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FINDING A PLACE TO PARENT?

**Housing
Young
Fathers**

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Following Young Fathers
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FINDING A PLACE TO PARENT? HOUSING YOUNG FATHERS¹

INTRODUCTION

Housing is a crucial resource and topic of concern for young parents. An adequate home environment is a vital foundation for the care of a child. It shapes quality of life, affects relationships and opportunities, and it has a fundamental impact on the ability of parents to establish their parental role and identity. For young parents who are dependent on the older generation, the stability of the grandparental home as a place to parent can be vital. This is the case for young fathers as well as mothers, and for those who are single, as well as for those who are in a couple relationship.

In post war Britain in the 1950s, setting up an independent home became part and parcel of the ideal transition into adulthood. The orderly progression involved leaving school or college, finding work, entering a stable relationship, moving into one's own home, and starting a new family (Neale 2015).

In 21st century 'austerity' Britain, however, changing patterns of family life, the collapse of the young labour market and a crisis in housing provision have disrupted this pattern. In the current climate, over 50% of young people continue to live with their parents well into their 20s (ONS 2014). They are increasingly reliant on their families to house them, and for longer periods of time.

Yet living with family may be difficult for young parents and not

sustainable over time (briefing paper no. 3). A significant cause of youth homelessness is the breakdown of family relationships, particularly among those from disadvantaged backgrounds (Cooke and Owen 2006; Quilgars et al 2010).

These processes may be triggered by overcrowding and a lack of resources that create pressures for impoverished families. Moreover, those who have spent time in the care system may not have a safety net of family networks to fall back upon (Duncan et al 2010).

Opportunities to set up an independent home, however, may also be few and far between. House prices are rising again following the financial crisis, while incomes are falling and the employment market for young people is unstable (briefing paper no. 4). In the UK, independent living for young people, through ownership or social renting, is becoming difficult and costly.

The private rented sector (PRS) is the most common form of tenure in the UK but is often undesirable. The standard of such housing is usually poor, and the short-hold tenancies provide little security for tenants. Rent is unregulated and comparatively high: on average, households spend 43% of their income on accommodation in the PRS, compared to 29% in social housing and 19% in owner occupation (DCLG 2013). Without additional financial support, young people living in the PRS may become 'trapped', with high rents reducing their ability to

resource their families or to save up for a home of their own.

The social housing sector, provided through local authorities, housing associations (non-profit making, private organisations), or housing charities, also has its limitations. Such housing is subject to local variations, since there is no national policy to guide provision (Johnsen and Quilgars 2010).

Public sector housing stock has been decreasing, a trend likely to be exacerbated by the extension of the Right to Buy Scheme to Housing Associations.

There is an increasingly large waiting list for new social housing applicants and priority is given to those most in need. Supported housing units, or foyers, provided through local charities, are designed to provide short to medium-term, intensive support to young people in the transition from dependent, family based living, to independent living. Such provision, however, is in short supply and limited almost entirely to young mothers, or to young people with high support needs, such as care leavers or victims of domestic violence or abuse.

Young fathers applying individually for social housing are likely to be seen as a low priority unless they are registered as their child's primary carer. Nor are they likely to be allocated accommodation that is suitable as a place to parent their children (Royston and Davey 2013). There is a

KEY FINDINGS

- Family based housing for young fathers is a vital resource in developing their roles as parents. But the stability of such provision is highly variable and it may not be sustainable beyond the short term. Young men from low income, disadvantaged families may find themselves leading nomadic lives, without a stable base to care for and develop a relationship with their children.

- Social housing, provided by local authorities, housing associations or housing charities is a crucial

safety net in these circumstances. Provision for young fathers based on their parental status, that recognises their support for and commitment to their children, is currently negligible. The credentials of young fathers as parents are only recognised where they are the primary carers of their children, and, to a lesser extent, where they are co-resident and partnered with the mothers.

- Where young fathers access social housing, this is usually on the basis of their status as

young, single people, rather than as parents. They are likely to be allocated poor quality housing, in degraded neighbourhoods, which is unsuitable for babies and young children, and located too far away to facilitate contact. The lack of support for young fathers in the social housing sector can seriously impede and undermine their parenting efforts, to the detriment of the fathers, their children, the mothers and the wider family.



widespread pattern of housing young, single, homeless people in inadequate temporary accommodation, in locations some distance away from their families, friends and support networks, and from employment and education opportunities (DCLG 2013).

For partnered young parents, the routes into independent living are also limited and circuitous. A typical housing trajectory involves multiple moves: from their parents' homes to temporary accommodation such as a hostel or bed and breakfast; gaining housing via the homeless system for a small flat or house; and finally gaining a tenancy for better quality housing (Cooke and Owen, 2007).

In this briefing paper we explore the housing experiences and journeys of the young fathers in our study. We draw on the accounts of 31 young fathers, aged 14-24 at the point of entry into parenthood, gathered over a two to four year period². We focus on continuities and changes in these arrangements over time, what they mean for the parenting efforts of the young men, and how these experiences differ for young fathers who are partnered and those who are single.

FINDINGS

HOUSING JOURNEYS: STABILITY AND CHANGE

The young men in our study uniformly aspired to have an adequate home of their own. This was seen as an integral part of growing up and establishing one's independence, and the foundation for family life. Jason, for example, was living in a degraded neighbourhood and aspired to a better life for his son:

"Just to stay away from a council estate ... and not go to a typical council estate school, where it's full of idiots. ... Living in a council flat in a block of smack head flats in [deprived area of the city] isn't ideal. ... So I can't give him the best possible life" (Jason, aged 22, wave 1, single, formerly in the care system, local authority housing).

Jock's ideal pathway towards starting a family mirrors the norms of 1950s Britain:

"Finish University first, get my degree, get a decent job, get our own place, get settled down. And then take it from there. It's like I'm doing it all back to front! ... Financially, no, I haven't got a chance of finding anywhere of my own. That's why I'm working so hard ... to get to that stage in my life where I can have my own place and, you know, hopefully make another go of it, trying to be a family" (Jock, aged 22/23, waves 1 and 2, partnered, living with family).

Like Jock, approximately two-thirds of the young men lived with their families for all or part of the early years of their children's lives. At the close of our study, 15 young men were living with their parents, 3 were living with the maternal grandparents, and the remaining 13 were living independently primarily in social housing.

However, there were striking variations in the stability of these arrangements over time. For 12 young men (11 from middle income families and most still in education), living with family was a stable arrangement that was sustained

over their early years as a parent.

At the other end of the spectrum, 16 young men led what might be called a nomadic existence, living in precarious, temporary abodes and sofa surfing at the homes of friends, interspersed with frequent moves in and out of the homes of their mothers and/or fathers. Twelve of these young men were from low income, disadvantaged families. Jimmy, for example, moved 7 times during the course of the study:

"It's harder for me, 'cause then I've got nowhere to go, nowhere to live. And I'm like sponging off people's mums and that. And then obviously I can't go and see [my child's mum], she can't bring [my son] down to see me. So... it's just harder on me" (Jimmy, aged 16, wave 3, partnered, nomadic).

Similarly, Andrew moved four times over the course of the study. From his father's house he moved to a local authority singles hostel, then onto a spell in a social housing flat with his partner. After his relationship came to an end, he went to stay at his mother's, but by the close of the study he was facing eviction, since he had no income and his mother could not afford to keep him:

"It's more I sleep at me mum's house. But like I say, if I don't get any money or anything from anywhere, I'm going to be probably homeless. So it is hard" (Andrew, age 19, wave 5, single, living with family).

Five young men in the sample spoke explicitly about being homeless at some point in their lives. For Cade, the lack of a home address meant he could

not register with the Job Centre:

"It's hard. It's harder than having a kid, trying to find a place and a job. I could go over to my friends still and stuff like that. But recently we was homeless. Just finding me a room was hard. And I only got a room 'cause of the cold weather. ... I asked the woman, 'what if it was summertime?' And they said that nothing would be done for me. I'd have to spend it on the street. ... It's hard to get a job because when you go to the job centre ... you tell them, 'I haven't got a place to stay'. ... Then they go, 'well you've got to go [back] to housing'. ... It's really hard ... it's awful. You don't feel like a man or a human being anymore. You know, you just don't, you don't feel like you're worth anything" (Cade, aged 21, wave one, partnered, homeless).

The nomadic lives of these young men were a constant disruption to developing a role as a father, and a major constraint on their ability to provide a stable, homely environment for their child. Below we explore the varied experiences of young fathers in these stable and unstable arrangements, the triggers for moving on from the family home, and how both partnered and single young fathers fared in social housing.

LIVING WITH FAMILY

In many cases, this arrangement was a natural continuation of previous

patterns of living. Where households were adequately resourced, the young men valued this. They were able to provide a safe and secure environment for their children. But a family home life also gave them help with finances and child care, enabling them to maintain a social life and to pursue their education and/or employment.

Family living could provide a vital cushion with their efforts to manage the triple shift of earning, learning and caring (Briefing paper no. 4). Jed aspired to set up home with his partner and child in the future, but was content to be based with his mother for now:

"I don't want ... to be in a hostel or anything like that because it's not a good environment for my little one. I want a decent environment for him. I'd sooner stay at my mum's where it's a nice environment. I'd prefer an environment like that so he can grow up without getting hurt" (Jed, aged 16, wave 1, partnered, living with family).

For young single men, living with their families gave them space to establish a relationship with their child in an environment that was not under the control of the mother or her family:

"Like, everything's set in place for me to have him whenever. Like ... he's got

his own bedroom at my house. He's got his own set of clothes. ... When I go and pick him up from, from her house, it's just him I pick up. I don't pick up anything else" (Dominic, aged 21, wave 4, single, living with family).

While these family based arrangements were highly valued, there were also drawbacks. One was managing the times when parental support tipped over into interference (briefing paper no. 3):

"[You're] constantly in the same environment as [the grandparents]. ... It's a constant conflict" (Dominic, aged 19, wave 2, single, living with family).

Another drawback, for low income families, was poor neighbourhoods:

"My view on bringing her up is completely different to how I got brought up. Like, I'd like to bring her up in a nice area where there's no crime or anything like that. So I'd keep her away from all that sort of stuff" (Trevor, age 16, wave 2, single, living with family).

Young men often shared a bedroom with their child and siblings in overcrowded conditions. This was the case for Jayden, whose daughter came to stay three nights per week as part of a shared care arrangement. The small family home also housed his mother, step father and two brothers:





“I only live in a two bedroom flat, so it's not really that big. So I've got to share a room with my brothers. And like [daughter], she, she's got her own bed and like stuff like that. But we've all got to share a room and stuff. So I'm trying, trying to [persuade] my mum ... to get a bigger house, but she's not having none of it!” (Jayden, aged 21, wave 1, single, living with family).

For some young men, the family based arrangements had overridden earlier, youthful aspirations to branch out on their own:

“If I didn't have [daughter] I would have gone halves on a flat and moved in with [friend]. ... Or gone to [Spain] to work in a bar. ... But cause of [my daughter] I can't, 'cause I have to think, 'well where's [daughter] going to go?' ... [I'm] a little bit disappointed but I know I'm just, I'm only young so I could go out and go anywhere in later life” (Peter, aged 17, wave 1, single, living with family).

These annoyances, safety concerns, limitations and regrets, however, were overshadowed by the benefits of a stable and generally supportive home environment in which to develop a role as a father.

PATERNAL AND MATERNAL HOUSEHOLDS

Where young men were in a partnership with the mother, it was common for them to move into the

maternal household temporarily following the birth. This enabled them to live as a family unit, establishing a bond with the baby and supporting each other:

“When my partner at the time, she had [son], she was ... staying at her mum's and I was at my mum's. And it was, it was difficult again. And her mum actually invited me to stay. And we ended up, well I ended up staying for just over a year. She didn't have to do that. ... But she wanted to do that. ... It was just the help and support from family members. Yeah, don't know what we would have done without them” (Kevin, aged 21, wave 1, formerly partnered and living in maternal household).

These arrangements were generally helpful for the young men, particularly where the two households were located miles apart and they could not afford bus fares to visit their children regularly.

Some young families split their time fairly evenly between their parents' homes. For the older generation, this co-grandparental arrangement meant frequent contact with their new grandchild, but regular breaks from the intensity of supporting the young parents. The young couple, in turn, were able to spend every day together. They developed a routine as joint parents of their child and established some autonomy and a sense of semi-independence as a young family, yet without the financial pressures or responsibilities of independent living:

“It's got easier now, now we've got into like a routine. ... And like I've bought stuff ... she's bought stuff ... so we don't have to carry it all. ... I've got clothes at hers, she's got clothes at mine, [son's] got bottles at hers and that” (Jed, aged 16, wave 1, partnered, living with family).

Where young partnered men were not able to live with the mother and child, there was a palpable sense of loss. Unusually, Jock's partner had moved into the paternal household at the outset, but tensions were running high and she moved back to her mother's. Jock's son came to stay with him once a week:

“This isn't how it's supposed to be. ... If I had one wish that'd be ... for all three of us to be together 'cause ... we've ended up in separate places and, you know, this bickering going on between, you know, our family members ... it's not great. ... And I just want him to be with me all the time, I'd like to have all, all three of us to have our own place but it's just frustrating having to go somewhere to see my son. ... I shouldn't, you know, have to go and pick him up and take him back to mine, just to spend a day with him” (Jock, aged 23, wave 2, partnered, living with family).

MOVING ON

The triggers for young men to leave their family homes, and the routes they pursued in doing so varied

across the study. For middle-income young men, a university placement in another town provided a standard and prescribed route into rented student accommodation. Three of the young men in our study had moved out under these circumstances. While Ben was living in a shared student house that was unsuitable for children, two others had married and moved into their own flats prior to the arrival of their children:

"I feel like we have our own lives" (Martin, aged 23, wave 1, partnered, privately rented accommodation).

In other cases, young partnered couples were able to move on via local authority housing that was offered to the mothers. This was the case for Kevin, for example, who, after a year of living temporarily in overcrowded conditions in the maternal household, moved with his partner and child into their own accommodation:

"[My partner] ended up getting her own place. And ... we moved in together. I think that's, as a family that's what you want. You want your own space, your own house. Yeah it was ... it was our castle. ... It was, it was brilliant" (Kevin, aged 21, first wave, formerly partnered in local authority housing).

In line with wider evidence, however, the key trigger that necessitated a move, often a sudden move with little prior planning, was volatile relationships across the generations

and/or between the young parents themselves. This pattern was particularly characteristic of the low income, 'nomadic' young men in our study. Having become homeless, the young men were dependent on social housing, provided in the main by local authorities or housing charities.

SOCIAL HOUSING

The experiences of the young men in this study show that housing support across the statutory, voluntary and private, not for profit sectors is limited for young fathers. There is very little recognition of the involvement of these young men in their children's lives, whether they are part of a couple, or trying to parent as single young men.

There seems to be an assumption that young mothers are parenting alone and that the fathers are only peripherally attached to the family unit. Where young men were moving on from the family home independently of the mother and child, they often found themselves unable to secure local authority housing. They were regarded as a low priority, for without a role as a primary carer, or co-resident status with the mother, their credentials as a parent were not recognised.

As in the case of Kevin above, where the young men's partners secured local authority housing as the primary caring mothers, this was of benefit to the young men. But they could not benefit where mothers were placed in supported housing schemes, such as mother and baby units. These are single-sex occupancy schemes, although in some cases in our study the couples bent the rules when

the young men unofficially stayed overnight.

One young father, Darren, received some unofficial tailored support from a housing charity. While provision in his case was single-sex, male occupancy, the manager moved Darren from his room in a shared house to a small, one bedroom apartment, and turned a blind eye when Darren moved his partner and child in. The manager had chosen the apartment for its location near the maternal grandparents. This was a stepping stone for the couple to a local authority council house. The charity provided Darren with 'floating' support to help him manage the financial and other responsibilities of moving from dependent to independent living. This was highly valued:

"So it made it a lot more easy, if you know what I mean, to actually, for a first time moving out of my mum's, but to still be living near her mum, it made it a bit easier for her. ... He taught me how to use phones and all that, 'cause I were crap, and ringing job centre. ... It learns you how to start paying your bills. ... They don't work with partners, you know, like me and our lass. They can't do stuff like that. But like, he said, what's not on the books is not on the books if you know what I mean" (Darren, wave 1, partnered, housing charity support).



While seven young men in the study received floating support from housing charities, Darren was the only one whose status as a parent was recognised and taken into account, albeit unofficially. Those moving into local authority accommodation lacked this transitional support, although some were able to fall back on a parent. Callum's mother, for example, would no longer house him, but she continued to support him in this way:

"It's stressful, very stressful. Like ... I've got my own ... flat to look after, bills to pay. All this to pay out and I'm not earning a lot of money. ... Like, with me mum ... I'd ask her to, say, buy me a carpet for me flat. And then I'd pay her back every week. And, you know, I felt like I'd ... always have to ring me mum and, you know, I'd be like 'oh mum, boiler's leaked, what shall I do'. Or, you know, just things like that. But [it's] now things around the house and all that lot and ... just going out there to [the] shops and buying things" (Callum, aged 19/20, waves 2 and 3, re-partnered, local authority housing).

Local authority housing and housing benefits were an important safety net for fathers like Callum. But the provision was for young, single, homeless men. For young parents there was no discernible provision. The accommodation was most often too far away from the mother and child, confounding attempts to maintain

contact, and it was of poor quality, or in degraded neighbourhoods that were felt to be unsuitable environments for babies and young children. Callum's small, one bedroom flat, for example, was in a noisy and run down neighbourhood. His only hope was to be invited to move in with his new partner, who, as a primary caring mother, had secured a well appointed flat from the local housing association.

Tracing Adam's housing journey over time shows how his experiences shaped and constrained his efforts to be a father. His housing journey had started at his father's flat, and then on to the maternal household after his son was born. The arrangement was short-lived; the couple found it hard to be permanently together and Adam responded badly to the perceived interference of maternal grandparents:

"I was sick of them telling me what to do. They're not my parents. And I just lost it. Fair do's it's their house and everything. I was respecting their rules and everything. But they just didn't like me there" (Adam, aged 16, wave 1, partnered, living in maternal household).

At this point, Adam moved in with his mother, but, when he dropped out of college, she could no longer claim benefits for him as a dependent child:

"So I got kicked out of my mum's for not being able to pay to live there. So then I was homeless for about two or three months. I was living at my mates, at my dad's, just in and out

of houses" (Adam, aged 17 wave 2, partnered, nomadic).

After this intensely nomadic period of his life, Adam went to live in a hostel for single homeless men, arranged for him by a local housing charity. This gave Adam a roof over his head, but one that took no account of his parental responsibilities. Safeguarding issues in the hostel environment meant that children were not allowed to visit. Adam was also located some miles away from his partner and child and unable to pay for transport to visit them. This left him missing his son and living in relative isolation:

"No, [son] can't come [to visit], but if they're above the age of eighteen then they can come on a Sunday for four hours. And I've got to be there at least four nights a week. So I just sit there basically, doing nothing for hours on end. I can go out but if I haven't got money to get to my places I've gotta walk it. ... I've got ... a load of pictures and videos of [my son] so I just slideshow them and just watch him before I go to bed. ... It makes me a bit upset now and then but at least I get to see him on a picture" (Adam, aged 18, wave 4, partnered, singles hostel).

POLICY AND PRACTICE IMPLICATIONS

Family based housing for young fathers is a vital resource, providing the material foundation for developing their skills and commitments as parents. It is also a financial and emotional cushion where dependent young men have few resources of their own and are still building their educational and employment pathways. But the stability of such provision is highly variable and it may not be sustainable beyond the short term.

In particular, young men from low income, disadvantaged families may find themselves leading nomadic lives, without a stable base to care for and develop a relationship with their children.

The provision of social housing, via the local authority, housing associations, or charities, is vital in these circumstances. But provision that recognises the needs of young fathers, and their involvement in and commitment to their children,

currently seems to be negligible. This is the case whether the young men are part of a couple, or trying to parent as single young men.

Where young fathers are allocated social housing, this is likely to be based on their status as young, single people, rather than as parents. They are likely to find themselves in local authority units or single hostels that are of poor quality or in degraded neighbourhoods. These are often deemed unsuitable for babies or young children and may be located too far away to facilitate contact. In these circumstances, the lack of tailored social housing for young fathers can seriously impede and undermine their parenting efforts.

The reason for this neglect of young fathers in social housing provision is not clear. But it may relate to the widespread assumption, found in a variety of professional contexts, that young mothers alone have a stake in their children, and that young fathers

are therefore peripheral (Briefing paper no. 6).

The expansion of supported housing schemes to address the needs of young fathers may also be constrained by safeguarding concerns about placing men in the same housing environments as vulnerable young women (Quilgars et al 2011). An assumption that all young fathers are inherently risky and therefore best 'sidelined', however, may do them an injustice. Where there are risks, side-lining may do little to address or manage them (Briefing paper no. 6).

Whatever the limitations of current housing provision, the situation does not look set to improve. In the current climate, funding for social housing for young people is increasingly being cut. This begs the question: in the absence of support from their families, who will support young fathers to find an adequate place to parent?

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NOTES

1. The Findings in this briefing paper will be developed and reported in full in Ladlow, L. and Neale, B. (2016) 'Finding a Place to Parent?: The Housing Needs and Experiences of Young Fathers', for submission to the Journal of Youth Studies.
2. The methodology is reported in full in Neale, B., Lau Clayton, C., Davies, L. and Ladlow, L. (2015) *Researching the Lives of Young Fathers: The Following Young Fathers Study and Dataset. Briefing paper no 8*. Available on the project website. www.followingyoungfathers.leeds.ac.uk
3. The Following Young Fathers research team: Professor Bren Neale, Dr. Carmen Lau Clayton, Dr. Laura Davies, Linzi Ladlow, and Dr. Ruth Patrick. For further information about this briefing paper please contact Linzi Ladlow l.ladlow@leeds.ac.uk or Bren Neale b.neale@leeds.ac.uk
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5. The Following Young Fathers Briefing Paper Series: edited by Carmen Lau Clayton and Bren Neale; designed and produced by Jamie Knipe. The full series is available on the project website: www.followingfathers.leeds.ac.uk



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