# The Challenges of Measuring Homelessness among Armed Forces Veterans: Service Provider Experiences in England

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> **Abstract_** *This study investigates the measurement of homelessness among Armed Forces veterans in England, starting from the strikingly low figures in local authority administrative data returns compared to the USA. Findings from stakeholder interviews revealed awareness of more homeless veterans than identified through the local authority homelessness return, although presentations varied between organisational types. Participant perspectives on the low official numbers included both veteran- and institutional-based explanations, ranging from the perceived reluctance of veterans to present to homelessness services, through to the centrality of priority need and the exclusion of those supported outside of the statutory homelessness system. Reforms to administrative data-based statistical returns are suggested in the conclusion.*

> **Keywords_** *Veterans, measuring homelessness, inter-organisational collaboration, Armed Forces Covenant.*

## Introduction

A sizeable minority of veterans in England are homeless or at risk of homelessness (Quilgars *et al.*, 2018), and there is reported over-representation of veterans among multiple excluded homeless people who face extreme disadvantage and difficult to meet needs (Johnsen and Fitzpatrick, 2012). However, statutory homeless statistics, derived from administrative data, reveal that very few households are recorded as having support needs due to having served in HM Forces.

In April-June 2019, this included just 0.63 per cent of those owed a homelessness duty (Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, 2020). This discrepancy may not be surprising given the debates over how homelessness is measured (Busch-Geertsema *et al.*, 2014; Mostowska, 2019). Still, as homelessness services are required to be accountable and cost-effective, statistics that offer an incomplete picture can have negative resource implications for homelessness services. These English figures are also low when compared to the USA, where veterans made up eight per cent of the homeless population in 2019 (Henry *et al.*, 2020). This raises the question of why official records of veteran homelessness in England are so low in comparison.

The need for this study is based on the importance of reconciling discrepant accounts of veteran homelessness in England and thereby contributing to the sparse evidence on the implementation of homeless veterans' policy (Quilgars *et al.*, 2018), along with debates on the measurement of homelessness (Busch-Geertsema *et al*., 2014; Mostowska, 2019). More generally, much of the research on homeless veterans in England and their service provision can be classified as grey literature in that there is a dearth of peer-reviewed studies (Jones *et al.*, 2014). Although veteran homelessness has been identified as an issue in other European states, including Belgium and Croatia for example (Mostowska, 2014; Bežovan, 2019), there is a lack of research into the issue. Nevertheless, signs of a shift to inclusive veteran policies and all-volunteer Armed Forces in Europe (Boene, 2009; Danilova, 2010), similar trends of decentralisation across Europe, with homelessness services in most countries being provided by a range of non-profit organisations (Busch-Geertsema *et al*., 2010), and efforts to improve homelessness statistics (Busch-Geertsema *et al*., 2014), mean that there may be scope for drawing lessons from the English experience.

Despite an inclusive tradition of not giving the military special treatment in England, vulnerable veterans are now considered to be in priority need, and the Armed Forces Covenant attempts to ensure that veterans are not disadvantaged across a range of areas including housing (Mumford, 2012). However, it is difficult to assess whether there is disadvantage when veteran status is not always captured among the homeless population. As such, it is necessary to understand the experiences of service providers in relation to capturing veteran status among the homeless population. This study aims to examine the demand on services from homeless veterans in order to answer the question of why administrative measures of homeless veterans in England are so low. To this end, this study draws on a review project to present the findings of interviews with 16 organisations working on this issue in one local authority area in the North of England, including housing and community organisations and Armed Forces charities.

## The Literature on Veteran Homelessness

### *Capturing veteran homelessness*

England, as with the rest of the UK, employs a broad definition of veteran that includes all personnel who have received a day's pay from the Armed Forces, with dependents also being eligible for benefits (Dandeker *et al.*, 2006). This contrasts with the US definition, which only extends to those who have actively served (Henry *et al.*, 2020). This is a significant difference as broad definitions tend to be tied in with relatively weak veterans' rights, not least because of the costs involved in extensive service delivery to a wide population (Danilova, 2010). There have, over recent years, been a number of initiatives to improve veterans' rights, however, which will be discussed below. Estimates of the proportion of homeless people in England that are Armed Forces veterans have followed a downward trend since the mid-1990s, which Jones *et al.* (2014) attribute, along with improvements to veterans' services, to the declining proportion of people with Armed Forces experience (as a result of the shift to all-volunteer forces and reduction in overall numbers in the forces). Still, there is a significant minority of veterans at risk of homelessness or who become homeless (Quilgars *et al.*, 2018). Indeed, a study found that across seven UK cities, veterans made up 11 per cent of non-migrants experiencing multiple exclusion homelessness, identified by factors including time in prison or substance misuse (Johnsen and Fitzpatrick, 2012).

This contrasts with the statutory homelessness statistics, however. In April-June 2019 in England, 70 030 households were assessed and owed a prevention or relief duty, and only 440 (0.63 per cent) were recorded as having support needs due to having served in HM Forces (Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, 2020). The English figures are also significantly lower than in the US, where federal estimates of veterans as a proportion of the homeless population stood at eight per cent in 2019, down from 12 per cent in 2013 (Henry *et al*., 2020). The differences with the US may be due in part to the larger veteran population there, with English estimates suggesting that veterans make up five per cent of household residents aged over 16 (Ministry of Defence, 2019), compared to 7.6 per cent in the US (Schultz, 2019). Nevertheless, as the English veteran homelessness figures are so much lower, this implies that there are issues with capturing and recording veteran homelessness in England. The literature on homeless veterans offers veteran- and institutional-based insights which can help to explain the low-recorded numbers of homeless veterans.

### Veteran-based explanations

The low figures in England are partly explained by homeless veterans being less likely to present to housing services (Jones *et al.*, 2014). This may be due to a lack of awareness among veterans of their entitlement to support from local authority homelessness teams, along with a number of services being available from Armed Forces charities, with preferences for one sector or the other being contingent on their attitudes towards their time in the military (Johnsen *et al.*, 2008). The timing of veteran homelessness may also affect the decision on whether to disclose veteran status, as the most common explanation of homelessness among veterans is relationship breakdown (Milroy, 2001; Johnsen *et al.*, 2008), and this can occur at any point in time. The onset of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) can be delayed (Goodwin *et al.*, 2012), which may mean that veterans or homelessness teams do not attribute veteran vulnerability to leaving HM Forces. Although there is diversity in homeless veterans' circumstances, those leaving the Armed Forces are usually more prone to alcohol misuse and reporting mental health disorders, including PTSD (Hatch *et al.*, 2013). The mix of vulnerabilities and resilience of many homeless veterans may help to explain why they are more likely to sleep rough and avoid presenting as homeless (Armes *et al.*, 2019).

US studies have highlighted similar issues (Tsai *et al.*, 2016; Metraux *et al.*, 2017). While PTSD is common among homeless veterans (Tsai *et al.*, 2016), homelessness typically occurs more than two years after leaving the military, and as other factors including unemployment, substance misuse and relationship breakdown often occur in the interim, veterans tend not to directly link their military service and homelessness (Metraux *et al.*, 2017). Tsai *et al*. (2016) suggested that homelessness service presentation rates are low among veterans. Yet, they found that they are higher for black and minority ethnic veterans who are more likely to be without health insurance and thereby need to rely on the Department of Veterans Affairs system (which supports veterans' homelessness services) for their healthcare. In contrast to veterans in England, US veterans are less likely than the wider national homeless population to be rough sleepers (Henry *et al.*, 2020). This appears to be related to the exclusive approach to veteran homelessness through veteran specific services, which will be discussed below. Due to the broad similarity of homeless veteran characteristics in the two countries, such institutional differences may offer more insight into the reasons for the disparities in the prevalence of veteran homelessness between England and the USA.

### Institutional-based explanations

In part, the low figures in England may be explained by the ways in which access to homelessness services is rationed and how this relates to homelessness statistical returns. The English definition of homelessness is broad in that it goes beyond rooflessness to include people without the right to stay where they are and people living in unsuitable housing (Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, 2018). In England, there is a right to housing, and prevention services are now universal (Wilding *et al.*, 2020). However, demand for services among those already homeless is managed through mechanisms including priority need (i.e., only those with children or the vulnerable are deemed deserving of support), intentionality and local connection (Dwyer *et al.*, 2015). More specifically, those who are vulnerable due to serving in the Armed Forces, for example through the type of service engaged in or time spent in a military hospital, were added to the homelessness priority need categories in 2002.

In line with the rationing mechanisms, veteran status only appears in the statutory homelessness statistics for those considered to be vulnerable and who meet the intentionality and local connection criteria. In addition, the need to self-report veteran status means that low numbers of veterans have been accepted as homeless due to having served in the Armed Forces (Jones *et al.*, 2014). A further factor which minimises government homeless veteran numbers is that as the statutory homelessness statistics are collated from local authority homelessness team data returns, homeless veterans who are supported by Armed Forces charities or other housing organisations without going through the statutory system do not appear in the figures. This is possible as the duty to refer, which was introduced for specified public authorities under the *Homelessness Prevention Act 2017* requires the service users' consent and does not include charities and housing organisations, although a number of organisations have made voluntary commitments (Garvie, 2018).

A range of non-statutory support services centred on homelessness were previously brought together by Supporting People. However, changes including austerity measures mean that there is no longer a budget allocation for this programme, and this has damaged strategic efforts to coordinate housing-related support services and data collection through an administrative database on Supporting People services (McNeil and Hunter, 2015). Ongoing examples of collaboration include the Combined Homelessness and Information Network (CHAIN), which is a multi-agency database that records veteran status among other information in seeking to avoid duplication of efforts in appropriately supporting rough sleepers in London (St. Mungo's, 2017). Nevertheless, this level of data is not available nationwide for all types of homelessness. Where veterans are concerned, the need for coordination is arguably even greater, with almost 400 welfare focussed Armed Forces

charities being identified in the UK (Pozo and Walker, 2014). This has led to the observation that post-military welfare is a 'competitive, confused and confusing assemblage' (Herman and Yarwood, 2015, p.2628).

Government efforts to improve collaboration, including the Office for Veterans Affairs and the Armed Forces Covenant, bear a resemblance to US initiatives. The Office for Veterans Affairs was launched in October 2019 to champion veteran interests within the UK government and to improve coordination and collaboration towards this end. Making a home in civilian society is one of the key themes of the *Strategy for Our Veterans*, which the Office seeks to deliver against (HM Government, 2018). The Armed Forces Covenant is another key mechanism which encourages collaboration between organisations from the public, private and third sectors as part of its efforts to ensure that policies for veterans are upheld and that they receive equitable treatment (Mumford, 2012). The Community Covenants in the USA influenced the Task Force, which rebuilt the Armed Forces Covenant in the UK in 2010, particularly in terms of local community pledges (Strachan *et al*., 2010). Covenant guidance makes specific reference to housing (Ministry of Defence, 2017a), and a range of housing associations have voluntarily signed up to the Covenant, as have community organisations, charities, and local authorities (Ministry of Defence, 2017c). As such, it has been suggested that homelessness amongst veterans can be best addressed through more integrated multi-agency support from veteran and generic housing and other services, with leadership from within the housing sector and government (Quilgars *et al.*, 2018). A criticism of the Armed Forces Covenant in England, however, is that it shifts the onus of responsibility for veteran care from the state to society, in line with the greater decentralisation and commissioning of public services (Mumford, 2012).

In the USA, there is no right to housing and the availability of support is more limited (Fitzpatrick and Christian, 2006). Yet, veterans are privileged through exclusive service allocation, for example through US Department of Housing and Urban Development – Veterans Affairs Supportive Housing, which provides housing vouchers for rental assistance to eligible homeless veterans (Cretzmeyer *et al*., 2014). Administrative data is combined with survey data to produce federal statistics, but there are also significant differences from England in administrative data collection methods. Veteran status is a universal data element in the USA, required across all programmes and projects dealing with homelessness (US Department of Housing and Urban Development, 2019). As such, this is a question that programme administrators are instructed to ask and record the response to, along with additional questions for service users who may not be aware that they are considered veterans. Moreover, this multi-agency data feeds into the US Department of Housing and Urban Development homeless veteran statistics. This is not to say that measurement of veteran homelessness is not without its own issues in the US.

For example, as with administrative data more generally, less data is collected in areas with fewer homelessness services, which can lead to under-recording homelessness (Busch-Geertsema *et al*., 2010). However, the US approach does allow for a broader range of organisations to contribute to federal homelessness statistics and appears to record a greater proportion of veterans experiencing homelessness. This array of organisations collaborates in service delivery to homeless veterans similarly to in England (Verkuil and Fountain, 2014). Nonetheless, an important difference, stemming from the exclusive approach to veterans, is the prominent role of the Department of Veterans Affairs, which has long pursued a joined-up approach to veteran welfare as well as supporting veteran specific facilities (Cretzmeyer *et al*., 2014).

## Study Design

This study is based upon findings from interviews with stakeholders in one local authority in the North of England. Access was given as part of a review project to inform the local authority approach to housing veterans. Twenty-eight stakeholder organisations were invited to participate in a telephone interview based on a purposive sample of organisations offering services accessible to local veterans, and 16 interviews took place in January to May 2017. Telephone interviews were used as a data collection method due to the convenience that this offered busy service providers, with interviews being fit in, often at short notice between other appointments. Although telephone interviews are often overlooked in the qualitative research literature, the data gathered can be vivid and of high quality (Novick, 2008).

This range of organisations was included to capture support given to veterans at various stages of the homelessness pathway, including housing advice, temporary accommodation, floating support, and allocations. For the purpose of the analysis, and to maintain anonymity, participants are disaggregated only so far as the broad group which most closely represents their function: housing organisations (n=10); Armed Forces charities (n=4); and community organisations (n=2). These interviews took a semi-structured format to examine perspectives on issues including the number and type of requests from veterans, and the reasons underlying these numbers. The findings are presented thematically under the headings of type and extent of requests; veteran-based explanations; and institutional-based explanations.

Rather than suggesting that the case is representative of local authorities throughout England, we instead seek to draw out implications for practitioners facing similar issues (Yin, 2017). Although seeking to situate the findings internationally and particularly in relation to the US literature on homeless veterans, we accept that the

different approaches to veterans, homelessness, and administrative data limit the generalisability of the findings. Nevertheless, there may be lessons that can be learned from examining what exactly it is in the English way of measuring homelessness that makes the figures so much lower than in the US.

The following information can be provided about the local authority area to contextualise the findings. The local authority is in the upper quartile for homelessness in England as assessed per thousand households (Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, 2020). Based on available statistics, we estimate that veterans make up almost eight per cent of the local authority area population, and that 53 Armed Forces leavers returned to the local authority area in the 12 months prior to the research taking place (Kinsella, 2011; Ministry of Defence, 2017b). Although there is no national database of the location of veterans, these estimates are consistent with reports of the North having a relatively high veteran population compared to the rest of England (Riverside ECHG, 2011).

## Interview Findings

### Type and extent of requests

It was difficult to pinpoint the numbers of homeless veterans in the area, due to reasons including non-collection and non-availability of data, or there being no cases. However, homeless veterans were recorded in the year prior to the interviews by the local authority homelessness team (5 cases) and a supported housing organisation (21 cases), while an estimate was provided from another supported housing organisation (12 cases). It is not possible to ascertain the degree of overlap between the figures for each organisation. We do know, that except for one couple identified by a housing association, all instances were of single men. Moreover, none of the reported cases were recorded as statutorily homeless through losing their last settled home due to leaving HM Forces. The figures are similar for the community organisations providing housing-related support, with the only organisation able to offer an estimate reporting the equivalent of supporting one veteran each month. A divide emerged in the interview responses amongst supported housing organisations and Armed Forces charities on the one hand, as organisations that have been subject to a significant number of support requests, and general needs housing associations on the other, as organisations that have received no requests or very few.

### *Veteran-based explanations*

Participants put forward a range of veteran-based explanations for the perceived low overall numbers of homeless veterans recorded as receiving support, from veteran resilience and reluctance to accept support through to a lack of awareness of available services. Participants from supported housing organisations stressed that although they had accommodated a number of veterans, demand varied throughout the year, and they tended to move on quickly before they could be housed. This was ascribed to reasons including pride and the readiness to sleep rough if necessary:

> Christmas is always a crunch period. They don't mind sleeping rough so much in Summer. (Housing organisation 10)

> We had like three or four at the same time. They've all moved on now because they don't like to be in a position like this. It's very much a pride thing. (Housing organisation 6)

One of the general needs housing associations reported that they had housed several veterans in recent years. In some instances, they had presented directly, but in others they were referred by an Armed Forces charity. Overall numbers were low, and they faced difficulties in providing services due to an apparent reluctance among those referred to accept support:

> In the last few years, we've had four referrals [from an Armed Forces charity]. We rehoused one person. The other three just disappeared, despite us chasing them. (Housing organisation 7)

The interview responses contrasted in attributing veterans' reluctance to accept support and disclose their Armed Forces background to pride and attempting to maintain distance from authority. However, there also appeared to be challenges in meeting the needs of homeless veterans, which may in turn have made them more reluctant to request support:

> Because they're proud and see themselves as people that should be supporting others, they're not quick to accept help, so it's us being able to provide opportunities for them to help themselves. (Community organisation 1)

> Some refuse help. They see us as an authority that they're trying to get away from. (Armed Forces charity 4)

Awareness was perceived to be a key challenge in terms of veterans being unsure of their rights or how to access support, despite increased support given through the Ministry of Defence before discharge and the availability of information from the local authority and housing associations:

Is it the publicity that people don't realise that they can apply? We do promote it in our literature, it's there. (Housing organisation 3)

### Institutional-based explanations

Interview responses also revealed institutional explanations for the overall low numbers of recorded veterans, including the centrality of priority need in local authority homelessness returns, and limited knowledge of the work of other organisations supporting homeless veterans. A key reason put forward for the low numbers of homeless veterans recorded as homeless by the local authority was the difficulties of linking vulnerability (and thereby priority need) to service in the Armed Forces. This is significant, as veteran status only appears in the homelessness statistics for those deemed to be in priority need. Still, proving priority need based on vulnerability was unlikely for some as their circumstances could not always be attributed directly to service in the Armed Forces:

The majority served quite some time ago and have never held a tenancy on their own… some come back to us after a relationship breakdown. (Housing organisation 10)

Another explanation for why the numbers of homeless veterans appeared low from the perspective of statutory figures was because not all homeless veterans made it as far as mainstream housing services, due to their support needs being met by Armed Forces charities:

What seems to happen is that if somebody's involved with SSAFA [an Armed Forces charity] already, or one of the [Armed Forces] organisations, then they've sorted the problem out before they get to the stage where they need to come to us. If they've got a good worker, they probably go above and beyond sometimes and solve the problem before we're needed. (Housing organisation 5)

Thus, these veterans were excluded from the official homelessness figures, in stark contrast to practices in the USA. Moreover, housing organisations' lack of detailed information about the extent of support for homeless veterans in the local authority area from Armed Forces charities meant that less need was seen for inter-organisational collaboration, and in turn that there was less potential for homeless veterans to come into the mainstream homelessness system, thereby continuing the cycle of low official numbers. This is problematic because the lack of collaboration helps to maintain the low visibility of homeless veterans to mainstream housing organisations and official homelessness statistics. For example, there was an assumption from housing organisations that if the issue of veteran homelessness was serious enough, then the Armed Forces charities would initiate collaboration. Similarly, none of the community organisations, and only one of the housing organisations, had signed up to the Armed Forces Covenant:

> We haven't done so much on the Covenant, but we take guidance from the Council on that. (Housing organisation 9)

> If it was a large problem within [local authority area], then the ex-military charities would have been in touch to try and work with us because we do recognise that there's a need for housing this group of people. (Housing organisation 1)

## Conclusion

This study has attempted to understand why administrative measures of homeless veterans in England are so low. Though more homeless veterans presented to services than identified in the local authority homelessness return, veterans were predominantly self-referring into direct access hostels or accessing support through Armed Forces charities and community organisations. As such, these veterans were not going through the statutory homeless system. This is despite the availability of a range of relevant services, from temporary accommodation to post-tenancy support. Housing organisations have sought to explain this selective take up of services through veteran resilience and reluctance to accept support, along with a lack of awareness of available support.

These findings are in line with the related literature that notes a lack of awareness of housing rights and reluctance to present to services (Higate, 2000; Johnsen *et al.*, 2008), and are broadly consistent with findings from the USA (Tsai *et al.*, 2016). Nevertheless, other factors were clearly also at play, including institutional-based explanations. These include veteran status only appearing in statistical returns for those who are in priority need due to leaving the Armed Forces, and limited knowledge of the work of other organisations supporting homeless veterans. Thus, the numbers differ markedly from the US where statistics are recorded by all programmes and projects. This is due in part to the privileged status of veterans who are exclusively defined in the context of limited housing support. Yet, it is also due to the more systematic approach to local planning and evaluation, which includes a recognition of the need for ongoing data, which has driven the advances in homeless management information systems (O'Connell, 2003). A more joined up approach to veterans, led by the Department for Veteran's Affairs has facilitated these developments. In England, the lack of a joined-up approach, including a passive attitude to the Armed Forces Covenant, means that many mainstream housing organisations have only limited awareness of other organisations' work to support homeless veterans, which serves to underplay the issue.

More reliable homeless veteran statistics are clearly needed, not least to make the extent and nature of veteran homeless support needs more transparent. One way of doing this is to require local authorities to submit the numbers of all homeless

veterans in their statistical returns, not just those in priority need due to having served in HM Forces. This would help to ensure that all homeless veterans going through statutory homelessness services, and who declare their veteran status, are captured in homelessness statistics. However, it is also important that the home-lessness of veterans presenting to non-statutory housing and related support services is captured in statistics. As such, an alternative is to compile the figures from all organisations working with homeless veterans, similarly to the US model. To some degree, extending the approaches used in the Supporting People and CHAIN databases offers a way forward. If the data on use of non-statutory housing and related support services, including provision by Armed Forces charities, was compiled for each local authority, a much clearer picture of the prevalence of home-lessness amongst veterans and their support needs could be established.

Data both reflects and supports inter-organisational collaboration, and so efforts at a coordinated approach to supporting homeless veterans can facilitate more coherent data collection, as has been seen in the USA. To build on approaches to data collection developed in the homelessness sector, and to ensure the necessary consistency between homelessness and veteran organisations, collaboration could be strengthened at several levels. Housing and community organisations signing up to the Covenant could act as a starting point. However, in the absence of tangible progress measures and penalties for non-compliance (Mumford, 2012), there is a need for leadership. Along with strategic collaboration at the inter-ministry level, led by the new Office for Veterans Affairs, leadership could come from Elected Councillor Armed Forces Champions and Lead Officers in local councils, with reporting to the local Covenant Forum as recommended by the Forces in Mind Trust (2016). There is also a need for leadership from within the housing sector and so there may be a case for the appointment of Armed Forces Champions within home-lessness teams, as is already the case with the Jobcentre Plus.

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