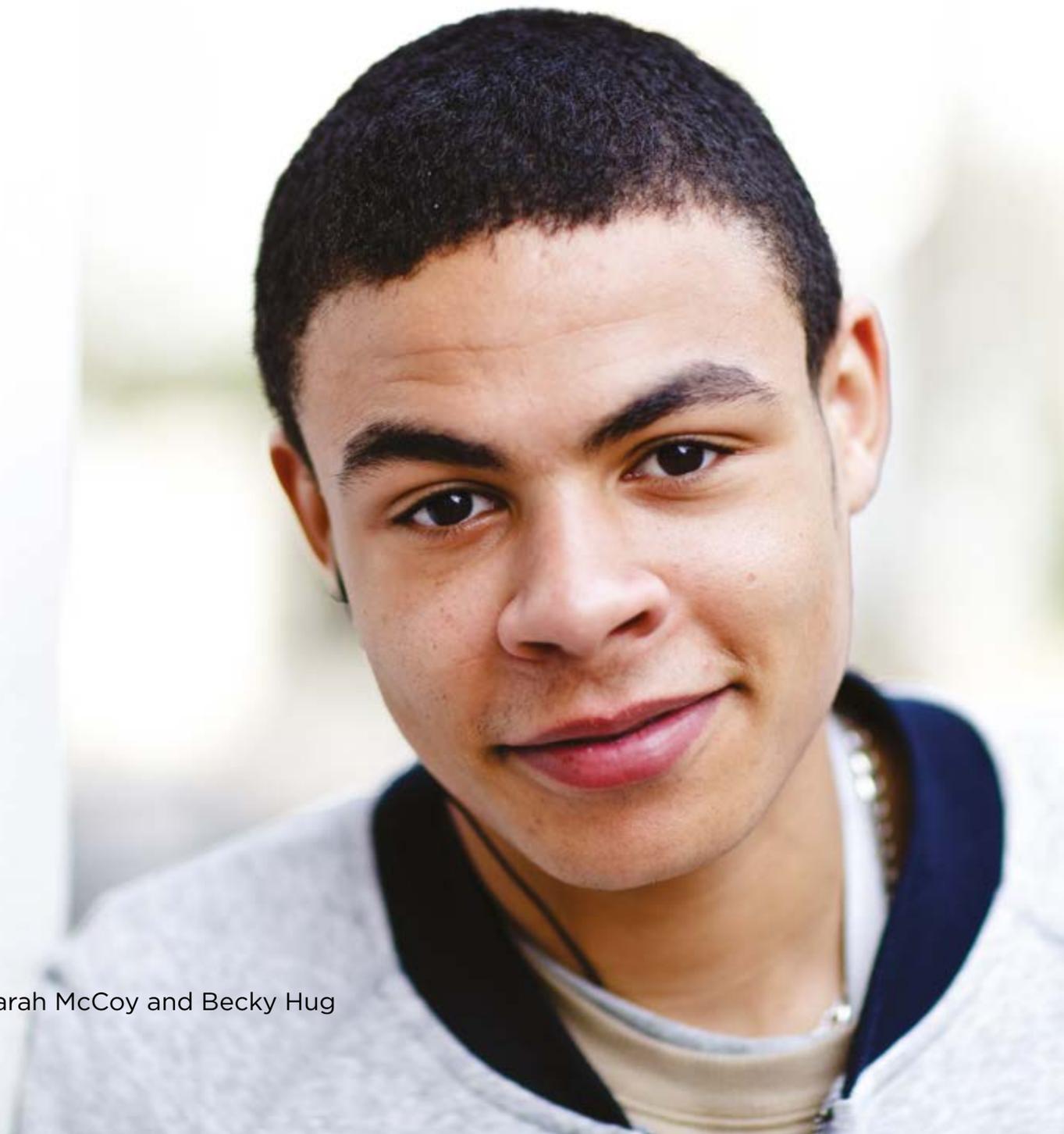




# **DANGER ZONES** AND STEPPING STONES

*Young people's experiences of hidden homelessness*



By Sarah McCoy and Becky Hug

# 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 as 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.

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Homelessness has no place

## WE HELP YOUNG PEOPLE IN CRISIS

Depaul UK  
291-299 Borough High Street  
London  
SE1 1JG  
UK

0207 939 1220  
depaul@depaulcharity.org.uk  
uk.depaulcharity.org

 @DepaulUK

 Depaul UK

Registered Charity Number: 802384. Company Number: 2440093  
(Registered in England and Wales)