

Pathways to Youth Homelessness

Research Report

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In partnership with:



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Foreword

This critical piece of research has been carried out at a pivotal moment in time; mapping the impact of youth homelessness in Northern Ireland against the backdrop of social, economic and political instability spreading throughout the country. Furthermore, cuts to vital public resources, funded services and support mechanisms, alongside the imminent onset of restrictive welfare reforms is threatening to increase incidences/impact of homelessness, induce a deeper poverty and feelings of 'hopelessness' amongst vulnerable young people and increase the likelihood of generational homelessness becoming a reality for many.

The overarching aim is **to gain an authentic insight into young adults' experiences of their pathways into homelessness**. For this reason, we have positioned the young people's voices at the heart of our research to pave the way for:

- A greater understanding of this marginalised group
- More specific, targeted support and early intervention
- A derailing of the negative stigmas and homelessness 'blame culture'
- Interventions to prevent secondary complications once young adults are deemed 'homeless'.

Thank you to the large number of partner agencies who have played a key role in making this research and report a reality. Thank you to the young people who willingly shared their experiences of homelessness and finally, to the passionate people working in youth homelessness services. The invaluable work happening each day across Northern Ireland encourages young people to achieve their unique goals and helps move individuals towards a fulfilling and independent life.



Jim Dennison,
Chief Executive, Simon Community NI

Executive Summary

On 7th December 2018, Simon Community NI hosted a working breakfast as part of Homeless Awareness Week. The event ‘Pathways to Youth Homelessness Findings Review: A multi-agency conversation’ provided an opportunity for the youth homeless sector in Northern Ireland to discuss the top-line results from this research and explore how best to translate the findings into departmental recommendations and sector actions.

Over 50 participants representing the statutory and voluntary sector attended the event including NHSCT, BHSCT, Youth Justice Agency, NIHE, Springboard, Belfast Metropolitan College, MACS, Barnardo’s, First Housing, Apex Housing, BCM and CHNI

On the day, participants commented on:

- The emergence, and increased use, of heroin within the youth homelessness sector.
- A serious gap in service provision relating to rehabilitation facilities for young people.
- The impact of childhood trauma, domestic violence and exploitation in youth homelessness – particularly with young females.
- The rise of homelessness of young people who are transgender.

Based on findings from the report and roundtable discussions from the sector, a list of recommendations was compiled;

1. Development of a cross-party and inter-departmental Youth Homelessness Working Group responsible for homelessness prevention.
2. Further interrogation to be undertaken by statutory agencies into the decision making in relation to young people who are known to them who find themselves homeless post 18. This would enable a clearer understanding of homeless prevention strategies and should include:
 - a. HSCT to review care pathways and decision making in relation to Looked After Children who find themselves homeless post 18

- b. HSCT to review the decision to end Social Work support to young people who find themselves homeless post 18
- 3. Commitment to funding research that will explore the level of LGBT within youth homeless populations and the support needs of this group
- 4. Exploration of a specific accommodation service for young females
- 5. Public campaign that changes perceptions of youth homelessness and assists individuals to receive the support they need.

Chapter 1: Introduction

This study was originally commissioned as a piece of academic research to support a master's degree in Social Research Methods, Queens University, Belfast. Its foundation highlighted the necessity of an exploration of the associated risk factors contributing to young people's pathways into homelessness in Northern Ireland. The methodology was put into practice in accordance with the theoretical framework of French philosopher and sociologist, Pierre Bourdieu to identify accurate links between potential risk factors and youth homelessness. Bourdieu's work focused on uncovering and analysing the perpetuation of inequality in society, addressing issues of subjectivity and the relationship between individuals/groups and their surrounding social structures.

At an agency level, the documented findings of the research are based directly on the statistics and feedback from young people on the ground who had been deemed homeless; either residing in temporary housing projects or in receipt of floating support services at the time of the study. The lead partner in rolling out the study, Simon Community NI coordinated and facilitated the involvement of other youth housing providers. These providers were: MACS, Barnardo's, Belfast Central Mission, First Housing, Action for Children and Apex Housing.

Aims and Objectives

The overarching aim of the study was to **gain an insight into young adults' experiences of their pathways into homelessness**. The main objectives of the study were:

- To develop a greater awareness and understanding of this marginalised group
- To highlight the need for more specific targeted support and early intervention
- To minimise negative public opinion which still surrounds homelessness and engender more appropriate attitudes (through highlighting key messages within young people's own personal stories)
- To explore how to better mitigate and/or prevent longer term impacts of homelessness on young people's lives

Chapter 2: Methodology

The methodology was comprised of both quantitative and qualitative elements to gain the most accurate and in-depth insight into the characteristics contributing to young peoples' pathways into homelessness, thus *'increasing the validity and utility of the findings'* [1].

Quantitative Data

The SurveyMonkey Programme was used to create a survey for the young people to complete. 79 out of a total population sample of 145 young people completed the survey. Data collected from this was analysed using Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) after which a statistical analysis was then conducted to determine various outputs including frequencies and descriptive statistics.

Key workers and other support staff were briefed and instructed by each agency representative to assist the young people in completing the survey, should they require help, and that policies pertaining to confidentiality should be followed.

Qualitative Data

Carefully semi-structured interviews were conducted with 10 young people, 5 male and 5 females, ranging between age 18 and 22 years old. The interviews were based on a narrative type of Inquiry (Biographical Narrative Interpretive Method), and allowed each young person to tell their story, in their own words and pace through the process of active and reflective listening on the part of the researcher [2]. Thematic analysis was used when analysing the qualitative interview data [3, 4].

The selection process was done in collaboration with key workers to identify those most suitable to take part in the study.

Both the qualitative and quantitative strands focused on addressing the following key components throughout the study:

- The characteristics of the social spaces/fields from which the young people found themselves heading towards a pathway into homelessness

- The lived experiences of the young people
- The young people's perception and understanding of their pathways into homelessness
- The young people's interaction with their contextual/surrounding social structures

Participant Sample

79 young people completed a survey with specific questions focusing on factors affecting their pathways into homelessness. A further 10 young people took part in face to face interviews, sharing more personal stories and experiences of their journey.

The young people who took part in the study were both male and female, aged between 18 and 25 years old, with a status of homelessness; either residing in temporary housing projects, or in receipt of floating support services within the community.

The research participants for both the quantitative and qualitative components were young adults, aged between 18 and 25, both male and female. These young adults had been deemed homeless and were subsequently either: residing in temporary housing projects or in receipt of floating support services within the community.

Academic Context

For Bourdieu, a relationalist methodology was about uncovering and analysing the perpetuation in society of inequality. A key factor in adopting this approach is in the context of what Beck describes as the 'second modernity' [5]. Characteristic of the 'second modernity' concept is a 'decline in the influence of traditional, collective sources of meaning and action' [6]. That is to say that homeless young people 'occupy a particularly marginal position in the power relations' [6]. inherent in late modern social structures and:

'in the absence of collective explanations for inequality, young people who occupy disadvantaged structural positions become individualized 'life projects' that have 'failed' due to their lack of responsibility and active subjectivity' [6].

It is this subjectivity which lies at the core of Bourdieu's theoretical framework and more importantly, its relationship with the surrounding social structures in the lives of individuals and groups. Viewing young homeless adults as 'failed' individuals disregards the role of the social structures which surround them along their pathways.

A young person's journey into adulthood is characterised developmentally by a growing sense of identity and attachment to the social roles influenced by background and upbringing. It is vital not to underestimate the impact of decisions and incidents occurring during this '*critical time period*' (in their lives), '*which will likely continue to shape (one's) future life course*' [7].

For an increasing number of vulnerable young adults who do not have access to the necessary resources and support during their journey into adulthood, homelessness is becoming a reality. Whilst there is often a web of '*complex subsidiary pathways*' [8], at times specifically individual, leading to a young person's pathway to homelessness, both our literature review and the results of the study have highlighted several overlapping factors:

- Family Breakdown; Conflict & Abuse
- Mental Health Issues
- Low Educational Attainment and Unemployment
- Poverty
- Crime & Paramilitary Threat
- Alcohol & Drug abuse

These risk factors associated with youth homelessness have been well documented throughout literature emphasising that this pathway is one often punctuated with traumatic experiences initiated in childhood including, among others: experiences of being in care and histories of abuse and neglect [9, 10, 11, 12], mental illness and personal and/or parental substance misuse [13, 14], family conflict and relationship breakdown [15, 16, 17, 18, 19, 20, 21]. Indeed, observations made by staff on the ground working for Northern Ireland's largest service provider for the homeless, Simon Community NI, have confirmed that a growing number of young people accessing their services have had previous engagement with other Agency support such as Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS), Beechcroft Child and Adolescent In-Patient Unit, Social Services and the Drug and Alcohol Mental Health

Service (DAMHS), among others, evidencing the complexities and difficulties experienced by many young people before even reaching the stage of homelessness.

The impact, psychologically, emotionally and physically of the experience of homelessness at such a young age has been widely acknowledged in research and literature, suggesting that *'early homelessness can precipitate a lengthy experience of homelessness and associated social problems'* [22].

For those whose pathways have led to homelessness, they have often cited damaging experiences of: exposure to risky sexual behaviour and victimisation [23], criminality and anti-social behaviour [24], substance misuse and low educational attainment [14, 25], unemployment [26], poor mental and physical health [27], and continued relationship difficulties [28], at the onset of becoming 'homeless.' These experiences, compounded by early experiences of trauma or difficulties that led to such pathways, can make it very difficult for young people to get their life back to a place of security, stability and forward progression, having never experienced this or been provided with the tools to carve out such a space for themselves.

In addition to the physical and psychological problems often experienced by young people at the onset of homelessness, cultural myths and stereotypes continue to perpetuate negative public perceptions of homelessness. As such, young people who become homeless are *'in danger of becoming disengaged and alienated from mainstream society...slipping into a culture of dependence, poverty and social exclusion'* [29].

Despite the widespread research reflecting the complex and traumatic histories of marginalized populations, such as those affected by homelessness, there remains a *'strong societal tendency to attach "blame" to behaviours considered "deviant", particularly when exhibited by low-income groups'* [30]. Youth homelessness has become a useful concept through which to sustain a regime of social inequality and injustice. The exclusion of these groups from *'core societal institutions'* is *'viewed as essential to maintaining social control'* [30].

Identifying both personal and structural risk factors is only the beginning in terms of fully understanding the complex lived experiences of homeless young adults. Individual experiences are fundamental to aid in this, alongside an understanding of the young adults' contextual structures. Moreover, in the '*absence of collective explanations*' for their homelessness, young adults are at increased risk of being viewed as '*failed life projects*' [6].

Furthermore, whilst current housing policies do support some young adults in securing temporary accommodation [20], with the imminent onset of a raft of welfare reforms specifically directed at young adults, it is perhaps unsurprising that the numbers of young adults deemed homeless are set to rise [31].

The effects of these cuts have already been witnessed in England and Wales, with the introduction of the Shared Accommodation Rate (SAR), cuts to Job Seekers Allowance (JSA) and housing related cuts to the Universal Credit system for 18-21 year olds [10].

As a starting point to this study, we believed it vital to go to the original source of knowledge on youth homelessness; the young adults themselves. To actively listen to their stories in an attempt to understand what experiences have been key to their pathways into homelessness. For Howe:

'Perhaps the most underestimated [social work] skill is that of understanding. The attempt to make sense of other people's... behaviour is more than an intellectual event. It is an act of compassion' [32].

Having reviewed the relevant literature, it is evident that there is a gap in understanding the interplay between young people and their surrounding social structures during their pathways into homelessness. More specifically, there needs to be a focus on the young peoples' perceptions and experiences of the relations and relationships involved in this interplay, as it is well documented that '*the stuff of social reality, and thus the basis for heterogeneity and inequality, consists of relations*' [33].

Understanding relationships and networks is fundamental to our understanding of marginalised populations. This is very much the case when we look at the youth homeless

population in Northern Ireland. It is useful to apply the concept of methodological relationalism, the '*self-in-relation-with-others*' [34] to look closely at the young peoples' engagement with family, friends, peers, local authorities and indeed the world around them. In this way we can begin to determine how they came to be members of a socially marginalized population at such a young age.

The Bourdieuan framework employed throughout the study provided us with an excellent conceptual tool through which to address the key components affecting young people's pathways into homelessness in Northern Ireland.

Research Preparation

Alongside the key Coordinator of the project, Karen McAlister, Head of Young People's Services with Simon Community NI, other youth housing providers were invited and subsequently took part in the study. These were: MACS, Barnardo's, Belfast Central Mission, First Housing, Action for Children and Apex Housing.

Issues concerning consent, vulnerable adults, privacy, harm minimisation and confidentiality were addressed in accordance with the Queen's University Belfast *Policy and Principles of the Ethical Approval of Research* (2014) document [35].

Chapter 3: Research Findings - much more than an issue of housing

Findings revealed the complex range of factors affecting youth homelessness in Northern Ireland today. The research identified six key areas which most influenced young peoples' pathways into homelessness. These were:

- Individual Profile; Characteristics & Identity
- Family Background & Relationships
- Education, Training & Employment
- Drug & Alcohol Use
- Agency Support
- Future Hopes

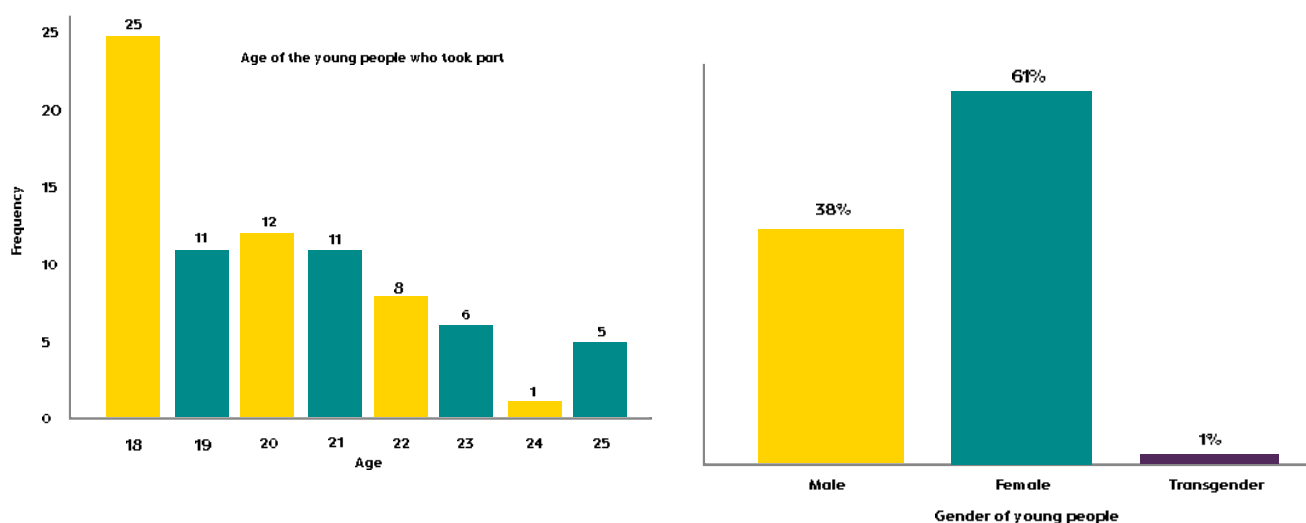
Profile of the young people

The individual profiles of the young people were evaluated to detect any link between identity/personal characteristics and youth homelessness. The factors considered were:

- **Gender**
- **Age**
- **Geographical Area**
- **Ethnicity**
- **Religious background**
- **Disability**
- **Sexual Orientation**
- **Care Experience**

Gender & Age Range

The diagrams below provide a breakdown of the gender and age range of the young people who took part in our study.



The diagrams show a higher proportion of females than males presenting as homeless out of the 79 young people surveyed. This is not relative to the overall figures of young people presenting as homeless to NIHE in 2014/2015, which saw a higher number of young males with a homeless status.

The age range of the young people surveyed fell between 18 and 25 years old. However, almost a third of the young people were aged 18. Most young people (75%) were 21 years or under.

Impact of Geographical Area

A high percentage of the young people surveyed (47%), grew up in either Belfast or Derry/Londonderry before becoming homeless. These are the two largest cities in Northern Ireland, with many areas rife with deprivation and poverty. Some of the young people interviewed voiced how they believed that some of their actions and behaviours were shaped by coming from a deprived area:

*'But with living in a **deprived** area, you're going to get in a fight at least once or twice. It's a thing that you do as a boy growing up, like.'* Michael, Derry

*'See, I grew up in a **deprived area known for paramilitary activity...*** Simon, Belfast

The areas from which some of the young people came from are widely considered to be some of the most disadvantaged, low socio-economic areas in Northern Ireland. This may suggest an increased risk of exposure to commonly associated socio-economic impacts such as: crime, drug & alcohol misuse, paramilitary threat, poverty, low educational attainment and poor health & wellbeing (including mental & emotional health).

Ethnicity

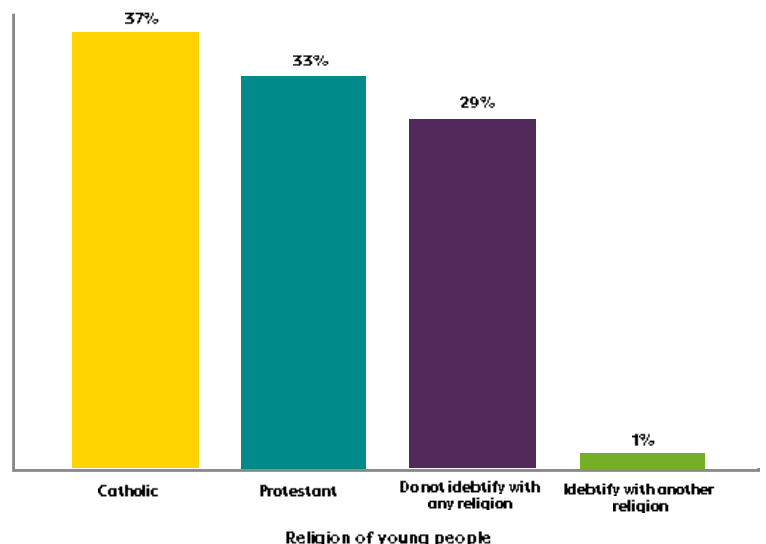
100% of young people stated that they were white. This may be reflective of the small number of ethnic minority groups and the over-representation of white people within the young homeless population of Northern Ireland. There were no statistics available in relation to the ethnicity of the youth homeless population of Northern Ireland at the time of the study.

Religious Affiliation

The graph below shows the religious backgrounds identified by the young people in the survey:

There was a three-way split between those young people who identified as Catholic, Protestant and no religion at all.

Almost one third of young people stated that they did not identify with any religion, which in contrast, is double the national average statistics.



Disability

14% (11) of the young people stated that they had a disability. This is a significant percentage and is perhaps suggestive that additional vulnerability amongst young people can play a role in a young person's pathway into homelessness.

Sexual Orientation

82% of young people said they were straight whilst 18% identified as being gay, lesbian, bisexual or were unsure. This number is significant compared to 1.9% of the general population identifying as LGBT in a recent ONS survey (2015) [36]. This high representation of LGBT young people among the homeless population has been well documented in research and literature. It is thought that approximately one quarter of young homeless people across the UK are LGBT (AKT, 2015) [37].

This is perhaps indicative of the unique challenges faced and the barriers to effective support experienced by some young adults within the LGBT community.

Care History of Participants

Of the 79 young people surveyed, 43% had experience of living in a variety of care settings, with foster care the most common placement type:

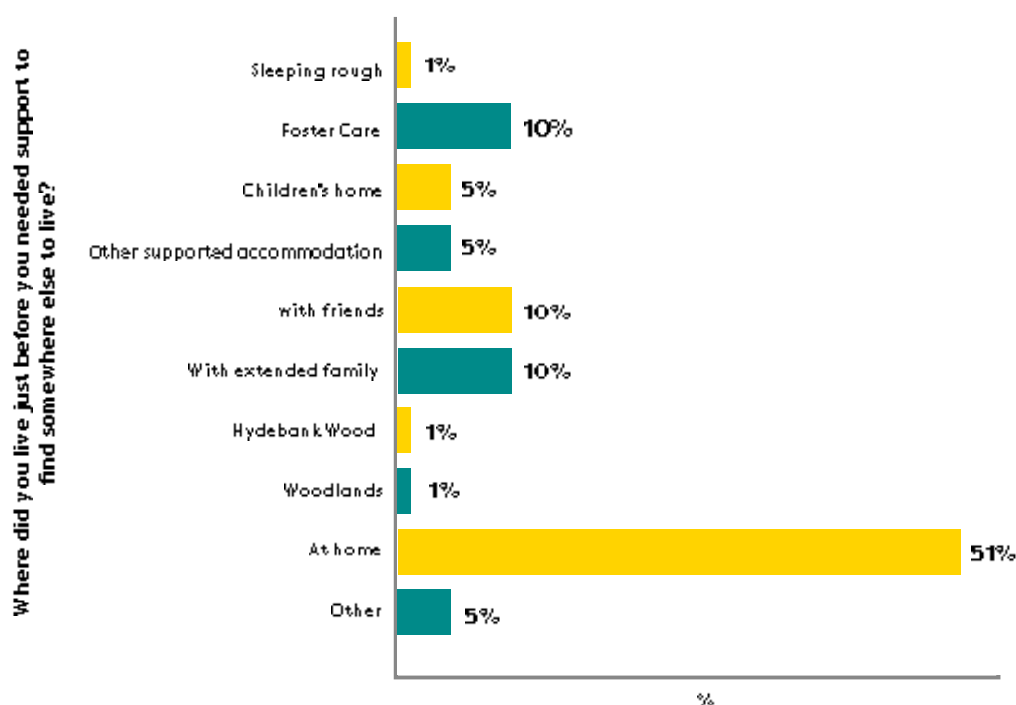
Foster Care	Kinship Care	Residential Care	Secure Accommodation
79%	3%	47%	6%

Some of the young people had experienced multiple placements, ranging from 1 to 13 during their time in care. The average number of placements per young person surveyed was 6.

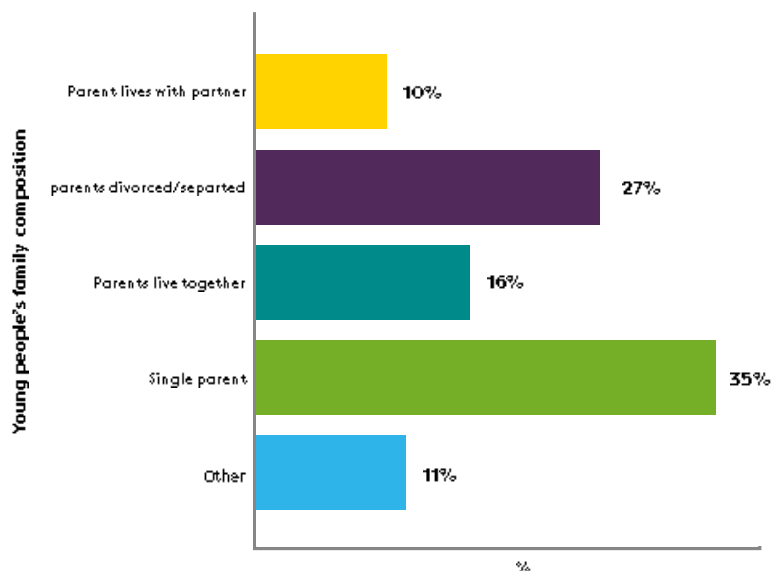
With the associated frequent emotional and physical upheaval, instability and feelings of rejection caused by multiple placements, the link between such care experience and youth homelessness comes as no surprise. It has been well documented via associated research and literature that the absence of a stable home '*support system*' and the crucial lack of '*nurturing bonds*' can lead to '*higher school dropout rates*', '*poverty, mental illness and housing instability*' [7].

Family Background

It is evident from this study that family makeup and dynamics can play a significant role in determining young peoples' pathways into homelessness. 51% of young people surveyed were living 'At Home' prior to homelessness, with a further 20% living with extended family or friends, as shown by the following graphs:



Most young people surveyed came from lone parent families, with only 16% from families whose parents were still together. This is a stark contrast when compared to the national average which shows that 67% of households have parents who are still in a relationship [38]. Similarly, the



high percentage of young people with divorced parents or with a parent who lives with a 'new partner' indicates that potential for conflict and instability in the family home due to the dynamic of a '*blended family*' [13], can be a crucial factor in a young person's pathway into

homelessness. This mirrors previous studies which have linked family make-up to youth homelessness:

“...it was apparent that conflict and instability, if not discomfort, at home led them to seek out” ...other places to live [13].

Lack of Father Figure/Male Role Model

Our findings revealed that for many young people the only parent present at home was their mother. Many confirmed that they had no contact with or had never experienced living with their father. The commonality of this experience was evidenced further during 1-1 interviews with young people, who stated that:

“my father left when I was a baby” Peter, Portadown

“he left when I was two” Michael, Derry

“I haven’t known him for 18 years like, my dad” Simon, Belfast

The negative impact of growing up without a male father figure in the family home has been highlighted in previous studies [13, 15] examining the effects of an absent father on school age children:

[They] ‘...are at risk for the development of psychological problems, poor social/peer interactions, and intellectual and social competence’ [39].

Research by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation (1997) [40] found that half of their sample of young homeless adults had spent a considerable time at home with one parent before a new partner was introduced. It has been documented that with the onset of a new partner, conflict arose, with young males believing that:

‘...they should be given priority over their mother’s new partner’ [40].

Further studies around young males with absent fathers suggest that they have a:

‘...higher likelihood of unemployment, incarceration, and a lack of involvement with their [own] kids’ [41].

Family Conflict and Relationship Breakdown

Findings reinforced the link between family conflict/relationship breakdown and a young person’s journey into youth homelessness. Evidence from the 1-1 interviews offered further insight with several the young people speaking openly about their experiences of poor family relationships, breakdown and conflict:

‘Because you know my dad killed someone and my uncle killed someone and then I’m thinking is that going to come back on me’ - Peter, Portadown

*“...her [Michael’s mum] boyfriend still cheats on her with prostitutes regularly.”
- Michael, Derry*

“There was just fighting all the time and then it didn’t help that my brother was going through his terrible teenage phase, getting in trouble all the time so that made them fight even more.” - Olivia, Derry

‘I was fighting with everyone and I was really struggling getting along with my mum and dad and wee brother.’ - Lisa, Lisburn

The devastating impact of family conflict and upheaval was expressed widely by the young people, exposing feelings of distress, fear and anger regarding the difficulties they experienced at home.

Some young people felt the need to flee the family home, with homelessness seeming like a better option than facing continued dysfunction and/or threat of abuse at home. Despite the potential dangers and risks homelessness presents, young people hoped they would find newfound freedom from the constraints of family life, craving a more ‘normal’ life:

‘They’re [Michael’s family] just so, not normal and I need a normal life for a while you know... I’ve had enough fantasy shit’. - Michael, Derry

'I definitely think separating us [Olivia and her brother] from the family has done us better to be honest'. - Olivia, Derry

Case Study: Peter's Story

A closer look at Peter's story highlights the complexity of family conflict upon the life of a young person.

Family Background: Peter grew up in a hostile and highly dysfunctional home environment, experiencing domestic violence daily. He was also terrified of the threat from paramilitaries, who had ties with his family. With his father and uncle in prison for murder, Peter explained that he feared for his safety every day:

'...subconscious fear of getting killed... my dad killed someone, and my uncle killed someone and then I'm thinking is that going to come back on me. And it's been the paranoia of that over the years... I've sort of been conditioned that way from my mother.'

School Disengagement: Peter disengaged from school at the age of 12, due to the deterioration of his mental health as well as suffering bullying at the hands of his peers.

Left Family Home & Entered Homeless Hostel System: Soon after, Peter was asked to leave the family home due to his increasingly challenging behaviour. He spent some time in various residential care settings before a brief period spent 'sofa-surfing' in friends' houses. He then entered the homeless system.

Community Housing: Short periods were spent in community-based housing, but Peter explained why he felt this often broke down:

'Because you know, even if you get a stable place, you know a house, you still have all that stuff [trauma] you've collected, you know, picked up from all around. Like you know if you go from a normal, everyday house into a hostel, you know a hostel is going to be a complete smack around the face. Because you know there's going to be boys taking drugs, ones coming up tapping you for fags.'

For Peter, the hostel environment only heightened his already anxious and mistrusting outlook.

Further Placement Breakdown: Peter went on to discuss getting his first flat in the community, and why he felt this placement broke down:

*‘People will state the facts, you know right ‘That’s it you’ve got a house!’...and you’re like sitting inside it thinking ‘Well I’m not stable like’ *laughs*. For example, for me you know I’m sitting there, and I’m not used to this. It doesn’t matter where I am because you know I’m still going to look at the world through my eyes.’*

At the time of the interview, Peter stated he had been in his current community accommodation for seven months but that he was becoming increasingly agitated and fearful of his neighbours, suggesting that he may not be in the placement for much longer and that it would probably break down:

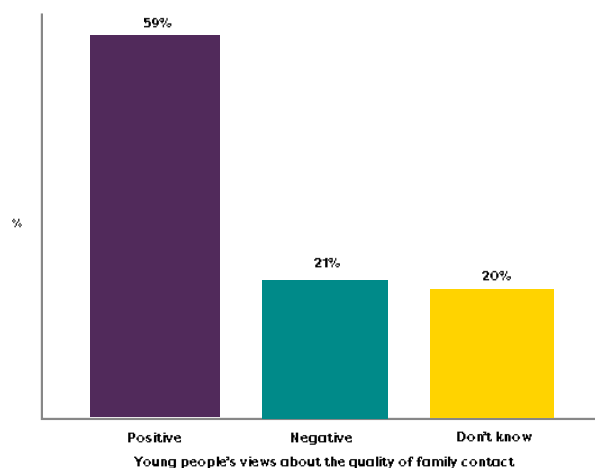
“And you know you sorta get used to this chaotic lifestyle, where you know nowhere is permanent...”

Conclusion: Peter’s story highlights the severe impact of abuse within the family home compounded by the fear and terror he experienced, due to feeling threatened by local paramilitaries in the area.

It is evident how far reaching the impact of these issues have been in shaping Peter’s pathway into homelessness; first cutting short his education, then going on to experience mental health problems and drug misuse.

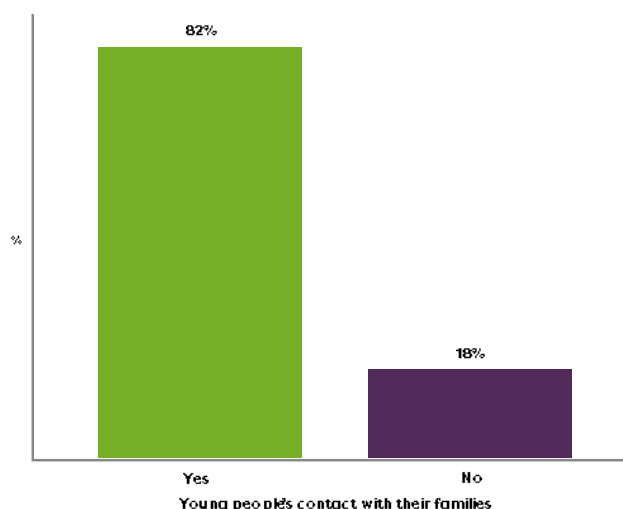
Family Contact

Many young people stated that they still had contact with family (82%). 59% stated that they viewed their contact as positive whilst 21% saw it as negative; 20% of young people did not respond, as shown in the graphs below.



Family Contact Statistics

It is important to note the high percentage of young people who continued to maintain family contact despite the negative impact it appeared to have had on their lives, suggesting the difficulty of breaking family ties as well as a yearning for belonging and parental approval, regardless of the damage such contact can cause.



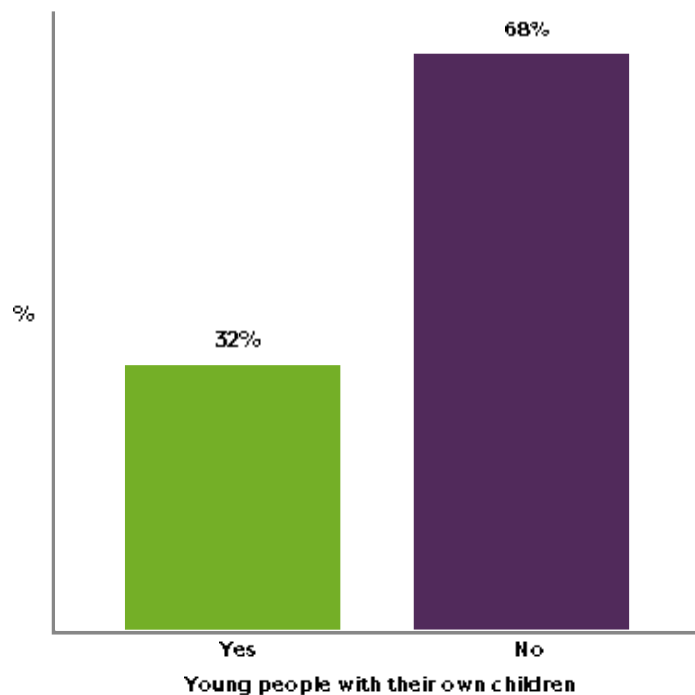
18% of young people stated they had no contact with family. The longer-term impact of this in terms of feelings of isolation, rejection and low self-esteem upon these young people must be considered, given that the support currently provided to many of these young people via supported accommodation is time limited. Once living independently, it

is difficult to determine what level of meaningful support these young people will have access to daily.

Considering this, moving forward, it is crucial to address current gaps and challenges in the provision of supportive communities for young people deemed 'homeless', where skills and networks can be built to encourage independent living alongside access to familial and social type support, if is required. This could be key in enabling young people to successfully maintain their own accommodation and move forward successfully into adulthood.

Young People and their Own Children

One third of young people (32%) stated that they had children. Of those young people who had children, 36% were care experienced and 52% had been living at home prior to homelessness. The high percentage of young parents who had lived at home before becoming homeless could suggest that their pregnancy and/or birth of their child may have been connected to them leaving the family home prematurely.



Overall, the number of young people with children reflects higher averages than that of the general population. NISRA data from 2014 [42] reported that teenage pregnancy in NI was at its lowest for a decade and the average age for motherhood was 30.4 years. This is often attributed to the success of Government initiatives focused on lowering teenage pregnancy rates. Our survey findings could suggest that such initiatives have been inaccessible to certain groups of young people in society.

Just under half of the young parents surveyed lived with their children, with the clear majority of those who did not live with their children having contact with them. This might suggest issues in terms of the young people's capacity to cope with the breakdown of relationships, lack of support and the impact of not having the children in their care.

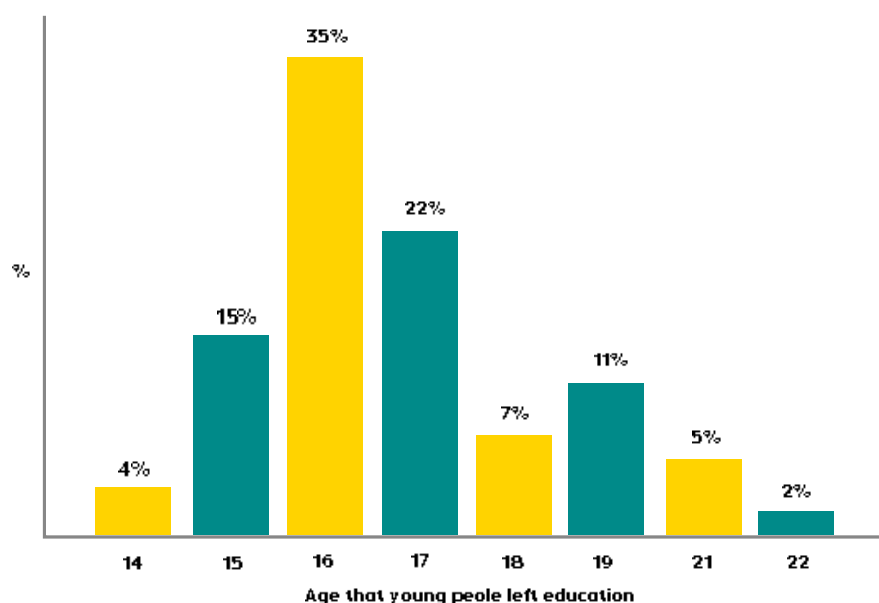
Education, Training and Employment

The findings highlight the impact of low educational attainment upon a young person's pathway into homelessness.

The table below shows the educational/training and employment status of the young people noted at the time of the survey:

Still in School	Paid Work	Training Course	Volunteering	Unemployed
22%	8%	17%	8%	63%

Whilst 39% of young people surveyed stated that they were still in education (school/training), 63% confirmed that they were unemployed. Given that almost 1/3 of the young people surveyed were aged only 18, this is a very high



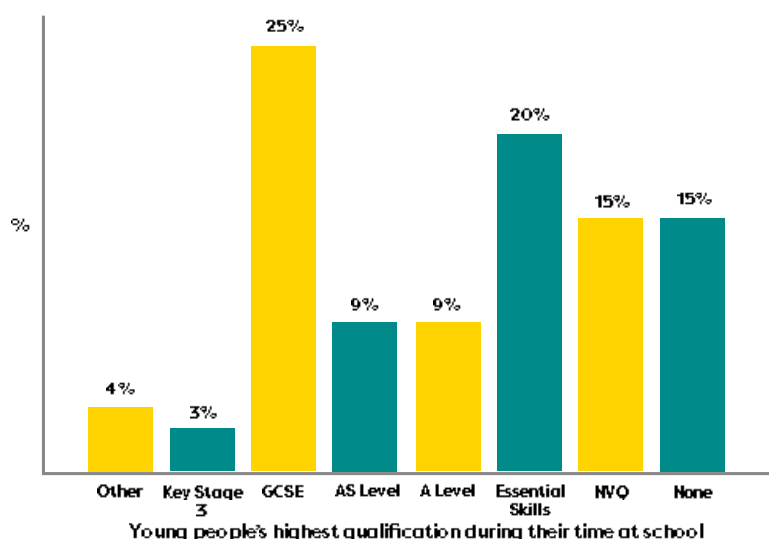
percentage of people not in education or employment compared to the general population of young people aged 18 years old not in education and employment.

54% of young people stated that they left school at age 16 or under, with a further 19% stating that they left school before even reaching age 16, the compulsory age of school attendance; 4% of whom were only 14 years old.

In one interview, Peter, stated that he:

'...left school at twelve and before that there, I didn't learn much out of School'
- Peter, Portadown

15% of young people surveyed stated that they left education/training with no qualifications. 25% stated they had attained GCSEs and 9% left with A-Levels. The low educational attainment of those surveyed is manifest when compared to national statistics, which document that 79% of young people across Northern Ireland taking their GCSE's in 2016 achieved Grades A-C [43].



Young Peoples' Experiences of School

Understanding the young people's experiences of school life is crucial in establishing the role this played in their journey into youth homelessness.

In terms of the young peoples' views on their educational experiences, our survey revealed that:

- Almost half (**47%**) of the young people rated their overall time at school as negative, with **20%** stating that they didn't know and **33%** rating their experience as positive;
- **67%** of young people *'felt that they did not fit in at school'*;
- **47%** of young people felt that they *'struggled to keep up with the learning'* with a further **7%** stating that they didn't know.

The 1-1 interviews further highlighted the difficulties of 'fitting in' faced by the young people. Michael explains how uncomfortable he felt at school as he came from a different, 'poorer' area:

*"...I would've been the only one in my class who'd ever been in a fight, cause they all lived in such posh areas... But with living in *inner city area*, you're going to get in a fight at least once or twice. It's a thing that you do as boy growing up, like...they didn't take well to that... they were all 'that's not good' and I would've wore a tracksuit back then too so I would've been a chav *laughs*." - Michael, Derry*

Bullying at School

The interviews further exposed the challenges faced by young people at school, including the impact of conflict at home, *whilst also experiencing bullying* at school:

'...it's just really bad ...my parents were going through the separation, my brother was acting out, my mum was going crazy. I just couldn't handle bullying on top of that.'
- Olivia, Derry

In fact, bullying became a recurrent theme throughout the 1-1 interviews, with young people recalling periods of sustained harassment, which had left deep emotional and psychological scars, the impact of which continued to be felt, as evidenced by their personal stories:

'...they took my sheets and stuff out of my school bag and just threw them... A really, really packed tight paper ball with cello tape... pelted it at my face on the bus.'
- Lisa, Lisburn

'I left school half way through fourth year. I said I'm fine with doing the work, but I just don't want to be near them people anymore.' - Joanne, Ballymena

Bullying often followed participants from one educational setting to another:

'Then at tech, my background caught up with me – people found out I was homeless and so fake Facebook accounts were made to harass me.' - Jimmy, Coleraine

'...people picked on me in tech as well because I'm just so different than everybody else.' - Lisa, Lisburn

The bullying experienced by the young people individually, reflected common themes raised by a majority of those surveyed. These included; a difficult home life, involvement with social services and having a parent(s) with mental health difficulties.

Case Study: Olivia's Story

Olivia's story exposes the devastating impact of having to face multiple challenges and difficulties at such a young age.

Olivia was referred to the school counsellor as a result of mental health difficulties she had developed. Whilst this experience should have been beneficial, Olivia was bullied even more intensely than before. The bullies began to suspect that Olivia was attending counselling as she was called out of class on a specific day and time:

'They could've waited for a break or lunch and I could've talked to the counsellor then but no, they barged straight into the class, "Olivia, office," every Tuesday.'

After three counselling sessions, Olivia disengaged from the service due to the increased bullying she suffered. As a result, she was unable to avail of the support she needed regarding her home life.

The findings suggest that the education system had failed to adequately support these vulnerable young people and that their experiences of school have played a major role in their journey into homelessness.

Employment Status

As previously mentioned, 62% of the young people surveyed stated that they were unemployed. This is more than three times the rate of the national average, as published by NISRA in 2016 which found youth unemployment statistics at 17.5% in Northern Ireland and 11.7% across the UK [44].

In relation to perceptions as to their unemployment status, the young people's responses included:

'Can't get a job'

‘Due to mental health’

‘Need to get back into education to complete essential skills’

‘No qualifications, no experience and a single parent’

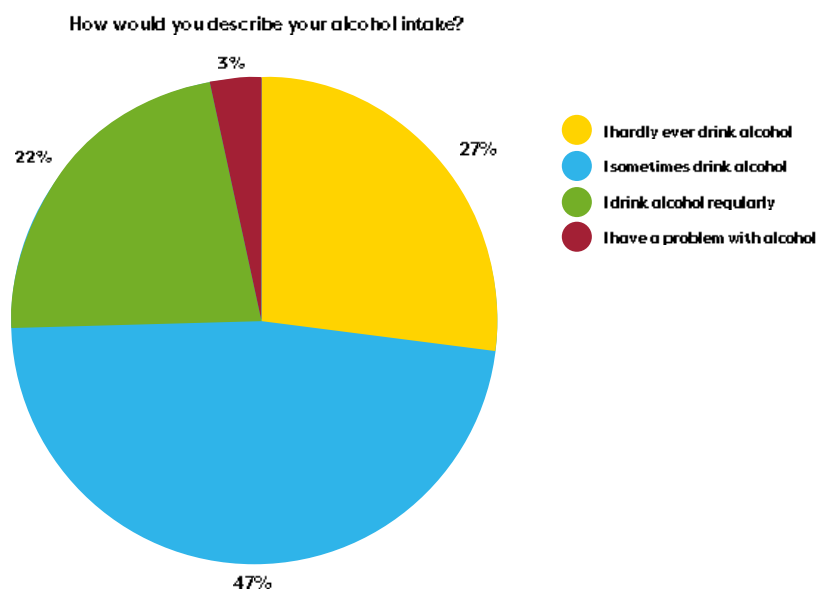
Homeless Young People & Benefits

The young people surveyed were in receipt of a range of benefits, with 89% stating that that they claimed one or more type of benefit:

Job Seekers Allowance	Employment Support Allowance	Education Maintenance Allowance	Housing Benefit	Disability Living Allowance	‘Other Benefits’, e.g. Child Tax Credits
32%	23%	6%	42%	14%	6%

Drug and Alcohol Use

While 75% of the young people surveyed stated that they drank alcohol, only 3% of young people stated that they felt they had a problem with alcohol, 15% of those who drank alcohol had accessed alcohol support services. 60% of those who had accessed the support rated the experience as negative or unsure whilst 40% stated that it had been positive.



Some young people commented about this experience:

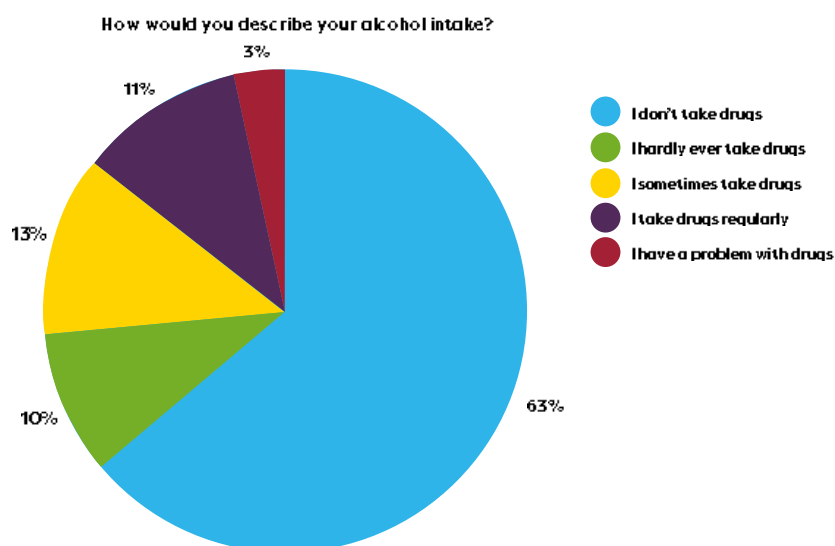
“Attended Drugs & Alcohol, as suggested by Social Services. Didn’t work”

"I didn't really get support plus scared as my ex was living beside it"

"Meetings were depressing"

Experience of Drug Use

46% of the young people surveyed stated that they either use or had used drugs in the past. This figure contrasts with figures reported in a national study carried out in 2016 in England which found that 31% of 11-15 year olds and 8.4% of 18-59 year olds stated that they had taken drugs during the previous year [45].



Types of Drugs Used

Of the 28% of young people who stated that they currently take drugs (at the time of the survey), the types of drugs they said they had tried varied, with cannabis being the most common:

Cannabis	Cocaine	Prescription Drugs	Ecstasy	Legal Highs	'Other,' (e.g. Acid, LSD, Mushrooms, Methadone & Ketamine)
44%	24%	24%	23%	19%	8%

Increase in Prescription Drug Use

The prevalence of the misuse of prescription drugs amongst young people, such as a stimulant, 'upper', or 'downer' was noted throughout both our survey and the 1-1 interviews:

‘When I was going to up to the doctor I was looking for something like diazepam or something *laughs* because I couldn’t afford to get any more herbal... ah legal highs.’ - Michael, Derry

Although Northern Ireland has a much higher rate of GP's prescribing various types of anti-depressants and opiates, there is growing concern among service providers and health and social care staff of the increasing use of 'street' prescription drugs and the effects they are having on our young homeless population.

Contact with Drug Support Services

Approximately one third of young people who took drugs stated that they had had contact with drug support services, yet only 7% stated that they felt their drug use was problematic. 52% of young people stated that their contact with drug support services was a negative experience.

Some of the young people's comments on their experiences of these services, included:

‘Not for me’

‘No support or help’

‘Helped me stop taking drugs so much’

‘Meetings were depressing’

Impact of Drug Use on Family and Home life

The young people shared stories about the impact they felt drug taking had on their family relationships and on being ‘out of home’ at such a young age. 49% of the young people surveyed stated that drug and alcohol use had either caused conflict within their home or played a direct role in their homelessness:

“... [mum] thought, best that I do it there [family home] than somewhere else ... it got a wee bit out of hand then. She thought it was just going to be a phase, but I got addicted to it. Can’t really just drop it, it’s not a choice anymore. And she just... she got fed up I

wasn't going off it and I was losing the rag when I didn't have it and she was all 'you have to leave' so I went to [housing project for homeless/ young people]".

- Michael, Derry

"One night me, her [his mum] and Steve were sitting sniffing [cocaine]... they had coke and I had meth. I didn't think that me ma was going to take meth and I was like, right Steve, I have a wee bit of meth now that the coke's running out and you can keep the coke for after to bring us down again. But aw naw, me ma got ripped into it".

- Michael, Derry

These comments not only highlight the impact of parental drug use, but also raise serious questions about child safeguarding and the unstable and inappropriate family environment some young people have experienced, which has played a key role in their pathway into homelessness.

Michael's Story:

Michael grew up in an area of socio-economic disadvantage and paramilitary presence. His father left the family home when he was very young and over the next ten years he experienced different male partners of his mother move in and out of the house. Relationships were often emotionally abusive and from the age of 5, Michael was exposed to open drug taking within the home.

By age 15, Michael would spend evenings taking cocaine and methadone with his mother and her partner. Michael's relationship with his mother's partner was fraught and he struggled to deal with the abusive treatment towards her. Michael soon began smoking cannabis more regularly. His mother allowed this at first, but as the addiction took hold, his behaviour became more erratic and he was asked to leave the family home.

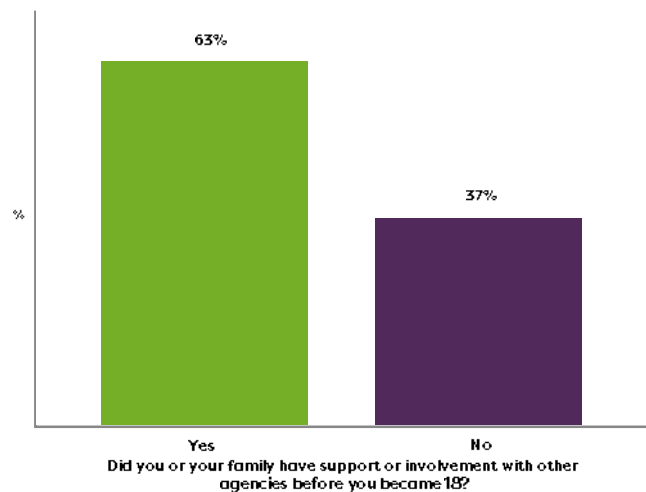
Michael's spiral into cannabis addiction impacted massively on his underlying mental health vulnerabilities such as anxiety and stress he suffered because of growing up in an unstable environment of abuse and chaos. Despite this traumatic experience limiting Michael's life choices from an early age, he still feels that his journey into homelessness was entirely his fault:

'I accepted that no one else is to blame at all in any way, shape or form and it's entirely everything...every decision that I've made has lead to me being completely alone and there's a good reason for it.'

Michael's low self-esteem and addiction, alongside the lack of support to manage his issues at a younger age, reveals the complex reasons why young homeless people find it so difficult to access a path back to stability.

Agency Support and Involvement

63% of young people surveyed stated that they or their families had experienced Agency support before reaching the age of 18, as shown in the graph below:

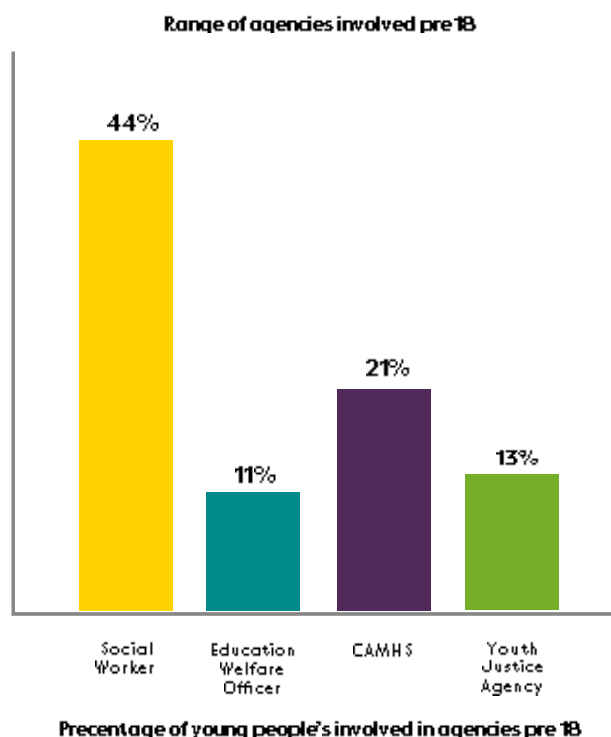


Range of Support Services Accessed Before Age 18

Young people identified four key agencies that they had been involved in prior to their 18th birthday. The graph below outlines the level of their involvement:

Young Peoples' Views of Agency Support Experienced Before Turning 18:

- Of those who had a social worker – 40% cited this as positive, 42% as negative, 18% didn't know
- Of the 18% of young people who had an Education Welfare Officer - 21% cited this as positive, 64% as negative, 14% didn't know
- Of the 34% of young people who were involved with CAMHS - 52% cited this as positive, 37% negative, 11% didn't know
- Of the 22% who had Youth Justice Agency involvement - 82% cited this as positive, 18% negative



48% of young people who had had Agency Involvement before the age of 18, said that this support was ended before they turned 18. This could suggest that the support was either deemed no longer necessary or that the young person/family/carers had disengaged with service or that the young people had 'aged out' of the service.

However, during 1-1 interviews, young people voiced how they felt that they had still been very much in need of agency support when it was dismissed.

Some of the young men we spoke with felt that only when they had hit 'rock bottom' in relation to their mental health, did they get the help they needed:

***'Social services failed massively with me because my mother kind of dominated the whole thing. She made out that I was this badly-behaved child that wanted attention and they referred me to CAMHS where my opinion was taken into account. Eventually the social worker, against the advice of all other agencies around them closed my case and left me to fend for myself until I was 18. I am currently in the process of making a lawsuit against them.'* - Jimmy, Coleraine**

'He [GP] brought me in and I thought, you know, now that I'm here I'm going to lay everything out on the table. You know, I have problems, I've got drug addiction... you know, depression, anxiety and because I understood everything that was wrong with me and told them I needed help they were like aw 'you don't need to be here'.'

- Michael, Derry

Current Agency Involvement

43% of young people surveyed stated that they currently had a social worker while 3% stated they had a probation officer and 16% stated that they were linking in with mental health support services (at the time of the survey).

63% of young people were working with an agency prior to becoming 18 years of age – could more have been done to prevent their pathway into homelessness?

The types of support young people stated they needed but currently had no access to, included:

- 27% - Financial/Debt Management
- 15% - Support with Issues of Self-harm/Suicide Ideation
- 15% - Counselling
- 23% - Mental Health Support
- 13% - Drug and Alcohol Support

When compared with the findings in relation to agency involvement prior to becoming 18, there is a clear gap: for example, 34% stated they were involved with CAMHS pre-18 years old yet a total of 51% felt that they currently needed support from mental health services. This could be due to a variety of factors, including: service gaps, capacity or thresholds for services, transitions between child and adult services or the impact of previous negative experiences with agencies.

Future hopes and aspirations

It is widely acknowledged that hope and aspiration are traits instilled in young people during their formative years, mostly through positive familial/parental relationships and experiences of educational achievement.

It is important to note that our research has revealed high incidences of young people who have experienced a succession of disappointments and let downs at a very young age from either their family, the education system or statutory services/systems.

Whilst homeless young people can often be perceived as 'failures' by society, this study has highlighted that many systems have in fact *failed them* as vulnerable children and young people. The concept of hope and motivation for the future may therefore be much more challenging to instil in young people who often have had such negative earlier experiences, than in their peers, as is noticed by McCoy and Bowen:

'Having a sense of hope and aspirations for the future are often conceptualized as components of resilience for youth' [46].

Resilience and the capacity to foresee and have hopes and aspirations for the future are important in the lives of young people and so, our research explored this area.

Of the young people surveyed:

- 20% stated that they had little or no hope for the future
- 37% stated that they had some hope
- 43% were feeling positive and hopeful about the future

Young People's Housing Aspirations

In relation to their preferred housing type in the future, young people stated as follows:

- 47% preferred Housing Executive housing
- 23% would prefer their own flat/house
- 19% were in favour of private accommodation
- 9% wanted to be living with a partner/child – (this is slightly different as it refers more

to living arrangements than accommodation).

- 1% stated that they would prefer to live with friends or in other accommodation such as University Halls of Residence.

The highest proportion of young people stated that they would prefer living in Housing Executive housing, perhaps due to the perceived stability this offers and is what young people have come to expect as possible or likely for their own future. However, it is worth noting that accessing suitable social housing is increasingly challenging for young people in NI, with private rented accommodation, often shared, becoming a more likely option for many homeless young people.

This is a concern moving forward about the impact of further barriers facing young people in accessing safe and affordable private rented accommodation, due to current benefit restrictions regarding age and the impact of welfare reforms.

What Would Make A Difference?

The young people surveyed voiced their thoughts on what they thought could make a difference in the future to help other young people in a similar position as themselves:

Young People's Views on how to Improve Services and Provision for both Them and their Peers:

'More encouragement to stay at school.'

'More opportunities for social housing.'

'Better support needed in children's home so we can stay there longer or up until we are ready to move out.'

'Better support from local NIHE - more local hostels for females.'

'Better access to mental health services and a clearer, easier system for young people in relation to the housing process.'

'More support when social services end.'

'There should be more focus on homelessness from the government.'

'More activities for young people.'

'I think that if young people had more emotional support it would enable them to do better in everyday life.'

'For people to show more respect to young adults like the people living here.'

'Agencies to be more open minded and tolerant of young people.'

'I believe there is no help for us.'

Chapter 4: Conclusion and Learnings

Our research highlights the range of structural and system failures experienced by vulnerable young people, which has led to their various pathways into homelessness. Our findings show that these young people yearn to be listened to, to be understood and to have their basic needs met; something that many didn't experience growing up. The direct comments and statistics gathered from the young people raise critical questions around:

- The impact of conflict, trauma & abuse during early family life and it's connection to youth homelessness
- Agency involvement and family support pre-18; our findings highlight the need for an in- depth investigation as to why support was, in some cases, terminated before the age of 18, and what measures were deployed to fully support and protect these vulnerable young people before they became homeless.
- Agency involvement post-18; given that 63% of young people who took part in this survey were known to external agencies, such as social services, before the age of 18, our findings lead us to question what long term pathways were set up with the young people to encourage and support independent living once the young people reached adulthood. This question is particularly significant when applied to 'Looked After' young people with an experience of/residing in care before becoming homeless; it begs the question as to whether there was a clear pathway set up for these young people moving from care to adulthood?
- The education system; throughout the study, young people repeatedly highlighted the negative experiences they suffered during school, most significantly, the effects of bullying which seemed to follow them no matter which educational setting they moved to; either school or college. Many young people expressed how family life and bullying led to bad attendance at school, withdrawal, low educational achievement and leaving school at an earlier age, which then had a major impact on the future training and employment possibilities for the young people. There is a crucial question therefore around the adequacy of the education system in supporting vulnerable young people to meet their learning needs, thus helping to prevent a downwards spiral into homelessness.

- The impact of drug and alcohol use on the young people's journey into homelessness (both by family members and the individual young people themselves).

In conclusion, the study demonstrates that the association of the above risk factors with vulnerable young people has a clear link to their journey into homelessness, and that certain aspects and protocols of agency involvement and the education system need to be challenged to help prevent further vulnerable young people journeying towards youth homelessness in the future. These young people are not failures; they have been failed by society and the structures around them and it is crucial that this is understood widely. It is therefore evident that understanding the complexities and realities of youth homelessness in Northern Ireland is much more than just an issue of housing.

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