



Young and Homeless

November 2021

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Produced by

The Homeless Link Research Team, November 2021

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Executive Summary

Young people in England have been facing significant challenges within the homelessness system for some time. In 2020/21 over a fifth of households accessing local authority support to prevent or end their homelessness were aged between 16-24.¹ Over the past eight years, Homeless Link has been monitoring and exploring the trends in youth homelessness, alongside the prevalence and nature of support through our annual Young and Homeless research.²

Heading into the pandemic the scale of youth homelessness had been rising: between 2018/19, when the Homelessness Reduction Act was introduced, and 2019/20 there was a 6% increase in households aged 16-24 owed either a prevention or relief duty by their local authority.³

The findings of the 2020 Young and Homeless report show how the pandemic impacted on all areas of young people experiencing homelessness, and the providers supporting them. Young people were the only age group that saw an increase in statutory homelessness in 2020/21, the pressure of lockdowns led to increased family breakdowns, and services reported impacts on worsening mental health and substance misuse.

Alongside this, structural barriers that existed prior to the pandemic, that had led to increasing unemployment and underemployment of young people, lack of affordable housing, and the impact of welfare policies were all exacerbated by the situation caused by COVID-19.

This report summarises the findings from two online surveys conducted between March and April 2021 with those working across the area of youth homelessness, alongside analysis of available secondary data. The first survey was for service providers and the second for local authorities. In total, 117 responses were collected. The surveys pertain to the nature of services provided by organisations and local authorities, the availability of services locally and trends amongst youth homelessness.

Summary of key findings

- Young people aged 18-24 were the only age group who saw an increase (2%) between 2019/20 and 2020/21 in statutory homelessness, this was driven in particular by households aged 16-24 without children (either single person households or couples) who increased by 15%.⁴ This is supported by the 58% of survey respondents who stated they have seen an increase in demand for their service over the last year
- The statutory data shows that in 2020/21 there was a 50% increase in young people who presented at their local authority as rough sleepers compared to 2019/20. This is echoed by the Combined Homelessness and Information Network (CHAIN) data which shows rough sleeping data from London. Whilst in the three years leading up to the pandemic there had been a steady

¹ DLUHC (2021) *Statutory homelessness in England: financial year 2020-21*

² <https://www.homeless.org.uk/facts/our-research/young-and-homeless-research>

³ DLUHC *Statutory homelessness live tables*

⁴ DLUHC *Statutory homelessness live tables*

increase in young people found to be rough sleeping in the capital, there was a steep rise showing a 30% increase between 2019/20 and 2020/21.⁵

- Throughout the pandemic young people at risk of homelessness were particularly vulnerable to volatile housing situations during the pandemic.⁶ In particular the impact lockdown had on removing sofa surfing as an option for many people making their homelessness more visible, alongside the impact and pressure lockdown had on increasing family breakdown.

“COVID-19 means those who previously sofa surfing in friends’ house can no longer do so and end up rough sleeping.”

"Initially when the pandemic hit referral went down as families who were at breaking point held on to their young people. As it became clear that the pandemic was going to last – increased tensions and fear about [lockdown] non-compliance lead to increased parental evictions and end of sofa surfing arrangements"

- Welfare reform continues to be a significant concern for service providers: In particular the five week wait before first payment was flagged by 98% of respondents as having a negative impact, with monthly payments in arrears (87%) and removal of automatic entitlements to housing costs for 18-21 year olds (85%) the next two areas of greatest concern.
- Responding homelessness accommodation providers reported a fairly equal split between male and females accessing their services, with 54% male and 42% female. This is a much more even split between the genders than is seen amongst the general single homeless population. Survey respondents over 50% reported that they had seen an increase in both male (56%) and female rough sleepers (51%) in their area over the past year.
- Although the main cause of homelessness for both genders was families no longer willing to accommodate, women were more likely to become homeless as a result of fleeing domestic abuse (14% of females against 2% of males). Whereas as men were more likely to become homeless as a result of leaving an institution including care (4% of males against 1% if females), or due to being evicted from supported accommodation (8% of males against 3% of females).⁷
- Survey respondents reported that 22% of young people accessing their service were Black, Asian or Minority Ethnic, showing that young people from these backgrounds are disproportionately affected by homelessness. This is particularly true of young Black people who were over three times more likely to be at risk of, or experiencing homelessness than young White people.⁸

⁵ GLA (2021) CHAIN Annual Report Greater London April 2020 – March 2021

⁶ Boobis, S. and Albanese, F. (2020) *The impact of COVID-19 on people facing homelessness and service provision across Great Britain*. London: Crisis; Centrepont. (2020). *Locked Out: Young Homelessness during and before the Covid-19 pandemic*. <https://centrepont.org.uk/media/4293/locked-out-report.pdf>

⁷ DLUH (2021) *Reason loss: households aged 16-24 by gender 2020-21*

⁸ DLUH (2021) *Duties owed by age and ethnicity 2020-21*

- Many young people who experience or are at risk of homelessness will have other needs outside their immediate need for housing, and therefore require some form of tailored support to help them make successful transitions into adulthood and independence. The most common support need identified by providers was lack of independent living skills (71%).
- 53% of respondents reported that the young people engaged with their services required support related to not being in education, employment or training. With 50% of young people lacking literacy and numeracy skills highlighting the stark educational need amongst the cohort.
- Providers also highlighted the impact COVID-19 had on access to employment reflecting additional challenges to supporting young people experiencing homelessness into paid roles.

“[The pandemic means] fewer jobs available in fields where young people have traditionally worked.”

- Homelessness service providers reported that 64% of young people accessing their support experienced mental health challenges. This is a significant increase on the reported 35% from the 2018 Young and Homeless report. Again respondents highlighted how much the pandemic and associated lockdowns had impacted on mental health needs.

“We have seen an increase in substance misuse and mental health issues around anxiety and being isolated from friends and family.”

- 98% of respondents indicated that there had been an increase in those with multiple disadvantage presenting to their services over the past year, and in particular related to complex mental health needs.
- Overall respondents reported that the level of support needs amongst young people continued to increase across all areas, and that whilst the pandemic has exacerbated some of these issues, many of them were already present concerns.

“Year on year the complexity of need that young people present with increases significantly. The majority of young women that we work with now have some mental; health concern and almost half are involved in unhealthy relationships. We see fewer people now who have successfully finished mainstream education with qualifications.”

- 69% of respondents stated they had been unable to provide support for individuals because they were considered too high risk to others in the service, while the same proportion indicated they had been unable to support young people whose needs were too high. And 49% of respondents said they had turned young people away due to a lack of capacity within their service.
- Although providers offer many additional support services internally (100% of respondents said they provide financial or budgeting support, 92% independent living skills, and 75% wider

meaningful activity such as arts or sport), there were still concerns with access to wider support needed.

- Mental health services in particular were identified as difficult to access with 50% of respondents reporting it was difficult to access general mental health support, and 56% specialist young person support. The challenge of high thresholds for accessing mental health support was identified as a key barrier.
- Blockages and barriers to moving young people into secure, and long-term housing has been a longstanding challenge, but the pandemic created increased problems.

'Due to the pandemic things have changed for people, our placements have been longer as there were no move on options as services were not operating.'

- In identifying barriers to moving on from their service, 88% identified the lack of available housing from the local authority, while 80% identified the lack of accommodation available at the LHA rate.
- When young people are not being moved on, this can not only have a significant impact on these individuals who are, as a result, trapped in temporary accommodation, it can also, as respondents explained, clog up the system, with *'waiting lists increasing'*. The lack of affordable accommodation means that, as one respondent explained, *'due to [a] lack of move on provision we are often left with longer placements'*.
- Even where accommodation is available, young people can still struggle to afford furnishings, with 52% stating that a lack of money to furnish flats is a barrier to moving on. Many also highlighted clients being excluded from housing providers due to previous antisocial behaviour (49%).
- In addition to the lack of affordable accommodation, respondents commonly cited challenges due to a lack of move on services, particularly those specifically tailored to the needs of young people. 54% respondents stated that it was difficult for young people to access youth-only accommodation and 48% said the same about floating support.
- Where support is available, responses indicate that it is likely to be on an informal or short-term basis. While 51% of respondents indicated that they provide formal floating support on a regular basis after move on, most indicated that move on support was for six months or less, with 22% offering support for less than three months and 31% for three to six months.
- Barriers in accessing long-term secure accommodation, coupled with insufficient levels of support to help young people sustain their tenancies remains one of the most significant challenges that trap young people in homelessness. The importance of tenancy support is particularly apparent when considering that 71% of young people had support needs related to living independently.

The pandemic has not caused these issues but has exacerbated blockages in the system, creating greater pressure on services and further limiting move-on options for young people.

- Without opportunities to access affordable accommodation or move on support, we know that homelessness is more likely to occur. Most worryingly, an experience of homelessness while young can significantly contribute to the likelihood of experiencing chronic homelessness and multiple disadvantage later in life. One respondent explained: *'Some young people still seem to slip [through] the net and end up rough sleeping. Once they are rough sleeping it is [difficult] to help as they begin a lifestyle of risky behaviours with adults using homeless services'*.
- In order to prevent youth homelessness, it is important that local authorities and Government understands the factors causing homelessness and has a clear, evidence-based strategy that sits across all sectors to stop homelessness before it occurs and averts its recurrence. Although 64% of providers indicated that there was a strategy to prevent youth homelessness in their local area, this remains inconsistent across the country. With one respondent simply stating: *'There are no prevention activities [in our local area] specifically aimed at Young People that we're aware of'*.
- Most providers thought that the biggest gap in prevention services was in the availability of services to support young people to remain in their family home (37%) or services to prevent young people from losing their tenancies (35%).

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic young people at risk of, or experiencing homelessness were facing increasing systemic pressures both pushing them into, and trapping them in homelessness. Lack of affordable housing, welfare policies that mean young people struggle to cover the cost of rent as well as their wider living costs, and an increasingly precarious job market all contribute to ongoing barriers for this population.

The pandemic hit England in March 2020 at a time when there had been a continued increase in young people eligible for support from their local authority since the introduction of the Homelessness Reduction Act in 2018. This report found that the pandemic has had a profound impact on youth homelessness.

The historically hidden nature of youth homelessness, with many young people sofa surfing, was pushed to the fore when the first lockdown was announced. As sofa surfing options were cut off for young people many were forced on to the streets. Alongside this the ongoing pressures of COVID-19 led to increased family breakdown resulting in increased homelessness amongst young people.

The research also highlighted the diversity of young people experiencing homelessness, in many cases more so than the general homelessness population. Understanding why there is such diversity amongst youth homelessness and why this doesn't carry through to older homeless populations is critical to building the awareness of how to most effectively support these individuals.

Access to services both for immediate support needs, and for homelessness prevention is a significant barrier. With the research finding increasingly complex support needs amongst young people experiencing homelessness access to necessary support is vital. Whilst barriers to access existed prior to the pandemic, findings show that since the start of COVID-19 these barriers have become more pronounced particularly in relation to access to mental health provision.

Likewise, whilst move-on to long-term secure accommodation has been a challenge for youth homelessness providers for a long time the research has found that the pandemic, and associated interventions, created a knock-on effect that has exacerbated this even further. Blockages in the system, lack of suitable move-on options including affordable housing and supported accommodation capacity, means that many young people are trapped in temporary accommodation for too long.

Despite operating within this context the research shows that providers are still offering a range of services and support to meet the diverse needs of young people experiencing homelessness. As the sector emerges from the crisis phase of the pandemic there is an opportunity to harness the energy of the sector that operated throughout, building on the lessons learned and continuing to push for the changes needed to ensure that wherever possible we are preventing young people from becoming homeless in the first place.

Introduction

Young people in England have been facing significant challenges within the homelessness system for some time. In 2020/21 over a fifth of households accessing local authority support to prevent or end their homelessness were aged between 16-24.⁹ Over the past eight years, Homeless Link has been monitoring and exploring the trends in youth homelessness, alongside the prevalence and nature of support through our annual Young and Homeless research.¹⁰ The 2021 report covers the period of the COVID-19 pandemic and provides insight into the changing face of youth homelessness during this time.

Heading in to the pandemic the scale of youth homelessness had been rising: between 2018/19, when the Homelessness Reduction Act was introduced, and 2019/20 there was a 6% increase in households aged 16-24 owed either a prevention or relief duty by their local authority.¹¹ Young people have also been hit particularly hard by the austerity measures introduced in 2010, including experiencing the largest falls in income and employment. Before the pandemic, youth unemployment remained consistently higher than the national average.

2020, and the COVID-19 pandemic brought unprecedented challenge to the homelessness sector with an upending of service provision, and mass mobilisation to deliver Everyone In and provide emergency accommodation for all those sleeping rough or at risk of rough sleeping. This was particular true for the youth homelessness, in which levels of sofa surfing are very high and the impact of lockdown in March 2020 blocking these options pushed many young people on to the streets.

The findings of the 2020 Young and Homeless report show how the pandemic impacted on all areas of young people experiencing homelessness, and the providers supporting them. Young people were the only age group that saw an increase in statutory homelessness in 2020/21, the pressure of lockdowns led to increased family breakdowns, and services reported impacts on worsening mental health and substance misuse.

Alongside this, structural barriers that existed prior to the pandemic, that had led to increasing unemployment and underemployment of young people, lack of affordable housing, and the impact of welfare policies were all exacerbated by the situation caused by COVID-19.

This report also looks at the profile of young people experiencing homelessness, exploring the diversity of this population and where disproportionate impact is observed, as well as understanding the range of support needs faced.

The homelessness sector in England has a relatively high proportion of services providing support that is tailored to the needs of young people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness.¹² Understand the profile and characteristic of this population is vital to ensure that these services meet the needs of young people experiencing homelessness. The Young and Homeless research looks to explore what these needs are, and how that might inform service provision as the sector looks beyond the pandemic.

⁹ DLUHC (2021) *Statutory homelessness in England: financial year 2020-21*

¹⁰ <https://www.homeless.org.uk/facts/our-research/young-and-homeless-research>

¹¹ DLUHC *Statutory homelessness live tables*

¹² Homeless Link (2021) *Support for people experiencing single homelessness in England: Annual Review 2020*

Methodology

This report summarises the findings from two online surveys conducted between March and April 2021 with those working across the area of youth homelessness. The first survey was for service providers and the second for local authorities. In total, 117 responses were collected.

The surveys pertain to the nature of services provided by organisations and local authorities, the availability of services locally and trends amongst youth homelessness.

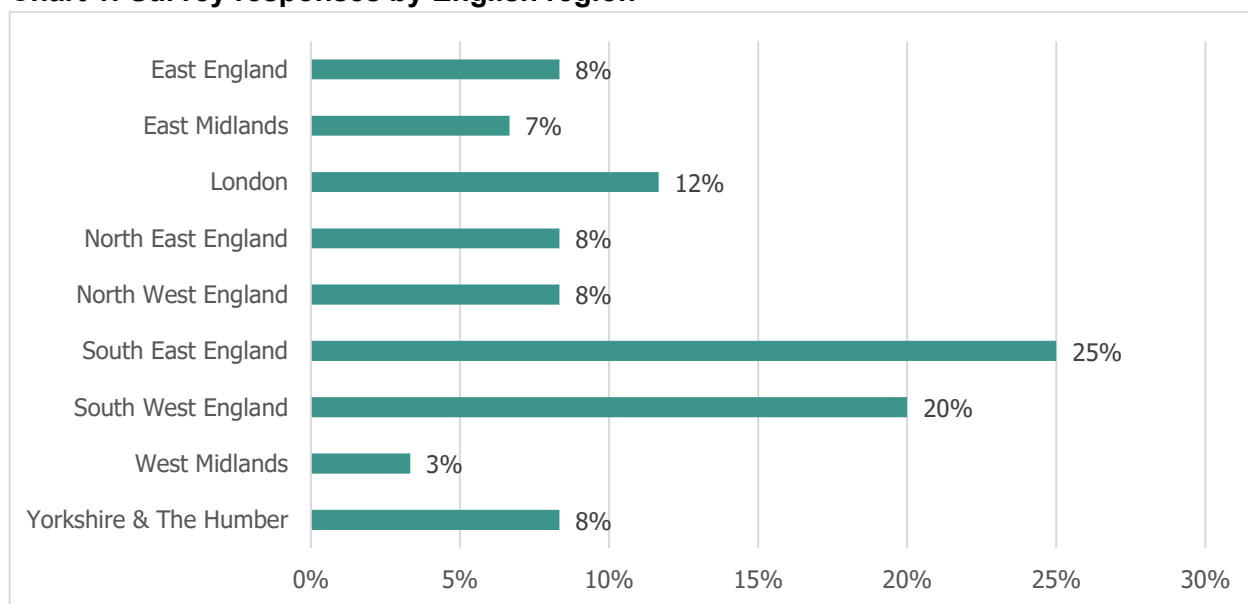
The low response rates, particularly from local authority representatives, may, in part, be due to 'survey fatigue' due to the large number of surveys that were sent to organisations during the course of the pandemic. Due to the particularly low rate of response from local authorities, this report primarily focuses on service providers' responses.

The estimated figures provided by service providers should be interpreted as such, with nearly all responses indicating that some or all of these figures are 'best estimates'. Specifically, 6% of respondents indicated that they provided exact figures, while 47% indicated that all answers were best estimates and the same figure indicated that their responses were a mix of best estimates and exact figures.

When answering the survey, 45% of service providers indicated that their answers related to their whole organisation, while the remainder provided information about a specific service. Across both samples were respondents from across England, with a greater proportion from South West and South East England.

The majority of service providers (85%) indicated that they provided accommodation services, with 12% offering a hosting scheme and one respondent a day centre. Most also indicated that they provided services to generally support young people aged 16-25 (85%), with two services supporting young men and care leavers each and one supporting young women.

Chart 1: Survey responses by English region



Chapter 1. Trends in youth homelessness

Varying definitions of homelessness and youth, the lack of a single approach in assessing the number of young homeless people in England, and the ‘hidden’ nature of many homeless people’s experiences, makes quantifying youth homelessness particularly challenging. This chapter explores recent trends in youth homelessness across a range of different measures.

The Homelessness Reduction Act (HRA) introduced in 2018 made a significant difference to our understanding of the scale of youth homelessness. Through the prevention duty, for those at risk of homelessness, and the relief duty for those experiencing homelessness, the scope of those eligible for support from the local authority was vastly increased. Many young people who may have found themselves outside of priority need decisions and therefore not entitled to main duty support and accommodation under the old legislation are now entitled to at least 56 days of support under the new duties.

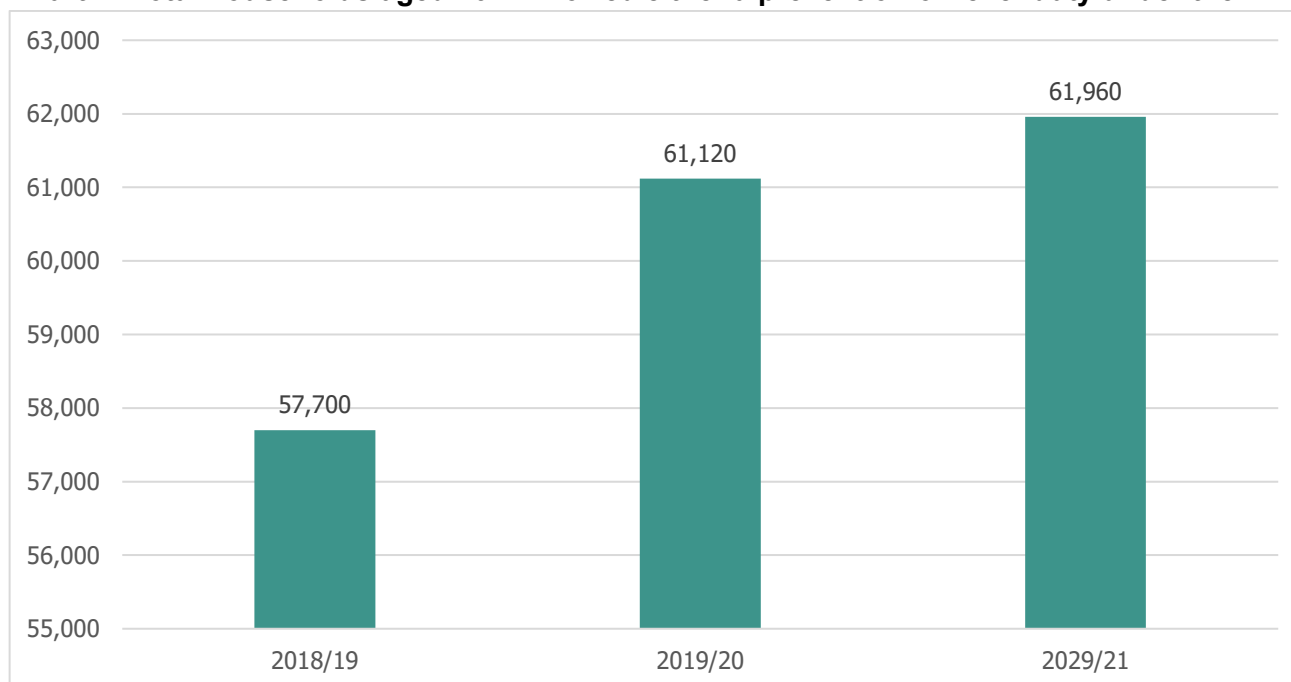
Widening the offer of those eligible for local authority support means that we now have much more comprehensive data on young people experiencing, and at risk of, homelessness. The significant shift in statutory support does however mean that pre-2018 trends are no longer comparable with post HRA data. The difference in entitlements post-HRA is most starkly apparent when looking at the numbers of young people owed a statutory duty in the quarters immediately pre and post the HRA: in January – March 2018 there were 2,810 households aged between 16-24 owed a statutory duty, in April – June 2018 this was 13,480 households.¹³

Through the HRA it is hoped that we are able to see a clearer picture of the scale of youth homelessness, and that this better represents the true number of young people living in vulnerable situations across street homelessness, sleeping in tents or public transport, or sleeping precariously in sofas and floors across their social networks.

Since the introduction of the HRA there has been an increase in the number of young people owed a statutory duty by their local authority. Between 2018/19 and 2019/20 there was a sharp increase of 6%, increasing from 57,700 households to 61,120 households. It should be noted that there was an increase across all age ranges between the first two years of the HRA, with the most significant increases being seen by those over 55. However young people aged 18-24 were the only group who saw an increase (2%) between 2019/20 and 2020/21, this was driven in particularly by households aged 16-24 without children (either single person households or couples) who increased by 15%.¹⁴

¹³ DLUCH *Statutory homelessness live tables*

¹⁴ Ibid

Chart 2: Total households aged 16 – 24 owed either a prevention or relief duty under the HRA¹⁵

The 2020/21 data captures the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic and represents a huge disruption to data trends as wide-ranging and significant measures were put in place to protect and support people experiencing homelessness during a mass public health crisis. Interventions such as Everyone In which looked to accommodate all those experiencing, or at risk of, rough sleeping in hotels or other emergency accommodation, the eviction pause, and temporary uplifts to Universal Credit means that typically we have observed a decrease in people owed a homelessness duty by their local authority. The measures introduced by government worked to reduce the number of people being forced out of their homes, and to move people away from street homelessness. Overall, there was a 7% decrease in statutory homelessness between 2019/20 and 2020/21. So why have young people bucked this trend?

The statutory data shows that there was a significant increase in young people owed a relief duty as a result of no longer being able to stay at either friends or family homes. Research conducted throughout the pandemic indicates that young people at risk of homelessness were particularly vulnerable to volatile housing situations during the pandemic.¹⁶ Going into the pandemic it was already known that sofa surfing was a hallmark of youth homelessness, and one of the challenges in understanding scale as so many people were hidden from the services.¹⁷ During the first lockdown in England which started in March 2020, many local authorities reported a significant rise in people presenting to their services who had been sofa surfing. It is perhaps unsurprising when people were confined to their homes that individuals who were sofa surfing were pushed out onto the streets, and during the immediacy of Everyone In through the first few months of the pandemic, were engaged

¹⁵ DLUCH *Statutory homelessness live tables*

¹⁶ Boobis, S. and Albanese, F. (2020) *The impact of COVID-19 on people facing homelessness and service provision across Great Britain*. London: Crisis; Centrepont. (2020). *Locked Out: Young Homelessness during and before the Covid-19 pandemic*. <https://centrepont.org.uk/media/4293/locked-out-report.pdf>

¹⁷ Clarke, A. (2016) *The Prevalence of Rough Sleeping and Sofa Surfing Amongst Young People in the UK Social Inclusion 2016, Volume 4, Issue 4, Pages 60–72*; Sanders, B., Boobis, S., and Albanese, F. (2019) 'It was like a nightmare' *The reality of sofa surfing in Britain today*. London: Crisis

with local services, and therefore, for some, being captured in the data for the first time. This is reflected by survey respondents who highlighted sofa surfing as a key driver behind observed increases.

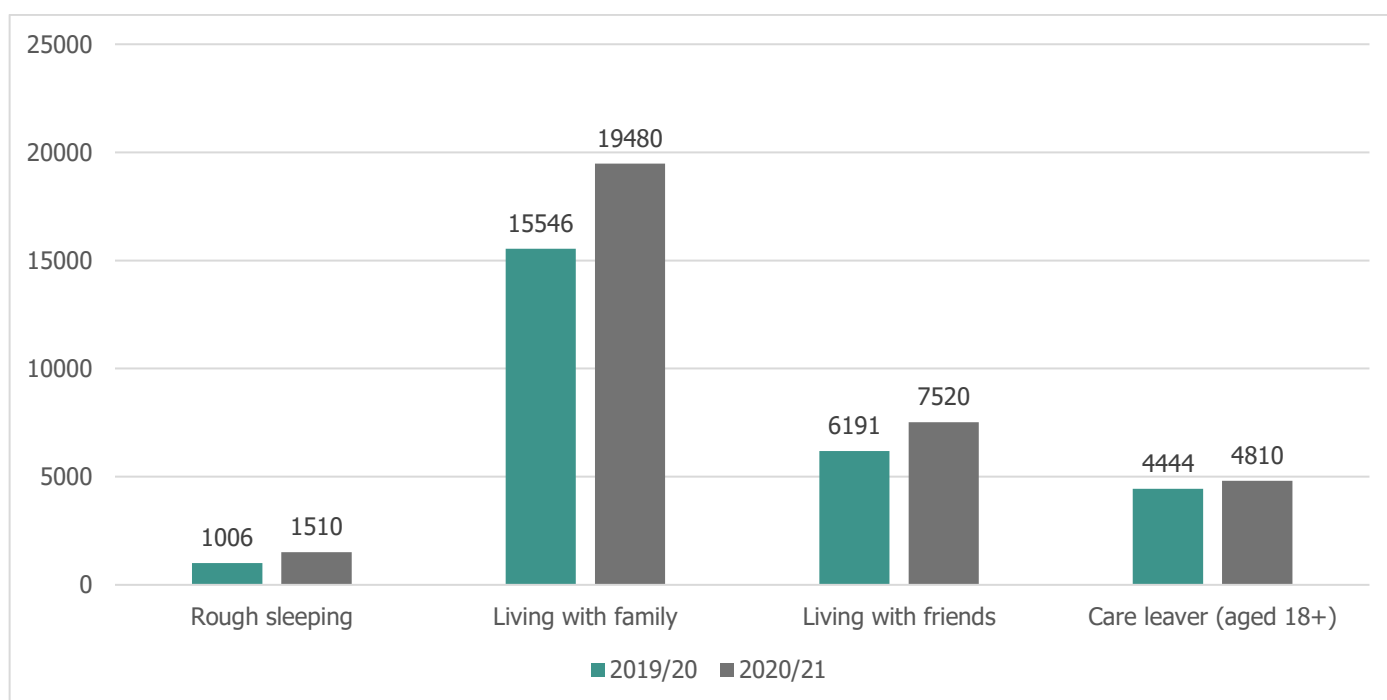
“COVID-19 has removed the sofa surfing option for a lot of young people and therefore higher numbers have presented as homeless.”

“COVID-19 means those who previously sofa surfing in friends' house can no longer do so and end up rough sleeping.”

“Initially when the pandemic hit referral went down as families who were at breaking point held on to their young people. As it became clear that the pandemic was going to last – increased tensions and fear about [lockdown] non-compliance lead to increased parental evictions and end of sofa surfing arrangements”

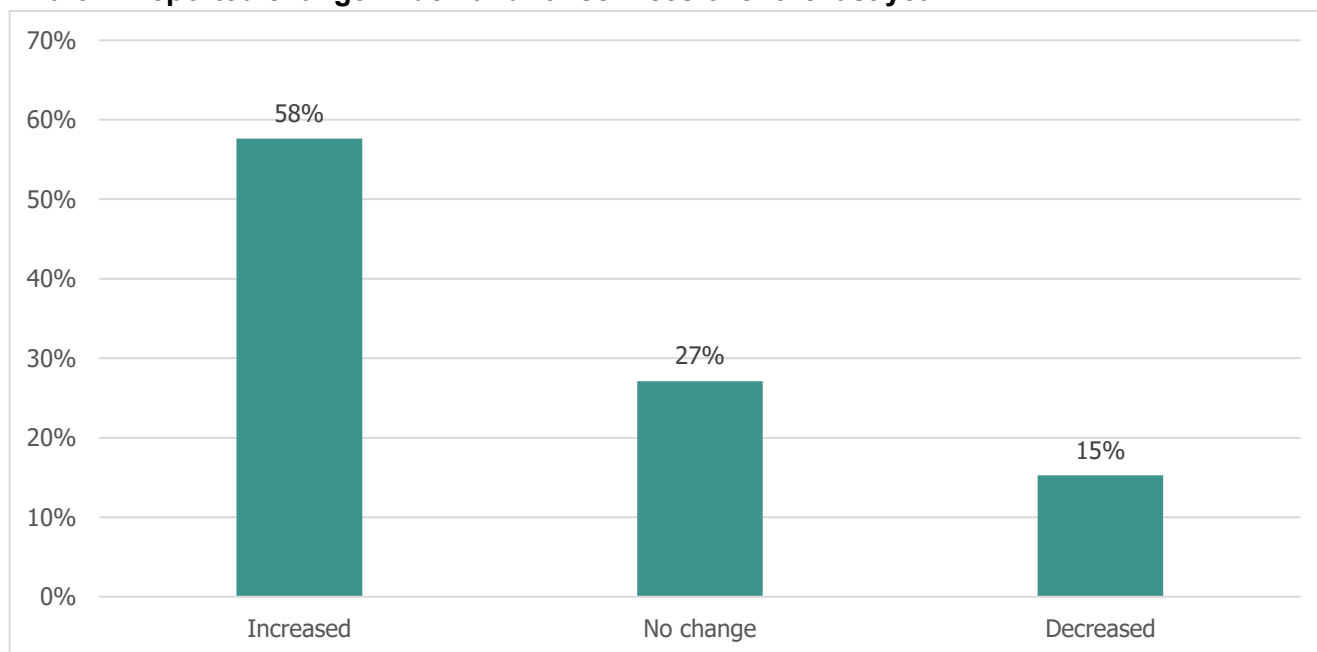
Another cause of homelessness that was reported by local authorities amongst young people over the course of 2020 and 2021 was the impact and pressure lockdown had on intergenerational families. Differences in adherence to lockdown rules and guidance led in some instances to family breakdown with the young person being forced from the family home.

Chart 3: Accommodation at time of assessment for households aged 16 – 24 owed either a prevention or relief duty¹⁸



Homelessness providers also highlighted an increase in youth homelessness with 58% of survey respondents stating they have seen an increase in demand for their service.

¹⁸ DLUCH (2021) *Households aged 16-24 without children: 2020-21*

Chart 4: Reported change in demand for services over the last year

Again, the impact of the pandemic was identified as being a driving force behind this increase. The pressures of lockdown leading to family breakdown was highlighted as a particular challenge during this period.

“The impact of Covid-19 on young people has been extremely severe, and the pandemic has exacerbated many of the leading drivers of youth homelessness including family relationship breakdown, precarious and low-paid employment, and unaffordable housing. We have seen more young people coming to us because of family relationship breakdown, increasing over time as lockdown restrictions kept people at home for longer.”

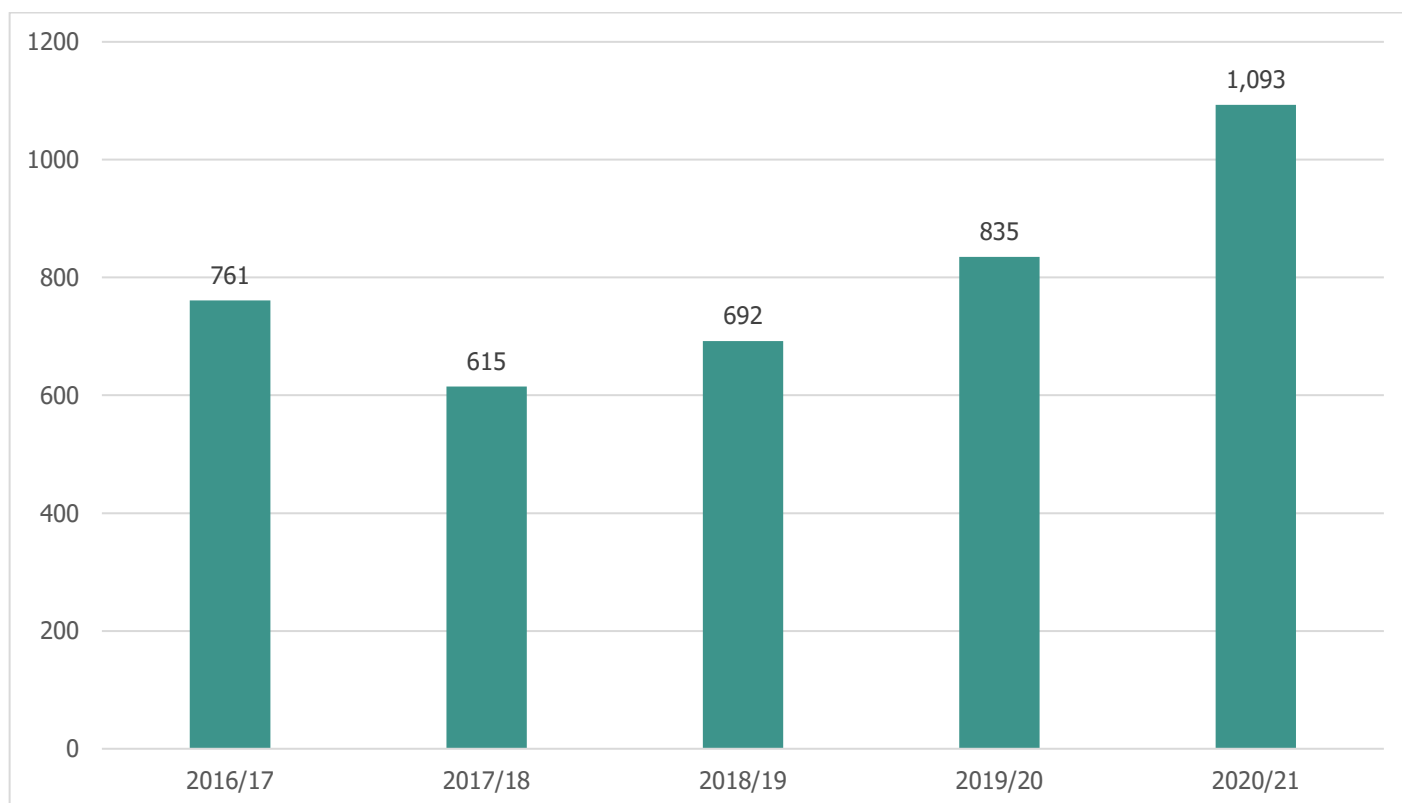
“Relationship breakdown in families due to the pressures put on them around COVID.”

“Increased family strain and pressures by being “trapped” in together due to lockdowns.”

Respondents also identified loss of employment, or significant income change, as a result of COVID-19 as a key driver behind their observed increase in youth homelessness.

The statutory data shows that in 2020/21 a 50% increase in young people who presented at their local authority as rough sleepers compared to 2019/20. This is echoed by the Combined Homelessness and Information Network (CHAIN) data which shows rough sleeping data from London. Whilst in the three years leading up to the pandemic there had been a steady increase in young people found to be rough sleeping in the capital, there was a 30% increase between 2019/20 and 2020/21.¹⁹

¹⁹ GLA (2021) CHAIN Annual Report Greater London April 2020 – March 2021

Chart 5: Under 25s seen sleeping rough in Greater London²⁰

The observed trends of youth homelessness during the first year of the pandemic speak to an incredibly vulnerable population who are extremely precariously housed, and the pressures of COVID-19 show just how many individuals there are at risk of being pushed on to the streets.

COVID-19 interventions

Over the course of the pandemic, the homelessness sector had to adapt quickly to expand or change their services to not only meet new COVID-19 restrictions but the impact of the pandemic on individuals' lives and wellbeing.²¹ The wide variety of government interventions did, however, enable and support some of this work, particularly through the government's Everyone In initiative.

Through the Everyone In programme, announced on 26 March 2020, local authorities were instructed to move all those who were rough sleeping or in communal shelters into safe accommodation. As of This was initially supported by £3.2 million in targeted funding, alongside additional funding provided to councils to support vulnerable populations during the pandemic.

²⁰ Ibid

²¹ Grassian, T., & Boobis, S. (2021). *Homelessness Provision for the Future: Best practice from the homelessness sector during the COVID-19 pandemic*. Available: <https://www.homeless.org.uk/sites/default/files/site-attachments/Homeless%20Link%20-%20Homeless%20Provision%20for%20the%20Future%20v3.pdf>.

Government rolled out a range of changes to the welfare system alongside this initiative, including the increase of the Local Housing Allowance (LHA) rate back to the 30th percentile and a £20 monthly uplift to Universal Credit. Specifically for young people, this also included an extension of exemptions to the Shared Accommodation Rate (SAR) for those who have experienced homelessness. As one local authority representation explained: *'The COVID-19 pandemic has seen various funding from public departments made available to help maintain the current situation'*.

However, as many of these programmes and funding pots have now come to an end, services face the challenge of still supporting young people and maintaining higher levels of service to meet what many describe as increased and more complex need. One of these initiatives is the Universal Credit uplift, which, during the pandemic provided an additional £20 a month and was ended in October 2021. 80% of respondents described this as a positive intervention on young people's ability to access and sustain accommodation in their local area. Many expressed concern about the impact of the end of this temporary measure.

"People who claim UC are now reliant on that £20, by taking it away will mean they get into more debt. It is already a struggle to survive on the payments."

This increase has provided a vital lifeline for those claiming UC to actually be able to afford to live, removal of this uplift will have a hugely detrimental impact for those whose only income is through UC

"The dependence on food banks by some young people was evident before March 2020; Once you are accustomed to a certain level of income it is difficult to readjust. We will see an impact on increased poverty as hard choices need to be made on what money is spent on and no doubt debt."

Welfare

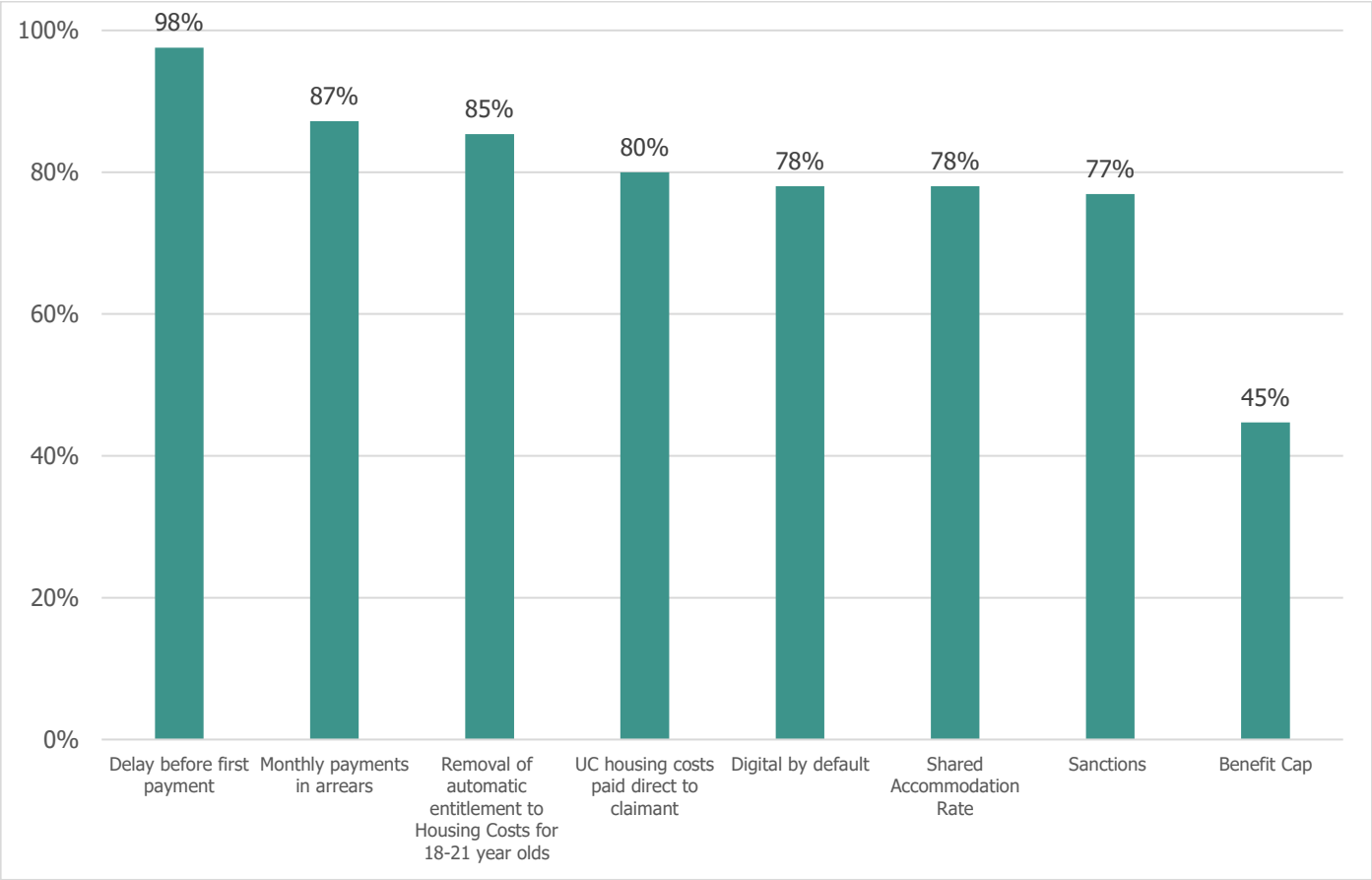
"Young people have long been at a disadvantage within the benefits system ... despite facing the same housing and bills costs."

Although the £20 Universal Credit uplift was seen as a big positive over the last year there was not the same positivity towards wider welfare policies. Younger people are impacted differently by the current welfare system with specific elements geared towards them such as under 35s only being entitled to Local Housing Allowance at the Shared Accommodation Rate (SAR). However, as of 31st May 2021 SAR exemptions were applied to all those aged 16 or over who have lived in hostels or refuges for at least 3 months. The data collection period for this report predates this change.

When asked about the impact different welfare policies have on young people's ability to access and sustain accommodation there were very clear concerns around certain aspects of the welfare system. In particular the five week wait before first payment was flagged by 98% of respondents as having a negative impact, with monthly payments in arrears (87%) and removal of automatic entitlements to housing costs for 18-21 year olds (85%) the next two areas of greatest concern.

As Chart 6 shows there are significant concerns about the impact of the current welfare system on preventing and relieving homelessness amongst young people. It is only the benefit cap that was not reported to have a net negative impact amongst providers and this speaks to the fact that young people's entitlements are lower than wider benefit claimants and therefore are less likely to hit the benefit cap.

Chart 6: Percentage of respondents reporting a negative impact of Universal Credit policies on young people’s ability to access and sustain accommodation

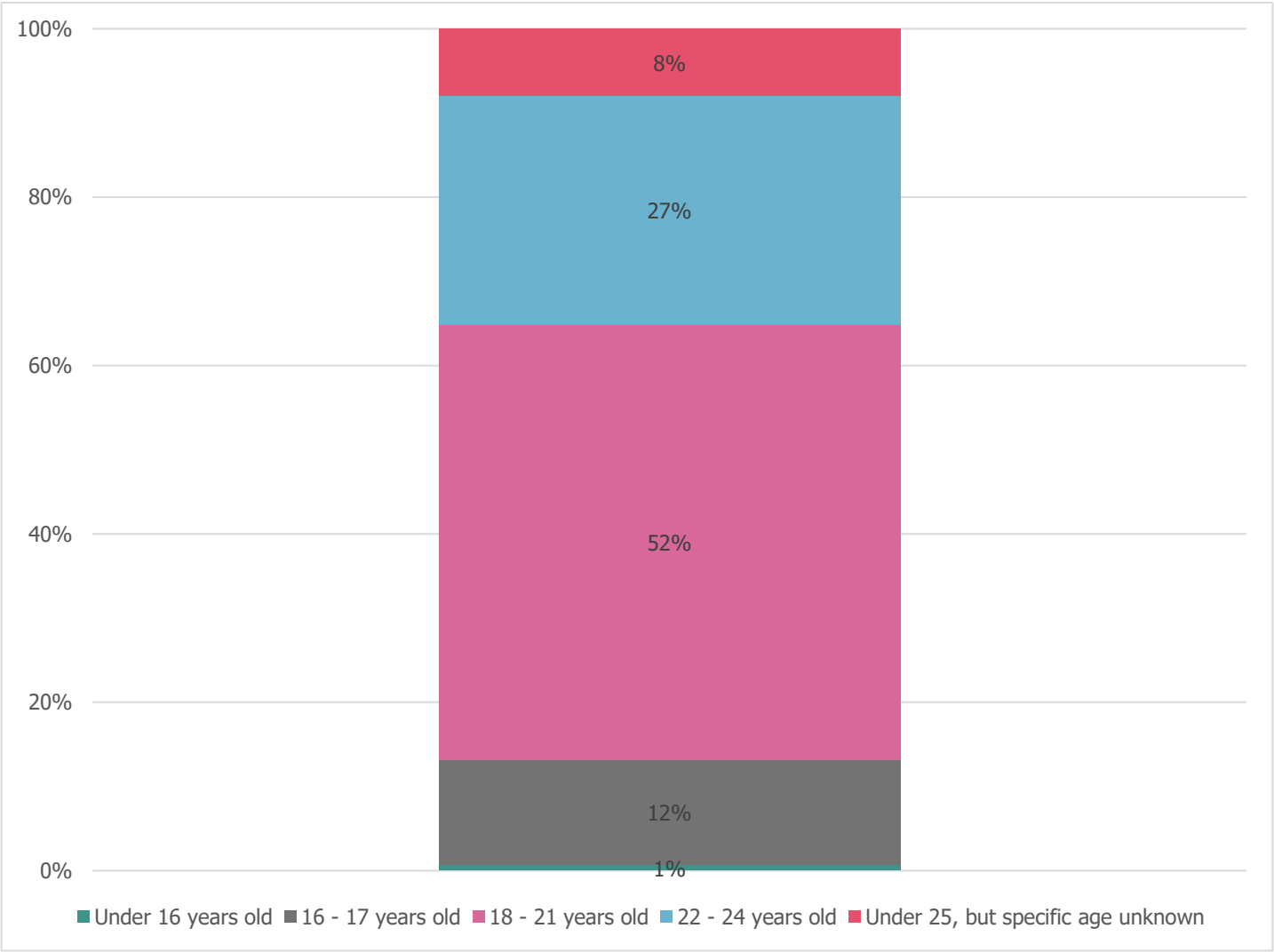


Chapter 2. The profile of youth homelessness

Young people experiencing homelessness represent a much more diverse profile of individuals than the overall population of people experiencing homelessness. Having a clear understanding of who may be most at risk of homelessness, can help to effectively target early intervention and prevention initiatives. This chapter explores the socio-demographic characteristics and risk factors associated with youth homelessness, and discusses young people’s main support needs.

The profiles explored in this section are based on the responses of 36 providers, who reported a monthly snapshot of supporting a combined total of 6,098 young people in their services. In line with previous Young and Homeless findings the vast majority of young people supported were aged between 18 and 21 (52%).

Chart 7. Breakdown of supported young people by respondents by age

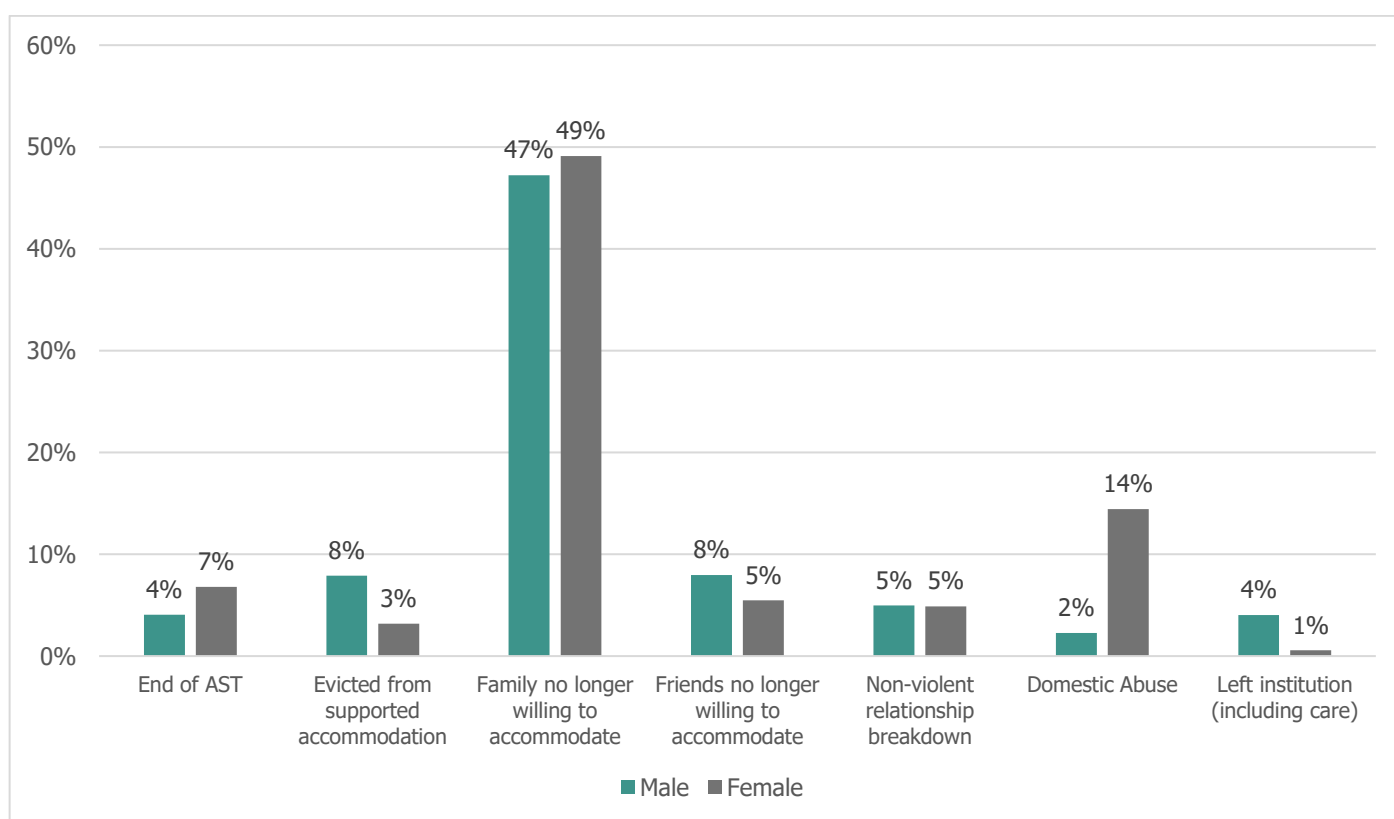


Gender

Responding homelessness accommodation providers reported a fairly equal split between male and females accessing their services, with 54% male and 42% female. This is a much more even split between the genders than is seen amongst the general single homeless population which in 2020/21 shows that 71% of single households owed a relief duty were male, compared with 29% female.

Statutory data shows that the leading causes of homelessness between the two genders is relatively similar, with no longer able to stay with family being by far most likely driver. However, we do see a larger proportion of females experiencing homelessness as a result of domestic abuse, and of males due to eviction from supported housing or leaving institutions including LA care.²²

Chart 8: Causes of homelessness by gender for households aged 18 – 24 (2020/21)²³



Across survey respondents over 50% reported that they had seen an increase in both male (56%) and female rough sleepers (51%) in their area over the past year.

Race and ethnicity

Survey respondents reported that 22% of young people accessing their service were Black, Asian or Minority Ethnic. This exactly mirrors the wider proportion of people who are Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic who were

²² DLUCH (2021) *Reason loss: households aged 16-24 by gender 2020-21*

²³ DLUCH (2021) *Reason loss: households aged 16-24 by gender 2020-21*

accepted as either at risk of, or currently experiencing homelessness by their local authority.²⁴ This suggests that whilst Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic young people are not disproportionately affected by homelessness compared to people of colour of all ages, overall people from Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic backgrounds are overrepresented in the homelessness data in general. This is particularly true of young Black people who were over three times more likely to be at risk of, or experiencing homelessness than young White people.²⁵

30% of survey respondents reported they had seen an increase in rough sleeping amongst young Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic people over the last year.

There were relatively low levels of non-UK nationals accessing support, with 3% of reported young people EEA nationals, and 1% young people with no recourse to public funds (NRPF). This is particularly notable given 30% of respondents reported that they provide specialist accommodation for young people with NRPF and that 43% of respondents reported seeing an increase in rough sleeping amongst this population. Understanding why this observed increase in street homelessness isn't translating to access to support is critical to being able to engage this particularly vulnerable group.

LGBTQ+

Accommodation providers reported that 8% of those they were supporting identified as LGBTQ+. This is significantly lower than other research which has found estimates of 24% of young people identifying as LGBTQ+.²⁶ It is unclear why this year's Young and Homeless survey found such a disparity in numbers but perhaps speaks to the level of specialist provision for this cohort, who if they did not respond to the survey could substantially change the represented numbers, and of an unwillingness for young people to disclose this information in none-specialist provision. Indeed of the survey respondents only 6% reported that they provided specialist supported accommodation for this group.

Despite this 34% of survey respondents reported they had seen an increase in rough sleeping amongst young people who identify as LGBTQ+.

Care leavers

Respondents reported that 22% of individuals supported were care leavers, with the majority of those being care leavers over 18 (18%). A further 3% of people supported were young people aged 16-17 currently being looked after in the care system.

Care leavers were the cohort that services reported having seen one of the highest increases in, with 53% of respondents reporting they had seen an increase in rough sleeping amongst young care leavers. This is echoed by the statutory statistics which saw a 2% increase of care leavers between 2019/20 and 2020/21, and a 26% increase between the introduction of the HRA in 2018/19 and 2020/21.²⁷

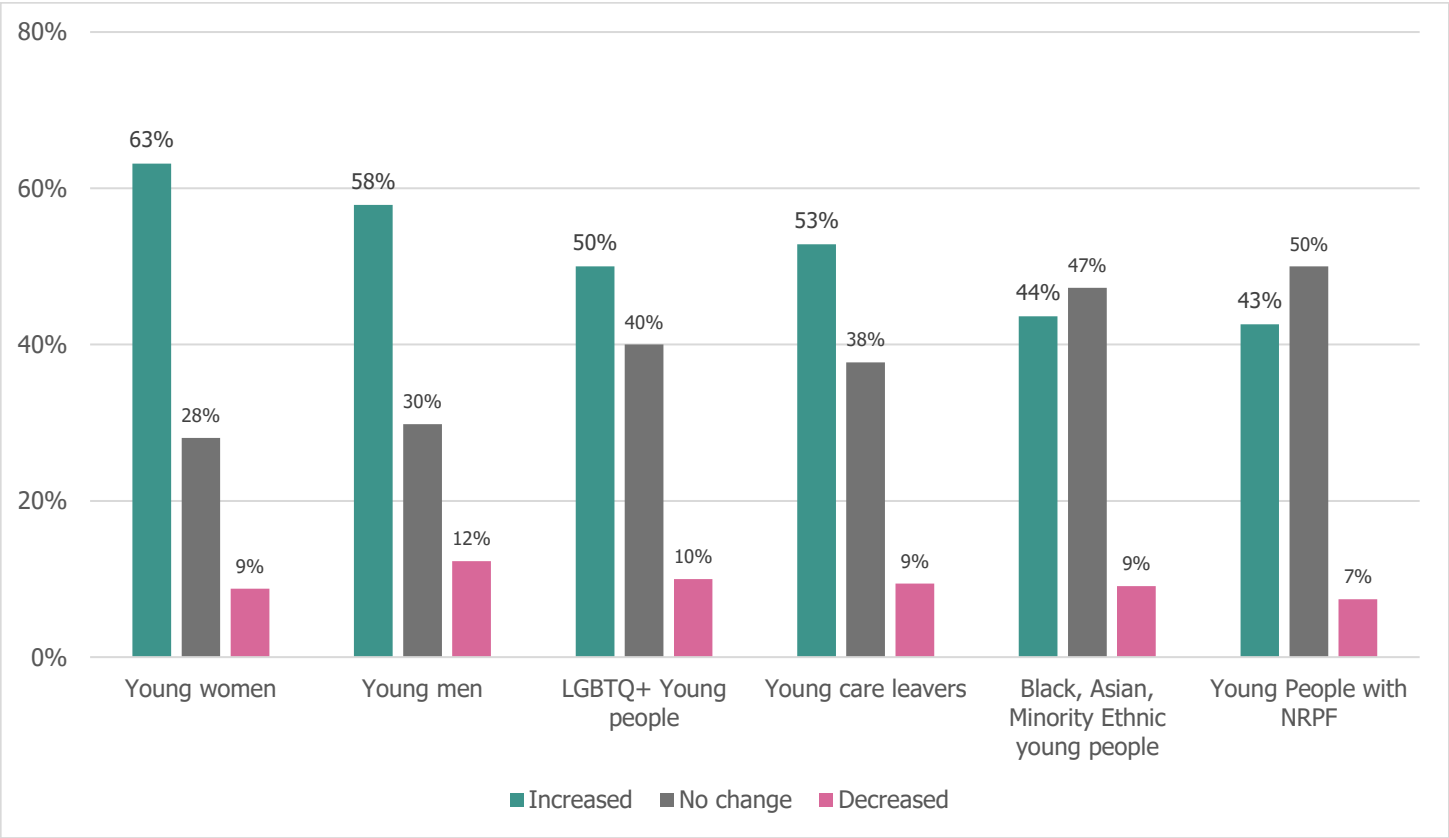
²⁴ DLUH (2021) *Statutory homelessness in England: financial year 2020-21*

²⁵ DLUH (2021) *Duties owed by age and ethnicity 2020-21*

²⁶ AKT (2015) *LGBT Youth Homelessness: A UK national scoping of cause, prevalence, response, and outcome*

²⁷ DLUHC *Statutory homelessness live tables*

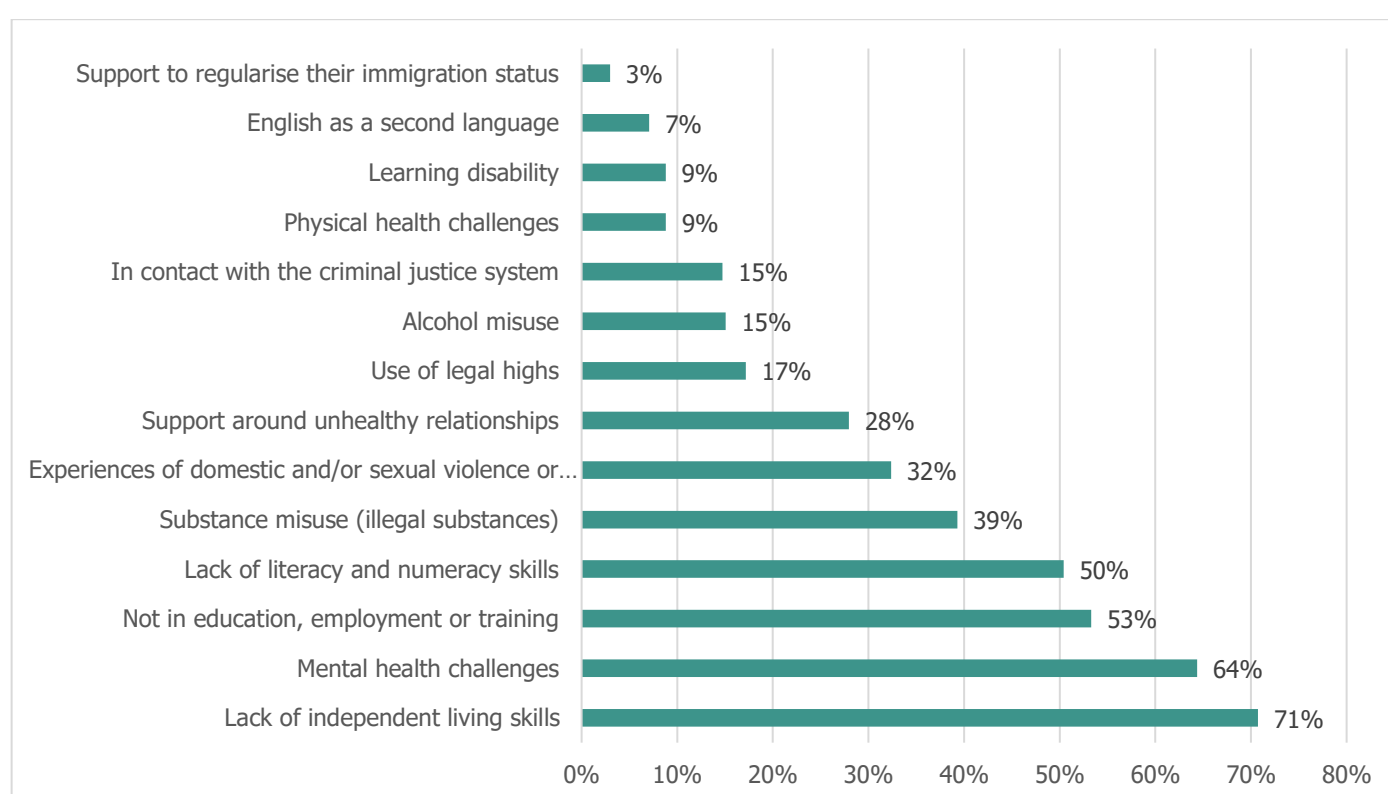
Chart 8: Reported increases in rough sleeping over the last year



Chapter 3. Support needs

Many young people who experience or are at risk of homelessness will have other needs outside their immediate need for housing, and therefore require some form of tailored support to help them make successful transitions into adulthood and independence. As chart 9 below sets out the support needs of young people cover a wide range of issues and identify some key areas of focus for services. Although the top three support needs identified match previous Young and Homeless reports,²⁸ the 2021 data represents a disruption in the trends where for the first time support around not being involved in education, employment or training was not the top need identified. Instead lack of independent living skills was highlighted as the most significant need, with 71% of respondents reporting this, followed by mental health challenges (53%).

Chart 9: Support needs of young people accessing homelessness services in August 2020



Education, employment and training

53% of respondents reported that the young people required support related to not being in education, employment or training. Although 32% of young people supported were identified as being in either education, training or paid employment it is clear that education and employment opportunities remain a significant challenge for young people experiencing homelessness. This is particularly notable given 50% of young people had a lack of literacy and numeracy skills speaking to the stark educational need amongst the cohort. Providers did highlight the impact COVID-19 had on access to employment reflecting additional challenges to supporting young people experiencing homelessness into paid roles.

“[The pandemic means] fewer jobs available in fields where young people have traditionally worked.”

“More young people losing their jobs through COVID-19”

Although they did also reflect that the pre-pandemic economy and job market had already been a contributing factor.

“Low and fluctuating wages, especially for young people on zero hours contracts and in precarious work”

Mental health, substance misuse and complex needs

Homelessness service providers reported that 64% of young people accessing their support experienced mental health challenges. This is a significant increase on the reported 35% from the 2018 Young and Homeless report. Mental illness can be a causal or a preceding factor for a young person becoming homeless, or can be exacerbated because of homelessness.

Again respondents highlighted how much the pandemic and associated lockdowns had impacted on mental health needs.

“Increased mental health due to isolation and anxiety.”

“Almost all residents are struggling to some extent with mental health issues. These have been increased with the fear/frustration with COVID-19”

“We have seen an increase in substance misuse and mental health issues around anxiety and being isolated from friends and family.”

Homelessness service providers reported that 39% of young people had needs relating to substance misuse, with 17% reporting support around legal highs, and 15% around alcohol misuse. Across youth homelessness, research has shown a tendency for multiple disadvantage and complex need, with these young people likely to have a background characterised by trauma.²⁹ A shocking 98% of respondents indicated that there had been an increase in those with multiple disadvantage presenting to their services over the past year, and in particular related to complex mental health needs.

“We definitely see people with more complex mental health needs, and more complex needs in general.”

‘[T]he majority of our young people over the last few years have complex needs and endured traumatic childhoods’.

Providers stated that 15% of young people in their services had experience of the criminal justice system. Alongside this 36% reported that they had seen an increase of young people with an offending history sleeping rough over the last year. Overall respondents reported that the level of support needs amongst young people continued to increase across all areas, and that whilst the pandemic has exacerbated some of these issues, many of them were already present concerns.

²⁹ Watts, B., Johnsen, S., & Sosensko, F. (2015). Youth homelessness in the UK: A review for the OVO Foundation. Heriot-Watt University.

“Year on year the complexity of need that young people present with increases significantly. The majority of young women that we work with now have some mental; health concern and almost half are involved in unhealthy relationships. We see fewer people now who have successfully finished mainstream education with qualifications.”

Chapter 4. Accessing support

Within the youth homelessness sector, local authorities and providers face the challenge of both a need for more youth-specific services and yet, at the same time, the recognition that a one-size-fits-all approach cannot work for such a complex and diverse group of vulnerable young people. Likewise ongoing challenges around access to mental health and substance misuse services were impacted by the huge changes seen in available provision during the pandemic.

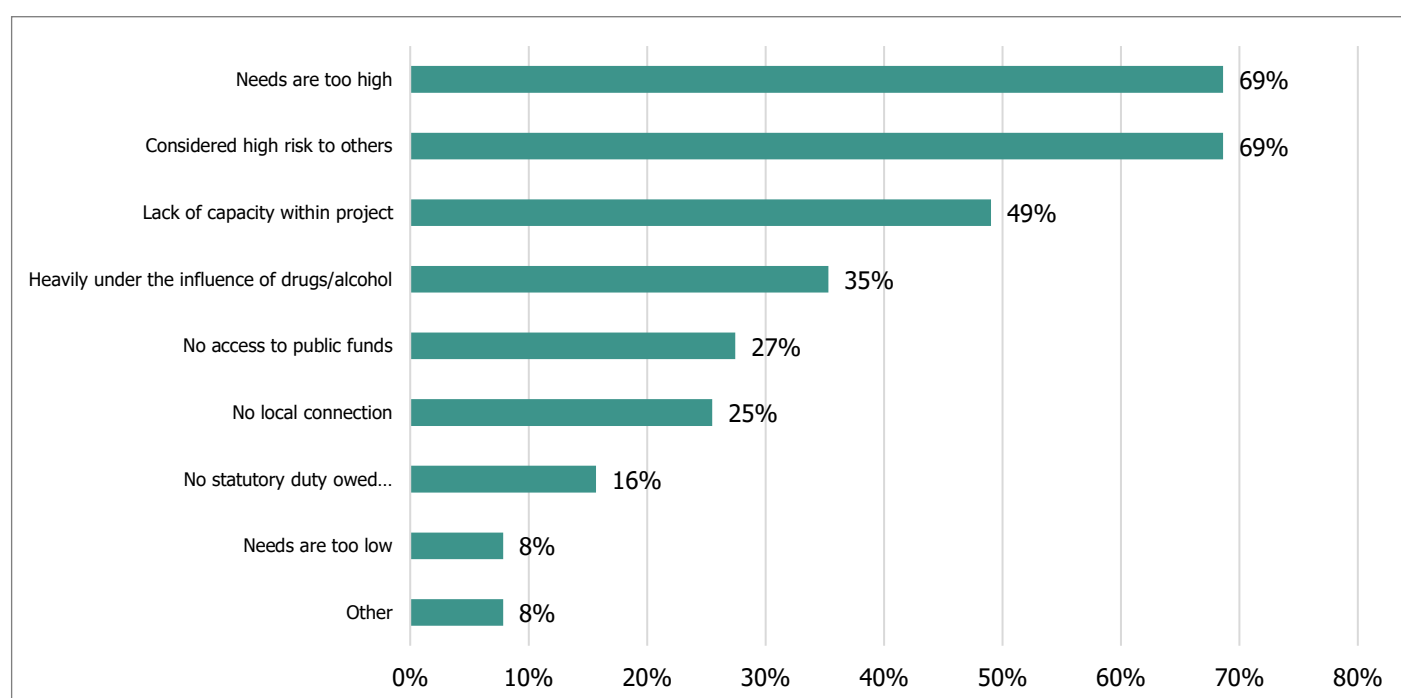
Access to support

Within the wider youth homelessness system, there can be a range of barriers for individuals in need of support, which can be exacerbated by the diversity of young people experiencing homelessness and the high prevalence of multiple disadvantage, combined with a lack of funding and services. Austerity measures during the past decade have hit youth services particularly hard, with a 70% funding reduction across the sector from 2010/11 to 2018/19.³⁰

When clients present to services, the first challenge can be in ensuring that they are eligible to receive support. When discussing the reasons for seeing an increase in the number of young people presenting with multiple disadvantage, 13% of respondents referred to challenges with proving eligibility. One respondent explained: *'Young people's needs are so much higher and the criteria to be referred seems higher.'*

After determining eligibility, the often complex and challenging needs of clients can be a significant barrier in helping vulnerable young people. When asked for reasons they could not support all young people presenting to services, 69% of respondents indicated this was due to individuals being too high risk to others, while the same proportion indicated they had been unable to support young people whose needs were too high. Nearly one-half of respondents (49%) had had to turn away clients due to a lack of capacity within their project, while 35% had turned away a young person who was heavily under the influence of drugs and/or alcohol.

³⁰ YMCA England and Wales. (2020). *Out of Service: A report examining local authority expenditure on youth services in England & Wales*. Available: <https://www.ymca.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/YMCA-Out-of-Service-report.pdf>

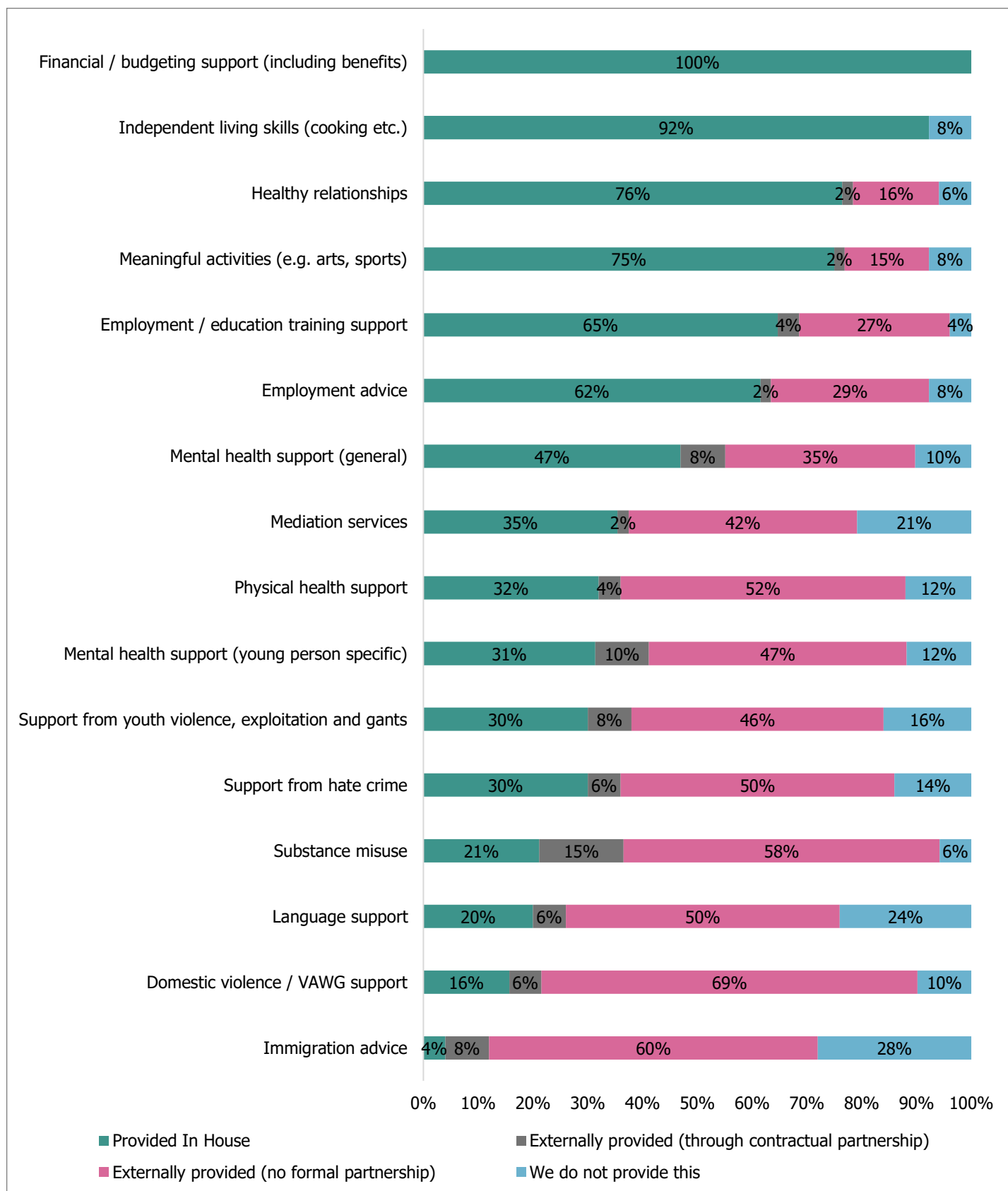
Chart 10: Reasons services could not support young people

Sometimes, providers are able to meet clients' needs by providing additional services in-house or working in a formal or informal partnership. Most provided supported accommodation and/or youth-specific supported accommodation (60% respectively), followed by offering services to help find independent accommodation (52%), offering youth-specific (6%).

In addition to accommodation services, organisations also offered a wide range of other services. Where they did offer additional services, financial or budgeting support was the only service area that all respondents indicated they offered, all of whom did so internally. A further 92% provided independent living skills internally, while 77% did so for services around healthy relationships, 75% for meaningful activities and 65% for employment or education training.

In addition to the wide range of services offered internally, however, responses also indicate the numerous types of support services are able to provide through formal partnerships or other external providers. The most common of these was financial or budgeting support, which 100% of respondents stated they provided internally, followed by independent living skills, which 92% provided internally. Other services were less commonly provided internally, particularly immigration advice (4%), domestic violence or violence against women and girls (VAWG) support (16%), language support (20%) and substance misuse (21%) services. However, in many of these cases, most providers were still able to offer services through external providers. For instance, while only 16% of respondents offered domestic violence / VAWG support internally, 75% did so through formal or informal partnerships.

Chart 11: Additional services provided

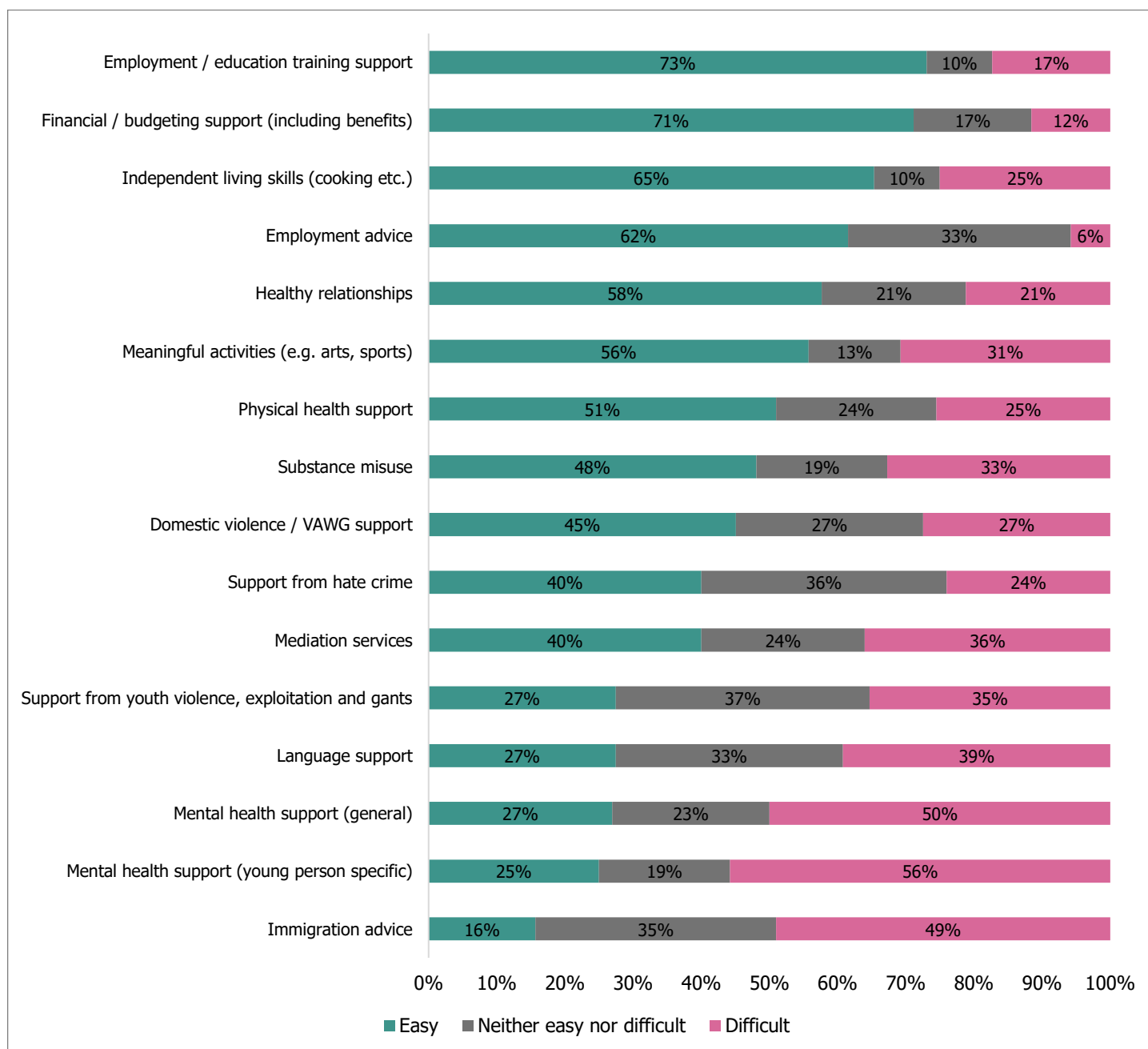


In many cases, services that respondents were more likely to describe as easy for young people to access locally were those that they also provided in house or through a formal partnership. For instance, only one in six respondents (16%) rated immigration advice as easy for young people to access, a service that only two respondents (4%) offered in-house and 8% offered through formal partnerships.

However, the availability of a service – in house or externally, did not necessarily reflect feelings that the service was easy to access. This was particularly apparent with mental health services. Most respondents indicated that they provided general mental health services in house (47%) or through a formal (8%) or informal (35%) partnership. Similarly, most indicated that they provided youth-specific mental health support internally (31%) or through a formal (10%) or informal (47%) partnership. However, only 27% indicated that it was easy for young people to find mental health support locally, while 50% described it as difficult. Notable in the context that 64% of respondents reported mental health related support needs.

In open response questions, many referred to the difficulties in accessing services due to high thresholds, with the many barriers in accessing mental health services being a recurring theme. One respondent discussed several of the factors impacting the increase they had seen in multiple disadvantage:

“[There is] much more [of a] prevalence / increase in complex mental health issues, and [a] lack of specialist support when needs are very high ([i.e. a] risk to life or others). Thresholds of mental health support being very high or rejected due to [a] lack of engagement. Mental health has been affected by covid, but this [isn't] the only reason, the lack of other support services around education, finances, drugs and alcohol, parental issues. Covid has most definitely intensified the isolation - digital and in person. Also a change in local authority approach to joint [homeless] protocol means many young people (aged 16 & 17yrs) are being rejected by children social care as being homeless at referral stage, [and are] not even getting the assessment they are entitled to.

Chart 12: Reported ease for young people to access services locally

Services have been hard hit by the pandemic, with a lack in sufficient services and internal capacity exacerbated by the challenges of supporting individuals with complex needs, often in vulnerable situations. Most respondents reported having had to evict clients from their service due to antisocial behaviour (74%) and/or being a risk to others (52%). Respondents also commonly reported having evicted clients due to their needs being too high (44%) or being a risk to themselves (22%).

For providers, the range of challenges in supporting this highly diverse population can be substantial. It can be difficult to access appropriate support, which can then have insufficient capacity or be too generalised for the specific needs of individual young people. The ability to access resources or funds can also be challenging,

when young people's entitlements are generally lower. All of these factors can also impact what the already often substantial challenge of trying to access affordable accommodation.

Chapter 5. Move-On

In addition to the challenges faced while receiving support, services and young people face additional challenges when they are able to move on from their current, often temporary or emergency, service provision. Across open response questions, respondents commonly referred to move on as a key challenge and barrier in supporting young people. In particular, when discussing the reasons for an increase in demand, challenges with accessing move on accommodation and support were the most commonly cited after family breakdown, with 18% describing difficulties with move on.

This challenge was worsened by the pandemic, with thousands accommodated in hotels or other forms of emergency provision through Everyone In needing to move on to secure and sustainable accommodation. One respondent explained: *'Due to the pandemic things have changed for people, our placements have been longer as there were no move on options as services were not operating. It has been crucial that we continue to provide a service even through these challenging times'*.

Lack of affordable accommodation

The lack of affordable housing is a key challenge that makes it difficult to procure accommodation for those with experiences of homelessness.³¹ Most recently, the 2020 Annual Review for single homelessness found that 21% of those in accommodation were ready and waiting to move on, 48% of whom had been waiting for six months or more to do so.

This challenge was exacerbated during the pandemic, with individuals commonly stuck in emergency accommodation while local authorities struggled to procure affordable accommodation.³² Centrepont found that fewer than 22% of councils are confident that they will be able to accommodate all individuals who are in emergency Everyone In accommodation.³³

For young people experiencing homelessness, there can be further barriers to accessing safe, affordable accommodation. While those who have been in homeless accommodation are now eligible for a SAR exemption, many young people at risk of or experiencing homelessness are 'hidden' and thus would not be eligible for this exemption. Nonetheless, even where individuals can receive the full LHA rate, research by Crisis found that continuing reductions to the LHA have meant that, in 92% of areas in Great Britain, only one in five (or fewer) privately rented homes would be affordable to those receiving LHA payments.³⁴ Challenges in accessing affordable accommodation were the most cited barriers to move on for young people. For instance, in one open response question, one in five mentioned the lack of affordable accommodation as a reason for the increase in young people sleeping rough or experiencing other forms of homelessness (20%). In identifying barriers to moving on from their service, 88% identified the lack of available housing from the local authority, while 80% identified the lack of accommodation available at the LHA rate and 57% the lack of accommodation at the Shared Accommodation Rate.

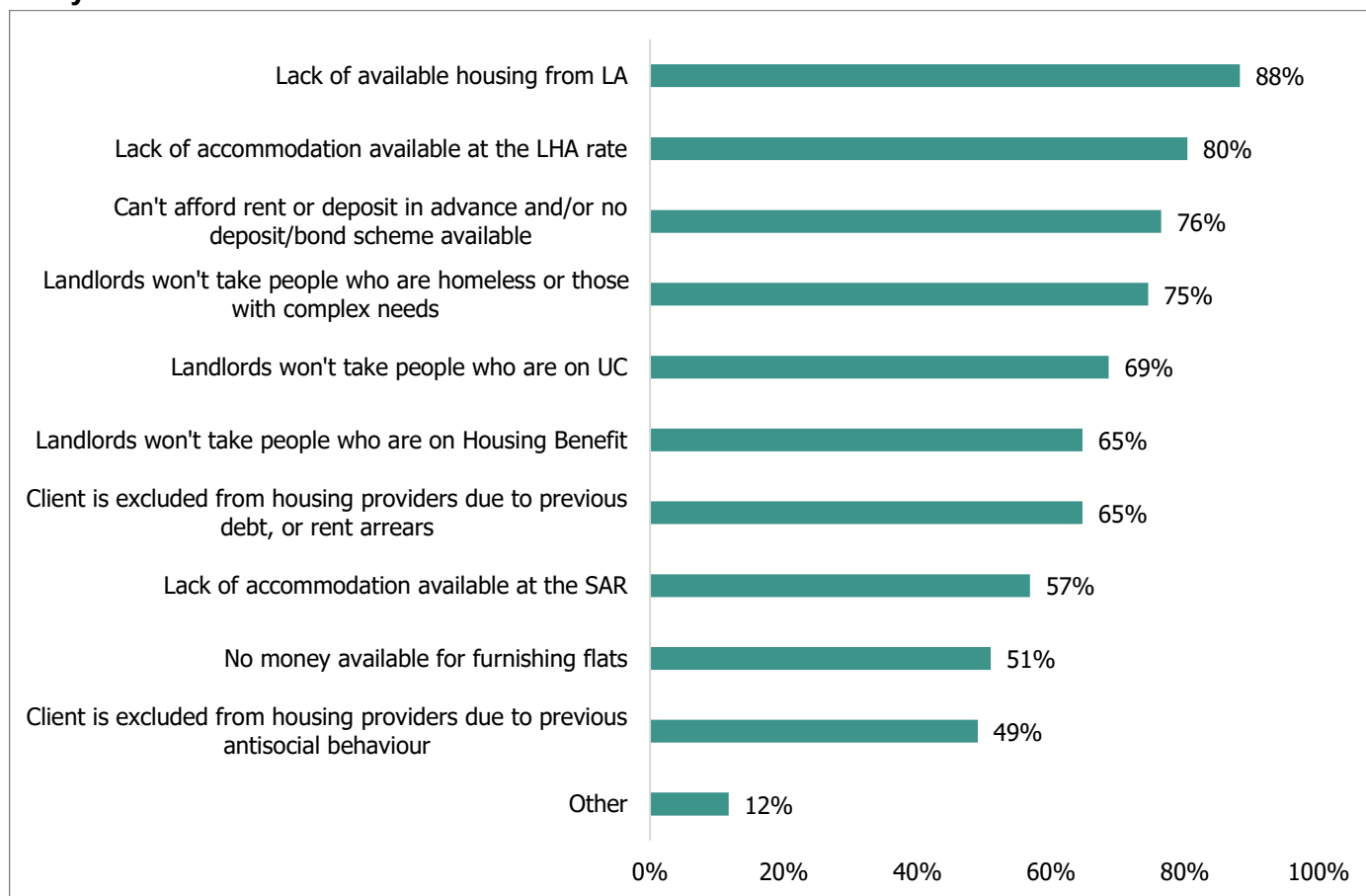
³¹ Homeless Link. (2021). Annual Review: Support for Single Homeless people in England 2020.

³² Grassian, T., & Boobis, S. (2021). *Working together: the homelessness sector's path beyond COVID*. <https://www.homeless.org.uk/sites/default/files/site-attachments/Homeless%20Link%20-%20Working%20together%20v5.pdf>

³³ Centrepont. (2020). *Locked Out: Young Homelessness during and before the Covid-19 pandemic*. <https://centrepont.org.uk/media/4293/locked-out-report.pdf>

³⁴ 6 Basran, J. (2019) *Cover the Cost: How gaps in Local Housing Allowance are impacting homelessness*. London: Crisis.

Chart 13: Barriers preventing young people from moving on from respondents' services when they are ready



Additional barriers to accessing affordable accommodation were also commonly cited, with most mentioning challenges with landlords' willingness to accept tenants who are homeless or with complex needs (75%), who are on Universal Credit (69%) or who receive housing benefits (65%). More than three-quarter of respondents (77%) also found that clients cannot move on due to being unable to afford rent or a deposit in advance and/or that there was no deposit or bond scheme available for them.

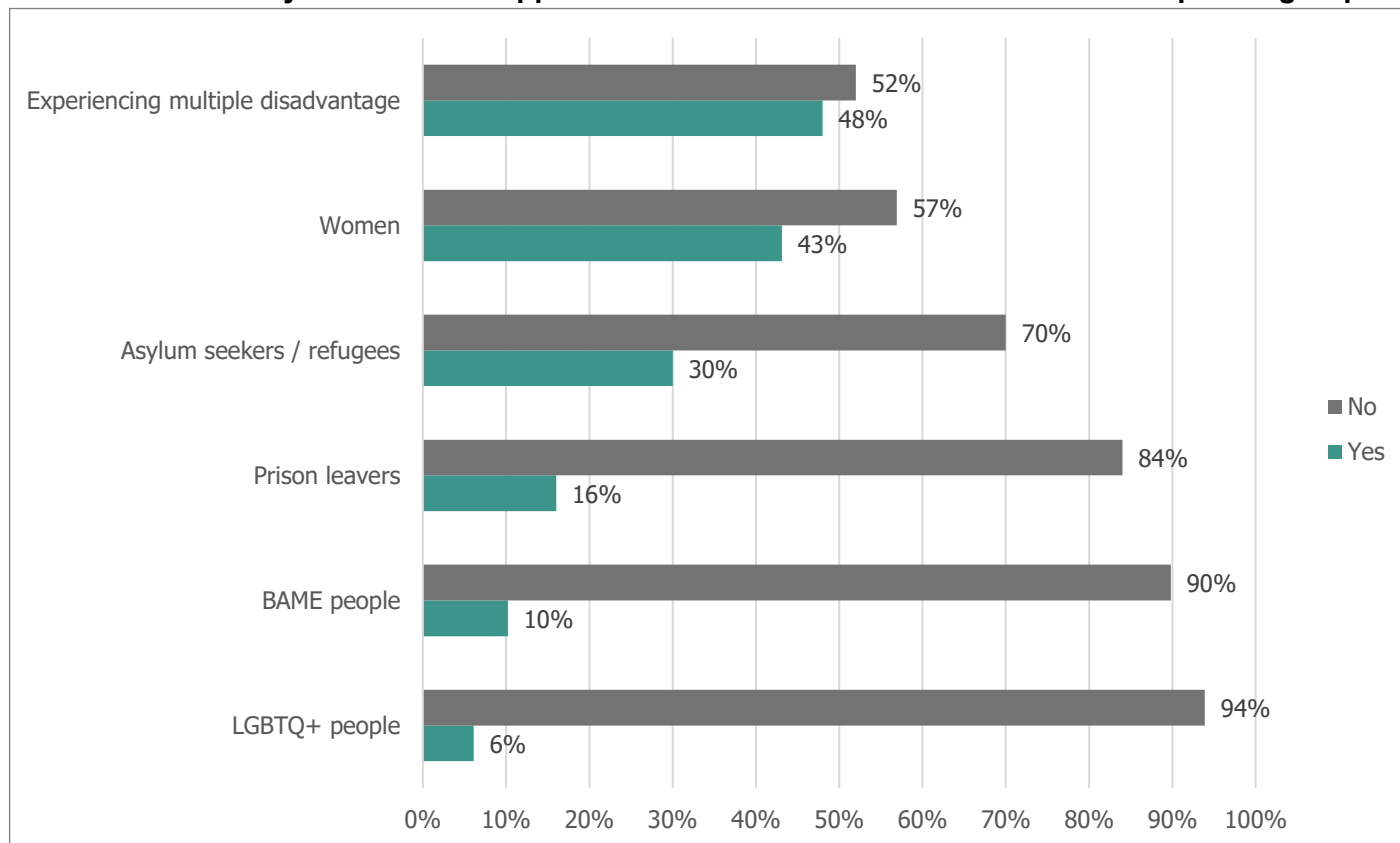
Young people can also struggle to obtain tenancies when landlords do not want 'sharers' and, due to the lack of a tenancy history and/or low- or un- employment, need a guarantor.³⁵ One respondent referred to issues due to a lack of credit history, while another mentioned clients failing the affordability test (i.e. meeting an income threshold to qualify for a tenancy) and landlords simply not wanting to accommodate young people.

When young people are not being moved on, this can not only have a significant impact on these individuals who are, as a result, trapped in temporary accommodation, it can also, as respondents explained, clog up the system, with '*waiting lists increasing*'. The lack of affordable accommodation means that, as one respondent explained, '*due to [a] lack of move on provision we are often left with longer placements*'.

³⁵ Homeless Link. (2020). *We Have a Voice, Follow Our Lead*. <https://homeless.org.uk/sites/default/files/site-attachments/Young%20and%20Homeless%202020.pdf>

In addition to the lack of accommodation and support for young people in general, the diversity and complexity in needs across this group has also meant that there is a real need for more specific, tailored support. While just over one-half of respondents (52%) stated that there was specialised supported accommodation for young people experiencing multiple disadvantage, for other groups this was less commonly described. For instance, 90% indicated an absence of sufficient supported accommodation to meet the needs of young BAME people, while 84% indicated the same for young prison leavers and 70% for young asylum seekers or refugees.

Chart 14: Availability of sufficient supported accommodation to meet the needs of specific groups o



This is particularly worrying given the cited increases in rough sleeping and other forms of homelessness by respondents across many of these groups.

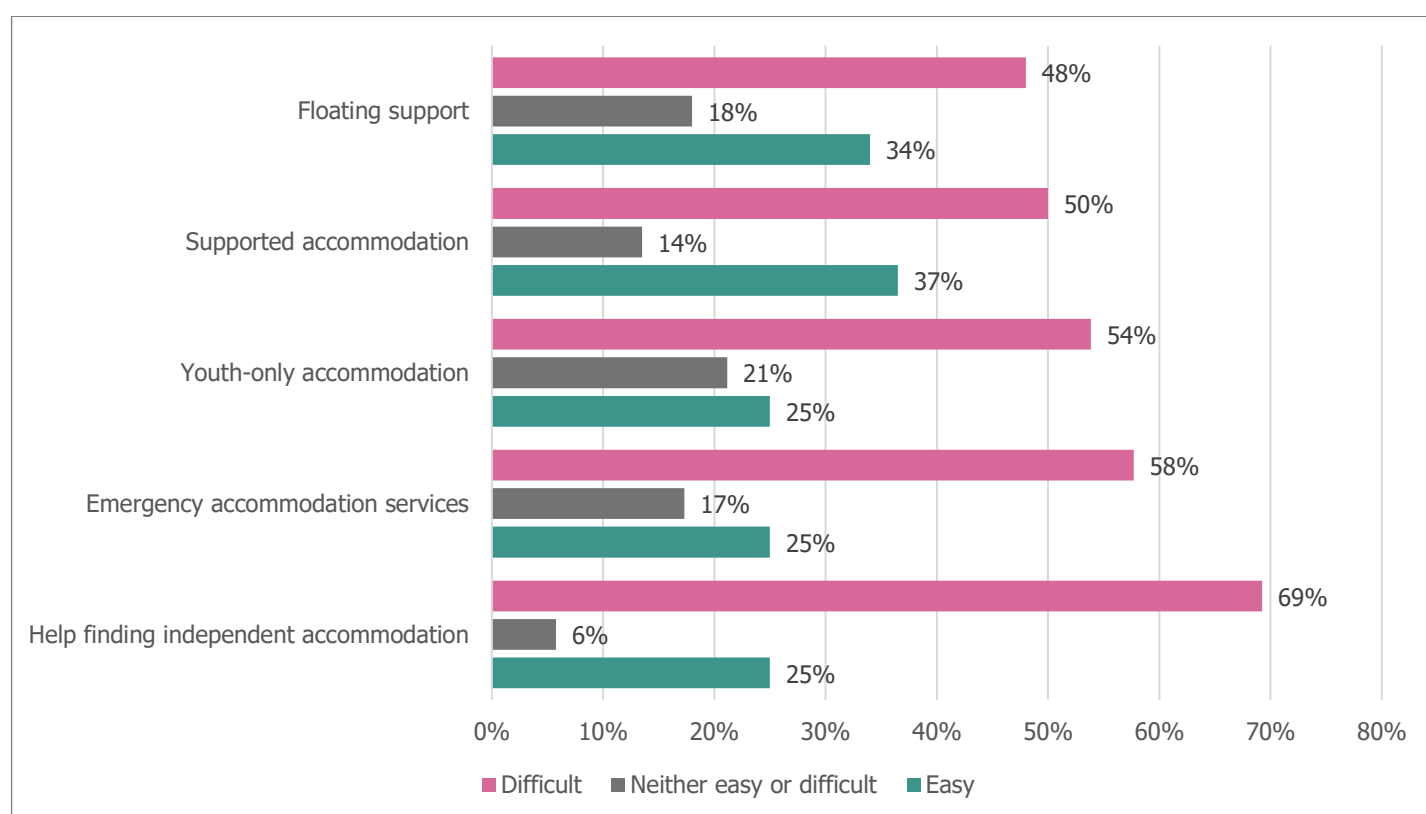
Additional barriers to moving on

Even once young people have access to accommodation, there can be a range of challenges in affording and maintaining the tenancy and ensuring they have the right support available. One key challenge can be the difficulty to obtain or maintain a tenancy when young people are more likely to be on zero-hour contracts or low-wages.

Even where accommodation is available, young people can still struggle to afford furnishings, with a slight majority (51%) agreeing that a lack of money to furnish flats could be a barrier to moving on. Many also highlighted clients being excluded from housing providers due to previous antisocial behaviour (49%), also the most common reason mentioned by services for having to evict young people.

In addition to the lack of affordable accommodation, respondents commonly cited challenges due to a lack of move on services, particularly those specifically tailored to the needs of young people. Specifically, reflecting on services available in their local area, 69% of respondents stated that it was difficult for young people to access help finding independent accommodation, while 58% said the same about emergency accommodation services, 54% about youth-only accommodation, 50% about supported accommodation and 48% about floating support.

Chart 15: Reported ease for young people to access services in local area



Where support is available, responses indicate that it is likely to be on an informal or short-term basis. While 51% of respondents indicated that they provide formal floating support on a regular basis after move on, most indicated that move on support was for six months or less, with 22% offering support for less than three months and 31% for three to six months. Only 18% of providers indicated that they provide support for six to twelve months, while just 6% offer support for one to two years. One respondent explained that any move on support they were able to provide was '*ad hoc*', clarifying, though, that they were '*not funded*' to provide this service.

Barriers in accessing long-term secure accommodation, coupled with insufficient levels of support to help young people sustain their tenancies remains one of the most significant challenges that trap young people in homelessness. The importance of tenancy support is particularly apparent when considering that 71% of young people had support needs related to living independently. The pandemic has not caused these issues but has exacerbated blockages in the system, creating greater pressure on services and further limiting move-on options for young people.

Chapter 6. Prevention

Without opportunities to access affordable accommodation or move on support, we know that homelessness is more likely to occur. Most worryingly, an experience of homelessness while young can significantly contribute to the likelihood of experiencing chronic homelessness and multiple disadvantage later in life. Thus, any work to support young people at risk of or experiencing homelessness needs to first begin with preventing homelessness in the first place and, where it has already occurred, preventing its recurrence. Research by Centrepont found that, on average, a 16-17 year old experiencing homelessness costs the state an extra £8,900 annually, rising to £12,200 for those 18 to 24.³⁶

One respondent explained: *‘Some young people still seem to slip [through] the net and end up rough sleeping. Once they are rough sleeping it is [difficult] to help as they begin a lifestyle of risky behaviours with adults using homeless services’.*

This research has highlighted a wide range of challenges to supporting young people, including a lack of specialised provision and affordable accommodation to meet the needs of this vulnerable and diverse group of people, who are likely to have a range of complex needs and be experiencing ‘hidden’ homelessness. A further challenge is the lack of prevention services available in general and specifically for young people, with one respondent simply stating: *‘There are no prevention activities [in our local area] specifically aimed at Young People that we’re aware of’.*

Local authorities were unlikely to indicate that there had been an increase in their prevention services for young people in their local area over the previous year, with 18% of respondents indicating this had increased, compared to 55% who stated that there had been no change and 9% who stated these services had decreased.

Prevention strategies

In order to prevent youth homelessness, it is important that local authorities and Government understands the factors causing homelessness and has a clear, evidence-based strategy that sits across all sectors to stop homelessness before it occurs and averts its recurrence. Promisingly, most providers (64%) indicated that there was a strategy to prevent youth homelessness in their local area.

One approach to preventing youth homelessness that has been developed specifically for the UK context is the Positive Pathways Model, an approach that was developed by the youth homelessness charity St Basils.³⁷ Their aim was for this pathway to serve as a national framework for local authorities and partners to prevent youth homelessness.

³⁶ Centrepont. (n.d.). *Preventing youth homelessness: What works?* Available: https://centrepont.org.uk/media/1699/prevention-what-works_full-report.pdf

³⁷ St Basil’s (2015) *Developing Positive Pathways to Adulthood*, Available at: http://www.stbasils.org.uk/files/2015-08-35/10_FINAL_pathwaysA4_booklet_98812.pdf; Green, S., McCarthy, L. and Pattison, B (2017) *The Positive Pathway Model: A Rapid Evaluation of its Impact*, Available at: <http://www4.shu.ac.uk/research/cresr/ourexpertise/positive-pathway-model-rapid-evaluation-its-impact>

Just under one-half of respondents (49%) stated that they were aware of the Positive Pathway Model, while 23% of respondents indicated that their local area was using the model. A further 9% stated that such an approach was being developed and 67% that it was not being used.

The Kickstart Scheme

One measure targeting the prevention of youth homelessness is the £2 billion Kickstart scheme, introduced by the government in 2020 with the aim of supporting 250,000 16-24-year-olds into employment for a minimum of six months. The impact of this programme has, however, yet to be evaluated and within this sample, we found that only 16% indicated that they had clients who had been employed by the scheme. Specifically, 9% of respondents had clients who had received jobs through Kickstart, while 7% (4) had clients who had received jobs through a partnering gateway service.

For organisations who had either directly worked with Kickstart or whose clients had engaged with the programme, this was usually by their having supported young people to access Kickstart without having directly contacted Kickstart providers (22%). Some (16%) had engaged with Kickstart providers directly to improve access to service users, while nearly one-half of respondents (45%) indicated that they had not any involvement with Kickstart.

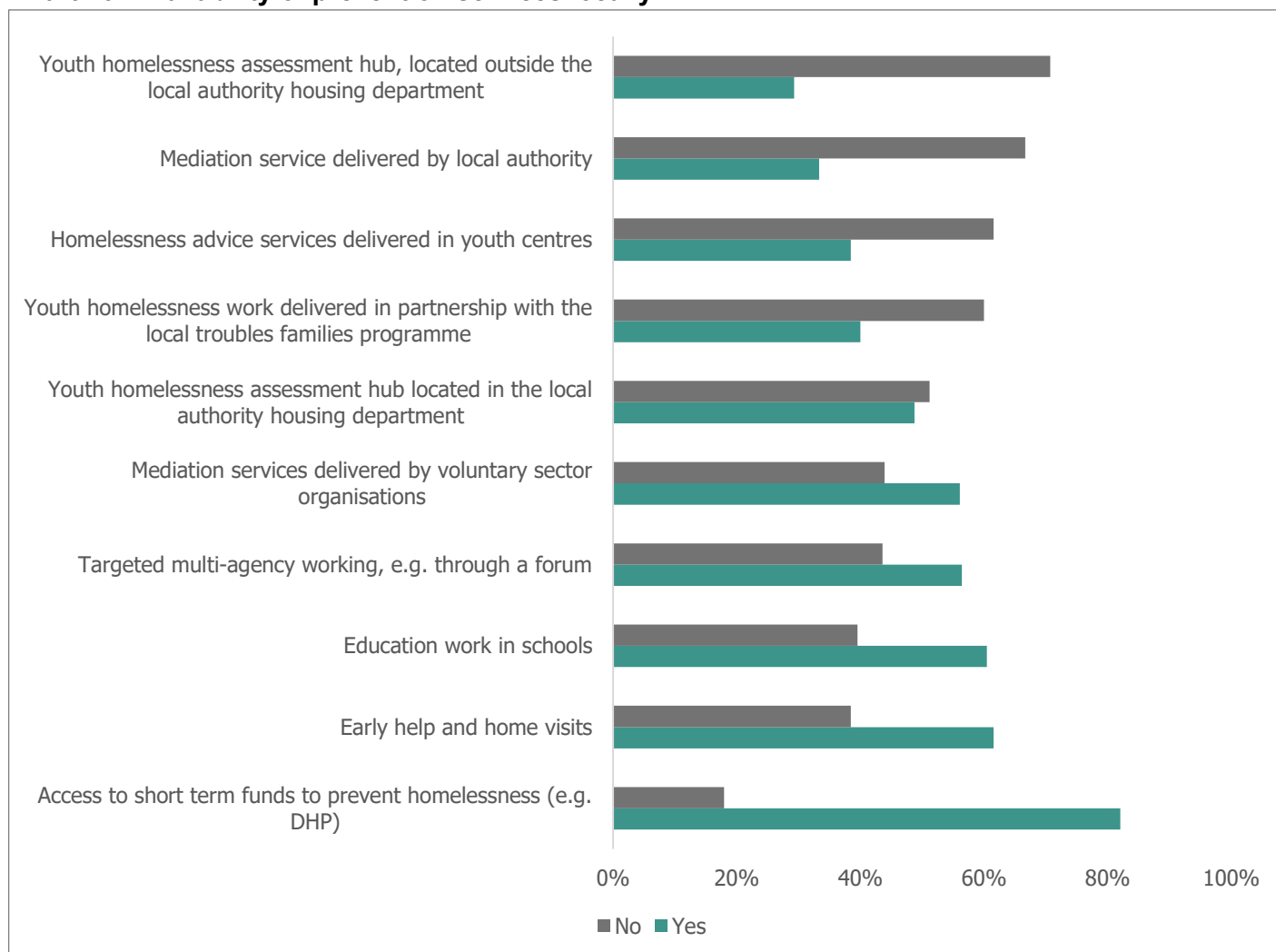
Other types of prevention services

Responses indicate varied opinions and experiences with the presence of prevention services. Most providers thought that the biggest gap in prevention services was in the availability of services to support young people to remain in their family home (37%) or services to prevent young people from losing their tenancies (35%). Our 2020 review of youth homelessness found that many young people had lost their housing because they were unaware of their rights and, without the necessary knowledge or skills, struggled to communicate with landlords.³⁸

A further 19% thought the biggest gap was in services to prevent young people sleeping rough. Other responses (9%) included limited supported accommodation options, a lack of recognition of prevention by children's services, no or little acknowledgement of hidden homelessness by services and local authorities not giving young people their statutory HRA entitlements.

Respondents were likely to indicate the presence of a range of other services in their local area – though to varying degrees. The most commonly provided local services include access to short term funds to prevent homelessness (82%), early help and home visits (62%) and education work in schools (61%).

³⁸ Homeless Link. (2020). *We Have a Voice, Follow Our Lead*. Available: <https://homeless.org.uk/sites/default/files/site-attachments/Young%20and%20Homeless%202020.pdf>

Chart 16: Availability of prevention services locally

Responses also suggest where certain services are more likely to be housed. For instance, while only 33% indicated that there were mediation services available through their local authority, 56% stated that there were mediation services available locally through a voluntary sector organisation. These services can be used preventatively, usually with the goal of maintaining the current accommodation (often the family home). Respondents were also more likely to confirm the presence of a youth assessment hub through their local authority housing department (49%) than one that existed outside of their local authority housing department (29%).

Prevention activity is critical to stop young people falling into homelessness in the first place. The findings of this research suggest that despite a high prevalence of prevention strategies, effective prevention support is not consistent across the country and there remain significant gaps in provision.

Conclusion

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic young people at risk of, or experiencing homelessness were facing increasing systemic pressures both pushing them into, and trapping them in homelessness. Lack of affordable housing, welfare policies that mean young people struggle to cover the cost of rent as well as their wider living costs, and an increasingly precarious job market all contribute to ongoing barriers for this population.

The pandemic hit England in March 2020 at a time when there had been a continued increase in young people eligible for support from their local authority since the introduction of the Homelessness Reduction Act in 2018. This report found that the pandemic has had a profound impact on youth homelessness.

The historically hidden nature of youth homelessness, with many young people sofa surfing, was pushed to the fore when the first lockdown was announced. As sofa surfing options were cut off for young people many were forced on to the streets. Alongside this the ongoing pressures of COVID-19 led to increased family breakdown resulting in increased homelessness amongst young people. Findings from this research suggest that these were the main factors behind young people being the only group that saw increased homelessness during the pandemic, despite the range of interventions put in place to prevent homelessness.

The research also highlighted the diversity of young people experiencing homelessness, in many cases more so than the general homelessness population. In particular the findings suggest that single young women are at a much higher risk of homelessness than single women over the age of 25. Young Black people are over three times more likely to experience homelessness than their White counterparts. And young people who identify as LGBTQ+ are heavily overrepresented. Understanding why there is such diversity amongst youth homelessness and why this doesn't carry through to older homeless populations is critical to building the awareness of how to most effectively support these individuals.

Access to services both for immediate support needs, and for homelessness prevention is a significant barrier. With the research finding increasingly complex support needs amongst young people experiencing homelessness access to necessary support is vital. Whilst barriers to access existed prior to the pandemic, findings show that since the start of COVID-19 these barriers have become more pronounced particularly in relation to access to mental health provision.

Likewise whilst move-on to long-term secure accommodation has been a challenge for youth homelessness providers for a long time the research has found that the pandemic, and associated interventions, created a knock-on effect that has exacerbated this even further. Blockages in the system, lack of suitable move-on options including affordable housing and supported accommodation capacity, means that many young people are trapped in temporary accommodation for too long.

Despite operating within this context the research shows that providers are still offering a range of services and support to meet the diverse needs of young people experiencing homelessness. As the sector emerges from the crisis phase of the pandemic there is an opportunity to harness the energy of the sector that operated throughout, building on the lessons learned and continuing to push for the changes needed to ensure that wherever possible we are preventing young people from becoming homeless in the first place.



What we do

Homeless Link is the national membership charity for frontline homelessness services. We work to improve services through research, guidance and learning, and campaign for policy change that will ensure everyone has a place to call home and the support they need to keep it.

Let's end homelessness together

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