Private Lives: the Social Networks of Young Homeless People

Introduction
Attachment to, or exclusion from, social networks is a key element in the meaning of home and homelessness. Social interaction is fundamental to the quality of life for us all, and an understanding of the nature of young people’s social relationships is indispensable to an appreciation of their experience of homelessness.

Most of this chapter is devoted to an examination of young people’s relationship with their parents because they emphasized that this was the most significant set of relationships in their lives. Relations with siblings and wider family members are also discussed. Young homeless people’s friendship networks are then explored, and the chapter concludes with a review of their family formation patterns.

Parents
I have already touched upon the family life and parental relationships of young homeless people in Chapter 4. Here, I draw together this evidence to explore the role of young people’s parents in creating and resolving their homelessness. It must be borne in mind that these issues are considered only from the perspective of young people in this study: readers are referred to Smith et al. (1998) for an important insight into the position of the parents of young homeless people.

Do young people’s parents cause their homelessness?
We consider here the extent to which young people’s homelessness can be attributed to their relationship with their parents. This involves examining young people’s views on the origin of their problems and...
the quality of their parental relationships, as well as considering other issues affecting their childhood family environment, such as gender relations and unemployment and poverty.

**The origin of young people’s problems**

Virtually all of these young people had unhappy childhoods. Gerard’s (17) description of his childhood captured many typical elements: ‘Trouble at school, went in tae a home, seen a lot of trouble in the hoose wi’ the six of us, ma and da arguing aw the time, shortage of money, never seemed to get anywhere.’

A couple of young people who had suffered severe abuse as children said that they had always had problems; George (18) told me: ‘I’ve had a bad life since I was a wee boy, since I was really young.’ Most young people, however, located the beginning of their difficulties in their teenage years. For example, Liz (17) said that she was happy until she left primary school and then her problems started because ‘I grew up’. For others it was a specific traumatic event which they felt marked the beginning of their troubles. Roger (19), for instance, told me that his problems began when his mum died when he was 15 years old.

Young people most often blamed both themselves and their parents or step-parents for their problems (see also Stockley *et al.*, 1993). For example, George (18) explained that if his father had treated him better:

> I would have still been wild, but I wouldnae have been homeless aw that. I wouldnae have had tae go through care, I probably wouldnae be on the drugs. But whit I dae blame maself for is burn-ing aw ma bridges. So it’s me and ma dad.

A few young people attributed their difficulties exclusively to their parents or step-parents; these were all young people who had suffered serious physical abuse. Interestingly, only one young person, Roger (19), located any blame for his problems in the political realm, and even here it was combined with personal blame on his father. He told me: ‘If it wasnae for him [his father] I wouldnae be here [adult hostel], and if it wasnae for the Government I wouldnae be here. So it’s equal parts.’

This replicates the findings of Hutson and Liddiard (1994) that young homeless people usually offer ‘individualistic’ explanations for their homelessness.