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## Real Voices, Real Trauma

**Adverse Childhood Experiences  
(ACEs), trauma and homelessness  
in Welsh young people**

**Research commissioned by The Wallich  
and carried out by Nia Ffion Rees.**

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***“I want a place to call home. [A] safe and happy place, that’s all...” (Lacey, 22)***

## **Introduction**

It is evident that pressures on young people have continued to increase worldwide, with populations growing at extraordinary rates and lack of affordable housing mirroring this growth. Scholars have also argued that young people are disadvantaged as a consequence of their position in terms of income and savings, and their precarious position within employment markets. Alongside this, the continual changes within the welfare system and the changing role of a young person within the family contributes to the pressures faced by youths within today’s society. These are all contributing factors to the increasingly unstable position faced by young homeless people and the opportunities to gain and sustain housing and support services. This reinforces the unstable pathways followed by this group (Steen and MacKenzie 2017, P:393).

Despite the continued debate both in terms of policy and third sector support surrounding homelessness and the issues faced by youths today, it is necessary to highlight the lack of opportunities for the voices of this group to be acknowledged. The aim of this study is to explore the experiences of homeless young people in Wales, focusing upon their views and opinions of the current support services available to them. It examines their backgrounds in terms of causes and reasons behind their individual homeless circumstance and considers their perspective of the services in place from accommodation to support and advice. This research provides an overview of the current situation for homeless youths in Wales since the prevention turn and the Housing (Wales) Act 2014, and the changes within the field of service accessibility and availability. It allows for key policy and practice recommendations to be considered.

## **Aims and purpose of research**

This research aims to explore the experiences of homeless young people in Wales.

## **Empirical objectives**

1. Examine the experiences and journeys of homeless young people.
2. Investigate the structural and individual influences of homeless young people’s pathways.

## **Conceptual objectives**

3. Explore the efforts and opportunities to prevent and support homeless young people in Wales, including both statutory and non-statutory services.

## **Report structure**

The second chapter reviews the current literature associated with homelessness. It focuses upon the challenges faced by homeless youths in the UK, particularly Wales. Chapter three explains the research design and methodology used in this study. This includes the case study approach and qualitative methods for research. Chapter four is the first of two empirical chapters which highlight key findings from interviews with young people, focusing upon their backgrounds and key constraints leading to their homeless situation. The aim of chapter five is to consider the current services in place and the views of the young people interviewed in terms of changes required to support this group of young people, with the input of key informants considered. Chapter six discusses the key recommendations at three levels: accommodation, county, and national level, suggesting key policy and practice changes. The final chapter suggests key conclusions of the study and opportunities for further research in the field.

***“The housing experiences of young people are a contemporary global concern...The first challenge is to ensure all young people have an equal opportunity to leave the family home and live independently.” (Mackie 2016, P:140)***

## Literature review

### Introduction

Steen and MacKenzie (2017, P:393) have identified many young people as experiencing a chaotic pathway (Ford et al 2002), characterised by “an absence of planning, limited family support and substantial constraints on access to housing”. This chapter seeks to develop our understanding of homeless young people by reviewing the current literature surrounding homelessness. This includes the causes of youth homelessness and the constraints faced by these young people. This is followed by the current policies in place to support them, and the role of services from both the state and third sector in terms of supporting homeless youths. It concludes by exploring the homeless situation for young people in Wales, its context within wider UK research and an overview of the current literature and research undertaken.

### Defining homelessness

It is difficult to define homelessness as this concept encompasses a range of individuals and living circumstances. To fully understand the meaning behind homelessness, it is necessary to define housing inequality. King (2016) suggests that housing inequality is centred on the lack of access to decent housing at an affordable cost. There are several groups within society facing particular disadvantage within the current housing market such as the disabled, ethnic minorities, older generation, and those with lower incomes. This therefore reinforces the range of people that could be at risk of homelessness within our society. As suggested by Gosme (2014), homelessness covers a range of housing and living situations, as the European Typology of Homelessness and Housing Exclusion (ETHOS) highlights. This includes: rooflessness, houselessness, insecure housing, and inadequate housing (Gosme 2014, P:290). Young people are no exception with Crane et al (2014, P:161) highlighting the challenges they face when resettled, and focuses upon housing, employment, finances and access to support services.

### Issues relating to the homeless situation of young people

Mayock et al (2008) suggest that there are several main pathways into homelessness for young people, including their care history, household instability and family conflict and the negative effect of peer associations and problem behaviour. However, there are many further debates surrounding the backgrounds, causes and constraints of homeless young people. These include relationships, childhood experiences, substance misuse and finances.

#### *Family and Relationship Breakdown*

Scholars suggest that the key reason behind many youths’ homeless circumstance is family breakdown owing to relationship struggle and housing arrangements. Gill (2016) suggests that familial pressures lead to breakdowns between young people and their families, usually between parents and children. However, in the English case study led by the Centrepointhomelessness charity found that family breakdowns develop for a number of reasons including structural factors (for example, poverty, welfare, unemployment and cultural difference); interpersonal factors (for example, parental conflict, peer pressure and poor access to support); and individual factors (for example, poor mental health and well-being and parents’ expectations) (Gill 2016, P:9). This is reinforced by Embleton et al’s (2016) systematic review and meta-analysis of the number of children and youth who have experienced street life in both developed and developing world countries. The predominant reason behind street involvement including homelessness was family conflict, however it is necessary to emphasise that issues surrounding abuse and psychosocial health contributed to this situation (Embleton et al 2016, P:439).

### *Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs)*

As was suggested in Embleton et al's (2016) study, adverse childhood experiences play a key role in youth homelessness. Tsai et al (2011) highlight the lack of understanding of chronically homeless adults, and the impact of ACEs on this group. These experiences include out of home placement, physical and sexual abuse, lack of parental care and unstable family housing (Tsai et al 2011, P:853). It is evident that negative childhood events can cause disruptions in the early development and effect the ability to function as independent adults (Tsai et al 2011, Trivedi et al 2007). Sundin and Baguley (2015) suggest that childhood physical and sexual abuse is more prevalent in Western societies. However, it is evident that further exploration is necessary to fully understand how trauma informed treatment and care for homeless people can effectively take into account Adverse Childhood Experiences of service users (Briere and Lanktree 2013, Guarino 2012, Hopper et al 2009, Hutchinson et al 2014 and Moher et al 2009). Heerde et al (2015, P:182) emphasise this by highlighting that young people often experience sexual and physical abuse prior and throughout their homeless circumstance, therefore the need to further understand this issue is evident.

### *Substance Misuse*

Although previous research documents high rates of child abuse, street victimisation and substance abuse amongst homeless youths, Tyler and Melander (2015) suggest that these issues are intertwined. Young people with parental drug problems were significantly more likely to have higher rates of substance misuse whether in the home or during their homeless experience. This is also the case when explaining previous high rates of abuse within the homeless youth population, with those experiencing child physical and sexual abuse and violence being prone to higher levels of substance abuse. Many other studies have reinforced this issue, highlighting high levels of alcohol use and misuse of drugs such as cannabis (Wenzel et al 2010, Rice et al 2011), which continue throughout their homeless experience.

### *Linking Factors – sexuality, mental health, care leavers*

It is evident that family breakdown, Adverse Childhood Experiences and substance misuse within the home are three of the key reasons leading to youth homelessness. There are other structural and agency led factors which impact on the lives of young vulnerable people and are linked to these three main factors. These include sexuality, whereby young gay, lesbian or bisexual individuals are at particular risk of homelessness (Coker et al 2010, Dunne et al 2002 and Gattis 2009). These young people are forced to leave or are evicted by their parents from their home due to their sexual orientation, with homelessness becoming a major public health concern for this group, with many developing psychological symptoms (Rosario et al 2012, P:544). In addition, the issue of poor mental health and wellbeing experienced by young people who become homeless is apparent. Narendorf et al (2017) suggest there are clear links between mental health, drug misuse and homeless youths. Self-medicating to tackle mental issues and other negative circumstances exacerbates those issues in an ongoing negative cycle, which is proving challenging to combat, with many not accessing mental health services (Hodgson et al 2014, Ha et al 2015, Kozloff et al 2013).

In addition, care leavers are more at risk of homelessness. Clare et al (2017) state that these young people have a lack of opportunity to live independently because of being institutionalised within the care system. This reinforces the poor out of care outcomes seen for this group (Badawi et al 2014) such as higher rates of homelessness and lower engagement in education and employment (Brown and Wilderson 2010, Fowler et al 2011, White et al 2011). There continues to be a developing discourse regarding the issues that lead young people into their homeless pathways and the effects are seen both individually such as family pressures and structurally such as challenges welfare state. It is therefore difficult to suggest firm reasons behind youth homelessness.

## **The policies: who is leading the way?**

Housing policy throughout the UK has seen an important change over the past few years, including legislation supporting arguably the most vulnerable within society - the homeless population. Despite this common aim of supporting homeless people, the differences between these policies are evident. Policies regarding housing and homelessness in the UK are focused upon the Homelessness Legislation – a rights-based approach. Housing is a right

under Article 25 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UN 1948). The Housing (Homeless Persons) Act 1977 supports people without housing.

This rights-based approach has three key caveats which a homeless individual or person facing homelessness must fall into to be accepted for government funded housing support. This includes 'priority need' whereby, households which contain certain groups of people will have 'priority' over others, such as a people fleeing domestic violence or threatened with domestic violence; becoming homeless after leaving the armed forces; or having dependent children or being a pregnant woman (Mackie 2014, P:5-7).

Alongside this, 'intentionality' refers to a deliberate act or omission that causes a person to lose their accommodation, such as antisocial behaviour or giving the keys to the landlord. Finally, 'local connection', for the purposes of the homelessness legislation means that households can have a local connection with a particular local authority because of residence, employment or family associations, or because of special circumstances (Mackie 2014, P:6). This is followed by England's housing and homelessness strategies. However, the rest of Britain, with its devolved governments, has deviated from this with different countries developing their own strategies.

### *England Housing Homelessness Act 2002*

Homelessness legislation in England focuses upon priority need, establishing who is owed the main rehousing duty by a local authority. The criteria for being statutorily homeless is set out in the England Order 2002 (Department for Communities and Local Government 2016):

- Young people aged 16/17 not owed a duty as looked-after child or care leaver under the Children Act 1989.
- Care leavers aged 18-21 who were in care between the ages of 16-18.
- People over 21 who are vulnerable as a result of being in care, being in the armed forces, being in prison or who are fleeing violence or threats of violence.

Prevention is currently outside the statutory legal framework in England. The Homelessness Act 2002 states that local housing authorities have a duty to carry out homelessness reviews and publish a homelessness strategy based on the results. Despite it being the responsibility of the local housing authority, the act specifies that social services should assist (Centrepoin 2016). The local authorities are also duty bound to record all cases, whether positive or unsuccessful, in preventing or relieving homelessness (Department for Communities and Local Government 2016). Despite the importance of prevention, it is not the same as ongoing support provided as a consequence of statutory duty. Local authorities are less accountable for the support provided; this is highlighted in the limited knowledge of the way in which homelessness has been prevented or relieved through their local authority statistics. In addition, evidence suggests that homelessness prevention is used to prevent people from making a homelessness application, and that some applicants are unsure of whether they have been helped through the prevention route or homelessness application route (Crisis 2014). However, the Housing (Homeless Persons) Act 1977 places a duty on local authorities to provide support and advice even if they are not considered priority need, Clarke et al (2015) suggest that many young people are turned away from their local authority every year: 30,000 in England and Wales. However, the recently developed Homelessness Reduction Act (2017) has had royal assent which will follow a similar legislative framework as Wales, being introduced in England to strengthen the statutory safety net and promote prevention (Parliament 2017).

### *Scottish Homeless Legislation 2012*

By the end of 2012, Scotland achieved a new homeless commitment, with legislative changes evident in both the Housing (Scotland) Act 2001 and the Homeless (Scotland) Act 2003. This change, as suggested by the Housing Minister, confirmed the commitment "to ensure all people facing homelessness through no fault of their own would have a right to settled accommodation" would be fully in place by 31 December (Scottish Government 2012).

The development of this new legislation was seen due to the sheer number of homeless single people found in comparison to England, with Scottish local authorities already becoming more accepting of 'single' homeless people. This suggests that the Scottish system had already become more generous towards non-priority homeless households (Anderson 2009, P:108). Nutley et al (2010, P:136) argued that Scotland had 'forged a somewhat distinctive' path in

evidence-based policy and practice, which is not evident in UK wide policy. The phasing out of the longstanding differential treatment of households was seen, with priority or non-priority status becoming a key aspect of the plan for 2012. Alongside this, recommendations to suspend local connection with the area, and 'softening' the impacts of the intentionality test by offering fixed-term (12 month) tenancies and support to deal with the act that resulted in their decision to become intentionally homeless. Therefore, the four legislations of the 1977 legislation reduced to one, and solely focusing upon the question: is the household homeless? (Anderson 2009, P:109, in Fitzpatrick et al).

However, the new legislation has received some criticism. The challenges of interpreting available data, as well as the possibility of diversion of applicants from the statutory system could be seen, as was suggested by Fitzpatrick et al (2012, P:1): "the administrative changes associated with the increasingly robust implementation of homelessness prevention activities have somewhat undermined the value of the homelessness statistics as an indicator of trends over time in acute housing need". As a consequence of the 'housing options' approach widely adopted, this has resulted in the narrowing of the scope of official statistical recording.

Alongside this, the fundamental principle of a social housing tenancy as the primary outcome for homeless households was questioned in the consultation paper on increasing flexibility for landlords (Scottish Government 2012d). Initial proposals fell short of a clear commitment that statutorily homeless households would remain a key priority group for access to social housing (Scottish Government 2011).

McKee and Phillips (2012) also argued that Scotland's strengthened homelessness framework threatened social cohesion in the social rented housing sector, but the statistical analysis undertaken for this study indicated that the problem of a declining pool of vacancies was much more significant than the increase in the number of homeless households rehoused.

Despite these criticisms, Scotland has passed the 2012 milestone in homelessness policy implementation. The evidence highlights its success in abolishing the priority need test. However, continuing challenges are seen in the provision of settled accommodation for all unintentionally homeless households (Anderson and Serpa 2013, P:34). The expanded homelessness safety net removed the long-standing discrimination between different groups of homeless households. Anderson (2009, P:121) states that Scotland should defend the new framework's long-term, secure sustainable approach to resolving homelessness, based on principles of choice, empowerment and rights for homeless people.

#### *Welsh Homeless Legislation 2014*

In Wales, the development of prevention strategies of homelessness was seen in the 2005 review of 2003's National Homelessness Strategy. Local authorities started to implement the housing option prevention agenda from 2005. The number of households making statutory homelessness presentation decreased, with more households seeing prevention officers. The National Homelessness Strategy 2006-2008 saw an emphasis on prevention. It was reinforced that homeless people were to be a part of the process of designing a strategy and the models of service provision.

These developments continued to highlight the need for a prevention strategy, more affordable housing, and improved delivery of homelessness services (Shelter Cymru 2007). In 2008, the Welsh Government published a draft of its proposed 10-year homelessness plan, with a full impact assessment undertaken, allowing for legislative reform to support an all-encompassing service provision (Welsh Government 2009). The prevention plan outlines that services should place people at the centre of design and delivery, and that all aspects of the individual's ability to sustain accommodation should be addressed (Clapham et al 2009, P:134, in Fitzpatrick et al). This can be linked to policies regarding health, education, employment and financial inclusion.

Shinn et al (2001) highlight the contemporary thinking in international homelessness policy: homelessness can and should be prevented. Academics have started to think critically regarding the turn in 'prevention', by questioning its implementation and deficiencies (Burt et al 2007, Busch-Geertsema and Fitzpatrick 2008, Culhane et al 2011 and Parsell and Marston 2012). Wales is the first country which has systematically reviewed its homelessness services since the 'prevention' turn. A shift towards a prevention-focused model reduces the number of people who become homeless and reduces the number in temporary accommodation (Mackie 2015, P:44). As Mackie (2015) suggests, the

turn negates the societal and political embarrassment which is linked to large homeless populations. As Mackie et al (2012) state the new legislation sees the primary focus on local authorities switch to more preventative interventions which would precede the current assessment of entitlements under the existing statutory homelessness system. This highlights the fact that all households threatened with homelessness would be eligible, without regard of their priority need, intentionality or local connection (Fitzpatrick et al 2015, P:18). However, academics highlighted key aspects of critique. Mackie (2015) identifies three key critiques of homelessness prevention in Wales:

1. The lack of whole systems change:
  - Critics of homelessness interventions globally have not been re-examined to incorporate prevention, highlighting piecemeal implementation (Culhane et al 2011). Failure to review Welsh homelessness legislation once the prevention agenda emerged has resulted in inconsistent practices of local authorities (Mackie 2015, P:49).
2. Selectivity in the implementation of homelessness prevention interventions:
  - International examples of selective implementation of prevention policies include Burt et al (2005 and 2007), Busch-Geertsema and Fitzpatrick (2008), and Moses et al (2007). Evidence from Wales shows the prevention of homelessness in 50-60% of household types, however only 36% for single males. Suggesting selectivity (Mackie 2015, P:52).
3. The individualisation of homelessness:
  - Parsell and Marston (2012) draw upon international studies focusing upon the problems of individuals, therefore highlighting individualisation of homelessness. Whilst examining the interventions used to prevent homelessness in Wales, Mackie (2015) suggests that these target the individual. Examples include debt advice and crisis intervention.

However, despite these criticisms the Welsh Homelessness Legislation “sets an example for [the] rest of [the] UK” (Walesonline 2015).

### **Supporting homeless young people: the prevention turn and services**

The changes in legislation have affected the services provided for this group of marginalised young people. The inclusion of prevention techniques in practice have been evident in both statutory and non-statutory services. Quilgars et al (2008) state that the most notable change has been seen in the welfare of young vulnerable people, through the strengthening and expansion of the priority needs group in three of the four countries and active promotion of prevention techniques at national level. Following this, local authorities have seen a cultural shift in the way housing officers and support providers view youth homelessness within their community, including the increased understanding that being accepted as statutorily homeless may not be the best outcome for young people (Quilgars et al 2008, P:3). However, Rugg and Quilgars (2015, P:13) suggest that despite these positive aspects within statutory services and the attempt to utilise prevention techniques, provision for young people at risk of homelessness has been cut back due to austerity measures. Therefore, the important role of third sector organisations continues to be evident and the evaluation of the types of services working efficiently with young people is necessary.

An English case study by Centrepoint (2016) suggested that the following are the most effective preventative measures if put in place at an early stage: multi-agency working (Home Office 2014, McCoy et al 2015), a ‘single front door’ approach (Mayock et al 2014, Centrepoint 2016), a ‘whole family’ approach (Dickens and Woodfield 2004, Pinkerton and Dolan 2007) and positive professional relationships (McCoy et al 2015, Action for Children 2015). This highlights the responsibilities of the third sector within housing and homelessness of young people, which is reiterated by politicians continuing to look towards third sector organisations as a more cost efficient, and sometimes more effective means of supporting vulnerable people and meeting social needs (Buckingham 2012, P:570). However, it is evident that when service integration exists manifested in regular communication, understanding of each other’s roles, high level of trust, involvement of the voluntary and share innovation and more support housing options both statutory and non-statutory services, it is the homeless youths that benefit (Whalen 2015, P:12).

*Youth Homelessness: Putting Wales into context*

The issues surrounding housing and young people, and their marginalisation within the housing sector continue to be an importance aspect of research internationally, with young people's housing problems widely reported within the media, and a developing concern for scholars (Clapham, Mackie, Orford, Thomas and Buckley 2014, Forrest 2012, Forrest and Yip 2016, Mackie 2012a, Ronald and Hirayama 2009 and Yip, Forrest and La Grange 2006). Mackie (2016) explores the key issues that pose barriers for young people threatened with homelessness, critiquing housing policy. Factors that pose barriers include: socio-economic background, the housing market, the labour market, and the operation of the welfare state (Mackie 2016, P:138). Others have critically examined the pathways followed by different groups of young people within society. Clapham et al's (2014) housing pathways studies explored the choices made by young people in relation to their housing circumstance (Clapham 2005, Clapham 2002). These pathways were developed following analysis of young people throughout the UK over a period of time, highlighting key transitions and housing choice. It is important to acknowledge the differing experiences undertaken by different groups of young people, such as those with disabilities and care leavers. Wade and Dixon's (2006) study of those leaving care and their opportunities relating to housing and employment highlights links to positive mental well-being, repeat offending and substance misuse problems. However, Stein (2006) examines the issues at a deeper level, highlighting these individuals' damaging pre-care experiences. In addition, Mackie (2012b) examines the structural, agency and wider discourses in the housing pathways of disabled youths, allowing for policy recommendations to be developed in order to support this group. These studies have gone towards further understanding the circumstance of young people and their housing options and constraints, whilst reiterating their vulnerable position. This includes the homeless youth population.

Crane et al (2014) explore the experiences of homeless people aged 17-25 years old in England in order to understand their resettlement into accommodation. The study further examines their transition, challenges, finances and employment situation. However, Martin et al (2011) in an Australian case study tried to further understand the experience of homeless young people in their transition from accommodation to independent living.

Alongside this, scholars have debated the changes within policy and the importance of the state when combatting homelessness. Quilgars et al (2008) examined policy developments in relation to youth homelessness within the UK, exploring their effectiveness and key future priorities. However, at a national level, Welsh case studies have focused upon the review of policies and legislative change. These studies have examined the impact of the Welsh legislations in terms of young people. Mackie et al (2012) undertook a review of homeless legislation in Wales. This study was undertaken after a considerable increase in the number of homeless people presented throughout local authorities in Wales and was utilised to understand the impact of the current legislative framework (Mackie and Hoffman 2011, Stirling 2004, Campbell 2011 and Humphreys et al 2007). In addition, the Welsh Government and partners developed positive pathways for young people, a flexible framework for local authorities and their partners to provide a planned approach to homelessness prevention and highlighting housing options for young people (Welsh Government 2016, P:4). Despite the Welsh Government and partners consulting with young people, this was at a small scale. In terms of the experiences of young people themselves, Mayock et al (2014) consider the housing instability among homeless young people in Dublin, and their long term homeless circumstance. In the case of Wales, Llamau (2015) conducted research exploring the homeless experiences of young people; the study focused upon links to mental health and those services provided for this group.

However, despite these positive studies contributing to the knowledge surrounding the situation for homeless youths at a UK wide level, there is a clear lack of research regarding their own views and opinions at a national level in Wales.

## Chapter summary

This chapter has reviewed the current literature surrounding the issues of homeless young people, particularly at a UK wide level. This includes the key reasons behind their youth homelessness circumstance such as relationship breakdown, which is important to consider when discussing the policies and services in place for this group. The chapter then evaluated the current policies in place for homelessness and focused upon the prevention turn within Britain. This included the innovative role Wales has played in systematically reviewing these services and policies since

the 2014 legislation. These policies were then considered in the context of services provided for young homeless people, considering the effects of the prevention turn on both local authority and government services and third sector organisations. It highlighted the valuable partnership between both agencies.

Finally, youth homelessness was examined within the Welsh context. This chapter highlighted research and studies within Wales and its local areas, and pinpointed key gaps within literature. This review has reiterated the need for further knowledge and acceptance of the views and opinions of young homeless people, particularly in relation to the services provided for them and their effectiveness. Mitra and McCormick (2017) highlight the importance of youth participation and honouring the unique contribution the youth perspective can provide. It is therefore important to consider young people's own experiences in order to fully understand their pathways into homelessness and opportunities, and the constraints faced by the homeless youth population.

***“Most qualitative studies are based on asking respondents questions or making observations in the field...Interviews seem not to have a predetermined pattern but to be fairly free-flowing and open ended.” (Silverman 2013)***

## Research design and methodology

### Introduction

The aim of this study is to examine the experiences of homeless young people in a developed world context. Ideally, such a study would draw data from multiple developed world countries. However, given time constraints and the need to examine young people’s experiences in depth (Kemney and Lowe 1998, P:161), a case study approach of Wales has been employed. The first section of this chapter discusses the case study approach and its suitability for this research. The research design is comprised of three important elements which will be triangulated to gain the in-depth experiences of this vulnerable group. This includes semi-structured homeless youth pathways; ethnographic observations; key informant interviews. This will then be followed by the researcher’s positionality and ethical considerations.

### Case study approach

A case study approach was chosen for several reasons. As previous scholars suggest, this approach can be developed and enhanced to suit different criteria. It provides researchers with an opportunity to explore a range of experiences faced by homeless young people and has been used in other homeless studies including Meert and Bourgeois’ examination of homelessness pathways in rural Wallonia, Belgium (2005). This study required methods which will allow an intensive examination of the influences on homeless youths. Therefore, this approach allows for the use of qualitative research methods and gives an opportunity to use a comparative design (Bryman 2012, P:72). However, it is necessary to highlight the limitations of this research. The approach revolves around one singular case study country, and therefore external validity is restricted (Bryman 2012, P:71). However, taking these limitations into consideration, one case study country has been chosen as changes within this particular country’s homeless legislation and service providers are now adapting following the introduction of the Housing (Wales) Act, in comparison to other developed world countries. The case study country Wales has been chosen, as a suitable country aware of the challenges, with government showing willingness to tackle the issue with legislation. The study will examine the experiences of homeless youths within a Welsh context. This allows the researcher to gain an understanding of youth homelessness in both urban and rural and different socioeconomic contexts across Wales, which is key for this study. This research is undertaken in collaboration with The Wallich, a leading homeless charity in Wales, and will be used as gatekeepers to gain access to young people and expertise within the field.

### In depth interviews with young people

#### *Justification of Interviews*

Interviews can be defined as discussions that “give an authentic insight into people’s experiences” (Silverman 1993, P:91). This method is beneficial as it is a sensitive approach, which is appropriate when considering this group of vulnerable individuals, allowing interviewees to construct their own experiences and opinions into their own words (Flowerdew and Martin 2005, P:11). Each individual has a different experience to tell, with different themes arising from each conversation. This is particularly advantageous as there is unpredictability in the experiences that will be studied. This allowed the interviewer an opportunity to explore different avenues within the research. This links to the idea of giving voices to others as an integral part of the research process (Cloke et al 2007, P:151), which is important when considering this group of marginalised people. Semi-structured interviews are an effective method when it comes to collaborating and collating the information and data required. Other studies regarding homelessness and vulnerable groups have used interviews, including Clapham et al (2014), Clapham (2003), and Mackie (2012a).

### *Sampling and Recruitment of Young Homeless People*

The target population was 16-25-year olds who were currently homeless or who had recent experiences of homelessness. The researcher aimed to gain an overview of males and females, throughout Wales. The sample size was 30 – a viable number representing a breadth of the population throughout all areas of Wales. Representatives were gained from all parts of Wales to the best of the researcher's ability- North, South, West and Mid Wales. Gatekeepers were used to identify interviewees. These included service providers and key officials within the field. This method was advantageous, and the use of snowball recruitment was identified. Names of the young people have been changed for confidentiality purposes.

### *Themes to be Explored*

The themes discussed within the young people's interviews derived from the literature review. The questions explored the young people's backgrounds and reasoning behind their homeless circumstance and examined the services they had come into contact with, gaining their views and opinions of the services provided for them. This highlighted key structural and agency challenges faced by these young people. Key recommendations for change within the homeless services available can be made based on interview findings. Thematic coding will be used in order to analyse these interviews (Bell 2010, P:164).

### *Practical Considerations*

The researcher gained a full DBS check by The Wallich prior to undertaking the research. It is necessary to undertake interviews in a quiet space, allowing the respondent and interviewer to speak freely (Flowerdew and Martin 2005, P:118). As such, interviews were recorded and took place in a public open location, known to gatekeepers and interviewee. The balance of safety for the interviewer and confidentiality for the respondent is a challenge. The interviewee was given the option of a chaperone or support worker; however, most of the participants declined this support once meeting with the interviewer. The researcher's age - similar to the participants - and Welsh background was advantageous when interviewing the young people. In addition, the interviewer gave the choice for interviews to be conducted in Welsh or English. The interviews were recorded and transcribed, with translation when necessary. This created some challenges in terms of ensuring appropriate meanings were respected. However, the researcher's Welsh speaking ability meant that meaning was accurately translated.

## **In depth interviews with key informants**

Most studies use 'key informants' in order to gain initial data about a person's current housing situation; for example, Lazarovic et al (2015) used key informants to understand workforce housing in Chicago and London. Semi-structured interviews were also undertaken with key informants. These included stakeholders from local authorities and Welsh Government and members of the third sector organisations previously mentioned as gatekeepers. This was valuable in order to gain an understanding and overview of the situation for homeless youths in Wales, and the policies in place. There were limitations when gaining interviews with key informants, including time constraints. However, the researcher was flexible and gained interviews with more than the number of key informants required. The questions derived from academic literature and housing and homeless policy. They considered the organisation's role within the field and the current work undertaken to support homeless youths across Wales. The interviews were analysed by thematic coding to develop ideas into theories (Bell 2010, P:164).

## **Ethnography: exploring the real situation for young people**

This immersive technique enables the researcher to experience first-hand some of the individuals' living arrangements and family situations (Flowerdew and Martin 2005, P:168). This includes a fieldwork diary and observations where possible. It is particularly important to understand the environment and background the young people live and come from, in order for the researcher to gain in-depth understanding of the situation.

## **Researchers' positionality and ethical considerations**

The issue of power relations must be considered, particularly when conducting interviews with homeless young people. The researcher's appearance and behaviours were informal, with cultural norms being upheld (Kumar 2014, P:174), such as using the language most comfortable for the participant if possible. This allowed the researcher to develop an environment that was comfortable for both interviewee and interviewer, allowing the participants to feel at ease when discussing sensitive issues. This is key when undertaking research of this nature. As this study was based on young vulnerable people, ethical considerations arose. Safety and cultural issues were noted in a risk assessment prior to undertaking the field research. Confidentiality was upheld by anonymising data and locations (Kumar 2011, P:246). The participation of the interviewees was completely voluntary, and consent was recorded at the beginning of interviews. As previously mentioned, all interviewees were offered a chaperone, however the majority did not feel it necessary and deemed that this might hinder their interview. In terms of safety considerations for the researcher, she was positioned closest to exits when undertaking interviews, and was shown all routes when entering the building. However, no incidents occurred involving either participants or the researcher.

## **Chapter summary**

The case study approach was successfully deployed using immersive methods to collect homeless experiences and allow the voices of the young people to be recognised. The researcher used ethnographic techniques and semi-structured interviews of one particular population and case study country.

***“I didn’t have the best start to life and continue to struggle now, I hope once I am settled I can forget about my past...” (Kelly, 24)***

## Hearing the stories of the young and homeless

### Introduction

The aim of this chapter is to provide a ‘snapshot’ examining the experiences of homeless young people in the case study country, Wales. The sample of young people was obtained from a variety of geographical locations, both rural and urban across Wales, with a range of backgrounds and cultures. A profile of the young people will be introduced, highlighting key characteristics including gender, parenthood, age, financial support, disability and mental health. It will also highlight those that are living independently, no longer experiencing homelessness. The causes and reasons of each homelessness situation will be examined. These determinants include family breakdown, domestic violence and abuse, death within the family, substance abuse, relationship pressures and cultural differences.

### Meeting the young people

**30** young people were interviewed; **15** were male and **15** were female.

Of the **30**...

... **6** had children.

... **2** were pregnant at the time of interviews.

... **5** were no longer homeless and were renting accommodation.

... **1** was married.

... **2** were employed full-time (see financial support table below).

... **1** was employed part-time (see financial support table below).

... **1** was diagnosed with autism.

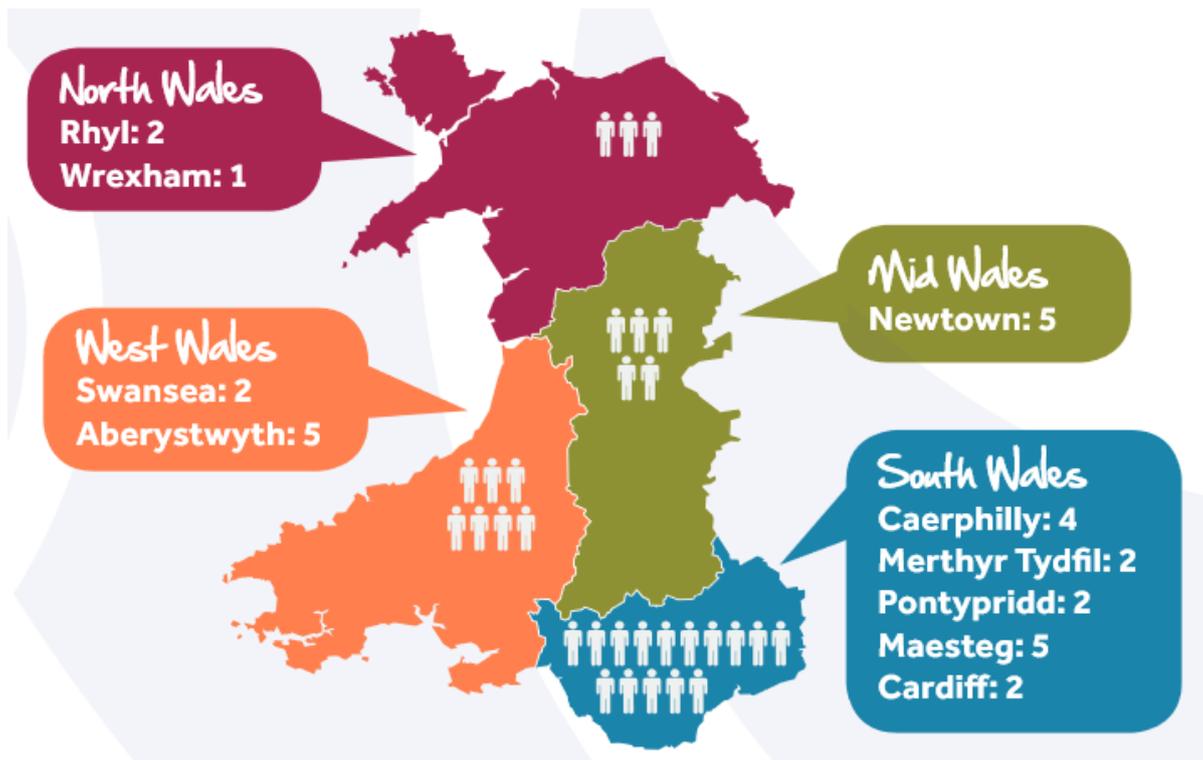
... **1** was diagnosed with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD).

... **1** had Asperger Syndrome as well as ADHD and Dyslexia.

... **1** had general learning difficulties.

... **15** had known mental health issues, including anxiety, depression, psychosis, borderline personality disorder (BPD), suicidal thinking, eating disorders, bipolar disorder, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

## Interview locations



## Ages of interviewees

Age	Number of young people at age
16	1
17	3
18	7
19	4
20	8
21	1
22	2
23	1
24	3
25	0

## Current financial support

Current financial support	Number of people receiving support (some individuals received more than one type)
Personal Independence Payment (PIP)	6
Disability Living Allowance (DLA)	1
Employment and Support Allowance (ESA)	5
Income Support (IS)	4
Universal Credit (UC)	6
Job Seekers Allowance (JSA)	6
Education Maintenance Allowance (EMA)	4
Social Services Allowance	4
Housing Benefit (HB)	6
Child Tax Credit	1
Child Benefit	1
Full-time employment	2
Part-time employment	1
Unknown	1

## Understanding the reasons behind young people leaving their homes

### *Unstable Family Set Up*

Literature suggests that familial pressures, family breakdown and unstable family homes are the key issue facing young homeless people (Embleton et al 2016, Gill 2016). This fact is reiterated in this study with just under half, 14, of the young people interviewed highlighting that issues with parents and wider family members are a key contributor to their homeless circumstance. Many of the young people spoke of the continued tensions apparent in their relationship with their parents, including repeated arguments such as the conflict between mother and daughter leading to a breakdown in their relationship. Notably, these tensions were not exclusively between the young person and parent, whole family breakdowns were apparent in a number of cases. This includes conflict between siblings and parents from an early stage, leading to a number of siblings falling into homelessness, with one individual stating, “I don’t get along with my mum and my brother got kicked out too, he is actually homeless right now...” (Liam, aged 18). This is also apparent for young people who have a history of instability in their childhood, with one individual being adopted at a young age. However, struggles continued when moving between foster parents, with tensions and arguments developing between both parents and the young person. This reinforces the evidence shown in literature that the complexity of relationships and home set up is a strong contributing factor.

It is important to highlight the fact that the majority of young people have difficulties with their parents that stem from divorce and separation, with this conflict affecting the young person and adding pressure to family relationships, creating tension and causing arguments, particularly between single parents and young people. This contributes to further problems including financial pressures; physical abuse; and substance misuse, suggested by Lucy (aged 18) who stated: “it wasn’t a safe household to be in anymore...”. Alongside this, issues arise once a step parent is introduced to the family situation which creates additional friction and tension between the young people, causing arguments between the step parents and feelings of isolation for the young people. One individual also spoke of the abuse and neglect she and her siblings faced from the start, without the knowledge of the mother as suggested by Kelly, aged 24, who said “He used to tie us up.... And I wasn’t allowed outside [the] front door and around friends’ houses...” Therefore, the complexities of family breakdowns are evident, with a range of contributing factors affecting the family set up.

### *Domestic Violence, Abuse and Sexual Assault*

Despite instability and family breakdown being among the most common reasons for young people's homeless pathways, it is also important to recognise the issues surrounding family breakdown and the subsequent problems that can develop from this.

Sexual and physical violence and the issues surrounding abuse are common factors which contribute to the homeless situation of young people. Notably, seven young people out of the 30 sample spoke of their experience with abuse and violence in the home. These are commonly known as Adverse Childhood Experiences (Tsai et al 2011, Trivedi et al 2007 and Heerde et al 2015). Young people referred to the breakdown in parental relationships, often resulting in divorce as the trigger to changing the dynamics of the family, this is highlighted by one individual stating, "My mum left when we were little. But as I got older [my father's] behaviour changed... [he was] aggressive towards me, [he] pushed me away and manipulated me" (Jonno, 20). This aggressive behaviour in many cases continued throughout their childhood until support was put in place. Nadia, aged 17, for example, said "[My mother] took everything out on me, she started hitting me when I was 13 years old, it wasn't till I was 16 years old, I confronted [her] and told my social worker...". The young people appeared to leave home soon after coming to terms with the violent family set up, before accepting help and support from service providers.

As previously highlighted, the introduction of step parents proves a challenge for many of the young people interviewed. Two of the thirty vulnerable young people spoke of the sexual abuse, assault and violence from their step fathers. The young people felt trapped for a long period of time, as suggested by Natasha, 18, who said, "He was sexually abusing me, asking me for money that I wasn't allowed to give him. He was mean to my brother. My older sister got kicked out, and I walked out." This level of maltreatment did not end until the Natasha made the decision to flee their family home. Commonly, female siblings were targeted and sexually abused by the step parent, without the knowledge and acceptance of the parent. Those young people who face maltreatment throughout their childhood - including both abuse within the home and street victimisation (Bender et al 2015) - see these effects into early adulthood. This increases the likelihood that they will experience mental health issues and substance misuse.

However, it is necessary to highlight that not all domestic and sexual abuse faced by young people took place within the home, with one individual, Chloe aged 19, explaining her experience with a young family friend, "... he threatened me with a crow bar, a machete, and he sexually assaulted me and attempted to rape me..." As a result of the relationship with an individual known to the family, Chloe, like many others, was faced with scepticism from the family, which continued for months after the attack. It therefore led to an unstable family set up, with arguments and destructive relationships, and ultimately the young person being forced out of the family home. Similarly, this occurred in one case within a romantic relationship, between partners. The young person turned to drugs and other methods to cope with the domestic violence faced in the relationship. This caused pressure between the individual and family, which also resulted in the young female being forced out of the family home. Beth, 20, explains: "...[be]cause things were going downhill with domestic violence... [my mum] threw me out, [be]cause I was doing drugs and stuff..." This highlights the uncertainty faced by this group of marginalised young people as they are targeted with sexual and physical abuse, with little or no support network in place to protect them from further victimisation. This is the case for seven of the young people, from those who faced abuse within the home, from step parents and from those outside the family set up.

### *Death within the Family*

As previously mentioned the issues resulting in family breakdown are not frequently acknowledged and explored within the literature. Another issue evident in this study was the effect of a family death on the young person. Five young people pinpointed this event in their life as a catalyst on their path towards homelessness. The lack of support and inability of the remaining parent to take care of the young person resulted in two of the individuals being taken into care at early stages of childhood, five years old and nine years old. Both individuals highlighted that the remaining parent faced many difficulties such as alcoholism and imprisonment, creating an unstable and unreliable home and family set up. In addition, the challenge of obtaining and sustaining a home as a young person once leaving care was evident, resulting in their homelessness circumstance. Laura, aged 20, said, "It was really hard as I was on benefits, I decided the house was too big for me..." This reinforces the inequality faced by young care leavers to attain stable housing.

The three other young people who suffered a family death, some in their early childhood and other in early teens, highlighted the challenges of a single parent home. Kayleigh, 16, explained, "Everything went downhill from there..." The single parent was unable to provide the support required, with arguments and tensions developing between the young person and parent, as highlighted by one young male, who said, "We didn't get along very well, and he kicked me out..." (Jacob, 20). This resulted in the deterioration of the young person's mental health; periods of rough sleeping; increase in substance misuse leading to two cases of imprisonment of the individuals. "I went off the rails. Went into a secure unit and jail," said David, 24. This is similar to a study of low income communities in Detroit, Breman et al (2015) suggest that the loss of a parent during childhood or adolescence is a catalyst for subsequent periods of intermittent homelessness.

### *Substance Abuse*

A theme in 80% of interviews was that of substance and alcohol misuse. Usually, this is as a result of their homeless circumstance or time living on the streets. However, two of the individuals interviewed, both male, suggested that their drug use and alcohol intake contributed to them being 'kicked out' of the family home. Despite none of the interviewees suggesting that there was use of drugs and alcohol within the home, international case studies such as Mallet et al (2005) Australian study suggests that the likelihood of children and adolescent contact with drugs is higher if parents or other family members use within the home. This is a contributing factor to the ongoing misuse of substance into adulthood.

### *Relationship Pressures*

In addition, a key factor which played a critical part in the homeless circumstance of the young people was relationship pressures. Danny, aged 17, spoke of his difficult childhood and the neglect he faced. Despite then developing a reasonable relationship with his mother, he moved into his partners' familial home at the age of 16. Danny suggested that despite the mother's negativity towards the move, the young male felt pressurised by his girlfriend. This was soon followed by his girlfriend becoming pregnant, and repeated arguments between the couple. He explained, "The baby was born and [my girlfriend] wanted me to move in... [then] she kicked me out because we were arguing..." Despite this being an uncommon reason of homelessness in young people, many others spoke of turbulent relationships contributing to the tensions developed between their parents. This is reinforced in Taylor- Sheehafer et al's (2007) study, which considers the relationship and group differences between homeless youths and suggests the need for this group to understand the importance of healthy sexual behaviour and relationships.

### *Cultural Differences*

The cultural differences and pressures faced by young people within today's society is apparent, with one Mjega, aged 22, who suggested that the "many rules [of] being a Muslim" contributed to her leaving the family several times; the third time she was faced with homelessness. The difficult relationship between parents and daughter, alongside the cultural expectations of a young woman her age contributed to her leaving home and renting accommodation. However, faced with a financial crisis and unable to go back to her home, Mjega ended up following the homeless pathway. This was highlighted by her stating, "I was the black sheep of the family, [I] failed at school, [I] wasn't great at anything, there were a lot of expectations." Despite only one singular case suggesting that cultural pressures were a key contribution to their homeless circumstance, the continued development of a multicultural and ethnically diverse society might suggest that the numbers of young people faced with this issue will rise.

## **Chapter summary**

This chapter has examined the profile of the individuals interviewed in this study. It then explored the reasons and causes behind their homelessness circumstances. This included the unstable family set up and family breakdown, ACEs, and death within the family as the most prevalent causes of youth homelessness within Wales. However, despite the lower number of samples highlighting them, substance abuse, relationship pressures, and cultural differences were also key factors in contributing to their homelessness circumstance. It is important to acknowledge that this study did sample all areas around the region of Wales - North, South, West and Mid Wales. However, this sample is illustrative and cannot be taken as fully representative.

***“I’ve moved around a lot for only being 17 in different placements and with loads of different families and hostels. But I think this one is right for me, I like it here, they seem to want to help and want you to do well. I’ll be going back to school next year too.”***  
***(Nadia, 17)***

## Do we know what Welsh homeless young people need?

### Introduction

This chapter seeks to review the current services in place for homeless young people in Wales. This chapter builds upon the experiences mentioned in the previous chapter including the causes, reasons and constraints faced by the group and here allows for their opinions and voices to be heard. This chapter considers a variety of services including contact with the local authority and their processes. It finally explores the views and opinions of the key informants including professionals within the field and those who work closely with this group.

***“Everything that has been done for me has helped me and got me to where I am today.”***  
***(Tevi, 17)***

### Positive contributions

#### *Easy Transition*

Many of the young people spoke of the fluid process when contacting local authorities with regards to their homeless situation. One female remarked on the level of understanding of their housing officer, who recognised the needs of the individual, allowing for a fast and easy process. The majority of young people stated that there was good communication throughout the process between them and services as suggested by one Chloe, 19, stating, “If you are a young person they try and get [you] in quickly.” Alongside this, other statutory authorities were in close contact with the housing department, with police and social services contacted in order to further support the individuals. Wrap around support was provided such as accommodation at a women’s refuge. In addition, social services support was also put in place for young people who were homeless and pregnant. Kelly, 24, highlighted the high level of support provided for young adults facing homelessness: “They bent over backwards to help me like I was 16 and I want to be able to do this on my own.”

#### *Supportive Programmes*

The level of support available throughout a range of additional programmes for young people was a key aspect highlighted by four individuals, who suggested that they were offered a variety of programmes to suit their interests and needs, once settled within their accommodation. One positive aspect of these programmes was the emotional support available. This support helped the young people manage feelings of isolation whilst at the same time respecting their independence. In addition, four of the young people observed the effective communication between the networks of services, programmes and projects with one individual highlighting the quick transition she experienced between Women’s Aid and police protection support. The young people were keen to highlight the positive support in place for those with specific needs including substance misuse and domestic violence. This was highlighted with women’s safety support and counselling being offered to one of the young people spoken to. Specific needs were recognised and rapid was action taken to support the individuals such as Owen, 18, highlighted here: “... brilliant [e]specially for homeless people and [people experiencing] substance misuse.”

#### *Independence*

The independence gained from living in longer term accommodation with support was noted by many of the young people. This includes an individual’s positive transition post care into her own privately rented accommodation, with post care workers supporting her with independent living skills within the home. However, two of the individuals did

highlight that they needed encouragement and support to be proactive in improving their living skills. In addition, two of the young people spoke of the financial support they received, allowing them to obtain and sustain their own home. This included support with benefit applications and a Discretionary Housing Payment, which is financial support towards housing costs for those receiving Housing Benefit or Universal Credit.

### *Support Workers*

The importance of support workers both within the accommodation and at day projects was evident, with many suggesting the close relationship with their support worker was instrumental in their personal development. Tom, aged 19, for example, said: “[The] homeless section are some great people to be honest with you [and the] support workers are absolutely amazing.” Six of the young people spoke of the personal support gained from workers, including health support. Staff also helped clients set up benefit claims and provided other financial support. Clients were offered emotional support, particularly in the first few weeks of accepting their homeless circumstance; relationship support was also provided with both families and partners, as suggested by Ben’s (18) comments: “Just like what to do with my family and things, and deal with the situation and they seem to motivate you here.” This is reiterated by two of the young people highlighting the encouraging nature of the workers which helped them stay “on track and keeping me in check to do it...” (Ben, 18). This was evident once individuals left supported accommodation and gained their own tenancy, where floating support was crucial in sustaining their own accommodation through practical advice and emotional support throughout the process. This is evident in the following comments from one Kelly, 24: “If it wasn’t for the support worker I would probably have no money and...find it hard to leave the house.” This is also the case within supported lodgings, hostels and longer-term accommodation, with 4 of the young people suggesting that the support worker was key in the rapid transition from each accommodation including from hostel to their own privately rented accommodation. Two of these individuals suggested that the wider family was also supported throughout the process.

### *Personal and Professional Development*

The young people highlighted the difficulty of continuing with education whilst living at hostels and in short term accommodation. One individual spoke of the support gained from the hostel to continue with mainstream education, with another suggesting that the support from the long-term accommodation allowed him to continue his aspirations of training in military college. It is important to note the educational training opportunities provided for this group within their supported accommodation, with the majority of individuals undertaking several training courses in order to reintroduce themselves to employment or education. This included professional development courses through Job Centre Plus including communication, team work and CV building. Aaron, 18, summed this up by saying he was supported to, “get...work ready.” In addition, the young people highlighted the opportunities available for personal development and confidence building after facing many challenging issues. This included domestic abuse awareness, relationships and emotional expression training. It is important to consider the positive influence educational institutions have on young people, allowing for a safe place for young people to be supported and protected.

### *Mental Health*

Half of the young people interviewed had known mental health issues including anxiety, depression, psychosis and suicidal tendencies. The needs of this group are varied and specific, posing a challenge for them to personally develop and sustain accommodation and training. Therefore, the importance of supporting this group is crucial, with many of the individuals stating that the hostels and supported accommodation understood what was required and the level of support needed through both counselling services and further one to one support. One young female spoke of the additional programmes available for her complex needs, with coping mechanisms developed to enable her to live communally and continue in training. The relationship with support workers was key in allowing the young person to accept their mental health issues; Adam, 20, explained, “[My] support worker has to tell me [things that were] hard to hear...I had done my three years brick laying, I wanted a job, I should be on site working. I struggled...”.

***“It’s hard living here, they don’t really understand the struggles I have faced...” (Nadia, 17)***

## **Constraints**

### *Accessibility*

The process of homelessness applications for young people can be a complex journey, with 4 individuals stating that their local authority representative was a key contributor to the difficulty faced throughout the process. This included the departments’ lack of knowledge, with many not knowing who was responsible for different cases, in particular those post 18 years old, making it a longer process for the young people as suggested by the following comments: “I was lost in the system, [the council took] a year to come back to me whilst I was on the streets.” (Mark, 22). In addition, individuals spoke of the difficulty in accessing the local authority housing options and the lack of understanding the staff had for their situation. This has also led to many of the young people feeling vulnerable, with many not understanding the terminology used by the housing options teams, specifically those young people faced with the ‘intentionally homeless’ title. This then left the young people feeling confused and without adequate help and support. Alongside this, three of the young people spoke of the challenging benefit process, in particular the Personal Independent Payment (PIP) process along with the interview and other needs examinations, which left the young people feeling unworthy of support. The recent benefit changes have been highlighted by two of the young people, reinforcing their worries in obtaining housing, and a stable future. As Jack, 23, put it, “I’m just not sure about things anymore, with these cuts I might not ever leave here...”

### *Unsuitable Accommodation*

The young people who lived in a number of different housing placements suggested that these types of accommodation were often not always appropriate. This left the young people feeling vulnerable and unsafe, with the majority suggesting that abuse was experienced from other service users and visible substance misuse within the accommodation was common, as Lacey, 22, pointed out: “It was horrible, there were two of us sleeping on a camp bed, people were injecting heroin next door to us.” Drug use was evident in general needs hostels, where young people were also placed. Many stated that the other residents caused difficulties for the young residents with their complex needs and backgrounds including heavy substance abuse and criminal activity, creating an uncomfortable environment to live in. Craig, 20, explained, “[I] don’t want to be around them drug takers and just want to go to [a] youth hostel...” Notably, five young people highlighted the unsuitable location of their placement including hostels and lodgings throughout the county. This includes locations far away from their home town and other family members, which contributed to many of the young people’s mental health challenges. In turn, their personal development and housing attainment were affected. Kelly, 24, said, “They are just not thinking about my head.”

### *Having a Voice*

Eight of the young people stated that there were numerous occasions when they didn’t feel like their concerns were understood. This was seen in day projects and at accommodation when worries of the young people were highlighted including problems with accommodation, other residents and ineffective training for the young people. Jacob, 20, explained, “I did tell them I wasn’t happy here, it was unsafe and not right to me, and this has happened a lot to me like when I was at a work placement and nothing much [has] been done...I [need] to move soon.”

### *Mental Health*

As previously mentioned the mental health challenges faced by this group are complex and varied with many of their health issues a consequence of their homeless situation. The young people spoke of the lack of ongoing support

throughout the different transitions in their life, from each programme and accommodation. This includes two individuals' experience with mental health teams and female-specific support organisations, with just one initial risk assessment and no further contact despite troubling mental health issues. In addition, the lack of communication between services and the level of understanding of their personal circumstance was an issue for three of the young people. This led to them being unable to complete courses and training programmes. In one case, the young person – Caron, aged 24 - felt vulnerable and unsafe, and despite contact with community mental health teams felt that she needed to be at crisis point in order to gain the level of support required. She put it like this: “[I] have to go to their place first before they [will come to me...But what if I can't [go to them] and get out of my house.”

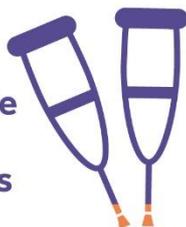
# The findings

The group of 30 was evenly split in terms of gender, with



**15 males and 15 females**

**13%** of the young people interviewed have physical disabilities



**47%** highlighted conflict with parents or other family members as a key driver in them becoming homeless

Divorce and/or separation of parents was a recurring theme in these stories. In some cases, the young people highlighted the arguments with their parents that took place because of relationships the young people had formed.



**7%** suggested that drug or alcohol use was a key element leading to homelessness

**80%** would mention that drug or alcohol use became a feature of their homelessness

This suggests that young people who have suffered trauma and become homeless are more likely to drink or take drugs.



**50%** of the young people interviewed have mental health issues (including issues diagnosed as anxiety, depression, borderline personality disorder, suicidal ideation, eating disorders, and PTSD)



**23%** spoke of experiencing violence, abuse or sexual assault within the childhood home

Two of these spoke specifically of violence and sexual abuse at the hands of their step-fathers, while another highlighted a sexual assault carried out by a family friend, after which the young person was treated with scepticism.

**17%** said that the death of a close family member was a key driver in their homelessness



In two cases, one of the parents died, and the young people interviewed highlighted how difficult the remaining parent found it to continue to take care of the family. All five young people who discussed the death of a loved one mentioned the challenges of a single-parent home, and how unstable the home environment became.



One of the young people interviewed raised the issue of **religious pressure** in the family contributing to her homelessness, referencing her struggle with 'the many rules' associated with her religion.

## Are we all on the same page? Exploring the views of professional key informants

The table below lists the roles and organisations of each key informant interviewed for this research.

### Key informants

Role	Organisation
Senior Housing Officer	Local Authority
Support Manager	Local Authority
Senior Officer	Local Government
Senior Officer	National Government
Senior Support Worker	Homelessness Charity
Senior Support Worker	Homelessness Charity
Senior Support Worker	Homelessness Charity
Support Worker	Homelessness Charity
Development Worker	Homelessness Charity
Policy Officer	Housing Industry Representative Body
Chief Executive Officer	Homelessness Charity
Operational Manager	Homelessness Charity
Hostel Manager	Housing Charity
Education Officer	Housing Charity
Campaigns Officer	Housing Charity
Project Manager	Homelessness Charity

### *Educational Opportunities*

It was important to capture the opinions of key informants in this study when discussing the issues and needs of homeless young people. A quarter of the key informants spoke of the opportunities given to this group of young people within homeless accommodation and to those accessing other services. This includes a support worker mentioning the changes in educational aspirations apparent for young people living at the accommodation for even the shortest amount of time, such as those discussing college and university. In addition, the skills learnt included independent living skills and personal development. A senior support worker stated: “We aim to build the confidence of these broken young people and enable these individuals to further learn life skills whilst in our care...”

### *Multi-Agency Approach*

Alongside this, three of the key informants highlighted the positive contribution of a multi-agency approach. This includes the network between local authority services, mental health, homeless services and other local organisations. A CEO of a homeless charity suggested that this joined up approach was positive when tackling the complex needs of this group, “...we have to continue to adapt and seek support from specialists within the field to gain the most support for these young people”. In addition, a local government senior official stated that the continued partnership work and research amongst organisations within the field has supported the development of new initiatives such as the Positive Pathways Approach (Welsh Government 2016), allowing for policies to be developed locally and nationally.

### *Psychologically Informed Environments (PIE)*

The growing concerns with sexual abuse and violence faced by this group has been acknowledged by the professionals within the field. This includes two of the key informants highlighting new initiatives focusing upon psychologically informed environments such as appropriate long-term accommodation and spaces of leisure for these young people. A project manager spoke of the importance of the correct choice of accommodation saying, “The young vulnerable people need the right accommodation and space to live in order for them to feel safe and protected within their new environment, however the need for more Psychologically Informed Environments is critical”. Alongside this, the increase in trauma informed support services and workers within these organisations is evident, with many stating that this must continue in order to fully understand the needs of the young people.

Despite the key opinion leaders acknowledging a number of successful projects and many positive aspects highlighted above within services for the homeless youth population, there are a number of constraints within the system and issues that pose challenges for the young people and their support systems.

#### *Limited Accommodation*

The accommodation available for young people is varied, however more young people are facing short term placements as longer-term options become scarce. A local government senior official acknowledged the decrease in social housing for this group, and a lack of options for longer term accommodation in often unsuitable areas. In addition, within hostels and short-term accommodation the number of bed spaces is limited with one senior support worker stating that, “We have so many calls a week and a growing number on our waiting list, we have had to advise that alternative accommodation be provided in [a] night shelter for even young people aged 16, 17 years old, and others in emergency accommodation for up to a month...”. Despite gaining stable accommodation being the end goal of the majority of young people a local authority official stated that even house share and private rented sector options are unaffordable, therefore continuing the repeating cycle of lack of housing and decreasing the opportunities for this group.

#### *Benefit Changes*

Three of the key informants stated that changes to the systems in place and financial support for this group within the UK benefit system has caused serious challenges for the homeless youths who are dependent on this form of financial support. A senior support worker suggested that because of these changes many young people struggle to financially survive and therefore resorted back to crime for additional income. Alongside this, a senior local government official highlighted the increase in the number of sex for rent workers, with many individuals finding different forms of income to support their livelihoods. Families are also affected by these changes to the welfare state and benefit system, with an operational manager of a charity stating that “these changes are posing risks for children and young people and their families who are dependent of this form of income, as many who reach 16 years old and above are then seen as a hindrance and are no ‘use’ to the family, therefore at higher risk of homelessness at an early stage in their childhood”.

#### *Rural Homelessness*

A number of the key informants pinpointed issues surrounding youth homelessness within rural areas. This includes those sofa surfing in rural areas and those moving between different small villages and towns. An operational manager for a charity spoke of the issues surrounding the concept commonly referred to as ‘NIMBYism’, Not In My Back Yard. A term frequently used when considering the homeless populations living in secluded rural communities (Bonds and Martin 2016), both unseen and misunderstood. Many communities do not accept the severity of homelessness in their area and challenge any support or shelter developed for this group, which would be placed in their ‘Back Yard’ as such. This is reiterated through one key informant’s comments stating, “The number of young people homeless in our area is increasing with many travelling from our most secluded and isolated parts for support... However, without the acceptance that this a problem from [the] local council we cannot help [homeless young people].” This highlights the continuing problem of youth homelessness throughout both urban and rural Wales.

#### *Generational Homelessness*

It is apparent that homelessness amongst families and those suffering from generational homelessness, where a number of generations from one family or a whole family unit are homeless, is an issue facing young people. Despite services in place to support families and their children most at risk, a senior officer within a local charity stated that numbers of repeated and generational homelessness are rising; the officer said, “I have three sets of siblings in the hostel at the moment, and I know their families very well. They have faced a lot of problems with both their parents experiencing homelessness at different points...” However, despite acknowledging that generational homelessness is evident within communities, there does not seem to be a clear protocol or system in place for this group. This therefore poses further risks for the children and young people in these vulnerable families.

### *Additional Needs*

As previously mentioned homeless young people have complex needs, and many of the key informants spoke of the difficulties in catering for this group. The issues surrounding domestic abuse and ACEs were evident, with two of the key informants including a senior official within an umbrella organisation of homeless services, stating that these vulnerable young people were at crisis point before any issues were recognised. Alongside this, the additional needs for those with mental health issues who have experienced violence within the home were difficult for many workers to deal with. The person suggested, “We need to have more support for these types of young people, so many now have had such disturbing childhoods and faced so much violence at such a young age, we need to adapt and be trained to see their needs quicker than we do now...” This highlights the need for understanding of the complex needs of these young people and the need for knowledge, skills and resources to deal with the problem.

A local housing official suggested that “It is very disappointing and upsetting in many cases to see a high number of young disabled people coming into our services, with a lack of understanding of what is required for this group to thrive and gain their own housing”. This suggest that there is a lack of knowledge within the sector of this group of homeless young people, with more training and education required for the workers to sufficiently support disabled homeless youths.

### *Culture of Providers*

A quarter of the key informants suggested that there needs to be a change in the culture of service providers and despite legislative changes within Wales this has not been apparent within the sector. A Supporting People senior official spoke of the struggles in trying to change the culture of their providers, “...the natural instinct is to support; however, we need to look away from this and towards more prevention. We are at the start of our journey with many providers still in this head frame...” This reinforces the importance of a joined-up approach and of accepting that supporting young people in isolation is not completely beneficial to the homeless youths.

## **Chapter summary**

This chapter has examined the current services accessed by the homeless young people in this study. This includes some successful outcomes highlighted such as supportive programmes; strong relationships with support workers and the personal and professional development of these young people. However, the young people also faced challenges within these services, including accessibility issues; unsuitability of accommodation; and lack of mental health support. In addition, the views of the key informants were examined, this includes the successful development of Psychologically Informed Environments (PIE) as a consequence of the number of cases of Adverse Childhood Events (ACEs); evidence of the increase in the educational aspirations of young people as a result of service support; and the successful multi agency approach highlighted in many cases across Wales. However, key informants did recognise the constraints faced by the homeless services including unsuitable areas and accommodation; changes in the benefit system seeing an increase in young people seeking inappropriate forms of work; lack of support for those at crisis point from issues surrounding mental health and domestic violence; lack of acknowledgement of youth homelessness in rural areas; increase in generational homelessness; and the change required in the culture of providers. Despite the range of complex issues discussed there were similarities in the issues raised such as mental health support, the importance of education and the need for further investigation of the support in place for the most vulnerable homeless young people including those facing ACEs and disability.

***“It’s hard to get to where you want to be in life when living in a hostel, but I’d rather be here than on the streets...” (Aaron, 18)***

## Policy and practice recommendations

### Introduction

This chapter seeks to review the study which explored the experiences of homeless young people across Wales. It will make some key recommendations to the agencies working with this group. These include changes to service provision, education and training, and mental health. These recommendations have derived from the views and experiences of the thirty young people in this study. They are also supported by discussions with key informants in this sector including local and national government officers, project workers, support workers and senior charity officers. It is important to acknowledge that there are existing elements of good practice within homeless services, however these need to be implemented comprehensively across the country and in all settings.

### Recommendations

#### *Service Provision*

- Ensure that young people are involved in decision making surrounding the services relevant to them. Local authorities and the Regional Collaborative Committees need to commit to enhancing their provisions for the involvement of young people. The processes of engagement with the young people should be appropriate, accessible and not intimidating. This could include small scale focus groups feeding into the more formal committee structures, which would have the advantage of the young people owning the process, and therefore likely to be more honest with feedback and more committed to the outcomes.
- There should be the provision of age appropriate accommodation for all young homeless people aged 16-25 years old. Further rigorous assessment of a young person’s ability to live independently, their background and other contributing factors such as mental health and disability must be acknowledged, in order to place the young person in suitable accommodation. General needs hostels are only appropriate for short term crises, with a move on to appropriate support for young people or help into independent living being the next priority. This would require a more responsive approach with the views, needs and age of the young person taken into consideration.
- In order to improve the effectiveness of all staff engaging with young people, a Young People’s Homelessness Charter is recommended. This would encourage a co-ordinated approach across the range of specialist and generalist services. All involved would commit to providing appropriate resources to support this group and achieve the charter’s goals. This would further facilitate close working partnership and the commitment to raising the priority of the complex needs of this group. Those asked to sign up to the charter could include housing and support providers, mental health teams, volunteer and training programmes, schools and colleges and local authorities. There should be an emphasis on providing a seamless, non-judgemental service, which would be particularly advantageous for those smaller scale services which might lack the resources and staff to support young people with challenging issues, especially in rural areas with fewer services. This charter has similar principles to, and would support the goals of, the Well-being and Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015 (Future Generations Commissioner for Wales 2017).
- There is a need for all major services for young homeless and vulnerable people to be located within accessible environments. This could be incorporated into the charter. Local authorities should recognise the particular needs of young people, with staff being aware of Adverse Childhood Experiences and mental health issues in all housing options departments. In addition, there could be a space for young people which is less intimidating than formal housing options services. These more ‘accessible environments’ could be located within each area of the country with the highest number of homeless youths, although rural areas would need

careful consideration too. As well as offering housing support and advice, the spaces could provide emergency accommodation, washing facilities, training rooms, leisure areas, and spaces where young people could relax and socialise. They could accommodate services including social services, housing advice teams, and mental health support worker, all staff being ACEs trained. These spaces could allow young people access to all the services they might require, as accessibility to these can be challenging if spread out over different areas of towns and regions. They could also decrease the chance of young people being unable to seek the support they require as well as decreasing the current time frame this takes.

### *Education and Training*

- Independent living skills courses should be provided within all accommodation settings, and their attendance could be compulsory for a set period of time at the beginning of their homeless journey. The courses should be provided with an interactive and practical approach with potential for accreditation to be gained for each stage completed, in partnership with local training providers. Courses might include skills in food preparation, nutrition, budgeting, personal administration and computer literacy. It could also be part of a support worker's role to advise on independent living skills and help people access training opportunities.
- Education could be provided in secondary schools, colleges and statutory or voluntary youth settings, raising awareness of the issues surrounding youth homelessness. This could include recognising when peers are facing troubles within the home and when and where to seek help. The main reasons for homelessness among young people in Wales are an unstable family set up or family breakdown. Therefore, the importance of young people knowing where they can go to access support, advice and mediation is imperative. This could be championed by the relevant Welsh Government departments, with educational institutions becoming the first step in the prevention process.
- In order to challenge the negative images and stigma surrounding youth homelessness, the provision of non-judgemental, non-stereotypical public education campaigns could be a part of a longer-term strategy.

### *Mental Health*

- The importance of securing good mental health support networks for young people is key. At a national level, there needs to be an increase in the profile of the issues surrounding Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs), sexual abuse, and physical violence. This should include policy work that would protect young people and further educate and train those working with young vulnerable groups. This in turn will ensure that young people are appropriately supported at the first point they access services. The possible outcomes of such adverse experiences, including signs of mental health problems, anger issues and emotional wellbeing would be recognised with further training, allowing the young person to fully settle within new environments.
- Psychologically Informed Environments (PIE) are an important factor in protecting and supporting vulnerable young people. Despite efforts to develop these environments, further investment is required to fully understand the benefits of this, with more pilots of PIEs introduced throughout Wales. Developing these environments and other smaller scale services used by homeless young people in accommodation, will allow even the most traumatised young person with complex needs to begin to feel accepted and comfortable. This would therefore reinforce an 'enabling environment' for these vulnerable youths, allowing for more successful outcomes in terms of securing and sustaining accommodation and in the long-term employment, education or training.

## **Chapter summary**

This chapter has used the experiences and views of young people interviewed and the knowledge of key informants to suggest key initiatives to further support and prevent youth homelessness. This includes suggestions for service provision, education and training, and mental health. Despite the presence of good practice throughout different agencies in Wales, it is important to acknowledge the need for further development of these services and ensure that

they are appropriately resourced and implemented. In order to consolidate existing good practice and to develop a more comprehensive programme, the aforementioned key recommendations should be adopted and integrated into local and national service provision. As a senior support worker put it, “We are happy to expand and learn in order to help these young people, but without the right support we can’t reach our goals. Yes, the goal of ending youth homelessness. But first, let’s find the answer for the young people in front of us.”

***“I don’t want to be left behind anymore. I am going to every training course I can and have stayed at this accommodation for the past 18 months. I just don’t feel like enough is being done to help the ones who really want to get on, and live independently out of this situation...” (Liam, 18)***

## Conclusions

This study examined the experiences of homeless young people aged 16-25 years old around Wales, in particular the issues surrounding current services in place for this group. The literature review supported the researcher in understanding the issues faced by young homeless people at a UK wide level and the current policies in place. Following this, the methodologies and research design utilised for this study were determined and included a case study approach and interview techniques. The two thematic chapters were then presented. The first considered the current issues faced by this group of 30 young people including the reasons and causes of their homeless situation. Followed by the views of the young people regarding the services in place by both statutory and non-statutory bodies were explored, including both positive contributions such as easy transitions and supportive programmes; and constraints including system challenges and unsuitable accommodation. The opinions of key informants were explored and their perspectives regarding educational opportunities and benefit changes were examined. The final chapter highlighted key recommendations including service provision; education and training; and mental health. Despite there being a presence of good practice throughout Wales these require further enhancement and be implemented across the range of agencies. The Head of Campaigns for a homelessness charity said, “If we are not all on the same page, how can we prevent further vulnerabilities for this group, and homelessness in Wales all together.”

The Housing (Wales) Act 2014 aimed to move the culture of homelessness services towards prevention. Key informants reflected on the success of this change and the need for further progress. However, this report reinforces that many young people still need crisis support, having slipped through the net of prevention services, often having not received the most effective support at a local authority level. This therefore suggests that local authorities are also still in the process of implementing changes brought in by the Act, and further support is required for them to fully integrate these prevention methods.

This study successfully captured the experiences of 30 young homeless people across Wales, and their views regarding the services currently provided. It is an innovative study, primarily focusing upon the opinions of the homeless young people. These have been translated into accessible recommendations for service providers. The study is a snapshot of Wales and is a platform for further research of its kind, which focuses on hearing the voices of the service users.

The Welsh Government itself sums up the situation neatly in the following statement:

*“On the ground, local authorities, other public sector agencies, housing associations and third sector agencies continue to work together to provide services to vulnerable young people at risk of homelessness. There are significant challenges facing young people, families and the services that support them... In every area there are some young people with complex lives who need additional support to make a successful transition to adulthood” (2016, P:3).*

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