

Not housed but not homeless: How did we get here?

A housing pathways study of vehicle dwellers

IN BRISTOL

Urban vehicle dwelling is growing, particularly in Bristol where a persistent shortage in housing has negatively impacted affordability.

The number of people living in vehicles on Bristol roads increased 33% between 2017 and 2018.

Bristol City Council is one of the first local authorities in the UK to develop a strategy for lived-in vehicles parked on highways. It has proposed that lived-in vehicles will be assessed taking welfare needs into account.

Vehicle dwellers' housing pathways were found to be influenced by a complex interplay of structural drivers and personal agency, in addition to self-efficacy leading to the self-provision of housing by living in a vehicle.

- ✗ flexible employment
 - ✗ low/intermittent income
 - ✗ difficulties in accessing homeownership & social housing
 - ✗ insecure private rented sector accommodation
 - ✗ high rents
- structural drivers**

Ruth McAllister's research involved interviewing 13 van dwellers in the city.

The postgraduate student found that the low cost of van dwelling cushions an irregular and insecure income, and makes relocation easier.

Living in a van also led to other benefits. Van dwellers enjoyed more leisure time, more time outdoors, increased social contact and environmental awareness, improved mental health and healthier relationships.

It was just really uncertain. Are we going to be homeless in a year or two? We needed to do something. Living in a truck is a result of that.

Simon, 36, who lives in a converted truck with his wife, said:

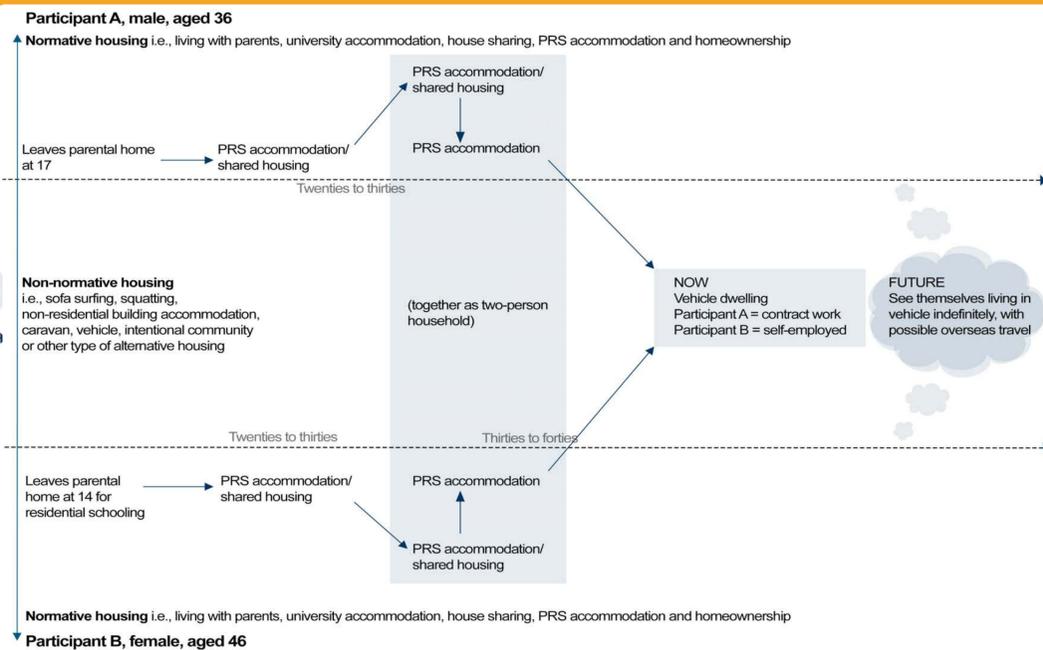
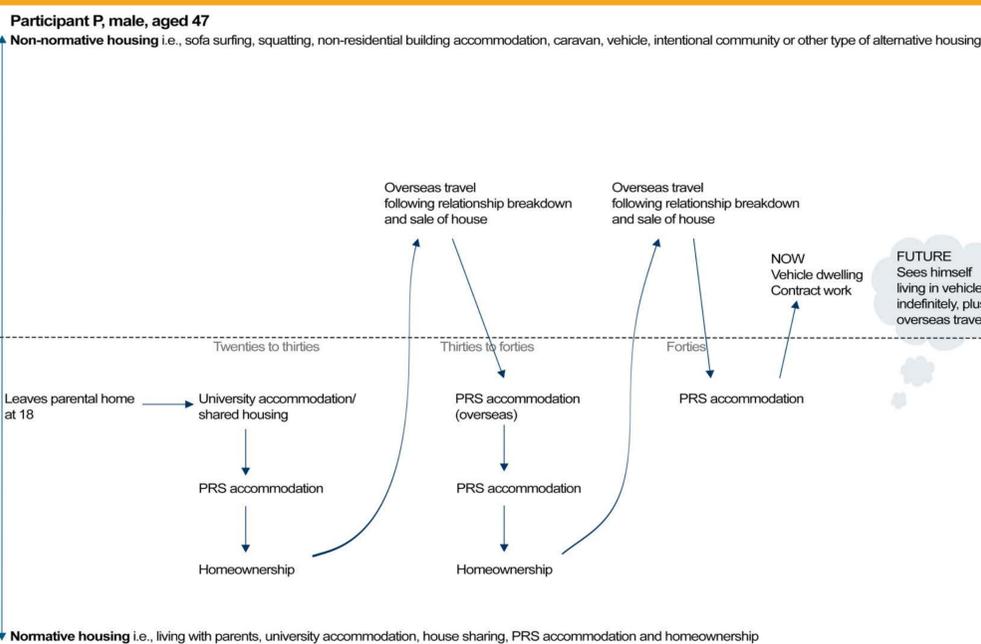
You haven't got two pennies to rub together some months, but then you've got more money, but the rental market isn't set up for that. So if you have your vehicle, you know at least you've got somewhere that's yours and you don't have to worry about it.

Holly, a 35-year-old freelance interpreter living in a converted transit van, said:

We're spending much more time together as a couple and we've become stronger and closer.

As described by Simon:

The research presents graphical representations that illustrate the diversity of participants' pathways into vehicle dwelling, ranging from relatively simple with few moves in or between normative and non-normative housing, to more complex pathways in and between the two types.



A van dweller's lifestyle includes frequent moves to different 'park ups', careful water usage, and vehicle maintenance. They seek out commercial or local authority amenities for waste management and bathing.

"For me, a part of van life was being really mobile. I'd wake up in the morning and I'd never know where I'd end up in the evening and I really loved that," said 49-year-old health worker Lisa.

The research also discovered that van dwellers often want to be regarded as responsible and good citizens. They therefore invariably keep their vehicles legal, are committed to work and do not want to disturb their house-dwelling neighbours.

"I don't want to antagonise the local people," said Chris, a 47-year-old data analyst living in a converted transit van. "I can see that the locals might get a bit annoyed, so I try not to make too much of an impact on the area."

It was found that vehicle dwelling is actively pursued to control precarious housing situations, as a goal in itself to engage in the lifestyle it creates, and/or to facilitate transition to a future ideal living situation.

Download the full research:
<http://ruthmcallisterkemp.co.uk/not-housed-but-not-homeless-vehicle-dwellers-bristol/>

Ruth McAllister is a postgraduate Environmental Health student at the University of the West of England (UWE Bristol). She has a passion for housing and is currently working with <https://marksoutoftenancy.com> - a review platform where tenants can rate their tenancy experience. She wants to amplify tenants' voices to give more power and control back to renters.

This unique research gives a crucial insight that can help local authorities shape their approach to welfare assessments and, as more local authorities seek to unify and formalise their response to vehicle dwelling, could be used to inform van dwelling policies.