

Myth Busting Women's Homelessness

About

Myths or assumptions about women's experience impact on most aspects of homelessness, from who is represented in the data, how services are commissioned and designed, and how the public treat women who are visibly homeless.

Myths exist in the imaginary and so it is difficult to comprehend how widely held they are. The seven myths that are explored in this briefing have been identified through our work on women's homelessness because of the impact they have had on service design and delivery. This briefing is suitable for anyone, but particularly for those who want to provide or develop support to women experiencing homelessness.

Seven Myths About Women's Homelessness

1. Myth: Women are less likely to be homeless
2. Myth: Women are protected from the harshest effects of homelessness
3. Myth: Women make up a small proportion of people who experience rough sleeping
4. Myth: Women are more likely to reach out for support
5. Myth: There are enough services for women who experience homelessness
6. Myth: All women's experiences are the same
7. Myth: Women who are considered single and homeless are not mothers

1. Myth: Women are less likely to be homeless

Women are less likely to experience forms of homelessness that are immediately visible to the public and to services, so it can be assumed that women are less likely to be homeless. However, women make up a greater percentage (60%) of those who are homeless and in temporary accommodation¹. Women in refuges are also not visible to the public and are not included in statutory homelessness statistics. If a woman is homeless but not in temporary accommodation or a refuge they are less likely to be visibly rough sleeping. Instead, women tend to stay in precarious accommodation, refuges, sleep on trains or other less visible places.² Therefore the true scale of women's homelessness is unknown.

Women are extremely vulnerable to experiencing homelessness. They occupy a difficult position in the labour market; are more likely to live in poverty and have lower levels of savings and higher levels of debt.³ Women are also more likely to hold caring responsibilities and are commonly the head of single households. This means women have additional financial

¹https://assets.ctfassets.net/6sxvmndnnpn0s/3fo63KyM9D5qJedQvxe7A6/df905542ec226fd909388759727059d0/Fobed_off_women-centred_peer_research_report_FINAL.pdf

² <https://www.mungos.org/app/uploads/2018/10/Women-and-Rough-Sleeping-Report-2018.pdf>

³ <https://wbg.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/The-gendered-impact-of-the-cost-of-living-crisis.pdf>

pressures but less flexibility to increase hours of work, move accommodation or make other financial adjustments to prevent homelessness.⁴ The impact of the precarious position in the labour market which leaves women vulnerable to the effects of austerity is apparent in the available statistics. In the last 10 years, the number of women in England who are homeless has increased by 88%.⁵

2. Myth: Women are protected from the harshest effects of homelessness

Living in unsuitable accommodation, temporary accommodation and precarious housing situations has a significant impact on the mental health of women who experience it.⁶ Participants in research carried out by Shelter explain that their housing circumstances are either a cause of, or an exacerbating factor of poor mental health.⁷ Women sleeping rough are also more likely than men to need support for their mental health needs.⁸

The effects of homelessness on women who do not have children in their care and live between precarious accommodation and rough sleeping are dramatic. Experiences of violence among women who slept rough are near universal⁹, often compounding interpersonal trauma experienced throughout their life¹⁰. The 2021 ONS statistics show that the average age of death for women was 43 years, and the men's average age of death was 45 years¹¹. This is inverse to the general population, where women tend to live longer than men, with an average age of death being 81 years.

⁴ <https://wbg.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/The-gendered-impact-of-the-cost-of-living-crisis.pdf>

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https://assets.ctfassets.net/6sxvmndnnpn0s/3fo63KyM9D5qJedQvxe7A6/df905542ec226fd909388759727059d0/Fobed_off_women-centred_peer_research_report_FINAL.pdf

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⁸ <https://www.mungos.org/app/uploads/2018/10/Women-and-Rough-Sleeping-Report-2018-Summary.pdf>

⁹ <https://www.mungos.org/app/uploads/2018/10/Women-and-Rough-Sleeping-Report-2018.pdf>

¹⁰ [Hidden-Hurt.pdf \(womancentre.co.uk\)](https://www.hiddenhurt.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/Hidden-Hurt.pdf)

¹¹ <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/birthsdeathsandmarriages/deaths/bulletins/deathsofhomelesspeopleinenglandandwales/2021registrations/pdf>

3. Myth: Women make up a small proportion of people who experience rough sleeping

Women make up a small proportion (14%) of those recorded in official figures on rough sleeping.¹² The methodologies used to count rough sleeping in England, rely on the recording of people who meet a specific definition of rough sleeping, which predominantly includes those who are visibly street homeless. Women are known to adopt strategies and patterns of homelessness to support their safety, but which prevent them from being visible and are therefore underrepresented in the data. In the rough sleeping strategy published in 2022, the government acknowledges that the counts are likely to represent an underestimate of women's homelessness as there is qualitative data which would suggest women's experiences of homelessness are often 'hidden'.¹³

The rough sleeper counts disaggregated statistics by sex since 2016, a relatively recent recognition of the need to understand the relationship of gender to experiences of rough sleeping. However, the current methodology used has not been altered to reflect the impact of gender on rough sleeping.¹⁴ The Women's Development Unit in London, working with Single Homeless Project and St Mungo's, have developed a new methodology to count women's rough sleeping which actively looks for women. Key aspects of the methodology include developing a survey for women which takes into account the nonlinear patterns of their homelessness; conducting a count led by outreach workers in the daytime and asking services outside of the homelessness sector to complete the survey with women they know to be homeless. This was trialed in October 2022 and the results will be published in January 2022.¹⁵

¹² <https://www.mungos.org/app/uploads/2019/03/St-Mungos-Womens-Strategy-2019-22-web.pdf?x74044>

¹³

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1102408/20220903_Ending_rough_sleeping_for_good.pdf

¹⁴ <https://www.birmingham.ac.uk/documents/college-social-sciences/social-policy/hcrn/violence-under-quiet-conditions.pdf>

¹⁵ <https://www.connection-at-stmartins.org.uk/womens-census/>

4. Myth: Women are more likely to reach out for support

Women are more likely than men to reach out for support among friends and family, exhausting those options before experiencing rough sleeping ¹⁶, however that does not necessarily translate to a willingness to reach out to support from services.

Women experience significant stigma and shame while homeless. Gendered assumptions associate women with the home, and the responsibility for maintaining the home.¹⁷ Homelessness can be perceived as a personal failure of women as it represents a deviation from gendered expectations to maintain the home and standards of female decorum. This perception of homelessness as personal failure conceals the role of structural disadvantage in causing homelessness. As discussed, women are extremely vulnerable to the experience of homelessness due to their position in the labour market, additional caring responsibilities, and their subjection to patriarchal violence. When compared to men, women report higher levels of violence while homeless, including from members of the public.¹⁸

Women report experiences of judgement from the public and professionals, which deter them from seeking further support.¹⁹ In the report 'Violence Under Quiet Conditions' a woman with lived experience explained how the dynamics of judgment and shame as she experiences it:

"Women are judged more harshly for lots of things, like offending too, Victorian attitudes, sexism even going back to that rubbish that girls mature quickly than boys, expected to take a lot more on, they can cope, girls keep it together, keep the family together, do the right thing. I think there is a lot more layers with women." ²⁰

¹⁶ <https://www.birmingham.ac.uk/documents/college-social-sciences/social-policy/hcrn/violence-under-quiet-conditions.pdf>

¹⁷ <http://shura.shu.ac.uk/23215/1/women-homelessness-putting-gender-on-the-agenda.pdf>

¹⁸ https://homeless.org.uk/documents/743/Exploring_Womens_Homelessness_Final_VA_-_Copy.docx

¹⁹ <https://www.birmingham.ac.uk/documents/college-social-sciences/social-policy/hcrn/violence-under-quiet-conditions.pdf>

²⁰ ["Violence Under Quiet Conditions": \(birmingham.ac.uk\)](#)

The experience of judgment and shame in interactions with services is often felt in relation to experiences of the care system. In the same report one professional explains how the loss of trust in the system acts as a barrier to supporting women to engage with available support.

“The system has destroyed some of these women. Lost their kids, judged, rather than helped. Why would you go back to that?”²¹

In the Insights and Impact report produced by Homeless Link,²² it was found that among several solutions, both mixed sex services and women-only services improved the support for women by conducting assertive outreach; and a number of other techniques which enable practitioners to meet women where they are and build relationships of trust.²³ This practice recognises that women are not always reaching out for support, and that services need to take initiative and be flexible to ensure they are accessible.

5. Myth: There are enough services for women who experience homelessness

It can be wrongly assumed that accommodation and service provision is sufficient at meeting women’s needs. This is because women make up a small proportion of those verified as rough sleeping and so it can be assumed that their needs are being met within alternate pathways such as refuge provision and temporary accommodation.

Services which are designed for everyone without recognising the difference that gender makes, can privilege access for men. A significant reason for this is that women can feel unsafe accessing services where men dominate. Other key aspects of women’s experiences of homelessness that can affect their relationship and ability to access mainstream services include their experience of motherhood; their additional and gendered health needs; the additional stigma and shame they face and their experience of violence.²⁴

²¹ [“Violence Under Quiet Conditions”: \(birmingham.ac.uk\)](https://homelesslink-1b54.kxcdn.com/media/documents/Homeless_Link_-_Violence_Under_Quiet_Conditions_.pdf)

²² <https://homeless.org.uk/knowledge-hub/insights-and-impact-from-the-ending-womens-homelessness-fund/>

²³ https://homelesslink-1b54.kxcdn.com/media/documents/Homeless_Link_-_Insights_and_Impact_from_the_Ending_Womens_Homelessness_Fund_1.pdf

²⁴ https://homeless.org.uk/documents/743/Exploring_Womens_Homelessness_Final_VA_-_Copy.docx

When the impact of gender is not recognised by the service in design or delivery, women face additional barriers to accessing and benefiting from the support available. When women do not access traditional homelessness services this can lead us to believe that the need is not there, as we do not have the data to suggest it is.

Homeless Link's 2021 annual review of single homelessness services in England found that only 11.1% of services offer single-gender accommodation.²⁵ The official figures record that women make up 14% of those rough sleeping²⁶. As discussed, this is likely to be a large underestimate. Even according to the official figures, there are not enough services for women to have the option to live in gender exclusive accommodation should they wish. There has been a significant reduction in refuge provision, something the Domestic Abuse Act 2021 aims to address, but this is a gradual process. There is currently a lack of safe suitable accommodation for women. Services need to be designed to meet the different needs of women, designating gender exclusive, gender informed spaces in which women can access the support they need to end their homelessness.

6. Myth: All women's experiences are the same

While women's homelessness is distinct from men's experiences, women do not experience homelessness in a uniform way. Just as women's experiences of homelessness are gendered, they are also affected by their relationship to other structures of violence, such as racism and homophobia. It is important to recognise how the experience of Black and minoritised women, trans women, queer and disabled women among many others may be different from each other. The cumulative nature of these

²⁵ <https://homeless.org.uk/knowledge-hub/2021-annual-review-of-support-for-single-homeless-people-in-england/#:~:text=Homelessness%20trends,-During%20the%202020&text=This%20includes%20194%2C670%20single%20households,increase%20of%2037.9%25%20since%202010.>

²⁶ <https://www.mungos.org/app/uploads/2019/03/St-Mungos-Womens-Strategy-2019-22-web.pdf?x74044>

structural barriers has been called a 'double disadvantage', for example being both a woman and Black render someone statistically more likely to be homeless than if they were a white woman. Analysis of CHAIN data for 2021-22 (statistical information on rough sleeping in London) revealed that 21% of women sleeping rough were Black compared to Black women making up 12.5% of the London population.²⁷

To provide effective support to women, it is necessary to explore how their lives are impacted by forms of structural violence which shape their experience of homelessness and their relationship to services. For example, migrant women face significant barriers to accessing housing and homelessness services, such as lack of knowledge around ways to support people with restricted eligibility for public funds, discrimination, lack of understanding of their needs and experiences and limited provision of translation services. Engaging with the specificities of a woman's experience will help all services to find the best route to support.

It is also vital that a range of services to meet women's different needs are available, particularly 'by and for' services. Services which are developed 'by and for' their own communities are in the best position to provide the appropriate support and challenge the rest of the sector to improve the support it offers.²⁸

7. Myth: Women who are considered single and homeless are not mothers

The category of 'single homeless' can obfuscate the complex relationship a woman may have to her children and her identity as a mother. It can also affect her rights and entitlements in such a way that the possibility of re-establishing a relationship with her children is restricted.

²⁷ https://homeless.org.uk/documents/743/Exploring_Womens_Homelessness_Final_VA_-_Copy.docx

²⁸ https://829ef90d-0745-49b2-b404-cbea85f15fda.filesusr.com/ugd/2f475d_6d6dea40b8bd42c8a917ba58ceec5793.pdf

The UK has the highest rate of forced child removal in Europe²⁹. In a report by Ava and Agenda published in 2022, it was found that mothers are often held solely responsible for childcare and protection and end up being perceived as failing to protect their children in cases of domestic abuse³⁰. There is significant pressure placed on mothers to guard against structural failings such as poverty and the housing crisis.

Forced child removal has a significant impact on women who might be categorised as single and homeless. In a recent report, St Mungo's found that over 50% of the women they supported through their services are mothers and of those, 79% had children taken into care.³¹ The traumatic effects of not having children in their care, coupled with the stigma and shame associated with child removal, is substantial. For women to be supported in a trauma-informed way, it is important that they are recognised as mothers, even if they do not currently have children in their care.

The categorising of women without children in their care as 'single', also creates a 'Catch 22' in which they can be prevented from having children returned to their care, despite that being the best outcome for the family. Women who do not currently have children in their care (for multiple reasons, not just forced child removal) are considered by the welfare benefits system to be 'single with no dependents'. This means they are only eligible for single or shared room housing benefit rates. If homeless or threatened with homelessness, women can only access accommodation that is deemed 'affordable' and not above Local Housing Allowance. The accommodation they can secure is unlikely to be considered suitable for them and their children. Social services are unlikely to enable women to reunite with their children unless they have suitable accommodation (e.g., sufficient space) for them and their children.

Supported accommodation can have restrictions on visitors, which would prevent children from staying with their mother temporarily or building the bonds that would enable reunification later. Unless women are recognised

²⁹ <https://avaproject.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/Staying-Mum-Final-1.pdf>

³⁰ <https://avaproject.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/Staying-Mum-Final-1.pdf>

³¹ https://homeless.org.uk/documents/743/Exploring_Womens_Homelessness_Final_VA_-_Copy.docx

as mothers, despite not having children in their care, they will continue to face barriers to connecting family and community.

Conclusion

Women are highly vulnerable to experiences and effects of homelessness, in all its forms. The extent of women's homelessness is not known. There are fundamental differences in the way women experience homelessness to men. Services which are designed for all, by not recognising the differences in women's experiences in homelessness, do not meet the needs of women who require support. Women can therefore find homelessness services difficult to access, which in turn limits our understanding of the full picture of women's homelessness.

To discover more about the differences between women's experiences of homelessness, read the literature review completed by Homeless Link. [Click Here](#)

For further guidance on how to improve the support you offer to women experiencing homelessness, visit the Homeless Link website to find a collection of guidance and toolkits. [Click Here](#)

If you have any questions get in touch with our Women's Homelessness Project Manager Isabel Langdale at Isabel.Langdale@homelesslink.org.uk

What We Do

Homeless Link is the national membership charity for frontline homelessness services. We work to improve services through research, guidance and learning, and campaign for policy change that will ensure everyone has a place to call home and the support they need to keep it.

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