



Statutory Homelessness in England:
The experiences of families and 16-17 year olds
Homelessness Research Summary Number 7, 2008



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Introduction

The main aim of this study was to provide robust statistical evidence on families and 16-17 year olds accepted as owed the main homelessness duty¹ by English local authorities, in order to inform effective policy interventions.

The study focused on the *characteristics and support needs* of families and 16-17 year olds accepted as homeless; the *causes* of statutory homelessness; the *experience of temporary accommodation*; and the *impacts* of homelessness and stays in temporary accommodation.

It drew on data from five linked surveys:

- Surveys 1 and 2: parents and children in families accepted as homeless;
- Survey 3: young people accepted as homeless 16-17 year olds; and
- Surveys 4 and 5: parents and children in families accepted as homeless who had spent more than a year in temporary accommodation.

The findings of this study could be viewed as largely a ‘good news’ story with regards to families accepted as homeless, in that these families appeared in the main not to be extremely vulnerable, and the provision of assistance under the homelessness legislation had apparently secured a substantial overall net improvement in their quality of life. Key points of concern include the lengthy periods spent in temporary accommodation by families in London and the South, and the reported deterioration in many families’ (already weak) economic position.

In contrast, young people accepted as homeless 16-17 year olds appeared to be an extremely vulnerable group, for whom (supported) temporary accommodation could be viewed as a helpful transitional intervention. As with families, the provision of assistance under the homelessness legislation had apparently brought about a substantial overall net improvement in their quality of life, but seemed to have a negative net effect on their economic circumstances (a very high proportion were not in education, employment or training at point of interview).

¹ Hereafter generally referred to as ‘accepted as homeless’.

Key Points

- Families accepted as homeless were mainly young, headed by lone women parents, and workless.
- Adult respondents² (usually the mothers) in these families seemed to be a relatively disadvantaged group with respect to their health and access to social support, and many had experienced domestic violence. However, only a minority appeared extremely vulnerable and very few self-reported current drug or alcohol problems. Children in these families were generally happy at home and at school and were reportedly in good health.
- Young people accepted as homeless 16-17 year olds were, in contrast, an extremely vulnerable group, who had often experienced educational and/or family disruption, violence at home, and mental health and/or substance misuse problems. A very high proportion were not in education, employment or training.
- The main reasons for applying as homeless amongst families were relationship breakdown, eviction, overcrowding, or overstaying welcome (although the latter two reasons often seemed to reflect a breakdown in informal arrangements entered into after losing settled accommodation).
- For young people, the overwhelming reason for applying as homeless was relationship breakdown with parents or step-parents.
- The great majority of both families and young people had sought at least one form of alternative help with their housing problems before seeking assistance from a local authority.
- Families' experience of temporary accommodation was largely determined by where they were accepted as homeless. In particular, those accepted in London, and to a lesser extent in the South, were likely to experience much longer periods in temporary accommodation than those in the North and Midlands.
- Self-contained temporary accommodation was the most common form of provision for families with children. Overall levels of satisfaction varied little between this and other forms of temporary accommodation – namely, hostels and B&B hotels, or temporary arrangements with friends or relatives.
- Much of the temporary accommodation experienced by young people was 'supported' accommodation of various kinds. Most young people seemed to appreciate the company of other young people and the help from staff in such accommodation.

² An 'adult respondent' was purposively selected in each family as the person best placed to comment on the position and experiences of the whole family (usually this was the mother).

- Families who had been provided with settled housing (almost always social housing) were markedly more satisfied with their accommodation than those still in (any form of) temporary accommodation. In contrast, young people in settled housing were only marginally more satisfied with their accommodation than those still in temporary accommodation.
- For parents, children and young people assisted under the homelessness legislation, life was far more likely to be reported as better rather than worse than when they lived in their last settled accommodation³.
- The overall (net) impact of homelessness and temporary accommodation on the health and social support circumstances of families and young people seemed largely negligible, or marginally positive, and improvements were often reported in children's relationships with their parent(s) and in their school performance (since leaving their last settled accommodation). However, there was a substantial (net) negative impact on these families' and young people's economic position (since leaving their last settled accommodation), and in children's participation in clubs/activities.
- Families in settled housing reported a consistently better quality of life than those still in temporary accommodation. Whether they were living in temporary or settled accommodation seemed less critical to the quality of life of young people.
- The great majority of families in temporary accommodation for over one year had been accepted as homeless in London. These families tended to be larger than other families accepted as homeless, and were more likely to be headed by an adult respondent who had an ethnic minority background and/or who was a former asylum seeker. In most respects the circumstances and quality of life of both adults and children in these families was very similar to that of adults and children in families who had spent shorter periods in temporary accommodation. However, families in temporary accommodation for over one year were less satisfied with the living space and facilities in their accommodation; more likely to report that they were struggling financially; and were very often frustrated at the length of wait for settled housing.

³ Adult respondents and young people accepted as homeless 16-17 year olds were asked a range of questions about their circumstances and well-being in their 'last settled accommodation' prior to acceptance as homeless, as a means of investigating whether there was evidence of changes that could be associated with the experience of homelessness and temporary accommodation.

Characteristics and support needs

Families accepted as homeless

Most families accepted as homeless were headed by a lone woman parent (65 per cent), and usually contained one or two children. The other main household type was couples with children (30 per cent). Very few families were in other sorts of household arrangements. Both parents and children in families accepted as homeless tended to be young (32 per cent of parents were under 25 years old; 50 per cent of children were pre-school age).

Adult respondents in families accepted as homeless were overwhelmingly women (84 per cent). While the great majority were White (76 per cent), adult respondents with a Black/Black British background (at 12 per cent) were over-represented as compared with parents in the wider population. Ethnic minority adult respondents were heavily concentrated in London. One in ten (11 per cent) of all adult respondents had, at some point, sought asylum in the UK – these former asylum seekers⁴ were mainly from ethnic minority groups, tended to be older than other adult respondents, and most were living in London.

Families accepted as homeless were far less likely to contain a working member than families with dependent children in the general population: 64 per cent were 'workless', compared with 14 per cent of all families with children. Most were in receipt of Income Support and other means-tested benefits or tax credits. They were much more likely to self-report difficulties managing financially (34 per cent) than families with children nationally (10 per cent).

Many adult respondents had experienced some family or educational disruption in childhood, and two in five (41 per cent) reported being a victim of domestic violence at some point during their adult lives. However, while they were a relatively disadvantaged group with regards to their health and access to social support, adult respondents did not appear in the main to be extremely vulnerable. Half (52 per cent) self-reported experience of anxiety, depression or other mental health problems, but the proportion who said that they had current mental health problems was much lower (27 per cent) (although this was still somewhat higher than the rate found in the general population (18 per cent)). The proportion of adult respondents with some (self-reported) experience of drug or alcohol problems was 11 per cent, and current drug or alcohol problems were reported by only 3 per cent. White lone parents were the group most likely to have experienced multiple personal problems in childhood and/or adulthood.

There was some evidence of stability in many adult respondents' housing histories, and two thirds (65 per cent) had lived independently in their own mainstream (rented or owned) housing at some point prior to their acceptance as homeless. However, around

⁴ Current asylum seekers are ineligible for assistance under the homelessness legislation.

half had experienced at least one episode of homelessness or insecure housing before the circumstances which led to their acceptance as homeless; most commonly, they had stayed with friends or relatives because they had no home of their own (41 per cent). A much smaller number (8 per cent) had at some point slept rough or in a car or a squat (almost none of whom had had their children with them when they experienced these scenarios). A similar proportion (7 per cent) reported that their family had experienced homelessness when they were a child. In total, one quarter (26 per cent) of all adult respondents reported that they had never had a 'settled home' as an adult.

Two-thirds (63 per cent) of adult respondents reported that they had received one or more forms of 'practical support' from service providers since being accepted as homeless (very often help with repairs to their accommodation or with acquiring furniture or other household equipment). However, 35 per cent reported at least one current unmet need for practical support; this was mainly related to practical or financial help with getting furniture or with money management. A much lower proportion (16 per cent) said that they had received help with 'personal support' needs since acceptance as homeless (such as with mental health or substance misuse problems or with parenting skills); only 4 per cent reported an unmet personal support need.

The children in families accepted as homeless generally appeared happy at school and at home, and were reportedly in good health. Only a small minority seemed to have extremely difficult or fractured family relationships. The majority (77 per cent) of all child respondents reported being very or fairly happy with life, with the youngest children interviewed (8-11 year olds) tending to be happiest overall.

Families in temporary accommodation for over a year

Families in temporary accommodation for more than one year had a quite distinct profile from that of other families accepted as homeless. The great majority (82 per cent) were accepted as homeless in London, and they had a larger average household size than other families accepted as homeless, both because they were more often headed by couples, and because they tended to have more children. Over half the adult respondents in all families in temporary accommodation for over one year had an ethnic minority background (59 per cent), and one third (33 per cent) reported that they had, at some point, sought asylum in the UK.

The personal characteristics and support needs of adult respondents in families in temporary accommodation for over one year were in the main very similar to those of other adult respondents, although they were somewhat less likely to report troubled childhoods

(their experience of personal problems in adulthood was very similar). The characteristics and experiences of children in these families reflected those of children in other families accepted as homeless.

Young people accepted as homeless 16-17 year olds

Two thirds of young people accepted as homeless 16-17 year olds were young women, and the remaining third were young men. These young people, over half of whom had turned 18 by point of interview, were a much more vulnerable group than adult respondents in families accepted as homeless.

Many had suffered violence at home and other forms of childhood trauma, as well as severe disruption to their education. A far higher proportion of young respondents (37 per cent) had experienced drug or alcohol problems than adult respondents in families accepted as homeless (11 per cent); and 16 per cent had a current substance misuse problem (compared to 3 per cent of adult respondents). Current substance misuse problems were more common amongst the young men (22 per cent) than amongst the young women (12 per cent). Half of all young respondents (52 per cent) had experienced depression, anxiety or other mental health problems; and 33 per cent had current mental health problems (a rate approximately three times that of young people in the general population). Current mental health problems were more common amongst the young women (40 per cent) than amongst the young men (24 per cent).

Young people accepted as homeless 16-17 year olds were five times more likely not to be in employment, education or training than young people in the general population (57 per cent as compared with 11 per cent). They were living on very low incomes (median of £45 per week, excluding Housing Benefit), and 35 per cent reported difficulties managing financially (this was similar to the proportion of adult respondents who reported financial problems).

A much greater proportion of these young people were in receipt of practical forms of support from service providers than were adult respondents: for example, 43 per cent reported getting assistance with filling in official forms or claiming benefits, as compared with 21 per cent of adult respondents. In addition, they were far likelier than adult respondents to be in receipt of help to facilitate their access to employment, education or training. They were also marginally more likely to be receiving help with mental health and/or drug problems. As with adult respondents, levels of self-identified unmet personal support needs were low.

The causes of statutory homelessness

Families accepted as homeless

The 'immediate' causes of statutory homelessness were predominantly disintegrating social relationships on the one hand, and housing pressures on the other – with most adult respondents identifying only one or the other as the reason they had applied as homeless.

Around half (55 per cent) of families applied as homeless from somewhere other than their last settled accommodation. This suggests that many families make short-term accommodation arrangements before applying to a local authority for help.

Approximately one quarter of all families accepted as homeless applied from each of the following settings: the private rented sector; the parental home; and friends' or (other) relatives' homes. The remaining families applied as homeless directly from a social rented tenancy (11 per cent); owner-occupation (5 per cent); 'managed' accommodation (such as hostels or B&B hotels) (10 per cent); or 'other' settings (such as tied housing) (3 per cent).

The most prevalent reason for applying as homeless, cited by 38 per cent of adult respondents, was relationship breakdown (usually, but not necessarily, with a partner). Violent relationship breakdown with a partner affected 13 per cent of all adult respondents.

The other major reasons that adult respondents gave for applying as homeless were eviction or being threatened with eviction (usually because a private sector fixed-term tenancy had come to an end) (26 per cent); overcrowding (24 per cent); and 'outstaying their welcome/could no longer be accommodated' (20 per cent). However, it should be noted that both overcrowding and overstaying welcome as reasons for applying as homeless sometimes seemed to reflect the breakdown or expiry of informal 'emergency' arrangements with friends or relatives, rather than the 'original' cause of homelessness.

All of the other potential reasons for applying as homeless were identified by only a small minority, including those relating to 'individual' personal problems such as drug, alcohol or mental health problems (2 per cent in total). At the same time, purely 'financial' reasons, such as the inability to pay the mortgage or rent (7 per cent), were also rarely mentioned. Leaving National Asylum Support Service (NASS) accommodation was mentioned as a reason for applying as homeless by 2 per cent.

Only small numbers of adult respondents reported that they had applied as homeless because they perceived this to be the 'quickest' (3 per cent) or 'only' (6 per cent) way to gain access to social housing. This evidence, coupled with the fact that the great majority (85 per cent) of adult respondents had made efforts to gain alternative help with their

housing problems before approaching the council for assistance (usually by asking to stay with friends or relatives or by trying to acquire a private or social tenancy), weighs against suggestions of widespread 'abuse' of the homelessness legislation. For 87 per cent this was their first homelessness application, and the majority (70 per cent) reported at least one concern about making a homelessness application (most commonly that they would have to live in a 'rough' area).

These findings on the immediate causes of homelessness lend some support to arguments for a 'structural' understanding of family homelessness, insofar as eviction or being threatened with eviction was more commonly reported as a reason for applying as homeless in the areas of highest housing stress. There is certainly little support for an 'individual' analysis of the causes of family homelessness, given the small numbers reporting health problems or substance misuse as contributing to their reasons for applying as homeless.

Families in temporary accommodation for over a year

Families in temporary accommodation for over one year mainly reported similar reasons for applying as homeless as other families, but they were less likely to say that relationship breakdown had contributed to their homelessness.

Young people accepted as homeless 16-17 year olds

For young people accepted as homeless 16-17 year olds, relationship breakdown (almost always with parents or step-parents) was the overwhelming reason for applying as homeless (70 per cent). Two in five of young people (41 per cent) affected by relationship breakdown with their parents or step-parents reported that violence had been involved.

As noted above, these young people had often had traumatic childhoods and frequently had a range of support needs which may well have contributed to the relationship breakdown or other circumstances that led to their homelessness.

As with adult respondents, most young people (85 per cent) had tried to do something to address their housing problem before approaching the council for help (most commonly they had asked family or friends to let them stay). Two thirds (64 per cent) reported at least one concern about making a homelessness application, and, as with families, this was most often that they would have to live in a 'rough' area.

The experience of temporary accommodation and the provision of settled housing

Families accepted as homeless

The overall experience of temporary accommodation – including length of stay, type of temporary accommodation experienced, and number of moves between temporary accommodation addresses – was largely determined by where families were accepted as homeless.

For example, one fifth (21 per cent) of all families accepted as homeless had been moved directly into settled accommodation without a stay in temporary accommodation. However, this included only 6 per cent of families accepted in London, compared to 30 per cent of families accepted in the North and Midlands.

At point of survey (on average 9 months after acceptance as homeless), 55 per cent of families had been provided with settled housing, and 45 per cent were still living in temporary accommodation. However, in London only 18 per cent of families had moved into settled housing, compared to 76 per cent in the North and Midlands.

Those accepted in London, and to a lesser extent in the South, were likely to experience prolonged stays in temporary accommodation, and to spend much of their time in self-contained temporary accommodation. Families in the North and Midlands typically experienced a relatively short stay in temporary accommodation (very often temporary arrangements with parents, friends, or (other) relatives) before being moved on to settled housing.

Amongst those still in temporary accommodation at point of survey, 78 per cent were in self-contained temporary accommodation, and only 2 per cent were in B&B hotels (6-7 per cent were in each of hostels; parents' houses; and staying with friends or (other) relatives)⁵. However, some families had stayed in more than one type of temporary accommodation and overall experience of shared forms of temporary accommodation was somewhat higher than was suggested by where families in temporary accommodation were living at point of survey. In all, 59 per cent of families with a temporary accommodation stay had experienced self-contained temporary accommodation (including 84 per cent of those in London); 24 per cent had stayed in a hostel; 15 per cent had stayed in a B&B hotel; 25

⁵ The disparity with the quarterly P1E statistics published by Communities and Local Government (which reported 84 per cent of households in self-contained temporary accommodation at end June 2005) is mainly attributable to the fact that P1E statistics treat those in temporary arrangements with friends and relatives as an entirely separate category, whereas they are considered alongside all other households in temporary accommodation in this analysis. See <http://www.communities.gov.uk/> for information on the P1E statistics.

per cent had lived in temporary arrangements with parents; and 27 per cent in temporary arrangements with friends or (other) relatives.

Multiple moves between temporary accommodation addresses were rare: only 35 per cent of all families accepted as homeless had stayed at more than one temporary accommodation address, and only 8 per cent had stayed at more than two such addresses. Moves between temporary accommodation addresses were likeliest in London and the South, and the purpose of most of these moves appeared to be to relocate families from shared forms of provision – including B&B hotels, hostels and temporary arrangements with friends and relatives – into self-contained settings whenever it seemed likely that they would be subject to sustained stays in temporary accommodation.

Overall satisfaction levels varied little between temporary accommodation types. When adult respondents were asked to rank their temporary accommodation using a score of between 1 and 10 (where 10 was 'excellent'), the median for all forms of provision was 6.

However, different forms of temporary accommodation were perceived to offer distinct advantages and disadvantages. Thus self-contained temporary accommodation was reported to offer better space standards than other forms of provision, and was rated most highly with regards to cooking, sleeping, bathroom and other facilities. On the other hand, and perhaps surprisingly, this type of provision was often reported to have worse physical conditions than other forms of temporary accommodation, particularly with respect to damp, décor and state of repair.

Temporary arrangements with friends and relatives, on the other hand, appeared to offer families the best physical conditions and access to the widest range of household items and amenities. Families also felt safest when in this form of temporary accommodation. However, concerns about space and privacy were at their most acute in these arrangements.

Access to household items and amenities (including kitchens and living rooms) was often more restricted in hostels and B&B hotels than in other forms of temporary accommodation. However, the worst physical conditions and space standards were not generally found in these forms of temporary accommodation.

Families accepted in the North and Midlands tended to report better physical conditions in their temporary accommodation than those accepted elsewhere. This was in part attributable to the relatively low use of self-contained temporary accommodation in this broad region. However, another important factor was that conditions in all forms of temporary accommodation were reported to be better in the North and Midlands than in their equivalents elsewhere.

Almost all of the 55 per cent of families in settled housing by point of interview had been provided with social rented housing. Only 25 per cent of these families reported being

given any choice over this settled housing. Overall living space and access to gardens was reported as better in settled housing than in self-contained temporary accommodation, and problems with several physical conditions (such as damp, infestation and risks to child safety) were less commonly reported. However, satisfaction with cooking, laundry and, especially, bathroom facilities was much lower amongst adult respondents in settled housing than amongst those reporting on self-contained temporary accommodation.

Despite these mixed results with regards to accommodation conditions, adult respondents' overall satisfaction with settled housing was markedly higher than with self-contained (or indeed any other form of) temporary accommodation. Likewise, children in settled housing were happier with their accommodation and less likely to want to move elsewhere than those still living in temporary accommodation.

Families in temporary accommodation for over a year

All families in temporary accommodation for over one year (average stay at point of survey was 2.9 years) were staying in self-contained temporary accommodation when interviewed. These families were more likely than other families accepted as homeless to have made multiple moves between temporary accommodation addresses (43 per cent had stayed in three or more temporary accommodation addresses). However, most of these moves seemed to have happened early in these families' temporary accommodation experience, as the average length of time they had spent in their current temporary accommodation address at point of survey was 2.5 years. As with other families accepted as homeless, the purpose of many of these moves appeared to be to relocate families from shared forms of provision into self-contained settings in situations where they were likely to spend a prolonged period in temporary accommodation.

Lack of space was more of a problem for families in temporary accommodation for over one year than for other families accepted as homeless (58 per cent were satisfied with their living space, compared with 69 per cent of other families). They were also less satisfied with bathroom, cooking and sleeping arrangements than other families accepted as homeless. These findings appeared to be associated with the larger average household size of families in temporary accommodation for over one year, and in particular to the substantial proportion of these families (26 per cent) with five or more members (only 12 per cent of other families accepted as homeless had five or more members).

Levels of frustration at the length of wait for settled housing were high amongst the adult respondents in families in temporary accommodation for over one year: more than half (59 per cent) reported that they were 'very frustrated' and 28 per cent that they were a 'bit frustrated' with the wait.

Young people accepted as homeless 16-17 year olds

At point of survey, 40 per cent of young people had moved into settled housing, and 60 per cent were still living in temporary accommodation.

Almost all of these young people had spent some time in temporary accommodation (only 6 per cent had moved directly into settled housing), and half (47 per cent) had experienced some form of 'supported' accommodation (that is, a hostel, other managed/supported accommodation, or supported lodgings). While some problems were reported with sharing in these forms of provision, 71 per cent of young people felt that the other young people they shared with were 'good company', and 77 per cent felt that the staff in their accommodation were 'helpful'.

Unlike adult respondents, young people in settled housing were only marginally more satisfied with their accommodation than those still in temporary accommodation. This finding, together with the data on overall quality of life (see below), indicates that the meaning and significance of temporary accommodation may well be very different for young people than for families accepted as homeless. For young people, it is perhaps more accurate and helpful to view such accommodation as 'transitional' rather than simply as 'temporary'.

The impacts of homelessness and temporary accommodation

Families accepted as homeless

Encouragingly, those adult respondents who reported that life was now better than in their 'last settled accommodation'⁶ heavily outnumbered those for whom it was perceived to be worse (57 per cent as compared with 19 per cent). Likewise, they were far likelier to report an improvement (57 per cent) than a decline (12 per cent) in their child(ren)'s overall quality of life. While positive changes were commonest amongst those families in settled housing, a substantial net improvement was also reported for adults and children still in temporary accommodation. Positive change was particularly associated with families for whom violent relationship breakdown had been a cause of homelessness, but was far from limited to this group.

Across a range of measures, adult respondents in settled housing reported a better current quality of life than those still living in temporary accommodation. In particular, while the majority of adult respondents in temporary accommodation considered their lives to be 'on hold' (64 per cent), this was true of only 18 per cent of those in settled housing.

Adult respondents in temporary accommodation were also more likely than those in settled housing to worry about the future (55 per cent compared to 36 per cent), and to report lower levels of overall happiness (44 per cent were very or fairly happy, compared to 68 per cent of adult respondents in settled housing). Quality of life was consistently reported to be poorer amongst adult respondents staying in temporary arrangements with friends or relatives, or in hostels and B&B hotels, than amongst those in self-contained temporary accommodation. Poorer quality of life was also often associated with mental health problems, financial difficulties, feeling unsafe in accommodation or neighbourhood, and having insufficient living space.

The impacts of homelessness and spending time in temporary accommodation on the health and social support circumstances of adult respondents seemed largely negligible, or marginally positive. Thus most adult respondents (66 per cent) reported no change in their health status since leaving their last settled accommodation, and where it had changed, their health was more likely to have improved than deteriorated. Their access to emotional support (someone to listen if they needed to talk) and instrumental support (someone to help out in a crisis) had seldom changed since their last settled accommodation. Likewise, there was no net change reported with respect to adult respondents' contact with relatives since leaving their last settled accommodation, although a net drop in contact with friends

⁶ Adult respondents were asked about a range of their family's circumstances in their 'last settled accommodation' prior to acceptance as homeless, as a means of investigating whether there was evidence of changes that could be associated with the experience of homelessness and temporary accommodation.

was reported (36 per cent had less contact with friends, and 20 per cent had more). Very few had no contact at all with friends or relatives at point of survey.

However, there appeared to be a net deterioration in these families' economic position as compared with when they were living in their last settled accommodation. In particular, while 74 per cent of families had not seen any changes in their working status since their last settled accommodation, 21 per cent had moved from a working to workless status, and this was offset to only a small degree by the 6 per cent of families who had experienced the reverse. Despite this finding, 'homelessness-specific' barriers to employment – such as 'living in temporary accommodation' or 'the disruption caused by homelessness' – were very seldom cited by adult respondents.

Overall, 47 per cent of adult respondents reported that their financial circumstances had worsened since leaving their last settled accommodation, while only 18 per cent said that they had got better. Families living in self-contained temporary accommodation appeared more likely to struggle financially than those in other forms of accommodation (a finding that was only partly accounted for by their concentration in London, where families in general were more likely to report financial difficulties). Expenses directly associated with moves due to homelessness, such as the purchase of new furniture and household goods, seemed to be relatively minor problems in the context of the overall weak economic position of these families.

Some positive (net) changes were reported for children (as compared with their last settled accommodation), particularly with regards to improvements in their school performance and their relationship with their parents. However, some negative (net) changes were also apparent in relation to loneliness and reduced participation in clubs/activities. One third of school-aged children had changed school as a direct result of homelessness. There was evidence that changing schools could have powerful positive as well as negative impacts on children.

The perception of parents was that any negative impacts on their children were largely attributable to the initial disruption and uncertainty caused by leaving their last settled accommodation. Likewise, positive changes were generally attributed by parents to moving away from former 'family problems' in their last settled accommodation, and the establishment of a more stable home environment.

Families in temporary accommodation for over a year

In most respects, the circumstances and quality of life of both adults and children in temporary accommodation for over one year were very similar to those of adults and children in families who had spent shorter periods in temporary accommodation. This suggested that the length of time spent in temporary accommodation was not generally the key influence with respect to the impacts of homelessness on families.

Families in temporary accommodation for over one year were more likely than other families accepted as homeless to report that, overall, they were struggling financially (49 per cent). However, this finding seemed related to their concentration in London, and the form of accommodation in which these families were living (self-contained temporary accommodation), rather than to the length of time they had stayed in temporary accommodation.

Young people accepted as homeless 16-17 year olds

Young people accepted as homeless 16-17 year olds, like families accepted as homeless, were much more likely to report that life was better (52 per cent) rather than worse (25 per cent) than it had been in their last settled accommodation. For the minority of young people who perceived their quality of life to have declined, this was associated with feeling unsafe in their current neighbourhood, and also with deteriorations in their ability to cope financially (see below). Notably, it was not associated with whether they were living in settled or temporary accommodation, nor with temporary accommodation type.

Young people still living in temporary accommodation were, as with adult respondents, much more likely than those in settled housing to perceive their life to be 'on hold' (57 per cent as compared with 18 per cent). However, in contrast to adult respondents, neither worrying about the future nor general levels of (un)happiness were associated with living in temporary accommodation amongst young people. For these young people, the key negative influences on quality of life appeared to be feeling unsafe in their accommodation and/or neighbourhood. It was also notable that a smaller proportion of young people reported being very or fairly happy (47 per cent) than either adult respondents (57 per cent) or child respondents (77 per cent).

There was an overall net reduction in young people's contact with family and friends since leaving their last settled accommodation. Nonetheless, their access to emotional support (someone to listen if they needed to talk) and instrumental support (someone to help out in a crisis) appeared to have improved overall (primarily because of increased professional support), albeit that this was still poorer than the level of support available to young people in the general population.

There was, as with families, evidence of a substantial overall (net) deterioration in the economic position of these young people (since leaving their last settled accommodation). Thus approximately one third (34 per cent) had discontinued participation in education, employment or training, and this was offset to only a very small degree by the 4 per cent who had taken up one of these activities. Moreover, 56 per cent of young people reported that their ability to manage financially had declined since leaving their last settled accommodation, and only 12 per cent said that it had improved.

Conclusion

This study sought to provide robust statistical evidence on families and 16-17 year olds accepted as homeless by English local authorities, drawing on data from five linked surveys which covered parents, children and young people assisted under the homelessness legislation (including parents and children who had spent more than one year in temporary accommodation).

The findings of this study could be viewed as largely a ‘good news’ story with regards to families accepted as homeless. These families appeared in the main not to be extremely vulnerable, but rather were generally low income households who found themselves unable to secure alternative housing when they were confronted with a crisis such as relationship breakdown or eviction which caused them to lose their settled accommodation. The provision of statutory homelessness assistance seemed to have secured a substantial overall net improvement in the quality of life for both adults and children in these families. Moreover, those families (mainly in the North and Midlands) who had moved on to settled housing by point of interview appeared reasonably satisfied with their accommodation. However, the long waits for settled housing in London and the South were a source of considerable frustration. Another key note of concern has to be the apparent negative impact of homelessness on families’ (already weak) economic position.

For young people accepted as homeless 16-17 year olds, the data tells quite a different ‘story’. This is an extremely vulnerable group, in need of extensive support, for whom (supported) temporary accommodation could be viewed as a helpful transitional intervention. As with families, the provision of statutory homelessness assistance appeared to have brought about a substantial overall net improvement in young people’s quality of life, and had also increased their access to professional sources of support. However, the pronounced negative (net) impact on these young people’s economic position, and in particular the very high proportion who were not in education, employment or training at point of interview, is clearly a cause for concern.

About this Research

This study was commissioned in December 2004 by the then Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (now Communities and Local Government). It was conducted by the Centre for Housing Policy (CHP) at the University of York (www.york.ac.uk/chp/) and BMRB International (www.bmrb.co.uk/).

The surveys were conducted in 2005 and 2006. The total number of usable interviews from each survey was as follows: 2053 (Survey 1); 450 (Survey 2); 350 (Survey 3); 571 (Survey 4); 180 (Survey 5). The authors are: Nicholas Pleace; Suzanne Fitzpatrick; Sarah Johnsen; Deborah Quilgars; Diana Sanderson.