

A year like no other: Youth homelessness during the COVID pandemic

Executive summary

The impact of the Covid-19 pandemic has been unprecedented. Since the UK went into its first lockdown in March 2020, the Government has channelled funding of over £700 million to help prevent homelessness and provide emergency accommodation for rough sleepers as part of the Everyone In scheme.

Alongside the specific measures for rough sleepers, the Government imposed an eviction ban as well as six month notice periods, except in certain cases such as serious anti-social behaviour and domestic violence. Universal Credit was also increased by £20 a week to help support those living on a low income through this difficult period. The uplift was due to finish at the end of March 2021, but was recently extended for a further six months as laid out in the Chancellor's Budget.

Whilst these interventions have resulted in a significant reduction in people sleeping rough over 2020, levels are still up considerably since 2010. Furthermore, youth rough sleeping figures recorded in London through the Combined Homelessness and Information Network (CHAIN) increased dramatically during 2020. Between April and June 2020, 449 under-26s were seen sleeping rough - an increase of 80 per cent from the same period the previous year. This number dropped by the end of 2020 - in October-December, 300 under 26s were seen sleeping rough. However, despite a national lockdown and the Everyone In scheme, numbers remained higher than the same quarter in 2019 and shocking numbers of young people are still sleeping rough on our streets.

Huge increase in youth unemployment

During the pandemic, unemployment has risen significantly across all age groups due to the restrictions imposed on many sectors of the economy. Young people have been hit particularly hard by the pressures placed on retail and hospitality industries: 582,000 young people aged 16-24 were unemployed in November 2020-January 2021, an increase of 76,000 (or 15%) from the same period the year before.

The youth claimant count has risen even more sharply, with increases seen in every region of the UK. Between February 2020 and February 2021 there was a **117% increase in the benefit claimant count among 16-24 year olds** across the UK. However, in London the rise was particularly shocking, with the claimant count nearly trebling in number from the previous year.

Insight from Centrepoint's Helpline

Evidence from Centrepoint's Helpline demonstrated that, despite the significant interventions from government, much more needs to be done to tackle youth homelessness.

The Helpline saw a record number of calls across the past year: **the total number of calls in 2020/21 was 13,019, 33% higher than the year before.** Call volumes peaked in September 2020 with 1,343 calls to the Helpline - a 62% increase compared to September 2019. This coincided with local restrictions being imposed in many areas of Northern England.

Trends highlighted by Centrepont Helpline workers:

- The emotional toil of the pandemic has had a considerable impact on familial relationships. During 2020/21, family breakdown remained the biggest cause of homelessness among young people calling the Helpline, accounting for 59% of those who reported their main cause of homelessness.
- The Helpline has seen a rising number of callers who are sleeping rough: **17.7% of those who provided information about their housing situation in 2020/21 were rough sleeping at the time of their call.** This is slightly higher than 2019/20 when 15% were rough sleeping.
- Whilst the Everyone In scheme was a huge achievement for the Government and wider sector in terms of reducing the number of people rough sleeping, **Helpline staff reported that the level of support this afforded at the start of the lockdown appears to have waned**, meaning that in some areas young people are facing significant problems accessing emergency accommodation.
- Due to reductions in face-to-face support, **young people have faced significant barriers to making formal homelessness applications.** A lack of information or clear guidance about how to make an application or whether services were being carried out in person or online were common. Young people without any money to call the council or without access to phones have faced particular barriers in accessing support.
- Moreover, **long wait times for assessments** were commonplace, with some young people waiting over two weeks for a response from the council.
- Despite the duties placed on councils by the Homelessness Reduction Act (HRA) 2017, in some areas of the UK, young people are facing significant problems securing help from their local authority. Helpline staff have seen numerous examples of **young people being asked to 'prove' they are homeless before they are offered help, including being asked to sleep rough for the night** so they can be verified by outreach teams.
- **Helpline staff have even seen young people who should qualify for priority need status, such as pregnant young women, being turned away by the council without receiving appropriate support.**
- Whilst the eviction ban has certainly helped to reduce the number of evictions, our Helpline highlights that some young people have still lost their tenancies during this period. Those on license agreements or living in less formal living arrangements continue to be at risk of losing their home. Moreover, young people with minimal understanding of legislation and their rights are more likely to fall victim to landlords who are ignoring the change in law.

Impact on mental health and wellbeing

"if you are homeless and can't see an end to the lockdown restrictions, can't see yourself getting a job, you can't see yourself affording to rent somewhere, the sense of despair is a lot higher than it was before the pandemic"

Centrepont Helpline worker

The Covid-19 pandemic has had a negative impact on mental health for many people across the UK, but for many homeless young people, who have already faced severe trauma, the pandemic has created an additional strain on their emotional wellbeing. Over half (54.1%) of young people at Centrepont were reported to have a mental health need pre-COVID, and the experience of our in-house health teams suggests that these problems are becoming even more prevalent as the challenges of the pandemic have

taken hold. Since the first lockdown in March 2020, **wait times for Centrepoint's mental health services have significantly increased due to a 40% increase in demand**, reflecting that more needs to be done to protect the mental health of young people throughout the pandemic.

Food insecurity

Despite the £20 per week uplift to UC, **food insecurity has increased significantly during the pandemic**. The number of young people needing to access Centrepoint's emergency food support has risen dramatically. As of the beginning of March 2021, the total number of emergency food actions in 2020/21 had reached 553, which is a **276% increase** from the previous year. Loss of employment, the wait for benefit payments, rising food prices, and lack of access to usual stores for shopping are likely to be contributing factors as to why young people have been forced to rely on vouchers or food parcels as a means of survival.

Great resilience of services on the frontline

Despite the hardship and loss that has shrouded the country for the past year, frontline homelessness services have stepped up and continued to effectively support those with increased vulnerability to the pandemic. All Centrepoint accommodation services have remained open throughout the pandemic, and despite many logistical challenges to keep staff and young people safe, we have continued to provide mental health support and learning services for those who need it. New ways of working as well as stronger local partnerships will hopefully lead to a positive change in the way organisations and frontline services carry out their work in the future.

Recommendations

1. The Ministry for Housing, Communities and Local Government should provide long-term funding for youth specific accommodation across the country, including specialist emergency accommodation.
2. MHCLG should produce a centralised directory of housing options and homelessness services for each local authority, accessible through Gov.uk. This should include an up-to-date telephone number, email and physical address.
3. The Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) should ensure that Universal Credit (UC) personal allowance rates cover the real cost of living. In the short-term, this should include making the temporary uplift to UC permanent, extending this increase to legacy benefits, and committing to a long-term linking of benefit levels to real living costs. In the longer-term, DWP should consider raising the personal allowance rates for young people living independently to match the rate that over-25s receive.
4. The DWP should remove barriers to employment faced by young people living in supported accommodation, through raising the applicable amount within housing benefit or extending UC work allowances.
5. MHCLG and the DWP should urgently put together a package of support for tenants who have accrued rent arrears due to COVID-19.