

Missing and Homelessness

Key Points:

- Research suggests a proportion of homeless people will also be missing people, with one study finding that nearly half of the homeless people interviewed said they had run away or been forced to leave home (Shelton et al, 2009).
- There are common factors behind homelessness and going missing, including relationship breakdown (Harding et al, 2011) and for young people, conflict with parents (Centrepoin, 2009).
- The prevalence of mental health problems and substance abuse are also common issues that link homelessness and missing (Crisis, 2002 and Rees, 2009).

Background

Every year approximately 250,000 people go missing in the United Kingdom (Home Office, 2010). There are links with the issue of homelessness as a proportion of missing people will be homeless for a period of time, and a number of homeless people will have been reported as missing. Furthermore, research suggests there are common factors in why some people become missing or homeless, such as relationship breakdown.

What is homelessness?

Most people only associate homelessness with rough sleeping, however the legal definition of 'homeless' extends beyond this to take in other circumstances. Under the Housing Act 1996, a person is legally defined as homeless if:

- They have no accommodation which they are entitled to occupy;
- If the accommodation they are entitled to is of such poor quality they cannot reasonably occupy it;
- If they have been illegally evicted, or;
- If they are in accommodation they have no legal right to occupy (Shelter, 2007).

As such, people can move in and out of homelessness; it can be a temporary or long term problem.

How many people are homeless?

Government statistics state that in the 2013/4 financial year, 52,270 households were legally homeless and owed a 'main homelessness duty'¹ by their local authority (DCLG, 2014b).

1. These households were deemed eligible for assistance from their local authority, unintentionally homeless or falling within a priority need group (DCLG, 2014b).

Estimates of rough sleepers are often based on snapshot counts (that is, data collected from counts of rough sleepers within local authority area on one night) or information on the Combined Homelessness and Information Network (CHAIN) database used by people working with rough sleepers in London, such as hostel staff and outreach workers. Therefore this can have limitations. In autumn 2013 there were an estimated 2,414 rough sleepers in England, and 22 percent of these people were in London (DCLG, 2014a).

What causes homelessness?

Homelessness can be caused by personal or 'structural' factors, or a combination of these; 'structural' factors refer to wider socio-economic problems in society such as a lack of affordable housing, restrictions on housing benefit, unemployment and poverty.

Various personal factors can make people more vulnerable to homelessness. These include family conflict and breakdown, leaving care or other institutions, and substance abuse. Government statistics suggest that the two most common factors contributing to homelessness were problems with family and friends (45 percent) and the ending of shorthold tenancies (28 percent) (DCLG 2014b). Of the problems with family and friends, 28 percent were from parents, family, or friends being unable or unwilling to accommodate the person and 17 percent were from relationship breakdown (12 percent violent, 5 percent non-violent). In a further study, nearly half of the homeless people interviewed said they had run away or been forced to leave home (Shelton et al, 2009).

Most often however, homelessness is the culmination of many different issues and it can take up to "nine years for this cumulative effect to result in homelessness" (Shelter, 2007: 8).

What support is there for homeless people?

Under the Housing Act 1996, local authorities have a duty to assist a homeless person if:

- They fit the legal definition of homeless as described above;
- They are deemed eligible because of their nationality, immigration status or the length of time they have been living in Britain;
- They are classed as being in priority need because they have dependent children, are pregnant, vulnerable, 16 or 17 years old, have spent time in care, custody or the armed forces, or are fleeing violence (DCLG, 2014b), and;
- They are not intentionally homeless.

If a homeless person meets all four conditions the local authority must assist them by finding them permanent accommodation. While this decision is being made the local authority must provide temporary accommodation.

Links between homelessness and 'missing'

There are clear links between homelessness and 'missing'. A proportion of those who are homeless

will have been reported missing, with research into the experiences of people who have been missing suggesting that sleeping rough is “a common experience among both adults and young runaways” (Biehal et al, 2003: 36). In addition, there are similarities in the causes of each of these social issues.

Research conducted by Shelter Scotland suggests a link between running away or going missing as a child and adult homelessness. Here, it was found that 84 per cent of young homeless people (categorised as 16 – 24 year olds) had “run away before the age of 16” (2011: 2). A further study by Shelton et al explored the risk factors associated with homelessness and found that nearly half of the young homeless people interviewed said they had run away or been “ordered out of their home by their parents” (2009: 467).

Similarities can be found in the causes of homelessness and going missing. Harding et al (2011) found that relationship breakdown was a significant life event amongst homeless people, with participants reporting it as the most common reason for their current or recent homelessness. Significantly, relationship breakdown is also a common factor in why adults go missing, with Biehal et al finding that 30 per cent of adults were missing as a result of family/relationship breakdown. A breakdown of relationships parents and adult children, partners or siblings was the “most common reason underlying a deliberate break in contact by adult missing persons” (2003: 15).

Mental health problems are a common factor in both issues. The occurrence of common mental health problems is “over twice as high and of psychosis 4-15 times as high amongst the homeless population compared to the general population” (Rees, 2009: v). This is also reported by people that go missing, as found in Biehal et al’s research whereby “over one fifth (22 percent) reported depression and around one in twelve (9 percent) reported having other mental health problems” (2003: 11).

Substance use can additionally be found amongst people who are homeless and those who are missing. The relationship between “substance use and homelessness is a stark and early one” (2002: 4) according to Crisis, with two-thirds of those interviewed in one study citing “drug or alcohol use as a reason for first becoming homeless – a similar proportion as those who cited relationship problems with a parent” (Crisis, 2002: 4). In terms of missing persons, Biehal et al found a group of, mostly men, who become missing due to ‘transient lifestyles’ involving substance abuse, mental health problems and periods of homelessness (2003: 18).

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Published: October 2013. Updated: September 2014