

# AUTISTIC PEOPLE EXPERIENCING HOMELESSNESS: DOUBLE INVISIBILITY?

**D**rawing attention to the heightened risk of homelessness for autistic individuals, this article discusses the mental health impact of the challenge autistic individuals face in accessing homelessness services and the inadequacy of current support structures. It calls for improvement in the conditions, increased awareness, and tailored housing solutions, to address the mental health needs of this group, breaking the cycle of exclusion.



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*'I actually want to become a key worker here [at homelessness service], which is odd for someone who has my difficulties but it is because [...] I get what it feels like, I get where the barriers are [...] you can't equip someone with tools if you don't carry them.'*

*(Ellie, 28-year-old autistic woman having experienced homelessness for the past 12 years, England)<sup>1</sup>*

Autism is often described as an invisible disability, and people experiencing homelessness may be considered invisible members of society. Autistic people face widespread discrimination and lack of accessibility across different sectors (in employment, health, education, etc.),<sup>2</sup> which are major risk factors for homelessness. While the links between autism and homelessness have been previously established,<sup>3</sup> they continue to be under-researched. There is still much to uncover regarding how many autistic people are homeless, how homelessness among people on the spectrum can be prevented, and crucially what can be done to better support autistic people who currently find themselves in any form of homelessness.

- 1 Beth Stone et al., "The autistic experience of homelessness: Implications from a narrative enquiry," *Autism* 27, no. 2 (2023): 495.
- 2 David Mason et al., "A Systematic Review of What Barriers and Facilitators Prevent and Enable Physical Healthcare Services Access for Autistic Adults," *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders*, no. 49 (2019); Valentina Della Fina and Rachele Cera, eds., *Protecting the Rights of People with Autism in the Fields of Education and Employment: International, European and National Perspectives*, (Heidelberg, New York, Dordrecht, London: Springer Open, 2015).
- 3 For an overview of disability and homelessness, see Sonia Panadero Herrero and Miguel Pérez-Lozao Gallego, "Personas sin hogar y discapacidad," *Revista Española de Discapacidad* 2, no. 2 (2014).

Understanding this reality through the prism of this edition's theme – mental health – will hopefully offer the reader a wider perspective on the complex reasons why autistic people are at higher risk of experiencing homelessness and the structural solutions of support that are needed.

## HOW MANY AUTISTIC PEOPLE ARE HOMELESS AND WHY?

Establishing a data overview is already challenging as there are no official figures on the number of autistic people per European country. Instead, we must rely on prevalence studies and local research – an issue shared by the homelessness sector. This problem is further compounded by the fact that many autistic people remain undiagnosed, especially adults, women, and minorities.<sup>4</sup> Estimates suggest that around 1% of the global population is autistic, although recent studies point to a significantly higher percentage.<sup>5</sup> Among the homeless population, however, this prevalence rate increases at least twelve-fold – a 2019 peer-reviewed paper found that over 12% of people experiencing homelessness from the study had screened positive for autism.<sup>6</sup> The same percentage was identified by a National Autistic

- 4 Yunhe Huang et al., "Diagnosis of autism in adulthood: A scoping review," *Autism* 24, no. 6 (2020); Georgia Lockwood Estrin et al., "Barriers to autism spectrum disorder diagnosis for young women and girls: a systematic review," *Review Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders* 8, no. 4 (2021).
- 5 Jinan Zeidan et al., "Global prevalence of autism: A systematic review update," *Autism research: official journal of the International Society for Autism Research* 15, no.5 (2022).
- 6 Alasdair Churchard et al., "The prevalence of autistic traits in a homeless population," *Autism* 23, no. 3 (2019).

Society survey over a decade ago,<sup>7</sup> while a 2019 study revealed that 18.5% of homeless participants were found to have autistic characteristics.<sup>8</sup> However, the prevalence of autism among rough sleepers might be even higher than this, as a small local research project in England from 2010 pointed to one in two rough sleepers being autistic.<sup>9</sup> While this evidence regarding rough sleepers is anecdotal, it is nonetheless revealing of autistic experiences. It also underlines the urgent need for additional research and a greater focus on autism in support services. At the very least, these figures suggest that autistic people are over-represented among the homeless population, which is unfortunately unsurprising.

Researchers have shown that many risk factors for homelessness – such as social isolation, reduced access to education, unemployment, mental health conditions, poverty, etc. – are found disproportionately among the autism community. In fact, 75-90% of autistic people are estimated to be unemployed,<sup>10</sup> and over 70% have a co-occurring mental health condition – such as attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), anxiety, depression, or other conditions.<sup>11</sup> The widespread lack of support for autistic people and exclusion across sectors

contribute greatly to the high prevalence of mental health conditions among the autistic community. Autistic people also continue to be institutionalised across the EU,<sup>12</sup> directly violating their right to live independently and be included in the community as stated in Article 19 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, which is legally binding across the EU.

It is also crucial to highlight that the autistic community has higher rates of victimisation, as studies show that 44% of autistic individuals have been victims of violence such as 'bullying (47%), child abuse (16%), sexual victimisation (40%)' and others.<sup>13</sup> Gender-based violence has long been established as a risk factor for homelessness, and research has shown that autistic women might be at an even higher risk of homelessness than other women who are victims of abuse.<sup>14</sup> Considering the extensive barriers autistic people have to face when accessing services – such as potential communication challenges, lack of accommodations and discrimination – the harmful effects of this violence on both their physical and mental health are undoubtedly profound and long-lasting.

7 Rebecca Evans, "The life we choose: shaping autism services in Wales," National Autistic Society (2011).

8 Niko Kargas et al., "Prevalence of clinical autistic traits within a homeless population: barriers to accessing homeless services," *Journal of Social Distress and the Homeless* 28, no. 2 (2019).

9 Colin Pritchard, "An Evaluation of the Devon Individualised Budget project to encourage rough sleepers into accommodation", Exeter City Council (2010).


10 Marco Fasciglione, "Article 27 of the CRPD and the Right of Inclusive Employment of People with Autism" in *Protecting the Rights of People with Autism in the Fields of Education and Employment: International, European and National Perspectives*, 146; Autism-Europe, "I can learn, I can work: Europe-wide awareness-raising campaign 2020-2021," online source (2021).

11 Meng-Chuan Lai et al., "Prevalence of co-occurring mental health diagnoses in the autism population: a systematic review and meta-analysis," *The Lancet Psychiatry* 6, no. 10 (2019).

12 Jan Šiška and Julie Beadle-Brown, "Report on the transition from institutional care to community-based services in 27 EU Member States," research report for the European Expert Group on Transition from Institutional to Community-Based Care (2020).

13 Grace Trundle et al., "Prevalence of Victimization in Autistic Individuals: A Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis," *Trauma, violence & abuse* 24, no. 4 (2023).

14 Georgia Lockwood Estrin et al., "Homelessness in autistic women: Defining the research agenda," *Women's Health*, no. 18 (2022): 4.



[A]t least one out of ten persons that homelessness services encounter is autistic. Shelters, outreach programmes and housing solutions are already in high demand and underfunded as it is, but they are also widely non-adapted to the needs of autistic people.”

## WHAT IS THE MENTAL HEALTH IMPACT OF HOMELESSNESS ON AUTISTIC PEOPLE?

Based on the estimates presented above, at least one out of ten persons that homelessness services encounter is autistic. Shelters, outreach programmes and housing solutions are already in high demand and underfunded as it is, but they are also widely non-adapted to the needs of autistic people. These services can be overwhelming for people on the spectrum, both from a sensory aspect – as autistic people can be highly sensitive to light, smell, sound and texture – but also from a functional point of view, as they heavily alter routines and can trigger or worsen certain mental health conditions, not least because these services are highly populated.<sup>15</sup> Autistic people in homelessness

<sup>15</sup> Stone et al., “The autistic experience of homelessness: Implications from a narrative enquiry.”

services have also reported the need to mask autistic behaviours (such as stimming or intense interests) which research has shown to be exhausting and detrimental to their mental health.<sup>16</sup>

Additionally, these resources are often not adapted to the communication needs of autistic people, as they might have to face confusing administrative procedures without the possibility of using their preferred form of communication. The fact that many adults remain undiagnosed aggravates this situation, as neither they nor frontline staff might be aware of the accommodations needed to access these services.

<sup>16</sup> Hannah Belcher, “Autistic people and masking,” National Autistic Society (2022) <https://www.autism.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/professional-practice/autistic-masking>; Louise Bradley et al., “Autistic Adults’ Experiences of Camouflaging and Its Perceived Impact on Mental Health,” *Autism in adulthood: challenges and management* 3, no. 4 (2021).

Increasingly worrying however are the reports of autistic people being denied support when approaching homelessness services as their disability or mental health condition is not seen as qualifying them for assistance.<sup>17</sup> Researcher Beth Stone notes that these situations are ‘concerning, given that participants’ substance use escalated, and their mental health deteriorated, during periods of street homelessness. It illustrated a damaging approach to eligibility; meaning that participants’ conditions had to worsen before they were helped’.<sup>18</sup>

Autistic experiences of homelessness also point to the fact that navigating the rejection from social services, the administrative hurdles and the difficulties experienced when accessing social housing sometimes impacted their mental health more significantly than other factors.<sup>19</sup>

## WHAT MEASURES SHOULD BE IMPLEMENTED AT HOMELESSNESS SERVICES TO SUPPORT AUTISTIC PEOPLE AND THEIR MENTAL HEALTH?

While structural solutions aiming at preventing homelessness are of course needed – such as legally binding policies tackling access to education, unemployment, and financial support – immediate action is required to avoid the homelessness and housing exclusion cycle.

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<sup>17</sup> Stone et al., “The autistic experience of homelessness: Implications from a narrative enquiry,” 493.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*; Alex Birch, “It’s time to break the link between autism and homelessness,” *The Century Foundation* (2023), accessed online.

It is essential to raise awareness of autistic experiences of homelessness and develop tools for identifying and better meeting their needs. This can be done by developing autism awareness training, research, and adapted housing solutions, which should be co-produced with autistic people who have lived experience of homelessness to truly be effective. In 2015, Homeless Link prepared a briefing on autism for frontline staff and in 2019 the *Autism and Homelessness Toolkit* was published.<sup>20</sup> This guide is a positive step forward as it provides an overview of autism, information on how to recognise it and crucially how to adapt outreach and working strategies to better support the autistic community. These accommodations are a first step towards improving the mental health of autistic people experiencing homelessness and pave the way for the implementation of individualised mental health support. Unfortunately, guidelines like these are rare and not easily available in other European languages.

At a time when the European Commission has identified mental health as being a key priority for the Union, targeting specific actions and funds for autistic people is imperative. As it stands, the widespread lack of support for autistic people and their mental health needs only perpetuates homelessness and exclusion from society.

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<sup>20</sup> Homeless Link, “Autism and Homelessness, briefing for frontline staff,” online (2015); Homeless Link et al., “Autism and Homelessness Toolkit,” online (2019) <https://homeless.org.uk/knowledge-hub/autism-and-homelessness/>