

Resource for ISVAs

Working with victims and survivors of sexual violence who are homeless

Introduction and overview

This resource aims to provide a brief introduction to sexual violence in the context of homelessness, highlight specific barriers to accessing support following sexual violence, and share good practice for ISVAs when engaging with victims/survivors who are homeless.

This resource has been created in consultation with professionals directly from organisations, academics and ISVA services supporting victims/survivors who are homeless. We would like to thank all who shared their expertise and feedback to support the development of this guidance.

Terms

The terms “victim” and “survivor”, and “sexual violence” and “sexual abuse”, are used interchangeably throughout this resource.

Homelessness

“ Homelessness is devastating, dangerous and isolating ”

Crisis, Ending Homelessness

The legal definition of homelessness is a household or individual who has no home available or the home is unreasonable to occupy.

“Statutory homelessness” is where local authorities have defined a household as homeless within the terms of homelessness legislation. Homelessness, therefore, can take many forms:

- People without shelter of any kind and who are street homeless/rough sleeping. This is often considered the most visible and most dangerous form of homelessness
- People living in hostels, shelters or refuges
- Temporary accommodation (this may span years) whilst awaiting permanent accommodation
- People staying temporarily with family and friends (“sofa surfing”)
- People who are not entitled to housing support or who do not access services – often living in unfit or overcrowded homes, hostels, or squats
- People who are going through an eviction process and are at risk of homelessness¹.

Multiple factors can contribute to an individual becoming homeless, which are often classified into structural causes and individual circumstances. Structural causes include wide-reaching considerations such as poverty, benefit reforms, lack of affordable housing and unemployment. Individual circumstances or life events that may push people into homelessness may include childhood trauma, mental or physical health problems, substance misuse, bereavement, job loss and debt.

People who have recently left prison or the Armed Forces and have no home to return to are also at increased risk of homelessness. Individual circumstances may also include violence, abuse and the breakdown of relationships. For women specifically, one of the biggest contributors towards homelessness is an abusive or violent relationship.²

Homelessness and Sexual Violence

A review of existing academic research and anecdotal evidence from specialist organisations highlights that issues of domestic and sexual abuse, adequate and stable housing, and homelessness are strongly interlinked.

Although there is limited recent UK-specific research on the interrelationship between sexual abuse and homelessness, many services, professionals, and academics working in the homelessness sector are clear that there is an inextricable link between the two. In 2019, in an article for the Big Issue, the Chief Executive of sexual violence charity Safeline stated that the link between sexual violence and homelessness was being “missed”.³

- 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.
- The same study also found that homeless women with histories of childhood sexual abuse were twice as likely to experience adult violent victimisation as those without such histories.⁴
- 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.⁵
- 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.

It is important to recognise that sexual violence in the context of homelessness is multi-faceted. Sexual violence may predate or precede homelessness; a lack of suitable and safe accommodation options can result in increased risk of sexual violence and exploitation. Some individuals resort to engaging in activities that place them at further risk in order to secure a roof over their head for the night, such as an unwanted sexual partnership or engaging in sex work. This is not unique to women; however, women are significantly more likely to be involved in sex work compared to men.⁶

Crisis’ “It’s no life at all” report (2016) found that rough sleepers endured “shocking and unacceptable levels of abuse and violence”, with 6% of 458 respondents involved in the study having been sexually assaulted in the past 12 months. Of those who had experienced sexual abuse, around half (53%) had not reported to the police as they did not think the police would do anything about it.⁷ These experiences and assumptions indicate a severe lack of trust in services, which in turn inhibits individuals from seeking support to enable them to move on from homelessness.

Enabling access to ISVA support

LimeCulture's engagement with specialist homelessness organisations and professionals highlighted a wealth of good practice and experience in overcoming barriers in working with victims of sexual violence and enabling homeless individuals to access vital support. However, it was also clear that the role of the ISVA is still unfamiliar among homelessness professionals and, as a result, is often under-utilised.

ISVAs play a critical role in an individual's recovery journey following sexual violence, conducting important risk and needs assessments to ensure the co-ordination of holistic, wrap-around support for their clients. As such, partnership working between homelessness services and ISVA services is crucial to ensure an individual's immediate needs (i.e. food, shelter) are addressed whilst ongoing and potentially complex needs (i.e. trauma support) are not neglected.

It is also important that ISVAs and ISVA services have a good knowledge of the drivers and impacts of homelessness to enable them to understand and address individual and social barriers that can make it difficult for clients to engage with support services; and to adapt their models of support to make their services more accessible to those who are homeless.

Barriers to Support

There are many barriers to accessing support for victims/survivors of sexual violence who are homeless. Experiences of course will differ from person to person; however, consultation with specialist homelessness organisations and professionals highlighted several common and intersecting barriers that may impact on individuals' ability to access a wide range of support services:

1 Stigma and shame

2 Multiple and complex needs

3 Male orientated services

4 Confidence and trust in services

5 Ability to engage

1 Stigma and shame

Research shows that stigma and shame are significant barriers for homeless individuals in accessing support. Within Shelter's 2018 rough sleeping report "On the streets", half of those interviewed reported feeling stigmatised, judged and looked down on because of their situation, with embarrassment and shame leading them to hide their circumstances.⁸ Women shared that they often experience multiple stigmas and labels resulting from society's expectations of them to be feminine, good mothers and to maintain a home. Experiences of homelessness often directly conflict with these expectations and can lead to women feeling judged when they fail to meet these ideals.⁹

2 Multiple and complex needs

Overlapping or intersecting problems experienced at the same time can be defined as multiple and complex needs, or multiple disadvantage. Many people who are homeless are highly likely to have experienced trauma and abuse, either prior to becoming or whilst homeless; many are vulnerable with multiple and/or complex needs.¹⁰ This can result in many challenging situations including chaotic lifestyles, poor mental health, substance misuse, and/or the removal of children, constraining individuals' ability and/or willingness to engage with support services.

A common message arising from consultation with professionals and academics was how women tend to remain hidden from services for longer in comparison to men, and often only reach out for support once they have reached a crisis, at which point their needs have become more complex and entrenched making engagement with services and support challenging. As a result, women who are homeless can be unfairly labelled as “difficult” or “unwilling to engage”, and when coupled with rigid service engagement protocols, this can often lead to the rapid closure of new referrals.

When considering how best to support victims/survivors of sexual violence who are homeless, an understanding of an individual's immediate and ongoing needs is critical. Shelter and food for example is often essential to ensuring individuals are able to begin addressing more complex needs such as trauma support following sexual violence, considerations around reporting to the police, etc. It is important to note, however, that the rehousing process can often be long and support should not be withheld or delayed on this basis should the individual be willing to engage with services.

3 Male orientated services

Research strongly indicates that women's experiences of homelessness and the trajectories they take through it significantly differ from that of men.¹¹ Often, women's homelessness occurs after prolonged experiences of gendered abuse and trauma that can involve physical, sexual, and emotional abuse resulting in myriad complex and longer-term problems.¹² Shelter's “Stuck in Limbo” study in Greater Manchester found that domestic abuse was the third most common trigger of homelessness¹³ and, whilst domestic abuse was not always a direct cause of homelessness, experiences of domestic abuse are a common theme for women who become homeless.

In “Women and rough sleeping” (2018), Bretherton and Pleace describe women's experiences of homelessness as “horrific violations” which include being spat at, urinated on, vomited on, robbed, and threatened.¹⁴ Many women have experienced physical violence and sexual abuse whilst homeless, including being harassed for sex by male members of the public. Women will often attempt to manage housing problems alone, turning to alcohol, illegal substances or sex work to “survive” or “escape their plight” – this can result in the erosion of resilience and creates substantial challenges for recovery.¹⁵

Women experiencing homelessness often remain hidden from frontline services, resulting in increased isolation and heightened vulnerability to further violence and abuse. We know that those women who do eventually reach out for support to homelessness services are likely to

encounter services that primarily cater to the needs of single men, due to homelessness largely being considered a male issue and men being more visible on the streets and in services.¹⁶ With so many homeless women likely to have experienced abuse from men, it is understandable that women will avoid male dominated spaces. Professionals we spoke with stated that women had described these spaces and services as unsafe, aggressive and frightening. Sadly, female-only accommodation options are limited and, for those women who have experienced domestic abuse, refuge spaces are often few and far between due to overwhelming demand. Additionally, mixed gender accommodation (which are often, in reality, spaces only utilised by men), temporary accommodation and sofa surfing can be precarious situations for women.

Homelessness professionals told us that sexual violence perpetrated by other co-residents of temporary accommodation occurs all too frequently.

Professionals from a specialist ISVA service shared that the only women's hostel available in their local area is situated within the Red-Light district of the city centre. Professionals frequently observed a rapid decline in women placed there, noting that if women were not previously engaged in sex work when entering the hostel, it was highly likely they would be upon leaving it. Temporary accommodation offering appropriate female-only spaces is crucial to ensuring the safety and wellbeing of individuals and safeguarding them from further abuse and violence.

4 Confidence and trust in services

Homelessness organisations and professionals consistently highlighted throughout our consultation that so many of those who are homeless feel repeatedly let down by the very systems and services designed to support them. These negative interactions and poor experiences result in a lack of confidence that professionals will treat them with dignity and respect, respond to their needs, and inform them of their rights.

The last decade of research by homelessness organisations highlights poor attitudes and a lack of compassion and empathy from professionals, often exacerbated by misinformation and poor advice. Individuals experiencing homelessness consistently report they are often made to feel like “their problems are not substantial enough” or are retraumatised by the need to “prove their abuse”.¹⁷ They frequently find their experiences of crime and violence are disregarded by the police, which they felt would not have been the same if they had been a housed member of the public.¹⁸ One professional we spoke with described the police as “bullish” in their approach, and that victims of sexual abuse routinely felt reporting their experiences would be “pointless”. Many victims/survivors of childhood sexual abuse have experienced people in positions of authority acting inappropriately or breaching their trust and, as adults, may be suspicious of the very people whose job it is to help them.¹⁹ This fear or reluctance to seek help from “people in the system” can result in people remaining vulnerable and at risk of ongoing victimisation and abuse.

For women specifically, poor experiences with the police and social care, compounded by the fear of removal of children, is often motivation enough to remain hidden from services. In Shelter's "Stuck in Limbo" report, some women reported that abuse had worsened following services becoming involved, especially if the perpetrator remained in the home. They recounted devastating implications such as anti-social behaviour evictions or being left with tenancy and housing arrears.²⁰ Whilst partnership working is generally seen as desirable from a professional standpoint, a homelessness charity we spoke with described how many people they support, consider involvement from multiple services as indicative of a "messy broken system" that has repeatedly let them down.

5 Ability to engage

It is important to note that professionals from the homelessness sector are clear – homeless people are reachable by support services, with flexible engagement approaches, effective outreach, and partnerships with homelessness services key to reaching them.

However, significant challenges for people who are homeless in engaging with services are the means and ability to do so, both initially and on an ongoing basis. Many people will not have a mobile phone or only have it for a few days due to loss or theft. This results in frequently changing contact numbers or individuals "dropping off the map" entirely. Many agencies, due to high demand and rigid internal policies, are unable to keep uncontactable clients' cases open and subsequently close support requests/referrals for these individuals, leading to high rates of so-called disengagement. Professionals supporting those who are homeless advised that individuals frequently find themselves prematurely closed out of services, refused services, or even banned because of their complex and chaotic lifestyles, resulting in a cycle of risk and exclusion.

Attending appointments and meeting new people can often be challenging for those experiencing homelessness, and formal language and service jargon off-putting. Online referral processes are often inaccessible, and form-filling or making applications can feel intrusive; many victims of abuse re-experience trauma and feel they have to "prove" their abusive/traumatic experiences to agencies.²¹

Good practice for ISVA services

Due to the high proportion of people who are homeless that have experienced sexual violence, ISVA services are a critical partner in ensuring an effective multi-agency response. The function and ability of ISVAs to assess and respond to multiple and complex needs, develop and implement holistic support plans in partnership with the client, and provide specialist trauma-informed and gendered services are crucial to an individual's recovery and their ability to access pathways into wider homelessness services.

It is important to understand how frequently multiple disadvantages, complex needs and intersecting barriers can make engagement with ISVA services extremely challenging for people experiencing homelessness. Avoiding terms such as “refused support” and “disengaged” and understanding the reasons why someone could not engage with a service is a helpful first step to acknowledging this.

ISVA services may find it challenging to contact and engage with women who remain hidden from frontline services. Flexible and creative engagement strategies are therefore vital. Consider who women do and do not engage with, where they present, and seek (where appropriate) to meet with them at their place of safety or via a trusted professional.

When working with those experiencing homelessness, consider adapting policies/procedures that establish rigid protocols such as ‘three contact attempts via telephone/letter’ as these are likely to be ineffective for engaging people who are homeless. Formulate creative ways to engage individuals and take the front door of your service to them.

Consider how to build capacity in-service to enable ISVAs to work creatively and flexibly with clients who are homeless. Consider raising capacity issues and highlighting engagement gaps with your funding provider / commissioner.

Be curious, explore what has not worked previously, and directly discuss and engage with their fears around support services/professionals.

Consider whether your service can implement “engagement budgets” to support individuals to engage and attend appointments, by supporting with bus fares, hot drinks, mobile phones, etc.

To foster trust, ISVA services should seek to work alongside local homelessness hubs and homelessness teams to cultivate good relationships with clients and strengthen local referral pathways. Robust support pathways are essential to ensure people who are homeless are receiving specialist, trauma-focused services to aid them in their recovery journey.

Building a trusting relationship with individuals prior to assessments and appointments is important. Are you able to arrange to introduce yourself at a space which is safe and familiar? Can you support them to access essential items such as a hot drink, food items or toiletries?

Once the ISVA service has established this relationship with an individual, it may be beneficial for ISVAs to accompany clients to appointments with new services to help bridge the gap, support their initial engagement, and reduce the likelihood of discharge/premature case closure.

Ensuring clients are aware of their rights and are supported to make their own choices are powerful tools when attempting to rebalance power dynamics between clients and professionals and help promote empowerment.

ISVAs may need to respond to varying and increasing levels of risk and need in response to an individual’s changing housing journey. ISVAs may find more intensive support is needed in the form of practical support such as form-filling and a greater degree of advocacy/challenge with partner agencies and services.

Consider whether access to specialist trauma informed support that responds specifically to abuse, and the loss of children, is required.

It is important that ISVAs recognise the demoralising and debilitating impact stigma and shame can have on individuals who are homeless. It can result in the erosion of self-esteem and self-worth and create a sense of failure which amplifies isolation and vulnerability, and negatively impacts recovery. ISVAs supporting individuals who are homeless must be especially sensitive to homeless women, who may face greater stigma and discrimination and experience a lack of gender-appropriate services and safe accommodation options.

It is imperative that people who are homeless are treated with compassion, empathy, dignity, and respect, their achievements and strengths celebrated, and unhelpful language and assumptions challenged. Empowerment and confidence-building activity from ISVA services can have a huge impact on addressing negative self-perception, and ISVAs supporting access to further specialist support (e.g. counselling, group work) in response to abuse, trauma, grief and loss will be essential to a client's recovery.

Additionally, it is important to consider the implications of “no fixed abode”, movement between addresses, and the lack of ID for clients who are homeless on their ability to access and engage with other support services.

As a critical local partner, the ISVA service can be an important voice in identifying, amplifying and escalating issues with local commissioners and funders where there is a lack of safe, available and appropriate accommodation options.

To locate local homelessness services, ISVAs can visit: <https://homeless.org.uk/homeless-england>

Further Reading

- 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, Cresr, 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

- ¹ Public Health England (2020), Health matters: Rough sleeping
- ² Crisis <https://www.crisis.org.uk/ending-homelessness/about-homelessness/>
- ³ The Big Issue <https://www.bigissue.com/news/housing/preventing-homeless-starts-with-preventing-sexual-abuse-says-charity-chief>
- ⁴ Goodman, L., Fels, K., Glenn, C. (2006), No Safe Place: Sexual assault in the lives of homeless women, p.3
- ⁵ Estes, R. & Weiner, N. (2001), Commercial sexual exploitation of children in the U.S., Canada, and Mexico. Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania
- ⁶ Goodman, L., Fels, K., Glenn, C. (2006), No Safe Place: Sexual assault in the lives of homeless women p. 6; Crisis, Cresr, Reeve, K. & Batty, E. (2011), The hidden truth about homelessness: Experiences of single homelessness in England, p. 28; St Mungos (2015), Rebuilding Shattered Lives, p.17
- ⁷ Crisis (2016), It's no life at all: Rough sleepers' experiences of violence and abuse on the streets of England and Wales, pp.6, 14
- ⁸ Shelter (2018), On the streets: An investigation into rough sleeping, p.27
- ⁹ St Mungos (2015), Rebuilding Shattered Lives, p. 20
- ¹⁰ St Mungos (2015), Rebuilding Shattered Lives, pp.3, 53
- ¹¹ Public Health England (2020), Health matters: Rough sleeping
- ¹² St Mungos (2015), Rebuilding Shattered Lives, pp.3, 53; St Mungos (2021), Keeping us safer: An approach for supporting homeless women experiencing multiple disadvantage, pp.6, 11
- ¹³ Shelter (2019), Stuck in Limbo: Experiences of women in Greater Manchester on surviving domestic abuse, homelessness and a housing system not working for them, pp.18-19
- ¹⁴ Bretherton, J .and Pleace, N. (2018), Women and rough sleeping, London, St Mungos
- ¹⁵ Homeless Link (2017), Supporting women who are homeless: Briefing for homelessness services, p.3, The Queens nursing institute, Homelessness and the Criminal Justice System; Guidance for Practitioners; Crisis, Cresr, Reeve, K. & Batty, E. (2011), The hidden truth about homelessness: Experiences of single homelessness in England, p.4; Public Health England (2020), Health matters: Rough sleeping
- ¹⁶ Homeless Link (2017), Supporting women who are homeless: Briefing for homelessness services, p.3
- ¹⁷ Shelter (2021), Fobbed Off
- ¹⁸ Crisis (2016), It's no life at all: Rough sleepers' experiences of violence and abuse on the streets of England and Wales, p.14
- ¹⁹ Goodman, L., Fels, K., Glenn, C. (2006), No Safe Place: Sexual assault in the lives of homeless women, p.4
- ²⁰ Shelter (2019), Stuck in Limbo: Experiences of women in Greater Manchester on surviving domestic abuse, homelessness and a housing system not working for them, p.11
- ²¹ Shelter (2019), Stuck in Limbo: Experiences of women in Greater Manchester on surviving domestic abuse, homelessness and a housing system not working for them, pp.16-18