



The Right2Eat Project

Short Report: Youth Homelessness and Food Poverty in the UK

Summary of Key Points:

1. Homelessness amongst young people is difficult to quantify due to 'hidden homelessness'.
2. There are many reasons as to why young people end up being homeless.
3. Regardless of the cause, being young and street homeless increases the level of vulnerability.
4. Their vulnerability is further compounded by a range of problems such as mental health issues or the breakdown of family relationships.
5. One of the major concerns of the youth homeless crisis is a significant lack of temporary crisis accommodation for homeless young people in the UK.
6. Food poverty amongst young and homeless people in the UK has been increasing in recent years.
7. The demographic profile of people accessing foodbanks is rapidly changing with increasingly more young people accessing their services.
8. In the UK, young homeless people may lack access to vital support services and as a consequence a significant number of young people remain within the food poverty cycle.

Report

The term 'homelessness' is fuzzy and not easy to define. For instance, in addition to the visible homelessness of those on the streets, it also encompasses those living with family and friends, sofa-surfing, in hostels, temporary housing, or those otherwise housed in insecure and often dangerous settings. More difficult to quantify is the hidden homelessness (for example, those young people who are not in formal accommodation but who are sleeping rough, accommodated in squats or isolated and vulnerable young people who may not identify as homeless). This included 43,075 young people (aged 16–24) who were accepted as statutorily homeless in the UK and at least 31,000 non-statutorily homeless young people using Supporting People services from 2006 to 2007 (Quilgars et al, 2008). In the United Kingdom, youth homelessness is a pressing issue. Currently at least one in every 200 16- to 25-year-olds is estimated to be experiencing some form of homelessness.

Homelessness amongst young people is not a new phenomenon but an enduring social problem that has a long history in the UK. Seventeen years ago, in between 2006 and 2007, it was estimated that at least 75,000 young people experienced homelessness in the UK. In terms of gender, it was found that young women were more likely to be statutorily homeless (see homelessness data, 2013) than young men, whilst young men (aged 18 or over) are more likely to be non-statutorily homeless. Statutorily homeless young people are very unlikely to have an ethnic minority background in Scotland, Wales or Northern Ireland but are significantly over-represented in England, most particularly London (Quilgars et al, 2008).

For someone to become homeless at a young age there is rarely one single cause. Their vulnerability is further compounded by numerous issues. These range from, engaging in criminal or anti-social behavior, cognitive deficits underlying disobedience to authority (for example, unable to comply with household rules), poverty and insecure or inadequate housing, or exclusion from education and living in unstable family environments. Precipitating factors, like mental health issues or a breakdown of family relationships or the death of a loved one, often compound these contributing factors. Across the United Kingdom, it has been estimated that 129,000 young people aged 16-24 presented to their local authority as homeless or at risk of homelessness between April 2021 and March 2022. This represents a six per cent increase compared to the previous financial year, when almost 122,000 young people faced homelessness (Centrepont, 2021). Some 41,950 households were assessed as homeless and therefore entitled to relief duty (for example, help to secure settled housing - by their local authority between January and March 2023). The total number of children in temporary accommodation also reached its highest level since records for that measure began in 2004 - at 131,370. Almost 14,000 households were living in bed and breakfasts as of March (up 37.4% on the year before, and the number of B&Bs with dependent children in them rose by 131.2% to 3,930 by the end of March 2023, see Baker, 2023).

Outside of raw statistics, one of the most concerning elements of the youth homeless crisis is a significant lack of crisis accommodation for homeless young people in the UK. This gap in the system can render young people highly vulnerable to exploitation and abuse. Indeed, the dangerous nature of homelessness among young people means they are at greater risk of perpetrating or experiencing crime, exploitation, substance misuse and becoming involved in the criminal justice system. It is against this backdrop that several charitable and public initiatives have been established to tackle the issue of youth homelessness in the UK. Across the board, these focus on prevention such as young people's access to education, training and employment opportunities. Locally, there are projects run by organizations like CenterPoint that provide young people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness with individualized and therapeutic support, and access to accommodation and training/employment opportunities.

These efforts need to be significantly ramped up. There should be a long-term, systematic, collaborative approach to addressing youth homelessness. This should include the voluntary, charitable and statutory sector working together, to ensure that prevention services are comprehensive and effective and that all homeless young people receive the help that they need. This is vital if we are serious about guaranteeing that all young people are safe and secure and able to realize their potential. Whether it is providing the right kind of support to those leaving care, improving the prospects of those not in education, employment or training or ending the scandal of high rent levels in the UK, young people at risk of homelessness need to be supported. Only then can they look forward to a safe and secure future.

Food poverty amongst young and homeless people

The term 'food poverty' refers to an individual or family's inability to access sufficient food to maintain a healthy diet. For individuals who are young and homeless, food poverty may result due to a variety of factors ranging from difficulty in accessing benefits or employment, to limited income due to low wages or benefits. Food poverty amongst young and homeless people in the UK is a worrying issue as it contributes to the physical and mental health issues which can prevent people from exiting poverty and reaching their full potential. A recent report from the charity Centrepoint estimated that over 200,000 young people in the UK, aged between 16 and 25, are currently without a permanent home and food banks are reporting an ever-increasing trend of young people accessing their services (CenterPoint, 2021). Young people (aged 16-25) living independently are some of the most financially vulnerable groups in society. Following a survey of 209 of young people with experiences of homelessness it was found that 1 in 4 (26 per cent) vulnerable young people had £20 or less of monthly income left after rent and bills were paid, leaving them to live off five pounds or less a week (Cretch, 2022). Official figures published by the UK government's Trussell Trust show that the amount of food parcels sent out to children has increased. Between the 1st of April and 30th September 2020 more than 1.2 million emergency food parcels were given to people struggling to afford essentials. Over 470,000 of these parcels went to children (The Trussell Trust, 2020).

In the UK, young homeless people may lack access to vital support services, notably inadequate levels of health services, and inadequate housing support. These limitations can contribute to the ongoing problem of food poverty as they may restrict the range of available resources to support people to access food and ensure a regular healthy diet. The complexity of circumstances which can lead to food poverty amongst young and homeless people means that it is difficult for attention to be targeted at the issue. Consequently, a significant number of people remain in food poverty, and there is an urgent need for long-term solutions to be implemented. One way to address this issue is to ensure better access to education and training for homeless youngsters, as well as better access to employment advice and guidance. This can help to equip young people with the resources and skills they need to gain stable and rewarding jobs, which is essential in tackling food poverty.

Furthermore, the creation of a more cohesive and supportive system for welfare benefits is necessary for an effective approach to tackling food poverty. For young and homeless people, the system must be able to both support them financially and provide timely and accessible advice and guidance about their benefits. This all-encompassing support must also consider everyone's unique circumstances, ensuring that solutions are tailored and suitable to their needs. To reduce food poverty amongst homeless young people, several charities and organizations offer support. These include initiatives such as the Trussell Trust, established in 1997, which runs a network of food banks to provide food and essentials to those in poverty. Other organizations like Feeding Britain and the Food Foundation work to tackle food insecurity in the UK by working with local communities, making policy interventions and working with key government bodies.

Summary

In summary, food poverty amongst young and homeless people in the UK is a worrying and concerning issue that has been increasing in recent years. To effectively tackle the issue, it is essential that there are long-term solutions that create healthier societies and access to vital resources for those affected. Such solutions must include better access to education and training, improved access to benefits, and greater external support from charities and organizations.

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What can be done to support young people experiencing food poverty in the UK?

1. Increase access to free school meals: The UK government should introduce legislation to ensure all pupils, regardless of parents' income, are eligible for free school meals—an effective way to reduce hunger amongst the most vulnerable young people.
2. Expand access to food banks: The government should increase public funding for food banks, while also incentivizing local businesses and charities to reduce the cost of nutritious food for vulnerable families.
3. Provide vouchers for fresh food: Young people experiencing poverty should be given vouchers for fresh food from supermarkets. These vouchers would contribute to the households' monthly grocery bills, helping them feed their children on a budget.
4. Promote healthy eating: Educating and inspiring young people to make healthy and nutritious meals on a budget should be a priority, with schools offering after-school clubs on budget cooking.
5. Introduce financial incentives for education: By introducing financial incentives and scholarships for young people experiencing food poverty, it would enable them to continue their studies without worrying about food.

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Further reading:

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