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Homelessness has no place

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FACE

Danger Zones and Stepping Stones:

Phase Three

*Putting evidence into action to protect
young people experiencing homelessness*

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Executive Summary

This report presents the findings of the third and final phase of Depaul UK's research project into how to better protect and support young people experiencing homelessness. In 2015-16 we embarked on this five-year journey, establishing a new approach to assessing Temporary Living Arrangements – the Danger Zones and Stepping Stones Model. This has been refined throughout the research and has now inspired the development of a diagnostic toolkit to help protect young people from harm and support them back into stable accommodation.

Throughout our research we have used the term 'Temporary Living Arrangements' to denote places young people stay for periods of up to six months while out of stable accommodation. 'Service-provided accommodation' means all formal housing solutions provided by statutory or charitable services, such as hostels or small accommodation projects.

The research's first phase comprised a qualitative exploration of young people's experiences of temporary living based on detailed interviews with 18 young people and two homelessness sector academics. We found that phrases like 'sofa surfing' and 'staying with friends' are misleading ways of describing living arrangements that downplay the risks being faced by young people in temporary accommodation. The temporary living experiences of the young people interviewed varied greatly, and we found evidence of both safe and unsafe, as well as supportive and unsupportive, environments. The Danger Zones and Stepping Stones Model was created as a tool to promote understanding of Temporary Living Arrangements in terms of the level to which they pose a threat to young people's safety as well as their propensity to support them out of homelessness.

Phase Two of Danger Zones and Stepping Stones was a quantitative study involving more than 700 young people. This enabled us to estimate the magnitude of the issues highlighted in Phase One, and identify groups of young people who may be particularly vulnerable in temporary accommodation. In particular, we found that young women, young people from the LGBTQ+ community, young people who are care leavers, and young people with

disabilities or mental health concerns are particularly likely to experience harm in temporary accommodation. While more than half (55 percent) of the young people responding to our survey had experienced some form of harm in temporary accommodation, this proportion rose to two thirds for LGBTQ+ young people, those who previously had been 'looked-after children', and those with disabilities or long-term mental health concerns (66 percent, 68 percent and 67 percent respectively). Young women were more than three times more likely to say they had experienced sexual abuse than young men (19 percent compared with five percent).

Additionally, our findings suggested that young people are more likely to experience harm in 'informal' Temporary Living Arrangements with people they do not know well than in arrangements with close friends/family or service-provided accommodation. However, harmful living arrangements were found to exist in every category of accommodation, so we concluded that no accommodation type can be assumed to be safe for young people without further investigation. In the light of this important finding, the Danger Zones and Stepping Stone Model was refined.

The core of this report, Danger Zones and Stepping Stones: Phase Three, comprised further qualitative research with 22 young people and six homelessness professionals. Informed by evidence from the first two phases, we explored what makes a Temporary Living Arrangement harmful by linking specific characteristics of living arrangements to experiences of harm. We also looked at commonalities between stories of successful move on to explore

what makes a temporary living arrangement supportive.

The young people interviewed described experiences that supported our previous findings, providing accounts of sexual, mental and physical abuse, exposure to harmful levels of substance use, and dangerous physical conditions. Incidents of harm were varied and experienced across the full range of temporary living environments, including service-provided accommodation, such as large hostels and emergency shelters, as well as informal Temporary Living Arrangements, such as staying with friends.

We found that the following factors increase the likelihood of harm to a young person across all Temporary Living Arrangements:

- › Previous incidents of harm
- › Power imbalances between the young person and others in the accommodation, particularly the accommodation provider
- › Negative external relationships that are facilitated by the accommodation
- › Exposure to substance abuse
- › Poor or unhygienic living standards, including a lack of space
- › Insufficient security measures

The risk factors identified were found to be highly interrelated, with interviewees' experiences suggesting that as one risk factor increases, so do the others, often through impact on mental health and resilience. This results in a cycle of escalating risk of harm.

The following factors were found to positively affect young people's ability to move quickly and positively onto more suitable accommodation:

- › Direct support from individuals within the immediate living environment
- › Access to support from outside the accommodation or from a wider social network
- › Knowledge relating to housing and support options
- › Skills for independent living
- › Stability and clear pathways out of homelessness
- › Practical provisions, such as computers, reliable WiFi and telephone access

As such, living arrangements that provide, or facilitate access to, these factors were found to be the most likely to support young people on their journey towards stable accommodation.

Taken together, the factors we have identified provide a framework for assessing Temporary Living Arrangements in line with the Danger Zones and Stepping Stones Model. To help put this into practice, we have created three diagnostic tools for use within the homelessness sector: one to help frontline services more effectively assess young people's circumstances at the point of engagement/referral, one for young people to assess their own circumstances, and one to help services improve the temporary accommodation they provide.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Our Danger Zones and Stepping Stones research has provided further evidence to suggest that young people in temporary accommodation can be at significant risk of harm. We have heard shocking stories from young people who have been physically assaulted, bullied, threatened with weapons, and introduced to drugs and alcohol. Young people also described feeling trapped in homelessness by their living circumstances, without access to the support they need to find stable accommodation. Moreover, our findings suggest that assumptions in relation to the safety or supportiveness of living arrangements based on accommodation type are unreliable, particularly when ambiguous terms such as 'sofa surfing' or 'living with friends' are used.

While there was some indication that certain living arrangements (for instance, living with strangers) may pose a greater risk than others (for example, supported accommodation), we found 'good' and 'bad' arrangements within all categories.

In the homelessness sector, we need to get better at assessing Temporary Living Arrangements so that we can protect young people from harm and move them towards safer, more stable environments. Government, too, has a role to play in improving the support available for young people experiencing homelessness.

We have little control over the quality of informal arrangements, so our focus must be on:

- a. identifying those who are at risk of harm within informal arrangements, so that they can be moved to safer environments and
- b. improving the temporary living environments that we can control, i.e. service-provided accommodation.

We believe that the Danger Zones and Stepping Stones Model, when used with the framework and tools presented in this report, is an effective way to achieve this.

We hope that our research over the past five years, and the practical tools that it has informed, will prove to be a catalyst for change, increasing our understanding of young people's circumstances, informing better decision-making within the sector and in government and, ultimately, improving the lives of young people experiencing homelessness.

We recommend that:

Providers of accommodation services and non-accommodation services for young people who are experiencing homelessness should use the diagnostic tools that have been developed. Specifically, providers should:

1. Assess young people's Temporary Living Arrangements using the Temporary living environment assessment tool for homelessness services (Tool 1). This will challenge assumptive practice and help providers base their decisions on a more nuanced understanding of individual circumstances.
2. Assess and improve their own accommodation offerings by utilising the Self-assessment tool for accommodation providers (Tool 3). This will enable services to identify possible weaknesses within their accommodation which may place a young person at heightened risk or prevent a young person from taking steps towards suitable accommodation options.
3. Promote, and support young people to use, the Self-assessment tool for young people (Tool 2). This will help young people gain a clearer understanding of the realities of the Temporary Living Environment they find themselves in and enable them to communicate this with service providers.

Additionally, providers should:

4. Ensure all young people in their services are taught about housing options and related issues, so that they are equipped

to take steps towards more suitable accommodation when they are ready.

5. Actively explore how young people's identities and characteristics may shape their experiences of their services. It is of paramount importance to safeguard young people from ethnic minority backgrounds, young women, those from the LGBTQ+ community, care leavers, and young people with disabilities and/or learning difficulties.

Recommendations to Government

Government also has a role in ensuring that sufficient safe, supportive service based accommodation for young people is available, particularly since much of it is publicly funded. The recent publication of the Government's National Statement of Expectations in Supported Housing, as well as a consultation on introducing regulatory standards in accommodation for looked after children and care leavers, are encouraging steps.

The Government, however, needs to go further to meet its commitment to 'breaking the cycle of homelessness'. Our Danger Zones research reports have shown that there are significant numbers of young people staying in informal, non-service provided accommodation. While we know these informal arrangements often expose young people to harm and trap them in homelessness, their informal nature means they fall outside of any attempts to introduce regulation or oversight.

Most of the 712 people we surveyed for our second report had stayed with strangers, and most of these had been harmed while doing so. Twelve per cent had engaged in sexual activity for a place to stay, and over a quarter had slept rough. We know that young people are sleeping rough and in other dangerous places right now, during a pandemic. The evidence points to a significant shortage of service provided accommodation for young people who are homeless:

1. The Ministry for Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) should urgently commit to initiate and lead work with homelessness charities, local authorities

and elected mayors to assess the need for youth specific homelessness accommodation services and the extent to which this need is being met.

Our Danger Zones and Stepping Stones research shows that homelessness is inherently risky. While we need to make sure young people without a home have somewhere safe to sleep, Depaul believes that homelessness, including youth homelessness, can and should be ended. To do this we need to prevent people becoming homeless in the first place. Crisis research has found that the median age when people first become homeless is 22 [<https://www.crisis.org.uk/ending-homelessness/homelessness-knowledge-hub/types-of-homelessness/nations-apart-experiences-of-single-homeless-people-across-great-britain-2014/>]. Doing more to prevent youth homelessness would make significant progress towards making sure no one is left without a home, as well as to meeting the government's commitment to ending rough sleeping:

2. The Prime Minister should act on his commitment to launch a review into the causes of rough sleeping. This should include a specific focus on young people and make recommendations that would reduce other forms of homelessness, as well as rough sleeping.
3. MHCLG should fund and evaluate a national youth homelessness prevention programme, including preventative family mediation services and homelessness intervention in schools and colleges.



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With support from



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