

Humiliating, painful, depressing: brutal realities of 'sofa surfing'

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New research from national homelessness charity Crisis has unearthed shocking findings about the most common yet misunderstood form of homelessness—sofa surfing.

The figures on the number of individuals who sofa surf were taken from Crisis' research on 'core homelessness,' compiled by Heriot-Watt's

Institute of Social Policy, Housing, Equalities Research (I-SPHERE). Sofa [surfing](#) is the most common form of 'core homelessness,' making up 42 percent of the total.

The hidden nature of this form of homelessness means that very little is known about sofa surfing, despite it being the most common form of homelessness. Most recent figures produced by I-SPHERE estimate there are over 71,400 families and individuals across Great Britain who are forced to stay on friends or family sofas or floors on a short-term basis, as they have nowhere else to go.

Glen Bramley, from I-SPHERE, said: "This report is a welcome addition to the evidence base on this often hidden form of homelessness, underlining that there is a serious problem, closely connected to rough sleeping and other forms of homelessness. It is not a situation about which we can be complacent.

"Quantifying sofa surfing is a challenging task. Heriot-Watt has worked with Crisis for a number of years to develop 'core homelessness' measures, including sofa surfing and, through those studies, we used analysis of several national surveys to estimate the number of people experiencing sofa surfing using a strict definition. These numbers have helped to inform and set the context for this new report. We also use statistical modelling to predict numbers and how they would change in different areas of the country, depending on the economy, housing and welfare policies."

Crisis' new report, based on interviews with 114 people who had experienced sofa surfing, shines a light on the horrific effects on a person's mental and [physical health](#), eroding their relationships and leaving them sleeping on sofas and floors in the long term with no viable way out. The research also reveals the root causes forcing people to sofa surf in the first place.

An overwhelming four-fifths reported a downturn in their [mental health](#) because of sofa surfing, many attributing this to the constant pressure of feeling like a burden, tension with their host and insecurity of their living situation. A further three-quarters also told of the debilitating impact sofa surfing had on their physical health, reporting issues like extreme back and neck pain, [chronic fatigue](#) and the effects of poor diet with many having no access to cooking facilities.

The isolation of sofa surfing has also been revealed, with three-fifths saying they are seeing their friends and family less. For many, this was because they felt ashamed of their living situation and their close relationships fell apart, having overstayed their welcome. Particularly stark instances include mothers who could no longer see their young children.

For most, sofa surfing is not a one-off temporary situation or stepping-stone between homes—with a third having done so for between six months and three years. A large number of people interviewed disclosed that they moved from one experience of sofa surfing straight to another and a significant proportion even went on to rough sleep after their last instance of sofa surfing. It can be the beginning or part of long periods of homelessness where people move in and out of different forms, which are often insecure and dangerous. Failing to help people in this situation early on means we are allowing people to sofa surf long term, making it harder to leave behind for good the longer it continues. The constant insecurity can make it even harder for people to move on, as over half of people interviewed told how sofa surfing had negatively affected them searching for and maintaining employment.

Danielle, 28, from Barrow was forced to sofa surf after leaving her partner who was physically and verbally abusive. She said: "When the council refused to help me out, I had no idea what to do. I had no family nearby who I could stay with. One friend let me stay on her bedroom

floor for a few weeks while I began to go through the court system to try and get off the tenancy I shared with my ex-partner.

"Another friend then said I could stay on his sofa, but it was only a one bed flat, and it was massively overcrowded. He was a nurse, working day and night shifts, and I was still a student in the day while working at a cinema in the evening, so I would often be asleep while he would be trying to eat his breakfast, and vice versa. It was really difficult—even things like getting dressed in private was impossible. Because I was going through a lot of trauma at the time, I was just constantly crying and angry. Having to stay like this ruined our friendship for a while. I don't know what would have happened if he hadn't put up with me. I've thought about it quite a lot, but honestly there was no Plan B."

Commenting on the research, Chief Executive of Crisis, Jon Sparkes, said:

"We know homelessness causes untold human suffering. Too many people in our society are facing unbearable pressures, forced to sleep on sofas and floors night after night after night. The harsh reality of sofa surfing is clear to see here—people trapped in this situation with no way out and everyday facing the worry that today could be the day they are asked to leave, with nowhere else to go. None of us should be forced to live this way.

"This research acts as a shameful reminder to the new government that tackling homelessness must be treated as a top priority in the coming months to ensure more people are not forced into this situation. We know homelessness can be ended in the UK—but this will only be made a reality by investing in housing benefit, so it truly covers the cost of rents across the country, and making sure local councils recognise sofa-surfing as a form of homelessness that is eligible for assistance across the board.

"In the meantime, anyone wanting to help can support Crisis, so we can be here this Christmas and all year round for anyone who needs us—whether it be someone [sofa](#) surfing, stuck in unsuitable temporary accommodation or forced to sleep on the streets."

Provided by Heriot-Watt University

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