Communicating a Better Future for Young Homeless People

Claire Topping, Fiona Brooks, Maxine Offredy & Julia Williams
Presentation Outline

• Background
• Methodology
• Preliminary Findings
• Summary
• Questions
Youth Homelessness

- Evidence of increased prevalence of learning difficulties e.g. Rohde et al (1999), Barwick & Siegal (1996)

**N.B.** U.S. & Canadian studies

- Young people from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds and/or experiencing disruption or trauma in childhood are at increased risk of homelessness (Quilgar et al 2008).

- Significant minority have experienced violence in the parental home (Quilgar et al 2008).
• Homelessness can instigate or compound existing mental health and/or drug misuse problems amongst young people. (Quilgar et al 2008)

• A strong association between homelessness and withdrawing from education, employment or training (Quilgar et al 2008).

• Overlapping populations: Youth Justice, revolving door-cyclical homelessness (Robinson 2008)

• “Young homeless people are neither the architects of their situation nor the passive objects of external forces. They are both these things, attempting to find their own pathways in an environment of choice and constraint.” (Robinson, 2008)
• Defining homelessness complex e.g. “rooflessness”, street homeless, hidden homeless, “houselessness” Intentionally homeless, statutory homeless (Robinson, 2008)

• Young people’s definitions of “home”: safe/familiar neighbourhood, security & permanence of tenure, independence, control, privacy, decent material conditions, homeliness & personalisation, family (Fitzpatrick, 2000)

• At least 75,000 young people experienced homelessness in the UK in 2006–07 (Quilgar et al 2008).

• At the centre participating in the study 2,000 + young people seen each year (16 - 21 years old)
Asset-based approaches to intervention

Deficits
Identify sub-group of the population requiring a particular (often existing) intervention or service

Assets
Identify assets and devise strategies to enhance them across the population
What is an asset?

“A health asset is any factor or resources which enhances the ability of communities and populations to maintain and sustain health and well-being. These assets can operate at the level of the individual, family or community as protective and promoting factors to buffet against life’s stresses”

(Morgan, cited in Foot & Hopkins (2010))
Young People and Assets

- **Positive youth development** which highlights core processes and dynamics in human development that are the foundations for growing up healthy.

- **Prevention**, which focuses on protective factors that inhibit high-risk behaviors such as substance abuse, violence, and dropping out of school.

- **Resiliency**, which identifies factors that increase young people’s ability to cope and thrive in the face of adversity.

- **North American Focus**, Majority of work has taken place in USA, e.g. Search Institute - 40 “developmental assets”, criticisms of model.
Relationship between Assets & High Risk Behaviours (12 -18 Years old)

www.search-institute.org/research/assets/assetpower
Relationship between Assets & Positive Behaviours (12-18 Years old)

www.search-institute.org/research/assets/assetpower
Research Question

Can communication skills act as a (significant) asset for homeless young people?

What are the communication demands being placed on homeless young people?

• What are their current skills and abilities for meeting these demands?

• What additional skills and abilities would be useful in meeting these demands?
Research Context

Day Centre (16-21 yr olds)

DROP-IN
Mon-Fri
10am-4pm

WORKSHOPS

Essential Living Services e.g. meals, clothes washing, showers

NEET

Advice & Housing

Scheduled Activities

Satellites (External Agencies)

WEEKEND PROGRAMME
Sat-Sun

OUTREACH

Individual borough funded work

Women’s Open Space (WOS)

Prison Visits

Prison Visits
Methodology

• Ethical considerations e.g. informed consent

• Mixed methods design i.e. uses both qualitative and quantitative data

• Recruitment- hybrid sampling approach

• 2 stage interview process: Communication Checklist- Self Report (CC-SR) administered verbally (Bishop et al, 2009), followed by a semi-structured interview
Sample

• 20 young people (12 men and 8 women)
• 18-23 years old
• All speak English as a main language (although some are multi-lingual)
• 2x street homeless, 1x emergency shelter, 3x “sofa surfing”, 13x temporary housing/ hostels, 1x currently back at parental home
• 4x no formal qualifications, 1x care leaver
• 3x experience of Youth Justice
Preliminary Findings

• Sample profile on CC-SR
  75% (15) scored below 50\(^{th}\) centile on all 3 dimensions (language structure, pragmatic skills, social engagement)
  25% (5) scored below 5\(^{th}\) centile on all 3 dimensions

• However 2\(\times\) young people at 95\(^{th}\) centile or above on all 3 dimensions

NB: This is \textbf{cannot} be generalised to the population
Homeless young people are future-focused & aspirational

They can identify future goals and articulate these:

- Getting a career or job (army, bio-scientist, administrator, shop)
- Accessing educational opportunities, including university
- Finding stable accommodation
- Looking after others
- Have their life “more sorted”
Emerging Themes

Communication as power
“The way you put things across words can be a very powerful weapon if you’re going to be in an interview or something”

Code switching
“I think changing that kind of communication from the way that you speak to a friend or a relative to somebody like in a position of authority or something to do with furthering yourself, you need to definitely be articulate and be able to promote yourself in a positive way through verbal and physical communication”
Communicating Confidently

“I feel confident about not getting beaten up on the roads or like approaching a girl, you know little things like that but when it comes to like getting a job and getting things sorted in my life for the long term that’s where confidence lacks, you know what I’m saying? That’s where I don’t really believe in it”.

Skill Building

“(Work on) my body language cos the way you sit and the way you portray your body language it says a lot about you cos that’s a way of communicating and talking”.
Conflict Resolution

“I kept getting more and more aggravated cos he was just standing there and not saying anything to me so it got me into more and more trouble as I kept talking to him, well, it was more like screaming at him”

Communication as Self-Preservation

“He tried forcing something on me so I just kind of talked my way out of it. I can’t remember exactly what was said but I was just like “No, this has got to stop”.”
Limitations of communication skills as an asset for homeless young people?

“(Need to) stop smoking weed…Cos I was smoking weed all the time and then I stopped and I didn’t smoke any weed when I went away for a trip and they (centre staff) showed me like I could be a good person, they showed me what I could do”
Summary

• Asset theory offers an opportunity to think about populations and intervention in a different way.

• There is a need to develop asset theory within a UK and European context.

• Emerging evidence that communication skills can act as an asset for homeless young people within UK context.

• However, it is a complex asset with individual young people giving it different meanings and values.
Lost for Words?- possibly

Lust for Life?- definitely!

Lost for Life?- maybe not?
References


[www.search-institute.org/research/assets/assetpower](http://www.search-institute.org/research/assets/assetpower)