

HOMELESSNESS AND VIOLENCE

THE IMPACT OF VIOLENCE ON HOMELESSNESS IN SCOTLAND



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Homelessness as a result of violence is preventable - not inevitable.

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Introduction

Homelessness is an incredibly difficult situation for anyone to be in and is linked with a plethora of issues regarding health, social services interaction, educational attainment, poverty and justice. Due to the inherently chaotic nature of many homeless people's lives, they are more likely than most to be victims (and perpetrators) of crime. The link between violence and educational attainment¹, family stability, income and health have been well established and similar links exist with homelessness. Poverty and instability are common themes when it comes to those involved in violence and the same often applies to those who find themselves homeless. Despite Scotland leading the way with regards to homelessness legislation in the UK by abolishing the 'priority need' test for those who become homeless unintentionally, there is still much to be done by way of both research and action, especially when it comes to the link between homelessness and violence.

Violence is so commonly linked with homelessness that housing legislation even mentions it. 'Section 24 of the Housing (Scotland) Act 1987, as amended, defines homelessness for the purposes of the Act as follows. A person is homeless if he/ she has no accommodation in the UK or elsewhere. A person is also homeless

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if he/ she has accommodation but cannot reasonably occupy it, for example because of a threat of violence'².

The purpose of this report is to provide an overview of the link between violence and homelessness. This includes both the level of homelessness which is a result of violence (either victim or perpetrator), as well as the extent of the violence homeless people then face when they do not have any stable accommodation.

Overview

Homelessness remains a major problem for local authorities and service providers. In an era of financial restraint, the capabilities of these agencies to deal with it have become increasingly limited.

- In Scotland between 1 April 2015 and 31 March 2016 there were 34,662 homeless applications of which 82% were assessed as homeless or threatened with homelessness. Repeat homelessness was 6.6% and only 6% were intentionally homeless or intentionally threatened with homelessness. 42% of applicants had at least one support need³.
- 'The majority (56%) of homeless applicants, or nearly 21,000 households, were under 35 years old in 2015/16' – in Scotland⁴.
- Crisis calls for exemptions from shared accommodation rate to apply to those fleeing domestic abuse⁵.
- Although many homeless people have a complex mixture of mental and physical health issues which require special attention, a lot of people don't and have become homeless as a result of circumstances which could affect anybody, including unemployment, an abusive relationship, or benefit changes.
- 'Over 4,000 homelessness applications are made a year in Scotland as a result of a violent dispute within a household'⁶.
- 'One fifth of homelessness projects said most of the people using their services were prison leavers, in a study by charities Homeless Link and Resource Information Service. Ex-prisoners were also present at nearly all of the rest of the homelessness projects' (from the Survey of Needs and Provision, 2013 – England only).⁷
- Lack of stable accommodation is a major contributing factor in reoffending.
- 'The majority of applicants tend to be single, younger males, of White Scottish ethnicity.'⁸ The same is true regarding violence. Young males are most likely to be involved in violence both as a perpetrator and a victim.
- Even for those who do not present as homeless but live in sub-par accommodation, aggressive behaviour is more likely to be displayed from a young age⁹.
- A background of institutionalism – including being in prison – can play a part in a person becoming homeless.
- 'Research examining routes into homelessness found that family conflict was the most common starting point for homelessness, regardless of age. Family conflict in the past can also trigger homelessness in later life.'¹⁰

- Women, as well as being more likely to live in poverty, are at higher risk of homelessness as a direct result of violence. Therefore, although most homeless people are men, homelessness can be a gendered issue, particularly when domestic violence is involved.
- A survey of 452 homeless individuals found that 43% had been victims of violence (including domestic violence), and the median age of first occurrence was just 20.¹¹

Definitions of Homelessness

Although there is no one definition of homelessness used globally, all EU countries recognise those who sleep rough, and 'some also recognise those who live with family members or who live in transitional accommodation as homeless'¹².

Shelter Scotland, on the 'What is homelessness?' section of their website, say –

'You might be homeless if you are:

- sleeping on the streets
- staying with friends or family
- staying in a hostel or bed and breakfast hotel
- living in overcrowded conditions
- at risk of violence in your home
- living in poor conditions that affect your health.
- living in a house that is not suitable for you because you are sick or ^{disabled}¹³

Herein lies a difficulty when addressing the issue of the link between violence and 'homelessness' as such a broad term. For example, it is clear that the level of risk of someone sofa surfing amongst friends and family is very different from that of someone sleeping on the streets or in a homeless unit. Similarly, their reasons for ending up in those situations are likely to differ. What is worth noting, however, is that homelessness disproportionately affects single people, who make up around 70% of homelessness applications (and about 80% of prevention approached)¹⁴. This implies a shortage of support for many homeless people from friends and family, for a variety of reasons.

Explaining Homelessness

Homelessness can and does happen to anyone. The breakup of a relationship, coming out of a long term institution such as prison, the care system or the armed forces, losing a job and falling quickly into poverty, and benefit changes can all result in an individual losing stable accommodation.

'The causes of homelessness are complex. Current thinking is that homelessness is an interaction between individual and structural factors, including the presence or absence of a safety net. Individual factors include poverty, early adverse childhood experiences, mental health and substance misuse problems, personal history of violence'¹⁵.

The epidemiological model we use for explaining why people are violent (below) shows it is often a combinations of individual, relationship based, community and societally influenced factors which drive a person to commit a violent act.

Individual factors may include a history of violent behaviour, a impulsive personality and confused perceptions of masculinity, or what it means to be male and whether or not that necessarily translates as aggressive.

Relationship factors refer to potentially chaotic family units experienced by some homeless people as children, physical or sexual abuse or unhealthy family/peer norms.

Communities which have high levels of unemployment or in which temporary accommodation is a norm, there is a legitimisation of illegal behaviour and services are not properly utilised.

Society affects homelessness in number of ways, notably with regards to the inequality within a society, visible (and invisible) poverty, Government cuts to essential services and a lack of empathy from a portion of the population.

Similarly, with homelessness, a number of factors present in the above model are relevant when describing the common reasons for someone becoming homeless, such as substance abuse issues, exclusion from services, violence within the home, poverty and inequality.

How violence contributes to homelessness

Victims

Crisis reports that, along with physical or mental health problems, escaping a violent relationship was the most common reason for women to become homeless¹⁶. Domestic abuse in 2013-14 accounted for 11% of homeless applications in Scotland, the 4th most common cause¹⁷, highlighting just how common violence is (or has been) in the lives of those who are homeless. The below table also highlights the fact that social renters are more likely to present as homeless than any other group, showing the link between poverty, violence and homelessness as a result.

Table 9. Reason for homelessness application by housing prior to application (single people, percent)

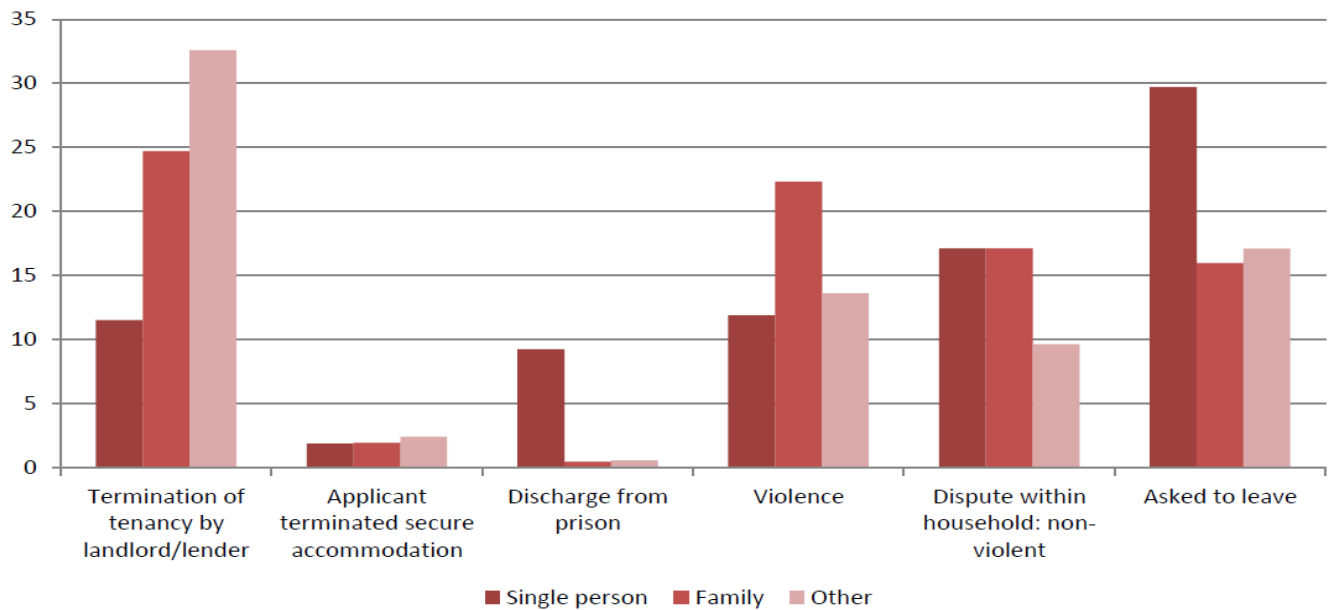
	Termination of tenancy by landlord/lender	Applicant terminated secure accomm.	Discharge from prison	Violence	Dispute within household: non-violent	Asked to leave	Total
Social Rented Tenancy	23	8	0	28	13	6	12
Own property - PRS	52	6	0	12	8	6	12
Own property - Owning	25	4	0	21	20	3	3
Parental/family home/relatives	3	0	0	8	23	55	29
Friends/partners	3	0	0	16	30	42	20
Prison	0	0	95	1	0	2	8
Long-term sofa surfing	0	0	0	4	10	40	3
Other ¹²	7	1	12	6	8	18	13

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Homelessness as a result of domestic abuse is highly gendered, and the vast majority of homeless applications which come as a result of domestic abuse are from women, many of whom have children. Therefore, although the majority of those who are homeless are single and are usually young males, when it comes to people being made homeless as a direct result of violence, women are perhaps more likely to be affected. This is consistent with research from the USA, which found that, from the sample used, 63% of homeless mothers had experienced adult intimate partner violent¹⁹. The below graph, from a report on single homelessness in Scotland, produced by Crisis, shows that a higher percentage of families present as homeless as a result of violence than single people do. Whilst it is the case in some instances that single people presenting as homeless will have a history of violence, what differentiates them from many women and families is the fact that this violence has not been the root cause of their homelessness. Substantial research is required in order

to establish what percentage of all homeless people have come from a background of violence either as a child, an adult or both.

Figure 6. Reasons for homelessness application by household type (percent)¹¹



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What is also concerning about the gendered aspect of homelessness as a result of violence is that ‘domestic abuse is also closely linked with repeat homelessness’²¹. Those leaving the family home because of domestic abuse will often return, only for further abuse to take place. Whilst obviously traumatising for the victim, this also has a detrimental effect on the development of any children involved, not least because we already know that children who have been brought up in an environment in which violence and temporary accommodation are the norm are more likely to be violent. Therefore, along with women, young people should be specifically targeted by prevention programmes if they are not in stable accommodation as a result of violence in order that the cycle of violence is broken at as early a stage as possible. An evaluation of prevention programmes (some aimed specifically at victims of domestic abuse) can be found in ‘Evaluation of Homelessness Prevention: Innovation Fund Projects’²² from the Scottish Government. Crucially, not all of these prevention programmes rely on the victim leaving the households, with alternative solutions sought. This approach can offer the victim a level of control over the situation, something which can have positive effects on self-esteem and confidence going forward.

Perpetrators and People with Convictions

Whilst there has been a good amount of research done into the link between domestic abuse and homelessness, there is a gap in the literature available regarding information on those who have become homeless as a result of acts of violence they themselves have committed. For example, it is reasonable to assume that a young male being thrown out of his parent's house as a result of his violence behaviour is a situation that could occur, and this sort of occurrence is something which could be looked into further, if only to establish how common it is.

Profiling those who are both homeless and have a history of violence has not been widely tackled, although a study conducted in Stoke-on-Trent in 2007 does allude to the difficulties involved. Amongst other findings, it noted that 'it may be rare for people who display violent behaviour not to have an offending history relating to other forms of criminal activity', showing that other offending history can often indicate that an individual does also have a violent past. Furthermore, the survey respondents (all homeless people with a history of violent behaviour) in this research were asked about their life experiences and the results showed similarities to what we already know about violent offenders in general.

- '61 per cent reporting having had an unsettled life while growing up
- 56 per cent had experienced drug dependency and 48 per cent alcohol dependency
- 55 per cent had been excluded or suspended from school
- 46 per cent had experienced domestic violence and 45 per cent had experienced 'other' forms of abuse
- 40 per cent reported mental ill health
- 36 per cent had been in the care of the local authority
- 29 per cent reported self harming
- 21 per cent had literacy difficulties' ²³

What is also evident is that this group cannot be pigeon-holed as all having come from the same chaotic background. Like every subsection of the homeless population, diversity exists. It must be understood by all of those involved in the provision of services for homeless people that there are a number of reasons for people ending up in the situation that they find themselves in. This will lead to a more tailored approach to providing assistance and will hopefully result in a lower number of people presenting as homeless on more than one occasion.

Furthermore, the research found that within that area, those with issues relating to aggressive behaviour and violent histories were limited in a number of ways with regards to the housing assistance they were given due to the fact that they were amongst the most likely to be rejected from homeless shelters, they sometimes did not want to share rooms with other people so they could control their aggression, and if they had been evicted from other shelters they found it difficult to get accepted into another one²⁴. Whilst the safety of others within any particular homeless unit is of course of paramount importance, and the discrimination faced by those with a history of violent behaviour could be, at times, understandable, special arrangements must be looked into for those who are seen to be a danger. If this is not explored then there is a very real risk of marginalising these people further.

From the research carried out in Stoke-on-Trent it is clear that for those who have a history of violent behaviour, the struggle of homelessness can become even more difficult. The life pattern of homeless people who have been violent in the past is strikingly similar to other groups the VRU has previously interacted with (i.e. gang members). Use of alcohol and drugs from a young age, chaotic lifestyles, poor health and below average educational attainment are all common themes for many people in this situation. What their research also points out, however, is how diverse a group the sample they used was. Rather than everyone falling into the 'chaotic' category, there is a group who have been brought up in more stable environments, are less likely to be dependent on alcohol and drugs and do not necessarily have relationships with others who are. Rather than a lifetime of conflict, this group is more likely to be characterised by a more secure lifestyle which has been hindered by individual issues with aggression and anger management²⁵.

Given the fact that violent behaviour is often a characteristic of ex-offenders even if they have not been imprisoned for violence²⁶, it is important that those trying to reintegrate after spending time in prison be given as much support as possible. The charitable company, Iriss, gives an overview of the problem of ex offenders coming out of prison and becoming homeless in their report 'Prison Leavers and Homelessness'.

'Lack of access to appropriate accommodation on leaving prison has led to over-representation of this group within every section of the homeless population: those who have made a statutory homelessness application; those who are roofless; and those who are hidden, sleeping on friends' sofas or in unsuitable places. For example, in Glasgow in 1999, 44% of people living in hostels or sleeping rough had been in prison at least once (Homelessness Task Force, 2002).

More recently, a survey of 500 homelessness services in England in 2013, reported that an estimated 18% of service users were prison leavers (Homeless Link, 2013).²⁷

For those with aggression and anger management issues, the lifestyle associated with being homeless can itself offer difficulties. The Turning Point attributed the primary cause of 52 recorded incidents to violence & aggression between May 2005 and December 2007 within their homeless services, far more than were seen to be caused by alcohol, self harm or attack/assault²⁸. This implies that aggressive behaviour may not be uncommon within hostels and homeless shelters (although the relatively low number of attack/assault incidents would suggest that such behaviour might not always lead to serious physical altercations). Nonetheless, for those with a history of this kind of behaviour, this environment is unlikely to be positive.

Community Justice Scotland has acknowledged that reoffending is often impacted heavily by the security and quality of the housing people receive when they leave prison. “Prisoners who have problems securing accommodation on their release are significantly more likely to reoffend than those individuals who do not face these challenges”... Access to suitable housing is a fundamental aspect of any individual’s effort to desist from offending, fulfil requirements on community sentences or reintegrate back into the community after a custodial sentence or release from remand.²⁹ This issue is made worse by that fact that often, prisoners are offered housing in undesirable areas where turnover of tenants is high and so are crime rates. High levels of violence are more likely in these areas and so the likelihood of re-offending increases as a result.

The other obvious link between homelessness, violence, and crime more generally, is around the issue of whether being homeless makes a person more or less likely to commit a crime. In some ways, it is to be expected that those who are homeless are likely to be the most deprived and vulnerable in our society and as such, some offences (especially acquisitory crime) can be explained by the desperation many homeless people feel. A report from Homeless Link found that as well as 31% of homeless people one JSA having been sanctioned in comparison to just 3% of typical claimants, 62% of homeless people had turned to crime ‘to survive’³⁰, highlighting further the links between homelessness, poverty and crime. Furthermore, research has shown that homeless people will, in order to stay safe, commit a crime in order to get an indoor bed for the night in custody, with a survey of more than 400 rough sleepers reporting that a fifth have committed offences for this reason³¹.

In terms of whether or not the precursors to violent or criminal behavior are often there already amongst homeless people who commit crime, the evidence that can be drawn upon relates to the similar issues many people face from an early stage in their lives which can affect how they behave later on regarding crime and homelessness. As was mentioned in the 'Explaining Homelessness' section of this report, outlining the impact of adverse childhood experiences and their role in making someone more likely to be violent as an adult. The same is true of homelessness. However, it has also been established in this section of the report that the homelessness affects people with a range of life experiences.

Therefore, when people commit crime it could be down to a chaotic upbringing, substance abuse, a lack of stability and other disadvantages. The same can sometimes be said of why people become homeless. However, both could also be down to events that take place later in life, whether that be cuts to benefits, a job loss or some other unforeseen circumstance that leads to an individual ending up in a life of turbulence, poverty and uncertainty, words which often describe people who are regularly homeless and/or regularly engage in criminal activity. The similarity between the paths of both groups would imply that both issues could be dealt with in some way by addressing the same problems.

Homeless people as victims

The vulnerabilities that come with not having stable accommodation mean that homeless people are often more likely to be victims of violence than the general population. Those in hostels or sleeping rough are particularly at risk due to their exposure to other people, including while asleep, and 'compared to the general public, rough sleepers are 13 times more likely to have experienced violence'³². Further still, a great deal of the abuse rough sleepers face comes from members of the public, with reports of beatings, verbal abuse and being urinated on not uncommon for those on the streets. This was confirmed by research carried out in England which showed that homeless people were at a much higher risk of being victims of a number of crimes, and that of those interviewed, 52% had been victims of violence in the year previous, compared to just 4% of the population of England and Wales. Similarly, sexual assault rates were 8%, a far higher proportion than that of the overall population³³. Often these attacks are not from other rough sleepers, but from members of the public, and there have been reports of intoxicated young men attacking an individual sleeping on the street in order to show off to friends³⁴.

Interviews in the USA with homeless people found that certain characteristics made them feel more likely to be victims of violence or abuse. These include: age, with young homeless people being seen as more vulnerable; gender, with males more at risk of physical assault and theft and women more at risk of sexual abuse; 'unkempt appearance' and being a rough sleeper increased the risk of being physically and sexually abused; and substance abuse and links to 'deviant peers' is linked with increased criminal victimisation³⁵.

The complexities of rough sleepers particularly revolve around the multiple support needs many people have, such as substance abuse issues and mental health problems. Becoming victims of violence is therefore an even more stressful experience for those who are in such poor physical and mental health. In order to help rough sleepers, and specifically those who have been victims of violence, it is crucial that mental health and substance abuse charities and services are involved in the housing process.

Women are particularly at risk while sleeping rough to sexual abuse. Even in mixed hostels this can be the case, and it has been reported that the estimated number of women who are homeless in the UK could be far lower than the reality given the case that many women tend to sleep in more secluded areas where they are less likely to be counted when research on numbers is being conducted³⁴. Also concerning is the fact that research from the United States has concluded that 'By

far the most significant risk factor for violent victimization as an adult is a pattern of physical, emotional and sexual abuse as a child... many of the young girls destined to become homeless adult women have been permanently scarred by their childhood victimizations and have an extremely warped sense of what is normal and acceptable in their relationships with men'³⁶.

Engaging as many stakeholders as possible, from a wide variety of fields, will inevitably lead to a more rounded approach in tackling the abuse rough sleepers, who are often the most vulnerable people in our societies for more reasons than one.

Conclusion

If we want to start explaining homelessness in a similar way to the way we do violence, then we can, by approaching it as a disease, given other factors which contribute to it. The point of the epidemiological model is not to imply that everyone who experiences some of the aforementioned problems regarding poverty and poor health will become homeless (or violent), but rather to say that if we know that those experiences are statistically more likely to drive someone into a chaotic lifestyle then our focus should be on preventing the conditions in which they take place. This is the same approach that the VRU has taken towards violence. What is clear is that for many, the road to violence is one which takes many of the same twists and turns as the road to homelessness. Thus, if the approach which has been taken towards reducing violence (successfully) is replicated for homelessness, and a more holistic strategy is implemented around poverty, health and education, then a major drop in the number of people presenting as homeless is entirely achievable. As it was put in a report on the evaluation of homeless prevention, 'the prevention of homelessness does not happen in isolation from other issues. An exclusive focus on homelessness may not yield the most efficient results; rather a holistic or systemic approach is needed.'³⁷

Whilst Scotland is leading the way in homeless legislation within the UK by abolishing 'priority need', there is always more to be done. What this report has shown is that it is not uncommon for those who are homeless to have been affected by violence at some point in their life in one way or another, and at a time when public finances coming under increasing pressure, it is these vulnerable people who become more and more at risk of slipping through the safety net. The Glasgow Housing Network indicated that the benefits cap, for example, 'has particular implications for homelessness as households will have to make up the shortfall in their rent, leaving many at risk of rent arrears, eviction and homelessness'³⁸. For those whose lives have been blighted by violence, changes to the benefits system pose just one of a plethora of difficult challenges to overcome. As well as simply, for example, building more houses and making changes to the way in which the private rental system is regulated, which are solutions for the broad issue of homelessness, special assurances need to be made for those leaving prison, people fleeing domestic abuse, and individuals who have a history of violent behaviour that they will get tailored, indiscriminate help to ensure they do not end up homeless.

Recommendations

Homelessness, like many social inequalities, is likely to be borne out of a life blighted by poverty. The reasons people present as homeless can vary widely and as such the responses offered must be tailored accordingly to ensure the quickest and most efficient solution possible is found.

- Further research, including in depth quantitative analysis regarding the experiences of people with a history of violent behaviour presenting as homeless will allow for a clearer, Scotland-specific intelligence base to be built up.
- Given that research has shown that over a quarter of homeless people have been charged with a violent offence³⁹, ensure that homeless units and other services specifically for homeless people start offering anger management classes and other such activities aimed at moving people away from a violent lifestyle.
- VRU should engage with organisations such as Women’s Aid to make further progress in understanding the full extent to which domestic abuse plays a part in the overall issue of homelessness in Scotland and allow for further lobbying of the Scottish and UK Governments to develop housing plans specific for those victims who are presenting as homeless as a direct result of domestic abuse. We should aim to begin framing these cases not just as housing issues but as also as problems related to violence and wider attitudes towards women.
- Engage with domestic abuse victims who have been homeless repeatedly as a result of the violence they have encountered to find out how services could have better protected them.
- Produce and promote literature warning of the difficulties associated with being homeless with a history of violence. It is important that the consequences of violence, including those that only occur later on in life, be publicised as much as possible.
- Work to engage with and expand successful homeless prevention programmes aimed specifically at victims of domestic abuse, such as ‘Safe as Houses’ in Edinburgh (City of Edinburgh Council).
- Ensure housing advice, given by qualified individuals, be available to all those in prison (as well as the armed forces and in care). Furthermore, acknowledge that cuts to services like this are unlikely to yield positive outcomes (‘Targeting to prison leavers has dropped by 15 percentage points from 16% to 1%’ (England only, 2013)⁴⁰).
- ‘Victimization studies reveal that homeless people are also disproportionately subject to extreme and persistent violence, where they typically experience hate crime, assault, theft,

sexual harassment, interpersonal violence, and homicide⁴¹ – ensure community police officers especially are trained to spot signs of rough sleepers who may have been victims of violence, or who are particularly vulnerable.

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