

Hidden Homelessness: Britain's Invisible City



CRISIS

Fighting for hope for
homeless people

“It was one mate’s floor one night, another mate’s sofa the next night. There’s so much pressure not to let people know how bad your situation is, but deep down, you’re absolutely falling apart.”



Britain's invisible city

Imagine if every single resident of a vibrant, flourishing city like Manchester was displaced from their home. That's approximately 380,000 people without a home. Their plight would cause outrage and we'd want to do all we could to help these people reclaim their lives.

But an invisible city of vulnerable and excluded people does exist in Britain today. Crisis has estimated that there are 380,000 Hidden Homeless people trapped in circumstances that leave them on the fringes of society. They live in hostels, squats and bed and breakfast accommodation or stay with friends or family. Their situation is not a temporary interlude – many are trapped in it for years.

This is a city that doesn't appear on any map of Britain. Its population is found spread across the country. Ignoring this problem comes with a heavy price. Hidden Homelessness is costing Britain as much as £1.4* billion every year, a sum equivalent in scale to the local government expenditure of a city the size of Birmingham.

The people of this city are amongst the most vulnerable in Britain today, and the problems they face are not just about being without a roof. Many are struggling with problems such as unemployment, family breakdown, mental ill health and substance abuse. With the right support they could overcome these, but all too often they are left to cope alone.

It is time that Hidden Homelessness was recognised as a major social problem facing Britain today. Providing people with a roof over their head is not a solution on its own. It has to run alongside solutions that help people rebuild their lives. But in order to provide solutions, we need a proper understanding of the situation. We want politicians and policy-makers to carry out a census of Hidden Homeless people.

* See www.crisis.org.uk/hidden for further information.

“It became a juggling act of B&Bs, staying with my parents – not telling them anything about my situation. The stress of having to find somewhere to live and find work was too much.”



Invisible people

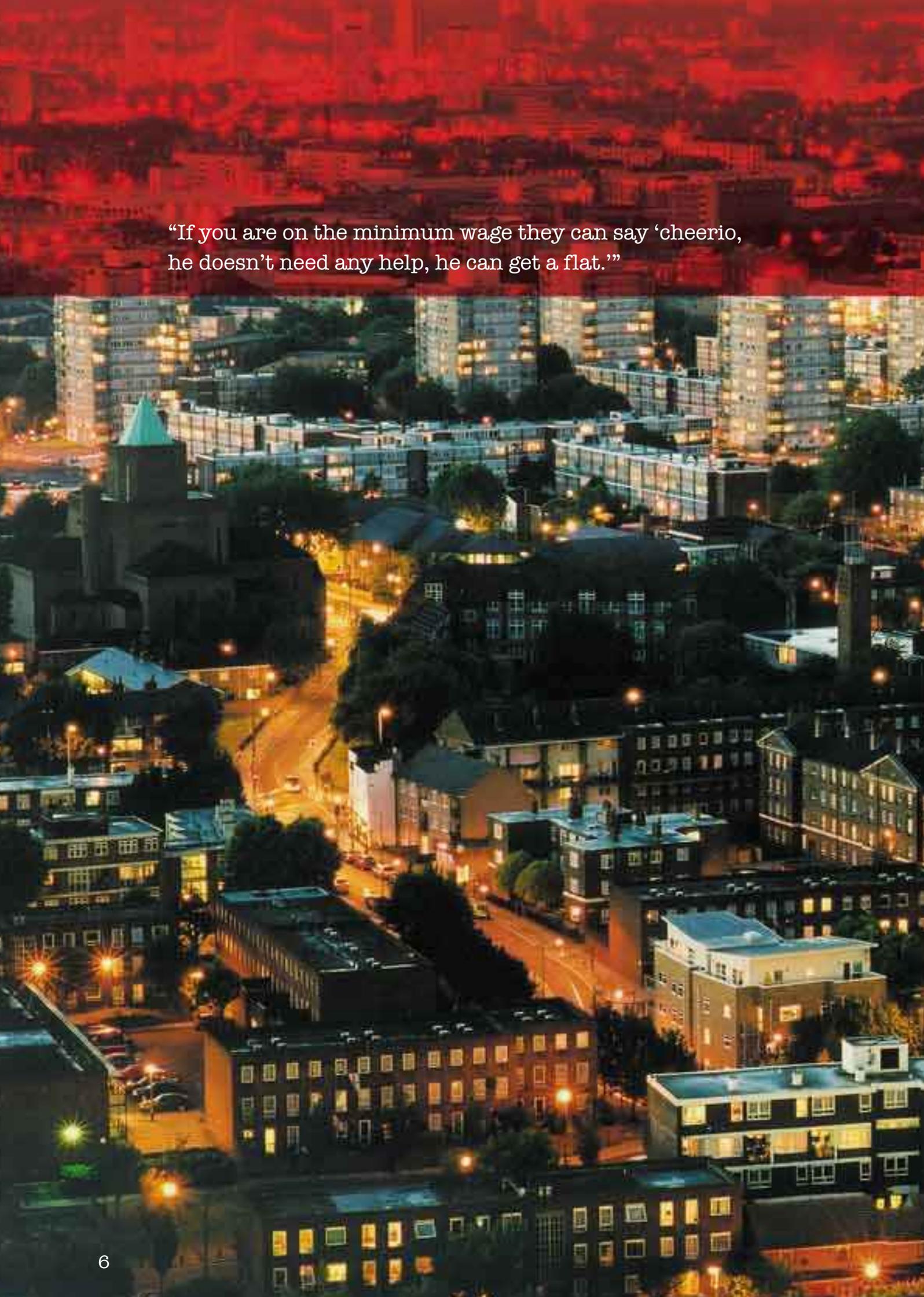
Hidden Homelessness is the problem of single homeless people who exist out of sight in hostels, bed and breakfast accommodation, squats or with friends and family.

Those affected are amongst the most vulnerable people in our society, homeless as a result of unemployment, relationship breakdown, mental ill health, substance abuse or any combination of these factors. Many are excluded from mainstream society, unable to participate in the communities in which they live. All are determined to find a route out of homelessness but such an existence is incredibly damaging and can erode confidence and skills - making the journey back very difficult. They face many barriers that can block the way back to an independent and fulfilling life.

“Homelessness broke me. Despite everything I had been through and survived, it was being made homeless that got to me in the end.”

Yet their dilemma is rarely recognised as a priority by policy makers. There is no official count of the numbers of people affected and too little is known of their needs. As a result they are often ignored.

In an era of official audits on everything from health and poverty to recycling levels, it seems scandalous that there are no official figures for the number of Hidden Homeless people living in Britain today.

An aerial night photograph of a city, likely London, showing a dense urban landscape. The sky is a deep, vibrant red, suggesting a sunset or sunrise. The city is illuminated by streetlights and the lights from buildings, creating a warm, golden glow. In the foreground, a large, dark building with a prominent, illuminated spire is visible. The background shows a vast expanse of city buildings, many of which are lit up, creating a bright, glowing effect against the dark sky. The overall scene is a mix of modern and traditional architecture, with a mix of high-rise buildings and older, multi-story structures.

“If you are on the minimum wage they can say ‘cheerio, he doesn’t need any help, he can get a flat.’”

Real numbers

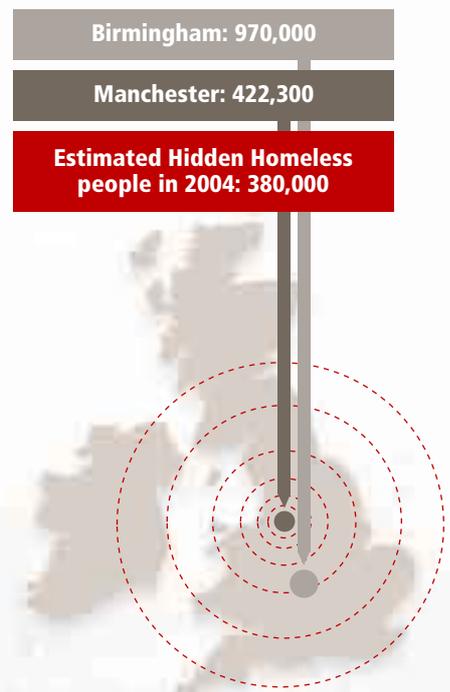
Crisis has estimated that there are as many as 380,000* Hidden Homeless people in Britain today. That is almost equivalent to a population the size of Manchester, and one that looks likely to grow, with current trends indicating that it could reach the one million mark by 2020.

Society is becoming more fragmented. The number of single households has increased three-fold since 1971, with fewer people getting married and more people getting divorced. Problems such as substance abuse, alcohol addiction and mental ill health are common and, in some cases rising. Crisis research found that amongst some Hidden Homeless populations, one in three had mental health problems and one in four were struggling with a serious drug addiction. These are the factors that combine to cause homelessness.

In Britain, local authorities are responsible for keeping a register of the numbers of people who approach them as homeless. According to their figures, homelessness is at its highest level since 1997. But these figures do not tell the whole story as they only include those who approach local authorities for help. Official figures ignore Hidden Homeless people.

For every household recognised as homeless by a local authority, there will be someone out there whose homelessness is hidden. Some people are unaware of their entitlements, others are too vulnerable to look for help and some simply slip through the net. Most of these are single adults; all of them are Hidden Homeless people.

* The number of single homeless people is estimated to be in the hundreds of thousands at any one time. Only a tiny proportion of these are rough sleepers. Around a quarter are single people staying either in hostels, bed and breakfast accommodation or facing imminent threat of eviction on the grounds of debt. The remaining three quarters form what are known as concealed households, residing with friends or family, but without any explicit right to do so and in accommodation, which is in some way unsatisfactory. See www.crisis.org.uk/hidden for further information.



City populations in 2004



Projected rise in the number of Hidden Homeless people

“ I wanted to work... I was ready for work.”



Real costs

Hidden Homelessness is costing Britain approximately £1.4 billion* a year, a sum equivalent in scale to the local government expenditure of a city the size of Birmingham.

Thousands of people are trapped by a combination of unemployment, rocketing house prices and complex benefits systems. Forced to live transient lives in temporary accommodation, they are prevented from playing their part in society.

Thousands of Hidden Homeless people are desperate to work but are unable to. That means £450 million in lost earnings every year. Most are determined to get back on their feet and gain control of their lives again but are prevented from doing so by a lack of skills and training.

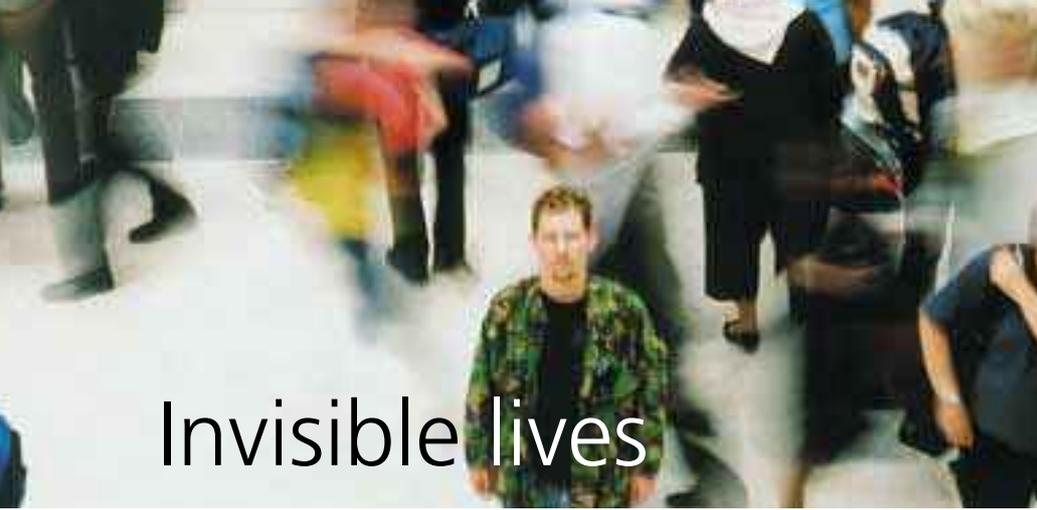
Yet it is apparent that there is a rich seam of untapped potential amongst Hidden Homeless people. A Crisis survey of its Changing Lives Award recipients revealed a diversity of skills and experience: with two in three of those questioned having worked before becoming homeless; one in five having held managerial positions and one in ten having been self-employed or ran their own businesses. However, the erosion of skills and confidence makes the journey back to a career and training very difficult.

“I do really hate this feeling that I have of living on the nation’s taxes.”

Understanding the causes of Hidden Homelessness and enabling vulnerable people to live independent and productive lives are the only ways to bring down this bill.

Cost category	Cost element	Broad annual scale of cost
Temporary accommodation	Local authority homelessness services	£100 million
	People in hostels	£500 million
	Housing benefit for those in bed and breakfast	£100 million
Health, police and criminal justice services		£100 million
Lack of paid work	Lost income to the individuals (plus lost taxes to the State)	£450 million
	Savings in out-of-work benefits	£150 million
Total		£1.4 billion

* See www.crisis.org.uk/hidden for further information.



Invisible lives

Hidden Homelessness can happen to anyone. It has no respect for status, income or age and affects as many as 380,000 people in Britain today.

“I had a four bedroom house, a good job and a very comfortable lifestyle. I found it very difficult to cope with my marriage breakdown; I simply couldn’t cope anymore.”

Crisis has built up a clear picture of the lives and experiences of the most vulnerable who lead chaotic and precarious lives. They are stuck in hostels, squats, and temporary bed and breakfast accommodation. Some spend months, sometimes years moving between friends’ floors with nowhere else to go.

Many Hidden Homeless people have left behind careers, families, skills, and friendships and have led independent, stable lives in the past. Problems such as rising house prices combined with traumatic events, including family breakdown, domestic violence, addiction and mental health problems often lead to their homelessness. Hidden Homelessness means they lose their independent lives and are set on a course away from normal choices and options, rapidly diminishing their chances of rebuilding their lives and regaining stability and independence.

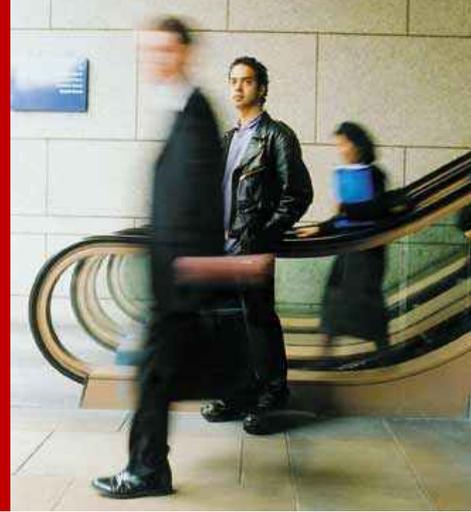
The hopes and potential of Hidden Homeless people are thwarted daily by being shut out from the opportunity to live at the heart of society. They see ‘real life’ going on all around them; people going to work, college, homes and social events but they are distant observers, separated by a series of barriers that keep them on the fringes.

“It’s like watching the rest of the world going on around you but you are not part of it. I am tired of living on the other side of the glass.”

To hold down a job whilst living in a hostel or squat is a feat of willpower and organisation - very few manage to do it for long. Often they lose their job when their employer finds out they don’t have a home of their own, or the effort of leading a ‘double life’ and disguising their homelessness becomes too much of a strain.

“There’s huge stigma about it. If I had told people I was homeless I don’t think the people I was working with would look at me in the same way.”

“It’s like living in a glass box... you’re entirely protected but also entirely isolated”.



Job-hunting is tough. Hostels, squats or temporary bed and breakfast accommodation are not good environments from which to be job-hunting or preparing for interviews. And many employers do not want to take on people who have no permanent home, seeing them as unreliable and a liability.

“I never put my full address on the cv. You could suddenly see them switch off as soon as people learnt where I lived.”

Being shut out of employment is not the only toll Hidden Homelessness takes. It’s a debilitating state, confidence and skills become severely eroded and depression and isolation set in. Living in a hostel or squat, sleeping on someone’s floor or in temporary bed and breakfast accommodation denies people privacy and a chance to feel safe and secure.

“I’m not comfortable having visitors where I am. You don’t want people you care about to get caught up in anything that might happen in the hostel.”

Hidden Homeless people often struggle to get the help they need to get back on their feet and build a more stable life. It’s common for them to be without the support they need, out of contact with their local authority and without the most basic housing advice or information.

“All around you is the distress of life. Nothing to make you smile. My circumstances have brought me to the brink of suicide.”

A high proportion of Hidden Homeless people have more complex problems including mental ill health and addiction. They are urgently in need of specialist help including psychiatric assessment and care, detox and rehabilitation support. Many are not in touch with specialist drug or mental health workers and few are even registered with a GP.

The temporary arrangements of hostels and friends’ floors that provide a stopgap in an emergency, rapidly become permanent. And although people are desperate to get paid work, they are often caught in the benefits trap and can’t earn enough to make ends meet.

With the right kind of support, we can help them get back on their feet and gain control of their futures.

“Now I am a productive member of society.
I pay my way. I’ve got a lovely home
and a great job.”

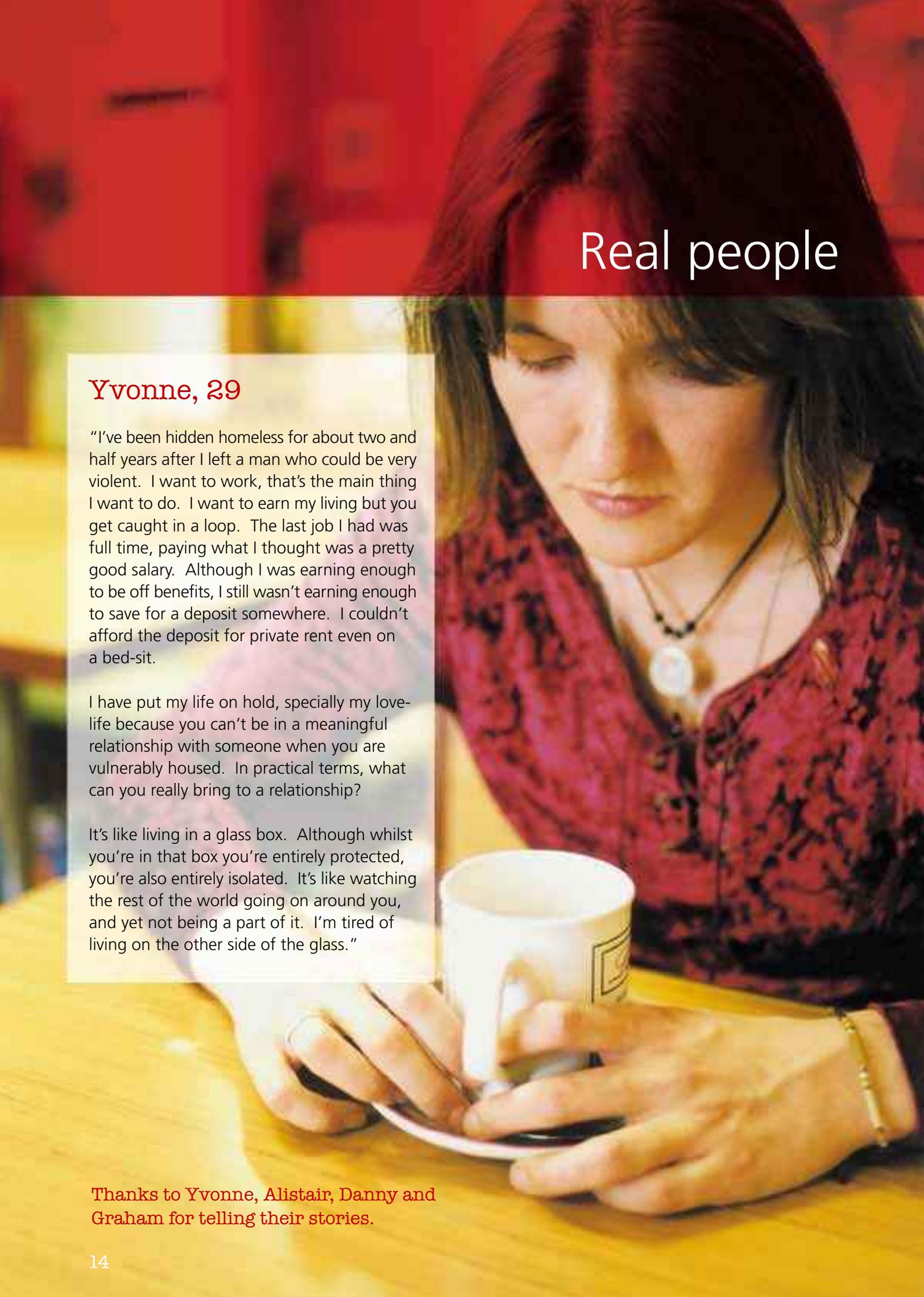


A Hidden Homeless census

Homeless people are desperate to move on and can do so if we recognise their dilemma and provide them with the services and support that they need.

We need a new approach to homelessness that puts people at its centre and recognises housing as only one part of the solution. We need to ensure that homeless people are given help to overcome problems such as drug addiction and mental ill health, afforded a real chance to reskill and sustain a job, and the opportunity to reintegrate into mainstream society.

The first step however, is as simple as it is critical. We need a comprehensive audit of the problem. We need a census of the Hidden Homeless population. There are far more Hidden Homeless people than is officially recognised and the problem has only been partially understood and only partly tackled. We need to know how many Hidden Homeless people there are, who they are and what help and support they need. Conducting a census of Hidden Homeless people will allow us to understand the true nature of the problem that we face, the reality of the interventions that we need to make, and the scale of resources that we need to commit. Hidden Homelessness is a problem that can be solved.



Real people

Yvonne, 29

"I've been hidden homeless for about two and half years after I left a man who could be very violent. I want to work, that's the main thing I want to do. I want to earn my living but you get caught in a loop. The last job I had was full time, paying what I thought was a pretty good salary. Although I was earning enough to be off benefits, I still wasn't earning enough to save for a deposit somewhere. I couldn't afford the deposit for private rent even on a bed-sit.

I have put my life on hold, specially my love-life because you can't be in a meaningful relationship with someone when you are vulnerably housed. In practical terms, what can you really bring to a relationship?

It's like living in a glass box. Although whilst you're in that box you're entirely protected, you're also entirely isolated. It's like watching the rest of the world going on around you, and yet not being a part of it. I'm tired of living on the other side of the glass."

Thanks to Yvonne, Alistair, Danny and Graham for telling their stories.



Alistair, 26

"I've been on and off the streets for about eight years, since coming out of prison. When I came out of prison and went to the homeless hostel in Liverpool, I didn't smoke weed. When I left Liverpool, I smoked a lot. There is a culture amongst a lot of homeless people, with a lot of people drinking, smoking and doing drugs. It's a hard cycle to get out of.

"I don't smoke anymore. I might smoke cigarettes maybe, but not drugs. Most people don't realise how easy it is to become homeless. I worked as a chef. A second chef actually, earning about £1,000 plus a month after tax. Five months later I had no money, no job and was living on the streets. OK, I had mental health issues but I think the catering industry contributed to that. I've worked as a barman on and off during the last eight years, as well as a waiter and a chef. You'd always meet after work for a drink with your work mates, then another drink, then another drink. I haven't touched a drop of booze for about six months.

"To most people, homelessness is the beggar you see on the street corner or the old fella begging for change. No. There are lots of people sleeping on a friend's floor or staying with their family because they've got no home of their own. Living in a hostel affects so many different people from all walks of life. Most people just don't see this."

Danny, 26

"I've been homeless here and there for about eight years or so, mostly in hostels. I had a big falling out with my family, and so began eight years of complete frustration really.

"I had a good job. I was made homeless shortly after starting it but somehow managed to hold on to it for about three or four months. I don't know how. I was sleeping on one mate's floor one night, sleeping on someone else's sofa another night. I always had to make sure I got my shower before going into work because you can't really let the people you're working with know what

your situation is. There is such a big stigma about it. You just put on a brave face. But it was getting harder and harder. Eventually the pressure got too much and I ended up losing my job. To make matters even worse I was on an HNC college course. It was going to lead up to a diploma course. Because I was sofa-hopping far away from the college, I couldn't attend and I lost the course. I was so, so gutted.

"I just want to be able to get out there and actually show people what I can do. I just want to get out there and make something of myself. This situation – it's like a brick wall. Just because I am homeless doesn't mean that I am lazy, beyond hope and not even worth looking at. I would really, really like people to put the homeless label to one side and actually look at me for who I am. Look at me for the skills I can bring and what I can achieve."

Graham, 57

"I left a responsible job to come back to London to look after my elderly parents. They ended up in hospital within a couple of months of each other. They then went into nursing homes. The bills were astronomical and on their deaths, the nursing home took me to court to have me evicted so that my parents property could be sold to pay the bills.

"It was impossible to get private rented accommodation, as I was on benefits at the time. It is nowhere near enough to cover the deposit you have to pay. So I ended up on the streets. If you said to me two years ago that I'd be here now sleeping on the streets of London, I would have said you were mad.

"When I was working, I was running a department of eight people spending £20 million a year.

I'm looking for work. The problem is that if you are honest with people when applying for a job and they see 'of no fixed abode' as your address the shutters come down and they don't want to know. They don't even give you a chance. I'll wash up. I've applied for billboard holding.

All I dearly want is four walls, a bed, a mattress and a lockable door so that when I go to bed I feel safe."

Be part of The Crisis Hidden Homelessness campaign

A highlight of the campaign will be a specially constructed walk-in box where visitors will be able to hear about Hidden Homelessness for themselves, through a series of recorded voices of Hidden Homeless people telling their stories.

To get involved in the campaign and take a virtual tour of the Hidden Homeless box, please visit www.crisis.org.uk/hidden

Crisis is the national charity for single homeless people and works year-round to help vulnerable and marginalised people get through the crisis of homelessness, fulfill their potential and transform their lives. We develop innovative services that help homeless people rebuild their social and practical skills, join the world of work and reintegrate into society.

Crisis Skylight is an award-winning activity centre, designed to re-skill and re-motivate single homeless people by offering flexible first steps back into learning and society – through a variety of non-compulsory courses.

Crisis Changing Lives provides financial and mentoring support to help people who are homeless or settling into a new home realise their ambitions.

Urban Village is a new project currently being developed. It aims to create an integrated community where homeless people live alongside low-paid key workers and receive support in a thriving complex of around 400 flats.

Crisis SmartMove is a nationwide scheme that gives homeless and vulnerably housed people comprehensive housing advice and helps them access accommodation in the private rented sector.

Crisis Open Christmas offers homeless and vulnerably housed people a range of services including medical treatment and housing advice, but above all - companionship.

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