevalence, risk factors and trigger events. *Health & Social Care in the Community*, 14(4), 319-328

10 Jones, A. and Pleace, N (2010) *A Review of Single Homelessness in the UK 2000 - 2010*, London: Crisis

11 Thomas, B. (2012) *Homelessness kills* London: Crisis. <http://www.crisis.org.uk/data/files/publications/Homelessness%20kills%20-%20full%20report.pdf>

12 Sanders, B. and Brown, B. (2015) *'I was all on my own': experiences of loneliness and isolation amongst homeless people*. London: Crisis. [http://www.crisis.org.uk/data/files/publications/LonelinessReport\\_FINAL.pdf](http://www.crisis.org.uk/data/files/publications/LonelinessReport_FINAL.pdf)

general public homeless people were more likely to have experienced violence.<sup>13</sup> Sadly this violence can be extreme: of the 97 people who died while sleeping rough in England in the past five years, almost a quarter experienced a violent death.<sup>14</sup>

### 1.4 Report outline

The first section outlines the experiences of crime and anti-social behaviour people experienced in the past 12 months whilst rough sleeping and also more broadly when they had ever been homeless.

The report then explores some impacts of experiences of abuse on the street including negative effects on health and wellbeing and increased fear and anxiety about the future. All of which can undermine a rough sleeper's attempts to move on from living on the street.

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13 Newburn, T. & Rock, P. (2005) *Living in Fear: Violence and Victimisation in the Lives of Single Homeless People*. London: Crisis. [http://www.crisis.org.uk/data/files/publications/LivingInFear\\_full.pdf](http://www.crisis.org.uk/data/files/publications/LivingInFear_full.pdf)

14 St Mungo's (2016) *Nowhere safe to stay: the dangers of sleeping rough*. London: St Mungo's. <http://www.mungos.org/documents/7414/7414.pdf>

## Research findings

### 2.1 Safe on the streets?

*“It was some guy. He said, ‘Are you homeless?’ I said, ‘Yeah,’ and he just kicked me in the head. I was sat on the floor reading my book.”* Simon

*“Well it’s de-spiriting isn’t it? Because it doesn’t matter what life skills you have or what sort of, person you are. But they do see the lowest level.”* Gary

The survey reveals just how dangerous and risky rough sleeping on the streets of England and Wales is. More than three-quarters (77%/353) of rough sleepers surveyed had, at one time when sleeping out in the past 12 months, experienced some form of anti-social behaviour or crime against them. Almost eight out of 10 (79%/362) people surveyed had experienced anti-social or criminal behaviour whilst being homeless.

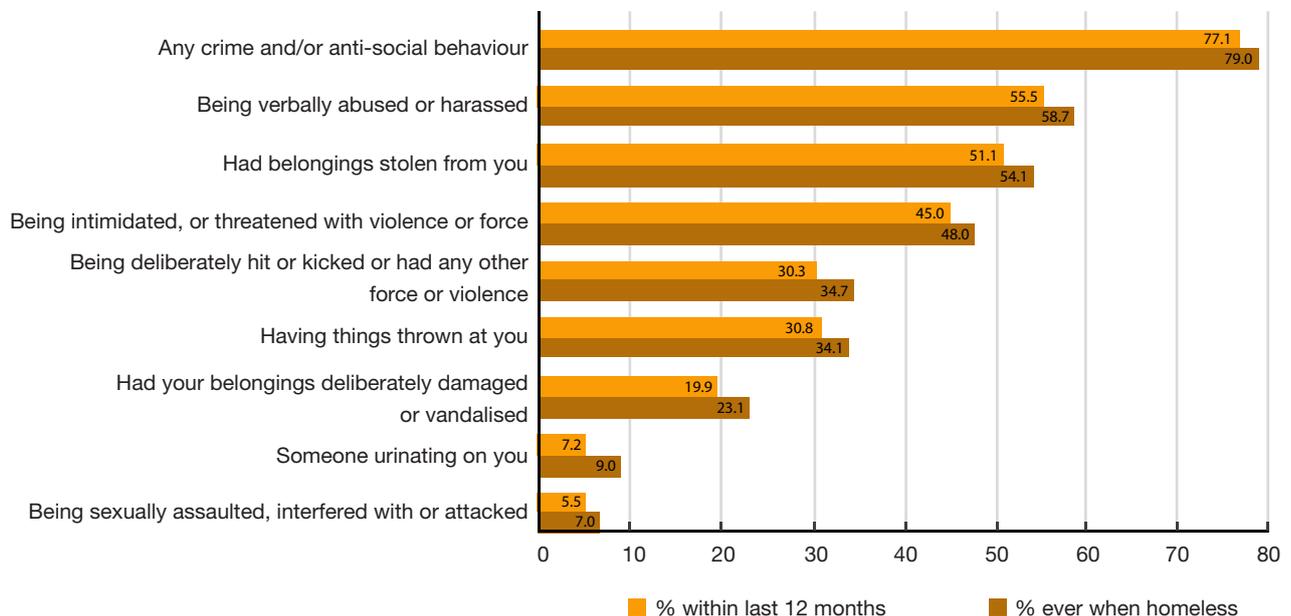
The range of anti-social and criminal behaviours endured by rough sleepers included: violent assault; theft; sexual assault; damage to belongings; verbal abuse, intimidation and being urinated on.

*“Gangs of young kids, you know about five or six of them that come around on the night time, 2.00am in the morning. And anyone sleeping in the shop door was done. They used to brick them or worse still. You know a couple of lads that were sleeping on the streets with me got knifed while they were asleep.”* Gary

### 2.2 Physical violence, intimidation and sexual assault

Thirty per cent (139) of rough sleepers reported being deliberately hit or kicked in the past 12 months. Female rough sleepers (36%/26) were proportionally more likely than

**Chart 1: Type of crime and anti-social behaviour experienced whilst ever homeless or within the 12 months when rough sleeping (per cent)**



male rough sleepers (29%/11) to be a victim of violence. In over half (55%) of the latest incidences of people being hit or kicked a member of the public unknown to the respondent was responsible.<sup>15</sup>

The threat of violence and being intimidated with potential force was a regular problem for almost half of people surveyed. Forty five per cent (206) had in the last year been threatened or intimidated with (potential) violence. Thirty one per cent (141) of respondents had experienced things being thrown at them.

In 56 per cent (124) of most recent threats of violence, the main perpetrators of such acts against rough sleepers were members of the general public.

*"I got attacked, you know. I didn't get beaten up, but I got a kick in the head for being homeless, down there. You know, if I was in town, then obviously there's a lot more cameras, and that wouldn't have happened, I think. But when I was down there, I was out... you know, there's no cameras down there, so I was at the mercy of other people. And, yeah, I got kicked in the head, I had a black eye for a few weeks, you know, and it was quite scary."* Simon

*"Oh I was beaten up once, that was a couple of weeks ago, by the same people I think that burnt my bedding up. I was in my sleeping bag because it comes around up over the shoulders, do you know what I mean? And three of them, and I was sleeping, they came over and started jumping on me, kicking me like. But I managed to get out, but to be honest, I don't know how I didn't have no marks or bruises, but I never had nothing."* Jeremy

A small proportion of respondents (6%/25) disclosed that they had been sexually

assaulted, interfered with or attacked in the past 12 months. Again in most cases the perpetrator was a member of the public. Not only is physical violence and abuse common on the street, but some rough sleepers reported being urinated on. Seven per cent (33) of respondents said this had happened to them in the past year.

*"It's disgusting, they peed on us in doorways and certainly not nice."* Phillip

### 2.3 Verbal abuse and harassment

Verbal abuse and harassment – being shouted at and insulted – was also a frequent experience when living on the streets. More than half (56%/254) of people surveyed had experienced some form of verbal abuse or harassment in the past 12 months.

*"I've had young lads coming up to me like giving me loads of shit, you know, call me a dirty scumbag and scrounger and all that. But they haven't got a clue, you know?"* Dan

Female rough sleepers were also more likely to experience this than men. Sixty five per cent (47) of women compared to 53 per cent (206) of male rough sleepers had been verbally abused in the last 12 months. As with other forms of abuse, the general public are those most likely to be behind recent experiences (66%).

*"Kind of treatment you get off the public sometimes, you know, calling you a tramp or calling a smack head and things like that and they don't know you at all, you know? But yeah, you know, you very much feel on your own."* Dan

### 2.4 Damage and theft of property

While violence and abuse directed towards

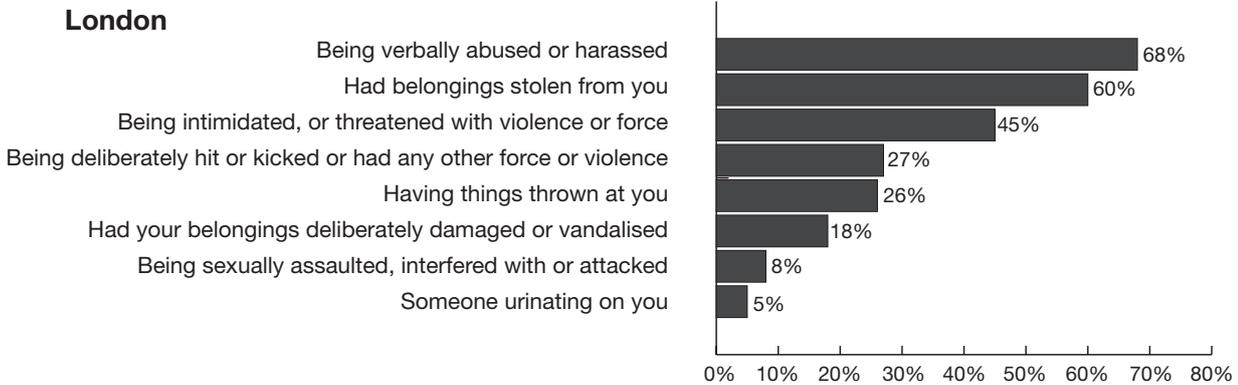
<sup>15</sup> These findings are in similar proportions to the recent findings from WHAT (2016) which found that 34% of rough sleepers in Westminster had been beaten up or attacked since they had been rough sleeping. The proportion was also higher for women rough sleepers. See <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5732f934e707eb22d69226c8/t/580a222e659490225805b4/1477059122289/WHAT+Detailed+Findings+-+Oct+2016.pdf>

**Chart 2: Breakdown of crime or anti-social behaviour experienced within the last 12 months in Wales and English regions (per cent).**

**Wales**



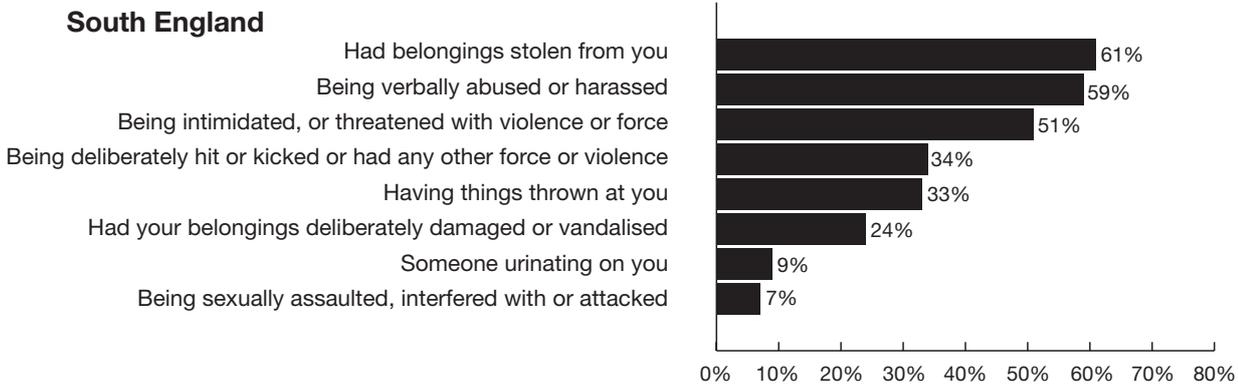
**London**



**North England**



**South England**



Sample size: South England 97; North England 243; London 73; Wales 45; All 458

rough sleepers is common so too is damage to and threat to their property and belongings. Proportionally female rough sleepers (54%/39) were more likely in the last 12 months to have experienced a theft than their male counterparts (50%/194). Overall more than half of rough sleepers (51%/234) reported having had things stolen from them when sleeping out.

*"I have been... things have been stolen from me just then, and they treat me... I don't know them, they just come to where you are sleeping on the street. And steal your things or kick you or try to fight with you, they try to take your money and things like that, asking for what, you know, you can't talk about all the kind of things, like, you know, they just want to violate you, something like that."* Benji

The theft of their belongings is a constant threat and worry for rough sleepers in England and Wales as is the worry of them being vandalised or deliberately damaged. Two in ten (20%/91) respondents had their belongings deliberately damaged or vandalised. Male rough sleepers surveyed (21%/79) experienced this more than female rough sleepers (16%/12).

## 2.5 Reporting incidences of crime and anti-social behaviour

As already indicated, the main perpetrators of the abuse and violence that rough sleepers experience are members of the general public.

*"I've been chucked over subways in tent in [name of town], picked it up and chucked over a subway. .. It was at Christmas time and everyone was going out getting drunk. You get more trouble at Christmas, I believe, than any other time. It's supposed to be a happy time."* Paul

In many cases where an obvious crime had occurred many rough sleepers were reluctant to report it to the police. When asked if they had reported the last crime or experience of anti-social behaviour to the police, in over half of cases (53%) people had not. This varied dependent on the type and severity of incident that had taken place but on half of the sexual assaults cases they hadn't reported it to the police and where people had been intimidated or threatened with violence or force this increased to 80 per cent. The main reason that people cited for not reporting the crime was because they did not think the police would do anything about it.

Rough sleepers explained that,

*"... I'm not anti-police and I do talk to the police. But they don't give you the time because you're homeless I think. You don't get the support as you, if you have like a house."* Ian

*"Obviously there was no police down there. When I did see the police, which was the next day, I told them about it [an assault], they did nothing at all about it, you know. Whereas if it was someone else, I know for a fact they would have taken a statement, or taken details off me, but whereas the police didn't want to know nothing about me."* Simon

### 3. Impact of violence and abuse on the street

The consequences of the violence and abuse rough sleepers experience are serious and significant. There are a range of repercussions.

These include negative impacts on their mental and physical health and ability to trust others. This can inhibit them from seeking help to move on from homelessness.

Experiences of abuse can further entrench rough sleeping and marginalise rough sleepers from support. The survey also showed that more than half of respondents (66%/302) across England and Wales think that life on the street is getting worse. The recent survey of rough sleepers in Westminster confirms this rather bleak message: 66 per cent (161) said that they were not involved in any activities beyond just trying to survive on the street.<sup>16</sup>

#### 3.1 Living in fear and surviving on the street

Rough sleepers spoke of how being attacked or abused on the street left them feeling more at risk and in an even more perilous situation. Other people were considered to be untrustworthy and to be viewed with suspicion.

*“There’s a lot of pressure on you, you don’t know who is going to come and pick [on you]... we don’t know if we’re going to get burnt alive or anything, it’s too dangerous out there. I’m glad that we have got each other out there because I don’t know how people cope on their own, I really don’t.”*  
Phillip

*“I see some people sometimes, I watch, because when I sleep, I used to hide too much. If I was in the park, I used to hide, right; but if I see some people, sometimes they are dangerous, I used to think, ‘Run!’”*  
Francis

Fear and, at times, paranoia become commonplace and part of daily existence on the streets.

*“If you sleep somewhere, you can see, like, bad people. It depends which area, sometimes, but if you are not alert, if you go to sleep, some areas... there is some people they are not good, you can get killed easily. You can get stabbed sometimes, you know?”* Benji

*“I think I get more paranoid now as well because you’re always looking over your shoulder, you can’t trust anyone see, you can’t... the best people to trust living on the street are the street people, the other homeless people. But then you’ve got to be careful because they’re not all genuinely truthful and then, well.”* Philip

The survey showed that the constant uncertainty over the trustworthiness of others means some rough sleepers look to other rough sleepers for a sense of security, comradery and support.

*“I was in [name of town] on the soup run and this homeless boy saw me shivering, do you know what he done, he took off his coat and he give it to me, you know, that brings tears to my eyes that he would.”*  
Phillip

<sup>16</sup> Westminster Homeless Action Together (2016) *Detailed survey findings*. <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5732f934e707eb22d-69226c8/t/580a222ebe659490225805b4/1477059122289/WHAT+Detailed+Findings++Oct+2016.pdf>

Previous research by Crisis has shown the impact that negative encounters with others can have on homeless people. In almost half of the cases (44%) people felt they did not deserve help and felt stigmatised and ashamed of their circumstances.<sup>17</sup>

Despite the potential source of support other rough sleepers could provide, many of those interviewed for this research talked about the dilemma of either staying in public view and near other rough sleepers or hiding away from sight.

Previous recent research confirms this dilemma. More than half the homeless people surveyed (about what made them feel safer) said that visibility and proximity to the general public made them feel less safe.<sup>18</sup>

*"I sleep in the buses, mainly because I can't see sleeping in the street as...safe, it's not safe because I have been harassed, I have been kicked..."* Benji

Other people that took part in the interviews explained that staying away from other rough sleepers meant they were also away from people drinking alcohol or using drugs.

*"I stay by myself quite a lot. Mainly down to past drug history and all that. I don't want to get involved. So it doesn't really do me any good mentally because I'm on my own, but I do find it's safer. A lot of people say it's safer to stay in groups, but I always found it safer to try and get out of the city centre as far as you can, find somewhere quiet."* Dan

The consequences of remaining isolated and away from others can be severe and further exacerbate loneliness which can have its

own long-term consequences. Homeless people and homeless service users are three times as 'lonely' as people over the age of 52 (a cohort most associated with loneliness) in the UK. In previous Crisis research more than a third reported often being isolated and lacking in companionship. Over half of homeless people surveyed said that these experiences make attempting to seek support much harder.<sup>19</sup>

*"It's really not a life. It's like dying every day. It's no life at all. ... It's like hell really, hell... because... [you spend] most of the time alone really. I don't really have much friends... Most of the time is alone."* Benji

### 3.2 Impact on health and wellbeing

Further to the issues of fear and isolation, remaining on the street has serious implications for people's health.

*"When I sleep on the dust, you see here, like maybe in the park, you know, the grass, sometimes there is a lot of dirt. And then sometimes you see the dog hair, something like that, you know? A lot of times when I go there, I get bad asthma; and then there is cold. A lot of time, when I get cold outside, I get asthma, and I get chest – very tight in my chest."* John

*"And sleeping rough is very dangerous. I experience some kind of sickness, a lot of sickness that I don't or that I've never dreamt of before in my life. I have the same came to me like no man business.*

*I was so sick, my leg was so swollen up and I was diagnosed with hypertension. They had a blood pressure thing, I was*

17 Sanders, B. and Brown, B. (2015) 'I was all on my own': experiences of loneliness and isolation amongst homeless people. London: Crisis. [http://www.crisis.org.uk/data/files/publications/LonelinessReport\\_FINAL.pdf](http://www.crisis.org.uk/data/files/publications/LonelinessReport_FINAL.pdf)

18 Newburn, T. & Rock, P. (2005) *Living in Fear: Violence and Victimization in the Lives of Single Homeless People*. London: Crisis. [http://www.crisis.org.uk/data/files/publications/LivingInFear\\_full.pdf](http://www.crisis.org.uk/data/files/publications/LivingInFear_full.pdf)

19 Sanders, B. and Brown, B. (2015) 'I was all on my own': experiences of loneliness and isolation amongst homeless people. London: Crisis. [http://www.crisis.org.uk/data/files/publications/LonelinessReport\\_FINAL.pdf](http://www.crisis.org.uk/data/files/publications/LonelinessReport_FINAL.pdf)

*always eating drug more than food, you know, because you hardly get the food but you get... they will give the drugs or tell them to give you the drugs.” Benji*

Ill-health, the threat of violence and abuse can mean some rough sleepers felt like turning to alcohol as a means of managing the difficult circumstances they find themselves in.

*“...out of sheer boredom sometimes or because of depression you end up drinking a lot, you know?” Dan*

*“Sometimes I used to drink a lot, but then I think, I’m getting poison, so yeah, I can get no pain forsaking myself. But something tells me, ‘Ah, stop it, stop it’.” Cem*

The cumulative impact of being on the street – the violence, the abuse, the fear, the isolation, the ill-health – can take its toll on the mental wellbeing of rough sleepers.

*“Well it has changed my personality, for a start. My self-confidence has gone to nothing, because there has been no change for so long, you just give up like and you just accept it.” Jeremy*

And in some cases it can push individuals to contemplate suicide.

*“I used to feel, you know, to kill myself, a lot of times. I used to feel a lot. I used to feel to do something a lot of times. But a lot of times, I’d think to drink a lot, and then to take some poison and drink it, and that’s it. Something tells me, I stop it, ‘Don’t do that’. Yeah. But I used to feel like killing myself, a lot of times.” Cem*

*“I know people who have committed suicide and overdosed, you know, because they can’t be dealing with it anymore. As I say, you know, I’ve almost done it myself. But yeah I do, I do find a lot of people think they’re you know, being ignored or forgotten about and that – that is the way it feels, you know?” Dan*

These experiences and sentiments are unfortunately not rare. In 2016 a survey of more than 200 rough sleepers in Westminster found that 18 per cent had threatened or tried to harm themselves, or others, in the last year.<sup>20</sup>

Furthermore, these experiences add weight to the existing understanding about the links between mental health and rough sleeping. In England 45 per cent of rough sleepers have a diagnosed mental health problem and 91 per cent reported a mental health issue.<sup>21</sup>

People sleeping on the streets with a mental health problem are more likely to live on the streets for longer. This is in large part because mental health problems can be a barrier for people engaging with services that can help them move out of rough sleeping and into sustainable accommodation.<sup>22</sup>

20 Westminster Homeless Action Together (2016) *Detailed survey findings*. <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5732f934e707eb22d-69226c8/t/580a222e659490225805b4/1477059122289/WHAT+Detailed+Findings+-+Oct+2016.pdf>

21 Homeless Link, *Health Needs Audit* data tool: <http://www.homeless.org.uk/facts/homelessness-in-numbers/health-needs-audit-explore-data>

22 St Mungo’s (2016) *Stop the Scandal: the case for action on mental health and rough sleeping*. London: St Mungo’s. <http://www.mungos.org/documents/7430/7430.pdf>

## 4. Conclusion

This new research adds to existing evidence of the unacceptable levels of abuse and harm caused to people sleeping rough on the streets. It shows the prevalence of incidences of crime and anti-social behaviour amongst people who are current and recent rough sleepers and how these experiences alongside other aspects of rough sleeping can cause long-term damage to health and wellbeing. It also highlights how this can compromise both personal and institutional attempts to move someone away from sleeping on the streets.

Something urgently needs to be done. Existing support from local authorities in England for homeless households and single homeless people is inadequate. Many are turned away with no help whatsoever.<sup>23</sup>

The Homelessness Reduction Bill currently going through parliament is a step in the right direction. If this bill becomes law it would help do more to prevent and relieve homelessness and offer homelessness assistance to those at risk of rough sleeping at a much earlier stage.

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<sup>23</sup> Dobie, S., Sanders, B. & Teixeira, L. (2014) *Turned Away: The treatment of single homeless people by local authority homelessness services in England*. London: Crisis

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## About Crisis

Crisis is the national charity for homeless people. We are dedicated to ending homelessness by delivering life-changing services and campaigning for change.

Our innovative education, employment, housing and well-being services address individual needs and help homeless people to transform their lives. We measure our success and can demonstrate tangible results and value for money.

We are determined campaigners, working to prevent people from becoming homeless and advocating solutions informed by research and our direct experience.

We have ambitious plans for the future and are committed to help more people in more places across the UK. We know we won't end homelessness overnight or on our own. But we take a lead, collaborate with others and together make change happen.

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## Homelessness ends here