

Practitioner article

Running out of time: working with young homeless people

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Shelter

Running out of time

Nick Bell discusses the issue of youth homelessness and how it can be prevented through early intervention during crises such as running away from home. She illustrates this by discussing a particular case she has followed long-term.

Introduction – Jordan’s story

Back when I was a teacher I taught a lad called Jordan*. Jordan was bright, engaged and popular. His homework came in on time; he ‘worked well with others’. Occasionally he would miss a lesson or two, but absences were always explained and even if the number seemed to creep up a bit over a couple of years, nobody in the school found it remarkable. And if he wasn’t quite as happy as he used to be? Probably just teenage stuff, nothing more. Certainly Jordan didn’t seem to be hugely different to anyone else in his year group. Eventually, I left teaching and Jordan faded from my consciousness.

Fast-forward six years and a change of career and I’m a project worker for a frontline youth homelessness project and one of my first referrals for support is Jordan. He had been running away from home from the age of 14 onwards, initially for a night or so, but gradually he started staying away for longer and longer - eventually leading to him staying away for good by the age of 16.

The next year or so saw him stay at friends’ houses, but when he’d pretty much exhausted his friends’ patience (or, more usually his friends’ parents’ patience) he found himself staying in hostels, even occasionally sleeping rough because it ‘seemed’ safer at the time. While on the streets he was approached by men looking to buy sex or exchange sex for a roof over his head, he was offered drugs and was even asked to take part in a planned serious assault in exchange for a place to stay. After a while he made contact with a youth work service at a drop-in and gradually started to get his life back on track.

Looking back, Jordan pin-pointed the moment he became set on a path towards homelessness precisely: it was the first night he stayed away from home:

‘It was easier to run than to deal with the arguments. Trouble is, the arguments catch up with you and things just get harder. I ended up feeling like I couldn’t go back even if I wanted to.’

* Name changed to ensure confidentiality

Youth homelessness prevention

Back to the present day and I'm the Manager for Youth Homelessness at Scottish Council for Single Homeless. A key area SCSH's youth team has always dealt with is homelessness prevention, through materials like the **Streets Ahead Guide to Leaving Home and Housing** [http://www.leavinghome.info/streets_ahead.html] or the **My Place, My Space** tenancy sustainment pack [http://www.scsch.org.uk/information/publications/2005/my_space.htm], and even the **Home Smart** [<http://www.leavinghome.info/homesmart/>] campaign and **I'm Offski** [http://www.leavinghome.info/im_offski.html] resources made available to every secondary school in Scotland.

Running away and homelessness

Increasingly there is a need for young runaways to be put on the agenda of homelessness/housing organisations as part of a far-reaching early intervention programme of homelessness prevention. Research already suggests a link between running and homelessness ('Youth Homelessness in the UK', Quilgars, Johnsen and Pleace : JRF; 2008) with further research from runaways charity **Railway Children** due to be published later in the year also highlighting this link.

SCSH, working as part of the **Scottish Coalition for Young Runaways** is also looking to further evidence this connection. Our aim is a practical one, seeking out how to best support organisations working with young runaways in order that they do not become homeless post -16 and to share best practice.

Running away is not just a child protection issue but a housing one too. Although reducing risk from harm for young people under 16 is a significant concern, there is a real need to also consider the needs of this often overlooked group once they reach or near 16 in order that they don't fall into homelessness.

Conclusion

Homelessness prevention can mean far more than avoiding immediate crisis: early intervention work can also be a valuable tool. There is already great work taking place across Scotland to help prevent young runaways from becoming the next generation of young people to experience homelessness, but more can still be done to help prevent any current and future 'Jordans' from going through the same sort of experience.

Further information

If your organisation is working, or considering working, with young runaways, or you would like more information about the Scottish Coalition for Young Runaways - or if you are interested in the work of the SCSH Youth Team - please contact Nick Bell, Manager Youth Homelessness, SCSH (0131 226 4382) nick@scsh.org.uk

You can find out more about the Scottish Council for Single Homeless at:
<http://www.scsh.org.uk/>