

# **Topic Briefing:** Hidden homelessness

October 2018

Until there's a home for everyone  
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**Shelter**  
Scotland

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## About the Author

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## Hidden Homelessness

### What is homelessness?

Last year in Scotland there were 28,792 homeless people in Scotland. That means that 28,792 people went to their local authority for help due to housing issues, were found to be homeless, and were legally entitled to help, support and accommodation. Anyone who makes a homeless application is recorded in the official homelessness data. This gives the Scottish Government, local authorities and policy makers a good idea of who makes up the official homeless population. But this also means that official 'homelessness' is not a reflection of how many people are literally 'home-less', but rather a record of those who have gone to the council for help with their homelessness.

Shelter Scotland helps over half a million people every year struggling with bad housing or homelessness through our advice, support and legal services. And we campaign to make sure that, one day, no one will have to turn to us for help.

### What is hidden homelessness?

'Hidden homelessness' refers to people who would meet the legal definition of homeless if they were to make a formal application, but are not represented in the local authority homeless statistics. This may include people who have not approached the council for help, who have been turned away from statutory services<sup>1</sup> (otherwise known as "gatekeeping") or who have not been recorded for other reasons. This group includes people who are sofa-surfing (staying with friends, often on floors or couches), people living in overcrowded or unsafe conditions, and in out-of-season holiday lets or poor-quality caravans in rural areas.

### Who is affected by hidden homelessness?

It is very difficult to tell who is affected by hidden homelessness. Evidence suggests that certain groups are more likely to experience hidden homelessness:



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<sup>1</sup> Shelter Scotland (2018); [Evidence of gatekeeping in Glasgow City Council](#)

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- Ethnic minorities, due to over-representation in poor quality housing, and difficulty accessing information due to unfamiliarity with the system or lack of flexibility in service provision<sup>2</sup>
  - Migrants who have limited or no recourse to public funds, and are therefore unable to claim benefits or apply as homeless.
  - People (often women) in situations of domestic abuse who don't feel able to seek help.
  - Those in rural areas, due to distance from services.

Anecdotal information from winter night shelters tells us that there are also many rough sleepers who choose not to seek assistance from their local authority, due to not wishing to be placed in a certain temporary accommodation unit or a negative previous experience.<sup>3</sup>

### **How many people are affected by hidden homelessness?**

We don't know how many people are affected by hidden homelessness; there are no statistics. The very nature of hidden homelessness dictates that it is impossible to properly measure the scale of the problem.

However, there are some statistics we can look at which go some way towards indicating the level of certain types of hidden homelessness:

Sofa-surfing:

- According to Scottish Government statistics<sup>4</sup>, last year 736 people approached their local authority to make a homeless application for the reason of "long-term surfing."
- UK-wide research for the BBC conducted in 2017 found that 41% of young people have stayed with friends on floors or sofas for at least one night (excluding after nights out or due to travel difficulties). Just over 9% did so for more than a month. This was more prevalent among young men than young women.<sup>5</sup>
- Research conducted by the University of Cambridge in 2016 found that 35% of 16-25-year olds had stayed with friends or extended family members as they had nowhere else to go. Among these, the two most prevalent reasons were 'left due to a negative home environment' (16%) and 'parents unable or

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<sup>2</sup> Equality and Human Rights Commission, [Addressing racial inequalities in Scotland's housing](#), page 5 (access via Shelter Scotland)

<sup>3</sup> Shelter Scotland, [Getting behind the statistics 2016-17](#), page 5.

<sup>4</sup> Scottish Government (2018); [Homelessness in Scotland 2017-18](#)

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-42427398>

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unwilling to house' (12%).<sup>6</sup>

- In 2016, Crisis estimated the number of households sofa-surfing in Scotland at 5,200<sup>7</sup>.

#### Overcrowding:

- The Scottish household Survey 2015<sup>8</sup> found that just under 3% of households live in overcrowded accommodation. This was more common among lower-income households (4%) than higher income households (2%).

#### Concealed households:

- 'Concealed households' refer to individuals, groups or families who are unable to form separate households and are obliged to live with others. In 2015, Crisis found that 9.3% of households in Scotland contained concealed households.<sup>9</sup>

#### Other indicators:

- Recent research linking health and homelessness data<sup>10</sup> showed that at least 8% of the Scottish population (as at 30 June 2015) had experienced homelessness at some point in their lives.
- There have been some attempts made to measure the number of people who sleep rough and yet might not be recorded in the official statistics as homeless. For example, Glasgow Homelessness Network reported back in 2014 that around a quarter of rough sleeping service users did not make a presentation to Glasgow City Council for homelessness assistance.<sup>11</sup>
- In Joanna Mack and Stewart Lansley's 2012 book, *Breadline Britain*, 15% of UK adults reported experiencing hidden homelessness over their lifetime<sup>12</sup>.

Above all, the disparity between data sources shows how difficult it is to measure the scale hidden homelessness.

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<sup>6</sup> Clarke, Anna (2016), [The Prevalence of Rough Sleeping and Sofa Surfing Amongst Young People in the UK](#), pages 65-66.

<sup>7</sup> Crisis (2017), [Homelessness projections: Core homelessness in Great Britain](#), page 7

<sup>8</sup> Scottish Government (2016), [Scottish House Condition Survey 2015](#), Table 57

<sup>9</sup> Crisis (2015), [The homelessness monitor: Scotland 2015](#), page 12

<sup>10</sup> Scottish Government (2018); [Health and Homelessness in Scotland](#)

<sup>11</sup> Glasgow Homelessness Network (2014) Annual Homelessness Monitoring, Report: April 2013-March 2014 <http://www.ghn.org.uk/HomelessnessMonitoring>

<sup>12</sup> Lansley, S., & Mack, J. (2015). *Breadline Britain: The rise of mass poverty*. Oneworld Publications.

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We're here so no one has to fight bad housing or homelessness on their own.

Please support us at [shelterscotland.org](https://shelterscotland.org)

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