

**Supporting victims and survivors  
of sexual violence**

# Guidance for professionals working with people who are homeless

# Introduction and overview

The LimeCulture National ISVA Co-ordinator Initiative has been working in partnership with homelessness organisations, academics, and sexual violence support services to identify and seek to address challenges and barriers to accessing support for victims/survivors of sexual violence who are homeless.

The aim of this guidance is to support organisations and professionals working with individuals who are homeless to:

- Appropriately respond to and support those who have experienced sexual violence (recently or non-recently)
- Identify and access sexual violence pathways of support local to the victim/survivor
- Improve access to Independent Sexual Violence Adviser (ISVA) services
- Strengthen internal processes and local partnerships with sexual violence support services.

This guidance includes an overview of:

- What sexual violence is
- The link between homelessness and experiences of sexual violence
- Specialist support for victims/survivors of sexual violence
- Responding to victims/survivors of sexual violence
- Contact information for the National ISVA Co-ordinator.

This guidance is not intended to comprehensively address either sexual violence or homelessness but rather aims to strengthen partnerships and pathways between homeless organisations and local sexual violence support services. The pathway and service considerations set out within this guidance should be used in conjunction with an organisation's internal safeguarding procedures and/or other relevant policies.

LimeCulture would like to thank the professionals, organisations and ISVAs who have shared their expertise to support the development of this guidance.

# What is sexual violence?

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The World Health Organization defines sexual violence as “any sexual act, attempt to obtain a sexual act, unwanted sexual comments or advances, or acts to traffic or otherwise directed against a person’s sexuality using coercion, by any person regardless of their relationship to the victim, in any setting, including but not limited to home and work

World Health Organization, 2002

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Sexual violence incorporates many criminal acts such as rape, sexual assault, sexual touching, child sexual abuse, exploitation and grooming, and is perpetrated throughout the world, in all countries, cultures and communities regardless of age, race, gender, sexuality, religion or social status. It can occur between family, friends, current or ex- partners, acquaintances, strangers or online; however, in most cases, the perpetrator is known to the victim/survivor.

Sexual violence may have happened recently or some time ago (often referred to as non-recent assault/abuse). It may be an isolated incident or have occurred more than once over an extended period.

Sexual violence is predominately perpetrated by men against women and girls. However, it is important to recognise that men and boys experience sexual violence too.

**Sexual violence is rarely motivated by sexual gratification, it is about power and control**

**The impact and trauma of sexual violence varies – there is no right or wrong way to behave during or following sexual violence and there are often no physical injuries**

**False allegations of sexual violence are rare and most people who experience sexual violence do not make a report to the police**

**It is never the victim/survivor’s fault. Blame should always lie with the perpetrator**

Sexual violence can have a devastating impact on every aspect of a victim/survivor’s life and make them vulnerable to further sexual abuse or violence.<sup>1</sup> Victims/survivors often experience both short and long-term physical, emotional and psychological impacts in addition to secondary impacts, which may include experiencing homelessness.

# Sexual violence and homelessness

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“ There is an inextricable link between sexual abuse and homelessness...[yet] the link between the issue and how it drives homelessness is being missed ”

Neil Henderson, CEO, Safeline

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There is limited recent UK research specifically focusing on the interrelationship between sexual violence and homelessness; however, existing research and anecdotal evidence from specialist organisations and those experiencing homelessness clearly demonstrates that issues of domestic and sexual abuse, adequate and stable housing and homelessness are strongly linked.<sup>2</sup>

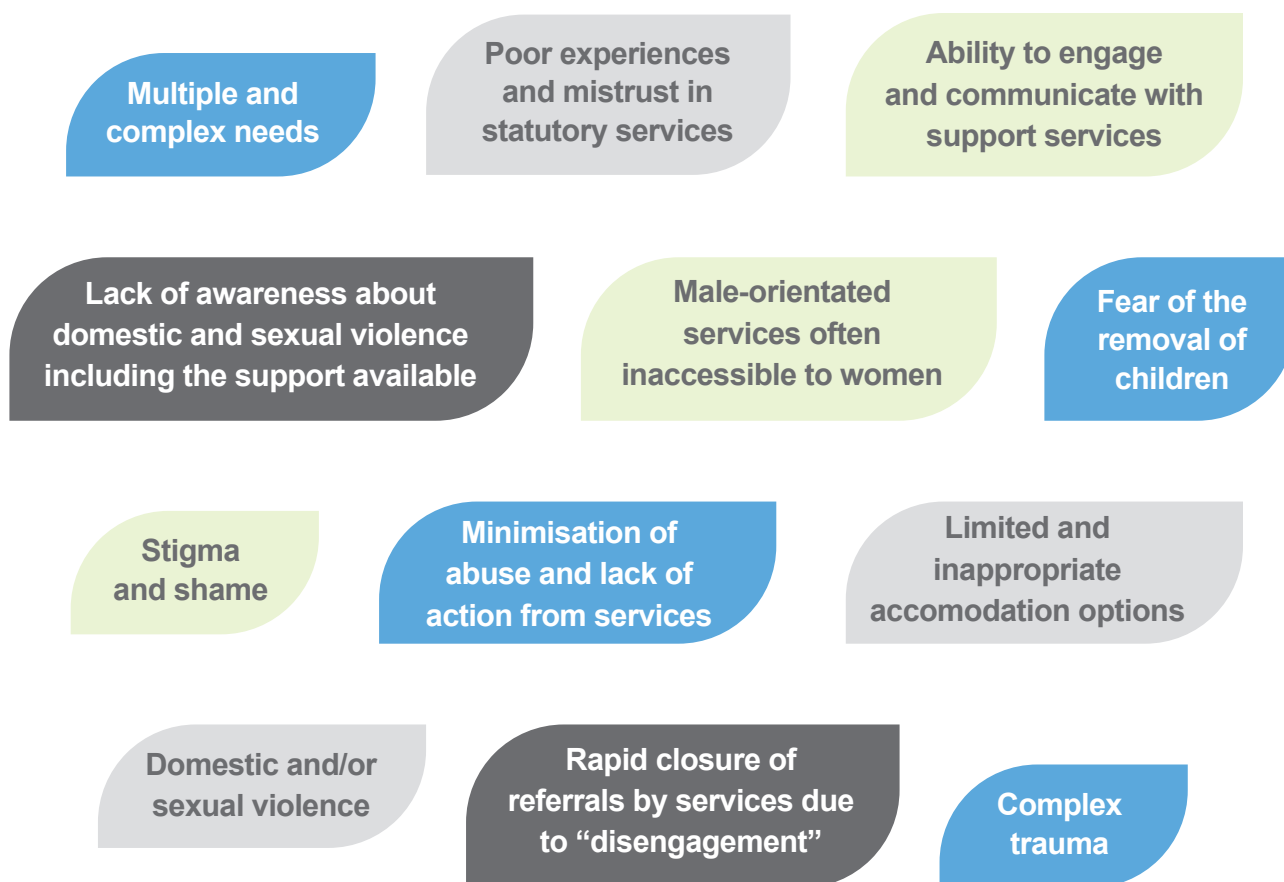
- A US research study published in 2001 found that 61% of girls and 16% of boys cited sexual abuse as the reason for running away and leaving home.<sup>3</sup>
- A 2006 UK study of women seeking help from a rape/sexual assault support centre found that childhood sexual abuse was reported by 43% of homeless participants compared with 24.6% of housed participants.<sup>4</sup>
- Crisis' *"It's no life at all"* (2016) report found that 6% of its 458 respondents had been sexually assaulted in the past 12 months.

For women specifically, research strongly indicates that women's experiences of homelessness and the trajectories they take through it significantly differ from that of men.<sup>5</sup> Domestic abuse – which can incorporate incidents of sexual violence – is a near universal experience for women who experience homelessness<sup>6</sup>; and women with histories of childhood sexual abuse are twice as likely to experience adult re-victimisation as those without such histories.<sup>7</sup>

It is important to recognise that sexual violence in the context of homelessness is multi-faceted. It may predate, precede or have driven homelessness; moreover, a lack of suitable and safe accommodation options can elevate individuals' vulnerability to sexual violence. For example, mixed gender support settings, night hostels, squats, sofa surfing and transactional sex all expose individuals to a higher risk of exploitation and sexual violence.<sup>8</sup>

It is often assumed that people who are homeless will be willing and able to access the support of specialist services and professionals; however existing research and the experiences of professionals suggest that the multiple impacts of abuse and complex trauma alongside poor previous experiences of public services severely inhibit victims/survivors of sexual abuse from seeking support, reporting their experiences to the police, and moving on from homelessness.<sup>9</sup>

Whilst individual experiences are unique, there are several multiple and intersecting common barriers that might prevent people who are homeless from accessing specialist sexual violence support services:



LimeCulture's engagement with specialist homelessness organisations and professionals highlighted a wealth of good practice in overcoming barriers and enabling homeless individuals to access vital support following domestic and/or sexual violence. For example, simply asking targeted questions about sexual violence and trauma is a helpful first step for those who previously have been unable to initiate a disclosure of their abuse or do not recognise their experiences as abuse.

Despite pathways of support for victims/survivors of sexual violence existing in all parts of the country, these pathways are often under-used by professionals working outside of the sexual violence sector. It is important for professionals operating in the homeless sector not to assume sole responsibility for supporting individuals who have experienced the trauma of sexual violence.

Sexual violence support services and Independent Sexual Violence Advisers (ISVAs) have a critical role in supporting an individual's recovery following sexual violence and can aid homelessness professionals in the co-ordination of holistic, wrap-around and ongoing support.

Partnership working between homeless services and ISVA services is important to ensure the immediate and long-term safety and support of victims/survivors of sexual violence who are experiencing homelessness.

# Specialist support for victims/survivors

Specialist sexual violence support services provide a broad range of targeted support to victims/survivors of sexual violence and can facilitate and support access to other agencies. Support for victims/survivors of sexual violence may be therapeutic, educational or advocacy-centred and may include helpline services, Sexual Assault Referral Centres (SARCs), counselling and psychological services, Independent Sexual Violence Advisers (ISVAs), peer support groups, and wellbeing or psycho-educational services.

It is an important principle of an effective sexual violence response that all victims of sexual violence, including those who are homeless, should be offered the support of a specialist sexual violence support service. Support services for victims/survivors of sexual violence are available in all parts of the country and can offer immediate and long-term support.

Homeless organisations are encouraged to build and strengthen partnerships with local sexual violence services to share knowledge, develop information sharing protocols and ensure that referral pathways are in place to improve access for victims/survivors of sexual violence who are homeless.

Professionals and volunteers working with people who are homeless have an important role in assisting victims/survivors to access support from specialist support services where sexual violence has occurred, either recently or non-recently. Professionals can make referrals to specialist sexual violence support services and should do so at the first opportunity (see pathway, page 9).

## **Independent Sexual Violence Advisers**

Independent Sexual Violence Advisers (ISVAs) play an important role in providing specialist tailored support to victims/survivors of sexual violence, including through the criminal justice system. However, victims/survivors of sexual violence can access ISVA support irrespective of whether they have made a report to the police.

ISVAs conduct individual risk and needs assessments and work in partnership with a range of agencies to ensure the specific needs of each victim/survivor are met, and holistic plans of support are put in place. ISVAs provide impartial information to victims/survivors of sexual violence about all their options, such as reporting to the police, the criminal justice process, accessing Sexual Assault Referral Centre (SARC) services, and other specialist support such as counselling/therapy services. ISVAs often play an integral role in connecting victims/survivors of sexual violence with other essential services, for example in relation to health and social care, housing, benefits, and immigration.

UK research details how ISVAs deliver critical services which go beyond criminal justice outcomes both to individual victims/survivors and to their multi-agency partners. ISVAs can, and do, therefore add value to the local response to victims/survivors of sexual violence.<sup>10</sup> Research also shows that support from an ISVA can enable victims/survivors to remain engaged with the criminal justice process.<sup>11</sup> Additionally, research from the US reveals improved outcomes for victims involved with specialist sexual violence support services, including reducing the number of negative responses from the police and health professionals, and buffering against the distress that can be caused by the legal process.<sup>12</sup>

### Further Reading

- Hester, M., Lilley, S. (2017), More than support to court: Rape victims and specialist sexual violence services, University of Bristol
- Home Office (2017), The Role of the Independent Sexual Violence Adviser: Essential Elements
- Ava (2019), Breaking down the barriers: Findings of the national commission on domestic and sexual violence and multiple disadvantage
- Crisis (2016), It's no life at all: Rough sleepers' experiences of violence and abuse on the streets of England and Wales
- Crisis, Reeve, K., Batty, E. (2011), The hidden truth about homelessness: Experiences of single homelessness in England
- Goodman, L., Fels, K., Glenn, C. (2006), No Safe Place: Sexual assault in the lives of homeless women
- Homeless Link (2017), Supporting women who are homeless: Briefing for homelessness services
- Public Health England (2020), Health matters: rough sleeping
- Shelter (2018), On the streets: An investigation into rough sleeping
- Shelter (2019), Stuck in Limbo: Experiences of women in Greater Manchester on surviving domestic abuse, homelessness and a housing system not working for them
- Shelter (2021), Fobbed off
- St Mungos (2014), Rebuilding shattered lives
- St Mungos (2021), Keeping us safer
- Bretherton, J. Pleace, N. (2018), Women and rough sleeping, London, St Mungos

# Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> McMillan, L., Thomas, M. (2009), Police interviews of rape victims. In: Horvarth M and Brown J (eds) Rape: Challenging Contemporary Thinking. Cullompton, UK: Willan Publishing, pp.255–280
- <sup>2</sup> Shelter (2019), Stuck in Limbo: Experiences of women in Greater Manchester on surviving domestic abuse, homelessness and a housing system not working for them
- <sup>3</sup> Estes, R., Weiner, N. (2001), Commercial sexual exploitation of children in the U.S., Canada, and Mexico. Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania
- <sup>4</sup> Goodman, L, Fels, K, Glenn, C (2006), No Safe Place: Sexual assault in the lives of homeless women, p.3
- <sup>5</sup> Public Health England (2020), Health matters: Rough sleeping
- <sup>6</sup> Shelter (2021), Fobbed off
- <sup>7</sup> Goodman, L., Fels, K., Glenn, C. (2006), No Safe Place: Sexual assault in the lives of homeless women, pp.3
- <sup>8</sup> Ibid, p. 6
- <sup>9</sup> Crisis (2016), It's no life at all: Rough sleepers' experiences of violence and abuse on the streets of England and Wales, p.15
- <sup>10</sup> Robinson, A. (2009), Independent Sexual Violence Advisors: A Process Evaluation. Cardiff: University of Cardiff.
- <sup>11</sup> Brown, J., Horvath, M., Kelly, L. et al. (2010), Connections and Disconnections: Assessing Evidence, Knowledge and Practice in Responses to Rape. London: Government Equalities Office
- <sup>12</sup> Campbell, R. (2006), Rape survivors' experiences with the legal and medical systems: Do rape victim advocates make a difference? Violence Against Women 12(1): pp. 30-45.



# Responding to victims/survivors of sexual violence

The pathway below is intended to support professionals and volunteers to support victims/survivors of sexual violence who are homeless. It is recommended that this pathway should be used in conjunction with internal safeguarding policies and procedures to explore and co-ordinate support.

## RESPOND

Manage disclosures sensitively while following internal procedures:

- > Listen; offer belief and empathy; use non-judgmental language
- > Empower the victim/survivor to take control of their situation and options where possible – what do they want to happen?
- > Do not probe for detailed information; ask basic facts only to inform actions
- > Contain detailed disclosures sensitively, avoiding details of the incident

### REMEMBER:

It is imperative that action is taken at the first contact as this may be the only opportunity to validate the victim/survivor's experiences and facilitate support

## RISK

Complete a risk and needs assessment:

- > When/where did the incident occur?
- > Any immediate risk from the perpetrator or others?
- > Who has been informed? (Friends, family, professionals)
- > Initiate internal safeguarding procedures if there is an immediate risk

### REMEMBER:

If the incident is recent, you should contact your local SARC or ISVA service for immediate advice about a forensic medical examination

## REFER

Sexual violence pathways of support are available in all parts of the country and offer immediate and long-term support to all victims/survivors of sexual violence:

- > **Sexual Assault Referral Centres (SARCs)** provide crucial health and medical intervention such as emergency contraception, sexual health screening and forensic medical examinations
- > **Independent Sexual Violence Advisers (ISVAs)** are specialist professionals working with people who have experienced sexual violence, irrespective of whether they have reported to the police

### REMEMBER:

Your nearest SARC can be located [here](#)

Identify the client's local ISVA service; discuss support and complete a referral if appropriate

## ISVA SUPPORT

ISVAs provide specialist support to victims/survivors of sexual violence, offering impartial information and providing practical and emotional support. This ensures victims/survivors can identify choices, exercise their rights, and feel in control and empowered. ISVAs will work in multi-agency partnerships, including with specialist homeless professionals and organisations, to ensure the needs of each individual are met holistically. ISVAs can support with:

- > Risk and needs assessments, tailoring individual plans of support
- > Reporting options, Criminal Justice support and exploring civil justice options
- > Accessing SARC and sexual health advice
- > Housing and welfare advice, support, and advocacy
- > Onward specialist referrals such as for domestic abuse support or counselling

The National ISVA Co-ordinator service provided by LimeCulture can provide support in identifying your nearest ISVA service.

To contact the National ISVA Co-ordinator, please email: [NISVAC@limeculture.co.uk](mailto:NISVAC@limeculture.co.uk)

To locate your local SARC: <https://www.nhs.uk/service-search/other-services/Rape-and-sexual-assault-referral-centres/LocationSearch/364>