

Feature — Giving Voice: Young People Experiencing and Responding to Homelessness

Youth Homelessness from the 16-year-old Perspective

Written by a 16-year-old youth refuge resident at Hope Street Youth and Family Services

Everyone in my adopted family was trying to control me and sometimes this made me feel like I was trapped. I didn't have any say in what I did or who I was. There were too many rules that made no sense. I was on the streets when I was little and, after having no rules at all, it made it hard. I had to realise that some of the rules were there to help me but others were too disempowering. I felt like I couldn't breathe and was not in control of my life. I was just a puppet in someone else's theatre.

I knew I had to escape somehow, as I was getting tired and very sick of my situation. But I never imagined I would end up homeless. I didn't know where to go. I had been thinking of leaving but once it happened, I had no idea how to respond. It was strange, because even though my family said they didn't want me anymore, they showed me where to go to get help. Once they released me and someone else was looking after me, they wished to have nothing to do with me.

I have been to a lot of counsellors and psychologists, as well as to groups and activities. They even tried to make me have acupuncture. Sometimes the counselling helped but sometimes it was more about the present than the past. We thought that if we solved the problems that were haunting me from the past, it would help the present. But, actually, the past and present were caught up in the same reality.

I think I might be responsible for me becoming homeless because of my behaviour. But when I think about it my real parents were the problem. The fact that when

I grew up I wasn't shown any respect, love or trust made it hard to live in the world. I was rescued from a bad situation but then being rescued became the problem. It felt like I was floating down a totally different stream. It was so controlling and freedom wasn't possible, with all my actions controlled and supervised. I wasn't able to be my true self. I went from one extreme of total neglect and freedom to total control of over my life and I didn't know which way to turn.

The experience of being homeless has affected my sense of self, in that I don't think much of myself. I always thought everyone else is more important than I am. I always put others first and me second. Now though, with the help I'm receiving, I have realised that I do have value. I didn't realise this because of the way I was treated early on. And then being so controlled meant that my need for being my own person was ignored. I didn't have a hand in what I did or a say in who I was. I'm learning now that every person has value and I'm imagining that if everyone has value, then I am a person too and so I must have value. I don't really believe it yet, but with others people's trust and their believing in me, I must be able to be worth something.

The mental health services are the most important for me, as they are explaining things and helping me understand that everything happens for a reason and I hope to have an answer for the future. The only negative is that every time a session would finish they would try to shoo you away after you'd just given everything to them about your life and this felt

insulting in some way. Because I'm so young, they tried to get me to play games but I didn't feel up to them after the terrible stories I had to tell.

The system needs to have more options and opportunities for housing, especially for really young people. It's unfair that most of the supported accommodation places available are only for people over 18. It's not fair, because homelessness happens to younger people too and they need more help. People over 18 years old are considered adults but what happens to those under 18? There are no housing options for them.

Every service has experts at something and they are good at their jobs. This is important, as they all have their different perspectives and no one is better. It's when they double up and do the same job that causes problems. Combining them would be better than them working separately.

Young people can offer a lot to the services as they can give their feedback and opinions on how things work. The workers' job is to make the young person feel safe but sometimes they might say things that are wrong and the young person doesn't feel safe. Workers have got to know that they shouldn't talk to young people like they're little kids. One of things I learned when I became homeless was that I had an adult mind and would prefer not to be treated like a kid. Even though we look like kids, we expect to be treated as adults, because we know a lot more than the adults who have never been homeless.