

Not housed but not homeless: How did we get here? A housing pathways study of vehicle dwellers in Bristol

Introduction

In areas of Bristol there are people living in vehicles. Whether it is a horsebox, a windowless panel van, a campervan or one of many other types of vehicle, all of them will have been modified to accommodate day-to-day life to varying degrees. Most vehicles are mobile and have an MOT certificate, road tax and insurance (Burnett, 2017; Davis, 2017; Davis, 2017a; BBC, 2017). Lived-in vehicles are mostly parked on public highways that do not have parking restrictions and a small number are parked within Gypsy, Roma and Traveller encampments on public and private land (Bristol City Council, 2018b). Some lived-in vehicles are easily recognisable because they have a chimney or curtains in the windows, while 'stealth' vans (Seb, 2018) deliberately show no external indication that they are lived in, but can be identified from solar panels and/or a ventilation device on the roof.

Urban vehicle dwelling is a relatively new phenomenon that is growing. While the number of Traveller caravans on authorised and unauthorised sites in England has been officially monitored since 1979 by The Department for Communities and Local Government, estimates of vehicles being used as dwellings in England are unavailable. The homelessness charity Crisis (2017) estimated that in 2016 there were 8,000 households sleeping in cars, tents and public transport. But this figure is based on a survey question asking young people if they had ever slept in a park, tent or night bus because they had nowhere else to stay (Clarke, 2016) and does not accurately represent people who have actively converted a vehicle into a dwelling.

Estimates of lived-in vehicles parked on Bristol roads began only in 2017. The number of people living in vehicles on roads in Bristol has risen from 90 to 120 – an increase of 33% from 2017 to 2018 (Bristol City Council, 2018a). Importantly, this estimate may not include stealth vans because they are not easily recognisable as lived-in vehicles. Estimating the size of the vehicle population is difficult, not least because of the nature of vehicles being highly mobile and hard to count. In addition, vehicle dwelling can be used as a temporary

measure as people transition to other types of housing.

This research is the first to explore vehicle dwelling. Its overall aim is to advance an understanding of the issues that drive people to live in vehicles, looking specifically at vehicle dwellers in Bristol. It has particular focus on people who live in mobile vehicles; it does not include people who live in stationary caravans. The decision to exclude caravans was based on the researcher's untested hypothesis that the vehicle dwelling demographic is different to the caravan dwelling demographic. A vehicle owner needs an income to cover the cost of an MOT certificate, road tax and insurance for it to be legally driven and parked on highways, while a stationary caravan does not need to be financed beyond its initial purchase, thereby suggesting a difference in economic capital between the two groups.

This research is not an attempt to describe vehicle living, nor an attempt to discuss the problems caused by vehicle living (or, indeed, the solutions provided by vehicle living). However, in its attempts to elucidate the complex reasons contributing to van dwelling, research such as this can be used to inform the development of local authority policy. While the housing shortage in Bristol persists and the number of people living in vehicles continues to grow, research into van dwelling is vital.

The increase of lived-in vehicles has affected a number of Bristol neighbourhoods. By May 2018, roads around Greenbank Cemetery in Easton were lined with a dense concentration of lived-in vehicles and caravans. Whether or not in response to a government consultation on powers for dealing with unauthorised development and encampments published the previous month, in late May 2018 Bristol City Council issued legal notices to all vehicles and caravans at Greenbank to leave. The local authority claimed to be responding to complaints about anti-social behaviour (BBC, 2018). A few weeks later, Bristol City Council published a consultation on its Draft Policy for Vehicle Dwellers aimed at formalising its approach to vehicle dwelling encampments on the highway.

Bristol City Council is one of the first local authorities in the UK to develop a strategy for lived-in vehicles parked on highways. In devising its approach the local authority cited Bristol's desirable location, a lack of decent affordable housing, and the fact that there is no designated site for van dwellers as issues that add to the complexity of vehicle dwelling in the city. Moreover, it asserted that variations within the vehicle dweller community range between those who are very vulnerable, to those in employment that cannot afford house prices or rents and who see vehicle dwelling as a preferred way of living (Bristol City Council, 2018b).

Often rated as one of the best places to live (*The Sunday Times*, 2017), Bristol is a very popular city regardless of its lack of housing. If trends continue, Bristol's population is expected to see a rise of 9% by 2022 (Bristol City Council, 2016), yet there continues to be an undersupply of new homes both for ownership and rent despite the demand for housing. The housing shortage adversely affects affordability and in 2016 the cost of the cheapest Bristol home was over eight times the annual earnings of the poorest households. Bristol City Council anticipated that households priced out homeownership but ineligible for affordable housing would recourse to the PRS, yet also warned that proposed welfare reforms would "very likely result in more households being unable to afford to rent or buy in the private sector" (Bristol City Council, 2016).

With access to homeownership severely restricted (Beer *et al.*, 2011; Ost 2012b; Brown and Lafrance 2013, cited by Revington, 2018), high rents in the PRS reflect the burgeoning demand despite the sector being marred by low standards (Clapham *et al.*, 2014; Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, 2018). In addition to the dearth of social housing (Wilkinson and Ortega-Alcázar, 2017), the impact of welfare reform (Bristol City Council, 2017; Wilkinson and Ortega-Alcázar, 2017) plus the insecurities and demands of flexible working (Ost, 2012b, cited by Revington, 2018), it is possible, though not necessarily correct, to conclude that this combination of factors is driving people to live in vehicles.

The structural drivers mentioned above affect people's housing choices (Clapham *et al.*, 2014) and may steer a small but growing number of people to live in vehicles. Some of the

issues are discussed in media reports, in particular a recent article claiming that ‘low-paid workers’ are ‘resorting’ to living in vehicles and caravans in response to rising rents (Hall, 2018). But, as identified by Bristol City Council in their vehicle dwelling policy, the reasons why people choose to live in vehicles are complex, yet there is no academic research that investigates that complexity. There is abundant research concerning the GRT population and a small amount of research that looks particularly at the housing pathways of young adults (Clapham *et al.*, 2014; Hochstenbach and Boterman, 2015; Ronald, Druta and Godzik, 2018), and homelessness pathways for young people (Clapham, 2005). There is one piece of research into the housing pathways of camping ground residents in New Zealand (Severinsen, 2013) and another that looks at park home residence in the UK (Bevan, 2010). A number of those studies (and relevant others) are discussed in this research, but as yet there is no academic research that examines the relatively new phenomenon of urban vehicle dwelling.

The research applies the housing pathways approach (Clapham, 2002) and is therefore a qualitative study. Data were obtained from semi-structured interviews with 13 participants. In the analysis of the data, the structural drivers identified by Clapham *et al.* (2014) in their research into the housing pathways of young adults in the UK were used as themes. In conjunction, the thematic analysis process described by Braun and Clarke (2013) was also applied. The research is limited by the restriction of applying structural drivers as themes, and by the small sample that is subject to self-selection bias.

Research questions

The overall aim of this research is to advance an understanding of the issues that drive people to live in vehicles, looking specifically at vehicle dwellers in Bristol. The objectives were to:

1. Explore the housing pathways of people who live in vehicles as an alternative to house dwelling.
2. Discuss how the mediating processes of identity, autonomy and security influence vehicle dwelling.
3. Evaluate critically the research gap using pertinent research on housing pathways, Travellers and the current housing situation in Bristol.

The following chapters include a literature review that evaluates pertinent research, a description of the methodology and methods used, findings from the data analysis that includes a graphic representation of participants' housing pathways, a discussion of the findings and a conclusion.