

The RHP companion to

**Working
with
Young
People**

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Key Points

1. 'Homeless young people' means the 'hidden homeless' (those living with friends or relatives) as well as those sleeping rough.
2. Homelessness is more than just a housing problem; homeless young people are at risk and often require other services such as support, advice and counselling.
3. Family conflict, violence and abuse are the most common reasons for leaving home but those leaving care are up to 60 times more likely to become homeless than other young people.
4. Youth homelessness is a rural as well as a city problem.
5. A homeless young person may be assessed for housing if they are:
 - 'vulnerable' and in 'priority need' (Housing Act 1996)
 - a 'child in need' (Children Act 1989)but restrictions on the nature and cost of housing, severely reduces accommodation options.

Introduction

Youth homelessness, while not a new phenomenon, first came to public notice in the UK in the 1960s when Ken Loach's drama-documentary *Cathy Come Home*, focused national attention on the homelessness problem. The squalid conditions in which Cathy and her children were shown to be living created the impetus for the creation of Shelter, the homelessness pressure group, while the Ministry of Housing was galvanised into improving conditions in temporary accommodation. The 1975 television documentary *Johnny Go Home* was instrumental in exposing the risks of homelessness for young people going to London and placed the problem of youth homelessness onto the public agenda. It was this concern for young people sleeping on the streets in the West End of London that led to the opening of the Centrepont Night Shelter in the 1970s. Centrepont was the first charity to raise youth homelessness as a specific issue and campaign about it.

The advent of youth homelessness must be understood in the context of the expectation in western culture that young people will live independently when they become adults. Once they leave school they are expected to make their own way in the world by seeking employment or going

to college. Leaving home is regarded as the next logical step in this process of growing up. However, for some young people, leaving home is not planned and is very often precipitated by a particular negative event or chain of events which leads to them running from or being 'thrown out' of their parental homes, foster homes or residential care. It is important to understand the distinction between normal patterns of adolescent development and growth towards independence, and the experiences of the young people who find themselves homeless.

Partly as a result of the Thatcher administration's housing policies, the 1980s and 1990s saw a dramatic rise in youth homelessness in the UK. Large-scale youth unemployment led to fears in government circles that the benefits paid to young people would put the social security budget under stress. This concern was expressed in the right-wing media by describing young people who were living off the state as being on the 'Costa del Dole' and the furore whipped-up around this issue culminated in the Social Security Act 1988 which withdrew state benefits from under-18s living away from the parental home. Responsibility for young people was now shifted from the state, to the family. However, the failure to clarify what 'parental responsibility' actually meant for this

group of young people and the acute pressures this legislation placed upon the most vulnerable, contributed to a significant increase of youth homelessness.

A survey conducted by Centrepont in the eight months following the implementation of the Social Security Act 1988 found that the numbers of 16–19 year olds without proper accommodation in London had increased by 35 per cent. Their predicament was made even worse by major changes to the board and lodgings regulations in 1989, and changes in the funding arrangements for housing association hostels in the Housing Act 1989. Of the young people entering Centrepont nightshelter in 1994/5, 41 per cent had no source of income and 43 per cent were receiving no state benefits (Pitts, 2001). As a result, the age of economic independence for most young people was effectively raised to somewhere in the mid-20s. Subsequent minimum wage legislation introduced by New Labour established a 'transitional' wage to be paid to under-22s with adult levels of social security benefits only being paid at 25 years.

A Problem of Definition

It is difficult to get a true picture of the extent of the problem, as there is little agreement about what constitutes youth homelessness. In the UK the term is usually taken to refer to homelessness among young single people between the ages of 16 and 25 years. However, it has been in the interest of governments to define homelessness as narrowly as possible, and they have usually employed the term to describe rooflessness, the state of having no accommodation whatsoever or 'sleeping rough'.

In 1981 a Department of the Environment study suggested a very broad definition incorporating the notion of the 'hidden homeless' (hidden in so far as they are not officially recognised as homeless), as well as the 'visible' homeless. The study defined homelessness as involving persons:

- Being without immediate shelter.
- Facing the loss of shelter within one month.
- Living in a situation of no security of tenure and being forced to seek alternative accommodation, e.g. potential dischargees from institutions of all types, living temporarily with friends or relatives in overcrowded conditions, illegal tenancies.

- Living in reception centres, derelict buildings, squats, hostels, bed and breakfast hotels.

The Scale of the Problem

Due to the inaccuracy of official statistics, the exact number of young people who are homeless in Britain is unknown; however a number of organisations have tried to estimate the extent of the problem. *The National Inquiry into Youth Homelessness* estimated that in 1995 33,000 16–21 year olds and 246,000 16–25 year olds were homeless. Their findings suggest that 1 in 20 of the young people in the age range are likely to experience homelessness at some point. It is estimated that in one year alone 25,900 young people were homeless in central London. (Smith, 1996).

A Social Exclusion Unit report *Rough Sleeping* (1998) found that young people are over-represented among those who sleep rough. It estimated that approximately 25 per cent of the 10,000 people who sleep on the streets in England, in the course of a year, are aged between 18 and 25. In recent years, there has been a considerable increase in homelessness among 16 and 17 year olds. One third of all the homeless young people in a national survey undertaken in 1996 were aged below 18. Of young people admitted to the Centrepont night shelter, 41 per cent were aged 16 and 17 and, as such, they had no automatic right to welfare benefits.

The Characteristics of the Young Homeless

London generates its own homeless young people but it also attracts many young people from other parts of the UK. In 1998–99, the London borough in which young people from Centrepont's Berwick Street emergency shelter had most commonly slept rough in, was Westminster in which the 'West End' is situated. 51 young people with an average age of 18.5 years had slept rough for between three and four nights. The next most common boroughs were Hackney and Lambeth. An increasing proportion of the young homeless are female. Of those currently entering Centrepont, 44 per cent are young women; a substantial majority is under 18.

Homelessness amongst Black and Asian young people tends to be less visible because unlike white

young people, they tend not to end up sleeping rough. *Discounted Voices*, the first national survey into homelessness amongst young Black and Asian people, found these young people are disproportionately over-represented in hostels and bed and breakfast accommodation. Of young people entering Centrepoin, 43 per cent are Black or of mixed parentage.

Gay and lesbian young people are a group at particular risk of homelessness. One in nine gay and lesbian young people are evicted from their homes by their parents when they disclose their sexuality. These young people are also vulnerable to homelessness as a result of harassment by landlords and neighbours.

Running away from home may be a precursor to homelessness: 53 per cent of homeless young people interviewed had run away from home or care before the age of 16, and 85 per cent of these had done so more than once. (Craig et al., 1996). There are approximately 50,000 young people in the care of, or 'looked after' by local authorities in the UK at any given time and approximately 8,000 young people leave care each year. Despite the fact that 1 per cent of young people, under the age of 18, have been in care, between 20 per cent and 50 per cent of young homeless people have been 'looked after' by or in local authority care. Care leavers are up to 60 times more likely to become homeless, and are particularly over-represented among those sleeping rough or living in temporary accommodation (Evans, 1996).

A survey by the youth homelessness charity Centrepoin (1995) revealed that in 1994/95, 28 per cent of young people entering their nightshelter had previously been in care. Of these, 51 per cent had run away before they were 16. In a subsequent study of 39 care leavers, Centrepoin found that over half had been homeless immediately after leaving care, that nearly all of them had 'slept rough', and that 30 per cent had become homeless when social work help was withdrawn. In his study of 1,158 first admissions to the 'safe house' referred to above, Matthew Pitts (1992) noted that 36 per cent of first admissions had run from local authority with 75 per cent of 17 year olds having 'run' at least once before. The Centrepoin study of care leavers estimated that within six weeks, most young people living on the street would resort to crime, drugs or prostitution as a survival strategy.

Youth homelessness is not restricted to London and other big cities. Centrepoin's work around the

country shows that there is serious incidence, including rough sleeping, in areas such as Devon, Cumbria and Warwickshire.

The Causes of Homelessness

In 1999, Safe in the City, the first pan-London initiative aimed at preventing youth homelessness, produced a homelessness study entitled *Taking Risks* (Bruegel and Smith, 1999). 195 homeless young people in London hostels aged 20 and below were interviewed. The study highlights the young people's negative experiences in their families and in school as key links in the chain of events, which leads to homelessness. The report notes that the routes into homelessness constitute an 'unhappily familiar set of landmarks; poverty, family instability and stress, problems at school and school exclusion'. The following factors have been linked at different times with a range of causes:

- low self-esteem
- poor literacy
- youth crime
- mental health problems
- teenage pregnancy
- unemployment

Research by Centrepoin in London in 1987 found that 52 per cent of the homeless young people approaching them for help had left their home for 'pull' reasons, like moving to find work or needing to establish their independence. However, by 1995 only 14 per cent had left for these reasons. The majority, 86 per cent, had been forced to leave due to 'push factors' such as violence, abuse, family breakdown and being thrown out. Some parents ask their children to leave when poverty means they have difficulty in supporting them. There is some evidence that same-gender step-relationships can be more problematic than the average adolescent relationship. Moreover, opposite-sex step-relationships are more likely to be abusive and there is evidence that step-relationships are significantly associated with running away and youth homelessness (Russell, 1986). The most stressful areas are divided loyalties and discipline. The conflicts that arise can lead stepchildren to leave home (Smith et al., 1997). In 1999, 40 per cent of homeless young women in touch with Centrepoin had experienced sexual or physical abuse in childhood (Centrepoin, 1999).

The Dangers of Homelessness

The homeless population is an unhealthy population and chest respiratory problems are *most* common amongst them. Homelessness often precipitates deterioration in young people's mental health in the form of the onset, or deepening of, anxiety and depression. One third of young people interviewed by the Mental Health Foundation in 1998 had attempted suicide at some point in their lives. Homeless young people experience loneliness, a loss of self-esteem and feelings of worthlessness. They are disproportionately prone to alcohol and drug misuse; 39 per cent of young people sleeping rough under the age of 25 had a drugs problem (DoE, 1993). As we have noted, after a relatively short time on the streets, a disproportionate number of homeless young people will turn to crime or prostitution. On the other hand, homelessness puts these young people at far greater risk of violence, and physical and sexual abuse. Lack of money, leads to hunger, which may lead on to begging or the commission of committing petty offences. Of the young homeless interviewed for a study in 1996, 52 per cent had committed some form of crime, mainly involving theft or violence.

Homelessness Legislation

The Housing Act 1996 places a duty on local authorities to provide information about homelessness and the prevention of homelessness. However a number of barriers exist which must be overcome if a homeless young person is housed. They must first satisfy local authorities that they are:

- Homeless or threatened with homelessness within 28 days.
- In 'priority need' i.e. families with children, pregnant women, victims of fire or flood, or those vulnerable by reason of illness, disability or age (S.189).
- They are not 'intentionally homeless'.
- They do not have a 'local connection' with another area: if there is a connection elsewhere that other authority will have responsibility (S.198).

Discretion in interpreting *these* guidelines resides with individual local authorities and there are significant variations in their decisions about what

constitutes a priority case. As many as one in five Social Service Departments do not assess 16 and 17 year olds for housing need. Similarly, housing departments will not accept 16 and 17 year olds as being in 'priority need' because of their age. Section 14.10 states that vulnerability should not 'automatically be judged on age alone' and this has allowed housing departments considerable room for legal and administrative manoeuvre. Even if a local authority accepts that a young person is homeless and in 'priority need' it may nonetheless refuse to house them on the basis that they are 'intentionally homeless' if they may have outstanding rent arrears.

For many homeless young people the transition to independent living includes a number of 'false starts'. These young people need advice and support in following correct tenancy procedures if they are not to jeopardise their chances of gaining access to 'social housing'. Although social services and housing departments operate under different legislative frameworks, the Housing Act 1996 places a duty on them to work together in the case of young care leavers. The Labour government amended the Act in 1997 by taking away the guidance placed on the housing authority to provide suitable temporary accommodation for a minimum period of two years (Section 193(3)), and further extended their duties to include young people leaving care up to 21 years of age. The DETR, (Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions) will shortly issue guidance to local housing authorities, making clear that with very few exceptions, all care leavers and homeless 16 and 17 year olds, without back-up support, should be regarded as 'vulnerable' and have priority rights to be housed in suitable accommodation. Also, the Rough Sleepers' Unit and the DoH will be setting up a special team to look at the effectiveness of care-leaving packages in place across London.

The Act has also introduced important housing benefit changes, which has had an impact on young people's ability to access decent accommodation in the private rented sector. Young homeless people are traditionally highly dependent on the private rented sector, and are competing for an increasingly scarce resource. Housing benefit is linked to income support and meets the rent if it is assessed to be at, or below the 'local reference rent'. The local reference rent is the average rent for mid-priced accommodation in the area but such an

assessment takes no account of the quality of the accommodation. Those whose rents are considered to be above a reasonable market rent have to make up the shortfall. This is a particular problem for young people because of the reduced level of benefit they receive. Those aged 16 or 17 are not generally entitled to benefits as they are expected to go on a training scheme. At 16 years they are paid a Job Seekers' Allowance of £29.50. Those without a training place are paid discretionary payments known as Severe Hardship payments, awarded to young people for a period of 8 weeks at a time. Young people have to prove estrangement from their parents to be awarded this. At 17 years it rises to £35 and to £37.50 for those aged between 18 and 24 years. With an estimated subsistence level of £134.84 (excluding housing costs) for a single person over 25 in 1995, it is clear why many socially disadvantaged young people are likely to fall into arrears and face eviction and why landlords are reluctant to let properties to those under 25 years. Young people under the age of 25 are further disadvantaged as they are only eligible for housing benefit to meet the cost of **shared** accommodation. This has raised issues of safety for some very vulnerable young people, with few social skills, and who find sharing difficult. Making them share increases the risk of tenancy breakdown.

The Children Act 1989 was, among other things, designed to offer a safety net for homeless young people in need. The Act placed the onus on social services departments to assess the needs of young people and, in certain circumstances, to accommodate them. This was an important innovation, designed to prevent the drift into homelessness, which characterised so many young people's experience of leaving local authority care. In practice, however, young people continue to be passed between departments with nobody accepting responsibility. Recent reports from the CHAR (The Campaign for the Homeless and Roofless) found that only three-quarters of councils had a policy of assessing all 16 and 17 year olds who approached them for accommodation under the Children Act. Yet, section 24 of the Act makes it clear that the social services department has responsibility for young people leaving care and outlines their duty to give 'advice, assistance and befriending until the young person is 21'. However, disproportionate numbers of care leavers and those who have spent time in care

continue to end up as homeless, indicating that the state, in its role as guardian of these young people, is failing to meet their needs.

Government Initiatives

The government's *Rough Sleepers Initiative* (RSI), was launched in 1991, with a remit to provide emergency accommodation, including winter shelters, and access to 'move-on' accommodation for an estimated 1-3,000 people sleeping rough in London. In 1996 this was extended to other towns and cities designated as action zones. The RSI and the subsequent increase in the number of London hostel places has decreased the incidence of rough sleeping in London, but it has done nothing to stem the flow of newly homeless young people onto the streets. This is because the RSI does not target homeless or potentially homeless young people; just rough sleepers.

In response to the Social Exclusion Unit's 1998 report, the government has established the Rough Sleepers Unit so as to address the high incidence of young people sleeping rough. The DETR has also launched a Youth Homelessness Action Partnership to bring together representatives of central government, local government and the voluntary sector. Its aims are to produce an agreed definition of youth homelessness and an estimate of the numbers involved; to identify what works in tackling and preventing youth homelessness, to disseminate good practice, and to contribute towards the evaluation of the impact of government policies on youth homelessness.

The young person's Safe Stop project is part of the Rough Sleepers Unit's strategy to reduce the numbers of people sleeping rough to as near to zero as possible and by at least two-thirds by 2002. The aim of the Safe Stop project is to provide an emergency safety net for young vulnerable rough sleepers in a secure and safe environment, with the intention of providing opportunities to return home or securing access to accommodation or other specialist services as appropriate.

New Initiatives

The Supporting People Programme will offer housing support services to a wide range of vulnerable people. It promotes housing-related services which are cost effective and reliable, and

which complement existing care services. Supporting People is a working partnership of local government, service users and support agencies. The programme is a key element in the government's drive against social exclusion, and will be developed in a way which complements the Modernising Social Services agenda, the Crime Prevention agenda, and the recently announced proposals of the Housing Green Paper. The aim is to improve the quality and effectiveness of these support services by:

- Focusing provision on local need.
- Improving the range and quality of support. In particular the previous link of support services to tenure will be broken, so that more 'floating support' may be introduced where appropriate.
- Integrating 'support' with wider local strategies, particularly within health, social services, housing, and neighbourhood renewal and community safety.
- Monitoring and inspecting quality and effectiveness in a more structured way.
- Introducing effective decision making and administration. This will include changing the arrangements for funding.

The Transitional Housing Benefit Scheme has now started. After 2003 the new scheme will continue to develop in partnership with the Department of Social Security and other government departments.

Delivery and Evaluation

The range of accommodation available to homeless young people currently includes:

- Emergency short stay accommodation, which may include the provision of free meals, clothing, showers, laundry, advice and medical facilities. Some projects now have a range of on-site facilities, including an IT room, resources room, life skills kitchen and counselling facilities.
- Hostels offering medium to long-term accommodation.
- Shared housing which usually offers a single room with shared facilities.
- Supported lodgings for young people with mental health and drug problems.
- Independent living projects which offer assistance with budgeting, cooking, and

sustaining a tenancy.

- Bed and breakfast hotels.
- Private rented accommodation, although high market rents mean that this is generally of poor quality with few facilities and little security of tenure.
- Permanent accommodation from local authority housing departments and housing associations. It is unusual for single young people under 25 years of age to be offered this type of accommodation.

In addition, specialist or separate provision and support are available for young people from black and other minority ethnic communities, young women and young lesbians and gay men. The Ashiana Project provides safe accommodation for women from the South Asian, Turkish and Iranian communities, who have experienced physical, sexual, mental or emotional abuse. Support includes short term crisis counselling, advice on benefits, health care, education, employment, and applications for re-housing and accessing legal advice.

The Foyer movement, a model based on the French network of *foyers pour jeunes travailleurs* (hostels for young workers), is running projects alongside the government's New Deal programme for unemployed 18-24 year olds. This usually takes the form of a partnership between government, the private sector, the voluntary sector and a number of housing associations. These projects provide easy access to relatively cheap accommodation, which is linked to training or employment. Centrepoint's Camberwell Foyer is an example of this integrated approach, where residents meet with a vocational guidance worker to draw up an action plan within two weeks of moving in, and are given on-site training in 'job ready' skills. However, Youth Aid's evaluation of the foyer experience (Chatrik, 1994) found that the foyers they reviewed offered little more than the unpopular government training schemes. The report also expressed concerns about the capacity of foyers to provide the types of intensive support required by more vulnerable young people. Drop-in services offered by agencies such as CLASH (Central London Action for Street Health) and The London Connection, while not offering accommodation, provide excellent facilities and services during the day which homeless young people are able to utilise. CLASH focuses its work on harm minimisation. 'Works', syringes, condoms

etc., can be purchased here, and there is a drugs advice team on hand. Doctors and nurses are available for service users and to advise and support other staff. The London Connection offers 'drop-in' sessions throughout the week for specific target groups such as homeless women and young men selling sex.

Preventative Work

Safe in the City is an independent charity set up by Centrepont and the Peabody Trust and partially funded through the government's Single Regeneration Budget. Over a six year period the organisation will work closely with, and invest in, 30 charities and eight London local authorities (Lambeth, Waltham Forest, Newham, Hackney, Tower Hamlets, Brent, Greenwich and Islington) to provide support for over 12,000 young people and their families. Together, they will identify successful models of service delivery to prevent young people from becoming homeless. Each service will be monitored and evaluated for its effectiveness. The programme aims to provide a joined-up and structured support pathway for young people at risk which includes three important interconnected elements:

- *Skills and employability*: mentoring projects will assist in basic literacy and numeracy skills, and peer education schemes where young people can learn from their own and other's experiences.
- *Personal development*: a focus on confidence building, acquiring social communication skills as well as skills in budgeting, prioritising and advice on hygiene, nutrition, benefits, tenancy rights and how to maintain a tenancy.
- *Family support*: this will offer individual support as well as solutions focused on family interventions. Family conflicts can be addressed and managed by using mediation techniques. The NCH project, Turnaround, is one such service which works with young runaways and is based at the London Refuge, a certified 'safe house', under Section 51 of the Children Act 1989, for young runaways under the age of 16. Family mediation addresses family conflict in a safe environment in which all parties have an opportunity to express their views. The project aims to facilitate negotiations in

order to arrive at an agreement which all family members can live with. In this way it is hoped communication will be restored and conflict resolved, thus preventing young people running away again. In certain circumstances, of course, a return home would not be in the young person's best interests and staff are ever mindful of the child protection dimensions of their task.

Safe in the City recognise that multiple and connected problems experienced in childhood consistently put young people at risk in early adulthood. Therefore in order to turn crisis intervention to crisis prevention, a co-ordinated and holistic response to the reasons why young people become disaffected, excluded and homeless is required.

Responses to Youth Homelessness

Clearly, the model of intervention adopted by agencies and individual workers in their work with homeless, or potentially homeless young people, will influence the experience and outcome for those young people. Harding (1999), in a study examining the relationship between beliefs about youth homelessness and the steps being taken by local authorities to tackle the problem, has identified five models of response:

- *The Individual Culpability Model* arises from a school of thought which sees recipients of welfare services as deviant and undeserving. A young person is regarded as selfish, in opting to become destitute, and so evading their obligations.
- *The Social Pathology Model* takes a more sympathetic view in regarding the homeless young person as 'socially inadequate, maladjusted and psychologically disturbed'. They are believed to be acting in a pathological manner as a result of their background or genetic make-up.
- *The Child Model* sees the young person as a child and their homelessness as arising from immaturity and naïveté.
- *The Spiritual/Religious Model* regards the homeless person as 'a sinner to be saved' and homelessness as a symptom of the spiritual poverty of society.

- *The Political Model* identifies the causes of youth homelessness as political, social and economic rather than personal. Individuals are believed to have a right to accommodation and the factors which bring about homelessness are those which prevent them from exercising this right, e.g. shortage of suitably priced accommodation, job scarcity, and inadequate benefits levels.

Youth homelessness is currently high on the political agenda. New policies are still in the early stages of implementation and development but it appears that both central and local governments are beginning to identify more closely with Harding's *Political Model*. This policy focus will hopefully shift the apparently ingrained tendency amongst moral commentators, elements of the media and sections of the British public who exclude socially, pathologise and punish the young homeless 'for not fulfilling their citizenship obligations, even though the state fails to fulfil its duties of nurturance and protection towards them' (Carlen, 1996).

Partnership and Empowerment

The principle of partnership should be paramount in any 'inclusionary' strategy for the young homeless. Consulting young people on a particular issue or proposal allows them to express their views and to have an effective voice. This has the advantage of gathering new perspectives and increases the sense of ownership of an idea or project amongst its intended beneficiaries. Partnership can take the form of *representation* as is the case in Centrepont's 'Real Deal' programme,

in which young people's views are gathered, listened to and acted upon where appropriate. Alternatively, participation can be in the form of *joint decision-making* or *self managing* where young people have effective control over finances and forward planning, thus allowing them to change, influence, direct or control their own activities. Greater participation allows greater responsibility for the decisions. This has benefits of educating and empowering young people, increasing their self-confidence and self-esteem and improving young people's communication skills.

Participation can also give organisations a new impetus and an opportunity to work beyond established ways of doing things. Advisory Group Meetings are a good example of joint working, where many different organisations and agencies come together to feed in their ideas and viewpoints on a particular issue or project. Joint decision making can ensure a more creative approach to problem solving which will reflect what young people really want or really need. This more open style of education is based on equality, trust and mutual respect for each other and is based upon 'continual dialogue' which 'ensures that both play an active part in the process' (Rosseter in Jeffs and Smith, 1987).

Resource Implications

By adopting a multi-disciplinary approach, local authorities can ensure that their education, leisure, economic development, social services and housing policies mesh into an integrated and coherent strategy for prevention of youth homelessness.

Key Questions

1. Have you consulted and encouraged each young person to participate in making decisions and finding solutions?
2. Are you working in partnership with other agencies in a holistic way?
3. Has a full assessment of youth housing need and support required under the criteria of the Housing Act 1996, and the Children Act 1989 taken place in your local authority area?
4. Are you offering basic life skills training, including budgeting skills and benefits advice, in order to support young people in their accommodation?
5. Can early support to young people in their schools and communities prevent them running away and becoming homeless?