

Research report

No place to stay:

Experiences of
youth homelessness



centre
point

give homeless
young people
a future



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Many thanks to the young people who shared their stories and experiences, and to the charities and housing providers across the country who supported this research.

About Centrepoin

Centrepoin is the leading national charity working with homeless young people aged 16 to 25. We are a registered social housing provider, a charity enterprise and a company limited by guarantee. Established 50 years ago, we provide accommodation and support to help homeless young people get their lives back on track.

This Christmas, Centrepoin estimates that over 22,000 young people in England will be homeless or at risk of homelessness.

Homelessness of all kinds has increased over the past ten years, with over 60,000 households officially accepted as homeless or at risk of homelessness in October to December 2018 alone.¹ Rough sleeping has more than doubled in the last decade,² and there are more than 120,000 children across the UK who are living and growing up in temporary and insecure accommodation.³

Data on the scale of youth homelessness specifically is sparse. Centrepoin's Youth Homelessness Databank project examines data from local authorities across England obtained through Freedom of Information requests. Using this data, we estimate that during October, November and December 2018, 22,000 young people approached a local authority for help because they were homeless or at risk of homelessness.⁴

However, figures pertaining to support provided by local authorities only show part of the picture when it comes to youth homelessness. Many people without a stable place to live do not appear in these statistics, due to being 'hidden' homeless.

They could be staying on a friend's sofa, spending nights on the back of a night bus or sleeping in a tent hidden from public view. It is estimated that almost two thirds of single people experiencing homelessness are 'hidden' and so do not show up in official statistics.⁵

Young people are particularly likely to experience hidden homelessness – which is why it is so important that these hidden experiences are highlighted and the right support is put in place so that no young person has to live through it.



This report is based on the findings of a survey of 227 young people across England and Wales currently residing in homelessness accommodation, such as hostels, foyers and semi-independent flats. It highlights the experiences and challenges faced by young people experiencing hidden homelessness.

The research reveals how young people across the country are faced with shocking conditions and are forced to

make impossible choices. It shows the impact of not having a stable place to call home on a young person's mental and physical health, on their ability to succeed in education and employment, and on their relationships with family and friends. It shows the risks and physical dangers that young people going through homelessness face every day and every night without safe accommodation – and why it is so important that we campaign for change.



No place to call home

Almost two thirds of the young people accommodated by Centrepoint lost a place to live due to family breakdown. Wider evidence also suggests that this is the main driver of youth homelessness across the UK, with an estimated 52 per cent of 16-25s presenting as homeless last year due to parents or others not willing to accommodate them.⁶

Family breakdown is often a complex issue: mental ill health within families, cultural differences and expectations, discrimination and tensions with new partners can all push households to breaking point and leave young people facing homelessness.⁷ Wider factors, such as poverty, unemployment and poor housing also impact households at

a personal level, leading to pressures boiling over and families breaking down.

Deep cuts to preventative and early access services for young people and families – like youth services and family support workers – mean that more and more households risk reaching this breaking point. A lack of places offering advice and support also means that many young people facing homelessness do not know where to turn for assistance before a situation becomes a crisis.

Almost four in 10 of the young people surveyed in this research were forced to choose between staying in an abusive or unsafe home, or becoming homeless.

37 per cent stayed in an abusive home with a parent/guardian because they had nowhere else to stay.

45 per cent of young people identifying as LGBT+ reported staying in an abusive home with a parent or guardian because they had nowhere else to stay.

Almost half of the young people responding to the survey reported having stayed in an overcrowded property. Overcrowding, where too many people are having to live in the same space, has been shown to disrupt education, negatively impact on someone's physical and mental health and can lead to stress, tension and family break-up.⁸

46 per cent stayed in an overcrowded property because they had nowhere else to stay.

This was even higher for young people who identify as black, Asian or minority ethnic (BAME) with 64 per cent reporting having stayed in an overcrowded property.

Domestic abuse from a partner or family member also disproportionately affects younger people in England and Wales, where a critical lack of refuges and safe alternate accommodation can make it highly difficult to escape an abusive household.⁹



19 per cent stayed in an abusive home with a partner because they had nowhere else to stay.



40 per cent said that homelessness had a negative impact on their ability to access or sustain education.



64 per cent said that homelessness had a negative impact on their relationships with family.

In many of these situations, young people are again faced with an impossible choice: between staying in an abusive, unsafe or unsuitable home, or not staying at home at all.



Sabrina

Sabrina's mother suffered with mental health issues, and was emotionally and physically abusive to her and her sister. Sabrina began sofa-surfing with different family and friends before approaching her council as homeless, at age 16.

"My mum used to hit me, we would argue I would run away. She would say, 'I didn't want you, you were a mistake.' It got worse over the years. Eventually I went to stay at a family member's house and then various different houses. You just have to get used to it. That went on for three years, from when I was thirteen."

No place to stay

For many young people unable to stay in their family home, the first option is to find friends or acquaintances who can offer a roof over their heads. This places young people at high risk of being exploited or taken advantage of by adults who may not have their best interests at heart.

For three in four of the young people surveyed, sofa surfing had formed part of their journey through homelessness.

73 per cent had sofa surfed because they had nowhere else to stay.

This meant staying on sofas and floors, living out of bags and waking up each morning without knowing where they would be staying the following night. For many of the young people supported by Centrepunt, sofa surfing between different family and friends puts a strain on those relationships, impacts on school work, employment and mental health.

A critical shortage of affordable housing means that it is harder and harder for young people to find a secure home, while low incomes and reduced entitlements to benefits make this even more difficult.¹⁰

50 per cent said that homelessness had a negative impact on their relationship with friends.

When the goodwill of friends runs out, young people can find themselves with fewer and fewer options for a warm place to stay. This can lead to staying with 'friends of friends' and strangers, putting them at risk of danger, exploitation and abuse.

Many of the young people surveyed reported cases where people had tried to take advantage of their situation, such as being pressured to take drugs or drink alcohol, and in some cases being pressured to stay with a complete stranger.

27 per cent felt pressured to drink alcohol while homeless.

26 per cent felt pressured to take drugs while homeless.

24 per cent felt pressured to stay with a stranger while homeless.

The impacts of not having a place to stay go beyond just affecting a young person's education or employment. The young people in this study reported feeling lonely and isolated, embarrassed and ashamed, and not being able to tell anybody about their situation.



69 per cent felt that there were times when no-one cared about them.



67 per cent felt lonely while homeless.



55 per cent felt there were times they could not tell anyone they were homeless.



Gina

Gina moved in with her boyfriend at age 17, but was made to move out after arguments with his family became too much. Although she was working full time, she could not afford to find anywhere to rent on her own and so had to sofa surf among different friends and acquaintances.

"I had nowhere to go back to that was stable and somewhere for me to relax. That's what a home is, and I didn't have one. I felt a little bit useless in a way. I couldn't return the favour for anybody, and I felt like I was relying on people a bit too much. It was quite hard to relax because I couldn't stay in any one place for too long. I was going to the doctor a lot around then because the stress of it all was making me ill."

No safe place

68 per cent of respondents felt unsafe while homeless.

Being homeless greatly increases a young person's risk of violence, abuse and exploitation. Research has shown the risks and harms faced by people who are homeless or sleeping rough, ranging from being verbally abused through to being physically attacked.¹¹

The young people in this study reported a range of harms from other people while experiencing homelessness:

30 per cent suffered physical assault.

27 per cent suffered theft.

15 per cent suffered mugging.

One in five of the young women who took part in this survey reported having been a victim of sexual assault while homeless.

14 per cent suffered sexual assault.

Being homeless increases the risk of being exploited and for young people, this risk is even greater.

Recent research by Centrepoin has shown that homelessness puts young people at greater risk of criminal exploitation, violence and gang involvement when they do not have a safe place to call home.¹²

Without access to stable income or strong support networks, homeless young people can find themselves pushed towards gangs and criminal activity. The impact of this can be life threatening and puts them in the most risky of situations. It also keeps a vulnerable young person trapped in a cycle of homelessness and exclusion.

More than one in six of the young people in this study reported having taken part in illegal activity, such as preparing or selling drugs for a place to spend the night. One in five young people felt pressured to commit a crime while homeless.

15 per cent took part in illegal activity for somewhere to stay.

21 per cent felt pressured to commit a crime while homeless.

6 per cent committed a crime in order to be arrested for somewhere to stay.

One in five young people reported spending a night in a 'squat'; an empty or unoccupied property, because they could not stay anywhere else.



20 per cent spent a night in a squat or empty property because they had nowhere else to stay.

Staying in a squat can expose young people to risks on a daily basis, from poor physical conditions to harassment and abuse.¹³ Recent changes to the law around staying in unoccupied properties also mean that homeless young people face criminalisation and imprisonment simply for having nowhere else to stay.



Frank

Frank became involved in criminal activity and drug use after moving to a new area. Changes to his behaviour began causing issues with his family, and eventually he saw no way out of his criminal lifestyle other than running away from home.

"I was involved in gang violence as well. If you get involved in bad situations, say for example you owe people money that you can't afford to pay straight away, they won't take no for an answer. You need to get them the money, otherwise you're getting done. And when I say 'done' - I mean you could get stabbed. That's how serious it was getting for me.

"Eventually I just thought: 'I need to get away.' I realised I couldn't stay at home at that time - sometimes you just can't. Once you get mixed in with that group, there's not really a way out of it."

No place at all

More than six out of ten young people in this survey reported having slept rough. Faced without anywhere else to turn, these young people were forced to spend the night in a range of unsafe, unsanitary and unsheltered locations.

Rough sleeping is defined by the government as people sleeping or bedding down 'in the open air' - such as on the street or in a bus stop - or sleeping in a place not designed for human habitation, such as a train station, barn or in a car.

Where did homeless young people have to stay?



33 per cent of young people spent a night in a **park** because they had nowhere else to stay



27 per cent spent a night in a **tent** because they had nowhere else to stay



20 per cent spent a night in a **car** because they had nowhere else to stay

18 per cent spent a night in a **doorway**

14 per cent spent a night **under a bridge**

17 per cent spent a night in a **car park**

10 per cent spent a night on a **night bus**

16 per cent spent a night in a **station**

7 per cent spent a night in a **public toilet**

12 per cent spent a night in a **stairwell**

Even a very short period of homelessness and sleeping rough can have significant long-term impacts on a young person's mental and physical health.

72 per cent said that homelessness had a **negative impact on their mental health.**

58 per cent said that homelessness had **negative impact on physical health.**

60 per cent reported going to sleep hungry when they were homeless.

Official statistics suggest that only a small number of young people are sleeping rough: fewer than 300 on a given night in 2018.¹⁴ However, young people, who may be more vulnerable to exploitation and abuse, are more likely to stay in locations which are hidden from view. Centrepoin't's Youth Homelessness Databank found that across England, more than 103,000 thousand young people approached their council for support with their housing situation, but fewer than half received any documented support.¹⁵

Even though new legislation means that all people seeking homelessness advice and support should receive it, a lack of resources and critically of affordable accommodation means that young people still risk being turned away. The reality of youth homelessness today means

that across the country, thousands of young people are faced with staying in an abusive or unsafe household, forced into exploitative and dangerous situations, or having nowhere to stay at all.

Almost four in 10 of the respondents to this survey were either in care or had spent time in care. While legally entitled to support and assistance from the state, our research shows that too many young people go from care into housing insecurity and homelessness and are left ill prepared for independent living.¹⁶

A large proportion - 49 per cent - of the respondents to this survey with experience of the care system reported sleeping rough highlighting that for many young people leaving care, official support is all too often not enough to provide the accommodation they need.



Kasim

Kasim's relationship with his mum deteriorated after he began drinking heavily as a way of relieving his anxiety. She eventually kicked him out, and after sofa surfing among family and friends, Kasim ended up sleeping on the streets:

"One time I remember I slept outside in Trafalgar Square at a bus stop. When I slept on buses, the bus driver would wake me at the end of the line and then I'd sleep at the bus stop. There were times that I felt scared. There was one time that a guy came up to me and started asking me questions; he was really high, you could tell he was really high and he started touching my stuff and I got really scared then."

A home at last

Homelessness is a situation which nobody should face in the UK. It is exhausting and destabilising, can have serious long term effects on a person's health and wellbeing and increases the risks of violence, abuse and exploitation. However, this report shows just how, across the country, children, teenagers and young adults are faced with having nowhere safe to call home.

Organisations like Centrepoin support young people affected by homelessness not just over Christmas, but throughout the entire year. We offer a warm bed and a safe place for over 1500 vulnerable young people every single night, alongside support for education, employment and training.

Young people supported by Centrepoin have access to specialist health teams, engagement programmes through art and fitness, and training and development to help them prepare for living independently, such as managing a budget and household bills.



Layla

Layla became homeless after her relationship with her mum broke down. After staying temporarily with other family and friends, Layla moved into one of Centrepoin's London services and has now moved on into her own accommodation.

"I've had so much support from Centrepoin. I had amazing keyworkers. They were so supportive; they would bend over backwards for you. It always felt like they would go the extra mile for you. With my mum, life just happened and it was nobody's fault. Centrepoin gave me the legs I needed to stand independently. Having that space to call my own allowed me to develop my skills and be strong. My relationship with my mum now is excellent. Having that space really helped us.

"I'd love to work doing something I'm passionate about and I want to be a director. That's what I'm working towards."

We have a dedicated advice line for young people across the country who are concerned about their housing situation.

Across the country, from Cornwall to Northumberland, charities and housing providers provide a vital lifeline to young people faced with homelessness.

However, homelessness organisations are being forced to do more with less, at a time when all forms of homelessness are increasing.

Cuts to council budgets means that local authorities have less to spend on supporting and accommodating young people who become homeless, and less to spend on preventative services.

A critical lack of housing which young people can afford means it is increasingly difficult for young people to move on from homelessness and into a home of their own when they are ready. This means they

are stuck for longer than they need to be, and that charities like Centrepoin are less able to support young people who need accommodation and support.

That is why Centrepoin is campaigning for change, to ensure that young people do not become homeless in the first place, and those that do are able to receive the support they need to allow them to move into stable accommodation as quickly as is possible.

We are calling for changes to the benefits system, to ensure that young people are able to access a fairer level of financial support which reflects the amount needed to rent a property. We are calling for better access to advice and support for young people and families at an earlier stage. And we're calling for the government to properly invest in genuinely affordable housing, so that young people moving on from homelessness have a real chance of finding a place to live.



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