

# Women and rough sleeping: a critical review of current research and methodology

Summary | October 2018

Sleeping rough is dangerous for everyone. Women sleeping rough carry the added burden of gender-based violence and abuse before, during, and after their time on the streets. Hiding from harm can mean that women are hidden from help, and missing from homelessness services and statistics.

To explore how we can understand and end women's rough sleeping, St Mungo's has commissioned researchers from the University of York Centre for Housing Policy, Joanne Bretherton and Nicholas Pleace, to conduct a rapid evidence review.

The report presents fresh analysis of data from London and across England, alongside new research with women who have slept rough.

"We have to hide because if we don't we're going to get raped, kicked, beat."



Across England

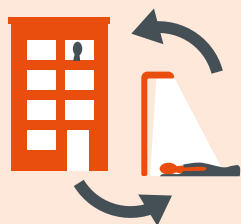


**653** women were sleeping rough on any one night in autumn 2017 (up from 509 in Autumn 2016)

## What's different for women?

Research shows that women take different trajectories through homelessness than men.

Women tend to rely on informal, hidden arrangements with family, friends or acquaintances, and may **alternate between hidden homelessness and rough sleeping**. Women say they avoid homeless services where men are present.



Our latest survey data shows that **54%** of St Mungo's female residents that slept rough have experienced violence or abuse from a partner or family member. **33%** say that domestic abuse contributed to them becoming homeless.

Women sleeping rough are **more likely** than men to need support for mental health problems. Women with mental health problems are more likely to experience long-term or repeated rough sleeping.



Women sleeping rough tend to be younger, and are significantly more likely than men to be aged **25 or under**.

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**St Mungo's**  
Ending homelessness  
Rebuilding lives

## What do government statistics tell us?

- Women are sleeping rough across England. Government estimates suggest that on any one night in autumn 2017, **653** women were sleeping rough, and **14%** of people sleeping rough were women. These figures are a one night snapshot and many more women and men slept rough throughout the year.
- The number of women sleeping rough in England appears to be rising, though data is limited. Women's rough sleeping rose **28%** between 2016 and 2017, according to government statistics. Overall rates of rough sleeping rose **15%** over the same period.
- The 'street count' method of measuring rough sleeping has methodological limitations, and there is reason to believe that women may be at greater risk of being missed than men.
- There is very little data available on 'hidden homelessness', meaning that people sofa surfing and sleeping in unsafe situations, but not visible to outreach teams, are not counted. Evidence suggests this pattern of homelessness is common for women.

## How do other countries count rough sleeping?

- Other countries approach measuring homelessness in very different ways. Some pay more attention to how long people are homeless than whether they are sleeping rough.
- The most comprehensive data is collected in Denmark, combining surveys with data from homelessness services and merging datasets to give a much more rounded picture.


## How can we do things differently?

There is clear scope to improve the data we collect on rough sleeping. The government has pledged to end rough sleeping by 2027 with a new Rough Sleeping Strategy, which includes plans to improve data on rough sleeping and homelessness.

- St Mungo's recommends that government should include a **dedicated work stream on recording and measuring women's homelessness** as part of their plans. The methodological recommendations set out in this report should give a starting point for this work.
- Women tell us they conceal themselves to try to keep safe. Government should **engage directly with women with lived experience** to understand how and where women sleep rough in order to improve data collection.
- To end rough sleeping and reach women at risk, government should **investigate how to combine and merge data in new ways to understand hidden homelessness**. This work should include organisations in the domestic abuse sector, where women may go for help.
- Government should understand that violence against women and girls is both a cause and a consequence of rough sleeping. **Work on women's rough sleeping should directly inform the government VAWG strategy**, and vice versa.


## What do women tell us?

Researchers conducted new focus groups with women with a history of rough sleeping.




"People tend to look down on you more if you're a woman than a bloke. There's a lot of stigma for women on the street."

Women experience homeless differently. Sexual harassment, abuse and violence are common, so women tend to conceal themselves.



"It's easier to find a shed in someone's back yard than it is to sit in a doorway and risk getting a beating."

Women's homelessness is closely linked to domestic abuse and other violence against women, but women who approach domestic abuse services may not have their homelessness recognised or recorded.



"Because they have been abused and had domestic violence they don't want to be around men... they don't know who's gonna be there."

Women avoid homelessness services because they are often designed with male homelessness in mind and do not offer safe facilities for women, so they may not be seen and counted in traditional services.