



accommodation needs and experiences



Youth Justice Board
Bwrdd Cyfiawnder Ieuentid

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A summary of research commissioned by the Youth Justice Board for England and Wales (YJB) into the housing needs and experiences of young people who have offended

RESEARCH AIMS

The research aimed to provide:

- a national picture of the housing issues that face young people who have offended, and the barriers to their accessing accommodation
- an understanding of these issues from the perspective of the young people, youth justice practitioners and other organisations involved in assisting young people with their living arrangements.

DEFINITIONS

Definitions of ‘homelessness’ and ‘unsuitable accommodation’ were agreed with the YJB in order to form a clear basis and understanding for the research, and to try and capture ‘hidden’ accommodation difficulties that the legal and standard definitions fail, on occasions, to reflect or make explicit.



Homelessness¹

Homelessness means not having a home. Even if you have a roof over your head you may still be homeless, or may be using homelessness services. This is because you may not have any rights where you live or your home may be unsuitable for you.

1. This definition is taken from the Shelter website (www.shelter.org.uk).

Unsuitable accommodation

Accommodation was defined as ‘unsuitable’² on the basis of a number of factors, which included:

- the size, location and condition of the property
- social factors, such as access to family, amenities and education, training and employment provision
- the risk of physical, mental or emotional harm.

METHODOLOGY

Identifying research sites

Ten youth offending team (YOT) areas were used as research sites. These were chosen to be geographically and demographically representative across England and Wales, and included urban and rural areas, different ethnicities and an adequate sample of girls and young women.

Identifying the sample

The young people used as the research sample were principally identified through the aggregation of three *Asset* domains:³

- family relationships
- living arrangements
- neighbourhood.

2. It should be noted that in its *Counting Rules*, the YJB uses the Children (Leaving Care) Act definition of ‘unsuitable accommodation’.

3. *Asset* is the structured assessment profile used across the youth justice system in England and Wales.

Research methods

These included:

- **structured interviews with 152 young people, in community and custodial settings, and semi-structured interviews with 54 of these, to gain more detailed information**
- **'proxy' interviews with 64 youth justice practitioners (where young people could not be interviewed)**
- **focus groups or semi-structured interviews with key stakeholders (as identified by the YOT) in each of the ten areas, including the YMCA, Shelter, children and family services, housing authorities and local voluntary organisations and housing providers**
- **a survey of 30 housing providers across the ten areas**
- **a review of 83% of the youth justice plans produced by every YOT for 2004/05.**

FINDINGS

Characteristics of young people in housing difficulty

Although aged 18 years or younger, all the young people in the sample were in housing need, including:

- **75% who had lived with someone other than a parent at some time**
- **40% who were or had been homeless or had sought formal housing provision and/or support.⁴**

This compares with just 1.5% of children and young people in the general population who do not live either with a parent, or in a communal setting such as local authority residential care.⁵

4. Our definition includes those who are 'street' homeless, those in temporary accommodation and those living independently; this is discussed in more detail in the full report.

5. Office of National Statistics 2001.

The young people in the sample are mostly a vulnerable group with a range of needs. A high proportion:

- had been abused (40%)
- had been in care (49%)
- had a social worker (71%).⁶

Their accommodation problems are often related to difficult or tense family relationships, which have usually existed for some years. While stakeholders described 16 as the most common age for having accommodation difficulties, young people identified housing as first becoming an issue between the ages of 13 and 15.

The young people in the sample also highlighted that accommodation difficulties could involve a number of moves and a considerable degree of impermanence: the average number of accommodation moves made by the sample in a twelve-month period ranged from none to more than 14, with an average of 2.7.

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6. As distinct from a social worker in the YOT.

Number of accommodation moves made by the sample over a twelve-month period

| Number of moves | Frequency |
|------------------------|------------------|
| 0 | 20 |
| At least 1 | 31 |
| At least 2 | 28 |
| At least 3 | 26 |
| At least 4 | 20 |
| At least 5 | 11 |
| At least 6 | 6 |
| At least 7 | 3 |
| At least 8 | 1 |
| At least 9 | 2 |
| At least 10 | 1 |
| At least 13 | 1 |
| At least 14 | 1 |

When young people left the family home (whether they ran away, were told to leave or did so of their own accord), they went to one or more of the following places:

- into 'care' (for example, foster care or a children's home)
- to stay with another family member
- to stay with a friend.

In addition, some young people might sleep rough for a period of time or go into emergency or temporary accommodation.

Experiences of homelessness

The young people sampled did not generally describe themselves as 'homeless' if when they left the family home they were offered accommodation by extended family and family friends, friends or friends' families. Instead, homelessness for these young people was strongly associated with exhausting this supply of family and friends, and being street homeless or in any form of formal temporary accommodation. Asking young people about homelessness therefore requires careful phrasing in order to identify the status of their living arrangements accurately.

Stakeholders in seven of the ten areas stated that more males than females presented with accommodation difficulties. However, this perception appears misleading, as in this study the young women in the sample were significantly more likely to be homeless; this would suggest that young women are either not presenting for assistance, or that assistance is not offered or is unsuitable.

Of the 40% (n=61) young people sampled who said they had ever been 'homeless':

- 13 said they had been helped out of the situation by friends
- 9 were helped by family members, who might take them back into the home, and allow them to stay for a short while or to access alternative accommodation
- 9 were helped by housing professionals such as housing projects, housing associations or the local authority
- 1 moved into secure accommodation
- 1 received a Referral Order with a condition that they be accommodated by their father.



it was necessary to be **'tough'**
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Many young people interviewed described a mixture of problems and anxieties when they were homeless, which ranged across physical and mental health and social issues:

- **31% said they had experienced poor physical health⁷**
- **66% felt depressed**
- **48% felt hungry**
- **39% felt lonely**
- **21% were frightened of other people**
- **15% had been a victim of crime.**

Experiences of temporary accommodation

Young people entered temporary accommodation for a variety of reasons:

- **on a regular, if occasional short-term basis following arguments with parents (this generally involved staying with friends)**
- **as part of a pattern of disrupted family relationships (which might also have involved periods 'in care'), with moves in and out of the family home over a number of years**
- **as the result of the need for a complete change, usually due to difficulties with one or both parents or a step-parent.**

The temporary housing experienced by the sample included:

- **sofa-surfing (the most common form)**
- **bed-and-breakfast accommodation**
- **hostels (both supported and unsupported)**
- **children's homes and foster care (for those under the age of 16)**
- **a women's refuge**
- **a squat**
- **respite care**
- **a crack house.**

7. This included weakness, weight loss, headaches, colds, asthma, shingles and aches and pains.

Young people's ideas of what constituted good temporary accommodation focused principally on:

- **cleanliness**
- **other residents**
- **staff**
- **rules**
- **loneliness.**

The structured interviews showed that:

- **40% of the sample had been asked to leave a place where they were living**
- **13% were subsequently banned from that form of accommodation.**

Violence by the young person was the principal reason for their eviction, particularly in relation to hostels, bed-and-breakfast accommodation and children's homes: in qualitative interviews, 22 young people described having committed acts of violence or aggression. Young people were inclined to describe their own or others' behaviour as reflecting a world of posturing, bravado and threats, where it was necessary to be 'tough' or violent to ensure that no-one harmed or took advantage of you.

Accommodation on leaving custody

At the point of interview, 40% (n=61) of the young people in the sample were in custody or secure accommodation. Of these, 67 % had been in custody before, and 17% of this number had previously left without a place to live.

Of the young people interviewed in custody, 26% (n=16) said they did not have a place to live arranged for their release. Despite this, only two young people thought that they would definitely be homeless on release; nine young people believed they would not be, and five did not know.

In terms of specific accommodation issues for young people leaving secure accommodation, stakeholders reported that most private landlords and bed-and-breakfast owners would not agree to the installation of the monitoring equipment that can be a court requirement. They also raised the problem of organising accommodation in advance of release when some local authority housing services and other providers will not recognise a young person as homeless until they present themselves in person.

Accommodation provision

In nine out of ten of the research sites, stakeholders reported insufficient accommodation in their local area for young people who had offended and who were experiencing housing difficulties. In the tenth site, some practitioners felt that there was an adequate number of 'bed spaces' for young people in the area, but these were not being properly targeted.

stakeholders reported insufficient accommodation in their local area for young people who had offended

Accessing accommodation

Of the 54 young people who undertook the more detailed semi-structured interview, most could identify an individual or organisation that had helped them with their accommodation, with 26 naming the YOT.

However, the interviews and the stakeholders' focus groups both highlighted that the working practices or requirements of some housing providers and organisations were inappropriate when dealing with young people who have offended, and were actively unhelpful in some cases. For example, practitioners from three sites stated that local authority housing services in their areas insisted that young people had a letter from their parent or carer confirming that they had been evicted. This was deemed to be difficult for the young person to achieve in most cases, and impossible in some. One young person interviewed was frustrated by this requirement and explained that his mother, although she had evicted him from the family home, refused to write such a letter.

The young people interviewed were clearly confused by the requirements and rules of the local authority and other helping organisations – particularly as they felt they were approaching them at a time of dire need.

The role of the YOT accommodation officer

The youth justice plans for 2004/05 revealed that most YOTs had accommodation officers in place. However, the majority of plans were not detailed enough for analysis of how this function was discharged or what role the accommodation officer was expected to play. While some accommodation officers had a strategic brief, representing the YOT in a range of local housing forums, the role more frequently appeared to be focused at the operational level, and involve locating individual



placements as the need arose, and supporting young people in these placements.

Housing provider study

Of the 30 housing providers⁸ who returned questionnaires, the majority were hostels. In most cases (n=23), the young person had his or her own room and shared communal facilities such as a kitchen, bathroom and living room. Six providers supplied a self-contained flat or bedsit that also had communal facilities, and five had fully self-contained facilities. All but two providers (93 percent) gave the young person a key to his or her own room or accommodation.

Housing providers reported young people were referred to them by:

- **local authority housing departments (referrals received by 27 providers)**
- **social services (25 providers)**
- **YOTs (25 providers)**
- **voluntary organisations (21 providers)**
- **young people self-referring (16 providers).**

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8. These were the housing providers identified by the YOTs as the services to which they referred young people.

Housing providers were asked how soon after the referral an assessment of suitability would take place:

- **14 indicated that this was likely to occur within a week (with a number of these saying it could be less)**
- **7 reported assessment could be on the same day**
- **5 that it could be within two or three days**
- **3 that assessment would be within a month.**

As part of the assessment, all housing providers asked whether a young person is an ex-offender, and what types of offences the young person had committed. Providers were also asked whether there were any offence types that they considered unacceptable. The answers that occurred most frequently were:

- **arson and causing damage by fire (as it could create insurance problems)⁹**
- **Schedule 1 or sex offences (because of the potential risk to other residents)¹⁰**
- **violence and violent behaviour.¹¹**

All housing providers indicated that they provided support to young people in their accommodation. However, the interviews conducted with young people did not reflect this, despite the fact that many young people had direct experience of the accommodation or support on offer from the housing providers surveyed. Only four young people mentioned receiving support from hostel staff (and this was not always positive), and young people were often unsure whether they had ever lived in supported accommodation.

9. Of the research sample, 5.4% had their most recent conviction for criminal damage including arson.

10. That is offences listed in Schedule 1 of the Children and Young Persons Act 1933 where the victim is a child or young person. In July 2005, the DfES replaced the term with that of 'risk to children' to describe those persons identified as posing an ongoing risk to children. Of this sample, 8% were convicted of Schedule 1 offences and 2% of sexual offences.

11. Of the sample, 17.5% had their most recent conviction for violent offences.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- The aggregation of the three *Asset* domains of Living Arrangements, Family and Personal Relationships and Neighbourhood can usefully identify the individuals and the population of young people who are in need of housing or at risk of having accommodation problems. Reviewing the young person's situation and circumstances over time will also help the YOT to identify the nature and extent of problems related to accommodation.
- Practitioners and stakeholders should ensure that the needs of young women are met; the suggestion that this is not the case is also an area for future research.
- The elevated mental health *Asset* scores and the levels of depression, anxiety and loneliness reported by young people at times of more serious accommodation need suggest that this is an area that should receive further focus.
- The standard and quality of accommodation available to young people frequently does not meet their needs; this requires policy imperatives for improved standards.
- The availability of dedicated and specialist assistance to help young people to cope on a day-to-day basis with their housing arrangements should be specifically available for all 16 and 17 year olds who live independently.
- There needs to be improved information-sharing between Social Services, housing authorities and YOTs so that the most appropriate options are always considered for young people.
- Given that young people may well experience problems on release from custody and the fact that homelessness applications can take up to 28 days to assess, the review of a young person's housing situation should start as early in their sentence as possible.

- More effective strategies should be developed to deal with violence in temporary accommodation in order to avoid young people being victimised and evicted.
- There are a number of wider policy considerations that need to be reviewed, such as the way in which housing legislation can be used to discriminate against individuals with a criminal record when seeking access to housing.

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The full report on which this summary is based
is available from the YJB website.

Further copies of this summary can be obtained from:
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