



'IT WAS LIKE A NIGHTMARE'

– the reality of sofa surfing in Britain today

Ben Sanders, Sophie Boobis and Francesca Albanese

Crisis

Together
we will end
homelessness



Acknowledgements

We would like to thank all the participants who gave up their time to talk to us and share their experiences of sofa surfing which, at times, was a difficult thing to do. Special mention also to all the staff across Crisis Skylights, day centres and hostels who worked hard in supporting the research team with contacting people with recent sofa surfing experience and arranging visits. Finally, thanks to other members of the Crisis Research and Evaluation team who supported the interviews and analysis.

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ISBN 978-1-78519-068-1

Crisis UK (trading as Crisis).
Registered Charity Numbers: E&W1082947,
SC040094. Company Number: 4024938



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Foreword

Having a home enables people to build a life and thrive. Yet we know that over 170,000 families and individuals across the UK on any given night are denied this.

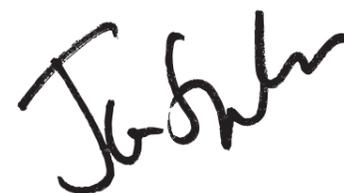
The largest proportion of these – 71,400 – are families and individuals who are sofa surfing and have to suffer the indignity of having to sleep on someone's else sofa or the floor. Unlike some preconceptions, sofa surfing is anything but a pleasant experience. There is no privacy, no personal space and people sofa surfing follow host's routines.

As this new research shows, sofa surfing is very often the only option when rents are unaffordable. Whilst it can be a safer place to stay than the street, it comes with its own damaging consequences.

Experiences of sofa surfing compromise people's wellbeing: mental and physical health gets worse. Living conditions are often poor and dangerous. Sleeping on sofas and floors is uncomfortable and made worse by a lack of access to basic amenities. This can be compounded by exposure to forms of anti-social behaviour of others, yet it is often a compromise those who are sofa surfing have to make.

But it doesn't need to be this way. The people we spoke to as part of the research told us what they needed to end their homelessness – more and better access to housing they could afford along with tailored support for those that need it. In many cases local authorities could have stepped in and stopped homelessness from happening in the first place.

Making sure that everyone has a safe and secure home benefits us all. This research acts as a reminder that this must be treated as a top priority. We know the solutions, let's act now to end homelessness.



Jon Sparkes
Chief Executive, Crisis

Executive summary

There are more than 170,000 families and individuals across Great Britain experiencing the worst forms of homelessness. The majority of these – 71,400 (42%) – are sofa surfing.¹ Sofa surfing is defined as being forced to stay with a friend or extended family member on a sofa or a floor on a short term or insecure basis because there is nowhere else to go. It is an insecure and precarious arrangement.

Sofa surfing is characterised by a 'permanent impermanence'. The term itself does little to capture the complex realities and frequent transitions that are a reality of it, nor the consequences produced. These include:² insecurity, poor living conditions, abuse and exploitation, risk to personal safety, health impacts and intensifying multiple needs and exclusions. All of these were found in this research.

While the figure of 71,400 gives insight into the scale and prevalence of sofa surfing, research into the experiences of it and the impact it can have is more limited.

Based on face to face interviews with 114 people, the research shows the duration, cause and impact of sofa surfing but most importantly how it can be prevented and solved.

No one should have to live in damaged, dangerous accommodation – yet it is a reality for those people sofa surfing on any given night across Britain.³

Frequency and duration of sofa surfing

For many people sofa surfing is not a short term or stop gap but a form of homelessness that is difficult to move out of. The average period for those currently sofa surfing was between six months and a year.

In the last 12 months, six out of 10 people have sofa surfed up to four times with almost two-fifths doing so more than five times. Episodes of sofa surfing can be brief, lasting a few days; but for a quarter of those spoken to individual periods can be longer term, lasting between a month and three months.

People end up sofa surfing before and after experiencing rough sleeping and other extreme forms of homelessness. Moves into sofa surfing from, and out of it, to securer forms of housing are much less prevalent.

Impact of sofa surfing

Sofa surfing is a detrimental experience. Personal well-being in terms of physical and mental health are significantly negatively impacted by sofa surfing. Eight out of 10 reported a downturn in mental health while three-quarters said their physical health deteriorated.

There is a significant impact on personal relationships and this erodes further over time. People see friends and family less, because they are further away and also because of the stigma attached to sofa surfing. These human costs can make the indignity of sofa surfing all the more unbearable.

My host bares with it but I feel very uncomfortable. I feel like I am burdening other people. [I] don't want to impose. [It] Creates a lot of anxiety.

Sofa surfing also stops people from moving on and building their lives. It compromises the ability to look for work and secure and maintain a job. It can also make seeking support or help harder and addressing other support needs. Over half said alcohol and drug use got worse. Over half of the people we spoke to were exposed to behaviour and activity they felt uncomfortable with including drinking, drug taking and dealing, and being forced to stay up late.

Sleeping on a sofa or floor in the lounge was the most common sleeping arrangement. It was described as uncomfortable, in many cases causing physical discomfort, and people have no control over what time they go to bed nor when to get up. Over long periods of time this had a strain on physical health

and wellbeing.

The floor is very hard - one blanket – sometimes I am cold. I get back pain doing that.

In terms of living conditions, many people did not have their own keys to the places they were staying and were reliant on their hosts to access the property. Over two in five people had to go out during the day or when the host had visitors. Basic things we take for granted were not available to many of the people we spoke to. Almost one in five had nowhere to wash themselves and over half of people had nowhere to store personal items.

The drivers and causes of sofa surfing

Sofa surfing is experienced by people at different points in their homelessness journey but the drivers behind it mirrors the causes of homelessness in general.

Over half of people surveyed (54%/61) stated that issues related to housing affordability were a factor in them starting to sofa surf. These included not being able to afford rent, benefits not covering the cost of rent, and falling in rent arrears. A further 22 per cent (25) of people said that not being able to afford a deposit also impacted on their need to start sofa surfing.

The impact of welfare reform is also evident in the drivers of sofa surfing, both as a cause and as something trapping people in their situation, with three quarters of respondents stating that some form of welfare issues impacted on their sofa surfing. The most common reason cited was the gap between Local Housing Allowance rates and Housing Benefits and rents, with 38 per cent (26) of people that their benefits did not cover the rent.

41 per cent (47) of people surveyed said that needing somewhere safer to stay was one of the primary reasons behind their sofa surfing. In many

1 Bramley, G. (2018) *Core Homelessness: 2018 update* (unpublished data) <https://www.crisis.org.uk/about-us/media-centre/more-than-170-000-families-and-individuals-across-britain-are-experiencing-the-worst-forms-of-homelessness/>

2 Reeve, K. (2011) *The hidden truth about homelessness: Experiences of single homelessness in England*. London: Crisis. https://www.crisis.org.uk/media/236815/the_hidden_truth_about_homelessness.pdf

3 Bramley, G. (2018) *Core Homelessness: 2018 update* (unpublished data) <https://www.crisis.org.uk/about-us/media-centre/more-than-170-000-families-and-individuals-across-britain-are-experiencing-the-worst-forms-of-homelessness/>

cases this was for people who were already experiencing rough sleeping and saw sofa surfing as a better option than sleeping on the streets.

I've been sofa surfing [for eight months] to avoid sleeping on the streets. I have to provide care and support to an alcoholic host. When he's drinking he gets aggressive and tells me to leave the property. The hygiene in the flat is poor and I have to live like that. I can't challenge him.

This was not the only reason given for wanting somewhere safer to stay, with some people reporting a preference to sofa surfing over unsuitable temporary accommodation (bed and breakfast or unsupported hostels, for example). Those who had been in B&Bs or unsupported hostels described the poor quality of accommodation they were offered and the intimidating behaviour they were exposed to. As well as feeling unsafe it also made addressing other life issues harder, including mental health and finding employment.

A quarter of people surveyed (25%/29) said that mental health issues played a role in causing their sofa surfing. Alongside this 11 per cent (8) of people stated that a recent bereavement impacted on their loss of accommodation. For many this was the mental health impact of losing someone close to them coupled with their housing situation being tied up with the deceased. Relationship breakdown was a contributing factor for over a quarter (27%/31) of people we spoke to. Normal life events such as an illness, relationship breakdown or losing a job should not be a cause of homelessness.

Support and help for people experiencing sofa surfing

The majority of people who were sofa surfing we spoke to had sought help from the council. In fewer than half of the cases where people were engaged with the council prior to sofa surfing did councils acknowledge their new

housing status. Help received, in the main, was limited to signposting or referrals to other services. At some stage of engagement with the council, 22 per cent (26) had been offered a form of emergency accommodation (a hostel or B&B). In a fifth of cases no assistance was received at all.

Ensuring everyone has safe, stable housing creates a stronger society where homelessness has no place. The moves into and out of sofa surfing detailed in this research show how vulnerable and precarious many participants' situations are. The people we spoke to as part of the research told us what they needed to end their homelessness which have clear implications for how sofa surfing can be addressed.

In many cases homelessness could have been prevented by the local authority homelessness team. There were also other opportunities to stop homelessness happening in the first place through contact with other services including Job Centres, primary and secondary healthcare services and probation. Effective joint working with sufficient funding is key to help address the range of factors that can cause an individual to become homeless, and successfully prevent it. The findings also raise concerns about local authorities not taking sofa surfing seriously enough as a form of homelessness when people approach for help. In addition, there were clear issues with access to stable, affordable housing both as a cause of sofa surfing and as something trapping people in their situation. Temporary Accommodation provided must meet people's needs and not risk making someone's situation worse and more needs. There needs to be increased investment in Local Housing Allowance to help prevent people becoming homeless, and over the long term we must ensure there is enough social housing to meet current and future demand.

Chapter 1: Introduction

There are more than 170,000 families and individuals across Great Britain experiencing the worst forms of homelessness.⁴ Those who are sofa surfing make up the largest proportion of this number: on any given night there are an estimated 71,400 households who are sofa surfing.

England has the largest amount of people experiencing sofa surfing (63,000) followed by Scotland (5,150) and Wales (3,250).⁵ Across Great Britain numbers have remained relatively stable since 2012 but in England sofa surfing has risen by 5 per cent.⁶ Just over half (53%) of people sofa surfing were aged 34 or less.⁷

While these figures give insight into the scale and prevalence of sofa surfing, research into the actual experience of it and the impact it can have is more limited. Research and attention often focuses on increases in rough sleeping and more visible forms of homelessness. The research

that exists to date on sofa surfing has predominantly examined the experiences of young people and can conflate it with other forms of (insecure) Temporary Accommodation or hidden homelessness including squatting and overcrowded accommodation.⁸

1.1 Existing evidence

Previous studies show sofa surfing is a more widespread homeless experience than is often recognised. One survey found that a third of young people (16-25) said they had experienced sofa surfing at some point with a fifth having done so within the last year. Sofa surfing can also be the

4 Albanese, F. (2018) *Crisis blog: 'What is the scale of homelessness on any given night?'* <https://www.crisis.org.uk/about-us/the-crisis-blog/what-is-the-scale-of-homelessness-on-any-given-night/>

5 Bramley, G. (2018) *Core Homelessness: 2018 update* (unpublished data)

6 Ibid.

7 Ibid.

8 Countryside Alliance and Crisis (2003) *Hidden Homelessness: your place, not mine The experiences of homeless people staying with family and friends*. London: Crisis. <https://www4.shu.ac.uk/research/cresr/sites/shu.ac.uk/files/hidden-homelessness-your-place-not-mine.pdf>; McCoy, S. and Hug, B. (2016) *Danger zones and stepping stones Young people's experiences of hidden homelessness*. De Paul: London. <https://uk.depaulcharity.org/sites/default/files/Depaul-UK-Report-Danger-Zones-and-Stepping-Stones-April-2016.pdf>; Clarke, A. (2016) *The Prevalence of Rough Sleeping and Sofa Surfing Amongst Young People in the UK in Social Inclusion*. 4. 60. 10.17645/si.v4i4.597. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/309338204_The_Prevalence_of_Rough_Sleeping_and_Sofa_Surfing_Amongst_Young_People_in_the_UK; Reeve, K. (2011) *The hidden truth about homelessness: Experiences of single homelessness in England*. London: Crisis. https://www.crisis.org.uk/media/236815/the_hidden_truth_about_homelessness.pdf and Centrepoint ComRes poll: https://www.supportsolutions.co.uk/blog/care_and_support/post/the_hidden_homelessness_of_the_uk_sofa_surfing_.html



first experience of homelessness⁹ and is often understood to be a period characterised by impermanence, a feeling of invading space of others and a sense of losing control over the situation.¹⁰ Through a desperation to find somewhere to stay, people who are sofa surfing can end up in a range of potentially dangerous situations, alongside the disrupted living arrangements in terms of disturbed sleeping patterns and lack of privacy and personal space.¹¹ The prevalence of poor mental health and substance misuse is commonly reported as people exhaust their opportunities to stay with friends and families.¹²

In many ways, a 'permanent impermanence' characterises the

lives of people who are sofa surfing. The term itself does little to capture the complex realities and frequent transitions that are a reality of it nor the consequences it can produce. As Reeve (2011) makes clear, there are many hidden costs to this form of hidden homelessness, all of which were found in our research:

- **Insecurity:** those having to live in such conditions have no right to remain in their accommodation and arrangements can come to an end without notice.
- **Poor living conditions:** many must live without access to basic necessities and instead have to make do.
- **Abuse and exploitation:** being in

9 Islam, S., Gomes, S. and Wyld, N. (2014) *The Door is Closed A report on children who are homeless because they are failed by the system which is supposed to protect them*. Coram Voice. London. https://www.coram.org.uk/sites/default/files/resource_files/Coram_Voice_The_Door_is_Closed.pdf

10 McCoy, S. and Hug, B. (2016) *Danger zones and stepping stones Young people's experiences of hidden homelessness*. De Paul: London. <https://uk.depaulcharity.org/sites/default/files/Depaul-UK-Report-Danger-Zones-and-Stepping-Stones-April-2016.pdf> p. 11

11 Ibid. p. 17

12 Countryside Alliance and Crisis (2003) *Hidden Homelessness: your place, not mine The experiences of homeless people staying with family and friends*. London: Crisis. <https://www4.shu.ac.uk/research/cresr/sites/shu.ac.uk/files/hidden-homelessness-your-place-not-mine.pdf>

such an insecure and uncertain situation can mean falling prey to financial and other forms of exploitation by hosts or other people are staying with.

- **Risk to personal safety:** dangerous living conditions alongside the behaviours of hosts or others in the property can increase exposure to violence and sexual abuse.
- **Health impacts:** poor living conditions and the toll of insecurity can contribute to worsening physical and mental health.
- **Intensifying multiple needs and exclusions:** enduring experiences of hidden homelessness including sofa surfing can exacerbate existing support needs, create new ones and entrench them further, making the chance of escaping homelessness harder.

The conclusion that can be drawn from existing research on sofa surfing is that the poor conditions, insecurity, and limited access to support services can lead to people become entrenched in homelessness.¹³ This, as is well known and documented, has considerable costs for us all.¹⁴

1.2 The research

While on any given night there are 71,400 households sofa surfing, there is insufficient understanding and insight into the day-to-day realities of what this really means for people who experience it. Consequently, this research sets out to focus specifically on people's experiences of sofa surfing and provide greater insight into what the reality is that lies behind these figures.

The research was driven by three core concerns:

1. What is the experience of sofa surfing like for people having to live like this and what are the consequences of this?
2. How is sofa surfing related to other forms of homelessness and what pathways do people make between them?
3. What are the solutions to sofa surfing and how are these experiences preventable?

1.3 Methodology

The research was conducted during Autumn 2019 and involved conducting face-to-face surveys with people across Great Britain who were either currently sofa surfing or had done so within the last 12 months. Fieldwork visits were made to 14 different homelessness services in 12 cities.

In total 114 people completed surveys. The sample largely reflected the demographic nature of the homelessness population in that we spoke with a majority of men (83 or 75% of the sample). Almost 7 out of 10 (67%/76) were British. The average age of respondents was 40, with half (50%/57) of the sample being aged between 26 and 45. In terms of homelessness experience, two fifths of the sample (43%/47) last had a settled home over two years ago.

13 Reeve, K. (2011) *The hidden truth about homelessness: Experiences of single homelessness in England*. London: Crisis. https://www.crisis.org.uk/media/236815/the_hidden_truth_about_homelessness.pdf

14 Pleace, N. (2015) *At what cost? An estimation of the financial costs of single homelessness in the UK*. London: Crisis. <https://www.crisis.org.uk/ending-homelessness/homelessness-knowledge-hub/cost-of-homelessness/at-what-cost-2015/> and Downie, M., Gousy, H., Basran, J., Jacob, R., Rowe, S., Hancock, C., Albanese, F., Pritchard, R., Nightingale, K. and Davies, T. (2018) *Everybody In: How to end homelessness in Great Britain*. London: Crisis. https://www.crisis.org.uk/media/239951/everybody_in_how_to_end_homelessness_in_great_britain_2018.pdf Chapter 15.

Chapter 2: Frequency and experience of sofa surfing

2.1 Duration and frequency of sofa surfing

All of the research participants had recent experience of sofa surfing. Almost a third (31%/35) were currently sofa surfing while the remainder had done so within the last 12 months. For those who were currently in that situation, a quarter (25%/9) had been doing so for between a month and six months. More, however, had been in this situation for over six months and up to three years (33%/12). The average length of those currently sofa surfing was between six months and a year. This shows that sofa surfing for many is not a short term or stop gap but a form of homelessness that is difficult to move out of.

It was clear that across the preceding 12-month period people experienced a number of different episodes of sofa surfing. For almost two fifths of the people we spoke to (37%/44), across the last 12 months they had had to move two to four times; while for a similar proportion (39%/43) they had moved five or more times during the year. As explored later, the frequency of moving and lack of a stable and permanent home has dire consequences for people's lives.

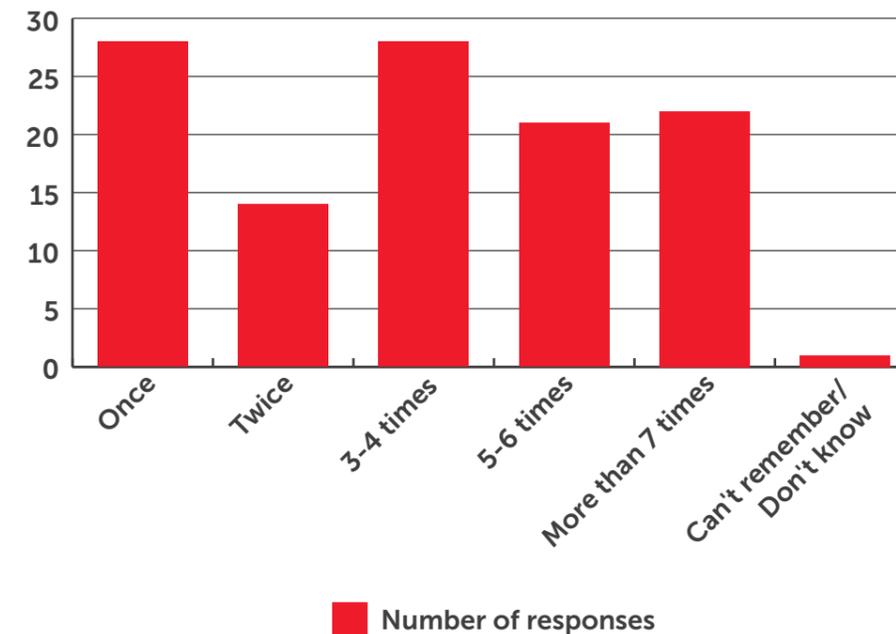
In terms of length of time people have spent in sofa surfing 'episodes', this can range from a 'few days' for almost a third (29%/33) of people, to much longer periods of time spent without a stable home environment. A quarter (25%/28) spent between three and six months sofa surfing.

2.2 Sleeping where?

Sleeping arrangements were predominantly on a sofa located in communal areas. Three quarters (74%/84) of respondents had slept on a sofa in a communal space (front room/lounge). Almost half (47%/53) had slept on the floor in a communal area.

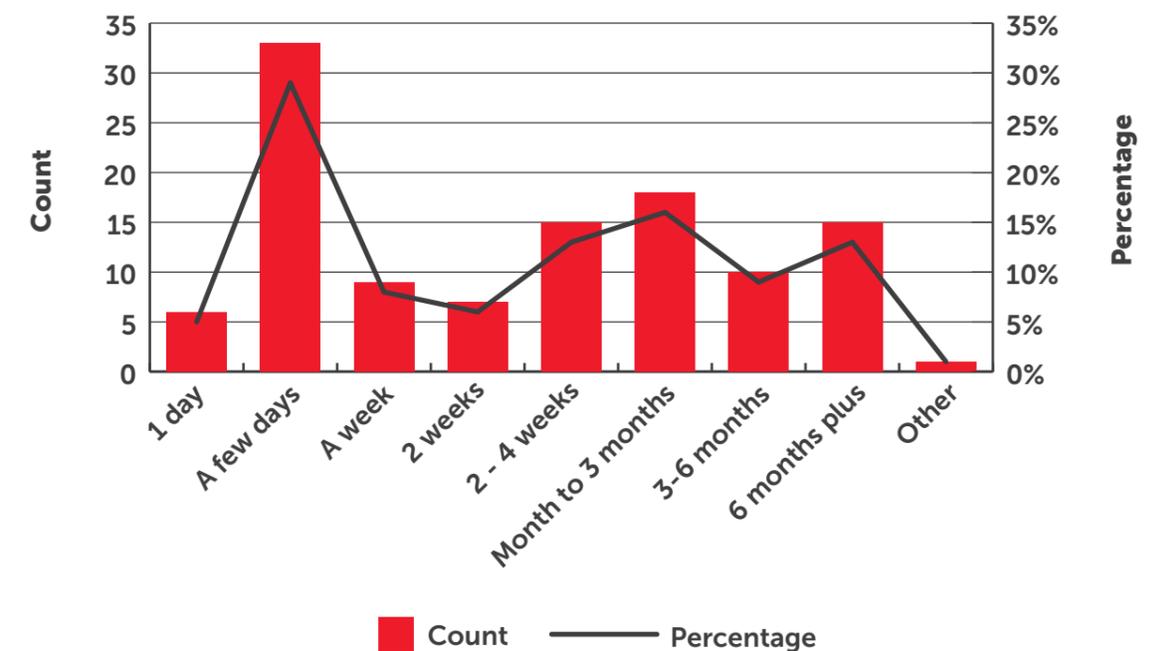
It was clear from participants' comments about the comfort and suitability of these sleeping arrangements that sofa surfing in this way is not a sustainable way of living. Many people described how uncomfortable these sleeping arrangements were in terms of physical discomfort (back and neck pain). People also reported that it meant they were in harm's way especially if where they were staying was already unsafe.

Figure 1. How many times sofa surfed in last 12 months?



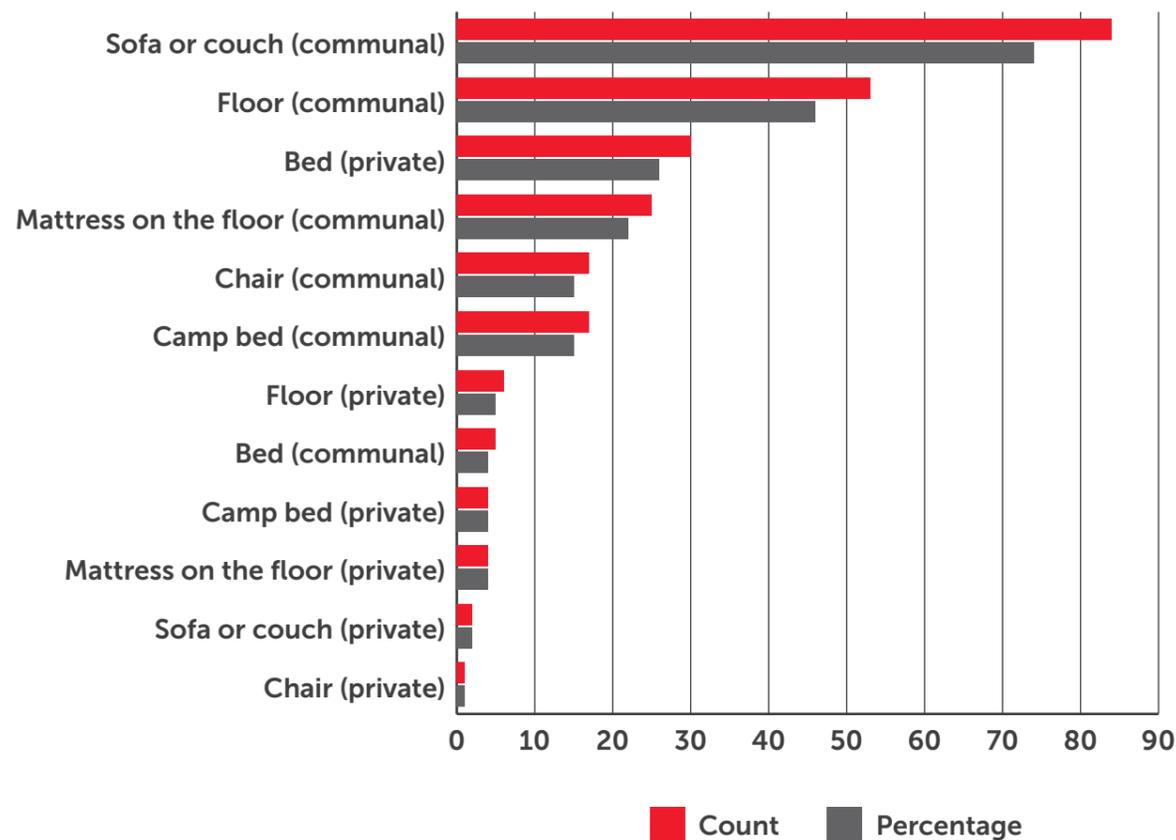
n=114

Figure 2. Over the last 12 months, on average, how long did you spend in each sofa surfing situation?



n=114

Figure 3. Where have you slept when sofa surfing?



n=114

The floor is very hard – one blanket – sometimes I am cold. I get back pain doing that.

One time had to sleep in shifts with my girlfriend because it wasn't safe. I was exposed to violence. I was assaulted. Sofa's bad for your back and leather is too hot in summer. There is a lack of privacy – we have no space of our own.

The research found that a lot of respondents did not have control over their routine, and it was clear from the participants' experiences that it was not only the physical discomfort and safety issues they had to endure. Not being able to get enough sleep was common because of the discomfort, cold and the presence of others going to bed late or getting up early dictating

sleeping patterns. These sorts of experiences could contribute to the negative impact on personal issues already explored above.

Not at all ideal – I have a bad back and get a stiff neck. As soon as someone else is up, you're up. No private space. People walking through.

It's cold, was uncomfortable until I got a futon cushion. It's tiring because you have to wait until the host goes to bed. You cannot rest at weekend either.

Chapter 3: Causes and pathways of people sofa surfing

3.1 Pathways into and out of other forms homelessness

It is clear from participants' experiences that sofa surfing is not just a stop-gap experience or something that is casually entered into. Two-fifths of the participants last had a settled home over two years or more ago. Included within those is 28 per cent (30) who had not had a settled home for over four years or more. There were, however, participants for whom a settled home is a more recent experience, with almost four out of 10 (38%/41) having had one in the last year.

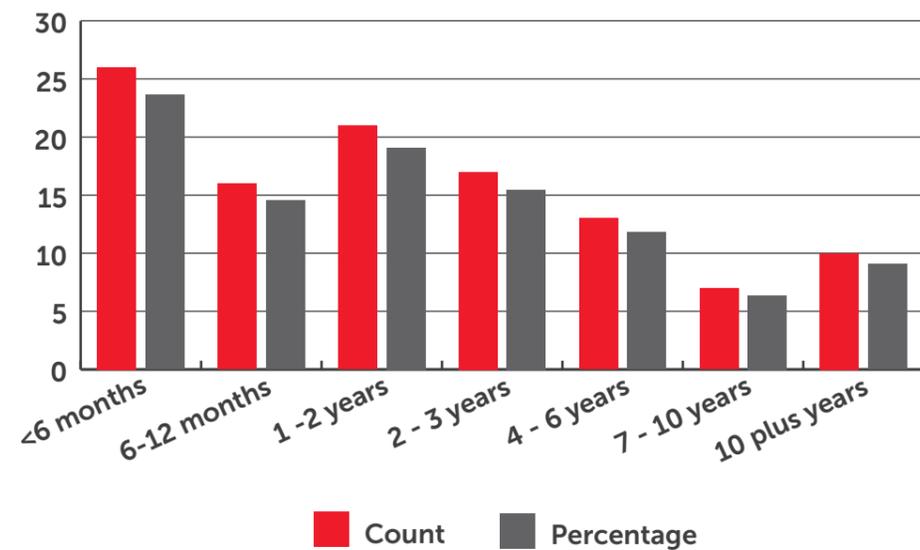
Chart 1 shows the trajectories people have been on *before* and *after* experiences of sofa surfing. It demonstrates that people are less likely to come from secure housing situations into sofa surfing. Whilst previous research shows sofa surfing is often the first experience of homelessness, this study highlights how sofa surfing is more likely to act as a conduit between other insecure housing situations.

For instance, it shows 74 participants (out of 114) had sofa surfed at some stage before sofa surfing again. 58 participants had sofa surfed after rough sleeping and 49 people had slept in cars, vans or on public transport before sofa surfing. The

numbers of participants coming from more 'secure' housing situations (renting from the council/HA n=34 or Supported Accommodation n=18) are much lower. Although the numbers are low, worryingly those we spoke to who had left statutory care or institutions such as hospital have a high prevalence of sofa surfing after such experiences.

The research also shows that housing situations after experiences of sofa surfing also tend to replicate those preceding it i.e. people do not move back into secure and suitable housing situations. In fact, people move on to just as insecure and vulnerably housing situations as they have come from. There were 66 participants who went into more sofa surfing after an experience of it. 51 participants slept rough at some point after sofa surfing and 44 went back in sleeping in cars, vans or public transport.

There were 20 participants who went into a council or Housing Association property after sofa surfing. Fewer (16) entered the PRS – in stark contrast to the 44 participants who sofa surfed after being in the PRS. At play here are welfare barriers such as the gap between Local Housing Allowance (LHA) and the cost of renting, or the difficulty that almost a fifth (17%/19) of participants faced in finding affordable

Figure 4. When did you last have somewhere settled to live?

n=114

rents and/or getting a deposit together (see section 3.2). These issues are exacerbated by the difficulties sofa surfing creates for individual economic activity (see section 5).

Overall these findings show that, for many participants, sofa surfing had not been a fortuitous stepping stone away from rough sleeping or similar vulnerable and insecure housing situations, but rather a perpetuation of already existing insecure (and dangerous) housing trajectories that they struggle to get out of.

As the rest of the report below makes clear, there are serious consequences for people's lives in terms of work, physical and mental wellbeing because of this. This sits alongside what we already know about the debilitating effects of long-term homelessness

for individuals and the cost there is to the public purse if left unresolved, as well as the fact that if homelessness is not ended quickly or prevented then further experiences of homelessness are likely.¹⁵

3.2 Drivers and causes of sofa surfing

Whilst sofa surfing is experienced by people at very different points in their homelessness journey, the drivers behind it mirror the causes of homelessness in general. As section 3.1 explores, sofa surfing exists as an interplay between different forms of homelessness and it is helpful to consider the causes of sofa surfing within this context. For people who are already experiencing rough sleeping or sleeping in cars, tents and public transport it can be seen as a relief from the arduous conditions and

15 Pleace, N. (2015) *At what cost? An estimation of the financial costs of single homelessness in the UK*. London: Crisis. https://www.crisis.org.uk/media/237022/costsofhomelessness_finalweb.pdf; Pleace, N. & Culhane, D.P. (2016) *Better than Cure? Testing the case for Enhancing Prevention of Single Homelessness in England*. London: Crisis. https://www.crisis.org.uk/media/20680/crisis_better_than_cure_2016.pdf; Mackie, P. & Thomas, I. (2014) *Nations apart? Experiences of single homeless people across Great Britain*. London: Crisis. https://www.crisis.org.uk/media/20608/crisis_nations_apart_2014.pdf



dangers of street homelessness. For those who have recently become homeless it is often the first form of homelessness following on from settled accommodation.

There is a general acknowledgement that understanding the causes of homelessness means exploring the interconnection of individual and structural factors.¹⁶ Structural causes are underpinned by housing market trends, welfare benefit arrangements and policy choices. There is also now consensus about the role that poverty plays in shaping homelessness.¹⁷ Whilst structural causes such as lack of affordable housing create the conditions that make homelessness possible, specific individual risk factors like poor mental health increase

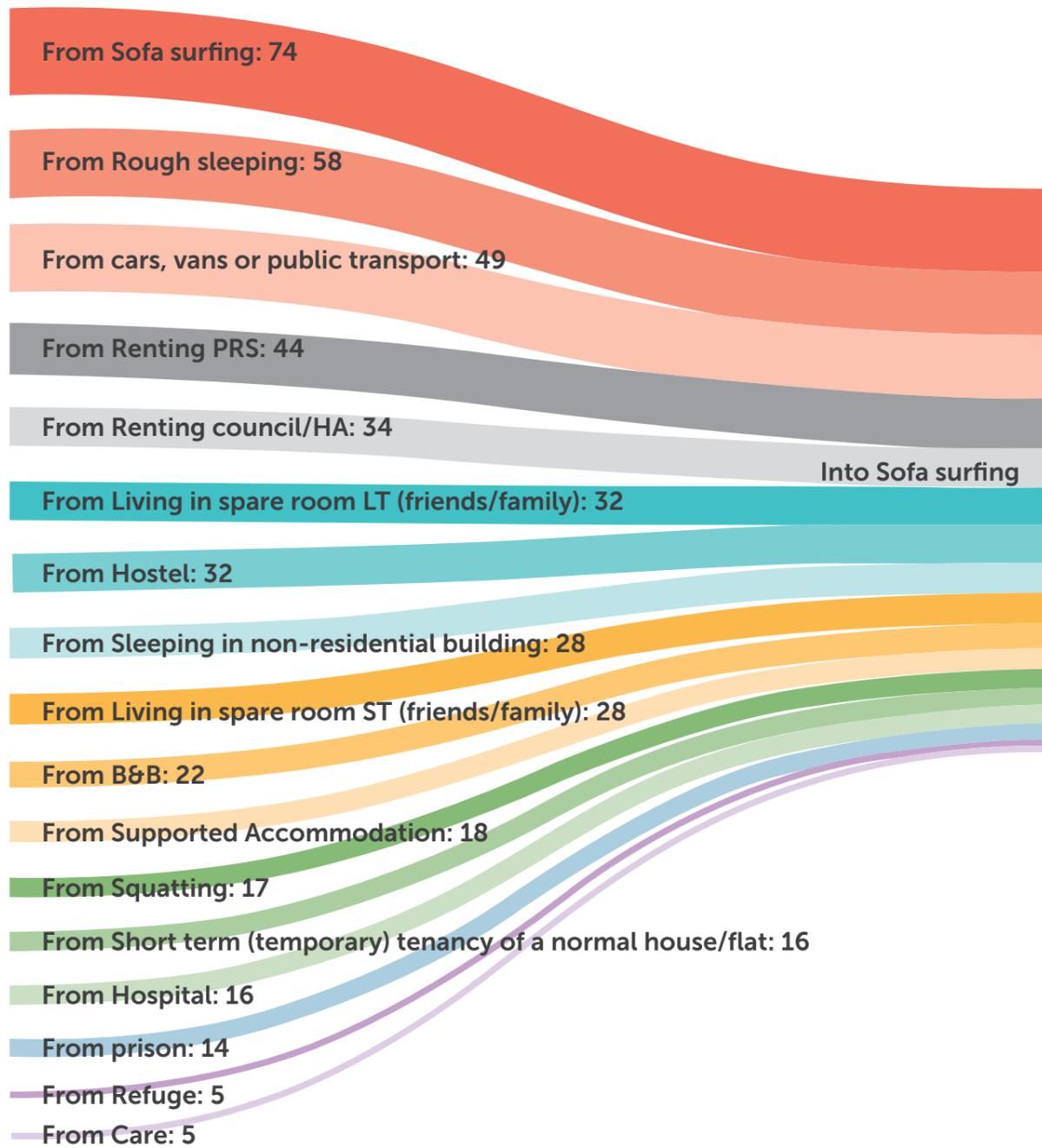
someone's likelihood of experiencing homelessness.¹⁸ It is in this context that we can look to understand the causes of sofa surfing.

Over half of people surveyed (54%/61) stated that issues related to housing affordability were a factor in them starting to sofa surf. These included not being able to afford rent, benefits not covering the cost of rent, and falling in rent arrears. A further 22 percent (25) of people said that not being able to afford a deposit also impacted on their need to start sofa surfing. Given that over two thirds of people (68%/78) stated that they had sofa surfed immediately after living in a private rented property or social tenancy, this needs to be considered within both the context of a lack

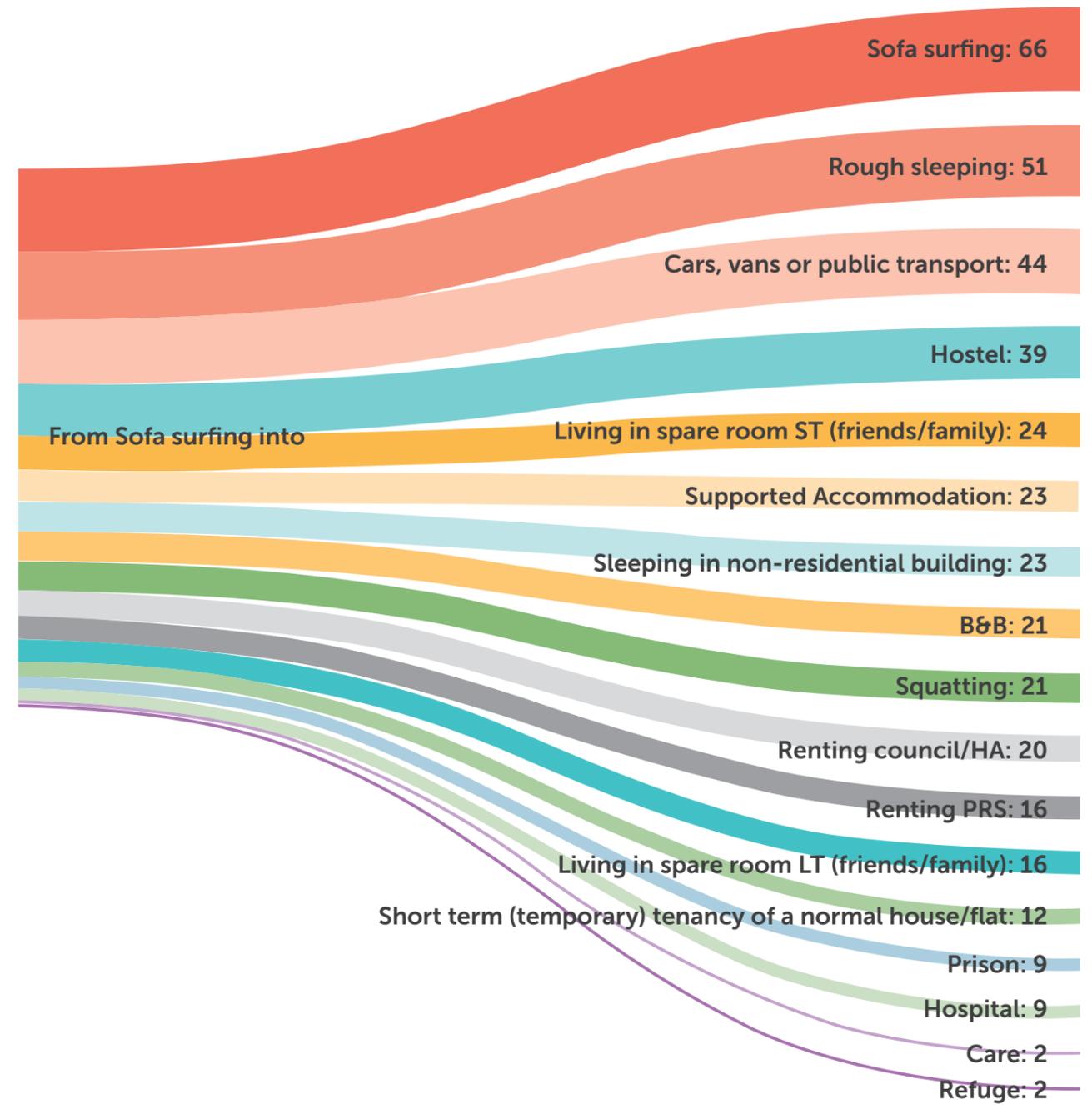
16 Christian, J. (2003). *Homelessness: Integrating international perspectives*. *Journal of Community & Applied Social Psychology*, 13(2), 85-90; Fitzpatrick, S. (2005). *Explaining homelessness: a critical realist perspective*. *Housing, Theory and Society*, 22(1), 1-17; Benjaminsen, L. (2016). *The variation in family background amongst young homeless shelter users in Denmark*. *Journal of Youth Studies*, 19(1), 55-73;
17 Bramley, G. and Fitzpatrick, S. (2018) 'Homelessness in the UK; who is most at risk?', *Housing Studies*, 33:1, 96-116
18 Ibid.

Chart 1. Destinations before and after sofa surfing

i. starting points before sofa surfing



ii: destination after sofa surfing



affordable housing and prevention activity that is not meeting the needs of individuals. 46 per cent (52) of respondents said that lower rents or support paying rents through a Discretionary Housing Payment would have prevented them from sofa surfing.

The impact of welfare reform is also evident as one of the drivers of sofa surfing, both as a cause and as something trapping people in their situation, with 60 per cent (68) of respondents stating that some form of welfare issues impacted on their sofa surfing.

For nearly three quarters (74%/50) of these respondents, these were welfare issues related to affordability adding to the constant pressure in their lives that leads to homelessness. The most common reason cited was the gap between Local Housing Allowance rates and Housing Benefit or Universal Credit, with 38 per cent (26) of people stating that their benefits did not cover the cost of rent. Compounding welfare rules, such as the benefit cap, Shared Accommodation Rate (SAR) and the bedroom tax were also highlighted as factors in contributing to causing sofa surfing. Figure 5 sets out the full breakdown of welfare issues that affected those surveyed.

Once people were sofa surfing, they again identified welfare reform as contributing to them being trapped in their situation. Forty per cent (27) stated that they were unable to move out of homelessness because they were not able to find a landlord who accepted either Housing Benefit or Universal Credit. Figure 5 sets out the full breakdown of welfare issues that affected those surveyed.

A fifth (24%/27) of the people we spoke to were non-UK nationals, of which a third were EEA citizens. Depending on

their status there may be restrictions on access to the labour market (in some cases an inability to work), housing, and the welfare system. Being unable to access benefits leads to a desperation for employment, and alongside the precarious nature of housing, this creates situations where people are extremely vulnerable to exploitation.¹⁹ For those in this situation sofa surfing might be their only alternative to rough sleeping and means that they may be even more dependent on their host.

I've been sofa surfing [for eight months] to avoid sleeping on the streets. I have to provide care and support to an alcoholic host. When he's drinking he gets aggressive and tells me to leave the property. The hygiene in the flat is poor and I have to live like that. I can't challenge him.

41 per cent (47) of people surveyed said that needing somewhere safer to stay was one of the primary reasons behind their sofa surfing. In many cases this was for people who were already experiencing rough sleeping and saw sofa surfing as a better option than sleeping on the streets.

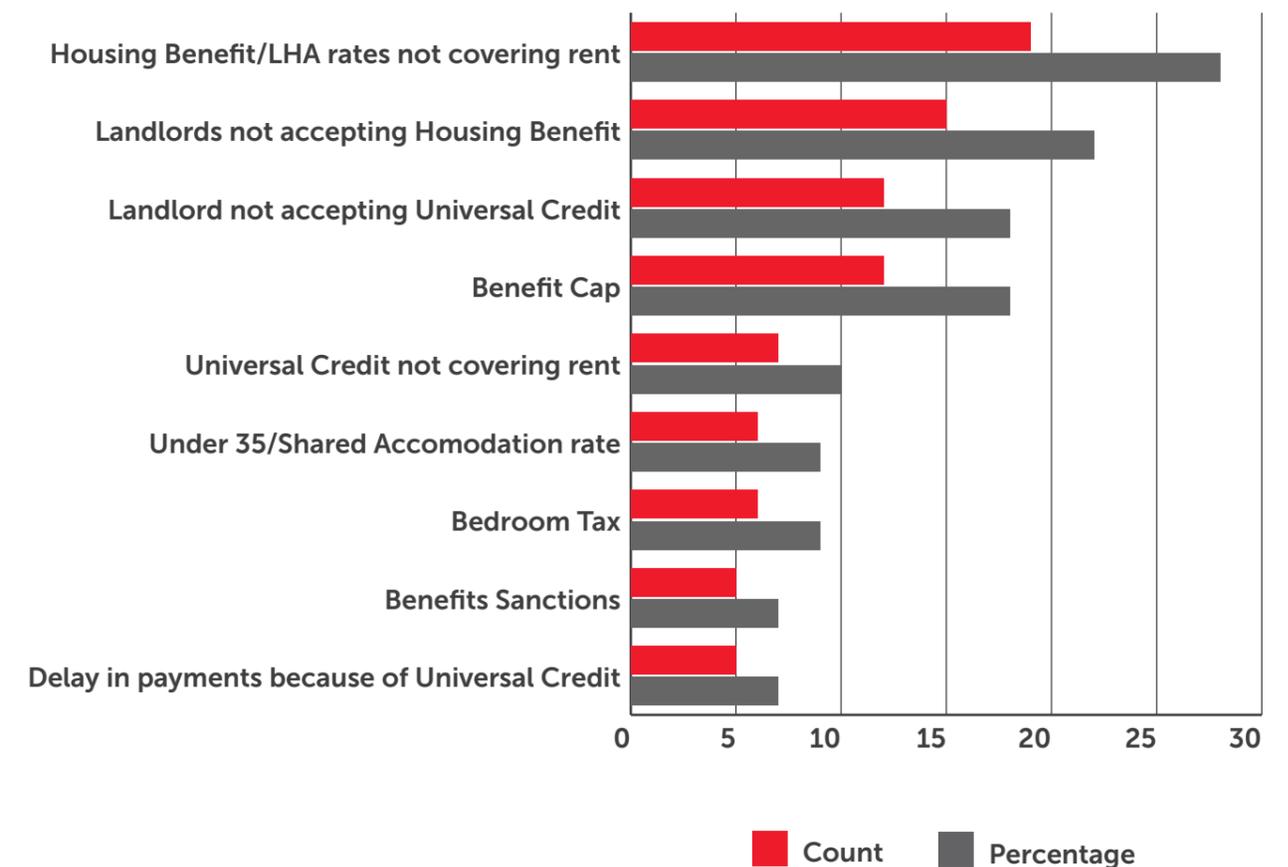
I looked at the streets and thought, "I can't"

[sofa surfing is] not very comfortable but it's better than the concrete floor.

Some people reported a preference for sofa surfing over unsuitable temporary accommodation (bed and breakfast or unsupported hostels, for example). Those who had been in unsuitable temporary accommodation described the poor quality of accommodation they were offered and the intimidating behaviour they were exposed to. As well as feeling unsafe it also made addressing other life issues harder,

19 Boobis, S., Jacob, R., and Sanders, B. (2019) *A Home For All: Understanding Migrant Homelessness in Great Britain*. London: Crisis

Figure 5. Did any of these welfare issues ever lead you to sofa surf?



n=68

including mental health and finding employment.²⁰

That the environment can be so damaging that they would rather risk sofa surfing than remain in the accommodation offered speaks to the need to ensure that Temporary Accommodation provided meets people's needs and does not risk making someone's situation worse.

Many people move between sofa surfing with different friends and families, and when exploring the reasons for this stated clearly that they didn't want to be a burden. This could be driven by a personal sense of not wanting to overstay their welcome, and so they would seek somewhere

new to stay. People also reported that they did not want to become an inconvenience or exhaust the good will of hosts. Nor did some want to threaten the housing security of hosts if they were a council tenant. Some participants would move on from one sofa surfing place to another if they felt threatened, and some women who were sofa surfing received unwanted sexual attention from the host.

I didn't want to be an inconvenience even though I've known these friends for a long time.

There was bullying and unwanted sexual advances.

20 Sanders, B. with Reid, B. (2018) *'I won't last long in here': Experiences of unsuitable temporary accommodation in Scotland*. London: Crisis.

A quarter of people surveyed (25%/29) said that mental health issues played a role in causing their sofa surfing. Alongside this, 11 per cent (15) of people stated that a recent bereavement impacted on their loss of accommodation. For many this was the mental health impact of losing someone close to them coupled with their housing situation being tied up with the deceased. Fifteen per cent (17) of respondents identified substance misuse as a key factor, alongside physical health (8%/9).

**Never used to be like this.
Losing mam. Losing a brother.**

Domestic abuse was a cause of homelessness and resulting sofa surfing for ten per cent (11) of respondents, of which four out of ten said that referral into domestic abuse support would have prevented their sofa surfing.

**Feeling more at risk of abuse
and in potentially dangerous
situations. The stress caused my
blood pressure to go up.**

Twenty-seven per cent (31) of people highlighted relationship breakdown either with a partner, or with friends or family as a cause of sofa surfing, whilst 17 per cent (19) cited loss of employment.

Currently sofa surfing exists as a lynchpin between prevention and relief, acting as a gateway into homelessness for those forced to leave their home, and as a personal relief option for those experiencing rough sleeping. However, sofa surfing is in itself a form of homelessness and it should not be accepted as an alternative option for people whilst they are trying to move on to permanent and settled accommodation.

Chapter 4: Getting help

4.1 Local authority assistance

The majority of participants in this research (93%/106) have visited a local authority for help because they were homeless or about to become homeless. In almost half (46%/52) of those instances they had visited before they were sofa surfing. More troubling still is that of those participants who were engaged with a local authority before they started sofa surfing, four of 10 (42%/28) did not have their change in housing situation acknowledged or recognised by the local authority.

This means that there was an opportunity to intervene and potentially prevent or lessen the amount of time and episodes individuals sofa surfed or help them exit homelessness completely. However, the research showed that in the main these opportunities were missed. In almost three-quarters (72%/81) of cases no emergency accommodation was offered, meaning participants were not diverted away from sofa surfing into other forms of – potentially more suitable – accommodation. In Scotland, whilst Temporary Accommodation was offered to all who were eligible who

approached their local authority, concerns around the quality of the accommodation and the length of time they might need to stay, meant people were more likely to continue to sofa surf.

Whilst everyone interviewed, regardless of immigration status, would have been entitled to advice from their local authority, further homelessness assistance would have only been available for those with the correct entitlements. In Scotland all support is offered regardless of 'priority' status, in England and Wales this would have been under the respective prevention and relief duties, even if they would have not been entitled to the main duty.²¹

The experiences and circumstances explored in chapter five show just how difficult, dangerous and costly sofa surfing can be for individuals. There is a clear need for help and support to ensure that people do not have to go through these experiences in the first place. Research shows that the failure to deal with homelessness early significantly impacts on the severity of people's support needs: without

²¹ In England and Wales under their respective Housing Acts local authorities provide support under a number of different duties. The prevention duty is for those at risk of homelessness within 56 days and the relief duty for those already experiencing homelessness. Support under these duties is available to anyone who is entitled and eligible to local authority support but it is time limited to 56 days per duty. If a household remains homeless at the end of their 56 days of support they are then assessed for the Main Duty which if they meet the priority need criteria entitles them to a statutory duty to access to housing. To be considered 'in priority need' a person must either: be pregnant; have dependent children; be aged 16-17, or if a care leaver aged 18-20, or be vulnerable as a result of mental illness, disability, risk of domestic abuse (automatically priority need in Wales if experiencing or threatened with domestic abuse) or time spent in care, prison or the armed forces.

Table 1. Forms of assistance received from local authorities

	Count	%
Referral to other services (legal, drugs-alcohol, charity, social care, JCP etc.)	36	32
Other (i.e. food bank vouchers, transport pass, asked to prove immigration status)	36	32
Nothing	21	19
Help to secure or securing an immediate safe place to stay for people who are sleeping rough or at risk of sleeping rough	14	13
Providing support to access PRS	9	8
Resolving Housing and Welfare Benefit problem	8	7
Financial payments	6	5
Debt and financial advice	3	3
Providing other assistance or specialist support	2	2
Young person meditation and conciliation	1	1
Measure to prevent domestic abuse (sanctuary accommodation)	1	1

the right help or right resources it can damage health, well-being and life chances.²² Additionally the financial cost of failing to prevent homelessness incurs significant additional costs.²³

Local authorities' failure to recognise or respond appropriately to sofa surfing means that the tailored help they could have been entitled to was not forthcoming. What help people did receive from local authorities amounted to referral or signposting to other services (32%/36) or some form of 'Other' help (32%/36). In a fifth of cases (21%/19) participants said they received no assistance. 'Other' forms of help participants received included being given food bank vouchers, told to prove their immigration status, being given a transport pass, advised to stay in or look in the PRS.

I got a bunch of leaflets and numbers for B&Bs.

I received a freedom pass. Otherwise [I] received nothing.

I said I was already with Crisis so there was no further help offered.

Table 1 details the range of assistance participants received, and demonstrates just how little assistance they received to help them either avoid sofa surfing in the first place or relieve it if they were already experiencing it. What was clear from many participants was that councils did not always take seriously their situation, presuming that because they technically had a roof over their heads and somewhere to stay that their problems and needs were not that pressing. Some were informed that if they left their sofa surfing

22 Mackie, P. and Thomas, I. (2014) *Nations apart? Experiences of single homeless people across Great Britain*. London: Crisis. https://www.crisis.org.uk/media/20608/crisis_nations_apart_2014.pdf; Pleace, N. & Culhane, D.P. (2016) *Better than Cure? Testing the case for Enhancing Prevention of Single Homelessness in England*. London: Crisis. https://www.crisis.org.uk/media/20680/crisis_better_than_cure_2016.pdf

23 Pleace, N. (2015) *At what cost? An estimation of the financial cost of single homelessness in the UK*. London: Crisis.



accommodation and then made a homelessness application, they would be found 'intentionally homeless'²⁴ and the council would have no duty to help them.

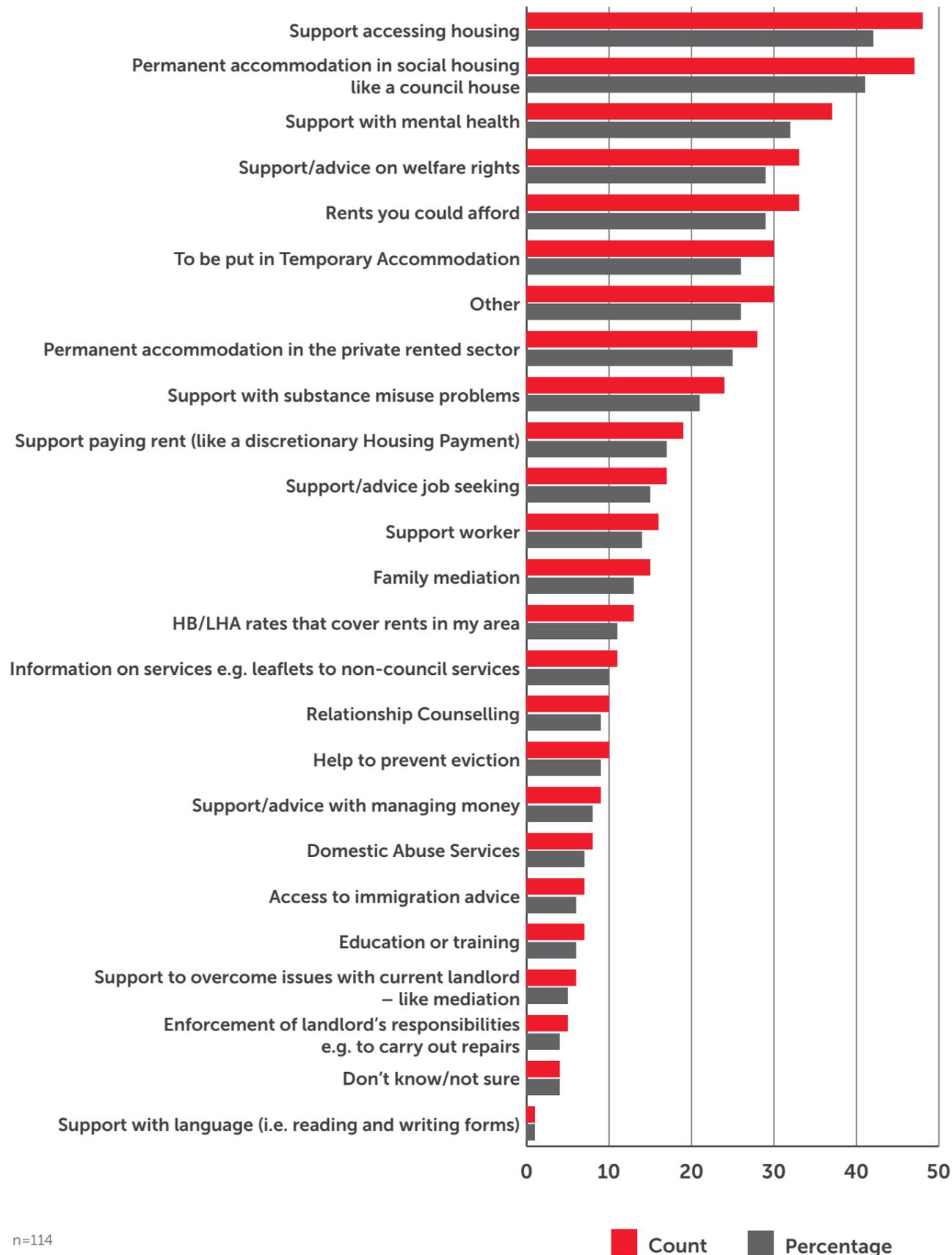
4.2 Preventing sofa surfing

While many participants received little by way of assistance when they had approached a local authority for assistance, it was clear they knew what would have helped prevent them ending up having to sofa surf in the first place. When participants were asked to consider what would have prevented their sofa surfing, answers fell into two main categories: namely a desire for better access to affordable housing and help with addressing various support needs.

Given the welfare related issues participants had had that lead some of them to start sofa surfing in the first place – four in 10 (42%/38) affected by welfare issues could not afford accommodation because of LHA rates/ Universal Credit or the Benefit Cap – it was not surprising that two-fifths (42%/48) named wanting support to access housing as the top means of preventing their sofa surfing. A similar proportion (41%/47) named permanent social housing as a key solution. Rents that were affordable was also highlighted by almost three out of 10 (29%/33) as being an important preventative measure. Other housing led preventative solutions participants wanted included permanent housing in the private rented sector as well as being placed in Temporary Accommodation.

24 Being 'intentionally homeless' is defined as someone satisfying all three of the following conditions: i) deliberately doing or failing to do anything which leads to them ceasing to occupy their accommodation; ii) the accommodation is available for their occupations and ; iii) it would have been reasonable for them to continue to occupy the accommodation. Some examples of its application include being evicted for antisocial behaviour, rent arrears, or refusing an offer of accommodation given by the local authority. For more nation specific detail on intentionality please see: <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/anaw/2014/7/section/77> (Wales); <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/homelessness-code-of-guidance-for-local-authorities/chapter-9-intentional-homelessness> (England) and <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/asp/2003/10/contents> (Scotland).

Figure 6. What would have prevented your sofa surfing?



n=114

Knowledge about the help that was actually available: knowing where to go for help.

In terms of support for personal issues they may have been dealing with, support with mental health was high on the priority of participants with a third (33%/37) citing this as an important preventative measure. A fifth (21%/24) wanted help with substance misuse. Others talked of wanting support with bereavement and access to personal counselling. Support workers and help with job seeking featured too. Some wanted support with decision making and support when they had left prison. Underpinning all these issues was the fact that just under a third (29%/33) wanted support and advice on welfare issues.

The instability of it and being reliant on people - health concerns. I want to be able to control my own life - I can't be in control of own life.

Prevention plays a key role in the stopping of homelessness in the first place. Failing to take action early can lead to people experiencing repeated and entrenched periods of homelessness. This has a knock-on cost for health services, drug and alcohol services and the criminal justice system.²⁵ The message from the participants about what would have prevented or helped end their sofa surfing was clear: secure affordable housing, help to access it and support with addressing personal issues. These are common themes that are widely understood across all forms of homelessness.²⁶

25 Jacob, R. (2018) *Preventing homelessness: It's everybody's business*. London: Crisis. https://www.crisis.org.uk/media/239551/preventing_homelessness_its_everybodys_buisness_2018.pdf; Pleace, N. & Culhane, D.P. (2016) *Better than Cure? Testing the case for Enhancing Prevention of Single Homelessness in England*. London: Crisis. https://www.crisis.org.uk/media/20680/crisis_better_than_cure_2016.pdf

26 Downie, M., Gousy, H., Basran, J., Jacob, R., Rowe, S., Hancock, C., Albanese, F., Pritchard, R., Nightingale, K. and Davies, T. (2018) *Everybody In: How to end homelessness in Great Britain*. London: Crisis. https://www.crisis.org.uk/media/239951/everybody_in_how_to_end_homelessness_in_great_britain_2018.pdf

Chapter 5:

The impact of sofa surfing

5.1 Relationships

We have detailed above the extent of participants' sofa surfing experiences, alongside their pathways into and out of it. However, it is also important to capture the subjective difficulties of having to live like this, such as the impact of sofa surfing on personal relationships. These human costs can make the indignity of sofa surfing all the more unbearable.

As a result of sofa surfing, six out of 10 (58%/66) people we spoke to saw friends and family less.

I don't have access to my son. I haven't been able to get myself stable enough to come home. I don't have a home for him to go to.

Almost a third of respondents (31%/24) said that they were seeing friends and family less because they were staying too far away. For others (30%/23) it was because they felt ashamed of their situation. Participants described desperate situations and the emotional turmoil they experienced as they tried to negotiate sofa surfing with trying to maintain relationships with loved ones. Without a secure home those with children had no space to see them. Others spoke of the shame they felt at

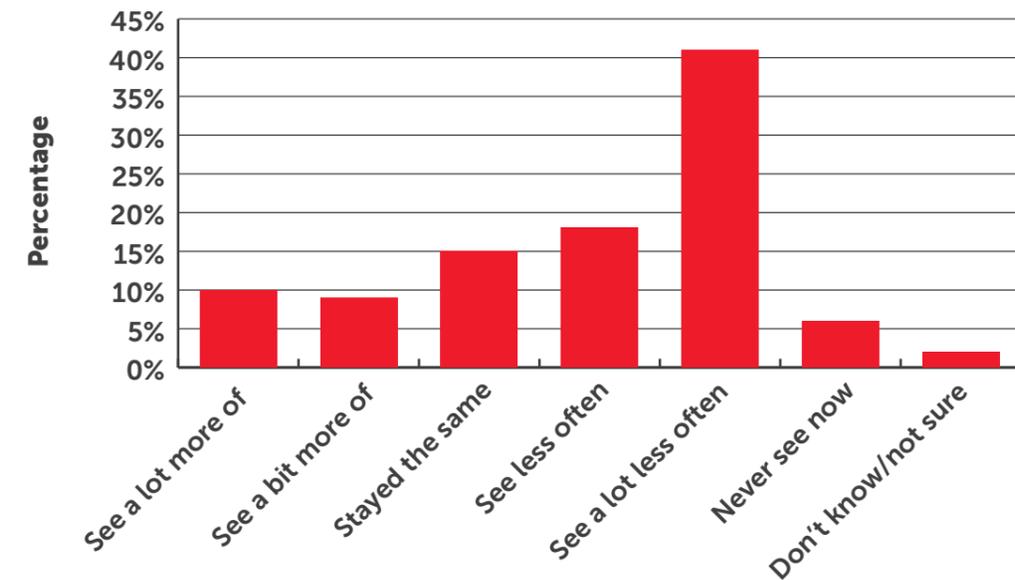
having to live under, what felt like, the dictates of others.

These findings align with research that shows the power of stigma that can be attached to the situation homeless people find themselves in. This can have the effect of contributing to a sense of shame and despondency about their situation and then withdrawing from others around them, resulting in isolation and loneliness.²⁷

For just over one in 10 (12%/9), no longer being on good terms with friends and family was one of the reasons for seeing them less. Many participants explained how friends and family struggled with understanding or accepting their sofa surfing, feeling they had brought it on themselves. There were other reasons too including having to look after hosts' children, lack of time and struggling with addiction problems.

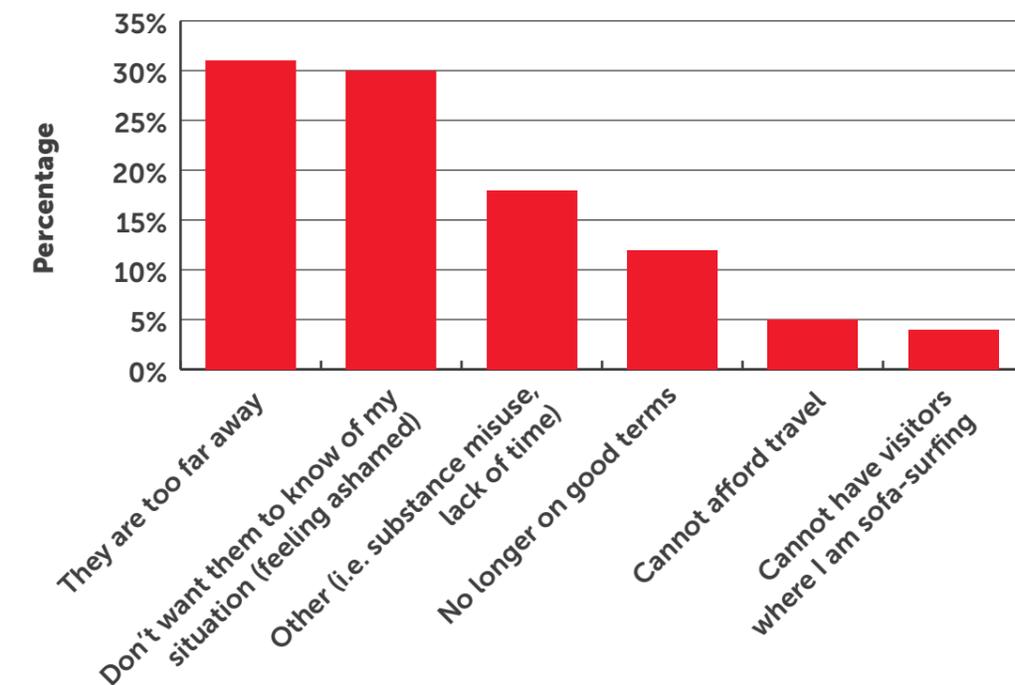
It was also clear from speaking to participants that the corrosive effect of sofa surfing could damage relationships with others over time. This was particularly the case for the relationships participants had with the sofa surfing hosts. These findings align with other research that found people who are sofa surfing had

Figure 7. Since or when you were sofa surfing, what has happened to the frequency with which you see your friends or family?



n=114

Figure 8. Why do you see friends and family less?



n=114

²⁷ Sanders, B. and Brown, B. (2015) 'I was all on my own': experiences of loneliness and isolation amongst homeless people. London: Crisis. https://www.crisis.org.uk/media/20504/crisis_i_was_all_on_my_own_2016.pdf



concerns about 'putting on' their friends or family in terms of the impact of their presence on the lifestyle and behaviour of their friend or relative.²⁸

A strong and repeated concern from participants was them feeling that they were a burden while sofa surfing. This is a powerful emotion, with people feeling they were 'in the way', and putting a significant strain on relationships. Again, the sense of shame was present in some participants and it was underpinned by a strong sense of personal failure and unworthiness at – what felt like – being solely reliant on the goodwill of others.

Very often it did not matter how hospitable the host was and how reassuring about them being able to stay. Instead there was sense or suspicion that the offer of accommodation was not genuine. In some cases, this meant people would

move sooner in order to avoid being asked or told to leave, which they expected would inevitably come.

I felt like I was putting myself on them - being a hindrance. Feeling like I was being a burden even though they didn't say so.

I didn't want to be an inconvenience even though I've known these friends for a long time.

Worst feeling in the world lying on their couch knowing they don't want you there.

This pressure of not wanting to overstay one's welcome was a common experience leading to anxiety and sense of not being able to settle or be at 'home'.

My host bears with it but I feel very uncomfortable. I feel like I

²⁸ Countryside Alliance and Crisis (2003) *Hidden Homelessness: your place, not mine The experiences of homeless people staying with family and friends*. London: Crisis. <https://www4.shu.ac.uk/research/cres/sites/shu.ac.uk/files/hidden-homelessness-your-place-not-mine.pdf> p. 42

am burdening other people. [I] don't want to impose. [It] Creates a lot of anxiety.

It's pretty uncomfortable - you feel like a burden. Stressed out over how long you can stay even if the people are nice.

You make sure you don't out stay welcome. I always find somewhere else to stay in advance.

Living with this pressure could make some relationships fail and others become untenable. Participants spoke of relationships with close friends and relatives faltering and breaking down, very often leaving them feeling more bereft and alone which could reinforce a sense of personal failure for the situation they found themselves in.

Relationships broke down. [I'm] Unemployed and out of work – it was very hard. I felt like I couldn't really rely on them [friends]: I feel like I was burdening them. They'd ask for money upfront and I didn't have that. When you're homeless you find out who your real friends are.

Me and my sister fell out because we were under each other's feet. We took everything out on each other.

I still had a good relationship with them but they're still the boss and I have to do what they wanted otherwise I'm on out on my ear.

People who had sofa surfed also told of how relationships with hosts and others could change particularly if they learned or became aware of new personal issues they may have been struggling with. This could further heighten tension and stress on the relationship.

They saw more of my issues and distanced themselves from me. Now they're having to rebuild

trust with me. There is one friend I am not even on speaking terms with now.

It was difficult with my family because of alcohol issues. They couldn't cope. It was OK but not easy for them.

5.2 Health and support needs

Sofa surfing adversely impacts a range of personal issues that can make it harder for people to leave homelessness behind.

Alongside negative impacts on relationships, one of the widest felt effects of sofa surfing was on participants' mental wellbeing. Eight of 10 (80%/91) said they had suffered in this area. The pressure, insecurity and strain of sofa surfing took a cumulative toll on individuals, with many struggling to see a way of their turmoil.

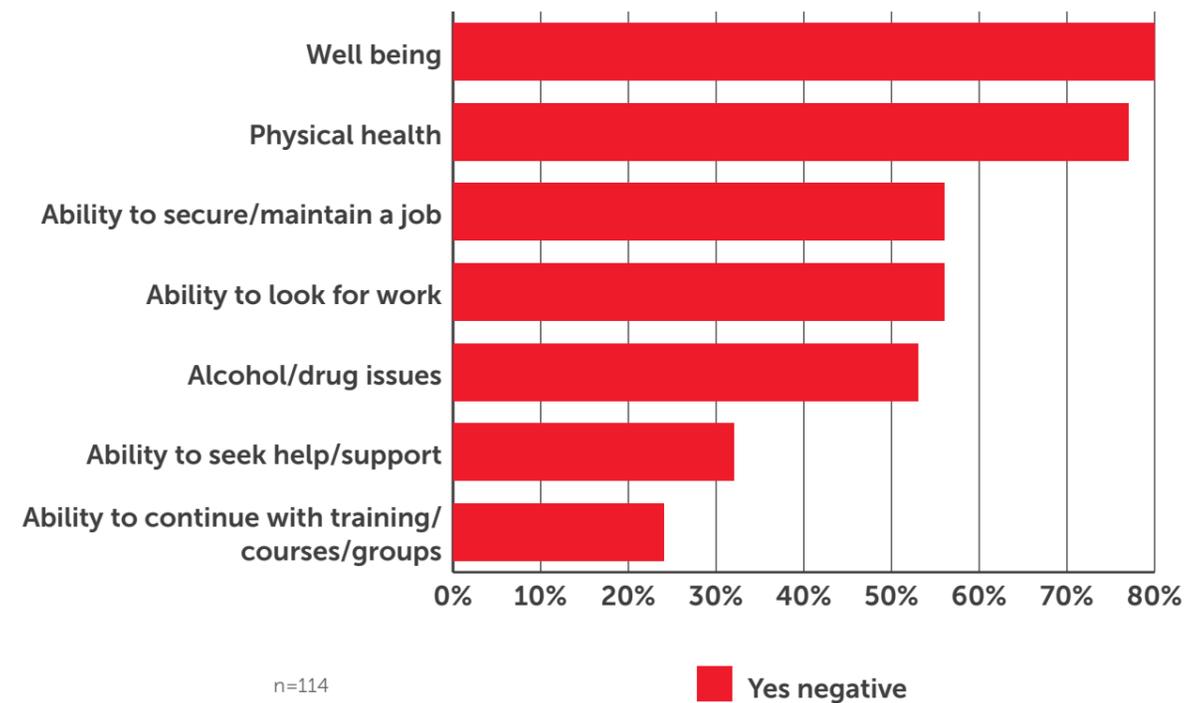
There is always tension – feeling that they [hosts] are sick of me and that is affecting my mental health.

I really struggle with the uncertainty and insecurity – not knowing where I'll be staying next impacted my mental health.

Mental health consequences were closely followed by over three-quarters (77%/86) of respondents reporting that their physical health had deteriorated while sofa surfing. The physical discomfort of sleeping on the floor was a leading contributor to this.

Bad back and aching neck. Takes the worst out of me. It's very hard. Only benefit is that it's a roof over your head.

Mental health and severe chronic fatigue - I need lots of rest and chance to recuperate. If I don't, I can spiral out of control and struggle to get back on an even keel. I contemplated suicide until my mum helped.

Figure 9. What effect did sofa surfing have on the following areas of your life ?

Having to live with the constant pressure of uncertainty, stress and physical discomfort alongside strained relationships gives context to the findings that over half the participants (53%/57) struggled with drug or alcohol use which got worse during periods of sofa surfing. Participants explained that this was sometimes due to being in situations where alcohol and drugs were being used, but also their use was a means of dealing with the stress of sofa surfing itself.

My use of alcohol and drug use got a lot worse. There was casual drinking and smoking weed – it got a lot more. My mental health took a battering. My drug use was disguising a lot of the pain I was in.

My physical and mental well-being have taken greatest toll. I tried to help those I've stayed with but this has made me worse. There's no peace and quiet: you have to do what the host is doing.

5.3 Employment

Having to exist in a sofa surfing situation can compromise the ability of people to look for, secure and maintain a job. The issues explored above and the daily pressure and consequences of not enough sleep meant over half (56%/63) of respondents said that looking for work, securing or maintaining a job was negatively impacted by sofa surfing.

My ability to maintain a job was affected. My mental health and drug use all got worse. I couldn't go to bed early because had to wait til everyone went to bed. Got drunk/stoned to go to sleep.

Participants told us of having to give up jobs because the pressure became too much or because they were now living too far away. Having no space of their own meant for people who are sofa surfing it was hard to maintain a normal routine. Others spoke of sleeping at work to try and catch up

because they had no control over what time they could go to bed or get up.

I struggled to continue with my career because things became too much and I had to stop.

Maintaining a job was hard given the anxiety that I developed and it undermined my confidence.

5.4 Support and assistance

Getting appropriate and timely support for those experiencing homelessness helps provide a strong foundation and platform to end it. Yet for some participants the experience of sofa surfing makes this harder.

One in three (32%/35) said that the ability to seek help or support was harder, while for a quarter (24%/26), being able to continue with courses or training they were on was compromised.

There was no relationship change [because of sofa surfing] but I did feel that I stayed too long and it was hard to be motivated to seek help and go on courses. It felt like I needed to leave.

Some participants explained that motivation could be hard to maintain and anxiety, the result of uncertainty over the future, could further inhibit desire to continue with support or seek it.

I don't mind sleeping on the floor because of my bad back but I didn't have my own space – I have not been able to have a routine or been able to work or attend college.

There were some participants, however, for whom the experience of sofa surfing actually acted as an incentive to get help or address particular issues they were struggling with. For instance, just over a fifth (23%/25) said that sofa surfing had

helped them address their substance misuse.

Staying somewhere helped me with keeping off the booze. They [host] provided me with guidance, support and encouragement to stop. [They] were so kind and positive.

Some of the intermittent rough sleepers we spoke to found that access to amenities and a warm place to stay while sofa surfing could help with job searching.

Having somewhere warm and safe to stay helps with jobs and looking for work.

5.5 Access to amenities and facilities

While many participants were appreciative of hosts' offers of somewhere to stay for a while it was not always the case that they could really make themselves at home or have use of the amenities a normal home has.

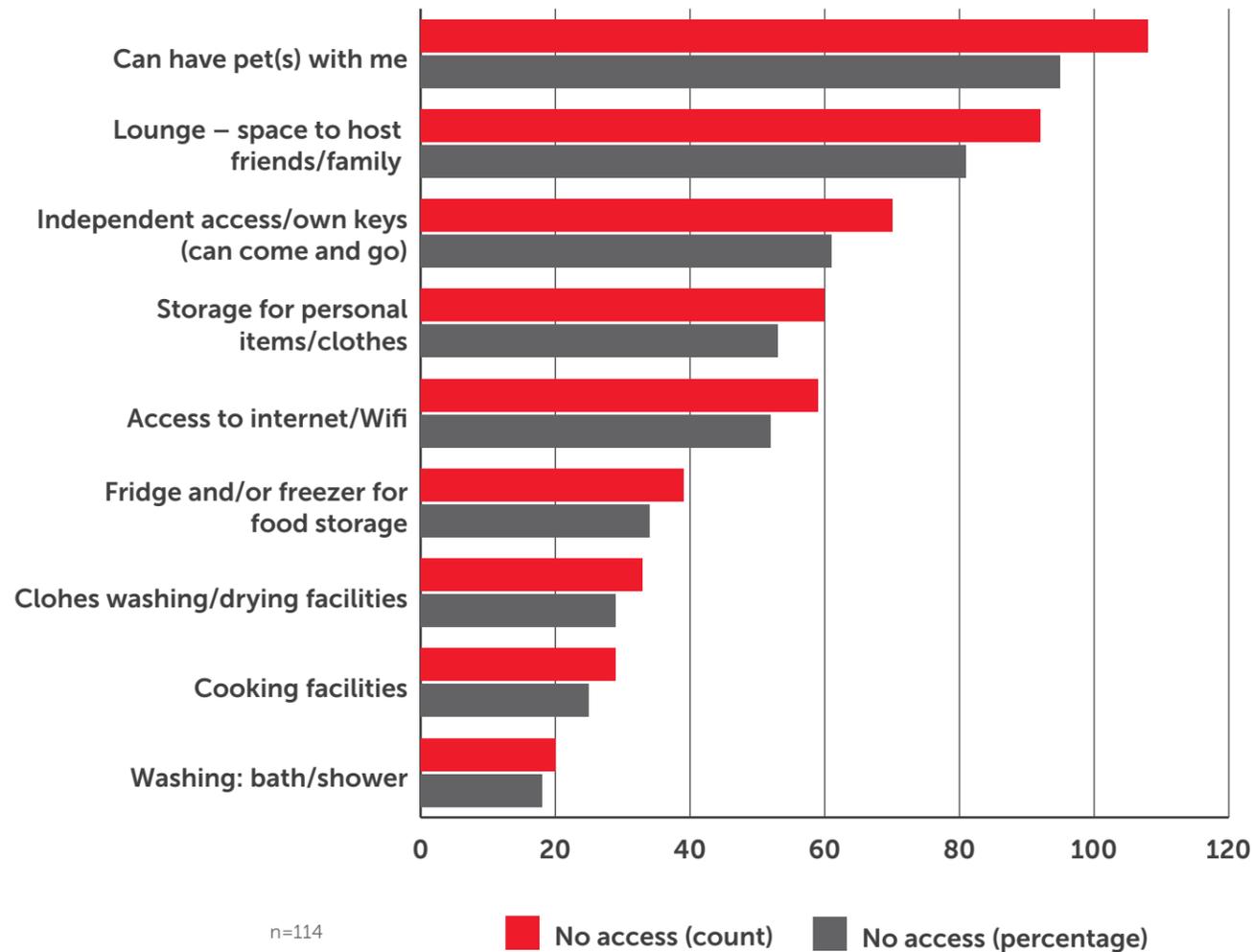
I feel awkward relying on someone else for help. Depending on others is hard: you don't know whether you can have a shower. I struggle to keep clean and safe depending on whose house it is.

Six out of ten (61%/70) participants were unable to come and go as they please or needed. Not having keys or independent access meant being reliant on the host for when they could come and go from the property. Often this caused problems particularly for those who were managing to maintain a job.

Once I finished work at 8pm - came back by 8:30pm and had to wait outside until 12.45am. This is life as a sofa surfer.

Not having anywhere to store personal items or clothes was an issue for over half (53%/60) of participants in their

Figure 10. Thinking about your most recent/current experience of sofa surfing have you had access to any of the following?



most recent experience of sofa surfing. This often meant they had personal items and clothes left across a range of different hosts' places. Things inevitably would get lost or forgotten during moving from place to place, including items of personal value.

Over a third (34%/39) had nowhere to store food (a fridge and/or freezer) nor were a quarter (25%/29) of participants able to access any cooking facilities when they had recently sofa surfed. Eating irregularly and poorly was a result for some which could contribute to ill health and weight loss.

My physical health was affected – I've lost a lot of weight and am just eating at work which is Burger King. I was ill looking and pale.

Basic personal hygiene and keeping oneself clean could be difficult for some. During their most recent experience, almost a third (29%/33) had no access to somewhere to wash or dry their clothes while almost a fifth (17%/20) had no access to a shower or a bath to wash themselves.

At first things were OK and good. Then it got very abusive - caused me to get depressed. They bullied me and they shouted at me. They stopped me being able to wash clothes or have a shower. They took the keys off me – [I had] limited access.

In some cases, people did have physical access to these amenities but felt prohibited in using them because of the sense they got from this host that really they cannot use or access them (very often despite what reassurances the host had given them).

When I'm living with someone at first it's welcoming, but then after [they] decide to show it's your house. I don't feel comfortable. They make sure you know it's their house.

The cumulation of these impacts compromise people's ability to live with dignity. Everyone should have a safe and secure home which provides the foundation to build a life from. Participants' experiences show how sofa surfing can deny this and a means to move on with their lives.

5.6 Dangers, risks and obligations

As is clear, sofa surfing is not a sustainable nor appropriate way of living. There is the frequency of moving from place to place and resulting impact of personal relationships alongside the impact on a range of personal issues and poor sleeping arrangements. What also became apparent from speaking with people with current or recent sofa surfing experience was the extent to which they could be put in places of danger and at risk of harm. Furthermore, many participants spoke of unwritten obligations to do things for the host(s).

We had to take 3-hour shifts sleeping as it was that unsafe. We had to hide sharp objects ... there was a lack of privacy. Fear of uncertainty of being assaulted by mother. We could hear shouting

and screaming from upstairs. It was like a nightmare.

I was at my Auntie's who had her own problem - she was struggling also – it was a toxic environment and caused problems. It is not a healthy state to be in.

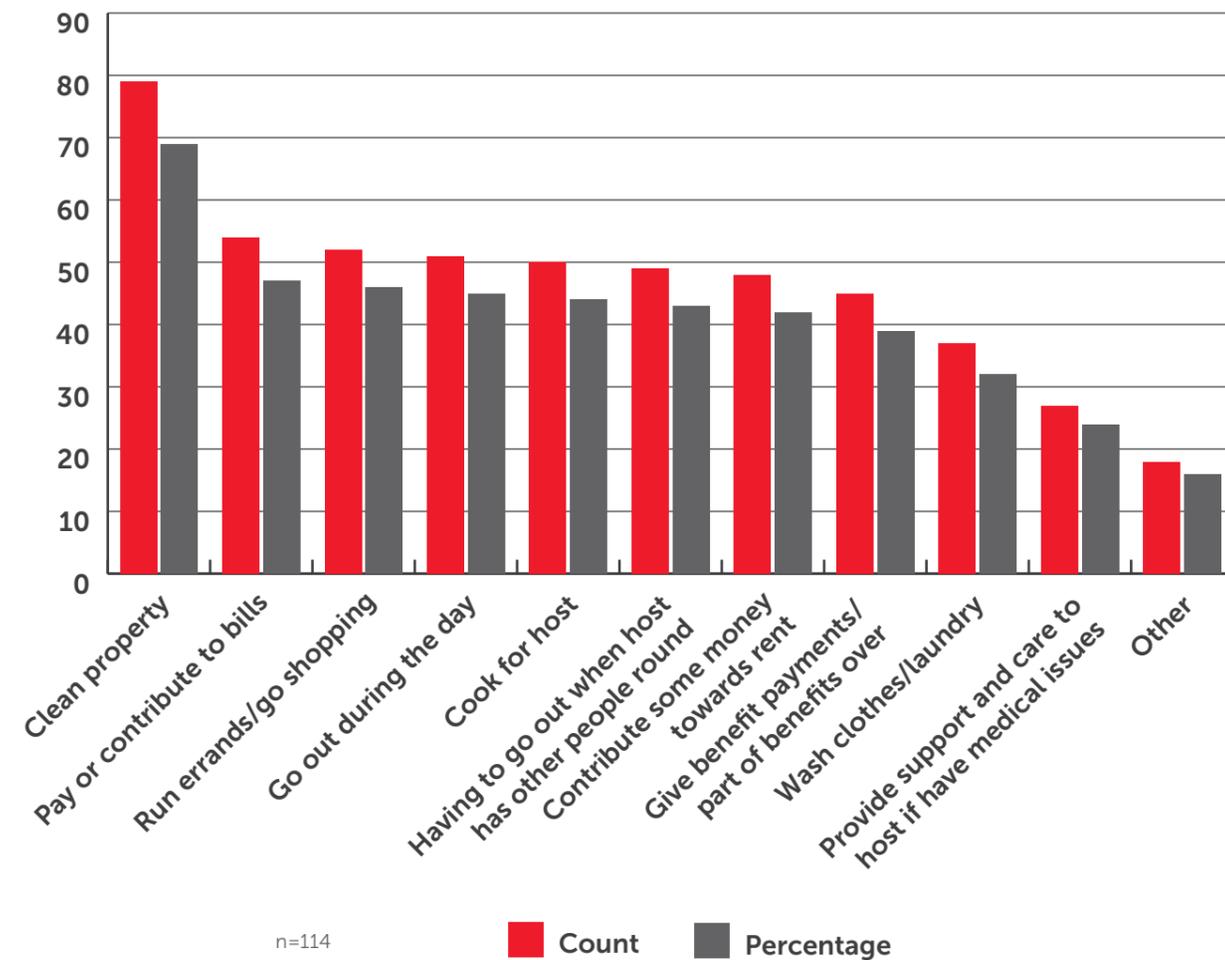
Some participants spoke of developing a 'sixth sense' in terms of having an awareness of danger when they were sofa surfing. In large part this was down to the fact that it was not their own space and they had no control over who was in the property. For women with sofa surfing experience this could be particularly difficult to deal with, including not sleeping properly for fear of something happening to you.

It's more comfortable than sleeping on the street. But it's not your own space. You're always on guard. I felt cautious and paranoid. There were people always coming in and out. People banging on the door – they were drug dealing.

The presence of others and risk they could pose to those sofa surfing was often beyond their control and there was little they could do aside from leave and look elsewhere for somewhere to stay.

It wasn't suitable or comfortable. When you are in their place its totally different – they try to boss you around, like your parents. Telling you off.

Despite these dangers and threats, there were several things that people sofa surfing did to help the host(s) which were more under their control, albeit often underpinned by a sense that if these sorts of things were not done then they could be asked to leave. Hosts would sometimes outright ask participants to do things for them and other times people sofa surfing would 'voluntarily' do them.

Figure 11. Did you ever feel obliged to do any of the following?

The most common form of 'help' that participants said they had given while sofa surfing was to clean the property (69%/79) followed by paying or contributing to bills (47%/54). Just under half of participants said that they had done a range of other forms of help for hosts including: run errands (46%/52), cook for host (44%/50) and pay money towards rent (42%/48). Participants would also wash hosts' clothes (often along with their own) and sometimes provide support if the host had medical issues.

[Her] mother expects us to go shopping, buy her food, pay money towards rent... There is a lack of understanding, [they're]

unwilling to communicate, possible racism from partner's family, physical and emotional abuse, guilt tripping.

You can get stressed. [Often] feels like you have to go out of the way to make them happy. Hosts can take advantage of you - make you do jobs, DIY, gardening, baby-sitting.

The other form of 'help' that almost half of participants said they performed was going out during the day (45%/50) and having to leave the accommodation when the host had other people round (43%/49). This was less voluntary help and more an



obligation that came as a condition of being allowed to sofa surf at the hosts'. It also came with consequences for participants, many of whom had nowhere to go when they had to vacate the premises. For some this meant whiling away time in the local library, riding the buses or sitting in day centres waiting until they could return. It also served to reinforce the feeling of insecurity and uncertainty; that this is not your home.

They didn't like me living there. I felt they did not trust me. I had to be out during the day.

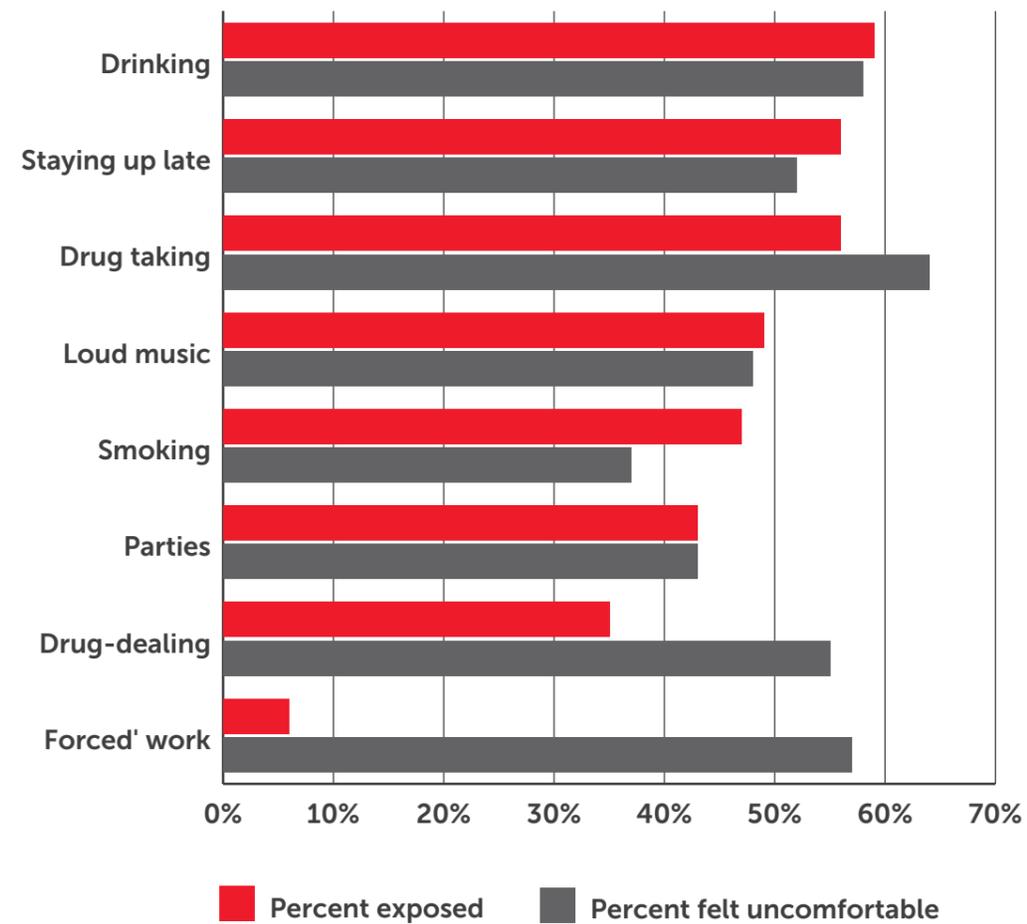
People end up getting funny about things.... You're in their household and they want their own space. Hard to feel settled and it is difficult. They say one thing and then you get the say(?) that you need to leave.

Alongside the forms of 'help' participants gave hosts, there were also potentially troublesome and

sometimes illegal forms of behaviour that others in the property would engage in. It meant participants were often exposed to a range of behaviours that could unsettle them and potentially compromise any desire they had for stopping drinking or drug use.

The most common forms of behaviours participants were exposed to during their experiences of sofa surfing were drinking (59%/67), having to stay up late (56%/64) and drug-taking (56%/64). Of those exposed to drinking, staying up late and drug taking and dealing, over half expressed being uncomfortable at being around such behaviours.

Where participants were struggling with their own addiction issues, being surrounded by similar behaviours seemed par for the course and was not something they felt particularly troubled by. For some, using drugs and/or alcohol was a way to numb the experience of sofa surfing and

Figure 12. Behaviours exposed to and felt uncomfortable about

to maintain a strong resolve when surrounded by others consuming drugs and alcohol. The need to 'fit in' could be too strong. It could also put further strain on relationships with the host they were staying with. This combined with participants' reports of the downturn in their mental health shows just how corrosive sofa surfing can be to people's attempts to leave homelessness behind.

make sleeping in such uncomfortable circumstances bearable.

The drugs affected me the most. I started taking speed and I tried to give it up.

My drug and alcohol use was affected the most because my addiction got out of control and helped block out insecurity of not having anywhere to stay.

Other behaviours that participants witnessed included smoking (47%/54), loud music (49%/56), parties (43%/49) and drug-dealing in the premises (35%/40). These behaviours are not conducive to creating a stable and restorative environment. This was something many of the participants

needed, especially given the poor sleeping arrangements and frequent moves they already had to endure.

It's the behaviour of others, bringing prostitutes back and drug use. This made me feel very uneasy.

My alcohol use increased. I was getting drunk to block things out. My drug use also increased. It's a vicious circle and a struggle to get out of it.

Unsurprisingly many participants were left feeling uncomfortable when exposed to these behaviours. Some acknowledged how it had affected their attempts to abstain from using drugs or alcohol. It was difficult

Chapter 6:

Conclusion and recommendations

Access to a safe, stable, and affordable home is a moral right that many of us take for granted. But currently in Great Britain, too many of us suffer the inhumanity of unsafe, temporary, or no housing.

The clear message to emerge from those with current and recent experience of sofa surfing is that it is an uncomfortable, unsustainable and potentially dangerous form of homelessness. While not as visible as some forms of homelessness, its impact can be just as damaging for people's life prospects and wellbeing.

Participants in this research had multiple episodes of sofa surfing which ranged in duration from a few days to months at a time. Insecurity and uncertainty characterised their lives and a 'permanent impermanence' defined the housing trajectory many were on. Moves into sofa surfing and moves on from it or back into it are more likely from one vulnerable and insecure 'housing' situation (i.e. rough sleeping, for example) to another equally insecure situation (more sofa surfing or rough sleeping again). Sofa surfing cannot be viewed as a fortuitous stepping stone or a dip between one form of secure accommodation and another.

These trajectories into and out of sofa surfing give context to the reasons participants gave for leaving prior

accommodation and beginning to sofa surf. For over half of people this was due to issues with housing affordability including rent arrears, or not being able to afford a deposit. The impact of welfare reform, specifically the gap between Local Housing Allowance rates and Housing Benefits, is also evident in the drivers of sofa surfing, both as a cause and as something trapping people in their situation. This was compounded by mental health issues, relationship breakdown and bereavement.

The impact of having to sofa surf is clearly detrimental. Those in the research saw less of their family and friends because of it and were now too far away and in some cases ashamed of their current situation. Relationships with the host they were staying with can also be difficult and strained. What characterises their experience is feeling like a burden and in the way, while feeling like they are eroding the good will of others. This led some to move on before they needed to.

Sofa surfing also means not always having access to the day-to-day amenities and facilities securely

housed people take for granted. Having nowhere to store personal items or food or not being able to a shower makes daily life complicated, hard and undignified. While the fact that many participants had no independent access to the property and had limited access at certain times of the day only served to reinforce the unacceptable nature of having to live like this.

Unsurprisingly, sofa surfing is not good for mental well-being and many participants were badly affected, in part fuelled by uncertainty and insecurity plus exposure to other people's damaging behaviour. Attempts to find work or maintain a job are also undermined by experiences of sofa surfing, as is seeking or maintaining any support participants may have been receiving. The stress and strain of sofa surfing results in poor physical health – partly because of sleeping on sofas and the floor – and some used drink and drugs more as a means of managing the stress of the situation.

Sofa surfing also means being put in harm's way and exposed to other people's behaviours. This can often involve having to live in a toxic and stressful environment and the sometimes-impending dangers of other people's behaviours. Even without the threat of danger, people sofa surfing often feel obliged to do things for the hosts they are staying with. Cleaning, shopping and handing over money were commonplace forms of 'help' and often done under a sense of duress, otherwise they feared they faced being 'evicted'.

Getting help while sofa surfing was difficult. Not all of those who were already engaged with a local authority before they started sofa surfing had their new situation recognised. This meant that opportunities to prevent sofa surfing were missed. Instead the most common form of assistance was signposting or referral to other services rather than active attempts to relieve or prevent sofa surfing.

Finally, it was clear what would have prevented participants' sofa surfing: being able to access affordable and secure accommodation alongside getting proper assistance to address support needs. Ending or preventing someone's homelessness quickly is vital to stop people's experiences getting worse and the increased likelihood of them ending up in a more entrenched form of homelessness.

This research shows that sofa surfing is not something that can be understood as a one-off aberration to lives otherwise lived in safe and secure housing. Rather, it is indicative of the insecure housing pathways many homeless people are on. It is an experience that brings many costs to those experiencing it, but also serves as a reminder of the wider failure of governments to provide adequate affordable housing and proper support to some of the most vulnerable people in society.

Recommendations

- The moves into and out of sofa surfing detailed in this research show how vulnerable and precarious many participants' situations are. The loss of employment, experience of bereavement and support needs around mental and physical health along with exacerbated substance misuse means that it is highly likely that at various stages they have come into contact with other public authorities (including primary and secondary healthcare, JobCentre Plus, probation or social services, for example). These are all opportunities for a referral to be made and action taken to prevent and end someone's homelessness. Effective joint working is key to help address the range of factors that can cause an individual to become homeless, and successfully prevent it.

Governments in England, Scotland and Wales should extend legal duties to prevent homelessness to all relevant public bodies and housing providers. This

must be accompanied by long term and sustainable funding for homelessness prevention services for all agencies who have a responsibility for preventing homelessness.

- The research shows that of those participants who were already engaged with a local authority before beginning to sofa surf, over half did not have this change in housing situation acknowledged. This means there were potential opportunities to prevent participants moving into sofa surfing. Given that 44 people sofa surfed after being in the PRS we know there is work that can be done to maintain tenancies or find viable alternative accommodation. The fact that some a fifth (19%/21) participants left local authorities with nothing shows that homeless people are still being turned away despite the prevention and relief duties introduced by the Homelessness Reduction Act (2017) in England and Housing (Wales) Act (2014) and strong legal protections in Scotland. In Scotland all unintentional and intentional homeless households are entitled to Temporary Accommodation settled accommodation but many we spoke to were turned away.

Guidance should be strengthened across all legislative frameworks to ensure people who are sofa surfing are recognised and treated as being homeless when they approach for homelessness assistance.

- That people reported a preference for sofa surfing over unsuitable Temporary Accommodation such as Bed and Breakfasts (B&Bs) or hotels highlights an environment that can be so damaging that they would rather risk sofa surfing than remain. Temporary Accommodation provided must meet people's needs and not risk making someone's situation worse.

There will always be a need for emergency accommodation such as hostels and night shelters but there should be no one living in this kind of accommodation without a plan for rapid rehousing into affordable, secure and decent accommodation.

- Over half of people surveyed (54%) stated that issues related to housing affordability were a factor in them starting to sofa surf. Housing benefit is one of the most powerful and practical tools we have to prevent and end homelessness and needs to align closely to local rents. Research participants also specifically named support and advice on welfare rights are being something they felt would have prevented their sofa surfing. There needs to be increased investment in welfare assistance to help prevent people becoming homeless.

The UK Government must end the freeze on Local Housing Allowance rates, and ensure that the rates cover at least the cheapest third of private rents across Great Britain.

- Being able to secure a stable home gives people the best chance of moving on from homelessness or preventing it altogether.

Over the long-term, national governments across England, Scotland, and Wales must ensure there is enough social housing to meet current and future demand.

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Appendix

Table 2. Age breakdown of respondents by gender

	Men		Women	
	Count	Percent*	Count	Percent**
17-25	12	14	1	3
26-35	20	24	11	35
36-45	19	23	7	23
46-55	22	27	5	16
56-65	8	10	6	19
66 plus	1	1	1	3

*as proportion of male respondents

**as proportion of female respondents

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ISBN 978-1-78519-068-1

Crisis UK (trading as Crisis).

Registered Charity Numbers: E&W1082947,
SC040094. Company Number: 4024938



**Together
we will end
homelessness**