

# HOMELESSNESS IN THE COUNTRYSIDE: INTERIM FINDINGS.



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University of Kent and  
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Interim findings from a one year research project examining rural homelessness. In collaboration with English Rural, ACRE, Rural Services Network, Homeless Link, National Housing Federation, Hastoe HA, CPRE, Trent and Dove HA, Citizen Housing. Full information and contact available at [www.research.kent.ac.uk/rural-homelessness](http://www.research.kent.ac.uk/rural-homelessness).

#### Research Team

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# HOMELESSNESS IN THE COUNTRYSIDE: A HIDDEN CRISIS.

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## Introduction

This research project aims to uncover the characteristics of rural homelessness, what worsens it, and how it can be prevented.

Rural homelessness is an unseen crisis in the countryside, driven by limited access to services and an absence of affordable homes. The extent of the crisis is unclear as limited rural data is captured in official statistics. Trends show that overall homelessness has increased in the last decade and where interventions have helped in urban areas, their impact is less successful in rural communities. A rural housing task force has joined forces to shine a light on the crisis by commissioning a 12-month research collaboration between academics at Kent and Southampton Universities.

## Method

This is a mixed method project, utilising a combination of statistical analysis from existing datasets, a national survey for housing and homelessness providers and local authorities, and ethnographic research in four different geographical areas in England. The project is still ongoing and data presented here reflects two of our field sites and preliminary results from the survey.

## Survey Results

We have asked housing and homelessness providers and local authorities across the country for feedback on their experiences of providing support and services in rural areas. Our survey results (n=147) indicate that:

- 88% of our respondents believe homelessness to have increased in their area in the last year
- The drivers for this increase are lack of affordable/accessible housing, mental health, relationship breakdown, and the reduction/lack of welfare state provisions
- Services in most demand are mental health services and emergency accommodation
- Although 71% of our respondents work with migrants experiencing homelessness, there are no targeted organisations that provide specialist support for this group
- Organisations working in rural areas feel disadvantaged compared to those in urban areas, and 80% of respondents believe not enough funding is the main barrier to solving homelessness in their area.
- Stigma is perceived to be a major barrier to get support for those experiencing homelessness in the countryside

## Ethnographic Findings

Our ethnographic research in Herefordshire and Kent has highlighted that there are many aspects of homelessness that are similar in urban and rural areas, but there are specific challenges for rural areas. For example, access to support, transport issues and affordability. Travel is often inaccessible to those experiencing homelessness due to a lack of connections between market towns and rural settlements, infrequent or non-existing buses, and the high cost of travel. The fuel crisis makes those with their own transport unable to make journeys for work or for appointments, and services providing help in remote areas are dwindling. This means that access to food, clean water, laundry facilities, food banks, jobcentres and healthcare becomes even more challenging.

## Why a Hidden Crisis?

Hidden homelessness often refers to either groups we cannot physically see in the streets, such as sofa surfers, or hidden in statistics from not being counted as homeless. In rural areas, homelessness is hidden for both these reasons, but also because rough sleepers are not easy to find in these areas and may not be able to reach towns where support is available.

## Common sites for rural homelessness



Churches



Tents/Shanties



Stables



Woodland



Storm drains



Phoneboxes



Caravans



Lorries



Sofa surfing



Cars



Containers

# Case studies\*



## Themes for Exploration

Our ongoing research focusses on different themes that our respondents so far have indicated as important for rural homelessness, including;

- Affordability in the countryside
- Rural cost of living and Airbnb
- Fuel crisis and transport concerns
- Private rented sector inaccessibility
- Lack of social housing and shelters/emergency accommodation with support
- Intersecting inequalities of opportunities
- County lines
- Migrant homelessness and Brexit
- Shame and stigma
- Tolerance, breaching of social norms
- Trust and self-esteem
- Trauma

The cost of living crisis, fuel crisis, Brexit, and the ending of Covid-measures such as 'Everyone In' and eviction-bans is creating a perfect storm for rural communities, and people on the poverty line are at extremely high risk of homelessness. The need for supported accommodation and mental health interventions is urgent and our research suggests that this need will only grow in coming years.



## David

David is 47 and has a replacement hip. Last night he slept on the floor of a public toilet. He lost his house during the pandemic. He was able to stay at his mother's house for a while but their relationship broke down. The homeless shelter in his area which he wanted to use had been closed down. After experiencing blackouts due to illness, David's glasses broke. He had no choice but to spend his monthly unemployment benefit on a new pair so he could see. David used to work as a binman, which he said "broke" him. He was recently offered work in a town in a neighbouring county, but the cost of getting there was too expensive. He told us he has a hospital appointment for stomach problems soon, and he is worried he will have to jump the train barriers to get there. Recently David's close friend, whom he lived with whilst sleeping rough and in temporary accommodation, passed away. He was unable to travel to the funeral due to transport costs. He has lost a number of friends to suicide. David's physical and mental health are serious concerns for those trying to help him.



## Mary

Mary is from a Traveller Gypsy background. She was evicted from her house and had to move into a caravan without a fridge-freezer, so keeping food was difficult. The caravan was very cold but she could not afford gas in the winter. She began rough sleeping in a tent and her children had to move elsewhere. Whilst Mary was out in town one day, someone destroyed her tent, so Mary slept in a church for a few days. Mary acquired a new tent and she is currently staying in a field where the local farmer has given her permission to stay and provides her with clean water. She struggles to get food and to cook; she often does not eat for 4-5 days. She receives food from a local food bank, but it is only open two days per week. She has been in trouble with the police for making a campfire to cook her food with. The closest town to Mary has a small shop, but no laundrette, so she walks into town to buy fairy liquid and washes her clothes in the river. She recently got herself a large dog, so that she can feel safe in her tent, and to help keep her warm. When we asked Mary what she would like to say to people who take decisions about homelessness and housing in rural areas, she said she would like for people to try and walk a day in her shoes and try to survive.

\*case studies and images are anonymised

## Key statistics



88% of our respondents believe homelessness to have increased in their area in the last year



71% of our respondents work with migrants experiencing homelessness



80% of respondents believe not enough funding is the main barrier to solving homelessness in their area