University of Nottingham Rights Lab

Homelessness and Modern Slavery

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Introduction

Recent research has shown that despite homelessness being both a cause and a consequence of modern slavery (the exploitation of others for personal or commercial gain) our understanding of these dynamics remains limited.[i]

Given the often-hidden nature of both issues quantifying the problem exactly is difficult, but evidence suggests that it is a rapidly growing issue likely to impact several thousand people across the UK.[ii] Reflecting these challenges this brief presents qualitative research into the links between modern slavery and homelessness. It contributes practical policy responses to this issue, recognising the significant social and financial benefits of sustained, appropriately-targeted support for victims of modern slavery.[iii]
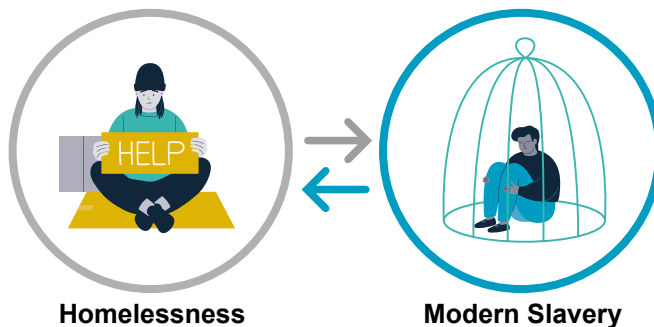
> When I became homeless… you'd be surprised how many people offered help that wasn't really help… Suddenly, because I'm in desperate situation… they come and they offer me their home. They're just relentless… you're offered to come and stay here, and then you realise it's not that. When you're in a desperate situation, they come out and they prey on you, prey on your vulnerability.
>
> **Amanda**

The Research

Dr Nick Clare (University of Nottingham) carried out in-depth qualitative research between 2022 and 2023 exploring the relationships between homelessness, housing disadvantage, and modern slavery, in Nottingham (UK).

This included 65 semi-structured interviews with people with lived experience of homelessness and modern slavery, frontline staff in the statutory and voluntary sectors, as well as national experts. Quotes are from these interviews. All names have been changed and, unless specified, are from people with lived experience of homelessness and modern slavery. Carried out in conjunction with Pathway Housing Solutions, the research was a project of the University's School of Geography and Rights Lab, and was funded by a British Academy Innovation Fellowship with support from the University of Nottingham's Institute for Policy and Public Engagement.

Homelessness   **Modern Slavery**

Key Policy Recommendations

1. Promote the National Referral Mechanism, but recognise its limitations

Early intervention by frontline housing and homelessness workers is crucial for supporting potential victims of modern slavery[iv], yet staff often lacked knowledge of the potential signs of exploitation and the confidence to engage with the National Referral Mechanism (NRM: the UK government's framework for identifying victims of modern slavery).

It is, however, crucial to recognise the agency of potential victims. Research participants had mixed experiences with the NRM, and the NRM may not be the most appropriate avenue for support[v] – especially for people who have had negative experiences with the police and the state, for example racialised minorities and migrants.

> Staff have uncertainty about when to use a modern slavery approach…. They're not always sure what is slavery, if to use the NRM and that sort of pathway. **Aamir, Statutory Sector**
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> I don't think about when you use that stuff because the modern slavery system is dogsh*t anyway, and it doesn't always help people... Often it's not really modern slavery anyway, just a deal gone wrong. **Liam**

2. Adopt a multi-agency approach

Potential victims of modern slavery experiencing homelessness often have complex needs and so multi-agency support is vital.[vi] Communication across agencies is crucial for early intervention, developing staff skills and confidence, and sharing best practice.

Both the statutory and voluntary sectors are important here. The ideal combination of support is determined by local context[vii] and the specific needs of potential victims. Regular stakeholder mapping can help develop and maintain these locally-specific pathways.

> We encourage local authorities to work together [in] a multi partnership approach involving first responders involving colleagues from DWP etc. Linking potential victims up with all of those services that they need to help them through the NRM if that's what they choose to do… but fundamentally help them out of their homelessness. **Chris, Statutory Sector**
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> You know all kinds of the statutory and voluntary sector partners. So if there's someone you think is really stuck, they're not getting the support you can refer [them]… [But] it does need to be more linked [and] joined up… you really need that local knowledge and context. **Peter, Voluntary Sector**

3. Embrace smaller, culturally competent service providers

Services must be culturally competent. Growing numbers of migrants and racialised minorities are experiencing homelessness and modern slavery[viii] and our research shows many mainstream and statutory services fail to support these groups. One size does not fit all and there is thus a need to work more closely with smaller, culturally competent organisations to help build community power and reduce vulnerability to modern slavery.

> So I had to ask all the English services and beg them for help because I thought they would understand, especially when they say they're very culturally aware of issues. I don't think they are culturally aware of issues… There needs to be a deeper education for them to understand. **Aisha**
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> There's not really much out there for the black person... You go into certain [organisations] and they're not understanding our needs, the way we talk, our actions, not understanding because they're not black themselves. But there's no black organisations that you can go to or phone up. **Clive**

4. Recognise forms of homelessness beyond rough sleeping

Policy responses to homelessness often prioritise rough sleeping, failing to capture the contemporary picture and overlooking the experiences of racialised minorities. Exploitation is tied to both the absence of accommodation and the presence of inappropriate accommodation, including growing concerns around 'cuckooing' where housing is taken over for criminal purposes[ix]. Anti-slavery policy needs to consider these more 'hidden' forms of homelessness.

> People living in overcrowding or just staying at 'friend's' house...I see a major cycle that people are in [with] modern slavery, basically you got to stay and that opens up abuse **Steph, Statutory Sector**
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> They came to the house and started to sell drugs and I remember coming downstairs one time and then walking into a room of at least 12 people, right…. it's like my home has now become a crack house. **Clive**

5. Embrace smaller, culturally competent service providers

Housing is crucial in fighting against modern slavery, but accommodation alone is insufficient.

Building on point four, above, feelings of autonomy and belonging increase individuals' security and wellbeing and thus reduce risks of modern slavery. Where possible a sense of ownership and control over accommodation status is needed and can be fostered through small acts of 'homemaking' that personalise accommodation[x].

> It has definitely given me stability it has given me a lot of passion to want to do better myself because it is a nice place to live, I am finally able to have my kids there… I met this woman, she was living in a car until they got her in to a hotel. And she preferred her car because the hotel is tiring for her, that she preferred her car because she doesn't know where she is getting placed next and she had a three-year-old kid. **Jada**

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The British Academy

Pathway Housing Solutions
"Building Futures"

References

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