

Homelessness

Author: Dr Peter Mackie

Introduction

Homeless people are perceived by most of the public to be beggars, tramps and alcoholics who live on the streets of cities and towns. However, this description does not reflect the experiences of most homeless people.

In the UK, policy makers agree that homelessness is about more than just people sleeping rough on the streets. A person is defined as homeless if they have no accommodation or they have accommodation but for good reason they cannot stay there. For example, a person might be homeless whilst staying on a friend's sofa. They may be staying there because they were kicked out by their parents and have no other accommodation. Equally, they may have a home but it has been flooded and so they cannot stay there.

Previous research tells us a lot about the scale of homelessness amongst young people. A study by Quilgars et al (2008) estimated that 75,000 16-24 year olds experienced homelessness in the UK in 2006-07. They also found that the numbers of young homeless people sleeping on the streets in the UK on any given night are low. Most homeless young people will be sleeping on sofas or in homeless hostels.

This case study presents the findings of a research study completed in Wales, which involved interviews with 40 homeless young people aged 16-24 years and interviews with more than 30 professionals who work with them. The purpose of this research was to investigate the causes of their homelessness, the experience of the young people, some of the solutions currently being implemented, and the effectiveness of these solutions.

Findings

The causes of homelessness

The causes of homelessness amongst young people fell into two categories. In the first category, young people became homeless because of their own individual actions. For example, some young people used drugs, drank alcohol, or behaved in a way that led their parents to force them to leave the family home. A minority of young women were homeless because they became pregnant and were forced to leave by their parents. A final individual action in this first category was forgetting or being unable to pay rent, which led to them being evicted from their flat.



Human Geography

Social geography and social inclusion

In the second category, young people became homeless due to causes outside of their control. For example, a lot of the young homeless people had been in care homes and they left these homes before the age of 18, unprepared to live on their own and lacking in any family support. Young people who had been in young offender institutions also often ended up homeless because they were not ready to live on their own without family support.

For many young homeless people, homelessness was caused by a mixture of factors outside of their control and their own individual actions.

The experiences of being homeless

Experiences of homelessness varied. Most young people who were in care were provided with their own permanent accommodation fairly quickly but they would often become homeless again because they were not ready to live alone and they were not supported. For young people who became homeless whilst in the family home, they nearly all found themselves sleeping on friends' sofas before moving to a homeless hostel and waiting a long time before moving into permanent accommodation. Most of these young people were able to rebuild relations with their family and were supported emotionally and financially.

One of the major differences in young people's experiences was that young people who left care were normally unemployed and not in education or training, whilst more than half of the other young people continued in some form of employment, education or training.

The solutions

A lot of time and money is invested in trying to address the problem of homelessness amongst young people. Three interventions appeared to be particularly important.

- **Homelessness prevention:**

Firstly, in some schools young people are educated about leaving home, managing money and the causes of homelessness. This early education can prevent later homelessness. Secondly, there are projects that talk with young people and their family if problems are beginning to arise. This early intervention can prevent relationship breakdown and later homelessness.

- **Advice and accommodation:**

In Wales, and across the UK, there is a law which demands that all homeless people must be given housing advice. For



the young people in this study, most were able to get guidance on what to do next. The law also states that some homeless people must be provided with accommodation. Unfortunately, most young people aged 18-24 are not a priority for this accommodation and so many were left to find their own accommodation, normally of a very poor standard.

- **Support:**

One of the main problems that homeless young people face is keeping accommodation once they are housed, for example by paying the rent on time, paying other bills such as gas and electricity, and sorting out problems with the bills and repairs needed. Some support is given to young people once they are housed to assist them with these matters and with personal problems they may have that make it difficult for them to manage these matters, but this study found that young people may have to wait a long time before they are given a support worker and they do not see their support workers often enough.

Recommendations

Three primary recommendations emerge from this research with homeless young people.

- National and local governments must do more to prevent homelessness occurring in the first place. Whilst this important recommendation still applies in Wales and beyond, since this research was conducted, a law was introduced in Wales which requires all local authorities to take steps to prevent homelessness. The impacts of this law should be closely monitored and policy makers in other countries may draw lessons.
- Not all homelessness will be prevented. Therefore effective support must be available when young people become homeless. National and local governments in Wales should amend existing homelessness legislation to ensure all homeless young people are offered accommodation which meets their needs.
- Providing accommodation is clearly insufficient to meet the needs of all young people. In addition to accommodation, homeless young people must be offered prompt support to enable them to maintain the accommodation they are offered.

Conclusions

- Youth homelessness is about more than just young people sleeping rough on the streets and it is a significant problem in the UK.
- Youth homelessness is caused by a mixture of their own individual actions and factors outside of their control.
- Experiences of homelessness vary. Some young people will receive family support and will continue in education, training and employment, although they may not be provided with permanent accommodation. Other young people will have no family support, will be unemployed and not in education or training, but will be provided with permanent accommodation, often after leaving care.
- Solutions to homelessness focus on prevention, advice, accommodation provision and support but these interventions do not affect all young people and are not available equally across the UK.
- This research recommends that more is done to prevent homelessness. Everyone should be entitled to accommodation if they become homeless, and everyone who needs support should have access to it.

References

- Quilgars, D., Johnsen, S. and Pleace, N. (2008) Youth homelessness in the UK: a decade of progress? York: Joseph Rowntree Foundation

Further information

- For further information on youth homelessness visit: <http://www.homeless.org.uk/facts/our-research/young-and-homeless-research>