

# Mini 'mod' homes can help rough sleepers get off the streets for good: study

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Inside one of the first modular mini-homes in England created for those experiencing homelessness. Credit: Jimmy's Cambridge

A new study on the first modular mini-homes in England created for those experiencing homelessness has found that—combined with "wraparound support"—these small, inexpensive units made from factory-built components help to restore the health, relationships and finances of residents.

A University of Cambridge team worked with homeless charity Jimmy's Cambridge to investigate the effectiveness of housing a group including long-term rough sleepers in six "mods" constructed in 2019 on land leased from a church in Cambridge city.

The self-contained box-shaped homes are a total of 25 square metres, complete with tiny kitchen, bathroom and front porch, and can be rapidly assembled like giant Lego. Each of the six units cost £36,000—almost equivalent to the estimated public spending on one person sleeping rough for a year in the UK.

Housing experts from the Cambridge Centre for Housing and Planning Research (CCHPR) and a social anthropologist from the University's Max-Cam Centre tracked the first mod occupants over twelve months along with the staff from Jimmy's providing services from addiction counselling to cookery classes.

Researchers found that the pilot project reduced drug and alcohol misuse and dramatically boosted physical and mental health—leading to improved financial management, new or increased work or training, and renewed relationships with family members.

After a year, and despite the disruption of COVID-19, several residents had already made plans to move on to [social housing](#) once their 18-month modular home tenancy ended, while others planned to stay in the mods longer term. The findings are published today in a report on the CCHPR website.

"For people traumatised by homelessness, often fending for themselves on the streets for many years, hostels and shared accommodation can feel unsafe. Modular homes provide that sense of safety and security that allow people to rebuild," said Dr. Gemma Burgess, research co-author and Director of CCHPR.

Mark Allan, Chief Executive of Jimmy's Cambridge, said the research backed up the observations of his staff. "Modular homes are a simple and effective way of tackling homelessness. I hope the findings encourage the expansion of Cambridge's pioneering scheme nationwide, so many more people can experience the benefits."

The six original mods, financed and constructed by local social enterprises Allia and the New Meaning Foundation, have since been expanded to a total of sixteen homes in Cambridge through support from regional house-builders Hill.

Cambridge—a city with some of the country's highest house prices and private rents—has the fourth largest homeless population per capita. Between 2013 and 2019, almost half (46%) of homelessness-induced deaths in the East of England occurred in Cambridge.

The six mod residents were all men—most rough sleepers are male—between late twenties and early sixties. Before experiencing homelessness, all had held jobs in sectors such as retail, construction and furniture making.



The outside of some of the first modular mini-homes in England created for those experiencing homelessness. Credit: Jimmy's Cambridge

One [resident](#) had been homeless for over a decade, another for over two. Some had served short jail terms. Reasons for homelessness included job loss, death of a partner, and losing close family in a fire. Most struggled with addiction.

The mods are drug-free as a condition of residence, and support workers conduct random checks. "It is unbelievably difficult for homeless people with a history of drug abuse to get sober," said anthropologist and Cambridge co-author Dr. Johannes Lenhard.



"The mods, combined with support, have allowed residents to begin tackling their addictions, many for the first time, which is extraordinary," he said.

One resident entered a detox programme after some twenty years on opiates. "Living here, oh everything is good!... It's got me off drugs, got a roof over my head, it's got me back to work... Everything's positive," said a resident.

Associated costs such as rent and utility bills are funded through each resident's welfare benefits, and support is offered to improve money management skills. This, in turn, helps restore confidence and enthusiasm for work.

After a year in the mods, some were pursuing new training in areas including hairdressing, while others revisited old trades. "I'm returning to my passion. I've got a goal; I've got a plan. I can't believe I'm saying that..." said one resident.

The stability of mod living also allowed the rebuilding of family relationships. One resident became determined to find permanent housing in hopes of living with his son again. Another reconnected with his daughter after decades apart:

"Now I talk to my daughter every week, twice a week... I've been clean for 14 months. She's coming to see me here for my birthday in July," he said.

Researchers argue that the mods allow a "greater sense of self, safety and security" that is vital to creating the stable daily routines that support sobriety and autonomy in society. As one resident put it: "I've been paying my rent and I feel happy right now... I feel I'm in control of my life right now."

Added Lenhard: "There is a huge sense of wellbeing tied to simply having your own front door. We can see the effect this has in the lifestyle changes of people who have previously struggled in hostels. It gives them the opportunity to re-make a home and a life."

"Mods are a cost-effective and flexible stepping stone that help rough sleepers in desperate situations transition into permanent homes and settled lives."

**More information:** Modular homes for people experiencing homelessness in Cambridge - Final Report

Provided by University of Cambridge

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