

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

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# Acknowledgments

We gratefully acknowledge the contributions of all those involved in this project and publication. First and foremost, we thank all the research participants who so generously shared their stories, experiences and thoughts with us. Without them, this project would not have been possible. We acknowledge and thank the project team who worked intently and tirelessly at each stage of the project and ThinkPlace who supported us throughout the research journey. There is no doubt that the team's collective knowledge and experience enhanced this project. We also thank the Auckland Homelessness Steering Group, in particular our project mentors, Diane Robertson (Auckland City Mission), Moira Lawler (Lifewise) and Manu Pihama (Auckland Council), who provided invaluable guidance throughout the research. We also acknowledge Auckland Council's financial contribution to the project.

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Auckland City Mission  
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Lifewise  
Ministry of Justice  
Ministry of Social Development  
New Zealand Police  
New Zealand Prostitutes Collective  
Serco  
Te Puni Kokiri  
Waitemata District Health Board

# Project background

This project was designed to generate a deeper understanding of the experience of rough sleeping in central Auckland in order to create meaningful change.

## Purpose of the project

There is little research into the lives of those who sleep rough on the streets of central Auckland. To further our understanding, we spoke to people with lived experience of rough sleeping - people who currently sleep rough, people who formerly slept rough and family members of those who sleep rough. We also spoke with those who may be impacted by people sleeping rough – businesses and the general public.

This document is designed to highlight the insights generated by the research and to walk the reader through the rough sleeping experience. It is hoped that this will act as a catalyst for inclusive and collaborative conversations that produce practical outcomes that are meaningful for those who sleep rough in central Auckland. This document will also provide the homelessness sector with insights that can be used to build empathy and think reflexively about the relationship between people's experiences, policy and service and programme delivery.

The project is expected to produce a number of additional written outputs beyond this report including academic journal articles, technical reports and case studies.

## How to read this document

This document is designed to provide insights about the experience of those who sleep rough in central Auckland. We acknowledge that this is not representative of all those who sleep rough. We also acknowledge that each individual experience is complex and multifaceted. However, the graphic design elements provide a visual representation of the key ideas that emerged from the participants' stories and experiences. These visuals were created

through a rigorous process of thematic analysis. Many details in these visual representations were taken verbatim from the participants' stories.

The report is not intended as a final and definitive statement of the experiences of those sleeping rough in central Auckland. Rather, we see it as a starting point for service agencies, policy makers and the wider community to begin thinking and talking about how to better respond to the needs of those who sleep rough in central Auckland.

## Project objectives:

The objectives of this project were co-created during an initial sector-wide workshop.

### 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.

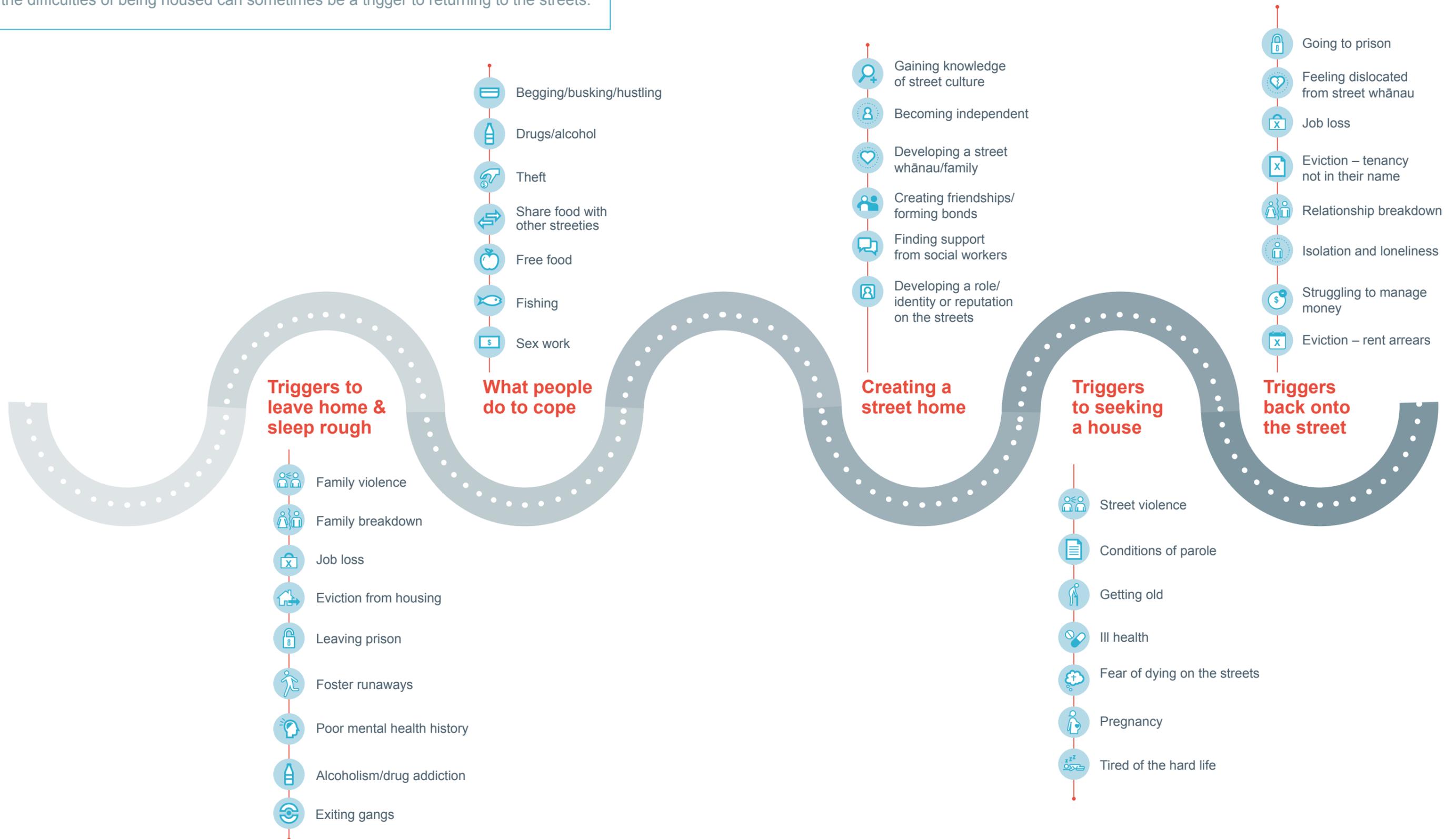
Each project team member was provided with a number of interview transcripts and asked to mine the interviews for insights about the experience of rough sleeping. The project team later came together in several collaborative workshops to synthesise the emergent themes for each participant group. The 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.

# Triggers and coping pathway

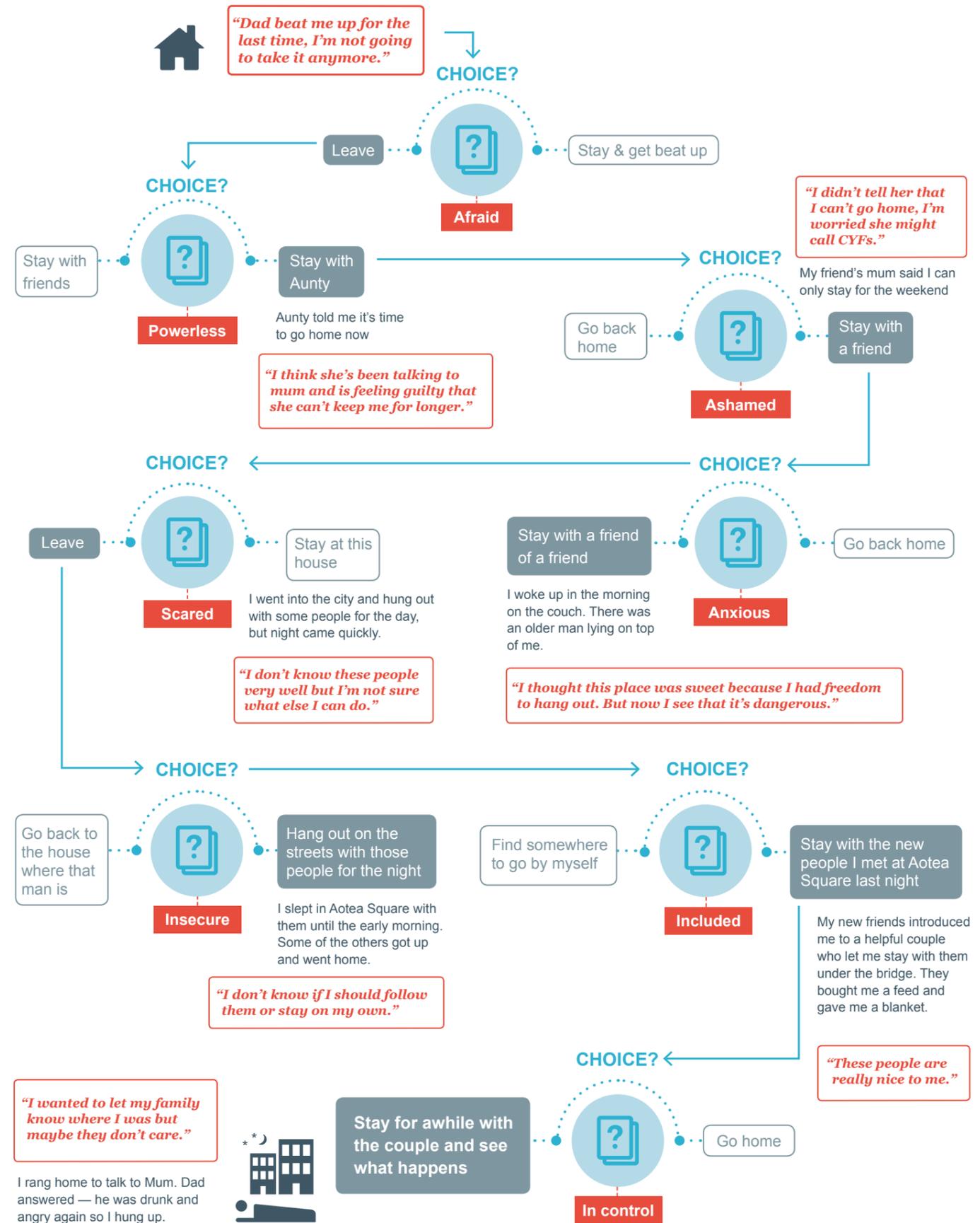
There are many different triggers onto the street and while there, people develop strategies and methods to cope and make a home for themselves. There are also many different triggers to leaving the street and seeking accommodation. However, the difficulties of being housed can sometimes be a trigger to returning to the streets.



# 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.



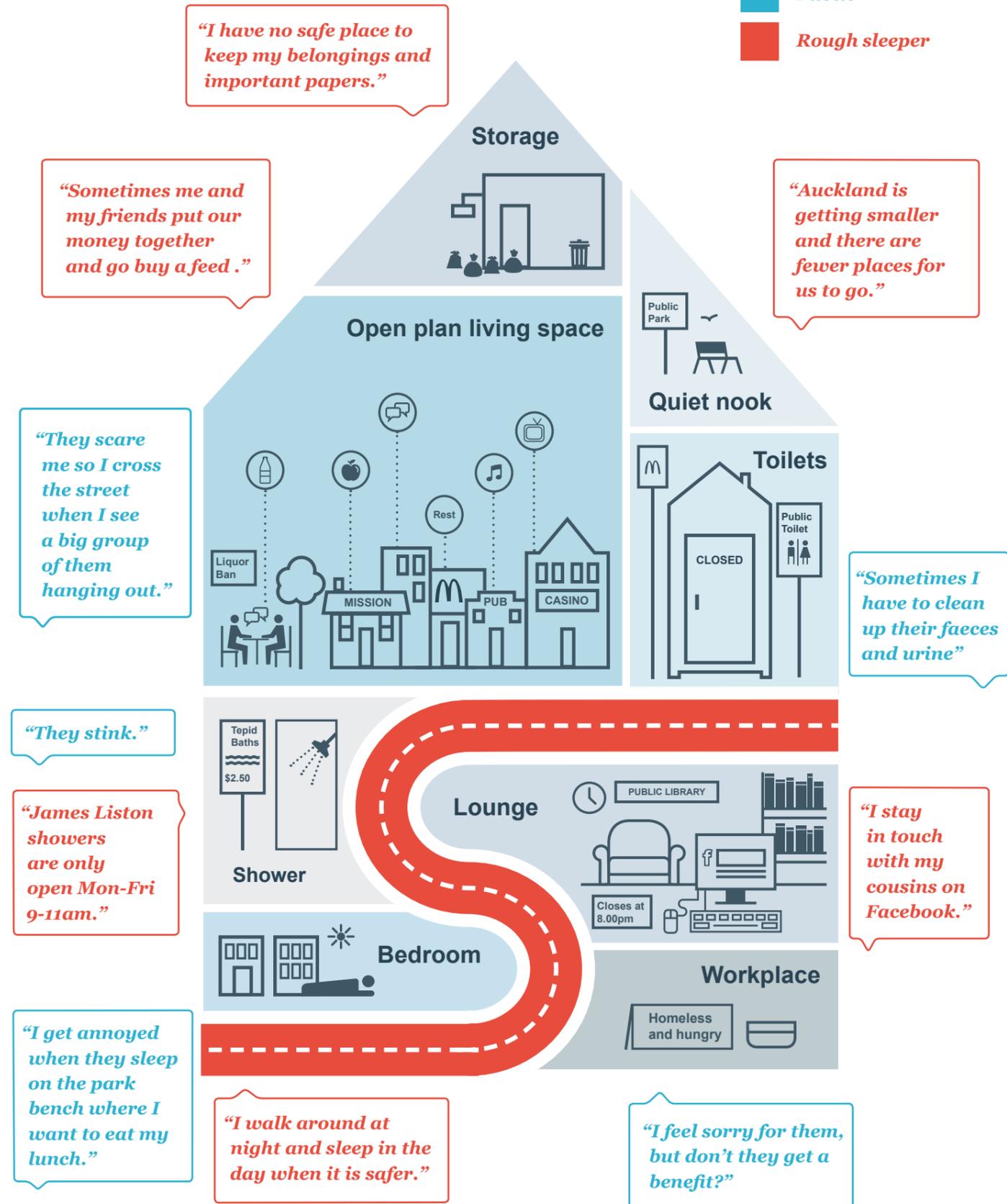


## When public and private domains meet on the street

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.

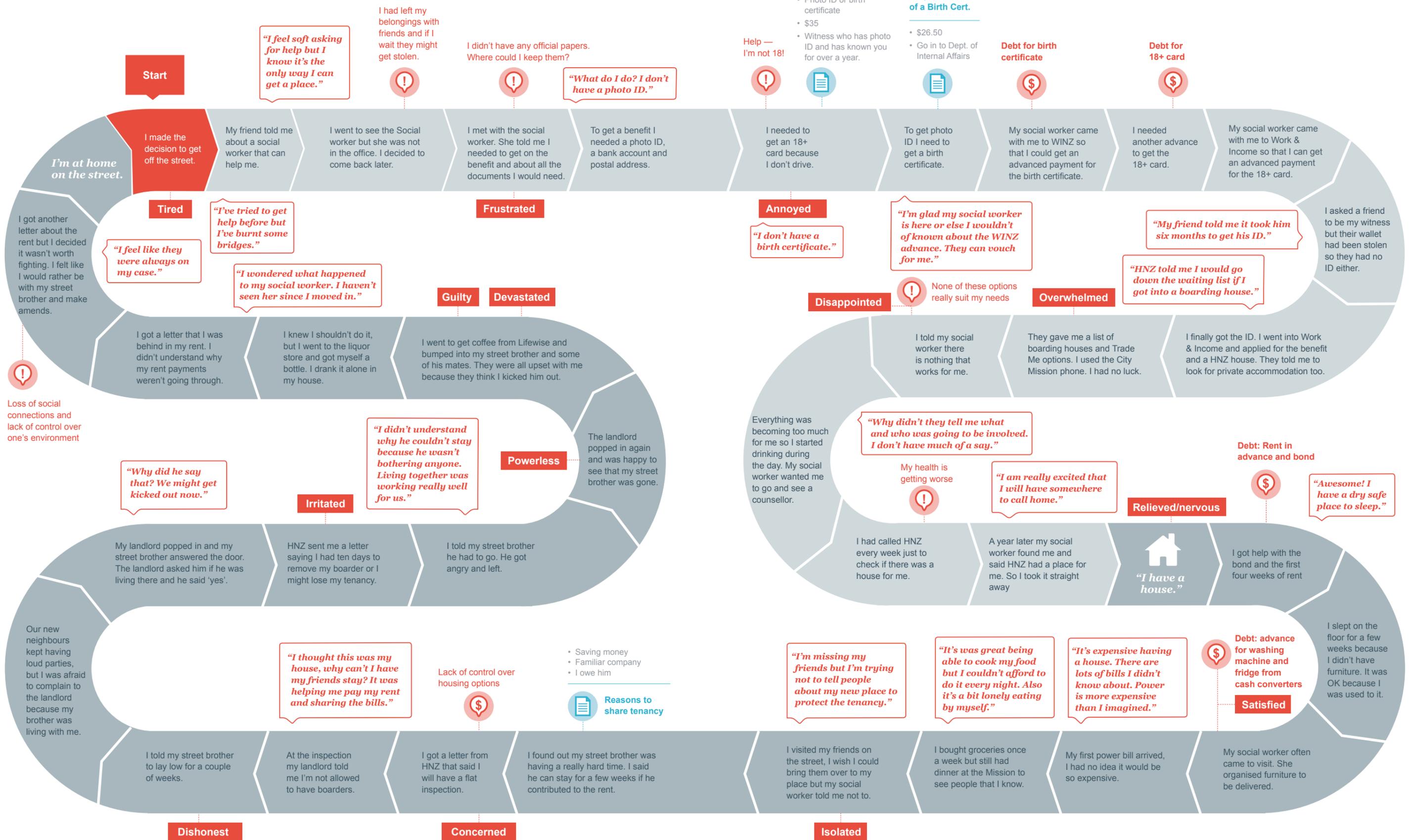
Key

- Public
- Rough sleeper



# The housing conundrum

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



## Key insights

The visuals in this report provide detail of the experiences of those who sleep rough. This section provides a broad overview of the key insights.

### **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:**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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How might we **change negative public perceptions about homelessness**?

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

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

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

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