

Youth homelessness in the UK

Findings
Informing change

May 2008

There have been significant policy developments across the UK to address youth homelessness in recent years, most particularly the extension of priority need groups and a new emphasis on the prevention of homelessness. This study, the first UK-wide review of youth homelessness for a decade, explores whether these changes have been effective in tackling youth homelessness.

Key points

- Data on the scale of homelessness (which is limited to young people who are in contact with services) indicates that at least 75,000 young people experienced homelessness in the UK in 2006–07. More young people were accepted as homeless following the extension of priority need groups in the early 2000s, but numbers have fallen in England and Wales in the last three years.
- Young people from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds and/or experiencing disruption or trauma in childhood are at increased risk of homelessness, and a significant minority experienced violence in the parental home.
- Homelessness can instigate or compound existing mental health and/or drug misuse problems amongst young people. There is a strong association between homelessness and withdrawing from education, employment or training, with a discord evident between the welfare benefit system and employability initiatives.
- New approaches to homelessness assessment, and services, had been developed in response to the government's preventative agenda. However, tensions remained about the role and timing of some interventions, and there was scope for further development of earlier 'pre-crisis' interventions, including parenting initiatives. Effective prevention also requires the creation of affordable housing pathways for young people.
- Models of temporary accommodation for young people were well developed, although further clarity was needed as to whether some should be short-term or more 'transitional' accommodation. Nonetheless, there remained a lack of suitable emergency accommodation and move-on housing options. Floating support was widely available and appeared successful.
- Agencies were more effective and coordinated in their approach to meeting the needs of young people aged 16 and 17, and those looked after by the local authority, than a decade ago. However, they regarded young people aged between 18 and 24 as in a comparatively worse position. Overall, agencies considered that policy was moving in the right direction although young people were less positive, pointing to the continuing challenges they faced in securing appropriate and affordable housing.

The research

By a partnership between the Centre for Housing Policy at the University of York and Centrepoint.

Background

There have been significant policy developments across the UK in the last decade to address youth homelessness. The introduction of homelessness strategies has placed a new emphasis on prevention, paying explicit attention to young people. Statutory protection has also been strengthened with the extension of priority need categories (particularly 16 and 17 year olds and care leavers aged 18–20) under the homelessness legislation in England, Wales and Scotland (with Northern Ireland soon to follow).

There have also been country-specific developments relevant to youth homelessness. In Scotland, there are plans for providing permanent rehousing to all homeless households by 2012. In 2007, England launched a National Youth Homelessness Scheme with a particular focus on the provision of mediation services and supported lodgings schemes, Northern Ireland published a strategy for the social inclusion of homeless people, and Wales produced a special report on youth homelessness.

This study included a review of available statistics and literature and six detailed case studies (Belfast, Edinburgh, Lambeth, Leicester, Sedgfield and Swansea), including interviews and focus groups with a total of 148 young people (including those with and without children) and 121 agency representatives. It also incorporated the findings from two national consultations with young people led by Centrepoint, and a policy roundtable event with national experts.

The scale of youth homelessness

Existing data on youth homelessness has significant limitations; in particular it is only possible to count young people who are in contact with services. On this basis, it can be estimated that at least 75,000 young people experienced homelessness in the UK in 2006–07. This included 43,075 young people (aged 16–24) who were accepted as statutorily homeless in the UK and at least 31,000 non-statutorily homeless young people using Supporting People services during 2006–07.

The number of young homeless people sleeping rough in the UK on any given night is low. However, qualitative evidence indicates that some young homeless people

may experience short periods of rough sleeping before securing temporary accommodation. Limited data also suggests that considerably more young people may experience rough sleeping over the course of a year than on any given night.

The overall numbers of young people accepted as homeless across the UK increased following the extension of priority need groups in the early 2000s. However, levels have fallen in the last few years. At a country level, numbers have reduced in England and Wales but have remained similar in Scotland and Northern Ireland.

The annual rate of young people aged 16–24 accepted as homeless is highest in Scotland (15.1 young people per 1,000 young people in population), followed by Wales (8.2), England (4.9) and Northern Ireland (4.8).

Young women are more likely to be statutorily homeless than young men, whilst young men (aged 18 or over) are more likely to be non-statutorily homeless. Statutorily homeless young people are very unlikely to have an ethnic minority background in Scotland, Wales or Northern Ireland but are significantly over-represented in England, most particularly London.

The experience of homelessness

Young people experiencing disruption or trauma during childhood and/or from poor socio-economic backgrounds are at increased risk of homelessness. The main 'trigger' for youth homelessness is relationship breakdown (usually with parents or step-parents). For many, this is a consequence of long-term conflict within the home, and often involves violence.

Young homeless people have much poorer health than other young people. Depression and other mental health problems are prevalent, as are substance misuse issues. A significant minority of young homeless people have multiple needs. It is not clear whether the prevalence of complex needs is on the increase or whether agencies are now better at recognising a range of needs.

Homelessness compounds a number of the problems faced by young people. This is particularly evident with mental health problems and/or the onset of (or exacerbation of existing) substance misuse problems. There is particularly strong evidence that homelessness impedes young people's participation in employment, education or training.

Other impacts are more mixed. For some young people, social networks are fractured, but many gain support from new sources (particularly support workers). Homelessness can be associated with experiences of

violence and/or involvement in 'risky behaviour', but may also lead to increased feelings of safety and an overall improvement in quality of life.

Service provision

There has been a significant cultural shift in the way that local authorities and support providers are responding to youth homelessness. There was an increasing consensus that being accepted as statutorily homeless was not always the 'best' outcome for young people. A housing options approach predominated, and whilst there were some concerns about gate-keeping, most felt that new practices had improved service delivery.

However, young people continued to find the experience of homelessness assessment intimidating, and commonly reported feeling confused, misunderstood, and/or powerless when navigating the homelessness 'system'. Both agencies and young people called for more widespread provision of dedicated housing officers for young people.

The provision of preventative services – particularly family mediation – had expanded significantly in recent years. Family mediation practice varied considerably, with tensions evident between some statutory agencies and mediation practitioners as to the role of the service. Agencies and young people identified significant scope for further development of earlier 'pre-crisis' interventions, including work with parents.

A range of models of accommodation were in place. However, there was a lack of clarity as to whether this accommodation should be 'temporary', moving young people on as soon as possible, or 'transitional', providing an opportunity to assist young people in gaining life-skills. Moves between accommodation settings were common; sometimes these were planned but moves were often crisis- or supply-driven and increased instability in young people's lives. Some young people spoke of being caught in a 'homeless circuit' for months or years.

Shortages of social housing were acute in many areas, necessitating often very lengthy stays in temporary accommodation. Support providers were increasingly developing strategies to facilitate young people's access to the private rented sector, but identified a number of barriers to, and concerns about, doing so. Rent deposit/ guarantee schemes were not always accessible to young people.

The recent push for the expansion of supported lodgings provision was largely welcomed by agencies, although the idea had a more mixed reception by young people.

Floating support schemes were well established, and appeared successful in improving young people's ability to sustain tenancies. Providers were increasingly seeking to complement these by (re)building young people's social support networks (promoting mentoring and befriending schemes in particular).

Availability of treatment for diagnosable mental health problems was said to have improved, but gaps remained for young people with 'low-level' mental health problems such as depression and anxiety. Provision for substance misuse had also improved, but little treatment was available for young people dependent upon cannabis and/or alcohol.

Similarly, provision supporting young people into education, employment and training had improved significantly, but major barriers – caused by a discord between the goals of employability initiatives and the welfare benefit system – severely impeded young people's economic participation.

Overall there were significant gaps in the evidence base of 'what worked well' for young homeless people. The success of provision was widely agreed to depend to a significant degree upon the quality of individual project staff and their relationship with young people.

Joint working

The development of homelessness strategies had been a crucial factor in addressing youth homelessness. The effective links between the homelessness strategy and both Supporting People Plans and Children's and Young People Plans were highlighted in most case studies, although success had been achieved to differing extents.

Operational joint working between service providers was seen to have made some significant steps forward in the last five years, assisted by factors such as policy and legislative change; youth homelessness forums; and joint protocols. However, challenges still existed in inter-agency working, often arising from resource constraints and a lack of understanding of organisational roles.

All case studies had developed, or were developing, joint protocols to ensure that agencies worked together more effectively to deliver housing and other support services to young homeless people. These appeared to be useful tools, although they had limited applicability to non-priority need groups of young people.

The monitoring of initiatives was improving at both the national and local level, though developing more appropriate measures for preventative work, and incorporating more qualitative outcomes into such measures were seen as future priorities.

Case study respondents differed in their assessment as to whether central funding was adequate. The recently introduced three-year local area agreements (LAAs) between central and local government (and its partners) were seen as a good opportunity to influence priorities in future homelessness service delivery.

Overall assessment of progress

Within all four countries, there was a widespread consensus amongst agency representatives that policy on homelessness generally, and youth homelessness specifically, was moving in the right direction. Young people, however, did not concur with this view because of the challenges they faced with finding housing.

There was a call from all quarters to take the prevention agenda further with a greater focus on the family and recognition that conflict in the home may predate the young person leaving by many years. New initiatives, such as Targeted Youth Support, were welcomed for their focus on joint working and consideration of the full range of risks to young people's well-being – including issues such as offending, poor mental health and drug and alcohol misuse, alongside homelessness.

There was a general concern that the homelessness system was operating as the only route to housing for less well-off and particularly vulnerable young people in some areas. It was argued that effective prevention needed to include the creation of affordable housing pathways for young people.

Whilst floating support was widely available, agencies and young people reported a shortage of high quality temporary accommodation for young people. Periods of rough sleeping and stays in bed and breakfast accommodation were still felt to be too common. New targets on bed and breakfast use in Wales and Northern Ireland (with England to follow) were welcomed but those who took part in the study felt that more emergency accommodation was required.

The review concluded that there is a need for an improved evidence base on 'what works' in addressing youth homelessness, including an evaluation of supported lodgings schemes in particular.

The review confirmed that income poverty and worklessness are associated with homelessness, with evidence that homelessness leads to increased proportions of young people not in education, employment or training. Young people found it difficult to study or work and afford present (hostel and private sector) rent levels together with Housing Benefit restrictions and problematic administration. The potential reform of the 16-hour rule for Housing Benefit claimants when studying and living in hostels would represent a first step in addressing these problems.

Some groups of young people appear to have benefited to a greater extent than others from recent policy change. There was evidence of a much more effective and coordinated response to meet the needs of young people aged 16 and 17, and those looked after by the local authority (again particularly in the younger age group). Those aged between 18 and 24 were regarded to be in a comparatively worse position. In addition, young people received very different service responses depending upon whether or not they had dependent children living with them. Services could usefully develop policies to support better youth transitions across housing, employment and family formation.

About the study

The study was undertaken by a partnership between the Centre for Housing Policy (CHP), University of York and Centrepoint. The independent review (involving a comprehensive review of statistics and literature and six case studies) was conducted by CHP. In addition, two national consultations with young people were undertaken by Centrepoint, and a policy roundtable event with key national experts was hosted by the JRF.

For further information

The full report, Youth Homelessness in the UK by Deborah Quilgars, Sarah Johnsen and Nicholas Pleace, is available as a free pdf download, from www.jrf.org.uk

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