

Cambridge Centre
for Housing &
Planning Research

Estimating the scale of youth homelessness in the UK

Executive Summary

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Foreword

How do you go about allocating resources to solve a problem when you don't know the scale of it? That's the reality facing any charity, government or local authority who wishes to tackle youth homelessness.

Changes in the way information is collected means that data on youth homelessness is patchy at best. Some local authorities continue to record data on young people supported by hostels in their area, but the picture is mixed. At the same time, the main source of data held by central government – statutory homelessness figures – only include those who are found to be in a 'priority need' group, such as under 18s, care leavers up to the age of 21 and those with children of their own. Most single homeless people over 18 are therefore missing from these statistics.

In response to this situation, Centrepoin commissioned Cambridge University to calculate an estimate of the true scale of youth homelessness. As part of this, we sought to understand the extent of all forms of youth homelessness, including the numbers of young people in hostels or supported accommodation services, and more hidden forms of homelessness such as sofa surfing, where young people move between different friends' and family members' sofas because they have nowhere else to go.

Previous estimates of youth homelessness by the Universities of York and Heriot Watt which found that 78,000-80,000 young people experienced homelessness in 2008/9. Unfortunately the same method could not be used again this time as some of the datasets on which this previous estimate relied are no longer collected by government. This research has therefore used a different methodology and as a result is not directly comparable, but does give us a much more up to date estimate of the scale of youth homelessness.

This new report shows how the available data has dwindled since 2009 and highlights both the role local councils and the homelessness sector can and must play in filling the gaps in knowledge. As both commissioners and providers of support, we must work together to ensure that we collect accurate and consistent data about the number of young people being supported so we can develop an accurate national picture to inform effective provision to meet their needs.

To aid this process, Centrepoin has established, with funding from Google, the Youth Homelessness Databank that will bring together data from across both local and national government, as well from support providers.

Over time the Databank will complement this report's baseline estimate of 83,000 young people accessing homelessness services over the course of a year to provide crucial insight into the scale and nature of youth homelessness both now and in the future.

In an era where the drive for value for money is at the heart of public service delivery, comprehensive data will be key. Without it no politicians or charity can effectively make the case for new resources to tackle any problem, including ending youth homelessness.

Seyi Obakin

Chief Executive, Centrepoin

Key findings

Young people using homelessness services

- Around **83,000** homeless young people have been accommodated by local authorities or homelessness services **during the last year**.
- There are around **35,000** young people in homeless accommodation **at any one time** across the UK.
- The proportion of homeless young people who are assessed as statutory homeless varies areas across the UK, with Scotland assisting the large majority of young people via the homelessness legislation, whilst in England (outside London) young people are more commonly assisted without a formal homelessness assessment.
- Access to emergency accommodation is increasingly controlled by local authorities rather than the accommodation providers themselves. This means **providers themselves are less aware of the overall needs for their services**.
- **Overcrowding increased** between 2001 and 2011, suggesting that there is a growing underlying housing pressure.

Hidden homelessness

- To assess levels of hidden homelessness among the wider population of young population not in contact with homelessness services, **a UK-wide survey** was carried out with young people aged 16-25.
- This found much higher numbers of young people who reported having slept rough than are known to have done so from published data:
 - Overall, **26 % of young people said they had ever slept rough or in unsafe such as cars, nightbuses or on the streets** because they had nowhere else to go:
 - **17% had slept rough** (including unsafe places such as in cars) during the last year, with 10% having done so for more for than one night.
 - **20% had sofa surfed** during the last year, with 16% having done so for more than a week, and 4% for over three months.
- Of those who had slept rough the most common location was in **a car** (55%), followed by in a **tent** (34%), on the **streets** (18%), in a **car park** (16%) or in a **park or other open space** (15%).
- In total, it is estimated that in the last year around **1.3 million young people aged 16-24 have slept rough or in an unsafe place**, and just under **300,000 are doing so on any one night**.
- Around **a third** of young people who responded to the survey said they had **sofa-surfed** at some point, which would suggest over a million nationally.
- Sofa surfing is more common for **men**, those **without British citizenship** and young people who have been **in care** or had a social worker as a child.
- The most common causes of sofa-surfing reported were **leaving a negative home environment** or **parents being no longer able or willing to house** the young person.
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Introduction

This research, commissioned by CentrepoinT aims to produce an up-to-date estimate of the number of young people (aged 16-24) currently experiencing homelessness in the UK.

The figures produced by this research differ from those already published regarding youth homelessness, including official government figures, in that they aim to include *all* types of homelessness, and aim to include the number of young people experiencing homelessness in the UK across a whole year, rather than simply a one night count.

Part 1 looks at numbers who were in homeless accommodation at the start of 2013/14, and then at the numbers who came into contact with service providers during the year. Part 2 looks at the numbers who sofa-surfed or slept rough during the last year. Part 3 looks at changing housing pressure.

What is homelessness?

Homelessness in the UK is officially defined quite broadly by the Housing Act 1996.¹ Although the definition is not simple, it could be said to cover anyone without a legal residence which is accessible to them and reasonably fit to live in. This research focuses on homelessness in a range of forms - rough sleepers and those living in hostels for homeless people as well as those sometimes referred to as the 'hidden homeless'.

There is an important distinction to draw between this wider legal definition of homelessness and Statutory Homelessness, often used as the basis for official statistics. This term refers to households found owed a legal duty to be housed by Local Authorities throughout Great Britain, and Northern Ireland Housing Executive in Northern Ireland.

Some homeless households are not Statutory Homeless even though they lack a legal residence, due to being considered to have made themselves homeless deliberately ("intentionally homeless"), or due to not being in a "priority need" category. The definition of priority need varies between the devolved nations of the UK and in Scotland over the last ten years its scope has been gradually extended so that all households who have been deemed unintentionally homeless to include all young single people².

In order for a homeless person to be considered as Statutory Homelessness, they also need to have approached, and been assisted by, a local authority. Many homeless people never come into contact with the local authority, for a variety of reasons, or they are assisted to find accommodation by a local authority without the actual formal homelessness assessment taking place.

Research methods

This research seeks to make up to date estimates of the numbers of young people experiencing homelessness during the course of a year, drawing on secondary data where possible and collecting data to fill the gaps. This included data collected from 40 local authorities throughout the UK and a survey of young people to explore rates of hidden homelessness.

¹ www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1996/52/section/175

² www.scotland.gov.uk/Publications/2012/06/9193/44

The figures produced will not be comparable to those published previously by Centrepoin as they will be drawing on different data sources.

Most data is available for the financial year 2013-14. The numbers experiencing homelessness is therefore taken to comprise:

Number homeless at the start of the year (i.e. on 31 March 2013)	<i>plus</i>	Number who became homeless during the year 2013-14	<i>equals</i>	Total number experiencing homelessness during 2013-14
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Young people are defined for the purposes of this study as being aged between 16 and 24 (inclusive). Households headed by young people (such as young couples or single parents and their children) are included in the definition, but homeless young people who are living with their own parents (i.e. their whole family is homeless) are not included.

The research has sought to estimate the numbers of households headed by young people experiencing all types of homelessness, including rough sleeping, staying in hostels and 'sofa-surfing' with friends.

Part 1: Homeless young people receiving support from local authorities or homelessness services

This section draws on the data available and the case study work in order to make estimates of the numbers of young people (aged 16-24) who experience homelessness during a year. Part 1.1 looks at the numbers who were homeless at the start of the last financial year (2013-14) and Part 1.2 looks at the numbers who **became** homeless during the year.

1.1: Those who were homeless at the start of 2013-14

Figures for the number of statutory homeless households are published for all parts of the UK. These include figures on the number of statutory homeless households who are in temporary accommodation at the end of each quarter. The figures for 31 March 2013 have therefore been used as an estimate for the number of statutory homeless households at the start of 2013-14.

For non-statutory homelessness, Homeless Link provide data on the number of hostel spaces that are available., Case study work confirmed that hostels are almost always full and oversubscribed, so figures for the numbers of bedspaces have been used as a proxy for the numbers living in hostels at any one time.

Neither of these sources give an age breakdown for current occupants, so the proportion of households headed by someone aged 16-24 has been estimated from other data sources (such as CORE and SCORE, and data on statutory homeless acceptances).

In Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland there is no equivalent of the Homeless Link data on hostel spaces, so the numbers of non-statutory homeless under 25s has been estimated instead from figures collected from the eight case studies undertaken in each country.

The table below therefore shows the estimates made for the number of homeless households headed by someone aged 16-24 on 31st March 2013:

	Statutory homeless	Non-statutory homeless
London	8,489	3,656
Rest of England	4,633	13,647
Wales	705	621
Scotland	2,796	147
Northern Ireland	275	112

Source: Various: See full report

1.2: Those who became homeless during 2013-14

Figures on the number of young people accepted during a year as statutory homeless are published for England and Scotland, and estimates can be made for, Wales and Northern Ireland from the figures published for all age groups.

Figures for those who become homeless and enter homeless accommodation but are not assessed as statutory homeless have been estimated from CORE/SCORE data (where available) and from case study work across the 40 case study authorities. Young people who were known to have moved from one homeless accommodation provider to another were not included in the estimates, to avoid double-counting.

The table below therefore shows the estimates made for the number of households headed by someone aged 16-24 who became homeless during 2013-14.

	Statutory homeless	Non-statutory homeless
London	3,590	1,976
Rest of England	10,810	17,175
Wales	1,785	1,022
Scotland	8,321	843
Northern Ireland	2,346	292

Source: Various: See full report

Part 2: Sofa surfing and rough sleeping among young people

Sofa surfing and rough sleeping out of sight are both very difficult to measure as young people in this situation are unlikely to come into contact with services that might record them. To gain insight into the scale of these issues among young people ComRes were commissioned to conduct a survey with a representative sample young people.

The 2,011 young people aged 16-25 surveyed were asked whether they had had to stay in one of a list of places because they had nowhere else to stay. These sites included outdoor sites such as the streets, but also some forms of shelter that are unsafe or unsuitable for long periods such as a squat. The responses are summarised below:

Response	Number	Proportion of all young people	Proportion of rough sleepers
In a car	292	15%	55%
In a car park*	83	4%	16%
In a park or other open space*	82	4%	15%
In a squat	50	2%	9%
In a tent	180	2%	34%
In an abandoned building	53	3%	10%
In another place (please specify)	10	1%	2%
On a night bus	74	4%	14%
On the streets*	95	5%	18%
Yes to any of the above	533	26%	100%
<i>Of whom had done so within the last year</i>	346	17%	
Yes to outdoor places (marked with *)	195	10%	37%
I have never had to sleep in one of these places	1,478	73%	-
Total	2,011	100%	-

Source: Young people's survey, September 2014

Those who answered yes have been termed hereafter as "rough sleepers", though it should be noted that the definition of rough sleeping is therefore a broad one that includes not just those sleeping on the streets and in parks, but also those who have slept in cars or tents because they had nowhere else to stay.

A narrower definition of rough sleeping as including only those who were outdoors and open to the elements would include only those who had slept on the streets, in a car park or in a park or other open space. This narrower group of "outdoors rough sleeping" comprised a total of 195, or ten percent of young people.

Those who answered "in another place" and also those whose reason for having nowhere else to stay was given as "other" were checked and any who appeared to have been sleeping rough through *choice*, whilst *outside of the UK*, or because they did have accommodation but that they were *unable to access* it (such as those who indicated they had lost their keys or missed the last train home) were excluded from the rough sleepers group for the purposes of analysis. They have therefore not been counted as rough sleepers in the table above, and throughout this report.

The table below shows the numbers who reported rough sleeping in each part of the UK.

	London	Rest of England	Wales	Scotland	Northern Ireland	UK
Number of young people answering survey	259	1,429	96	169	58	2,011
Number who have slept rough during the last year	32 (12%)	247 (17%)	18 (19%)	33 (20%)	15 (26%)	345 (17%)
- Of whom had slept in "outdoors" location	28 (11%)	131 (9%)	12 (13%)	15 (9%)	9 (16%)	195 (10%)
Total population of 16-24 year olds	958,200	5,269,500	373,500	624,900	220,700	7,446,800
Estimate of number of 16-24 year olds who had slept rough during the last year	118,388	910,823	70,031	122,022	57,078	1,277,546
- Of whom had slept in "outdoors" location	103,589	103,589	103,589	19,589	96,967	722,091

Lengths of rough sleeping

Young people who had rough slept within the last year were asked how long they had slept rough for. Of the 346 young people who had slept rough in the last year, 40% had done so for just one night, and a further 34% for between one night and a week. In contrast, seven people reported that they had slept rough for over six months.

It is then possible to make estimates of young people sleeping rough on any one night:

	UK
Number of young people answering survey	2,011
Number who have slept rough during the last year	346
Minimum number of nights spent sleeping rough in last year (by all rough sleepers) ³	3,899
Estimated number of young people in survey sleeping rough on any one night ⁴	11
Proportion of young people rough sleeping on any one night	0.53%
<i>Total population of 16-24 year olds</i>	<i>7,446,800</i>
Estimate of number of young people rough sleeping on any one night	39,557

Sources: *Young people's survey, September 2014* and *DCLG Mid-year population estimate*; own calculations

³ The length of time spent rough sleeping was asked in bands. A conservative estimate has been used here by assuming all spent the lowest time for each band (eg "more than a week but less than a month has been assumed to be just eight nights). This means that the estimates of the proportion of young people sleeping rough on any one night and the total numbers sleeping rough are lowest possible estimates from the answers given in the survey.

⁴ This has been calculated by dividing the total number of nights spent by the number of days in a year (365).

The figure for the UK is 39,557 young people sleeping rough on any one night. It is unsurprising that it is higher than the published data – as making contact with rough sleepers can be difficult for agencies, or people trying to count them especially if the rough sleeping is for a short duration or away from areas popular with rough sleepers. Only around a third of the young people sleeping rough were in the more visible outdoor places where they might be more likely to be found by people doing street counts or working with rough sleepers.

All reasonable efforts were made to ensure that the sample was representative and avoid sample bias. The sample was matched and weighted to be representative of the demographics of the general population. The content of the survey was not clear when people were asked to start answering it to avoid non-response bias, and drop out rates from the survey were not higher than usual for a poll of this kind.

Particularly in light of these efforts, the extent of the rough sleeping of all sorts found in this survey is however staggeringly high, and much higher than was expected. Even if there was a level of unintended survey bias despite our efforts, this would therefore suggest that existing estimates of rough sleeping among young people significantly underestimate the scale of the problem.

2.3 Sofa surfing

As well as being asked about whether they had ever slept rough, the 2,011 young people aged 16-25 who completed the survey were asked about their experience of sofa surfing. The demographics of those who responded are shown in Annex 2 of the full report.

They were asked:

Thinking about “sofa surfing” (where individuals stay with friends or members of their extended family on their floor or sofa as they have nowhere else to go), do you have any experience of doing this?

They were asked whether this experience was in the last year, or longer ago.

Overall, the survey suggested that 35 per cent of young people in this age group (703 of the 2,011) had experience of sofa surfing, and 20 per cent of them (409 people) had done so within the last year.

The table below shows the number of young people who reported sofa surfing during the last year, and also the number of these who also slept rough, meaning that the total who had either slept rough or sofa-surfed can be calculated:

	London	Rest of England	Wales	Scotland	Northern Ireland	UK
Number of young people answering survey	259	1,429	96	169	58	2,011
Number who have sofa-surfed during the last year	65	268	23	39	14	409
- Of whom also rough slept during the year	13	49	5	7	5	79
As proportion of those	25%	19%	24%	23%	24%	20%

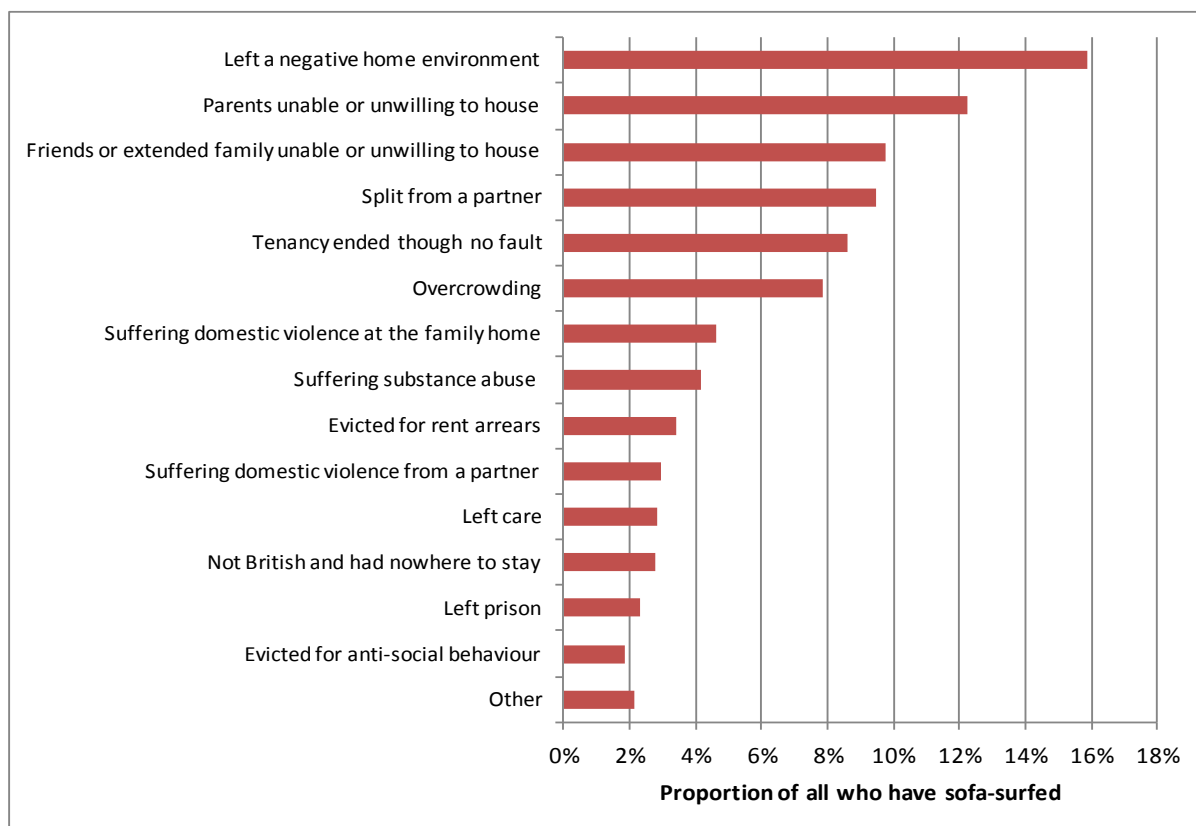
answering survey						
Total population of 16-24 year olds	958,200	5,269,500	373,500	624,900	220,700	7,446,800
Estimated number of 16-24 year olds who sofa surfed	240,475	988,262	89,484	144,208	53,272	1,514,541
Estimated number of sofa surfers who did not sleep rough	192,380	807,572	70,031	118,324	34,247	1,222,001
Estimated number of 16-24 year olds who either sofa surfed or slept rough	310,768	1,718,395	140,063	240,346	91,324	2,499,547

Sources: Young people's survey, September 2014 and DCLG Mid-year population estimate; own calculations

As well as providing this useful data, the survey also reveals more about who sofa-surfers are, how long they sofa-surf, why they end up sofa-surfing, and the impact of the experience on their lives.

The causes of sofa-surfing

Respondents were asked why they had had nowhere else to stay:



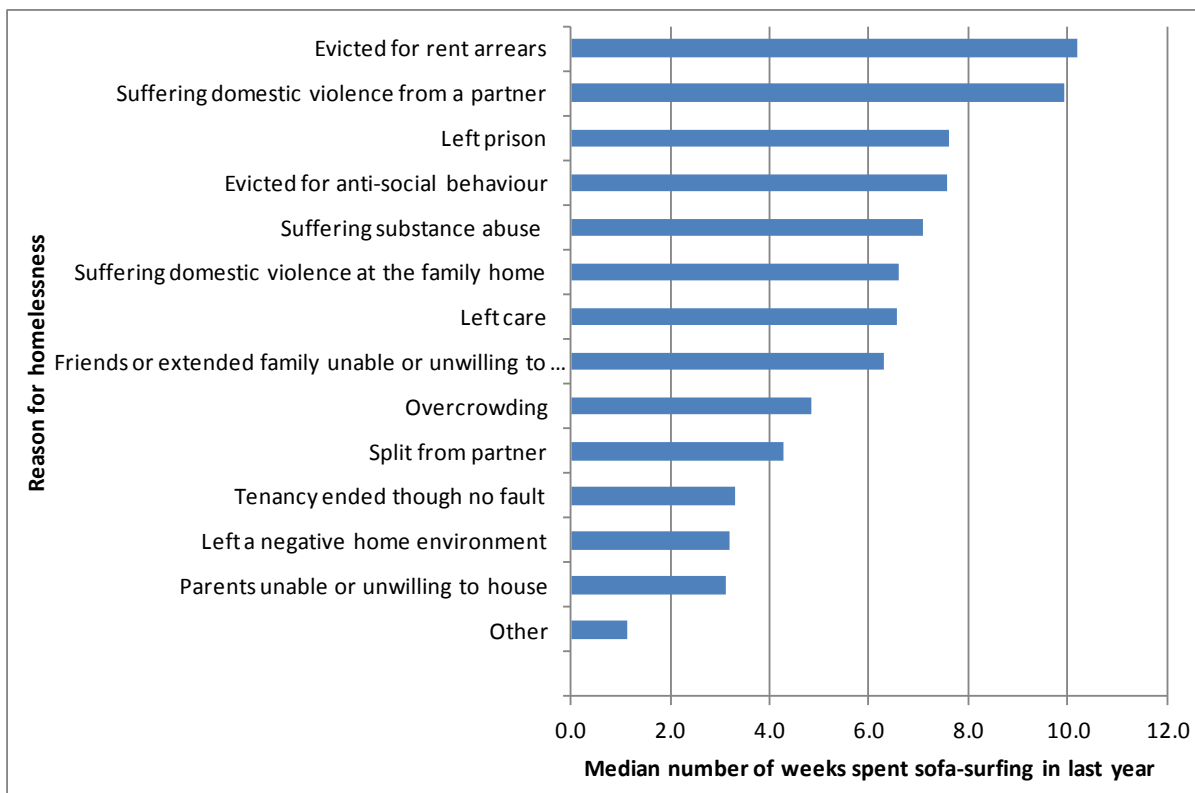
Source: Young people's survey, September 2014

As can be seen, the main reasons for young people sofa-surfing relate to negative home environments or having been asked to leave by their parents. However there were substantial numbers also indicating that they had sofa-surfed after a period of living independently, and were made homeless by a tenancy ending, splitting from a partner or no longer being able to stay with friends or extended family. Overcrowding was also a factor in eight percent of cases.

Lengths of sofa-surfing

The median length of time that sofa surfers spent sofa-surfing was 25 days, or three and a half weeks. However there was substantial variation in this. Eighteen percent had sofa-surfed for over three months, with four percent having sofa-surfed for six or more out of the last 12 months. In contrast, 23 percent had done so for a week or less.

There was substantial variation between different groups in the average length of time that they spent sofa-surfing, as shown below:



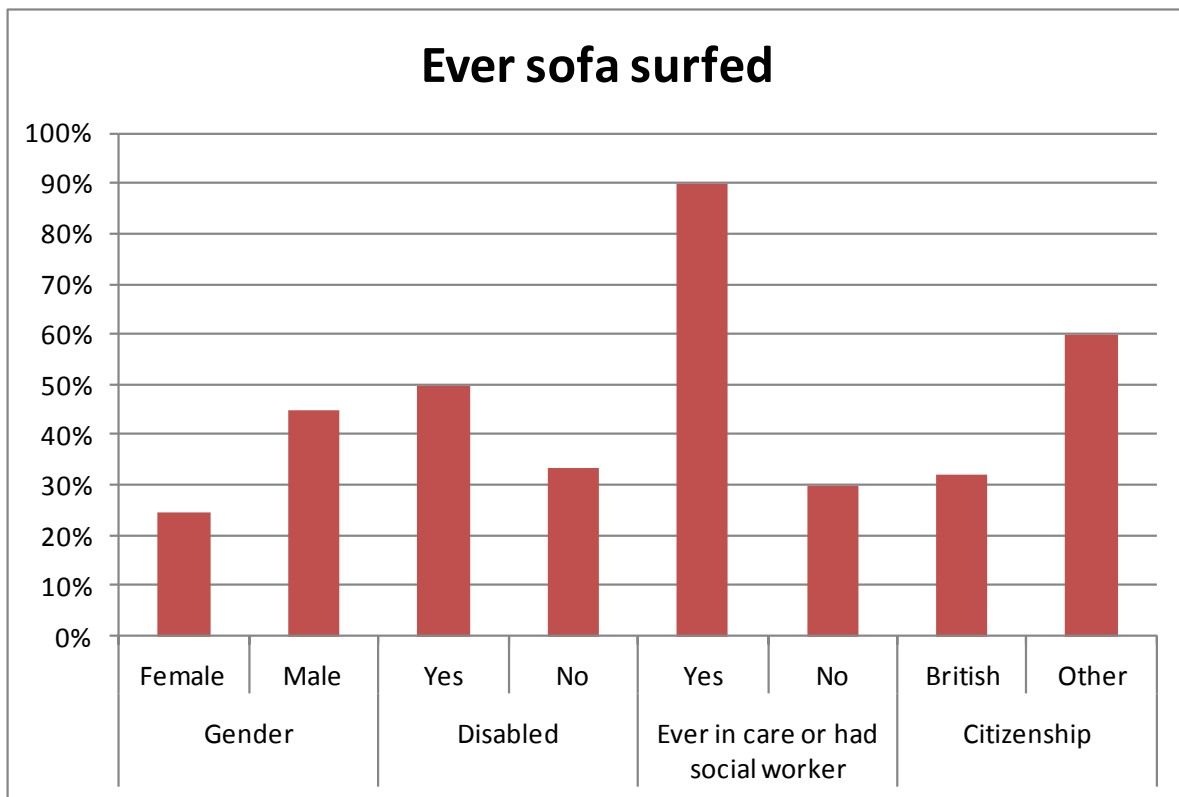
Source: *Young people's survey, September 2014*

As can be seen, the reasons that are associated with having left home and then losing a home (evictions, leaving prison and domestic violence from a partner) are all associated with longer lengths of sofa-surfing than are those associated with moving directly from the parental home to sofa-surfing. This may suggest that for some young people a relatively short stay sofa-surfing with a friend may be sufficient to enable them either to move back home or find a more permanent housing solution. Whilst in contrast, those who have lost a home of their own find it harder to move on from sofa-surfing in a short timescale.

There were also significant differences between men and women, with men having sofa-surfed for a median of five and a half weeks (38 days), as compared to two weeks (16 days) for women.

Who is most likely to sofa surf?

Four key factors could be identified which were statistically related to the likelihood of having sofa surfed:



Source: *Young people's survey, September 2014*

As can be seen young men were substantially more likely than young women to have sofa-surfed, whilst ninety percent of those who had ever been in the care of a local authority or had a social worker as a child said that they had done so. Those without British citizenship or who were disabled were also significantly more likely to report having sofa-surfed.

Of those who had sofa-surfed, all four of these groups (men, non-British citizens, disabled people and those who had been in care or had a social worker as a child) were more likely to report having done so for longer lengths of time.

The survey also asked whether sofa surfing had had a negative or positive impact on various aspects of the respondent's life. Around half of sofa surfers reported positive experiences in most aspects of life, most likely because respondents were comparing to the situation they had left behind.

Part 3: Is youth homelessness changing?

Changing housing pressure: Changes in overcrowding 2001-2011

In order to set the research in context, analysis of census data from 2001 and 2011 has been carried out in order to establish whether the housing pressures facing 16-24 year olds have changed during this time period.

The table below shows the proportion of young people aged 16-24 who were living in overcrowded households in 2001 and 2011.

	2001	2011	change (percentage point)
London	34.2	40.0	5.8
Rest of England	14.5	17.5	3.0
Wales	12.6	15.4	2.8
Scotland	26.3	21.4	-4.9
Northern Ireland	22.1	19.1	-3.0

Source: Census 2001 and 2011

This means that young people in England and Wales are more likely to be living in overcrowded housing today than they were back in 2001, and those in London especially likely. In contrast, those in Scotland and Northern Ireland were less likely to be doing so.

Analysis and Conclusions

The analysis below presents the overall estimates of the number of young people who use homelessness services or are hidden homeless during the course of a year.

As discussed earlier, the box below shows how this has been calculated:

Number homeless at the start of the year (i.e. on 31 March 2013)	<i>plus</i>	Number who became homeless during the year 2013-14	<i>equals</i>	Total number experiencing homelessness during 2013-14
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The figures for those who have used homelessness services and the hidden homeless (those who have who sofa surfed or rough slept) are presented separately because of the very different ways in which these figures have been estimated.

Young people using homelessness services

The table below shows estimates of the scale of youth homelessness across the UK in 2013-14, drawing together the analysis above:

		London	Rest of England	Wales	Scotland	Northern Ireland	UK total
Homeless at start of 2013-14	Statutory homeless provision	8,489	4,633	705	2,796	275	16,898
	Other homeless provision	3,656	13,647	621	147	112	18,183
	Total	12,145	18,280	1,326	2,943	387	35,081
Becoming homeless during 2013-14	Statutory homeless	3,590	10,810	1,785	8,321	2,346	26,852
	Other homeless	1,976	17,175	1,022	843	292	21,308
	Total	5,566	27,985	2,807	9,164	2,638	48,160
Total using homelessness services during 2013-14		17,711	46,265	4,133	12,107	3,025	83,241
<i>Total number of young people</i>		958,200	958,200	5,269,500	373,500	624,900	220,700
Proportion using homelessness services		1.8%	1.8%	0.9%	1.1%	1.9%	1.4%

It should be cautioned that the data in this table comes from a variety of data sources and is subject to some margin of error due to the inadequacy of many data sources and the assumptions that have had to be made to estimate some figures. The data are also not comparable between the different parts of the UK because they are based on different types of data, with different shortcomings. Where assumptions were necessary, we have taken conservative estimates, meaning that the figures in this table are likely to be an underestimate of the actual numbers experiencing homelessness, though not necessarily to the same degree in each part of the UK.

Hidden homelessness

The table below gives estimates for sofa-surfing and rough sleeping, drawing on the young people's survey:

	Source	London	Rest of England	Wales	Scotland	Northern Ireland	UK total
Numbers during last year							
Rough sleeping	Table 2.2	118,388	910,823	70,031	122,022	57,078	1,277,546

Sofa surfing	Table 2.5	240,475	988,262	89,484	144,208	53,272	1,514,541
Either sofa surfing or rough sleeping	Table 2.5	310,768	1,718,395	140,063	240,346	91,324	2,499,547

The table below gives the estimated numbers sofa surfing or sleeping rough on any one night across the UK:

	Source	Number
Sleeping rough	Table 2.4	39,557
Sofa surfing	Table 2.6	215,957
Total hidden homeless		255,514

These figures for hidden homelessness are high, and significantly higher than has been found previously. This clearly merits further research, and highlights the potential shortcomings of relying on administrative data and rough sleepers' counts for quantifying something that by its nature does not necessarily bring people into contact with those who collect the data.