

Specifics of social work with young people experiencing homelessness

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Abstract. There were about a 4.1million homeless people in the European Union [1]. In the European Union, 20-30 per cent of homeless people are young people between the ages of 18-29 years [2]. Homelessness is a concern for policymakers and society as a whole. Recent literature on social workers' experiences with homeless people has mainly focused on working with the general homeless population and not specifically on social work with homeless youth. A qualitative research method was used to analyze the cause and consequences of youth homelessness, and identify skills needed for social work with young homeless people and inspiration of social workers motivation to help young homeless people. Five social workers working with young homeless people from a city in Finland participated in research. The semi-structured interview data were analysed using the content analysis method. The study revealed – causes and consequences of youth homelessness; skills needed for social work with young homeless people and social workers driving force working with homeless youths.

Key words: homelessness, youth homelessness, youth, social work.

1 Introduction

Homelessness is a concern for policymakers, individuals, agencies, and society as a whole. Homelessness can be described as a symptom and cause of extreme poverty and exclusion today and pushes the European political agenda to its brim. The Lisbon Declaration [3] thus acknowledged the latter and added that homelessness affects people's physical, mental health, employment and thus affect all Member States. Homeless people have the same human right as everyone. The European Court of Human Rights [4] specifies the right to a house, a protected home and family; the right to be protected against inhuman and degrading treatment. In 2012, there were about a 4.1million homeless people in the European Union [1]; 20-30 per cent of homeless people are young people between the ages of 18-29 years [2]. Recent literature on social workers' experiences with homeless people has mainly focused on working with the general homeless population and not specifically on social work with homeless youth. The term "youth" refers to the transitional period between childhood and adulthood, typically characterized by development, growth, and vulnerability. The United Nations defines youth for statistical purposes as individuals

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between the ages of 15 and 24, although definitions may vary across countries [5]. Young people may face challenges, engage in risky behaviours, and experience a period of learning and development [6]. The transition from childhood to adulthood is a critical stage, involving the completion of education and integration into the labour market.

2 Youth homelessness as a phenomenon

Youth homelessness occurs where an individual between the ages of 13 and 26 is experiencing 'rooflessness' or 'houselessness' or is living in insecure or inadequate housing without a parent, family member or other legal guardian [7]. This definition bases on the knowledge that young people experiencing homelessness have a different pathway into homelessness. Hence, their needs are distinct and need a specific youth-oriented measure of homelessness. The causes of youth homelessness are multifaceted. Family conflict, including poor communication, verbal aggression, and lack of warmth and support, can lead young people to leave home [8]. Changes in family composition, such as divorce, remarriage, or death, can also contribute to tension and homelessness among young people [9, 10]. Discrimination, stigma, and social exclusion limit access to education, employment, and services for homeless youth. Structural factors like poverty, unemployment, housing affordability, and system failures in child welfare, mental health, and correctional facilities also may be contributing factors to youth homelessness [11].

The consequences of youth homelessness are multifaceted and have significant impacts on various aspects of a young person's life. Homelessness affects young people, such as anxiety, sleep disorder, substance misuse, and social isolation [12]. Homelessness increases vulnerability to victimization [13]. Homeless youth are at a higher risk of experiencing sexual victimization, physical violence, and involvement in criminal activities compared to their housed counterparts [14]. Homelessness is associated with a range of physical and mental health issues. Homeless youth may experience depression, emotional distress, anxiety, and developmental concerns. Disorders due to substance use often co-occur with mental health issues among homeless young people [13, 15]. Homelessness means not having a safe place to call home, leading to insecurity, exposure to violence, theft, and sexual abuse [16]. Homeless youth often lack access to nutritious food, proper hygiene facilities, and personal belongings. The absence of a fixed address can also limit their access to essential services like employment. Homeless youth are more prone to substance misuse, including alcohol and drug addiction. Drug and alcohol use may serve as a coping mechanism for their difficult circumstances and contribute to addiction. Homelessness provides an environment that facilitates drug acquisition and consumption [17]. Homeless youth have a higher likelihood of engaging in delinquent behaviour and spending time in juvenile detention [18]. Instability in housing, poverty, and associated hardships contribute to delinquency among homeless young people [19]. Homeless youth, particularly those from sexual minority groups, are vulnerable to stigmatization and discrimination [20]. Negative societal attitudes and stereotypes about homelessness can perpetuate social inequality and hinder the integration of homeless youth into mainstream society [21-22]. Homelessness disrupts educational stability, leading to excessive school mobility, poor academic performance, and increased risk of dropping out. Homeless youth face difficulties in building relationships, experience sleep disorders, and exhibit regressive behaviours. Limited education and training opportunities hinder their access to resources and future employment prospects [23]. Homeless youth often face obstacles in finding and maintaining employment due to their circumstances [24].

3 Materials and methods

A qualitative research strategy was used to explore the phenomenon of youth homelessness from the social worker’s point of view. A qualitative research method allows us to understand aspects of human experience and uncover factors that lead to specific outcomes. Qualitative research enables us to make sense of reality, explain, and describe social worldviews. It also allows us to understand what, where and when of decision making [25]. The inclusion criteria for participants in this study are those social workers working with young people, youth or under-age that are homeless or might face homeless and work in a city in Finland. The participants were generally contacted through their organisation, and the follow-up remainder was made through personal email and telephone. Therefore, five social workers were chosen based on a predetermined characteristic such as place of work, department of work and qualification. The length of time the social workers have worked with homeless people was not the central point in choosing the participants; therefore, the participants work experiences range from eight months to fifteen years. A semi-structured one-to-one interview was used to collect data on social work experience with homeless young people. Semi-structured interview gives the possibility to vary the questions and draw the research participants into the content of the research topic more fully. The participant chose to answer in Finnish or English, depending on how they felt comfortable. The interview lasted 20-40 minutes, depending on the participants’ knowledge of the questions and responses. A content analysis is used to analyse data in this research. Content analysis can be seen as a means of collecting, reading, and analysing research work already produced that exists in some concrete form. It may be a text, symbol, and image. Reading and analysing the data may not necessarily be from the perspective of the author, but directed towards the purpose of the research [26].

4 Results and Discussion

4.1 Causes and consequences of youth homelessness

Furthermore, after analysing data related to the phenomenon of youth homelessness, it was categorised into two main categories 1) causes of youth homelessness and 2) consequences of youth homelessness. There are many reasons why a young person might experience homelessness (Fig. 1).

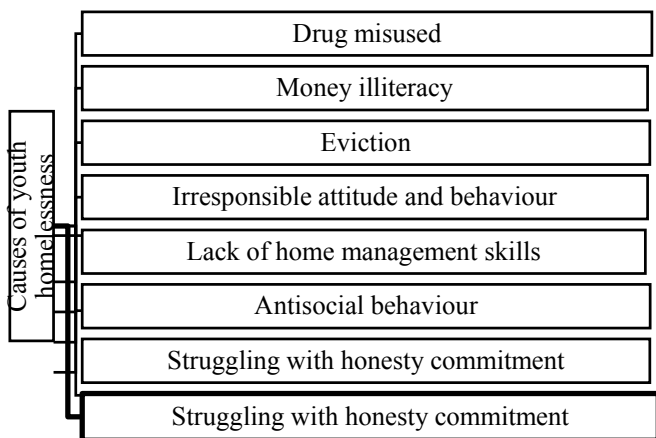


Figure 1. Causes of youth homelessness.

Causes of youth homelessness. Most of the participants in this research explain that eviction is the trigger that put the young person into the reality of being homeless, “... of course other aspects related to the young individuals’ manners may lead to the young individual to being evicted from their house” (5). As social workers have found, the reasons of eviction from their apartment are many, some might result for the fact that the misuse drugs “...In working with young people I have noticed that most that become homeless at a young age increases with the usage of narcotics specifically drug issues, like inhalants, cannabis, marijuana and many...” (2). In order to buy drugs, they need money. Money for rents may be misdirected to buying drugs, and gambling. Eventually, they fall into severe debt and rental debt as indicated in these statements: “...There is also gambling debt, where the debt can easily start adding up...”(1); “...money literacy, so how the money is to be used at home, as a young person is mostly lacking in most of my clients”(4); “...falling into debt and unpaid rent that may lead to homelessness”(3). Irresponsible behaviour and attitude from the participants’ perspective is a trigger that leads to a young person becoming homeless, “...a general lack of control over one’s life and that the person generally may have an irresponsibility attitude, that requires that the person should pay for rent, make sure it gets paid for in time and apply for the benefits which they have the right to from the social insurance institution... does the required studying or are they going to work or applying for unemployment fund.”(3); “When the young person cannot sustain themselves and their habits cannot support their own wellbeing. And show to the neighbours that they are orderly, that there aren’t making too many loud sounds, that there aren’t huge groups of people coming over and drinking and doing drugs, I would say that those are the main issues that will make a young person homeless” (4). Home management is an integral part of decision making in keeping a home for a longer time. It is the ability to use the minimum resources available to get what you want (Rani 2016). “...In a sense making sure the day-to-day requirements are taken care of. We talk about living etiquettes, meaning taking into consideration the Neighbours and making sure the apartment is clean, knows how to cook food and just, in general, the basic necessity” (1). The provided quotation illustrates that young people who do not have these skills will eventually lose their apartments. Interview data also shows that commitment to the services they receive is vital in keeping their apartment. When a young person is not able to dedicate themselves to these services, they might eventually become without a home. “Commitment... commitment to the services provided by the assisted apartments, young homeless people tend to cause some problems. When they have gotten an apartment then they say “thanks for the apartment”, and they don’t commit to the services or any further counselling or any form aid which will help them to deal with the issues such as the usage of recreational drugs which caused them to become homeless in the first place, Commitment is far weaker in most of the youth” (2).

Consequences of youth homelessness. The repercussion of youth homelessness’ brings despair to the youth in the form of life instability (Fig. 2).

The recklessness of a young person discourages those with a stable life to associate with them: “...With the young age comes a sense of impulsiveness and such. Which brings its challenges; such as the young person life may not be very stable...” (1) “... unfortunately those people with a stable life wouldn’t like to take someone with an unstable life to stay with them” (4). The inability to control themselves due to the use of drugs, from the participant’s point of view, results in isolation due to the loss of their apartment: “... I have noticed amongst my clients that suffer from the use of recreational drug misuse and lack of control of one’s life can cause that the person to fall into homelessness and isolation from the main society” (5). Living in isolation due to homelessness may limit the possibility to connect to the network of available services that can help in exiting homelessness, from the social workers perspective: “They don’t know the network of services available, they don’t

know what services they can get from social insurance institution” (2). For a homeless person it becomes challenging to get a proper education and employment: “...I think that if you are homeless, it makes it harder to apply and to get a place to study in or to even go to work; to build a life with routine without a house is extremely difficult” (3). The provided interview data illustrate that to get a job a person should have an address, as well as a level of education that will help them strive in their careers. Being evicted from many apartments due to bad rental credit limits the possibility of having another apartment, as illustrated by the participants: “...Well one of the challenges is that those without credit won’t be granted an apartment regardless of the source or what has caused it” (3). There is an increased risk of getting involved in crime and safety problems when a young person becomes homeless, as indicated by the social workers in the following way: “And of course, the lack of safety which is made more prominent when you don’t have your own home.” (4). “... Lack of safety, an increase of exclusion from general society, thus leading towards the road of crime... I would say there is a greater chance when compared to, [LONG PAUSE] those who have their own home; When an individual is in a difficult and closed position the temptation to commit a crime may be greater” (4).

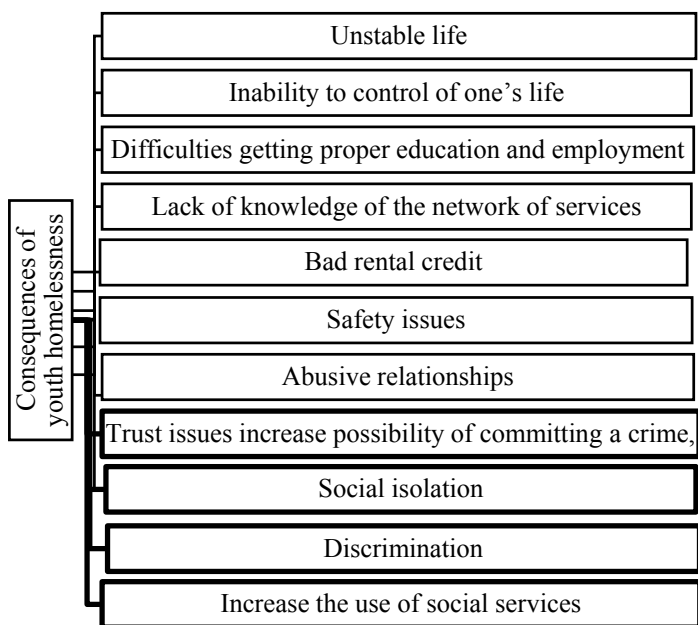


Figure 2. Consequences of youth homelessness for youth.

Trust issues become a concern when young people become homeless, got cut up in crimes involving many different authorities as pointed out by the participants: “Probably the biggest challenge is that they don’t trust the authorities. [LONG PAUSE]...If the individual has committed juvenile crimes, meaning that the interactions with authorities have been negative, they will always think that they might be controlled; however, we are just here to help to get the life right on track and to some.”(2) These statements indicate that it becomes a concern and problem to get the young homeless person to involve in services and activities that are geared to help their homeless situation. Young homeless people may also have the prejudice of associating with the mainstream society thinking that they do not

belong and thus also avoid seeking help. *“They are at an increased risk of social isolating themselves from the mainstream society because they think they are not like other people, especially when they don’t know how to seek for help..., I would say with the discrimination, exclusion and all other factors are closely related and go hand in hand with one another when you are homeless”* (1). According to the social workers, the situation of the young homeless person is disheartening since they are having other challenging issues and seeking a home from place to place: *“They are horrible; the discrimination risk rises tremendously and uncontrollable... It is disheartening and shocking to be homeless and apply for a home with all types of conditions from one place to another. No matter what it takes, It isn’t good at all.”* (2). With the challenges of acquiring a home, it becomes tempting to seek a relationship with benefit which may lead them into abusive relationships: *“Young homeless person in search of an intimate relationship, they sometimes find themselves in a very abusive relationship, could be due to drugs use and other mental health conditions”* (5). Decrease in trust and low level of commitment, drug misuse, and mental health problem may prolong the intervention process, thereby leading to increase the use of social services. *“...of course, the increased usage of society’s resources, it becomes more expensive on the society that someone becomes homeless; The individual will most likely depend on the society and the amenities and services provided by the society”* (3). Stenius-Ayoade (2020) suggests that homeless young people are a high-risk group due to their poor health condition as they use hospital and emergency services a lot.

4.2 Social workers’ skills and motivation to work with youth homelessness

The analysis of the survey data led to the disclosure of: 1) skills needed to work with young homeless people; 2) social workers motivation to work with youth homelessness. The content of the above data thus indicated that social workers needed to have specific skills to work successfully with homeless young people (Fig. 3).

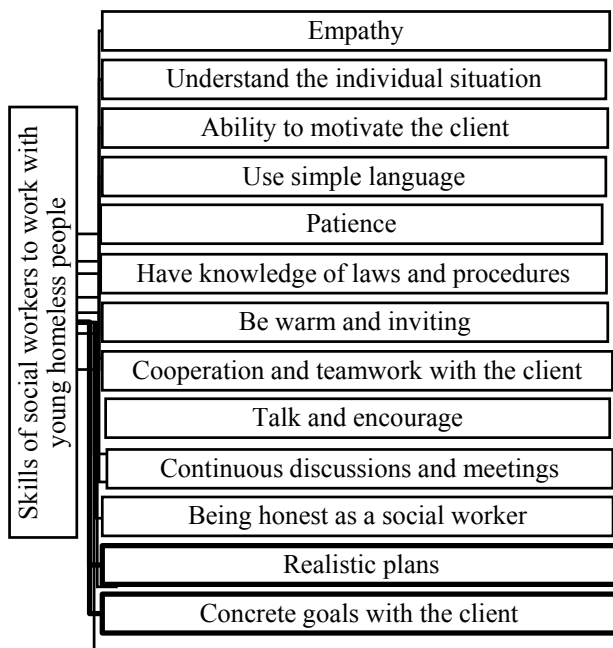


Figure 3. Skills of social workers to work with young homeless people.

Empathy is essential to understand people from a different perspective. It is the essence of the worker putting themselves into the client's situation from the participants' point of view, "...In my own opinion a social worker should be able to express a sense of empathy and look at the situation from the perspective of the young individual..." (1). "... So real empathy is required and a lively interest to the young person situation" (4). Having a more comprehensive outlook and understanding the individual situation from the participant point of view does reflect the skill that is needed to work with young people experiencing homelessness: "Understand the cause-and-effect relationship as to why the young individual has ended up homeless. Why have they ended up in this situation?" (3). Understanding the phenomenon of youth homelessness allows the social worker to motivate and give hope to the young homeless individual to acquire and keep an apartment. "A social worker should also maybe.... in some way through conversation or dialogue to motivate the individual and give them hope that an apartment can be found and also be kept and that the apartment it is really important in a person's life." (5).

The social workers do acknowledge that using simple language to the understanding of the young homeless client and respect to make the client open up and facilitate communication as indicated in the following statement: "... Well... Social worker must come to the level of the young individual and speak and use language which the young person would fully understand..." (3) "... If you present yourself as a controlling bureaucratic person and use formal language, it may alienate the youth from the social worker"(5).

Patience is imperative, and knowledge of laws and procedures associated with youth homelessness are skills that workers consider to be essential:"... And also, patience is very important..." (4), "Of course, these aids needed by young homeless people provided by the social insurance institution need to be clear and known by the social worker so that they know what do in each situation" (2). Being warm and inviting, and getting the young homeless person to involve, encourage and facilitate the intervention process is important as illustrated in the following statements. "Not to be cold, but instead be warm and inviting regardless of the youth's situation" (1) "Many times, we take steps back and sometimes nothing happens but when you get the young person to understand their situation and that we are on the same side and I am not the enemy but their helper" (2). Continuous discussions and meetings, talk and encouragement for the young person to maintain and keep their apartment and exit homelessness reflect the views of the participants; "A lot of the time it requires more than one meeting; there may be many meetings, where the main purpose is to lead to the realization of the situation."(5); "I strive to give a motivational approach while talking with a client So that the young person can accept the aide being offered. Many believe that when an apartment has been gotten, everything is ok; however, this isn't the case in actuality." (2). Being honest as a social worker and laying the situation in a way the young homeless person will understand, "By talking, talking, and talking, again and again and we come back to the topic as to why you should take care of yourself, and you should get some help... Just like anything else, honesty is the keyword. If a person denies that they have an issue with recreational drugs usage, it makes it extra difficult to discuss and find solutions..." (3). This given statement shows that social workers try to be open with the reality of the homeless situation with the young person and plan realistic concrete goals together; "A person can only be motivated when they can admit they have an issue and want to find a solution..." (4); "... The way I encourage them is to ask what type of situation will they end up, what type of emotions rise when talking about the matter when there is not a place that can be called home or the other issues related to what type of dreams and wants someone has for their life"(1); "I sit with my client, and then we make a plan together, I make sure the goals are pleasant, perfect sized and very concrete while looking at the current situation as realistic as possible" (3).

Study reveals reasons that motivate social workers to work with youth experiencing homelessness (Fig. 4).

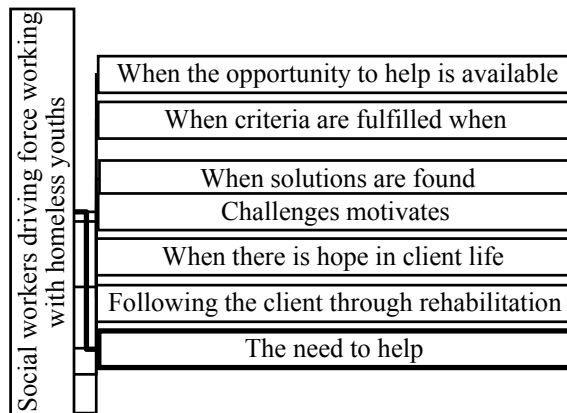


Figure 4. Motivation of social workers to work with young homeless people.

Most of the participants said that when the opportunity to help is available, it keeps them going; “... *When there are opportunities to make arrangements to help the person to a home is available and accessible*” (5). When the latter aspect is fulfilled, and the client meets the criteria, it is a motivating factor: “... *The opportunity to make arrangements for the person to get a home if they fulfil our criteria...*” (3). It implies that even though everyone has the right to have a home, when the client does not meet the criteria, it becomes a problem. However, when all the criteria are met, and solutions are found, it is a motivating factor for the social worker to continue their work; “*It is not easy, but it is very satisfying to find a solution to the situation. At the end of the day, it is a very pressing and monumentally large issue, so the result of the work is concretely motivating*” (1). Not all difficulties discourage social workers working with homeless young people some participants say that some challenges act as a motivating factor to do their work; “...*And I get a lot of motivation from even the smallest steps taken forward with them. With others, we go faster and easier forward together, and with some, it is far more challenging and tedious. The challenge motivates a lot*” (2). The social workers feel that they need to help one motivating factor, also when following the client through rehabilitation and observing the progression of the young person to get out from the problem situation is motivating as illustrated in the following statement: “...*And I get a lot of motivation from even the smallest steps taken forward with them. We go faster and easier together forward with others, and with some, it is far more challenging and tedious. The challenge motivates a lot*” (2), “...*it is very inspiring and motivating to follow clients on the road to rehabilitation out of homelessness*” (5). Progression to the right direction gives hope for the client and so the social work; “*There is a possibility that the person may have an actual change in their life and the person could truly rebuild their life. They can get a status for themselves through getting a place to study or a job. They can also provide for themselves. And for me, that the most rewarding for me*” (4).

From the above mention point, it could be assumed that working with homeless youth people requires a lot of dedication and motivation. Even the least step ahead to assisting the young person exit homelessness is a motivating factor for the social workers working with young people experiencing homelessness.

4 Conclusion

Causes of youth homelessness - drug misuse, money illiteracy, eviction, irresponsible attitude and behaviour, lack of home management skills, antisocial behaviour, struggling with honesty lead to consequences of youth homelessness - unstable life, inability to control of one's life, difficulties getting proper education and employment, lack of knowledge of the network of services, bad rental credit, safety issues, abusive relationships, trust issues. They all increase possibility of committing a crime, social isolation, discrimination, increase the use of social services. Skills needed to work with young homeless people are the following - empathy, understanding the individual situation, ability to motivate the client, use simple language, patience, have knowledge of laws and procedures, be warm and inviting, cooperation and teamwork with the client, talk and encourage them to maintain their apartment, continuous discussions and meetings, being honest as a social worker, plan realistic and concrete goals with the client, be realistic. Social workers' driving force working with homeless youths is - when the opportunity to help is available, when criteria are fulfilled, solutions are found. Challenges motivate, when there is hope in client's life, following the client through rehabilitation.

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