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***Youth Homelessness in the UK:
A Decade of Progress ?***

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This study from the Centre for Housing Policy, University of York is a review of the progress on youth homelessness in the UK over the past decade (a previous National Inquiry into Youth Homelessness was undertaken by the voluntary sector in 1996). National databases are used to report on the scale of youth homelessness and data from a government-funded representative sample survey are used to analyse the profile and nature of young homeless people. Six case studies in different localities were also undertaken to assess service provision and an additional consultation with young people produced maps of each young person's journey into and through homelessness. Using these methodologies the report draws conclusions on the impact of current policy and practice development and directions for future policy and practice priorities in the UK.

Chapter 1 reviews the policy and legislative changes in the UK and Chapter 2 provides an estimate of the number of young homeless people. Both these chapters require some knowledge of UK homeless legislation and the Supporting People framework that funds supported accommodation (the explanations offered may be too brief for European readers). In particular the expansion of priority need categories in the homelessness legislation of 2002 to include young people aged sixteen and seventeen and those leaving an institution including care, prison or hospital increased the rights of young people to housing support from their local authority.

Young people accepted under homeless legislation by their local authority are described as 'statutorily homeless' and 43,075 young people aged between sixteen and twenty-four were accepted in 2006/7, including more than 8,000 sixteen and seventeen year olds, and 2,000 young people from social care or at risk of exploitation. Young women were more likely to be accepted as statutorily homeless and one-fifth of the statutory homeless young people in England were from an ethnic minority background.

Chapter 2 also reports on the number of young people in supported accommodation. In 2003 Supporting People was established providing centralised funds for the support costs of supported accommodation, replacing a range of previous grants, whilst housing costs were met through local rent allowances. Using the Supporting People database to identify non-statutorily homeless young people, the research team found that the number of young people non-statutorily homeless living in supported accommodation in England in 2005/6 was 21,000 and, through estimates, 31,130 for Great Britain as a whole; a further 2,000 were placed in housing association lets.

Based on these two figures, the York team conclude that 75,000 UK young people experienced homelessness annually (one per cent of sixteen to twenty-four year olds) in the period 2005 to 2007, although this figure does not include any estimate of 'hidden homeless' young people. In the European context it is important to stress that the majority of the identified young homeless people were never street homeless (the proportion of young people in street counts in the UK is currently very low – 7 per cent in London) although one-fifth of young people in a government survey of statutorily homeless young people reported that they had slept rough at one time. Moreover the estimate is based on administrative data. By 2006/7 the number accepted under the homeless legislation had halved since 2003/4, following the launch of the government's prevention agenda. If this estimate had been made three years previously it is likely that it would have found over 100,000 young people experiencing homelessness annually.

Chapter 3 uses data from a government survey¹ of statutorily homeless young people to report on pathways into homelessness, or at least the major reasons young people gave for their homelessness. The survey drew two representative samples of young people accepted as homeless by local authorities: one sample of sixteen and seventeen year olds, and one sample of young homeless families whose head was aged between sixteen and twenty-four. A majority of both groups reported that their parents were separated or divorced and, as with all other experiences except personal violence/abuse, rates were higher for the sixteen and seventeen year olds. The most common reported difficulties were family disruption, school exclusion/absence, mental health, step-parent, running away and no settled home as an adult, family financial difficulties, domestic violence in the family, their criminal behaviour, their use of alcohol and drugs, and violence against them.

The most common reason given by single young people aged sixteen or seventeen for their homelessness was parents (55 per cent) or other relatives (13 per cent) no longer willing to accommodate them. The most common reasons for young parents

¹ A summary is available online at:
www.communities.gov.uk/publications/housing/homelessresearchnumber7.

were violent relationships and loss of tenancy (social and private). Particular groups of young people were more susceptible to experiencing youth homelessness: care leavers, ethnic minorities, young offenders, runaways and young people with criminal records. Chapter 3 also reports on outcomes of homelessness in relation to health, safety and risk of violence and future employment prospects; more than half (57 per cent) of homeless sixteen and seventeen year olds in the survey were not in employment, education or training compared with 11 per cent of their age group.

Chapter 4 reviews the development of services in six localities: Belfast, County Durham, Edinburgh, the London Borough of Lambeth, Leicester and Swansea. The report found that the 2002 homeless legislation, the requirement to produce homeless strategies and the Supporting People funding arrangements have all led to a greater uniformity of provision across local authorities. It also found that although in principle young people have greater rights to housing support the government's homelessness prevention agenda has led local authority providers to seek alternatives, principally family mediation, for young people. This chapter also considers different types of supported accommodation and the role of transitional accommodation, which is perceived as more beneficial here than in the Mayock et al. study reviewed above. There were the same issues as in the Dublin study with respect to the increasing promotion of the private rental sector and the belief amongst agency workers that social housing is a better option for their group of clients. This chapter also considers the role of floating support in tenancy sustainment and the non-housing needs of homeless young people.

Chapter 5 reviews the importance of the requirement on local authorities to produce homeless strategies, considers the development of joint working between government agencies and draws attention to problems of joint working with the welfare benefits/job seekers' agency. Chapter 6 provides policy suggestions based on the review.

In Chapters 3, 4 and 5 several 'journeys' are displayed, drawn by young people at a homeless consultation event. These journeys are not analysed but present, from the perspective of the young person, problem childhoods, frequent moves, moves between homeless agencies and family/friends, the intervention of many agencies and difficulties in finding training or sustaining work or affordable housing.

The report is too short to do justice to the huge range of material at the authors' disposal. However, it is a review based on rich and complex primary data that will be exceptionally useful to researchers in other European countries as a report on the state of homeless youth services in the UK and an assessment of the development of services in the past decade. Notwithstanding this, the authors' hoped for future developments in services may not be realised. Subsequent to this report, Supporting People funds were absorbed into general local authority funds and

service provision may have become more variable once again. Many agencies have already experienced cuts in the funding available for the support costs of supported housing, increased intervention by local authorities in their referral and acceptance processes and particular pressure on funds for their holistic services including family mediation, work in schools and extensive floating support.

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