

SOCIAL POLICY

Sofa-Surfing: Using a Community-Based Approach to Tackle the Most Common Form of Homelessness

Donatella Petrucci
Noah Durban
Ava James
Faris Luke
James Wooding



Leeds Policy Institute
May 2024

About Leeds Policy Institute

Leeds Policy Institute (LPI) is the first student-run policy unit and think tank located at the University of Leeds. Founded in April of 2023, LPI has united over 60 students across the University of Leeds from a large range of undergraduate and postgraduate degrees to tackle and research both local and national issues that are encapsulated within our six policy divisions of Macro Policy, Social Policy, Urban Planning and Transport, Energy and Environment, Financial Regulation, and Market Interventions.

LPI is dedicated to producing data-driven research from an initial non-partisan position to attract a wide range of talent with varying political beliefs and backgrounds from the University. Through this, we generate organic research conclusions while extending opportunities to all students across the University of Leeds. LPI's research is reviewed by our academic advisory council consisting of lecturers and researchers from the University of Leeds and through this, LPI ensures that all published research conclusions have undergone their respective review process.

The core mission of LPI is to create opportunity and to develop the professional academic, research, and interpersonal skills of students at the University of Leeds. In this year alone, LPI has created opportunities with members presenting at LSE's British Conference of Undergraduate Research while being published in external newspapers such as the Financial Times. LPI is a testament and example to the resilient and innovative spirit that is fostered and shared by all students at the University of Leeds, and we hope that our newly published research will reflect the values and mission of Leeds Policy Institute.

Acknowledgements

First and foremost, LPI would like to thank its partners. The charts and data you will see in this report would not have been possible without our partnership with Macrobond, the world's largest macroeconomic and financial database, who kindly offered LPI the rights to operate their integrated analytical software. Through a partnership with the UK's original free-market think tank, the Institute of Economic Affairs (IEA), LPI receives non-controlling funding that allows the institute to support its members by running social events, and workshops, while also facilitating the publishing of physical materials for research dissemination.

Second, we would like to thank the Leeds University Business School (LUBS) and the Economics Department for their ongoing support and assistance in acquiring funding for LSE's BCUR event and dissemination of LPI opportunities across the university respectively. The willingness of faculty to engage with LPI is something that we are immensely grateful for.

Here, we would like to thank Stefan Kesting, Teaching Fellow and Assistant Head of Year at the University of Leeds, for his review of this research paper. Stefan's advice and suggestions have been instrumental in the finalisation of research conclusions within this report and for this, we would like to thank him for his input.

Finally, we would like to extend our thanks to the LPI data team consisting of Jasper Holmes, Andrea Morter-De Cecco, Tegan O'Connor, and Evan Gardiner for assisting with the charting and graphical analysis found within this and other LPI reports and publications.

Table of Contents

1	1 INTRODUCTION	5
	1.1 Nature and Context of Sofa-Surfing	5
2	2 POLICY INTERVENTIONS	8
	2.1 Short Term	8
	2.2 Long term	9
	REFERENCES	13





Abstract

Sofa-surfing is the largest form of hidden homelessness within the UK and one that is often overlooked in policies to tackle homelessness due to the inherent difficulties in quantifying the number of individuals who are sofa-surfing and the many interpretations of the term itself. Despite these issues, this research identifies and examines four key contextual features of sofa-surfing:

- 1) The commonality of sofa-surfing as a homelessness experience.
- 2) The short-term social and economic damages that sofa-surfing can have on an individual's livelihood for both the host and sofa-surfer.
- 3) The disproportionate damages that can occur to people of a marginalised background in particular women and people on the Autism spectrum.
- 4) The potential for sofa-surfing to become part of a long-term pathway into other worse or equally worse forms of homelessness.

As such, it is argued in this paper that despite the aforementioned difficulties, appropriate policies need to be introduced to tackle this form of homelessness alongside the larger fight to stop homelessness in the UK. In response to some of the key contextual features of the experience of Sofa-surfing, this paper argues for a focus on community centres as the main body to help tackle the issue. A decentralised approach to tackling the locally based nature of sofa-surfing, community centres can provide aid to both the sofa-surfer as well as its host. This can provide short-term aid to sofa-surfers such as meal provisions and clothing as well as long-term provisions like training courses depending on the funding given to these centres.



Sofa-surfing: Using a Community-Based Approach to Tackle the Most Common Form of Homelessness

Donatella Petrucci, Noah Durban, Ava James, Faris Luke, James Wooding

Recommendations

1. **Policy must be directed in such a way that it is available at the point of use but also respects people's need for anonymity and independence:** sofa-surfers are frequently trying to avoid the system (2013, pp.532), going to a friend or acquaintance's house is often a way to avoid confrontation or systemic intervention.
2. **Introduction of community spaces:** Those should work to rebuild the community in areas which have been displaced and further marginalised: becoming a hub for people to organise, meet and share. As these community hubs become more established (and with the right funding) they will need staffing. Finding work is an incredibly difficult task when you don't have an address or a bank account. However, with the support of the support services at the community centres, and the provision of fixed address or access schemes such as 'HSBC no fixed address bank accounts'.
3. **Community centres should provide to access several training schemes:** whether they provide access to apprenticeship schemes, support with filling out applications, or the acquisition of high-demand skill sets such as coding. Several different workshops could take place in the space, by people in the community and beyond who have skills to share. Skill-sharing spaces are not a new concept; with examples in community spaces across the country including 'Sharing Space' by Camden Thinks and Do which provides dedicated time and resources for people in the community to meet and share knowledge.



1 Introduction

1.1 Nature and Context of Sofa-Surfing

Sofa-surfing is a type of “hidden homelessness” which involves an individual sleeping within the residence of a member of their support network, usually on the floor or in informal living quarters (Deleu, Schrooten and Hermans, 2023). Due to the informal nature of sofa-surfing arrangements, government statistics often struggle to capture accurate estimates of who is currently sofa-surfing. Lohman (2021) shows that capturing information on sofa-surfers is unreliable due to a range of caveats such as issues with wording as well as trying to access proxy information. Yet, despite these issues, sofa-surfing is still a big problem as it is still considered the most common form of homelessness with an official estimate of about 538k households currently hosting someone in some variation (ONS, 2023). Another issue is that the experience of sofa-surfing varies from person to person as the pathways into hidden homelessness can be radically different. Sanders, Boobis and Albanese (2019) found that from 2019 found that 2/5th of participants who were sofa-surfing had lived in a settled home for more than a year. However, in the same study, a similar number of participants had entered sofa-surfing from other forms of rough sleeping or living in caravans (Sanders, Boobis and Albanese, 2019).

The reasons for entering sofa-surfing have a strong influence on how long the bout of sofa-surfing lasts. In a study looking specifically at young sofa-surfers, the average length of sofa-surfing was about a month, 22% had done so for more than 4 months, whereas 23% had done so for less than a week (Clarke, 2016). It is important to consider both the length of time, the experiences and opinions of the surfer, and the reasons for entering sofa-surfing as all of these factors are good indicators of the strength of that individual's support network. As explored later in this paper, a support network is made up of individuals who are close to the individual and its strength is determined by the number of people who are available to aid the sofa-surfer. Over time, this network weakens as fewer people



can help the individual. Later, the report will use a narrative about an individual named Sofia to show how support networks can weaken. Existing institutional issues in accessing homelessness provision can put a time bomb on those who have weaker support networks. In fact, about 36% of those who tried to access provisions reported unrealistically long waiting times whereas 27% said they had issues with proving their homelessness status. (Kilshaw and Still, 2022). Due to inherent socioeconomic disadvantages that marginalised groups already suffer, naturally, these individuals can have a worse experience and suffer during a sofa-surfer period. It is crucial to explore the link between sofa-surfing and different demographics such as those with disabilities, and gender (Clarke, 2016). While there may not currently be a direct link between individuals who are on the autistic spectrum, Alasdair Churchard's evidence suggests that autistic people have a greater risk of homelessness (Churchard et al, 2019). In Lincolnshire, 18.5% of residents in a homeless shelter had a positive screening for autism (Kargas et al, 2019). It is important to understand the factors associated with autism which may contribute to individuals within this demographic facing the possibility of sofa-surfing.

Firstly, housing support services that are available to people with autism are limited (Garratt & Flahert, 2023), as such, individuals can face vulnerability when it comes to securing long-term, stable accommodation. Likewise, a common trait amongst individuals with autism is co-concurring mental health issues. It is estimated that about 53% of adults with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) have one or more mental health disorders, with depression and anxiety being the most common (Lever & Geurts 2016). This can also contribute to difficulties of individuals within this demographic securing long-term accommodation. Many also face the inability to live independently with a lack of support services available, they are pushed into housing measures that are only designed to be temporary. Other factors such as social communication barriers as well as employment challenges, contribute to the risk of many individuals with autism, being forced into sofa-surfing with no long-term restorative policy



proposals to provide them with the support they need. Links between sofa-surfing and gender should also be examined. This connection is perhaps clearer than that of people on the autistic spectrum.

Many factors influence this, one of which are economic disparities. Women are susceptible to gender-based inequalities as well as wage gaps, with women on average earning 7.7% less than men per hour (Office for National Statistics 2023). This can leave women vulnerable to the inability to find secure accommodation. Other factors such as domestic violence can also contribute to this, with women who are escaping abusive relationships forced into sofa-surfing, seeking refuge with friends or family members. Domestic violence disproportionately affects women, which is one factor which would suggest that women may face a greater risk of being forced into sofa-surfing (Fitzpatrick, 2005). The connections between gender and sofa-surfing are nuanced but are crucial for the development of targeted restorative support systems and interventions. While sofa-surfing is designed to be a temporary measure, without the necessary restorative policy in place, it possesses many long-term implications for individuals.

Firstly, questions arise regarding the legality of sofa-surfing. While there currently is no UK statute that forbids sofa-surfing, there are key pieces of legislation that can affect sofa-surfers. As sofa-surfing is not a legal arrangement, difficulties may arise when an individual is seeking employment, official documentation, or state benefits. This alone acts as a barrier to sofa-surfers securing long-term permanent accommodation. Sofa-surfers also face difficulties accessing essential services, another key barrier to restoring individuals to a position of housing security. A vital service that sofa-surfers face limited access to, is health care. Consistently moving from property to property and relying on the sanctuary of others, can place a huge strain on both the physical and mental health of individuals. 33% of sofa-surfers cited better access to mental health services as a preventative measure to their situation (Sanders et al, 2019). Sofa-surfing can contribute to anxiety and depression, and without



proper access to essential health services, the long-term health implications to sofa-surfers, even those who may eventually secure permanent accommodation, can be dire as insecure and unsafe housing worsens and compounds pre-existing mental health conditions (Thomson, Petticrew & Morrison, 2001). Without a restorative policy, individuals who find themselves sofa-surfing could quite easily find themselves spiralling into a more dangerous situation from rough sleeping to serious long-term health problems. Without appropriate measures, sofa-surfing serves only as a temporary solution to a permanent problem.

2 Policy Interventions

2.1 Short Term

Now that we have explored the nature of sofa-surfing, we shall now turn to what policies may be implemented to help, protect, or lessen the burden on sofa-surfers. But it is first very important to highlight the difficulties with this. As highlighted by McLoughlin, sofa-surfers are frequently trying to avoid the system (2013, pp.532), going to a friend or acquaintance's house is often a way to avoid confrontation or systemic intervention. Because of this, policy must be directed in such a way that it is available at the point of use but also respects people's need for anonymity and independence. Sofa-surfing is also often a short-term affair, with 35% of people aged 18-25 stating that they have Sofa-surfed at some point in their lives (Clark, 2016, pp.61), yet only a fraction of this number will be in long-term homelessness at any given point (DLHC, 2023). Therefore, any policy must focus on directly available support that can be picked up or dropped at a moment's notice, while also providing methods by which to help people into more stable living environments.

To explore these potential policies, we shall look through the lens of the fictional character of 'Sofia'. Sofia is 20 years old and was recently forced out of her parent's house after an argument between her and her family. Luckily, she has a friend who is willing to host her on their sofa for a few nights while



she works out what to do next - but this sudden change is not without immediate problems: kicked out of her home she has no spare clothes, toiletries, or sanitary products - and not enough spare cash to buy any. Her host, while trying to make her as comfortable as possible, is also struck by the added cost of an extra person to feed and is conscious that this living arrangement cannot last for long as their goodwill diminishes over time, consequently weakening the sofa-surfers support network. In a situation like this, how can government policy help? As this problem is centred around a community, the solution must be held similarly to allow for comfortable and non-committal help to be attained, because of this we believe that community centres can be improved to become even greater hubs for support and advice.

Community centres, as described by Demireva, are places which “essentially provide a wide range of services aimed at the needs of the local community and the most disadvantaged among the local residents” (2017, pp.28). This position as a place of support with doors open to anyone gives them a unique opportunity to help the lives of sofa-surfers in a way most government organisations cannot. Given enough support and funding, Community Centres could help people in a multitude of ways. Returning to Sofia, A community centre could provide her with clothing, sanitary products, and toiletries, as a permanently available institution of her local area. Given enough funding, they could also support hosts by providing support for groceries or even providing meals themselves. In addition, advice and support provided by social workers would aid both the host and sofa-surfer in navigating pathways out of sofa-surfing. These projects, while small, could benefit from extended government funding; not only to make more of these services available, but also to spread awareness of them to those who need them.

2.2 Long term

Sofia is a young woman, part of what is described by Watt as ‘Generation Rent’ - a demographic of people faced with housing scarcity, unaffordable homes, and low wages. Driven by the gentrification



of many working-class areas; the displacement of communities forces them into increasingly precarious positions (Watt, pp 129 -130). As introduced earlier, the community is, for many young homeless people, a key source for survival - with many relying on the kindness of friends and family to host young people like Sofia. Thus, one of the main benefits of the introduction of these community spaces is that they work to rebuild the community in areas which have been displaced and further marginalised: becoming a hub for people to organise, meet and share.

As these community hubs become more established (and with the right funding) they will need staffing. Finding work is an incredibly difficult task when you don't have an address or a bank account. However, with the support of the support services at the community centres, and the provision of fixed address or access schemes such as 'HSBC no fixed address bank accounts', these job openings could be staffed by young people like Sofia.

In the same vein, Sofia could access several training schemes whether they provide access to apprenticeship schemes, support with filling out applications, or the acquisition of high-demand skill sets such as coding. Several different workshops could take place in the space, by people in the community and beyond who have skills to share. Skill-sharing spaces are not a new concept; with examples in community spaces across the country including 'Sharing Space' by Camden Thinks and Do which provides dedicated time and resources for people in the community to meet and share knowledge (Camden Thinks and Do, 2024). As community centres become trusted places for the community to gather, these communities can become a safe space for young people like Sofia to access the vital support they need. As the most common reason for young people to face homelessness is a result of mental health crises and the breakdown of the family unit, community centres can act as a quiet safe space to host counselling sessions for those young people suffering from poor mental health or issues such as substance and alcohol abuse. (Quintyne & Harpin, pp, 649) They can also become a



place for family support sessions, creating a space for families to talk through issues and come closer to resolution. This will improve our reactions to the root causes of homelessness for young people.

In this way, community centres not only contribute to fulfilling short-term essential needs of sofa-surfers but also empower young homeless people to reach their full potential - becoming a place to work, learn and build in a way which is essential for the improvement of people like Sofia's lives. The community centres also do not antagonise any of the parties involved as they just act as community infrastructure which is important as most young sofa-surfers do not see themselves as homeless.

In conclusion, this paper has highlighted the significant and varied impacts of sofa-surfing on individuals. In addition, the paper has proposed community-based and inclusive policy recommendations for effectively managing sofa-surfing. Although the tracking and addressing of sofa-surfing has presented complex challenges, the social and economic implications of ignoring such an issue are too significant to overlook, with an estimated 538,000 households engaging in hosting sofa-surfed (ONS, 2023). The implications of sofa-surfing for individuals within marginalised groups, such as women and people on the autism spectrum, are particularly severe. Individuals with autism frequently experience concurrent mental health issues; coupled with the limited availability of supportive housing, this often leads to deteriorating mental health, which in turn complicates their pursuits of stable and secure accommodation. Similarly, women contend with insecure economic prospects, exacerbated by significant gender pay gaps. In addition, social vulnerabilities emerge for those who unfortunately find themselves subjected to domestic abuse, which creates unstable environments that further implicate the securing of stable housing.



The policy recommendations proposed in this report, particularly regarding the pivotal role of community centres, establish a strategic and manufactured framework for intervention and managing of insecure sofa-surfing housing. The decentralisation of support from the sofa-surfer and host only, to a broad community solution allows for economic and social hardships to be mitigated. These community centres would provide practical assistance such as meals, clothing, and advice, and offer long-term support such as job training and mental health services. Ultimately, addressing the diverse phenomena of sofa-surfing requires a multi-dimensional approach which focuses on inclusive policies to respond to the unique needs of individuals affected. These comprehensive efforts would not only effectively help manage those currently sofa-surfing, but also set a foundation to start eliminating sofa-surfing in our communities.

References

- Churchard, A., Ryder, M., Greenhill, A. and Mandy, W., 2019. The prevalence of autistic traits in a homeless population. *Autism*, 23(3), pp.665-676.
- Clarke, A., 2016. The prevalence of rough sleeping and sofa surfing amongst young people in the UK. *Social Inclusion*, 4(4), pp.60-72.
- Deleu, H., Schrooten, M. and Hermans, K., 2023. Hidden homelessness: A scoping review and avenues for further inquiry. *Social Policy and Society*, 22(2), pp.282-298.
- Fitzpatrick, S., 2005. Explaining homelessness: a critical realist perspective. *Housing, theory and society*, 22(1), pp.1-17.
- Garratt, E. and Flaherty, J., 2023. 'There's nothing I can do to stop it': homelessness among autistic people in a British city. *Disability & Society*, 38(9), pp.1558-1584.
- Kargas, N., Harley, K.M., Roberts, A. and Sharman, S., 2019. Prevalence of clinical autistic traits within a homeless population: barriers to accessing homeless services. *Journal of Social Distress and the Homeless*, 28(2), pp.90-95.
- Lohmann, H., 2021. Hidden Homelessness in Germany: Gathering Evidence on Couch Surfing in Telephone Surveys. *European Journal of Homelessness*, 15(1), pp.37-58.
- Office for National Statistics (ONS), released on 29 March 2023, ONS Website, Article, "Hidden" homelessness in the UK: evidence review. Available at: <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/housing/articles/hiddenhomelessnessintheuk/evidencereview/2023-03-29> (Accessed 24th April 2024)
- Sanders, B., Boobis, S. and Albanese, F., 2019. It was like a nightmare. *The reality of sofa surfing in Britain today*. Available at: <https://www.crisis.org.uk/media/241555/it-was-like-a-nightmare-the-reality-of-sofa-surfing-in-britain-today-2019.pdf> (Accessed: 24th April 2024)
- Kilshaw, H. and Still, D., 2022. *Hidden homelessness: the prevalence and impact of sofa surfing | Market Research Society, Market Research Society*. Available at: <http://www.mrs.org.uk/resources/homelessness> (Accessed: 13 December 2023).
- Office for National Statistics (2023). *Gender pay gap in the UK. - Office for National Statistics*. Available at: <https://www.ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peopleinwork/earningsandworkinghours/bulletins/genderpaygapintheuk/2023> (Accessed: 24th April 2024)
- Lever, AG & Geurts, HM 2016, *Psychiatric co-occurring symptoms and disorders in young, middle-aged, and older adults with autism spectrum disorder,* *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders*, vol46, no.6, p.1922. Available at: <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s10803-016-2722-8> (Accessed: 24th April 2024)



Thomson, H., Petticrew, M., & Morrison, D. (2001). *Health effects of housing improvement: Systematic review of intervention studies*. *British Medical Journal*, 323 (7306), pp. 187-190
Think & Do Camden (2024). *Sharing Spaces*. Available at:
<https://www.thinkanddocamden.org.uk/sharing-spaces/> (Accessed 24th April 2024)



leedspolicyinstitute.org.uk