

# Out in the cold

Homelessness among destitute  
refugees in London

Refugees reveal the reality of living in destitution

- KEY FINDINGS

# 1. KEY FINDINGS<sup>1</sup>

## 1.1 Living situation

### 1.1.1 Levels of street homelessness

A significant majority of respondents were or had been street homeless: 58% (over 62% of those who gave us information about it), had slept rough within the last year<sup>2</sup>, and nearly 20% for more than a month. 5% had slept on the streets the night before filling out the survey<sup>3</sup>, and 13% had slept in a shelter of some kind, 4% in a shelter that changed every night, and 9% in another kind of shelter. Alongside some perpetual street homelessness sits a wider pattern of sporadic rough sleeping, pointing to a perpetual vulnerability to street homelessness.

62%

of refugees have been street homeless in the last year

### 1.1.2 Insecurity of accommodation

Overall, living arrangements were found to be highly unstable, with a large number at constant risk of having to sleep outside.

Nearly half of respondents – 47% – did not have a regular place to sleep, instead sleeping in different places on different nights.<sup>4</sup> People would couch-surf, going from friend to friend. Several people reported coming home to find themselves locked out for the night, as a fairly routine occurrence. This helps to explain the sporadic rough sleeping: sometimes, they managed to find a floor to sleep on, sometimes not. Unsurprisingly, the vast majority of people – 87% of those surveyed – said they did not feel in control of when they left their current accommodation, while only 8% said that they did.<sup>5</sup>

*“I go from one friend’s to another.”*

A more specific point needs to be made about the nature of this instability. Respondents were asked how long they had been staying in the place they had slept on the previous night. 81 people, 60% of those who answered, said that they had been staying there for 6 months or more and were

1 Percentages are rounded to the nearest whole number.

2 People were asked: ‘How many nights in the last year have you found yourself sleeping on the streets?’ 79 people – 58% of total respondents – had slept on the streets at some point in the last year, corresponding to 62% of those who answered (the figure of 79 includes one person who did not state how long they had been sleeping on the streets, but did state that they had been on the streets the previous night – and therefore evidently at some point in the last year).

3 7 people.

4 People were asked “Do you tend to stay in different places on different nights?” 48% of those who answered said yes, corresponding to 47% of total respondents.

5 In a list of questions about current accommodation, respondents were asked: ‘Do you feel in control of how long you stay there?’, given the options of yes or no, and asked to explain. 87% of all respondents, 91% of those who answered the question, said no. Not all who did not answer ‘yes’ or ‘no’ ignored the question; some skipped over the multiple choice aspect and gave an answer in their own words, normally more nuanced.

not street homeless.<sup>6</sup> Taken on its own, this might seem to suggest a relatively stable living situation. However, such a suggestion would be misleading: 44% of those people also reported that they stayed in different places on different nights, which is only slightly lower than the overall percentage of people who stayed in different places on different nights.<sup>7</sup> For these people, the place they have been staying for 6 months is not, evidently, a stable home, but one of multiple places in which they lodge informally, and, in some cases, from which they may find themselves locked out without notice on any given night.

## 1.2 Living conditions for those in accommodation

63% of people reported that they had stayed in some kind of house or flat the previous night. The below focuses principally on their experience, though it also includes some respondents who stayed in shelters. Most people live in conditions that are not fit for habitation – one of the criteria for legal homelessness. Several trends emerged about physical living conditions, detailed below.

### 1.2.1 Overcrowding

*“I share a small room with children and sleep on the floor. I’m sick and walk with a stick.”*

Overcrowding is difficult to quantify via a questionnaire as perceptions of what counts as overcrowded vary. We sought to measure this by asking both how many

# 36%

of refugees don't feel physically safe in their accommodation

people respondents lived with, and how many bedrooms there were. This itself had limitations in that it did not establish how many rooms were shared between partners, but we thought it important to avoid too intrusive a line of questioning. As an indication: over 56% of those staying in flats or houses, and answering questions about number of rooms,<sup>8</sup> stayed in properties with more than twice the number of people than bedrooms.<sup>9</sup> That is, over half of the relevant people stayed in accommodation with more than two people per bedroom. This suggests that overcrowding is a significant issue for many at the Day Centre, which was reinforced by responses to more open-ended questions.

Numerous people reported sleeping on the floor or on a sofa, either in a communal area, or in a room shared with several others. Several of those who reported this were older. For example, a married couple in their 60s slept on the floor, and a woman of 57 said she slept on a chair. In light of this, one ought to consider the possibility that not having a bed is very common. Plausibly, people accustomed to hardship cease to focus

# 47%

of refugees do not have a regular place to sleep

6 85 people, 63% of respondents, 66% of those who answered, said that they had been staying there for 6 months or more. 4 of those people were street homeless.

7 Of the 85 people who had been staying in the place they stayed last night for 6 months or more, 39 stayed in different places on different nights. However, 3 of those were street homeless, as were 4 of the total 85. Therefore, 36 people were a) not currently street homeless b) had been staying somewhere for 6 months or more and c) stayed in different places in different nights. This is 44% of all those who a) were not currently street homeless and b) had been staying somewhere for 6 months or more.

8 *i.e.*, excluding those who answered “Not applicable” or did not answer the question “How many bedrooms are there in the place where you stayed last night?”

9 41 out of 73 people.

on some aspects of it. A relatively young and healthy person might come to find this normal. Older people are most likely to feel it and therefore to bring it up when asked to describe their living conditions.

### 1.2.2 Uninhabitable conditions

The survey did not ask specifically about living conditions, partly because it focused on levels of homelessness, and partly because it was intended to give respondents a chance to talk about what they thought was most important. Nonetheless, the poor condition of their accommodation came up in response to many questions, suggesting that it was a significant feature of respondents' experience. There were reports of:

- Rat-infested properties;
- Bed-bug infestation;
- Properties soiled with faeces;<sup>10</sup>
- Chronically dirty properties;
- Cold or unheated properties.

### 1.2.3 The threat and/or experience of physical violence looms large

*“their [my housemates’] behaviour is bad.”*

*“I feel in danger being in different places sometimes I do not know the person living with me.”*

*“I need a proper safe place to stay.”*

*“Sometimes I come late just to avoid problems at home. And stay in the cold or without food.”*

36% of people said they did not feel physically safe in their accommodation.<sup>11</sup> When respondents were asked to give their views on the accommodation situation of destitute refugees, the theme of safety and security came up repeatedly. Responses to the question, “What do you think about the living arrangements of destitute refugees as a whole?” included: “Very unsafe”; “People

<sup>10</sup> It needs to be borne in mind that, in many cases, those surveyed had no control even over the internal condition of their accommodation.

<sup>11</sup> Corresponding to 38% of those who answered the question. It should be borne in mind that some may find this an uncomfortable question to answer – especially if they do not feel safe.

## Refugee Stories: **Marius and Svetlana**

Marius and Svetlana, a couple in their 60s, have been in the UK for 15 years. They have spent much of that time sleeping on the streets, including around a month within the last year. Now, they share a room in a church-based hostel. Do they feel safe there? “Yes, it’s secure. They help,” they both agree. “But when I go out I am scared”, Svetlana adds.

They don’t have money to buy food, so they take food from bins to eat.

They are grateful for the help they receive from the church, but feel let down by the government whom they asked for protection: “Thank you for...[those who host us]. I wouldn’t be alive if not for them. The government never gives support,” says Svetlana. “I am 15 years here. No support, no help. The government does not care”.

who are destitute must be provided a safe place to stay”; “refugees like us...[should be] respected and offered accommodation as being homeless is dangerous all the time.”

Many respondents reported highly volatile situations. “Anything can happen” was a common refrain. Asked about how they felt about their accommodation situation, a respondent said: “I feel bad because anything can happen to me any time”; similarly, asked if they felt in control of how long they stayed in their current accommodation, one person answered no. They remarked: “anything can happen”. It is evident that this volatility and insecurity was closely connected to fear or experience of physical violence, because it was especially prominent when people were asked whether they felt physically safe, or to explain why they didn’t. For instance, responses to this question included:

*“Not really. So many people. Anything can happen any time.”*

*“Family but still a bit insecure. Anything can happen.”*

*“No.”* When asked to explain: *“I don’t know what’s gonna happen.”*

Similar comments elsewhere in interviews included:

*“I don’t know what could happen to me.”*<sup>12</sup>

*“I don’t know what happens tomorrow.”*

Hosting schemes provided a measure of safety in this context, and all respondents in the JRS UK hosting scheme felt safe.

42%

of refugees do not feel comfortable around the people they stay with

#### 1.2.4 Undernourishment and malnourishment

Several respondents referred to not having enough to eat. This is significant because food was not mentioned in the survey, nor was it obviously a natural focus of it. When asked to reflect on their housing situation, food came up.

#### 1.2.5 Poor living conditions had an adverse effect on mental and physical health

*“I feel worried as I don’t get permanent place to live and my health become worse.”*

Unsurprisingly given the above, many people reported that their living situation was having an adverse effect on their health. Reports included:

- One woman who had just been released from hospital and was still recovering was staying in very overcrowded conditions; there were two bedrooms and 7 people;
- A woman in her late fifties to early sixties explained, *“I share a small room with children and sleep on the floor. I’m sick and walk with a stick.”*

This is in line with research by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, which noted that, in many cases, destitution was bad for mental and physical health.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>12</sup> The original French: “Je ne sais pas ce qui peut m’arriver.”

<sup>13</sup> Joseph Rowntree Foundation, “Destitution in the UK” (April 2016), pp.44-48.

### 1.2.6 Frail and older people in destitution

In several of the interviews quoted, respondents described the difficulty of being older in their living situations. It is important to bear in mind that extended destitution takes a huge toll on the human body. So do the kinds of trauma that many refugees experienced in their countries of origin – such as torture. Aging and frailty are likely to set in earlier for destitute refugees than for the UK population as a whole. A woman of 57 thus described herself as an “old woman”.

Of those who stated their age, one in five were over 55 years old, which suggests that older people in destitution are a significant phenomenon. This is corroborated by data from Doctors of the World, another organisation that works with vulnerable and impoverished populations, and disproportionately with migrants: in 2016, 15% of patients in Doctors of the World’s UK clinics were 50 or over.<sup>14</sup>

# 87%

of refugees do not feel in control of their accommodation

## 1.3 Destitute refugees’ feelings and reflections

### 1.3.1 Trapped in a painful situation

*“I just need my freedom.”*

42% of people said that they did not feel comfortable around those they lived with.<sup>15</sup> This, of course, could be a response to a wide range of scenarios or cover a range of feelings, but it was a good starting point for a deeper conversation. In people’s

explanations of their discomfort, and in their wider reflections on their situation, a pattern emerged: there was frequently a sense of being trapped – one man actually likened destitution to imprisonment – and a very widespread feeling that agency and autonomy were lacking. This was naturally framed by the total inability to control one’s home and therefore one’s life. It played out in several overlapping ways, often involving a privation of bodily autonomy, and connected to physical danger.

### 1.3.1a Forced to live with abuse and in danger

Many respondents felt forced by homelessness into accepting abuse – and often connected this with the experience or fear of physical violence. One man explained: “When it’s cold I have to accept any mistreatment...” A woman stated: “I don’t have a choice. I have to comply with the conditions in the place where I live.”<sup>16</sup> Asked whether he felt physically safe, one man replied “Not really, but [I] have no choices”.

### 1.3.1b Lack of freedom to structure one’s life or perform basic tasks

Destitute refugees often find themselves utterly dependent on the hospitality of others – many of whom might give it grudgingly, many of whom themselves have relatively few resources and relatively little space. This means having to fit around someone else’s life in every possible way. At the same time, without money, opportunities to take a break away from the house are scarce; in the absence of work or the funds to go to a café, one may be stuck in the house all day, an unwelcome guest, accommodating oneself to a host’s routine. This provides valuable context for the following remarks from the interviews.

<sup>14</sup> <https://www.doctorsoftheworld.org.uk/Handlers/Download.ashx?IDMF=72acc37f-bdc6-44b4-82b8-c17bc462ddff>.

<sup>15</sup> Corresponding to 45% of those who answered the question – which is, like the question about physical safety, potentially a difficult question to answer.

<sup>16</sup> The original French: “Je dois me soumettre à l’endroit où je vis.”



For many, living with others on whom they were dependent meant that they were unable to choose when to eat, sleep, or wash, and were sometimes prevented from doing so altogether.

*“If only I could have my freedom to look after myself properly.”*

*“You do things their way. You do not sleep the time you want, or get up the time you want.”*

*“Since I sleep on a chair in the living room, I must wait for everyone to leave the room so that I can sleep and I have to be the first to wake up to vacate the living room...”<sup>17</sup>*

*“I sleep in the living room, I can’t sleep before the host.”<sup>18</sup>*

*“I have limited [time] to do something, time to go to shower, time to eat and watch TV, I don’t like it.”*

*“Sometimes I am prevented to do certain things”; What, if anything, would make you feel more comfortable in your accommodation? “I would like to have my own place, to feel free.”*

Related to this was the almost total deficit, for many, of privacy.

*“I have no freedom for myself, no privacy, share room with children.”*

*“[I have] no freedom, [I’m] stressed, [I have] no privacy.”*

*“I feel sad, and especially I do not have my own privacy anymore.”<sup>19</sup>*

*“I don’t have privacy...I don’t sleep properly.”<sup>20</sup>*

Many respondents had no freedom to come and go, but had to wait for their housemates to get home and unlock the door at an unspecified time – and a time that might not come:

*“I have no keys to the house. So I usually stay outside to wait for them.”*

17 The original French: “Je dors sur une chaise au salon, je dois attendre que tout le monde quitte pour dormir et je dois me reveiller le premier pour liberer le salon...”

18 The original French: “Je dors au salon, je peux pas dormir avant le propriétaire.”

19 The original French: “Je me sens triste, et surtout je n’ai plus ma propre intimité.”

20 The original French: “Je n’ai pas d’ intimité...je ne dors pas convenablement.”

## Refugee Stories: Litzian

Litzian, a woman aged 26-35. Litzian was street homeless, and had been so for more than 6 months, sleeping outside on her own. She moved around from place to place each night, depending on the weather. She explained that she was often in physical danger: “Living on the streets means that I

am at great risk of being assaulted.” This, she thought, was typical, but that didn’t make it endurable: “We are left at the mercy of people we don’t know. Abuse is common and somewhat expected. People like me have an impossible life to lead.”

*"[I want] A house for myself. You open the door you can go inside. Sometimes when I am late people are not happy."*

*"Sometimes I get home late and the home is closed. No keys, so had to go elsewhere..."*

*"Sometimes I stay outside for hours for him [my host] to come and open the house door."<sup>21</sup>*

### 1.3.1c Lack of assurance over one's home

*"...they tell me just to leave."*

The feeling of being trapped was wedded to the insecurity of almost all living arrangements. Across the spectrum of feelings about one's hosts or housemates and one's living conditions, a profound awareness of uncertainty and instability was constant. Sometimes, it was part of an explanation for why the respondent didn't feel safe:

*"I can be out at any time."*

*"it is not easy to know that you might need to leave the place at any time."*

Or a caveat, overshadowing a feeling of safety:

Do you feel physically safe? *"Yes, but I don't know how long I will stay in this place."*

Other similar remarks included:

*"My host family are very kind and lovely people. But I am afraid they may need their space at any moment."*

*"The place does not belong to me, the owner can need her space in the future."*

Inevitably, the constant threat of having nowhere to sleep profoundly shaped the way people saw the world.

### 1.3.1d Indignity of being unable to contribute or participate

Even among those who currently had somewhere safe to live, and whose hosts were kind, there was a profound feeling of being a burden (a term specifically used by seven respondents). People didn't want to be completely dependent. People desperately wanted to contribute to their households – often to deter their hosts from mistreating them, but also, in other cases, to repay their hosts' kindness.

A respondent who was afraid of their housemates was asked what would improve their situation. They replied: "[To] contribute e.g. food, electricity, gas, water."

*"You feel you are overstaying your welcome."*

One man who said he did feel not only safe but also comfortable said he felt so because the friend he lived with was old, and he looked after him, so it was like charity. He felt comfortable because, unlike most others, he had agency and the chance to contribute in his living situation: "my friend is an old man over 80. I help him as well, so it is part of charity work so I'm happy". His situation, atypically, afforded some opportunity to stand in solidarity with another who stood in solidarity with him, and this gave him dignity. It is notable that, while he saw his assistance to his friend as meaningful work, he still expressed a desire for more opportunity to work and contribute. He told me, "If immigration problem is solved...[t]hen I will do charity work as well."

21 The original French: "Des fois je reste dehors pendant des heures pour qu'il vienne ouvrir la maison."



## Refugee Stories: Mahmood

Mahmood, a man between the ages of 36 and 45. 8 years ago, he spent over a year on the streets, often sleeping rough for two or three months at a time, then was on and off the streets for 7 years. He had spent over a month sleeping rough over the past year. He moved around from night to night: “I sometimes stay with a friend, sometimes on the street, sometimes with family.”

Mahmood gave a gruelling description of his life on and off the streets: “It’s not good. Very, very bad. No matter how you try, you end up...mixing with unkind people. They steal your things. You can’t carry everything all the time. All the time, you’re not really clean. Your shoes are wet.” He describes being trapped by the inability to work, by the total lack of resources or choices: “It’s like you are in prison, but you are walking around on the streets. It’s like you are a prisoner who was let out on license and you have to report to the police and you know you are still a prisoner. We are treated worse than criminals. When I went to sign, I asked what help they could give me. They said ‘nothing’.”

In this horrifying situation, there is both kindness and resilience. For several months, Mahmood slept in a tent underneath a tree in a park. One day, he went out. When he returned, a branch had fallen, and broken the tent. His response? “I gave thanks to God, because if I had been in the tent, I

could have been hurt or even killed.” A few days later, he returned to find a brand new tent in place of his old one. Thinking it belonged to someone else, he slept outside it for about a week, but no occupier turned up. He realised the tent had been a gift for him, from an anonymous well-wisher.

At the time the survey was conducted, he was sleeping at a friend’s, where he had been staying on and off for six months. When there, he felt physically safe and comfortable, but described tight constraints on him. He couldn’t go into the kitchen if anyone was in there, and he didn’t have his own key or own space. His current accommodation was also insecure, and he was sometimes ill-treated but felt he was unable to complain: “I can go back on the streets at any time. When it’s cold, I have to accept any mistreatment or if anyone is not happy.”

For Mahmood this was a massive improvement. “There are some other places I have slept in the past year where I don’t feel safe...Other friends want money and drink.” He reflected on his situation: “If you live in someone’s house, not paying rent, not working, you don’t expect nice words every day, and you have to accept it, because otherwise you end up on the streets.”

### 1.3.2 Immigration status

Immigration status and fear of immigration enforcement appeared in the interviews repeatedly and unbidden. Many people explicitly linked their housing situation to their immigration situation, though immigration was nowhere mentioned in the questionnaire. For several people, lack of immigration status was a significant factor in creating fear, alongside housemates' behavior. When asked what would make their situation better, one man replied simply: "If immigration problem is solved then I will be okay."

At times, the responses turned to immigration status or control by government when the question had more obviously focused on the relationship with housemates. When asked whether they felt in control of when they left their accommodation, one person responded: "I can be detained at any moment." Someone else explained that they did not feel physically safe in their accommodation because of "Fear of arrest and deportation." They were afraid of being removed from the UK. This person also had a tense relationship with their host, who was pressuring them to move out. Nonetheless, in this case, it was the government who additionally threatened them with physical danger. An older woman who did feel safe in her accommodation said she felt so in part because those she lived with "don't call the police".

*"I can be detained at any moment."*

This offers important context for the frequently expressed sense that "anything can happen." Anything could happen on so many levels, in any and every sphere of life. Housemates and immigration officials both present danger: homelessness and statelessness bleed into one another.

### 1.3.3 Destitution as dehumanising

*"We left our countries due to different problems, political or other, thinking that our situation would be improved but on the contrary we found ourselves in a worse place. This should be treated more humanly."*

11 respondents explicitly stated that refugees should be treated as human beings, that refugees were human beings, or that refugees were not treated as human beings. Again, no question on the survey particularly invited this response. Nowhere did the survey ask about the humanness of refugees, or even couch the issue of homelessness in terms of the treatment (as opposed to experience) of refugees. The neglected humanness of refugees came up, again and again, when destitute refugees were asked, in the most general terms, for their reflections on their own or other refugees' experiences and situation. The responses are quoted below:

*"I believe it's a basic right of asylum seekers or refugees to be helped because they are human beings at the end of the day. To be in this situation makes you feel unwanted."*

*"We left our countries due to different problems, political or other, thinking that our situation would be improved but on the contrary we found ourselves in a worse place. This should be treated more humanly."*

*"I believe refugees should be treated as humans."*

*"We should be helped as we are human beings."*

*“As human beings, refugees should be treated good.”*

*“I would be happy...if refugees are [were] treated like humans.”*

*“Refugees are human beings they should have their own accommodation.”*

*“refugees are human beings they should have accommodation.”*

*“It [the living arrangements of destitute refugees as a whole] is not good for humans.”*

*“We live through very difficult times now... we do not have status or secure accommodation for ourselves. I think that all human beings have the right to have accommodation. This should not be regarded as a luxury but as a priority for all.”<sup>22</sup>*

These all indict refugees’ exclusion from human community and the good things that should be for everyone. One person in particular considered how this exclusion was bad for community:

*“The forced destitution of asylum seekers and refugees is not good to anyone – not to themselves, their communities, or family. It is a major violation of human rights.”*

This speaks powerfully of a denial of human dignity that is fundamentally detrimental to the common good.

In 2016,

**41%**

of asylum appeals were granted

### **1.3.4 Reflections on the government**

Related to both the focus on immigration and the concern with dehumanisation, many respondents turned to systemic issues: the system should be improved, the government should help, this was an injustice. There were a number of responses calling for systemic change or serious research, or critiquing the government from a human rights perspective.

*“The government does not do anything at all, any arrangements at all are by charities only and there are a handful of them. We need more.”*

*“It must be publicly investigated and researched.”*

<sup>22</sup> The original French: “Nous vivons des moments très, très difficiles...on n’as pas de papier, aussi pas d’endroit pour nous securiser. Je pense que tout être humain a le droit d’avoir un abri cela ne doit pas être un luxe mais une prioritee pour tous.”



Jesuit Refugee Service UK  
Hurtado Jesuit Centre  
2 Chandler Street  
London  
E1W 2QT

tel: 020 7488 7310  
fax: 020 7488 7329  
e-mail: [uk@jrs.net](mailto:uk@jrs.net)  
web: [www.jrsuk.net](http://www.jrsuk.net)

