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HIDDEN **HOMELESSNESS**

USING RESEARCH FOR SOCIAL GOOD

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ABOUT US

In 2020, Walnut Unlimited won the MRS &more Research Proposal Competition, designed to give opportunities to young researchers to develop their talents while carrying out a worthwhile piece of research. Our proposal 'Giving a voice to those experiencing homelessness – the hidden population' highlights the plight of homelessness, whilst shifting focusing onto the under-researched and less understood type of sofa-surfing.

SPECIAL THANKS

We would like to thank all those who supported us with the research, including:

- The research respondents and participants who shared their stories with us
- The group of people with lived experience of sofa-surfing who supported us at all stages of the research, for all their time and valuable input
- All the charities and their representatives who helped us along the way with their sage counsel and access to a wealth of background data and research
- The research funders, whose generosity enabled the programme to go ahead along with self-funding from the Unlimited Group
- The Market Research Society, for setting up the competition, inputting in the research, and hosting a webinar where we will share the findings as widely as possible
- A special mention for Neil Preddy, whose energy and commitment as part of the Advisory Board were invaluable to the process

A full list of contributors and thanks is found at the end of this report.

SOFA-SURFING: INSIVIBLE HOMELESSNESS

As human beings we tend to focus on what's visible or what we see around us. That informs the way we think about a topic and thus what we focus our resources and efforts on. This is particularly true when we think of homelessness.

Most of us picture people sleeping rough or housed in temporary hostels. But did you know that the most common form of homelessness is, according to the Crisis Homelessness Monitor: England 2021, sofa-surfing?

Not to be confused with couch-surfing (a form of free holiday accommodation where an online community of people open their homes to fellow travellers), sofa-surfing is having to stay on someone's sofa or floor on a short-term, insecure basis because there is nowhere else to go¹.

Emotionally draining, logistically challenging and sometimes dangerous, our research explored the experience of sofa-surfing through the eyes of those who have lived it, as well as setting this form of homelessness within the context of the Covid-19 pandemic. It has also provided us with invaluable insight into the emerging cost-of-living crisis and the likely impact that it will have on people experiencing sofa-surfing.

One frequently overlooked element of sofa-surfing is the role of the hosts, who welcome people into their homes during times of need. As we will see in this report, hosts often provide much more than a roof over the head of their guest, offering food, washing facilities, internet access, and a range of emotional and practical support. This research explored in detail the role of hosts and uncovered the help and support needs that they themselves have in hosting someone who is sofa-surfing.

Our findings are informed by a substantial piece of research including expert interviews to frame the approach, a large-scale survey of people experiencing sofa-surfing and hosts, and in-depth interviews with these groups. Throughout the research we involved an advisory panel of people with lived experience of sofa-surfing and hosting, who gave us new ideas and kept us focussed on the key issues.



Research and policy interventions seem to focus on the more visible groups at the detriment of those who are hidden... This is particularly surprising considering sofa-surfing is numerically the largest form of core homelessness.

Fitzpatrick et al., 2021

THE CONTRIBUTORY FACTORS TO SOFA-SURFING

There are myriad factors that lead to sofa-surfing

There isn't one key contributor to sofa-surfing. Relationship challenges, financial difficulties, health problems and housing insecurity are all significant elements.

Experiencing any one of these problems (with relationships, finances, housing, or health) indicates that someone is living through a vulnerable situation. In fact, many experienced several of these factors simultaneously, painting a picture of complex and inter-related causes of sofa-surfing.

For most, there is a 'tipping point'

Underlying issues with health, finances and relationships can build up over time, but for most people we spoke to there was a 'trigger point' or event that led to them experiencing sofa-surfing – such as being evicted, losing a job, or the breakdown of a relationship. In some cases, the trigger point was extreme, such as suffering from physical or emotional abuse, or being released from a detention facility with nowhere to go.

Few are prepared for the experience of sofa-surfing

These trigger points, and the suddenness with which people often find themselves sofa-surfing, leaves many unprepared for the experience – particularly those experiencing it for the first time. The suddenness and severity of the situation, coupled with the lack of knowledge of available support services and the importance of a support network of family and friends, often results in an uphill struggle. This struggle is not only in managing their short-term situation but can impact getting their lives 'back on track' in a more substantial way.



Relationships | 62%

- Breakdown of relationships
- Arguments with family / friends
- Being the victim of abuse
- Problems with neighbours



Financial | 61%

- Debt / financial difficulties
- Benefits not covering expenses
- Delays in benefits payments
- Sanctions / penalties



Housing | 59%

- Being evicted
- Feeling unsafe in accommodation / feeling threatened
- Not knowing where to go



Health | 30%

- Mental health problems
- Physical health problems
- Problems with addiction



For me personally, mental health issues and losing my job led to me experiencing homelessness.

Female aged 51 years

My job moved quickly, and I didn't have anywhere lined up to stay. Rent was expensive and I had no references.

Male aged 32 years

THE LIVED EXPERIENCE

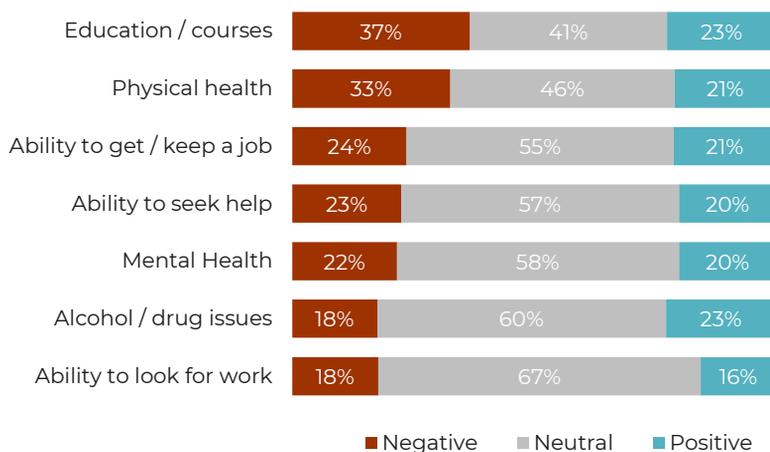
To be clear, everyone's experience of sofa-surfing is unique, but this research found that many people's experiences of sofa-surfing are not dissimilar to those experiencing other forms of homelessness, and is often influenced by similar structural issues such as access to affordable housing or issues around accessing benefits.

People experiencing sofa-surfing do have a roof of their head, and this provides a certain sanctuary and comfort, but there are also hard realities. The lack of personal space to carry out day-to-day activities can result in them often leaving the house for substantial periods at a time to give their hosts space (to work, to care for children etc.). This can compound the insecurity that their seemingly stable living situation has.

We heard evidence that the experience of sofa-surfing can lead to increased mental health problems, with the lack of a private space in the host's home denying people the space to reflect and focus on dealing with their situations and the ongoings of life that didn't end when they started sofa-surfing.

Two in ten (22%) people experiencing sofa-surfing said it had a negative impact on their mental health. Other common negative effects were on their ability to continue with courses or groups (37%), their physical health (33%), and their ability to get or keep a job (24%).

Impact of sofa-surfing on...



You find yourself in limbo. Often, you're not trusted with a key at home, so you have to be out all day in all kinds of weather. Even just somewhere where you can 'just be' would be useful. But when you do see that, it's often just one day a week or two afternoons, so what do you do on the other days? You could go to another place in a different area, but you can't afford the bus, so you have to walk in the rain. Something that people don't understand about sofa-surfing is that it's exhausting, the physical and mental demands on you are huge.

Male aged 47 years

You never had any personal space, and it was difficult to get on with my university work. I didn't have a key, so I could only come and go when they were there. It started to have an impact on my mental health.

Male aged 22 years

The kindness and generosity of hosts is unquestioned, but many people experiencing sofa-surfing felt that staying 'too long' at any one place would damage their relationship with their host and were keen not to outstay their welcome. Some reported seeing the signs that it was time to move on, putting more pressure on them to find somewhere else to stay.



CASE STUDY

SPOTLIGHT ON JOHN

John is in his late forties and has experienced sofa-surfing on numerous occasions. Like many of the people we spoke to, there was usually a trigger that led to John not having somewhere permanent to live. "There always seems to be a catalyst, either losing a job, finishing a course, having mental health problems, death in the family etc. and these things just lead to a crossroads and you're not always able to find somewhere to live. It's a succession of vacuums and voids." Alongside these trigger points lie a series of underlying issues which made it harder for John to gain stability, including insecurity of housing and a series of low-pay, zero hours jobs. "Once I was evicted from my flat because the owner wanted to give it to her daughter who was going to university. I was working in a zero hours contract at the time and the money was fine for a while, but then the hours dried up and I couldn't afford to pay rent anymore. It was a perfect storm really." When, at the age of 35, he finished a university course and had nowhere to live and no income, it was an even more daunting reality.



I've lived with different people – sometimes a couple, sometimes a couple with a kid and it creates a difficult dynamic. You're there as grace and favour, you're not really contributing, paying rent, you're just there as a guest. You can have a week or two, even a month or two, but after that you're really pushing your luck. I've never been a person to under-stay my welcome, but you do realise when you're starting to overstay it – there can be verbals or even physicals. It's a very testing situation, particularly when there's no solution, for example if you don't have a job or enough money to get somewhere to live.

Male aged 47 years

SUPPORT SERVICES

The experience of sofa-surfing is ultimately impacted by propensity to vulnerability, and how vulnerable each individual's situation is. Some were less vulnerable, characterised by having fewer issues to contend with and a stronger network of friends and family around them. Many of these people experienced sofa-surfing only for a short time, and were perhaps in work.

At the other end of the spectrum were people experiencing very vulnerable situations, multiple issues with accommodation, relationships & finances. Having a weak support network, perhaps through having exhausted it during previous periods of homelessness.

VULNERABILITY			
		Lower	Higher
Characteristics	Generally short-term, only sofa-surfing	Medium-term sofa-surfing	Longer-term sofa-surfing and significant experience of other accommodation including sleeping rough
	Few physical/mental health issues	May use other accommodation	Multiple, significant issues including health, addiction, being a victim of violence etc.
	Doesn't self-define as homeless	At least 1 significant issue (e.g. housing, finances, relationships)	Multiple, significant issues including health, addiction, being a victim of violence etc.
Support network	May be in work or studying	Just coping financially (probably on benefits)	Multiple, significant issues including health, addiction, being a victim of violence etc.
	Strong network of family/friends	May experience health issues	Limited support network (already exhausted?)
	Low perceived need for support	Loose support network	Acknowledge need for support, but may lack awareness
Support needs	Could benefit from some support to prevent recurrence	May not feel eligible for support	Significant support needs
	Would benefit from support for short- and long-term needs	Would benefit from support for short- and long-term needs	Significant support needs



I didn't end up going to hostels or shelters, I had enough personal contacts to find somewhere to stay.

Male aged 47 years

I didn't like the environment of temporary accommodation due to OCD and past negative experiences. I turned to sofa-surfing and stayed with my girlfriend at the time.

Male aged 41 years

I was kicked out of my accommodation by the council and disowned by family as a result of a combination of not paying bills and my domestic situation (abuse and drug use). I ended up homeless, spending time on the streets and sofa-surfing. I was on the streets unless I made friends or hooked up with someone. However, I stopped sofa-surfing in the end as some of my friends were eventually able to help me to get settled in Wales.

Male aged 48 years

Although it feels somewhat redundant to state, it is worth clearly setting out that all those who experience some form of sofa-surfing need support. Those at the lower end of the vulnerability spectrum may need lighter

levels of support, particularly to prevent reoccurrence, and those at the higher end of the spectrum with multiple, inter-related support needs require more complex support.

Regardless of level of need, though, nearly all (93%) of those we spoke to who had experienced sofa-surfing stated they had sought support around housing, finance or health. But despite this, significant proportions reported barriers to receiving support, including long waiting times, a lack of awareness of how or where to seek support, feeling that they were ineligible, or having difficulties in proving their eligibility status.

Challenges with accessing support...



This highlights a number of themes in relation to support and access:

1) The system is complex and difficult to navigate

Low levels of awareness of the different types of support available from local authorities, charities and other support organisations was a key theme across the research. Many were not aware of what services were available or the different types of providers they could reach out to.

2) Preventative services could be a solution

Many participants felt that support services focus mainly on remedial support once someone has become homeless and started sofa-surfing, and there were calls for more or better preventative support to help people to stay in their homes and address their issues, rather than needing to do so from the relatively difficult situation of sofa-surfing.

3) Support is more important now than ever

Particularly so given the impact of Covid-19 pandemic and the ongoing cost-of-living crisis. The near universal levels of requests for support underlines the vital role the various sectors and organisations play in supporting this group of hidden homelessness.

There is an underlying perception among some that support services are focused on the more extreme, or visible, forms of homelessness (such as rough sleeping) and thus there is little to offer those experiencing sofa-surfing. However, the constantly changing context suggests that sofa-surfing could grow as a form of homelessness.



I think I would have asked for help if I'd thought about it, but I didn't know what they could do, how to do it etc.

Female aged 20 years

They tend to provide remedial support - whether that's meeting your daily needs of housing or food, rather than helping people to stop getting into that situation in the first place.

Male aged 47 years

Because I can't afford the hostels I now sofa surf as a way to save money and it's often with strangers, which can be scary.

Male aged 49 years

THE HOST PERSPECTIVE

This research sought to provide a more holistic perspective on sofa-surfing, raising questions such as 'what impact does sofa-surfing have on hosts?' and 'is there enough support for this group of the population?'.

One significant finding from the research was around the cyclical nature of sofa-surfing. Nearly seven in ten hosts had, at some point, experienced sofa-surfing themselves (68%). This shows the link between the two groups, and many hosts told us that it was the experience of sofa-surfing that gave them the empathy and drive to take in people in need.

Despite many having past experience of sofa-surfing, most hosts are, like their guests, thrust into the situation at short notice, and are similarly unprepared for the role in which they find themselves. This means that ground rules are rarely established, and there can be tensions as hosts and guests adjust to living together, particularly over longer periods or where space is limited. Although the majority of hosts only have their guests for up to a week or so (56%), a quarter reported hosting someone for at least a month (25%).

Many hosts explained to us that their priority was in helping their guest with their immediate situation, and supporting them to get back on their feet. This relationship went far beyond simply providing accommodation, and included cooking for their guest, providing as much private space as possible, access to the internet for job searches and benefits applications, support with accessing services, and, perhaps most importantly, emotional support through offering a kind, listening ear.

Doing all this for their guests clearly had an impact on the day-to-day lives of hosts, who told us about their increased worry, the stress on their finances, and sometimes the added strain placed on existing household relationships through hosting. Most said that they were unaware of support services targeted at hosts, but there was clear demand for such provision if it existed.

With the cost-of-living crisis on-going, hosts told us that they are increasingly concerned about being able to support guests as prices continue to rise. While none said that they would turn away someone in need, if we don't get inflation under control, this could soon lead not only to more people losing their permanent home, but increased hardship for their hosts.



When someone's staying at your house, you can't just make food for yourself, even if you can't afford it you have to offer.

Female aged 38 years

I was just overwhelmed, I didn't know what support was available, and so I didn't look for any or try to find it. With emotional support I knew I could go to my GP, but I didn't want to trouble them. I don't think councils do tell people what's available. I've never seen anything that says 'if you're hosting someone who's sofa-surfing, we can support you'.

Female aged 51 years

The cost of living might impact on hosting as I may need to ask for a contribution from those staying for more than a week or so.

Male aged 41 years

WHAT DOES THE RESEARCH TELL US

The research has cast a light on this under-researched and poorly understood form of homelessness, giving a voice to people who have experienced sofa-surfing and hosting people who have sofa-surfed. Through carrying out the research we have drawn a range of conclusions and implications relating to different sectors and groups within society.

These have been tailored to the following groups:



... for policy makers



... for support services

(local authorities and charities)



... for society



... for market research sector



O N E

Implications for policy makers

- While largely invisible, sofa-surfing is already the most common form of homelessness and is likely to grow further as the cost-of-living crisis mounts.
- We know that early intervention is an effective way of preventing issues from escalating, and more work is needed to ensure that delivery bodies have the resources they need to identify and help people at risk early. Partly this is about understanding the various warning signs and working across services to identify those at risk – particularly those with higher levels of vulnerability where need is greatest.
- In the short term, there are low-cost and practical ways to help, such as better signposting to sources of help, raising awareness of this issue and how people can get help.
- In the longer-term, there needs to be a focus on improving security of housing tenure, increasing the supply of affordable homes to buy and rent, and on fostering a culture in which people feel comfortable asking for help early.



T W O

Implications for support services

(local authorities and charities)

- There is a clear need for these services for those experiencing sofa-surfing or at risk of doing so, however there is currently low awareness of how support services can help, and who is eligible.
- It is important to raise awareness of services, and ensure people know that there is early preventative help as well as support for those facing immediate crisis.
- People experiencing sofa-surfing often have multiple inter-related issues, so support needs to assess and help individuals on a personal, holistic basis – particularly when they are feeling vulnerable due to a lack of secure accommodation.
- There is also scope to provide more help to hosts, both in supporting them to help their guest, and to help hosts directly in dealing with the financial and emotional aspects of hosting someone who is sofa-surfing.



T H R E E

Implications for society

- Sofa-surfing, like other forms of homelessness, is not something that can be tackled overnight, and we need to continue to be there to support our families, friends, and even people we may not know when they need our help.
- As a society we need to actively educate ourselves about this, and other forms of homelessness, to be able to identify the contributory factors to sofa-surfing, but also to understand what the experience is like to work towards a more empathetic society.
- Many of us are reluctant to ask for help – we feel that others may have a greater need or feel embarrassed for needing support. As a society we need to challenge these perceptions and normalise asking for help so that more people can get support early.



F O U R

Implications for market research sector

- We are all susceptible to focusing our research on what is visible and easy to identify. We hope that this research will make the reader take pause and consider how their organisation can carry out research for good. Both in upskilling their workforce and other sectors but also providing insight that supports society at large.
- Walnut Unlimited was immensely proud to win this competition and part-fund this important research which has brought seldom heard voices to the forefront. We have also used the project to give exposure of new techniques and skills to young researchers.

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- The 20 individuals with lived experience who took part in an interview
- The 551 individuals who took part in the survey

RESEARCH APPROACH

We began the research with a period of desk research and expert interviews to refine the focus and definitions of the research, as well as the design and objectives for the study. This was followed by a large-scale online survey of people who had experienced sofa-surfing or hosting. The survey attracted 551 responses. To bring depth to the quantitative findings and bring the stories of those who have experience sofa-surfing to life, we then carried out 20 in-depth interviews with people who had experienced sofa-surfing, hosting, or both.

Throughout the research we held sessions with a participatory group of people with lived experience of sofa-surfing and hosting. This group met regularly to input into the research approach and objectives, to share their experiences and understanding, advise on language and content for research documents (questionnaires, topic guides etc.) and to provide their views on the emerging findings. The support of the participatory group was a key element of the research and we thank all members of the participatory group for their ongoing support and valuable contribution.

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