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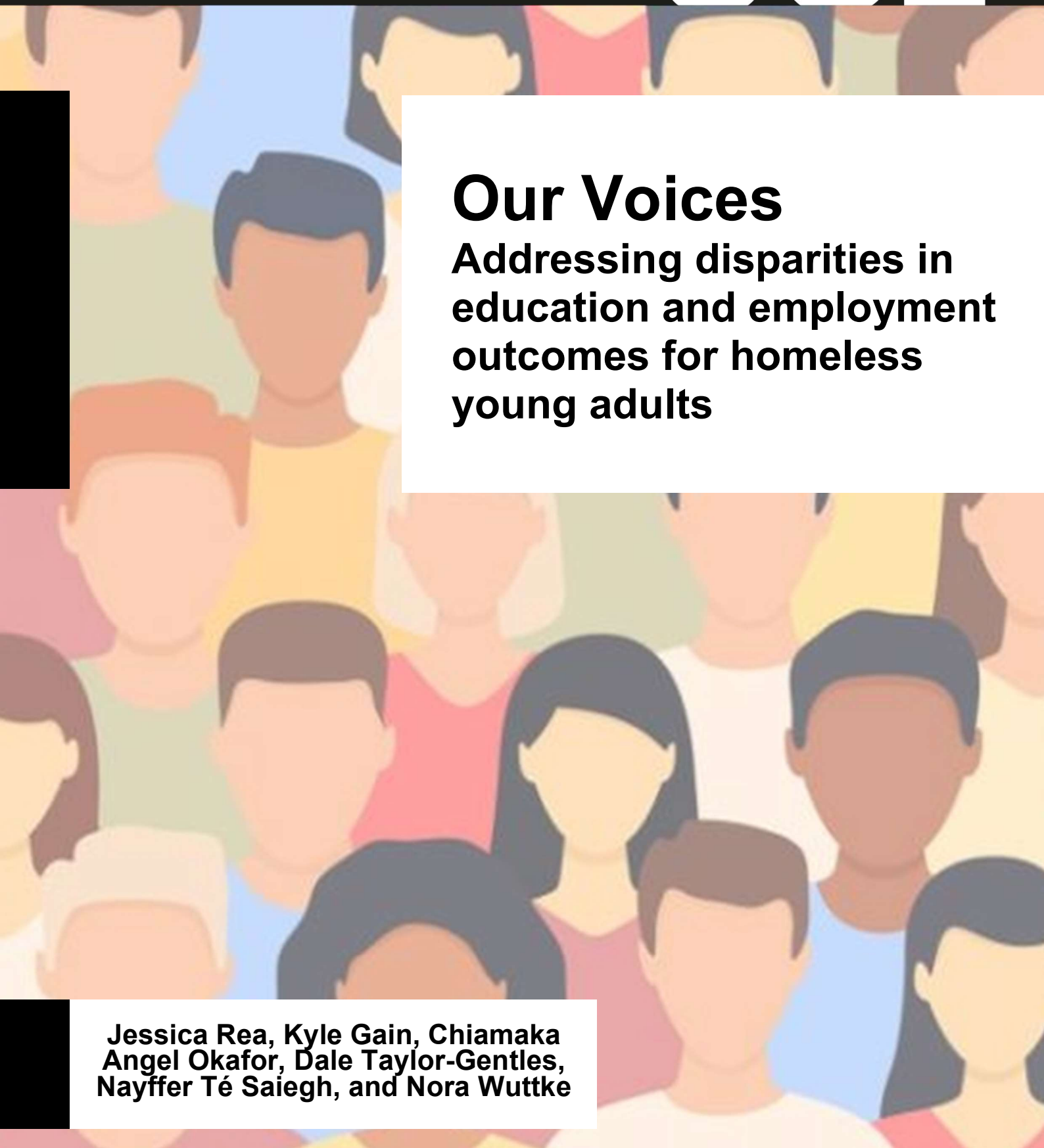

Our Voices

Addressing disparities in education and employment outcomes for homeless young adults

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Centre Point Ending Youth Homelessness

The Salvation Army

Havering London Borough

Shelter from the Storm

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Executive Summary

There is estimated to be 150,000 children experiencing homelessness in the United Kingdom[1], which equates to approximately one child experiencing homelessness in every school class in the country. The implications of these statistics have long term consequences for both individuals and societies, with homeless adolescents experiencing difficulties with engaging in education[2] and the workplace[3]. The 'Our Voices' project took a participatory approach to understand the barriers young people experiencing homelessness face in achieving their education and employment goals. Nine co-creators (aged 18-26) with lived experience of homelessness, either on their own or as part of a family, collaborated with the principal investigator throughout all stages of the research. The co-creators formulated the interview questions, interviewed 24 homeless young people and analysed the data by creating collaborative artworks and engaging in related discussions to identify themes. The co-creators formulated concrete recommendations for changes that governments, councils, support services, employers, schools and other key stakeholders can implement. Addressing barriers to support and access, such as better communication of entitlements, simplifying complex bureaucratic processes, and removing requirements for certain types of documentation, which can be near-impossible to access for those fleeing conflict and domestic violence, were at the forefront of recommendations for policy change.

Key Findings

- 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. These skills were often not acknowledged, or fostered, by those providing career guidance and support.

- 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 many available support services and suggested better coordination and communication among these services.

Summary of Policy 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.*

Project Impact

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.

"Thank you so much for [interviewing me], I found it really positive and am so glad I took part!! [The interviewer] was such a great host too, and it was really nice to share my story" – **Interviewee**

"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**

Background

Youth homelessness is a pressing social issue in the United Kingdom, affecting over 150,000 children[1], which is equivalent to one child in every school class in the country. The experience of homelessness during formative years can have profound and lasting effects on a young person's ability to access education[2] and employment[3]. The Homelessness Reduction Act 2017 introduced duties for local authorities in the United Kingdom to prevent and relieve homelessness, including personalised housing plans and referrals from public bodies. Despite the scale of the issue of youth homelessness, only 66% of those who sought help from local authorities received an assessment[7], indicating systemic gaps in support.

Youth homelessness encompasses a range of living situations characteristic of instability including rough sleeping, sofa surfing, and temporary accommodation. Concerningly, the European federation of homelessness support organisations (FEANTSA) does not include young people experiencing homelessness as part of a family within their definition[6]. This suggests that young people experiencing homelessness as part of a family unit may not be considered within the scope of interventions aiming to support homeless young people.

Barriers to Education

Instability caused by homelessness disrupts a young person's ability to attend school consistently and achieve their academic goals. In addition to facing challenges within the family environment[8], young people need to navigate the stress of frequent moves, resultant school changes, and living in temporary and often overcrowded accommodation[9]. These factors result in missed school days, chronic absenteeism, and disengagement from learning[10]. Teachers are often unaware that young people are experiencing homelessness, and when they are aware, have reported that students struggle with concentration, emotional regulation, and social integration[9], all of which hinder academic progress. Many students drop out of school due to the multifaceted adversities they encounter when becoming homeless[11]. It is thus unsurprising that mental health issues are prevalent among homeless young people[12], with more than half reporting struggles such as anxiety and depression[13]. These conditions can impair cognitive functioning, motivation, and attendance, further limiting educational attainment[14].

Barriers to Employment

In addition to the challenges young people face during their education, and the related consequences of this on their educational attainment and employment opportunities, young people face a number of other barriers to employment. One of the most frequently heralded barriers is the structure of the social support, or 'benefits', system in the United Kingdom. Nearly half of homeless young people have had to turn down job offers or additional hours due to the impact on their benefits[15]. The Housing Benefit

taper rate and Universal Credit rules often disincentivise work, particularly for those in supported accommodation[16]. Three-quarters of young people surveyed identified the lack of local jobs as a major obstacle to achieving their employment aspirations[17]. This is especially true in economically deprived areas where youth unemployment is high and opportunities are scarce. Homeless young people often lack access to tailored employment support, such as job coaching, skills training, and apprenticeships. While some Jobcentre staff are supportive, many young people report difficulties in explaining their circumstances and receiving appropriate help[17]. When people do manage to secure work, it often pays insufficiently to materially change their circumstances[18]. Without stable employment, young people are more likely to remain in poverty, experience poor mental health, and face continued housing insecurity, creating a cycle of disadvantage that is difficult to break[12].

Intersectionality and Vulnerability

The experience of homelessness is not uniform[9]. Gender, nationality, and ethnicity all influence how young people navigate education and employment. For example, young women with children face additional barriers due to childcare responsibilities and limited support networks[19]. Refugees and non-UK nationals often struggle to access homelessness support due to immigration status and discrimination[20]. Homeless Young People from ethnic minority backgrounds report concerns about racial discrimination further affecting their employment prospects[17]. These overlapping experiences of exclusion highlight the need for integrated support systems that address the full spectrum of challenges faced by homeless young people.

Research Aims

The study aims to address the pressing societal issue of education and employment inequalities faced by young people experiencing homelessness. Recent reviews conclude that evaluations of interventions aimed to support people experiencing homelessness need further development with a particular focus on engaging with people experiencing homelessness in evaluation design[4]. Taking a participatory approach, which has been highlighted as a gold-standard methodology for evaluating intersectional inequalities by the World Health Organisation[21], this research engages homeless young people in the design, delivery, and interpretation of the findings to ensure that barriers and issues that may have been overlooked by researchers and policy makers historically are identified[22]. The inclusion of people who are homeless both on their own, and as part of a family, provides us with the opportunity to better understand the ways in which people's experiences converge and differ across these contexts. Through the meaningful engagement of people who are affected by the issue of homelessness this research aims to advocate for impactful policy change informed by lived experience.

Our Approach

This project took a participatory approach to address the shortcomings identified in the design and evaluation of support interventions aimed at supporting young people experiencing homelessness[4]. In particular, the participatory research approach undertaken in this study aimed to engage people with lived experience of homelessness during their adolescence throughout the research process. While there are a vast array of different approaches taken in coproduction, ranging from co-authored research to participant consultation, the overarching principles involve: shifting unbalanced power dynamics traditionally enacted in the process of research to ensure equality, diversity and respectful inclusion; building capacity and skills for all members of the co-production team, ensuring that the process is beneficial to everyone involved; and maintaining a reflexive and fluid approach to ensure that the process evolves to meet challenges and truly deliver its agenda of social change and justice[23]. Recognising the unique insights that can be gleaned by collaborating with young people from diverse backgrounds who were experiencing homelessness, the Principal Investigator (PI), Dr Jessica Rea, secured funding from UCL Grand Challenge Justice and Equality Special Initiative to work alongside people with lived experience of homelessness in the design, delivery, and outputs of this research. Co-creators were recruited into the study and collaborated with the PI to develop the study aims, and interview schedule to address the research questions. The co-creators received training in qualitative research methods, interviewing skills, and research ethics before conducting interviews with each other and then 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 which are documented in this report. This project was reviewed and approved by the UCL IOE Research Ethics Committee (REC1928).

Research Design

There is very little, if any, research that expressly brings together young people experiencing homelessness as part of a family, and young people experiencing homelessness on their own, to discuss the ways in which their experiences converge and differ. It was an essential part of this research design to bring together young adults experiencing homeless living in different social settings to better understand and address the needs and experiences of a broad range of young people facing homelessness while in school and education.

Planned recruitment methodology: The initial plan was to recruit ten co-creators with lived experience of homelessness during their adolescence. We aimed to have co-creators evenly split between young people who were experiencing homelessness apart from their families (recruited through Centrepoint), and young people who were experiencing homelessness within a family unit (recruited through Havering Borough Council). We intended for the co-creators to speak with two other young people experiencing homelessness; hoping to maximise opportunities for discussions about diverging experiences by ensuring each person interviewed one person who was

experiencing homelessness on their own, and one person who was experiencing homelessness as part of a family. We planned to pay co-creators the standard UCL Research Assistant rate (2024) of £18.18/hr for their time, and the interviewees were due to be paid £20 for participation in an interview lasting between 30 and 60 minutes. We found it very difficult to recruit participants, which is unsurprising given the mistrust people experiencing homelessness hold towards researchers[5], and had to revisit our planned methodology as a result. Reasons we were unable to recruit participants included: parental concern about institutionally imposed consequences placed on families resulting from child disclosures; young people feeling unconfident about catching public transport independently as they had never caught a train before; and a lack of available childcare to support young parents who were experiencing homelessness in participating in the discussions.

Co-Creation Workshops

Participants: A total of nine co-creators were recruited into the study via Centrepoint, Havering Borough Council, and through referral from other co-creators. Not all the co-creators attended all the workshops, and the grant funds were redistributed, following approval from the grant provider, to include more generous payments for both the co-creators and the interviewees. The co-creators were paid £130/day for each of the workshops that they attended, and £125 for each interview that they conducted.

Table 1: Co-creator Demographic Characteristics and Project Engagement

Pseudonym	Recruitment Path	Group	Gender	Age	Workshops Attended	Interviews Conducted
Carl	Centrepoint	Single	Male	22	4	3
Rachel	Centrepoint	Single	Female	25	4	3
Tina	Centrepoint	Single	Female	19	2	2
Zane	Centrepoint	Single	Male	23	1	0
Darren	Co-creator Referral	Single	Non-binary	26	3	1
Nathan	Havering	Family	Male	20	2	0
Angel	Havering	Family	Female	19	4	2
James	Havering	Family	Male	20	3	2
Ahmed	Havering	Family	Male	17	4	3

Procedure: Co-creators were provided with information sheets and consent forms which outlined that they would be invited to contribute to the development of every stage of the research project. This specifically involved attending four day-long workshops over a six-week period, during which time they were encouraged to respectfully share their views and experiences with the other members of the research team. It was also explained that they would be expected to interview two other people about their experiences of attending education and seeking work while experiencing homelessness. Co-creators were consulted about when the most suitable time would

be to host the sessions, and the workshops were scheduled to accommodate their collective availability.

The workshops were held in Bloomsbury between 10am and 4pm with a two-hour break in between which included an hour-long catered lunch. Co-creators were sent an information pack with directions to the office, accessibility guide, and an overview of sessions to take place on the first day. The format of the workshops is detailed below:

Workshop 1: The first workshop began with a brief presentation of the research stages and process followed by a discussion about the importance of confidentiality and respect. Introductions were then facilitated by a 'this is me' artwork session guided by an experienced arts facilitator. During this session, people were provided with a range of artistic materials and encouraged to trace their hand onto an A3 page and include contents that impacted them inside and outside of themselves. After working on these for an hour, we then took turns introducing ourselves to the room by explaining what the artworks meant to us. After a break, everyone then participated in a round table discussion outlining the key barriers they think impact employment and educational outcomes for young people experiencing homelessness. The day concluded with the collective formulation of research aims and research questions for the interview study.

Workshop 2: The second workshop took place the day after the first workshop and was primarily designed to provide co-creators with support in developing confidence in their interview skills. The session began with an introduction to interviewing skills, and practical tips and training for conducting interviews provided by an experienced interviewer. Co-creators also received training on research ethics, confidentiality and data handling. In the afternoon, people were paired and interviewed each other. These interviews were recorded and anonymously transcribed for inclusion in the study with the consent of the co-creators. Following the interviews, the research team reflect on what they learned during the interviews and what they could take forward in their next interviews. The research questions were refined following the first interviews and the co-creators then interviewed each other for a second time. The research questions were again refined to ensure maximum clarity, ensuring that they addressed the areas that the co-creators identified as important.

Workshop 3: The third workshop took place four weeks after the second workshop, and only once each member of the research team had spoken with at least two other young people experiencing homelessness. The workshop began with a reflective discussion about the interview process itself and the suitability of the research questions. The team then began to construct collaborative artworks to generate the themes identified across the interviews. The collaborative thematic analysis session involved each member of the research team sitting at the table with an A1 board in front of them, and a range of art materials centrally placed for all people to use. The members of the research team were asked to draw, or create, a visual representation of something that stood out to them about the disclosures of their interviewees. Some people drew images, others wrote words, and some made collages to represent their interviews. They were then requested to stand up and move left around the table to the next board, review the image that the other person had made, reflect on whether

something about this image reminded them of contents in their interview(s), and add to that person's creation with related visual content from the interviews that they had conducted. Once each member of the research team had contributed to each of the seven boards on the table, the group discussed each board. The discussion would begin with the first artistic contributor talking about the board they had started, and each contributor would speak then speak about their contributions to the board. This alternative form of thematic analysis provided rich discussions that extended beyond people relaying the contents of the interview.

Workshop 4: The final workshop took place a week after workshop three, and once all co-creators had the opportunity to interview at least one more person since the previous workshop. In the morning, the arts-based exercise from Workshop Three was repeated with the same boards. This was followed by a discussion about the themes from the interviews and how they may have differed, or reinforced themes, from earlier interviews. After a celebratory lunch, the research team worked together to develop a set of policy recommendations about ways in which obstacles could be removed, and the lives of homeless young people improved, by service providers and government agencies (see 'Summary of Policy Recommendations' on page five of this document). The workshops concluded with a reflective discussion about the research process.

Interviews

Participants: The co-creators interviewed each other during the second workshop and then interviewed 17 other young people experiencing homelessness over the subsequent five weeks. Two of the co-creators requested that their interview recordings were deleted during the second workshop resulting in a total of 24 interview recordings which were anonymously transcribed. Seven people, aged between 16 and 25, had experienced homelessness with their families, and 17 people, aged between 17 and 28, had experienced homelessness on their own. We had initially planned to pay interviewees £20 for a 30–60-minute interview but struggled to recruit people. Young people approached via Havering Borough Council reported being concerned about the implications of interview disclosures on their siblings and parents. Young people approached via Centrepoint were reluctant to engage in the interviews, likely resulting from being over surveyed and studied (known as research fatigue)[24]. The PI thus approached several organisations, some of which she had worked with before, and increased the payment for interviews to £40 per interview. To ensure maximum confidentiality, people were recruited via poster advertisements placed within the shelters with scannable QR codes and tinyurls to an online participant information and consent form. These advertisements were placed in shelters run by Havering Borough Council, Centrepoint, Shelter from the Storm, and Salvation Army youth support services.

Table 2: Interviewee Demographic Characteristics (excluding co-creators)

Pseudonym	Age	Single / Family	Gender
Valerie	16	Family	Female
Anna	16	Family	Female
Samantha	25	Family	Female
Gina	21	Family	Female
Imani	22	Single	Female
Barry	17	Single	Male
Sunny	23	Single	Female
Adam	19	Single	Male
John	18	Single	Male
Arthur	20	Single	Male
Janice	28	Single	Female
David	22	Single	Male
Eddie	22	Single	Male
Alan	21	Single	Male
Sharon	18	Single	Female
Salim	17	Single	Male
Halim	23	Single	Male

Procedure: The online interview signup sheets were checked daily by the PI who would then liaise with the interviewees and co-creators to coordinate their availability. Once a date and time had been set, the interviewees and interviewer were sent Zoom links to attend the session. The PI would attend the beginning of all interviews to ensure that the interviewees and interviewers were both in attendance, and that the interviewees understood their right to withdraw from the study at any point without giving a reason. Interviewees were also told that they could skip any questions that they did not feel comfortable answering by saying 'pass' or 'I don't want to talk about that'. Interviewees also had an opportunity to ask the interviewer, and PI, any questions about the study prior to the interview commencing. Once this was done, the PI would thank the interviewer and interviewee for their time, remind them that they could reach out following the interview with any questions or concerns, and left the call. The PI would review interview transcripts following the interviews, and follow up with interviewers and interviewees to check whether the interview had gone well. The interviewees were universally positive about their experiences of being interviewed. All interviews were recorded via Zoom and anonymously transcribed for storage and analysis. The recordings were deleted once the transcriptions were completed.

Analytic Approach

This research took a multimodal approach to ensure rich data from a range of settings and sources, including arts-based methodologies in the workshops, workshop discussion recordings, and interviews conducted both in-person and online.

Arts-led Methodologies

The project's art-led methodology placed creative practice at the centre of both collaboration and analysis, with co-creators receiving training in drawing as a methodology for ethnographic research[25] during the workshops. Through drawing, collaging, and later sound-making, co-creators engaged with one another, and with the material, in ways that moved beyond conventional verbal exchange. These artistic practices were not just icebreakers, or illustrative tools, but became integral to how relationships were formed, how interviews were reflected upon, and how analysis was collectively produced. By working with visual and creative forms, the methodology also lowered barriers to participation, enabling contributions from those who might feel less comfortable in conventional academic or policy discussions. In parallel, creative methods helped surface hidden assumptions and invited diverse perspectives into the process. Together, these artistic and creative approaches fostered spaces for reflection, dialogue, and co-production, while also generating visual and sonic archives that both capture complexity and engage wider audiences.

'This is me': We used drawing and collaging to start the project. Co-creators were encouraged to draw the outline of their hand, then depict something about their internal world (inside the hand) and external world (around the palm and fingers) to introduce themselves. This opening exercise set the tone for the sessions, giving space for quiet reflection and considering one's positionality. We gave a substantial amount of time to this exercise, signalling the importance of the individuals and their experiences.

Collaborative Thematic Collages: Rather than co-creators recounting their interviews, we created collaborative drawing-collage hybrids. Everyone received a large (A1) carboard sheet and were requested to create a drawing, collage, or diagram based on what their interlocutors had said in interviews. We swapped places every fifteen to twenty minutes and continued to work on our neighbour's sheet; continuing a line of inquiry with sometimes new materials available around this new workstation or building on someone else's drawings. This created a collaborative visual narrative of the interviews, encouraged quiet reflection about the interviews, and allowed for connections and inspiration between the co-creators and what they had learned during the interviews. We then discussed the collages and process of making them. While some co-creators found this intense mode of collaboration difficult, particularly "letting go" of their creations and allowing someone else to continue their reflections on their sheet, this mode of thinking with our hands was extremely productive. Rather than reciting interviews, and relaying what we thought we had learned, we stepped right into the analysis. By describing what we had created on the sheets based on the interviews and what we had seen others do facilitated a rich discussion. Dr Wuttke also encouraged the co-creators to ask about visual representations from others that someone was curious about; thus everyone became everyone's interlocutor for the analysis. This approach fostered reflections that related to each other rather than stood by themselves. This co-production of thematic collages created a visual archive of the interviews as well as a truly collaborative mode of analysis. This co-productive mode, in this case through art, creates valuable avenues for impact[26] by creating a visual archive of the project; artefacts that diverse audiences can directly engage with without jeopardising anonymity.

Soundscape Production: Dr Rea and Dr Wuttke commissioned a sound artist to create a soundscape which communicated the subjective experience of navigating employment and education as a young homeless person. Using verbatim text from the workshop discussion transcripts, the sound artist created a narrative sound experience that spoke to the young people's experience in relation to education. Yet again, the soundscape engages a diverse range of audiences. However, most importantly, the collaboration with the artist added another dimension to the analysis. This artistic sensibility and translation of the recordings into sound art created a new discussion about the content of the recordings between the researchers and the artist. The soundscape was produced with follow-on funding from the ESRC Impact Accelerator and is accessible via the following link: https://mediacentral.ucl.ac.uk/Play/117432.

Workshop Discussions

There were nearly eight hours of recorded discussions which took place across the four workshops. Co-creators were informed that discussions would be recorded and anonymously transcribed in the information sheets provided to them prior to joining the team. The PI would ask again for consent to record prior to switching on the recording device on and placing it centrally on the table. The recordings were deleted following anonymous transcription. The discussions primarily informed the key findings and policy recommendations outlined in this report. They served as supplementary to the arts-based methodologies and were referred to periodically by the PI in preparation of this report. They also served the basis of the soundscape communicating people's experiences of navigating education and employment when homeless: https://mediacentral.ucl.ac.uk/Play/117432

Interview Recordings

The interviews comprised of over 15 hours of recorded discussions which were anonymously transcribed, and the recordings subsequently deleted. The interviews were thematically analysed through the production of collaborative artworks and discussion amongst the interviewers. Supplementing these discussions and artworks, the interview transcripts were also thematically analysed[27] by Dr Rea to identify additional emergent themes and exemplar quotes for use in the production of this report.

Methodological Reflections

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.

"Thank you so much for [interviewing me], I found it really positive and am so glad I took part!! [The interviewer] was such a great host too, and it was really nice to share my story" – **Interviewee**

"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**

What worked well

Participatory work enabled deeper insights, and a broader and better-grounded set of policy recommendations. For example, having care leavers and people who have worked in mental health support teams in the co-creation collective meant that recommendations for integrated service support could be aligned to existing infrastructure.

The participatory methodology enabled inclusive co-creation design which was reflexive. Participants expressed a desire to be seen, heard, and involved in shaping the narratives and systems that affect them. With several expressing a desire '*to be credited as part of the research*' which resulted in all co-creators who wanted to be included as co-authors on the report credited in recognition of their intellectual and material contributions.

The multimodal structure of the workshops was generally very well received. People valued the opportunity for creative expression and described the art sessions as therapeutic, collaborative and accessible '*It was more like a therapeutic way... not constraining... made us feel more relaxed'.* Co-creators appreciated seeing how others built on their contributions during the thematic analysis through collaborative production of artworks, saying '*seeing what other people added to what you started off... everyone else's thought process... that's quite interesting.'*

Artist: Darren

The iterative approach to the research design was highlighted as a strength of the process. People felt that they had been listened to throughout the process of the

research and that their contributions were valued *'I do feel like my contributions have added on to everyone else's ideas.'*

What could be improved

The logistics of managing this project were incredibly challenging. There were a lot of preconceived ideas about people's roles and the ways in which the project would be delivered. For example, in trying to schedule the workshops around everyone's availability, rather than imposing a timetable that might lead some people to be strained in trying to attend or excluded, co-creators were left with the perception that the coordination of the project was '*disorganised*'. This suggests that a fluid and egalitarian approach to logistical coordination can cause stress to some people. Future research should stress the relatively fluid nature of co-creation at the outset and incorporate structured time for co-creators to reflect on their roles, contributions, and learning early in the process.

Relatedly, there was some confusion about the aims of the project. Although the project aims were discussed at length throughout the workshops, and collaboratively agreed, some co-creators were quite disengaged through the process. The workshops being hosted at a university left two people with the impression that they were on a '*course*' and consequently deprioritised their commitment to the project to attend '*work'* which was more casualised and worse paid than the co-creation duties. This confusion was likely exacerbated by people being paid with vouchers of their choosing rather than cash. Future projects should facilitate payment in either cash, or via vouchers, depending on people's preferences - ensuring that social support entitlements are not compromised in doing so. Policy makers may wish to ensure that individuals are not penalised for undertaking temporary work while experiencing precarious or un-employment.

The workshops were structured as two sessions per day, of two-hours each, interrupted with a two-hour catered lunch break in between. While the PI thought that this schedule would not be too gruelling, some co-creators reported finding the day-long workshops to be intense and tiring. Future projects may wish to structure similar sessions into '*more days, shorter bursts*', possibly splitting the workshops into half-days.

Some participants found the art-based methods unfamiliar or less meaningful saying, *'I didn't really appreciate the art thing... I just don't understand it.'* Future research may benefit from offering even more diverse modes of engagement, such as writing or poetry, and scaffolding collaborative art with individual reflection time.

The primary piece of feedback co-creators gave was about the space the workshops were held in. It was difficult to secure a recurring venue at the university resulting in the workshops being held in a large meeting room in the department which needed renovation. People described the space as cramped and uninspiring with someone saying *"This doesn't say 'I'm coming here to get creative and change the world'."*

Future work may wish to pay closer attention to the venues in which workshops are held, prioritising space and light.

One person flagged that a lack of pronoun visibility made them feel that their identity was not recognised '*My pronouns haven't really emerged in this space... it makes the space less inclusive*.' We discussed that people have different levels of comfort with stating their pronouns, and the PI acknowledged that this was an oversight. For the following workshops we included coloured stickers that people could attach to their name tags which represented their pronouns. People were encouraged to take as many, or few, as they felt comfortable with.

Findings

Education

The findings highlight the multifaceted nature of educational barriers faced by young people experiencing homelessness. These barriers are not isolated but intersect issues of housing, mental health, cultural identity, and systemic discrimination which characterise multiple forms of marginalisation. Addressing these challenges requires a holistic approach that integrates educational reform with social support services and broader policy change. The findings suggest that while current educational structures are tailored to support some vulnerable young people, these structures are ill-equipped to accommodate the lived realities of homeless young people who may be at the boundary of present care support systems. The reform of education and related policy structures must be grounded in empathy, flexibility, and recognition of more diverse educational trajectories.

Barriers to Education Opportunities

One of the most prominent educational barriers discussed is the disruption caused by homelessness. Young people described how unstable housing situations—such as sofa surfing, living in hostels, or temporary accommodation—interfered with their ability to attend school consistently or focus on their studies. For example, people talked about the difficulties in accessing schools that were faraway when they were rehoused. Another young person shared that being homeless on their own meant having to manage all responsibilities independently, including grocery shopping and studying for A-levels, which significantly impacted their academic performance. These disruptions often led to young people falling behind their peers, repeating years, or dropping out altogether. People also described becoming socially isolated and not being able to share that they had become homeless with their peers due to concerns about societal stigma associated with homelessness. This was particularly prominent in young people who were experiencing homelessness with their families, where their parents are often targeted with support and interventions. The emotional toll of homelessness, combined

with the logistical challenges of accessing education, created a cycle of disadvantage that was difficult to escape.

"I feel like, I do have a bit of a social anxiety, because obviously not a lot of people know that I'm like homeless [tone dips]… obviously, I can't talk to my friends about this situation because they don't really know about it. So I feel like I'm kind of like to myself, and I don't really have a lot of people to talk to about this situation, how I feel." – **Valerie, aged 16**

Mental and physical health emerged as another critical barrier to education. People shared difficulties they had experienced in maintaining personal hygiene which made them anxious to attend education. Several participants spoke candidly about their struggles with anxiety, depression, and trauma, often exacerbated by their living conditions and lack of support. One young woman described having a functional neurological disorder and frequent blackouts, which made attending school and navigating her environment extremely challenging. She worried about what would happen if she had a seizure while alone, highlighting the absence of adequate support systems. Another participant mentioned the importance of a boxing bag in their shelter, which helped them manage anger and emotional distress—until it broke, leaving them without a coping mechanism. This account underscores how relatively simple interventions, such as ensuring people have access to exercise facilities, or hosting mental health check-ins for everyone in sheltered accommodation, can mitigate impacts of mental health issues, which when left unaddressed, can severely hinder educational engagement and success.

"Because when you don't have anywhere to go, and you go into college, and you don't know where you'll have to go tomorrow. It would be harder for you. You can't do your homework, you cannot focus, you are tired… mentally and physically" – **John, aged 18**

The structure and content of the education system itself was frequently critiqued. People felt that the curriculum was overly narrow, focused on traditional academic subjects, and failed to accommodate diverse learning styles or interests. One suggestion was to design education which better allowed students to engage with subjects and careers that matched their strengths and preferences. Others advocated for more creative subjects and vocational training to be introduced earlier in the school journey, enabling students to discover and pursue passions beyond the conventional academic route. The lack of exposure to alternative and diverse pathways was seen as a form of systemic exclusion.

"we need to diversify…Not everyone wants to be a doctor… I remember in secondary school…if you did well in your mocks in Year 9, you could only choose 'smart' subjects…I feel like it traps you in that box… I can only be a doctor because I only did sciences at A-level. So, it's like a cage that you can't really escape, but I feel like, if they made you more aware of other things, like you can be other things, other than a doctor or a lawyer, like, there are more jobs…if I knew more, then my eyes would be more open and I'd be more likely to choose something else. I just think there

needs to be more options and more encouragement for the younger generation". – **Angel, aged 19**

Cultural and familial expectations also played a significant role in shaping educational trajectories. Participants from African and Asian backgrounds in particular described intense pressure to pursue careers in medicine, law, or finance, often at the expense of their personal interests. These stories reflect how cultural narratives around success can limit young people's exploration of alternative educational and career paths, reinforcing rigid definitions of achievement. These career expectations may be grounded in experiences of systemic prejudice, and the devaluation of foreign qualifications, which were highlighted as significant barriers. Young people shared experiences of having their overseas education dismissed or being required to repeat schooling in the UK despite holding degrees or professional experience. These accounts reveal how institutional biases against non-Western education systems can undermine the aspirations and potential of young people, forcing them into low-skilled jobs and perpetuating cycles of inequality.

Together, these insights illustrate the multifaceted barriers to education faced by homeless young people. They call for a more inclusive, flexible, and empathetic approach to educational policy and practice—one that recognizes lived experience, supports mental health, values diverse pathways, and actively dismantles systemic prejudice.

Recommendations to Address Educational Barriers

Recommendation	Implementation Suggestions
Recognise that there are a very wide range of career paths.	*Inform students about the wide range of career pathways available to people beyond education.*
Offer skills and talents-based career guidance.	*Offer people aptitude-style assessments which can provide recommended potential careers advice suited to their interests and talents.*
Ensure people can maintain hygiene when attending school.	*Ensure that school showers are made available for students to use, and sanitary products are freely provided to students.*

Employment

The employment barriers identified during the research reflect a deeply interconnected set of challenges, including legal status, illness, systemic discrimination, and emotional resilience. Addressing these issues requires holistic support systems, policy reform,

and greater recognition of lived experience and non-traditional pathways to employment.

Barriers to Employment Opportunities

People recounted navigating a complex landscape of employment barriers including homelessness, migration, legal status, mental health, educational disruption, and lack of social capital. They highlighted the ways in which existing support systems, such as Job Centres, further embed inequality by only offering precarious and low wage employment. They also critiqued the highly gendered nature of the employment offered, with young women discussing how they were often encouraged into jobs in hairdressing salons and beauty parlours, and young men disclosing that they were frequently encouraged to undertake work as security officers.

"Well, it's a zero-hours contract that you can do at a stadium if you need money, and that's it…if someone needs the money, they're just going to say 'yes', because they're desperate in that situation. But I don't think it allows someone to maximize their potential or achieve what they really want in life or even consider what they might want in life. Because all they have been presented with is a minimum wage job, which there is nothing wrong with. But people should be allowed to aspire to more than that, and know that they can aspire to more." **– Darren, aged 26**

Young people expressed that access to employment—especially in creative or competitive industries—was heavily dependent on having connections, mentorship, and insider knowledge. One young person who had achieved A-grades in his final year at school, and aspired to be a car journalist, described how his dream felt unattainable without social and financial capital to facilitate it. Others noted that universities and career services emphasised networking as a key strategy for success, yet many young people from disadvantaged backgrounds lacked the resources or opportunities to build such networks. They also felt that the people who were supposed to help them did not have the expertise to facilitate diverse career pathways. People critiqued existing mentoring and internship schemes as often representing tokenistic box checking which did not meaningfully develop the skills and networks of the people undertaking them. This disparity reinforces existing inequalities and limits upward mobility for those without familial or institutional support.

"It's just, like, the thing is, with being a car journalist. One, you need links, you need contacts, and you need money. Those three things, I don't have any." – **Ahmed, aged 17.**

Bureaucratic rigidity and inflexible job requirements further compounded these challenges. People described being caught in a paradox where entry-level jobs required prior experience, making it impossible to gain a foothold in the labour market. One person noted the absurdity of needing *'two to three years' experience'* for roles advertised as entry-level, a sentiment echoed by others who felt disillusioned by the disconnect between effort and opportunity. This paradox is most clearly exemplified in the case of one interviewee with a master's degree in marketing from a reputable mid-

tier London university who ended up working on the shop floor at H&M. Issues of underemployment were particularly acute for those whose qualifications were not recognised, leaving them with few viable pathways into employment. For example, the interviews revealed how systemic prejudice, and the devaluation of foreign qualifications hinder employment prospects differentially for migrants, and their descendants. Participants with degrees and professional experience from countries such as India, Somalia, South African and Nigeria found their credentials were not recognised in the UK, forcing them into low-skilled or precarious jobs. This led to a discussion about how people in the room who had migrated from other European countries, such as Germany, did not face similar challenges post-migration. These experiences underscore the structural discrimination embedded in employment and education systems, where non-Western qualifications are routinely dismissed, regardless of their merit or relevance.

"a lot of people from Nigeria…parents from the older generation had to go to university again in England. I know my dad had to do that again, go to university, and my mum as well ….if the system doesn't really accept people from certain countries, I don't know if I'd say that's prejudice, I'd just say that's just how their system works. They don't want them. That's what I mean." ***– James, aged 20***

Lack of documentation and legal status was also identified as a barrier to employment. Young people described being unable to access work due to missing identification documents, national insurance numbers, or formal recognition of their immigration status. Several people discussed needing to flee domestic violence and being unable to return to their former home address to obtain the documentation needed for work. One young person, who had lived in the UK for ten years, shared that he still had no identification or national insurance number, which prevented him from working or enrolling in education. Despite receiving support from services, he expressed frustration at the prolonged bureaucratic delays and the lack of clarity about when he would be able to participate fully in society. This situation reflects a broader systemic issue where legal and administrative hurdles effectively exclude individuals from the labour market, regardless of their willingness or capability to work.

Mental and physical health challenges also emerged as critical barriers to employment. Several participants discussed how chronic health conditions, such as heart disease and epilepsy, limited their ability to work consistently or safely. One young person described frequent blackouts and dizziness, which made it difficult to navigate her environment or maintain a job. Another participant shared that his hospitalisation for six months had a more profound impact on his life than homelessness itself, leaving him feeling "useless" and disconnected from potential employment opportunities. The emotional toll of these barriers was evident throughout the interviews. Several young people described feelings of hopelessness, resignation, and frustration, particularly when their efforts to find work were met with systemic obstacles. One young man shared that he had '*given up'* on his education after studying very long hours for, and attending, an exam only to receive a grade of not being in attendance. An administrative error that the school was unwilling to rectify. Another was described as feeling '*numb'* to his circumstances after having to cope with the death of his father and then undertake subsequent financial and caring responsibilities for his entire family

as a teenager. These emotional responses reflect the cumulative impact of exclusion, where repeated setbacks erode motivation, making it even harder to pursue employment or envision a stable future.

These accounts highlight the need for more inclusive employment policies and support systems that accommodate individuals with complex health needs, particularly those without stable housing or family support. Together, these insights portray some of the intersecting employment barriers faced by homeless young people. They call for a more compassionate and responsive approach to employment policy—one that recognises the structural inequalities at play and actively works to dismantle them

Recommendations to Address Employment Barriers

Recommendation	Implementation Suggestions
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.*

Broader Institutional Barriers

Beyond education and employment, the interviews and workshops revealed a range of broader institutional barriers that significantly impacted participants' lives. These barriers often intersected with housing, immigration, health care, and social services, creating compounding layers of disadvantage and exclusion.

The most pervasive barrier was the lack of integration of social services systems, which resulted in a lack of responsiveness and continuity. Participants described being passed between departments, receiving inconsistent information, and feeling that their cases were deprioritized. One young person noted that after moving to a new borough, their previous council simply "cut off" support without any handover or follow-up. Others described how social workers were constrained by the system, wanting to help but unable to offer meaningful assistance due to policy limitations. People talked about the difficulty of proving that they were homeless due to requests for documentary evidence of domestic violence and disputes, which were even unattainable following police involvement. This disconnect between frontline workers and institutional frameworks left many participants feeling unsupported and disempowered.

"… my counsel, they weren't supportive at all, like zero percent. I just remember when we went to [them] and they'd be like, "Oh, no, we can't help you. You're telling this story, but we went to your dad, and your dad says that this and that, and we don't believe you, we believe him..." And I was like, "I'm so confused about why?"... And they're like 'but you're not homeless." I'm like, "What do you mean? The police took us here", and they just wouldn't believe us…I don't understand how that's not evidence enough for them? - **Angel, aged 19**

Young people disclosed being placed in temporary accommodation that was completely unsuitable, leaving them feeling dehumanised, criminalised and traumatised by the systemic failure to recognise homeless teenagers as '*a child in need*'. One participant talked about feeling traumatised after being '*wrongfully*' housed in a shelter with drug addicts and prostitutes at the age of 16. Another discussed the conditions of their hostel as representing that of a '*prison*', describing the need for teenagers to enter through two magnet closed doors that only activated when the other was shut, prior to fingerprint scanning to get access to the accommodation which they likened to a '*cell*'. They also reported occasions where responses to requests to improvements in accommodation were met with disdain by service providers.

"they don't understand the people that are [homeless], and they don't have a lot of compassion. I remember when I first moved here, I didn't have a washing machine or a cooker for 6 months. I had to just either microwave food, or… go to the launderette which is so expensive. When I complained to the Council about it, they were like, "you're lucky, because we used to just give people a box." – **Imani, aged 22**

The complexity and inefficiency of the housing system itself was also critiqued. Participants described being placed in temporary accommodations such as hostels or council-provided flats that were overcrowded, poorly maintained, or unsuitable for people's needs. For example, one young woman spoke about living in a tower block where the stairs made her dizzy due to her health condition, yet no alternative was provided. Another participant described how their friend had been stuck in the same council flat for four years, despite its poor quality and lack of space. These accounts highlight how housing services often fail to respond to the evolving needs of vulnerable individuals, leaving them in stagnant or unsafe environments. Moreover, the process of transitioning between boroughs or councils was described as abrupt and unsupported, with participants noting a lack of communication and continuity in care; once again highlighting the need for better administrative connection between government services.

"The council wasn't really supportive of me [with my disability]. I've tried to get health and social care to support me right. So in the property, I was in the box room. One of the heads of youth support… told health and social care that I wasn't allowed to get support until I move house…" – **Sharon, aged 18**

Participants also described barriers within the health care system, particularly in relation to mental health and chronic conditions. Several individuals shared experiences of being unable to access appropriate care or support, especially while living in temporary housing. One young person described how their mother was

undergoing chemotherapy while they were both experiencing homelessness, yet the system required them to provide documentation to prove their circumstances—adding stress to an already traumatic situation. Another person spoke about the lack of access to mental health services and how the breakdown of a simple coping tool, like a boxing bag in a shelter, had a profound impact on their emotional stability. These examples illustrate how institutional systems often fail to accommodate the lived realities of vulnerable populations, placing bureaucratic demands above compassionate care.

"it was the bureaucracy, but also what she described as like a feeling of hopelessness, or that they couldn't help her at all. Which made me really sad because it sounded very similar to my own experience. Where the counsel is like, "Well, I'm sorry there's nothing we can do for you" and the person who's speaking to you wants to help, but the system that they're working with doesn't allow them to offer any support. [My interviewee] spoke about how there was a lot of back and forth, going back and forth with them to fill out forms… and chasing them up, and nothing was happening…she'd have to go back again and again, and nothing happened... she spoke about how that whole situation has compounded an already difficult situation with the homelessness, and the cancer diagnosis of her mum, etcetera." **– Darren, aged 26**

Together, these reflections paint a picture of institutional systems that are fragmented, rigid, and often indifferent to the complex needs of young people experiencing trauma and multiple forms of marginalisation. The barriers extend far beyond education and employment, affecting every aspect of life—from housing and health care to immigration and social support. Addressing these challenges requires prioritising service integration and reforming processes to remove unnecessary bureaucratic hurdles.

Recommendations to Address Institutional Barriers

Recommendation	Details
Support 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.	*Introduce a digital platform (similar to Electronic Patient Journey System) so that people can access better connected services.*

Recommendation	Details
Ensure inter-agency collaborations so that people can access better connected services. Introduce planning reforms for better quality environments. Better advertise and communicate support.	*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.*
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.*

Social Barriers

People who experience homelessness often face multiple forms of societal stigma that affect their sense of identity, access to services, and relationships with others. These stigmas are not only interpersonal—manifesting in how others treat them—but also institutional, embedded in the systems meant to support them. The interviews and workshops revealed how stigma operates across various dimensions of life, shaping how young people perceive themselves and how they are perceived by society.

Assumptions of responsibility: One of the most common forms of stigma is the assumption that homelessness is a result of personal failure. Aligned with other research[5], people described feeling judged or pitied when others learned about their housing status. This led many to conceal their circumstances, even from close friends. For example, one young woman chose to remain at her original school despite relocating due to homelessness, in part to avoid revealing her situation. She noted that none of her friends knew she was homeless, underscoring the shame and fear of being treated differently. In addition, more than half of the co-creators opted not to have their contributions publicly acknowledged in this report. Even though they felt '*proud*' to be part of such '*important work'*, they expressed concerns about potential ramifications of their homeless status being in the public domain. This internalized stigma reflects a broader societal narrative that frames homelessness as a moral or behavioural issue rather than a structural one, discouraging openness and help-seeking.

"Both of the [people I spoke to] hadn't told their friends they were homeless, which I thought was really interesting." – **Rachel, aged 25**

Assumptions of ethicality: Stigma also manifested in the way institutions interact with homeless young people. Several people described being met with disbelief or bureaucratic indifference when trying to access support. These accounts come through in the repeated requests for extensive documentation to prove people's circumstances, often adding to the emotional toll of dealing with family illness, domestic violence, or parental estrangement. Another described the emotional toll of having to "prove estrangement" from their family, questioning how one could be expected to obtain a letter stating that they were unwanted. These examples show how institutional processes can reinforce stigma by treating individuals with suspicion, requiring them to justify their need for help in ways that are emotionally taxing and often retraumatizing.

"It reminded me again, my own experience of having to provide documents that you don't necessarily have or like, for my example, like get a proof of estrangement from family. It's like, if I am already estranged from my family, why would they write a letter to say they don't want me around?" – **Darren, aged 26**

Intersectional marginalisation: The stigma of homelessness also intersects with social biases towards other identities, such as racial stereotyping, xenophobic attitudes towards migrants, or preconceived assumptions about young parents. People discussed the exclusion of homeless young parents in receipt of housing benefit from private rented accommodation. They attributed this exclusion to the seemingly paradoxical concerns of landlords about the financial viability of the tenant, coupled with concerns about people being more demanding of landlords to address degraded properties. Young people who had migrated to the UK described being questioned about why they had come, with officials implying that their countries were "safe" and therefore they had no legitimate reason to seek support. This not only invalidated their experiences but also reinforced xenophobic assumptions about who deserves help. These forms of stigma compound the challenges of homelessness, making it harder for individuals to access the support they need and reinforcing feelings of isolation and marginalization.

Social exploitation: Media and charity narratives further reinforce these societal biases through marginalising depictions of people experiencing homelessness. During the workshops people expressed their frustration with depictions of homelessness in serialised television series as almost universally being preceded by someone becoming involved in drugs or criminal activity. Young people also talked about feeling exploited by charities who often used their stories for campaigns without truly valuing their voices or contributions.

"They want me to be like, 'Woe is me.' I'm this little poor homeless girl… No. My name is Rachel." – **Rachel, aged 25**

Overall, the interviews and workshops reveal that stigma is a pervasive and multifaceted barrier for people experiencing homelessness. It affects how they are treated by others, how they navigate institutions, and how they view themselves.

Addressing this stigma requires not only changes in public attitudes and recognition of systemic failures that often cause people to experience homelessness but also reforms in service delivery that prioritize dignity.

Recommendations to Address Social Barriers

Recommendation	Details
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.*
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.*

Implications

Throughout this report we have communicated the findings of a study run in collaboration with young people experiencing homelessness. This study aimed to understand more about the barriers homeless young people face in accessing education and employment. What was revealed over the course of the research is that, while the experience of homelessness is not universal for all young people, there are commonalities in experience regarding feelings of stigmatisation, criminalisation, dehumanisation, and trauma. These feelings are often rooted in the lack of compassion and understanding shown by many institutional stakeholders. The young people have made a range of concrete and actionable recommendations for policy makers and service providers which are referenced throughout this report and summarised on page five. These recommendations align with the following overarching themes.

Avoid retraumatising people: a notable recommendation put forward by the co-creators was highlighting the ways in which existing mental health and safeguarding services available in the UK could be leveraged to ensure better service integration and support more widely. This would remove the burden on people already experiencing complex trauma to have to repeatedly describe the often-traumatic events that led to their becoming homeless in the first place.

Communicate entitlements: during the workshops and interviews it became very clear that people were receiving markedly different levels of support from governments and services. Conversations in the workshops highlighted the need for better communication of available services in public spaces. This could be provided through QR codes and leaflets at schools, libraries, gyms, shelters and accommodation.

Restore human dignity: people felt dehumanised by the lack of free, publicly available, sanitation and hygiene services. They recommended that the state, and support services, partner with private enterprise to provide access to wash facilities and hygiene products, highlighting several successful initiatives that had previously been run with corporate sponsors.

Provide communities of support: many young people felt very isolated during their experiences of homelessness and providing communities that better support young people was reflected in a range of their recommendations. Several important steps are needed here.

1. Services need to recognise that these young people are still children. This does not mean that one needs to infantilise or control them, but rather carefully consider the safety and suitability of environments in which they are placed.
2. Services need to avoid taking a default position of treating young people as if they are misrepresenting their circumstances. Encountering this attitude erodes trust, hope, and mental wellbeing.
3. Services need to meaningfully consider requests made by people who are placed into accommodation. Rather than assuming people are being ungrateful, they may wish to reflect on whether the accommodation facilitates the person's ability to participate fully in society (e.g. access and facilities).
4. Provide opportunities for social and emotional support to young people who may be feel isolated in their experiences of homelessness. One of the charities we partnered with during this project initiated a weekly check-in and chat session, where young people who were in the accommodation were invited to meet in a common area for juice and a biscuit to provide opportunities for people to feel less alone.
5. Address societal sources of stigma, including exploitative representations of people experiencing homelessness in fundraising campaigns. Ensure that people formulating publicly available content about the lived experience of people who are homeless are representative of those communities.

Recognise strengths: nearly all the young people we spoke to were in work and education at the time of the interviews. Despite the personal difficulties and multifaceted institutional barriers that they faced, people showed a tremendous degree of perseverance and strength. The tenacity and resilience of these young people should be highlighted throughout institutions, whether educational, employment or governmental.

Conclusion

This report has presented the complex and intersecting barriers faced by young people experiencing homelessness in accessing education, employment, and broader institutional support. Through a participatory research approach, young people have not only shared their lived experiences but have actively shaped the analysis and recommendations presented here[29]. Their insights reveal a society that too often fails to recognise their resilience, talents, and needs, encapsulating a social policy sphere that is fragmented, bureaucratic, and frequently dehumanising.

Through interviews, collaborative workshops, and creative methodologies, we uncovered the multifaceted barriers that homeless young people face in accessing education, employment, and broader institutional support. Specifically, we found that housing instability disrupts educational continuity and limits access to employment opportunities. Specific barriers to education experienced by young people include frequent school changes, lack of guidance tailored to individual strengths, and the impact of mental health challenges. These institutional and policy barriers couple with social barriers linked to the stigmatisation of homelessness in society. In maintaining secrecy related to feelings of shame in their circumstances, young people experience isolation which further impacts their mental health.

Barriers in education feed into barriers to employment, often deepening and embedding inequality for young people who are experiencing homelessness. Young people are often channelled into degree pathways, such as business management, which are relatively low return for the financial investment in comparison to economics or engineering degrees[28]. Young people who are unemployed are often encouraged into ‘degrading’ unskilled minimum wage employment, without feeling that the institutions around them encourage their aspirations for more technically qualified and diverse work opportunities. This coupled with other systemic issues such as benefit disincentives, lack of local opportunities, and under-recognition of foreign qualifications, compound the difficulties faced by homeless young people in seeking meaningful work.

Compounding the barriers to education and employment, we identified time-consuming institutional barriers that one needs to navigate while dealing with the circumstance of homelessness. These include fragmented service provision, bureaucratic inefficiencies, and inadequate support for young people experiencing homelessness as part of a family unit. The pervasive societal stigma that young people encounter, often reflected in hostile, dehumanising and criminalising treatment by institutions and the public, affect homeless young people’s self-perception, mental wellbeing and motivation.

Despite these challenges, the people involved in this research demonstrated remarkable strength, creativity, and commitment to change. Their voices shaped a comprehensive set of policy recommendations aimed at improving service coordination, destigmatizing homelessness, and creating more inclusive pathways in education and employment. The recommendations they have formulated are grounded

in practical realities and offer clear, actionable steps for improving outcomes across education, employment, housing, and health.

To move forward, we must listen to and act on the voices of those most affected. This means dismantling stigma, improving service coordination, and creating inclusive environments that foster dignity, opportunity, and hope. The findings of this report should serve as a catalyst for systemic reform that ensures all young people, regardless of their housing status, are supported to thrive.

Artist: Chiamaka Angel Okafor

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