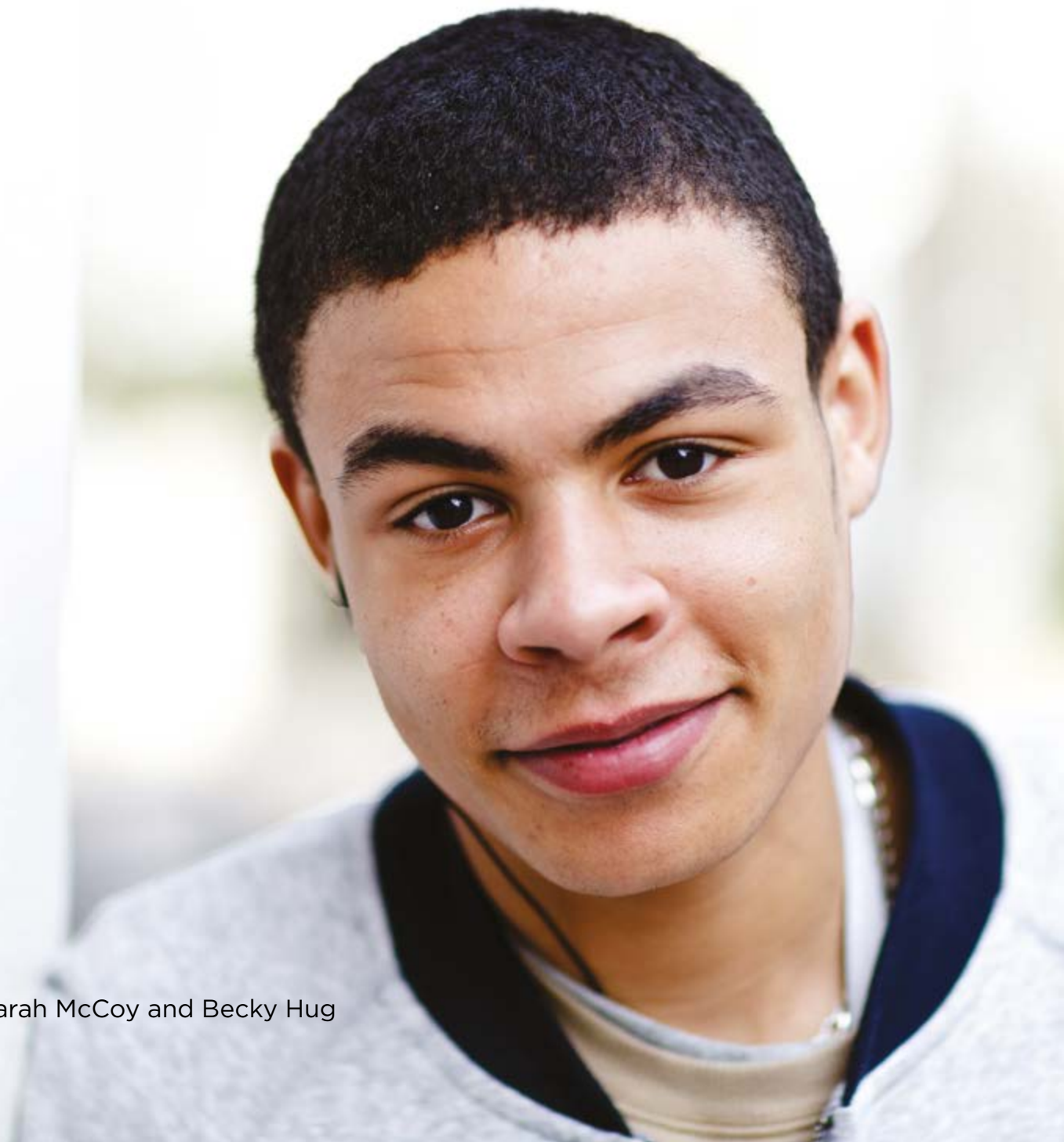DEPAUL
Homelessness has no place

# DANGER ZONES
# AND STEPPING STONES

*Young people's experiences of hidden homelessness*

By Sarah McCoy and Becky Hug

# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

# FOREWORD

**It is 30 years since the seminal report, Faith in the City, on what were then called 'Urban Priority Areas' revealed the depths of poverty facing our nation at that time:**

*"In a competition for a scarce resource it is the poor who will lose. An increasing number are forced to resort to cheap lodging houses, or to large institutional hostels which date back to the Victorian period and are due for closure, though replacement has been slow and inadequate. Some sleep rough. The numbers are unknown because no one has a responsibility to record them. Many are 'hidden homeless', continually moving between friends and relatives in search of something permanent."*

*Faith in the City, 1989*

Now we are in a new century and much has changed. We have seen, for example, continued investment in hostel-type accommodation and, with 'no second night out', a transformation in the understanding of and approaches to rough sleeping. But what more do we know, and with what degree of greater intelligence do we approach the issue of hidden homelessness?

This brief but in-depth study looks into the experiences of young people who have known what it is to be homeless and yet hidden from sight. The revelations contained here are both shocking and remarkable. Remarkable: because the resilience and determination of young people facing the horrors of no place to call home is met consistently with a determination to find a way out. Shocking: because the experiences of vulnerability, fear and, in some cases, hurt and harm feature all too frequently in these true stories.

Depaul has been delivering 'Nightstop' now for over a decade, a community-based solution to the hidden homeless. Through the extraordinary effort of an army of volunteers across the country, thousands of young people have avoided the pitfalls of the survival strategies outlined in this report. We still do not know enough of what makes a young person vulnerable to risk when resorting to what professionals before this report might have called 'sofa surfing'; but this report begins to look at this in greater depth.

I believe this is the start of a new debate on hidden homelessness. I ask all of our colleagues, in government, in the voluntary sector and in our academic communities to join that debate. Together I believe we can make the United Kingdom a place where no young person has to sleep in an unsafe place. Indeed, with a concerted effort we should aim to end homelessness for the young altogether.

**Martin Houghton-Brown
Chief Executive, Depaul UK**

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

**Depaul works to provide safe places for young people experiencing, or at risk of, homelessness. Between periods of stable accommodation, young people experience varied, complex and sometimes unsafe living arrangements. This report examines these arrangements to find more appropriate policy and service solutions to the problems posed by hidden homelessness.**

The temporary living experiences of young people are often referred to using the term 'sofa surfing'. This research looks at how this phrase is understood by young people, practitioners and researchers in the field of homelessness.

In this report, Depaul also proposes a new model, **Danger Zones and Stepping Stones**, for understanding temporary living arrangements and makes a series of recommendations – calling on policymakers and practitioners to improve the help offered to young people experiencing homelessness and for further research to be undertaken.

## Sofa Surfing

'Sofa surfing' was found to be an umbrella term encompassing a number of different living arrangements, with no universal definition.

There were notable differences in how 'sofa surfing' was defined in the literature and by young people. We found that young people do not commonly use the term

'sofa surfing'. While most were aware of the phrase, those who used it appeared to do so to "speak the language" of the professionals rather than because it accurately described their experiences.

Importantly, some of the young people interviewed felt use of the term 'sofa surfing' could lead to the risks of living in temporary accommodation being underestimated. This report recommends 'temporary living arrangements' as a more neutral and less-loaded term for experiences between periods of stable accommodation.

## Temporary Living

Depaul's research found that the breakdown of family relationships was the most common reason for loss of stable accommodation. Young people also fell into temporary living arrangements after choosing to leave home because they had failed to maintain tenancies in supported or independent accommodation. These temporary living arrangements included staying with friends, with family members, in large hostels, in bed and breakfast lodgings (B&Bs), in other council-commissioned accommodation and with volunteer hosts such as those who make Depaul's Nightstop possible.

Our research found young people's experiences varied hugely from arrangement to arrangement, depending on: the practical circumstances of the accommodation, with whom they had stayed, the likelihood that they would

be exposed to harmful influences, and the level of support to which they had access.

Staying with friends was found to be the most diverse category of temporary living. Young people described a huge spectrum of experiences in this way, ranging from relatively safe arrangements with close family friends or the parents of school friends to those that are potentially very dangerous such all-night parties or staying with near-strangers. Other categories, such as staying with family or in B&Bs, also encompassed a wide range of experiences – both positive and negative.

However, the young people interviewed reported no positive experiences of staying in generic hostel accommodation. They said they were housed with much older residents and exposed to negative influences such as drugs and alcohol. "It's mad, total madness," said one young interviewee.

These experiences support suggestions that a reduction in longer-stay supported accommodation for young people can result in them being housed in generic services unsuited to their needs.

The techniques that young people used to find temporary accommodation varied. Their decisions appeared to be heavily influenced by their sensitivity to the stigma surrounding homelessness, perceptions of how successful the various options would be and the sense of urgency and desperation they felt when looking for accommodation.

All these factors were found to draw young people away from accessing organised services and towards living arrangements that could be dangerous.

While some temporary living arrangements were good for young people, many were found to be harmful. Physical effects included fatigue due to poor and irregular sleep patterns, weight loss, and health issues connected to drugs and alcohol.

Significant risks to young people's personal safety also exist because some living arrangements, for example staying with strangers, could leave them vulnerable to mistreatment and exploitation. "They could have done anything to me," recalled one young person.

Psychologically, young people were affected by the stress of living in someone else's home and the associated lack of privacy and also by a strong sense of being a burden on their hosts. These feelings had a clear impact on young people's self-esteem. Young people often said that temporary living made them feel "worthless" or "pathetic". Evidence was found of young people moving away from potentially beneficial circumstances to avoid "putting out" the people accommodating them. This led to situations where they felt less of a burden, but were given little support to move into more stable accommodation, leaving them trapped in temporary living.

The research found some arrangements were less harmful and more likely to help young people out of homelessness than others. Supportive environments were most likely to be provided by smaller accommodation projects, or by friends or family, where: there was a strong relationship between the young person and those accommodating them; the host cared about the young person and their future; the young person did not feel like a burden and was willing to accept help; and the host supported the young person – practically and through knowledge and advice.

## The Danger Zones or Stepping Stones Model

As a result of this research, Depaul has created Danger Zones or Stepping Stones, a new model for assessing young people's circumstances. The aim of the model is to support improved decision-making and prevent judgment based on inappropriate assumptions of what phrases such as 'sofa surfing' or 'staying with friends' mean.

Young people's circumstances are assessed according to the level of risk that they will experience harm as a result of their temporary living arrangements, and the capacity of the people accommodating them to support them out of homelessness.

If this model was widely adopted, we believe it would lead to more effective prioritisation of cases, and more young people receiving the help they need.

The model places temporary living arrangements into one of four categories:

**Danger Zones**: Arrangements that pose a high degree of risk to young people's safety and/or wellbeing with hosts who have very little capacity or willingness to help young people out of homelessness.

**Minefield**: While hosts of arrangements in this category have the skills, knowledge and willingness to support young people, the level of risk is so high that young people will usually experience harm and/or fail to escape temporary living through these routes.

**Storm Shelters**: Arrangements in which young people are relatively safe from harm, but their hosts have limited capacity to help them out of temporary living.

**Stepping Stones**: Arrangements in which young people are kept safe from harm and are supported by their hosts out of temporary living and towards more stable accommodation.

## Recommendations

**Depaul UK calls for policymakers and commissioners to:**

- **Increase the provision of preventative services, such as family mediation and short respite accommodation**, so in cases where homelessness can be prevented, families are supported to work through tension and conflict.

- **Ensure an adequate mix of accommodation services are provided and there is sufficient young person-specific accommodation**, to avoid young people being exposed to negative influences, such as drugs and alcohol, that could prolong their homelessness journeys.

- **Increase the provision of emergency accommodation that also supports young people out of homelessness**, such as Depaul's community-based Nightstop service.

- **Take steps to reduce the stigma of homelessness** by instigating awareness-raising activities targeted at young audiences, particularly in areas where there are high levels of socio-economic deprivation and/or homelessness is prevalent.

- **Increase the capacity of potential temporary living hosts to support young people out of homelessness** with activities to raise awareness of: the signs of homelessness, the housing sector and options available to young people and local charitable and statutory support services.

**Depaul UK calls for services working with young people to:**

- **Avoid reliance on ambiguous terms when assessing young people's circumstances** and instead evaluate temporary living arrangements on an individual basis according to the level of risk they pose to the young people concerned, and the likelihood that they will receive the necessary support to help them out of homelessness.

- **Use the proposed model to identify young people in urgent need of support** (i.e. living in high risk and low support temporary environments) and prioritise them for crisis accommodation.

**Recommendations for future research**

Following this exploratory study, Depaul has the following recommendations for future research:

- The current study took into account the views of 18 young people, all with experience of temporary living. As the term 'sofa surfing' is used in the public domain, further research is required to explore understanding of the term among other audiences, including the general public and policy-makers.

- Further research to explore understanding of other terms used within the sector (such as 'homelessness', 'rough sleeping' or 'stable accommodation') would also be welcomed.

- Quantitative research on young people's experiences of temporary living should avoid the use of ambiguous terms such as 'sofa surfing' to ensure accuracy of findings.

- This research suggests that young people are most likely to progress into stable accommodation from temporary living arrangements that present low levels of risk, and where those accommodating them have a high capacity to provide support. To support or refute this hypothesis, further research is needed to evaluate the effectiveness of Stepping Stone accommodation (e.g. smaller accommodation projects) as a means of helping young people out of temporary living and preventing statutory homelessness.

- Further qualitative research focusing specifically on young people's experiences of temporary living should be undertaken. Key areas for exploration should include:

  - the prevalence of different types of temporary living arrangement

  - young people's sensitivities to the stigma around homelessness and how this affects their choices in crisis

  - other barriers to young people accessing support from organised services (charitable or statutory)

  - how the threat of homelessness affects young people's perceptions of risk in accessing temporary accommodation

  - the relative effectiveness of congregate (hostel-type) emergency accommodation and non-congregate (e.g. Nightstop and other community hosting models) emergency accommodation for young people

  - the long-term effects of temporary living on young people's mental health

  - the support young people need to move away from temporary living and towards stable accommodation (i.e. what constitutes a genuine Stepping Stone for young people)

A full understanding of the nature and level of young people's reliance on temporary living arrangements is needed before we can truly start to provide effective support to those experiencing, or at risk of, homelessness.

# INTRODUCTION

A key part of Depaul UK's work focuses on providing safe places for young people experiencing, or at risk of, homelessness. Evidence from Depaul UK's services suggests that experiences of temporary accommodation, between periods of secure housing, are an increasing part of young people's journeys on the edges of homelessness, and that these experiences are exceptionally varied and complex.

Within the homelessness sector many terms and labels are used to categorise people's experiences and devise plans for support. One of these terms is 'sofa surfing'. It is unclear however, whether the terms and labels we use adequately describe experiences of temporary living, or whether they are commonly understood.

This research investigates understanding of the term 'sofa surfing' among young people, practitioners and researchers in the field of homelessness. It also explores the complex nature of what we have termed 'temporary living arrangements' to increase understanding of young people's experiences across the sector. Depaul hopes this will enable the provision of more suitable services to those in need and the development of more appropriate policy solutions.

**"It makes you feel horrible, it makes you feel worthless, you're just relying on other people all the time."**

*(Simon, 19, North West)*

# METHODOLOGY

The research on which this report is based comprised two workstreams:

## Rapid Evidence Review

A Rapid Evidence Review (RER) was undertaken focusing on the term 'sofa surfing'. Internet searches were carried out covering academic literature and grey literature published after and including the year 2000 to gather evidence regarding how 'sofa surfing' has been used in policy, research and in the public domain. The key findings of the RER are summarised below.

## Semi-structured interviews with young people

The findings of the RER informed the development of a question schedule that was used to interview young people about their experiences of temporary living and their understanding of 'sofa surfing'. This schedule was used alongside a specially designed timeline tool that enabled researchers and young people to record young people's journeys in a pictorial map. The purpose of this tool was to aid both discussion and analysis by providing structure to the often highly chaotic and complex situations that young people described. The full schedule of questions and an example of the timeline tool can be found in Appendices A and B which are published online (the website address for the appendices is on page 54 of this report).

Interviews were carried out in August and September 2015 with 18 young people aged 16 to 23 from Depaul UK projects in Oldham, Sheffield, Whitley Bay, London and Gravesend. The sample of young people was diverse in gender, age, ethnicity and background. Half (nine) of the young people interviewed were male and half were female; three were under 18 years of age, 11 were between 18 and 20 years old, and five were aged 21 years or older; 13 described themselves as white or white British and five were from minority ethnic backgrounds. For a full breakdown of sample demographics and details of how the sample was recruited, please see Appendices C and D.

Two researchers independently coded the interview data using a combination of inductive codes (which emerged from the data), and a priori codes (which emerged from the literature review and study objectives). Findings were then discussed and synthesised by the research team.

Where possible, to avoid influencing young people's responses during the interviews, the term 'sofa surfing' was avoided during the recruitment process. In a small number of cases, however, the term was used by local project teams when they invited young people to take part. Data from these particular young people in relation to their awareness and understanding of the term 'sofa surfing' were excluded from our analysis and have not influenced the findings presented.

Separate interviews were also carried out with two academic researchers working in the field of homelessness, Dr Kesia Reeve and Professor David Robinson, to gain further understanding of how the term 'sofa surfing' is used and their opinions of whether if it is a useful way to categorise young people's experiences. Their insights are included in this report.

## Ethical approval

To protect the interests of the young people involved, and the integrity of the research, Depaul formed an Ethics Committee to oversee this project. This comprised academic researchers from Bedfordshire and Heriot-Watt Universities, project managers working with young people from Depaul UK, a representative from the research team of the National Council for Voluntary Organisations (NCVO) and the Chief Executive of Depaul UK.

A crucial part of the Committee's role was to review the research methodology and all of the project documentation. This included an Ethical Statement; a Risk Assessment; a consent form that young people were asked to sign and a letter that was given to the young people following their interviews. These documents, as well as further details regarding the composition of the Ethics Committee and its Terms of Reference, can be found in Appendices D to H.

## Key findings of the Rapid Evidence Review

The key findings of the Rapid Evidence Review that were used to shape the primary element of this research were:

- **There appears to be no common definition of the term 'sofa surfing' in academic circles or elsewhere**

The term 'sofa surfing' is commonly used across the sector, by researchers and service providers alike, as if it has a clear and agreed definition. However, the review found notable inconsistencies regarding how it is defined within literature. For example, some studies define 'sofa surfing'

as something that takes place with friends or relatives (Clarke et al. 2015), and others as something that takes place with friends (Cloake and Millborne 2006).

For some researchers 'sofa surfing' encompasses "a range of unsafe sleeping environments" including "on a night bus" (Coram Voice 2014: 21), whereas others use a narrower definition, describing sleeping on a night bus as a form of 'rough sleeping', separate and distinct from 'sofa surfing' (Clarke et al 2015). These findings highlighted a potential weakness in the existing evidence base where 'sofa surfing' is used to estimate the prevalence of temporary living (or hidden homelessness), and a clear need for further research into whether the complexities of young people's experiences can be more meaningfully categorised.

- **Characteristics of 'sofa surfing' are varied with some common themes**

Despite the inconsistencies discussed above, some common themes were found regarding how 'sofa surfing' was understood within the literature. 'Sofa surfing' was frequently characterised by: impermanence of accommodation and frequent movement from place to place (Shaw et al. 2008) and/or not paying formal rent (Goldberg et al. 2005). It was sometimes said to be marked by an exchange of domestic services (Reeve and Batty 2011) or sex (Harris and Robinson 2007), and was linked to a lack of access to statutory services (Reeve and Batty 2011). Most definitions of 'sofa surfing' provided in the literature included one or more of these descriptors.

- **Use of the term 'sofa surfing' is sometimes contradictory in non-academic contexts**

The review found 'sofa surfing' is used in non-academic contexts to describe a diverse range of experiences, not all related to homelessness. While some sources used 'sofa surfing' in a similar way to academics, i.e. to denote a form of homelessness and highlight the potential harms of temporary living (such as a Channel 4 blog article

by Ciaran Jenkins), others used the term to describe more positive experiences characterised by a sense of choice and freedom. For example, a Daily Telegraph article that focused on 'sofa surfing' among older professionals suggested it is a lifestyle choice made to facilitate living in the country while working in the city, and websites such as Couchsurfing describe 'couchsurfing' as an enabler of travel and social activity.

- **There is very little existing evidence of young people's experiences of 'sofa surfing' and temporary living**

The research suggests that people first encounter experiences termed 'sofa surfing' early in their homelessness journey and at a young age (Coram Voice 2014; McLoughlin 2012). However, most of the research found in the review explored the 'sofa surfing' experiences of older people (sometimes recalling experiences earlier in their homelessness journey). When research did draw on young people's experiences of 'sofa surfing' and temporary living, this was usually as part of a study about something broader, with 'sofa surfing' tangential rather than the focus of the research (Stone 2010).

Thus there is a need for research that explores 'sofa surfing' and temporary living directly with young people to better understand their particular experiences. Given the potential harms of 'sofa surfing' that sources have highlighted, such as: strains on relationships (Coram Voice. 2014: 21); damage to health (Robinson and Coward 2003); exposure to dangerous environments (Robinson and Coward 2003) and sexual exploitation (Harris and Robinson 2007), it is particularly important to understand if similar, or indeed different, harms are posed to younger "sofa surfers".

- **It is not clear if 'sofa surfing' is a term used by young people to characterise their own experiences**

Terms such as 'sofa surfing' are used on a daily basis to categorise young people's experiences and make decisions about their needs. As such, it is important that there is a common understanding of these terms among researchers and practitioners and also that we understand how young people themselves define and use them. The review, however, identified a gap in the evidence base in relation to how young people use and define the term 'sofa surfing', which needed to be addressed.

## Conclusions and implications for the primary phase of this research

The evidence gathered in the RER indicates that use and understanding of the term 'sofa surfing' is inconsistent in both academic and non-academic circles, and that there is a gap in evidence regarding how young people themselves define 'sofa surfing' and whether it is a term they would use to describe their experiences.

Furthermore, it is suggested that the term may inadequately portray the complexities of temporary living experiences. Indeed, Reeve and Batty (2011) argue that the term ['sofa surfers'] does not accurately depict, nor fully capture the range of ways in which homeless people rely on accommodation provided by other people. The experience of 'sofa surfing' is more wide ranging and nuanced" (p.28).

In addition, as also highlighted by Watts et al (2015), while some studies have explored the practice termed 'sofa surfing', including its associated harms, few have focused on the experiences of young people, which may be very different to those of their older counterparts.

In light of these findings, the primary element of the research was designed to help answer the following questions:

1 **Do young people use the term 'sofa surfing', what do they understand it to mean, and do they think it is useful?**

2 **How do young people fall out of secure accommodation?**

3 **What different types of temporary accommodation are young people experiencing?**

4 **How do young people access different types of temporary accommodation and what influences the decisions they make?**

5 **What are the practical realities of temporary living?**

6 **What are the effects of living in temporary accommodation on young people, both in the short and long term?**

7 **How do young people move back into stable accommodation and what resources and support do they need to do so?**

8 **Can the experiences of young people be meaningfully categorised in a way that will help the homelessness sector provide them with relevant and effective support?**

In this report, we attempt to answer these questions by drawing on data from the interviews conducted with young people, and supporting evidence, where appropriate.

**"She kind of used to encourage me to take the drugs she was taking, like cocaine and stuff like that.... I was thinking that I should take this because I'm in her house, she wants me to take it, and maybe she'll have me stay for a bit longer if I do what she wants me to do."**

*(Grace, 19, South East)*

# DO YOUNG PEOPLE USE THE TERM 'SOFA SURFING'? WHAT DO THEY UNDERSTAND IT TO MEAN? AND DO THEY THINK IT IS USEFUL?

## Not a term used by young people: "I've heard it with professionals, but that's about it."

Before the introduction of the term by researchers, six of the 14 interviewees whose comments were analysed for this section had mentioned 'sofa surfing' spontaneously during their interview to describe their experiences. When prompted, only one young person said they had not come across the term before.

While this suggests that awareness of the term is high among young people, and that some would describe their experiences as 'sofa surfing', it does not tell us whether they are using the term because they feel it is an appropriate description of their experiences or because of external influences. After further investigation, evidence was gathered to suggest that 'sofa surfing' is a term used more by practitioners, academics and the media than by young people themselves.

The young people we spoke to told us the term was used by "older people" and professionals rather than by their peers, and they had heard it used on television.

*"My parents, they would say 'Are you going out sofa surfing?' if I was to stay out during the week."*

*(Grace, 19, South East)*

*"I've never heard it, well I've heard it with professionals but that's about it."*

*(Jon, 18, North West)*

*"None of my mates use [the term] but, when I normally watch TV about the homeless and all that stuff… I actually hear it a lot on there."*

*(Reece, 17, North West)*

The majority of the young people involved in the research said they had first heard the term used by professionals, usually when they had engaged with some sort of support service. Several recounted experiences of services categorising their experiences as 'sofa surfing' either when they presented themselves at a service or while receiving support. For instance, one young person said they first heard the term when they were given a support worker:

*"I remember her saying, 'you don't want to be sofa surfing like the rest of them'."*

*(Amelia, 16, North East)*

While some of the young people interviewed described their experiences as 'sofa surfing', there was some suggestion that this was to speak the language of professionals. For example, one young person used the term having been advised by his uncle that it would improve his chances of receiving support:

*"I don't know, I just think it's easier, you get an extra point, do you know what I mean, for being a sofa surfer."*

*(Josh, 23, North East)*

## No universal definition among young people: "I think everyone's got their view of what it means"

The young people we interviewed provided further evidence that the term 'sofa surfing' is inconsistently understood. There were differences between the young people in terms of what experiences they felt could be classified as 'sofa surfing'. For some, an experience could only be described as 'sofa surfing' if it involved sleeping on an actual sofa, but for others the term was less specific and encompassed other temporary living experiences involving a variety of sleeping arrangements.

The latter of these standpoints reflects the views of the researchers interviewed, who felt the term 'sofa surfing' does not adequately depict the range of physical situations it has come to define – Robinson and Reeve recalled interviewing young people who had stayed not just on a sofa but on mattresses on the floor, with some even having their own bed.

Some of the young people felt that whether an experience could be classified as 'sofa surfing' was less about the sleeping arrangements that were involved, but determined by the identity of the host (for some, staying with family could never be 'sofa surfing', but for others it could). Other factors that influenced young people's decisions about what could or could not be described as 'sofa surfing' included: the duration of stay, whether money or goods are exchanged, and the level of choice involved in the decision to stay in a particular place.

When asked whether or not they felt there was a common understanding of the term 'sofa surfing', most of the young people we spoke to said there was not, believing that people's understanding of the term differs quite considerably.

*"I think they use it for different experiences, each person's different aren't they?"*

*(Josh, 23, North East)*

*"I think everyone's just got their own views of it."*

*(Amelia, 16, North East)*

This again reflected the views of the researchers we interviewed, who did not believe there is an agreed definition of the term among young people they have interviewed for their own research projects.

Nevertheless, as there were among the academic descriptions we reviewed, some common themes emerged in how the term was defined by the young people we spoke to. It was generally felt that 'sofa surfing' was characterised by **impermanence**, a feeling of **invading space of others** and a sense of **losing control** over the situation. For the young people, 'sofa surfing' is when "you've got nowhere else to go" and where there is an understanding that stays are temporary and permitted only at the discretion of others.

Interestingly, if these conditions apply, some professional crisis accommodation services are considered to be 'sofa surfing' by young people. For example, one of the interviewees with experience of Depaul's Nightstop, where young people are offered a bed for the night by trained and vetted community volunteers, described the service as 'sofa surfing' because:

*"…even though it's like [an] organised thing, so it does feel a lot better than, I don't know, they are still randomers so even though you know that they've been trained and checked, it's still sofa surfing."*

*(Josh, 23, North East)*

## Risks can be underestimated: "It makes light of a serious situation"

Sofa surfing is an umbrella term that encompasses a wide range of living arrangements — both safe and very dangerous. In general, while young people could see the merits of having a term to describe a set of experiences that it would be difficult to categorise otherwise, they felt the term had a number of disadvantages.

Some felt that use of the term could lead to the **risks being underestimated**. This may be as a consequence of confusion regarding what the term means, or because of the actual phrase, which can sometimes appear light-hearted.

*"I don't think it's a very good term because [sofa surfing] doesn't always mean you have a sofa to sleep on... you could be on the floor or in someone's cupboard but you say to people 'sofa surfing', they just assume that you've got a sofa to sleep on but sometimes that's not the case..."*

*(Matthew, 22, South East)*

*"It sounds funny and makes light of a situation that is serious."*

*(Emma, 19, North East)*

Those we spoke to felt that the **stigma** around the term 'sofa surfing' may lead some young people to avoid describing their experiences in this way. One young person had experience of being made fun of when he admitted to 'sofa surfing', which made him less inclined to explain his situation to others. He implied that he preferred to be described using derogatory terms such as "lazy" and "unreliable" to being labelled as a 'sofa surfer'.

*"They just used to wind us up like 'Do you want to stay at Uncle Dave's?' and all that... it's pretty taboo, I didn't really talk about it much, so it's just put down as 'he's lazy' or 'he's very unreliable', that sort of thing, which I suppose I am."*

*(Josh, 23, North East)*

Having terminology that adequately describes young people's experiences was important to interviewees as they felt it was vital that wider society understood how it felt to be without secure accommodation. However, they struggled to suggest alternatives to the term 'sofa surfing', largely because they felt there were no words that could adequately portray the gravity of the situation:

*"To me there's no explanation, like you can't explain it because it's that horrible and it's that depressing."*

*(Sean, 18, North East)*

## Use of the phrase 'temporary living arrangements' in this report

The findings from the interviews with young people underline the findings of the Rapid Evidence Review that young people's experiences are "more wide-ranging and nuanced" (Reeve and Batty. 2011: 28) than the term 'sofa surfing' suggests. Given the wide variety of young people's experiences, and concerns that the term 'sofa surfing' may unhelpfully homogonise these experiences and, in some cases, make light of a serious situation, in this report we use the term **'temporary living arrangements'** to describe young people's experiences between periods of stable accommodation. This neutral phrase allows for a broader range of experiences to be discussed, and for a more nuanced exploration of the reality of young people's lives in these situations.

# HOW DO YOUNG PEOPLE FALL OUT OF SECURE ACCOMMODATION?

All the young people we spoke to had experience of falling out of stable accommodation and into more transient and temporary living arrangements. The reasons for these transitions were varied, but some common themes emerged.

## Relationship breakdown: "I got kicked out of my mum's"

The young people involved in this research were most likely to have found themselves in temporary living situations because of a **breakdown in family relationships.** This is in line with other research on the causes of youth homelessness such as Watts et al (2015) and Homeless Link (2015). Nearly half of the interviewees said tensions in their family home were the primary reason they lost stable accommodation. For one young person, it was their foster placement that broke down rather than relations with their birth family.

**Personality clashes** were frequently mentioned, as were issues such as **drug use** that caused conflict between young people and their parents.

*"Basically the reason why [Mum] kicked me out was because I was going through stopping smoking cannabis and I was going through stopping smoking as well. So obviously I had mood swings and [my mother's partner] couldn't put up with me."*

*(Christopher, 21, South East)*

While some young people were asked to leave their family home, others chose to do so to avoid the stress of family life. For more than one young person, the decision to leave was influenced by fear for their personal safety as they were subjected to **domestic abuse**.

*"Because [my Dad] was going out with this girl... and she kept beating me up for certain things that I'd do, like if I had a fag, she'd beat me up, or took something that weren't mine, she'd beat me up."*

*(Reece, 17, North West)*

There was evidence that more subtle forms of abuse may have also influenced young people's decisions to leave their family home. For example, one young person cited excessively controlling parents and a **lack of personal privacy** as the main reason he fell out of stable accommodation:

*"If I was there, I wasn't allowed to go to my room, I had to sit in the living room all day... there'd be no conversation in the room whatsoever... I wasn't allowed to have my bedroom door shut at night, just stupid little things that made me really unhappy. That's why I had to leave."*

*(Matthew, 22, South East)*

In some cases, periods of temporary living did not occur directly after young people left their family home, but after the **breakdown of other significant relationships**. For instance, one young person left home to move in with a friend,

but over a period of time the relationship deteriorated and he was forced to leave. He moved in with his father, but that arrangement also broke down, leaving him with nowhere secure to go. Another young person had moved in with his girlfriend, with whom he had had a child, but the relationship failed and, consequently, he found himself homeless.

## Searching for freedom: "I just thought it'd be better out of there"

Some interviewees said that they had initially moved out of their family home because they **wanted more freedom**. However, most had found that life out of the family home was not what they had expected or necessarily better for them. Reflecting on their own or others' decisions to leave, interviewees agreed that moving out of the family home without the resources or maturity to live independently can be a mistake, as long as the family environment they are leaving is a safe one.

*"I think some young people just leave home because they want the freedom, not because it's better for themselves and that's where they go wrong."*

*(Abigail, 18, South East)*

*"Some people don't know what to do with their freedom, they view it as freedom but it's not…"*

*(Kayla, 19, North East)*

## Difficulties maintaining tenancies in hostel accommodation: "I couldn't pay my rent so they evicted me."

Several of the young people described difficulties maintaining hostel accommodation and felt this had pushed them further away from housing stability. Difficulties were commonly the result of **failure to pay rent or service charges** or the **negative influence of other hostel residents.**

The young people we spoke to with experience of living in hostels understood that they were obliged to pay rent in order to do so, and indeed most young people in these situations would be entitled to housing benefit. They felt, however, that consideration for their individual circumstances was lacking at these hostels, and that if they experienced difficulties paying monies owed, there was limited support provided.

The young people interviewed tended to have stayed in hostels for homeless people of all ages, rather than ones specifically for young people. This meant they were surrounded by older people who were further into their homelessness journeys and often struggling with addictions. One young person told us how her experience of hostel living was the first time she had been exposed to drugs and alcohol. She described how she was deeply influenced by these surroundings and how it led her to adopt dangerous patterns of behaviour.

*"[There was] drugs and stuff, drinking constantly, I saw some awful things there… I started taking drugs and stuff just because everyone else was doing it around me."*

*(Kayla, 19, North East)*

Several of the young people interviewed said they had moved out of supported housing because of the people with whom they had been housed. Some had been evicted on the grounds of their behaviour, which they said had been influenced by those around them. Others had chosen to leave because they disliked their fellow residents or wanted to avoid negative environments.

For example, one young person moved out of a small housing project because the people living there made him angry and he was worried he would lash out at them, making his situation worse. Another felt intimidated by the volatile environment he had found himself in and decided to leave as a result.

*"I moved into this hostel and that was horrendous as well, just the people and stuff, it just didn't work out, there was just so much drama, you know when you're involved in these people who [have] real bad addictions and stuff like that, it's mad, total madness, so it didn't really work out, I had to sort of flee the town and that was the end of that."*

*(Josh, 23, North East)*

Experiences such as these substantiate the suggestion that the level of provision of longer-stay supported accommodation for young people has fallen and that this can result in young people accessing "generic services which are unlikely to be able to cater for their needs" (Homeless Link. Young and Homeless 2015: 28).

## Gradual transitions

What is striking about many of the journeys into temporary living described by the young people interviewed is that the move away from stable accommodation was not always the result of a conscious decision or a specific, identifiable incident. Instead, transitions – particularly when they were from the family home – were gradual, starting with young people staying for a night or two at a friend's house after they felt conditions had become challenging with their parents. One young person described a transition into temporary living that had started several years before he felt he had officially left home:

*"Because I was never happy, when I was at school, I used to get up in the mornings, go to my friend's house, put my school uniform on at my friend's house, eat breakfast at my friend's house, go to school with my friend and then her mum would pick us up, I'd go back to theirs, have dinner… sometimes I wouldn't even go back to my mum's, I'd end up staying [at my friend's] because I didn't want to go back there."*

*(Matthew, 22, South East)*

This shows that the line between stable and unstable accommodation is blurred and there is often a considerable amount of time during which young people can be supported to rebuild family relationships or, if it is more appropriate to do so, move on to more secure accommodation independently.

# WHICH DIFFERENT TYPES OF TEMPORARY ACCOMMODATION ARE YOUNG PEOPLE EXPERIENCING?

Terms such as 'sofa surfing' are used to describe a diverse range of temporary living experiences, from staying with friends and family to using professional crisis accommodation services. In the context of this report, we have considered any form of accommodation that is not stable and permanent to be a temporary living arrangement. The most common categories of accommodation described by the young people interviewed for this research are described in this section.

## Staying with friends

Almost all the young people who were interviewed said they had stayed with friends at some point when they were without stable accommodation. However, with the rise of Facebook and other forms of social media, the concept of 'friends' has become increasingly ill defined, particularly among young people. In line with this, the young people we spoke to used the phrase 'staying with friends' when describing a wide range of experiences.

Some young people stayed with very **close friends**, often those they had known throughout their childhood. If these situations occurred at a young age, this usually meant the young people stayed in the family homes of their friends where they were supported by their friends' parents and, in some cases, "treated as one of the family". These were often very positive experiences, where young people were made to feel welcome and comfortable.

*"Yeah, she's basically my mum, that's what I class her as, I call her 'mum' and stuff like that because I've known him [the friend] like 11 years, so it's just family basically, that's what I class it as."*

(Sean, 18, North East)

The young people whose temporary living experiences started at a young age described staying with their **school friends' families**. In some cases, these were close friends, but not always. Sometimes the young people had stayed with people they knew from school with whom they had forged temporary friendships to secure accommodation for a night. In these circumstances, the school friends and parents who were hosting the young people were unlikely to be aware of their precarious housing situations.

The assumption is often made within housing services and elsewhere that for young people 'staying with friends' is a safe alternative to sleeping rough. In light of this, it is important to note that the young people interviewed used this phrase to describe situations where they were in fact **staying with strangers.**

*"I've stayed in a house that I found with a random person that I met two days previous, they could have done anything to me or I could have done anything to them, they could have done something to me and I still don't know! It's true, anything could have happened."*

(Matthew, 22, South East)

*"A couple of times, I've stayed with people I didn't know very well, like I would stay where I could... it didn't matter where."*

(Craig, 20, South East)

This is in line with Reeve and Batty's (2011) research which found that while homeless people often stayed with friends well known to them, they also "often have to rely on acquaintances, people they hardly know, or friends of friends" in circumstances where their safety "cannot be guaranteed" (p. 29).

While they appeared aware of the risks this involved at the time of their interviews, there was evidence that young people's perception of risk — and the level of risk they were willing to tolerate — changes when they are faced with homelessness. This can lead them into potentially dangerous situations they would not have entertained previously.

*"After a while, things got really bad and my mindset changed. Someone could say to me, 'you can stay here' and I didn't even know them. I'd stay there and I wouldn't care because it was somewhere to stay."*

(Craig, 20, South East)

Young people's desperation to find somewhere to stay led them into a range of potentially dangerous situations that if not pressed they would describe as 'staying with friends'. For instance, one young person told us that she had accompanied a friend of hers to "go and chill at some of her boys' houses". Initially she had been OK with this, but by the early hours of the morning she had started to feel uncomfortable and wanted to remove herself from the situation. She explained that she had felt so vulnerable staying with men she didn't know that she had preferred to wander the streets alone until morning.

The most extreme account of a potentially very dangerous situation that was initially described as 'staying with friends' was provided by a young woman who described staying, along with many other young girls, at "some man's house" from the age of 13.

While she was clearly very vulnerable in this situation, at the time she believed that they were taking advantage of him.

*"It's basically someone... you know he likes you and you play it with him but he don't do anything to you... we just used to make him spend his money basically... that's how you have to work with him for you to be able to stay there."*

(Bethan, 21, South East)

Now in relatively stable accommodation and several years older, the young woman looked back on the experience with some unease. With hindsight she could see how it had been a dangerous place to stay and felt lucky that nothing serious had happened to her as a result. Other young people also looked back on decisions they had made and reflected that the risk involved was higher than they had considered it to be at the time:

*"Well I've always been quite vocal, like I'm quite good at talking to people, so I would tell them, 'you need to get away from me, you need to get away from me now', but I suppose if I was a bit more timid and allowed them to just overwhelm like they were trying to do, then they probably could have done whatever they wanted."*

(Grace, 19, South East)

These experiences show that the phrase 'staying with friends' encapsulates a huge variety of experiences. Some are very safe and can be extremely positive for young people, but others pose a great deal of risk to young people's physical and mental wellbeing. If we are to support young people away from potentially dangerous situations and towards stable accommodation, assumptions that 'staying with friends' is necessarily a safe alternative to rough sleeping need to be challenged, and the complexities of the category need to be thoroughly understood.

## Staying with family

It is often assumed that staying with family members is low risk in the context of temporary living. However, the young people we spoke to described a variety of experiences within this category. Several were far from positive, and some pushed them further into instability and homelessness.

One young man reported being "in good shape and good health" before moving to another city to stay temporarily with his uncle. It soon became apparent that his uncle was a heavy user of drugs and alcohol, and as a result of this influence, the young man started using hard drugs himself. His mental health suffered and his living arrangements broke down, leading to a six-week period of rough sleeping.

*"[Staying with my uncle] was quite difficult. He had a dealer living in the house and it wasn't like cannabis, it was hard-core drugs... I had a complete mental breakdown after that like and I kicked off, I was homeless."*

*(Josh, 23, North East)*

Where relationships with family members were weak, young people reported challenging experiences that also pushed them further from stability. For example, one young person left his childhood home to stay with his biological father with whom he had spent very little time previously. As they barely knew each other the situation became strained, and after a few months he decided to leave. With nowhere to go, he was also forced to sleep rough and turned to petty crime.

*"I lived with [my Dad] for a few months, but it didn't work out so I decided to leave one night... I was out on the streets after that, just getting nicked, trying to like just do bad stuff I shouldn't have been doing, you know, like getting myself in the wrong trouble."*

*(Craig, 20, South East)*

In some cases staying with family members was stressful for young people and resulted in the permanent severance of family ties. For example, one young person had fallen out with her grandmother, who had allowed her to stay in a spare room, because of disagreements over contributing to bills. At the time of her interview, the young person told us she had not spoken to her grandmother since the incident and did not expect to again.

Interviewees did report positive experiences of staying with family that helped them to take steps towards stable accommodation. These tended to involve family members who were willing and able to support the young people, and with whom they had strong relationships. For example, one young person stayed with their aunt on occasion, describing her as "the family person to go to in a crisis". While this aunt lacked the physical space to accommodate the young person on a permanent basis, she supported her to access statutory homelessness services. Another young person had a similar experience with his grandmother who had been responsible for making contact with Depaul on his behalf. This led to him securing the accommodation that he had been living in for several months by the time of his interview.

This variety of experiences suggests that the category of 'staying with family' can be as complex as 'staying with friends'. While some experiences were positive and helped young people into secure accommodation, others were stressful and pushed them more deeply into homelessness. Whether 'staying with family' is likely to be a positive and transformative experience appears to be largely determined by family members' capacity to support young people emotionally and the strength of their relationship with them. These factors seem to have a greater bearing on outcomes for young people than the ability of their host to provide a physical space for them to stay.

## Large hostels and refuges

As mentioned above, several of the young people we spoke to had experience of staying in large hostels or refuges as part of their temporary living journey. This was usually as a result of having been placed in these services after contacting statutory services for support.

From our sample, there were **no examples of positive experiences of larger hostels** recounted. Instead, young people spoke of being exposed to negative influences, such as drugs and alcohol, and of a lack of adequate support. There were some graphic descriptions of what it was like to live in these hostels, which sounded far from suitable for young people.

*"I couldn't even walk out my room without shoes or socks on because there could be needles or something all over the hostel."*

*(Jon, 18, North West)*

*"It's just like a massive hostel but it's got, like, the people there were more rough, they're a lot older... most people that are in there are like ex-druggies, alcoholics and stuff like that."*

*(Carly, 19, Yorkshire and the Humber)*

One young person also highlighted that living in larger hostels can be difficult for young people to sustain financially. While housing benefit should cover basic rent, there are often additional service charges that young people can struggle to pay without a reliable source of income. Moreover, if for some reason housing benefit is not in place, young people can accumulate large levels of debt very quickly, compounding their reliance on the homelessness sector.

Some of the young people who stayed in hostels said they had been offered some support by hostel staff. However, this seemed to be fairly light-touch and was viewed negatively. In particular, there was a sense that hostel workers were unwilling to listen to young people or to be flexible to their individual circumstances when it came to, for example, paying money that was owed on time. This perception may be linked to cuts in local authority funding, which have inevitably resulted in pressures on staff time and a reduction in support hours available in hostels.

Across the board, the time the young people interviewed had spent in larger hostels and refuges appeared to be very troubling. While they had a roof over their head, these experiences were damaging to the young people both emotionally and, in some cases, physically. As such, those who were not evicted tended to leave such environments of their own accord, even if their only alternative was sleeping rough.

## B&Bs and other council-commissioned short-term accommodation

Relatively few of the young people interviewed had experience of staying in B&Bs or other short-term accommodation commissioned by their local authorities. This may reflect recent efforts within the housing sector to avoid placing young people in such accommodation in response to evidence to suggest that it is unsuitable for their needs (House of Commons Education Select Committee 2014).

While the evidence base paints a largely negative picture of B&Bs as a form of temporary accommodation for young people, opinions among those interviewed were mixed, with some young people speaking positively about their experiences and others less so.

Rather than contradicting existing evidence, this gives weight to the finding that young people's temporary living experiences are complex and difficult to categorise. Even within the relatively distinct category of B&Bs, there is considerable variation, with some environments more suitable than others. On the whole, whether or not the placements were successful appeared to be dependent on: the young person's level of maturity and their ability to live

independently without external support, the physical conditions of the B&B, and the strength and nature of young people's relationships with those around them.

While one young person described a B&B he had stayed in as "the best place I ever, ever lived in my whole life", it should be noted that this was largely because he got on so well with the people around him when he had previously been subjected to bullying and abuse. There were no examples of such experiences helping young people to progress in their lives or take steps towards stable accommodation.

## Smaller accommodation services for young people

Depaul provides supported accommodation that is exclusively for young people in projects that typically house no more than 20 residents at any one time. Although young people are able to stay in projects like Depaul's for a considerable amount of time (up to around two years), we have included them as a type of temporary living arrangement in the context of this report because the accommodation provided is not permanent. Instead, the intention is to work with young people while they are living in the projects to prepare them for independent living.

All but two of the young people we spoke to were living in small Depaul accommodation projects at the time of their interview. It is possible that young people's comments were influenced to some degree by the fact they were speaking to Depaul staff. However, attitudes towards the type of accommodation Depaul provides was resoundingly positive.

Despite the transient nature of their stay, the young people we spoke to felt more secure in Depaul accommodation than they had at other stages of their temporary living journeys. This was partially because the projects they were staying in were for the exclusive use of young people, and either staffed on a 24-hour basis or strictly supervised. This, for the large part, protects young people from exposure to the

negative influences that are so widespread in larger establishments. The young people we spoke to described the atmosphere in their projects as generally "calm" and "easy going".

This sense of security also appeared to be related to the fact the majority of the young people spoke highly of, and had built strong relationships with, project staff. One young person described how he felt both physically and emotionally secure in his project as a result of having staff around that he could be open and honest with:

*"It helps just them being there, just knowing that if I hear a noise downstairs, it's nothing to worry about. And I know that I can come down here and talk to [the staff] about absolutely anything. They're not going to judge me, just give me their honest opinions, which is a big comfort."*

*(Matthew, 22, South East)*

As a result of staff having the time to dedicate to the young people, they are able to support them with several aspects of their lives that should help them access permanent accommodation at a later stage. The interviewees shared several examples of how support staff had helped them progress. For example, most had been supported to access the benefits they were entitled to when they first moved in, and others were helped to secure work or further education, or to rebuild frayed relationships with family members.

As discussed later, when the young people recounted other stages of their journeys, such as times they spent staying with friends or family members, they often did so with a sense of timidity, as if they were ashamed of their experiences. In contrast, however, when they spoke of their time with Depaul, they appeared considerably more confident and optimistic about the future, implying that the young people themselves considered the move into such accommodation to be a positive step towards stability.

The finding that smaller accommodation projects can more adequately meet the needs of young people than larger, generic and congregate housing is in line with previous research. For example, in a study for Barnardo's, "Homeless not voiceless", Stone (2010), raised concerns about the influence of group dynamics and the effects of inadequate staff-to-resident ratios in large accommodation services, calling for "smaller hostels" and "higher staff training levels" (p. 8). Watts et al (2015) highlighted a particular need for "small-scale supported accommodation projects" to meet the needs of "young homeless people with complex needs who require high levels of support" (p. 122).

## Nightstop

Three of the young people we spoke to had experience of using Depaul's volunteer-based service, Nightstop, in which young people are provided with a place to stay in the home of vetted volunteers.

They all considered Nightstop useful respite and found it considerably better than "being cold on the streets", which tallies with previous research by Insley (2011) in which 15 out of 18 respondents said they felt safer at Nightstop than in their previous living situation (p. 22).

One of the young people had been housed in the home of a fairly affluent family and had felt "awkward" in "posh" surroundings. Because of this, and the influence of a friend who advised him against staying with "randomers", this young person only used the service once.

*"It was a bit awkward, they were really posh, like she sat there and played the piano in the living room and… it was like really high standard flats in the city centre. It's too high up for me in a way."*

*(Sean, 18, North East)*

In contrast, however, the other young people who had used Nightstop gained a great deal from the service. As well as providing one-off support for young people in crisis, Nightstop works in partnership with

other agencies to help the young people it supports find stable accommodation. In the case of one young person, the decision was made to extend her Nightstop placement so that she should stay with her host for a longer period of time. As a result, she forged a strong relationship with the volunteer who was able to provide her with the emotional and practical support she needed to find more secure accommodation. The young person spoke very highly of her host during her interview:

*"She was really nice and it made you forget about all your problems… She just made me feel like life could be worse and she just made me feel, I don't know, she was just really good, really good."*

*(Abigail, 18, South East)*

The other young person who had used Nightstop had done so on and off over a period of time and described how it had given him the respite he had needed to progress independently:

*"I started using Night Stop and I was working as well at the time so I was laughing really to be honest with you, when I was at that Night Stop, it was brilliant, it give us enough time to save some money up so I could like get a room and…"*

*(Josh, 23, North East)*

While the sample of Nightstop users in our study was very small, the variation between the experiences described further highlights a gap in evidence regarding "the pros and cons of different models of congregate accommodation compared to community hosting models" found by Watts et al (2015: p. 13) and others.

## Rough sleeping – the alternative to temporary living arrangements

'Rough sleeping' is not accommodation, so we would not consider it to be a temporary living arrangement comparable to those we have described above. We have included it here, however, as it is important to acknowledge the types of scenario young people are trying to avoid by entering into the temporary arrangements we have described.

'Rough sleeping' featured prominently in the experiences of the young people involved in the research. Most had experience of 'rough sleeping' between temporary living arrangements, usually falling to such options when they had exhausted all other alternatives. However, it is important to note that 'rough sleeping' is yet another term that is difficult to define, highly complex and denotes a diverse range of situations (Watts et al, 2015).

The young people used terms such as 'sleeping rough', 'sleeping on the streets' and 'properly homeless' to describe a variety of experiences, including but not limited to:

- Sleeping in squats with existing friends or strangers

- Sleeping on all-night buses or trains

- Spending the night in 24-hour restaurants or cafés

- Staying with other homeless people in large homeless "camps"

- Breaking into and sleeping in cars

- Sleeping on the streets

While none of these options are safe, the level and type of risk presented varies. It is important, therefore, that when a young person describes themselves as sleeping rough, their specific circumstances are explored to understand accurately the risks to which they are exposed.

Interestingly, while 'rough sleeping' was considered by the majority of the young people to be the least appealing of all temporary living options, one interviewee was very clear that he would prefer to sleep rough than in the home of a stranger because he would feel safer outside with CCTV than in someone's home where "anything could happen". Another said they would rather sleep outdoors than in the house of a volunteer because he would feel like he was being judged for being homeless, highlighting the importance of ensuring that crisis accommodation for young people is non-judgemental and appropriate for their needs.

*"I'd sleep on streets before I'd sleep at someone's I don't know. The housing agency offered me [a room] with someone for three days or something, like three days a week and move to different people's houses, but I was having none of it, I said to them I'd rather be on streets."*

*(Simon, 19, North West)*

# HOW DO YOUNG PEOPLE ACCESS DIFFERENT TYPES OF TEMPORARY ACCOMMODATION AND WHAT INFLUENCES THE DECISIONS THEY MAKE?

Our analysis of the methods young people employed to find somewhere to stay revealed a clear desire to avoid association with the **stigma** of homelessness. The young people we spoke to wanted to avoid feeling or looking desperate or needy, or being a burden on others. Young people were **embarrassed** that they had no stable accommodation, and about having to ask for somewhere to stay.

To avoid the shame of asking for a bed outright, many young people attempted to disguise their dependence by orchestrating situations where staying with friends was – in their minds – more socially acceptable. This included suggesting 'sleepovers' with school-friends or inviting themselves to all-night parties:

*"I used to be like 'we haven't had a sleepover in time so I'm staying at yours tonight'."*

(Jessie 18, Yorkshire and the Humber)

*"I never made it out that I needed [somewhere] to stay. I never said 'Oh I can't go back to mine, can I stay at yours?' It would be like 'let's go out' and then we have an all-nighter and everyone ended up saying, 'let's stay there, let's stay there'."*

(Bethan, 21, South East)

At first, young people tended to be content with this kind of arrangement, seeing it as an opportunity to have fun and spend time with their friends. But over time,

the uncertainty and the lack of sleep began to take its toll. Such strategies also led young people into situations in which they felt vulnerable, such as parties in the houses of people they had never met. One young person told us how she had gone to a party with a friend so that she would have a place to stay, but left in the middle of the night because she had felt uncomfortable:

*"You feel a bit unsafe don't you when you're around people who you don't know, like men. It's like 'No, I don't want to stay here…'."*

(Crystal, 19, Yorkshire and the Humber)

Also influencing their choice of approach were young people's perceptions regarding **how successful strategies were likely to be.** In general, young people felt they were more likely to get a positive response from friends, who may feel an emotional obligation to help, than from statutory or other organised support services. They also felt that asking face to face was more likely to be successful than asking over the telephone or by text. For some, this meant showing up on people's doorsteps to "put them on the spot", but others concocted multi-stage plans in order to maximise their chances of being able to find somewhere to stay. For example, the two young people who were interviewed together described using the free Wi-Fi in fast food restaurants to arrange causal get-togethers over Facebook. Once they had met their friends, they would then ask them in person if they

could stay the night because they felt that this was more likely to be successful than asking them over the phone or online.

*"I'd rather like say it to the person when I see them face to face. That way they can't say no whereas they could just put over [in] a chat: 'No'!"*

(Jessie 18, Yorkshire and the Humber)

Lastly, the strategies chosen were influenced by **how urgently young people needed a place to stay.** If they had several options available to them, they were able to be more discerning about their choice of accommodation. For example, they may avoid situations that would cause them embarrassment or put their safety at risk. However, where young people's options were limited, their inhibitions about where and with whom they stayed reduced. One young person described being so desperate he would do "just whatever, anything" to find a room for a night.

This sense of urgency also appeared to pull young people in the direction of asking friends or family members (or strangers) for support, rather than approaching charity or statutory support services. There was a perception that while friends could offer immediate support to young people, organised support services would take longer to accommodate them. Choosing friends over organised services may provide shelter in the short term, but if such services are more equipped to support young people back into secure accommodation, the decision not to access them may prolong temporary living for young people.

**"It does affect you, definitely, and relationships as well, like with friends and family and that. I never want to get too close to people."**

(Josh, 23, North East)

# WHAT ARE THE PRACTICAL REALITIES OF TEMPORARY LIVING?

## "On the floor, the sofa, share a bed, whatever"

Temporary living arrangements varied hugely with regards to the practicalities that were involved. Merely in terms of where they slept, the young people described a wide variety of experiences: on a sofa, in a spare room, sharing a bed with a friend and sleeping on the floor all featured prominently.

Whether or not a **key was given** (and therefore whether or not young people were free to come and go as they pleased) varied between arrangements, but it was more common for young people not to be given free access than to be given it. One young person described not having a key as "frustrating" because it meant she had to get up early and leave the house every day while her hosts were out. She was conscious, however, of this sounding ungrateful in the circumstances. Another young person said that he would not accept a key even if offered one because taking a key would make him vulnerable to losing the accommodation.

*"If you let them give you a key, then they expect you to go out and then they could change the lock, they could do anything… so if you just don't go out until they force you to leave then you've always got a roof over your head!"*

(Matthew, 22, South East)

Regardless of whether a key was provided, arrangements varied in terms of the freedom young people felt they had within their hosts' homes. This was largely dependent on their relationship with that host. When young people stayed with close childhood friends, or with romantic partners, they tended to feel comfortable and 'at home', but with people they knew less well they were more cautious, ensuring they asked before they used anything and respected their hosts' privacy:

*"With my boyfriend, he was my partner, so I could do whatever I wanted to, but at my friend's house, I had to be a little more, I don't know like make sure I take my plate in and wash it when I'm done with it straightaway, when I was at his I was like 'he can do it', do you know what I mean?"*

(Carly, 19, Yorkshire and the Humber)

Temporary living arrangements also varied in terms of whether **money changed hands** between young people and the people accommodating them. In the main, when hosts were friends or family members, young people tended to stay for free. This was particularly likely to be the case when young people were still at school and they were accommodated by their friends' parents. In one case like this, the family the young person was staying with gave her money - something that caused her to move out swiftly to avoid feelings of dependence.

*"There was times when I was using their money for my school dinners and just stupid little things, it all adds up and you feel like, 'What am I doing? I shouldn't be using them!'"*

(Amelia, 16, North East)

In some cases, friends or relatives did expect young people to make a financial contribution (e.g. one young person was asked to pay £60 every two weeks for food and utilities) and young people did their best to comply with this when they could. Several of the young people we spoke to told us that if they were unable to contribute financially, or if they were not asked to do so because of the short-term nature of the arrangement, they would try to do other things for their hosts, such as domestic chores. None of the interviewees displayed a sense of expectation, but instead appeared grateful for the support they received and willing to pay or do whatever they could in return.

Where young people stayed in organised accommodation, such as hostels or smaller accommodation projects, they were almost always expected to make some form of financial contribution for their keep. If they were receiving housing benefit, this contribution was usually a small service charge (e.g. £9 a week). None of the young people seemed to begrudge paying this as they saw it as a necessary condition of receiving the support.

There were some commonalities between the temporary living arrangements described by the young people. Regardless of the physical circumstances involved, the majority described **a lack of personal space and privacy**. Where young people were staying with friends and family, they were rarely given their own room to sleep in, but instead were sleeping in the communal areas of houses and had to adapt to the lives that were going on around them. This lack of privacy was particularly hard to take for those who had become accustomed to having their own space, either through living independently before becoming homeless or within their family home:

*"I've gone from having my own space, so to be going back to sleeping on the sofa and having to be woken up at a certain time, so everyone can get ready for school, it's not really a life that I would want."*

(Kayla, 19, North East)

These experiences reflect those described in studies from the RER. Robinson and Coward (2003) note that homeless people staying with friends and family had limited control and independence in their situations while Reeve and Batty (2011) note that people staying with family and friends reported lack of space and privacy as an important issue and that "insecurity was a key concern" (pp. 25-26).

Some young people mentioned **poor and unsanitary conditions** or that some places they stayed lacked cleanliness. In one case, poor conditions forced a young person to move out of a relatively long-term arrangement with friends in favour of sleeping on his boss's sofa:

*"Just the flat in general wasn't good, it wasn't tidy, it wasn't kept well, it was just starting to stink, so I had to get out, that's why I moved out of there 'cause it was horrible to live with."*

(Simon, 19, North West)

# WHAT ARE THE EFFECTS OF TEMPORARY LIVING FOR YOUNG PEOPLE, BOTH IN THE SHORT AND LONG TERM?

## "There's no words to describe how bad it is."

Robinson and Coward's study of homeless people across a mixed age range found that "for some homeless people staying with family and friends represents a positive experience and preferable situation, compared to available alternatives. For many, however, it is an experience characterised by problems and difficulties. These include insecurity... inadequate sleeping arrangements... limited privacy... and restrictions on behaviour and lifestyle... In more extreme cases, staying with family and friends can expose people to hazardous environments and threatening situations, including violence and abuse" (Robinson and Coward 2003: 40). In line with this, there was evidence from the young people we spoke to that the practical realities of temporary living arrangements, whether with friends, family or elsewhere, can have a negative effect on young people's wellbeing, both physical and psychological.

## Physical effects

Young people experienced **poor and irregular sleep patterns** due to the lack of space, privacy and control associated with temporary living arrangements. It was common for young people to describe situations where they were unable to sleep because of commotion during the night, or woken early in the morning to fit around others' work patterns or families.

For instance, one young person stayed with older people who frequently had late-night visitors. This prevented him from getting enough sleep and made him tired during the days.

*"They always had their mates round... I'd have to stay up late at night and then get up in the morning and obviously I'd be pretty tired."*

*(Simon, 19, North West)*

Another stayed in the living area of a house with young children who would get up each morning at 6am and disturb her.

*"They're getting up for work or they've got kids and they're screaming at six o'clock in the morning and I'm thinking, 'for God's sake, is this really what's happening?'"*

*(Amelia, 16, North East)*

Several young people reported **losing weight** as a result of temporary living. For some, this was a consequence of a lack of access to food, particularly for those who experienced long bouts of rough sleeping.

*"I suppose food-wise, I don't come into contact with a lot of food, I try and eat as much as I can but I never hit my daily calorie limit."*

*(Josh, 23, North East)*

For others, however, it was linked to the type of living arrangements they experienced. Those who were staying with people they didn't know very well often felt awkward asking for food. This resulted in them eating a lot less than they did when they were in stable accommodation. Those who found themselves in situations where there were drugs or alcohol also found they lost weight. For example, one young person shed several stone after starting to smoke cannabis regularly when she was living with a friend:

*"I mean before then I did socially smoke, but when I lived with her she used to smoke it like it was going out of fashion, so I did too. I mean I was quite a big girl when I was younger but that caused me to lose a lot of weight."*

*(Grace, 19, South East)*

There were several examples of temporary living arrangements leading young people into **substance misuse**. Unless they were staying with childhood friends in a family home, when young people described experiences of staying with friends they frequently mentioned using drugs or alcohol. In some cases this appeared to be a consequence of boredom, with more than one young person saying they smoked or drank when in temporary living arrangements because they had nothing else to do. There were other examples, however, of young people engaging in substance misuse because of the influence of those around them. For example, one young man found himself surrounded by drugs in a homeless camp in the centre of Manchester. This led to a drug addiction that he was still struggling with at the time of his interview. A young woman started taking drugs to "fit in" with other people in a hostel and avoid becoming isolated.

*"I started taking drugs and stuff just because everyone else was doing it around me, I never felt peer pressured... but if everyone else is doing it and I'm just sat with a bottle of Lambrini, then we're all on different levels, then I'd be isolated further. So I decided to start taking these things because I wanted to be on the same level as other people."*

*(Kayla, 16, North East)*

Worryingly, one young person described how she had felt obliged to take drugs to please the person she was staying with. Although she avoided doing so in the end, the young person had been encouraged by her host and felt that joining in may mean she'd be welcomed to stay longer.

*"She kind of used to encourage me to take the drugs she was taking, like cocaine and stuff like that. I've never touched anything like that. I was thinking that I should take this because I'm in her house, she wants me to take it, and maybe she'll have me stay for a bit longer if I do what she wants me to do."*

*(Grace, 19, South East)*

## Risks to personal safety

Some temporary living arrangements were less secure than others, and in some cases young people were exposed to a real risk of **physical harm**. Staying with strangers, for example, left them vulnerable to mistreatment and exploitation.

Accounts of violence or threats to young people's personal safety were thankfully rare during interviews. There were, however, some incidents that are an extreme cause for concern: one young woman was raped while she was staying in a large supported housing scheme; another was violently beaten by a friend's boyfriend while living in house-share accommodation sourced by social services; a young man was set on fire while at a homeless camp; and another experienced bullying in shared supported lodgings.

## Psychological effects

The psychological effects of temporary living arrangements on the young people we spoke to were marked. Many of the young people found the experience of staying in someone else's home to be an awkward and **stressful** one, largely because they found it difficult to relax or be themselves.

For most of the young people interviewed the **lack of permanence** associated with temporary living also caused considerable stress. Having to move from place to place and the lack of certainty over whether there would indeed be a 'next place' weighed heavily on young people's minds and placed a great deal of strain on their mental health. One young person spoke of having to walk the streets daily in order to find a place to stay each night. He found this difficult to bear, as if he was losing his sense of self.

*"[Moving around] made me feel like I wasn't myself anymore, it just didn't feel… right, like I'm on anti-depressants now because of that."*

*(Reece, 17, North West)*

It was not only those who were moving around frequently who suffered from stress. Some young people who stayed in more stable forms of temporary accommodation, such as hostels, described environments that they found it difficult to cope with mentally. For example, one young man was moved into a shared house after contacting a charitable organisation for support. However, he moved out fairly quickly because the people he was living with made him on-edge and angry. This situation was not uncommon as many of the young people we spoke to told us they had left various temporary living arrangements because the people they were placed with caused them stress. This highlights the importance of housing young people with an appropriate mixture of others, and in some cases of the need for independent accommodation, so that the environment is supportive rather than damaging to their mental health.

Almost all of the young people interviewed who had experience of staying with friends or family members spoke of a strong sense of **being dependent** on others, frequently describing themselves as a **burden**. This sense of burden seemed more pronounced when there was a close relationship between the young person and their host. There seemed to be a tipping point, however, because when the relationship was very close indeed, the sense of burden young people felt appeared to diminish.

One young person who stayed with a close friend for three months said that while he appreciated the physical comfort of being given somewhere warm and dry to sleep, the situation was "still depressing" because he disliked the **loss of independence** staying in other people's homes involved:

*"I felt like a burden all the time, being around him all the time, going out with his friends who I didn't really know that much."*

*Sean, 18, North East)*

These feelings of being a burden on others had a clear impact on young people's **self-esteem**, with suggestions prevalent that temporary living made them feel "worthless" or "pathetic".

*"It makes you feel horrible, it makes you feel worthless, you're just relying on other people all the time."*

*(Simon, 19, North West)*

*"You feel a bit shitty sort of thing. It's not what you want to do. You don't want to be relying on everyone else. You want to [be] feeding yourself, doing your own thing and you can't ever really do that because it's someone else's house."*

*(Amelia, 16, North East)*

The shame young people feel when asking people if they can stay with them also appears to contribute to this sense of worthlessness, as does the need to put pressure on people to help them out, particularly when these people may have their own issues to cope with. Indeed, there is evidence to suggest that this may

be fairly common because people living in poverty tend to have social networks in which friends and family are also struggling (Bailey et al. 2015).

*"'Cause you know when you just feel like you're putting pressure on the family, like their family, their mum and dad and that… they're probably struggling themselves."*

*(Bethan, 21, South East)*

It was clear from the interviews that none of the young people we spoke to wanted to feel a burden, regardless of how wealthy or otherwise they perceived their hosts to be. It was also evident the young people disliked interrupting people's lives and that having to do so affected them greatly. While this was true across the board, there was evidence to suggest that being dependent on others had the most pronounced effect on older young people, particularly those who had experience of living independently before falling into homelessness. One such young person had stayed with a friend whose tenancy didn't allow him to have overnight guests. He had to sneak in after dark, which made him feel guilty, and he worried that he was putting his friend's tenancy at risk. He compared his situation to that of his friend and where he thought he should be at his age, which made him feel "very, very low".

*"I shouldn't be relying on my friends the same age as me to help me. I should be able to support myself. He went to the same school as me, he did exactly the same GCSEs as me, how come he can support himself and I can't? Why? I shouldn't have to let him buy me food, let me use his shower, let me use his bathroom, anything. I should be ringing him up saying, 'Do you want to go down the pub tonight?' not 'Can I come and sleep on your floor?'"*

*(Matthew, 22, South East)*

The finding that young people are concerned about being a burden on the people with whom they stay is in line with the findings of studies in the RER, which speak of homeless people being worried about "putting on" the people they stay with (Robinson and Coward

2003: 42). Coram Voice (2014) found that "staying with family and friends often puts strain on relationships given the added pressures on space and finances" (p.21) and that "children and young people often feel they have overstayed their welcome so do not feel comfortable asking to stay longer" (p.21). McLoughlin (2012) notes that, "regardless of the length of their stay, it is worth noting that all of the interviewees reflected on rarely feeling 'at home' in couch-surfing households. To the contrary, most described a sense of imposing upon their hosts simply by being there" (p.540). Reeve and Batty (2011) found that "several respondents expressed a keen sense of embarrassment or shame, and felt they were taking from their friends without the capacity to reciprocate" (p. 27).

Some of the interviewees who were in more stable accommodation at the time they were interviewed had experience of supporting friends who were temporary living. Their views indicate that the sense of burden young people feel when forced to stay with others is not misplaced. While they were willing to help others – largely because they had been in the same situation themselves – they expected the people they supported to be demonstrably appreciative and were irritated if this appeared not to be the case. Repeatedly staying with people who see them as a cause for charity like this must undoubtedly affect young people's sense of self-worth.

Interestingly, while they generally received more support from organised services than they did from friends and family, young people did not appear to be affected by a sense of burden when they were staying in hostels or other supported accommodation projects. This may be because young people feel that it is more legitimate to accept support from a service that has been set up solely for that purpose than it is to do so from a friend. Also, the majority of services require young people to make a financial contribution to their living expenses, which may further lessen any sense of unease they may feel.

## Trapped by burden

It was clear from the interviews that the young people we spoke to were anxious to avoid being a burden on others. This led them into situations where they felt less of a burden, but were given very little support to move into more stable accommodation, leaving them **trapped** in temporary living.

Some of the young people were reluctant to ask for help at all. This made them unlikely to contact support services for assistance and prone to employing strategies for finding shelter that disguised their homelessness (such as attending all-night parties or sleepovers). Others would ask for help, but then modify their behaviour so that they would be less of an inconvenience to the people that accommodated them. For example, they might accompany friends to places they felt uncomfortable or even take drugs in attempt to fit in.

There were also examples of young people cutting potentially beneficial arrangements short for fear of taking advantage of their hosts or damaging relationships they cared about. In such cases, young people preferred to stay with strangers where they might still feel like a burden, but there was less at stake if arrangements broke down.

Some of these burden-avoidance strategies have clear implications for young people's safety, which must not be ignored. However, it is important to also highlight that all of the tactics young people employ to avoid feeling like a burden on others draw them towards situations that are at best temporary stopgaps, and away from scenarios where they could be supported out of temporary living and into more stable accommodation.

## Damage to current and future relationships

Feelings of burden and the stress of temporary living appear to have caused tensions in relationships for many of the young people interviewed. There were several examples of both family relationships and friendships suffering as a consequence of temporary living, some irretrievably.

For example, one young person split up with a girlfriend he had been staying with because he felt they were "under each other's feet all the time". Another explained how a close childhood friendship had deteriorated rapidly since she had been taken into the friend's family home when she first became homeless:

*"Well, at first I think it was great. She loved having me there. But then after a while I almost felt like she saw me as a bit of a burden, because then she couldn't have her friends that weren't my friends to stay and stuff like that... After a while she got a bit fed up. I think she just wanted her own space back really, which is understandable."*

*(Grace, 19, South East)*

There was evidence to suggest that the effects of temporary living on young people's mental health have a significant bearing on their social aptitude causing them to struggle to maintain friendships at a time it could be argued they need them most. For example, one young person said his experiences had a profound effect on his ability to control his temper and that this had led to the breakdown of the relationship he had with a close friend with whom he was staying. He felt that his state of mind since losing secure accommodation had become so fragile that he was no longer able to maintain his existing relationships or develop new ones.

*"I weren't in the right frame of mind to be around people 'cause I was constantly losing my temper and stuff... I couldn't have a girlfriend, I was constantly snappy, I couldn't have friends, nothing."*

*(Craig, 20, South East)*

Some young people found that they quickly wore out the goodwill of those they were staying with. For example, more than one interviewee recounted times when they were staying with friends and overheard hushed conversations between their hosts about when they would be leaving, and others described how an unwelcoming atmosphere had developed over time.

*"[My boyfriend's mum] was pulling [my boyfriend] more to one side, speaking to him, just him and her... I'd hear 'You're going to have to try and get something sorted'. She wasn't ever saying, 'I want you out', but you know it's time to go sort of thing."*

*(Amelia, 16, North East)*

*"Just like I say, he's there with his bird, you can just tell, they don't have to say it in front of you, you just know. In [the] bathroom you can hear them whispering, then they come back in, sat there with stroppy faces."*

*Jon, 18, North West)*

This is in line with research findings from Robinson and Coward who highlighted that staying with friends and family for a prolonged period can cause the attrition of "social capital", creating issues later in people's homelessness journeys. In research for Crisis and The Countryside Agency on single homeless people, they note that opportunities to stay with friends and family reduce as time goes on, in part due to the "stresses and strains associated with staying with a friend or relative, for both the homeless person and the friend or relative accommodating them" (Robinson and Coward 2003: 42).

As well as eroding current friendships and reducing young people's store of social capital, there was evidence that experiences of temporary living with family and friends can change young people quite profoundly, potentially damaging their ability to develop positive relationships in the future. One young person told us that his experiences of moving around became a habit, and that even now he was in secure accommodation, he found it difficult to stick with a friendship long enough for it to develop.

*"It does affect you, definitely, and relationships as well, like with friends and family and that. I never want to get too close to people."*

*(Josh, 23, North East)*

He was also conscious that his tendency to remain emotionally distant was a strategy he had developed when homeless to make moving from place to place easier. In light of our finding that the sense of burden young people feel is more pronounced when they have strong relationships with the people accommodating them, it makes sense that young people would attempt to remain detached as a strategy for avoiding these unwelcome feelings.

*"It's easier being detached, isn't it? It's easier to be at someone's house and be detached from them than like, I don't know, I'm not a very emotional person, I've really switched everything off just to make it easier for myself."*

*(Josh, 23, North East)*

Another young person felt that relying on others and not having control over his life had changed him a great deal, and that this had made him less appealing to be around. He went from being an optimistic and sociable teenager to someone deeply affected by depression and anxiety. He was not unreasonably worried this would impact his life in the future, regardless of how his housing situation developed.

*"It all just made me very depressed. I was a lot different when I was 16, when I was living with my mum or living with my girlfriend. I was a different person to what I am now, now I'm just depressing to be around. I can't speak to new people really. If I go out to a place, I don't speak to anybody, I kind of isolate myself from everyone."*

(Simon, 19, North West)

## Effect on education and employment prospects

There was clear evidence from those involved in this research that temporary living has a significant effect on young people's **work and employment prospects**. Young people had lost jobs as a result of their living arrangements, predominantly because of tiredness caused by disturbed sleep, or because the stress of temporary living had prevented them from being able to focus in a working environment:

*"There have been times where I just haven't turned into work [because I've been so tired] and then once I haven't turned in, that's it, that's job over."*

(Josh, 23, North East)

*"Oh yeah, I kept losing jobs as well. My head just weren't in it. I couldn't hold a job for longer than like two weeks."*

(Craig, 20, South East)

The frequent transitions and lack of permanence associated with temporary living also affected young people's education. Almost all of the young people we spoke to felt that their education had suffered as a consequence of having no stable accommodation. Several felt that their housing situation had prevented them from reaching their potential, which was particularly difficult for those who were ambitious and had specific career aims. For example, one young woman had a long-standing ambition of being a midwife, but felt that her homelessness had prevented, or at least delayed, this happening:

*"Well, it has had quite a big impact on my education. Like when I was 16 I did go to college and everything, I got my level three health and social care, but from then, because I have moved around quite a lot, I've never really focused on going to university so I haven't achieved what I wanted to."*

(Grace, 19, South East)

Another interviewee felt that it was particularly difficult for young people experiencing homelessness to continue their education because of a lack of support from within the education system. During an episode of temporary living with friends she had struggled to attend college consistently but felt that no effort was made to understand her situation or to make allowances. This left her feeling angry and let down:

*"Where you have all the stress, it does impact college but they don't get that, they sort of think that you're late because you're late. They don't really dig in and like try and understand that … they don't ever try and put themselves in your shoes, which annoys me."*

(Abigail, 18, South East)

Those who had made progress in the area of work and education since finding relatively stable accommodation generally felt that this would not have been possible had they remained in the throes of temporary living.

*"If I was still jotting around from house to house, I would never have settled and I wouldn't have been able to look for jobs like the way I do now. I wouldn't be able to plan what I'm going to do next week."*

(Amelia, 16, North East)

Despite their relative stability, some of the young people we spoke to had continued to struggle to re-engage with education or find work. This appeared to be related to the effects of temporary living on their self-esteem and staying power. For example, one young woman's confidence had been deeply affected by her experiences and she had developed a worrying level of self-doubt:

*"I think I can't stay, I can't. I can't just go to college and finish a whole course, I don't know why, I just can never do it, it never happens. I think it's because I've got into a habit of like leaving something before I've finished it."*

(Bethan, 21, South East)

## "I could not hold a job for longer than like two weeks."

(Craig, 20, South East)

# HOW DO YOUNG PEOPLE MOVE BACK INTO STABLE ACCOMMODATION AND WHAT RESOURCES AND SUPPORT DO THEY NEED TO DO SO?

## "She said 'You need my help, don't you?' so I said 'Yes please!'"

Broadly speaking, there appears to be a continuum of temporary living, with some arrangements more stable, and more likely to help young people out of homelessness, than others. At one end of the scale there are arrangements that provide young people with very little support and often place them at risk of harm (such as staying with strangers or at all-night parties). At the other there are supportive environments in which young people feel relatively safe and secure. Young people are most likely to move out of temporary living and into stable accommodation from arrangements at the more supportive end of the spectrum.

The experiences of the young people involved in this research suggest that supportive environments can be provided by smaller accommodation projects, or by friends or family where: there is a strong relationship between the young person and the friend or family member accommodating them; the host cares about the young person and their future; and the friend or family member is trusted by the young person. Several of the young people interviewed had experience of supportive temporary living arrangements with friends and family members. For example, one young person talked about the strength of the bond she had with the family that was accommodating her.

*"It was pretty much just like being at home really. They did look at me as their daughter, like I spent Christmas with them, like it wasn't like being at somebody else's house, do you know what I mean?"*

*(Grace, 19, South East)*

While not all positive arrangements with friends and family involved hosts offering practical support to help young people out of homelessness, they all helped sustain young people and ensure other parts of their lives stayed on track. For example, one young person was able to get to college while in a temporary living situation because "half of my friends have got cars and so they drop us off and pick us up". Another young person was able to continue working as, at the time, he was being supported by his boss who was very understanding of the situation:

*"Yeah, I worked with them so... I worked with him in the morning and then came back with him at night."*

*(Simon, 19, North West)*

While not directly helping them out of homelessness, these situations gave young people the time and space to continue to develop as young adults without exposure to the potential harms we have discussed.

Strong, supportive relationships are key to young people having a positive experience and moving on constructively. One young person described a positive experience of a temporary living arrangement with a close friend, which, despite not having her own space, was nonetheless a positive stopgap until she found more permanent accommodation:

*"It weren't bad, staying with her actually just because we're friends and she weren't 'oh you need to pay my rent and you need to do this and you need to do that'."*

*(Carly, 19, Yorkshire and the Humber)*

Another young person had a similar experience in relation to the support he received from his grandmother. While she was living in supported accommodation and was therefore unable to offer him a place to sleep every night, the strong relationship between them and her desire to help him enabled her to find him accommodation at Depaul.

What is particularly notable about these positive experiences is the lack of burden felt by the young people, allowing them to accept the support offered without feeling they needed to move on. This also prevented them from further harm they could potentially have experienced if they had felt obliged to find somewhere else.

Overall, it appears that in order not to slip further into homelessness, young people who find themselves in temporary living situations need a positive environment in which they are not made to feel like a burden, but given the time and space to sustain other elements of their lives, such as engagement with work and education, critical relationships and good mental health. With sufficient capacity to do so, as well as protecting young people from harm, hosts of temporary living arrangements can play a critical role in young people's journeys back into secure accommodation.

# CAN THE EXPERIENCES OF YOUNG PEOPLE BE MEANINGFULLY CATEGORISED IN A WAY THAT WILL HELP THE HOMELESSNESS SECTOR PROVIDE THEM WITH RELEVANT AND EFFECTIVE SUPPORT?

## Danger Zones and Stepping Stones: A new model for understanding Temporary Living Arrangements for young people

The evidence presented in this report suggests that terms such as 'sofa surfing' and phrases such as 'staying with friends' pigeonhole young people's experiences and do not adequately reflect the complexities of their encounters with temporary living. This can lead to misplaced judgments regarding the level of risk that young people may be exposed to and how best to support them out of homelessness.

In this section we suggest a new model for understanding young people's experiences of temporary living based on the findings of the current research. The purpose of this model is to enable young people's circumstances, and the options available to them, to be more effectively assessed. It is hoped that this will aid the prioritisation of cases and enable the development of support solutions that are more appropriate for young people's needs.

## The model

The evidence suggests that temporary living arrangements differ in terms of:

- the level of risk that the environment will lead to young people experiencing harm, such as those outlined in this report; and

- the capacity of the host to support young people out of temporary living and into secure accommodation.

Our model represents this variation using two scales.

### Level of risk of harm to young person

The current research indicates that the places young people stay during periods between stable accommodation vary enormously in terms of their potential to be harmful. Potential harms include: risks to personal safety; exposure to drugs and alcohol; domestic or other abuse; sexual or financial exploitation; and damage to physical and mental health. We have also discussed how some temporary living arrangements can affect young people's longer-term prospects, for example by limiting their capacity to secure or maintain employment or further education, or to build successful relationships.

The arrangements that involved the smallest degree of risk for young people tended to be those where they are under the supervision of a responsible adult. Examples included young people staying with: trained volunteers as in the case of Nightstop; trustworthy older relatives; longstanding family friends; or the parents of school friends. This is not to say that given the skills and resources to do so, young people could not manage a small degree of risk and live independently. In many cases, independent living would be

a very safe solution. However, our research has shown that due to the costs involved this is rarely an option for young people, and that they are more likely to be pushed into potentially dangerous communal circumstances.

Higher risk arrangements tended to involve young people staying: with or around people who are themselves engaged in risk-taking behaviours; in physically insecure environments; with people who may be indifferent to their safety or, in some cases, inclined to cause them harm. Examples of high-risk environments from the current research included young people attending all-night parties with strangers, or being housed in hostels with older homeless people struggling with drug and alcohol addictions.

### Host's capacity to support young person out of homelessness

The hosts in the temporary living arrangements that featured in our research varied enormously in terms of their capacity to support young people out of homelessness and into secure accommodation. This level of capacity appeared to be influenced by their:

- Knowledge of the young person's situation

  The research has highlighted that it is common for young people to attempt to avoid the embarrassment of asking for somewhere to stay by orchestrating situations where they are given a roof over their head without revealing that they are homeless (for example, by suggesting sleepovers or all-night parties). In such circumstances, those who are accommodating the young people will be unaware of their need for support and, therefore, their capacity to provide it will be very low.

In contrast, in cases where young people are more open about their situations, the people accommodating them will be in a better position to support them (providing they have the skills and resources to do so).
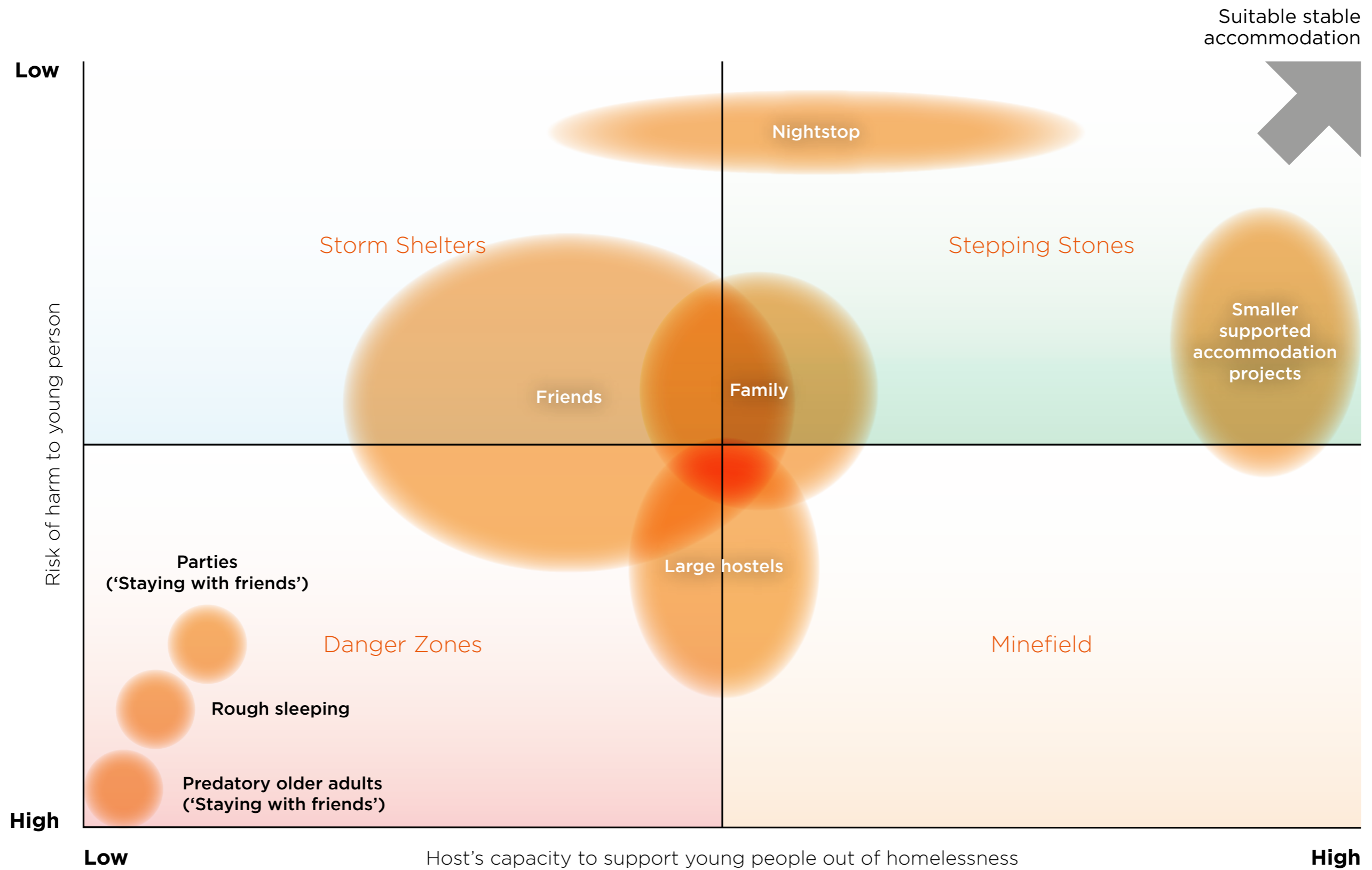
- Relationship with the young person

  The examples from our research of young people being supported out of temporary living by the people accommodating them tended to involve strong, positive relationships between the young person concerned and their host. Where relationships are weak or damaging in some way, young people appear less likely to open up to their hosts about their situation than when relationships are nurturing and beneficial. They may also be less likely to trust their host and, therefore, be open to any support they may be willing to give.

- Knowledge of the housing sector and routes out of homelessness

  If hosts are to support young people out of temporary living, unless they have the ability to offer them permanent accommodation themselves, they must have sufficient knowledge of the housing sector and the various options available to young people to advise them appropriately. In general, we would expect those working within professional support services (such as hostels or smaller accommodation projects) to have a greater level of knowledge than friends or family members.

**Figure 1. Model for understanding temporary living**



Suitable stable accommodation

Low

High

Risk of harm to young person

Storm Shelters

Nightstop

Stepping Stones

Smaller supported accommodation projects

Friends

Family

Parties ('Staying with friends')

Large hostels

Danger Zones

Minefield

Rough sleeping

Predatory older adults ('Staying with friends')

Low

Host's capacity to support young people out of homelessness

High

- Ability to initiative relevant support from elsewhere

  To move away from temporary living, young people may require specialist support, for example, to: access benefits or other financial support; gain qualifications to help them access work; gain skills for independent living; overcome mental health or relationship issues. Hosts will vary in terms of their ability to source this additional support for young people, largely according to the extent of their local networks. Again, we would expect those working in professional services to be able to source specialist support for young people more easily than friends or family.

- Ability to spend time supporting the young person

  Supporting young people towards stable accommodation takes time. There were several examples from this research of hosts whose capacity to support the young people staying with them was limited because they were working full time or had families of their own who required their attention. In some professional support services time is also heavily restricted by a lack of financial resources. Recent cuts to local authority funding have limited the capacity of services to maintain the staffing levels necessary for adequate support to be provided to young people.

Importantly, hosts' capacity to provide support also appears to be affected by the extent to which young people feel like they are burdening them by staying. If young people move on because they feel like a burden, there is very little hosts can do. As discussed, this sense of burden appears to be heavily influenced by the extent to which young people feel hosts have a responsibility to look after them. It is very low in relation to organised services (especially when they are paid for), but can be higher for friends and family, particularly if relationships are weak or distant, or hosts are perceived to be struggling themselves. The evidence suggests that in general,

the greater the sense of burden that young people feel, the less open they will be to receiving support from their host. So the capacity of the host to support young people out of homelessness is at its highest when the sense of burden is low.

## A new way to categorise temporary living arrangements

In Figure 1, the Y-axis represents the level of risk that young people will be subjected to harm (low at the top and high at the bottom) and the X-axis represents hosts' capacity to support young people out of homelessness (low on the left and high on the right). This creates four quadrants within which temporary living arrangements can be understood:

- **Danger Zones:** Arrangements in this category pose a high degree of risk to young people's safety and/or well-being and hosts have very little capacity (or willingness) to support young people out of homelessness.

- **Minefield:** While hosts of arrangements in this category have the skills, knowledge and willingness to support young people, the level of risk is so high that young people will usually experience harm and/or fail to escape temporary living through these routes.

- **Storm Shelters:** Young people staying in arrangements in this category are relatively safe from harm, but the capacity of their hosts to support them out of temporary living is limited.

- **Stepping Stones:** In temporary living arrangements in this category, young people are kept safe from harm, and are also supported out of temporary living and towards more stable accommodation.

## Using the new model to categorise temporary living arrangements

Based on the evidence from this research, we have assessed the types of

accommodation described by the young people interviewed and suggested where they might sit within the matrix. It should be noted that whilst the position of each accommodation type broadly reflects our assessment of the level of risk and capacity involved, the complexities of young people's experiences mean that there is considerable variation within each type of accommodation, and that there will be instances where the particular circumstances of an arrangement would place it elsewhere on the matrix.

## Staying with friends

### Storm Shelters or in the Danger Zone with some potential to be Stepping Stones

As discussed throughout this report, 'staying with friends' is a large and complex category. Some friends (for example, long-standing family friends or the parents of school friends) can provide a safe place for young people. However, their knowledge of both the young person's situation and potential routes out of homelessness may be limited. This places a large proportion of temporary living arrangements with friends in the Storm Shelter category. While young people in these situations are relatively safe from harm, they are unlikely to escape temporary living without further support.

If a young person stays with a friend in a low-risk environment, the relationship between them is strong enough, and he or she does not feel too much of a burden, the arrangement could be a Stepping Stone if the host's capacity to support the young person is sufficient. In such cases, our goal should be to increase hosts' capacity to provide support by, for example, increasing their specialist knowledge through information and training. It should be noted here that some young people will have sufficient independent living skills to negotiate a transition into more stable accommodation themselves. In such cases, arrangements that would be classified as Storm Shelters in the matrix may lead to positive outcomes for some young people without any change in the level of support provided by the host.

In contrast to the relatively safe environments of Storm Shelters, the evidence from our research suggests that there are several temporary living arrangements that young people would describe as 'staying with friends' that expose them to a high level of risk of harm. Examples include young people staying at all-night parties where they are exposed to drugs and alcohol and have nowhere comfortable to sleep, or with potentially predatory older adults. In these cases, hosts have almost no capacity (or willingness) to support the young people out of homelessness, placing the arrangements firmly in the Danger Zone. Young people living in this type of arrangement must be considered a priority for crisis support.

## Staying with family

### Strong potential to be Stepping Stones but likely to be Storm Shelters. Some arrangements will be in the Danger Zone

'Staying with family' is also a complex category in which there is much variation between living arrangements. In general, young people are likely to have similar experiences staying with family members to those they would with friends. Family members may, however, have a higher capacity to support young people because:

- They may be more likely to be told the full story of young people's circumstances.

- They may be more likely to have a strong relationship with young people and be trusted by them.

• Young people may be less likely to feel that they are burdening family members by staying (thereby increasing the duration of stay and, therefore, family members' ability to provide support).

If these factors enable the family hosts to provide sufficient support for the young person in their care, temporary living arrangements with family members have the potential to be Stepping Stones. As for friends, our goal in these situations should be to increase the likelihood that these arrangements will help young people towards stable accommodation by, for example, increasing family hosts' specialist knowledge through information and training.

It is important, however, that living arrangements described as 'staying with family' are not assumed to be safe. The young people involved in this research provided several examples of arrangements with family members that exposed them to potential danger, such as drug and alcohol abuse or domestic violence. In such cases, relationships between the young people involved and their hosts tended to be weaker and the capacity of the host to provide support very low. These temporary living arrangements would be in the Danger Zone and young people living in them should be a priority for crisis services.

## Large hostels

### At best a Minefield but likely to be in the Danger Zone

The interviewees provided considerable evidence to suggest that young people placed in large hostels are at high risk of harm. This is largely because they are housed with older homeless people who are often struggling with drug or alcohol addictions, and because levels of staff provision are relatively low. Hostel staff members' capacity to support young people will vary according to a variety of factors enabling or preventing the provision of effective support:

| Factors enabling support |
| --- |
| - Most staff members are trained and knowledgeable about the homelessness sector and routes out of homelessness. <br><br> - Young people feel a low sense of burden when staying in hostels (as it is a paid for, council-commissioned service). <br><br> - Hostels have good local connections, meaning they can easily draw on external sources of specialist support for young people. |

| Factors preventing support |
| --- |
| - Large hostels generally lack the financial capacity to fund large staff teams. This limits opportunities for relationship building and for tailored support to be provided. <br><br> - Young people are frequently disengaged from any support that is offered because of negative influences within the hostel. <br><br> - Staff tend to be less well trained than in smaller, specialist projects. |

In cases where the level of risk to young people is high and the capacity of staff members to provide support is low, temporary living arrangements in hostels will fall into the Danger Zone. Placing young people in this sort of environment should be avoided. Otherwise, because of the many negative temptations and influences present, even when the capacity of staff members to support young people is relatively high, arrangements at large hostels would fall into the Minefield category. This means that while it is possible that young people will progress from such arrangements, it is likely that they will struggle to do so and instead experience harm.

## Smaller supported accommodation services

### Stepping Stones with some a Minefield

Smaller accommodation services designed to support young people usually house young people only, and are more selective about whom they will accommodate, taking into account the type and extent of each individual's needs. Because of this, their size, and the fact there are usually higher levels of staff supervision, smaller services tend to pose much lower levels of risk to young people than larger, generic ones where they are subject to negative influence and exposure to substance misuse. The capacity for smaller projects to support young people is usually relatively high because:

- The ratio of staff members to young people is high. This means that staff have the time to build strong relationships with young people and provide tailored, specialist support.

- Staff members are usually highly trained and have significant knowledge and experience of the housing sector and routes out of homelessness.

- Services tend to be commissioned, so links to the local council and other local resources are good.

- Services are paid for so young people feel a relatively low sense of burden, meaning that they stay for long enough to allow staff to support them.

This puts the majority of temporary living arrangements in small accommodation services into the Stepping Stones category. However, while the risk is generally much lower, in some circumstances young people can be exposed to harmful influences in smaller services. For this reason there is some overlap into the Minefield category. To protect young people in these environments from harm, and keep such arrangements in the Stepping Stone category, it is essential that ways to minimise risk and maximise staff capacity within smaller accommodation services are explored.

## Nightstop

### Storm Shelters with the potential to become Stepping Stones

As its hosts are individually trained volunteers, Nightstop is perhaps the environment discussed during the interviews that presents the lowest level of risk to young people.

The service's short-term nature, however, limits hosts' personal capacity to support the young people they look after because there is insufficient time for fruitful relationships to be built. In addition, hosts also have more limited knowledge of the housing sector and fewer local connections than trained staff at an organised project (small or large) may have. While hosts' personal capacity to support young people is limited, however, Nightstop as a service is very well connected and has the ability to support young people into stable housing over a longer time period. For this reason, while the service will be a Storm Shelter for some, it will be a Stepping Stone for many.

Additionally, some Nightstop placements are extended so young people stay with their hosts for a longer period of time. This changes such arrangements into ones that

resemble the 'Supported Lodgings' model where young people are provided with relatively long-term accommodation in the houses of trained volunteers. In these arrangements relationships between hosts and young people can develop, improving the host's ability to provide support on a personal level. This also increases the likelihood the service will become a Stepping Stone rather than a Storm Shelter.

## Rough sleeping, including squats, camps and using 24-hour transport

### Firmly in the Danger Zone

As mentioned, we do not consider rough sleeping to be a temporary living arrangement in the context of this report because it does not involve being accommodated by a host or, necessarily, access to any form of shelter. It is, in fact, what young people staying in temporary living arrangements, as defined in this research, are trying to avoid. We have, however, positioned rough sleeping onto Figure 1 to illustrate how the model can be used to assess all experiences of homelessness.

All rough-sleeping environments are firmly in the Danger Zone as they pose a high degree of risk to young people and, while extensive outreach services exist in some cities, usually involve no support. There is, however, likely to be some variation. For example, squats and camps could be seen as slightly less risky than other rough-sleeping environments because young people tend to have others around them who may attempt to protect them. Equally, of course, other rough sleepers may pose an additional risk to young people, making their circumstances even more precarious. Using 24-hour transport or staying in all-night cafes may also be considered a slightly safer alternative to sleeping on the streets. That said, all young people in Danger Zone environments should be prioritised by crisis services.

## Implications for policy and practice

The aim of youth homelessness policy and practice should be to ensure that all young people in between periods of stable accommodation are able to live in arrangements that would be considered Stepping Stones, as it is from these environments that they are most likely to regain housing stability. However, our use of the new model places a number of the temporary living arrangements discussed in this report into the other three categories: Danger Zone, Minefield and Storm Shelters.

Several living arrangements have been placed in the Danger Zone, including some that would be described as 'staying with friends'. Young people who are already living in these circumstances should be considered a priority for crisis support services (such as Nightstop) as they are at great risk of experiencing harm. There must also be steps taken to prevent young people from falling into the Danger Zone by choosing high risk/low support living arrangements over safer and more beneficial alternatives. This could involve improving the accessibility of low-risk emergency accommodation, or efforts to reduce the stigma of homelessness so that young people feel more comfortable asking for help and less of a burden on those who are willing to accommodate them.

Our use of the model placed living arrangements in large hostels in the Danger Zone or Minefield categories. Minefield arrangements have the potential to be beneficial, yet the young people housed in them are unlikely to progress because of the harmful influences that surround them. In such cases, action should be taken to reduce the likelihood that young people will experience harm, and to encourage them to access the support that is available. Where large hostels are concerned, this would involve more diligent assessments of young people's needs to ensure they are housed with an appropriate mix of other residents (away from negative influences) and steps to increase levels of supervision and support. If it is not possible to make changes to Minefield environments,

it should be a priority to find alternative arrangements for young people housed in them to protect them from harm.

Other living arrangements that have been discussed in this report would be considered Storm Shelters. While young people in these environments are relatively safe from harm and, therefore, might not be considered an immediate priority for crisis services, they are unlikely to progress out of homelessness without further support. The goal here should be to raise the capacity of hosts (usually friends or family members) to support the young people they are accommodating. This could be achieved by raising awareness among the public of:

- indicators of homelessness or housing instability (to help potential hosts identify when a young person is in need of support);

- the housing sector and routes out of homelessness; and

- local services that are able to provide assistance to young people without stable accommodation.

If the capacity of Storm Shelter hosts to provide support is increased, in tandem with efforts to improve young people's own capacity to move on to sustain independent accommodation, such arrangements may turn into Stepping Stones. Otherwise, with increased knowledge of the options available to young people, hosts will be in a better position to support them into alternative Stepping Stone accommodation.

**"It all just made me very depressed... now I'm just depressing to be around. I can't speak to new people really. If I go out to a place, I don't speak to anybody, I kind of isolate myself from everyone."**

*(Simon, 19, North West)*

# CONCLUSIONS

This research has explored the experiences of young people living between periods of stable accommodation. It has highlighted the complexities of temporary living and cast into doubt both the usefulness of the terms we use to categorise young people's living arrangements and the assumptions that are often made about them.

'Sofa surfing' is a term that is commonly used by practitioners to assess young people's needs and determine the support they receive. Yet this research has found that 'sofa surfing' is an umbrella term that encompasses a number of different living arrangements, with no universal definition among either researchers or young people. This implies that decisions regarding how those who are 'sofa surfing' should be supported may be based on personal interpretations of an ambiguous term, rather than on thorough understanding of young people's circumstances. Furthermore, the research found that 'sofa surfing' is not a term that is commonly used by young people and that many feel it undermines the severity – and often bleak reality – of life without stable accommodation. This report proposes the use of 'temporary living arrangements' as a less-loaded term that allows for more nuanced analyses of young people's situations.

Temporary living arrangements were found to vary enormously in terms of: who young people stay with; the practical circumstances of accommodation; the likelihood that young people will be exposed to harmful influences; and the level of support they will receive. This variation exists between types of living arrangements, for example between staying with friends and staying in large hostels, and also within them. 'Staying with friends' was found to be the most diverse category, with young people describing a huge spectrum of experiences in this way, from relatively safe arrangements with close family friends or the parents of school friends, to those that are potentially very dangerous, such as all-night parties or staying with near-strangers.

There was also found to be significant variation in terms of how young people access temporary accommodation. However, their decisions appeared to be heavily influenced by sensitivities to the stigma surrounding homelessness and perceptions regarding how successful various strategies for finding accommodation were likely to be. Both these factors were found to draw young people away from seeking help from organised services and towards potentially dangerous circumstances. Furthermore, the sense of urgency young people feel when seeking accommodation in a state of crisis was found to alter their perceptions of risk, making them more likely to enter into arrangements that have the potential to cause them harm.

To support improved decision-making and prevent decisions being informed by inappropriate assumptions of what phrases such as 'sofa surfing' or 'staying with friends' mean, Depaul has proposed a new model for assessing young people's circumstances according to: the level of risk that they will experience harm as a result of their temporary living arrangements, and the level of capacity the people accommodating them have to support them out of homelessness. We hope the adoption of this model will lead to more effective prioritisation of cases, and the provision of support that is more suitable for young people's needs.

**"Because I have moved around quite a lot, I've never really focused on going to university so I haven't achieved what I wanted to."**
*(Grace, 19, South East)*

# RECOMMENDATIONS

## Depaul UK calls for policy-makers and commissioners to:

- **Increase the provision of preventative services, such as family mediation and short respite accommodation, so in cases where homelessness can be prevented, families are supported to work through tension and conflict.**

In line with other recent research, this study has found that the most common reason for young people losing access to stable accommodation is family breakdown. As the rest of our findings have shown, all circumstances are different and should be assessed on an individual basis. However, the experiences of the young people involved in this research indicate that in some cases homelessness could be prevented if families are supported to work through tension and conflict. As such, the provision of support to families experiencing difficulties, such as family mediation services, alongside short respite accommodation where appropriate, should be increased.

- **Ensure an adequate mix of accommodation services are provided and there is sufficient young person-specific accommodation to avoid young people being exposed to negative influences, such as drugs and alcohol, that could prolong their homelessness journeys.**

The young people involved in this research recounted no positive experiences of living in large accommodation services that cater for people of all ages. Instead they spoke of volatile environments where they were surrounded by negative influences such as drugs and alcohol. The decision to place young people in such services should only be made if there is a suitable mix of other residents within the property concerned as well as adequate support. Commissioners should ensure that a suitable mix of accommodation is available in local areas so that accommodation decisions which are appropriate for young people's needs can be made.

- **Increase the provision of emergency accommodation that also supports young people out of homelessness, such as Depaul's community-based Nightstop service.**

Young people living in high risk/low support (Danger Zone) environments should be placed in safe accommodation as a matter of urgency. While many emergency accommodation options are merely temporary stopgaps (Storm Shelters) that do little to help young people in the longer-term, services such as Depaul's Nightstop build relationships with young people and utilise their extensive networks to help them secure stable accommodation. To help young people escape the trap of temporary living, the provision of such services should be increased.

- **Take steps to reduce the stigma of homelessness by instigating awareness-raising activities targeted at young audiences, particularly in areas where there are high levels of socio-economic deprivation and/or homelessness is prevalent.**

This research has shown that as young people seek to avoid being labelled as 'homeless', due to the perceived negative connotations of the term, they can be drawn into potentially harmful living arrangements. While there has been recent media activity designed to break down the stigma of homelessness (for example the BBC's "Famous, Rich and Homeless"), more must be done if young people are going to feel more comfortable asking for help when they find themselves without safe and stable accommodation. This should involve awareness-raising activities targeted at young audiences, perhaps through schools, colleges and universities, particularly in areas where there are high levels of socio-economic deprivation and/or homelessness is prevalent.

- **Increase the capacity of potential temporary living hosts to support young people out of homelessness with activities to raise awareness of: the signs of homelessness, the housing sector and options available to young people and local charitable and statutory support services.**

Our research has shown that not all temporary living arrangements are harmful to young people. Some not only provide them with a safe place to stay, but also with essential support. Other arrangements, however, provide young people with safe shelter but do not help them to progress into stable accommodation, usually because the people accommodating them have limited ability to provide the support that they need. This may be as a result of time constraints or a lack of willingness, but it is more likely to be associated with a lack of relevant knowledge on the part of hosts. Effort should be made to raise awareness of indicators of homelessness or housing instability among those who may

find themselves accommodating young homeless people (for example, parents of adolescent children). This will enable young people in need of support to be more easily identified. Additionally, information on the housing sector and routes out of homelessness, and on local services that can provide assistance to young people without stable accommodation, should be made more accessible to existing hosts.

## Depaul UK calls for services working with young people to:

- **Avoid reliance on ambiguous terms when assessing young people's circumstances and instead evaluate temporary living arrangements on an individual basis according to the level of risk they pose to the young people concerned, and the likelihood that they will receive the necessary support to help them out of homelessness.**

This research has shown terms and phrases such as 'sofa surfing' and 'staying with friends' to be ambiguous and complex. Practitioners should avoid reliance on these inconsistently used expressions when assessing young people's circumstances (either on engagement with services to determine the support required or on exit to measure success). Instead, temporary living arrangements should be assessed on an individual basis according to the level of risk they pose to the young people concerned, and the likelihood that they will receive the necessary support to help them out of homelessness.

- **Use the proposed model to identify young people in urgent need of support (i.e. living in high risk and low support temporary environments) and prioritise them for crisis accommodation.**

As part of this report, Depaul has developed a new model that can be used to aid the assessment of young people's living arrangements. Subsequently, the charity intends to develop a diagnostic tool to help practitioners consistently assess "risk" and "capacity" levels, further enhancing the model's value.

## Recommendations for future research

Following this exploratory study, Depaul has the following recommendations for future research:

- The current study took into account the views of 18 young people, all with experience of temporary living. As the term 'sofa surfing' is used in the public domain, further research is required to explore understanding of the term among other audiences, including the general public and policy-makers.

- Further research to explore understanding of other terms used within the sector (such as 'homelessness', 'rough sleeping' or 'stable accommodation') would also be welcomed.

- Quantitative research on young people's experiences of temporary living should avoid the use of ambiguous terms such as 'sofa surfing' to ensure accuracy of findings.

- This research suggests that young people are most likely to progress into stable accommodation from temporary living arrangements that present low levels of risk, and where those accommodating them have a high capacity to provide support. To support or refute this hypothesis, further research is needed to evaluate the effectiveness of Stepping Stone accommodation (e.g. smaller accommodation projects) as a means of helping young people out of temporary living and preventing statutory homelessness.

- Further qualitative research focusing specifically on young people's experiences of temporary living should be undertaken. Key areas for exploration should include:

  - the prevalence of different types of temporary living arrangement

  - young people's sensitivities to the stigma around homelessness and how this affects their choices in crisis

  - other barriers to young people accessing support from organised services (charitable or statutory)

  - how the threat of homelessness affects young people's perceptions of risk in accessing temporary accommodation

  - the relative effectiveness of congregate (hostel-type) emergency accommodation and non-congregate (e.g. Nightstop and other community hosting models) emergency accommodation for young people

  - the long-term effects of temporary living on young people's mental health

  - the support young people need to move away from temporary living and towards stable accommodation (i.e. what constitutes a genuine Stepping Stone for young people)

# APPENDICES

# BIBLIOGRAPHY

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