Youth Homelessness in the United Kingdom

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Contents

Glossary of terms

Rough sleeping	Rough sleeping is the most visible and extreme form of homelessness. It includes people who are sleeping outside or in places not designed for people to live in, including tents, cars, doorways and abandoned buildings.
Sofa surfing	Sofa surfing is a form of homelessness in which people are staying on the floor, sofa or in the spare room of friends or family. These can be extremely temporary arrangements including moving on a nightly basis.
Hidden homelessness	Hidden homelessness does not have a strict definition and can be applied inconsistently but most definitions consider it to include forms of homelessness that are not visible on the streets or in official statistics. This can include people who are sofa-surfing, living in severely overcrowded conditions, squatting, and people sleeping rough in hidden locations.
Single homelessness	Single homelessness is a term within homelessness legislation to define people presenting to their local authority without any dependents or as a family. The alternative to single homelessness is family homelessness. Due to the way the homelessness legislation works, people presenting as single homeless may find it harder to access housing support. As a result a lot of voluntary, community and faith based support is targeted at single homeless populations.

Executive Summary

This report presents a brief overview of the current picture of youth homelessness across the United Kingdom. It sets out the different policy contexts, data trends and explores some of the causes and consequences of young people's experiences of homelessness.

Defining youth homelessness is difficult

- **Lack of unified definition:** Understanding youth homelessness starts with understanding how youth homelessness is interpreted and defined, and as with all things related to homelessness this is not a straightforward task as there is no unified, standalone definition across the United Kingdom.

- **Variability in definitions by nation:** Alongside this, definitions of homelessness vary across each of the UK countries, and even between different statutory bodies. This presents challenges in comparisons between models and approaches cross country, as well as present significant barriers to consistent data capture and analysis.

- **Implications for policy and systems changes:** The challenge in defining youth homelessness consistently presents difficulties in prescribing common approaches and shared ambitions towards policy influencing and system changes across each nation. This is further reinforced due to homelessness being a devolved matter meaning that across Great Britain and Northern Ireland each administration has its own legislative approach to statutory homelessness including specific measures for young people.

The policy context

- **Devolution of homelessness policy:** Whilst homelessness policy in the UK started with unified legislation it is now devolved and has developed and evolved in different directions. In England, Scotland and Wales changes made have been to open up and improve access to statutory homelessness support which had historically been hard to access for people without children or other dependents.

- **National policy:** Despite homelessness being devolved, preventing and ending homelessness across the four nations is impacted by some Westminster led policy that impacts at a national level such as welfare.

- **Housing supply and barriers for young people:** Housing supply greatly impacts on homelessness, both in terms of causes of homelessness and trapping people in homelessness unable to move into permanent, secure tenancy. Long term depletion in social housing stock combined with a private rented sector that is increasingly unaffordable to people on housing benefit. This is a particular issue for young people under 35 with no history of care or living in a homeless hostel who will only be entitled to the Shared Accommodation Rate. This is meant to cover the cost of renting a room in a shared house and is lower than other Housing Benefit rates. The amount is often not sufficient to cover the cost of rent in the private rented sector.

- **Immigration Policy:** Immigration policy is set in Westminster and current law creates conditions that mean certain migrants, including asylum seekers, have no recourse to public funds and are not entitled to either statutory homelessness support or welfare

benefits. This means that there is a population of young people experiencing homelessness who are not able to access anything beyond the most basic of support to meet their needs i.e. that which is provided by day centres.

Scale and trends within youth homelessness

- **Challenges with official data on youth homelessness:** Official data available are hugely variable and often does not capture age and other relevant demographic information meaning it is not possible to see an overall picture of the scale of youth homelessness across the United Kingdom. The limitations of all homelessness data are also true for young people, in that they fail to capture hidden homelessness or populations less likely to access statutory support

- **Divergence between the nations:** The Centrepoint databank is the most useful data source to directly compare across the UK although it is impacted by the same limitations of all official homelessness data. This data shows that since the pandemic there has been divergences in trends in youth homelessness across the UK nations with an increase in England, a decrease in Wales, and a plateau in Scotland and Northern Ireland.

- **Impact of legislation, policy and funding:** The impact of changes in legislation, policy approaches and funding is readily apparent in the data. The introduction of the Rough Sleeping Initiative can be seen in reductions in the England rough sleeping data from 2018 onwards, the impact of COVID-19 measures and in particular Everyone In can be seen across all the GB nations, and in Wales the introduction of a 2019 national Strategy for Preventing and Ending Homelessness with a specific priority around youth homelessness may indicate why Wales has bucked the trends seen in the other nations during and post pandemic.

- **Effects of the COVID-19 pandemic:** Analysis of the data suggests that the COVID-19 pandemic was the most significant event in terms of the visibility of youth homelessness within the statutory data. Aside from Wales, all UK nations saw a spike in the proportion of young people being accepted as homeless. This echoes wider supporting research which found that people sofa surfing, of which young people make a disproportionate percentage, were one of the groups most at risk of homelessness at the start of the pandemic and during lockdown. The increase in young people being accepted as homeless suggests a light being shone on the scale of hidden homelessness amongst under 25s.

- **Backslide in rough sleeping progress:** In England rough sleeping data indicates that prior to the start of the cost-of-living crisis rough sleeping amongst young people was falling at a faster rate than amongst other age groups, and that during the pandemic significant progress had been made to reducing the numbers of young people sleeping on the streets. However, since 2022, which saw the end of pandemic related support and the start of the cost-of-living crisis, rough sleeping amongst young people has risen at a faster rate than any other age group.

- **Gender differences in youth homelessness data:** Data from Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland shows a higher number of young females are assessed as being owed a homelessness duty compared to young men. However, this includes young women as single parents who will be automatically entitled to priority need as well as

single homeless women. A majority of young men will present as single homeless. Available data does not allow for a breakdown of household type by age and gender.

- **National differences in rough sleeping:** A much higher proportion of young people are recorded as sleeping rough in Scotland (14% in 2022) compared to England (6% in 2022). However, the difference in means of capturing rough sleeping (snapshot count in England versus recorded as part of homelessness application in Scotland) means that Scotland is more likely to identify individuals who are sleeping on the streets in hidden locations. Again, this speaks to the argument that youth homelessness is assumed to be less visible than other forms of homelessness as young people seek safety and security.

- **Differences in need by demographic group:** There is limited demographic data available for youth homelessness across official statistics. Most insight is informed from bespoke research and there are significant blindspots both geographically and in terms of fully understanding the profile of youth homelessness. But we do know that different demographics present with different supporting needs and any approach to tackling youth homelessness needs to account for this.

- **Gendered causes & experiences:** Gender impacts both the causes and the experience of homelessness. In both cases family no longer being able to accommodate is the leading cause of homelessness, and we know that relationship breakdown in the family home is the trigger for most youth homelessness. However, for females domestic abuse is the second most likely reason for becoming homeless. The second most common reason for males is friends no longer able to accommodate. This can often be a proxy for sofa surfing and may suggest that males are more likely to already be experiencing some form of homelessness before they ask for support from their local authority.

- **Sexual exploitation risks for young women:** Findings from a systematic review of studies on youth homelessness and sexual exploitation highlight that young women regularly experience sexual assault, rape and fear of being sexually victimised while homeless.[1] There is an additional dimension to young women's experiences of homelessness when there are children involved. This can create more fear amongst young women if they are worried that they may lose custody of their children and mean they are less likely to seek help early enough to prevent their homelessness.[2] It can also lead to young women with children as not being viewed through a youth lens despite having specific needs related to being a young person.[3]

- **Disparities for young Black people:** Statutory homelessness data in England from 2020-21 found that young Black people were over three times more likely to be at risk of or experiencing homelessness compared with young White people.[4] Structural racism can also present challenges when accessing support. For example, young Black men experiencing homelessness are more likely to be diagnosed with a severe mental illness and sectioned under the Mental Health Act but the wider factors

[1] Centrepoint (2022) *In Her Shoes: Young womens experiences of homelessness*
[2] Bimpson, E., Reeve, K. & Parr, S. (2020) *Homeless mothers: key research findings*
[3] Boyle, F. (2021) *Experiences of Youth Homelessness*
[4] DLUCH (2021) *Duties owed by age and ethnicity 2020-21*

impacting upon them including poverty, racism and discrimination are often not taken into account.[5]

- **Challenges for LGBTQ+ young people:** Lack of family support is a significant issue for young LGBTQ+ young people with just 13% feeling supported by parents or guardians whilst homeless. Many LGBTQ+ young people have reported experiencing abuse in the family home prior to becoming homeless as well as experiencing discrimination because of their sexuality or gender identity that led to them becoming homeless.[6] Once homeless young LGBTQ+ people report experiencing discrimination due to their identity with many reporting not feeling safe to disclose information about their sexuality or gender identity.

Causes of youth homelessness

- **The difficulties of transitioning from childhood to adulthood:** Across the UK youth homelessness is clearly associated with someone not being able to transition from the dependency of childhood to the self-reliance of adulthood, because they lack the emotional, practical and financial resources and supports that are available to most young people as they transition to adulthood. There are many reasons that a young person may be missing this safety net that is afforded to their peers and therefore be at a higher risk of homelessness. These include:

    - **Relationship breakdown**: the most common cause of youth homelessness and can be triggered by a range of different issues including changes in household dynamics, high and complex support needs, or violent or abusive relationships.
    - **Financial pressure** can result in young people being asked to leave the family home particularly when they are no longer eligible for child-related benefits.
    - Young people transitioning out of children's services or institutions either because they have outgrown the support, or because they are transitioning to adult services are also at greater risk of experiencing homelessness. This includes those leaving care or a children's home as well as those leaving young offenders institutions.[7]
    - **Gang crime and escaping violence** can also be a cause of youth homelessness particularly where it is no longer safe for individuals to stay in their local area and must move somewhere where they have no support network or safety net.[8]
    - **The transition between children's mental health and learning disability services and adult mental health and learning disability services** can also be a particularly challenging transition to manage particularly for those whose stability in maintaining their accommodation is reliant on the mental health support they are receiving.

- **Predictors (childhood trauma and poverty):** The two most common predictors are experiences of trauma during childhood and/or young people who have grown up in poverty. This highlights the importance of trauma informed approaches, an

[5] NHS digital (2020) *Mental Health Act statistics, Annual Figures*
[6] AKT (2021) *the lgbtq+ youth homelessness report*
[7] Arnull et al. (2007) *Young offenders housing needs and experiences*
[8] Centrepoint (2019) *Escaping the Trap: Supporting homeless young people affected by youth violence and criminal exploitation.*

understanding of adverse childhood experiences and early intervention activities amongst children who are in known high risk groups.

- **Broader causes of homelessness:** Alongside causes of homelessness that are specifically seen amongst young people, risk of homelessness can be triggered by the same factors that apply across everyone who experiences homelessness, including both structural causes and life events which can trigger someone losing their home

Young people's experiences of homelessness

- **Different forms of homelessness:** Typically young people experience homelessness as a journey into and out of different forms of homelessness characterised by moving between a range of informal and precarious forms of accommodation including sofa surfing, squatting, staying in overcrowded and unsuitable accommodation, as well as rough sleeping.[9]

- **Hidden homelessness:** The former of these are often described as hidden homeless as they are not visible to homelessness services and support. But the damaging and negative experiences in these forms of accommodation should not be underestimated. The evidence across youth homelessness suggests that young people may experience multiple forms of "hidden" homelessness before they reach homelessness services

- **Inadequacy of general needs accommodation:** Young people also report that general needs homelessness accommodation is often not suitable to their needs and can be seen as dangerous and less favourable than sleeping on the streets.[10] Young people of colour, young LGBTQ+ people and those who have uncertain immigration status all face additional barriers within services, reporting discrimination including racism, homophobia and transphobia when seeking support.

- **Barriers to moving on from homelessness:** For many young people experiencing homelessness, the barriers to moving on are mirrors to the causes of homelessness in the first place: lack of family support / support network, financial hardship, and support linked to mental health, substance use, learning disability and other unmet support needs.[11]

- **Impact of housing affordability:** Lack of affordable housing also presents a significant barrier in helping young people move on from homelessness caused by both insufficient supply of social housing and a private rented sector that is increasingly unaffordable to those on housing benefit.

Preventing and Ending Youth Homelessness

- **The Positive Pathway model:** Developed by St Basil's, the Positive Pathway is a flexible 5-stage framework for local authorities to prevent youth homelessness, including universal information, early help, a prevention hub, commissioned accommodation, and diverse housing options.

[9] Boyle, F. (2021) *Experiences of Youth Homelessness*
[10] Homeless Link and Youth Voice (2020) *We have a voice, Follow our lead: Young and Homeless 2020*
[11] Boyle, F. (2021) *Experiences of Youth Homelessness*

- **Mental health and trauma support:** There is a critical need for enhanced mental health and trauma support services tailored to the specific experiences of young people, challenging assumptions about their maturity and responsibility.

- **Affordable housing:** Increasing access to affordable housing is essential, particularly for young people facing inequalities in the welfare system.

- **Examples of practices & interventions:** Programs like Upstream Cymru in Wales utilize school screenings to identify at-risk youth and provide tailored support, drawing on successful Australian models. Mediation is emphasized across the UK as a vital prevention tool to address relationship breakdowns, though further evaluation is needed to understand its effectiveness. Additionally, the Housing First for Youth (HF4Y) model in Scotland offers unconditional accommodation with person-centered support, demonstrating positive outcomes in tenancy retention and overall wellbeing for care-experienced young people.

Introduction

This report presents a brief overview of the current picture of youth homelessness across the United Kingdom. It sets out the different policy contexts, data trends and explores the causes and consequences of young people's experiences of homelessness.

What do we mean by youth homelessness?

Understanding youth homelessness starts with understanding how youth homelessness is interpreted and defined; as with all things related to homelessness, this is not a straightforward task as there is no unified, standalone definition across the United Kingdom. Within Great Britain the typical understanding of youth homelessness refers to people aged between 18 to 24, in Northern Ireland this stretches to 25. However, from a policy and legal context youth homelessness can also be defined as 16 – 17, 18 - 21 and for certain situations under 35. LandAid's definition is 16-25.

Individuals who might fit the definition of youth homelessness can also find themselves re-defined out of the cohort due to their specific circumstances. This can have a gendered lens to it, where young women with dependent children owed a statutory homelessness duty will typically be considered as a homeless family and treated as a full adult, despite potentially having support needs specific to being a young person.

Likewise, individuals who have experienced care as a child will have different entitlements and this can vary depending on how recently they have left the care system. This also differs by each UK nation.

Alongside this, definitions of homelessness vary across each of the UK countries, and even between different statutory bodies. This presents challenges to comparisons between models and approaches cross country, as well as presenting significant barriers to consistent data capture and analysis. The Government Statistics Service carried out a UK wide homelessness harmonisation feasibility study concluding *"that it is not possible in the short term to develop a consistent definition of homelessness for UK official statistics, due to substantive differences in the administrative data systems and legal definitions of homelessness."*[12]

The challenge in defining youth homelessness consistently presents difficulties in prescribing common approaches and shared ambitions towards policy influencing and system changes across each nation. This is further reinforced due to homelessness being a devolved matter meaning that across Great Britain and Northern Ireland each administration has its own legislative approach to statutory homelessness including specific measures for young people.

For the purpose of this report, unless otherwise specified youth homelessness refers to young people aged 18 – 24 experiencing any form of homelessness including rough sleeping, sofa surfing, sleeping in cars, tents or public transport, sleeping in other forms of unsuitable housing including squatting and overcrowded accommodation, living in emergency accommodation and temporary accommodation. It should be noted that young people who have children, though included in this definition, tend to be housed in their own tenancies and often have particular support needs. Only a relatively low proportion of this group would go into supported accommodation projects with their children.

[12] Government Statistics Service (2019) *Harmonisation of Definitions of Homelessness for UK Official Statistics: A Feasibility Report*

The policy context

- There is no universal definition of youth homelessness
- Homelessness is devolved with four different, evolving legislative approaches. This means ease of access to support across each GB nation for young people varies.
- Specific legislation exists for care leavers across GB
- Welfare policies, and in particular Local Housing Allowance policies, disproportionately impact young people at risk of, or experiencing homelessness

Homelessness legislation across the UK

Since the Housing (Homeless Persons) Act was introduced in 1977, local authorities have had a statutory duty to provide support and long-term rehousing for people experiencing homelessness in Great Britain. This was extended to Northern Ireland in 1988. The Act used a broad definition of homelessness, defined as having no accommodation in which it is reasonable or available to occupy.

In order to access the statutory duty, there are five tests which were originally applied to each case of someone presenting to their local authority as homeless or threatened with homelessness. Following the introduction of devolution, each nation has taken a distinct approach to developing their homelessness legislation and there has been substantial divergence, particularly in relation to priority need and intentionality.

The below sets out the foundations of the initial Act, and then sets out how this has developed and changed by nation going forward.

Five Tests

Accepted as homeless

Does the person or household meet the definition of homeless or threatened with homelessness? This includes people who are without current accommodation including rough sleepers and sofa surfers, but also includes people living in accommodation which is not reasonable for them to continue to occupy due to affordability, condition, change in household profile e.g. increased number of children, or risk of violence.

Intentionality

The 1977 Act introduced the concept of **intentionally homeless** or intentionality which sets a test to investigate if homelessness has been a result of something the applicant did or didn't do which they would know might cause their homelessness and, if so, would this be deemed to be making themselves 'intentionally' homeless. The interpretation of intentionality can vary by local authority and can include situations where care leavers voluntarily leave

accommodation because they feel unsafe, or if a young person falls behind on rent and is evicted.[13]

Eligibility

Eligibility determines whether an individual has access to statutory homelessness support. This is primarily based on immigration status. Anyone with the condition of No Recourse to Public Funds (NRPF) will not be entitled to statutory homelessness support. This includes those within the asylum system as well as individuals with limited leave to remain who are in the UK for work or study. Refugee's and EEA citizens with settled status have eligibility. EEA citizens with pre-settled status have to prove they are habitually resident to access support. This means demonstrating you have a settled intention to continue living in the UK. Habitual residency tests can also apply to British citizens who have returned to the UK after living abroad.

Priority need

The 1977 Act was a world first in legislating housing provision for people experiencing homelessness however it also set out who would qualify for support by deeming only those in **priority need** as qualifying for housing support. This primarily involved families with dependent children. Later amendments to the Act also introduced vulnerability as a criteria for priority need including physical and mental illness and old age. Unless single people or childless couples met strict vulnerability tests they would not qualify for housing assistance, which would be temporary accommodation until suitable settled accommodation could be offered to them.

Historically priority need tests on vulnerability have been used to gatekeep access to support and we know that this can be of a particular issue for young people.[14] Gatekeeping occurs when local authorities limit the number of people able to access statutory support by applying high thresholds to the five tests enabling them to turn people away from support. Concerns around the impact of gatekeeping led to changes to the legislation across Scotland, Wales and England.

Local connection

Local authorities will also typically ask whether you have a local connection to the area. If you do not have a local connection the council may refer you to a different council for support. Local connection is established in an area if you have lived in the council area for:

- 6 out of the last 12 months
- 3 out of the last 5 years
- You are working in the council area
- You have close family who have lived in the council area for at least 5 years

Time spent in emergency housing or refuges counts towards local connection but prison and hospital inpatient stays do not.

Care leavers have a local connection if they are under 21 and were previously in care in the area for at least 2 years even if they were placed there by another council. If their pathway

[13] Gianni, E. & Williams, N. (2022) *Hitting brick walls: Barriers faced by homeless care leavers*

[14] Dobie, S., Sanders, B. & Teixeira, L. (2014) *Turned Away: The treatment of single homeless people by local authority homelessness services in England*. London: Crisis.

plan (see section on care leavers) is provided by a county council, they have a local connection to every local housing department in the county council area.

Refugees have a local connection to the last council area they were housed in by the Home Office under asylum support regardless of how long they lived there.

Local connection does not apply for people fleeing domestic abuse or violence.

Wales

With The Housing (Wales) Act (2014) the Welsh Government became the first in the UK to add additional duties prior to the main rehousing duty with the introduction of a prevention and relief duty. Under the Act, all young people in Wales who present to their council should be assessed. If eligible and either currently homeless or at risk of homelessness within 56 days, they are provided with prevention and/or relief support, based on their circumstances. In the event that the prevention or relief support is not successful, a main housing duty is then only owed to those who are currently homeless, are not intentionally homeless and have a priority need.

In 2019 the Welsh Senedd published a national strategy and action plan for Preventing and Ending homelessness which included specific commitments around early identification for youth homelessness including through joined up approaches with education reform and identification activity in schools, as well as commitments to ensuring improved transition from care into independent living.[15]

In October 2023 the Welsh Government published a white paper on ending homelessness in Wales proposing significant changes to policy and legislation. These are wide ranging reforms which if passed include the scrapping of priority need and intentionality, and amendments to local connection. The white paper also proposes a shift to more comprehensive prevention activity including targeted proposals for young people that strengthens existing legislation for care leavers and young people leaving the criminal justice system.[16]

England

Building on the legislation established in Wales, the Homelessness Reduction Act (HRA) came into effect in England in April 2018. As with Wales this introduces a prevention and relief duty prior to the main rehousing duty. These changes to legislation mean that single young people experiencing homelessness who would have previously received inconsistent support should now all receive prevention and/or relief support according to their needs.

In 2018 the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities published their first Rough Sleeping Strategy focussed on ending rough sleeping only. This is not statutory but set government priorities in relation to homelessness, including spending. The focus on youth homelessness was predominantly around care leavers providing some additional funding for high-risk local areas.[17] The strategy was updated in 2022 and whilst it provided greater mention of the specific needs of youth homelessness the only commitment was that young people leaving care will receive the support they need to secure and maintain suitable accommodation.[18] There is no specific youth homeless strategy in England.

[15] Welsh Government (2019) *Strategy for Preventing and Ending Homelessness*
[16] Welsh Government (2023) *Consultation on the White Paper on Ending Homelessness in Wales*
[17] DLUHC (2018) *Rough Sleeping Strategy*
[18] DLUHC (2022) *Ending Rough Sleeping for Good*

Northern Ireland

Northern Ireland's legislation is currently the most similar to the original 1977 Act in which support to secure accommodation for young people is only available to those who are eligible, unintentionally homeless, and have a priority need. Unlike in the GB nations where local authorities are responsible for statutory homelessness, in Northern Ireland the Northern Ireland Housing Executive (NIHE) manages statutory homelessness.

In 2022 the NIHE published their strategy to end homelessness with acknowledgement of young people as a specific cohort that needed targeted support although there is no objective or commitment targeted directly at youth homelessness.[19] As in England, this is not statutory but sets government priorities. There is no specific youth homeless strategy in Northern Ireland.

Scotland

Scotland is the first, and currently only, nation to have abolished priority need entirely (as of 31st December 2012) putting them on a very different path to the other UK nations (although priority need is under review in Wales). This means that aside from those with no recourse to public funds, virtually every young person experiencing homelessness is entitled to settled housing.

In 2018 Scotland introduced a national action plan to end homelessness which included a specific commitment to preventing and responding effectively to youth homelessness.[20] The plan also introduced a commitment to a rapid rehousing model which prioritises giving people their own tenancy regardless of whether their non-housing support needs have been met and working to support them once they are accommodated. Each local authority is required to develop a rapid rehousing transition plan stating how they will move towards this model with a specific requirement to respond appropriately to the needs of young people experiencing homelessness, and including the planning and development of pathways and a range of affordable housing options and associated supports for young people. An updated action plan was produced in 2020 which reaffirmed the commitment to prevent and respond effectively to youth homelessness.[21]

Care leavers

In all UK nations there are specific mitigations for care leavers at risk of, or experiencing, homelessness. A care leaver is defined as anybody who has been looked after for 13 weeks or more after their 14th birthday and left care on or after their 16th birthday.

England and Wales

In England and Wales, 16 and 17 year old care leavers with housing needs should be supported by the Local Authority Children's Social Care who must find individuals with somewhere to live. Care leavers should be provided with a personal advisor by Children's Social Care, who develops a pathway plan which includes housing options.

[19] NIHE (2022) *Ending Homelessness Together strategy 2022 - 2027*
[20] Scottish Government (2019) *Ending homelessness together: High Level Action Plan*
[21] Scottish Government (2020) *Ending homelessness together: updated action plan - October 2020*

Care leavers aged 18 and over who are homeless or at risk of homelessness need to make a homelessness application via their local authority. Those aged under 21 will have a priority need. Care leavers over 21 may be assessed as having a priority need if they can demonstrate they are vulnerable to their care history.

Scotland

In Scotland, due to the absence of a priority need test, there is a statutory duty to accommodation for everyone experiencing homelessness including all care leavers as long as they are 'eligible' in terms of their immigration status and access to public funds. As with England and Wales a pathway co-ordinator and social worker should also provide housing support when an individual is transitioning out of care.

Northern Ireland

In Northern Ireland, the Children (Leaving Care) Act (Northern Ireland) 2002 and the Children (Northern Ireland) Order 1988 both specify support for accommodating care leavers. The former places a duty to ensure any eligible[22] care leavers access homelessness support, and the latter defines the need for social services to prevent homelessness and provide accommodation for 16-17 years olds who have been in care, and requires that 18-21 year olds who have left care are assessed appropriately under the homelessness legislation.

National policy impacting on youth homelessness

Despite homelessness being devolved, preventing and ending homelessness across the four nations is impacted by some Westminster led policy that impacts at a national level such as welfare. This section explores the key policy and legislation that influence youth homelessness, both by exacerbating it and by limiting the options available to respond to it.

Housing Supply

The housing market is made of a range of different tenure types from private rented to social housing through to owner occupied. Shortage in different tenure types builds increasing pressure on existing supply, and when that shortage exists within affordable housing, it can lead to households at increased risk of homelessness and cause blockages within the homelessness system in which people are unable to move on from temporary or supported accommodation into secure permanent homes.

Affordable private rented sector accommodation in the UK are set through welfare policies which set the amount of Housing Benefit available to people living in the private rented sector. When this is insufficient it creates shortages in supply. Currently the rates that Housing Benefit are set are frozen and lag far below the need for affordable rent. This is discussed in more detail below.

Social housing is considered the most secure and affordable form of housing for those in housing need. As with homelessness policy, house building policy, including social house building, is devolved. Social house building in the UK boomed following WW2: in the 50's there was an average of 147,000 houses being built a year and by the 60's a quarter of all housing in the UK was council housing. Based on the 2021 census data for England and Wales this

[22] "Eligible" here refers to the technical definition of care leavers provided earlier. It is different to the eligibility test applied for statutory homelessness support, which refers to immigration status.

has now fallen to 17%, in Scotland 23% of properties were social housing (as of 2020), and 13% in Northern Ireland (2021-22).

Variation in current stock is caused by different approaches to loss of social housing and building supply.

The Right to Buy, established properly in 1979, allowed for social housing tenants to buy their property from the local authority at a discounted rate. The Right to Buy scheme led to significant loss of social housing stock amongst councils that has not been replaced and therefore depleted available social housing. The scheme has been abolished in Scotland (as of 2017) and Wales (as of 2019).

House building is also key to increasing supply and has been lagging far behind demand. In Great Britain research by Crisis and the National Housing Federation found that to meet housing need the total level of new housebuilding required is around 340,000 per year for England, 26,000 per year for Scotland, and 14,000 per year for Wales (380,000 for GB). These figures include new social housebuilding per year of 90,000 for England, 5,500 for Scotland and 4,000 for Wales (100,000 across GB).[23] In 2022 there were 33,439 new social rent homes completed in England,[24] 7,008 new social rent homes completed in Scotland,[25] and in 2022-23 1,203 new social rent homes completed in Wales.[26] Equivalent supply and demand analysis is not available for Northern Ireland.

When demand outweighs supply there is increasing pressure on the housing market. With insufficient supply, social housing households are forced into the private rented sector which can be costly and less secure. The lack of truly affordable housing is a significant barrier, which causes people to lose their homes and, prevents people from moving on from temporary accommodation.[27]

Local Housing Allowance (LHA) rates and the Shared Accommodation Rate (SAR)

LHA rates set the amount of Housing Benefit an individual receives. The LHA rate is paid at a flat rate based on the lowest 30th percentile of market rents (frozen since April 2020) within a Broad Rental Market Area. Most people on benefits living in the Private Rented Sector (PRS) are in receipt of LHA. Young people, defined as 18 – 35 in this context have different entitlements to Housing Benefit compared to other adults.

If you are single and under 35 with no history of care or living in a homeless hostel you will only be entitled to the **Shared Accommodation Rate**. This is meant to cover the cost of renting a room in a shared house and is lower than other LHA rates. The amount is often not sufficient to cover the cost of rent in the private rented sector.

Single under 35 year olds who have lived in a refuge or hostel for at least 3 months or experienced domestic abuse could be exempted from the Shared Accommodation Rate and

[23] Bramley, G. (2018) *Housing supply requirements across Great Britain: for low-income households and homeless people*
[24] DLUHC (2023) *Live tables on housing supply: indicators of new supply. Table 244: permanent dwellings started and completed, by tenure, England, historical calendar year series*
[25] Scottish Government (2023) *Housing statistics quarterly update: new housebuilding and affordable housing supply*
[26] Welsh Government (2023) *New house building: April 2022 to March 2023*
[27] Homeless Link (2023). *Support for Single Homeless People in England: Annual Review 2022.*

entitled the 1 bedroom LHA rate. This is higher than SAR but again is usually not enough to cover the cost of rent.

Care leavers aged under 25 are also exempt from the Shared Accommodation Rate and can claim the higher 1-bedroom rate of the LHA.

Alongside the absence of Government priority to lead a programme building more social housing, the lack of affordable housing available at any LHA rates across the private rented sector is one of the biggest challenges impacting on preventing and relieving youth homelessness.

Recent analysis has found that the freezing of LHA has had a catastrophic impact on the levels of affordable PRS available across the country. Research from Crisis and Zoopla found that only 11% of one bedroom properties are affordable at LHA rates across England, and only 7% of two bedroom properties.[28] Similar affordability pressures are found in Wales, where a snapshot analysis of the rental market in February by the Bevan Foundation found only 1.2% of PRS properties in Wales were available at LHA rates, and there were no available properties in 16 local authorities.[29] There is less recent analysis available for Northern Ireland research from 2018 found an average of only 12% of PRS properties were available at LHA rate in Northern Ireland.[30]

There is no dedicated analysis available for Scotland but a nation wide investigation for the Bureau of Investigative Journalism found that in 2019 only two rental areas in Scotland had at least 30% of PRS properties available at LHA rates.[31]

Immigration policy

Immigration policy is set in Westminster and current law creates conditions that mean certain migrants including asylum seekers have no recourse to public funds and are not entitled to either statutory homelessness support or welfare benefits. This means that there is a population of young people experiencing homelessness who are not able to access anything beyond the most basic of support to meet their needs i.e. that which is provided by day centres. Although not exclusive to any one location this is a particularly acute problem in certain cities including London and Edinburgh which have high proportions of non-UK nationals with restricted eligibility on the streets and experiencing other forms of homelessness. Accommodation options are available for this cohort[32] but because they are not entitled to housing benefit this has to be funded through either local authority grant, or the fundraising of voluntary and faith providers.

Individuals who have exhausted all rights of appeal within the asylum system or who are undocumented are not entitled to any statutory support and any additional support needs will have to be met by the voluntary, community and faith sectors.

[28] Crisis and Zoopla (2022) *'Falling short: Housing benefit and the rising cost of renting in England'*

[29] Bevan Foundation (2023) *Wales' Housing Crisis: Local Housing Allowance and the private rental market in Wales*, Winter 2023

[30] McAculey, M (2019) *Falling Behind: Exploring the gap between Local Housing Allowance and the availability of affordable private rented accommodation in Northern Ireland*

[31] Goodwin, K (2019) *Scottish families priced out of rental homes by UK austerity policies*

[32] Homeless Link (2022) "*Unlocking the door: A roadmap for supporting non-UK nationals facing homelessness in England"*

Additional barriers on young people experiencing homelessness who have restricted entitlements due to their immigration status includes either an inability to work (some people who have no recourse to public funds (NRPF) are not allowed to work as part of their conditions) or barriers to work. This can mean they are at greater risk of exploitation and exposed to homelessness.

Measures introduced through the "hostile environment" policy, including checks on immigration status ahead of renting, can also create barriers to young people trying to access private rented accommodation. These checks are mandatory for local authorities and landlords, with increasing fines for failure to do so. In some cases, assumptions about immigration status can lead to a refusal to rent even if there is no prohibition on their immigration status.[33]

Scale and trends within youth homelessness

- Data available is hugely variable and often does not capture age and other relevant demographic information meaning it is not possible to capture an overall picture of the scale of youth homelessness across the United Kingdom.
- Most data are not available to be broken down by age to understand better specific experiences of young people. And where age data are available they are often limited in what conclusions can be drawn.
- Ongoing changes to homelessness legislation has also disrupted data time series meaning there is limited long-term analysis possible.

The following section sets out the available data on youth homelessness across Great Britain, exploring trends over time and, where possible, comparisons across countries, albeit this is limited. As set out above the definitions of homelessness, and as a result associated data collection, differs between each UK nation. This means that data are typically not comparable between each nation, and even where statutory data are available the different definitions of homelessness means that it is not possible to make direct comparisons.

There are also wide variations across Great Britan and Northern Ireland as to what data are collected, in what form, and the length of time data are available. This is detailed throughout this section.

Key findings from the data

Official data available are hugely variable and often does not capture age and other relevant demographic information meaning it is not possible to capture an overall

[33] Bulman, M (2018) *Landlords refusing to rent to non-white British tenants due to government's hostile environment, court told*

picture of the scale of youth homelessness across the United Kingdom. The limitations of all homelessness data are also true for young people, in that they fail to capture hidden homelessness or populations less likely to access statutory support. Hidden homelessness does not have a strict definition and can be applied inconsistently but most definitions consider it to include forms of homelessness that are not visible on the streets or in official statistics. This can include people who are sofa-surfing, living in severely overcrowded conditions, squatting, and people sleeping rough in hidden locations.[34] It is assumed that young people are one of the populations most affected by this but, without the comprehensive data needed to demonstrate it, this is reliant on anecdotal evidence.

The Centrepoint databank is the most useful data source to directly compare across the UK although it is impacted by the same limitations of all official homelessness data in that it is reliant on statutory providers who only have data on the people who have accessed them for support which by default excludes certain populations including those whose immigration status restricts their eligibility for public funding.

The impact of changes in legislation, policy approaches and funding is readily apparent in the data. The introduction of the Rough Sleeping Initiative can be seen in reductions in the England rough sleeping data from 2018 onwards, the impact of COVID-19 measures and in particular Everyone In can be seen across all the GB nations, and in Wales the introduction of a 2019 national Strategy for Preventing and Ending Homelessness with a specific priority around youth homelessness may indicate why Wales has bucked the trends seen in the other nations during and post pandemic.

Analysis of the data suggests that the **COVID-19 pandemic was the most significant event in terms of the visibility of youth homelessness** within the statutory data. Aside from Wales, all UK nations saw a spike in the proportion of young people being accepted as homeless. This echoes wider supporting research which found that people sofa surfing, of which young people make a disproportionate percentage, were one of the groups most at risk of homelessness at the start of the pandemic and during lockdown. The increase in young people being accepted as homeless suggests a light being shone on the scale of hidden homelessness amongst under 25s.

In England, rough sleeping data indicates that prior to the start of the cost-of-living crisis rough sleeping amongst young people was falling at a faster rate than amongst other age groups, and that during the pandemic significant progress had been made to reducing the numbers of young people sleeping on the streets. However, **since 2022, which saw the end of pandemic related support and the start of the cost-of-living crisis, rough sleeping amongst young people has risen at a faster rate than any other age group.**

Data from Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland shows **a higher number of young females are assessed as being owed a homelessness duty compared to young men**. However, this includes young women as single parents who will be automatically entitled to priority need as well as single homeless women. A majority of young men will present as single homeless. Available data does not allow for a breakdown of household type by age and gender.

A much higher proportion of young people are recorded as sleeping rough in Scotland (14% in 2022) compared to England (6% in 2022). However the difference in means of capturing rough sleeping (snapshot count in England versus recorded as part of homelessness application in Scotland) means that Scotland is more likely to identify individuals who are sleeping on the streets in hidden locations. Again this speaks to the argument that youth

[34] Howells et al. (2023) *"Hidden" homelessness in the UK: evidence review*

homelessness is assumed to be less visible than other forms of homelessness as young people seek safety and security.

Statutory homelessness

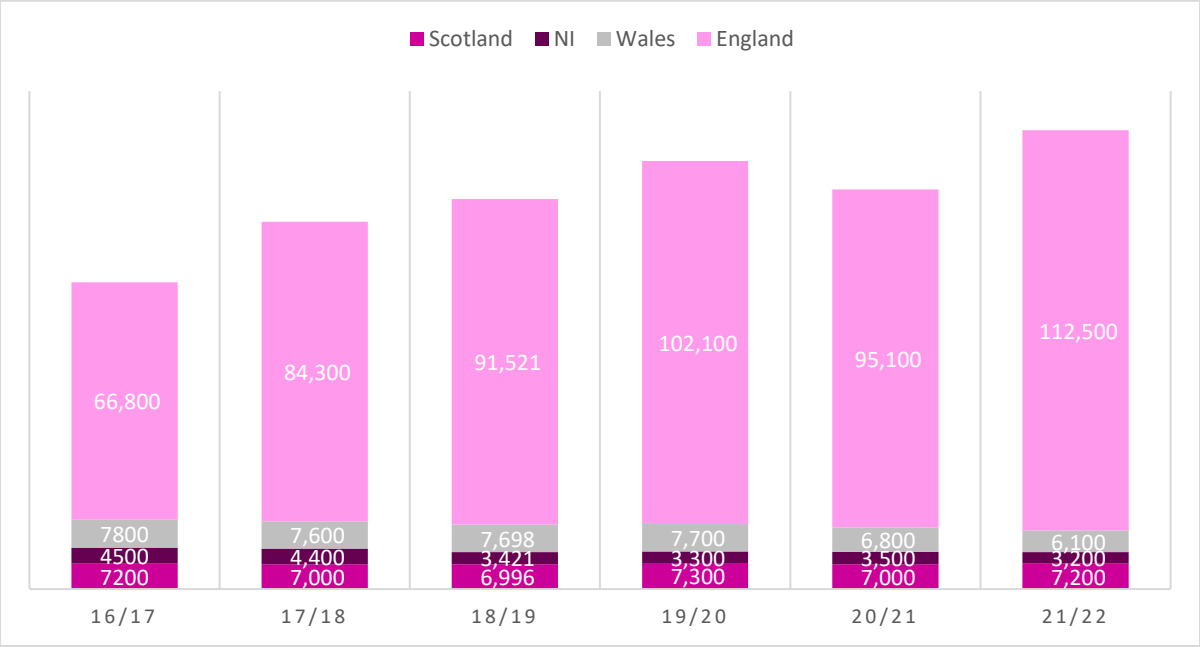
As discussed above definitions of statutory homelessness are different across all UK nations and consequently so are the data captured.

United Kingdom

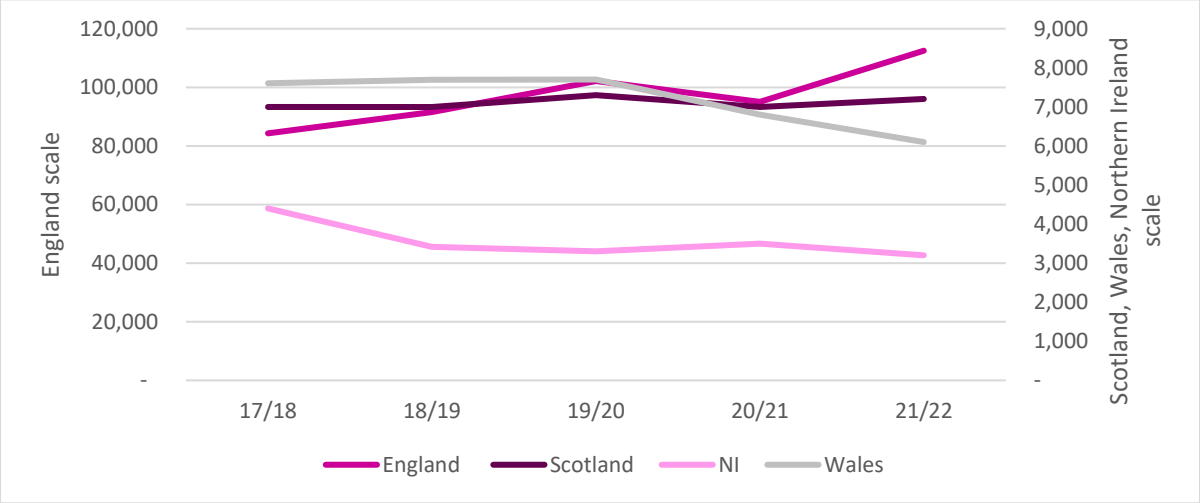
Whilst the ability to access homelessness support differs across England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, the Centrepoint databank compiles data on homelessness presentations to their local authorities (Housing Executive in Northern Ireland). The full breakdown of available official data for each nation is explored further within this section.

Data from the Centrepoint Databank indicates that there have been reductions in youth homelessness in Northern Ireland and a sharper decrease in Wales, a relatively static number of young people presenting as homeless in Scotland, and a significant increase in England.

Total number of people asking for homelessness support from their local authority across Great Britain, Centrepoint Databank



Number of young people asking for homelessness support from their local authority, Centrepoint Databank



England

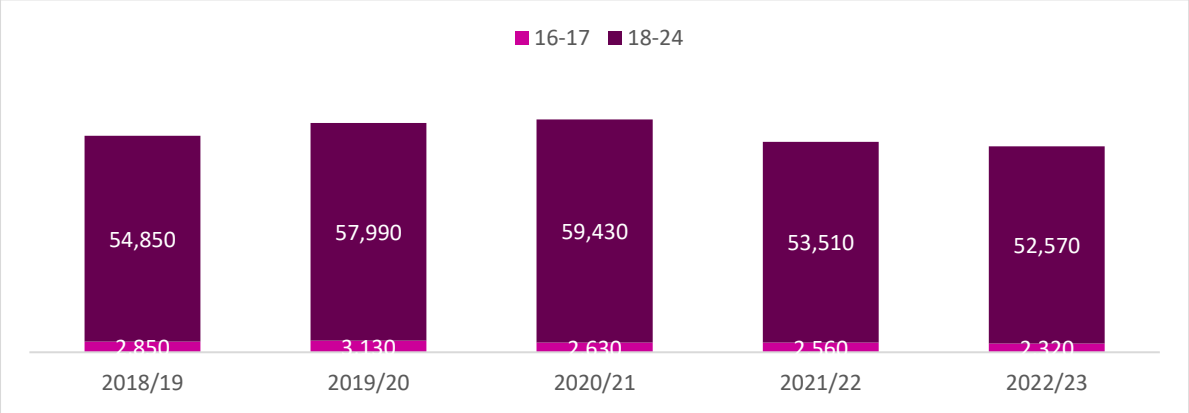
The statutory homelessness legislation in England changed in 2018 with the introduction of the Homelessness Reduction Act which brought in additional duties on Local Authorities to support those at risk of and already experiencing homelessness, regardless of whether they would be found to have priority need. Young people, and in particular young men, were anticipated to be one of the key beneficiaries of the HRA with both the shifted emphasis to prevent and because they had previously reported finding it harder than other demographics to be given priority need and therefore access statutory support .[35]

The changes introduced with the HRA meant that pre-2018 data are no longer comparable with current data.

Since the start of the HRA, approximately one fifth of people applying for statutory support are under 25. The highest number found to be owed statutory support (62,060) was in 2020-21, in the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic. This does not necessarily reflect the number that actually needed support; as covered earlier, young people are often subjected to gatekeeping by local authorities, via priority need testing, for example. By comparing the previous graph with the one below, it is possible to see the discrepancy between, on the one hand, the number of young people presenting to authorities as in need of support and, on the other hand, the number of young people being assessed as needing support (and we can contrast this with Scotland, which does not use priority need testing and has no discrepancy of a similar size).

Number of young people owed a statutory homelessness duty in England

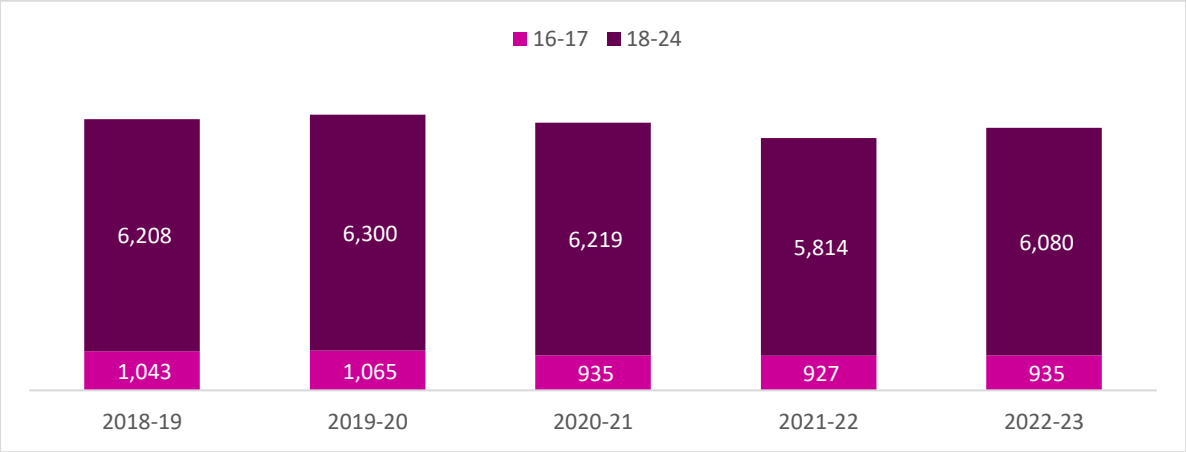
[35] Centrepoint (2018) *The Homelessness Reduction Act: Will it work for young people?*



Scotland

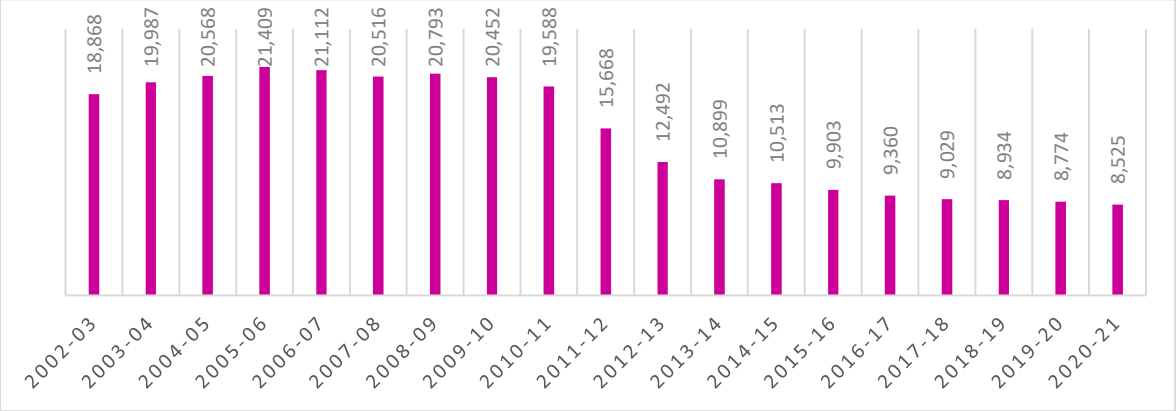
In Scotland, age demographic data of those assessed as homeless or threatened with homelessness is only available since 2018-19.

Number of young people owed a statutory homelessness duty in Scotland



Whilst demographic acceptances data are only available from 2018 onwards, Scotland does provide a longer time series of age data on those who applied for homelessness support. Whilst not all of these households will have met the criteria for being considered either homeless or threatened with homelessness we can see from comparing the 2018-19 – 2020-21 acceptances data that very few young people who apply for assistance are denied and therefore this is a useful proxy to understand trends in the proportion of young people needing homelessness support from their local authority.

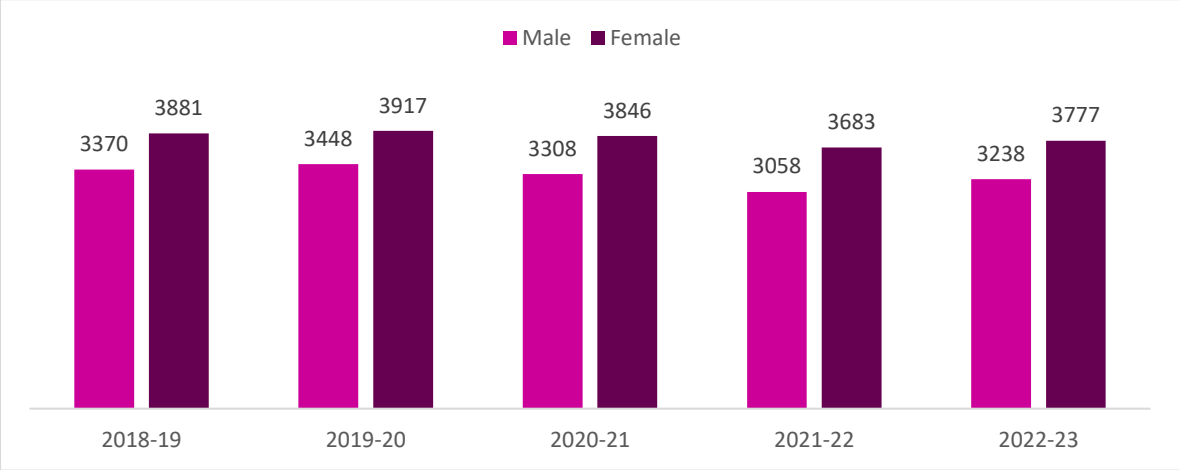
Number of young people applying for statutory homelessness support in Scotland



As with the rough sleeping data, compared with England, a slightly higher proportion of young people are assessed as homeless in Scotland: averaging closer to a quarter of the overall proportion of households owed a homelessness duty.

Scotland acceptances data also provides age demographics by gender and allows us to see the proportion of male and female households under 25 assessed as homeless or threatened with homeless. Whilst overall men make up over 50% of the total population accessing support, amongst young people there are consistently a higher number of women accessing support. This is the only age range where this occurs. Whilst the data doesn't allow for us to separate out different household types this may be due to young parents, either single or couple, but in which the household is headed by a female. The data only records the main applicant for a family or couple.

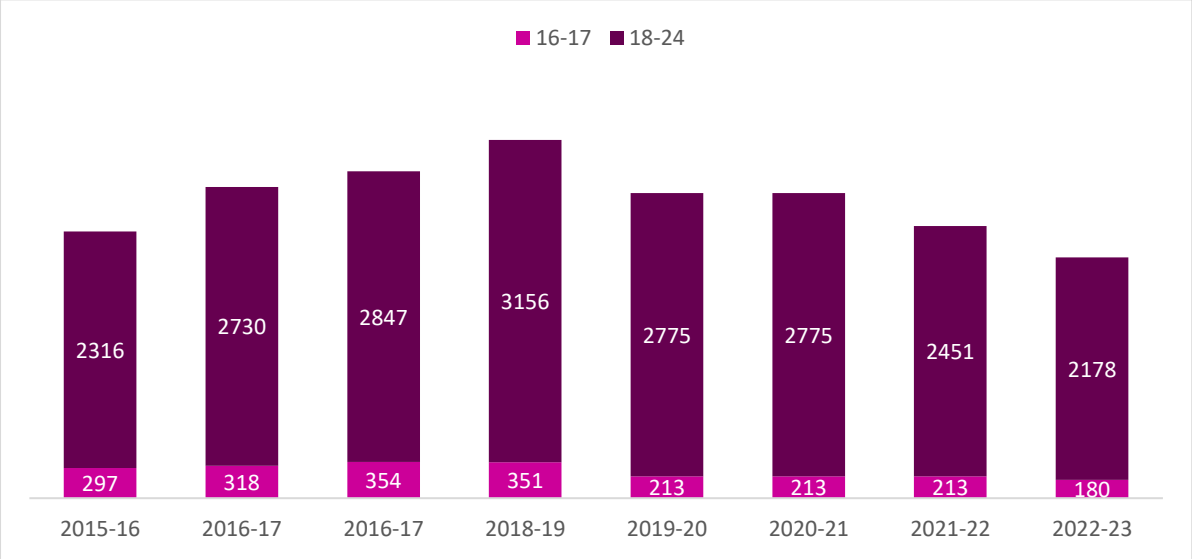
Number of 16-24 year olds owed a statutory homelessness duty in Scotland by gender



Wales

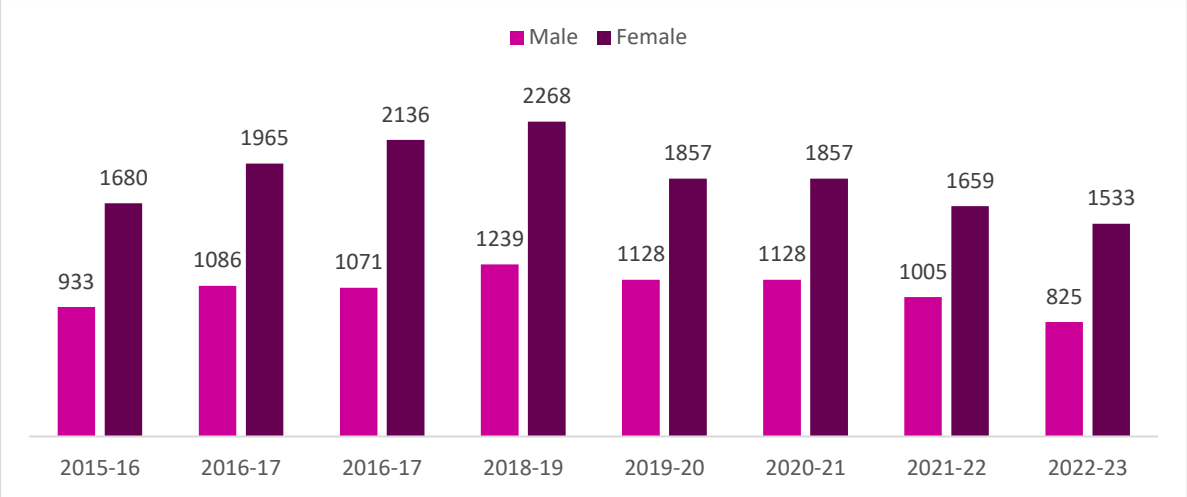
In 2015 Wales introduced the Housing (Wales) Act and as with England the significant changes in the legislation means that data prior to 2015-16 is not comparable. In contrast with England and Scotland where the proportion of young people accessing homelessness support from their local authority has remained relatively static over the last 5 years there has been much larger variations in Wales as it shifts from having the highest proportion of young people, at 41% of all acceptances in 2015-16 down to 22% in 2022-23.

Number of young people owed a statutory homelessness duty in Wales



As with Scotland, Wales also published age data by gender, and similar trends are seen in Wales with a higher number of young women accessing support compared to young men. The same limitations apply in that it is not possible to disaggregate by household type and so young families are included alongside single homeless young people.

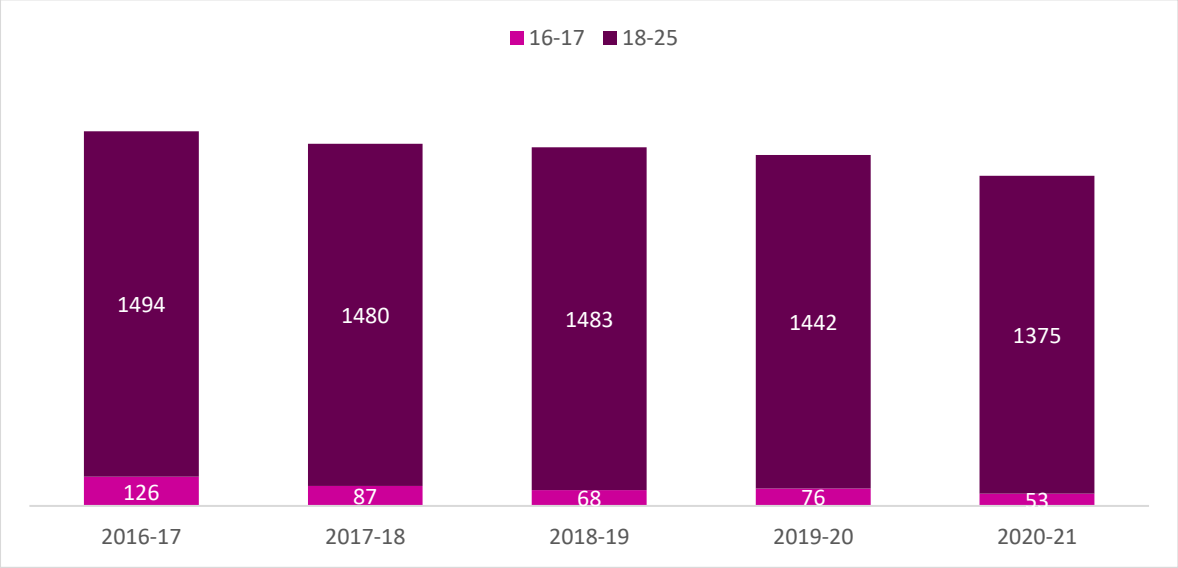
Number of 16-24 year olds owed a statutory homelessness duty in Wales by gender



Northern Ireland

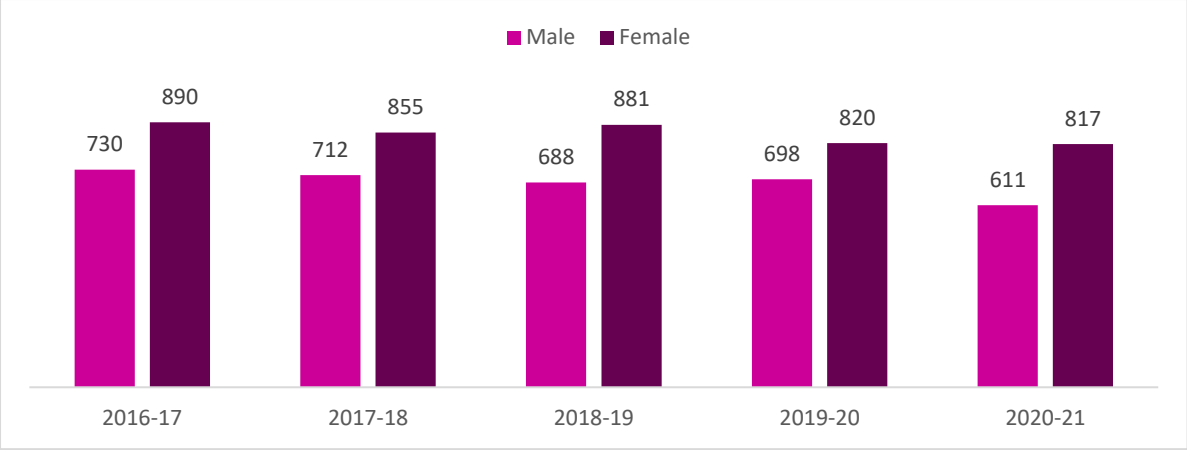
In Northern Ireland demographic age data are not publicly available in the statutory statistical releases. However, research conducted has compiled data from the NIHE data analytics unit which we are able to use, although this does limit the ability to be up to date and, as such, data are only available from 2016-17 – 2020-21. During this period the proportion of young people accepted as homeless has remained relatively steady: fluctuating between 13% and 15%.

Number of young people owed a statutory homelessness duty in Northern Ireland



Age by gender data is also available for the same time period and follows similar patterns to Scotland and Wales, with a greater number of females to males accepted under a homelessness duty but with the same caveat on inclusion of family and single homelessness.

Number of 16-25 year olds owed a statutory homelessness duty in Northern Ireland by gender



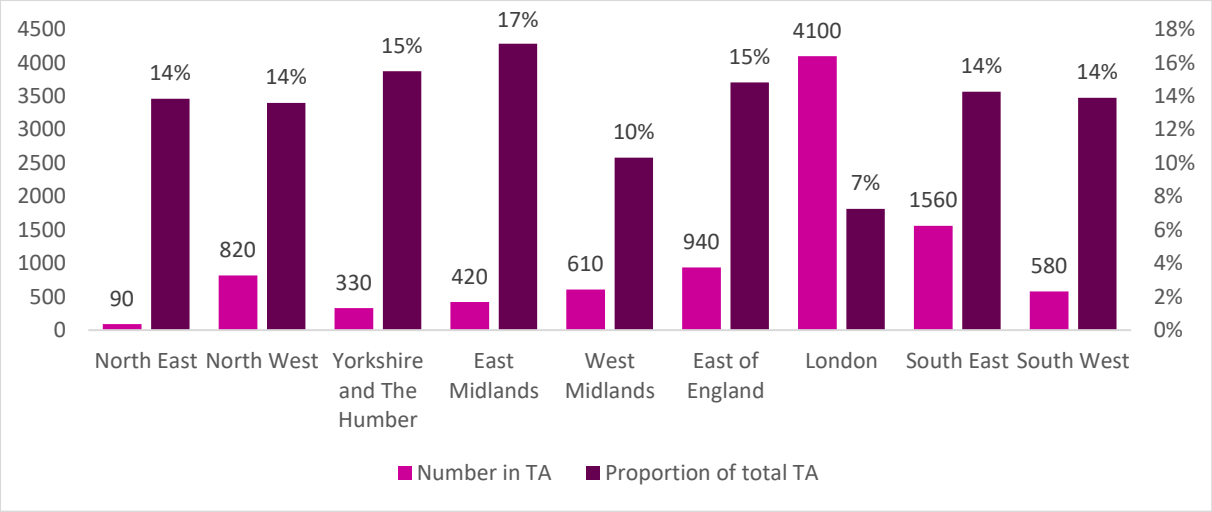
Temporary accommodation

Temporary accommodation data shows the number of people currently being accommodated by the local authority in some form of temporary accommodation whilst awaiting a move into permanent accommodation (which can include both social housing and the PRS). Excluding Scotland, this is usually given to those who have priority need and are being accommodated until an offer of permanent accommodation is made. In Scotland because there is no priority need everyone owed a duty will be accommodated until they are provided with permanent accommodation. Data on temporary accommodation placements for young people are only available in England and Scotland.

England

As of 31st March 2022 36,590 16-24 year olds were accommodated in temporary accommodation in England, of which 43% were in London (4,100). However as a proportion of the total number of young people accommodated in TA across English regions respectively, London has the lowest proportion of young people in TA (7%). This is compared with 17% for the East Midlands and 15% for Yorkshire and the Humber. Note this data refers to the age and gender of the main applicant and therefore a couple or family will only count as one person.

Number and proportion of 16-24 years olds in TA by English regions



Scotland

In Scotland in 2022-23 there were 8,730 young people accommodation in temporary accommodation making up 22% of the overall number of people in temporary accommodation.

Scotland also provides data on the length of time spent in TA broken down by age. Young people on average spend the least amount of time in TA with only people aged 65+ spending less time. 16-17 year olds spend an average of 208 days in TA and 18-24 year olds an average of 209 days. This is compared with a total average of 223 days.

Rough Sleeping

Rough sleeping is the most visible form of homelessness and is a dangerous and isolating experience that has a severely detrimental impact on an individual's physical and mental health and life expectancy.[36]

Rough sleeping data are captured differently across all UK nations and only England and Scotland publicly provide breakdown of this data by age. The table below sets out the different methodological approaches to capturing rough sleeping data by each nation.

Rough sleeping data capture in the UK

Nation	Method	Provides data on young people
England	Snapshot count	Yes since 2017

[36] Aldridge R.W., et al. (2019). *Causes of death among homeless people: a population-based cross-sectional study of linked hospitalisation and mortality data in England*. Wellcome Open Res, 4(49)

Scotland	Captured via number of people accessing LA support who were rough sleeping night before, and within the last 3 months	Yes since 2020
Wales	Snapshot count and estimate until 2019. Since pandemic monthly management statistics.	No
Northern Ireland	Snapshot count	No

England

In order to estimate the numbers of people sleeping rough in England on any given night, local authorities conduct an annual snapshot estimate to approximate rates and trends in rough sleeping across the country. The current methodology for the rough sleeping snapshot was introduced in 2010 and uses a specific and defined definition of what rough sleeping means: *'People sleeping, about to bed down (sitting on/in or standing next to their bedding) or actually bedded down in the open air (such as on the streets, in tents, doorways, parks, bus shelters or encampments). People in buildings or other places not designed for habitation (such as stairwells, barns, sheds, car parks, cars, derelict boats, stations, or "bashes")'.*

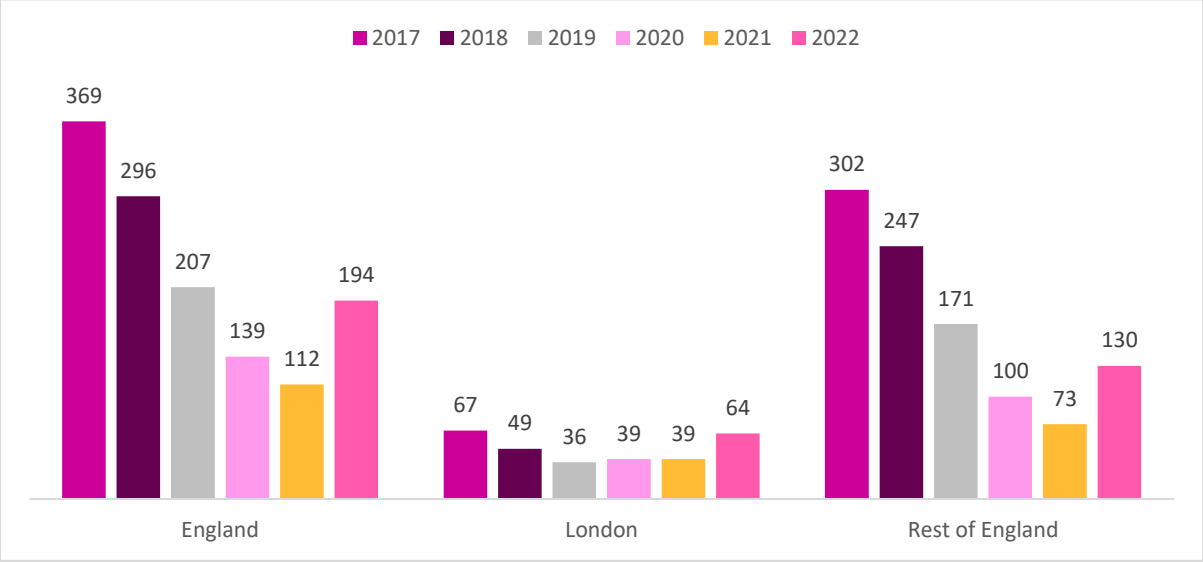
Since 2017, the rough sleeping snapshot also captured some basic demographic information including ages of people found to be street homeless. Since 2023, as part of the government's 2022-25 rough sleeping strategy, monitoring is taking place more regularly and a more comprehensive framework has been developed with a focus on rates of first-time occurrence, general occurrence, duration and recurrence, in line with a goal that rough sleeping should be prevented where possible and otherwise rare, brief and non-recurring[37].

The snapshot approach is not intended to provide a complete figure of the number of people rough sleeping in England and is by definition a best estimate count of street homelessness. The nature of only capturing visible street homelessness means that there are concerns that young people who may be sleeping in hidden sites, or more likely to be sofa surfing or staying in other forms of unsuitable accommodation, are one of the populations most likely to be underrepresented in the rough sleeping count and these statistics should be viewed with that as a consideration.

Since data are available, young people in England make up an average of 6% of the total rough sleeping population and recent trends echo the broader rough sleeping trends in England, with a peak in 2017 starting to fall from 2018 onwards, and then a sharp drop during 2020 and 2021 as a result of pandemic interventions, and then a not insignificant increase of rough sleeping in 2022.

Rough Sleeping Snapshot in England: Number of under 25s

[37] DLUCH (2024), *Ending Rough Sleeping Data Framework: Quality Assurance Review*



Whilst London has the highest number of young people rough sleeping, in 2022 the largest proportion of people sleeping rough that were under 25 was seen in the Yorkshire and the Humber (8%) compared with an England wide average of 6%. The only region to have seen a decrease in both number and proportion of young people rough sleeping between 2021 and 2022 was the North West.

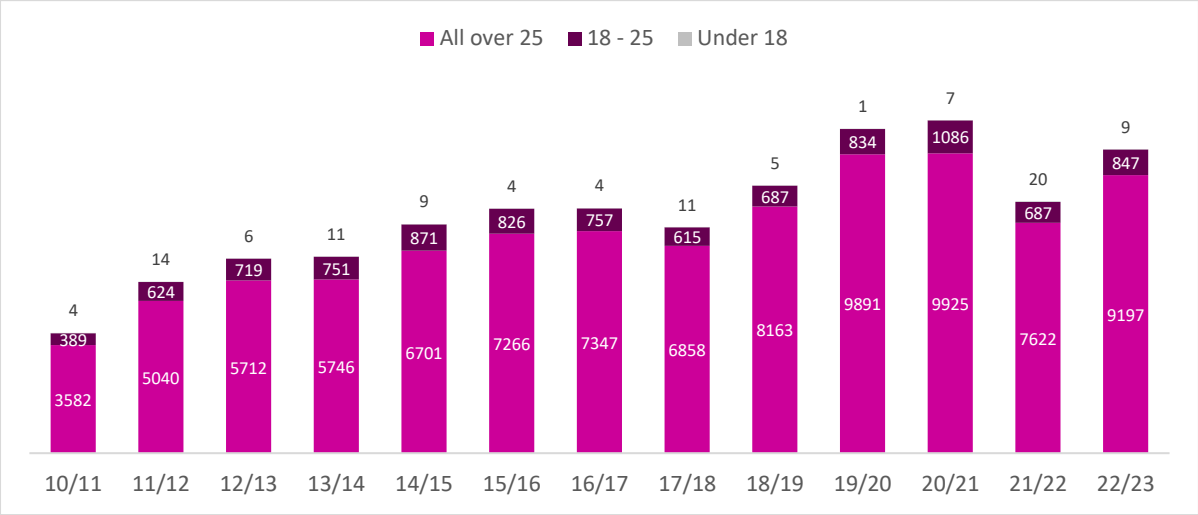
Proportion of people sleeping rough under 25 by English region

	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022
East Midlands	8%	9%	5%	4%	5%	7%
East of England	8%	6%	5%	6%	4%	4%
London	6%	4%	3%	5%	6%	7%
North East	8%	8%	6%	7%	4%	7%
North West	7%	10%	9%	5%	4%	2%
South East	10%	7%	6%	5%	3%	7%
South West	8%	8%	4%	5%	6%	7%
West Midlands	6%	6%	4%	5%	3%	5%
Yorkshire and The Humber	6%	5%	6%	4%	2%	8%

London

In London the availability of the Combined Homelessness and Information Network (CHAIN) provides a further and more detailed understanding of rough sleeping throughout the year. CHAIN data is based on contacts with outreach workers and instead of a snapshot gives a total number across the whole year.

In 2022-23 856 young people under 25 were seen rough sleeping in London. This is the third highest number of young people seen street homeless in the capital behind only 2020/21 which saw the highest ever total of rough sleeping in London, and 2014/15 when the proportion of young people rough sleeping hit a peak. 2020-21 was the start of the COVID-19 pandemic and in April 2020 and the months following there was a surge in rough sleeping. The particular increase in young people is thought to be due to sofa surfing or other informal housing arrangements collapsing as people entered lockdown.

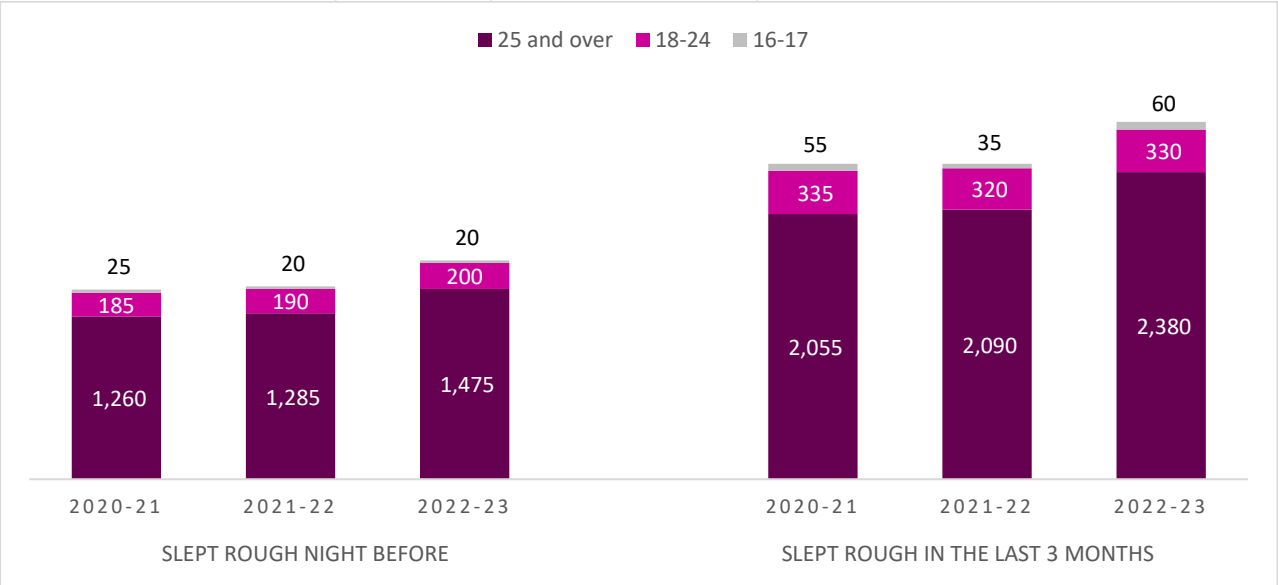


Scotland

In Scotland everyone who makes a homelessness application with their local authority is asked whether they have slept rough the night before, and have slept rough at all in the preceding 3 months. Data on both responses are published alongside the wider statutory homelessness statistics. Because this is based on self-reporting and not on a verified model as with the English rough sleeping count the Scottish data is more likely to pick up on people who have been street homeless in hidden locations or who have had short periods of sleeping rough amongst other forms of homelessness such as sofa surfing. This means it's assumed that there is a better picture of the proportion of young people rough sleeping in the Scottish data. However, this will exclude anyone not entitled to statutory support i.e. those with NRPF and anyone who chooses not to go to their local authority for help.

Age breakdowns on rough sleeping data are only available in detail from 2020-21.

Number of people rough sleeping in Scotland by age



The data in Scotland suggests that young people make up a greater proportion of the rough sleeping population than in England with those aged 16 – 24 making up 14% of the reported number of people sleeping rough the night before their application, and 16% of those who had slept rough in the three months prior to their application. However, the difference in means of capturing rough sleeping (snapshot count in England versus recorded as part of homelessness application in Scotland), means that Scotland is more likely to identify individuals who are sleeping on the streets in hidden locations. Again, this speaks to the argument that youth homelessness is assumed to be less visible than other forms of homelessness as young people seek safety and security.

- The quality of data available across the UK on youth homelessness is poor and limits our understanding of the experiences of youth homelessness.
- Aligning definitions and increasing the availability of data that can be segmented by age is key to moving forward.
- Since the pandemic there has been divergences in trends in youth homelessness across the UK nations with an increase in England, a decrease in Wales, and a plateau in Scotland and Northern Ireland. A full comparison of national contexts, interventions and policy changes would help to better understand the levers that have led to improved outcomes.

The profile of youth homelessness

Whilst limited statistics are available, broader evidence suggests that young people experiencing homelessness represent a much more diverse profile of individuals than the overall population of people experiencing homelessness. Having a clear understanding of who may be most at risk of homelessness can help to effectively target early intervention and prevention initiatives. It is also important to consider an intersectional approach to these characteristics.

Gender

The statutory data shows a higher proportion of young females experiencing homelessness. A reasonable assumption can be made that this is at least in part due to young women with children. Homeless Link's Young and Homeless research finds a slightly higher proportion of young males with accommodation services reporting they house 54% male compared to 42% female.[38]

Accommodation providers will have more varying definitions of age ranges for youth support than that set out by legislation: some providers will offer services only for those up to the age of 21, some for those up to 24, and in some cases, providers will describe provision up to the age of 35 as youth service due to shared welfare restrictions (Shared Accommodation Rate). Young people will also be accommodated in non-youth specific services.

It is also important to note that these providers will support people with and without a statutory homelessness duty and as a result, the data does not fully align with official statistics.

[38] Homeless Link (2021) *Young and Homeless 2021*

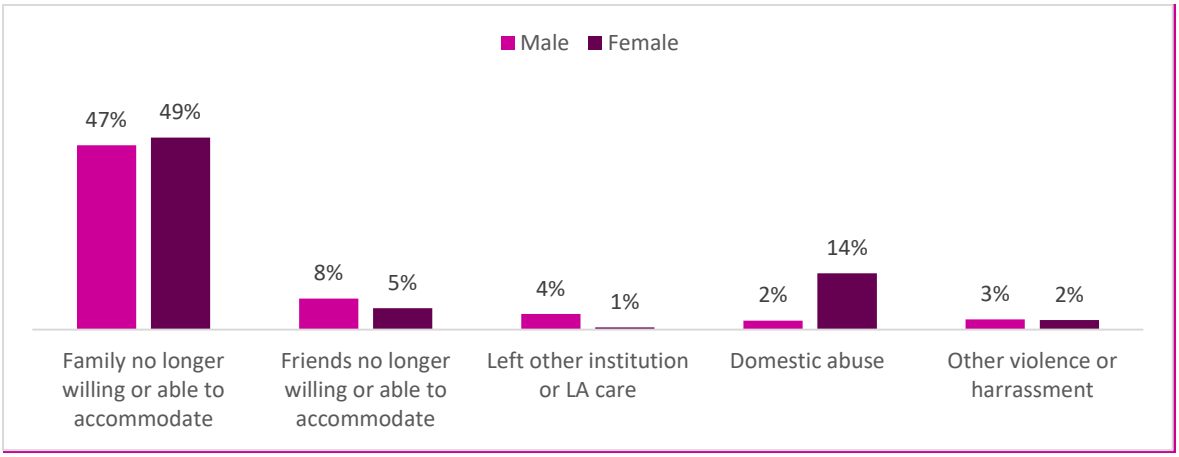
However, when looked at in connection with the statutory data, the evidence indicates both male and female young people experience homelessness, and that this is not something that impacts on one gender only.

On the other hand, we do know that gender can have a significant impact on the causes and experiences of homelessness.

In 2020-21, DLUHC released a breakdown of reason for homelessness applications for 18-24 year olds by gender.[39] This data has not been published since but allows us to compare the main causes of homelessness and understand the different gender stories it tells us.

In all cases, family no longer being able to accommodate is the leading cause of homelessness, and we know that **relationship breakdown in the family home** is the trigger for most youth homelessness. Specifically for females, **domestic abuse** in the second most likely reason for becoming homeless. The second most common reason for males is **friends no longer able to accommodate**. This can often be a proxy for sofa surfing and may suggest that males are more likely to already be experiencing some form of homelessness before they ask for support from their local authority.

Causes of statutory homelessness in England for 18-24 year olds by gender



Once homeless, we know that young women and young men are exposed to different risks and barriers.

Although evidence suggests that all young people are less visible amongst broader homeless populations, this is particularly true of young single women without children who are more likely to make their homelessness invisible, particularly if they are fleeing from violence.[40] Findings from a systematic review of studies on youth homelessness and sexual exploitation highlight that young women regularly experience sexual assault, rape and fear of being sexually victimised while homeless.[41] Women experiencing homelessness have a lower average age of death (43) than men (45) experiencing homelessness, although both are shockingly low compared to the general population.[42]

[39] DLUCH (2021) *Reason loss: households aged 16-24 by gender 2020-21*
[40] FEANTSA (2021) *A Gendered Approach to Youth Homelessness*
[41] Centrepoint (2022) *In Her Shoes: Young womens experiences of homelessness*
[42] ONS (2022) *Deaths of homeless people in England and Wales: 2021 registrations*

There is an additional dimension to young women's experiences of homelessness when there are children involved. This can create more fear amongst young women if they are worried that they may lose custody of their children and means that they are less likely to seek help early enough to prevent their homelessness.[43] It can also lead to young women with children not being viewed through a youth lens despite having specific needs related to being a young person.[44] Whilst this may open up housing support for them through statutory homelessness services, it may leave wider needs neglected.

Race and ethnicity

People of ethnic minority background are at a greater risk of experiencing homelessness and this is especially true for young people. Homeless Link's Young and Homeless research found that 22% of people accessing services were from ethnic minority groups.[45] Statutory homelessness data in England from 2020-21 found that young Black people were over three times more likely to be at risk of or experiencing homelessness compared with young White people.[46]

Young people of ethnic minority background have different experiences of homelessness to their White British peers, with systematic discrimination being a barrier that many face. Homelessness services rarely take into account the different needs of people from ethnic minority groups, including cultural barriers and considerations. For example, in some communities, mental ill-health is viewed very differently and there may be significant stigma impacting on willingness to talk about and access support for mental ill-health.[47]

Structural racism can also present challenges when accessing support. Young Black men experiencing homelessness are more likely to be diagnosed with a severe mental illness and sectioned under the Mental Health Act. However, the wider factors affecting them such as poverty, racism and discrimination are often not taken into account.[48]

Young people of ethnic minority background, particularly but not exclusively men, are also at greater risk of falling into gang culture and affiliation.[49]

LGBTQ+

LGBTQ+ youth are at greater risk of experiencing homelessness. Homeless Link's Young and Homeless research found that that 8% of people accessing services identified as LGBTQ+[50] and research from AKT has found estimates of 24% of young people experiencing homelessness identifying as LGBTQ+.[51] Further investigation would be needed to understand the disparity between these figures, but some explanation may be provided through sampling approaches of the two research projects. Homeless Link data are based on the number of young LGBTQ+ people across all accommodation types while the AKT statistics is based on

[43] Bimpson, E., Reeve, K. & Parr, S. (2020) *Homeless mothers: key research findings*
[44] Boyle, F. (2021) *Experiences of Youth Homelessness*
[45] Homeless Link (2021) *Young and Homeless 2021*
[46] DLUCH (2021) *Duties owed by age and ethnicity 2020-21*
[47] Ibid
[48] NHS digital (2020) *Mental Health Act statistics, Annual Figures*
[49] Centrepoint (2019) *Escaping the Trap: Supporting homeless young people affected by youth violence and criminal exploitation.*
[50] Homeless Link (2021) *Young and Homeless 2021*
[51] AKT (2015) *LGBT Youth Homelessness: A UK national scoping of cause, prevalence, response, and outcome*

a survey of young LGBTQ+ people. Therefore, the latter may be capturing more hidden forms of homelessness whereas the Homeless Link research is only reflective of those within homelessness accommodation.

Lack of family support is a significant issue for young LGBTQ+ young people with just 13% feeling supported by parents or guardians whilst homeless. Many LGBTQ+ young people have reported experiencing abuse in the family home prior to becoming homeless, as well as experiencing discrimination because of their sexuality or gender identity that led to them becoming homeless.[52]

Once homeless, young LGBTQ+ people report experiencing discrimination due to their identity with many reporting not feeling safe to disclose information about their sexuality or gender identity.

Research from AKT found that once homeless, LGBTQ+ young people are more likely to face violence, develop substance use problems and be exposed to sexual exploitation than their non-LGBTQ+ peers.[53]

Non-UK nationals with restricted eligibility

Data on the number of non-UK nationals with restricted eligibility experiencing homelessness, including asylum seekers and refugees without indefinite leave to remain, is extremely limited. Consequently, we know very little about the scale of young people in this population experiencing homelessness. However, we do know that people with irregular immigration status are even more likely to be hidden from sight than other demographics and that they can be extremely fearful of accessing support due to negative experiences with immigration enforcement.

- There is limited demographic data available for youth homelessness across official statistics. Most insight is informed from bespoke research and there are significant blind spots, both geographically and in terms of fully understanding the profile of youth homelessness.
- Different demographics present with different supporting needs and any approach to tackling youth homelessness needs to account for this.
- Gender impacts both the causes and the experience of homelessness. A better understanding of gender informed approaches and interventions targeted at both young men and young women would help to improve the current offer and provide greater guidance to commissioners and providers.
- Experiences of racism, homophobia and transphobia are causes and consequences of homelessness. Improving understanding and practices in providing inclusive services amongst mainstream provision would help to support young people at risk of discrimination and prevent support services from adding to their trauma.

[52] AKT (2021) *the lgbtq+ youth homelessness report*
[53] Ibid

- Ending homelessness is not possible without considerations for the needs of those with NRPF. Exploring voluntary, community and faith led options for this population is critical.

Causes of youth homelessness

Across the UK, youth homelessness is clearly associated with someone not being able to transition from the dependency of childhood to the self-reliance of adulthood, because they lack the emotional, practical and financial resources and supports that are available to most young people as they transition to adulthood. There are many reasons that a young person may be missing this safety net that is afforded to their peers, putting them at higher risk of homelessness.

The causes of homelessness for young people differ to that of the overall homeless population. Whilst 'friends and family no longer willing or able to accommodate' is still the leading cause of homelessness, in English statutory homelessness data from 2020-21 it was 33% of the total compared to over 50% for young people. Loss of an Assured Shorthold Tenancy (AST) in the private rented sector is the second biggest cause of people accessing homelessness support, making up tens of thousands of households every year (13%). Amongst 18-24 year olds, it was the reason given by only 6% of applicants. Scotland shows a similar picture whereby 40% of 18-24 year olds became homeless after being asked to leave by friends or family, compared with 26% of over the overall number of people accessing support from their local authority.

Relationship breakdown is the most common cause of youth homelessness and can be triggered by a range of different issues. In the family home, relationship breakdown resulting in a young person being asked to leave their home can be the result of changes in the household dynamics. This can include factors such as a young woman having a child, a parent having a new partner, homophobia or transphobia due to a young person coming out as LGBTQ+, families reaching a breaking point due to strained and potentially antagonistic relationships. Family relationships can also breakdown due to a young person with high and complex support needs that the family is not equipped to support, including significant mental ill-health or substance use needs. Additionally, it be triggered by a violent or abusive relationship breakdown where a young person is forced to leave due to domestic abuse within either the family home or with a partner.[54]

In addition, **financial pressure** can result in young people being asked to leave the family home, particularly when they are no longer eligible for child-related benefits. In these instances, a family may not want to force the young person to leave but cannot afford to continue accommodating an additional adult in the household.[55] This is likely to be of high concern during recessions, periods of low economic growth and high inflation when household budgets are increasingly stretched.

[54] Boyle, F. (2021) *Experiences of Youth Homelessness*
[55] Ibid

Gang crime and escaping violence can also be a cause of youth homelessness, especially in cases where it is no longer safe for individuals to stay in their local area, forcing them to move somewhere without a support network or safety net.[56]

Young people **transitioning out of children's services or institutions**, either because they have outgrown the support or because they are transitioning to adult services, are also at greater risk of experiencing homelessness. This includes those **leaving care** or a children's home, as well as those leaving **young offenders institutions**.[57] Care leavers are much more likely to be at risk of homelessness than peers who have not been looked after by the state as children.[58] Whilst specific legislation exists to support young care leavers transitioning out of the system and prevent them from becoming homelessness, it is estimated that up to **1 in 4 young people leaving care become homeless**. This could be attributed to a breakdown in delivering the support for care leavers at the level of local government, but it should be noted that this research is based on a relatively small sample size and understanding the housing experiences of young people leaving care in greater depth would benefit from further exploration[59]

Although the relationship between being care experienced and homelessness, and the impact this has on care leavers' lives, is well-known, significant gaps in support remain, both in national and local policy and practice. Adequate support is not available from social services to prevent young people from becoming homeless in the first place, with some young people reporting negative experiences of their personal advisors (who are meant to support the transition from care into independent living).[60] There are many other barriers that present challenges for young people transitioning from care and may increase their risk of homelessness. These also include the complexity of support needs of many care leavers and out-of-area placements, creating obstacles for young people accessing social housing in the area that they would like to live.

Young people leaving custody face significant barriers to accessing and sustaining accommodation. Many are released without appropriate housing options which puts them at risk of homelessness and increasing the likelihood of re-offending. Homelessness in young offenders is strongly associated with sofa surfing and 'exhausting' the supply of family and friends.[61]

Once homeless, there is a greater risk of young people undertaking criminal behaviour with one in six young people reporting they have taken part in criminal activity in exchange for somewhere to stay.[62] Homelessness is a significant risk factor for criminal behaviour amongst young people and housing insecurity can be a driver towards illegal activity, creating a damaging interconnection between homelessness and offending.

The transition between children's mental health and learning disability services and adult mental health and learning disability services can also be a particularly challenging adjustment

[56] Centrepoint (2019) *Escaping the Trap: Supporting homeless young people affected by youth violence and criminal exploitation.*
[57] Arnull et al. (2007) *Young offenders housing needs and experiences*
[58] Children's Right's Alliance for England, New Horizon and Youth Legal (2022) *Hitting brick walls: Barriers faced by homeless care leavers*
[59] Centrepoint (2017) *From Care to Where*
[60] Children's Right's Alliance for England, New Horizon and Youth Legal (2022) *Hitting brick walls: Barriers faced by homeless care leavers*
[61] Arnull et al. (2007) *Young offenders housing needs and experiences*
[62] Centrepoint (2021) *No place to stay: Experiences of youth homelessness*

to manage, especially for those whose ability to maintain their accommodation is reliant on the mental health support they are receiving.

Whilst relationship breakdown is the most common trigger for youth homelessness, the two most common predictors are experiences of trauma during childhood and/or young people who have grown up in poverty. This highlights the importance of trauma informed approaches, an understanding of adverse childhood experiences and early intervention activities amongst children in known high risk groups.

Although experience of childhood poverty is more widespread than experience of homelessness, **poverty is the sole, nearly universal risk factor of youth homelessness**.[63] Therefore, it is important to build better early identification models to find young people at risk of homelessness so that effective prevention and support can be put in place. In Wales, a focus on the importance of adverse childhood experiences as a predictor for social disadvantage including homelessness has led to the establishment of the Adverse Childhood Experiences Hub Wales. It aims to ensure that Wales becomes a world leader in ACE-free childhoods, embedding these approaches across all government departments.

Whilst not specifically pertaining to young people, Scotland has initiated a more general approach to mitigating these effects. They have introduced a National Trauma Transformation Programme, intended to engage the workforce in addressing inequalities and improving life chances of people affected by traumatic experiences, as well as working to prevent ACEs early on.[64] Although the publication from the Mental Health Directorate is recent, it shows a growing awareness of the importance of addressing trauma-related factors in disenfranchisement.

Alongside causes that are specifically seen amongst young people, homelessness can also be triggered by the same factors that apply to everyone who experiences it, including both structural conditions and life events which can lead to someone losing their home. Structural causes of homelessness consist of lack of affordable housing, poverty and unemployment. Life events could include eviction, job loss, debt caused by substance use or gambling addictions and untreated mental health needs. These suggested factors can put insurmountable pressure on an individual. Without access to the right support, an individual could lose the ability to maintain rent or mortgage payments and be pushed into homelessness.

- Young people can experience unique causes of homelessness that differ from adults experiencing homelessness. This is particularly affected by the transition between children's and adult's services.
- These transitions present greater opportunity to identify and prevent risk of homelessness amongst young people interacting with children's social care, criminal justice and health services.

[63] Boyle, F. (2021) *Experiences of Youth Homelessness*

[64] Scottish Government (2024) *Psychological trauma and adversity including ACES (adverse childhood experiences)*

- Universal factors such as poverty and adverse childhood experiences indicate the need for both embedded trauma informed approaches as well as considerations for upstream prevention.

Young people's experiences of homelessness

Typically, young people experience homelessness as a journey into and out of different forms of homelessness, characterised by moving between a range of informal and precarious forms of accommodation including sofa surfing, squatting, staying in overcrowded and unsuitable accommodation, as well as rough sleeping.[65] The former of these are often described as hidden homeless as they are not visible to homelessness services and support. Nonetheless, the damaging and negative experiences in these forms of accommodation should not be underestimated.

Sofa surfing can leave young people exposed to abuse, including both physical and sexual abuse, exploitation, and substance misuse. The trauma of sofa surfing can also be felt in the emotional impact of moving around regularly, exposing your vulnerabilities to friends, and the insecurity and volatility of the situation.[66] Every night, young people sofa surfing are at risk of being kicked out of their accommodation with nowhere to go. The impact of this was most acutely apparent at the start of the first COVID-19 lockdown which saw a surge in young people presenting as homeless, largely attributed to people who had been sofa surfing when the restrictions on households meant people were no longer willing to accommodate an additional person.[67] All of this can cause mental health problems, addiction, and other long-term consequences of trauma.

The evidence across youth homelessness research suggests that young people may experience multiple forms of "hidden" homelessness before they reach homelessness services – in some cases months after they first become homeless. This means countless opportunities to prevent or support young people out of homelessness are missed, further embedding the trauma of homelessness.[68]

Young people also report that general needs homelessness accommodation is often not suitable to their needs and can be seen as dangerous and less favourable than sleeping on the streets.[69] When housing and support is provided, young people have reported that it was

[65] Boyle, F. (2021) *Experiences of Youth Homelessness*
[66] Sanders, B., Boobis, S., and Albanese, F. (2019) *'It was like a nightmare' The reality of sofa surfing in Britain today.*
[67] Boobis, S. and Albanese, F. (2020) *The impact of COVID-19 on people facing homelessness and service provision across Great Britain.*
[68] Howells et al. (2023) *"Hidden" homelessness in the UK: evidence review;* Centrepoint (2019) *No place to stay: Experiences of youth homelessness*
[69] Homeless Link and Youth Voice (2020) *We have a voice, Follow our lead: Young and Homeless 2020*

often unresponsive to their needs and failed to address their mental ill health and wellbeing in a holistic way, leaving them feeling isolated and at risk of losing their tenancy.[70]

Young people of ethnic minority background, young LGBTQ+ people and those who have uncertain immigration status all face additional barriers within services, reporting discrimination such as racism, homophobia and transphobia when seeking support.

For many young people experiencing homelessness, the barriers to moving on mirror the initial causes of homelessness: lack of family support or support network, financial hardship, insufficient support linked to mental health, substance use, learning disabilities and other unmet support needs.[71] Young people are three times more likely to be in insecure employment than older adults, increasing economic insecurity.[72] For those in supported accommodation with much higher rent and service costs, some will have these expenses covered by enhanced Housing Benefit rather than the Local Housing Allowance rates. These individuals will also be impacted by the benefit taper which can be a disincentive to work. The taper means that as they increase hours worked, they have to pay a greater percentage of earned income on rent. In supported accommodation, rental rates can be totally unaffordable for those experiencing financial hardship which creates difficulties for young people in transition who are seeking work whilst maintaining support and sustained accommodation.

The lack of adequate support to meet needs can lead young people to develop alternative arrangements for themselves that can create more harm and trauma in the process. This could include finding unsuitable, dangerous or precarious places to live because they aren't able to access suitable accommodation support from local authorities. There is also a link between youth homelessness and sex work as some young people look for alternative ways to build financial resources.[73]

Lack of affordable housing also presents a significant barrier in helping young people move on from homelessness. Unless a young person has either spent at least three months in a homeless hostel or refuge or is a care leaver, they will only be eligible for the Shared Accommodation Rate as part of their Housing Benefit. In some parts of the country, there is almost no available private rented accommodation that is affordable at SAR. Even those who might be able to access the 1-bedroom rate will struggle to find affordable private rented accommodation. This means that they will immediately be facing shortfall in their income and at risk of quickly falling into debt and rent arrears.

The importance of LHA rates has become so significant because of the severe lack of social housing, particularly in England. For many young people, options to move out of homelessness will be either the PRS or long stays in temporary accommodation and simultaneously waiting for a social rented home to become available. In some cases, this can be years.

- Young people have distinct needs when experiencing homelessness and mainstream provision is often not suitable to provide the support required. In worst case scenarios it can increase levels of trauma.

[70] Centrepoint (2021) *No place to stay: Experiences of youth homelessness*
[71] Boyle, F. (2021) *Experiences of Youth Homelessness*
[72] Homeless Link and Youth Voice (2020) *We have a voice, Follow our lead: Young and Homeless 2020*
[73] Centrepoint (2021) *Benefits to Society: Homeless young people's experience of the social security system;* Boyle, F. (2021) *Experiences of Youth Homelessness*

- Ensuring there is sufficient capacity of youth specific provision that reflects the needs of various demographic is key to helping young people move on from homelessness quickly and with the necessary support.

- This would require better understanding of the scale of youth homelessness, not just nationally but also regionally, in order to understand where and what provision is needed across the country.

- Sofa surfing is a significant issue for young people and can lead to exploitation, abuse and trauma at the same time as not being visible or known to support. There is a need for a better understanding of how to reach young people who are sofa surfing, what is needed to encourage access to support and provide the housing options to ensure they can move on from homelessness.

Preventing and ending youth homelessness

Positive pathway

Developed by St Basil's in 2012 and refreshed in 2015, the Positive Pathway is a 5-stage framework for local authorities and partners to plan and develop their approach to preventing youth homelessness locally. It is intended to be used flexibly to suit local circumstances and needs and provides a framework that local authorities can adapt.

The five stages of the positive pathway are:

1. Universal information and advice for young people and families which is available to everyone in their local area
2. Early help - targeted at young people and their families who may be at higher risk of homelessness
3. A prevention hub - using a joint approach between Housing, Children's Services and other partners to resolve a housing crisis quickly. This also contains a single access point or gateway to commissioned accommodation and support
4. Commissioned accommodation and flexible support, based on what works well and developed according to local needs
5. A range of housing options for young people – affordable and safe housing options when young

Mental Health & Trauma Support

Beyond the positive pathway, there is also a need for much greater provision of mental health, exploitation and trauma support services for young people that reflects specific needs related to their experiences. This must include acknowledging the adultification[74] of young people experiencing homelessness and using this lens to challenge our expectations of young people

[74] Davis, J., Marsh, M. (2022) *The Myth of the Universal Child*

accessing services, our assumptions around maturity and responsibility and whether they are correct.[75]

Affordable Housing

In order to prevent and end all forms of homelessness, there must be increased access to affordable housing, both social housing and in the private rented sector. This is particularly critical for young people who face inequalities in the welfare system, reducing the amount of Housing Benefit they are eligible to receive and therefore limiting even further access to the Private Rented Sector. This is the fifth stage of the positive pathway model.

Examples of practices & interventions

The following section sets out examples of interventions or approaches that might be delivered with a positive pathway framework. This is intended to be illustrative and is not exhaustive of all approaches taking place.

Early help: School screening, Wales

Early help is the key to preventing youth homelessness. As they transition from childhood to adulthood, young people leaving care or other systems like young offender institutions must be effectively supported over a sustained period. Young people who have supportive families do not tend to have sharp transitions from childhood to adulthood but instead have time to find their independence with the safety net of a stable family home. Those who do not have this should be afforded the same considerations and not be expected to go from being a dependent child to an independent adult overnight.[76]

Early intervention activity that takes place in school settings that attempts to identify young people at risk of homelessness is starting to have traction and some success in Wales. Upstream Cymru carries out a screening survey in schools to identify those with housing needs, providing a support worker to provide tailored, strength-based support.[77] The approach is modelled on the Australian Geelong Projects which resulted in a 40% reduction in youth homelessness. The project is being evaluated by Cardiff University. Centrepoint have recently started a comparable project in Manchester.

Early help: Mediation, GB wide

Given the prominence of relationship breakdown as a trigger for youth homelessness, the importance of effective mediation provision should not be underestimated as a key prevention tool. One of the essential goals of preventing youth homelessness is to avoid young people transitioning into independent living in an unplanned way that leaves them vulnerable to homelessness. Mediation, where it is appropriate to do so i.e. there is no risk of abuse, is not necessarily about ensuring the young person can stay permanently but that they can be supported to move in a planned way reducing the risk of homelessness.[78]

Mediation is recommended as a prevention intervention across all GB nations but there is relatively little evaluation into understand the extent of its efficacy and in which situations it is

[75] Homeless Link (2022) *Understanding Young People's Development: A guide for homelessness services*
[76] Boyle, F. (2021) *Experiences of Youth Homelessness*
[77] Mackie et al. (2021) *The Upstream Cymru Story: A Tale of International Exchange, Collaboration and Persistence*
[78] Boyle, F. (2021) *Experiences of Youth Homelessness*

most effectively utilised. Increasing the evidence base on effective mediation activity is important to better understand how to effectively implement.[79]

Commissioned accommodation and a range of housing options for young people: Housing First for Youth, Scotland

Housing First for Youth (HF4Y) has started to gain some early footholds in the UK with indications of success in Scotland. Housing First is an intervention that provides unconditional accommodation with person centric support wrapped around. Lack of engagement with support does not risk the tenancy unlike more traditional forms of homelessness accommodation. There are key principles to follow that ensure a Housing First project maintains the high fidelity and principles required.[80] HF4Y follows the same principles as mainstream Housing First but with a greater emphasis on economic and social integration, as well as the need for trauma informed approaches to support young people who often have had adverse childhood experiences.[81]

The Rock Trust in Scotland opened their first HF4Y project in West Lothian specifically for care experienced young people it has since expanded to Fife, and they will be opening a service in Glasgow in 2023. An evaluation of the initial HF4Y project was carried out in 2020 and found all but one of the people supported had maintained their tenancy alongside other positive improvements related to health and wellbeing, relationships and meaningful use of time.[82]

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What We Do

Homeless Link is the national membership charity for frontline homelessness services. We work to improve services through research, guidance and learning, and campaign for policy change that will ensure everyone has a place to call home and the support they need to keep it.

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