Article

Improving homelessness and rough sleeping statistics across the UK

Initiatives across the Government Statistical Service to improve statistics on homelessness and rough sleeping in the UK, up to and including the 2021 Census.

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1 . Why are we improving homelessness and rough sleeping statistics?

Homelessness and rough sleeping is an important policy area, and high-quality evidence and statistics are needed to be able to deliver services and support to these often vulnerable people. Across the UK, the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG); the devolved administrations; other government departments; and the Office for National Statistics (ONS) are working to improve the range and quality of the statistics, which feed into the overall evidence base.

Homelessness and rough sleeping is a devolved policy area, with each country in the UK responsible for producing statistics according to their own legislative framework. Across the UK, a large range of regular official statistics regarding homelessness and rough sleeping are published, together with one-off research outputs and collaborations with academics and the third sector. However, differences in reporting categories, category definitions and reporting time frames can make comparing homelessness statistics, and the provision of a UK-wide picture of homelessness, difficult. To help build this overall picture, we have released an interactive tool and new analysis of UK homelessness statistics. These outputs aid comparability and coherence and are the culmination of work from analysts from across the four countries of the UK.

2 . How are we working together across the Government Statistical Service?

Analysts across the Government Statistical Service (GSS)[1] are already joined up at both a strategic and operational level with the aim of improving the coherence and accessibility of all housing and planning statistics, including homelessness. A Cross Government Housing and Planning Statistics Work Programme has been in place since April 2018. As the range of homelessness work increases, we will separate out the homelessness and rough sleeping statistics actions into a specific work plan, which will be published later in 2019. This will aid the visibility and transparency of this broad range of work. The work plan will be updated by the GSS Homelessness and Rough Sleeping Statistics Working Group, which exists to coordinate work and increase collaboration across the four UK countries: England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland.

There is a wide range of improvements and innovations underway, and the challenge is to continue acknowledging the devolved nature of the statistics and corresponding policy frameworks while improving coherence where possible to provide a UK-wide picture.

We will be continuing to improve the statistics, led by user need, through working with organisations, charities, academics and individuals as well as working closely between departments and devolved administrations and embracing new techniques and technologies.

The interactive tool and analysis of UK homelessness will help us to identify improvements in enhancing comparability, filling data gaps and increasing collaboration further.

Notes for: How are we working together across the Government Statistical Service?

1. For the purposes of this article, this also includes the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA).

3 . What do we currently collect and publish in the UK?

The Government Statistical Service (GSS) publishes a range of homelessness and rough sleeping statistics and research articles. Statistics on the number of people who are homeless, living in temporary housing or sleeping rough are collected by all four UK nations (see the final subsection for links), including demographic characteristics and the reasons for loss of home.

In addition, we produce publications looking at specific aspects of homelessness. For example, Deaths of homeless people in England and Wales (Office for National Statistics (ONS)), alcohol and drug misuse and treatment statistics (Public Health England) or Health and Homelessness (Scottish Government).

Alongside these statistics, we have produced scoping work around well-being and living standards (ONS Centre for Equalities and Inclusion) and a report on the feasibility of harmonising homelessness definitions across the UK (GSS Harmonisation Team). This demonstrated the challenge of producing a UK-wide figure for homelessness due to legislative differences.

4 . How are we improving existing statistics?

While we have a solid base, there is always scope to improve the quality of our statistics. An Across GSS Homelessness and Rough Sleeping Statistics Working Group has been set up to co-ordinate and publicise these improvements, with a work plan due to be published later this year. To provide transparency around what can and cannot be compared, the interactive tool provides comparison guidance and outlines the process a person may go through when seeking support for housing in each UK country. Despite the challenges of comparison, our cross-UK analysis of homelessness shows that UK-wide trends do emerge – particularly across the demographics for homeless people and the reasons for loss of previous home. We will continue to build on this work to improve the picture of homelessness statistics across the UK.

In 2018, a major step forward in the quality of homelessness statistics for England was the introduction and bedding in of a case-level collection system by the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) called Homelessness Case-level Information Collection (H-CLIC); this is already enabling a better understanding of why people become homeless and what can be done to support them.

In Scotland, the Scottish Government are looking to supplement their case-level statistics available through local authority returns by developing a new rough sleeping data collection system that will both improve the estimates of people sleeping rough in Scotland and facilitate joined up working across organisations working with people sleeping rough or at risk of sleeping rough. Decisions on which organisations will be involved in taking forward this development or how it will be achieved are still to be made.

In Wales, the Welsh Government are currently considering the feasibility of collecting case-level statutory homelessness data; a report outlining potential options is due to be published by the end of 2019. In Northern Ireland, the Department for Communities and the Housing Executive continue to develop their standalone biannual homelessness statistics publication by introducing new datasets where possible while also improving the accessibility and understanding of the statistics.

Statistics on the deaths of homeless people in England and Wales were published by the Office for National Statistics (ONS) for the first time in December 2018 as Experimental Statistics, shedding light on some of the most vulnerable members of our society. We have been working with local authorities, academics and the General Register Office (GRO) to improve the accuracy of these statistics, particularly for smaller geographical areas where there is user demand. On 1 October 2019 ONS will release data for 2018 to update this analysis.

It is also important that we understand the complex drivers of homelessness. To do this, ONS have been working with the Centre for Homelessness Impact (CHI) to look deeper into the causes of homelessness across the UK. As a What Works Centre, the CHI is well placed to draw on a range of expertise from academics, practitioners, and international evidence and best practice. The CHI has consulted with over 500 users who have experience of working in and around homelessness in the UK, and they have provided valuable insights into what the key indicators relating to ending homelessness should be. The results of this work are expected to be published soon, and discussions are being held about how this can be taken forward.

The mechanisms introduced by the Government Statistical Service (GSS) ensure statisticians and analysts across departments regularly come together to increase collaboration and learn from each other. For example, looking at the feasibility of producing a deaths of homeless people publication in Scotland or of collecting case-level homelessness data in Wales. The possibilities around de-identified data linking within or between countries will continue to be explored under the provision of the Digital Economy Act 2017.

5 . What further work is in development up to the 2021 Census?

Across the Government Statistical Service (GSS), we are looking to improve the accessibility of the wide range of data produced, for example, through better signposting between statistical releases in each country and through dedicated platforms such as an interactive framework of housing, planning and homelessness statistics (to be released later this year). This interactive framework will replace the current static version that was published in September 2018. This will help make the statistics easier to find and use, which is a key piece of feedback we have received from users.

The GSS are also building up a machine-readable data repository through the Connected Open Government Statistics (COGS) project. This project aims to join statistical datasets across government, further aiding users' ability to cross organisational boundaries to analyse cross-cutting topics. Subject to available funding, this would provide linked open data for England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland.

Alongside improvements to existing statistics, new research and policy evaluations are planned over the next two years. In collaboration with the wider analytical professions, the GSS will help ensure that our data and analysis help improve outcomes.

There will be more research into populations known to be at risk of homelessness such as working with the Ministry of Justice around prison release protocols in England and working with the Government Equalities Office exploring homelessness and rough sleeping among LGBT people.

In Scotland, the Scottish Government is working with the Scottish Prison Service to better understand the experience of prisoners on release and to evaluate and support the implementation of the Sustainable Housing on Release for Everyone (SHORE) Standards, which were published in 2017. Additional pathways for other groups at predictable risk (for example, people leaving the care system; women and children who have suffered domestic abuse; and veterans and people leaving hospital) are also in development by the Scottish Government with stakeholders.

The Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) rough sleeping strategy set out plans for improving the evidence base on rough sleeping in England to help design better interventions. The strategy also provides an overview of recent research and evaluations, for example, the MHCLG have carried out an impact evaluation of the Rough Sleeping Initiative and will be looking at the costs associated with rough sleeping and homelessness (currently planned for December 2020).

In Wales, a Review of Priority Need is underway. This research will review the current implementation of Priority Need but also explore potential impacts of any changes to Priority Need on local authorities, housing providers, the third sector and those accessing housing support. This is due to report in early 2020.

The [Housing First Scotland Pathfinder Programme](#) underway in Scotland (2019 to 2021) is being evaluated to understand both quantitative and qualitative impacts of this intervention and to inform roll out of Housing First approaches for people with multiple and complex needs across Scotland. The impact of changes to Scottish legislation regarding intentionality (November 2019) and local connection (by Spring 2021) will also be monitored through a combination of national homelessness statistics and local management information.

As part of a [Chronic Homelessness Action Plan](#), the Northern Ireland Housing Executive will undertake research into the impact of day centres for clients experiencing chronic homelessness and the impact of chronic homelessness on women.

How will we measure homelessness and rough sleeping in the 2021 Census (England and Wales)?

We are working with organisations that support and represent people who are homeless so that as many people as possible can make sure they are included in the next census, in March 2021.

All people who are homeless will be able to complete the census. For some, this will be through a form at an address where they are temporarily staying, for example, with a friend or in a hostel. Others will be able to use the address of an establishment that they are in contact with (for example, a day or night shelter).

Early in 2020, ONS will host a session to rehearse the enumeration of people who are homeless in England and Wales using a range of scenarios. This will involve stakeholders who have practical experience of engaging with homeless people and working with other places homeless people come into contact with (for example, food banks and soup kitchens). Following this work, ONS will release more information about its approach to maximising response

Using this together with other data, the ONS and wider GSS will be able to provide new insight into the homeless population. We will continue to work to develop its approach to maximising response and how census data can be used as part of the wider picture of the homeless population.

The Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA) is making similar arrangements to include homeless people in the census in Northern Ireland. For more information about the 2021 Census, see these websites: [England and Wales](#), [Scotland](#) or [Northern Ireland](#).

How about after the 2021 Census?

After the 2021 Census, the GSS will be continuing to improve the statistics, led by user need, including using new techniques and technologies as well as looking for evidence and best practice around the impact of policies.

The MHCLG will be looking to evaluate the Housing First pilots to understand the impact and the associated costs and benefits as well as to identify lessons from the implementation and delivery of the pilots.

Various initiatives using the new case-level homelessness data in England should be coming to fruition in 2021 or 2022. This will make it easier to help someone who may move between local authority boundaries, by linking case-level data together.

Northern Ireland are working towards a project to combine health and homelessness data to investigate the impact leaving the medical care system has on youth homelessness.

The Welsh Government will consider the findings of a report by the [Wales Institute of Social and Economic Research, Data and Methods](#) assessing options for collecting case-level homelessness data. The report is due to be published by the end of 2019. Should agreement on capturing case-level data be reached, there is potential, in future, to link pseudo-anonymised data between data sources within the Administrative Data Research Centre for Wales infrastructure to provide improved understanding of the drivers of homelessness and outcomes.

In Scotland, monitoring of the implementation and impact of the [rapid rehousing approach](#) (2019 to 2024) has been agreed and will be overseen by the Scottish Government, Convention of Scottish Local Authorities (COSLA) and wider stakeholders. A set of indicators to monitor the success of this approach are currently being developed and will inform the activities of the Scottish Housing Regulator relating to homelessness.

ONS are aiming to release all England and Wales census data by March 2023, which will have the most comprehensive information about the UK population. This has the potential to be combined with data from other sources to create insights into the homeless and rough sleeping population.

How can you help?

A core principle running through our work is that we should be guided by the needs of our users, and across the GSS we are using multiple avenues to seek feedback on our statistics, including:

- consultations

- roadshows

- mailing lists

- newsletters

- user forums (like upcoming forums in [Scotland](#) and Northern Ireland)

- local, regional and national events

- expert groups

- social media

- email

Some of these plans may change as we continue to seek and react to feedback and priorities around our statistics and potential improvements, but what will not change is that we will continue to work with organisations, charities, academics and individuals as well as working closely between departments and devolved administrations to continue to improve our statistics.

Please email us at GSS.Housing@ons.gov.uk or directly with the various statistics producers.

Where can you find the most recently published statistics and how often are they updated?

This list is not exhaustive, but it includes some of the major homelessness and rough sleeping official statistics publications.

Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government:

Rough sleeping in England, February 2019, published annually

Statutory homelessness in England, September 2019, published quarterly

Programme of Homelessness and Rough Sleeping evaluation and research, May 2019, ad hoc

Scottish Government:

Homelessness in Scotland, June 2019, published biannually

Housing Options (PREVENT1) Statistics in Scotland, June 2019, published annually

Health and homelessness in Scotland, June 2018, ad hoc

Welsh Government:

National rough sleeper count, February 2019, published annually

Homelessness statistics, July 2019 (next publication: 26 September 2019), published quarterly

Northern Ireland:

Rough sleeper street counts, February 2019, published annually

Northern Ireland Homelessness Bulletin, September 2019, published biannually

Office for National Statistics:

Deaths of homeless people in England and Wales, December 2018 (next publication: 1 October 2019), published annually

UK homelessness: 2005 to 2018, September 2019, ad hoc

Government Statistical Service:

Harmonisation of Definitions of Homelessness for UK Official Statistics: A Feasibility Report, February 2019, ad hoc

Homelessness Interactive Tool, September 2019, ad hoc