COMMENTARY

A house is not a home: housing disadvantage, homelessness, and modern slavery

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Abstract

This commentary focuses on the underexplored links between housing disadvantage, homelessness, and modern slavery. Despite significant anecdotal evidence, there is a pressing need for proper theorisation of the connections between housing situation and vulnerability to modern slavery. This commentary combats this lacuna by focusing on four types of (un)housing: homelessness, safehouses, social housing, and the private rented sector. While each site has its own relationship to modern slavery, be it cause, consequence, or potential solution, commonalities emerge. Modern slavery is a form of 'hyper-precarity', and the 'ontological security' of a place to call home is crucial when combatting this. But a house is not a home, and security of tenure alone is insufficient – in fact in some cases tenure security can actually *increase* vulnerability to modern slavery. A sense of home can act as a bulwark against modern slavery, but poor housing and bad policies increase precarity, homelessness, and exploitation.

Keywords

Modern slavery, homelessness, social housing, safehouses, housing crisis

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See end of article.

1. Introduction

Despite growing awareness of the interplay between modern slavery (MS) and homelessness in the UK, there remains an absence of robust research. As we highlight, homelessness can be both a *cause* and *consequence* of MS, and there is therefore a need for a deeper understanding of this relationship. Experiences of homelessness, however, must be understood in the wider structural context of housing disadvantage which, much like homelessness, can also *lead to* and *emerge from* MS. Building on research funded by a British Academy Innovation Fellowship, this commentary examines the intersections between housing disadvantage, homelessness, and MS, making two conceptual and policy-focused interventions. First, by synthesising existing literature, it provides a better understanding of these complex relationships and highlights pressing areas for future research. Second, it responds to important criticisms that claim much of the research into, and discourse around, MS portrays it as something that exists on the periphery, be that globally, socially, or economically (Kenway 2021). By literally bringing discussions of MS closer to home, the commentary emphasises the structural, everyday drivers of MS in the UK, while also showing the value of community responses to this 'wicked' issue (Gardner *et al.* 2021; McAnulty 2022) and the need to explicitly consider housing within 'whole systems' approaches to preventing MS (Balch 2022).

The commentary first briefly reviews literature on MS's drivers and solutions before turning to four sites of homelessness and housing disadvantage: homelessness, National Referral Mechanism[1] (NRM) safehouses, social housing, and the private rented sector (PRS). We argue that people in the position of extreme susceptibility to exploitation known as 'hyper-precarity' are vulnerable to MS (Lewis *et al.* 2015), and experiences of homelessness and housing disadvantage are significant, yet undertheorised, drivers of this. However, while secure housing options may be necessary for combating MS, this alone is insufficient, and there is a need to think carefully about the concepts of 'home' and 'homemaking' (Pleace *et al.* 2022), as the deep 'ontological security' a home can provide (Easthope 2004) can counteract 'hyper-precarity' and with it MS.

2. Modern slavery: from hyper-precarity to ontological security

The overlapping nature of MS has been well documented. The concept covers a vast array of practices – including forced labour, forced commercial sexual exploitation, debt bondage, servitude, and forced marriage – and intersects with a range of structural challenges including, poverty, organised crime, migration and asylum, and discrimination (Gardner *et al.* 2021). MS therefore exploits, perpetuates, and leaves people in a state of 'hyper-precarity', with recent work on the cost-of-living crisis showing increased levels of precarity and with it vulnerability to MS among the UK population (Balch 2022; McAnulty 2022). Nevertheless, some MS discourses and responses have been criticised for focusing on extreme cases, thus masking everyday discrimination (Kenway 2021). Similarly, MS is neither peripheral nor residual but instead structural, and exploitation

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[1] The NRM is a UK government framework for 'identifying and referring potential victims of modern slavery and ensuring they receive the appropriate support' (UK Government 2022b). It has, however, been criticised for a number of shortcomings, and research has shown the values in extending the length and nature of support offered to those exiting the NRM process (Nicholson *et al.* 2020).

stems not simply from *exclusion* from economic and social structures, but perhaps more often from *inclusion* on negative terms. Known as 'adverse incorporation' (Phillips 2013), this insight has been invaluable for understanding instances of MS in supply chains – the focus of an important 2019 supplementary issue in this journal (Blitz & Simic 2019) – illustrating the relational nature of the global economy and the responsibilities facing states and businesses.

Yet a focus on supply chains can still externalise MS and reduce the focus to the workplace rather than considering all aspects of life. Within the UK the number of people experiencing MS may be as high as 136,000 (Walk Free Foundation 2018), but focusing merely on labour activity rather than accommodation, for instance, misses many of these – in 2020 only 10,613 people were referred to the NRM (UK Government 2021). Analyses of MS must therefore consider 'social reproduction' (Gore & LeBaron 2019), the processes underpinning everyday and intergenerational reproduction of human life, like caregiving, education, and childcare. Yet despite the home being arguably *the* key site of social reproduction, the role of accommodation in MS remains broadly undertheorised – with the exception of domestic servitude where, predominantly female, migrants socially reproduce others while being locked in, both literally and figuratively, to their accommodation. Considering social reproduction also emphasises MS's messy nature which cuts across people's lives: they may experience exploitation in some parts while relative autonomy in others, and experiences also change over time. It is therefore important to think about MS on a dynamic continuum rather than as absolute, with people experiencing *more* or *less* unfreedom across different aspects of their life.

If MS is inextricably linked to hyper-precarity, then the battle against it must focus on building resilience (Gardner *et al.* 2021) and 'ontological security', a sense of deep security in the self. The ability to call somewhere 'home' is central to this (Hiscock *et al.* 2001), but home is more than just housing or shelter. People may be housed, but lack the attachment, security, and autonomy over their accommodation that is needed for it to be classed as a home (Easthope 2004).[2] As Pleace *et al.* (2022: 319) put it:

> There is a strong case for a definition of homelessness that encompasses people living within housing and temporary accommodation who have no adequate, legally secure, physically safe and private living space. A woman at threat of violence or abuse in her own home is homeless, as are people living in housing that is unfit for human habitation. Someone whose only accommodation is highly precarious and offers no physical or legal security, nor privacy, such as people staying temporarily with friends, family or acquaintances, because there is nowhere else to go, is also experiencing homelessness.

Conversely, those without traditional housing may, in their relationships and routines, have a sense of home (Schneider 2022), which is why many prefer the term 'houselessness' to 'homelessness'.

Home is a contested concept (Meers 2021), as illustrated by Black feminist scholarship which shows how 'home' can be variously sites of abuse, resistance, exploitation, and escape (e.g. hooks 2015). It is thus important to think about processes of 'homemaking' (Lancione 2019) and how these can achieve more/less ontological security, rather than simply a static conception of what is

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[2] Two examples may prove insightful here. First, the placing of people seeking asylum, including most notably the recent Afghan resettlement scheme, in hotels, creating a constant state of insecurity and instability. The Home Office (2023) has since recognised that extra, wraparound support is needed for these groups, helping them find a home and not just housing. Second, extensive research into agricultural work by the Gangmasters & Labour Abuse Authority (2018) emphasised the terrible, cramped conditions of exploited workers on caravan sites, highlighting how forms of exploitation are often explicitly linked to accommodation.

and is not a home (once more a continuum is a useful framing here). Across the next four sections, each representing a different type of (un)housing, we examine how lacking a sense of home can be a key driver of MS. Policy should therefore focus on facilitating homemaking and not just housing.

3. Modern slavery and homelessness

There is a complex interplay between experiences of homelessness and MS, with homelessness both a cause and consequence of MS. For instance, people in insecure, informal living arrangements, such as sofa surfing or rough sleeping, are at increased risk of being recruited into MS, while accommodation could be tied to the exploitation an individual is experiencing, and when that exploitation stops, are forced into homelessness (Parker 2021). Housing related statutory support systems currently available to victims of MS can overlap, are complex to navigate, and cannot guarantee more than transitional shelter, failing to offer ontological security. Firstly, while the NRM, discussed further below, can provide at least 45 days of safehouse accommodation if there are 'reasonable grounds' to suspect an individual is a victim of MS – and, if needed a further 45 days of safehouse accommodation is provided once a 'conclusive' decision is made that MS has 'more likely than not' occurred (UK Government 2022a)[3] – this support is unequally distributed and confusingly delivered. This highlights a tension at the heart of the NRM, where for many support ultimately comes to an end as soon as survivors exit it, with Project TILI reporting that a fifth of survivors receiving support from the NRM are still homeless on exit (Parker 2021).

Victims of MS may be also owed parallel or overlapping statutory homelessness support under Part 7 Housing Act 1996. Individuals could be owed a duty to be provided with emergency or temporary accommodation if they have no safe accommodation available (s.188 Housing Act 1996) or further duties to secure longer-term, suitable accommodation, such as social housing (s.193 Housing Act 1996). Since accommodation provided under the NRM is merely transitional in nature, this duty might be important on the exit of NRM safehouses. Both of these duties, however, are based on the individual meeting various criteria such as having recourse to public funds and a 'priority need' for accommodation. Of the 34 people supported by The Passage Modern Slavery Service in 2020/21, 28 of these had no recourse to public funds (NRPF) due to their immigration status. This highlights a significant barrier for victims with NRPF, who do not have equal access to homelessness support systems, relying almost entirely on the NRM or charitable support.

There is a need for better post-NRM, longer-term accommodation support, with evidence that without this, victims of MS are at risk of further homelessness, precarious housing situations, and re-exploitation (The Passage 2017). Recognising this, pilot studies were conducted in late 2018 through to early 2020 in six local authority areas, with the aim of improving post-NRM support and ensuring sustained accommodation was provided to victims of MS. However, these pilots still struggled to secure appropriate housing, and again excluded individuals with NRPF (Long *et al.* 2020).

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[3] This can also then be followed by a recovery needs assessment, 'inreach' support, and then case-by-case care depending on individual need.

Even when the support systems mentioned above can ultimately provide a roof, this will not necessarily provide ontological security. Engaging with the various support systems could involve several moves between refuges, safehouses or other forms of temporary and transitional accommodation, and cannot always guarantee secure accommodation at the end (Parker 2021), as explored in the next section. A risk of violence and re-exploitation could mean needing to settle in a new, unfamiliar local authority area, which could be uprooted again when exiting NRM safehouses, resulting in the loss of support systems (Local Government Association 2022). There is further growing awareness of emergency and temporary accommodation sites being targeted by criminals seeking out vulnerable individuals to exploit or re-exploit. The Passage (2022) reports recruiters specifically targeting London hotels used during COVID responses which provided people sleeping rough with accommodation. While there is an increasing body of policy-based literature recognising the interplay between experiences of MS and homelessness, there is a need for further, robust research on the interactions between different support systems, and the long-term outcomes for those engaging with them.

4. Modern slavery and safehouses

For survivors exiting enslavement, often their only accommodation option is a safehouse. Despite the ubiquitous nature of safehouses for this population and other vulnerable groups, the evidence base is scant in terms of definition and understanding their structure and function. Definitions of 'safehouse' variously refer to a secret place for sanctuary; somewhere to hide from law enforcement, hostile actors or states; or to avoid retribution, threats or danger. Their secret nature is significant, with only a few key individuals being aware of their existence, with Pratt (1991) suggesting that where there are legacies of subordination (such as slavery), groups need such places for healing and mutual recognition. The safehouse in this context is not just a passive site, but one that provides psychological relief for marginalised groups to construct shared knowledges and become active in generating transformative strategies and resources. True 'safehouses' are therefore not only places for hiding but also activism and recovery that build collective ontological security – as seen in the 19th-century Underground Railroads which consisted of a network of clandestine routes and safehouses which were used by slaves to escape to the northern free states of the USA (Still 2017). Those who offered their homes, barns and churches as safehouses were activists for change driven by a passion for social justice. Today, a plethora of different provider organisations offer safehouse accommodation to survivors of MS in the UK, both within and outside of the NRM.

Overseen by the Single Competent Authority within the Home Office, the Modern Slavery Victim Care Contract (MSVCC) is delivered by the Salvation Army and 12 subcontractor organisations who provide specialist support to survivors. Safehouse provision within the MSVCC is subject to inspection by the Care Quality Commission (CQC) who define them as: 'the provision of residential and outreach support services across England and Wales for survivors of [MS] under the Home Office MSVCC' (CQC 2022). Unlike the activist, transformative and social justice perspectives, policy definitions such as those proposed by the CQC instead merely highlight the provision of services and support as key. The five questions against which CQC inspectors assess safehouses (and all health and social care provision) emphasise this point (CQC 2022): Are they safe? Are they effective? Are they caring? Are they responsive to peoples' needs? Are they well led?

There are no simple answers to the questions raised by the CQC. Whilst a survivor may no longer be at risk of extreme exploitation in a safehouse, their situation remains precarious. Within the MSVCC the provision of safehouse accommodation is dependent on the decisions made by the state in relation to an individual's circumstances and whether a crime has been committed – a process that many survivors have little control over. Even the receipt of a positive conclusive grounds decision (the individual has experienced a crime aligned with MS) leads to housing precarity as, depending on their 'recovery needs', survivors may need to move on from the safehouse after 45 days (Antislavery International 2022). Therefore, whilst the safehouse is a crucial first step for survivors exiting slavery, they certainly do not offer the ontological security of a home, and so longer-term housing options are required, with the two main sites being social housing or the PRS.

5. Modern slavery and social housing

A lack of social housing has been flagged as the biggest challenge in building community-level resilience against MS (Gardner *et al.* 2021). For those exiting homelessness and/or the NRM, secure, affordable housing is vital, but financial pressures on both councils and housing associations (HAs) are forcing them to focus more on commercial than social obligations (Clare *et al.* 2022). Despite this there is a growing recognition among social housing providers that a focus on MS is needed, with councils being issued explicit guidance (Local Government Association 2017, 2022; see also McAnulty 2022), and HAs developing MS statements. These statements, however, tend to focus on their supply chains (Dodd *et al.* 2022), reflecting the perfunctory nature of MS statements (Simic & Blitz 2019), although some high-profile HAs have started to consider staff and tenants more explicitly, recognising the importance of safeguarding. In this sense social housing is central in the battle against MS, not only by having the potential to provide secure housing, but also through awareness of the extra support – financial and otherwise – that housing providers should offer tenants to combat hyper-precarity.

Yet perhaps counter-intuitively, the relative security of tenure offered in social housing can become a driver of MS, in particular 'cuckooing' – where criminals take over people's homes to store, distribute, and/or grow drugs and illegal goods (Spicer 2021). In such cases, arguably vulnerable tenants' biggest strength (secure housing with low eviction risk) becomes their biggest weakness. People with disabilities are especially vulnerable to cuckooing (Macdonald *et al.* 2022), but our preliminary research has shown that, with the cost-of-living crisis, social housing tenants are turning to alternative sources of income. This includes an increased use of high-interest, potentially violent loan sharks (Das 2022), cash-in-hand work, and cuckooing. People with experience of the criminal justice system are also especially vulnerable here, with those in social housing having two main routes into being cuckooed. On the one hand they can be housed in areas known to them and prior criminal networks, increasing the potential of reoffending and exploitation. Or on the other, if intentionally housed elsewhere, the *lack* of social network and the likelihood of social isolation is a major driver of cuckooing (Spicer 2021). Accommodation that has been cuckooed is not a home, offering no ontological security, and those with less attachment to their (social) housing are more likely to be cuckooed, often caused by a combination of unfavoured location and/or poor condition (Macdonald *et al.* 2022). Consequently, it is crucial to facilitate social housing tenants' homemaking to reduce cuckooing risks.

Social housing can be a crucial bulwark against MS, something reflected in HAs' more nuanced MS statements. What is more, the wraparound support offered by HA staff, and their relationships with tenants, means they should be well placed to implement early interventions – regular interaction with tenants can limit the chance of cuckooing while maximising the likelihood of its uncovering, further emphasising the importance of local councils and housing officers (McAnulty 2022). Many difficulties remain though, especially in a challenging funding landscape for social housing and a significant cost-of-living crisis, and sadly many HAs are failing to properly support their tenants and provide them with proper homes. That said, HAs remain a unique site of policy intervention and innovation, and the multi-agency support they can offer has real community resilience-building potential. The social housing sector is also more regulated than the PRS, to which we now turn.

6. Modern slavery and the private rented sector

The relationship between the PRS and MS is characterised by sparse evidence and the need for greater exploration of the relationship between economic and domestic precarity. This is not surprising given the illegality of human trafficking and the 'hostile environment' that inhibits those being trafficked from coming forward, thereby increasing their vulnerability (Shepherd & Wilkinson 2021): research in this field is consequently beset with legal and ethical barriers. Those experiencing MS typically do not have mortgages and, following the Immigration Act 2014, fail to meet the 'right to rent' criteria, effectively excluding them from local authority or social housing, as well as reputable sections of the PRS, fuelling the expansion of elements of the PRS that operate 'below the radar' (McKee *et al.* 2021). Growing social, economic and political precarity therefore forms the context within which those on the fringes of legality engage with housing, and further 'vulnerabilises' many people (Hodkinson *et al.* 2020). The hyper-precarity that comes with exclusion from mainstream markets forms the basis for entry into a 'shadow private rented sector' (Rhodes & Rugg 2018) that is well organised, uses 'letting agents', and is characterised by 'unconventional tenancy agreements' and a lack of tenants' rights (Spencer *et al.* 2020).

Consequently, a series of factors allow elements of the PRS to continue opportunistically, such as growing market pressure, growing migrant worker populations, and cutbacks in legal and inspection capacities making offenders harder to identify (Spencer *et al.* 2020). It has also been recognised that the growing use of an internet-mediated PRS coupled with a growth in short-term rentals further hides those experiencing MS, for instance trafficked women are at risk of experiencing sexual exploitation through the growth in 'pop-up brothels' offering sexual services online rather than through established 'massage parlours' (APPG 2018). The flexibility of the shadow PRS is further seen in 'hot bedding' where the bed is let to two people, one working days and one working nights, and also 'touring' where those experiencing MS are regularly moved (Scoular *et al.* 2019).

Malloch & Rigby (2020: 167) bring such concerns together by recognising that the cumulative impact of the right to rent, the hostile environment, and discrimination in the benefits system can 'render meaningless the traditional notion of a home', while also turning landlords into *de facto* border guards (McKee *et al.* 2021). Home can thus be instead replaced by the idea of housing as a functional prerequisite to maintain MS that can actually enable exploitation and reinforce hyper-precarity. Policy responses and political rhetoric continue to focus on creating a hostile environment

and discovering the landlords and employers that profit from MS. However, this overlooks the structural drivers of MS and the complex synthesis of the labour market, housing, migration and exploitation.

7. Conclusions

This commentary has focused on four key sites of (un)housing and how these can perpetuate MS. Some, like homelessness, may seem more immediately obvious than others, but crucially we argue that even relative tenure security and supposedly safehouse accommodation is insufficient to combat MS. This is, in part, down to an inability for victims and survivors to practise homemaking and experience the ontological security that comes with it. While presented as distinct, all four sites discussed here are relational – a lack of social housing is driving pressure on the PRS which in turn increases homelessness, while insufficient NRM safehousing cuts across all of these. As noted throughout, however, more research is urgently needed in all these areas, particularly surrounding migratory status and those with NRPF. Policy needs to develop a more nuanced understanding of home and the role that (un)housing plays in bother perpetuating and combatting MS, shining a light on often overlooked, more everyday forms of MS. Ultimately this can also hopefully help develop culturally-competent community and policy responses that collectively empower individuals to help develop the sense of ontological security that is needed to combat hyper-precarity and with it MS.

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