



What is homelessness?

In its broadest sense *Homelessness is the problem faced by people who lack a place to live that is supportive, affordable, decent and secure.* Whilst rough sleepers are the most visible homeless population, the vast majority of homeless people live in hostels, squats, bed and breakfasts or in temporary and insecure conditions with friends and family.¹

People who experience homelessness are often amongst the most vulnerable people in our society, suffering from a combination of poor housing, unemployment, low income, bad health, poor skills, loneliness, isolation and relationship breakdown.

Whilst there is some debate over the precise definition of homelessness there is a widespread acceptance that homelessness is about more than rooflessness. A home is not just a physical space; it provides “roots, identity, security, a sense of belonging and a place of emotional wellbeing”². It is also a practical pre-requisite to living and working in modern society, with a permanent address often being a basic requirement for employers and other essential services.

In United Kingdom homelessness is most commonly defined and discussed in terms of Homelessness Legislation, the first of which was introduced as the Housing (homeless persons) Act in 1977.³ Whilst the legal definition of homelessness is pitched in broad terms those who are actually accepted as homeless (the statutory homeless) and eligible for support by Local Authorities are a much narrower group. Those who are not clearly entitled to support are largely single people (people without dependents) they are the Hidden Homeless.

The legal definition of homelessness

A household is legally homeless if, either, they do not have accommodation that they are entitled to occupy, which is accessible and physically available to them or, they have accommodation but it is not reasonable for them to continue to occupy this accommodation⁴.

This definition is much wider than rough sleeping.

Homeless households • a family or individual who has applied for local authority housing support and been judged to be homeless. Local Authority homeless statistics are based on households, not individuals.

Homeless families • people with dependant children

¹ ODPM (2002) More Than A Roof, A report into tackling homelessness, p1

² Warnes A, Crane M, Whitehead, N and Fu R (2003) Homelessness Factfile, Crisis p2

³ Burrow, Pleace & Quilgars (1997) Homelessness & Social Policy p3

⁴ Kenway & Palmer (2003) How Many, How Much, Crisis, New Policy Institute p2

- Having a dependant child is the most common reason for being accepted as in priority need by local authorities
- Between January and March 2005, in 51% of priority need acceptances the presence of dependent children in the household was the primary reason for priority need. A further 12 per cent of households had priority need because they included a pregnant woman.

Single homeless

- individuals or couples without dependants
- traditionally helped by Crisis
- no-one has to find them accommodation, except in specific cases of vulnerability such as physical or mental health problems
- Crisis estimates that there are around 380,000 single homeless people in Great Britain. This includes those staying in hostels, B&Bs, squats, on friends' floors and in overcrowded accommodation (Crisis, *How Many, How Much?* 2003)
- About 459 people sleep outside around England *on any one night*, 221 of whom are in Greater London (ODPM, July 2005)

Statutory homelessness

Statutory homelessness refers to those homeless people or households who are recognized by Local Authorities to be homeless and are therefore recognized in government homeless statistics.

There are three categories of statutory homelessness;

- Unintentionally homeless and in priority need
- Intentionally homeless and in priority need
- Homeless but not in priority need

A local authority must consider all applications for housing assistance and investigate if an applicant is homeless or threatened with homelessness; if they are in priority need; if they are intentionally homeless; and if necessary if they have a local connection.

Priority Need

Under the homeless legislation certain categories of homeless household are considered to have priority need for accommodation. Priority need applies to families with dependent children, and households that include someone who is vulnerable due to pregnancy, old age, physical disability, mental illness or domestic violence. In 2002 the priority need categories were expanded to include homeless 16 and 17 year olds, care leavers aged 18, 19 and 20, people who are vulnerable because of time spent in care, the armed forces, prison or custody and people who are vulnerable because of violence.

If a household is considered to be in priority need and homeless through no fault of their own then local authorities have a duty to ensure that suitable accommodation is available for them. The accommodation may be provided in local authority housing stock, or can arrange for it to be provided by a housing association or registered social landlord or a landlord in the private sector. This accommodation must be made available until the household has found a settled home, until the household voluntarily leaves the accommodation provided (i.e. they find their own accommodation or accept tenancy with a private landlord), or a suitable tenancy is allocated in an authority's housing stock.

If permanent housing is not available for successful applicants due to a shortage of social housing or current vacancies then they will have to wait in temporary accommodation.

Intentionally Homeless

This is when a household is considered to have brought homelessness on themselves through a deliberate action or omission (non-action) unless they were not aware of a relevant fact. This may be due to someone deciding to leave their previous accommodation even though it would have been reasonable for them to occupy it, or because loss of tenancy or eviction is due to non-payment of rent or anti-social behavior.

Under the 1996 Act if someone is found to be homeless, eligible for assistance but intentionally homeless temporary accommodation must be secured for them for a period that will 'give them a reasonable chance of finding accommodation for themselves', which may only be for 28 days. For those without priority need temporary accommodation does not need to be provided, but the local authority must ensure that they get advice and assistance to help them get accommodation for themselves⁵.

Local Connection

You have local connection with an area if either you, or some one you might reasonably be expected to live with, have a connection based upon

- 1) present or past normal residence in that area or
- 2) employment in that area or
- 3) family associations or
- 4) other special reasons.

The current duty on local authorities is to house people who are considered to be 'homeless' or 'threatened with homelessness' (if it is likely they will become homeless within 28 days), provided that: they are in a 'priority need' category, that they did not become homeless intentionally, and that they have a 'connection' with the area of the local authority.

Those people who usually do not fall into this group and have no clear statutory right to housing are essentially single people and couples with out children. The term 'single homeless people' is usually used to describe this group of people.

Hidden Homelessness

Hidden homelessness is the problem of single homeless people who exist out of sight in hostels, bed and breakfasts, and squats or with friends and family

The nature of the legislation in Britain means that despite often being extremely vulnerable, many single people are denied access to appropriate support and housing. As a consequence not everyone who is homeless receives housing from their local authority, some are refused assistance, others are unaware of their entitlements, some do not bother applying because their entitlements are so slight and some are too vulnerable to look for help.

These homeless people are therefore not identified by government homeless statistics, and are hidden from view.

Crisis campaigns to raise awareness of the plight of Hidden Homeless people and has published a series of reports on the causes and consequences of this problem.

⁵ Homelessness Code of Guidance for Local Authorities (2002)
http://www.odpm.gov.uk/embedded_object.asp?id=1149852

Factors which increase risk of homelessness

Institutionalisation

- time in local authority care
- contact with the criminal justice system
- previous service in the Armed Forces

Health

- alcohol and drug misuse
- mental health problems, including mental illness and personality disorders
- a combination of mental health, drug and alcohol problems
- experience of physical or sexual abuse

Relationship breakdown

- disputes with parents or step-parents
- marital or relationship breakdown
- domestic violence
- bereavement
- lack of social support networks

Education and work

- learning difficulties and literacy problems
- exclusion from school
- lack of qualifications
- unemployment

Housing

- housing shortage, in some areas
- imbalance in supply and demand for housing

Others

- previous experience of homelessness
- debt, especially rent or mortgage arrears
- benefit problems

The average time between the triggers that lead to homelessness and when homelessness finally occurs is nine years (*Routes into Homelessness*, Centre for the Analysis of Social Exclusion, 2000).

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