
Youth Homelessness

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› **Abstract_** *In 1998, research by the European Observatory on Homelessness suggested that youth homelessness may be considered as a faltered or interrupted transition to adulthood. Whilst there was little evidence that youth homelessness was growing across Europe, information on the extent and nature of homelessness was patchy, responses appeared underdeveloped and specialist services for homeless young people were relatively uncommon. This chapter reviews the progress that has been made in understanding youth homelessness in the last twelve years. It finds that frameworks of analysis have developed further, particularly through a focus on pathways into homelessness, although more attention is still required on how structural factors affect young people's housing chances across Europe. It also finds that different definitions of youth homelessness continue to be used across Europe, making comparisons difficult, and that data on the extent of homelessness amongst young people, with the exception of some North/Western European countries, remains poor. Twelve years on, information is now available on a greater range of preventative and responsive interventions but effectiveness studies remain rare.*

› **Keywords_** *Young people; youth; leaving home; transition to adulthood; prevention; homelessness; housing and support.*

Introduction

Youth homelessness is the outcome of a process of failed transitions (Avramov, 1998, p106)

Virtually all young people are expected to make a transition from childhood, and a state of dependence on their parents or carers, to adulthood and independence. This process involves a number of inter-linked transitions, the three main ones arguably being from full-time education to employment (the school-to-work transition), the family of origin to new partnerships and families (the domestic transition), and from living with parents to their own independent housing (the housing transition) (Coles, 1995). In 1998 the first publication by the European Observatory on Homelessness to focus explicitly on young people (Avramov, 1998¹) suggested that youth homelessness may be conceptualised as a faltered or interrupted transition where vulnerable young people are unable to find, afford and/or maintain independent accommodation particularly when having to leave the parental home early or leaving state care. In this way, they are unable to achieve a satisfactory housing transition. This is likely to be affected by, and impact on, other critical transitions including finding and sustaining employment and family formation.

The Observatory focus on youth homelessness in 1998 was decided upon following a number of reports of increasing numbers of young people utilising shelters for homeless people in a couple of European countries, most particularly France and the United Kingdom. Whilst resources were not available to undertake primary research across Europe, the edited collection was the first attempt to provide a picture of homelessness among young people in the EU15 countries. Observatory correspondents provided an overview of youth homelessness in their country utilising key literature and any available data sets on homelessness. The edited collection explored a number of key dimensions of youth homelessness, including: the extent of youth homelessness; explanatory factors for youth homelessness; responses by statutory bodies and available services, and provided some examples of emergency services.

Since then, no specific work has been undertaken on youth homelessness by the Observatory, although the Observatory research reports (Doherty *et al*, 2002; Edgar *et al*, 2003a; Doherty *et al*, 2004) and policy overviews (Edgar *et al*, 2003b; Edgar *et al*, 2004; Edgar, 2005; Mandic, 2005) included some information on young people alongside other vulnerable groups. In addition, more recently, FEANTSA produced an overview of emerging trends on child homelessness in Europe (FEANTSA, 2007).

¹ The publication consisted of a number of detailed overview chapters by Avramov, with country case study sections by individual authors. In this chapter, the publication is referred to as an edited collection.

This chapter reviews the Avramov (1998) edited collection and updates our knowledge on youth homelessness by discussing the research undertaken in this area over the last twelve years². Firstly, the chapter examines definitions of youth homelessness. Secondly, the chapter reviews the limited evidence on what we know about the scale of youth homelessness. The chapter then moves onto consider explanations for youth homelessness. Fourthly, the nature of responses to youth homelessness, and their effectiveness, is considered in detail. The chapter ends by identifying research gaps in this area.

Defining Youth Homelessness

In Avramov (1998), the authors did not attempt to apply a uniform definition of youth homelessness across Europe, rather examining country specific situations. Firstly, it was clear that the situation of children and young adults of varying ages were being examined. Some Observatory correspondents (for example, in Germany and Austria) examined homelessness affecting children between the ages of 14 and 18 as well as young adults aged 18 to 25 or 27. In other countries, the age range extended into the early 30s (for example, Italy and Greece). The different age ranges under study reflected the differing policy and practice frameworks in operation across Europe. It also reflected cultural specific norms, in particular it is well known that young people from Southern Europe leave home at a later age than those in Northern Europe (for example, see Iacovou, 2002).

Similarly, in terms of definitions of homelessness, the Avramov (1998) edited collection focused broadly on the position of marginalised young people at risk of, as well as those experiencing, homelessness. The contributors to the publication were interested in considering the position of young people who were sleeping rough as well as using hostels or living temporarily in unsuitable accommodation or sharing arrangements. Further, homelessness was considered as one aspect of wider social exclusion. The study found evidence of a concern about the position of young people in society more generally across Europe, particularly 'troubled youth', rather than youth homelessness specifically. For example, in France, there was a perception that there were more young people travelling around as a lifestyle choice. In Italy, the marginalisation of youth was also perceived as a significant issue, however housing exclusion was rarely a key aspect of this. In some countries, specific concerns were prominent, for example drug abuse amongst young people (Greece), young people in care (Ireland) and young immigrants (the Netherlands, Spain). Overall, it was clear that 'youth homelessness' was not a concept widely discussed across Europe.

² Please note this is limited to publications in English.

Developments since 1998

There is still no one agreed definition of youth homelessness utilised across Europe. This is unsurprising given the lack of a definition of both 'youth' and 'homelessness' more generally. Youth is best understood as a life phase that, whilst influenced by biological processes, is largely determined by social and cultural processes which will differ over time and place. Youth occurs at the intersection between childhood and adulthood and stretches over a number of years as people navigate a series of transitions. The European Commission (2001) selected the period between ages 15 and 25 as representing youth for their White Paper, *New Impetus for Youth*. Similarly, EUROSTAT collects data on young people between 15 and 24 years of age.

In terms of the upper end of the age scale, it should be noted that empirical evidence suggests that youth transitions are becoming more extended. Data indicates that young people are staying with their parents until an older age and delaying forming independent households (Smith, 2009). A European network, Up2Youth, under the EC Sixth Framework Programme, compared welfare policies, education and training systems and labour markets across the EU 27 countries (Walther *et al*, 2009) and concluded that the life-course of young people is now fragmented and attaining adulthood has become more difficult over time. There may therefore be an argument for extending the age range upwards in any definition of youth homelessness.

It is also important to distinguish between youth and 'child' homelessness. The latter is usually defined as affecting people under the age of 18 (FEANTSA, 2007). This reflects the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child³ where national governments should protect children (defined as under the age of 18 unless majority is attained earlier) including ensuring a standard of living adequate for the child's physical, mental, spiritual, moral and social development 'in accordance with national conditions and within their means' and 'particularly with regard to nutrition, clothing and housing' (Article 27; 3). Child homelessness has been defined as including both 'children in homeless families' and 'unaccompanied adolescents experiencing homelessness' (FEANTSA, 2007). Generally, youth homelessness is understood to include this second category, but not the first. The second category has been further defined into four sub-categories (FEANTSA, 2007):

³ <http://www.unicef.org/crc/>

- homeless adolescents – young people who are homeless for a period of time who may sleep rough, stay with friends or in hostels. Some countries refer to ‘street youths’ or ‘street children’ where children sleep out and/or spend considerable time on the streets during the day⁴;
- runaways – young people who run away from home and experience temporary or episodic homelessness;
- unaccompanied minors – asylum seeking young people under the age of 18 arriving in a country with no parent or main carer;
- children leaving institutions – children leaving state care institutions and foster care; also other institutions such as youth custody facilities.

It is important that any definition of youth homelessness encompasses ETHOS’ categories of insecure and inadequate housing as well as the roofless and houseless categories (see Busch-Geertsema, this volume; Edgar, 2009). In the last decade, a number of studies have confirmed the high prevalence of hidden homelessness amongst young people, that is where people are living, usually temporarily, in the homes of friends and families (for example, see the Danish survey of homelessness, Benjaminsen & Christensen, 2007). Other studies have shown that young people often ‘sofa surf’ between various friends and relatives until they outstay their welcome, at which point they begin to access formal provision like homeless hostels (Quilgars *et al*, 2008). These studies suggest that hidden homelessness might be a particularly dominant type of homelessness experienced by young people.

The Extent of Youth Homelessness

The Observatory edited collection (Avramov, 1998) concluded that youth homelessness did not appear to be a significant issue in most countries (Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Finland, Luxembourg, Greece, Italy, Portugal, Spain). However, the lack of data available to measure youth homelessness meant that it was difficult to know whether this was indeed the case. Further, the extent of the problem may have reflected the lack of provision for young homeless people (see Responses to Youth Homelessness below). In particular, few young people appeared to be sleeping rough, utilising night shelters or other temporary accommodation for homeless people. Exceptions to these accounts included the United Kingdom and France,

⁴ In most countries, children will receive priority attention due to their age so these issues should not be widespread but it is evident that some young people under the age of 18 are still affected by homelessness, including rough sleeping. Recently, the European Parliament (2007) adopted a report on children’s rights which included a reference to ending child homelessness (p.21, para.108).

and possibly Germany and the Netherlands. However, it is likely that some young people are reluctant to access adult homeless provision and therefore youth homelessness might have been underestimated. It was acknowledged that some young people were staying in the parental home for longer than necessary due to low incomes and a lack of housing options (Greece, Spain, Portugal, Italy).

In 1998, there appeared to be no clear trend at the European level towards an increase in youth homelessness. However, there was some acknowledgment that there may be a trend towards greater vulnerability to homelessness in some countries (Austria, Finland, Portugal), though in other cases previous growth may have been halted (Denmark, Luxembourg). In some cases, the media appeared to be reporting greater numbers of homeless young people than the evidence supported (for example, 'street children' in Germany).

Developments since 1998

No reliable estimate of youth homelessness across Europe is available. Despite considerable progress in the measurement of homelessness in recent years (see Busch-Geertsema, this volume; and MPHASIS project⁵) definitional and measurement issues means that this is a huge task: as outlined above, countries tend to use different age groups and categories of homelessness and the hidden homeless are notoriously difficult to count. The FEANTSA Observatory on Homelessness has produced statistics on homelessness in Europe over the last decade, utilising the ETHOS categories, however have not attempted to measure youth homelessness. Young people are of course contained in most of the key categories, for example, people utilising night shelters, homeless hostels or sleeping rough but it is not routinely known what proportion they represent. In 2006 the statistics were revised (Edgar and Meert, 2006) and a new category was added for young people leaving children's institutions/ homes with no accommodation arranged, although the difficulties in measurement were recognised. In 2009 (Edgar), it was only possible to obtain information from four countries on this figure (the Czech Republic (20 000 children), Hungary (4 102), Ireland (262) and England (980)).

⁵ <http://www.trp.dundee.ac.uk/research/mphasis/index.html>

Data on the extent of youth homelessness has not been systematically analysed on a European wide level. Few specific studies have been undertaken specifically on the scale of youth homelessness, with available information mainly arising from general homelessness surveys which include an age profile of the population. Better data tends to exist on the proportion of the homeless young people within the wider homelessness population rather than absolute numbers/ proportion of young people affected by homelessness, but even here different definitions and methods used make comparisons problematic. Many studies have primarily focused on people sleeping rough and those utilising emergency shelters or other hostels (ETHOS categories 1-3), with only a few also including estimates of the hidden homeless (for example, category 8 of ETHOS, staying with friends and relatives) where young people are likely to be over-represented. It should also be pointed out that many surveys have focused on those utilising accommodation services for single people, meaning that young people with children (particularly women) are likely to be under-represented (or absent) in the data.

With these caveats in mind, Table 1 provides some examples of data on the number of young people, and the proportion that they represent in the homeless population in a number of countries. For example, the Danish national count of homeless persons in 2009 found that 13 per cent of homeless people were between 18 and 24 (and 23% between 18-29) (Benjaminsen, 2009). A similar proportion (14%) was under 25 in the 2004 homeless census in Prague, Czech Republic (Debski, 2010). One of the highest proportions of youth within the homelessness population was found in Spain with 30% of people in the Survey of Homeless Persons in 2005 being aged between 18 and 29 years (EPSH- Personas 2005; own analysis). The French INSEE 2001 survey of users of accommodation and hot meal distribution services also found that more than a third of people utilising aid services for homeless people were aged between 18 and 29, compared with a quarter of the whole population (Join-Lambert, 2009).

Table 9.1: Extent of youth homelessness in selected European countries

	Study/ method	Definition	Data
Czech Republic	Census of homeless people, 2004, Prague	Visible homeless and people in shelters	14% were under 25 (439 out of 3096 persons)
Denmark	National count of homeless persons, 2009 (one week)	People without dwelling or room (owned or rented), living in temporary accommodation, informal arrangements or sleeping rough	13% of homeless people were aged 18 to 24 (23%, 18-29)
France	INSEE Survey of users of accommodation and hot meal distribution services, 2001	People who had spent previous night in a shelter, on the street or in a makeshift shelter	More than a third of people were aged 18 to 29
Ireland	Department of Health and Children/ Health Service Executive statistics	Number of children who have left home with no accommodation to go to (known to services)	234 children (under age of 18) were identified as homeless in 2008
Netherlands	Information from municipalities to Dutch Audit Court	Counts of young homeless people known to services, estimates of street homeless and hidden homeless	6090 young people aged 16-25
Poland	Census of homeless persons, Pomeranian Province, 2009	Not stated, includes people sleeping rough	2838 people included 220 children (up to age 18). 8% of adults were under the age of 30
Spain	Survey of Homeless Persons, 2005 (EPSH – Personas)	Not stated, but includes sleeping rough and shelters	30% of 21900 people counted were aged 18 to 29 (82% male; 18% female)
UK	Independent study, analysis of available national statistics on youth homelessness	Young people accepted as homeless under UK homelessness legislation; those utilising specialist services for (formerly) homeless young people; those sleeping rough	75000 young people (aged 16-24) experienced homelessness in over 12 months (2006/7)

Sources: Benjaminsen (2009); Debski (2010); EPSH- Personas 2005 (<http://www.ine.es/jaxi/menu.do?type=pcaxis&path=/t25/p454/e02/a2005/&file=pcaxis>; own analysis); Join-Lambert, 2009; Muhic Disdarevic & Sloufova (2009); Quilgars *et al* (2008); Smith (2009);

Data on the trends of youth homelessness over time appears to be only available in a few countries. In particular, a recent review of youth homelessness in the UK estimated that about 75 000 young people (aged 16-24) had experienced homelessness in 2006/7 (Quilgars *et al*, 2008). This contrasted with a previous inquiry into youth homelessness (Evans, 1996) which had estimated a much higher number (about 250 000) young people experiencing homelessness in 1995, however the two estimates were not directly comparable as the latter included hidden homeless populations and utilised different data sources. Where time series data was available (mainly for young people accepted as homeless by local authorities under specific homelessness legislation), a reduction in youth homelessness was observed from a height of 68 000 young people accepted as homeless by local authorities in 2003/4 to 43 000 in 2006/7. The main reason for the recent reduction was considered to be the introduction of a preventative agenda which attempts to assist young people before they present to their local municipality as homeless (Quilgars *et al*, 2008).

In Ireland, the Department of Health and Children, and more recently the Health Service Executive, have collated information on the number of children, that is, under eighteen years of age (of whom they are aware) who have left home as well as the reasons for their homelessness. The most recent data available suggest that, nationally, 234 children were identified as homeless in 2008. A total of 774 children were identified as homeless in 1999 suggesting a substantial decline in the number of children presenting as homeless over the past decade. This reduction is likely to have been, at least partly, a result of activities following the publication of a youth homelessness strategy (Department of Health and Children, 2001) which emphasised the development of both preventative services and responsive services on a multi-agency basis for those under the age of 18 in Ireland.

In some countries (for example, Spain and Denmark), repeat surveys of homelessness make some comparisons of the number and proportion of young people experiencing homelessness possible in individual countries. However, overall the lack of data makes it impossible to identify whether youth homelessness has been increasing or decreasing over time across Europe.

Explanations for Youth Homelessness

The 1998 Observatory edited collection on youth homelessness focussed on the key risk factors for young people that might make them unable to address their housing and support needs. Risks of youth homelessness were identified at three levels: macro (changes in social protection, economic conditions and social values); meso (increasing stress on families and informal networks), and; micro (reflecting types of individual characteristics and behaviour of young people).

Whilst the authors highlighted the extended youth transitions that young people were facing across Europe, they were careful to point out that the majority of young people who postpone leaving home are not socially marginalised. Nonetheless, latent or hidden homelessness was seen to be increasing. The context of youth transitions was still seen as an important framework within which to understand youth homelessness with young people at greatest risk of homelessness where their passage to independence was abruptly or violently ended when they had to leave home.

Some groups were seen as being at much greater risk of homelessness, and social exclusion, than others. This included young people in or leaving state care at a relatively young age, young people living in families characterised by high levels of conflict and few relational or financial resources, as well as children in homeless families. Young homeless people were also seen as likely to have multiple problems, for example drug misuse, poor educational attainment and so on. The edited collection highlighted that the process of marginalisation that leads to youth homelessness may have begun many years earlier with young people running away from home, truanting and getting into trouble.

The collection concluded that risk factors for homelessness did not vary substantially between countries. However, the systems of family and state support did differ considerably, impacting on young people's coping mechanisms. Generally, the availability of comprehensive social protection was considered to protect most young people from homelessness in many countries (Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Finland, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Sweden). In other countries, strong family networks were most likely to provide a social buffer against housing exclusion (Greece, Italy, Spain, Portugal), where young people were generally expected to live with parents into their late 20s or even 30s.

Developments since 1998

Research over the last decade would suggest that youth transitions remain an important framework for analysis. Recent Observatory work (Edgar, 2009) has highlighted the importance of a life course approach to understanding social processes including homelessness. Within this approach, key periods of life including childhood and adolescence can influence present and future positions, roles and rights in society.

More specifically, the concept of housing or homelessness 'pathways' has been developed over the last decade (see for example, Anderson and Tulloch, 2000; Fitzpatrick, 2000; MacKenzie and Chamberlain, 2003; Clapham, 2005; Mallet *et al*, 2010). Australian researchers, Chamberlain and MacKenzie, identified a distinct 'youth' pathway into homelessness where young people are forced to leave their family prior to securing an independent home, and suggested that one of three key pathways to adult homelessness was the transition from youth to adult homelessness. UK research (Ford *et al*, 2002) also explored pathways into housing for young people, identifying that young homeless people were most likely to experience a 'chaotic pathway' characterised by an absence of planning, limited family support and substantial constraints on access to housing.

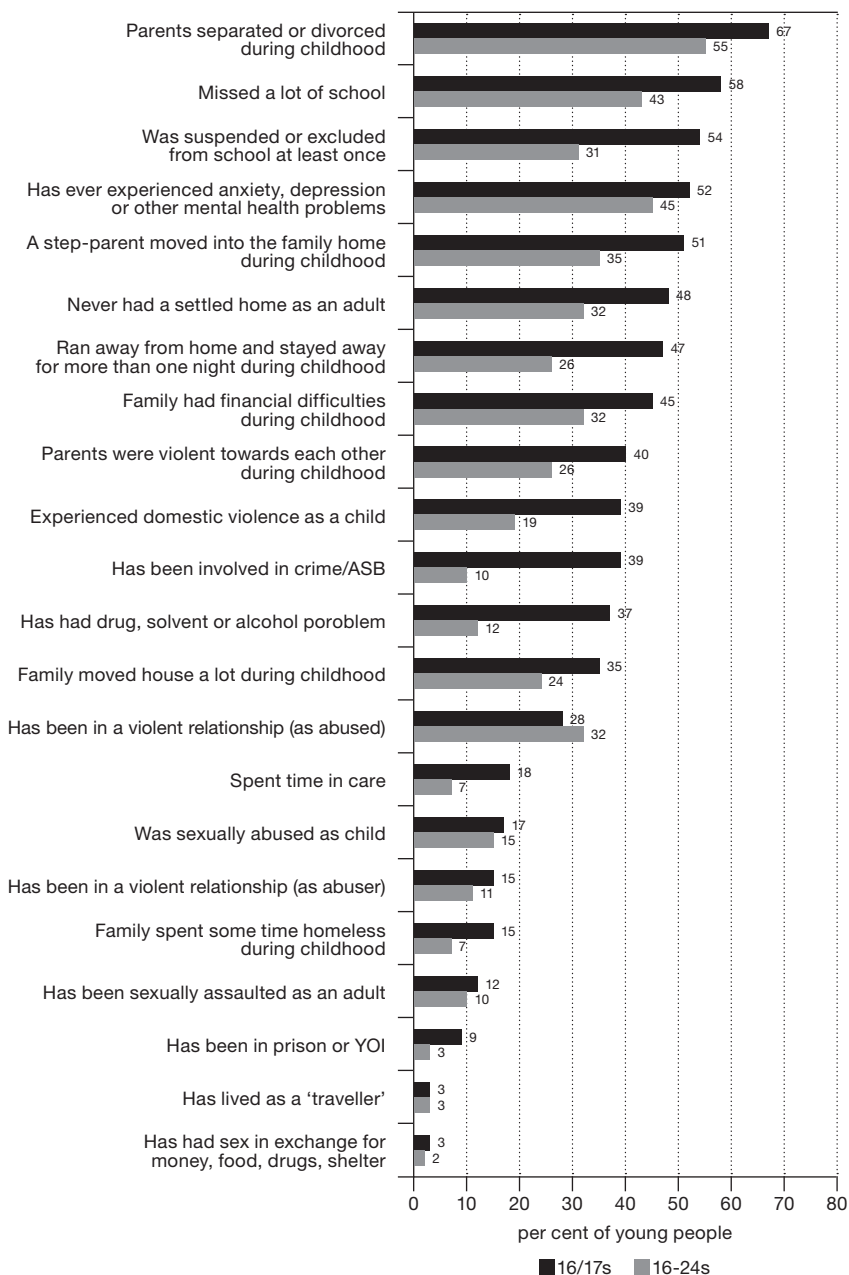
Detailed qualitative work has been used to examine both pathways into and out of homelessness in Ireland (Mayock and O'Sullivan, 2007; Mayock *et al*, 2008). Three main pathways into homelessness for young people were identified: a care history; household instability and family conflict; and negative peer associations and 'problem' behaviour. A further three pathways through homelessness were defined: an independent exit (mainly back to family); dependent exits (into housing and care settings), and; continued homelessness.

Other theoretical frameworks have also been utilised to examine youth homelessness. One of the aims of the ongoing European research project, Combating Social Exclusion among Young Homeless People (CSEYHP) (Smith, 2009), is to develop the concepts of risk and social exclusion in relation to the experience of young homeless people. Social exclusion/ inclusion is now a well established concept at the European level. In addition, risk theory predicts that, in an increasingly globalised world, governments will reduce expenditure on welfare areas, expecting individuals instead to plan and take responsibility for their own personal biographies. Young people may be one group who struggle disproportionately under these new arrangements. Other studies (for example, Green *et al* (2000)) have also stressed the concept of risk as being particularly useful in analysing youth cultures and transitions.

Some groups of young people still appear to be at heightened risk of homelessness compared to other groups. Young people leaving care remain a key group amongst homeless youth in Ireland (Mayock *et al*, 2008), although some reduced risk has been reported in the UK following changes to child care legislation (Quilgars *et al*, 2008). Young migrants, including unaccompanied minors, also appear to be disproportionately represented in some countries – this is particularly prominent in Spain where 77% of young people found homeless in the 2005 Survey of Homeless Persons were foreign (EPSH- Personas 2005; own analysis). In the CSEYHP project (Smith, 2009), the Czech Republic reported three groups of young people at risk of homelessness: young people in care, unaccompanied minors, and those with a criminal record. Portugal also reported that young ethnic minorities from Portuguese former colonies, as well as other countries, were at particular risk of homelessness. In the Netherlands, young people with poor educational attainment and/or were victims or abuse and violence were particularly at risk.

In the UK, a recent survey of 16 and 17 year olds and families accepted by local authorities as homeless identified a very high level of vulnerability amongst 16 and 17 year olds (Pleace *et al*, 2008, reported in Quilgars *et al*, 2008). Figure 1 shows, for example, that 58% of 16 and 17 year olds missed a lot of school, 52% had experienced depression, anxiety or other mental health problems, and 47% ran away from home at least once during childhood. Figure 1 also shows the past experiences of the heads of homeless families aged between 16 and 24 (Quilgars *et al*, 2008): here, quite high levels of vulnerability were found on some indicators like parent separation and missing school but generally vulnerability was less than for 16 and 17 years old on most indicators, and quite different on some including substance misuse problems and involvement in crime.

Figure 9.1: Past experiences of young homeless people accepted under homelessness legislation in England



Source: Quilgars *et al*, 2008 p44 utilising data collected for Pleace *et al*, 2008. Base: 789 (16-24s), 350 (16/17s). More than one response possible. Many questions were self-completion questions.

Less research has been undertaken on the specific nature of structural barriers to accessing and sustaining suitable housing for young people. Employment opportunities and vocational skills are likely to be key here, especially given that the average employment rate across EU27 of those aged 15 to 24 is only 37% (OECD data reported in Smith, 2009). Recently, Benjaminsen and Busch-Geertsema (2009) have argued that it is probable that labour market reforms in Denmark and Germany have had unintended consequences on the position of socially vulnerable young people, increasing their likelihood of becoming homeless as their likelihood of finding affordable housing is decreased due to reduced benefits. Reduced social benefits for people under the age of 25 were introduced in 1996 in Denmark, whilst those aged under 25 in Germany can only have housing costs covered for an independent home if they are found to have special needs that means they are unable to live with their parents. Further, sanctions for young people under new benefit rules are harsher than for other groups.

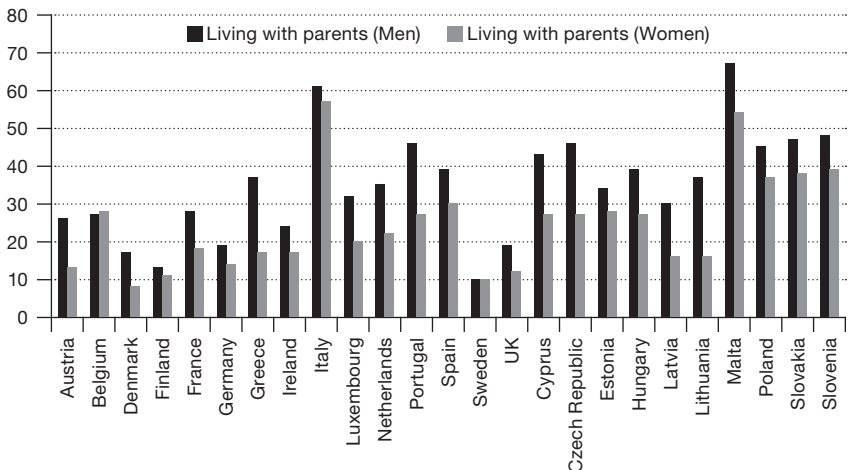
Other research has demonstrated that young people are generally at greater risk-of-poverty⁶ compared to other groups – 20% of young adults aged between 16 and 24 were at risk-of poverty within the EU27 in 2007, compared to 17% across the population (Eurostat, 2010). Variations between countries have also been observed: analysis of the European Community Household Panel (ECHP) data found that poverty rates⁷ among 20-24 year olds ranged from 8% in Austria to 30% in Finland amongst the 15 pre-enlargement countries between 1994 and 2001 (Iacovou and Aassve, 2007). Lower income levels will obviously influence young people's ability to access housing markets. Both of these studies also demonstrated that higher youth poverty rates are usually associated with countries which have earlier ages of leaving the parental home – young people are more likely to experience poverty when they are (attempting to) live independently than when they are still living in the family home. A survey of young people (aged 15-30) in the EU (Gallup Organisation, 2007) found that 44% believed that young adults remained living with their parents as they could not afford to move out, whilst 28% thought that people stayed put due to a lack of affordable housing.

⁶ Proportion of people who live in a household where individuals, on average, are under the threshold of 60% of median equivalised income after social transfers.

⁷ Using a definition of relative poverty: where person lives in a household where after tax income, adjusted for household size, is less than 60% of median income in the country in which he or she lives.

Recent exploratory analysis across 24 member states utilising the European Quality of Life Survey 2003 (Mandic, 2008) explored different structural factors⁸ influencing patterns of leaving home by young people under 35 years of age. Figure 2 shows the very different proportions of young people under the age of 35 living with their parents across Europe. Further, three clusters of countries were found: the north-western (Austria, Belgium, the Czech Republic, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, the Netherlands, Sweden and the UK), where young people leave home at the youngest age and have the best opportunities to access independent housing; south-western (Cyprus, Greece, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Luxembourg, Portugal, Slovenia and Spain), characterised by the latest leaving of home, less favourable opportunities but high family support, and; north-eastern countries (Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland and Slovakia), where there was late, though not extremely late, home-leaving, very unfavourable opportunities for independent living and low family support. A number of limitations of this analysis were noted, however an important finding was that new members states appeared in two of the clusters, suggesting that all new members states cannot be presumed to be different to older members nor always similar to each other.

Figure 9.2: Percentage of young men and women (aged 18-34) living with parents in Europe.



Source: Figures from Mandic (2008) using the European Quality of Life Survey, 2003. Own chart.

⁸ Variables were selected to represent the key structural determinants of leaving home including demographics, housing, employment, welfare states and support from family.

Responses to Youth Homelessness

Reflecting most European countries' emphasis on the problem of 'youth', in 1998 policy and practice responses appeared to be directed largely to issues that tended to be linked to youth policy rather than homelessness itself, such as school exclusions, anti-social behaviour, drugs and crime (Avramov, 1998). Social policy areas such as education, employment, health and welfare, alongside housing and homelessness policy, were therefore important in understanding responses. For example, the adequacy of the system of care for children who are not able to live with their parents was key to whether this risk group became homeless, for example Busch-Geertsema (1998) explained that the failure of youth welfare services had contributed to homelessness amongst juveniles.

The Observatory edited collection demonstrated that young homeless people were likely to have multiple problems and therefore concluded that, 'it is only an integrated approach and a well-targeted but co-ordinated chain of complementary services which can address effectively and efficiently the needs of troubled and homeless young people' (p339). In general, standard systems of welfare provision were not seen as sufficient to address crisis situations for these very vulnerable young people. Two key points were made. Firstly, it was suggested that there was a need to review the role of youth welfare institutions and how they could better address early social exclusion, potentially preventing later youth homelessness. Secondly, targeted measures were also needed to address the needs of young homeless people. Specific types of accommodation and care for young homeless people should be expanded.

Developments since 1998

No comprehensive reviews of responses to youth homelessness in Europe have been undertaken over the last decade. However, from the available country specific publications and policy overviews produced by the Observatory, it appears that some European countries have developed a range of responses to address youth homelessness to a greater extent than other countries. For example, as mentioned earlier, Ireland introduced a Youth Homelessness Strategy in 2001, which required every health board to develop a two-year strategic plan, following consultation with relevant voluntary and statutory bodies, to address youth homelessness. The strategy defined twelve key objectives in relation to preventative measures, responsive services and planning and administrative support. Similarly, an extensive range of provision has been developed in the last fifteen years in the UK with 21 different models of accommodation and support being identified in one study (Humphreys *et al*, 2007). Types of provision include foyers⁹, specialist emergency accommoda-

⁹ <http://www.foyer.net>

tion for young people, supported accommodation, floating support and supported lodgings. Other countries have instigated more modest plans. For example, the Spanish National Plan for Social Inclusion 2003-2005 included the development of special programmes for young people (Edgar *et al*, 2004). Recent information suggests that there is very little specialist accommodation for young homeless people available in Portugal (Casanova and Menezes, 2009).

There appears very little research on the effectiveness of transitional housing options for young homeless people. A recent systematic review of the international evidence of interventions (Altena *et al*, 2010) found only eleven quantitative studies that met pre-established quality criteria¹⁰ and none of these had been undertaken in Europe (nine of the eleven were US studies, one Canadian and one South Korean). This study was unable to provide firm conclusions about the effectiveness of interventions due to the lack of studies and heterogeneity of the interventions. Interventions based on cognitive-behavioural approaches were found to be the most convincing with positive results found particularly on psychological measures (Slesnick *et al*, 2007; 2008; Hyun *et al*, 2005). Some positive findings were also found for other types of interventions including supportive housing (improvements in self-reported health, lower levels of substance abuse) (Kisely *et al*, 2008); independent living programmes (some positive outcomes in employment and living status) (Upshur, 1986); and a peer-based intervention (positive impact on attitudes and knowledge of drug-use) (Fors and Jarvis, 1995).

There is some evidence of problems associated with long stays in homelessness provision, for example in UK and Ireland some young people have become 'stuck' in homelessness projects, with longer lengths of time spent homeless leading to increased risks, more enduring social problems and greater difficulties in exiting homelessness (Pillinger, 2007; Quilgars *et al*, 2008). This research would suggest that the Danish national homelessness strategy, 2009-2012, which states that young people should be offered alternative solutions to homeless hostels is likely to prove beneficial (see Hansen, 2010).

Improvements to inter-agency working between different municipality services for young people have also been reported in some areas. For example, in the Netherlands, a national policy framework has been developed to link services provided at the county/municipality level for homeless youth to regular youth welfare work at the local level (Edgar *et al*, 2003).

¹⁰ This included quasi-experimental studies, uncontrolled pre-post tests as well as randomised and controlled trials. Descriptive studies were excluded.

Prevention has also been a developing theme of responses to youth homelessness in the last decade. Smith (2009) has distinguished between early intervention services and prevention initiatives, with the former being defined as those available to a person whilst still living in the parental or care home, and the latter as those services that are provided at the point that someone is facing imminent homelessness. Using this definition, early intervention services tend to have a longer time perspective and are more likely to be provided by mainstream services such as education, children's services etc, whereas prevention services are often provided by housing and homelessness agencies. In the CSEYHP four nation study (Smith, 2009), early intervention and prevention services were much more extensively developed in the UK and the Netherlands compared to Portugal and the Czech Republic, although there was still considerable room for improvement in all countries. For example, in the Netherlands there is an extensive based youth service (with an aim to develop Family and Youth Centres across the country by 2011), and attention has been placed on preventing school exclusions, debts and evictions. In the UK, there have been several innovative voluntary sector early intervention projects, the development of the Connexions service¹¹ for 13-19 year olds, and a range of prevention projects including mediation services, rent deposit schemes and tenancy sustainment services. Legislation and services for care leavers have also been improved in the last ten years (Quilgars *et al*, 2008).

Remaining Research Gaps

More than a decade has passed since the publication of the Observatory edited collection on youth homelessness. At that time, there was a lack of information on the extent and nature of youth homelessness in Europe. Since then, some studies have been undertaken and knowledge has improved. The framework of the transition to adulthood remains helpful, but has now been supplemented by an understanding of pathways into homelessness. The concepts of risk and social exclusion have also been usefully developed. However, different definitions of youth homelessness continue to be used across Europe. This is one area that might benefit from closer attention in the future given the different causes and impacts of homelessness on a young person compared to an older homeless person. A useful way forward for comparative analysis might be the development of a separate young person's ETHOS categorisation. In addition, the heterogeneity of young people's situation more generally needs greater recognition, in

¹¹ The Connexions service aims to offer a full range of information and advice to young people (including careers advice and guidance) aged between 13 and 19 to help them make decisions and choices in their life.

particular research must address the needs of single young people and young families (and recognise that young people are likely to move between different statuses), and also be sensitive to gender differences.

Whilst the key routes into homelessness for young people are relatively well understood at a conceptual level, there has been a lack of research into the differential impact of welfare regimes on the extent and nature of homelessness amongst young people. Following the recent study carried out by Stephens *et al* (2010), this could be a fruitful exercise where the respective roles of housing, labour markets and wider welfare policies could be evaluated in terms of their role in increasing the risk of, as well as potentially protecting young people from, homelessness. In terms of understanding the causation of youth homelessness, research in this area would need to place a particular emphasis on early interventions via youth welfare structures, most centrally state care arrangements for children unable to live with their parent/s as well as broader youth welfare institutions. Joint working and the role of integrated services should also be prioritised in this area given the evidence of the vulnerability of young homeless people and their need for assistance in many areas of their lives. In addition, research could also usefully be undertaken to compare the varying legal and social norms with respect to parental responsibility for young adults – to what extent, if at all, could different frameworks be transferred to other countries? Within this, what are the expectations of young people of accessing independent housing vis-a-vis living with their parents?

To date, most youth homelessness studies have been undertaken at the individual country level, with only one comparative project which focussed on four countries (Smith *et al*, 2010). More European comparative projects are undoubtedly required. However, more national level research is also required in most countries in Europe on this subject. Most countries are unable to estimate the extent of youth homelessness, and data on the nature and impact of youth homelessness, including how often it leads to adult homelessness, is highly limited. It might be possible for some of this work to be undertaken as part of a review of national (or regional) homelessness strategies.

Finally, there remains a lack of high quality evidence on the effectiveness of responses to youth homelessness. The limited evidence seems to suggest that long stays in homeless provision, across age groups, impacts negatively on people's ability to resettle into mainstream society as people become institutionalised and possibly deskilled in everyday tasks such as cooking and budgeting. Yet, many models designed to address youth homelessness offer supportive and usually shared environments for young people where they may be encouraged to remain for one or two years to learn life-skills before independent living. This potentially introduces a tension into policy formation designed to address youth homeless-

ness. Might some forms of specialised supportive environments be useful for younger age groups but similar environments de-skill and de-motivate older young people who have already lived independently? Does it depend on the type of provision? Might Housing First models be most suitable for young people or might they set young people up to fail? As part of any examination of responses to youth homelessness, more attention also needs to be placed on both developing and evaluating services designed to prevent youth homelessness. Can services such as family mediation assist families, or are the issues much more structural in nature in terms of better supporting low income families in poor housing situations? Some of these questions will only be answered by higher quality research in this area, particularly longitudinal work that can track young people over time into adulthood. At the same time, arguably, housing and homelessness issues need to gain a greater priority within European youth initiatives such as the European Youth Pact¹², alongside established priority areas such as education and employment.

¹² The European Youth Pact was adopted by the European Council in March 2005 as one of the instruments for achieving the revised Lisbon objectives, promoting growth and more and better jobs. The Pact has three strands: employment and social integration; education, training and mobility, and; reconciling work and family life. http://ec.europa.eu/youth/archive/policies/youthpact_en.html.

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