

WOMENS ROUGHSLEEPING CENSUS LEEDS 2023

Facilitated by the following organisations:

Basis Yorkshire

Bevan

Change Grow Live

Francis House (Turning Lives Around)

Joanna Project

Leeds City Council (Leeds Housing Options)

Leeds Women's Aid

Simon on the Streets

St Anne's

Together Women Project

Acknowledgments

This report was compiled on the basis of data collected by organisations working in Leeds to support women who are roughsleeping in Leeds; the data analysis and this report was completed by Basis Yorkshire.

The Census and the report in Leeds would not have been possible without former Basis colleague Izzy Kynoch who facilitated the Census in Leeds, supporting the preparation and the completion, alongside the invaluable support from Homeless Link, Frontline Network, Solace Women's Aid, Leeds City Council and all the practitioners in Leeds working tirelessly to prevent and end women's homelessness in Leeds. Most importantly we would like to thank the women involved for giving us their time and trusting us to share their experiences.

April 2024

Background

The Women's Rough Sleeping Census in Leeds was conducted in the last week of September 2023, at the same time as it took place in London (30 boroughs) and 13 other local authorities across England. The census aims to collect more comprehensive data on women experiencing rough sleeping and trial a different method of data collection. In the 2023 census, the following definition of rough sleeping was used: ¹

“Having nowhere safe to stay at all: for example, sleeping outside on the ground or in a tent, sitting/sleeping in places which are open late or 24/7 (such as fast-food restaurants and hospitals), walking all night, sex working at night but not having anywhere to sleep during the day, using drugs in other people's accommodation at night but not having anywhere to sleep during the day, etc.

It is recognised that women may not do this every night, and rough sleeping may be interspersed with other forms of hidden homelessness such as staying in accommodation belonging to unsafe/unknown people/perpetrators, staying in 'cuckooed' flats, or staying with friends/family/associates on a very insecure and transitory basis (e.g. nightly or weekly, or regularly being forced to leave immediately)”²

The definition of rough sleeping for this was broader than the existing government definition of rough sleeping:

1. *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 street, in tents, doorways, parks, bus shelters or encampments).*
2. *People in buildings or other places not designed for habitation (such as stairwells, barns, sheds, car parks, cars, derelict boats, stations, or “bashes” which are makeshift shelters often comprised of cardboard boxes).*

The aim of the census was¹:

- Establish the circumstances and characteristics of women sleeping rough within that timeframe
- Identify some of the places where women are rough sleeping so that outreach services and other homelessness services can tailor their support to women out of sight of existing services.
- Refine the methods used for surveying women's rough sleeping (including hidden rough sleeping) by sharing the learning from participating local authorities across England.

The census aims to bring visibility to the experiences of women who are rough sleeping, using the above definition, to ensure it also includes people who might not always be sleeping outside on the street more often categorized as “hidden homeless” and therefore less likely to be represented in data, policy or services. We collected anonymised data over one week and combine with this other city wide data and discussion meetings to build an enhanced understanding of women's rough sleeping; with the aim of influencing and advocating for evidence based change.

The Census in Leeds

In Leeds, the following partners took part in the initiative:

- Bevan – Homeless GP Practice
- Francis House (Turning Lives Around) – housing charity
- St Anne's – a homelessness charity, hostel and substance use charity
- Change Grow Live - a homelessness charity

¹ Women's Rough Sleeping Census Report 2023: <https://www.solacewomensaid.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/FINAL-2023-WRSC-report-10-May-20241.pdf>

² Dept for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (2023) Rough sleeping snapshot in England: Autumn 2022. Official Statistics. Published 28 February 2023. Rough sleeping snapshot in England: autumn 2022 - GOV.UK (www.gov.uk)

- Together Women Project – a women’s charity
- Simon on the Streets – a homelessness charity
- Leeds Women’s Aid – Women’s domestic abuse charity
- Basis Yorkshire charity supporting women who sex work
- Joanna Project – charity supporting women who sex work
- Leeds City Council (Leeds Housing Options)

All of the above are third sector organisations of different sizes and include both the Third and Statutory Sector; this group of organisations were invited to take part either due to their current participation in the City’s Street Outreach program or as they work with women who are likely to be rough sleeping (or have recent experiences thereof). Basis Yorkshire facilitated and coordinated the exercise as part of their role as the lead facilitator of the Frontline Network for Women’s Housing and Homelessness in Leeds. Leeds City Council was able to support financially by offering survey participants a small £5 voucher in return for their participation. London based Solace Aid offered logistical support and guidance.

Methodology

The most significant component of the 2023 Census was the survey undertaken with 57 women by the above listed organisations. More than half were taken during their outreach, 42% were taken either at a drop in or while accessing the service otherwise; 4 were done as part of a gender informed census street outreach.

The vast majority of the surveys (84%) of surveys were undertaken by a Housing Officer/ Council Department (50%) or Homelessness organisation (34%).

Of those 57 only 50 surveys were ultimately deemed eligible following verification by the central census data collection (led by London based Solace Woman’s Aid supported by CGL who conducted the national data analysis). Following the census, we held a meeting with partners in October, bringing together all partners to review basic data about the number of women they work with who are rough sleeping. This final step helps establish an anonymised, representative picture of women rough sleeping in addition to the detail provided by the Census. The meeting was also used to explore general patterns and thoughts around women who rough sleep in Leeds including barriers to supported accommodation.

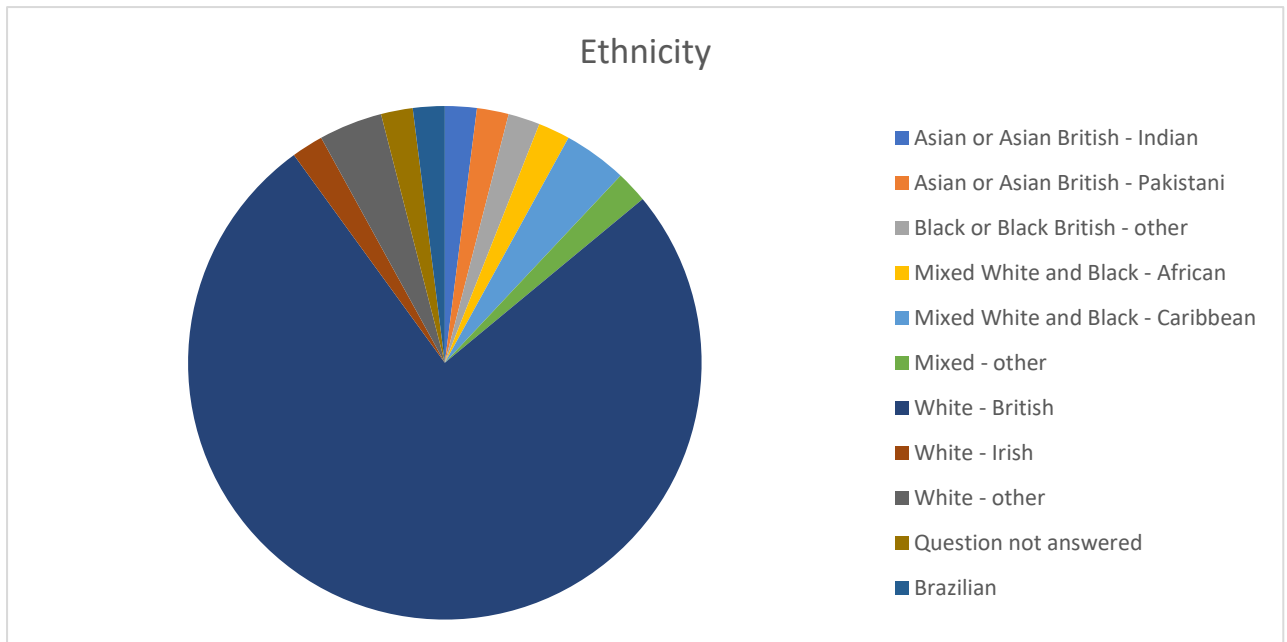
The final survey variables and available data included the following:

Women’s Recent Housing and Homelessness Circumstances	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • When women last slept rough • How many nights they had slept rough in the last 3 months • Where they stayed last night • Where they stayed prior to sleeping rough • Types of services accessed
Demographics	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Age • Ethnicity • Sex • Gender Identify

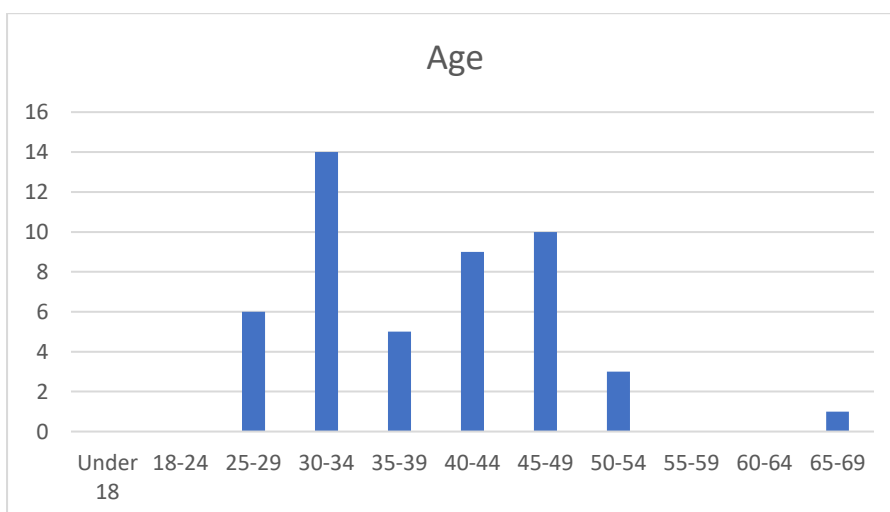
Census Findings

Demographics

The vast majority of respondents were White British (76%) with no other large representation among other ethnicities. Within the gender identity responses we found only 1 response indicating a different gender as that assigned at birth.



The average age was 39 with responses to this question ranging from 26 to 67, the vast majority of respondents falling in the 30- 49 age category (76%).



Homelessness Circumstances

When did you last sleep rough

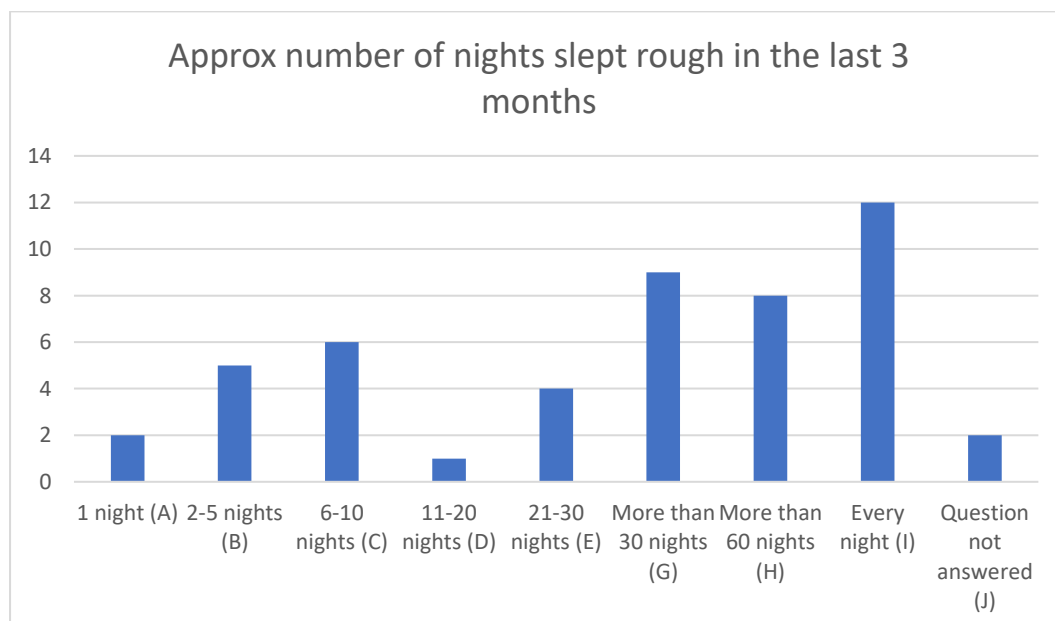
This question only allowed for 1 specific answer. The findings were as follows:

56% of women had slept rough last night, while a further 24% had slept rough in the last 3 months and 12% had slept rough in the last week. The largest cohort (slept rough last night) was also the oldest with an average age of 45 (above average); those who had slept rough in the last 3 months were only marginally younger (average age 42). Those who had slept rough in the last week were younger (average age of 34) though given that this is the smallest group size, it is difficult to assess whether any conclusions can be drawn from this. No obvious links were found with regards to ethnicity with this question.



Approximate number of nights slept rough in the last 3 months

The most common response here was "every night", followed by "more than 30" and "more than 60" nights; together this cohort represented over half of the responses (58%). A second significant cohort (22%) responded either "2-5 nights" or "6-10 nights". The largest cohort (every night) had an average age of 40, whereas the more sporadic cohort (2-5 and 6-10 nights) had a slightly younger age of 35. Among the smaller cohort of less frequent rough sleepers there was a relatively greater proportion of non-White British (3) vs the larger group (also 3).



Where have you stayed in the last 3 months

This question allowed respondents to give multiple answers, of which a breakdown can be found as follows:



Immediately noticeable is the great variety of responses. The average respondent gave between 3 and 4 different locations with 13 (26%) giving 4 different locations; and 3 women giving over 9 different locations. The variety indicates that a number of women are highly mobile and therefore might be harder to reach (not one fixed location). While we hear that women are less visible on the streets, many women did indicate sleeping on the streets as their most common response. The 2nd most common response was “walking around all night” possibly indicating a fear of sleeping on the streets at night.

On the other hand, nearly half of the respondents indicate to have been supported by a homelessness service, a night shelter, or other forms of temporary accommodation, indicating they are known to services (more info on their access to services further below). The data does not show an apparent link between having accessed supported or temporary accommodation and the total number of services they accessed or how many days they had been rough sleeping. Its noticeable how many stayed in places where they might be identified as homeless and be able to seek support such as A&E, hospital or a train or bus station. The vast majority of those who mentioned “staying with a stranger/new acquaintance” were over 30 years old.

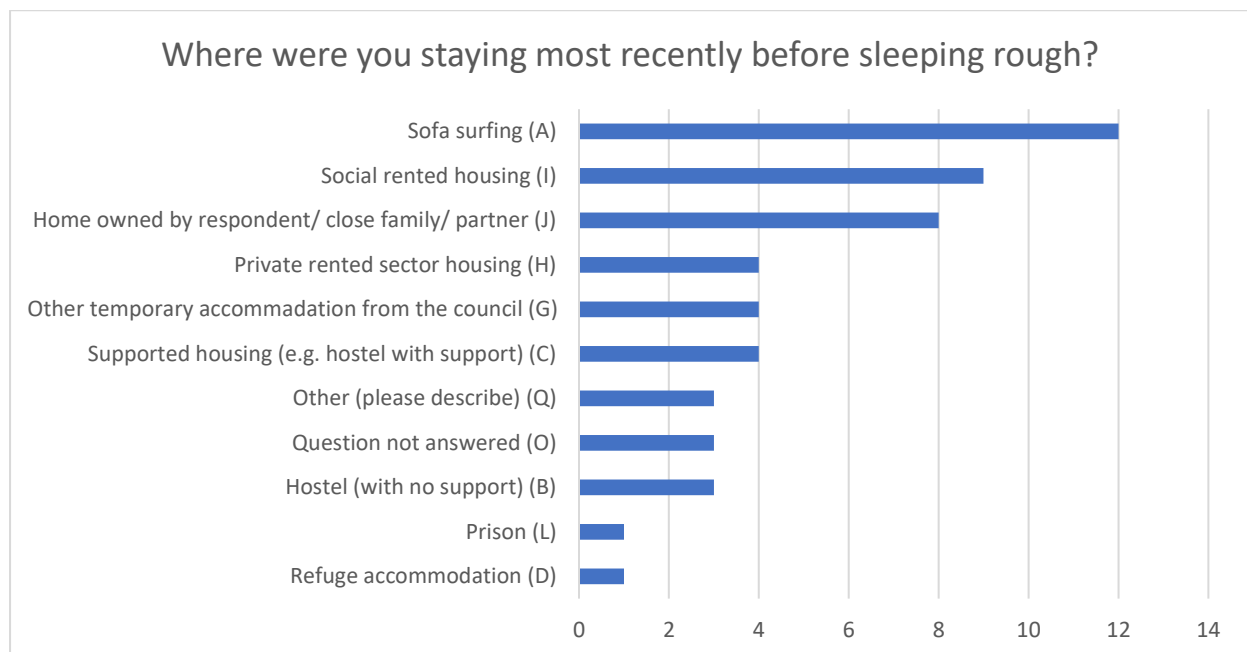
The answers around “Slept rough – other” varied greatly but included the following: In a trap or crack house (3x), bushes (2x), stairwells (2), in a tent (2), block of flats, with a punter (1x) or sex working (1x); car park (1x), in a phone box (1x)

Where were you staying most recently before sleeping rough?

This response specifically asks where women were staying most recently before sleeping rough. Here sofa surfing is the most common response, with particularly high representation among the younger cohort with 4 out of the 12 being under 30 (7 out of the total respondents are 30 or younger).

Other common responses were “staying with family” and “social or private rented”. The high response rate for the answer “home owned by respondent/close family/partner” could indicate family breakdown as the reason for rough sleeping, though this is not conclusive based on the data alone. The findings could indicate that women attempt to exhaust all other options prior to sleeping rough or are not aware that they can ask for support while sofa surfing, ie you don’t need to be sleeping outside to qualify for support.

1 in 5 women had been in either a refuge, supported housing, temporary accommodation or prison before sleeping rough, indicating that these women are known to services. Responses in the other category included: “in a car”, “with a friend”, “here there and everywhere”.



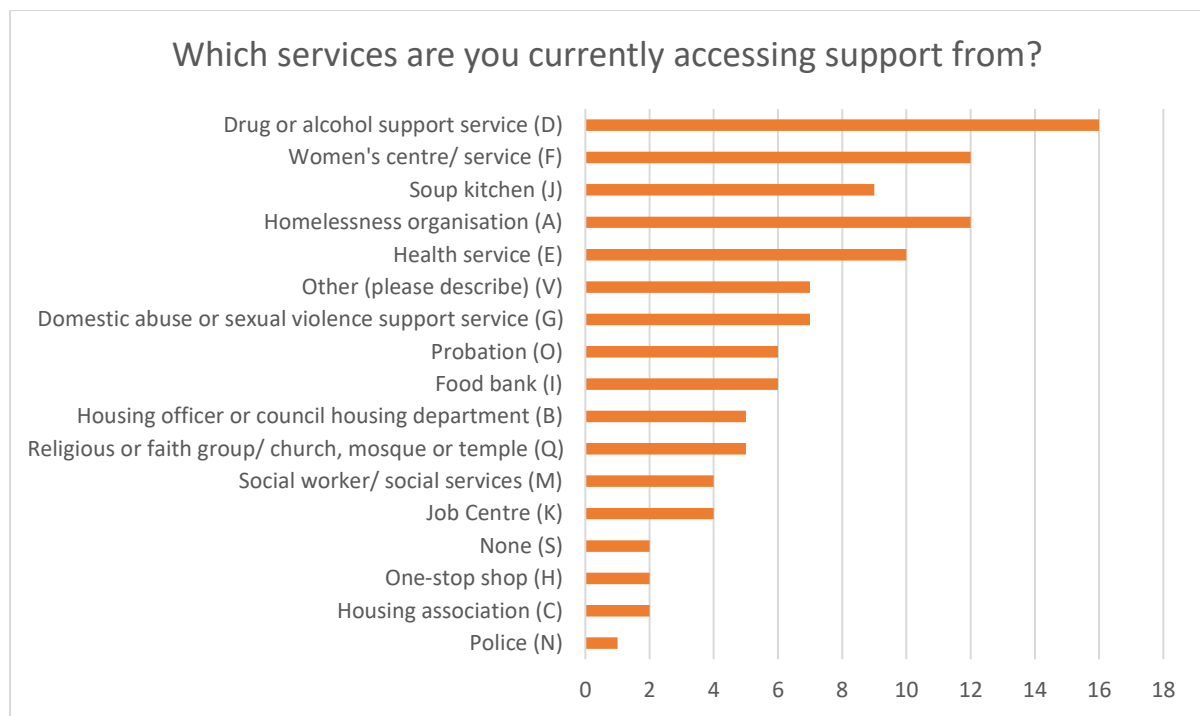
Which services are you currently accessing support from?

This question again generated a high variety of responses, with the vast majority offering more than one response, with the average respondent accessing an average of 3 services and just over half accessing 3 or more services. Just under a third mentioned only 1 service they accessed; among the 13 women this related to, 5 were supported by a women’s service. The other 2 most common responses (Homelessness organisation and Drug or Alcohol Support Organisation) were often mentioned in combination with other organisations.

The most common service to be accessed (just under a third) was a drug and alcohol service, pointing to the known relationship between substance use and rough sleeping, though the data cannot indicate whether this is the reason for their rough sleeping. The same can be said for the 7 women who were accessing domestic abuse or sexual violence support services. On the other hand, given the prevalence of domestic and sexual violence experienced by women who are homeless (whether related or not) the access to such specialist service can be considered low. Responses under “other” were for the vast majority sex work projects (the Joanna Project or Basis Yorkshire or both).

2 respondents answered they were not accessing any services, both were White British and had slept rough every night; both had a high variety of responses to where they had stayed in the last 3 months,

including a tent, on the street, in a squat house, walked all night, a shelter or in a stairwell. Both were surveyed on an outreach shift, one of which was gender informed.



Further Analysis

Further analysis was done on a number of specific cohorts including age and ethnicity. In addition, we looked at different cohorts, grouped according to how often they were rough sleeping in the last 3 months.

Ethnicity:

Of the women who indicated they were not White British the following could be found (24% of overall):

- Average age of 36, only slightly lower than the overall cohort
- 67% had accessed 3 or more services
- 3 (33%) reported to have stayed in a refuge accommodation or with a homeless service in the past 3 months (remainder staying on the street, in a stairwell, a squat etc)
- Responses relating to the length of time they had been rough sleeping in the past 3 months and where they had stayed prior to rough sleeping was highly varied

Age:

Of the 7 women who were 30 years of age or under the following can be found:

- 5 out of 7 were White British (71%);
- Responses were highly varied among services accessed (including the number of services accessed) and where they had stayed during the last 3 months
- More than half had been sofa surfing prior to rough sleeping
- 6 out of 7 responded they had been rough sleeping last night or in the past week
- 3 out of the 7 said they had been sleeping rough either every night or 60 nights out of the last 3 months, the other half stating between 2 and 20 nights, indicating some significant long periods of time rough sleeping, even at the younger age range

Of the 14 women aged 40 and over the following can be said:

- 86% were White British
- 86% had engaged with 2 or more services in the past 3 months
- 83% has slept rough more than 30 days over the past 3 months; with 25% stating they had slept rough every night and another 17% nights sleeping rough 60 nights
- Responses to where people had stayed either before rough sleeping or while they were rough sleeping was highly varied although only 15% (2) had accessed either a refuge, hostel or supported accommodation, potentially indicating a more entrenched pattern of rough sleeping.

Group 1 Women who slept rough more than 60 nights or every night

This cohort had 19 women (38% of overall cohort); below are the key points.

Age and Ethnicity	All were White British and had an average age of 35 (just under the overall average) but with an age range of 26 to 50.
Where had they stayed before sleeping rough	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - 37% replied that they had been in a home owned by themselves, partner or family member - 16% were in social rented housing or a council property - 11% were sofa surfing <p>Other responses included “can’t remember (6 yrs ago”, private landlord, hostel and supported accommodation.</p>
Where had they slept in the past 3 months	<p>On average 3 to 4 different responses were given to this question with the following breakdown</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - 58%: sleeping on the street - 47% a squat, trap house or crack den - 32% walked around all night - 26% a homeless service - 26% with a friend - 21% with a stranger or new acquaintance - 11% A&E and hospital (both answers for the same respondent) - 11% bus or train station - 11% in a car <p>Other responses included: with a relative, McDonalds, in custody, in a tent, in a stairwell or in bushes, 1 mentioned a B&B/hotel, temporary accommodation</p>
Which services did women access:	<p>The variety of responses here was lower; with 9 out of 19 mentioned 2 or more services; this cohort also includes the 2 women who responded they were not in touch with any services</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - 32% mentioned women’s service - 26% mentioned a homelessness organisation - 26% mentioned drug or alcohol service - 16% mentioned a sex work project - 11% mentioned probation - 11% mentioned housing officer or council department

	Other single responses including: soup kitchen, domestic abuse and sexual violence service
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Group 2 Women who slept rough more than 30 nights (but not more than 60)

A small cohort (only 9); below are the key points from this group.

Age and Ethnicity	Average age 45 (34 – 67) 6 out of 9 White British - 33% (above average) representation of other ethnicities
Where had they stayed before sleeping rough	Responses were highly varied: Social Housing (2); Leeds City Council (2); sofa surfing (1) in a car (1), with a friend (1), Housing Association (1), Supported Housing (1)
Where had they slept in the past 3 months	An average number of 5 responses per answer - higher variety than average including 66% slept on the street 56% walking around all night 44% McDonalds or similar 44% Bus or Train station 44%: With a stranger/new acquaintance 33% in an A&E waiting room 22% Homelessness organisation 22% in a squat Other answers included: In a stairwell (1), on a bus/train (1), in hospital (1) in a house owned or rented (1), with a friend (1), block of flats (1), with a relative
Which services did women access:	Between 4 and 5 services were accessed and included the following with a higher variety of responses: 66% Homelessness Organisation 56% Domestic Abuse and Sexual Violence service 56% Soup Kitchen 44% Food Bank 33% Drug or Alcohol service 33% Women's Centre 33% Health Service 33% Housing Officer or Council Department Other responses included: Social worker/services (2), GP (1); Religious group (1), Job Centre (1)

Group 3 Women who slept rough 10 nights or less

The second biggest cohort were those who slept rough 10 nights or less in the past 3 months: 12 women (24% of overall group of women surveyed).

Age and Ethnicity	Average age: 37 (27-53) 7 out of 12 White British (above average 58% presentation of other ethnicities)
Where had they stayed before sleeping rough	4 had been sofa surfing, the remainder of the responses were only given once but included: Prison; Private Sector rented, Refuge, Supported Housing, Hostel (no support), other Temporary accommodation, Leeds City Council property
Where had they slept in the past 3 months	Most had between 3-4 responses (including those who mentioned they'd only slept rough 1 night which could indicate a high level of mobility) although 4 also mentioned only 1 place <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - 50% walked around all night - 33% slept outside on the street - 33% A&E - 33% bus or train station or on a bus or train - 25% homelessness service <p>Other responses (2 or less) including: with a stranger, with a relative, with a punter, refuge accommodation, Housing owned/rented, social, in a car or in a squat, McDonalds or similar</p>
Which services did women access:	A high average level of services were accessed: between 3 and 4; only 1 had only 1 service Most often mentioned were: 67% Homelessness Organisation 42% Health service 42% Drug and Alcohol Service 25% Domestic Abuse and Sexual Violence 25% Housing Officer or Council Dept 16%: Probation 16%: Religious or Faith Group Other answers included: Mental Health service, Job Centre, One Stop shop, Police and Food Bank

Points to note on differences among the above groups

As the above group sizes are relatively small (other than the biggest cohort) it's hard to draw too many or firm conclusions from the above findings though we did note the following:

- The group who had been rough sleeping the longest tended to be more likely to have lived in a house owned by a partner or family member, indicating family breakdown being one of the reasons for rough sleeping.
- A higher average age was noted for the group that was rough sleeping 30 nights or less

- The group that had been rough sleeping for 10 days or less was more likely to be of a different ethnicity; while the group who had been rough sleeping for 60 days or more tended to have the largest representation of White British women
- The 2 groups with the longest period of rough sleeping (group 1 and 2) were most likely to have "slept on the street", whereas the group that had been rough sleeping for 10 days or less (group 3) were more likely to "walking around" perhaps indicating a fear of staying in one place. The group with the longest period of rough sleeping were more likely to mention a squat or crack den. Group 3 also didn't indicate to have been with a "stranger or new friend /acquaintance" as often as the other 2 groups; this could be due to this only being considered an option for those who had been rough sleeping for longer?
- The group who had been rough sleeping 10 days or less tended to be more in touch with Faith Groups, and Domestic Abuse and Sexual Violence services whereas the group who had been rough sleeping longer (more than 60 days) mentioned less services overall, although sex work services were a common response. The group who were rough sleeping for more than 30 days (but less than 60) had more contact with Soup Kitchens and Food Banks.
- Group 2 (more than 30 days) also seemed to be accessing a higher average of services; this could indicate they still feel there is a possibility to engage and attempt to avoid rough sleeping for a significant amount of time; whereas the longer rough sleeping continues, the less engagement there might be with services?

Reflection and wider data collection partners

A further data collection was completed and a wider discussion held with the group of partners.

Based on this an estimated total of 120 women were counted as reported having been rough sleeping at least one night in the past quarter. Partners who regularly conduct street outreach commented on the fact that the overall number of women rough sleeping has risen, as has the number of women seen. The Census had highlighted there were a significant number of women that were not being recognised in the "street count"..

Further reflection on this by partners led us to conclude that there did not appear to be a significant overlap between services accessing women; while this might appear efficient, this might also indicate potential for improved collaboration and coordination among partners and mitigating the risk of dependency on a small number of partners.

Further reflections on addressing the needs of those rough sleeping:

- Those who were rough sleeping sometimes were not able to sustain a tenancy once housed; evidencing the need for holistic support over and above housing alone; another reason for this might be a fear of failing to live up to expectations due to poor self-esteem or leaving their former network of friends in the rough sleeping community, in particular if in combination with recovery or rehab
- A barrier that was raised was housing for couples including those who continue to experience domestic abuse as women can be coerced into staying with their partner; although this sometimes may appear to be her choice.

Reflections on the logistics and overall project:

- All commented on the need for a longer lead up time for 2024 and the need for more preparation
- For data analysis purposes it is noted that many services in Leeds offer a number of services (GP services offer a substance abuse service, sex work projects and women's services also offer a Domestic Abuse service) which may distort some of the responses around access to services
- Some practitioners mentioned the desire for additional qualitative data
- Improved communication and facilitation of the Practitioners (in addition to the webinars that were held in preparation) will improve the understanding of the process including the data collection from services and partner reflection session
- Improved communication with those we are aiming to reach through preparation in advance of a survey; ensuring women aren't startled or taken aback by the survey which might influence their interest in taking part
- More thought to be given to what times of day are best: for those sex working, taking valuable time off work for a £5 voucher may not be worth it

Conclusions

The first of its kind in Leeds, the survey enabled us to document a snapshot of women rough sleeping that has not happened previously and generated greater interest among stakeholders in understanding more, while also recognising the limitations of the exercise. It has also led to a greater interest in working more closely between “street outreach” and “women’s specialist” organisations which has continued beyond the Census itself.

Key findings

- A high number of women (38% or 19) are rough sleeping for a considerable number of nights (60 nights or every night in the past 3 months); they are hidden, often transient and the locations and ways they are rough sleeping mean they often fall outside of the official definition of Homelessness; nor are they likely to be identified in the same way on city centre street counts
- The cohort survey is relatively homogenous in relation to ethnicity
- There is a wide range of ages among women who are rough sleeping – although none were found under the age of 25, the vast majority of age ranges were relatively evenly spread between 25 and 54, with one woman aged 69 surveyed
- Women tend to have a high variety of different places they stay during the night, of which most are relatively hidden; though some are less hidden and offer a clear opportunity to engage (e.g. A&E, McDonalds, bus or train station); a fear of being in one place is clear from the high levels that responded “walking around at night”
- Women access on average 3 or more services to seek support, though they differ greatly; the 3 most common are rough sleeping and drug and alcohol services. Domestic abuse and sexual violence services are underrepresented when taking into account the experience of sexual and domestic violence among women, although these experiences might not have been disclosed
- A number of worrying indicators from a safeguarding perspective were also raised including the high number of women staying in squats or trap houses and the high number of women staying with a “stranger or new friend/acquaintance”.

Recommendations

- Strategic local authority leadership to ensure a gender-informed lens to commissioning, design and review of all services involved with people at risk of or actively rough sleeping to ensure that women who rough sleep are not at a disadvantage due to the different manner of rough sleeping women often adopt (including being more transient and hidden) including adopting the wider definition of rough sleeping
- A commitment to support a repeat of the census in 2024 with a longer lead up time, in order to be better prepared and trained (both practitioners and women) and greater clarity around definitions of rough sleeping and services accessed
- Commit to resource more capacity for emergency accommodation (including women only) as the census clearly demonstrates the need is greater than current capacity as well as ongoing assessment of mixed gender services to ensure it meets the needs of women who rough sleep
- Ensure communications are targeted and specific to ensure those who are at risk of rough sleeping are aware of their options for support, meaningful opportunities for preventative action are not missed
- Commit to sharing of findings to a wider audience (including health, domestic abuse groups etc) to raise awareness of hidden homelessness and support available
- Ensure regular coordination and collaboration between street outreach and other specialist and women’s organisations is promoted, including working together to offer a gender focused outreach service and joint learning about issues affecting women specifically
- Improve identification of women in public places such as A&E, McDonalds and Bus or Train Stations
- Improve safe routes out of coercive environments with suitable alternatives for those in trap houses, crack dens
- Offer of additional resources for smaller organisations to take part to a greater extent than otherwise available