



Disability and homelessness: an identity or a label? A critical analysis of terminology in the UK

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Overview

- 1) Disability and homelessness; background, theory and terminology
- 2) An identity or a label? Navigating the opposing models of 'homelessness' and 'Disability'
- 3) Concluding thoughts and next steps

Based on: Stone, B. Wertans, E. (2023). Homelessness and Disability in the UK. London: Centre for Homelessness Impact

**1) Disability and homelessness:
background, theory and
terminology**



Homelessness and disability in the UK

By Beth Stone and Emily Wertans



Disabled people are disproportionately affected by homelessness – and getting support feels ‘nearly impossible’

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Disabled people are disproportionately affected by homelessness – and getting support feels ‘nearly impossible’

Disabled people are at greater risk of entering homelessness and more likely to remain without a home

BETH STONE, EMILY WERTANS | 23 Aug 2023

LIVING EDITION 

The Palgrave Encyclopedia of Disability

Disability outcomes in the UK

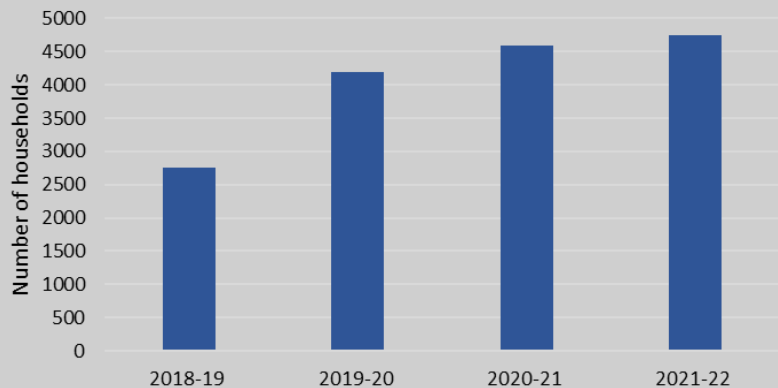
- Estimated 22% or 1/5 Disabled people in the UK
- Significant policy implementation gap with UK falling woefully short of commitments
- Failures including **access to, and standards of, housing**
- Outcomes reflect a wider culture of Disability exclusion, barriers to social participation and unacceptable standards of living
- Outcomes suggest **increased risk of experiencing homelessness**

Recognition of Disability in housing law

- State provision commonly comes under housing law (homelessness supersedes disability status)
- "Statutory homelessness" mandates housing duty for eligible individuals
- Clauses in relation to: intentionality, reasonability, local connection and priority need
- Priority need (England, Wales): *A person has a priority need for accommodation if they are **vulnerable** as a result of: (b) mental illness or learning disability or physical disability;*
- Lack of consistency at regional or national level. Postcode lottery of eligibility and support

Statutory homelessness - England and Wales

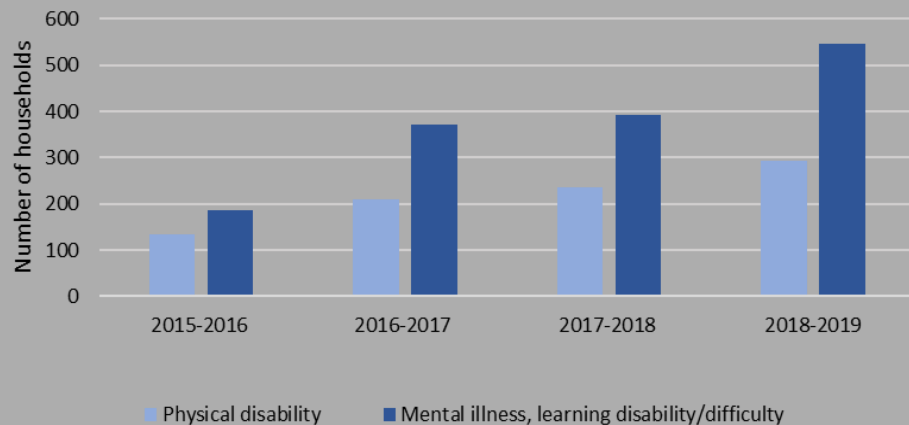
Households owed a main duty by reason of physical disability/ill health (England)



Adapted from MHCLG (2022)

Adapted from StatsWales (2019)

Households owed a main duty by disability category (Wales)



Theorising 'Disability' and 'Homelessness'

Theoretical level

Recognition of Disabling impact of environment and impairment effects

Social model framework

Onus is on external social transformation

Social interpretation

Disability as reclaimed, status used to challenge norms of personhood

Identity first language

"Disabled person"

Theoretical level

Recognition of both structural and individual causes of homelessness

Individualised pathologies

Onus often on personal transformation

Social interpretation

Homelessness as temporal state to be overcome/moved away from

Person first language

"Person experiencing homelessness"

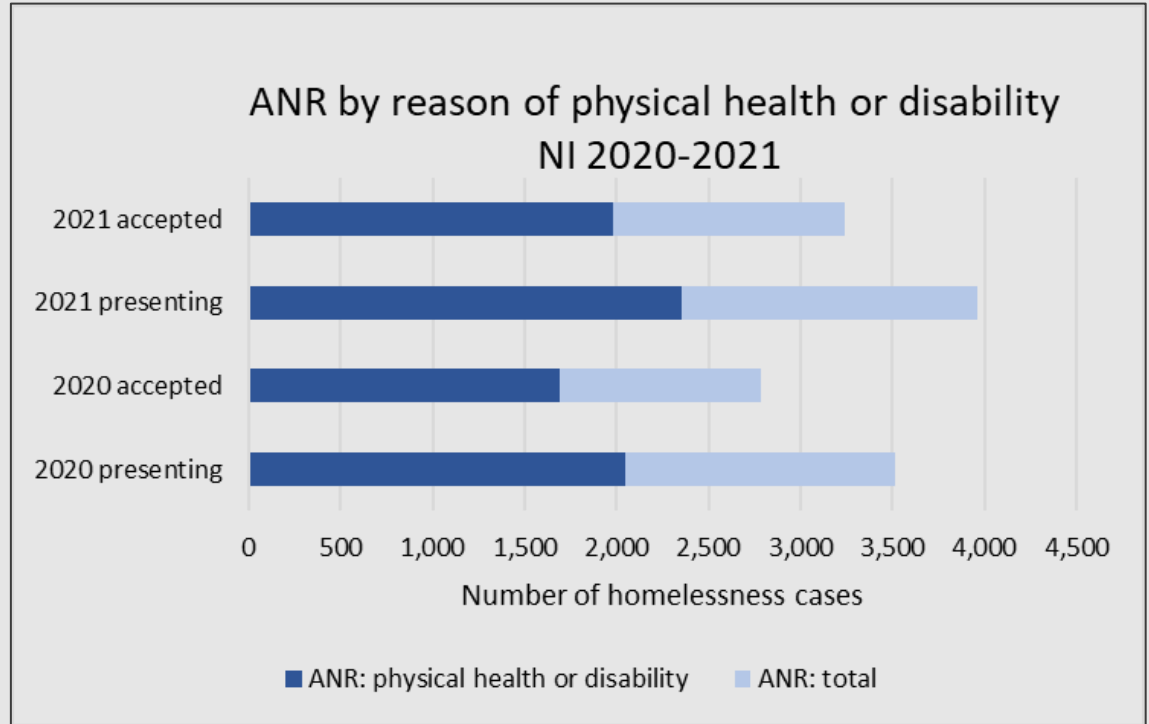
Why is terminology important?

- Achieving 'Disabled' or 'homeless' status has significant implications in terms of both support and personal identity formation.
- Labels necessary to attain support but are also associated with stigma and discrimination
- Tactical manipulation of what counts as 'Disabled' or 'homeless' according to political and economic motivation (see Roy et al. 2020)
- What are the practical implications of contentions in terminology when Disability intersects with homelessness? How does that impact self-perception and support offerings?


The impact of language on support eligibility

“As implied in its terminology, statutory homelessness restricts the definition of homelessness to that which is permitted by the state”

(Stone and Wertans, 2024, p.5)



Adapted from Department for Communities (2022)

A photograph of a teal tent pitched in a wooded area. A white cloth hangs from a tree branch in the foreground. The tent is partially open, revealing a sleeping bag inside. The background shows a dense forest of thin trees on a slight incline.

**2) An identity or a label?
Navigating the opposing models
of 'homelessness' and 'Disability'**

Person-first vs identity-first: the opposing models of homelessness and Disability



Structural level expectations and policies

- There is an access entry requirement to prove Disability or factors relating to Disability.
- Depending on categorisation, duty of support sits in different places.
- There are only records of those afforded support by reason of Disability. Additional issues with category conflation.



The challenges of proving an identity

- May not consider Disability their primary identity (Fisher et al. 2023).
- Discord between policy language and positive disability identity (e.g. vulnerability).
- Inaccessible, hard to navigate and often reactive.

I have had instances where agencies have asked the person to independently call their GP and request a learning difficulty assessment when it has been clear that the person is not capable of doing this or working a phone... The process of diagnosis without intense agency support therefore can take years or not happen at all... I feel that they get lost in the system and do not get the tailored support they need to secure a diagnosis.' (Support worker)

Service level requirements

- Refusing unsuitable accommodation on the basis of Disability related need can result in duty being discharged (support withdrawn).
- Support services look for and cater for a narrow view of Disability.
- Need for neat categorisation or supported under ‘multiple complex needs’ model.
- Labels can open doors to further support – but the longevity is questionable.

Misalignment with lived experience


- Need to 'perform' disability in the 'accepted' way.
- External labeling necessitated by support models but de-stabilising.
- Lack of quick or sufficient protection upon disclosure.
- Can prevent disclosure, knock-on effect on support access and challenging discriminatory practice.

'I don't think anybody should change who they are for what the world is around them... but I also understand that my idea of what the world should be and what the world is, is not the same thing... sometimes not being yourself is the safest thing to do, which sucks and its horrible but at least I'm alive' (Ellie)

Individual level reflections

- Disconnect between Disability sector aims and homelessness sector goals.
- Lived reality of intersection between Disability and homelessness can be incredibly dangerous.
- Risk of being subject to abuse, mistreatment and neglect is amplified.
- More options for support translates into less support given.

'The council didn't know how to help me, nobody did. Everyone seemed to only see my disability and didn't want to do wrong so did nothing. It took 10 months, of the council saying they could do nothing before I got offered a hostel room' (Charlston)



4) Concluding thoughts and next steps

Concluding thoughts and next steps

- Need for informed, consistent assessment, recording and support practices that align with lived experience
- Considering complexity and the bi-directional causal relationship of disability and homelessness
- Integrated approach to disability and homelessness
- Further research:
 1. *How do housing officers understand, assess, and record disability?*
 2. *How do Disabled people experiencing homelessness negotiate disability labels in relation to support eligibility and identity construction?*

Thank you

Comments, questions, reflections

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Related Research:

- Stone, B., Wertans, E. (2024). Disability and Homelessness: A Critical Analysis of Terminology in the United Kingdom. In: Bennett, G., Goodall, E. (eds) *The Palgrave Encyclopedia of Disability*. Palgrave Macmillan, Cham. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-40858-8_68-1
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