

TEENAGERS' EXPERIENCES OF DOMESTIC VIOLENCE REFUGES

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INTRODUCTION

Teenagers can experience domestic violence both in the family home and/or in their own relationships. Some will need to move to temporary refuge accommodation.

The Government's definition of domestic violence now includes young people aged 16 and 17. This means that refuges need to ensure that their services are appropriate and accessible for this group.

ABOUT THIS STUDY

This research was carried out as part of a PhD study at the University of Central Lancashire. It took place over 12 months (2014-15) in refuges across the North West, East Midlands and West Midlands in England. It involved telephone interviews with 25 members of staff and face to face interviews with 20 teenagers aged 13 to 18 years. Interviews with teenagers were repeated so they could talk about their experiences at different points during their refuge stay.

This research found that teenagers need to be recognised as refuge service users in their own right. The teenage years provide an opportunity to build resilience and recovery following domestic violence and to prevent it in the future. Refuges can struggle to acknowledge and meet the rights of teenagers, and for some young people, this results in a prolonged negative experience that intensifies their experiences of abuse.

The research recommendations are relevant for refuge services, policy makers, funders and other professionals. Refuges need to identify teenagers' needs and appropriate resources are required.



KEY FINDINGS

Shortcomings identified by teenagers included lack of personal space, lack of educational and personal support and living restrictions. Refuge support was seen as primarily aimed at adult women. Teenagers wanted refuges to recognise their specific needs:

"Something to do, to get your mind off things... if you're a teenager like me, when you're at that age and you see all that, it just ruins your life a little bit because it does hurt you... [I'd expect] to come places where you can go and clear your head..."

Rebecca

Teenagers were negatively affected by the length of time in refuge accommodation - for some this lasted over two years:

"I want to be in a home like a normal person, not in a refuge."

Zoe

There was an absence of educational, emotional and social support throughout their stay, and the picture was similar after leaving the refuge:

"...you just need someone to talk to, to share feelings, because I wouldn't want to talk to my mum about like anything too much because I don't think she would understand it the right way..."

Amy

"...it would be better to have a counsellor in the refuge...talk about how they feel...what is making them depressed...letting it out...they've been physically hurt and they're hurting themselves...talk about what's happened and why..."

Scarlet

Teenagers found that refuge rules and restrictions conflicted with their needs for social support and increasing independence:

"You can't sleep at your friends. You're not allowed out. If you're going out, you're not allowed out by yourself. You need an adult... in my own house, they would let me. I would be allowed."

Jordan



A focus on safety and protection within refuges could be problematic and raised questions concerning the design and management of refuges:

"I always get a bit paranoid... always this camera on top of you. You're always aware... Even outside in the garden...24 hours...everywhere... There's nothing you can do that they wouldn't know about and there's nowhere we can go where they wouldn't know about... makes me feel like it's a prison than a home... not such a healthy environment for people who have been here so long..."

Mohammed

Teenagers spent long periods without school places or educational placements were unsuitable. They felt they had no voice in decisions made about school. Completing homework was affected by limited access to computers and suitable space. Absence of support with these issues contributed to friendship difficulties and to concerns about future academic and career choices:

"I want to get a house near here because I don't want to move school again... My education is going to get ruined... I'm doing my GCSEs in January... I said I'm not moving school because it's not fair on me that my education keeps getting messed up just because I'm in a refuge."

Zoe

"My teacher tells me that we have to move, but I said there's no point of moving because if I'm going to move...and have to move back somewhere else... I really don't want to move... [school] is too nice...I'll have no more friends..."

Lulu

Where support was provided it was valued but this was unusual. Many refuges are missing opportunities to reduce harm and promote prevention of future domestic violence for teenagers.

"...built my confidence up really, took me on trips, and done what I've never done before..."

Bob Marley

Teenage participants in this research emphasised the need for young people to be given rights and status as service users by refuges and argued for the importance of investing resources and thought in young people to reduce future harm:

"...young people have feelings as well as older people, and if they don't get anything sorted out, it could lead to problems..."

Daisy



RECOMMENDATIONS

Physical Space

Restrictions on teenagers' access to refuge buildings and spaces need to be reviewed as they can have a negative effect. Refuges should also review policies that prevent teenagers from accessing communal spaces without their mothers.

Creating or allocating a designated space for teenagers should be considered. Where accommodation is being built or adapted, specific space for teenagers should be included.

Opportunities to utilise existing spaces outside the refuge for homework and leisure activities, such as school or community premises, should be improved.

Emotional Space

Ensuring sufficient and varied opportunities are available for teenagers to talk in confidence about domestic violence is a priority.

Improved access to counselling and mental health service should be prioritised. The possibility of providing counselling services for young people in refuges should be explored.

Refuges, schools and youth services should seek to provide opportunities for teenagers to meet other young people outside refuges. Teenagers in refuges should be helped to maintain existing friendships.

Education

Refuges and schools need to work collaboratively and proactively to address the negative impact that domestic violence and moving can have on a teenager's education. This may require training for teachers, social workers and other professionals to promote greater awareness of the effects of domestic violence and moving to a refuge.

The co-ordinated educational support provided to care leavers should be considered as a model for offering support packages to young people living in refuges. Where schooling is interrupted, teenagers should be provided with alternative resources.



Risks

There is a need for further development of teenager-friendly risk assessments which fully involve them in the task of balancing their own safety with their need for independence.

Refuges need to achieve a balance between empowerment and protection when considering online risks for young people.

Service Provision

Policies restricting access to teenage boys should be reviewed by refuges.

Support for teenagers is needed at the beginning of their stay and afterwards. A named support worker would be valuable. An information booklet upon arrival at refuges would be helpful for teenagers.

The promotion of resilience offers a guiding principle that can inform refuge provision for teenagers. The aim is to strengthen protective factors to overcome the consequences of domestic violence and to mitigate future harm.

Practice guidance with accompanying resources should be developed for staff working with teenagers in refuges. Practice materials should focus on empowering and non-stigmatising approaches to support. Examples of good practice were found and these should continue to be identified and be built upon.

Resources are needed to support teenagers living in refuges. Resources need to be allocated over longer periods and the option of resources for young people being shared between refuges should be investigated. Teenagers should be involved in developing service provision to meet their needs.

More evaluation of work undertaken in refuges is required. There is also a requirement for improved, disaggregated data collection.

Finally, consideration should be given to prioritising families with teenagers on housing waiting lists.

