



University of Dundee

Supporting pregnant women experiencing homelessness

Cumming, Sara

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Supporting pregnant women experiencing homelessness: an information tool for midwives*

Pregnant and homeless: the facts



Being homeless is not just street sleeping. There are many forms of 'housed' homelessness: hostels, hotels, sofa surfing and temporary accommodation.



Homelessness is on the rise in the UK: **2023 saw the highest numbers of families in temporary accommodation since records began.**^{1,2}



99.7% of midwives surveyed by the RCM in 2019 had provided care for homeless pregnant women.³

Pregnant and homeless: the impact

ALL READY FOR BABY?

I'm worried they will take the baby away from me if they find out I'm homeless.

I don't feel safe where I live. I can smell other people's smoke, there's damp, mould and mice. This doesn't feel safe for me or baby.

They must think I'm a terrible mum because I can't keep my kids safe, warm or feed them properly.

There's no space for a cot, where will baby sleep?

I don't know where or when they will move me next. I can't even think about the birth until I'm settled.

Who is going to look after my kids during the birth? I've got no one around to help...



Moving frequently is physically and mentally stressful when pregnant and removes women from vital support networks. Constant housing insecurity impacts women's ability to engage with their pregnancy or prepare for birth as they might not know where they will be living once baby is born.



Pregnant women feel unsafe in temporary accommodation due to poor housing standards and environmental hazards. They may be too scared to leave their rooms for fear of other residents. Feeling trapped and isolated in small, cramped rooms impacts their perinatal mental health.



Limited access to cooking facilities means pregnant women often eat cold, uncooked food from tins and packets. They worry what impact this reduced nutritional intake in pregnancy has on their unborn baby. Women who are formula feeding might have nowhere to clean and sterilise bottles properly.



Women may have to bed-share with a newborn baby and older children because there is no space for a cot in temporary accommodation. They worry about the increased risk of sudden infant death syndrome and want tailored health advice for this.

Pregnant and homeless: the barriers to care

Moving frequently means pregnant women can miss important appointments, tests and repeat prescriptions which is detrimental to health.

Reduced internet access in temporary accommodation makes digital maternity notes difficult to access. Women miss out on vital information and can't make informed choices about their pregnancy and birth.

Access to interpreters is essential for women whose first language is not English and who might not understand how maternity care works in the UK.

Women can feel unseen by midwives when barriers to care and the impacts of homelessness on pregnancy are not acknowledged or understood.

How can midwives help?

Midwives can have a **HUGE** impact on whether or not women feel seen and heard in their care. A positive interaction that is respectful and responsive to their situation makes a big difference.

- See** See me as an individual and don't stereotype me. See the barriers to care and remove them: Do I need an interpreter? Do I need financial help to travel to hospital?
- Ask** Ask me direct questions regularly throughout my pregnancy and after birth. Have you got somewhere safe and warm for baby to sleep? Do you feel safe where you live? Can you cook and store food where you live?
- Listen** Listen to my story without judgement. It might have taken me a lot of courage to tell you I'm homeless. Ask me how I really am and listen.
- Be kind** Be kind to me, I might have no social support. Treat me with respect and empathy. It's a simple act with a big impact.
- Adapt** Adapt health advice to make it achievable in my situation. Be flexible in your care to reduce the barriers: longer appointments, printed information, create a holistic birth plan that considers social support and childcare.
- Advocate** Advocate for me: help refer me to wider services and charities. Tell housing officers you are concerned as a health professional about where I'm living. Keep following up and stay involved in my story.

* This infographic is based on research by University of Dundee and supported by Wellbeing of Women (Award Ref: ELS1105). We conducted 14 qualitative interviews with women across the UK who experienced homelessness whilst pregnant, and 6 keyworkers from charities supporting them. For further information contact: scumming001@dundee.ac.uk



¹ Department for Levelling Up Housing & Communities, 2023.
² National Statistics, Scotland, 2023.
³ RoyalCollegeofMidwives, 2019.