Our Voices: Addressing Disparities in Education and Employment Outcomes for Homeless Young Adults

KEY POINTS

- **Young people felt they lacked guidance on education and career paths tailored to their unique skills and talents, leading to narrowed opportunities.**

- **Challenges in relocating schools or enduring lengthy commutes while experiencing homelessness added to the strain on young people living in temporary accommodation.**

- **Despite feeling shame and keeping their homelessness secret, young people acknowledged that their experiences had equipped them with strengths and skills for life.**

- **Parents in families experiencing homelessness tend to act as a buffer to their children against the stress of experiencing homelessness. Yet, these young people can be particularly isolated because most service-based support is targeted at their parents.**

- **Although many people expressed gratitude for the support received from councils and services, they reported being unaware of available support services and suggested better coordination and communication among these services.**

Introduction

There is estimated to be around 150,000 children experiencing homelessness in the UK[1]. This figure equates to one child experiencing homelessness in every school class in the country.

Adolescents experiencing homelessness experience difficulties with engaging in education[2] and the workplace[3]. A recent systematic review[4] found that evaluations of employment interventions aimed to support

young people needed further development, and recommended engagement with people experiencing homelessness in evaluation design to address shortcomings.

Summary of research

The 'Our Voices' project sought to address the challenges faced by young people experiencing homelessness in accessing education and employment. The project involved nine co-creators, aged 18-26, with lived experience of homelessness.

Collaborating with the principal investigator, the co-creators developed an interview schedule to address the research questions. They received training in qualitative research methods, interviewing skills, and research ethics before conducting interviews with each other and other young people experiencing homelessness.

The research team analysed the data by creating collaborative artworks and engaging in related discussions to identify themes. Based on the findings, the team formulated recommendations to improve and support the lives of young people experiencing homelessness.

Research Findings and Impact

In addition to the summary findings detailed above, the young people provided a clear set of policy recommendations across a range of domains, which can be viewed at the end of this summary report.

Methodological evaluation

People experiencing homelessness often report feeling frustrated by, and mistrustful of, the methodological approaches of researchers that engage with them.[5] The co-creation approach, which fully engaged people with lived experience in the formulation, delivery, and analysis of the research, resulted in a positive research experience. The participants, co-creators and service providers developed skills which they could further utilise in the future.

"I think what you guys have done with this… should be like a blueprint for a lot of research and projects…My participants held a lot of shame because they weren't talking to their friends about their current situation, I feel like it was a breath of fresh air for them to come and talk to me…they wanted to speak to people who have been through homelessness. Because I guess it validates their experience and it makes them feel like it's okay" – **Project Co-creator**

"The young people have been buzzing about the research and staff have noticed a change in them since completing the research. I have heard a lot from the staff that the young people who were co-creators have a lot more confidence, and both Centrepoint and Havering want to utilise this change and provide further opportunities to develop the skills you gave them." – **Homelessness Service Provider**

SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS

Category	Recommendation	Details
Services	Make it easier for people to access services. Acknowledge people's autonomy. Stop asking people to repeatedly give their histories to services.	*360 check-in for physical and mental health support.* *Postal boxes made available to people without a fixed address at local post offices.* *Storage units made available for people when they lose their homes.* *Implement 'blue-light' style cards which people can show to demonstrate service eligibility.*
Government	Properly define and recognise homelessness. Ensure inter-agency collaborations so that people can access better connected services. Introduce planning reforms for better quality environments. Better advertise and communicate support.	*Introduce a digital platform (similar to Electronic Patient Journey System) so that people can access better connected services.* *Regulate for better sound insulation to improve living environments in dense housing.* *Available services, and information about how to access them (e.g. free gym), should be widely advertised in public spaces such as libraries, job centres and schools.*
Employment	Offer more diverse, and better quality, opportunities through the Jobcentre. Ensure that people can aspire to more than minimum wage. Ensure Jobcentres are mental health, and trauma informed environments. Review age-based categories for specialist support for young people.	*Review the gendered pathways of work offered to people through Jobcentres.* *Introduce living wage apprenticeships in the creative industries.* *Introduce mentoring opportunities across a broad range of industries that are meaningful and not tokenistic.*
Education	Recognise that there are a very wide range of career paths. Offer skills and talents-based career guidance. Ensure people can maintain hygiene when attending school.	*Inform students about the wide range of career pathways available to people beyond education.* *Offer people aptitude-style assessments which can provide recommended potential careers advice suited to their interests and talents.* *Ensure that school showers are made available for students to use, and sanitary products are freely provided to students.*
Landlords	Ensure landlords cannot discriminate against tenants on housing benefit. Ensure people with children and pets are not excluded from housing.	*Landlords should accept or reject a tenant prior to them learning where payments will be sourced from (i.e. private funds or state benefits).* *Pets should be allowed in social housing.* *Unspoken discrimination against tenants with young children should be addressed.*
Public Facilities	Invest in infrastructure which enables all people to live with health and dignity.	*Ensure showers and washing facilities are freely available to people in gyms, libraries or public baths.* *Provide laundry coupons for people to access laundromats.* *Ensure healthy food and sanitary products are made freely available to people who need them – potentially through brand aligned corporate partnerships.*
Media	Help to destigmatise the situation of homelessness.	*Introduce storylines to mainstream media in which central characters experience homelessness through loss of employment.* *Public portrayals of people experiencing homelessness in mainstream media should have lived-experience workers as writers on these stories.*

References

1. UK Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (2024, 8 August). *Statutory homelessness in England: January to March 2024* [official accredited statistics]. https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/statutory-homelessness-in-england-january-to-march-2024
2. Parrott, K. A., Huslage, M., & Cronley, C. (2022). Educational equity: A scoping review of the state of literature exploring educational outcomes and correlates for children experiencing homelessness. *Children and Youth Services Review*, *143*, 106673.
3. Narendorf, S. C., & Palmer, A. (2023). Maybe It's Time to Reinvent the Wheel: Re-Imagining Supportive Services for Youth Served by Public Systems in the Transition to Adulthood. *Child and Adolescent Social Work Journal*, *40*(4), 435-438.
4. Marshall, C. A., Boland, L., Westover, L. A., Goldszmidt, R., Bengall, J., Aryobi, S., ... & Gewurtz, R. (2022). Effectiveness of employment-based interventions for persons experiencing homelessness: A systematic review. *Health & Social Care in the Community, 30*(6), 2142-2169.
5. Rea, J. (2023). Social relationships, stigma, and wellbeing through experiences of homelessness in the United Kingdom. *Journal of Social Issues, 79*(1), 465-493.

Further information

Contact details:
Dr Jessica Rea
Social Research Institute,
University College London

j.rea@ucl.ac.uk

Cite this research
Rea, J., Gain, K., Okafor, C.A., Taylor-Gentles, D., Té Saiegh, N. & Wuttke, N. (2024). *Our Voices: Addressing disparities in education and employment outcomes for homeless young adults.* University College London. [insert file link here]