

Human City **HEADLINES**

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Birmingham's Mounting Homelessness Crisis Homelessness and Rough Sleeping in Britain's Second City

SUMMARY

- This paper explores Birmingham's mounting homelessness crisis using mainly official data plus some emerging models pioneered by national homelessness charities Shelter and Crisis. These models attempt to calculate both core and wider forms of homelessness.
- These models reveal that Birmingham has the largest number of homeless people of any local authority in England (more than 15,500). This equates to 1 in 73 of the population, which is the highest ratio outside of London and the south-east.
- Use of temporary accommodation in Birmingham has increased by 300% over the last decade, costing almost £23m – a rise of 160% over the last five years.
- Rough sleeping has increased by 533%, although from a low base. According to official rough sleeper counts, Birmingham has 57 rough sleepers. This is likely to be an underestimate, and does not include many more sleeping in cars, sheds, tents, on public transport, squatting.
- Birmingham's homeless population tends to be drawn from disadvantaged groups – 65% are from a BME background, lone parents are over half of all homeless families, three quarters of homeless households are headed by a woman.
- Homeless people have higher rates of mortality and morbidity. Homelessness affects physical and mental health, and life chances.
- Homelessness stems largely from national policies, - especially those associated with austerity that have cut local authority and housing budgets. Eviction from shorthold tenancies, exclusion by family and friends, welfare reforms, and a lack of social housing and affordable housing are key drivers.
- Birmingham has a network of homeless charities and committed social landlords, which are confronting mounting homelessness in the city. Social lettings to homeless households have increased from 30% to 41% of the total over the last decade.
- While the government has recognised that more help needs to be given to local authorities and charities to prevent and tackle homelessness at the local level, this is only a short-term stopgap. Investment in social and affordable housing are crucial to long-term solutions.

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Introduction

This short paper explores whether there is a mounting crisis of homelessness and rough sleeping in Birmingham - the home city of the Human City Institute (HCI) - and how the second city compares with its home region and nationally. It equally scans the ways in which homelessness is measured, and whether these measurements capture the full extent of homelessness in great cities like Birmingham.

The paper also reviews, as far as official figures allow, the reasons why people become homeless. This has been supplemented by 'conversations' with rough sleepers in central Birmingham.

HCI plans to publish a more comprehensive paper in 2019. This will include full interviews with homeless households and rough sleepers.

What Is Homelessness?

In the last two decades, homelessness has mainly been defined as:

- Households applying to local authorities as homeless and those who are accepted as officially homeless under various Housing Acts.
- The totality of statutory homeless placed in temporary accommodation.
- An annual count of rough sleepers in cities such as Birmingham, or if a count could not be carried out, the best estimate from local authorities.

More recently, the Homelessness Reduction Act (HRA) 2017, which amended the Housing Act 1996, created new duties on local authorities in England. Introduced on 3rd April 2018, the Act brought in a number of changes including, a strengthened duty to provide advisory services by local authorities; an extension to the period during which an applicant was considered 'threatened with homelessness' from 28 to 56 days; new duties to assess all eligible applicants and to take reasonable steps to prevent and relieve homelessness.¹

Statutory Homelessness in Birmingham

Homelessness acceptances in Birmingham have averaged 3,599 households in the last decade and a half. The rate of homeless acceptances fell to 3,160 in 2013/14 – one of the lowest in recent years – but has since started to rise again, standing at 3,386 in 2017/18, as chart (1) over the page reveals. In the last ten years there has been a marginal decline in statutory homelessness in Birmingham (at -7%).

What is increasingly clear, however, from chart (2), is the rapid increase in the use of temporary accommodation, such as homeless hostels, bed and breakfast hotels, and short-term solutions in both the social and private rented sectors in the city.

The number of homeless households placed in temporary accommodation is now almost 300% higher than it was a decade ago, with 2,058 such placements during 2017/18.² The costs of temporary accommodation have soared in Birmingham over the last five years (from £8.8m to £22.9m, or 160%).³ This is equivalent to building 400 social rented homes annually.

¹ MHCLG (December 2018) Statutory Homelessness Statistical Release April to June 2018

² MHCLG (2018) Live Tables on homelessness

³ <https://www.insidehousing.co.uk/insight/insight/the-cost-of-homelessness-council-spend-on-temporary-accommodation-revealed-57720>

Chart (1) - Homeless Acceptances in Birmingham

Source: Human City Institute Analysis from MHCLG Lives Tables (2018)

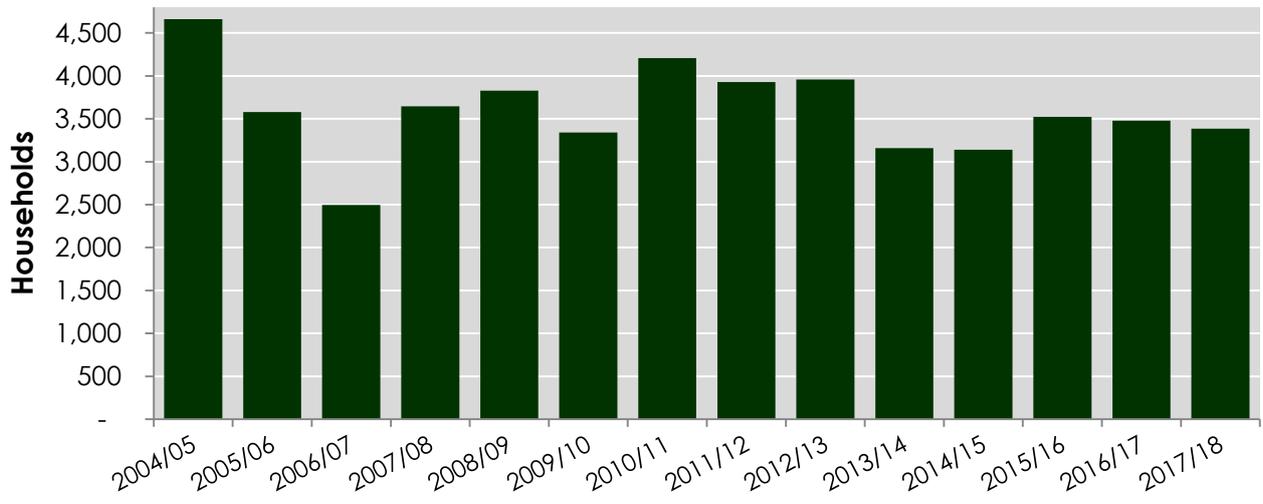


Chart (2) - Use of Temporary Accommodation in Birmingham

Source: Human City Institute Analysis from MHCLG Lives Tables (2018)

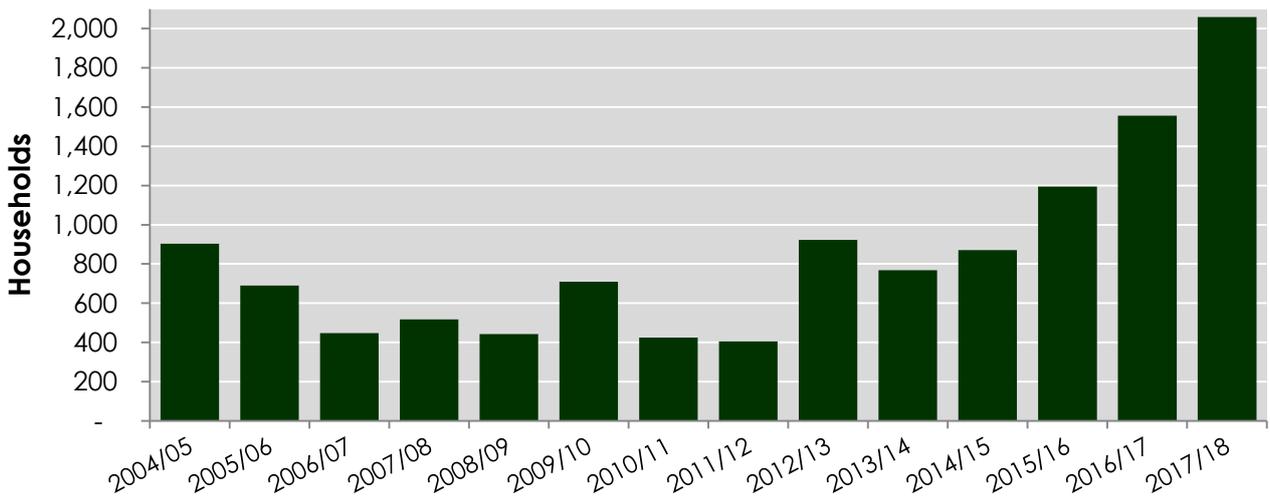
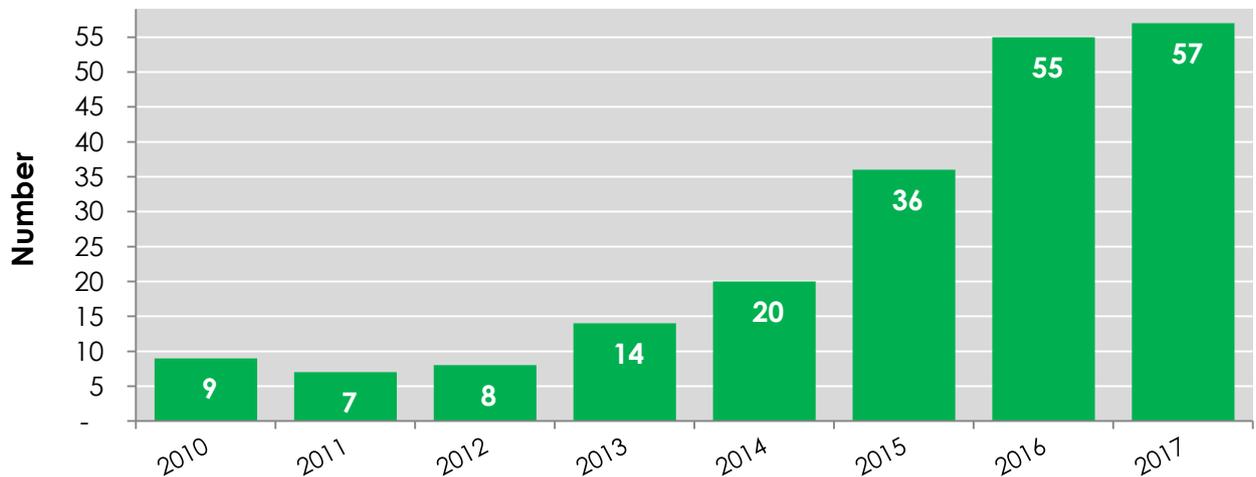


Chart (3) - Number of Rough Sleepers in Birmingham

Source: Human City Institute Analysis from MHCLG Lives Tables (2018)

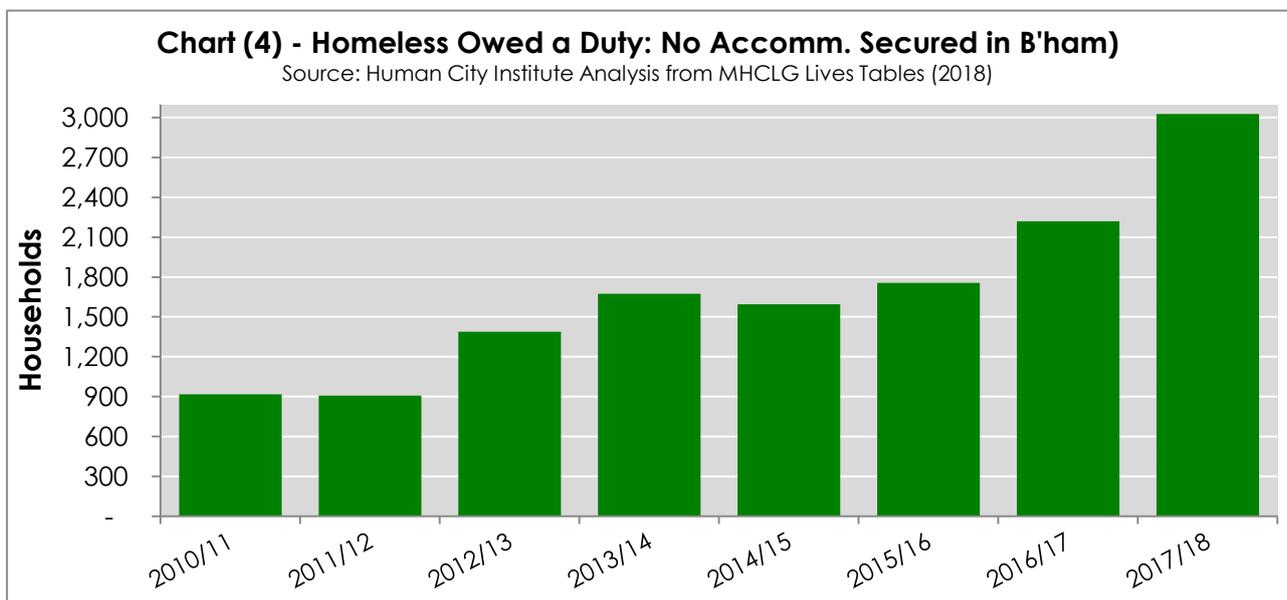


Rough Sleeping

Rough sleeping in the city, as established by the last count in autumn 2017, remains low [see chart (3) on previous page] in comparison with the wider West Midlands (at 295) and especially London (at 1,137). There were 57 rough sleepers identified in the city last year, representing a 533% rise from 2010, but from a very low base (of 9).⁴ It is widely recognised that the counting methodology is flawed and significantly under-represents rough sleeping (of which more later).

Action on Homelessness in the City

Primary action against homelessness in Birmingham comes from the city council, which has a duty to secure accommodation or other support for those it accepts as homeless and in priority need. As chart (4) illustrates, the number of statutory homeless households which are owed a duty, but where no accommodation was secured, has doubled over the last decade to stand at 3,026 during 2017/28.



In addition, there are a range of charities and housing associations – such as Midland Heart, SIFA Fireside, St. Basils and Trident Reach – which offer both hostel accommodation, outreach services for rough sleepers, and prevention services.

Alongside, the Homeless Reduction Act plus new funding from central government (Birmingham has secured £1.8m), the city council's homeless strategy, and the West Midlands Combined Authority metro mayor's commitment to reducing homelessness and rough sleeping, are all likely to bear fruit in the months and years ahead, providing a supply of social and affordable housing can be significantly increased.

It is clear that social landlords in the city (the city housing department plus housing associations) have increased their proportion of lettings to homeless applicants – from 30% to 41% of all lettings over the last decade.⁵ However, this is from a declining number of lettings because the social housing sector has fewer homes to let, due largely to the 're-invigorated' Right-to-Buy accelerating social housing decline on top of long-term effects of selling council homes, which began in 1980.

⁴ MHCLG (2018) Live Tables on rough sleeping

⁵ MHCLG Live Tables on tenure and social lettings

Future levels of social housing lettings will likely be threatened by the extension of the RtB to housing associations too, in which the West Midlands is the pilot.

The Real Extent of Homelessness

Shelter, the homeless charity, and Crisis UK, another national homeless charity, have both published new calculations for Britain that substantially increase the extent of homelessness.⁶ The concepts of core and wider homelessness have been developed to provide a more comprehensive picture of the extent of the problem.

Core homelessness includes rough sleeping; sleeping in tents, cars, public transport; squatting; unsuitable non-residential accommodation such as 'beds in sheds'; hostel residents and users of night or winter shelters; victims of domestic violence in women's refuge; unsuitable temporary accommodation (which includes bed and breakfast hotels; 'sofa surfing'; staying with others (not close family), on short term/insecure basis/wanting to move and in crowded conditions.

Wider homelessness involves longer-term staying with friends/relatives because unable to find own accommodation; eviction/under notice to quit, and unable to afford rent and/or deposits; asked to leave by parents/relatives; intermediate accommodation and receiving support in other temporary accommodation (e.g. conventional social housing, private sector leasing); and discharge from prison, hospital and other state institution without permanent housing.

Using these more in-depth definitions and calculations, researchers estimate that there are between 320,000 and 330,000 homeless households in Britain. This represents approximately 1 in 200 of the population.

The upshot of the application of these models to Birmingham is that the city currently has 15,538 homeless people – the largest actual number for any local authority in out of 353 in England. This amounts to 1 in 73 of Birmingham's population, ranking the city 22nd, with the 21 local authorities above Birmingham all being located in London or the south-east.

Birmingham City Council's own review puts homelessness even higher than this. The review estimates that there are 20,000 homeless people in the city, including those who are 'transitioning'.⁷

Homeless People – A Partial Profile

Looking at statutory homelessness, as chart (5) overleaf describes, it is noticeable how more vulnerable groups generally (in terms of their higher levels of housing stress and lower socio-economic position) tend to be over-represented in the homelessness figures.⁸

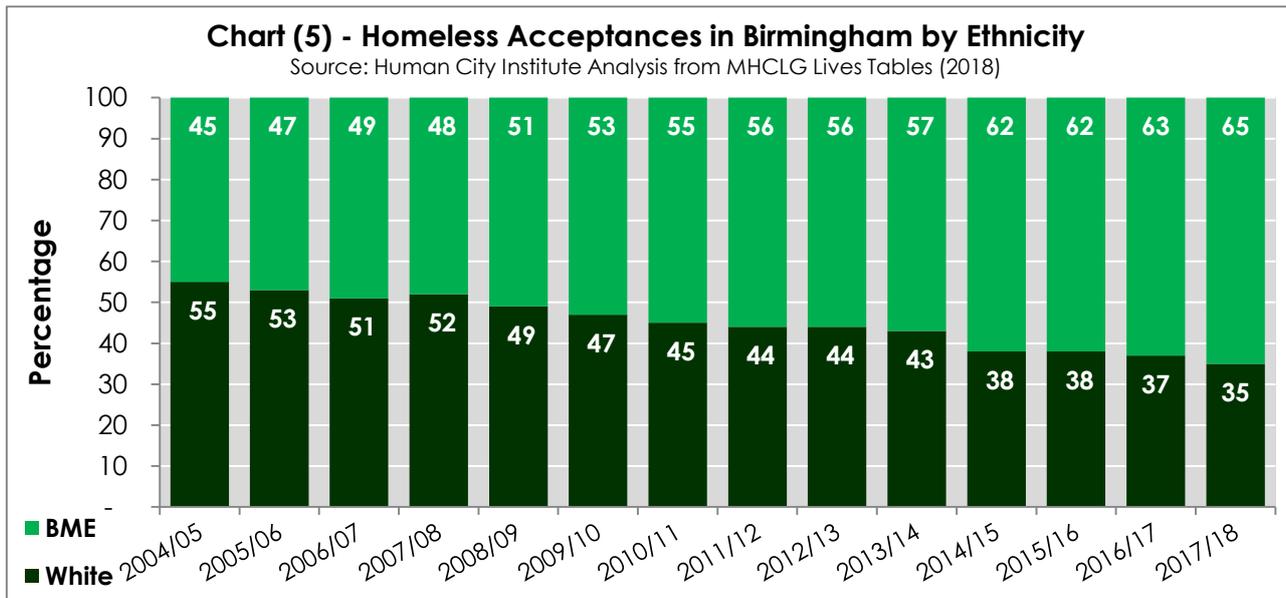
Of particular note, is that Birmingham's BME communities are far more likely to be accepted as statutorily homeless (at 65%) than their representation in the city's population (at 42%). What's more, this is a recent development, and mirrors national trends.

Almost three quarters of statutorily homeless households in Birmingham are headed by a woman.

⁶ Bramley G. (2018) Housing Supply Requirements Across Great Britain: For Low-Income Households and Homeless People. Crisis/NHF https://england.shelter.org.uk/media/press_releases/articles/320,000_people_in_britain_are_now_homeless,_as_numbers_keep_rising

⁷ Birmingham City Council (2017) Homelessness Review 2016/17. Directorate for People Commissioning Centre of Excellence

⁸ Gulliver K. (2016) Forty Years of Struggle: A Window on Race and Housing, Disadvantage and Exclusion. Human City Institute



Around two thirds are aged between 25 and 44 years old. But many more (about 30%) are young, aged 16-24.

More than four fifths of statutorily homeless acceptances are households with dependent children, of whom over half are lone female parents, with one quarter being couples with dependent children.

Rough sleepers are mainly aged over 25 years, although a minority are younger and newer to the streets. About one quarter of rough sleepers are women. The majority are white and UK nationals, although non-UK nationals who cannot access benefits form a growing number.

Street homelessness is associated with early death and higher rates of morbidity. There has been much media coverage in recent times about the rising number of deaths of rough sleepers across the UK: more than doubling in the last five years.⁹ There have also been high profile deaths on the streets of Birmingham; usually associated with cold weather, which have focussed media attention on the dangers of street homelessness.¹⁰

Physical health problems in homeless people are up to three times more likely than in the general population. Homeless people are usually living in poor quality temporary accommodation, which has knock-on effects for their health.

Homeless people also suffer significantly higher levels of respiratory and circulatory problems. Their resulting health care needs are often more complex than the average due to the need to treat often multiple, chronic illnesses and diseases.

Substance misuse (especially drugs and alcohol) is often a contributing factor to homelessness – particularly street homelessness. It can also form a barrier to accessing homeless hostel and similar accommodation.

⁹ <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2018/apr/11/deaths-of-uk-homeless-people-more-than-double-in-five-years>

¹⁰ <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2017/dec/22/this-man-died-sleeping-on-birmingham-streets-what-happened-to-his-life>

Reasons for Rising Homelessness in Birmingham

The city council's homelessness review reveals that rising homelessness in Birmingham is largely due to the end of assured shorthold tenancies. One quarter of the statutory homeless cite this reason.

Poor mental health is both a cause and consequence of homelessness. There are also complex associations with issues such as childhood trauma, substance misuse, and domestic abuse. The prevalence of mental ill health is far greater amongst homeless people than the general population.¹¹

One fifth point to domestic abuse, making it the second most common reason for homelessness in Birmingham. Factors influencing this may include the location of refuge provision and safety considerations of the people involved.

Parental exclusions, and those by other family and friends, account for 1 in 4 of all homeless households.

In the case of rough sleeping, welfare reforms, particularly reductions in entitlement to Housing Benefit or Local Housing Allowance, reduced investment by the city council in homeless services because of central government cuts in grant, and flows of non-UK nationals who are unable to access benefits are all key drivers in Birmingham.

Conclusion

Mounting homelessness in Birmingham tracks to national trends, and has its roots in national housing and welfare policies. While the government has recognised that more help needs to be given to local authorities and the third sector to prevent and tackle homelessness at the local level, this is only a short-term stopgap. Investment in social and other forms of affordable housing are crucial to long-term solutions.

The analyses above and the views expressed in the Bulletin are those of the authors and not necessarily those of the Trustees of the Human City Institute.

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¹¹ Birmingham City Council (2017) Homelessness Review 2016/17. Directorate for People Commissioning Centre of Excellence