

Homelessness leading to severe mental and physical problems, study shows

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Credit: University of Sheffield

The extent of the mental and physical health problems caused by homelessness among some of society's most vulnerable people has been laid bare in a new report involving research from the University of Sheffield.

Research into the experiences of 64 [people](#) who are homeless or facing [housing](#) problems in Newham, London, found some living in slum-like temporary housing and others living in constant insecurity and flux while grappling with a housing system which they find complex and confusing.

Of those interviewed, 22 per cent had a disability and 48 per cent had a

health condition. When asked an open question about their health, nine per cent - more than double the national average - reported experiencing suicidal thoughts and nine per cent mentioned self-harming.

Researchers from the universities of Sheffield, Leeds and Birkbeck, University of London, set out to understand the lives of some of society's most vulnerable people by working with Focus E15, a campaign group run by people who had themselves been threatened with homelessness and eviction in Newham.

Between September 2015 and April 2016, Focus E15 identified and interviewed people facing homelessness who were not known to them and who had either approached Newham Council for support, or were living in hostels in the borough.

Women were disproportionately represented, accounting for 67 per cent of those interviewed and more than half (59 per cent) had dependents, mainly children under-18. The report concludes that this is because the housing system prioritises those working in the labour market, which disadvantages women, who take time away from work to have children.

The research was led by Dr Tom Gillespie of the University of Sheffield and Dr Kate Hardy of Leeds University Business School.

Dr Hardy said: "To learn about the lives of those at the fringes of society who tend not be included in more mainstream studies of homelessness, members of Focus E15 – some of whom themselves have experienced homelessness and eviction – interviewed people facing similar situations.

"The sheer complexity of many respondents' situations and the various state institutions involved - as well as the significant confusion, lack of information and [poor mental health](#) in some - was distressing to hear. This is impacting on some of the most vulnerable populations in

society."

The research showed that 81 per cent of people interviewed had been homeless in the last five years. 73 per cent said that they had been evicted in the last five years.

Dr Tom Gillespie from the University of Sheffield's Department of Geography, said: "The reasons for people becoming [homeless](#) were many and varied and often involved a combination of losing their job, cuts to social support, rent arrears, eviction and family breakdown. One 47-year-old woman was sharing a bed with her 17-year-old son in a single room in a bed and breakfast. They've lived there for five months now. Her home was repossessed when her husband died. Lives like hers were typical of what we found."

The research also cast light on the controversial issue of people in temporary housing being offered longer-term housing if they move away from London. 58 per cent of people interviewed had been offered housing outside the borough, or told to look for housing themselves. They had been offered longer-term housing in Sussex and Hertfordshire, and as far away as Newcastle, Manchester and Leeds.

Dr Hardy said: "People facing homelessness are often being informally or formally 'advised' to move out of Newham, and 44 per cent had been offered or advised to consider moving out of London altogether.

"This puts incredible strains upon families. It disproportionately affects single mothers, with serious implications for the well-being and life chances of their children."

Provided by University of Sheffield

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