
Roughly Sleeping

How a black hole in the street count leads to a systematic underestimate of the number of people sleeping on the streets.

Research and Report by Grant Shapps MP

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Key Points

- Official Government statistics dramatically underestimate the number of rough sleepers.
- The number of people sleeping rough is **nearly 3 times greater** than admitted in official government figures.
- A flaw in the method of counting those sleeping rough has resulted in the **official nightly count being 498 rough sleepers**. However, this report reveals that **a more accurate estimate is 1,300 in England** alone.
- The current system requires Local Authorities to provide a rough sleepers estimate between the bracket of, for example, 0 and 10. However the number is then automatically reduced to zero, thereby dramatically underestimating the number of people sleeping rough each night.
- Homeless charities believe that a good estimate of the number of rough sleepers every year is to take a single night's total and multiply it by ten.
- Official Government statistics say that Manchester has just 7 rough sleepers, whereas, Lifeline, a Manchester based charity, has counted nearly 50 on a single night. 6 times more than officially recognised.
- The criticism in this report is that since the **Rough Sleepers Unit (RSU) was merged with the Homelessness Directorate in 2002, less emphasis has been placed on rough sleeping**, as opposed to the overall problem of homelessness. A point exacerbated by inaccurate rough sleeping data collection as outlined in the report.
- An interactive map showing true extent of rough sleeping is available at www.shapps.com/roughlysleping

Introduction

The hundreds of rough sleepers who line the streets of Britain every night form what is the most visible, yet also the most neglected, part of society.

Rough sleeper figures have been remarkably stable and relatively low for a number of years. This report sets out our concern that the figures are not accurate and that despite being one of the wealthiest nations in the world, we are ignoring the hundreds of people living on our streets.

Estimates

It is notoriously difficult to estimate the number of people sleeping rough in the UK. There are currently no national records of the flow of rough sleepers and this information is also not recorded at a local level.



There has long been evidence to suggest that the government has underestimated the number of rough sleepers in England. While government statistics claim that there are 498 people sleeping rough at any one time, the homelessness charity Crisis puts the figure at 700. As Jeremy Swain, Chief Executive of Thames Reach said last week, *'nobody is fooled by the notion that if only 500 more hostel bed-spaces were made available the end of rough sleeping would be nigh'*.¹

The most accurate estimates of those sleeping rough are provided through rough sleeping counts carried out by spot teams. The alternative at the moment is simply an estimate being made. However, while counts are considered to be the most accurate method, it will still produce a lower than accurate figure.

As the homeless charity Crisis points out, the count system is 'only available on a somewhat ad hoc basis via particular one-off data collections which are typically made on a 'snapshot' basis (i.e. the number of rough sleepers on a given night or a given week.'²

¹ <http://www.thamesreach.org.uk/news-and-views/an-end-to-rough-sleeping/>

² http://www.crisis.org.uk/policywatch/pages/rough_sleepers.html

This snapshot will fail to include rough sleepers spending the night away from well known sites or 'hot spots', people managing to find somewhere to stay for the night and quite simply the inability for spot teams to be everywhere at one time.

As this only produces a 'snapshot' count, it is difficult using this method and its results to estimate how many people sleep rough at any point in the year.

Research has suggested that a snapshot count is smaller than the year's total by a factor of 10.³ Applying this principle to Government's own figures, the official estimate would stand at 4980. However, charity Crisis estimates that currently 7,000 people sleep rough in the UK each year.

The difficulties that come with trying to estimate the number of rough sleepers in any given area at one point has been illustrated by the comparative figures of the Government and various local charities.

This report seeks to provide a better basis for that estimate and reveals a disturbing black hole in the current counting system.

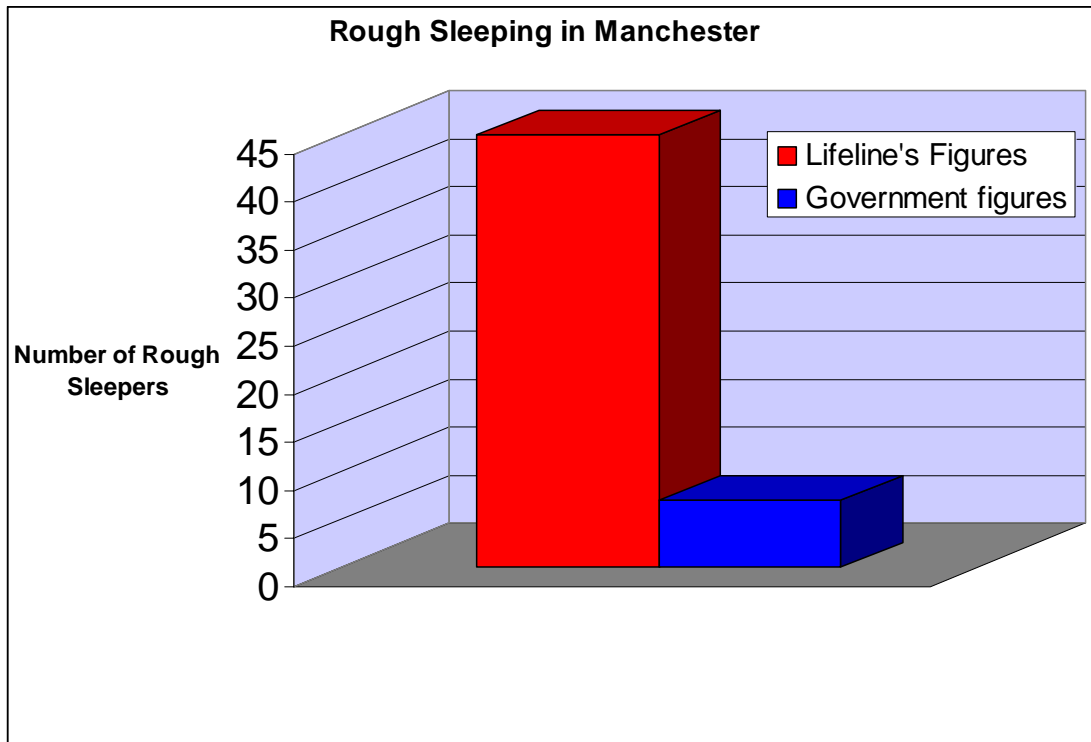
The graphs below show the comparative findings of various regional charities and Government estimates.⁴

³ Broadway, which manages the CHAIN database, found that 3112 clients were contacted by outreach teams in London in 2004/05. The benefits and limitations of assessing the numbers of people sleeping rough through counts on a single night were discussed in detail in the evaluation of RSI (Randall and Brown, 1999).

http://www.crisis.org.uk/policywatch/pages/rough_sleepers.html

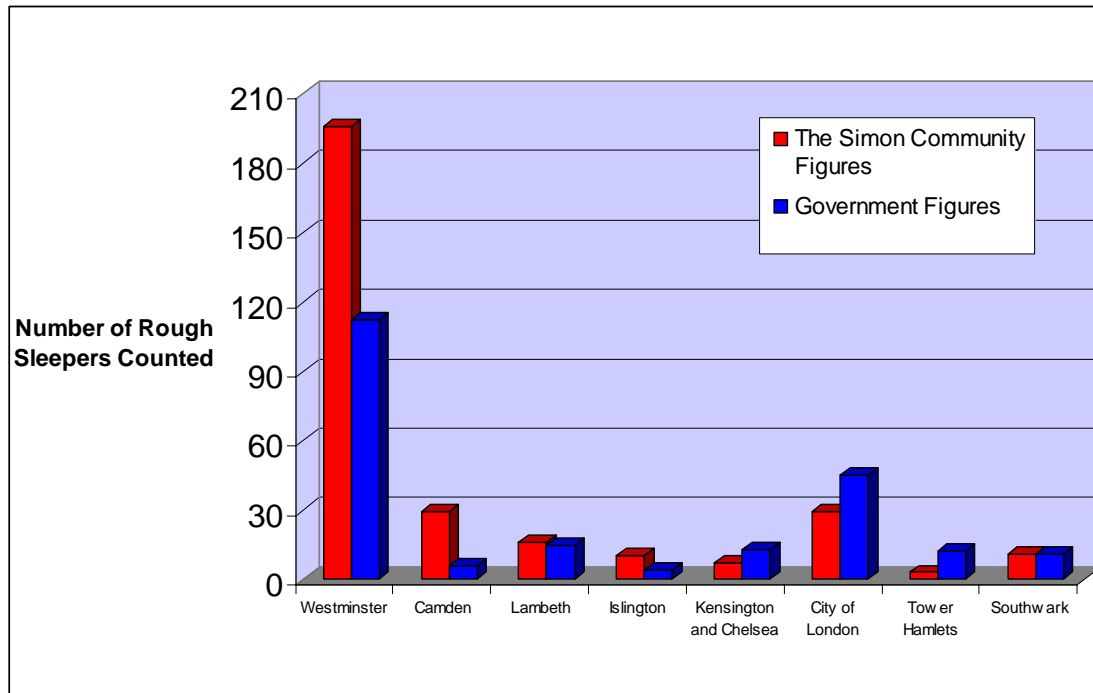
⁴ The figure for Manchester is based on Lifeline's survey which found that 'nearly half' of the 100 injecting drug users surveyed were homeless in Manchester on one night.

In June this year, Manchester based charity Lifeline conducted a survey of 100 injecting drug users in Manchester. Of those 100, they found that 8 in ten were homeless and almost half would be sleeping rough that night.⁵



⁵ http://www.lifeline.org.uk/docs/MDI_summary.html

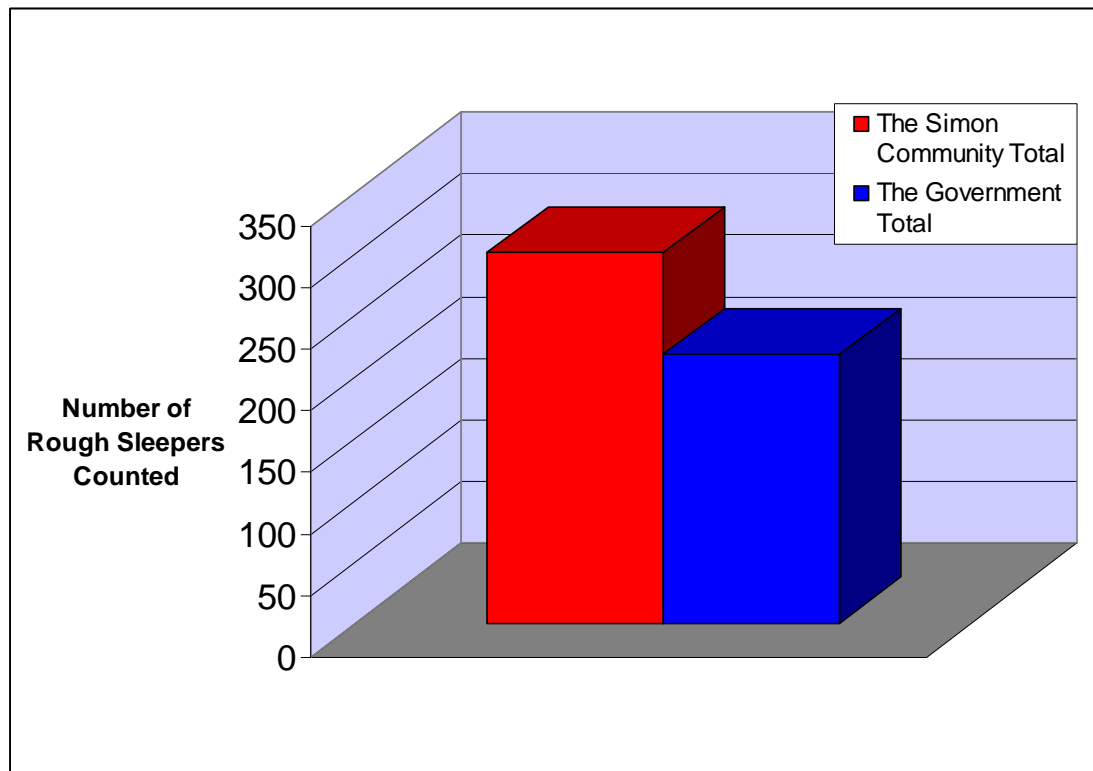
Similarly, in April this year London based charity The Simons Community undertook a count in 8 of London's inner boroughs and found 301 people sleeping rough.⁶



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http://www.simoncommunity.org.uk/latest_news.php?subaction=showfull&id=1176889771&archive=&start_from=&ucat=&

This graph shows the total based on Simon Community figures when compared with the Government's official estimate.



In 1999, the government set up the Rough Sleepers Unit (RSU) in an attempt to develop an integrated approach to tackle rough sleeping. In March 2002, the RSU was 'reshaped' and became part of the Homelessness Directorate, established as part of the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (ODPM). The Directorate brought together the Rough Sleepers Unit and the Bed and Breakfast Unit.

However, in 2004 the Homelessness Directorate merged with the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister's (ODPM's) Housing Care and Support Division, to form the Homelessness and Housing Support Directorate.⁷

This unit now falls under the responsibility of the Department of Communities and Local Government (DCLG).

One criticism within this report is that since the Rough Sleepers Unit (RSU) was merged with the Homelessness Directorate in 2002, less emphasis has been placed on rough sleeping, as opposed to the overall problem of homelessness. A point which has been exacerbated by inaccurate rough sleeping data collection.

⁷ <http://www.nao.org.uk/pn/04-05/0405286.htm>

This all comes at a time when the Government are already under fire for losing track of immigration which, since EU enlargement, has had a serious impact on the numbers of people sleeping on the streets. Research carried out by Homeless agencies suggest that more than half of rough sleepers seeking help are from Central and Eastern Europe, particularly in Central London.⁸

Current Methods

In 1999 the Government agreed that;

*'The most robust information available is provided by local single night street counts. In 1996 the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions (DETR) issued guidance to all local authorities on how to undertake street counts, based on a standard methodology developed in conjunction with Shelter and other voluntary groups.'*⁹

However, despite it being widely accepted that a 'snapshot' count is the most accurate way of establishing the number of rough sleepers, the Government does not currently call on local authorities to either carry out a count, or ensure that one is done in the area.

If a count does not take place, the local authority gives an estimate of the number of rough sleepers for that area.

The methodology for this is as follows;

*'The methodology for producing a national estimate of numbers sleeping rough involves aggregating figures for individual local authority districts to generate a total for England. Wherever street counts have been conducted this data is used, and they are supplemented by figures derived from local authority Housing Investment Programme¹⁰ estimates in all other areas. As Housing Investment Programme **estimates are provided within bands rather than as single figures (e.g. 0 to 10, 11 to 20 etc), these are***

⁸ <http://www.guardian.co.uk/immigration/story/0,,1863357,00.html>

⁹

http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm199899/cmhansrd/vo990519/text/90519w04.htm#90519w04.htm_wqn9

¹⁰ HIP returns are now known as HSSA, Housing Strategy Statistical Appendix.

converted into a single figure by assuming that the lowest point within the band is the most representative figure.¹¹

This illustrates the clear flaws in the current guidelines for counting numbers of rough sleepers. In an already difficult process, this methodology leaves it to nothing more scientific than assuming that local authorities will all exaggerate, all of the time. When dealing with such a serious situation, it is imperative that we find a more methodical and precise process than this.

The Government gave the following reason for using this simple, unscientific methodology.

‘This assumption is justified by clear DETR (Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions) experience that local authorities almost invariably overestimate the scale of rough sleeping in their district until they undertake a street count.’¹²

One way to establish the accuracy of current figures and how the Government’s methodology can affect results is to compare a figure produced from a count and the figure that would have been taken by the Government if that count hadn’t been taken.¹³

Of the 354 local authorities in England, 83 both made an estimate *and* carried out a count.

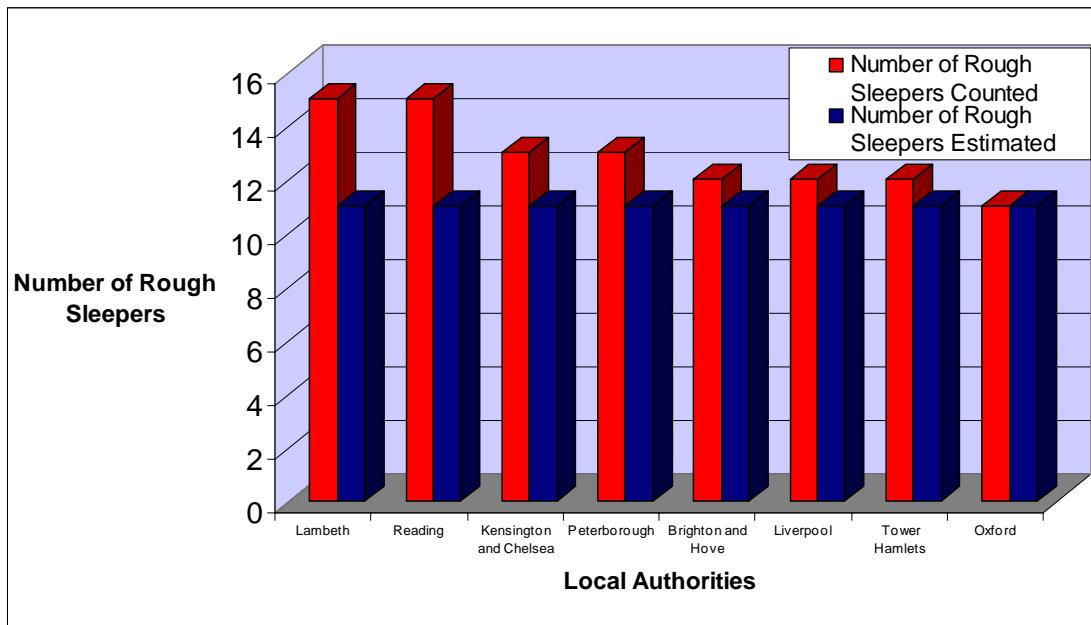
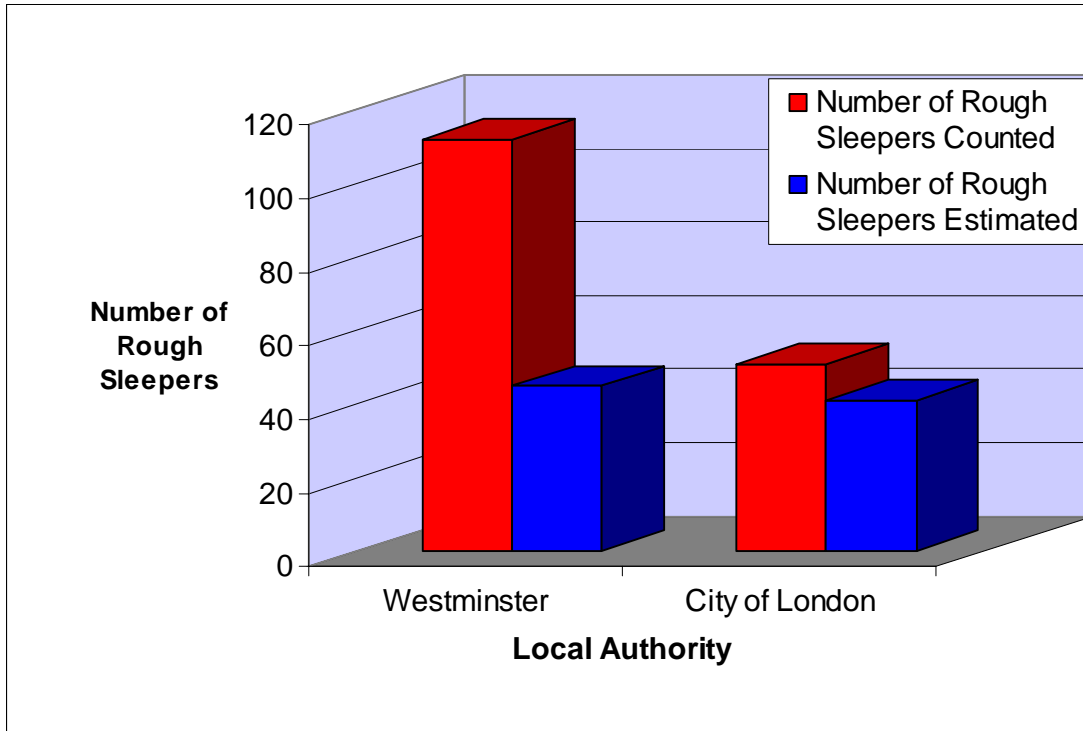
The comparative figures, i.e. the number in the bracket that would be recorded had the count not taken place, and the number actually counted, for the twenty places in England with the most people sleeping rough are shown in the three graphs below.

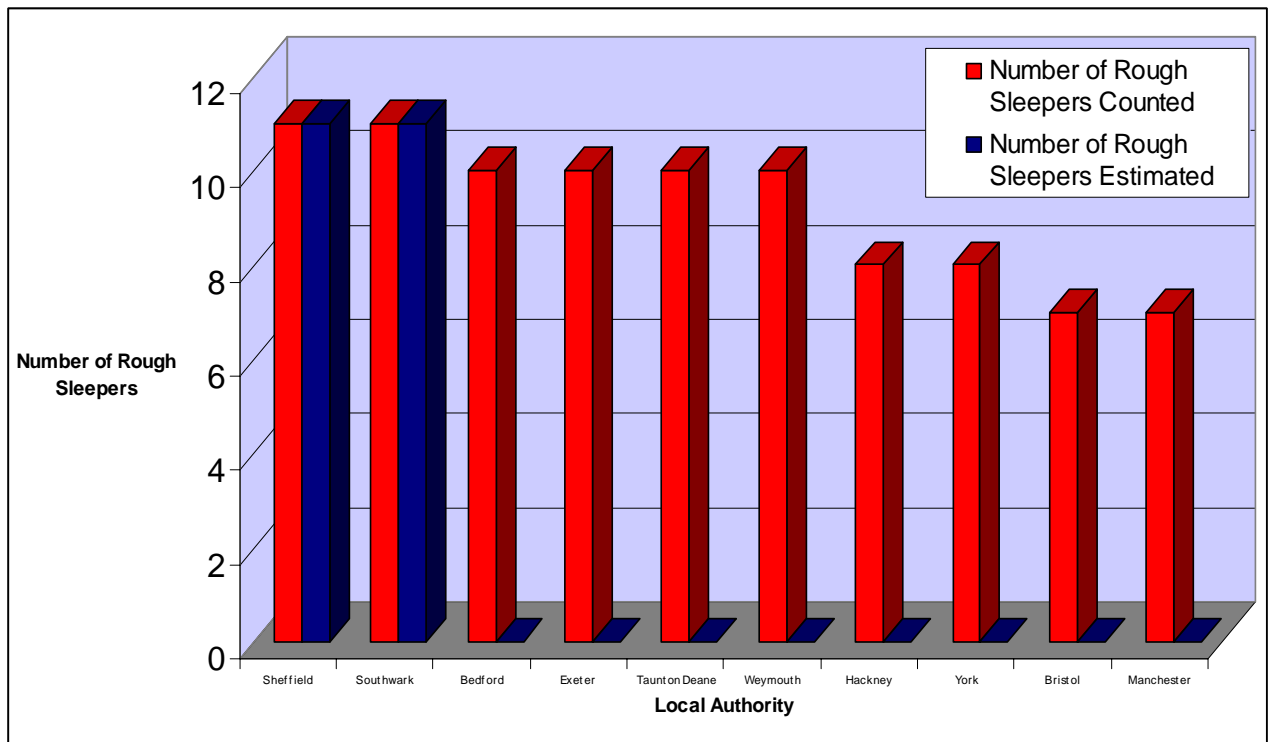
¹¹ http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm199899/cmhansrd/vo990519/text/90519w04.htm#90519w04.htm_wqn9

¹²

http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm199899/cmhansrd/vo990519/text/90519w04.htm#90519w04.htm_wqn9

¹³ This is based on the belief that local authorities would have given an estimate in line with the actual figure, ie if the count was 15, they would have given an estimate of 11-20.





These graphs highlight the true potential to overlook the number of people sleeping rough by assuming with every estimate, from every local authority, that the lower figure given will always be the most accurate. The methodology being used currently is simply adding to the flaws of a process that is already extremely difficult to carry out accurately.

A Comparative Method

A more accurate and methodical way to estimate the number of rough sleepers in England would be to compare the figures compiled through local authority counts, providing estimates of a more scientific nature.

In the Government's official figures published in June 2007, 83 local authorities provided a count. Of those 83, 71 local authorities provided a number between 0-10.

Those 71 local authorities produced, in total, a figure of 216 rough sleepers, including 4 local authorities counting 10 rough sleepers, 2 counting 8, 3 counting 7 and 8 counting 6.

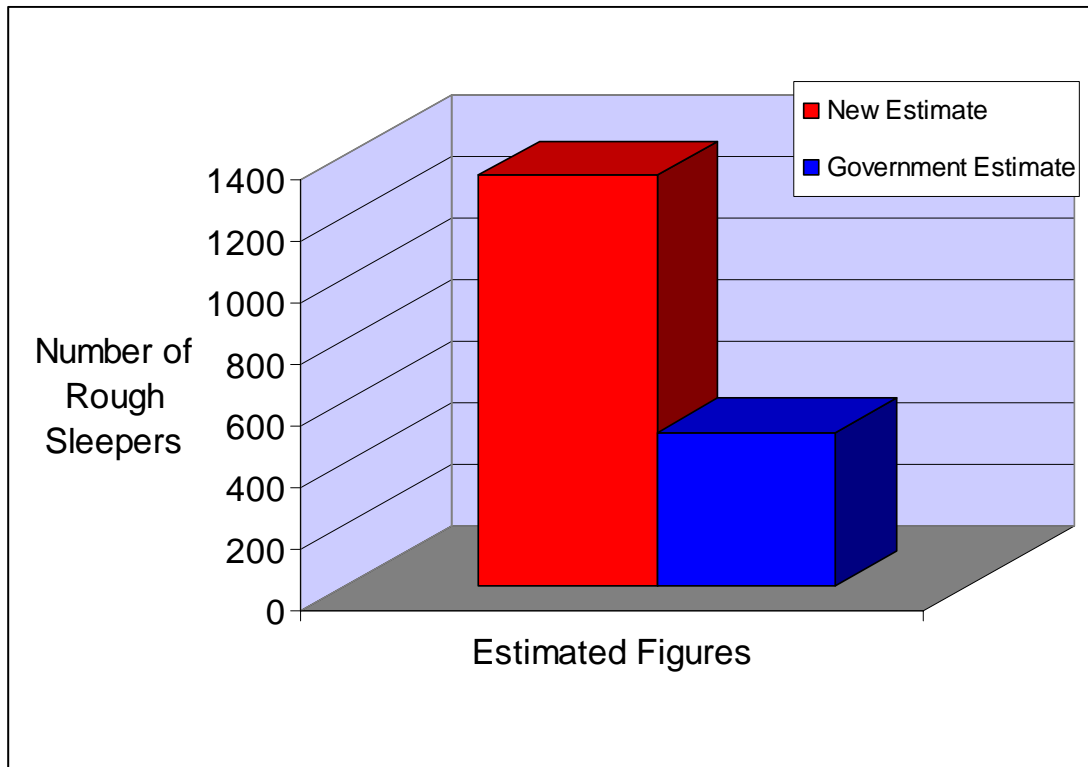
If these local authorities had not done a count in the area, but instead just provided an estimate of 0-10, instead of 216 rough sleepers being recorded, the total number would have been zero.

If you assume that 71 local authorities, that were in the 0-10 bracket, produce a total figure of 216 rough sleepers, then by applying this methodology to the remaining 271 local authorities that either provided a 0-10 estimate or didn't do a count, thus all of them totalling zero, the actual number of people sleeping rough in the country is around 1322.¹⁴

While no one will ever know how many people sleep rough every night, this is a more precise and systematic approach to establishing how many people are sleeping on Britain's streets.

¹⁴ The figures for this are $(216/71 \times 271) + 498 = 1322$

The graph below illustrates the potential difference between Government figures and those established through more precise methods.



Conclusion

In June 2007 when the Government produced its figures on rough sleeping, 271 local authorities did not carry out a count, and of those 271, 2 did not make an estimate.

Of the 271 who did not carry out a count, they all returned an estimate of 0-10. Therefore a figure of 0 was automatically recorded for all 271 estimates. On this basis, there are potentially another 2710 people sleeping rough in England, having not being counted due to mistaken assumptions and a flawed process, though this report does not claim this to be the case in reality.

The graphs above, using the Government's own figures, demonstrate how this methodology has the potential to leave dozens, possibly hundreds, of homeless people out of official rough sleeper statistics.

Jeremy Swain from charity Thames Reach recently commented that 'over the last five years rough sleeping has become a secondary issue in the minds of politicians responsible for tackling homelessness'.¹⁵

This report aims to serve as a reminder that just because we are starting to tackle rough sleeping, it doesn't mean that a box can now be ticked and we can simply move on.

At a time when the plight of rough sleepers seems to be slipping off the political radar, it is imperative that the Government uses the most accurate figures on rough sleeping and most importantly, trusts local authorities to give honest estimates as to how many people they think are sleeping on Britain's streets. If local authorities do not carry out a count, there needs to be a more robust way of determining the accuracy of the estimate, not relying on a system which allows the Government to use the lowest end of an inaccurate bracket count.

One of the problems when estimating how many people sleep rough on Britain's streets every night is that we simply don't know, and the restrictions in the methods to find out make it difficult to predict. However, although it is difficult, one thing we do know is that going out onto the streets and judging the situation from there is the best way to go about making an accurate calculation; doubting local authorities and deliberately diminishing estimates is simply a retrograde step for rough sleepers.

¹⁵ <http://www.thamesreach.org.uk/news-and-views/an-end-to-rough-sleeping/>

Quotes

Author of this report and Shadow Housing Minister, Grant Shapps said:

“This report reveals a major flaw in the collection of rough sleeping data, which means that hundreds more people are actually sleeping on our streets each night.

“Meanwhile the Government has downgraded the Rough Sleepers Unit because the defective data suggested that the problem had largely been resolved.

“Now we know that there are nearly 3 times more people sleeping on our streets each night I’m calling on the Government to recognise the scale of the problem and put measures in place to work with charities and other support services to urgently deal with this unacceptable situation.

“We will offer the Government every support for measures which are genuinely about reducing the number of people sleeping rough each night. The first step must be to accept that the current system of counting rough sleepers is in fact fundamentally flawed.”