

Policy briefing

COVID-19 and homelessness in England

What do we know about the homeless population?

- People experience homelessness in different ways. Some people sleep outside and others live in temporary accommodation such as hostels and night-shelters
- Before the pandemic, there are around 35,000 people living in hostels and another 10,000 sleeping outside or in night-shelters in England
- The majority of people experiencing homelessness are men, and the average age is about 45
- Most long-term conditions are more common in this group, and mortality rates are 3-6 times the general population. Many homeless people are vulnerable to severe COVID-19

What happened during the first wave of COVID-19?

- Night-shelters are the highest-risk homeless settings, and were closed early in the pandemic. Current government guidance says they should not reopen
- Many people were accommodated in commercial hotels under a £3.2m programme called Everybody In, funded by the Ministry of Housing, Communities, and Local Government
- Most homeless hostels have remained open, with increased infection control and social distancing
- Measures appear to have been successful, with no documented major outbreaks of COVID-19 in homeless settings in England
- An estimated 4% of the homeless population contracted COVID-19 during the 'first wave' – which is likely to have caused approximately 24 deaths
- The measures taken to protect homeless people may have reduced deaths due to COVID-19 by more than 90%

What might happen over autumn and winter?

Methods

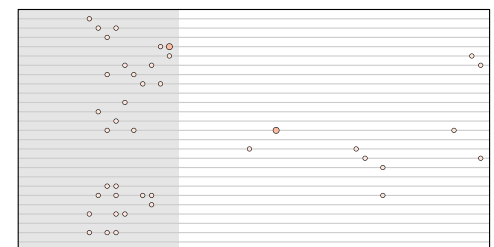
- We built a model to simulate COVID-19 among 45,000 homeless people living in hostels, night-shelters, and sleeping outside
- In the model, COVID-19 can be introduced into homeless settings such as hostels, via mixing with staff and the general population
- Outbreaks may occur if one or more resident has COVID-19 and transmission is not suppressed
- We modelled several scenarios, including closure of Everybody In sites, and a second wave in the general population

Results

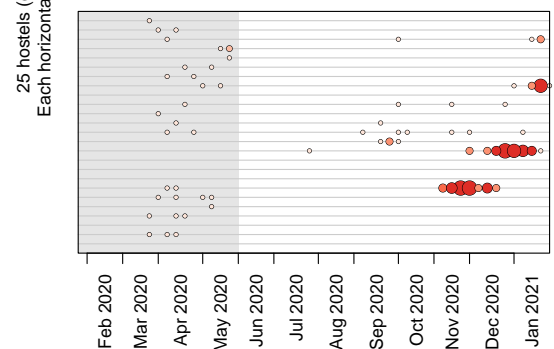
- The chart on the right shows example results from the model, assuming no second wave. During the first wave, some people got COVID-19 but physical distancing and other infection control measures meant that few large outbreaks occurred
- In future months, individual cases sometimes lead to outbreaks if transmission is not suppressed (bottom chart)
- Even if COVID-19 remains rare in England, outbreaks in homeless settings could lead to c.12,000 cases (one third of the population) and c.200 deaths over the next six months
- Continuation of Everybody In can protect people otherwise sleeping in dormitory-style accommodation, and could avoid c.50 deaths
- Most homeless people are living in hostels, and prevention of outbreaks in these settings could avoid c.130 deaths

Modelled infections in a sample of 25 hostels, with no second wave. Circles represent infections, with larger circles representing multiple infections

With infection control in hostels



Without infection control in hostels



What needs to happen now?

- A minimum standard of single-room accommodation for homeless people while COVID-19 is circulating
- Alternatives to dormitory-style night shelters, so they are not forced to re-open in cold weather
- COVID-19 testing with 24hr turnaround in homeless settings, to support isolation of cases and contacts
- Reinforcement of infection control measures in hostels, emergency hotels and day centres
- Primary care in-reach for accommodation providers, to identify and support residents who are vulnerable to COVID-19

Further information

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Read our research: Lewer D, Braithwaite I, Bullock M, Eyre MT, White PJ, Story A, Hayward A. 2020. COVID-19 among people experiencing homelessness in England: a modelling study. *Lancet Respiratory Medicine*. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S2213-2600\(20\)30396-9](https://doi.org/10.1016/S2213-2600(20)30396-9)

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