# The relationships between youth homelessness and offending: A systematic review of the UK literature

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ABSTRACT

International research has demonstrated that homeless youth are more likely to engage in offending behaviours. This systematic review collates, synthesises, and appraises the academic and grey literature on UK studies reporting associations between youth homelessness and offending behaviours. MEDLINE, Embase, PsycINFO, PubMed, Social Policy and Practice, Social Care Online, OpenGrey and Google Scholar were searched from 1969 until May 2020. Twenty-two studies met inclusion criteria. Findings indicate that mental illness, having disrupted family relationships, substance misuse, trauma, being a care leaver and gang involvement influence the relationship between youth homeless and offending. Family mediation and supported accommodation were highlighted as useful interventions. It is recommended that local authority provision and accommodation options work in partnership and improve their offer for this population.

## 1. Introduction

Youth homelessness is recognised internationally as a critical issue (Morton et al., 2018; Quilgars et al., 2008) and increasingly becoming a problem for public health and policy. Within the UK, 129,000 young people aged 16–24 were estimated to be at risk of homelessness in 2020/21, an increase of 6 % from the previous year (Centrepoint, 2023). Prior to this age, social services are responsible for housing and supporting children and young people at risk of homelessness (Shelter, 2023). Research tends to underreport prevalence and incidence rates (Homeless Link, 2019) due to methodological issues and gaps in data collection arising from high rates of drop-out and withdrawal (Quilgars et al., 2011; Clarke et al., 2015). Due to a lack of an appropriate assessment for the extent of youth homelessness in the UK (Centrepoint, 2023), it is difficult to accurately assess the number of young adults impacted by homelessness, resulting in challenges with devising appropriate solutions and ensuring sufficient funding is allocated. Furthermore, the terms 'youth' and 'homelessness' are defined inconsistently within the literature and thus it is likely research captures heterogenous groups of individuals (Fielding & Forchuk, 2013; Quilgars et al., 2011).

Available research indicates that young people become homeless as a result of multitude of interacting factors. Causes of homelessness are complex and individual specific, however there are commonalities which extend beyond issues of accessing secure and affordable housing (Gaetz et al., 2014). The most common reasons young people tend to become vulnerable to homelessness include abusive relationships (Bearsley-Smith, et al., 2008), family breakdown (Martijn & Sharpe, 2006), physical and mental illness (Hwang, et al., 2005) gang involvement (Yoder et al., 2003) and being a care leaver (Bender et al., 2015).

Crime and homelessness also appear to be interconnected. Homeless young people are more likely to be victims of crime and exposed to violence (Gaetz, 2004; Baron, 2003). Homelessness can also cause engagement in criminal activities ((Baron and Hartnagel, 1998; Chen et al., 2006). Schwartz and collegaues (2008) interviewed 42 homeless young people in the US, 96 % of young people reported contact with the police. Crimes that homeless young people commit include theft, drug dealing, vandalism, begging, property offences, petty crimes, and violent crimes (Heerde et al., 2014, 2015; Tavecchio, 1999). However, research demonstrating a relationship between youth homelessness and offending appears to be limited within UK populations. In the year 2020/21 over 11,000 young people aged 17–24 were reported to be detained in prison which made up for 15 % of the total prison population (Sturge, 2022; Prison Reform Trust, 2022).

Furthermore, in 2019, 21 % of people serving community sentences were young adults aged 18–24 ((Ministry of Justice, 2019), Yet, these figures are disproportionate as this age category only makes up 8 % of

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the UK population (Office for National Statistics, 2023). Moreover, it is unclear how many of these young people were homeless as these figures are not recorded.

Numerous theoretical approaches have been utilised in order to understand homeless young people's engagement in criminal behaviour. Firstly, the General Theory of Crime asserts that a lack of self-control causes participation in criminal behaviours (Gottfredson & Hirschi, 1990). Low levels of self-control combined with poor social circumstances and engagement with deviant other strongly predicts crime perpetration amongst homeless young people (Baron, 2003). Secondly, 'General Strain Theory' (Agnew, 1992) highlights homelessness and victimisation are key risk factors in causing crime participation. It is thought offending occurs in response to experiencing strain or stressors. Crime may therefore be a way of reducing the strains associated with being homeless (Agnew, 1992). Lastly, Ferguson and colleagues (2011) propose that Social Control Theory can be used to explain homeless young people's engagement in crime. They suggest young people may be predisposed to commit crimes to ensure their needs are met and seek fulfilment. Traditionally, social institutions such as education and occupations create a sense of security and reduce deviant behaviours. However, homeless young people fail to internalise mainstream ideals, leading them to be socially isolated from the internal and external forces that would typically prevent them offending.

Despite theories offering explanation as to why individuals may engage in offending behaviours, the exact reasons and risk factors remain unclear. Further research suggests homeless young people may resort to crime if they are struggling financially and feel unsafe (Ferguson et al., 2011; Schwartz et al., 2008) and that safe and suitable housing is critical to effective resettlement and is vital to preventing engagement in crime (Wusinich et al., 2019). Currently, hostels and supported accommodation are recommended as the safest options for young people who are unable to stay with family and friends (Centrepoint, 2019). However, young people and practitioners emphasise that these environments can also exacerbate exposure to violence and criminal activities (McCoy, 2018). Furthermore, housing options appear to be limited for young people due to a lack of available housing or financial / funding issues.

Homeless young people are amongst the most vulnerable in society. Timely, appropriate support and access to accommodation can help homeless young people to live fulfilling lives. Much of the current research exploring the relationship between youth homelessness and offending behaviour originates in Australia, Canada and the USA. Consequently, it is not known whether these findings can be generalised to the UK. It is vital that policy and practice is evidence-based to meet the needs of this subgroup of individuals. Furthermore, evidence-based recommendations are needed to support this population.

## 2. Aim & Objectives

In 2021/22, it is estimated over 129,000 young people presented to their local council as homeless (Centrepoint, 2023) and in 2020/21 over 11,000 young people aged 17–24 were reported to be detained in prison. Furthermore, 21 % of people serving community sentences were young adults aged 18–24 (Ministry of Justice, 2019). However, the relationship between homelessness and offending behaviours is not understood within the UK population. Current published systematic reviews involve international literature (Heerde et al., 2015, 2014). Whilst these reviews have identified associations between homelessness and youth offending, they are non-UK studies and moreover, have excluded available grey literature. Such a review would provide understanding about the specific issues relevant to UK social policy and identify potential interventions most likely to reduce offending behaviours and meet the needs of homeless young people.

The following questions were considered as part of this systematic review:

a) What are the relationships between youth homelessness and offending?
b) What are suitable interventions?
c) What are the implications for UK policy?

## 3. Method

This systematic review was conducted following the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-analyses (PRISMA) guidelines to enhance quality of reporting findings (Moher et al., 2009). Due to the heterogeneity of study designs included, it was not appropriate to undertake meta-analyses (Mays, Pope & Popay, 2005). Thus, a descriptive narrative synthesis was chosen to organise and present the findings.

A scoping search was conducted from 1969 to 2020 using electronic databases to identify academic and grey literature. The start date of 1969 was chosen as this was the year the youth homelessness charity Centrepoint was founded and ensures enough time to adequately capture all possible studies up to the study date of 2020. The search strategy was applied to five databases: PsycINFO, MEDLINE, Embase, PubMed and Social Policy and Practice. Grey literature was searched for using the databases Social Care Online and OpenGrey. Google Scholar was used to capture any additional studies. Reference lists of included studies were scanned to identify additional sources for inclusion, which did not arise in the initial searches. A combination of subject headings, key words, and relevant synonyms were used. Boolean operators (AND/OR) and wildcard symbols were utilised to yield variations. Search terms included "You* OR Young people OR Adolescen*", "Crim* OR Offen OR youth offen* OR Criminal behav**", "Homeless youth OR Homeless* OR Housing OR Temporary Accommodation OR No Fixed Abode OR Street Youth OR Sleeping Rough". The study research strategy is show in Table 1.

Full study eligibility was based on the inclusion and exclusion criteria shown in Table 2. Studies including a population of youth aged 16–25 were included, as prior to this age, social services and local authorities are responsible for housing and supporting children and young people at risk of homelessness (Shelter, 2023). Those that were homeless or had unstable housing were included. Studies that reported offending behaviour were included.

Studies identified were screened against eligibility criteria. Firstly, duplicates were identified and excluded. Secondly, titles and abstracts were screened alongside criteria. Inclusion and exclusion criteria were used to screen the remaining papers. Findings from the extracted references were recorded in a standardised template. The screening process is outlined in Fig. 1.

Twenty-two studies met inclusion criteria for this review. 2906 studies were found during the search, of which 175 were full text screened for eligibility. From these, 153 were excluded. 120 studies were excluded as they were not conducted in the UK. 8 studies were excluded as they were not relevant to the study aims, 18 were excluded as they were commentaries, 16 studies were excluded because they were review articles, 11 were excluded as they were books, two studies were excluded due to age.

Studies were also assessed for their risk of bias. The Mixed Methods Appraisal Tool (MMAT; Hong et al., 2018), was used to assess the quality of studies. The MMAT demonstrates good validity and reliability (Pace et al., 2012) and is the most appropriate tool to use due to the heterogeneity of study designs included in this review. However, studies were not excluded based on their methodological quality score as recommended by the authors (Hong et al., 2018) due to the lack of studies available. Each study was assessed against five criteria corresponding to the relevant study type and scored on a rating scale from 0 (no criteria met) to 5 (*****) (all criteria met) (Ayele et al., 2020), higher scores indicating higher quality. The MMAT showed that four articles were rated as five stars, eight as four stars, six as three stars, two as two stars and two as one star. Ratings of all articles are presented alongside the

**Table 1**
Search Strategy.

1 [exp Homeless/ or homeless*.mp.]
2 youth.mp.
3 young people.mp.
4 adolescen*.mp.
5 offen*.mp.
6 [exp Housing/]
7 homeless youth.mp.
8 (homeless* or housing or temporary accommodation).mp. [mp = abstract, title, publication type, heading word, accession number]
9 "no fixed abode".mp.
10 youth offen*.mp.
11 [exp Criminal Behavior/ or criminal behav*.mp.]
12 street youth.mp.
13 [exp Crime/]
14 sleeping rough".mp.
15 1 or 6 or 7 or 8 or 9 or 12 or 14
16 2 or 3 or 4
17 5 or 11 or 13
18 15 and 16 and 17

**Table 2**
PICO(s) inclusion and exclusion criteria for systematic searching

| PICO(s) | Inclusion | Exclusion |
|---|---|---|
| Population | −Youth (aged 16–25 years) −Any race/ethnicity −Samples <16 or >25 were included if the median or mean age fell between 16–25. −Practitioners and young people in the same study. | −Adult only samples −Not UK based −Samples >16 or <25 were excluded if the median or mean age did not fall between 16–25. |
| Comparator | Homeless, sofa-surfing or no stable home | Other risk factors other than homelessness mentioned |
| Outcome | Offending behaviour | Delinquency/delinquent behaviour/victimization |
| Study Design | Observational, quantitative studies, case-control, prospective or retrospective cohort, cross-sectional, qualitative studies, interventions, case studies, mixed methods | Systematic reviews and *meta*-analyses, literature reviews, books, discussions, commentaries, abstracts |
| Additional | −Published in English language −Conducted in the UK from 1969 until May 2020 | −Non-English language −Not conducted in the UK −Duplicate data −Non-electronic sources −Conducted before 1969 or after May 2020 |

study details in Table 3.

## 4. Results

Twenty-two studies met inclusion criteria for this review. Descriptions of studies including design, data collection methods, location, sample size and demographics are presented in Table 3. Ten studies used a mixed methods design, seven used a qualitative approach and five were quantitative studies. Only one qualitative study specified their analytical approach (Pain & Francis, 2004). This study used content analysis. The remaining qualitative studies were not clear in their approach however, it is likely thematic analysis was used to analyse data. Three quantitative studies were cross-sectional in design, one study was a case-control study, and one was a prospective cohort design.

The total number of participants was 12440. Of the studies that reported gender, 3973 were male, and 919 were female. Sample sizes ranged from 4491 to 22. Sample populations included: Youth Offending Teams (YOTs), homeless accommodation services, prisons, charities, local authorities, Secure Training Centres, Youth Offender Institutions (YOIs), street locations, remand liaison teams, day centres. Nine studies were conducted in specific regions of the UK.
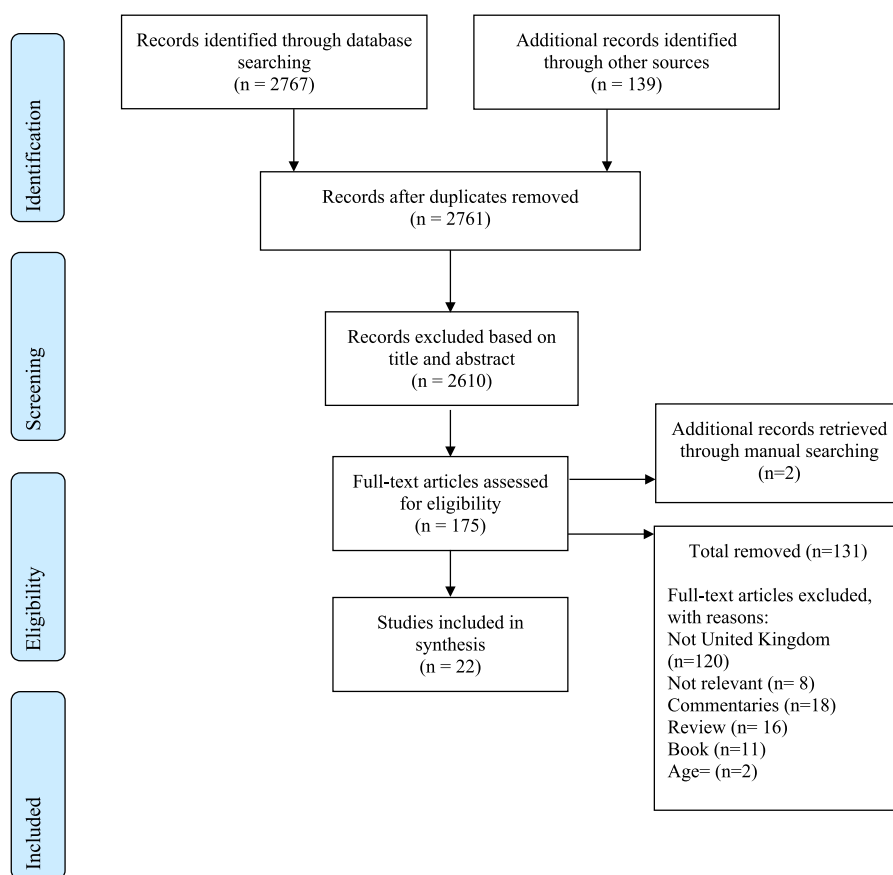
Seven studies reported an association between homelessness and offending. Wincup et al. (2003) found that rough sleeping was a risk factor for offending behaviour. 31 % of their sample thought their offending behaviour was as a result of being homeless. Centrepoint (2019) found 6 % to 15 % of young people took part in crime for somewhere to stay. Craig & Hodson (2000) found that those sleeping rough were significantly more likely to engage in crime (p < 0.001). Patel (2004) and Booth et al. (2011) found similar numbers of young offenders arrived in custody homeless (15.2 % vs. 11 %). Two studies found homeless young people were more likely to be charged with a crime by police ((Commander et al. 2002; Quilgars et al., 2005). Finally, Commander et al. (2002) found homeless young people had been charged by the police significantly more often in the past 6 months (19 % homeless young people vs. 3 % domiciled young people sample, p = 0.0003).

### 4.1. Types of offences homeless young people may engage in

Six studies described offences committed by homeless young people (Arnull et al., 2007; Centrepoint, 2019; Craig & Hodson, 2000; Harding, 2019; Pain & Francis, 2004; Wincup et al., 2003). Across studies, burglary and stealing were most commonly reported. Other offences included drinking and urinating on the street and begging as a means of acquiring money (Pain & Francis, 2004). Craig & Hodson (2000) found one third of their sample supplemented their crimes by regular begging. other offences committed by homeless young people included petty crime (e.g shoplifting) and serious crimes such as burglary and violent offences. Arnull et al. (2007) similarly found that homeless young people committed petty crimes such as shoplifting and the most common type of offence was violence against the person. Wincup et al. (2003) found homeless young people commit offences such as breaking and entering for shelter. Young people were also likely to be involved in scams, fraud and money laundering schemes (Harding, 2019). Gender differences were apparent among homeless young people's offending behaviours (Harding, 2019; Quilgars et al., 2005). Quilgars et al. (2005) found males were more likely to commit criminal offences than females (40 % of boys vs. 15 % girls). However, female young people were found to be exploited to sell illicit substances as they are less likely to attract police attention (Harding, 2019). Only one study explored differences between ethnicities. There were no significant ethnic differences of housing status among young offenders (Arnull et al., 2007).

PRISMA 2009 Flow Diagram

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Identification

    ┌─────────────────────────────┐      ┌─────────────────────────────┐
    │ Records identified through  │      │ Additional records          │
    │ database searching          │      │ identified through other    │
    │ (n = 2767)                  │      │ sources (n = 139)           │
    └──────────────┬──────────────┘      └──────────────┬──────────────┘
                   │                                     │
                   └──────────────┬──────────────────────┘
                                  ▼
                   ┌─────────────────────────────┐
Screening          │ Records after duplicates    │
                   │ removed (n = 2761)          │
                   └──────────────┬──────────────┘
                                  ▼
                   ┌─────────────────────────────┐
                   │ Records excluded based on   │
                   │ title and abstract          │
                   │ (n = 2610)                  │
                   └──────────────┬──────────────┘
                                  ▼
                   ┌─────────────────────────────┐      ┌─────────────────────────────┐
Eligibility        │ Full-text articles assessed │─────▶│ Additional records          │
                   │ for eligibility             │      │ retrieved through manual    │
                   │ (n = 175)                   │      │ searching (n=2)             │
                   └──────────────┬──────────────┘      └─────────────────────────────┘
                                  │                      ┌─────────────────────────────┐
                                  │─────────────────────▶│ Total removed (n=131)       │
                                  ▼                      │                             │
                   ┌─────────────────────────────┐      │ Full-text articles          │
Included           │ Studies included in         │      │ excluded, with reasons:     │
                   │ synthesis (n = 22)          │      │ Not United Kingdom (n=120)  │
                   └─────────────────────────────┘      │ Not relevant (n= 8)         │
                                                         │ Commentaries (n=18)         │
                                                         │ Review (n= 16)              │
                                                         │ Book (n=11)                 │
                                                         │ Age= (n=2)                  │
                                                         └─────────────────────────────┘
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*PRISMA flow chart of the screening procedure.*

**Fig. 1.** PRISMA flow chart of the screening procedure.

## 4.2. Risk factors associated with youth homelessness and offending behaviour

### 4.2.1. Mental health and substance misuse

Regarding specific risk factors associated with youth homelessness and offending behaviours, 5 studies reported mental illness was a significant risk. Arnull et al. (2007) found 72 % of young people said homelessness negatively impacted their mental health and 66 % of homeless young offenders felt depressed. Rates of loneliness ranged from 39 % (Arnull et al., 2007) to 67 % (Centrepoint, 2019). Young people voiced that mental illness and offending was exacerbated by unsuitable housing (Arnull et al., 2007; Campbell & Abbott, 2013; Centrepoint, 2019; Harding, 2019). Craig & Hodson (2000) discovered homeless young offenders with a history of conduct disorder in childhood were more likely to offend. Campbell & Abbott (2013) found young people contemplated suicide and committing crime when housing was unavailable. Studies also highlighted young people experience difficulties with accessing mental health support (Campbell & Abbott, 2013; Harding, 2019).

Five studies identified substance misuse was a risk factor for criminal activity among homeless young people. Arnull et al. (2007) found homeless young people were statistically more likely to use substances before their first conviction (p = 0.013). Substance misuse asset scores were significantly greater for homeless young people (p = 0.010). In interview, homeless young people also linked drug use to offending behaviour, such as theft (Arnull et al., 2007; Wincup et al., 2003). Young people reported using illicit substances to cope with mental health difficulties, leading to increased engagement in crime (Harding, 2019). Substance use was found to cause eviction from family homes or hostels (Pain & Francis, 2004; Glover & Clewett, 2011). Glover & Clewett (2011) found that substance misuse at a young age led to homelessness and offending. However, Arnull et al. (2007)found no link between age of use and offending.

### 4.2.2. Breakdown of family relations

Nine studies noted poor familial relations influenced offending behaviour among homeless young people. Rates of homelessness due to familial relationship breakdown ranged from 42 % (Patel, 2004) to 94 %

**Table 3**

Characteristics of studies included in the review.

| Author | Design | Primary sampling unit | Location | Data collection method | Age | Sample size | MMAT Rating |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Arnull et al., 2007 | Mixed method | 10 YOTs | England and Wales | Survey, Structured interviews, 'Proxy' interviews, Focus groups, Calendar analysis, Asset data | Mean age 17 years | N = 259 (n = 257 Asset data, n = 152 [structured interviews], n = 152 [calendars], n = 54 [semi-structured interviews], n = 64 [proxy interviews], n = 10 [focus groups], n = 30 [questionnaires from housing providers]) Males = 222, Females = 48 | ***** |
| Booth et al., 2011 | Mixed method | YOIs | England | Semi-structured interviews, Survey | Youth aged 15–18 years | N = 770 (n = 770 [survey], n = 61 [additional interviews from survey, n = 32 [case supervisors interviewed]) All male sample | **** |
| Campbell & Abbott, 2013 | Qualitative. No design reported | Transition to Adulthood (T2A) services | England (London, Birmingham, West Mercia) | Semi-structured interview, Focus groups, Email response to questions | Youth aged 16–25 years | N = 56 (n = 15 [Youth] n = 41 [Adults]) Males = 10, Females = 5 | *** |
| Carlin, 2010 | Qualitative. No design reported | 5 Foyers | England (Midlands, South-coast, London, Outskirts of southern market town location, Outskirts of northern market town location) | Focus groups, Interviews | Youth aged 16–25 years | N = 61 (n = 34 [Youth], n = 27 staff] Males = 21, Females = 13 | *** |
| Centrepoint, 2019 | Quantitative. Cross-sectional design | Homelessness accommodation (Foyers, semi-independent flats, hostels) | England and Wales | Survey | Youth aged 16–25 years | N = 227No demographic data reported | * |
| Clarke, 2016 | Quantitative. Cross-sectional design | Polling company 'ComRes' | United Kingdom | Survey | Youth aged 16–25 years | N = 2011No demographic data reported | * |
| Commander et al. (2002) | Quantitative. Case-control | Domiciled sample (Residents registered with a GP drawn from the Family Health Service Authority), Homeless sample (10 homeless hostels in Birmingham) | England (Birmingham) | Survey | Youth aged 16–25 years | N = 266 (n = 119 [Homeless youth sample], n = 147 [Domiciled youth sample]) Males = 90, Females = 91 | ***** |
| Craig & Hodson (2000) | Quantitative. Prospective cohort design. | Centrepoint and the London Connection | England (London) | Survey | Youth aged 16–21 years | N = 107 Males = 63 %, Females = 37 % | **** |
| Day et al. (2017) | Mixed method | Sefton Community and Adolescent Service | England (Sefton) | Survey, Interviews | Youth aged 16–17 years | N = 122 (n = 20 professionals [Phase 1] n = 25 professionals [phase 2], n = 20 youth, n = 5 parents or carers, n = 52 [surveys])Demographic data not reported | **** |
| Drummond et al. (2018) | Qualitative | Homelessness organisations, Probation, CRCs, Prisons, Charities, Local Authorities | England and Wales | Semi-structured interviews | Youth aged 18–25 years | N = 22 (n = 7 [custody leavers], n = 15 [professionals])All male sample | *** |
| Glover & Clewett (2011) | Qualitative. No design reported. | Secure Training Centres, YOIs | England and Wales | Case studies, Interviews | Youth aged 16–21 years | N = 42 (n = 15 [youth], n = 27 [professionals]) Males = 14, Females = 1 | ** |
| Gyateng et al. (2013) | Mixed method | Secure Children's Homes, Secure Training Centres, YOIs | England and Wales | Survey, Administrative records, Interviews | Youth aged 15–17, mode 16 (STCs), Youth aged 16–17, mode 17 (YOIs) | N = 2392 (n = 1245 [Youth, survey], n = 1105 [Youth, administrative records], n = 42 [Staff] Males = 92 %, Females = 8 % | **** |
| Harding (2019) | Qualitative. No design reported. | Practitioners working in housing, homelessness, policing, safeguarding and social services, youth services and youth justice | England | Semi-structured interviews, Written evidence from practitioners | Youth aged 16–25 years | N = 44 (n = 4 [Youth, semi-structured interview], n = 15 [Youth, focus group], n = 15 [Practitioners, semi-structured interview], n = | *** |

**Table 3** (*continued*)

| Author | Design | Primary sampling unit | Location | Data collection method | Age | Sample size | MMAT Rating |
|--------|--------|----------------------|----------|------------------------|-----|-------------|-------------|
| HM Inspectorate of Probation (HMIP) (2016) | Qualitative. No design reported. | YOTs | England and Wales (Enfield, Kirklees, Norfolk, Hartlepool, Blaenau Gwent, Vale of Glamorgan) | Interviews | Youth aged 16–17 | 10 [Practitioners, written evidence] N = 49 Males = 41, Females = 8 | ** |
| Homeless Link (2018) | Mixed method | Homeless service providers | England (South East England, South West England, North West England, East England, West Midlands, East Midlands, London, Yorkshire & The Humber, North East England) | Survey, Semi-structured interviews, Focus groups, Case studies | Youth aged 16–25 years No mean age given | N = 192 (n = 109 [Homeless service providers], n = 79 [Local authorities], n = 25 [Youth from survey, Semi-structured interviews, n = 4 [Case studies]) Males = 9, Females = 16 | *** |
| Pain & Francis (2004) | Qualitative. Content analysis | Hostels, Lunch clubs, Drop-in advice centres and Street locations | England (Newcastle Upon Tyne) | Interviews, Observations, Participatory Diagramming Techniques | Youth aged 12–25 years [case studies included youth aged 20–21 years] | N = 153 (n = 118 [Youth], n = 35 [Youth workers]) Males = 77, Females = 41 | ***** |
| Patel (2004) | Quantitative. Cross-sectional design | YOTs, Remand Liaison Teams | England and Wales | Survey | Youth aged 10–19 years | N = 4491 No demographic data reported. | *** |
| Pierpoint & Hoolachan (2019) | Mixed method | Local Authorities, YOTs, Secure Establishments, Other Stakeholders | Wales | Semi-structured interviews, Focus group, Online Survey | Youth aged 16–17 years | N = 125 (n = 65 [Semi-structured interviews, Stakeholders], n = 41 [Online survey, Stakeholders], n = 8 [Semi-structured interviews, Youth], n = 11 [Case studies]) No demographic data reported. | **** |
| Quilgars et al. (2005) | Mixed method | Foyers | England (Birmingham, Wolverhampton, Ryedale, Suffolk) | Semi-structured interviews, Database data | Youth aged 13–20 (mean age 16.8 years) | N = 160 (n = 152 [Database data], n = 12 [Youth, interviewed recorded in database data], n = 8 [Agencies, interviewed]) Males = 57, Females = 94 | **** |
| Savage et al. (2010) | Mixed method | 10 case study sites (5 RAP, 5 non-RAP) | England | Structured questionnaire, Focus groups, Case studies | Youth aged 13–21 years (mean age 17) | N = 558 youth (N = 558, SURVEY n = 104 [interviewed], n = 62 [followed-up after three months]) Males = 79 %, Females = 21 % | ***** |
| Wincup et al. (2003) | Mixed method | Day centres, Big Issue Distribution Centres, hostels, Foyer, Drop-in Housing Advice Centres, Resettlement Centre, Housing Providers, Supported Shared Accommodation, Project Providing Activities for Socially Excluded young people | England and Wales (Birmingham, Brighton and Hove, Canterbury, Cardiff) | Semi-structured interviews | 16–25 (mean age 20) | N = 182 (n = 160 [Youth], n = 22 [Professionals]) Males = 71 %, Females = 29 % | **** |
| Youth Justice Board (YJB) (2010) | Mixed method | YOTs | England and Wales | Survey, Interviews, Case studies | Youth aged 16–23 years (mean age 18 years) | N = 151 (n = 84 [survey], n = 30 [interviews with practitioners and accommodation officers], n = 5 [case studies], n = 32 [youth interviews]) No demographic data reported. | **** |

(YJB, 2010). Reasons for family relationship breakdown included arguing with caregivers or siblings, overcrowding and caregivers misusing illicit substances (Arnull et al., 2007; Day et al., 2017; Patel, 2004). Young people were also asked to leave home by parents or guardians after putting other family members at risk due to crime involvement (Day et al., 2017; Glover & Clewett, 2011; Harding, 2019;

YJB, 2010). Those in custody were twice as likely to have been asked to leave home by parents (29 % homeless young people in custody vs. 15 % homeless young people not in custody) (Drummond et al., 2018). Several studies also found young people became homeless after witnessing or being domestically abused by caregivers (Arnull et al., 2007; Harding, 2019; Centrepoint, 2019;; Pain & Francis, 2004).

### 4.2.3. Trauma

Four studies identified trauma was a risk factor for youth homelessness and offending behaviour. Campbell & Abbott (2013) found young offenders had histories of trauma, which led them to become homeless. HMIP (2016) found homeless youth offenders were more likely to have experienced childhood abuse. Young people described moving out of their family home due to childhood abuse (Arnull et al., 2007). Studies demonstrated similar rates of childhood abuse 37 % (Centrepoint, 2019) and 40 % (Arnull et al., 2007). Figures were higher for those who identified as LGBTQ+ (Centrepoint, 2019).

### 4.2.4. Gang involvement

Five studies found gang involvement was a risk factor for homelessness and offending. Harding (2019) found homeless young people accepted accommodation from gangs in exchange for criminal activity. Gang affiliation was also had an impact on access to accommodation on release from custody (YJB, 2010). Wincup et al. (2003) found offending behaviour was related to the company young people mixed with, since becoming homeless whilst Drummond et al. (2018) and Glover & Clewett (2011) found homeless young people relied on negative social networks they knew prior to prison for support.

### 4.2.5. Being a care leaver

Finally, five studies identified care leavers were at risk of offending and homelessness. Two studies found many young offenders were care leavers when entering prison (Drummond et al., 2018; HMIP, 2016). Patel (2004) found a significant relationship between housing need and care status in a sample of youth offenders (9 % care status vs. 7 % non-care status were in custody). Rates of homeless young people whom were once care leavers ranged from 33 % ((Arnull et al., 2007) to 49 % (Centrepoint, 2019).

## 5. Recommendations for interventions to reduce offending behaviours

### 5.1. Family Interventions

With regard to possible interventions for this population, 5 studies identified family interventions to be important. Specifically, 3 studies found family mediation was useful to encourage young people to return to the family home (Quilgars et al., 2005; Harding, 2019; Pierpoint & Hoolachan, 2019). Day et al. (2017) found families and young people found family therapy useful, whilst Booth et al. (2011) found over half of young offenders had engaged in family therapy. Harding (2019) noted that family mediation was important in preventing young people being evicted from their family home.

### 5.2. Supported Accommodation

Supported accommodation was identified as the most suitable housing option for homeless young offenders. Patel (2004) found 29 % of practitioners rated supported accommodation as most appropriate. Similar findings were reported within other studies (e.g. (Drummond et al., 2018; Pierpoint & Hoolachan, 2019). Harding (2019) found temporary housing, hostels and semi-independent accommodation were the safest options for homeless young people. However, hostels were also found to increase exposure to crime and gangs (Harding, 2019; YJB, 2010). Several studies highlighted that certain convictions make it difficult for young offenders to access supported accommodation. It was found that those who committed sex offences, arson or violent offences had the most difficulties accessing housing (Drummond et al., 2018; Pierpoint & Hoolachan, 2019; Arnull et al., 2007).

### 5.3. Staff Support

Of note, 5 studies highlighted staff support in housing

accommodation as important. Campbell & Abbott (2013) found the quality of relationships between staff and young people were key in making positive changes. Non-judgemental and informal relationships were important to young people. Quilgars et al. (2005) found young people wanted practical support with education, training and employment and emotional support. Carlin (2010) found youth valued supportive relationships with accommodation managers. Day et al. (2017) and HMIP (2016) found that suitable accommodation should be accompanied by appropriate support. In contrast, YJB (2010) found the majority of young people thought they could manage independently, few said they would like support.

## 6. Policy recommendations

### 6.1. Support from Local Housing Services

Several studies also examined how local homelessness pathways and homelessness services could be improved. Three studies acknowledged that the concept 'intentionally homeless' needed changing. Being deemed 'intentionally homeless' was found to reduce housing options for young people and precipitate offending behaviour (Campbell & Abbott, 2013; Drummond et al., 2018). It was also identified as a barrier to homeless young people accessing support (Arnull et al., 2007). Arnull et al. (2007) found that local authority pathways to securing housing are unsuitable. Young people needed a letter to state they had been evicted from their family home, but families often refused to write letters. Both HMIP (2016) and Pierpoint & Hoolachan (2019) highlighted that current pathways and protocols for supporting young people with finding accommodation are inconsistent.

### 6.2. Integrated and Collaborative Agencies and Systems of Care

Four studies recognised that local authorities and charities need to work together to create collaborative care systems. Quilgars et al. (2005) found that when developing a housing project to support homeless young people, bringing multiple agencies together was most valuable in supporting the individual. Arnull et al. (2007) recommended that information about the young person is shared between different agencies to ensure support is appropriate and tailored to the individual. Craig & Hodson (2000) recommended that health and housing services work collaboratively to support homeless young people as they found a relationship between homelessness and mental illness. However, Pierpoint & Hoolachan (2019) found that joint ownership of care can be problematic, noting that involving multiple agencies, can create confusion as to who is responsible for addressing housing issues. Similarly, Gyateng et al. (2013) found that poor communication between professionals resulted in fractured service provision, but recommended collaboration between agencies was essential when supporting young people.

### 6.3. Accommodation Options and Resources

Fourteen studies highlighted support is insufficient and accommodation options are limited for homeless young people. Issues were highlighted with the lack of available resources and affordable accommodation options Centrepoint, 2019; Harding, 2019; g; Savage et al., 2010; Arnull et al., 2007). YJB (2010) found 63 % felt there was insufficient available accommodation in local areas. Two studies highlighted that private accommodation created a barrier to securing housing (Arnull et al., 2007; Drummond et al., 2018). For example, Drummond et al. (2018) found landlords were reluctant to rent to homeless young people leaving custody and would not agree to installing monitoring equipment that can be a court requirement. Young people were unable to secure deposits, guarantors and finances for rent, leaving the private housing market being inaccessible (Arnull et al., 2007; Drummond et al., 2018).

Moreover, Campbell & Abbott (2013) found that the complex needs

of homeless young people makes it difficult to find adequate housing. Homeless Link (2018) found 15 % of homeless young people had offending histories and other needs outside of housing. However, HMIP (2016) found that the complex needs of homeless young people led to breakdown of housing placements. There appears to be a shortage of accommodation for offenders with complex needs, particularly those with substance use issues and mental health problems (Arnull et al., 2007; Savage et al., 2010). Drummond et al. (2018) found that young people needed to evidence a mental health condition to access priority housing which can sometimes be challenging.

*6.4. Clear Plans for Resettlement*

Several studies acknowledged that Young Offenders Institutions (YOIs) need to ensure resettlement is pre-planned to avoid homelessness (Arnull et al., 2007; Drummond et al., 2018; Glover & Clewett, 2011; Clarke, 2016; Gyateng et al., 2013; Booth et al., 2011; HMIP, 2016; Pierpoint & Hoolachan, 2019; Savage et al., 2010). Arnull et al. (2007) found 17 % of young offenders left custody without housing and 26 % did not have housing arranged on release. Similarly, Clarke (2016) found 2 % were homeless upon leaving custody. In contrast, Gyateng et al. (2013) found that roughly equal numbers of young offenders had received housing support (48 % received help vs. 45 % not received help). Two studies found that giving young people choice in accommodation reduced chances of homelessness and reoffending (Arnull et al., 2007; YJB, 2010). Finally, studies also highlighted accommodation qualities that young people valued. Arnull et al. (2007) found young people valued safe, clean environments near to family and friends. Similarly, Carlin (2010) found young people wanted safety and security.

However, five studies acknowledged that current data on homeless young people is inaccurate (e.g. a lack of nationally collated figures; Drummond et al. 2018). Booth et al. (2011) also highlighted that the collection of resettlement data was erratic, inconsistent, and follow-up data was limited. They found that establishments did not keep key figures such as the numbers of offenders who had missed early release due to housing issues. Patel (2004) highlighted that there is no available data on the effectiveness of support provision for young people. Arnull et al. (2007) found that accommodation problems are likely to be under-recorded. YJB (2010) discovered 61 % of professionals were not able to provide data on homeless youth as they did not have access to figures, were unable to locate them or were unable to extract relevant data. Concerns were also highlighted regarding data reliability.

**7. Discussion**

This is the first systematic review to synthesise, collate and appraise the UK literature on the relationships between homelessness and offending amongst young people aged 16–25. Twenty-two studies were identified and evaluated as part of this review. Findings are summarised and critically discussed in relation to the aims of this study, specifically, (1) What are the relationships between youth homelessness and offending? (2) What are suitable interventions? (3) What are the implications for UK social policy? Recommendations to guide future research, policy and practice are also discussed.

Findings from this review echo the findings from the international literature that homelessness increases offending amongst young people. Offences committed by homeless young people included arson, violent offences, burglary, breaking and entering and petty crimes. Findings are consistent with previous systematic reviews and international empirical studies (Heerde et al., 2014, 2015; Tavecchio, 1999) suggesting that types of offences committed by homeless young people may be universal. This review found there are gender differences in criminal behaviours exhibited by young people. In line with previous literature, males were found to be more likely to commit crime (Gwadz et al., 2009). This may be as males tend to commit crimes in groups, whereas females are likely to engage individual crimes such as sex work (O'Grady and Gaetz,

2004). In order to develop effective crime prevention strategies, further research is needed to understand why homeless males and female young people commit different types of crime.

No differences were found between ethnic groups in this study however, these findings refute current knowledge. Those from minority backgrounds are overrepresented among homeless young people (Quilgars et al., 2011) as well in the CJS (YJB and Ministry of Justice, 2019). This may be as studies included in this review did not control for ethnicity as a confounding variable. Thus, findings highlight the need for more rigorous research, which control for and explores ethnic differences in this population.

*7.1. Risk Factors*

Mental illness, trauma, substance use, gang involvement, disrupted family relationships and being a care leaver were found to increase the risk of offending behaviours in a homeless young people. Findings support current knowledge that pathways to homelessness are complex (Craig & Hodson, 1998) as it appears there are multiple risk factors which influence the relationship between offending and homelessness. Very few studies included in this review acknowledged trauma as a risk factor. This finding is surprising given international evidence suggests those with trauma histories are twice as likely to be involved with the CJS (Yoder et al., 2014). However, trauma is under-researched among young offenders (Paton et al., 2009) and trauma screening tools used within prisons are regarded as not fit for purpose by clinicians (Baglivio et al., 2014). Therefore, it may be that trauma was inadequately accounted for within the studies included in this review, particularly, as most population samples included in this review were young offenders. Services may fail to recognise the need for trauma-informed services without a suitable method of identifying trauma experiences and symptoms within young people, thus perpetuating the problem (Yoder et al., 2014).

Studies included within this review may have also neglected the influence trauma has on relations between family members, particularly as childhood traumas most commonly occur in the family home (Read et al., 2005). Literature reviews and empirical studies widely acknowledge poor family relationships as a risk factor for youth homelessness and offending (Quilgars et al., 2011; Martijn & Sharpe, 2006). Furthermore, studies controlling for confounding variables such as family relations demonstrate links between trauma and offending (Baglivio et al., 2015). Although, an ongoing barrier to providing trauma-informed support for homeless youth is the lack of standardized screening processes for identifying trauma symptoms within young people (Merscham et al., 2009).

Substance abuse was also found to be a risk factor for homelessness and offending in this review. This finding is consistent with previous research. Substance use rates are found to be higher among homeless youth offenders compared to non-offending peers (Schwartz et al., 2008). This may be as substance misuse heightens exposure to crime (Baron, 2003) and causes offending behaviour as it lowers inhibitions and sharpens irritable and aggressive feelings (Goldstein et al., 1992; Belenko & Peugh, 1998). Although, it is unclear whether substance use is a cause or consequence of homelessness (Neale, 2001). Further prospective studies are needed to infer temporal associations and understand effective intervention strategies in this population.

*7.2. Interventions*

Regarding evidence-based interventions for this population, studies in this review highlighted that family mediation was a commonly reported and effective intervention, which may be a consequence of the identification of disrupted family relationships increasing the risk of homelessness and offending behaviours. This finding is encouraging given family mediation is recommended within the resettlement literature for reducing homelessness and delinquent behaviour (Noh, 2018).

Family mediation can support households to resolve issues before they lead to relationship breakdown and can help a young person avoid a situation where they would otherwise be forced to leave the family home. It can also provide a space for caregivers and young people to work through problems in a neutral, non-judgemental setting (Centrepoint, 2019). However, it should be acknowledged that family therapy should not be recommended for all young people. For example, this review also found childhood trauma was a risk factor and systematic reviews have emphasised that family therapy is inappropriate for those who have been abused (Noh, 2018).

Supported accommodation was found to be the most suitable and recommended housing option for young people. This may be as supported accommodation affords better integration into society and quality of life for homeless young people (Kidd et al., 2016) and provides stability (Barker, 2016). Staff support, particularly within supported accommodation was found to be imperative within interventions, likely because of the key role of attachment in adolescent development, and its role in creating stability for homeless young people (Stefanidis et al., 1992). This review also found that trust and mutual respect were important personal qualities for staff to have. Literature suggests these qualities are of particular importance when working with homeless offenders (Pollio et al., 1997). Relationships between staff and homeless individuals can be used as a tool for change as these can be seen as an opportunity for learning and development (Keats et al., 2012). Trained key workers can provide oversight and support a variety of needs such as supporting a young person to access education (Centrepoint, 2019).

Furthermore, developing a service philosophy and establishing practice that is adopted by all staff members can help to support individuals to take ownership of their behaviour and recognise the impact of their anti-social behaviour. By placing the ownership on young people, this can shift power balance and empower individuals to make more informed choices about their actions (Keats et al., 2012; Sweeney et al., 2018) which can be particularly helpful those who have engaged in offending behaviours. Staff working in supported accommodation should ensure that these are psychologically informed environments (PIE) and be considerate of the complex needs that individuals may have. Many homeless young people have been involved in abusive relationships and therefore may have difficulties trusting others (Keats et al., 2012). PIEs acknowledge that young people have support needs which arise from trauma and abuse. Furthermore, training staff to work within a therapeutic framework (for example, using CBT-based models) can help to address some of the complex needs and trauma experienced by homeless young people to help to minimise the risk of future homelessness (Keats et al., 2012).

## 7.3. Recommendations for Policy and Practice

Numerous policy recommendations were identified in this review. Firstly, it is recommended that local authority pathways to providing housing support require improvement. Young people require more affordable accommodation options, services and resources than are currently available, especially those who are both homeless and offending (e.g., resettlement provision for custody leavers, supported accommodation for high risk offenders). It is recommended that a cross-departmental government strategy is implemented to support homeless youth (Centrepoint, 2023). For example, ensuring that there is a dedicated emergency housing officer in every local authority so that youth can access age-appropriate support. It is recommended that local authorities take responsibility for preventing homelessness and recognise the complex needs of homeless young offenders and prioritise those experiencing violence (Dwyer et al., 2015). Poor resettlement planning by practitioners was also found to cause young offenders to become homeless. However, current UK policies make it difficult for custody leavers to access housing, particularly the private housing market (Madoc-Jones et al., 2018; Maguire & Nolan, 2012).

This review has also emphasised, the lack of an official measurement or data available on the national, regional and local scale of youth homelessness in the UK. As a result, it is difficult to devise the most appropriate solutions and support for young people (Centrepoint, 2023). Therefore, it is recommended this information is collected to determine the scale of youth homelessness and appropriate allocation of resources. Moreover, current pathways to housing were found to be unsuitable and inconsistent, with councils often not interpreting legislation correctly. Practitioners also highlight the impact of inappropriate and incorrectly completed referral forms and risk assessments not being carried out thoroughly by the referring agency (g) leading to difficulties arising when supporting the individual.

It is also recommended that services and agencies should work co-operatively to support homeless young people. This review found practitioners and young people were frustrated by the lack of co-ordination between services, and therefore in the future more joint working between different agencies from statutory or third sector provision is required. Findings highlight that collaboration and communications between support providers (e.g. housing services and youth offending teams) yields benefits (Naert et al., 2017) as addressing youth homelessness requires co-ordination and multi-agency working (Black et al., 2018). It is imperative within these meetings that clear actions are identified to support the individual and clear boundaries of responsibility are outlined for each professional. Young people can struggle to engage with multiple professionals, particularly those who have experienced trauma (Lewing et al., 2018), therefore it is recommended that one professional is allocated to co-ordinate the individual's care.

Statutory services should consider ways to integrate support where possible to allow the needs of the young person be met through a holistic support package (Centrepoint, 2021). One example of good practice is the 'Making Every Adult Matter' approach (Making Every Adult Matter, 2019). This coalition of national UK charities has aimed to improve policy, providing services for individuals with multiple needs coming into contact with the police so they can access suitable support and assistance. UK based organisations such as Centrepoint and the New Youth Horizon Centre offer support for mental health, employment and life skills. Therefore it is recommended that when local authorities commission housing and support services, services are integrated to address the numerous, overlapping risk factors found to be associated with youth offending and homelessness in this review.

## 7.4. Limitations

There are several limitations of this systematic review. Of note, only 22 studies were identified that met inclusion criteria for this review, by considering both offending and homelessness in young people in the UK. This may be a result of these issues being studies in isolation rather than in conjunction. Future research needs to examine the relationship between these experiences to bridge this gap. Data on young people who are homeless in the UK is also lacking. Although the recent introduction of the 'Databank' (Centrepoint, 2020) is promising, this is still only an estimation of the scale of the issue. Data collection methods require improvement in order to understand the scale of youth homelessness and to be able to track changes over time (Clarke et al., 2015) and its relationship to other issues (e.g. offending).

Many studies included in this systematic review were also weak in design. Only one qualitative study reported their method of data analysis. Most studies included in this review reported low rates of participation thus, response bias was highly likely. Furthermore, the majority of quantitative studies included in this review were cross-sectional studies. Cross-sectional studies limit the ability to infer the temporal ordering of homelessness and offending behaviours. Nevertheless, this is the first UK only review of the homelessness and youth offending, and therefore the results obtained highlight some key pointers in developing social policy and intervention in this area. As the scope of the review included 'grey' literature, there was also a wider range of studies

included.

## 8. Conclusion

In summary, this is the first review to synthesise the academic and grey UK literature to understand the relationships between youth homelessness and offending with the aim to inform future UK social policy and practice within this area. Findings highlight the multitude of risk factors which influence the relationship between youth homelessness and offending. Furthermore, there is a need for integrated and collaborative agencies to address the multiple and complex needs experienced by homeless young people, who are also committing crime. Resettlement and housing options need improving to ensure effective rehabilitation into society and reduce rates of offending in this population.

Author contributions:

- Tara Self: Conceptualization, methodology, validation, verification, formal analysis, investigation, resources, data curation, writing – original draft, visualization, project administration
- Dr Helen Miles: Conceptualization, methodology, writing – review & editing, supervision.
- Billy Harding: Conceptualization, methodology, writing – review & policy.

## Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

## Data availability

No data was used for the research described in the article.

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