



Living in Fear:  
Violence and Victimization in the Lives of Single  
Homeless People

Initial Findings  
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CRIMINOLOGY

# Living In Fear: Violence and Victimization in the Lives of Single Homeless People

## Introduction

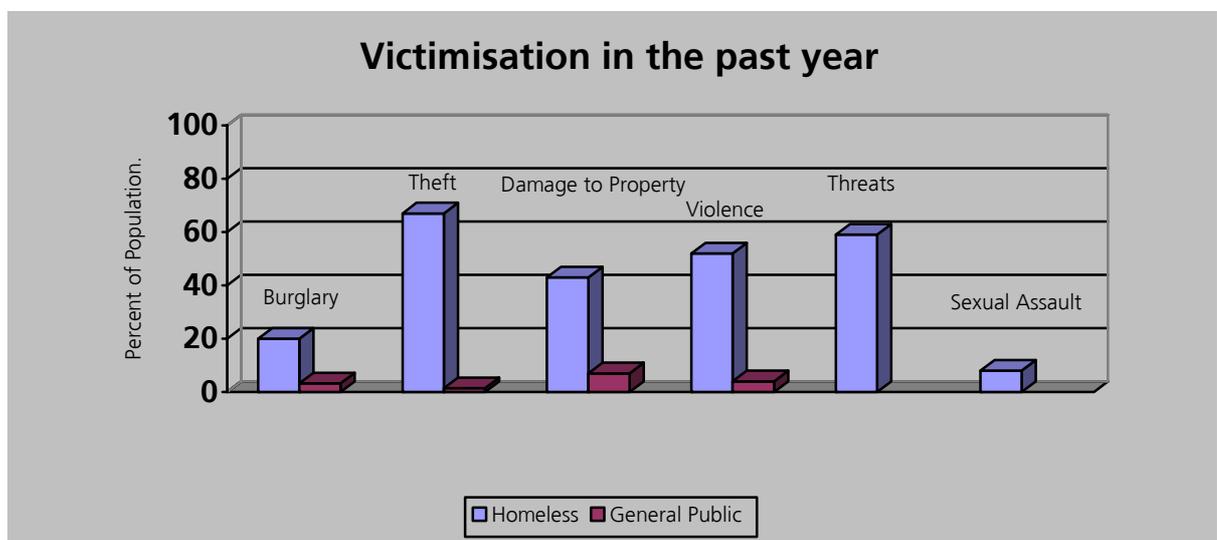
Homeless people are amongst the most vulnerable people in our society, suffering from acute levels of poverty and social exclusion. Now in a new study commissioned by Crisis, researchers at the London School of Economics have revealed that they are also victims of exceptionally high levels of violence, crime and victimisation. Alarmingly much of it is committed by the general public & for the most part it goes unreported.

Based upon interviews with homeless men and women living on the street and in temporary accommodation in three cities across the UK (London, Oxford and Cambridge)<sup>1</sup>, this work brings to light the stark reality that exists for homeless people as they face persistent abuse and threats on a day-to-day basis leaving them traumatised and living in fear.

Crisis is calling for immediate attention to a critical issue facing individuals who are homeless across the UK. There is an urgent need to identify the ways in which homeless people are at an increased risk and implement effective strategies to prevent continued abuse and injury.

## Homeless peoples experiences of violence & crime

Whilst crime figures in the UK are falling overall, homeless peoples experience of violence and crime remains staggeringly high. Compared to the general public they are 13 times more likely to have experienced violence & 47 times more likely to be victims of theft. Almost one in ten of those interviewed had experienced sexual assault in the last year, around half had experienced damage to property and one in five had been a victim of burglary.



<sup>1</sup> In August and September 2004, 336 people took part in structured (n=305) and unstructured (n=31) interviews. 205 of the interviews were conducted in central London, the country's capital city where the bulk of homeless people are to be found;<sup>1</sup> 50 were held in Oxford and 50 in Cambridge. The structured interviews have incorporated key elements of the British Crime Survey (BCS) a standardised interview schedule that measures people's exposure to crime. The BCS is a household survey that typically does not capture the experiences of individuals who are homeless.<sup>1</sup> Men and women who are currently homeless (rough sleeping, in temporary accommodation or in other hidden homeless situations) were recruited through activity & day centres, hostels, 'street' recruitment and 'snowballing' through the social networks of respondents.<sup>1</sup>

While crime levels are dropping across the UK, for homeless people the rates are staggering:

- 20% of people suffered a burglary, whilst the British Crime Survey reported that 3.2% of all households in England and Wales
- 67% of the homeless had suffered a theft, whilst 1.4% of all adults in England and Wales had done so.
- 43% of the homeless had experienced damage to property, whilst 7% of all households had done so.
- Just over half of the sample, 52% had experienced violence in the past year, in contrast to 4% of the general population
- 8% of the homeless had been sexually assaulted, but the British Crime Survey had encountered too few cases 'to count.'

Alarming much of the violence experienced by homeless people seems to be coming from general public who account for 32% of violent acts, 33% of threats, 24% of the incidents of theft, and 3% of sexual assaults against people who are homeless.

For rough sleepers, such as George in Oxford, being in the public eye places them at unexpected and disturbing levels of risk:

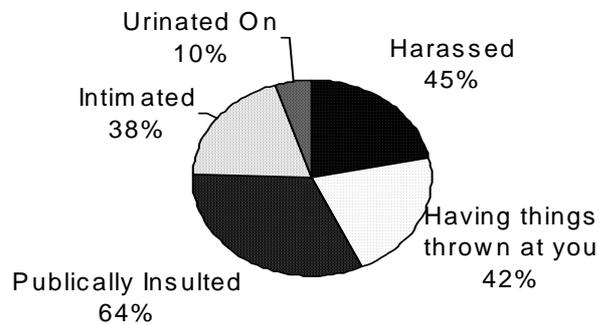
*A group of guys walked passed obviously on a night out. They returned later on. I was asleep and was woken up by one of them smacking me in the mouth. The other kicked me and pulled me by my jacket. Finally, the third youth told his mates to leave me alone. They saw me on my own. It happens a lot.*

People in all stages of homelessness may find themselves targeted, however people who were on the streets or were 'out in the open' were especially vulnerable. Some temporary housing settings may carry their own risks. Mark from Cambridge sustained alarming injuries when a stranger attempted to rob him:

*He grabbed me by the throat and pushed his thumb into my eyeball, which banged his head against the wall. As a result I couldn't see out of my eye for about 24 hours.*

Homeless people are often seen as a cause of crime, but the research suggests that in fact they are far more likely to be victims than they are perpetrators. Our findings paint a portrait of ongoing abuse and harassment creating situations of extreme vulnerability for homeless people, particularly in public settings. Almost two-thirds reported having been insulted publicly whilst sleeping rough and distressingly one tenth said that someone had urinated on them. Michael from Cambridge reports:

*You'd be surprised the sorts of people that will give you abuse. Families with kids will spit at you. Fag butts chucked at your blankets when you're asleep and lighted cigarettes thrown in your hair. It's worst are on Friday and Saturday night... When you get a group of lads together there'll always be one who thinks he's bigger than the rest who will have a go and show off to his mates'.*



### Hidden crime

Despite these alarming rates of violence and victimisation few homeless people felt confident making use of existing services and supports within the community. The homeless tend not to report crime in any numbers; they make modest use of health services and make little use of support services<sup>2</sup>. These findings point to a system wide failure to address the needs of homeless individual. Turning a blind eye to the experiences of homeless people as victims of crime and violence only contributes to their vulnerability.

### About Crisis

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

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<sup>2</sup> See S. Danczuk; *Walk on by . . .* , *op. cit.*, p. 19.