An insight into the experience of rough sleeping in central Auckland.

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Acknowledgments

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Auckland City Mission
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Housing New Zealand
Lifewise
Ministry of Justice
Ministry of Social Development
New Zealand Police
New Zealand Prostitutes Collective
Serco
Te Puni Kokiri
Waitemata District Health Board
The objectives of the project were:

1. To increase understanding of the experience of rough sleeping;
2. To provide a tool for the Auckland Homelessness Steering Group to develop a best practice that can appropriately respond to the needs of those sleeping rough in central Auckland;
3. To identify new opportunities and levers for change to better respond to the needs of those who sleep rough; and
4. To inspire innovative approaches to finding appropriate (rough sleeper-led) solutions for the complex issues identified throughout the course of the research.
Project Methodology

The project was developed collaboratively and held the stories and experiences of those sleeping rough at the centre.

The Project Team

This project was driven by the Auckland Homelessness Steering Group – a multi-agency group formed to respond to the needs of those sleeping rough in central Auckland. In order to develop the intent, framework and boundaries of the project, a sector-wide group was invited to participate in a workshop. The group included representation from central government, local government, non-government organisations, and people with experience of rough sleeping.

A core project team was formed from this group. Together, this team provided a broad range of knowledge, expertise and experience from a number of organisations including: New Zealand Prostitutes Collective; Department of Corrections (Probation); New Zealand Police; Serco; Ministry of Social Development (Work and Income); Housing New Zealand; WDHB (Community Alcohol and Drugs Services); Ministry of Justice; Lifewise; Auckland City Mission; and Auckland Council. The project team contributed to all elements of the research including developing the statement of intent, devising the research questions, carrying out research interviews, analysing the data and providing feedback on the results.

Staff from Auckland City Mission, Lifewise and Auckland Council were responsible for the overall facilitation, organisation and production of the final report. ThinkPlace, a Wellington-based research company that specialises in design-led thinking, was commissioned to mentor the research team and deliver a visual design product.

There were a number of benefits from using this collaborative research approach including: building the research capacity of the project team; strengthening networks and relationships; and developing a shared understanding of the experience of rough sleeping in central Auckland.

Research Method

In-depth, semi-structured interviews were carried out with thirteen people who were sleeping rough, nine people who had formerly slept rough and three people with family members sleeping rough. These interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. Participants were asked to share their story of rough sleeping. Additional information was sought on a wide range of relevant topics including: pathways into and out of housing; the practicalities of everyday life; and engagement with professional, social and familial networks. Participants were offered a $20 supermarket voucher in appreciation of their time.

Additional short interviews (comprising four questions) were also carried out with 68 members of the public. These people were intercepted in locations where there is a higher visible presence of people sleeping rough including Queen Street, Albert Park, Myers Park, Auckland Library and Karangahape Road.

Each project team member was provided with a number of interview transcripts and asked to mine the interviews for insights about the experience of rough sleeping. The project team later came together in several collaborative workshops to synthesise the emergent themes for each participant group. The project leads produced a visual representation of the dominant themes.
We agreed that a successful research outcome would:

- Provide opportunities for those who sleep rough to have, and continue to have, their voices heard;
- Generate increased understanding of the experience of rough sleeping;
- Provide the general public with a greater understanding of the experience of rough sleeping;
- Provide agencies with a shared understanding of the experience of rough sleeping;
- Inform a cohesive best practice for responding to the needs of those sleeping rough in central Auckland;
- Identify opportunities or levers for change; and
- Inspire different and innovative ways of communicating complex life experiences.
There are many different triggers onto the street and while there, people develop strategies and methods to cope and make a home for themselves. There are also many different triggers to leaving the street and seeking accommodation. However, the difficulties of being housed can sometimes be a trigger to returning to the streets.

**Triggers to leave home & sleep rough**
- Family violence
- Family breakdown
- Job loss
- Eviction from housing
- Leaving prison
- Leaving prison
- Foster runaways
- Poor mental health history
- Alcoholism/drug addiction
- Exiting gangs

**What people do to cope**
- Begging/busking/hustling
- Drugs/alcohol
- Theft
- Share food with other streeties
- Free food
- Fishing
- Sex work

**Triggers and coping pathway**
Creating a street home

- Gaining knowledge of street culture
- Becoming independent
- Developing a street whānau/family
- Creating friendships/forming bonds
- Finding support from social workers
- Developing a role/identity or reputation on the streets

Triggers back onto the street

- Going to prison
- Feeling dislocated from street whānau
- Job loss
- Eviction – tenancy not in their name
- Relationship breakdown
- Isolation and loneliness
- Struggling to manage money
- Eviction – rent arrears

Triggers to seeking a house

- Street violence
- Conditions of parole
- Getting old
- Ill health
- Fear of dying on the streets
- Pregnancy
- Tired of the hard life

Creating friendships/forming bonds

- Finding support from social workers
- Developing a role/identity or reputation on the streets

Conditions of parole

- Ill health
- Pregnancy
- Tired of the hard life
Choice?

Many rough sleepers told us it was their choice to sleep rough. As they described their childhood stories, many of which included experiences of family violence, it became apparent that the notion of choice is complex. Although family violence was a trigger on the journey to sleeping rough, the ‘choice’ to do so was more often than not a result of having no other options.
Follow this journey from a young person's perspective exploring their actions, thoughts and feelings as they grapple with some difficult life choices.

"Dad beat me up for the last time, I’m not going to take it anymore."

My friend’s mum said I can only stay for the weekend.

"I didn’t tell her that I can’t go home, I’m worried she might call CYFs."

Aunty told me it’s time to go home now.

"I think she’s been talking to mum and is feeling guilty that she can’t keep me for longer."

Stay at this house.

I went into the city and hung out with some people for the day, but night came quickly.

"I don’t know these people very well but I’m not sure what else I can do."

Stay with a friend.

I woke up in the morning on the couch. There was an older man lying on top of me.

"I don’t know if I should follow them or stay on my own."

Hang out on the streets with those people for the night.

I slept in Aotea Square with them until the early morning. Some of the others got up and went home.

"I wanted to let my family know where I was but maybe they don’t care."

Find somewhere to go by myself.

My new friends introduced me to a helpful couple who let me stay with them under the bridge. They bought me a feed and gave me a blanket.

"These people are really nice to me."

Stay at this house.

I rang home to talk to Mum. Dad answered — he was drunk and angry again so I hung up.

Go home.

Stay for awhile with the couple and see what happens.

In control.
Capturing the experience in one word

On World Homelessness Day 2014, we asked people who had slept rough to describe their experience in one word. These are their words*. 

*Words are not weighted on frequency.
When public and private domains meet on the street

Rough sleepers are under scrutiny because they live their private lives in public places. In the absence of a house to carry out everyday functions, alternatives are found in the cityscape. Tensions can arise when these two domains meet.
"I feel sorry for them, but don't they get a benefit?"

"Toilets CLOSED"

"Public Toilet Public Park"

"Tepid Baths $2.50"

"Open plan living space"

"Quiet nook"

"Toilets"

"Sometimes me and my friends put our money together and go buy a feed ."

"They scare me so I cross the street when I see a big group of them hanging out."

"They stink."

"James Liston showers are only open Mon-Fri 9-11am."

"I get annoyed when they sleep on the park bench where I want to eat my lunch."

"I walk around at night and sleep in the day when it is safer."

"I have no safe place to keep my belongings and important papers."

"Auckland is getting smaller and there are fewer places for us to go."

"Sometimes I have to clean up their faeces and urine."

"I stay in touch with my cousins on Facebook."

"I feel sorry for them, but don't they get a benefit?"
I had left my belongings with friends and if I wait they might get stolen. I didn't have any official papers. Where could I keep them?

My friend told me about a social worker that can help me. I met with the social worker. She told me I needed to get on the benefit and about all the documents I would need. To get a benefit I needed a photo ID, a bank account and postal address.

"I feel soft asking for help but I know it's the only way I can get a place."

I've tried to get help before but I've burnt some bridges."

"I feel like they were always on my case."

I wondered what happened to my social worker. I haven't seen her since I moved in."

"I didn't understand why he couldn't stay because he wasn't bothering anyone. Living together was working really well for us."

"I thought this was my house, why can't I have my friends stay? It was helping me pay my rent and sharing the bills."

"What do I do? I don't have a photo ID."

I made the decision to get off the street. I'm at home on the street.

"I've tried to get help before but I've burnt some bridges."

"I feel like they were always on my case."

"Why did he say that? We might get kicked out now."

I went to see the social worker but she was not in the office. I decided to come back later.

I met with the social worker. She told me I needed to get on the benefit and about all the documents I would need.

To get a benefit I needed a photo ID, a bank account and postal address.

I went to get coffee from Lifewise and bumped into my street brother and some of his mates. They were all upset with me because they think I kicked him out.

The landlord popped in again and was happy to see that my street brother was gone.

I told my street brother to lay low for a couple of weeks.

At the inspection my landlord told me I'm not allowed to have boarders.

I got a letter from HNZ that said I will have a flat inspection.

I found out my street brother was having a really hard time. I said he can stay for a few weeks if he contributed to the rent.

The housing conundrum
The pathway from sleeping rough to being housed is complex; locating and retaining suitable housing is often difficult.

Loss of social connections and lack of control over one's environment

Reasons to share tenancy
• Saving money
• Familiar company
• I owe him

Concerned

Powerless

Dishonest

Irritated

Guilty
Devastated

Frustrated

Tired

I'm at home on the street.

I'm at home on the street.

I'm at home on the street.

I got another letter about the rent but I decided it wasn't worth fighting. I felt like I would rather be with my street brother and make amends.

I got a letter that I was behind in my rent. I didn't understand why my rent payments weren't going through.

I knew I shouldn't do it, but I went to the liquor store and got myself a bottle. I drank it alone in my house.

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I'm at home on the street.
I needed to get an 18+ card because I don’t drive.

To get photo ID I need to get a birth certificate.

My social worker came with me to WINZ so that I could get an advanced payment for the birth certificate.

My social worker came with me to Work & Income so that I can get an advanced payment for the 18+ card.

“I needed another advance to get the 18+ card.

“Help — I’m not 18!”

“Annoyed

“I don’t have a birth certificate.”

None of these options really suit my needs

“Disappointed

Overwhelmed

“I’m glad my social worker is here or else I wouldn’t of known about the WINZ advance. They can vouch for me.”

“My friend told me it took him six months to get his ID.”

“HNZ told me I would go down the waiting list if I got into a boarding house.”

None of these options really suit my needs

“Overwhelmed

“I told my social worker there is nothing that works for me.

They gave me a list of boarding houses and Trade Me options. I used the City Mission phone. I had no luck.

I finally got the ID. I went into Work & Income and applied for the benefit and a HNZ house. They told me to look for private accommodation too.

“Everything was becoming too much for me so I started drinking during the day. My social worker wanted me to go and see a counsellor.

I had called HNZ every week just to check if there was a house for me.

A year later my social worker found me and said HNZ had a place for me. So I took it straight away.

“Why didn’t they tell me what and who was going to be involved. I don’t have much of a say.”

“My health is getting worse

“I am really excited that I will have somewhere to call home.”

Relieved/nervous

“I have a house.”

“I got help with the bond and the first four weeks of rent.

I slept on the floor for a few weeks because I didn’t have furniture. It was OK because I was used to it.

“I’m missing my friends but I’m trying not to tell people about my new place to protect the tenancy.”

“It was great being able to cook my food but I couldn’t afford to do it every night. Also it’s a bit lonely eating by myself.”

“It’s expensive having a house. There are lots of bills I didn’t know about. Power is more expensive than I imagined.”

“Awesome! I have a dry safe place to sleep.”

Satisfied

My first power bill arrived. I had no idea it would be so expensive.

My social worker often came to visit. She organised furniture to be delivered.

“I visited my friends on the street, I wish I could bring them over to my place but my social worker told me not to.

I bought groceries once a week but still had dinner at the Mission to see people that I know.

My health is getting worse

“Help — I’m not 18!”

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A history of suffering is a common pathway to life on the streets.

When asked to share their journey towards life on the streets of central Auckland, people often told stories of physical violence, emotional abuse and neglect when they were younger. These experiences were often, but not always, at the hands of close family members who were ultimately responsible for their care. It would seem that, for some, the vulnerabilities of life on the streets were preferable to the vulnerabilities of life at home and offered a way to reclaim their independence.

However, alongside these commonly expressed stories of abuse, was often another story of feeling dislocated from the family and wider community in which they had lived. Certainly, some people wanted to be reconnected with their families. However, they typically wanted to be reconnected on their own terms.

The concept of choice is complex.

We heard from the general public that living on the streets was a personal lifestyle choice. The general public often used such a claim to make sense of people’s decisions that were so very different from their own. An implicit judgment circulated around these claims, however, and they were often used to justify a decision not to offer help or support to those they encountered on the street. This was especially the case for those who believed that New Zealand’s welfare system offered a safety net to all who required or desired it, and that life on the street came with financial rewards beyond what could be attained in the paid workforce.

The word ‘choice’ was also used consistently by people who were sleeping rough to explain their decision to do so – but in a very different way.

Their declaration of choice was frequently made with a defensive tone but also with a sense of autonomy, pride and self-control. They valued being able to claim this life for themselves and spoke of the self-determination and freedom to live in a way of their choosing. However, the initial choice to sleep rough was often made in the face of intolerable physical or emotional abuse. The choice to remain on the street was complex and was often grounded in a sense of financial security (having no rent or utility bills to pay), a sense of independence and a lack of appropriate options for alternative accommodation. It would seem that many rough sleepers made a choice to live on the street while caught ‘between a rock and a hard place’.

Personal safety is an ongoing concern for those who sleep rough.

Concern about safety is ongoing for those who sleep rough on the streets of central Auckland. People sleeping rough are vulnerable to physical attack, especially from intoxicated patrons who leave bars and nightclubs late at night. Participants also reported being vulnerable to assault by friends and family who also slept rough.

However, the people we spoke with described numerous strategies they employed to keep themselves safe. This often involved their sleeping patterns. For example, some people chose to sleep in groups on the understanding that there is ‘safety in numbers’. In contrast, others described feeling safer when sleeping alone in an isolated spot where no one could find them. Other changes to sleeping patterns involved sleeping during the day in highly visible public spaces on the assumption that they would be less vulnerable to verbal or physical attack. Another strategy described by women was to avoid showering and use unpleasant body odour to repel unwanted sexual advances.
Street-based social networks are very important.

Street-based social networks offered those who slept rough practical, financial and emotional support. In a world where people felt they were being judged, social networks offered some reprieve. Moreover, for those who were experiencing significant dislocation from family and other loved ones, a ‘street family’ offered a very viable and real alternative. The kinds of support offered and received included: shared food and money; advice about life on the streets; and a shared sleeping space. The bonds shared between people on the street often evolved into a familial relationship; participants frequently described these relationships as street family or street whānau. It was clear that these relationships were deeply felt and, for some, were of greater significance than their biological families. Given the ongoing and everyday nature of these relations, and the levels of support received and provided, the development of such close ties is unsurprising.

Like any social relationship, however, relationships on the street are complex. Street-based friendships can sour as people take advantage or manipulate each other, or even when one friend moves off the street and into housing. Some participants told us stories of being physically assaulted by their street family and friends while others spoke of a sense of obligation to have sex in exchange for money, drugs, food or shelter.

Over time, biological families learnt to accept their family members’ decision to live on the street.

The family members that we spoke with described their initial confusion over their loved one’s decision to sleep rough and often challenged their decision. Over time this confusion and reluctance to accept the decision of their family member evolved into acceptance and support. Family members described the different ways they supported their family member on the street. Some maintained regular contact either in person or through social media websites. Facebook, in particular, was seen as a way for both groups to straddle the spaces of the former home and street life. Other family members asked their wider networks and friends to ‘keep an eye out’ for their loved one – several offering food, clothing or blankets.

Some family members continued to look after their loved one’s things including personal belongings, property and inheritance. They also described having an ‘open door policy’ – being willing to have their family member back home at any time. However, this was also acknowledged as a possible source of tension because the different lifestyles and new street-friendships were not always welcome.

Routine is an important feature of life on the street.

Rough sleepers often described fairly routinised lives that centred on meeting basic everyday needs such as securing a warm and dry place to sleep, finding food and water, acquiring access to toilets and showers, and meeting together with friends and street family. For some of the participants, routines centred on service agencies that offered cheap or free food at particular times of the day such as the Lifewise Merge Café or the Auckland City Mission. These service spaces also provided an opportunity to socialise with friends.

Other participants talked more about routines that centred on the best times and places for begging or hustling (or working as it was often described) in central Auckland. These participants had a wealth of experiential knowledge about the life and movement of the city and, more importantly, the people who lived and worked there who might be most generous.
The opportunity to meet with friends was also an important routine aspect of daily life.

Others’ routines were concerned with taking care of “their spot”. Many people were concerned with taking care of the place they slept each night and the belongings they sometimes stored there during the day. Strategies included returning earlier than necessary to sleeping areas so that if any belongings had been stolen or damaged there would still be time to replace them.

Together, these patterns of everyday life paint a picture of collective resourcefulness. The participants knew central Auckland intimately, knew where they could turn for support and knew how best to support themselves while living on the street. That said, discourses of safety continually circulated around and underpinned these narratives of routine.

The general public have a complex view of those who sleep rough.

Some people we spoke with felt that those who slept rough made personal choices to do so and, as a result, felt they were not responsible for supporting them in their life on the street or on their journey to become housed. Those who shared this viewpoint typically felt that rough sleepers were responsible for their own lives and no-one had a responsibility to support them into housing.

Others were much more empathetic and held a “compassionate curiosity” about the lives of those who slept rough. When coming across rough sleepers on the street, they wondered what had happened in their lives that had led to a life without shelter. Those who shared this view often had a strong social conscience which contributed to their belief that central and local government, non-government agencies, and the community more broadly all have a role to play in supporting people who sleep rough.

Some members of the public were more ambivalent, expressing wonder and concern about those sleeping rough at the same time as judging the life choices that rough sleepers had made. This ambivalence was often expressed as guilt which stemmed from an awareness of a person facing a difficult life situation at the same time as being unwilling or unable to do anything about it.

There were a range of obstacles that hindered access to social services.

Many of the participants were aware of the range of social services (and individuals who work within those services) available to support them as they negotiated street life. However, for many people, these social services were often difficult to navigate. Two key problems were raised by participants. First, some social services were not available at the times that people most needed them (often after-hours). Second, securing the appropriate documentation to facilitate access to the available services was difficult. Most people who are living on the streets do not possess formal documents such as birth certificates, driving licenses or passports and many do not have bank accounts. However, these things, in addition to a permanent address, are required to access support from Work and Income and other services.

Although some were able to successfully navigate these difficulties, considerable time, energy and money was spent doing so. Participants often told us that a more integrated and collaborative response by service providers would help rough sleepers in their everyday lives.

For those participants who were ready to move indoors, numerous barriers, obstacles and delays often left the person feeling frustrated. Participants described needing housing that was located near to their familial and social networks (typically in or
close to central Auckland). They also described a desire for an independent home. However, what they often reported being offered was shared-facility accommodation such as boarding houses or campgrounds. This was problematic for numerous reasons. First, participants were concerned about their personal safety in such accommodation as well as the safety and security of their belongings. Second, concerns were raised about vermin, bed bugs and fleas that were often rampant in this kind of accommodation. Finally, once housed in a boarding house or campground, participants were concerned that they might lose their position on the waiting list for more suitable accommodation.

Once housed, creating a home is not straightforward.

Some people told us how strange it was to be living in such an enclosed space after life on the streets – even describing their initial reluctance to furnish the space. A main concern, was the higher cost of living when compared with living on the streets. Managing a severely limited budget was reportedly difficult and it was easy to fall behind on rent and other important bills. Although budgeting and other support services were available to help, there was a constant juggle.

Many Aucklanders we spoke with felt that providing a house would solve all of the rough sleepers’ problems. However, current and former rough sleepers told us that having a house was often difficult and involved significant shifts in thinking.

Once housed, creating a home by inviting friends over was often a tension. On the one hand, friends can ‘overstay their welcome’, carry out illegal activities or cause damage to the property, all of which can jeopardise tenancy agreements. On the other hand, inviting friends over to socialise and share a meal is an important part of making a home for oneself.

For many housed rough sleepers, the streets provided a ‘fall-back’ option that was always ready to welcome their return. While this offered an important safety net, it also created a slippery slide back into street life. Overall, it seems that the pathway into secure housing is extremely difficult while the pathway back onto the streets is easy.
Opportunities for change

One of the aims of this research project was to identify potential leverage points that could contribute to positive outcomes and meaningful change for those who are sleeping rough.

The insights from this research raise the following questions and form a starting point for discussion:

How might we increase the individual and collective safety and wellbeing for those who are currently living on the streets?

How might we broaden the number of housing options and choices available to people?

How might we remove the barriers to accessing social services, including housing?

How might we work collectively to develop a range of pathways for people to move into housing?

How might we build on the strengths of the street whānau and lessen some of the adverse effects of belonging to a street whānau?

How might we better support those who have moved indoors to create a home for themselves and maintain their tenancies?

How might we change negative public perceptions about homelessness?

How might we change our language about homelessness in order to reframe the issues?

What can my organisation or agency do to better create meaningful change for people sleeping rough?

What can I do in my everyday life to support people who are sleeping rough?