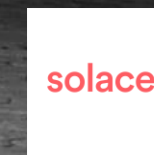




19th European Research Conference on Homelessness

Friday 19th September 2025
Utrecht, Netherlands

Making a hidden problem visible:
The Women's Rough Sleeping
Census in England



Single
Homeless
Project

**STANDING
TOGETHER**
against domestic abuse

**LONDON
COUNCILS**



Single
Homeless
Project

Lucy Campbell

Assistant Director
of System Change

*(Women's Homelessness and
Multiple Disadvantage)*

Today I'll be talking about....

- Why we need a women's rough sleeping census specifically?
- Our gender-informed methodology
- Findings and recommendations
- What next?

How do we define 'rough sleeping' in England?

Rough sleepers are defined for the purposes of rough sleeping counts and estimates as:

- ▶ People sleeping, about to bed down (sitting on/in or standing next to their bedding) or actually bedded down in the open air (such as on the streets, in tents, doorways, parks, bus shelters or encampments)
- ▶ People in buildings or other places not designed for habitation (such as stairwells, barns, sheds, car parks, cars, derelict boats, stations, or 'bashes').

Bedded down is taken to mean either lying down or sleeping. About to bed down includes those who are sitting in/on or near a sleeping bag or other bedding.

The annual rough sleeping snapshot records those people seen sleeping rough on a single night in Autumn each year.

Why do we need a women's rough sleeping census?



Our gender informed methodology

Challenge

Women are less likely to bed down visibly on the streets as they conceal themselves due to constant high risk of violence. This means they are often not seen in rough sleeping counts and not 'verified' as sleeping rough.

Women are even less visible to outreach at night as this is the most dangerous time for them. They will walk all night, sex work in flats or hotels, or accept high-risk offers of shelter from strangers from rather than face the streets at night.

Women's patterns of rough sleeping are transient and intermittent – meaning snapshot counts are highly likely to underrepresent them and traditional outreach shifts are unlikely to result in them being found and verified.

Women are often known to non outreach/housing services (health, Violence Against Women and Girls, substance use), but data is not shared between these sectors.

Rough sleeping provision has been designed for how men sleep rough. Understanding and recognition of how women sleep rough is limited.

Approach


The census guidance for outreach to direct them to look in places women tell us they shelter/sleep – stations, 24 hour cafes, hospital toilets and waiting rooms, libraries etc.

Outreach advised to conduct day shifts in order to find women they could never access at night, and services that women access in the day can also do the census survey.

Data collection window 7 days and women asked about experiences over the past 3 months. Census survey to determine circumstances rather than needing to see the respondent in a particular place.

After the census survey week, each LA holds a 'Local Insights' meeting, bringing together data from all services and sectors who support or encounter women who sleep rough.

The census goes beyond counting and asks women questions to better understand their circumstances, and every interaction is an opportunity to link women in to support. We now have a body of data from over 2000 women across England telling us how, when and where they sleep rough.

A woman with long, straight red hair and bangs is sitting up in bed, looking towards the left. She is wearing a dark, sleeveless top. In the background, a man with blonde hair is lying down, seemingly asleep, with his head resting on a white pillow. The room is dimly lit, with a warm, yellowish light source visible on the left side of the frame. The overall mood is quiet and contemplative.

arguments with
my partner

1014 women had slept rough in the last three months

371 women in the 33 local authorities in London

643 women in the 55 local authorities that took part in
the rest of England

Lack of
resources
to support
women
in need
of
accommodation
for women

Data driven
& commissioning
neglect women

Women's rough sleeping is hidden

54% (545 women)

Had slept rough in a place that wouldn't be included in the official snapshot.

This includes:

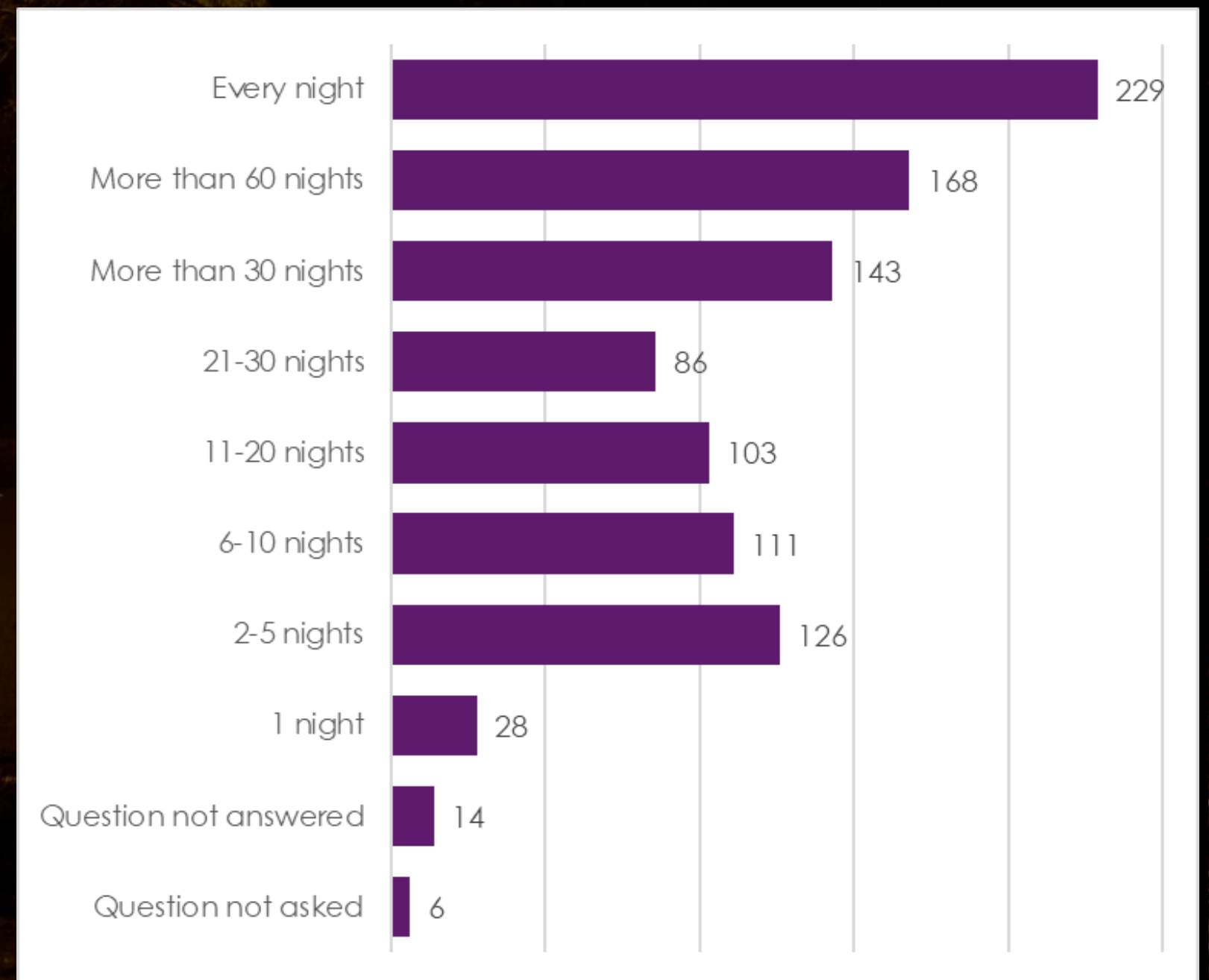
- 24 Hour Services such as McDonald's, A&E waiting rooms etc.
- On a bus or a train
- Walking around all night
- In a squat

Women's rough sleeping is transient and intermittent

While 23% of women reported sleeping rough every night in the last three months, for most women, rough sleeping was interspersed with periods in other forms of accommodation.

Just under half (46%) of women told us they had slept rough the night before completing the census. This is likely a reflection of much of the data being collected by outreach teams and therefore seeing women who are sleeping rough 'right now'.

Number of nights slept rough in the last 3 months



Women experience other forms of homelessness before rough sleeping

When asked where they had stayed most recently before sleeping rough, most women reported already being in insecure forms of accommodation.

- **26%** were sofa surfing
- **37%** were in homelessness accommodation (supported housing, hostel, TA from council, emergency accommodation refuge accommodation, asylum accommodation)

Accommodation provided to women who present as homeless continues to be poorly suited to their needs and isn't resolving their homelessness.

Lack of
accommodation
for women

Data driven
& commissioning
neglect women

Services are not consistently reaching women

- 77% of women weren't accessing support from a housing officer or council housing department
- 43% of women weren't accessing support from a homelessness service
- 33% of women weren't accessing support from either a housing officer or support service

Far too many women sleeping rough are not receiving statutory support to resolve their homelessness.

Lack of

commissioning
for women

Data driven
& commissioning
neglect women

Ethnicity intersects with gender to shape experiences

- 74% of respondents identified as white.
- The proportion of census respondents who identified as Black (12%) is higher than the general population in England (4%), however aligns with the 11% owed a prevention/relief duty in 2023/24.
- 3% of respondents identified as Asian – a smaller proportion than exists in the general population (9%) and those owed a prevention/relief duty in 23/24 (7.5%).
- 76% of women identifying as white reporting having slept on the street, compared to 64% of women identifying as from a global majority ethnic group.
- Women from global majority ethnic groups reported higher rates of sleeping in 24hr services such as McDonald's, on busses and trains and in night shelters.

These differences warrant further examination in future years.

Data driven by
& commissioning
neglect women

Recommendations to Government

Recognise women's homelessness: Adopt a gender-informed definition of rough sleeping that reflects women's hidden, transient and intermittent experiences.

Improve the data: Give councils the tools, resources, and guidance they need to collect accurate, inclusive data on women sleeping rough.

Fund safe services: Ensure homelessness services are accessible, safe, and equitable for women, backed by the funding to make this possible.

Recommendations

Join the dots: Develop joined-up strategies across departments, including the upcoming VAWG Strategy, so women can get housing and support wherever they turn - 'No Wrong Door' and ending verification

Act earlier: Invest in prevention and early intervention so women can avoid homelessness or get help when needed. Developing access routes and 24/7 women's safe spaces and expanding priority need of housing to all forms of VAWG.

We have secured major policy wins through London Rough Sleeping Plan of Action, but more needs to be done

What has the census achieved?

2022



2024



The census has collected the biggest data set in Europe on women's experiences of sleeping rough. More than 2000 women have been reached since the census pilot in 2022.

Their voices are being used to shape changes locally and nationally.

What has the women's census achieved?

“Women's homelessness is firmly on the agenda, senior decision makers who previously were dismissive of women's needs are now advocating for the needs of women across commissioning and service delivery.”

“The women's census has resulted in the development of a women's only accommodation service. Women clients have been more responsive to the bespoke offer for women, and clients that have struggled to sustain accommodation have responded well to the new approach, and are not just sustaining their accommodation but are thriving!”

What has the women's census achieved?

“We used the census data to successfully apply for funding for a new Respite Rooms style service for women, as well as a women's only SWEP provision.”

“We are showing we believe women, and will put interventions in place as soon as they need them.”

STYLIST

KISS

Schedule

Playlist

Presenters



INDEPENDENT

ITV's We Can End Homelessness: 4 women share their experiences of homelessness and working in the sector

Kicked, urinated on, tents set on fire - we reveal the realities for female rough sleepers in the UK

Our new investigation looks at the reality of life, and the untold stories, of female rough sleepers

Government accused of neglecting women rough sleepers by dramatically undercounting them

Exclusive: 'You have to be visible to get the help but you also need to be invisible to keep safe', says rough sleeper

Maya Oppenheim Women's Correspondent • Tuesday 07 May 2024 10:13 BST
9 Comments



"THAT FIRST NIGHT, I SAT AT A BUS STOP TOO AFRAID TO CLOSE MY EYES"

Feeling scared and alone, a woman who has experienced homelessness shares her story.



SUNDAY Mirror THE HEART OF BRITAIN Sunday, December 15, 2024 £2.60

SPECIAL INVESTIGATION

HIDDEN SCANDAL OF HOMELESS WOMEN

Rough sleepers are double official figures

EXCLUSIVE

OVER a thousand women have been found sleeping rough by charity workers - nearly twice as many as government figures admit. Today we shine a light on the hidden homeless who keep a low profile to avoid predators. One, Lainey Post, told how she tried to stay safe on the streets but was raped aged 17.

FULL STORY: PAGES 465



ATTACKED
Lainey was raped while homeless

itvX

EXCLUSIVE

Up to 9 times more women rough sleeping in England than government statistics suggest, report says

TYNE TEES | WOMEN | HOME



Kris Jepson Correspondent, ITV News

BIG ISSUE

Pioneering census sheds light on hidden reality of women's homelessness

There could be more than 5,000 women sleeping rough in England. We must find them

Last week 47 charities, networks and local authorities wrote to Angela Rayner calling for the government to step up efforts to help homeless women. Here's why it's vital to ending homelessness for good

LIZ RUTHERFOORD, NAHAR CHOUDHURY | 6 Sep 2024

We must recognise homeless women in their own right, and fund services accordingly

INSIDE HOUSING

INSIDE HOUSING

Up to nine times more women sleeping rough than government statistics say, research suggests

NEWS 07.05.24 BY ALEX TURNER

Nine times more women may be sleeping rough in England than are recorded by official rough sleeping statistics, study.

Islington Tribune The Independent London news

Not in the stats, women are left unseen in city's homelessness

SW Londoner

HOME NEWS SPORT LIFE ENTERTAINMENT FOOD & DRINK EDITOR'S PICKS

Homeless women underrepresented in numbers, data suggests

28 November 2024 Kasia Filisiuk Follow @SW_London

Homeless women are significantly underrepresented in the 2023 Women's Rough Sleeping Census, according to figures from the charity.

The 2023 Women's Rough Sleeping Census suggests that homelessness across England is significantly underreported in official government statistics.

'Women experiencing homelessness face an awful choice tonight - here's how we can help'

Lucy Campbell, Head of Multiple Disadvantage at the Single Homeless Project charity, makes the case for change and warns there will be women facing an awful choice tonight

OPINION By Lucy Campbell 18:05, 14 Dec 2024 | UPDATED 19:28, 14 DEC 2024

Mirror



What next?



The next census will be Monday 22nd September – Sunday 28th September 2025



We will continue lobby the government with our national manifesto asks.



Could the methodology work in a European context? It would be great to hear from areas who want to pilot the census!



Thank you!

