

Out of reach:
Young people's
experience of rough
sleeping and sofa surfing



Contents

The report in numbers	4
Key recommendations	5
Introduction	6
Rough sleeping	7
Sofa surfing	12
Nowhere to stay	13
Support and advice	14
Conclusion	15

The report in numbers

26%

of UK young people have been **forced to sleep in an unsafe place** at some point, including on the streets, in a car or in an abandoned building

35%

of UK young people **have sofa surfed** at some point in the past because they had **nowhere else to stay**

93%

felt that **no-one cared about them** while they were sleeping rough

75%

of homeless young people **felt threatened** while sleeping rough

52%

of young people who sleep rough do so **for 2-7 nights**

Over 50%

of young people seen rough sleeping in London in 2013/14 were **from outside the UK**

47%

of young people who have slept rough have been victims of **assault or physical abuse**

19%

have been **victims of sexual abuse**

From the UK wide poll

From the survey of young people in homelessness services

Key recommendations

Given the number of young people affected and the serious impact that both rough sleeping and sofa surfing have on young people's lives it is crucial that more is done by local and central government to tackle the problem:

Introduce a homeless young people's pathway

Councils and the voluntary sector must work together to introduce a pathway for homeless young people in every area to ensure the best use of existing local resources to guarantee no young person is left without access to emergency housing and longer-term support.

Make No Second Night Out a legal duty

The government should make the No Second Night Out target a legal duty to provide accommodation within 24 hours once a young person is identified as sleeping rough, and provide funding to achieve this.

Invest in more age-specific services for homeless young people

Greater and sustained investment in age-specific services for young people who are homeless is required, particularly for those who have slept rough.

Every local authority needs appropriate youth-specific emergency accommodation available in their area such as hostels, Nightstop services or crash pad beds to avoid the use of B&Bs.

Make it easier to find advice and support

All local authorities should map the available services in their area, and ensure that professionals working in these services are able to signpost and refer young people to the appropriate support.

Local authorities should work with other public services in their area such as schools, Jobcentres and GP surgeries, as well as with local public transport providers and the voluntary sector, to ensure young people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness can easily access advice and support.

Outreach teams should target less visible areas

Outreach teams should expand the areas that they target to include side streets and night buses to help identify more young people who often avoid the most visible areas. Approaches must be consistent across all areas, with practices updated as patterns in rough sleeping change.

Extend CHAIN to include other areas of the country

The existing sector-wide database CHAIN should be expanded to other areas of the country, particularly where No Second Night Out projects are in operation.

Introduction

Rough sleeping is the most visible form of homelessness, and one which has gained increasing political focus in recent years. Following pledges from both the government and the London Mayor to end rough sleeping by 2012, additional funding was committed to tackling the problem through the development of No Second Night Out.

As a result of increased investment in the sector and new intensive support programmes, the number of people seen rough sleeping fell significantly in the decade since the turn of the century. Unfortunately, however, rough sleeping has been rising again in recent years.

Most of the official data available do not tell us the ages of people seen sleeping rough, but where age breakdowns are available - for example in data collected by outreach teams in London - young people have, historically, made up a relatively small proportion of the rough sleeping population. This was thought to be due to the additional protections offered to this age group, particularly to those who were under 18. But the data for London for the last three years have suggested that the number of young people rough sleeping is growing at a particularly alarming rate.

As a result, Centrepoin t conducted research to shed greater light on the true scale of rough sleeping among young people across the country, and to understand more about the experiences of young people who are forced to sleep rough.

To do this, we used a mixture of qualitative and quantitative research methods, including a representative poll of young people across the UK conducted by ComRes;¹ a survey of young people living in homelessness services across the UK; analysis of data provided by outreach teams; and in-depth interviews with young people who have slept rough in the past and the staff who support them.²

¹ ComRes interviewed 2,011 young people aged between 16 and 25 in the UK online between the 13th and 21st October 2014. Data were weighted to be representative of young people in the UK aged between 16 and 25 by age, gender and region. ComRes is a member of the British Polling Council and abides by its rules.

² Homeless young people were recruited for the study from Centrepoin t services in London and the North of England, as well as from Centrepoin t Partner services across the UK, and fundraising members of the End Youth Homelessness group. 101 young people answered the survey. In-depth interviews were conducted with 13 young people and 5 members of staff.

Rough sleeping

More young people are forced to sleep rough than official figures suggest

Our research suggests that the official estimates of rough sleeping among young people significantly underestimate the true scale of the problem.

Department for Communities and Local Government data on rough sleeping are based on estimates or counts in each local authority of the number of people who sleep rough on a single night. The latest count from autumn 2014 showed that 2,744 people slept rough in England, representing an increase of 14% from the previous year and a 55% increase since 2010.³ Unfortunately, these estimates cannot be broken down by age.

While this kind of measure is useful at tracking trends over time, an annual estimate of the number of people who are forced to sleep rough over a year provides a more comprehensive understanding of the scale of the problem. In London, outreach teams record details of everyone they see bedded down on the CHAIN database which is managed by St Mungo's Broadway. However these data are only available for London as there is no such coordinated data collection outside the capital.

In 2013/14, 762 young people aged 25 or under were seen rough sleeping in London: an increase of 5% since the previous year. There has been an even steeper increase of 140% since 2010/11 when only 318 young people were seen rough sleeping.⁴

While some of this increase may have resulted from increased provision in outreach teams - meaning more young people are being picked up - the scale of this increase suggests that there has also been an increase in rough sleeping among this age group.

While these estimates are much more comprehensive than one night counts, they only include those who are picked up by outreach teams. Young people report that they often choose to sleep out of sight for their own safety, meaning that they are unlikely to be picked up by outreach teams. The true scale of rough sleeping is therefore likely to be much larger.

To help understand how many young people are being forced to sleep rough but are not picked up by services, we commissioned ComRes to conduct a poll of a representative sample of 2011 young people across the UK asking if they had had to sleep in any of a number of unsafe or unsuitable locations because they had nowhere else to go. This revealed that, after data cleaning, 26% of the young people surveyed had been forced to sleep in an unsafe place at some point, including on the streets, in a car or in an abandoned building, with 17% having had to do so in the last year. Most of these people had slept in cars (15% of the total sample) or tents (2%) in the last year, but significant numbers also slept on the streets (5%), in a park or other open space (4%) or on a night bus (4%).

³ DCLG, Rough Sleeping in England: Autumn 2014. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/rough-sleeping-in-england-autumn-2014>

⁴ Data provided by St Mungo's Broadway.

Young people living in homelessness services were, as one would expect, more likely to have slept rough in the past; 48% surveyed had been forced to sleep rough or in one of the unsafe places cited above. Young people in homelessness services were also much more likely than those in the wider poll to have slept in open spaces - 33% had slept on the streets, 25% in a park or other open space, and 9% in a car park.

Males and Non-UK citizens are particularly likely to sleep rough

Analysis was conducted of the characteristics of those who had experience of sleeping rough to understand which groups are most likely to sleep rough.

Data from CHAIN in 2013/14 show that among all age groups, most people seen bedded down sleeping rough are male (87%). However, the proportion of rough sleepers who are female is slightly higher among those aged 25 and under (17%) than those aged 26 and over (12%). More than half of the young people seen rough sleeping in London are from outside the UK. Over a third (38%) are from Central and Eastern Europe - higher than among those aged 26 and over (30%). Young people from other parts of Europe (8%) and from Africa (8%) make up 16%; and 5% are from Asia.⁵ This over-representation of non-UK nationals is likely to be a result of many not having access to public funds.

However, the results from our survey with homeless young people suggest that, particularly outside of London, there are also significant numbers of UK nationals sleeping rough. The survey was conducted in services that can only be accessed if young people have access to public funds, and almost all of the respondents were British citizens.

The poll data suggested higher levels of rough sleeping in Scotland (32% of respondents in this area had ever slept in one of the unsafe places cited). The regions with lower proportions of young people with rough sleeping experience were the South East (18%), the North West (19%) and Yorkshire (21%).

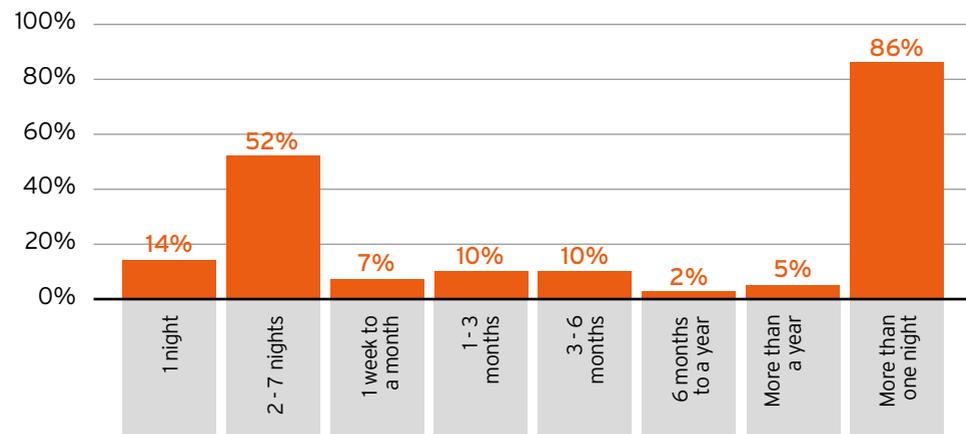
Many young people are sleeping rough for more than one night

Despite a government goal to ensure that no one has to sleep rough for more than one night, our research showed that many young people are forced to sleep rough for longer periods.

Only 14% of the homeless young people surveyed had slept rough for only one night. Over half (52%) had to sleep rough for 2-7 nights, suggesting the No Second Night Out goal is not being achieved for many young people in services across the UK. A smaller number of survey respondents had to sleep rough for even longer periods: 7% had to sleep rough for a period lasting between a week and a month, and a further 27% for over a month.

'I was in foster care for a long time, but I've been rough sleeping and sofa surfing for about 8 months, maybe more.'

Longest period of time young people have had to sleep rough



Source: survey of young people in homelessness services (n=42)

Our interviews with young people showed that many rotated between rough sleeping and sofa surfing; spending a night or two sleeping rough, then a night or two on sofas, then out on the streets again. This was sometimes because they would be asked to leave after a few days of sofa surfing, or in some cases they would willingly leave for a few nights as they did not want to feel like they were being a burden.

It is important that assessment officers in local authorities and outreach teams recognise this interaction between sleeping rough and sofa surfing so that their true length of homelessness can be properly assessed, and young people are not perceived as no longer being in need if they stop rough sleeping for a short period.



⁵ Data provided by St Mungo's Broadway.

Nearly half of young people are victims of assault when rough sleeping

Nearly half (47%) of young people surveyed who had slept rough had been victims of assault or physical abuse while sleeping out. Over half (57%) had experienced verbal abuse. Over a third (36%) had been victims of theft, and 17% had been mugged.

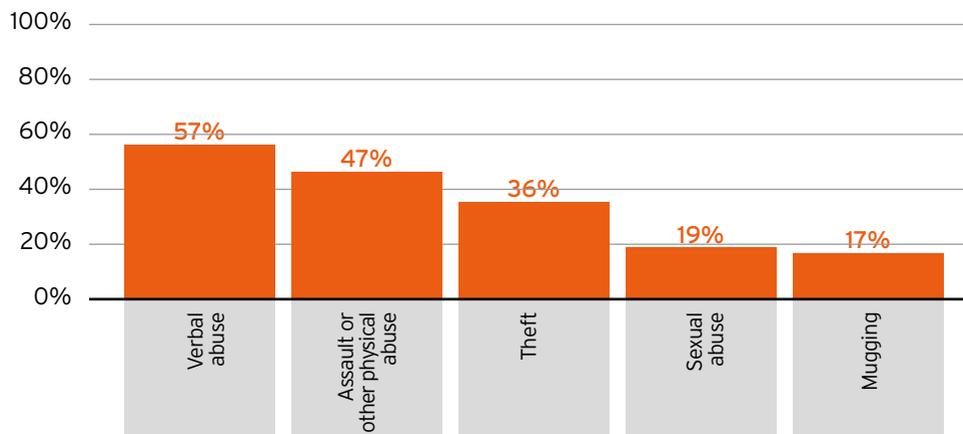
'People attacked me on the first night while I was out. A group of lads jumped me while I was out and about on my first night. And more times since. Too many times.'

One in five (19%) of all respondents who had slept rough reported that they had been victims of sexual abuse while sleeping out. In interviews, female interviewees in particular talked about sexual threats while in vulnerable situations.

'Being a female it's harder. Females I think are open to assault by strangers and other things, and it makes it even scarier and harder.'

These experiences, and fear of such experiences, led to many young people feeling very vulnerable while rough sleeping. Four in five felt frightened while sleeping rough and three quarters (75%) felt threatened while sleeping rough. This insecurity had a serious impact on their emotional and mental well-being. More than nine in ten (93%) felt that no-one cared about them while they were sleeping rough.

Victims of crime or abuse while rough sleeping



Source: survey of young people in homelessness services

Adam's story

"My mum was born in the UK and I came here when I was nearly 18 because I was trying to get away from all the drama. My mum had a stroke not long ago and now she's here in the hospital. She lost everything she worked hard for because my step-father was abusing her, and abusing us as well."

Adam spent a year staying with friends but found himself having to sleep rough close to a railway station during the winter.

"What would wake me up was the trains and footsteps. There were some steps at the station and I'd sleep there. I chose that place because it was out of trouble, out of danger and no one would go there. It was just people passing from work to go home."

"I would sleep for half an hour and then wake up and think it was the next day."

It would just be the same night so I'd just take a walk and come back and maybe try and sleep it off again."

"I had no choice but to live on the street. I would eat nothing; I would just try and survive, sitting on steps trying to scrunch up to keep warm. That's how I lived for almost two months."

A chance encounter with a stranger led Adam to Centrepont where he was able to find opportunities to further his education, learn new skills and get a job at a local supermarket.

"You come to Centrepont so you can learn something and pick up some skills to run your own life. I feel like I've changed a lot. Not only with the roof over my head but the courses and qualifications. If I didn't have those qualifications I wouldn't have job."



Sofa surfing

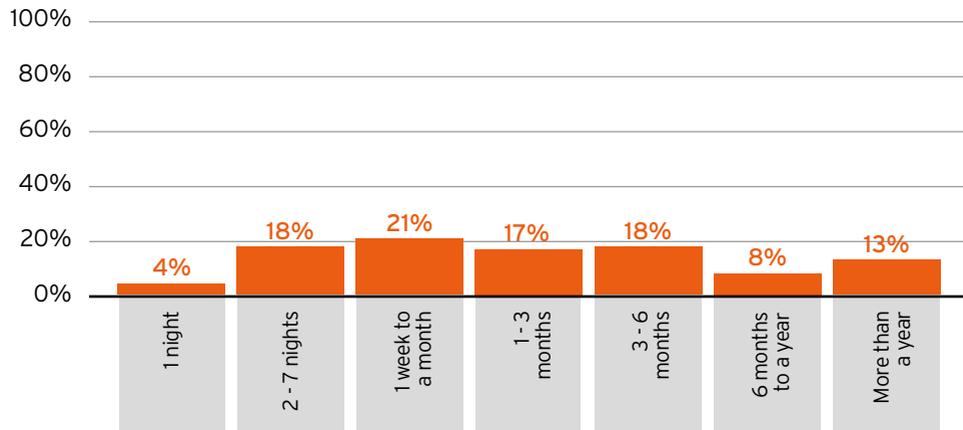
One in five young people have had to sofa surf in the last year

In both the survey with homeless young people and the representative poll of a wider cohort of young people, respondents were asked if they had experience of 'sofa surfing' - staying with a friend or extended family member on their floor or sofa because they have nowhere else to go.

'I started off being homeless for a bit, slept with friends for a couple of months, but that made me feel like I was being a burden.'

The results revealed that sofa surfing was very common, even among the general population of young people. Over a third (35%) of respondents to the poll reported having sofa surfed at some point in the past because they had nowhere else to stay, and a fifth (20%) had done so in the last year.

Longest period of time spent sofa surfing



Source: survey of young people in homelessness services (n=76)

Rates of sofa surfing were even higher among young people in homelessness services. Over three quarters (77%) had sofa surfed at some point in the past, and over half (55%) had done so within the last year.

Many young people are sofa surfing for months at a time

Unfortunately, our research revealed that young people without a stable home to go to are getting stuck in the cycle of sofa surfing for long periods; often months at a time. Only a few people reported having sofa surfed for a single night; for most it was a period of weeks or months, and 13% of respondents had sofa surfed for more than a year.

Sofa surfing has a serious impact on mental well-being

Many poll respondents reported serious negative impacts of sofa surfing: more than four in ten (45%) thought that sofa surfing had negatively impacted their mental state, and the same proportion thought that their physical state had been affected.

These impacts seemed to be more severe for the homeless young people surveyed: seven out of ten young people (70%) thought that sofa surfing had negatively impacted their mental wellbeing, and nearly six out of ten (58%) felt it had had a negative impact on their physical wellbeing. Over half (51%) said that it had negatively affected their ability to engage in education.

'I stopped eating. [...] It was only my gran who started feeding me when I managed to get back to her. I didn't accept it from other people while I was staying on their sofas.'

The fact that experiences were more negative among the homeless young people sample perhaps suggests that those who have the worst experiences are more likely to end up in homelessness services.

Nowhere to stay

Problems at home are the main reason that young people have nowhere to stay

'Arguments at home. That was the big one. One day my Mum said that was it and she said I'd be out by next week. I came back the next day and all my stuff was out on the pavement. I didn't really understand what was happening.'

Nearly two thirds of young people in homelessness services (64%) and nearly a fifth (18%) of the wider cohort of young people had nowhere to stay because their parents were unable or unwilling to accommodate them. Four in ten young people in homelessness services (42%) and a quarter of young people in the poll (25%) who had been forced to sleep rough or sofa surf said that they had to leave home due to the negative environment there.

In both our representative poll of young people and our survey with homeless young people, problems at home were the most common reasons that young people had nowhere to stay.

Other common reasons for having nowhere else to stay were friends or extended family being unwilling or unable to house them (32% of homeless young people and 17% in the poll), splitting up from a partner (14% of homeless young people and 17% in the poll), and a tenancy ending and being unable to find another (11% of homeless young people and 12% in the poll).

These findings are echoed by the CHAIN figures which showed that among people newly sleeping rough in London whose last settled base was long-term accommodation, young people are much more likely to have come from their parents' home than older groups: parental home was the last settled base for 27% of those 25 and under, but only 5% of those 26 and over.⁶

Support and advice

Young people often don't know where to go for help and advice

Young people often lack the advice and support they need when they become homeless. When young people found themselves in crisis situations at home or in their previous residences, most reported that they did not know about the services available or for what support they were eligible.

Only 24% of young people in homelessness services agreed that they knew where to go for help and advice while sleeping rough. Most of these young people primarily used family and friends as sources of support (89% received advice from friends, and 74% from family). Unfortunately this support from family and friends was not always helpful: 49% reported that their family was unhelpful, and 27% reported that their friends were unhelpful.

Services - such as day centres, hostels and other youth services - were less well used but in general rated as more helpful by those who did use them. Only a fifth (20%) had received advice from a homeless day centre, of whom 70% found them helpful. Nearly a quarter had received support from a Citizens Advice Bureau, of whom 53% had found their support helpful. A third (32%) had received advice from Connexions, of whom, 43% found them helpful.

Young people in homelessness services were asked if they had been picked up by outreach teams, and whether they had approached their local authority for support. Nearly three quarters (73%) had asked for support from their local authority; only 26% had been verified as a rough sleeper by an outreach team. This suggests that more young people are getting picked up by presenting at their local authority than by outreach teams.

Four in ten young people have to wait weeks for accommodation after asking for help

Our research revealed that many young people had to wait for an extended period of time to access emergency accommodation after asking for help. Four in ten (39%) young people in homelessness services had to wait for more than two weeks to access emergency accommodation after asking for help from their local authority or local advice service.

Interviews with young people revealed that those who did have to wait were left in precarious housing positions during this period of uncertainty, often continuing to sofa surf or sleep rough.

Some young people are placed in unsuitable accommodation

Our research revealed that many young people are well supported by services and are able to gain some sense of stability in the temporary or permanent accommodation that they are able to access. A third of homeless young people surveyed were placed in a young people's hostel or foyer after sleeping rough.

But many are still being offered unsuitable accommodation. A tenth of young people were placed in an all-age service after sleeping rough. A small number (2%) were placed in a B&B after sleeping rough. Interviews with young people suggested that many found these to be unsuitable as they felt vulnerable due to what they perceived as high levels of crime and substance misuse. Young people interviewed said that, in some cases, they would prefer to continue sleeping rough or sofa surfing than stay in this kind of accommodation. Staff members interviewed also echoed these concerns, and felt that young people were at risk of being exploited in all age services and B&Bs.

'Hostels for older people have more drug and alcohol misusers, lots of heroin users, crackheads. Lots of violence and lots of people who are sex offenders.'

Most worryingly, nearly half (48%) said their rough sleeping was ended by sofa surfing, suggesting that they were not picked up even when they were sleeping rough.

Conclusion

More young people are being forced to sofa surf and sleep rough than official estimates would suggest. Young people in this situation often do not know where to go for advice and support and therefore do not get the help they need for some time. This is sometimes due to a lack of support, but more often due to the complex and sometimes highly traumatic situations that often lead to young people having no stable accommodation.

⁶ Data provided by St Mungo's Broadway.

Centrepoint Head Office, Central House,
25 Camperdown Street, London E1 8DZ
Tel 0800 23 23 20
Fax 0845 466 3500
www.centrepoint.org.uk

Charity Number 292411
© Centrepoint 2015

