

# Homelessness: ‘People think it can never happen to them, but it can, in the blink of an eye’

Four people who became homeless this year tell their stories

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Marc Conant: ‘So many are just about managing to put food on the table.’ Photograph: Francesca Jones/The Guardian

**O**n any given night in England, there are an estimated 4,134 people sleeping rough. As the colder months approach, Big Issue founder [John Bird](#) has raised concerns this could be [“the worst winter for over two decades”](#) for homelessness. The figures are stark: between 2010 and 2016, the number of people sleeping rough in England [rose by 134%](#). Tens of thousands are off the streets but still homeless, in hostels and temporary shelters, in tents, cars or sofa-surfing. Crisis estimates that in 2016 there were 143,000 people in these categories, including rough sleepers. Many have linked this year’s rise to Conservative austerity: Bird cites a combination of local council service cuts, paltry funding of homeless charities and inadequate care for those with mental health problems. We spoke to four people who were made homeless in 2017, to hear their stories.

## Marc Conant, 27, Prestwood, Buckinghamshire



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In 2011 I had a car accident. I was driving dangerously and didn't have a licence. My friend died. My right arm was severed below the elbow, then amputated. I served two years in prison and developed PTSD, depression and anxiety.

This happened three months into a relationship. It lasted six years, but there was an incident when I was violent. I stopped drinking to make sure it didn't happen again, but she wasn't willing to follow my lead. I became homeless in February, after the breakup. I didn't have a job at the time.

The council was not helpful. The senior housing officer focused on the car accident and the fact that I'd been violent to my partner. There are no excuses, but it was clear I was not in a good mental state at that time.

I spent a few weeks on my sister's couch. Without help from her and [Wycombe Homeless Connection](#), there's no way I would have climbed out of that hole. They suggested I ring round estate agents; at the time, I wasn't really able to think for myself. I'm on benefits, but towards the end of March I found somewhere.

A lot of people think homelessness can never happen to them, but it can, in the blink of an eye. The Conservatives came in after the financial crisis and made people believe austerity was the only way forward, and the people at the bottom pay for it. So many are just about managing to put food on the table. They've no savings; if the main breadwinner lost their job, it would all go down the pan.

I'm in the last year of a business studies degree and hoping to set up a business doing motivational speaking in schools. I'm also volunteering at the homeless charity,

helping others deal with the Department for Work and Pensions, get their benefits, get registered at a GP – all the life basics to get back on their feet.

Last Christmas I was at my previous partner's parents' house, doing what we take for granted at Christmas: having a nice big dinner, receiving presents. That could be very different this year, if it weren't for the help I got. I've been fortunate enough to meet a new partner – a psychiatric nurse – and I'll be spending Christmas with her. Luckily I'll have dinner on the table again, and will receive the love and care everyone deserves.

## **Lesley Honey, 41, Chippenham, Wiltshire**



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Lesley Honey: 'You lose yourself when you're on the streets.' Photograph: Francesca Jones/The Guardian

I was living in Salisbury with a guy I thought was very nice, but between Christmas and new year he started beating me up. I ended up in Bath hospital with two black eyes, a broken arm and an eyebrow that had to be glued back together. I went – still black and blue – to the local police station, and after three days they said they couldn't do anything as there wasn't enough evidence. He knew I was vulnerable and he used that. He's still out there.

The council said that technically I had made myself homeless by leaving him, even though I was fleeing domestic violence and had nowhere else to go. I was put in [Unity House](#) (a hostel for homeless people) for five days, then told they didn't have any spaces, after which I was on the streets for five or six months. I told my family about my situation, but I don't get along very well with my stepfather.

Being on the street wore me down. I slept in car parks, where boy racers threw rubbish at me. You wake up freezing, with no public toilets open. I lost weight; I lost all communication with my friends. I had a nervous breakdown. When I came to

the [Doorway](#) drop-in centre, I was wearing trainers with the soles falling off. They managed to get me into a room after the government basically failed me.

I have noticed homelessness going up. Every other doorway there's someone sitting there – people are losing their flats because of [universal credit](#), domestic violence, not being able to afford the mortgage; it could be anything. I talk to them because I've been in that situation. It does help when someone says hello; most days you wake up with nobody to talk to apart from the pigeons.

But I'm grateful for what I've got compared with six months ago. This Christmas I'll be in my hostel room. I've got a little shower, a TV and computer downstairs, and I'm saving up my pennies to get on the coach to see my nieces and nephews. I'd love to get back into horse-riding, and have my own little flat. I want to get back to being me, because you lose yourself when you're on the streets. You've got to pick yourself up and do the best you can. Life's too short to sit around being miserable.

## **Claire Green, 30, Northampton**

I've been going to the [Hope Centre](#) since 2013, when I lost my kids. I have two boys and a girl, all under 10. My ex-partner was violent and went to prison. I asked to be moved to different supported accommodation, so he wouldn't know where I was, but I wasn't. He came back, and they took my kids away. They've been adopted now and I'm allowed to write to them only twice a year; I'm not allowed to sign "Mum", I have to put my name. This is why I don't celebrate Christmas, because it reminds me of them.

Six or seven months ago, I became homeless. I was living in supported accommodation, but my benefits got stopped because I missed an appointment. I didn't even know I had it. I couldn't pay my rent and got evicted.

I was on the streets for three or four months. My family let me stay at theirs for a few nights, but I didn't want to be a burden. I mostly slept in doorways. It is scary, especially in winter. You can't stay safe as a woman on the streets by yourself. You don't get much sleep; you're always worried about someone robbing you and beating you up.

I wouldn't wish homelessness on my worst enemy. Just under two months ago, I got into a shared house in supported accommodation. I'm on tablets for depression and anxiety, though they don't seem to be working. But what makes me happy now is that I've actually got somewhere to live. I've got the support I need.

I don't think about the future; I'm still living in the past, thinking about my kids, waiting for them to come back to me. They will. I know they will.

## **Darryl Lee-Jarman, 30, Canterbury**



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Darryl Lee-Jarman: 'When someone ignores you when you ask for change, it is hurtful.' Photograph: Francesca Jones/The Guardian

I became homeless in April, five years after my life started to fall apart. I worked on the motorways with the crash-response unit, picking up bodies, clearing up and doing repairs after car accidents. I was in a team with my best friend. We grew up together, qualified together, trained together and were paired together.

One day in 2012 we were clearing up an accident on the M2 by Canterbury. A car came and he pulled me out of the way; it hit him and took him up the road about 80 metres. I couldn't go to his funeral because I couldn't face his kids. I felt guilty, because it should have been me. I'm still suffering from PTSD and anxiety; I get nightmares and wake up screaming in the middle of the night.

My dad passed away a few years later, in 2015. It was very sudden. He had emphysema, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, lung disease, kidney failure; he went into hospital and that night he passed. We really felt the loss at Christmas. I started smoking marijuana and my life spiralled. The drugs and my outbursts were the last straw for my mum; she kicked me out.

I was on the streets for four months. Some nights I'd be lucky enough to kip on a friend's couch, or in my car, until someone broke the windows. It was horrible. People on a night out pissed on me while I was sleeping in a doorway; all I was doing was trying to keep out of the cold.

I got put in touch with [Porchlight](#) in July. My key worker, Sonya, rang me every day, came out to see me, helped me get shelter, warm clothes, food. She saved my life. Now I'm in housing, in therapy, getting the right help. Having my own front door key, a warm bed, somewhere to make something to eat and drink, was like winning the lottery. Trying to get a job with PTSD, anxiety and depression is hard, but I would like to become a key worker for people in my position.

**I was one of the hidden homeless. I needed help to build my life**

*Sali Hughes*



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I'm not surprised homelessness has gone up so much, because there isn't enough to help people like me. The government doesn't fund the support. If I could tell people anything about being homeless, it would be that it doesn't matter what someone looks like: you can be in a suit and still be homeless. Don't be a bastard to us. When someone ignores you when you ask for change, it is hurtful.

I'm going away with my mum for Christmas. I don't know where: she's planning it. When she was trying to help me, I refused the help because I was in a state, but now we've had counselling and we've got a better relationship. This Christmas is going to be great .