



Crisis

# **"I felt invisible": Revealing the reality behind hidden homelessness**

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# Executive Summary

**This research shows the scale of hidden homelessness in Great Britain, and reveals the experiences of people sleeping in cars, staying in sheds or garages, or sofa surfing with friends, family, acquaintances or even strangers because they have nowhere else to go. These less seen, but no less impactful, forms of homelessness lie below the more visible tip of the iceberg of the housing and homelessness crisis, underrepresented in public narratives and official statistics.**

Across Great Britain, 208,600 households are estimated to be experiencing hidden homelessness – sofa-surfing or sleeping in unconventional accommodation such as cars, vans, sheds, and garages – which has risen by 30% since 2020. These figures are based on statistical modelling conducted as part of the Homelessness Monitor<sup>1</sup>, a 14-year research programme

tracking homelessness trends, funded by Crisis and conducted by Heriot-Watt University. The research triangulates a range of data sources to produce a robust estimate of the scale of various forms of homelessness, including households not represented in official statistics.

To demonstrate the day-to-day realities of hidden homelessness, we conducted a survey of 225 people who have experienced hidden homelessness; in-depth interviews were conducted with four participants, to gain further, qualitative insights into their experiences. The research shows:

- The precarious and transitory nature of hidden homelessness situations, with 40% of participants reporting having moved over six times within a typical month.

- The most common type of sofa-surfing was with family or friends (65%); however, four in ten (42%) had stayed with an acquaintance and 29% had been forced to sofa surf with a stranger. A large majority (83%) of participants who had experienced sofa surfing also spent time in other forms of hidden homelessness.
- Other forms of hidden homelessness included sleeping in tents or sheds (67%), commercial/industrial premises (57%), abandoned buildings (47%), in indoor public spaces (48%), cars, vans or boats (42%), and public toilets (27%).
- People were forced into unsafe and dangerous situations. Participants reported having to stay with people they were not comfortable with (60%), having to take drugs or consume alcohol in order to keep staying somewhere (51%), experiencing violence and/or abuse during hidden homelessness (51%) and feeling afraid for their lives (58%).
- The survey revealed stark impacts of hidden homelessness, with 81% reporting impacts on their mental health, 72% on their physical health, and 81% on their sleep.
- Experiences for women were disproportionately more dangerous and traumatic. The number of women who responded to the survey was small (37), but the findings suggest that women moved on more frequently than men and relied more on sofa surfing, including more cases of staying with acquaintances, strangers, and people they did not feel comfortable with. A higher proportion of women than men spoke of violence or abuse, sexual assault, and feeling afraid for their lives during experiences of hidden homelessness.

This research shows that in hidden homelessness, people are left finding somewhere to sleep based on the limited options available leaving them with little control, in situations that can be dangerous, precarious, and conditional on the decisions of other people. For the majority, hidden homelessness meant loneliness, risk of violence and abuse, declining physical and mental health, and fear for their life. Concerningly, the statistical analysis shows that the scale of these harms may be greater than expected, with over 200,000 households estimated to be experiencing hidden homelessness across Great Britain.

1. See: <https://www.crisis.org.uk/ending-homelessness/homelessness-monitor/>.



# Background

While some forms of homelessness, such as rough sleeping and temporary accommodation, are the subject of many news articles, public discussion, and official counts, there are other, severe types of homelessness that are not well understood or easily quantified. Hidden homelessness lies beneath the ‘visible’ tip of the iceberg of the housing crisis that leaves too many struggling without a secure home. This research sheds light on these hidden forms of homelessness. It presents a current estimate of the number of households experiencing hidden homelessness in Great Britain, which draws on a range of data sources to include people not represented in official statistics. It highlights, through a survey and in-depth interviews, the precariousness, uncertainty and dangers faced by the large numbers of people who experience hidden homelessness.

# Method

To quantify the scale of hidden homelessness in Great Britain, this report draws on statistical modelling conducted as part of the Homelessness Monitor, a 14-year research programme tracking homelessness trends funded by Crisis and conducted by Heriot-Watt University. This modelling triangulates data from a range of sources – household surveys, statutory statistics, administrative data

and specialised surveys of services and their users – to produce the most up-to-date estimate of the worst forms of homelessness. The findings of this analysis include the estimated number of households sofa-surfing and sleeping in ‘unconventional accommodation’ (such as cars, vans, sheds, and garages) in 2024 across England, Scotland and Wales. This total is presented in this report as the number of households described as hidden homeless in Great Britain<sup>2</sup>.

In addition to this, a survey was conducted of 225 people across England, Scotland and Wales who were currently experiencing hidden homelessness or had in the past two years. For the purpose of this survey, hidden homelessness was defined as:

- Sofa-surfing
- Sleeping in a car, van, or boat
- Sleeping on public transport
- Sleeping in indoor public spaces, e.g. libraries, A&Es, 24-hour restaurants/cafes
- Sleeping in public toilets
- Sleeping in a tent or shed
- Sleeping in a garage or commercial/industrial premises
- Staying in a squat or abandoned property.

Interviews were conducted with four participants to explore their experiences in more depth.

Further detail on these methods can be found in Appendix 1.

# Findings

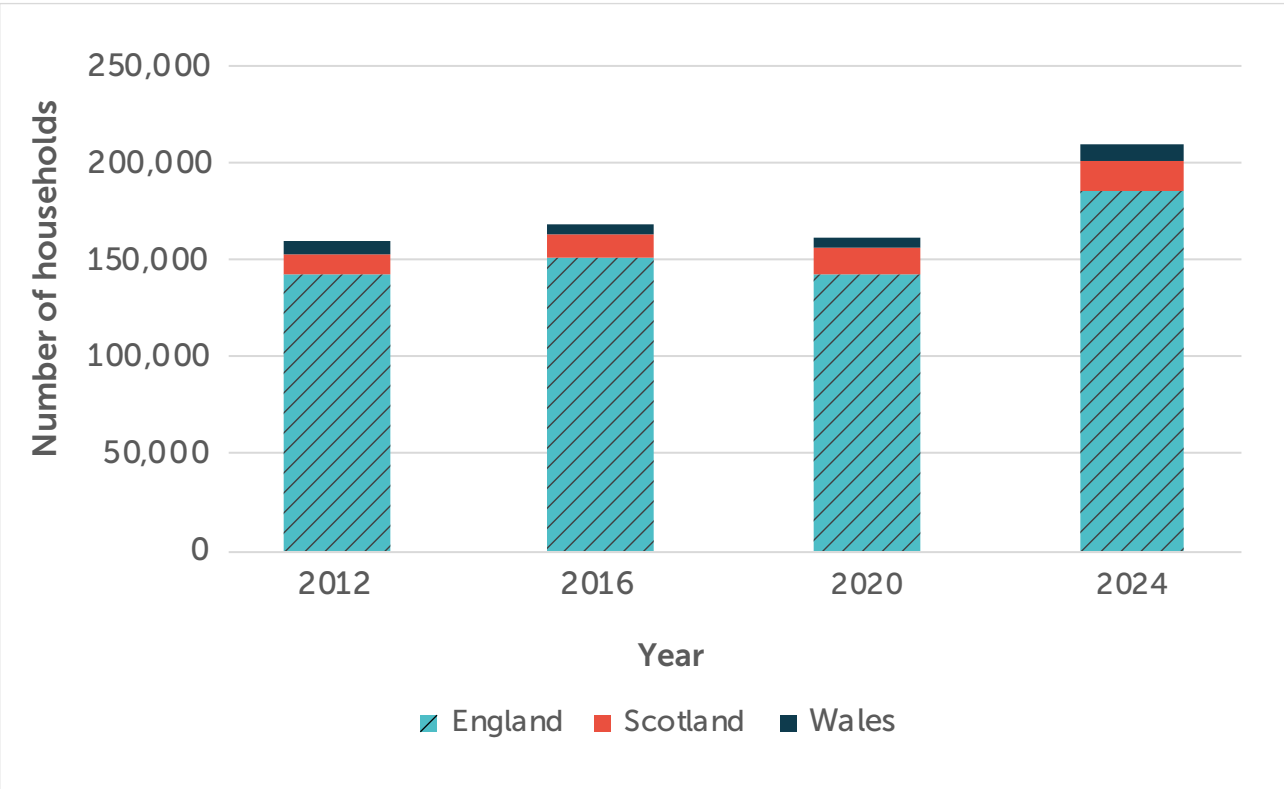
## The scale of hidden homelessness

The statistical modelling conducted by Heriot-Watt University found that

208,600 households are estimated to be experiencing hidden homelessness – including sofa-surfing and sleeping in cars, vans, sheds and garages – across Great Britain on any given night.

Since 2020, the number of individuals and families experiencing hidden homelessness in Great Britain has risen by 30%.

Figure 1: The number of households experiencing hidden homelessness in Great Britain, 2012-2024.



Further detail on these figures can be found in the Appendix.

2. There is no one official definition of hidden homelessness and for the purposes of this report we are talking about two categories of non-statutory homelessness collected as part of the core homelessness data set in the Homelessness Monitor series.



## Where people are staying during hidden homelessness

Hidden homelessness covers a wide range of situations, experienced by people being forced to find anywhere to stay once they lose the stability of a home. In these circumstances, many people are left with few options, making decisions based on the limited accommodation available or where they can sleep to have some form of shelter and avoid being moved on. This leaves people with little control, in situations that can be dangerous, precarious, and conditional on the decisions of other people. Many people experiencing hidden homelessness will not be known to the council or support services, and if they are, may not get the support they need to improve their situation in time to avoid homelessness. Hidden homelessness is characterised by instability, with people needing to move frequently. People may also move in and out of hidden homelessness between periods of more secure housing and periods of more unstable homelessness, such as being in hostels, shelters and even rough sleeping.

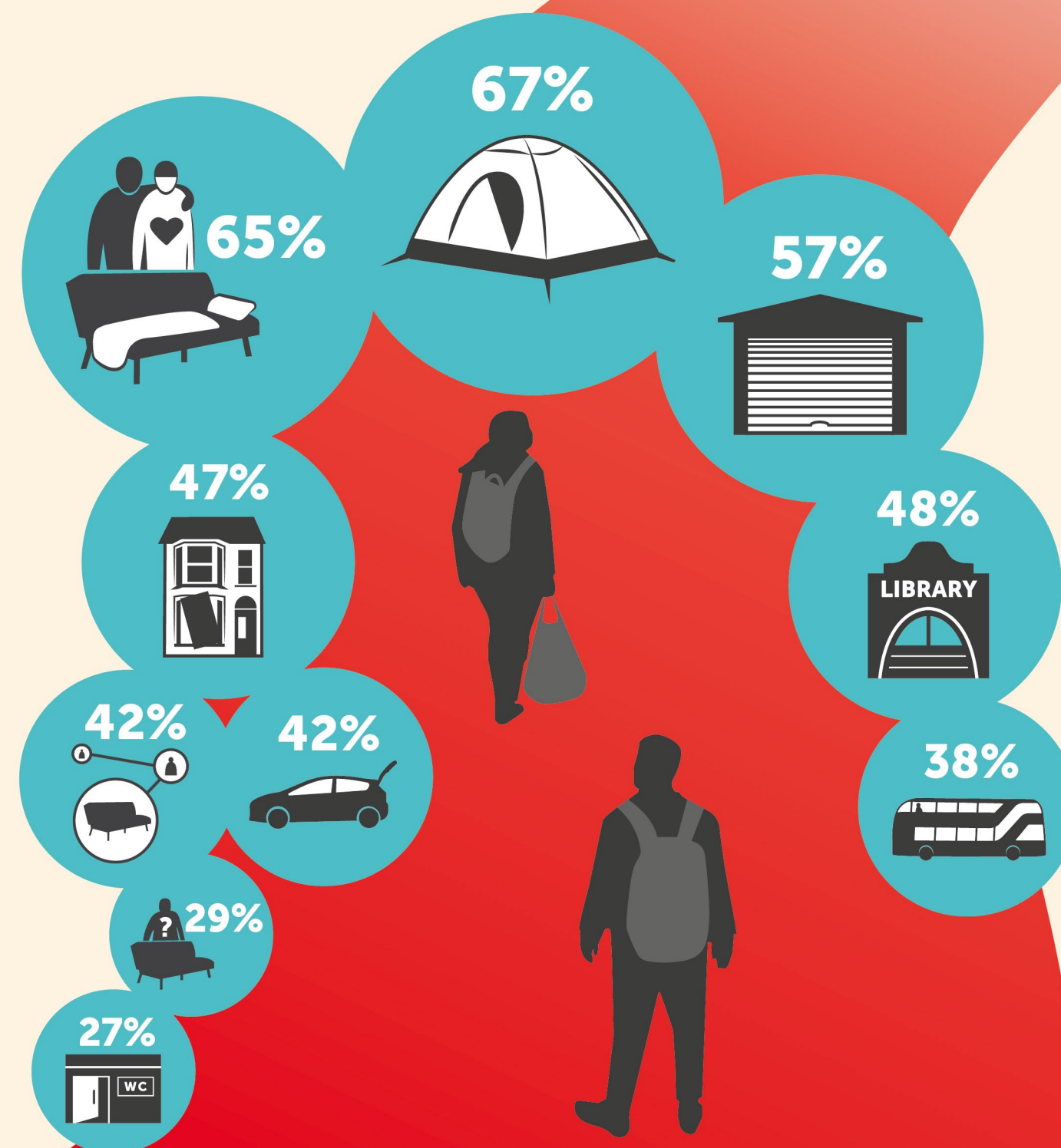
## Causes of hidden homelessness

Participants were asked about the causes that contributed to them experiencing hidden homelessness. The causes of hidden homelessness reported were similar to the main causes of homelessness in general<sup>3</sup>, with the most common being relationship breakdown, being asked to leave their previous accommodation, leaving prison with nowhere to go, no longer being able to afford somewhere to live, violence and/or abuse by a partner, and eviction from private rented or social accommodation.

- The main two reasons highlighted by participants for their homelessness were relationship breakdown with partner (reported by 23% of participants) and being asked to leave their previous accommodation (23%)
- Having left prison with no accommodation to go to was experienced by 17% of participants
- Affordability issues meaning that they could no longer afford somewhere to live due to rents being too high or increasing was reported by 16%
- Experiencing violence and/or abuse by a partner was a reason for 10% of participants facing hidden homelessness
- Evictions from either the PRS (9%) or from social housing (9%) were each contributing factors for around one in ten of participants.

3. Homelessness statistics (2025), Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government. Available online: <https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/homelessness-statistics>.

## Survey respondents reported sleeping in these settings during their experience of hidden homelessness:



Sleeping in a tent or shed, 67%; sofa surfing with friends or family, 65%; sleeping in a garage or commercial/industrial premises, 57%; sleeping in indoor public spaces, 48%; sleeping in a squat or abandoned property, 47%; sofa surfing with an acquaintance, 42%; sofa surfing in a car, van or boat, 42%; sleeping on public transport, 38%; sofa surfing with a stranger, 29%; sleeping in public toilets 27%.



Interviews allowed for further exploration of the complexity of situations that led to participants facing hidden homelessness:

**"She owned her own house.  
So, I was living with her.  
And then they also sort of went a  
bit pear shaped and I'd nowhere  
to go."**

Crisis member

**"My mum passed, I was in the  
process of getting my name put  
on the tenancy. And it would have  
been done in March. But my mum  
happened to pass in January.  
So, then I obviously have nowhere  
to go. So, my brother said, oh, you  
know, you can move in with me.  
So, I moved in with him, but it  
didn't work out."**

Crisis member

**"[The landlord] put the rent  
up and I was— I couldn't afford  
that, and I had to move out and I  
ended up homeless. Then COVID  
happened... I got no support,  
nothing at all, and I ended up  
relapsing and my children get  
took away. So, I've been homeless  
ever since."**

Homelessness service member





**"It just ends bad usually, like I have overstayed my welcome... I've had my stuff put out for the bin because I'd gone away for a few days."**

Crisis member

### Sofa surfing

In this research, participants were asked about the different places that they stayed and where they slept the most often during their experience of hidden homelessness. Whilst sofa surfing with family and/or friends was the main form of hidden homelessness, the majority of participants who had experienced this also reported other forms of hidden homelessness.

- Overall, 80% of respondents had experienced sofa surfing whilst hidden homeless.
- Nearly two-thirds (65%) of people had spent time sofa surfing with friends and family at some point during their

experience of hidden homelessness. Over a quarter (29%) of participants said that sofa surfing with friends and family was where they slept most often during their experience of hidden homelessness.

- Eight out of ten (83%) of those who had spent time sofa surfing had also experienced other forms of hidden homelessness.
- Participants reported transitory experiences of hidden homelessness, with 69% saying that they stayed in three or more different types of hidden homelessness yet only 18% staying in one type of hidden homelessness.

While sofa surfing was prevalent among experiences of hidden homelessness, the findings showed that even staying with family or friends can be precarious and uncertain and can fracture relationships, with fears of having to leave at any time being common. In interviews, participants highlighted some of the reasons for moving on from sofa-surfing with friends and family, explaining the worry and discomfort that comes with these experiences.

**"I feel really uncomfortable in other people's houses. I'm then worrying, then, that I've done something wrong, or I've been a bit too loud. And I don't want to like to disturb their routines, so always worried and like just don't really feel that comfortable."**

Crisis member



**"I just was never myself because I know like because she's got her family living there, she still got grown up kids living at home and her partner would come round and that. There I am in the front room and the stuff that I had was in the corner of the front room in boxes. So, I was never, really felt myself, you know?"**

Crisis member

### Staying with strangers

It was also common for participants to stay with people they were less close to, sofa surfing with acquaintances and strangers. These were less likely to be the main place participants had stayed, suggesting that these are more transient situations where the host is less likely to accommodate the person longer-term. These figures also show that sofa surfing in itself covers a wide range of circumstances, from places that may feel relatively safe to unfamiliar situations where the risks are potentially higher or unknown.

- Over four in ten (42%) of participants had sofa surfed with an acquaintance at some point, whilst only 6% said that this was where they had stayed most often while experiencing hidden homelessness.

- 29% had sofa surfed with a stranger at some point, whilst 2% said that this was where they had slept most often.

Interviewees stressed the lack of choice and agency they had as well as the lack of safety they felt when sofa-surfing.

**"Everything gets taken away from you. You feel like you have no choice and really like unsafe."**

Crisis member

**"Sofa surfing... you never, never knew who was going to be turning up at that house."**

Crisis member

### Unconventional sleeping arrangements

Many participants also stayed in 'unconventional accommodation' not meant for human habitation during their experiences of hidden homelessness. These situations come with their own risks as they are often in public places and vulnerable to the actions of others.

- Nearly a quarter (23%) of participants slept most often in a tent or shed during their experience of hidden homelessness. This was the second

most common main form of hidden homelessness (after sofa surfing with friends and family).

- Staying in tents or sheds was also the second most common place in which participants stayed at some point (67%) during their experience of hidden homelessness.

For many, hidden homelessness can mean having only limited protection from the elements and staying for long periods in places that are not designed for long-term habitation.

**"Being in the tent, going through, -5 out outside, you know, and trying to keep warm."**

Crisis member

Though less likely to be the participants' most used form of sleeping arrangement, it was not uncommon for survey respondents to have slept in a garage or commercial/industrial premises. Other forms of hidden homelessness experienced by the survey participants include sleeping in a car, van or boat, or staying in squats or abandoned buildings.

- Over half (57%) had stayed in commercial/industrial premises at some point, whilst 10% said that this was where they stayed most often while experiencing hidden homelessness.

- Just under half (47%) had squatted or stayed in an abandoned property at some point, whilst 9% said that this was the place they had stayed most often.
- Two-fifths (42%) had slept in a car, van or boat at some point, whilst only 4% said that this was where they had stayed most often.

The lack of affordable and suitable homes due to the cumulative impacts of the housing crisis means for some people living in vans, boats, guardianship schemes<sup>4</sup>, and squats is now an accepted form of accommodation. The findings in this research make clear that for the participants we spoke to these were unstable and precarious situations, interspersed with other forms of hidden homelessness. This is evidence by the survey findings, which showed that all but one of the 52 respondents who reported these settings as their main sleeping arrangement had also been in at least one other form of hidden homelessness.

**"Everything was up in the air. I was struggling to try and find somewhere to go because nobody would have me at the time, so I stayed in my car for a few days or so until I could find somewhere to go."**

Crisis member

4. A guardian scheme refers to accommodation where individuals (guardians) live in empty commercial properties in exchange for reduced rent.



**"When you leave [work] that night, everything sort of hits you like in waves. And it's like, oh, where am I going now? Have I got somewhere to go? Or am I staying in the car?"**

Crisis member

### Public settings

Finally, the survey investigated the prevalence amongst the survey sample of sleeping on public transport and in indoor public spaces such as A&Es, libraries, and 24-hour restaurants/cafes.

- Half (48%) of participants had slept in an indoor public place, and a third (38%) had slept on public transport. However, these were rarely the situation they stayed in most often (7% and 4% respectively).
- Shockingly, over a quarter (27%) of participants said that they had slept in a public toilet at some point, but none said this was where they slept most often during their experience of hidden homelessness.

These could be considered the most acute forms of hidden homelessness, where people are looking for any option to avoid sleeping rough.

Overall, these findings illustrate the varied and transient nature of hidden homelessness, with participants moving between a range of situations to trying to have somewhere to stay for the night. This is explored further in the following section.

### The day-to-day reality of hidden homelessness

Hidden homelessness is extremely precarious, and where even the most stable options are short term, with people's experiences of hidden homelessness lasting longer than they are able to stay in any one place. Previous research on sofa surfing talked of it as a form of *permanent impermanence*.<sup>5</sup> This is reflected in the survey findings and the number of different places participants stayed in during their experiences of hidden homelessness, evidencing just how transient and unstable hidden homelessness is.

- The majority (64%) of participants spent over a month experiencing hidden homelessness.
- Only 16% of participants stayed in one place in an average month during their hidden homelessness,
  - 41% moved between two and five times,
  - 4 in 10 people (40%) moved over 6 times in a typical month<sup>6</sup>.

5. Sanders, B., Boobis, S., Albanese F. (2019), 'It was like a nightmare': The reality of sofa surfing in Britain today. Crisis. Available online: [https://www.crisis.org.uk/media/241555/it\\_was\\_like\\_a\\_nightmare\\_the\\_reality\\_of\\_sofa\\_surfing\\_in\\_britain\\_today\\_2019.pdf](https://www.crisis.org.uk/media/241555/it_was_like_a_nightmare_the_reality_of_sofa_surfing_in_britain_today_2019.pdf).

6. 19% between six and ten, 5% between eleven and fifteen, 16% said they had stayed in over fifteen places in a typical month.

Participants spoke about the precarious and short-term nature of the places they stayed:

**"I'm always aware that I know that it could be maybe the last night that I stay in that place."**

Crisis member


**"We know there's [support] groups and stuff like that we can go to during the day and all the rest. But when you're sofa surfing and when you're in the hostels, you cannot go because you cannot keep up that routine. People have mental health problems. They can't keep up that routine."**

Homelessness service member

**"So, one of my friends like, well, you're not going on streets. But it's not as if they had a spare bedroom. So I was on their sofa and then two other friends said, look, you know, you need to come stay here as well. So I'm sofa surfing with them for three years."**

Crisis member





**"Washing my clothes. Well, that was a pain in the arse. I was... yeah... some of my friends did do some washing for me, you know, because obviously I couldn't."**

Crisis member

### Access to amenities

While having to often move around was a common experience, when people did have somewhere to stay, they encountered further issues around access and use of various amenities.

Participants often had no or limited access to what are considered basic and fundamental amenities such as being able to wash themselves, use toilets, cook, store food, store belongings, clean their clothes, store important documents, use the internet and access private space. All amenities often taken for granted by those living in secure accommodation.

- Almost half (48%) of participants could only access the places that they stayed at night in a typical experience of hidden homelessness. In these unstable and uncomfortable situations, 81% said that their ability to sleep was impacted.
- Many had little or no access to basic amenities – in their typical experience of hidden homelessness:
  - 65% had no access to cooking facilities
  - 67% had no access to food storage/ somewhere to keep food
  - 38% had no access to clothes washing facilities
  - 52% had limited access to bath/ shower

- 22% had no access to a toilet
- 46% had no internet access
- 87% could not have their pets with them
- 66% had no private space.

Interviewees described their experiences of getting by without basic amenities during hidden homelessness:

**"I usually stock up on wet wipes if I'm in the car."**

Crisis member

**"He didn't like it because as soon as you started using electric, he got all \*\*\*\*\* about it. Yeah, even putting the kettle on for a cup of coffee. He'd go mad about."**

Crisis member

Participants also reported the loss of personal belongings during hidden homelessness, and not having anywhere to keep important documents, sentimental items or things to do like hobbies.

- The majority of participants (62%) had no access to storage for belongings
- Over half (60%) had no access to storage for important documents.

Continuously moving and not knowing where they might be staying next made belongings difficult to keep hold of and led to people feeling disconnected from their previous lives and the things they enjoyed and made them feel human.

**"I've lost the moments. I've lost some photos of everything, my wedding, or anything close to me. Any documents close to me? You can't keep anything like that."**

Homelessness service member

**"Chucked in bags. It's just chaos. There's no like organisation"**

Crisis member

**"I love doing jigsaw puzzles, always have done. And I couldn't have done that when I was sofa surfing. Not only because not having a place to do it. I wouldn't have the concentration span as well because my head was in all these other directions"**

Crisis member



## Health and wellbeing

The lack of stability and access to amenities made it difficult for people to care for themselves, with impacts on physical and mental wellbeing. For example, participants reported not being able to regularly take or even access their medication/prescriptions, access the health services that they needed and having to wash at the local swimming pool. Difficulties engaging with services and activities acts as a further barrier to relieving some of the pressure on their lives and addressing their housing situation.

- More than half (56%) said that hidden homelessness had impacted their ability to take medication.
- Most (53%) said it impacted their access to medication/prescriptions, and access to health services they needed (60%).
- Nearly three quarters (72%) said that their ability to maintain or improve their physical health was impacted.
- An even larger proportion (81%) said their ability to maintain or improve their mental health was impacted.

Interviewees described these impacts:

**“It does have a big impact because, like mental health, I’ve only just started taking my tablets again. But like, I can put my tablets down and then forget where I put them or move on and lose my tablets. Being able to get an appointment with the doctor is increasingly difficult.”**

Crisis member

**“It’s horrible to feel like you’re not wanted or you’re... putting it on somebody, so I tried to not open up or anything. I keep everything in, which then obviously then goes back to the mental health like it builds up it. ‘Cause I keep it all in and won’t share anything.”**

Crisis member

## Working and learning

Work and learning are often cited as being key to building stability and ensuring that people have enough money to afford long term rented accommodation<sup>7</sup>. The high levels of instability and barriers to looking after basic needs makes engaging with work and learning much more difficult for people experiencing hidden homelessness.

- Close to half of participants (44%) said that hidden homelessness made it harder to even think about finding a job.
- Nearly half (47%) reported that hidden homelessness made it harder to look for a job.
- Many also reported that experiencing hidden homelessness made it harder to keep a job (38%).
- There were also impacts on participants’ training and education, with a third (32%) saying that this was more difficult to access these while experiencing hidden homelessness, and a quarter (25%) saying it was harder to stay in training/education.

One interviewee continued to work during their experience of hidden homelessness and described the disconnect that arose from hiding their housing situation from their colleagues:

**“It’s just like living two lives really, like having to put a face on before going in [to work], like going in and facing everyone and then pretending.”**

Crisis member

**“Trying to like find somewhere to wash my uniform or I just try and find somewhere that I could act like a couple of hours sleep between shifts. And then like going into work pretending that I’ve got a great life and stuff with all my work colleagues. It was it was quite draining, like trying to keep everything together.”**

Crisis member

7. McKnight, A., Stewart, K., Mohun, S., Himmelweit and Palillo, P. (2016) Low pay and in-work poverty: preventative measures and preventative approaches. London: CASE and LSE.; Ray, K., Sissons, P., Jones, K. and Vegeris, S. (2014) Employment, Pay and Poverty: Evidence and policy review. The Work Foundation, PSI, Coventry University; Hurrell, A. (2013) Starting out or getting stuck? An analysis of who gets trapped in low paid work - and who escapes. London: Resolution Foundation.; JRF (2016) UK poverty: Causes, costs and solutions. York: JRF. Bramley, G. and Fitzpatrick, S. (2018) Homelessness in the UK: who is most at risk?, Housing Studies, 33:1, 96-116.



## What it takes to keep a roof over your head

Hidden homelessness can leave people depending on others to have some form of shelter. Sometimes this can mean having to choose between staying with someone they feel uncomfortable or unsafe with, or face the risks associated with rough sleeping.<sup>8</sup>

In order to keep a roof over their head, participants described feeling obliged to pay for things and were sometimes in vulnerable and unsafe situations where they drank alcohol or took drugs when they did not want to. Some people were forced to stay in relationships they would rather not have been in, and some felt pressured into sexual activity. Women in particular reported facing these issues more than men (further in the report).

- Alarming, many participants (60%) had stayed with people they are not comfortable with to avoid having to find somewhere else to stay or sleep rough.
- Half (51%) said they had taken drugs or consumed alcohol when they didn't want to, in order to stay somewhere.
- More than one in ten (12%) said they had felt pressured into sexual activity in order to have somewhere to stay.
- Close to a third (29%) of people had stayed in relationships in order to have somewhere to stay
- Most (56%) had had to pay for things in order to stay somewhere.

8. Sanders, B. & Albanese, F. (2016) "It's no life at all": Rough sleepers' experiences of violence and abuse on the streets of England and Wales. London: Crisis. [https://www.crisis.org.uk/media/20502/crisis\\_its\\_no\\_life\\_at\\_all2016.pdf](https://www.crisis.org.uk/media/20502/crisis_its_no_life_at_all2016.pdf).

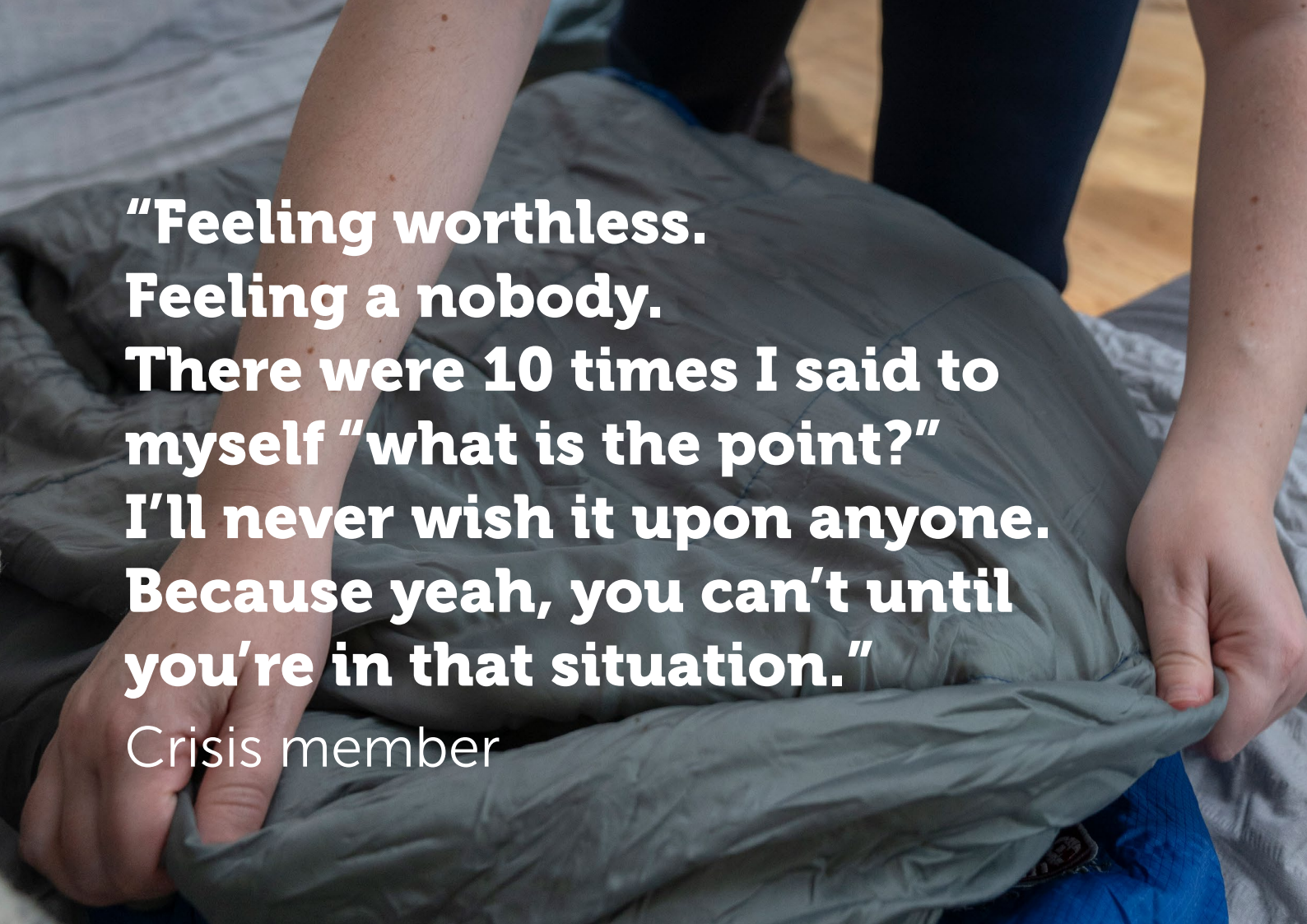
Staying with someone could also come with unsafe or unsolicited obligations; these could be explicitly made clear by a host – going on errands, doing the washing, for example – or could be unsaid, leaving the person unsure and anxious about what they might need to do to stay. One participant explained that while sofa surfing, they were put in the position of having to buy drugs for the host,

**"Sofa surfing, you know, a friend's house. Well, supposedly a friend, but he was quite a big drug taker. Taking... lots of drugs and everything, so I was buying him his drugs just for me to stay there."**

Crisis member







**"Feeling worthless.  
Feeling a nobody.  
There were 10 times I said to  
myself "what is the point?"  
I'll never wish it upon anyone.  
Because yeah, you can't until  
you're in that situation."**

Crisis member

## The impacts and dangers of hidden homelessness

As has been made clear, people being forced into hidden homeless situations is often an attempt to avoid having to sleeping rough somewhere. But despite avoiding the very real dangers and hazards of rough sleeping<sup>9</sup>, hidden homelessness is not without its own troubling impacts.

### Psychological harms

The survey and interview participants revealed that their experiences of hidden homelessness had a range of damaging repercussions. As hidden homelessness goes on, people can exhaust their sources of support, feeling like a burden and leading to them being more isolated and vulnerable. Many participants shared that hidden homelessness had impacted their relationships with family and friends, had made them feel lonely and isolated, made them less trusting of others, and negatively affected their sense of identity.

9. Sutton-Hamilton, C., Sanders, B. (2023), 'I always kept one eye open': The experiences and impacts of sleeping rough. Crisis. Available online: [https://www.crisis.org.uk/media/gdrdmtvj/oneeyeopen\\_report.pdf](https://www.crisis.org.uk/media/gdrdmtvj/oneeyeopen_report.pdf)

- Nearly two thirds of participants (63%) agreed that hidden homelessness had had a negative effect on their sense of identity.
- Most participants (71%) had not felt safe and secure while in hidden homelessness.
- Many reported impacts of hidden homelessness on several facets of their relationships with others:
  - Nearly two thirds (64%) said that their experiences of hidden homelessness had created strain on their relationships with their family
  - A similar proportion (69%) reported that their experiences of hidden homelessness had made them less trusting of others
- Over three quarters (76%) said that their experience of hidden homelessness left them feeling lonely and isolated.

Participants also spoke in interviews that they felt shame about their situation, and wanting to keep it secret.

**"You just didn't want nobody to know about it."**

Crisis member

**"Absolutely, I felt invisible... I don't think really people see you."**

Homelessness service member

### In harm's way

Participants were vulnerable to the actions of others whilst in hidden homelessness and were often exposed to dangerous and traumatic experiences and situations. Participants, particularly women, faced violence and abuse, sexual assault and feeling afraid for their lives. Despite not being on the street, which is often viewed as the most dangerous visible form of homelessness, hidden homelessness is experienced by more people, and these findings suggest that the scale of acute harms caused by homelessness may be far greater than previously recognised.<sup>10</sup>

- Half of the participants (51%) said they had experienced violence and/or abuse while in hidden homelessness, this rose to 65% when we just looked at the responses by women.
- 12% said they had been sexually assaulted while in hidden homelessness.
- 58% said their experiences of hidden homelessness had made them feel afraid for their life at some point.

**"I've been homeless. I've been attacked. I've had to stay with people that I've not wanted to stay with"**

Homelessness service member

10. Frazer K, Kroll T. Understanding and Tackling the Complex Challenges of Homelessness and Health. Int J Environ Res Public Health. 2022 Mar 15;19(6):3439. doi: 10.3390/ijerph19063439. PMID: 35329127; PMCID: PMC8955411.; Taylor, G., Vale, J., Gay Jackson, B., and Turtle, M. (2025) Dying Homeless Project 2024, Museum of Homelessness, London, UK. Available at: <https://museumofhomelessness.org/dhp>





## Women and hidden homelessness

Women's homelessness can be especially hidden, with previous research<sup>11</sup> finding that more than ten times as many women are sleeping rough in England than Government data shows. Risk of gender-based violence and abuse means that women are less likely to 'bed down' in open or visible areas, instead sleeping in places such as 24/7 fast-food restaurants or hospitals or facing the potential danger of staying with a stranger or acquaintance. As a result, these women are less likely to be reached by outreach teams, and less likely to access support and accommodation. Additionally, the lack of understanding of the scale and nature of women's homelessness means that policies and strategies are not designed to properly address it.<sup>12</sup>

The findings of this research further highlight the hidden and transitory nature of women's homelessness. While the number of women in the survey sample was relatively small (N=37), the findings suggest some differences in how women experience hidden homelessness compared to the wider group of survey participants:

- Women tended to move settings more frequently - 5% of women said they had only stayed in one place in a typical month of hidden homelessness, compared to 16% of all survey participants.

Over a quarter (27%) of women said they'd stayed in six-ten different places in a usual month (compared to 19% of all participants).

- Women relied more on sofa surfing. A larger proportion of women had sofa-surfed during their experience of hidden homelessness (92%), compared to men completing the survey (79%). A higher proportion of women than men had at some point sofa surfed with an acquaintance (62% vs. 40%), and sofa surfed with a stranger (41% vs. 29%).
- Seven out of ten (70%) of women said they had stayed with people they didn't feel comfortable with in order to have somewhere to sleep (which stood at 60% of all participants). Women also felt pressured into sexual activity more than the whole respondent group (32% vs 12%), and to have stayed in relationships in order to have somewhere to stay (59% vs 29%).
- The findings suggested that women may be relying on sofa surfing to avoid forms of homelessness that could expose them to even greater risks. Women reported having slept on public transport less than men (42% compared to 22% of men).
- Women also experienced some of the acute impacts of hidden homelessness. Nearly two-thirds (65%) of women said they'd experienced violence or abuse during hidden homelessness (this stood at 51% of all participants) and 41% had been sexually assaulted (12% of all participants).

- Seven out of ten (70%) women said that they feared for their lives at some point whilst experiencing hidden homelessness, compared to 58% for men.

Interviews shed further light on the reality of some of these experiences, with one participant explaining that her circumstances had meant she had stayed with people she had only known for a couple of weeks and was pursuing legal action after being assaulted by someone she had stayed with whilst sofa-surfing.

The survey findings also highlighted the difficulties of dealing with menstruation while in hidden homelessness. Among women<sup>13</sup> who responded to the survey:

- The lack of access to basic amenities described earlier in this report had particular impacts on menstrual hygiene and health. Over a third (38%) said they had been unable to access menstrual products during their time in hidden homelessness, and the same proportion (38%) said they had been unable to wash in a timely manner and keep clean.
- Over four in ten (43%) said they had been unable to access toilets during menstruation.
- 49% had had to use DIY products to manage their menstruation, and 27% had felt embarrassed asking staff at services for menstrual products.

11. Wright, S., Greenhalgh, E., Nathie, L., Campbell, L. (2025), How do we sleep at night?: Women's rough sleeping census 2024 report. SHP, Solace, Crisis, Change Grow Live. Available online: <https://indd.adobe.com/view/6adb800d-8136-4cb8-b379-9149c8d18911>.

12. Ibid.

13. A limitation of these findings is that the survey structure did not make it possible to filter these findings by whether or not participants menstruated. As a proxy, these findings are reported only for participants who self-identified as women.




# Conclusion

This research reveals the shockingly high number of households facing hidden homelessness in Great Britain. Too many are sleeping on the sofas or floors of friends, family, acquaintances and even strangers; sleeping in cars, on public transport, or in 24-hour public spaces; or seeking shelter in structures not meant for human habitation such as sheds, garages and tents. With many of the over 200,000 households estimated to be currently experiencing these forms of homelessness in Great Britain likely not being counted in official homelessness statistics, this issue is under-recognised.

The research shows the instability and precarity of hidden homelessness, with people having to move as many as fifteen or more times within a given month, staying in a range of different impractical, unhygienic and risky situations, and having to accept conditional offers of accommodation involving staying with people they feel unsafe with or doing things they do not want to do in order to have some form of shelter for the night.

The participants of this research report the harsh impacts of hidden homelessness, including lack of sleep, declining physical and mental health, loneliness, loss of trust and a damaged sense of self. The findings showed the risks of violence and abuse, and fear for their life, that people in these hidden homelessness situations endure – all for having nowhere else to go when they lose the place they call home.



**"Cause even though I had a roof over me all the time... but it's not my home."**

Crisis member



# Appendices

## Further research methodology: quantifying hidden homelessness

Since 2016, Crisis has commissioned Heriot-Watt University to produce a dataset on “core homelessness”, which measures types of homelessness that are not routinely recorded by statutory services. This is in response to the current gaps in statutory homelessness statistics, which are an insufficient measure of homelessness amongst some groups, particularly single adults who are not eligible for assistance, and hidden forms of homelessness such as sofa surfing. These data are published in the [Homelessness Monitor](#) research series.

The analysis draws on data from a range of sources – household surveys, statutory statistics, administrative data and specialised surveys of services and their users – and triangulates these to produce the most up-to-date estimate of the worst forms of homelessness, collectively defined as core homelessness. The analysis uses evidence about the length of time over which people experience different forms of homelessness. This is necessary because different sources cover different time

periods, and converting these to a common point-in-time basis minimises double-counting. The estimates also make allowances for the extent to which different sources do or do not cover certain groups, for example people who do not apply to a local authority for assistance, or the under-representation in some surveys of people who frequently move. The analysis draws on 18 different data sources, using a minimum of three (and in some cases six) different data sources for a single category of homelessness within a nation, combining these in a way which reflects judgements on the robustness of the different sources. Through this approach, we are able to report robust estimates of core homelessness across Great Britain, and projections of future levels of core homelessness under business-as-usual scenarios.

For quantifying the number of households experiencing hidden homelessness in Great Britain, we have defined hidden homelessness as a sub-total of the “sofa surfing” and “unconventional accommodation” elements of overall core homelessness. The full list of categories under core homelessness are listed below, with those included under hidden homelessness highlighted in green. We have examined this category of hidden homelessness in order to shed a light on forms of homelessness that are generally more out-of-sight, under-represented in official statistics, and often overlooked in coverage and public narratives around homelessness.

Category	Description
Rough sleeping	Sleeping in the open e.g. in streets, parks, carparks, doorways
Unconventional accommodation	Sleeping in places/spaces not intended as normal residential accommodation, e.g. cars, vans, lorries, caravans/motor home, tents, boats, sheds, garages, industrial/commercial premises
Hostels etc.	Communal emergency and temporary accommodation primarily targeted at homeless people including hostels, refuges, shelters and special COVID-19 provision
Unsuitable temporary accommodation	Homeless households placed in temporary accommodation of certain types, viz Bed and Breakfast, Private Non-self-contained Licensed/Nightly Let, and Out of Area Placements
Sofa surfing	Individuals or family groups staying temporarily (expecting or wanting to move) with another household, excluding nondependent children of host household and students, who are also overcrowded on the bedroom standard



To generate a current estimate of the levels of hidden homelessness, we have combined the point-in-time 2024 estimate from the Homelessness Monitor: England 2025<sup>14</sup>, with the projected 2024 levels from the Homelessness Monitor: Wales 2025<sup>15</sup> and the 2024 projection for Scotland based on a new to the figures reported in the Homelessness Monitor: Scotland 2024<sup>16</sup>, revised in September 2025<sup>17</sup>.

To investigate change over time, the 2020, 2016 and 2012 estimates were also drawn on, from the same sources.

Further information on how estimated and projected levels of core homelessness are calculated can be found in the Homelessness Monitor summary and technical reports<sup>18</sup>.

Based on this statistical modelling, the number of households experiencing hidden homelessness in Great Britain is:

2024	England	Scotland	Wales	Total
Sofa surfing	166,800	14,500	7,200	188,500
Unconventional accommodation	18,600	900	600	20,100
Total	185,400	15,400	7,800	208,600

2020	England	Scotland	Wales	Total
Sofa surfing	123,900	12,400	4,800	141,200
Unconventional accommodation	17,700	900	600	19,200
Total	141,700	13,300	5,400	160,400
2016	England	Scotland	Wales	Total
Sofa surfing	134,800	10,500	5,700	151,000
Unconventional accommodation	15,900	900	600	17,400
Total	150,800	11,400	6,200	168,400
2012	England	Scotland	Wales	Total
Sofa surfing	127,900	9,400	6,300	143,600
Unconventional accommodation	14,300	900	600	15,700
Total	142,200	10,300	6,900	159,300

Please note that apparent discrepancies in the totals are due to rounding.

14. Watts-Cobbe, B., Bramley, G., Pawson, H., Young, G., Sims, R., McMordie, L., Fitzpatrick, S. (2025) The Homelessness Monitor: England 2025. London: Crisis. Available online: <https://www.crisis.org.uk/ending-homelessness/homelessness-monitor/the-homelessness-monitor-england-2025/>.

15. Ibid.

16. Watts, B., Bramley, G., Fitzpatrick, S., Pawson, H., McMordie, L & Young, G. (2024) The Homelessness Monitor: Scotland 2021, London: Crisis. Available online: <https://www.crisis.org.uk/ending-homelessness/homelessness-monitor/the-homelessness-monitor-scotland-2024/>.

17. Bramley, G. (2025), Technical report on core homelessness baseline estimates and scenario projections for England, 2025. Heriot-Watt University. Available online: <https://researchportal.hw.ac.uk/en/publications/technical-report-on-core-homelessness-baseline-estimates-and-scen/>.

18. Bramley, G. (2017), Homelessness projections: Core homelessness in Great Britain. Crisis. Available online: [https://www.crisis.org.uk/media/237582/crisis\\_homelessness\\_projections\\_2017.pdf](https://www.crisis.org.uk/media/237582/crisis_homelessness_projections_2017.pdf).



## Further research methodology: survey and interviews

Between August-October 2025 a survey was conducted of 225 people who were currently experiencing, or had experienced in the last two years, one of the following forms of homelessness (collectively defined here as 'hidden homelessness'):

- Sofa-surfing
- Sleeping in a car, van, or boat
- Sleeping on public transport
- Sleeping in indoor public spaces, e.g. libraries, A&Es, 24-hour restaurants/cafes
- Sleeping in public toilets
- Sleeping in a tent or shed
- Sleeping in a garage or commercial/industrial premises
- Staying in a squat or abandoned property.

The survey was distributed via homelessness services in England, Scotland and Wales. Survey distribution was supported by Qa research.

The final sample comprised 77% men and 16% women; 87% from England, 7% from Wales and 5% from Scotland.

Additionally, in-depth interviews were conducted with four participants, to explore their experiences in more depth. Two interviewees were women, two were men; two were in England, one in Scotland and one in Wales. These interviews were conducted over phone or video call in October-November 2025.





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