

Homeless women: still being failed yet striving to survive - summary

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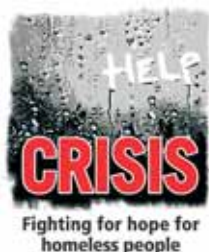
REEVE, Kesia, CASEY, Rionach and GOUDIE, Rosalind (2006). Homeless women: still being failed yet striving to survive - summary. Project Report. Crisis.

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Homeless Women: still being failed yet striving to survive

November 2006



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Homeless Women: still being failed yet striving to survive

November 2006

A summary of Crisis' latest research into the experiences of homeless women, undertaken by the Centre for Regional Economic and Social Research (CRESR) at Sheffield Hallam University.

"The findings in this report are shocking. Homeless women are telling us that they lead traumatic lives and are not getting access to housing and the support they urgently need. These women are hidden from view and hidden from services. Many are left with no choice but to sleep rough, squat, rely on the goodwill of friends or family, or form unwanted sexual partnership to get a bed for the night. Their individual situations and accumulated vulnerabilities are not being adequately taken into account by local authorities, and services are failing to reach those most in need.

I was struck by the ways in which these women described their attempts to manage their homelessness, trying to maintain their dignity and their hope of a better future and somewhere they can call 'home'.

This research should be a wake-up call to all of us concerned with homelessness and women's issues. We must take a fresh approach to the challenges of homelessness amongst women. We must ensure that we deliver the services, accommodation and support that they desperately need." **Leslie Morphy**, Chief Executive, Crisis

"Women's Aid welcomes this research. It is a timely reminder of the needs of a group of women who have for too long been overlooked. The findings are shocking but sadly not surprising – they are the sad reality for many homeless women. The research shows how many homeless women have experienced domestic and sexual violence and are not only homeless because of that abuse, but are often re-victimised in their attempts to keep a roof over their heads. The research also highlights the need for safe women-only support services, without which homeless women cannot find a route out of their homelessness and are often left unsupported through the lack of appropriate services and understanding. Politicians and policy makers need to take note of this research and increase rather than reduce provision of women-only services and appropriate support for homeless women, and for women and children at risk of domestic and sexual violence." **Nicola Harwin**, Chief Executive, Women's Aid

"This research is a vivid illustration of the different needs of women who face the challenge of life without anywhere to call home. Forty years on from the film Cathy Come Home, Crisis have shown that the causes and consequences of homelessness are still very different for women than they are for men – and still not well catered for. It is vital that there is a clear understanding of these different needs built into the design of public services from the very start. Without it, services can't hope to deliver for users, and risk wasting scarce resources. We will be working hard to ensure that from April 2007 the new gender equality duty helps to deliver this change of focus." **Jenny Watson**, Chair, Equal Opportunities Commission

About Crisis

Crisis is the national charity for single homeless people.



We have a vision of social integration and work year-round to help vulnerable and marginalised people get through the crisis of homelessness, fulfil their potential and transform their lives.

We develop innovative services which enable homeless people to progress through education and creativity and we campaign for a more inclusive society.

We regularly commission and publish research and organise events to raise awareness about the causes and nature of homelessness, to find innovative and integrated solutions and share good practice.



About the authors

Dr Kesia Reeve is a Senior Research Fellow in Housing at the Centre for Regional Economic and Social Research (CRESR) at Sheffield Hallam University. She has researched extensively around the issues of homelessness and the needs of vulnerable groups and has produced a number of research reports and academic outputs on these subjects.

Dr Rionach Casey is a Research Associate at CRESR and has been involved in a number of research projects focused on groups disadvantaged in the housing market. She has co-authored several reports on this subject.

Rosalind Goudie is a Research Associate at CRESR with specialist expertise in statistical data analysis. In recent years she has been involved in a range of housing and homelessness related research projects.

The full research report can be downloaded free of charge from the Research Bank area of our website: www.crisis.org.uk/researchbank

Reeve K, Casey R and Goudie R (2006) *Homeless Women: still being failed yet striving to survive*. London: Crisis. ISBN 978-1-899257-53-9

Homeless Women: still being failed yet striving to survive

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Executive summary

Much research about homelessness is not explicitly gendered, but is inadvertently dominated by the experiences and views of homeless men. While homeless people, regardless of gender, will share many common experiences, a failure to adequately understand the (sometimes distinct and unique) situations and experiences of homeless women can ultimately result in a failure to develop appropriate responses, and a failure to effectively tackle and prevent homelessness amongst women. Research focused specifically on homeless women is scarce and national statistics, surveys and datasets provide little by way of information about the female homeless population. In an effort to address this deficit in information and understanding this report explores the experiences of homeless *women*, as opposed to homeless *people*, and is informed by recognition of the potential influence of gender on homelessness experiences, circumstances and strategies to negotiate and manage these circumstances.

The report suggests that despite advances in homelessness policy and legislation over the past decade, homeless women are enduring traumatic and difficult homelessness situations and experiences. Many are not receiving the assistance they require with accessing accommodation, reflecting the fact that often their wider situations, needs and vulnerabilities are not being adequately taken into account by local authorities. As a result, many are sleeping rough, placing themselves in danger of assault and sexual attack, and many more are living in a range of hidden and marginalised housing situations. Very vulnerable women who have already experienced traumas in their lives are still becoming homeless and are not getting help in addressing their other needs.

About the research

The research on which this report is based was conducted between January and July 2006. A questionnaire survey collecting profile information and information about women's housing situations, their needs, and use of services was conducted with 144 single homeless women across 19 towns and cities in England. In addition, in-depth interviews were carried out with 44 single homeless women in London, Leeds, Norwich, and Sheffield. Concerted efforts were made to include minority ethnic women, women across all age groups, and women living in different accommodation situations in the survey and interview samples. Women were surveyed and interviewed in a range of services and other places including day centres, soup kitchens, hostels, B&Bs, rehabilitation centres, health centres and on the streets.

The main findings to emerge from the research are presented below, and a selection of quotes from the research have been included as illustration.

The accumulation of homeless women's traumatic life experiences

- There are high levels of vulnerability evident within the female homeless population – mental ill-health, drug and alcohol dependencies, childhoods spent in the care of the local authority, experiences of physical and sexual abuse and other traumatic life experiences were commonplace.

"Every time it had got to the same point and then my waters would break, I'd give birth and the child'd be dead and I just couldn't handle it any more ... I didn't even know what crack was like or anything but I knew people that did it so I just went out of my way to find people that did it and...just started taking it. Cos I just couldn't handle the pain any more"

- Homelessness is rarely the consequence of a single event, action or issue but is the culmination of a complex range of experiences and events which together bring women to the point of losing their accommodation. The immediate 'triggers' of homelessness mask a host of underlying issues, experiences and processes, all of which influence the likelihood of a homeless outcome. There were clear links between women's traumatic life experiences – for example sexual abuse, neglect and abandonment, reproductive health issues and experiences of violence – and their subsequent homelessness.
- Over 20 per cent of respondents left their last settled home (i.e. became homeless) to escape violence from someone they knew – whether a partner, family member or associate.
- Worryingly, very vulnerable women were those most likely to stay in the most insecure and difficult situations – care leavers, women with mental ill health and dependencies were all more likely to have slept rough, squatted, and stayed in emergency accommodation such as night shelters and B&Bs than women without these vulnerabilities.
- There was also evidence that very vulnerable women were those most likely to face difficulties meeting their needs because of active exclusion from services – care leavers, women who self-harm and women with coping difficulties were those most likely to have been excluded from services.
- The situations and experience of homelessness can have severe consequences for women's physical and mental health and well-being. Physical health problems, the onset of mental ill health, suicide attempts, drug and alcohol abuse, and 'coping crises' were commonly reported by respondents and attributed to their homelessness. Respondents were also separated from their children because they had nowhere settled to live and others resorted to forming unwanted sexual partnerships with men in order to put a roof over their heads.

"The psychiatric [hospital], right, they was always putting my problems down to drugs and alcohol, yeah. My psychiatric problems ... my problems started before the drugs and alcohol, know what I mean?"

Negative experiences of local authority assessments, decisions and practices

- The majority of women reported very negative experiences of approaching local authorities as homeless, with some being 'turned away at the door' or deterred by front-line staff from making an application. Over one third did not approach a local authority as homeless or could not remember doing so. Of those who did make an application less than one third were awarded priority need status and 28 per cent were found to be intentionally homeless.

"The housing officer went to see the manager and came back and said 'You're not priority'. But they hadn't checked any of the information – they said they could tell just on face value, by looking at me. They said if I had to sleep rough, I wouldn't fair any worse than anyone else, so I wasn't vulnerable enough."

"They started questioning why hadn't I gone until December when I'd been homeless since October? The thing is, at that time my priority was my mental health and it wasn't until December that I could start sorting out my housing."

"I'd told them I've suffered from depression for 30 years, and the [decision] letter said 'everyone gets depressed'."

- Many respondents were unaware of the outcome of their application raising the possibility that homelessness decisions are failing to reach applicants, and the 'advice and assistance' provided by local authorities was often deemed useless.

"They give me a piece of paper with hostels and the numbers to ring ... they said 'You can ring them and try them', but I didn't get no 'elp from them – they was either full up or something."

- Nearly one third of the 'single' homeless women (i.e. those without *dependent* children) participating in this study were not childless. Many had children not living with them who they hope to reunited with once they secured settled accommodation. Yet they were being treated by services and by local authority housing departments as childless women, with no consideration or acknowledgment given to their potential 'family' status.
- Repeat homeless appears to be very common. Nearly half the women surveyed had been homeless on at least one previous occasion and many had experienced homelessness several times. For some, settled accommodation was an exception in a housing career otherwise characterised by homelessness – indeed survey respondents were more likely to have lived in homeless accommodation such as hostels, night shelters, B&Bs or with friends and relatives than in their own tenancy.

Unsatisfactory and dangerous accommodation situations

- Rough sleeping is very common: over 60 per cent of respondents had resorted to sleeping rough, a higher proportion than had stayed in any other form of homeless accommodation situation. Rough sleeping appears to be particularly common in the early stages of homelessness: it was the most commonly cited situation in which women found themselves on becoming homeless for the first time, reflecting a lack of other options but also limited knowledge about the assistance available. This is a situation of great concern not least because rough sleeping is extremely dangerous for homeless women – many respondents had been physically attacked, verbally abused and sexually assaulted while sleeping rough.

"I mean you're vulnerable but you just have to stick it out ... one time I was sleeping on a park bench and a few guys ... just managed just about [to fight them off] but it can get pretty serious."

- Partly as a response to the dangers associated with sleeping rough, many women made concerted efforts to 'remain invisible', choosing places to sleep which were hidden from view or disguising their homeless status in some way. As a consequence many do not come to the attention of rough sleeper teams: over 60 per cent of women had slept rough but only 12 per cent had engaged with rough sleeper teams.

"the men tended to be in the shop fronts, which I would never contemplate doing ... for me it was a safety thing."

"There's places where we used to go, car parks where, you know, they were closed in and that, and nobody would see you there. So I wouldn't feel as unsafe there."

"Flats ... have these little sort of huts where they put the bins in and so you get behind the bins and you're hidden, you know they can't see you."

- It is likely that, at any given time, there are many women staying in 'hidden', informal and marginalised homeless accommodation situations. The vast majority of the sample had been in 'hidden homeless' situations and it was more common for women to have been accommodated informally by friends than in hostels.
- Frequent mobility is a key feature of women's homelessness careers but this is rarely a product of active choice. Rather it reflects the very temporary nature of many homelessness accommodation situations, the inability of friends and family members to accommodate guests for long, the scarcity of medium-term hostels, limited funding for B&B placements, and strict time-limits in some hostels and night shelters.

"I haven't had the chance to be in a place where I can just forget about the housing problem and get on with a proper life."

"I'm hoping my situation is temporary and I know I'm lucky to have friends helping, plus savings etc. But, the sheer strain of moving from friend to friend's, always in their space."

- It is not only women staying with friends, with family and in squats who are living in hidden homeless situations. An alarming number of the women interviewed had engaged in unwanted sexual liaisons (paid and unpaid) in order to secure accommodation and in exchange for basic necessities such as food and clothing. Many of these women would not have been engaged in any form of sex work had they not been homeless.

"It isn't nice being freezing to death, and that cold your bones are aching, and you're shivering that much, it's horrible. And you're that desperate that you go back with someone..., big, fat, greasy, smelly, dirty man bouncin' on top o' you, just for you to have a roof over your head. That's horrible."

"Oh, it was 'orrible [prison]. But I enjoyed it because I weren't 'aving to 'ave sex and that. I really enjoyed that I weren't lettin' people abuse me, you know. It were so nice."

Barriers to accessing services

- Many respondents were failing to access the support and assistance they required to help them secure accommodation (temporary and permanent) and meet their other, often complex, needs. Nearly 10 per cent of respondents had not been in contact with *any* service since becoming homeless and over 23 per cent had not been in *regular* contact with any service. Particular problems were evident in the early stages of women's homeless careers: nearly 40 per cent did not seek assistance from an agency when they first became homeless and many relied instead upon informal advice from friends and family members.

"I didn't know there were agencies to help. I didn't think about it at all. I wasn't aware that anyone could help."

- The fragmentation of services emerged as a key barrier preventing respondents from receiving the assistance they required. Many respondents had a variety of complex needs, but the services available to them were often too disjointed and specialised to address their individual situations. Few services were capable of addressing the multiplicity of needs that some homeless women presented with, and the inter-relatedness of their problems got lost in the 'service journey' because they were not treated in a 'joined-up' way.
- Women's failure to access support and assistance stems partly from their active exclusion from services (over 40 per cent of respondents had been excluded from a service). However, a lack of knowledge about available assistance also emerged as a key barrier to service engagement.
- The bureaucratic and inflexible nature of some services, male-dominated environments and unwelcoming physical layouts were also deterring women from using services.

"... a bit intimidating and I felt very much so. I was very quiet in myself, and I still am and ... it's not necessarily in the men I've met – I've found them very polite and helpful and so forth ... I just think it's the overwhelming numbers ... quite easily I'm the only woman, or maybe one or two or three out of, say, maybe 80."

"Oh, there's loads of things that you can't get help with because everything's for men really. Hardly anything for women."

- Women's homelessness careers often began before they reach adulthood. Over one in four respondents had first become homeless before the age of 16. Yet homelessness services and temporary accommodation are rarely available to these young women. Very vulnerable women – vulnerable by virtue of their age, and the traumatic childhoods many are escaping – are therefore most likely to stay in hidden homeless situations, to be disengaged from services and unable to access temporary accommodation.

Day-to-day life: needs and preferences

- The ways in which services are delivered can be as important as *what* is on offer. Women were particularly likely to engage with services which were informal, which felt 'safe', which provided women-only spaces, and which were staffed by 'caring' and 'non-judgemental' workers. Women were more likely to use, and be satisfied with, temporary accommodation provision if it resembled their notion of 'home'. Many wanted emotional support whether through formal counselling or just 'someone to talk to' which had not been available to them.

"Having that women's group there ... I wouldn't be coming here if there hadn't been this group – without any doubt, having that space, sometimes just to get over the overwhelming impact of men."

- Day centres are an important resource, providing many daily necessities of life, although the extent to which women feel able to access this resource varies.
- Public buildings and facilities play an important role in homeless women's daily lives. Day centres aside, public buildings and facilities (libraries, public toilets, public transport, galleries, bookshops) were the primary means through which respondents met their daily needs. These spaces and facilities provide opportunities for keeping warm, resting, sleeping, washing and eating.

"In the library I used to get a CD, to put the CDs on in a booth. I mean they are open sided but you can still, I put my head down. I used to get two or three hours sleep."

- Public spaces are also perceived as 'safe' places where homeless women can be anonymous and are not identifiable as homeless.
- The ways in which women manage their homelessness demonstrate resourcefulness, competence, imagination and ingenuity. By adapting their behaviour in particular ways and being adept at identifying key gatekeepers to public spaces, these women were able to blend in with other users of services, and negotiate use of public spaces to fulfil needs arising from their homelessness. This type of 'surviving' also demands emotional and psychological devices to be able to cope with the experience of homelessness.

Future hopes and aspirations

- Homeless women experience educational disadvantage and occupy marginalised positions in the labour market. Indeed respondents were more likely to earn their income from begging and the sex trade than from paid employment. Most, however, would like to pursue educational and employment related opportunities.

"I have looked at college courses and things and I know what's available. It's just having the confidence to say 'Right, I'm going to make a decision, I'm going to do that'."

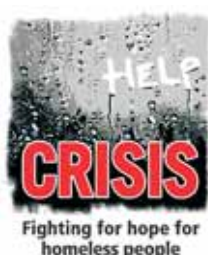
- Respondents long-term aspirations focused mainly on family life, a home of their own, securing work and education courses. However, it was 'normality' which most desperately sought – sitting on the sofa in their own home watching television with a cup of tea; reading a bedtime story to their children; cooking a meal in their own kitchen; and taking their children to school on the way to work.

"So we're properly re-housed ... that's all I dream about ... just to 'ave normality again. Just an 'ouse what I can clean and cook for me family, and put my children in bed and read 'em a story, and wake up and take 'em to school. Things like that, that's all I really really want ... That's all I want in life, to get that. It seems like I've got more chance winning the lottery at the moment."

Recommendations

Our understanding of the experiences, situations and needs of homeless people is rarely based upon an appreciation of gender differentials, which can result in a failure to respond appropriately to the needs of homeless women – to develop policies and initiatives sensitive to homeless women’s needs; to develop services which are accessible to homeless women; to deliver services in ways which match homeless women’s needs and preferences; and to tackle the underlying issues and experiences which result in homelessness. Comparison between the findings of this research and those of a similar study conducted by Crisis in the late 1990’s suggests that homeless women are still encountering many of the same difficulties as they were nearly a decade ago. There is still, then, much work to be done if homelessness amongst women is to be effectively tackled and prevented. A full list of recommendations is presented in the concluding chapter of this report. In summary, the following broad changes and developments have the potential to dramatically improve the situations and experiences of homeless women.

1. **Improvements and changes to local authority homelessness assessments, decisions and practices.** This includes ensuring that homeless women’s wider situations such as their children, their mental and physical health needs, and their vulnerabilities arising from accumulated traumatic experiences, are adequately taken into account.
2. **Recognising that gender does influence homeless women's situations**, and addressing the ways in which services are not sensitised to the needs of homeless women, and in some cases are not reaching them. Concerted efforts should be made to respond to and rectify gender-insensitive service provision, and to increase the availability of women-only services and provision.
3. **Addressing current gaps in service provision** in order to more effectively prevent and resolve homelessness amongst women. This includes improving awareness of services available to women when they first become homeless, and to enable responses to the particular circumstances of certain groups of women, such as prison leavers and women under 16. Importantly, a more integrated approach to meeting women’s needs is required, joining-up services which homeless women would benefit from – this should include sexual and domestic violence, substance misuse and mental health services.
4. **Harnessing the important role that non-homelessness places and public facilities play** in the daily lives of homeless women, including raising awareness of why homeless women use these spaces. Government funds should be directed to i) support public facilities and other non-homelessness agencies to develop homelessness-related initiatives, and ii) to enable homelessness agencies to deliver their services within ‘non-homelessness’ spaces and services.
5. **Developing and expanding our 'thinking' about, and our approaches to, women's homelessness** – about the situations in which they find themselves, their self-identity, the ways in which these issues impact on women's service use, and the ability of policy and practice to tackle homelessness amongst women. This involves recognising the invisibility of many women’s homelessness, and that the difficulties they face through homelessness are inextricably linked to a range of other unmet needs, often as a result of traumatic experiences in their lives. There is an urgent need to start measuring and examining women’s homelessness, to address the deficit in evidence and understanding.



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