

Article

Rough sleeping in the UK: 2002 to 2021

Report on the latest trends from rough sleeping statistics across the UK and how existing statistics can be compared.

Contact:
Tom Capon
Gss.Housing@ons.gov.uk
+44 (0)1633 582555

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1 . Main points

- Homelessness policy is devolved across the UK and each country produces data and statistics on rough sleeping according to their own legislative framework; the different approaches prevent direct comparison between each country's statistics.
- Because of the different methods and statistics, it is difficult to definitively report trends on rough sleeping for the UK as a whole.
- Trends in rough sleeping levels in each country of the UK vary, with recent peaks in either 2017 or 2018.
- In 2020, snapshot estimates of rough sleeping levels were lower than previous years, possibly related to policy responses, including providing emergency accommodation during the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic to people who sleep rough.
- Statistics indicate that more people who sleep rough in the UK are men, with an overall population ratio of around six men to one woman.
- Because of the challenges in identifying people who sleep rough in data collections, all topic statistics are estimates, providing general insight into the scale and characteristics of this population.

2 . Scale of rough sleeping in the UK: sources

People who sleep rough, because of their lack of secure accommodation and [often co-existing health issues or other vulnerabilities](#), represent one of the most disadvantaged groups in society. In the UK, homelessness policy varies as it is devolved. Different legislation has been enacted so each country has policies or strategies to end or reduce rough sleeping¹.

Currently no UK-wide rough sleeping official statistics are published. Countries in the UK have different approaches to measure and understand rough sleeping, within their respective policy frameworks. Before 2020, rough sleeping official statistics were solely derived from snapshot surveys and administrative data, two different types of data sources. During 2020 and 2021, additional management information has been collected and published as part of the process to protect those at risk of rough sleeping during the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic and is complementary to the regular statistics.

Findings from different types of data source should not be compared because of the different data collection approaches, coverage of people who sleep rough, and data collection periods. While findings from the same type of data source can be compared and used to develop UK-wide insights, this needs to be done carefully as methods of data collection and legislation vary.

This article brings together published data from across the UK to present a picture of rough sleeping and the people who rough sleep in the UK. In doing so it:

- provides an overview of the range of statistics produced and published in England, Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland relating to rough sleeping, including the most recent findings and trends
- explains how and why different statistics can be compared, and why certain statistics cannot be compared

The article includes the latest published official statistics and management information up to March 2021, and so contains statistics covering periods before and during the coronavirus pandemic.

The pandemic has shifted priorities that have influenced data collection and statistics publications; some have been suspended or delayed while some new data sources have been created because of re-prioritisation of analytical and operational resources and public health justifications.

This commentary has been written by the Office for National Statistics (ONS) in consultation with the producers of the quoted statistics. It is the fourth in a series of cross-UK articles on housing and homelessness, the previous articles being on [the private rented sector](#), [homelessness](#), and [affordable housing](#).

Notes for: Scale of rough sleeping in the UK: sources

1. For more information: [England – The rough sleeping strategy](#), [Scotland – Ending homelessness and rough sleeping: action plan](#), [Wales – Homelessness strategy](#), and [Northern Ireland – Homelessness strategy](#)

3 . Snapshot survey statistics

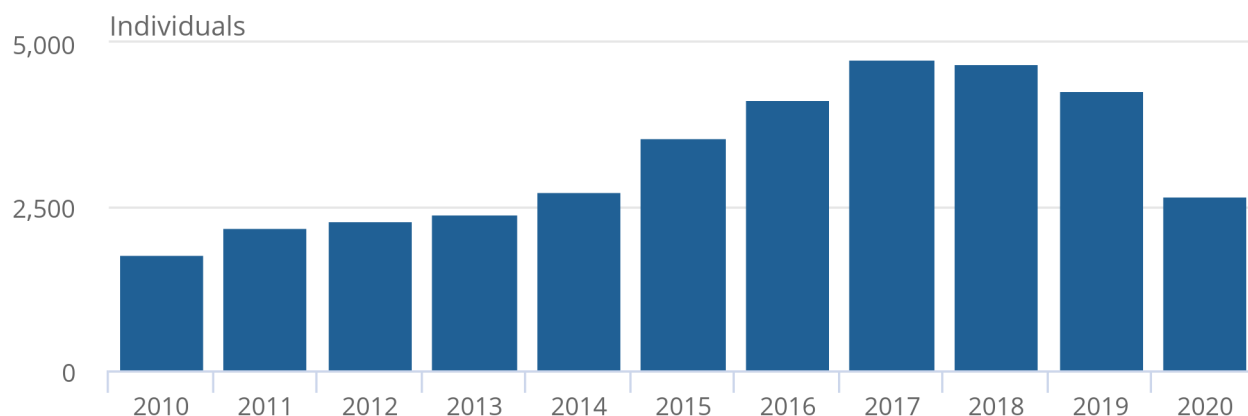
In England, Wales and Northern Ireland, snapshot surveys are regularly conducted each autumn to identify and record the number of people sleeping rough at a point in time. There is no rough sleeping snapshot conducted in Scotland. Findings from snapshots provide a general indication of rough sleeping levels at the time they are conducted in each country and do not measure the number of people who may have experienced rough sleeping over a longer period. Although the statistics aim to include every person who is sleeping rough, it is inherently difficult to estimate the extent of rough sleeping at any point in time. Figures 1, 2 and 3 present the findings from these snapshots for all available years in each country.

Figure 1: The number of people sleeping rough on a single night in autumn in England has fallen since a peak in 2017

Estimated number of people sleeping rough on a single night in autumn in England, 2010 to 2020

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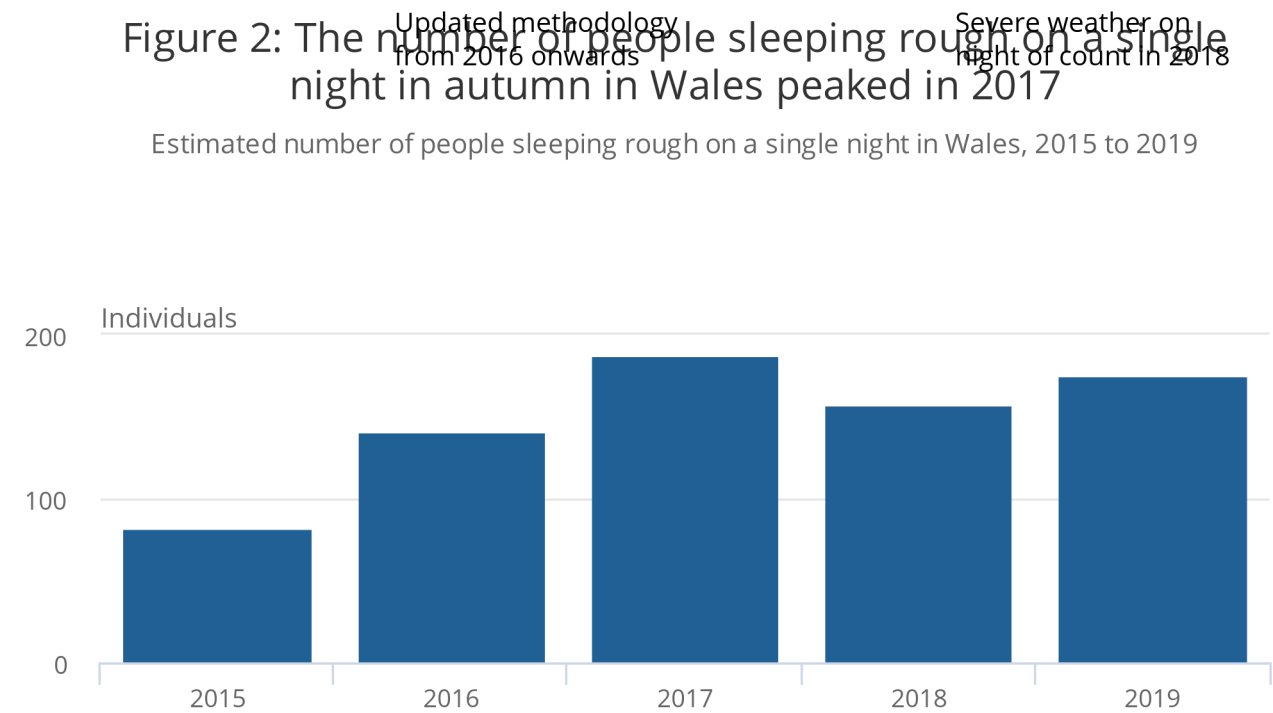
Source: Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) – Rough sleeping snapshot in England

Notes:

1. Data available for England from 2010 to 2020.

Figure 2: The number of people sleeping rough on a single night in autumn in Wales peaked in 2017

Estimated number of people sleeping rough on a single night in Wales, 2015 to 2019



Source: Welsh Government – National rough sleeper count

Notes:

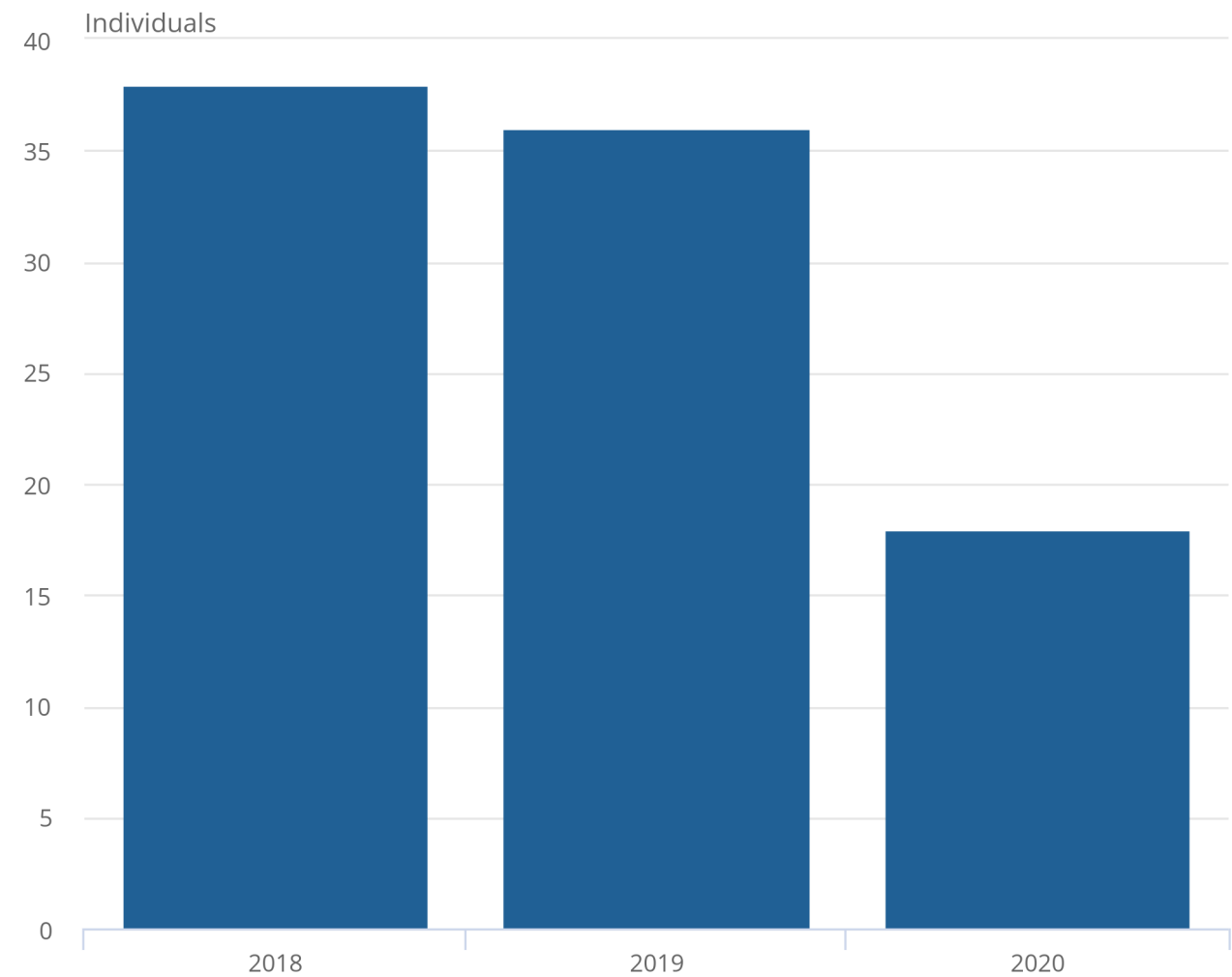
1. Data available for Wales from 2015 to 2019. The 2020 National rough sleeper count was suspended.
2. Welsh Government also publish an information-based estimate of the number of people rough sleeping in Wales over a two week period. This estimation occurs before conducting the physical one night count.

Figure 3: The number of people sleeping rough on a single night in autumn in Northern Ireland in 2020 was lower than in previous years

Estimated number of people sleeping rough on a single night in autumn in Northern Ireland, 2018 to 2020

Figure 3: The number of people sleeping rough on a single night in autumn in Northern Ireland in 2020 was lower than in previous years

Estimated number of people sleeping rough on a single night in autumn in Northern Ireland, 2018 to 2020



Source: Northern Ireland Housing Executive – Rough sleeping estimates

Notes:

- 1. Data available for Northern Ireland from 2018 to 2020

While differences between each country's snapshots exist, the official statistics suggest that the number of people sleeping rough reached a peak in 2017, with nearly 5,000 people sleeping rough across England and Wales based on their separate measures for a single night in autumn. By 2019, this had fallen to below 4,500, a decrease of around 10%.

England and Northern Ireland estimated lower levels of rough sleeping on a single night in autumn 2020 than in 2019, continuing trends of falling levels of rough sleeping from peaks in 2017 and 2018 respectively. While their approaches to estimation were the same as in previous years, the 2020 snapshots coincided with lockdowns and tier restrictions across the UK, which likely affected people's risk of rough sleeping. The findings will also have been influenced by interventions to provide emergency accommodation to people who sleep rough or those at risk of sleeping rough during the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic.

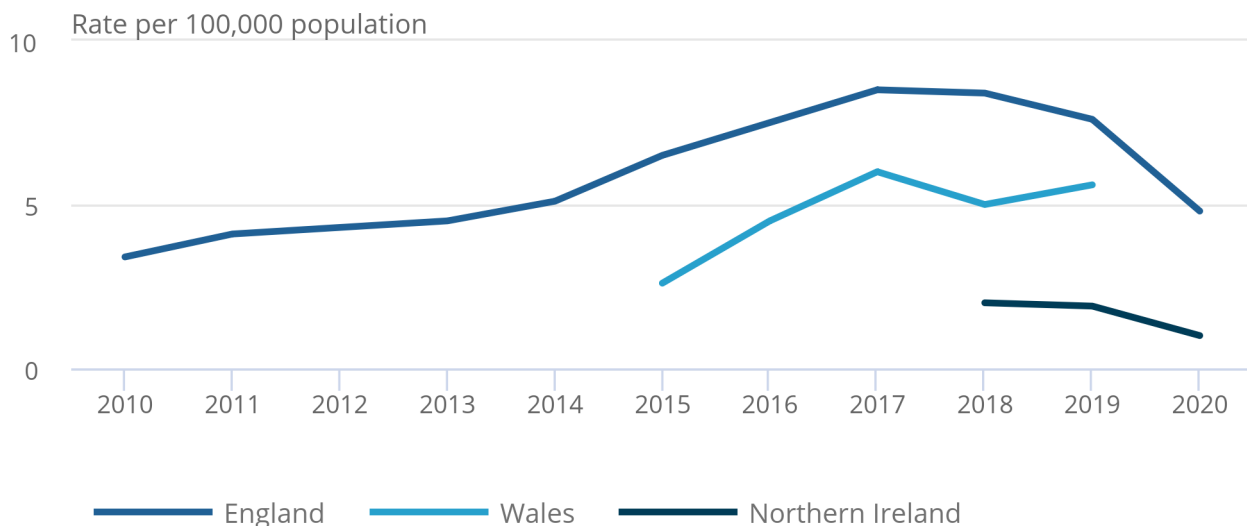
One further way to explore the scale of rough sleeping in each country is by adjusting snapshot estimates by population size. Figure 4 shows the rates of rough sleeping per 100,000 people in each country, based on single night estimates for each year in which they were conducted.

Figure 4: Single-night rough sleeping rates in England, Wales and Northern Ireland generally decrease from 2018

Estimated number of people sleeping rough in a single night in autumn per 100,000 population in England, Wales and Northern Ireland

Figure 4: Single-night rough sleeping rates in England, Wales and Northern Ireland generally decrease from 2018

Estimated number of people sleeping rough in a single night in autumn per 100,000 population in England, Wales and Northern Ireland



Source: Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government – Rough sleeping snapshot in England, Welsh Government – National rough sleeper count, Northern Ireland Housing Executive – Rough sleeping estimates, Office for National Statistics – Population estimates

Notes:

1. In 2018, on the night of the rough sleeper count, there was severe weather in parts of Wales, which made conducting an accurate count more challenging.
2. Rates calculated using Office for National Statistics (ONS) population estimates for each country for each year a snapshot was conducted. 2020 rates based on 2019 population estimates.
3. Data available for England from 2010 to 2020, for Wales from 2015 to 2019, and for Northern Ireland from 2018 to 2020.

Rough sleeping rates in England and Wales have followed similar patterns with increases between 2015 and 2017 and then some decline by 2019. England's 2020 rate is a large reduction from 2019 and below its rate in 2014, though higher than between 2010 to 2013. In Northern Ireland, the rates for 2018 and 2019 are similar and then halve to 1.0 person sleeping rough per 100,000 people in 2020.

Comparing information from across the UK

In each country, a similar approach and definition is used to identify and count people sleeping rough, broadly referring to people observed – or expected to be, if recorded by an informed estimate – sleeping in the open air or in places not designed for habitation.

Individual surveys in all local areas within a country are conducted to estimate the number of people sleeping rough on a typical night, either through a physical count or informed estimation. The implementation of the count within each country is supported by central guidance and through collaboration with local services that engage with homeless and rough sleeping populations. Regular snapshots are all conducted in the autumn. This provides consistency and controls for seasonal patterns in rough sleeping. As the overall approach is largely consistent over time, trends can be interpreted.

Statistics between countries are not directly comparable because of small variations in methods. Each country sets different guidance, rules, and stages for the data collections, which can contribute to some of the variation in figures over time and between areas. Any individual estimate can also be affected by factors such as weather, topography, the availability of alternatives to rough sleeping on the street such as night shelters, and knowledge of the local rough sleeping population by those arranging and conducting the snapshot.

As a result, the snapshots are best used to highlight the general level of rough sleeping at a point in time or to indicate possible trends in changes in rough sleeping over time in each country and for the UK.

Rough sleeping during the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic

During the coronavirus pandemic, governments have sought to understand the scale of rough sleeping by regularly requesting estimates of the number of people sleeping rough in each local authority. These snapshot estimates, published quickly as management information, provide timely, additional insight on the scale of rough sleeping during the pandemic.

Snapshots in England (Figure 5) and Wales (Figure 6) report lower levels of rough sleeping than in their most recent official snapshots. It is possible that the provision of emergency accommodation during the pandemic reduced rough sleeping levels, however, a like-for-like comparison with the snapshots to effectively evidence this interpretation is not available.

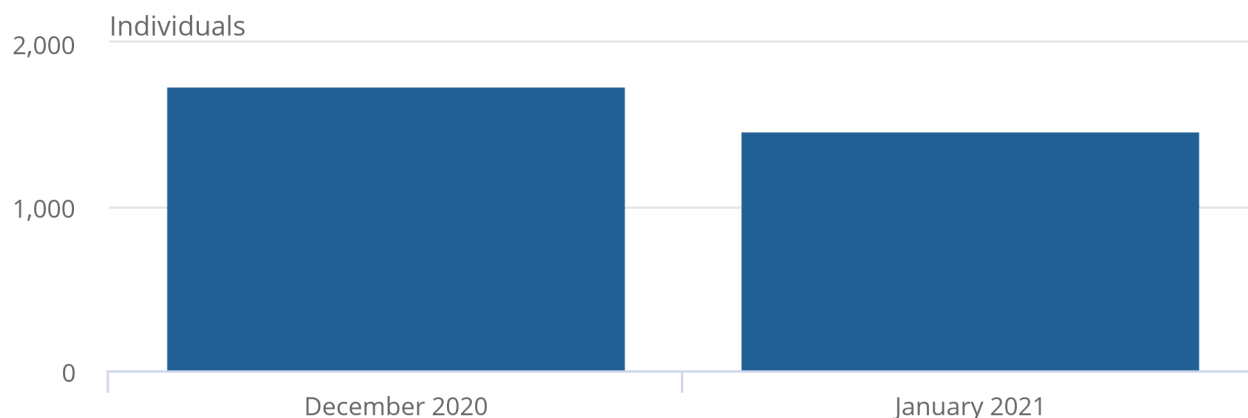
Management information snapshots cannot be directly compared with the higher quality, regular official statistics because of differences in data collection, including definitions, time periods and quality assurance. In addition, it is important to not draw too many conclusions from changes month to month in the management information snapshots. Instead it is important to focus on general trends.

Figure 5: Fewer than 1,750 individuals were estimated to be sleeping rough in England on single nights in December 2020 and January 2021

Estimated rough sleeping in England (single night), 2020 and 2021 management information

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Estimated rough sleeping in England (single night), 2020 and 2021 management information



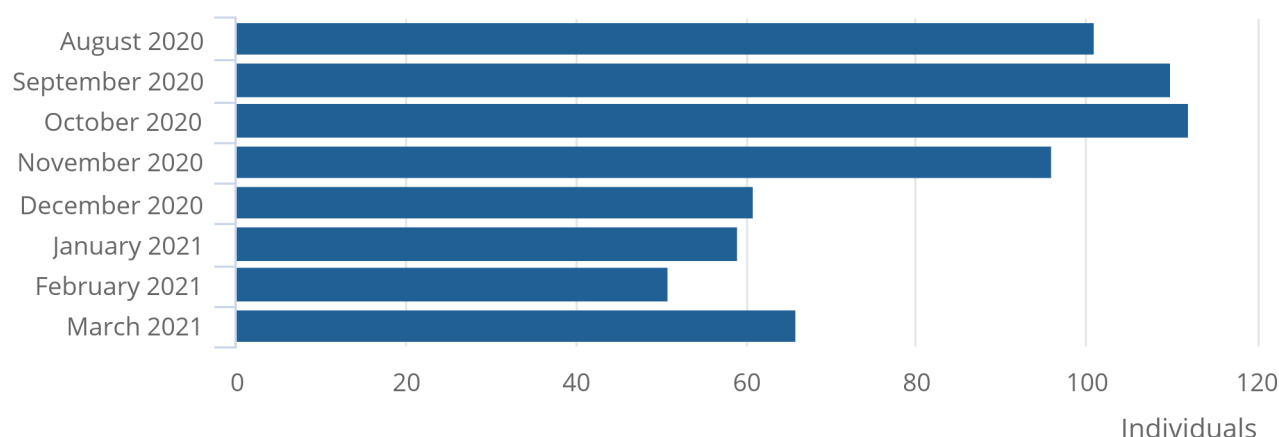
Source: Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) – Coronavirus (COVID-19) emergency accommodation survey data, January 2021

Figure 6: Single night estimates of rough sleeping levels in Wales report around 100 individuals between August 2020 and November 2020 and around 60 individuals between December 2020 and March 2021

Estimated rough sleeping in Wales (single night), 2020 to 2021 management information

Figure 6: Single night estimates of rough sleeping levels in Wales report around 100 individuals between August 2020 and November 2020 and around 60 individuals between December 2020 and March 2021

Estimated rough sleeping in Wales (single night), 2020 to 2021 management information



Source: Welsh Government – Homelessness accommodation provision and rough sleeping: March 2021

4 . People who sleep rough in statutory homelessness statistics

The devolved policy framework, with different definitions and legislation, sets the support homeless people, including people sleeping rough, are entitled to from local authorities or government bodies in each country of the UK, including secure and temporary accommodation. These differences in statutory duties and processes affect the statistics collected and prevents direct comparisons between the countries' statutory homelessness statistics, including measures relating to rough sleeping. The [Government Statistical Service Interactive Tool on Homelessness](#) and [article on homelessness statistics](#) explain some of these differences.

Statistics that are based on administrative data collected in the statutory homelessness application process relate to households seeking, being offered, or provided support through homelessness duties. While they add to the evidence base on homelessness and rough sleeping in the UK, they cannot be used to estimate levels of rough sleeping. Some people who sleep rough or are at risk of rough sleeping will be ineligible for support or will not make an application. In these instances, those individuals and households will not be present in the statistics. Changes in these statistics' trends may reflect changes in the proportion of people who sleep rough seeking assistance or changes to eligibility rather than levels of rough sleeping.

Statutory homelessness statistics in England and Scotland include measures that relate to rough sleeping, though these are not the same measure which therefore limits comparability; however, trends in each country can be explored (Table 1). Measures of rough sleeping in Wales and Northern Ireland are not currently published in their statutory homelessness statistics.

Table 1: England and Scotland record different measures relating to people who sleep rough in their homelessness statistics

People who sleep rough in homelessness statistics in England and Scotland, 2018 to 2020

Measure	April 2018 to April 2019 to	
	March 2019	March 2020
Households owed a homeless (relief) duty in England and rough sleeping on approach	7,030	8,410
Households applying for homelessness support in Scotland and reporting having slept rough in the three months before their application	2,913	2,916
Households applying for homelessness support in Scotland and reporting having slept rough the night before their application	1,664	1,660

Source: Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) – Statutory homelessness live tables, Scottish Government – Homelessness in Scotland: update to 30 September 2020

Notes

1. Households reporting having slept rough the night before their application in Scotland is a subset of households reporting having slept rough in the three months before their application.

Findings and trends

England

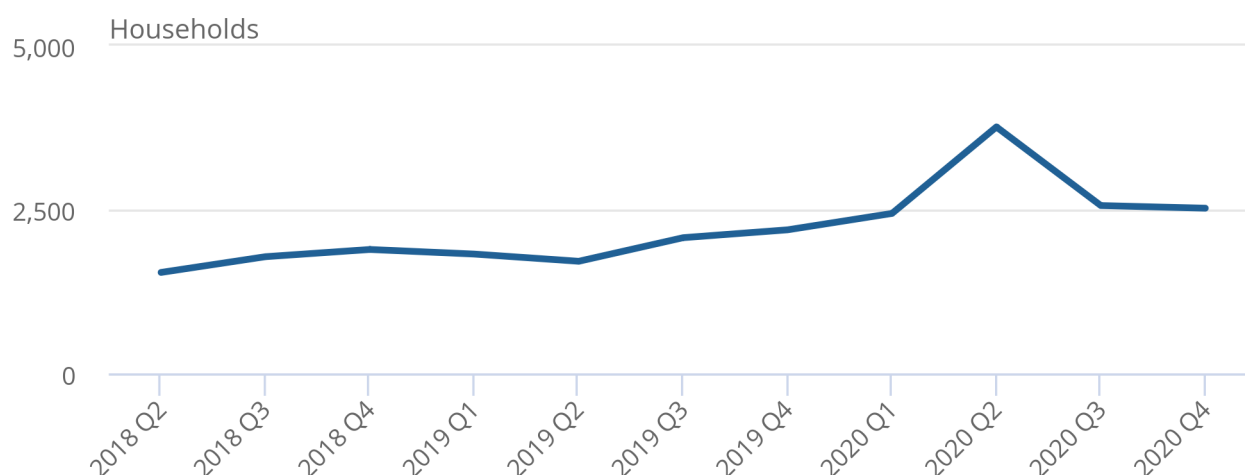
In England, the number of homeless duties owed to households rough sleeping on approach has generally been increasing with higher levels in 2020 than in previous years (Figure 7). Within this overall trend, there is a spike of homeless duties owed to households rough sleeping on approach in April to June 2020. This coincides with the initial provision of emergency accommodation to people rough sleeping and people at risk of rough sleeping during the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic, many of whom were then encouraged to apply for homelessness support. Data prior to the implementation of the Homelessness Reduction Act in April 2018 are not comparable with the current statistics, which are published each quarter.

Figure 7: More households owed a relief duty in England were rough sleeping on approach in 2020 than in previous years

Households owed a relief duty who were rough sleeping on approach, England, Quarter 2 (Apr to June) 2018 to Quarter 4 (Oct to Dec) 2020

Figure 7: More households owed a relief duty in England were rough sleeping on approach in 2020 than in previous years

Households owed a relief duty who were rough sleeping on approach, England, Quarter 2 (Apr to June) 2018 to Quarter 4 (Oct to Dec) 2020



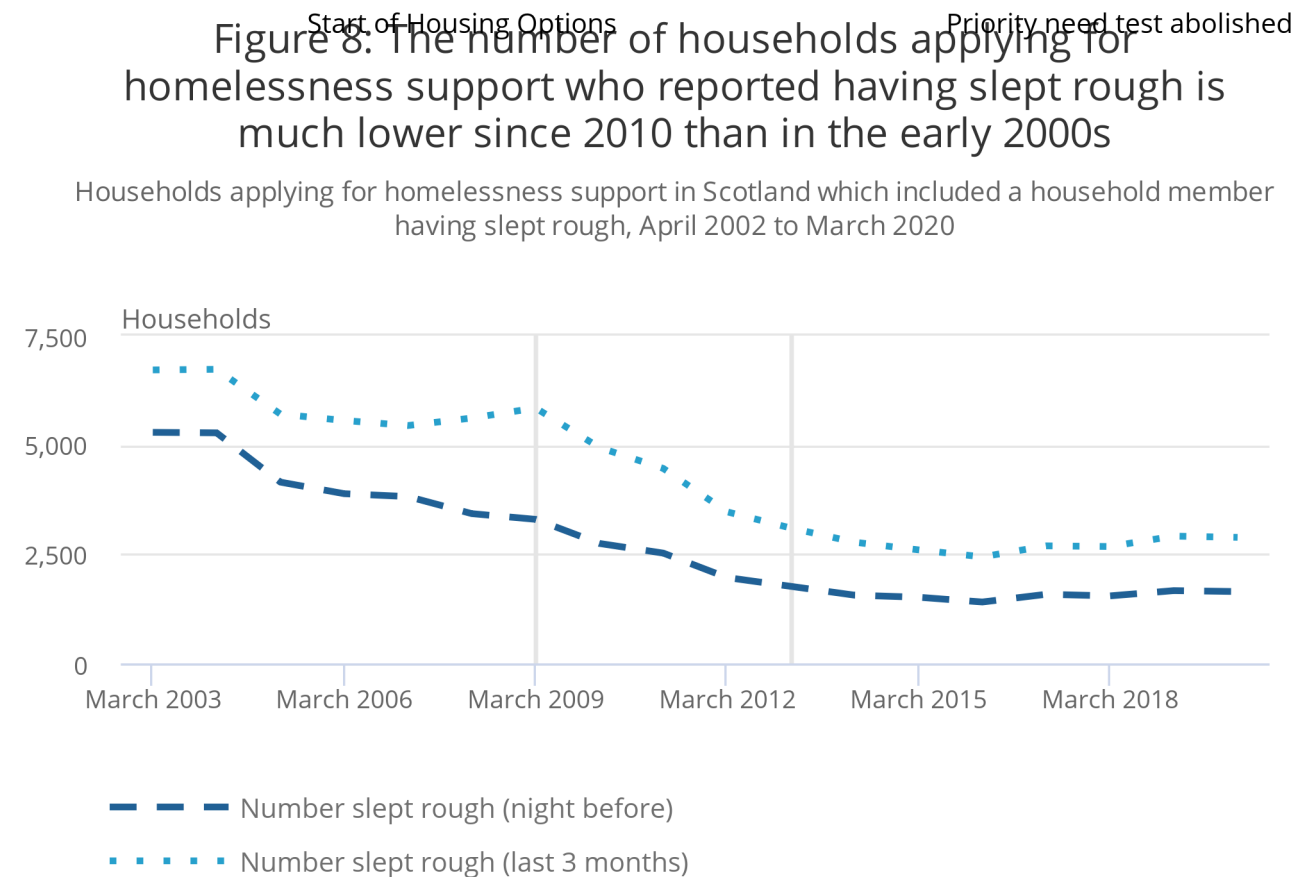
Source: Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) – Statutory homelessness live tables

Scotland

In Scotland, between April 2019 and March 2020, around 1,600 households who applied for homelessness support included a household member who reported having experienced rough sleeping the night before their application, and around 2,900 households reported a household member experiencing rough sleeping in the three months prior to their application. These findings are similar to previous years though have increased from the lowest recorded year of April 2015 to March 2016, in line with an increase in overall homelessness applications. The overall trend over a longer time period has been a reduction in the both the number and proportion of applications where rough sleeping was reported (Figure 8).

Figure 8: The number of households applying for homelessness support who reported having slept rough is much lower since 2010 than in the early 2000s

Households applying for homelessness support in Scotland which included a household member having slept rough, April 2002 to March 2020



Source: Scottish Government – Homelessness in Scotland

Notes:

Households reporting having slept rough the night before their application in Scotland is a subset of households reporting having slept rough in the three months before their application.

A number of factors may explain these trends, including policy changes, which are discussed in the [Homelessness in Scotland](#) bulletins published by the Scottish Government. Notably, legislation in Scotland more greatly diverged from the rest of the UK with the abolition of priority need assessment in December 2012. This means all eligible households assessed as unintentionally homeless must be offered settled accommodation by local authorities and they must be offered temporary accommodation until this is available. Where priority need is present, these duties to secure accommodation are more limited. As a consequence, a larger proportion of people sleeping rough may be expected to make statutory homeless applications from 2013.

Between April 2020 (at the beginning of the coronavirus pandemic) and September 2020, there was an increase of 4% in the number of applications reporting a household member rough sleeping in the night prior to their application, when compared with the equivalent months in 2019. Conversely, between April 2020 and September 2020, there was a decrease of 4% in the number of applications reporting a household member rough sleeping in the previous three months, when compared with the equivalent months in 2019. The overall number of applications between April to September 2020 decreased by 10%, therefore, an increased proportion of applications were from households reporting rough sleeping (Table 2). These findings may be a result of additional efforts by local authorities to provide accommodation to people who sleep rough since the onset of the pandemic.

Table 2: The proportion of homelessness applications in Scotland from households reporting having slept rough increased in April to September 2020 when compared to than the equivalent months in 2019
Applications for homelessness support in Scotland, April 2019 to September 2019 and April 2020 to September 2020

	April 2019 to September 2019	April 2020 to September 2020	Percentage change
Total applications	18,911	16,997	-10%
Number slept rough (previous three months)	1,417	1,365	-4%
Number slept rough (night before)	826	859	4%

Source: Scottish Government – Homelessness in Scotland: Update to 30 September 2020

Notes

1. Households reporting having slept rough the night before their application in Scotland is a subset of households reporting having slept rough in the three months before their application.

5 . Interpreting and bringing together the sources

For rough sleeping statistics it is often not advisable to directly compare across countries or data sources, but by bringing together the different data sources we can start to see a more complete picture of rough sleeping across the UK and over time. By understanding the purpose, strengths, and limitations of different data collections and by understanding that the choice of data collection reflects each country's legislation, circumstances and priorities, sources can be somewhat brought together.

Annual rough sleeping snapshot statistics conducted in England, Wales, and Northern Ireland indicate that the number of people sleeping rough rose to a peak in 2017 or 2018 with reduced levels in subsequent years, including a notable decline in 2020. The data collection method has similarities in each country and each year, enabling partial and qualified comparisons between these countries and over time.

The snapshot statistics provide point-in-time estimates of rough sleeping levels on a single night. The methodology provides robust, verified estimates but despite best efforts some people rough sleeping may be missed. Snapshots can be difficult to conduct and findings can be affected by external factors such as the weather.

Statutory homelessness statistics in England and Scotland separately report changes in the number of approaches to local authorities from people sleeping rough in recent years, including during the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic. These statistics are not direct measures of observed rough sleeping and are based on approaches to the local authorities and individuals or households' disclosure of having slept rough. Some people who are sleeping rough do not apply for, or are not eligible for, homelessness support and would not be included in these statistics. The varied legislation across the UK countries sets the duties of this support and should be considered firmly in any interpretation of figures over time or between countries.

Management information provides the timeliest source of information on rough sleeping, and the effects of the coronavirus response. The data are collected by governments for operational purposes and are a lower quality data source with limited comparability to regular statistics.

Without this deeper understanding of each of the sources, the figures they provide and the trends they illustrate can appear contradictory. For example, official snapshots in England show rough sleeping has fallen in 2020 and management information suggests this may have continued into 2021, yet the number of people reporting having slept rough in statutory homelessness statistics has increased in 2020. By understanding the sources, possible explanations emerge, such as people who were sleeping rough were provided emergency accommodation during the pandemic and may have subsequently applied for homelessness support, likely causing the spike in statutory homelessness statistics in Quarter 2 (Apr to June) 2020.

This illustrates how the different statistics relate to different aspects of the rough sleeping and homelessness picture and highlights why they cannot be summed to produce a purported total. Variations in trends between different statistics and between different countries should not be unexpected and instead promote further inquiry, helping to develop the richer understanding of rough sleeping in the UK.

6 . Characteristics of people who sleep rough

England and Scotland regularly publish information about the characteristics of people who sleep rough as part of their statistics. In England, these relate to the people sleeping rough identified during the annual autumn snapshot. In Scotland, these relate to characteristics of lead applicants for homelessness support in which a household member has self-reported rough sleeping either the night prior to or within the previous three months before their application¹.

Wales and Northern Ireland only publish characteristic information for homeless populations as a whole because of potential disclosure risks and data collection approaches. On occasion, additional characteristics are published as part of research such as findings from the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) [Rough Sleeping Questionnaire \(RSQ\)](#). There is no data collection that aims to understand the characteristics of people who sleep rough in the UK as a whole.

Because of the varied data collections of each of these sources, the characteristic breakdowns are not directly comparable, though they can provide insight into the similarities and differences between countries. Different measures and time series are available depending on the source.

Together these sources can be used as an evidence base to understand the general characteristics of people who sleep rough in the UK. They broadly suggest that the most common characteristics of people who sleep rough are being:

- male
- of UK nationality
- between the ages of 25 and 64 years

This is different to the demographic profile of all applicants for homelessness support within the UK, which has a more mixed gender profile and a less concentrated age profile².

Gender

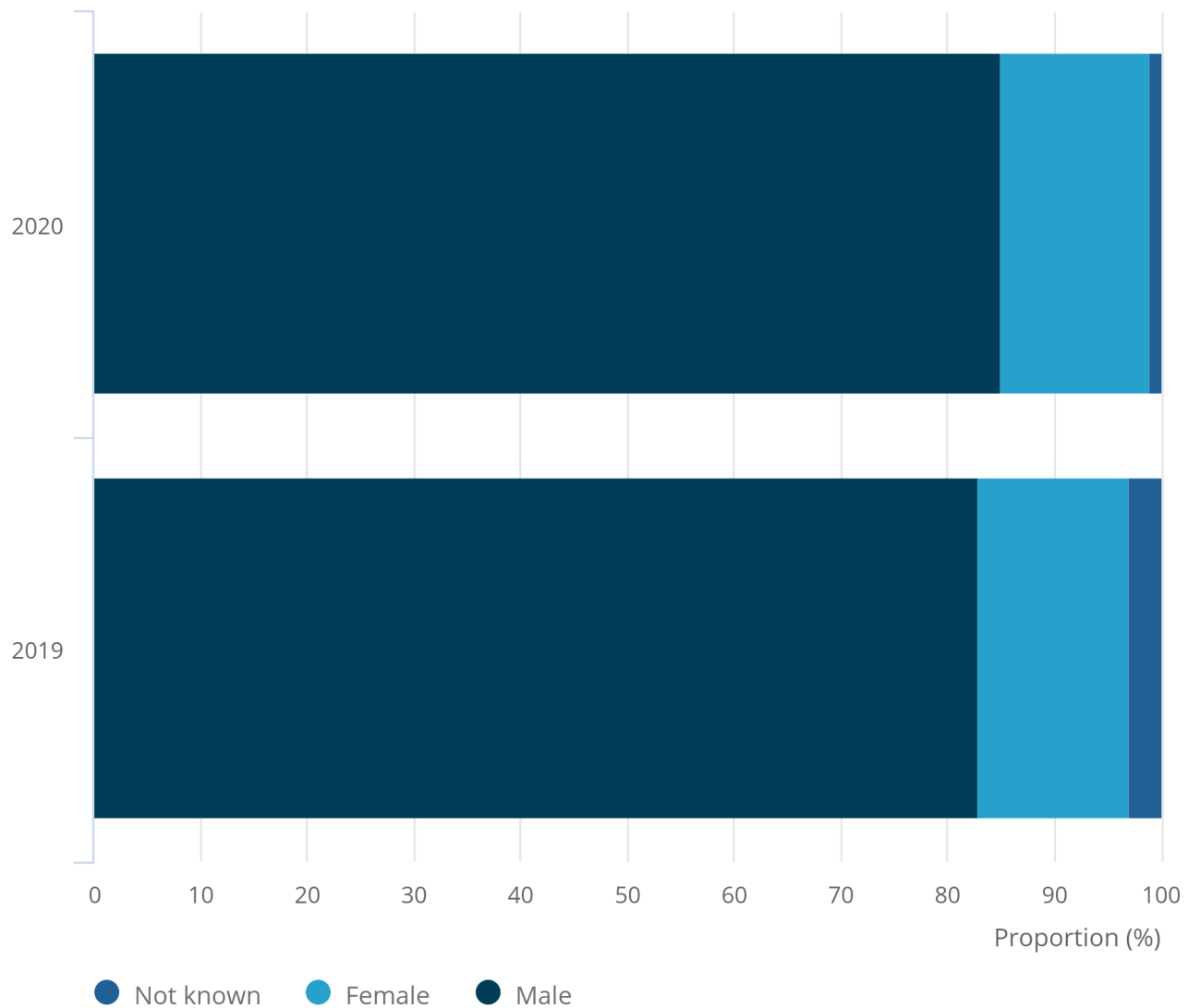
In the most recent data, over 8 out of 10 people who were rough sleeping in England were male (Figure 9). In Scotland, in applications for homelessness support in which rough sleeping was reported, over 8 out of 10 lead applicants were male (Figure 10). These proportions are similar to those available in previous years³.

Figure 9: Over 8 in 10 people sleeping rough in England were male

Proportion of people sleeping rough in England on a single night in autumn by gender, 2019 and 2020

Figure 9: Over 8 in 10 people sleeping rough in England were male

Proportion of people sleeping rough in England on a single night in autumn by gender, 2019 and 2020



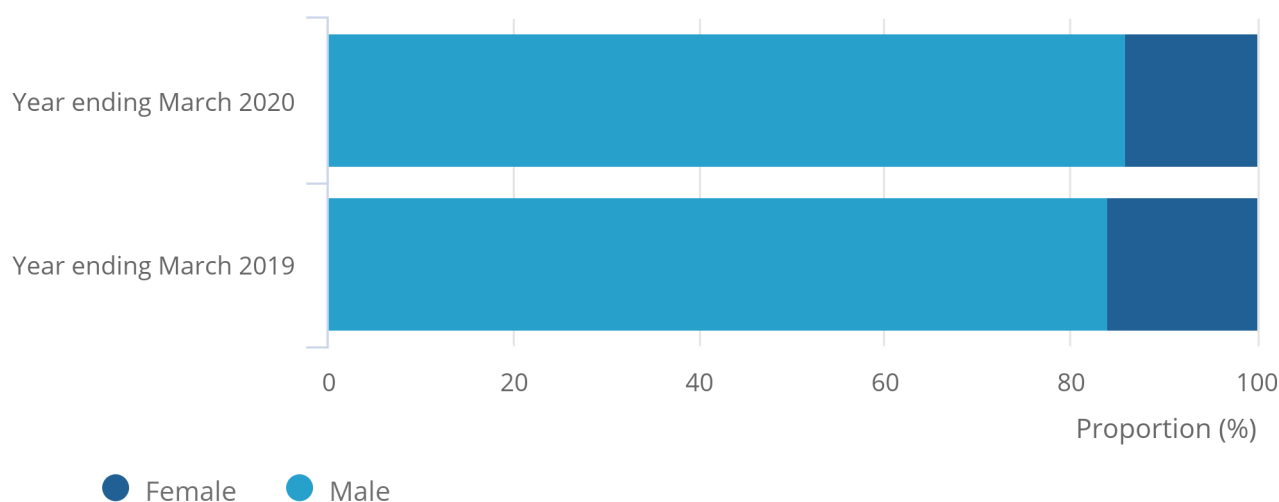
Source: Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) – Rough sleeping snapshot in England

Figure 10: Over 8 in 10 people who slept rough and applied for homelessness support in Scotland were male

Gender of lead applicants for homelessness support in Scotland among applications which reported rough sleeping the night before the application, April 2018 to March 2020

Figure 10: Over 8 in 10 people who slept rough and applied for homelessness support in Scotland were male

Gender of lead applicants for homelessness support in Scotland among applications which reported rough sleeping the night before the application, April 2018 to March 2020



Source: Scottish Government – Homelessness in Scotland: Equalities Breakdown

Notes:

1. An additional breakdown for gender of lead applicants where rough sleeping is self-reported in the previous three months is published by Scottish Government

Age

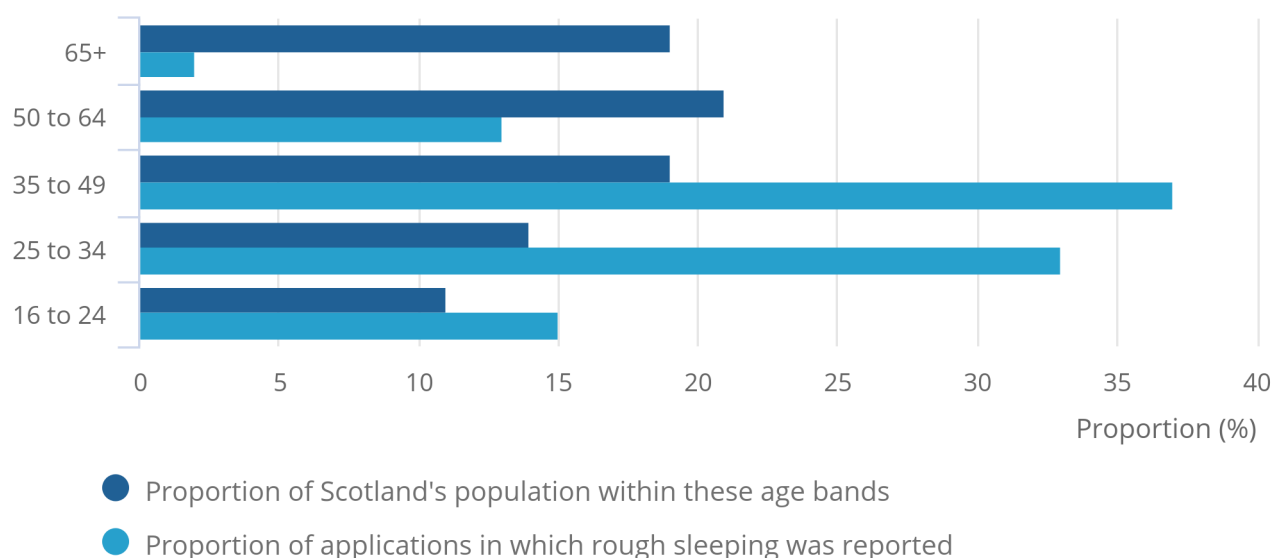
In Scotland, for applications for homelessness support in which rough sleeping was reported, over two-thirds of lead applicants were aged between 25 and 49 years, whereas only around a third of Scotland's overall population is between these ages. By contrast, while around a fifth (19%) of Scotland's population is aged over 65 years, only 2% of lead applicants were in this age band for applications in which rough sleeping was reported (Figure 11).

Figure 11: A disproportionate number of people who slept rough and applied for homelessness support in Scotland were between 16 to 49 years when compared to the overall population

Age of lead applicants for homelessness support in Scotland among applications which reported rough sleeping the night before the application, April 2019 to March 2020

Figure 11: A disproportionate number of people who slept rough and applied for homelessness support in Scotland were between 16 to 49 years when compared to the overall population

Age of lead applicants for homelessness support in Scotland among applications which reported rough sleeping the night before the application, April 2019 to March 2020



Source: Scottish Government – Homelessness in Scotland: Equalities Breakdown, Office for National Statistics – Population estimates

Notes:

1. An additional breakdown for age of lead applicants where rough sleeping is self-reported in the previous three months is published by Scottish Government.

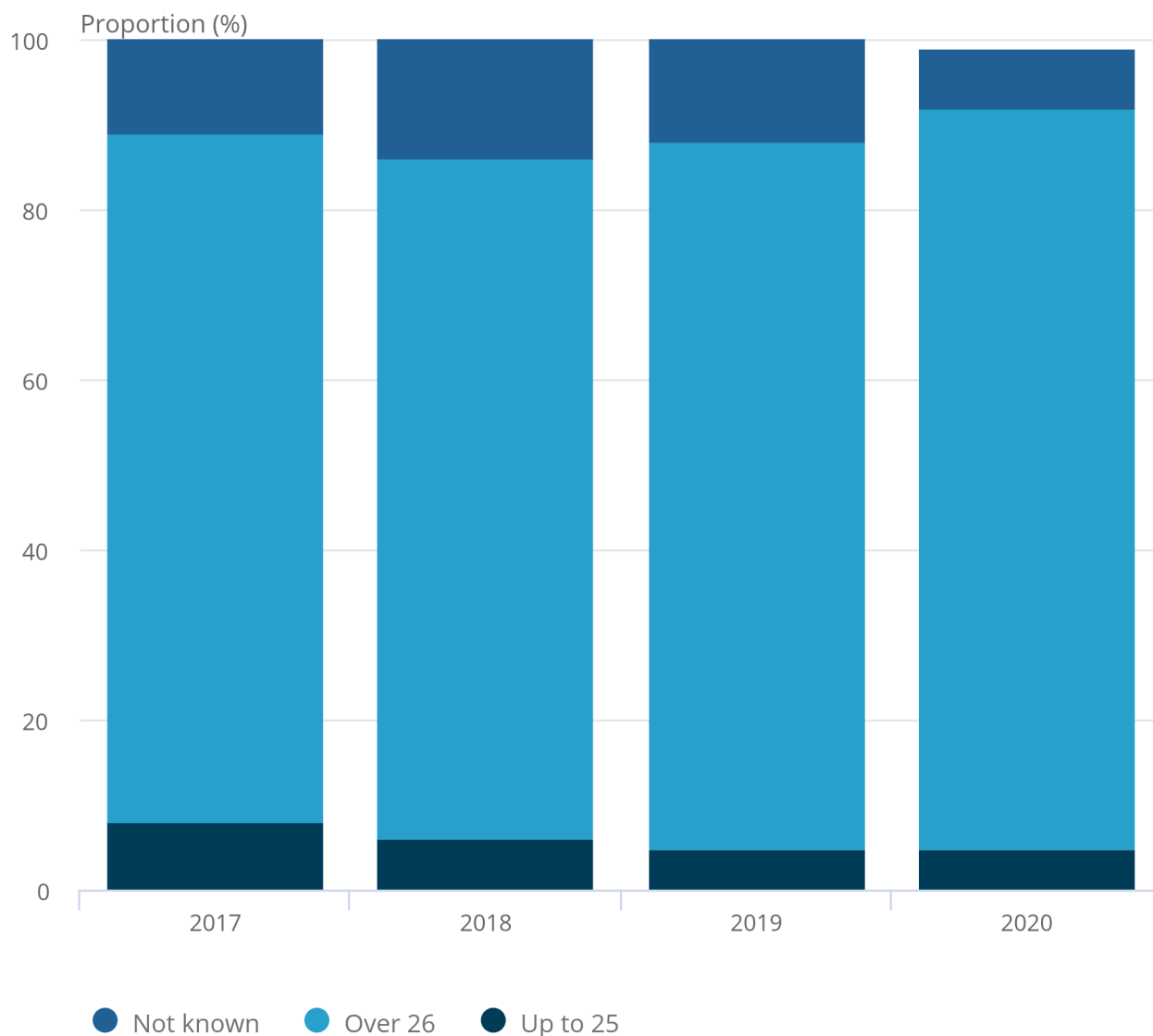
In 2020, most people sleeping rough in England were aged 26 years and over (87%), with a small minority aged 25 years or under (5%) or not known (7%). In the last four years, the proportion of people who sleep rough aged 25 years and under has been falling (Figure 12). There is some uncertainty as age was not known for around 1 in 10 people sleeping rough in each year between 2017 and 2020.

Figure 12: The proportion of people sleeping rough aged 25 years and under has been falling in England

Proportion of people sleeping rough in England on a single night in autumn by age, 2017 to 2020

Figure 12: The proportion of people sleeping rough aged 25 years and under has been falling in England

Proportion of people sleeping rough in England on a single night in autumn by age, 2017 to 2020



Source: Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) – Rough sleeping snapshot in England

Nationality

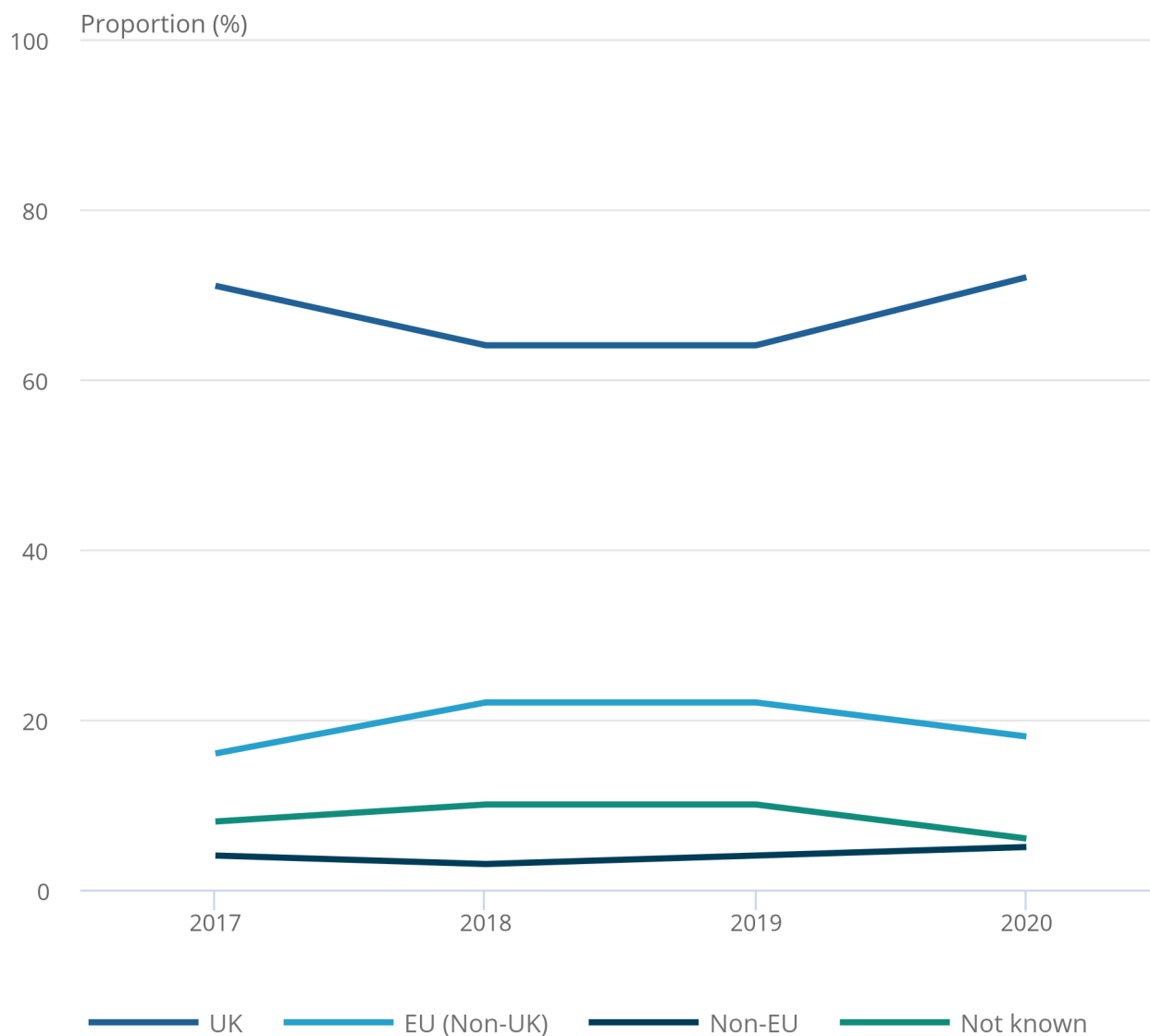
Between 2017 and 2020, around two-thirds of people sleeping rough in England were UK nationals, ranging between 64% (in 2018 and 2019) and 72% (in 2020). Around 1 in 5 were from the EU, with around 1 in 20 from non-EU countries. There is some uncertainty in these proportions as nationality was not known for around 1 in 10 people sleeping rough (Figure 13).

Figure 13: Around two-thirds of people sleeping rough in England are UK nationals

Proportion of people sleeping rough in England on a single night in autumn by nationality, 2017 to 2020

Figure 13: Around two-thirds of people sleeping rough in England are UK nationals

Proportion of people sleeping rough in England on a single night in autumn by nationality, 2017 to 2020



Source: Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) – Rough sleeping snapshot in England

Rough Sleeping Questionnaire in England

To improve the evidence base on people sleeping rough and rough sleeping in England, the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) conducted in-depth research between February 2019 and March 2020. The demographic results of the RSQ were consistent with the rough sleeping snapshot. In this sample of individuals who had slept rough at least once during the previous twelve months, 82% were men, 17% were women, the average age was 41 years, and 81% of respondents were UK nationals. Other demographic information was also presented in the findings, including ethnicity and sexual orientation (Table 3).

Table 3: Demographics of people sleeping rough from the Rough Sleeping Questionnaire in England
Demographics of respondents to the Rough Sleeping Questionnaire who slept rough at least once in the twelve months before their interview

	Average age	41 years
Gender		
	Men	82%
	Women	17%
	Not known	1%
Ethnicity		
	White	84%
	Black British or African or Caribbean	5%
	Mixed or Multiple ethnic groups	4%
	Asian or Asian British incl. Chinese	2%
	Other ethnic group	4%
	Non-response	1%
Nationality		
	UK	81%
	EU or EEA	14%
	Non-EU or EEA	3%
	Non-response	2%
Sexual orientation		
	Heterosexual	87%
	Homosexual or bisexual	7%
	Other	1%
	Non-response	5%
	Total sample size	563

Source: Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) – Rough sleeping questionnaire: initial findings

Limitations of characteristics statistics

Statistics on the characteristics of people who sleep rough are based on identifying people sleeping rough or their disclosure of previously having slept rough. It also relies on disclosure of information about their characteristics which an individual may wish to withhold. Consequently, these statistics may undercount the amount and proportions of people sleeping rough with particular characteristics. Individuals ineligible for public funds may be unknown to services and would not be successful applicants for homelessness support. This could also influence the reported statistics as well as their risk of rough sleeping.

Notes for: Characteristics of people who sleep rough

1. Most homelessness support applications in Scotland in which rough sleeping is self-reported are from individuals.
2. The profile of homelessness support applicants in each country of the UK can be explored through the publications and statistics of [Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government \(England\)](#), [Scottish Government](#), [Welsh Government](#), and [Department for Communities \(Northern Ireland\)](#). A whole UK commentary is published by the [Office for National Statistics](#) (ONS).
3. Terms used reflect categories in the data collection as reported by the responsible agencies.

7 . Support for people who sleep rough during the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic

The emergence of the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic in the UK brought concern about the potential exposure of people who sleep rough, and broader homeless populations, to infection. This population was regarded as having higher risk because of the difficulties in being able to isolate effectively and high levels of health conditions.

At the onset of the pandemic, governments in the UK took rapid action to offer and provide emergency accommodation to individuals and households sleeping rough, at risk of sleeping rough, or staying in accommodation where it was difficult to self-isolate such as shelters and assessment centres. To maximise the effectiveness of the public health intervention, offers of emergency accommodation were made independent of individuals' possible eligibility to statutory homeless support.

Following the initial intervention, there has been increased focus on subsequent accommodation alongside fulfilling statutory support to households presenting as homeless or at risk of homelessness before and throughout the pandemic.

Local authorities and governments have collected new information during the pandemic to record, understand and inform their operations, including in relation to homelessness and rough sleeping. Some of the findings have been published as management information. These new data sources were collected quickly to inform the response to the pandemic and do not have the guidance, planning and rigour of statistical data collections, which are preferred sources. Because of different definitions, coverage and data collections, the management information is not comparable to the regular statistics and it is not possible to effectively compare countries. However, they provide new and rapid insights into the effects of the pandemic on homelessness and rough sleeping, informing policy responses and the public.

Initial response

In March 2020, at the onset of the pandemic, local authorities in England estimated there were 6,000 people sleeping rough. By mid-April, the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) reported that more than 5,400 people (90% of this total) had been made an offer of emergency accommodation. As these totals relate to spring and include people sleeping rough on the streets and some individuals using shared sleeping sites, they are not comparable to the official annual autumn snapshot.

The Welsh Government reported that 407 people sleeping rough were moved off the streets and into emergency accommodation in Wales between 13 April and 28 June 2020.

The Northern Ireland Housing Executive reported having identified and engaged with 61 people sleeping rough in Northern Ireland, including providing 44 people with temporary accommodation, up to the end of July 2020.

In Scotland, although action was taken, no equivalent data collection occurred.

New regular data sources

In England, the MHCLG has published management information reporting the number of people who sleep rough or individuals at risk of sleeping rough currently living in emergency accommodation (Table 4) and the number of individuals who have "moved on" into settled accommodation or supported housing.

Table 4: The number of people being provided emergency accommodation in England
Total number of people sleeping rough or at risk of sleeping rough who are currently being provided emergency accommodation in England, May 2020 to January 2021

	May-20	Sep-20	Nov-20	Dec-20	Jan-21
People currently being provided emergency accommodation	14,610	10,509	9,809	9,673	11,263

Source: Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) – Coronavirus (COVID-19) emergency accommodation data: May 2020 and January 2021

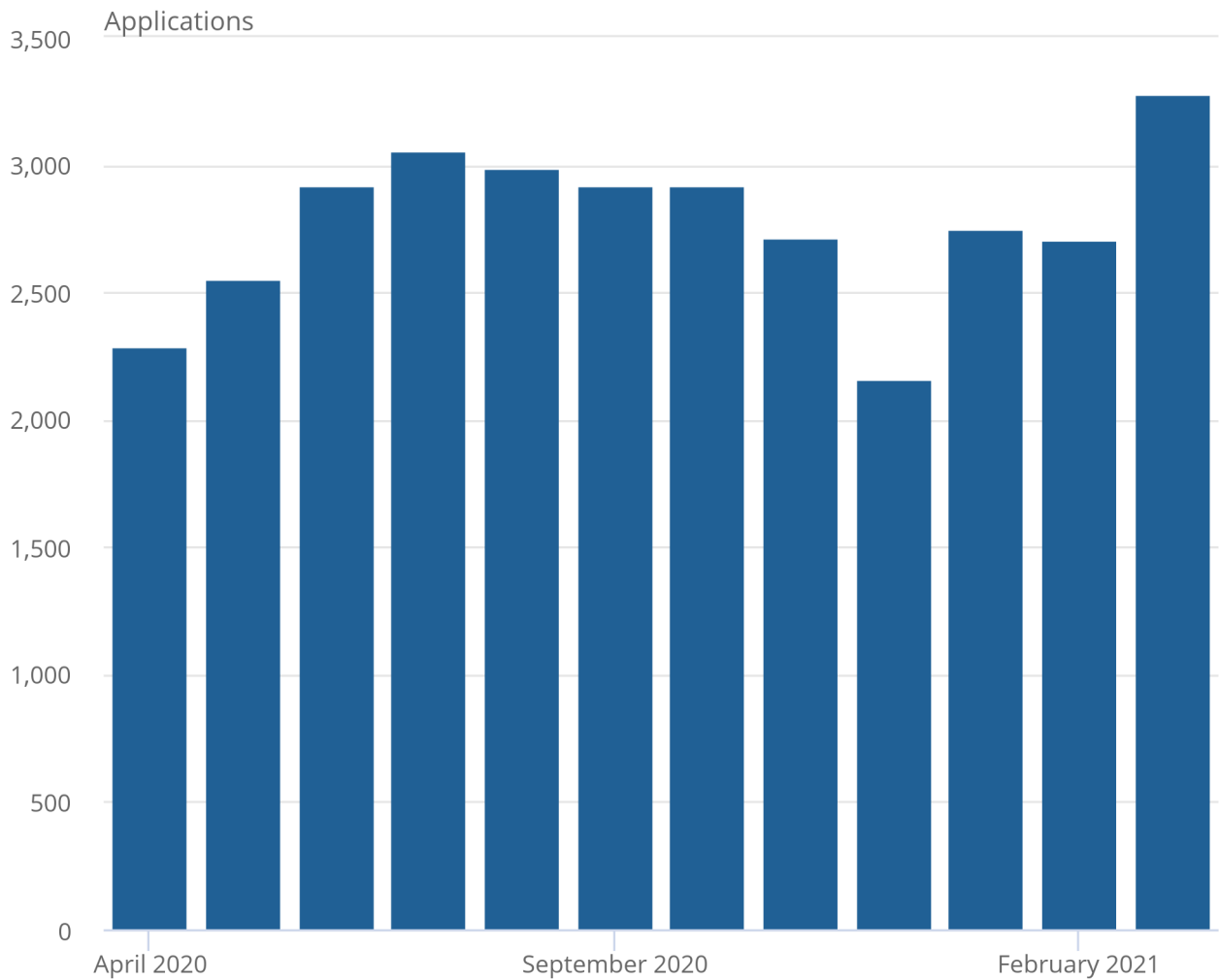
The Scottish Government, on behalf of the Society of Local Authority Chief Executives and Senior Managers (SOLACE) has been collecting information on vulnerable children and vulnerable adults including five measures relating to homelessness in Scotland from April 2020. The information includes the number of homelessness applications (Figure 14) and provision of temporary accommodation (Figure 15).

Figure 14: Management information in Scotland reports the number of homelessness applications made each month since the onset of the pandemic

Homelessness applications received in Scotland, April 2020 to March 2021

Figure 14: Management information in Scotland reports the number of homelessness applications made each month since the onset of the pandemic

Homelessness applications received in Scotland, April 2020 to March 2021



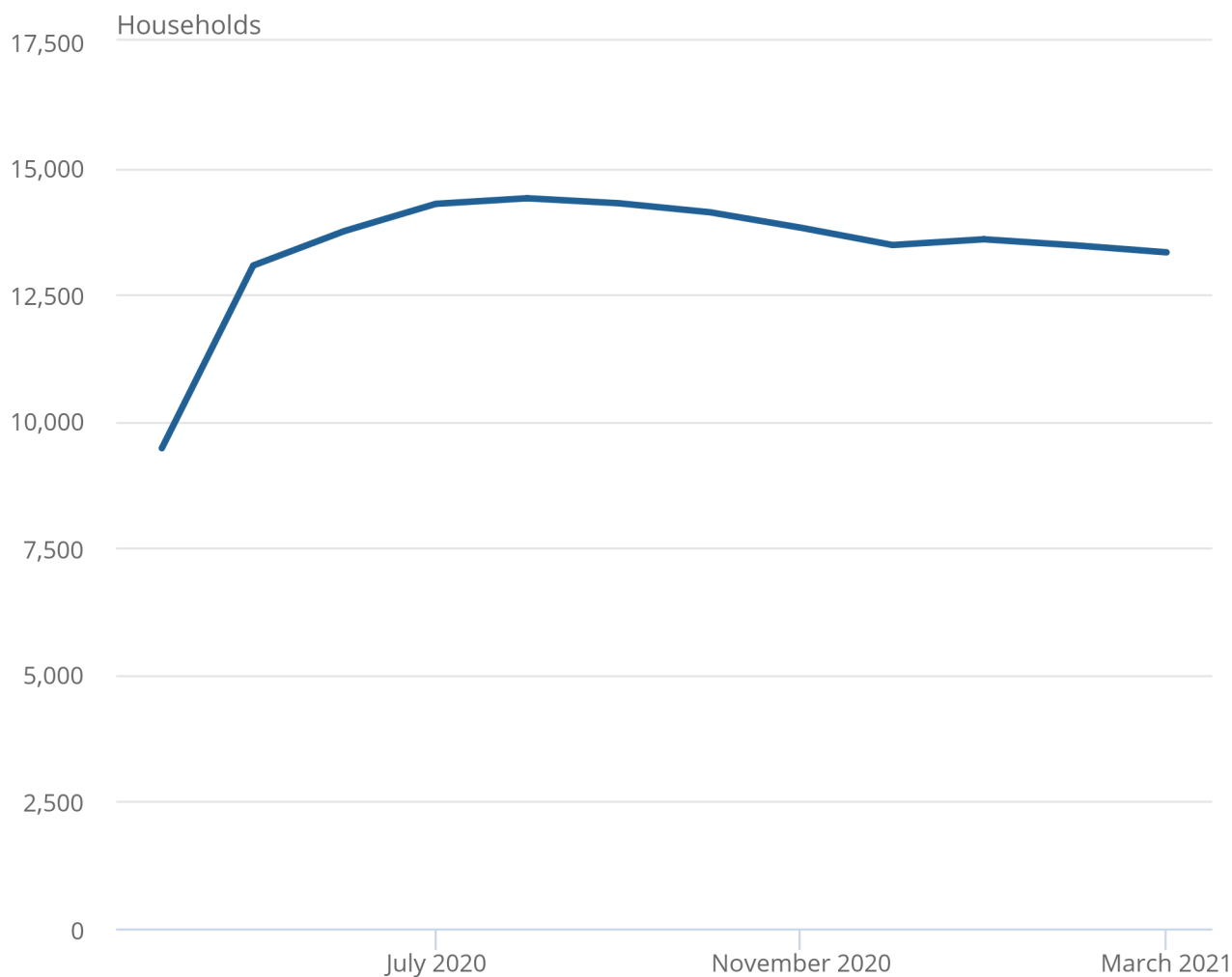
Source: SOLACE – Homelessness applications

Figure 15: The number of households in temporary accommodation in Scotland increased in May and June 2020

Households in temporary accommodation as at the end of a week or month, May 2020 to March 2021

Figure 15: The number of households in temporary accommodation in Scotland increased in May and June 2020

Households in temporary accommodation as at the end of a week or month, May 2020 to March 2021



Source: SOLACE – Number of households in temporary accommodation

The Welsh Government has surveyed local authorities to collect information on homelessness and rough sleeping in Wales, since August 2020. Table 5 shows the most recently published management information relating to March 2021.

Table 5: Management information in Wales reports information on homelessness applications and temporary accommodation

Homelessness accommodation in Wales, management information, March 2021

Number of homeless individuals, including dependent children	
Placed into temporary accommodation in Wales during March 2021	1,167
In temporary accommodation in Wales as at 31 March 2021	6,111
Moved into suitable long-term accommodation in Wales during March 2021	694

Source: Welsh Government – Homelessness accommodation provision and rough sleeping: March 2021

8 . Summary

A rich variety of statistics are published about rough sleeping within the UK. This provides an evidence base to deliver services and support to these often-vulnerable people. Statistics are just one element of the evidence base – departments and devolved administrations also run their own research programmes as well as consulting experts and commissioning studies.

In each country in the UK, different data sources are developed, and approaches are undertaken, to produce statistics to measure and understand rough sleeping. This is because devolved policies on rough sleeping and homelessness vary and each department or devolved administration is responsible for producing statistics that meet their national needs.

As a result, it is difficult to build a UK-wide picture of rough sleeping as the statistics are not directly comparable. This article improves coherence by highlighting the similarities and differences of these statistics and by explaining the ways in which different sources can be compared or not. This provides a clearer picture of rough sleeping and the people who sleep rough in the UK, enhancing the evidence base.

Many of the statistics reported in this article are recent developments, meeting user needs to improve the evidence base on rough sleeping. In particular, the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic and policies in response to the pandemic have changed the landscape for people who sleep rough and has required rapid data and insights to understand the effects of these changes. Statistics producers have responded by adjusting existing statistics or producing new data sources, alongside information about how these sources can be interpreted and compared in the context of the pandemic and earlier statistics.

9 . Glossary

People sleeping rough

People sleeping, about to bed down or bedded down in the open air (such as on the streets, in tents, doorways, parks, bus shelters or encampments). People in buildings or other places not designed for habitation (such as stairwells, barns, sheds, car parks, cars, derelict boats, stations or "bashes", which are makeshift shelters, often comprised of cardboard boxes).

Note: This definition is from England's [Rough Sleeping Snapshot](#); a similar definition is used in Wales and Northern Ireland.

Snapshot surveys

An exercise to count or estimate the level of rough sleeping in an area on a typical night or a range of nights.

Administrative data

Data on applicants for homelessness support collected by local authorities or governments, which can be subsequently processed and analysed to produce homelessness statistics.

Management information

Information collected by local authorities or governments for operational purposes, for instance recording the number of people who sleep rough provided with emergency accommodation, not specifically designed to produce official statistics.

Statutory homeless

In general, across the UK, a person is regarded as homeless if they lack a secure place in which they are entitled to live or they are not reasonably able to stay where they currently live. Individuals or households who are homeless or threatened with homelessness will be owed a duty to help secure housing, depending on country-specific legislation and the individual circumstances of the applicant. Legislation and the application process is described in more detail in the [Government Statistical Service's \(GSS\) interactive tool for homelessness](#).

Rough sleeping on approach

A category used to record and report previous accommodation of applicants for homelessness support in England.

Rough sleeping at the time of Local Authority Approach: "Rough sleepers are defined as those who were, in the judgement of the assessor, rough sleeping when they approached a local authority for help."

Priority need

In England, Wales and Northern Ireland, legislation confers that some categories of applicants for homelessness assistance have a priority need for accommodation. Scotland do not test for priority need.

Applicants who have priority need for housing include:

- households with dependent children or a pregnant woman
- people homeless because of fire or flood
- people who are particularly vulnerable because of ill health, disability, old age, having been in care or as a result of having been in custody or care, or having become homeless because of violence or the threat of violence

Housing Options

In Scotland, when households seek assistance for housing-related issues from their local authority, they may be presented with advice on a range of housing options, including the opportunity to make a homelessness application. This is known as Housing Options and began to be implemented from around 2009. More information is available from the [Scottish Government's homelessness statistics collections](#).

10 . Data sources and quality

It is inherently difficult to identify all people who sleep rough and to therefore include them in data collections when compared with people with more secure forms of accommodation.

Experiences of rough sleeping vary. The overall rough sleeping population can consist of new people sleeping rough, people who sleep rough regularly, and people who have previously slept rough who are sleeping rough again following periods in other accommodation. People may sleep rough for only one night, all nights in a period, or some nights in a period, possibly alongside other forms of insecure or temporary accommodation such as night shelters or sofa surfing. The experience of rough sleeping for an individual may be persistent, sporadic, repeated or one-off. The individuals and number of people sleeping rough on one night will not be the same as on other nights.

A person who is sleeping rough may seek to be hidden because of the insecurity and the risks of their situation. A person who sleeps rough or who has previously slept rough may not disclose this information to local authorities if applying for homelessness support.

These factors make measuring and understanding rough sleeping in the UK challenging. As a result, there is uncertainty in statistics relating to rough sleeping, so they should be interpreted as estimates that provide general insight into the scale and characteristics of this population.

Each data collection that underpins the rough sleeping statistics discussed in this article has its own purpose, strengths and limitations. This article highlights some of the main factors and dimensions that shape the quality of these statistics, especially when there are shared elements for multiple sources or countries, however, more comprehensive discussion is available through the links to the quoted statistics' original publications.

This report uses published government statistics related to rough sleeping from the following data providers: Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG), Scottish Government and the Society of Local Authority Chief Executives and Senior managers (SOLACE), Welsh Government, and Northern Ireland Housing Executive.

Snapshot survey:

MHCLG, [Rough sleeping snapshot in England](#)
Welsh Government, [National rough sleeper count](#)
Northern Ireland Housing Executive, [Rough sleeping estimates](#)

Statutory homelessness:

MHCLG, [Statutory homelessness in England](#), Table A4R
Scottish Government, [Homelessness in Scotland](#), Tables 2a and 3a and [Homelessness in Scotland Equalities Breakdown](#)

Related statistics in Wales and Northern Ireland:

Welsh Government, [Homelessness in Wales](#)
Department for Communities, [Northern Ireland Homelessness Bulletin](#)

Management information:

MHCLG, [Coronavirus \(COVID-19\) emergency accommodation survey data: May 2020](#)
MHCLG, [Coronavirus \(COVID-19\) emergency accommodation survey data: January 2021](#)
SOLACE, [Homelessness applications, acceptances, refusals and not offered & Number of households in temporary accommodation per week or month](#)
Welsh Government, [Homeless and rough sleepers in emergency accommodation in COVID-19 crisis \(management information\), up to 28 June 2020](#)
Welsh Government, [Homelessness accommodation provision and rough sleeping: March 2021](#)
Northern Ireland Housing Executive, [The Way Home: Homelessness response to COVID-19](#)

Other:

MHCLG, [Rough Sleeping Questionnaire: Initial findings](#)
ONS, [Population estimates](#)

11 . Future developments

Analysts across the Government Statistical Service (GSS) are continuously improving the quality and detail of statistics on homelessness and rough sleeping. These improvements are led by user needs, understood through working with organisations, charities, academics, and individuals, as well as through strong collaboration and shared learning between departments and devolved administrations.

The principles of collaboration, user-driven changes and transparency guide future changes to homelessness and rough sleeping statistics and research. More information can be found on the [GSS website](#), including about our working groups, workplans and interactive tools, or you can get in contact with the producers of the various statistics.

We welcome your views on the content of this article. Please contact us using the email address Gss.housing@ons.gov.uk to discuss any aspect of housing and homelessness statistics.

12 . Related links

[UK homelessness: 2005 to 2018](#)

Article | Released 17 September 2019

Assessment of the comparability and coherence of existing UK government data sources on homelessness.

[UK official statistics on homelessness: comparisons, definitions, and processes](#)

Website | Updated 10 June 2021

Interactive tool to help users: understand homelessness and rough sleeping concepts and how measures of the statistics for these concepts can and cannot be compared across the UK; and the different processes a person may go through when seeking housing aid within each country.

[Past experiences of housing difficulties in the UK: 2018](#)

Article | Released 22 October 2020

Estimates from 2018 of past experiences of housing difficulties to understand the extent, causes, methods of exit, current situations, and associated factors.

[Deaths of homeless people in England and Wales: 2019 registrations](#)

Bulletin | Released 14 December 2020

Experimental Statistics on the number of deaths of homeless people in England and Wales. Figures are given for deaths registered in the years 2013 to 2019.

[Homeless Deaths 2019](#) [Scotland]

Bulletin | Released 23 February 2021

Experimental Statistics on deaths of people experiencing homelessness in Scotland.

[Coronavirus and deaths of homeless people, England, and Wales: deaths registered up to 26 June 2020](#)

Article | Released 10 July 2020

The number of identified deaths involving the coronavirus (COVID-19) of people who were homeless.