



A COMMUNITY-BASED HEALTH AND WELLBEING APPROACH TO THE UK YOUTH HOMELESS CRISIS: CHALLENGING HARMFUL SOCIETAL STEREOTYPES

Executive Summary

- Harmful stereotypes across public and policy mutually reinforce each other and are still upheld within society today, acting as a barrier to support-seeking for young people experiencing homelessness.
- Arts-based and person-centred approaches that leverage community based action and promote inclusivity are needed to challenge harmful stereotypes and reduce stigma associated with experiencing homelessness.
- Government policy and commissioners need to prioritise strengths-based approaches to strategies to address the youth homelessness crisis that moves beyond focussing only on rough sleeping.

Introduction

The UK is currently facing a youth homeless crisis with rising figures (120,000 2020/21 - 136,000 2022/23), reduced resources to services and increasingly complex need support.¹

Strengths-based approaches to service delivery are effective in improving outcomes for young people experiencing homelessness and can be effectively embedded in organisations as seen through the My Strengths Training for Life programme™

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(MST4Life™) and associated Toolkit trilogy.² MST4Life™ improved the likelihood that young people experiencing homelessness transitioned into employment, education or training and independent tenancy by 30 percentage points.

Despite the evidence supporting strengths-based approaches, harmful stereotypes associated with homelessness persist across society and policy. These perpetuate stigma and shame that act as a barrier to help-seeking behaviours and increase exclusion within society by those experiencing homelessness.

Furthermore, policy makers place excess focus on long-term outcomes but need a clearer focus on essential development milestones that promote stabilisation and maintenance of long-term outcomes.

A community-based approach

A whole systems approach is needed that incorporates strengths-based perspectives at the individual, organisational, and policy levels. A community based-approach is essential to challenge harmful stereotypes that are upheld within policy and public domains to reduce stigma associated with homelessness, improving help-seeking behaviours and inclusion within society. Reducing stigma can increase early-stage help-seeking and improve outcomes and quality of life, and reduce public funds expenditure.

¹ Centrepont 2023; <https://centrepont.org.uk/ending-youth-homelessness/what-youth-homelessness/stats-and-facts>

² MST4Life™ is a co-developed strengths-based positive youth development programme developed from sport psychology and underpinned by psychologically informed approaches led by Prof. Jennifer Cumming. You can access further information on the programme and access the free Toolkit trilogy here:

<https://www.sprintproject.org/toolkit>

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Challenging harmful stereotypes

One such approach to challenging mutually reinforcing stereotypes is the use of arts-based activities that benefit those involved in their creation, and consumers from public, service, and policy domains.

A key part of this work was the use of the creative method of poetry to share experiences of homelessness and challenge harmful stereotypes, demonstrating that experiences of homelessness:

- Do not make someone less than human.
- Do not mean people don't have strengths and skills.
- Are not a lifestyle choice.

We have successfully leveraged this approach combined with the implementation of rigorous service provision evaluation focussing on soft skills development that support young people to sustain long term positive outcomes.

Impact

We have successfully leveraged this approach in the West Midlands, where we have actively engaged the general public in conversations and increased understanding of homelessness as part of a free public exhibition and workshops (e.g., poetry) at the University of Birmingham. Feedback from the events included:

“A reminder that we need to stick together and believe in humanity”

“Can you invite the Cabinet to see this Exhibition. Shaming and inspiring at the same time.”



Image description: The MST4Life™ feature at the free public exhibition featuring photos of four young people from St Basils Youth Voice and their experiences.

Poems from those with and without lived experience of homelessness have been collated into a free online-resource through a poetry eBook “What Makes Home?”. Download the eBook by scanning the QR code to the right.



Recommendations

1 Public attitudes

To challenge public attitudes further, campaigns surrounding homelessness would benefit from moving beyond demonstrating need. An alternative approach which could generate new positive images of people experiencing homelessness and their strengths, potential and capabilities needs to be considered by organisations and charities.

2 Service provision

Services must continue working to implement strengths-based and psychologically informed approaches that embed multi-agency working. Whole systems approaches require commitment from everyone involved, and for external services to housing provision to also operate in strengths-based ways that supports young people to develop key life skills.

3 Policy

More work is needed to challenge harmful stereotypes, enhance understanding of homelessness, and promote inclusivity. We recommend that strengths-based, person-centred approaches are embedded into government and organisational strategies to end homelessness and extend the focus beyond rough sleeping.

Find out more

www.sprintproject.org

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