

Statistics

Homelessness Facts and Figures



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Homelessness – understanding the statistics

1. Background

Explaining the world of homelessness to supporters, funders and friends is an important task for everybody working with homeless people and there are two frequently asked questions which, understandably, arise time after time. These are:

- a) What are the reasons for people becoming homeless?
- b) How many homeless people are there?

This article covers the second of these questions. We have all taken part in confusing conversations about the homelessness statistics. Measuring the size of the problem is not a simple exercise and the different figures referred to can often lead to the listener feeling baffled and bewildered. Hopefully this article will go some way in clarifying the figures that are frequently used, as well as illuminating the ones that are rarely mentioned.

2. Statutory homeless figures

The confusion starts because often the first reference point is government statistics. The United Kingdom has a highly unusual safety net for people who become homeless, which is not simply based on the notion of rooflessness, or literal homelessness.

A piece of research by the University of York [1] illustrated how our safety net was one of the most comprehensive in the world, albeit subsequently affected by housing benefit changes and welfare reform. In practice, homelessness legislation in this country means that a person can be in temporary accommodation and entitled under law to longer term housing from the state, whilst someone on the street sleeping rough may not be entitled to longer term housing from the state.

[1] *An International Review of Homelessness and Social Policy (2007)*

The important piece of legislation is the Housing Act 1996 (Part 7) which places a statutory duty on housing authorities (councils) to provide assistance to people who are homeless but a main duty of homelessness, that is, an obligation to rehouse into longer term housing, towards only those individuals who are eligible for assistance because they are in 'priority need' groups. The priority need groups include households with dependent children, a pregnant woman, 16 and 17 year-olds, 18-20 year-olds previously in care, people who are vulnerable because of a disability or age and others who are vulnerable as a result of being in care, custody, in HM forces, or having to leave home because of a threat of violence.

The statutory safety net works very successfully where the proof of statutory rights is easy to establish; e.g. where you are required to prove that you have dependent children. It is less helpful where you have to prove not only circumstances, but vulnerability. For example, a person with a physical disability has to prove that their disability makes them vulnerable 'so that they may suffer in a situation where another homeless person would be able to cope without suffering'. A process of assessment is required to ascertain vulnerability and this is carried out by the local authority to which the person has applied.

The government provides quarterly homelessness statistics for England. The most recent statistics – 1 October to 31 December 2017 – show 78,930 households in temporary accommodation on 31 December 2017. This is 4% more than at the same date last year but lower than its peak in 2004 when numbers reached the 100,000 mark. It's up 64% on the low of 48,010 on 31 December 2010.

Of these, 77% were families or pregnant women. 13,640 households were accepted as homeless between 1 October and 31 December 2017, 5% down on the same quarter last year and 11% down on the previous quarter.

78,930 households were in temporary accommodation as of 31 December 2017.

The most common reason for becoming homeless was the end of an assured shorthold tenancy at 27% (3,680 households) in England and 31% (1,160 households) in London. This is a big rise from the first quarter in 2011 which showed only 15% becoming homeless due to the end of an assured shorthold tenancy. The background

to why this has happened is that the private rented sector has doubled in size in England so that 4.3 million households are now housed in this sector. It also indicates that affordability is an increasingly significant issue, as more households facing the end of a private tenancy are unable to find an alternative without assistance.

Between 1 October and 31 December, a main homelessness duty was ended for 10,470 households who had previously been in temporary accommodation or were waiting in their existing housing to be rehoused elsewhere. They are mainly first time rather than repeat applications of homelessness, as most local authorities are still discharging their duties by offering social housing – 7,040 (67%) of households were provided with settled accommodation by accepting what is known as a ‘Part 6’ offer of a tenancy in local authority or housing association accommodation. 460 (4%) households accepted offers of settled accommodation in the private rented sector, which local authorities have been given government permission to use in recent years. This is down from 600 in the previous quarter.



13,640 households were accepted as homeless between 1 October and 31 December 2017, 5% down on the same quarter last year and 11% down on the previous quarter.

The same set of statistics show that 4,550 households approached councils for assistance with housing and were found to be homeless; that is, they were not entitled to occupy, or could not be expected to remain in, their accommodation. However, a main duty of homelessness was not owed by the local authority and therefore the applicant was not eligible for longer term housing (i.e. they were not in a priority group). A further 2,160 applicants were considered to be homeless and to be in priority need. However, they were deemed to be 'intentionally homeless' and therefore there was no requirement to find them longer term housing. Intentionality arises where it is deemed that the person or household has deliberately done something that caused them to leave accommodation that they could otherwise have stayed in. The usual reasons are non-payment of rent or anti-social behaviour.

Of the 78,930 households in temporary accommodation on 31 December 2017, 22,150 or 28% of households were housed in temporary accommodation in another local authority district. This is an increase of 1% from the 21,920 households in temporary accommodation in another local authority district at the same date last year. 19,730 or 89% of the England total were from London authorities. This is a decrease of 1% from the same date last year when 19,860 such households were placed by London authorities. This last figure may well be an indicator of the impact of Government welfare reforms – the housing benefit cap alongside high London property prices makes it difficult for councils in the more expensive parts of the capital to house families and forces them to look elsewhere.

3. Rough sleeping figures

3a Snapshots

Rough sleeping figures are collected through local authority street counts and estimates. All 326 local housing authorities across England provided a figure. Street counts were undertaken by 54 local authorities (17%) where it was believed that the local rough sleeping problem justified counting and estimates were provided by the other 272 local authorities. The street counts and estimates represent a snapshot of the number of people sleeping rough on a single night in autumn of that year.

The autumn 2017 total of rough sleeping counts and estimates indicates a total of 4,751 people. This is up by 617 (15%) from the 2016 total of 4,134 and 133% from 1,768 in 2010 when the first equivalent count took place, a seventh consecutive increase. London had the largest number of rough sleepers at 1,137, which accounted for 24% of the national figure. The number of rough sleepers in London increased by 18% from 964 in 2016, compared to an increase of 14% in the rest of England.

Thames Reach has gone on record to query some of these estimates and whether they accurately reflect the situation on any one night. They may well be over-estimates – some provincial towns have estimated higher figures than those reported by councils conducting street counts in well-developed urban areas with well established and higher levels of homelessness support services. This could indicate some local authorities have misinterpreted the Government's guidance and are not estimating the number of people sleeping rough on any one night that would have been found in a 'snapshot' count, but across a longer timescale. 54 street counts were conducted this year, a slight increase on the 47 counts undertaken last year, but still not enough, meaning estimates are increasingly being relied upon. With many estimates failing to follow Government guidelines, the national rough sleeping figures themselves are becoming increasingly inaccurate.

3b London's annual CHAIN figures

Annual figures for rough sleepers show a greater problem. Rough sleepers move or are helped off the streets and new rough sleepers come onto the street. Over a year, the figure is therefore much larger. The annual figures are compiled from information provided by homelessness outreach staff who work

tirelessly around the clock in the capital to help people move away from the streets – the information they gather is released in the CHAIN Annual Report, Street to Home, 1 April 2016 – 31 March 2017. <http://data.london.gov.uk/dataset/chain-reports>

They show not only how many people are sleeping rough in London but the reasons why they have ended up on the streets and what is being done by services to help them escape homelessness. 2,127 rough sleepers were helped off the street by outreach services and into somewhere safe. The figures show that 8,108 individuals were reported sleeping rough across the course of the year, compared to 8,096 the previous year. Of which, 63% or 5,094 were seen sleeping rough for the first time in London.

8,108 individuals slept rough across the course of the year.

72% of new rough sleepers only spent one night sleeping out in the capital, thanks mainly to the fact that the street outreach teams are able to reach people quickly, assisted by the public who are able to contact the teams via StreetLink www.streetlink.org.uk This figure is slightly down on figures from recent years but illustrates the success of the GLA funded No Second Night Out approach, which has focused on getting to people quickly before they become long-term rough sleepers.

The number of people being met on the streets by outreach workers in all four quarters of the year was 220 or 3% of the total. This figure suggests their rough sleeping is an ongoing issue that has not been successfully resolved. However, there was also an 8% increase in the number of long-term rough sleepers compared to 2015-16 with 1,978 people recorded sleeping rough in both the 2016-17 and 2015-16 figures, while 1,036 people returned to rough sleeping. These figures indicate a worrying rise in the number of people living on London's streets.



2,127 rough sleepers were helped off the street by outreach services over the course of a year.



Rough sleeping encampments have been springing up in recent years across London.

Thames Reach's London Street Rescue team is out every night of the year covering 14 London boroughs and Heathrow Airport, while the organisation also undertakes outreach work in Croydon as well as offering specialist interventions through its STAR team. 1,269 people sleeping rough were helped off the streets of London by Thames Reach outreach teams in the year running 1 April 2016 – 31 March 2017.

Severe and enduring mental health problems remains one of the main reasons why people sleep rough. 47% of London's rough sleepers had mental health support needs and more must be done to help this group escape street homelessness through multi-agency approaches involving mental health specialists working on the streets with outreach teams. 44% had alcohol problems and 35% a drug problem. Only 23% had no alcohol, drugs, or mental health support needs.

The figures also show that only four people under 18 slept rough in London during the course of the year, a testament to the effectiveness of the services working with young people.

49% of London's rough sleepers had mental health support needs.

The majority of London's rough sleepers are defined as non-UK nationals, accounting for 53% of the total. One of the biggest challenges facing the outreach teams is to assist people to reconnect home to family and friends when things are not working out for them in London or, in the case of economic migrants who are sleeping rough and working, to ensure that they are employed legally, as many are working within the informal economy, and able to access affordable, shared accommodation. 15% or 1,175 of the total people sleeping rough were female.

The number of UK ex-armed services personnel is often the subject of media interest and yet figures showed 132 individuals, making up only 2% of the total on the streets. More non-UK individuals, 266, had experience of being in the armed services overseas, however, making up 5% of the total.

3c London's Quarterly CHAIN figures

Quarterly reports are also issued from the information gathered on the Chain database indicating how many people slept rough on London's streets during the period.

During the period 1 October – 31 December 2017, 2,630 individuals were found sleeping on London's streets. This is a 7% decrease on the total figure for the same quarter last year, which saw 2,689 people sleeping rough. It is down 1% from the total of 2,659 people found in the immediately preceding quarter of 1 July – 30 September 2017.

1,121 people were recorded as sleeping rough for the first time, 14% lower than the same quarter last year. It's also down 2% from the figure of 1,148 found sleeping rough for the first time in the immediately preceding quarter. 861 people or 77% spent just one night sleeping rough.

The number of rough sleepers deemed to be living on the streets was 384, an 8% increase on the same quarter last year, and 2% higher than the immediately preceding quarter.

The number of intermittent rough sleepers – those not new to the streets but without enough contacts with outreach teams to be deemed to be living on the streets – was 1,115. This is 4% lower than the same period last year and unchanged compared to the immediately preceding three-month quarter of 1 July – 30 September 2017. During this period, 564 rough sleepers were booked into accommodation or helped to return home. 384 were found and booked into the No Second Night Out Assessment Centres.

54% of rough sleepers on London's streets were from the UK and 44% were from overseas. 24% were from Central and Eastern Europe, including 9% from Romania.



John is pictured in the garden of the hostel where he lives.

The support needs of the people seen sleeping rough by outreach services showed 49% had mental health issues, 43% had issues with alcohol, almost invariably super-strength lagers and ciders, 41% had issues with drugs, primarily heroin and crack cocaine, and only 19% didn't have one of these support needs.

4. Hostels – first and second stage accommodation

Apart from households in temporary accommodation and rough sleepers there are also people living in hostels who are perceived by many to be homeless, even if they do have a roof over their head. Emergency hostels are often the first place that a rough sleeper will be referred to by an outreach worker. The aim is to help people with their problems and to move on to either second stage accommodation or to a new long-term home.

At least 75,000 different individuals use hostels over the course of a year.

Second stage accommodation offers specialist support to homeless people as they aim to get their lives back on track. Most people move out of hostels within a year, but some stay longer, perhaps because suitable accommodation is not available or because their needs change.

According to Homeless Link, which produced 'Support for Single Homeless People in England Annual Review 2017', there are a total of 34,497 bed-spaces in 1,121 accommodation projects across England. London has the highest number of projects in total, with 172, and the most bed spaces, with 8,324. Turnover in hostels varies greatly, but it is reasonable to assume that at least 75,000 different individuals use hostels over the course of a year. Again, hostel residents are unlikely to show up significantly in the statutory figures. Some hostel residents will also have slept rough so could be 'double counted' in the rough sleeping figures, but other hostel residents will have never slept rough.

5. 'Hidden homeless'

The broader the definition given to 'the homeless', inevitably, the more speculative becomes the figures given for the number of homeless people. One commonly quoted figure is the number of hidden homeless, meaning that group which is not entitled to accommodation because they are not deemed by councils to be in priority need, yet have no accommodation that they are entitled to occupy or can reasonably continue to occupy. The hidden homeless figure is usually given as around 400,000 but should be treated with caution.

Firstly, it includes rough sleepers and hostel residents, for whom a separate figure is given, above. Secondly, it raises a bigger issue about how far someone can be defined as homeless simply as a consequence of their physical situation. For example, the hidden homeless figure includes people who are forced to stay with family and friends for a period and are reliant on continued goodwill to sustain this arrangement ('sofa surfers'). Should everyone in these circumstances be regarded as homeless? Some argue that there is a big difference between, for example, a sofa surfer with few prospects and a crack habit and a sofa surfer who can, if necessary, fall back on parents with a good income and expect to find a well paid job in the near future without too much difficulty.

6. Summary of statistics

Statutory homelessness figures

- 78,930 households in temporary accommodation (31 December 2017)
- 77% of acceptances are people with dependents or pregnant women
- The main reason for a person or household becoming homeless was the end of a shorthold tenancy (27% in England and 31% in London)
- Approximately 18,000 people annually are found to be homeless but not in priority need
- Over 9,000 people annually are found to be homeless but not entitled to housing as a result of being intentionally homeless

Rough sleepers

- The Government rough sleeping figures for England composed of street counts and estimates indicated 4,751 people slept rough on any one night in England (Autumn 2017). This is up by 617 (16%) from the autumn 2016 total of 4,134 and 169% from 1,768 in 2010 when the first equivalent count took place. Doubts are emerging over some of the estimates, as some councils may have misinterpreted Government guidance to estimate a figure based on any one night, and returned inaccurate figures based on a longer time frame
- A mixture of street counts and estimates indicated 1,137 people slept rough on any one night in London, accounting for 24% of the national figure
- 8,108 individuals were reported sleeping rough across the course of the year in London, a slight increase on the figure of 8,096 recorded last year
- 2,127 rough sleepers were helped off the street by outreach services and moved into somewhere safe
- 63% or 5,094 were seen sleeping rough for the first time in London
- 72% of new rough sleepers only spent one night sleeping out on the capital
- Only 220 or 3% of those rough sleepers seen on the streets in 2016/17 were seen in all four quarters
- Only four people under 18 slept rough in London during the course of the year
- The majority of London's rough sleepers are defined as non-UK nationals, accounting for 53% of the total in the latest annual figures
- 49% of London's rough sleepers had mental health support needs in the latest quarterly figures
- During the period 1 October – 31 December 2017, 2,630 individuals were found sleeping rough on London's streets, down 7% on the same quarter last year

Hostels

- 8,324 hostel and longer-term bed-spaces in London
- 34,497 hostel and second stage accommodation bed-spaces in England
- At least 75,000 individuals use hostels over a year

Hidden homeless

- Estimated at 400,000

Updated March 2018.

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