

Hidden homelessness in rural England: homeless people staying with family and friends

Staying with family and friends appears to be a common homeless situation, particularly in rural areas.

Background

This research note reviews findings to emerge from a research report commissioned by Crisis and The Countryside Agency. The report, 'Your Place, Not Mine: The experiences of homeless people staying with family and friends' by David Robinson with Sarah Coward, casts light on the incidence and experiences of people staying with family and friends in response to homelessness¹. Interviews with 164 homeless people were carried out across three case study areas (London, Sheffield and Craven, North Yorkshire).

Main findings

Staying with family and friends: basic facts and figures

A common situation

Staying with family and friends is a common homeless situation across England, but was found to be most common in the rural case study. Over three-quarters (77%) of all homeless people in Craven had stayed with family and friends since becoming homeless (compared to 72% in Sheffield and 69% in London). Over two-thirds (65%) of all homeless people in Craven had only ever stayed with friends and relatives since becoming homeless (compared to 13% in London and 4% in Sheffield).

Family and friends as a first port of call

Family and friends represented the first port of call for most people in Craven upon becoming homeless. Some people had stayed with the same friend or relative ever since, but the majority were found to have moved between different friends and relatives.

Recognition as homeless

Only half (51.9%) of the homeless people in Craven, who had stayed with a friend or relative, had approached the local authority as homeless. Less than one in four had been recognised as homeless by the local authority and, therefore, appeared in the official homeless statistics.

¹ People who have been forced to leave secure accommodation, that they had an established right to occupy, have been unable to access alternative secure accommodation, therefore becoming homeless, and have stayed with a friend or relative in response to this accommodation crisis.

The Countryside Agency research notes

The profile of homeless people staying with family and friends mirrors many of the common characteristics of the wider homeless population.

Homeless people in Sheffield and London gave various reasons for moving in with a friend or relative. Homeless people in Craven typically gave only one reason - family and friends were the only option.

Social and demographic characteristics of homeless people staying with friends and relatives

Age and gender

- The age profile of homeless people in Craven, who had stayed with a friend or relative, was far younger than in the other case studies. Half were under 25 years old and one in five were less than 19 years old.
- The majority of homeless people staying with a friend or relative in Craven were men, although women were more reliant on friends or relatives for accommodation when homeless.

Personal problems and challenges

- Homeless people staying with family and friends in Craven reported many of the personal problems and challenges that can contribute toward people becoming homeless or are known to emerge as a consequence of being homeless: one-third reported a mental health problem; one-quarter reported a problem with drug dependency; over one-third had been on probation; almost one in five had spent time in prison or a Young Offenders Institution; and over one in five had spent time in local authority care.

Last home

- Almost half of all homeless people staying with a friend or relative in Craven reported living with parents before becoming homeless, compared to one-third of homeless people across the three case study areas.
- 25% of homeless people in Craven staying with a friend or relative reported leaving their last home because of financial reasons, compared to only 10% of homeless people across the three case study areas. One in five reported leaving their last home either because their parents were unable to accommodate them or because of a dispute with their parents.
- Homeless people in Craven were less likely than in other case study areas to have moved into the district since becoming homeless, almost three-quarters (71%) living in the district before becoming homeless, compared to over half in London (55%) and Sheffield (55%).

Moving in with family and friends

Many people across the case studies moved in with a friend or relative upon first becoming homeless because they had no other option, either unaware of alternatives or unable to organise accommodation at short notice. In Craven, many homeless people explained that they moved in with a friend or relative because there were no other options and had continued to rely on friends and relatives for this reason.

None of the homeless people in Craven had attempted to access hostel accommodation when first threatened with homelessness, reflecting the absence of provision in the district.² People also reported problems accessing the private rented sector, which plays an important role in Craven given the relatively small social rented sector. Reported problems included the blanket exclusion of people receiving benefits by some landlords and the need to provide a deposit or bond payment. Finally, young people, who were more prevalent in the homeless population in Craven, were also found to sometimes lack the skills and knowledge necessary to negotiate access to alternative accommodation.

² There are no direct access hostels in Craven, one local authority family hostel, a foyer and a housing scheme providing bedsits.

Staying with a friend or relative can be a positive experience, but for most people involves sleeping on a sofa or the floor and rarely having a room of their own.

Homeless people often see little reason to approach their local authority for help.

Living with family and friends

For many people, staying with family and friends is a positive experience, compared to alternatives, such as sleeping rough. It is rarely, however, a comfortable or problem free situation. Staying with a friend or relative is often characterised by poor living conditions, the vast majority of people sleeping on a floor or sofa. Privacy can be limited and restrictions can be placed on behaviour and lifestyle. For some people, it also involves exposure to hazardous and health threatening situations. Staying with family and friends is also a highly insecure situation, people being reliant on the goodwill of their friend or relative, which can be withdrawn at anytime.

Homeless people staying with family and friends in London and Sheffield often reported utilising facilities and services provided by homeless agencies, such as homeless drop-in services or advice centres. The shortage of specialist provision in rural areas appears to be forcing a very different pattern of service use. In particular, people in Craven were more reliant on alternative service providers, such as college staff or probation officers, for help and assistance when homeless and were less likely to be receiving advice or assistance with efforts to escape homelessness.

Approaching a local authority as homeless

Homeless people in Craven had few expectations about the help likely to be forthcoming from the local authority in part reflecting the limited ability of the local authority to respond. Cynical about their chances of being recognised as homeless and receiving help, people often failed to recognise that the local authority might have a role to play in helping them escape homelessness. Consequently, only half of all homeless people staying with family and friends in the district had approached the local authority as homeless. Less than half of the homeless people staying with a friend or relative in Craven, who did approach the local authority for help, had been recognised as homeless. Only one in five of the homeless people in the district staying with a friend or relative had, therefore, been recognised as homeless and appeared in the official homeless statistics. In sharp contrast, over 80% of homeless people staying with a friend or relative in Sheffield had approached the local authority and two-thirds had been recognised as homeless. Why these two authorities are treating homeless people staying with family and friends so differently is unclear, but likely relates, at least in part, to the nature of the local housing market in the two districts. Put simply, Sheffield can afford to be more generous in its interpretation of the homeless legislation, given low demand and the widespread availability of social housing. Craven, in contrast, is faced with the challenge of managing high demand for a limited stock of social housing.

Conclusion and recommendations

Staying with friends and relatives is a common homeless experience across England but appears to be most common in rural areas. Indeed, in Craven staying with family and friends was the typical homeless situation. Although a positive experience for some, staying with a friend or relative is typically characterised by insecurity, poor living conditions, limited privacy and restrictions on behaviour and lifestyle.

These findings expose the urgent need for policy to recognise and respond more adequately to the reality of homelessness in rural areas. Traditional measures of homelessness have directed the attention of policy and the targeting of resources toward reducing the number of homeless people living in B&B hotels and the number of people sleeping rough. This research, however, suggests that the most common form of homelessness in rural areas is staying with a friend or relative. Traditional measures of homelessness fail to recognise this fact, leading to the neglect of rural homelessness by policy-makers and service providers. Responding to this evidence, policy and provision might consider the following recommendations:

Understanding rural homelessness

- Estimating the incidence and understanding the experiences of homelessness in rural areas demand that particular attention is paid to the situations of homeless people staying with family and friends.
- Local authority homelessness reviews must employ methods capable of illuminating situations, such as staying with family and friends, neglected by traditional methods of estimating homelessness (such as official homeless statistics and rough sleeper headcounts).³
- The reliance among homeless people on family and friends might be usefully employed as a proxy indicator of the availability and adequacy of temporary accommodation in rural areas.

Responding to rural homelessness

- Local and national programmes aimed at tackling homelessness must extend their interest in homelessness beyond people living in traditional homelessness 'spaces' and ensure that appropriate provision is available to homeless people regardless of where they are living.
- Efforts to tackle homelessness in rural areas and to limit the personal, social and financial consequences of ongoing exposure to homeless lifestyles must be rolled out to people staying with family and friends. Particular attention needs to be paid to the availability of advice, assistance and temporary accommodation.
- Homeless people staying with family and friends should be actively encouraged to approach their local authority for assistance. Even if their application is unsuccessful, the local authority has a duty to provide advice and assistance to homeless people.
- Central and local government should attend to the apparent reluctance of local authorities to recognise staying with family and friends as a homeless situation, which appears to be limiting the likelihood of people in rural areas being recognised as homeless and deserving of assistance.

Supporting the vital role played by family and friends

- Central and local government should recognise the vital role being played by family and friends in managing homelessness in rural areas and actively develop mechanisms for supporting people able and willing to accommodate homeless friends or relatives.
- Central and local government and partner agencies should actively work to limit the penalties that can be associated with accommodating a homeless friend or relative.

Further reading

Robinson, D with Coward, S. 2003. 'Your Place, Not Mine: The experiences of homeless people staying with family and friends.' Crisis: London.

³ The Countryside Agency publication 'Preventing homelessness in the countryside...what works?' provides advice to local authorities about the most effective methods and practice in addressing homelessness in rural areas.

Author

David Robinson, Centre for Regional Economic and Social Research, Sheffield Hallam University

**Countryside Agency Research Notes can also be viewed on our website:
www.countryside.gov.uk**