

Article

# "Hidden" homelessness in the UK: evidence review

This article summarises existing data on different types of homelessness in relation to "hidden" homelessness across the UK and highlights some of the main data gaps. This is part of an ongoing ONS work programme.

Contact:  
Teri Howells, Amy Davison and  
Sofiya Stoyanova  
equalities@ons.gov.uk  
+44 (0)1633 455532

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# 1 . About this review

This evidence review summarises existing data on different types of homelessness in relation to "hidden" homelessness across the UK and highlights the challenges, complexities, main data gaps and future work. The need for better UK data and evidence about groups of the population who are currently under-represented in data was one of the areas highlighted by the [Inclusive Data Taskforce Report](#) and the resulting Inclusive [Data Taskforce Implementation Plan](#).

This review considers a broad definition of "hidden" homelessness, which includes people who are experiencing homelessness or housing difficulties, regardless of legal definitions or entitlement, but who are not supported by their local authorities or counted in official statistics.

Exploratory work is underway across the Government Statistical Service (GSS) in the four nations to address the known long-standing challenges associated with the measurement of "hidden" homelessness. This includes research by the Office for National Statistics (ONS) around capturing the scale of women experiencing "hidden" homelessness, work by the Scottish Government (SG) to understand the experiences of people facing homelessness and housing insecurity, and work by the Department for Levelling Up and Communities (DLUHC) and the Centre for Homelessness Impact (CHI) to implement a new rough-sleeping data-led framework. Continued collaboration will be important to moving towards improved data on the "hidden" homeless. For more information, or to get in touch, please see the [Future developments and Get in touch](#) sections of this publication.

## 2 . Main points

- Limited data on some forms of "hidden" homelessness are available but it is not currently possible to estimate the true scale of "hidden" homelessness across the UK because of known complexities in reaching this population group.
- It is difficult to compare statistics across the UK because of differences in how "hidden" homelessness is defined and captured across the four nations as a result of devolved policy and resulting differing legislation.
- The available evidence suggests some population groups, such as women, young people and ethnic minority groups, are more likely to experience "hidden" homelessness than others.
- Those are likely to be vulnerable population groups that are particularly difficult to capture in official statistics because of the way they experience homelessness.
- Research is under way in the Office for National Statistics (ONS) and other organisations, including the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (DLUHC), on how to address these data gaps.
- The ONS is also considering how other countries are capturing "hidden" homelessness in their data and evidence, and is looking to learn from best practices.

Official statistics from various data sources have been reviewed to show what we currently know about "hidden" homelessness across the UK. However, these are not exhaustive and the information presented should be treated as useful insights into the complexities of measuring "hidden" homelessness, rather than its true scale or prevalence.

## 3 . Overview

Homelessness remains a challenge across the UK. It affects a wide range of people, including but not limited to people who are sleeping rough, those staying in temporary accommodation, with friends and relatives, in unconventional structures, in severely overcrowded accommodation, or those who are threatened with losing their permanent home.

In England alone, 278,110 households were assessed as either being at risk of homelessness or already homeless in April 2021 to March 2022 in the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities' (DLUHC's) [Statutory Homeless Annual Report \(PDF, 4.84MB\)](#). These are people who have approached local authorities for support and are recognised as statutory homeless. Statutory homelessness statistics are also regularly collected and published in [Scotland's homelessness statistics](#), [Wales's homelessness statistics](#) and [Northern Ireland's housing statistics](#). In addition, most of the UK nations publish statistics on rough sleeping, discussed later in this review.

Alongside the types of homelessness captured by statutory and rough sleeping statistics, there exist other forms of homelessness that are less well evidenced and understood. These are captured by the term "hidden" homelessness and cover people who may be experiencing homelessness, but their situation is not "visible", either on the streets or in official statistics. "Hidden" homelessness can refer to a wide range of experiences, as will be discussed in the next section.

Data on "hidden" homelessness are limited, particularly when it comes to enumeration. This is because of the very nature of "hidden" homelessness, which makes it difficult to accurately measure the scale of the problem. Individuals experiencing "hidden" homelessness tend to find themselves in housing situations that are not as well captured in official statistics, such as sofa surfing, squatting and rough sleeping out of sight.

In [The Hidden truth about homelessness 2011 report \(PDF, 954KB\)](#), Crisis estimated that 62% of single homeless people surveyed in England were experiencing "hidden" homelessness on the day they were surveyed and 92% had experienced "hidden" homelessness in the past.

Furthermore, the [London Assembly Housing Committee's 2017 Hidden homelessness in London report \(PDF, 630KB\)](#) estimated that, in London, 13 times more people were "hidden" homeless than visibly sleeping rough. Although these figures are estimates, they provide some insight into the extent of "hidden" homelessness and the difficulties in trying to enumerate that population, as many are hidden from view. Understanding the scale of this issue and beginning to explore the experiences and circumstances of those who are experiencing "hidden" homelessness is important for ensuring policy and service provision are aimed not just at those represented in official statistics but also those who are missing from them.

### Defining "hidden" homelessness

There is no UK-wide definition of "hidden" homelessness. The term can mean different things to different people and it is often applied inconsistently.

In their annual [Homelessness Monitor](#) publication, Crisis defines "hidden" homelessness as people who may be considered homeless but whose housing situation is not "visible" on the streets or in official statistics. Up until 2018, this definition included:

- people temporarily staying with friends or relatives (sofa surfing)
- those living in severely overcrowded conditions
- those involuntarily sharing accommodation with other households on a long-term basis (concealed households)
- squatters
- people sleeping rough out of sight

The [Homelessness Monitor from 2019 \(PDF, 2.2MB\)](#) narrowed their definition to only include people living in overcrowded conditions, sharing households and in concealed households.

In their [Hidden homelessness topic briefing](#), Shelter Scotland have previously referred to "hidden" homeless as "people who would meet the legal definition of homeless if they were to make a formal application but are not represented in the local authority homelessness statistics", either because they have not approached or have been turned away by their local authority. This includes people who are:

- sofa surfing
- living in overcrowded or unsafe conditions
- living in out-of-season holiday lets
- living in poor-quality caravans in rural areas

In a report of ["hidden" homelessness in London \(PDF, 630KB\)](#), the London Housing Committee propose a working definition of this form of homelessness, which includes people who:

- have no right to or cannot stay in a fixed place
- do not receive formal assistance by their local authority or related support services
- have not formally applied for support with their local authority
- do not have the resources to avoid their current situation

Their definition includes a wide variety of housing situations, ranging from sofa surfing to rough sleeping.

It is beyond the scope of this evidence review to provide a comprehensive discussion of the various definitions used in "hidden" homelessness research or to propose a new definition.

For the purposes of this review, we will consider a broad definition of this term, which includes people who are experiencing homelessness or housing difficulties, regardless of legal definitions or entitlement, but who are not supported by their local authorities or counted in official statistics. This could include people who:

- choose to not approach local authorities for assistance
- approach local authorities but do not receive a response that meets their needs
- find an alternative solution outside of the formal system of housing support and provision
- do not necessarily identify as homeless

## 4 . What existing data can tell us about "hidden" homelessness in the UK

While there are reports that estimate different types of homelessness using modelling techniques, such as the [Homelessness Monitor](#), this evidence review will focus on the current main data sources that provide official statistics rather than modelled estimates. This is with the intention of identifying data gaps and particular population groups that may be at increased risk of being underrepresented in official statistics.

Since each country in the UK is responsible for producing statistics according to their own legislative framework for housing, definitions of homelessness and data collection approaches vary between nations, and therefore caution must be taken when comparing statistics across nations. Separate work has been carried out by the Office for National Statistics (ONS) to assess the comparability and coherence of [homelessness](#) and [rough sleeping](#) statistics across the UK.

## Rough sleeping

Rough sleeping typically refers to sleeping outside on the streets or other places not designed for living, such as bus shelters and undercover car parks. While sleeping rough is often considered the most visible form of homelessness, many official statistics are only able to capture people sleeping rough based on local intelligence or where people are found to be sleeping rough in a visible way.

As discussed later in this review, there are numerous instances where people who are sleeping rough may try to remain "hidden" intentionally and are thereby more likely to be missed from official statistics. To better understand the true scale of people sleeping rough it is important to consider who is captured by official rough sleeping statistics and who is likely not, as suggested by evidence explored in [Section 6: Who is more likely to experience "hidden" homelessness](#).

Most nations within the UK collect their own official data on rough sleeping through annual snapshots surveys. These provide a way to estimate the number of people sleeping rough on a single night and to assess change over time, but do not give insight into the scale of the issue.

Table 1: England had over 4,000 people sleeping rough on a single night in autumn 2019  
Estimated number of people sleeping rough in autumn for each UK nation, 2019

Measure	England	Wales	Northern Ireland	Scotland
<b>The number of people sleeping rough on a single night in autumn</b>	4,266 individuals	176 individuals	36 individuals	No data available.

Source: Rough sleeping snapshot in England from the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, National rough sleeper count from the Welsh Government, Rough sleeping count and estimates from the Northern Ireland Housing Executive

### Notes

1. Because of different methodology coverage and time periods figures between the UK nations are not directly comparable.
2. Wales also conducted a further two-week estimate of people sleeping rough using a similar approach to the autumn 'snapshot survey' (both this and the snapshot survey were suspended in 2020).
3. Data in this table are not the most up-to-date data available for England and Northern Ireland. Data from 2019 have been used because they are before the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic. During the pandemic homelessness was affected by policies such as "Everyone In", which will have had an impact on the number of people sleeping rough.

Alongside collecting counts of individuals, England also collects information on their sex, nationality and age. In the 2021 rough sleeping snapshot, the majority of those identified were male (85%), over 26 years of age (86%) and of UK nationality (67%). Equivalent data are not published by Wales or Northern Ireland.

For local authority breakdowns and further information on each UK nation's approach to the yearly snapshot survey see:

- [Rough sleeping snapshot in England: autumn 2021 - technical report \(England\)](#)
- [National rough sleeper count: November 2019 \(Wales\)](#)
- [2021 Rough sleeping count and estimates \(Northern Ireland\) \(PDF, 578KB\)](#)

During the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic, England and Wales started to regularly request estimates of the number of people sleeping rough in each local authority. These monthly snapshot estimates, published as management information, provide timely information on rough sleeping stocks as well of flows over the month. For additional information and local authority breakdowns of these monthly estimates, see [Support for people sleeping rough in England](#) and [Homelessness accommodation provision and rough sleeping](#), for England and Wales, respectively.

As well as the yearly autumn rough sleeping snapshot survey, England also include measures relating to rough sleeping in their statutory homelessness statistics. As part of the application process, information is gathered on accommodation type at the time of local authority approach.

Scotland do not undertake a rough sleeping snapshot survey but collect some information on that in their statutory homeless statistics.

It is important to note that the following figures for England will differ from annual rough sleeping snapshots and management information data. This is partly because statutory statistics refer to households rather than individuals, capture people who have made an application that has been accepted by the relevant local authority, and cover different time periods. Such information is not collected in Wales or Northern Ireland.

Table 2: Measures recorded on rough sleeping through statutory homelessness data  
The number of households who sleep rough in statutory homelessness statistics in England and Scotland, April 2021 to March 2022

Country	Measure	April 2021 to March 2022
England	Households assessed as rough sleeping at the time of application (for one night or across several nights)	11,250
	Households that included at least one household member who experienced rough sleeping in the three months prior to application	2,129
Scotland	Households that included at least one household member who experienced rough sleeping the night prior to application	1,304

Source: Use: Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, Cabinet Secretary for Social Justice, Housing and Local Government from the Scottish Government

#### Notes

1. Direct comparison should not be made because of different data collected and each UK nation has its own devolved framework where statutory duties are processed differently.
2. Households in England refers to both single households and households with children. It also includes households owed a prevention duty or a relief duty.
3. Households in Scotland refer to any household where a member of the household had slept rough either the night before or in the three months before to application.

As well as collecting information about rough sleeping experiences before local authority approach, [Scotland also capture demographic characteristics](#) as part of the application process. In April 2021 to March 2022, 86% of those who reported experiencing rough sleeping in the three months before application were men. Rough sleeping was found to be most common among those aged 35 to 49 years and for people of White other, White Irish and White other British background.

In 2020, the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (later evolved into the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities) published their [Rough sleeping questionnaire: initial findings report](#) exploring the multiple vulnerabilities, support needs and experiences of people who sleep rough in England. The findings were based on interviews with over 500 respondents throughout 2019 and early 2020. While this research does not help to directly enumerate the rough sleeping population, it provides valuable insights into the characteristics and experiences of the individuals who had slept rough in England in the past year.

Of those interviewed who had experienced rough sleeping over the previous year, 82% were male, 84% were of White background and 81% were UK nationals. Other demographic characteristics collected as part of the interviews, such as age and sexual orientation, are shown in this [summary report: The rough sleeping questionnaire findings \(PDF, 263KB\)](#)

Most questionnaires were completed in day centres and hostels, meaning those who were less engaged with services were also less likely to be interviewed, further confounding the issue of "hiddenness". Although the sample broadly fit the same demographic profile as those reported in the rough sleeping snapshot survey, it should not be treated as statistically representative of the rough sleeping population in England.

Official statistics show that data on rough sleeping are captured to a different extent and using different methods across the four UK nations. While most of the UK nations produce some form of enumeration on people sleeping rough, Wales and Northern Ireland do not publish any demographic characteristics of this population group. The data sources explored previously do not capture the full extent of rough sleeping across the UK. For example, those represented in Table 2 will only include households who have approached their local authority for help in England and Scotland. This means that households who sleep rough but do not approach or accept help from their local authority will not be represented in these statistics.



## Sofa surfing

Sofa surfing refers to the experience of individuals who are staying with friends or family, often on a sofa, on a temporary or insecure basis because they have nowhere else to go. Currently there are no UK-wide official statistics published on sofa surfing and methods for capturing that population group differ across the four UK nations.

One method used in England for estimating the sofa surfing population is through the [English Housing Survey \(EHS\)](#). From 2019 to 2021, there were 538,000 households that had someone staying with them who would have otherwise been homeless. Of these, 63.6% were male and 36.4% were female. The EHS has recently been amended to capture age, but this has not yet been reported because of small sample sizes during the coronavirus pandemic.

England and Scotland both include measures relating to sofa surfing in their statutory homelessness statistics. This is achieved by asking questions about households' accommodation type upon application in England and asking households the property type from which they became homeless in Scotland. Responses for these measures are shown in Table 3.

These responses were selected as indications of the kind of insight possible from statutory homeless statistics, however, they have not been intended as a best estimate of sofa surfing. This is because the measures and most of the response options are not specific to sofa surfing and therefore could capture a broader range of individuals than solely those sofa surfing. There are no demographic breakdowns published alongside these figures. While Northern Ireland and Wales collect similar information about types of living situation, they do not include types of accommodation that could reflect sofa surfing.

Table 3: Between April 2021 to March 2022 16,070 households owed a relief duty were living with friends in England at the time they made their homeless application

Measures on households' accommodation type upon application and property type from which they became homeless in statutory homelessness statistics in England and Scotland, April 2021 to March 2022

Country	Measure	April 2021 to March 2022
England	Households owed a relief duty and were living with friends at the time of application.	16,070
	Households owed a prevention duty and were living with friends at the time of application.	11,530
	Households owed a relief duty and were living with family at the time of application	33,670
	Households owed a prevention duty and were living with family at the time of application.	35,240
Scotland	Households reporting that they had been long term sofa surfing as the property type from which they became homeless.	585
	Households reporting that they were staying with friends or partners as the property type from which they became homeless.	5,733
	Households reporting that they were staying with parents, relatives, or family home as the property type from which they became homeless.	7,964

Source: Use: Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, Cabinet Secretary for Social Justice, Housing and Local Government from the Scottish Government

#### Notes

1. Direct comparison cannot be made because of differing data measures and collection. Each UK nation has its own devolved framework where statutory duties are processed differently.
2. Households in England refers to both single households and households with children.
3. Households in Scotland refers to all households that were assessed as homeless including those threatened with homelessness.

This evidence shows a lack of coherent official statistics on sofa surfing. This is partly because of the lack of official definition of sofa surfing but is also a result of the difficulties involved in measuring this group, which is likely to move around frequently.

## Overcrowded households

Even if staying in a secure property, individuals can still be considered homeless if the housing conditions they live in are overcrowded. An overcrowded household is determined based on guidelines outlined by the room standard and the space standard, which is consistent across England, Scotland and Wales. For more information on legislative definitions see: [Housing Scotland Act 1987](#)), [England and Wales Housing Act 1985](#), [Northern Ireland Housing Selection Scheme Rules \(PDF, 1.23MB\)](#).

The [English Household Survey](#) (EHS) has been used to estimate the population living in overcrowded conditions in England. In 2021 to 2022, 3% of households in England were considered overcrowded, or approximately 732,000 households.

[Ethnic breakdowns](#) from the EHS were last published in 2019 using data over a three-year period from 2016 to 2019. The households with the highest rates of overcrowding were in the Bangladeshi (24%), Pakistani (18%) and Black African (16%) ethnic groups. In response to these findings the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities conducted further research in 2022 exploring [overcrowding in South Asian households](#).

Similarly, in Scotland the [Scottish House Condition Survey](#) found that around 51,000 households (2% of Scottish households) lived in overcrowded accommodation in 2019. The [Scottish House Condition Survey was postponed in 2020 because of coronavirus \(COVID-19\)](#) and resumed in 2021.

Scotland also collects information on overcrowding in its statutory homeless statistics. In 2021 to 2022, 583 individuals reported overcrowding as the main reason for their homelessness. There are currently no demographic characteristics published of these households.

Wales and Northern Ireland also have their own similar housing surveys, however, they do not provide sufficient information to determine overcrowding. Northern Ireland collect information on overcrowding as part of their statutory homeless statistics published in [Northern Ireland Housing Statistics](#). In April 2021 to March 2022, 199 households presented as homeless because of overcrowding.

Another source that can allow insight into the number of overcrowded households is Census 2021. The [Housing, England and Wales: Census 2021 bulletin](#) shows us that in England, the proportion of households with fewer bedrooms than required was 4.4%, equating to 1 million households. This is lower in Wales at 2.2%, equating to 30,000 households. Scotland and Northern Ireland produce their own figures for this using census data. These are not available yet as of March 2023.

The data explored here show that overcrowding in households is captured inconsistently across the four UK nations. England and Scotland both use surveys to capture the extent of overcrowding but this is not replicated in Wales or Northern Ireland. While surveys have attempted to provide an estimate of the number of households living in overcrowded conditions, there are currently no official statistics to capture the demographic characteristics of these households.

## Concealed households

Individuals in houses can still be considered homeless if living in a "concealed household". The definition of concealed households differs across different data sources.

The [English Housing Survey \(PDF, 241KB\)](#) defines concealed households as "households containing an adult who would prefer to buy or rent their own accommodation but cannot afford to do so". It estimated that between 2018 and 2019, 1.6 million households were living under these circumstances. The definition used in the [National Housing Federation's report People in housing need \(PDF, 551KB\)](#) is broader and it captures individuals or family units living within another household, including adult children who wish to move out. In 2020, they estimated around 1.9 million households were hosting a "concealed" household.

The [Office for National Statistics' \(ONS'\) 2011 Census](#) (similar data have not yet been published with 2021 Census) and [Scotland's census](#) share the same definition of a "concealed" family: a couple or single parent family living in a multi-family household including, for example, young adults living with a partner and/or child in their parents' household or unrelated families sharing a household.

According to their definition, a single person cannot be a "concealed" family and therefore an elderly parent living with their adult child, or a young adult living with parents are not considered "concealed" families. The ONS estimated there were 289,000 concealed families in England and Wales at the time of the 2011 Census. While [Scotland estimated between 24,000 and 37,000 families were living in concealed conditions between 2016 and 2018 \(PDF, 212KB\)](#).

Northern Ireland's definition differs from the other UK nations. In [Northern Ireland Housing Executive's \(NIHE's\) Homelessness strategy for Northern Ireland \(PDF, 611KB\)](#), concealed households capture people who are living in shared accommodation and cannot afford to live independently. We were not able to identify official data on concealed households in Northern Ireland.

## Unconventional structures

Another form of homelessness includes individuals living in non-permanent or non-standard structures. This can include mobile homes, caravans, non-standard buildings and non-permanent structures such as a tent.

There is currently very little data readily available on this form of homelessness across the four UK nations. [Scotland's statutory homelessness statistics](#) includes one measure where, between April 2021 and March 2022, 161 households reported a caravan or other mobile structure as the property type from which they became homeless. However, these statistics are not representative of the relevant population as they only include individuals who have approached their local authority for support.

Caution should be taken when interpreting data local authorities were invited to share for this review. Because of the limited number of local authorities that provided information, the figures presented should not be treated as representative of the overall homelessness population.

Local authorities and districts across the UK were invited to share the data they hold on individuals staying in unconventional or non-permanent structures, including the number of people and the nature of these structures. Of all local authorities contacted, 53 provided data, including 45 from England, 5 from Wales, 3 from Scotland and 0 from Northern Ireland.

Several local authorities reported people residing or sleeping in sheds, garages and outbuildings, derelict structures (including buildings, caravans and boats), barns, disused public buildings, chalets, "shacks", bin stores, and camping in wooded areas or parks. A vast range was reported by English locations, including boats, sheds, improvised shelters and squats that were unique to England.

Tents and cars were considerably more common than other forms of accommodation, particularly in Wales where tents were reported by all authorities that provided a breakdown of structures. Caravans and mobile homes were most common in Scotland and were reported by Scottish islands and highland areas. No cities or urban areas from Scotland reported this information. Most authorities did not hold information on the number of people, their sex, or the length of time they stayed in these structures.

In many local authorities, people staying in unconventional accommodation were counted as people sleeping rough and therefore separating the two was not feasible. However, this was not always the case as a small number of authorities shared that they did not classify tents or cars and other similar structures as rough sleeping.

Most authorities in England that provided figures reported their total count of people sleeping rough, with a note of locations where people were likely to be found. Wales and Scotland reported lower figures and were able to provide specific counts of the number of people within each accommodation type. Information from the local authorities highlighted that even between authorities within the same county, there were significant variations in the way people staying in unconventional accommodation were classified and counted.

## Squatting

Those who are homeless and end up squatting tend to occupy empty, disused or abandoned properties. For many it is a last resort for when the only alternative is sleeping rough on the streets. Much like unconventional structures, there is very limited data readily available on squatting. The [last official estimate for squatters in the UK](#) was 20,000 by the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (currently Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities) in 2011.

Authorities in England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland provided figures on the number of known squatters in their area. The majority across all four UK nations reported no squatters or no data held. Six local authorities in England provided specific figures (ranging from 1 to 8).

Of the areas reporting no squats or holding no data, many noted individuals staying in disused buildings as a form of rough sleeping; this was not the case for Wales or Scotland. As with unconventional structures, it appears that in some areas in England there is an overlap between squatting and rough sleeping. Many other local authorities across all UK nations noted data on squatting would likely be held by the police; it is unclear why a small number in England held data themselves.

To supplement this, data were requested from all police constabularies across the UK, with 16 responses from England and Wales giving ranges from 0 to 166 squatters in their local area. These figures are difficult to interpret because of the inconsistent criteria applied when collecting that information. For example, most police forces reported that squatting itself was not a criminal offence and some returned results for trespassing or crimes against public areas instead. The information provided is therefore not comparable across different areas.

There are currently limited data available on squatting. This is an important omission, as research from smaller studies highlights the high prevalence of squatting among people experiencing homelessness. For example, in 2011 [Crisis estimated that almost 40% of single homeless people in England squat](#) based on the 437 people involved in a particular survey that had squatted in the past. Similar information is not captured in official statistics suggesting that squatting is a particularly hidden form of homelessness.

## 5 . The journey of "hidden" homelessness: flows and durations

One element of "hidden" homelessness that is rarely captured in official statistics is individuals' journeys through homelessness. [Research on rough sleeping in England by the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government](#) (now Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities) in 2020 provides some insight into this.

This rough sleeping questionnaire captures data on people's wider homelessness histories, showing that many individuals experience multiple types of homelessness and accommodation. The average number of homeless accommodation types experienced by those surveyed as part of the research was 3.5 over the course of a year. This included rough sleeping, staying in refuges, hostels, emergency accommodation and other non-permanent accommodation including sofa surfing.

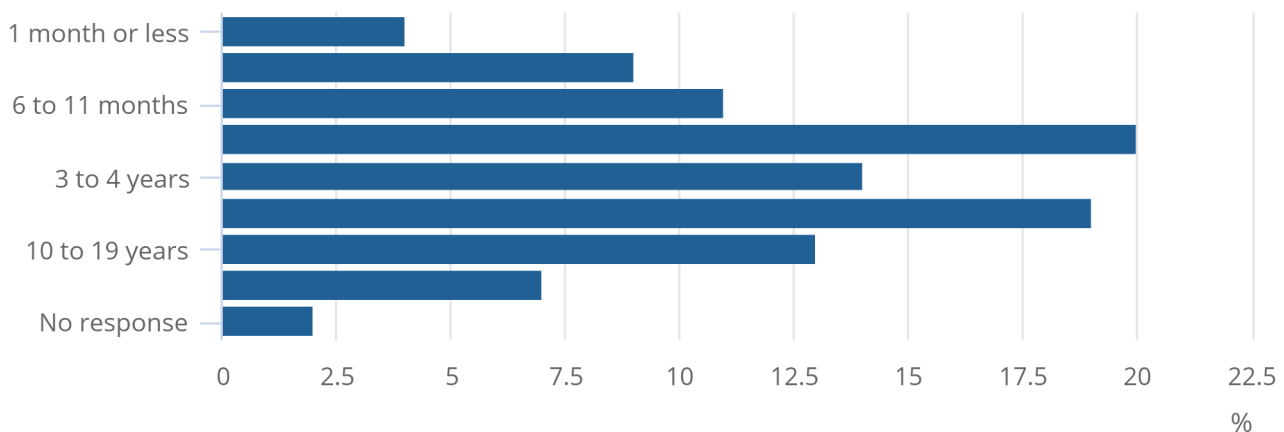
In addition, many of the individuals interviewed had experienced long periods of time in and out of homelessness, as highlighted in Figure 1. Of a sub-sample of 257 respondents, over half had been homeless for a duration of over three years across their lifetime. This, mixed with the interchanging types of homelessness that people experience, shows how complex individuals' homelessness journeys can be. This transient nature, complexity and uniqueness of experiences makes data collection in that space particularly difficult.

**Figure 1: Over half of respondents had been homeless for over three years across their lifetime**

Length of time individuals spent homeless across their lifetime in England, 2020

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Length of time individuals spent homeless across their lifetime in England, 2020



**Source: Understanding the multiple vulnerabilities, support needs and experiences of people who sleep rough in England from the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government**

**Notes:**

1. Based on a sample of 257 people sleeping rough.

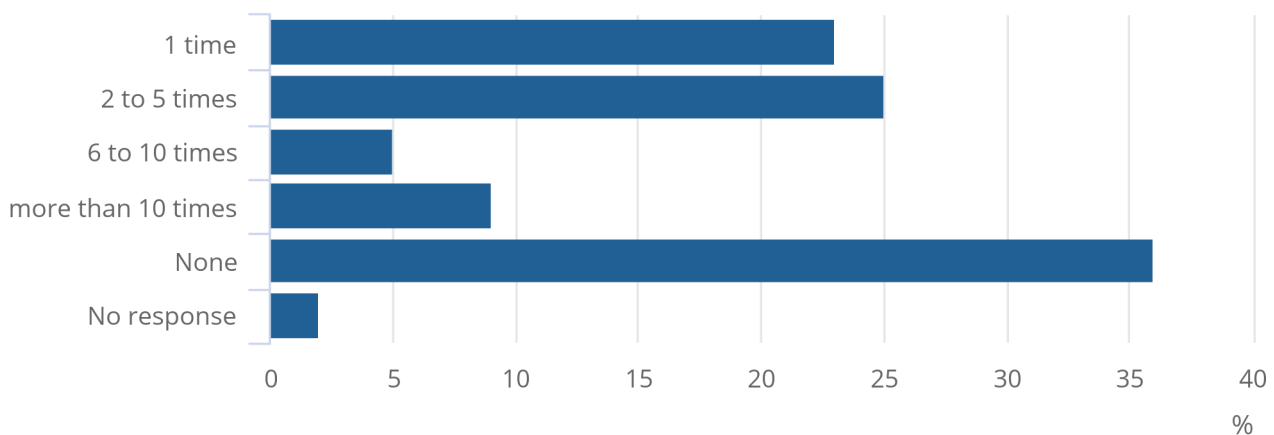
The [rough sleeping questionnaire](#) in England also collected information on whether respondents had sought housing support from their local authority in the past. Figure 2 shows the number of times, within the year before the questionnaire, respondents sought help from their local authority. While 36% of respondents did not seek support over the past year, approximately 39% sought help from their local authority more than once over the course of the year. This shows that even when people experiencing homelessness connect with their local authority it does not guarantee them a way out of homelessness.

**Figure 2: Nearly 4 in 10 of respondents sought help from their local authority more than once in the last year**

The number of times respondents sought help from their local authority in the last year in England, 2020

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The number of times respondents sought help from their local authority in the last year in England, 2020



**Source: Understanding the multiple vulnerabilities, support needs and experiences of people who sleep rough in England from the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government**

**Notes:**

1. Sample size of 563.

While temporary accommodation is normally seen as preferable to sleeping rough, [Crisis published a report on people's experiences of unsuitable temporary accommodation in Scotland \(PDF, 2.01MB\)](#), which highlighted the negative experiences people have had of these types of accommodation. Negative experiences and perceptions of temporary accommodation may contribute to some people avoiding these types of accommodation and thus remaining "hidden" homeless.

Poor mental health was also cited as a common response for disengaging from or refusing support from councils or outreach teams in England. Mental health struggles are a common experience within the homeless population. In their [Mental ill health in the adult single homeless population report](#), Crisis reports that mental ill health is more common among the street homeless than the general population.



## 6 . Who is more likely to experience "hidden" homelessness

This section explores groups in the UK that are at increased risk of experiencing "hidden" homelessness and thereby being missed from official statistics. This likely does not capture the full breadth of population groups likely to experience "hidden" types of homelessness but it provides some insights into the groups most at risk. The groups explored in this section have been selected as they were most commonly identified within the literature to experience "hidden" homelessness.

### Women

Research into "hidden" homelessness suggest that women are more likely than men to experience this type of homelessness specifically. According to official statistics from the [rough sleeping count in England in 2021 \(PDF, 297KB\)](#), women represented around 13% of people sleeping rough. Evidence suggests this figure is unlikely to accurately reflect the true scale of women sleeping rough.

[Research from Sheffield Hallam University on women and homelessness](#) shows that women experience homelessness differently from men. As a vulnerable group, women often choose to employ invisibility strategies, such as sleeping in places hidden from view or spending time in 24-hour services [The Centre for the New Midlands, 2021](#), or even disguising themselves as men [Solace Women's Aid, A strategy for ending women's homelessness in England \(PDF, 3.84MB\)](#). Women are also known to exhaust informal and social means of housing, including staying with friends and family, before approaching local authorities so remain hidden for longer (Women and Rough Sleeping, [Bretherton and Pleace \(PDF, 2.41MB\), 2018](#)).

[Solace Women's Aid \(PDF, 5.42MB\)](#) found in 2019 that women who had experienced domestic violence and presented to their local authority often received inadequate responses including being turned away or being placed in unsuitable accommodation. This may be a reason why some women choose to deal with their situation informally. Where women were unable to rely on support networks or other informal means of accommodation, the [University of York's research on women's homelessness in Camden \(PDF, 6.87MB\)](#) identified extreme measures taken including walking around all night, sleeping on buses, in hospitals and in the woods to try and keep out of sight.

Studies have also found that women are more likely than men to turn to dangerous methods to find accommodation; [Reeve and Battys' study on The hidden truth about homelessness](#) reports that women were more likely than men to exchange sex for accommodation.

Their research was conducted in 11 towns and cities in England over a one-week period in July 2010. In total 437 single people experiencing homelessness were surveyed and 27 were interviewed. Out of those surveyed, 28% of women compared with 14% of men had spent the night with or formed an unwanted sexual partnership with someone to obtain a roof over their head. A further 20% of women (3% of men) reported engaging in sex work to fund a night in a hotel or bed and breakfast. This is important to highlight as women's experiences are different to those of men.

### Young people

Another group more likely to experience "hidden" homelessness specifically is young people aged 16 to 25 years. Many young people often rely on informal support networks for somewhere to stay and as a result do not recognise themselves as homeless ([Welsh Government press release, 6 January 2020](#)). UK-wide research in 2014 on young people aged 16 to 25 years revealed that 20% had sofa surfed during the last year, with 16% having done so for more than a week and 4% over three months ([Cambridge Centre for Housing and Planning Research, Estimating the scale of youth homelessness in the UK, 2015 \(PDF, 1.07MB\)](#)). The same research also found that 26% of young people had slept rough at some point in their life and 15% had slept in a car.

In their [Youth Homelessness Databank \(PDF, 1.081KB\)](#), Centre Point report that only 5% of the 91,521 young people in England who approached their local authority in 2018 to 2019 were identified as statutory homeless and owed the main housing duty.

Support from local authorities is in decline: [Centre Point's The scale of youth homelessness in the UK report \(PDF, 4.3MB\)](#) shows that across England in 2018 to 2019, 79% of young people who approached their local authority received an initial assessment, which dropped to 66% in 2020 to 2021. This means that more young people approaching their local authority are not being given the chance to undergo assessment to identify support, which they might be entitled to. This leaves many young people facing homelessness forced to find alternative accommodation and consequently they are more likely to experience "hidden" homelessness.

## Ethnic minority groups

Evidence suggests that ethnic minority individuals are at a higher risk of experiencing "hidden" homelessness. A [literature review on the housing needs and experiences of ethnic minority groups in Scotland](#) published in 2021 reveals these groups are more likely to deal with housing difficulties informally and to stay with friends and relatives. They were also less likely to perceive themselves as homeless and therefore less likely to access homelessness services, making homelessness in these communities less visible. [Ethnic minority households are also more likely to live in overcrowded conditions](#), based on estimates from the English Housing Survey.

## 7 . Future developments

Improved accuracy of enumeration of this population would provide a foundation on which to develop methods to better understand these groups, including their experiences and journeys into "hidden" homelessness. This could in turn ensure that service provision is targeted appropriately and meets the specific needs of these population groups.

Better capturing "hidden" homelessness in data and evidence may involve novel methods such as those employed in [Denmark's biennial homelessness mapping](#) using a combination of street counts and service-based surveys, or by [amending the census to better capture these groups as in Australia](#).

Ongoing work within the Office for National Statistics (ONS) is aimed at improving the coverage of hard-to-reach population groups, including "hidden" homelessness, in UK data and evidence. Research is currently being carried out to explore the development of a methodology for enumerating women experiencing "hidden" homelessness across the UK. Subject to available funding, future research will likely involve piloting this methodology across the four UK nations.

In addition, the Scottish Government is currently carrying out a complementary evidence review exploring the international evidence base on methods to identify people who are facing or have faced "hidden" homelessness. The Scottish Government is also in the process of procuring external research to better understand the lived experiences of those people who are homeless, at imminent risk of homelessness or who face housing insecurity but do not appear in Scotland's official figures. The ONS and Scottish Government are working closely together to ensure their work on "hidden" homelessness is complementary.

The Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities has implemented a new [rough sleeping data-led framework](#), working with the Centre for Homelessness Impact. This will be used to monitor progress towards ending rough sleeping, to ensure it is prevented, and, where it does occur, is rare, brief and non-recurrent. This will identify parameters and metrics to measure progress and identify where action is needed.

## Get in touch

If you have any enquiries or would like further information about this article, please contact [equalities@ons.gov.uk](mailto:equalities@ons.gov.uk).

## 8 . Glossary

### Statutory homeless

In general, a household is regarded as statutorily homeless when the local authority has a duty to house them in settled accommodation. This might be because its members are unintentionally homeless in a priority-need category, but not sleeping rough. This is depending on country-specific legislation and the individual circumstances of the applicant. For more detail please see the [Government Statistical Service's \(GSS\) interactive tool for homelessness](#).

Statutory homelessness statistics are regularly collected and published in [Scotland's homelessness statistics](#), [Wales's homelessness statistics](#) and [Northern Ireland's housing statistics](#).

### English Housing Survey

This is a continuous national survey, which collects information about people's housing circumstances and the condition of housing in England.

## Scottish House Condition Survey

This is an annual, cross-sectional survey that provides robust evidence on the composition, characteristics, attitudes and behaviour of private households and individuals as well as evidence on the physical condition of Scotland's homes. The survey is an integrated component of the Scottish Household Survey.

## Freedom of Information Act (2000)

Legislation that grants public access to documents or other data in the possession of a government agency or public authority unless the information falls into a category that is specifically excluded from the terms of the legislation.

## Snapshot Survey

An exercise using a combination of both counts based and evidence-based information to estimate the level of rough sleeping in an area on a typical night or a range of nights.

## Overcrowded accommodation

Overcrowded housing conditions is determined based on guidelines outlined by the room standard and the space standard. For more information on legislative definitions see: [Housing Scotland Act 1987](#)), [England and Wales Housing Act 1985](#), [Northern Ireland Housing Selection Scheme Rules \(PDF, 1.23KB\)](#).

For Census 2021 in England and Wales, overcrowding is calculated by comparing the number of bedrooms the household requires with the number of available bedrooms.

The number of bedrooms the household requires is calculated according to the Bedroom Standard, where the following should have their own bedroom:

- adult couple
- any remaining adult (aged 21 years or over)
- two males (aged 10 to 20 years)
- one male (aged 10 to 20 years) and one male (aged 9 years or under), if there are an odd number of males aged 10 to 20 years
- one male aged 10 to 20 years if there are no males aged 0 to 9 years to pair with him
- Repeat steps 3 to 5 for females
- two children (aged 9 years or under) regardless of sex
- any remaining child (aged 9 years or under)

An occupancy rating of:

- negative 1 or less implies that a household's accommodation has fewer bedrooms than required (overcrowded)
- positive 1 or more implies that a household's accommodation has more bedrooms than required (under-occupied)
- 0 suggests that a household's accommodation has an ideal number of bedrooms

## Room standard

This considers the number and gender of people who must sleep in the same room. Any room people can sleep in counts including living rooms, dining rooms and studies.

## Space standard

This considers the maximum number of people who may sleep in a dwelling of a particular size. This is dependent on the size of the room, the number of living rooms and bedrooms, the dwelling and the age of the occupants.

## 9 . Related links

[UK official statistics on homelessness: comparisons, definitions, and processes.](#)

Website | Updated 13 October 2022

Interactive tool to help users understand: the concept of homelessness and rough sleeping and how statistics for these concepts can and cannot be compared between the four UK countries; and the different processes a person may go through when seeking support for housing from each country's local authorities.

[Housing, England and Wales: Census 2021](#)

Bulletin | Released 5 January 2023

Accommodation type, tenure, rooms and bedrooms, central heating and car or van availability in England and Wales, Census 2021 data.

[Rough sleeping in the UK: 2002 to 2021](#)

Article | Released 10 June 2021

Report on the latest trends from rough sleeping statistics across the UK and how existing statistics can be compared.

[UK homelessness: 2005 to 2018](#)

Article | Released 17 September 2019

Assessment of the comparability and coherence of existing UK government data sources on homelessness.

## 10 . Cite this article

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