

# Leaving home

by Gill Jones

No 2, June 1995

---

---

Young people's patterns of leaving the parental home have been changing in recent decades. At the same time, youth homelessness has increased. A new book considers the relationship between these two trends, and explores the problems young people face in the housing market. *Leaving Home* by Gill Jones, published by Open University Press, is the product of a programme of research conducted at the CES. This *Briefing* summarises the main findings and considers their implications for policy and practice.

---

---

- **Young** people need their parents' permission to live in their parents' homes after the age of 18 in England and Wales, and after 16 in Scotland. Permission to stay on at home, or to return there to live may depend on the quality of family relationships.
- **Reasons** for leaving home vary with age. Older leavers are more likely to do so to marry. At 18, young people leave home mainly to go on a course. Under the age of 18, they are more likely to leave because of family conflict or to take up work. People cannot always choose when to leave home.
- **More** young people are leaving home at an age when their incomes from grants, training allowances or wages are insufficient to maintain an independent household, and when their rights to social security have been eroded.
- **An** intermediate stage, between living with parents and living with a partner, has become more common. Young people need a variety of affordable housing which is appropriate for single people, whether workers, trainees or students.
- **More** people return home again after having left. This may be because they want to, or because their attempts to live independently have failed. Not all young people are able to return to live with their parents, even if they want to.
- **Family** help with setting up home, and an open invitation to return home, are now crucial factors affecting young people's chances of making a successful transition to adulthood.

## Leaving home

Leaving the home of one's parents is part of the process of becoming an independent adult. It is an important event for young people and their parents alike. It involves changes in the relationship between the generations, as young people become citizens in their own right. Patterns of leaving home are changing, affected by the expansion of post-school education and training, the reduction of income opportunities for young people, the changing structures of the labour and housing markets, and changing patterns of family formation.

Young people increasingly leave home during the late teenage years, in order to study or take up employment. Fewer now remain in their parental homes until they themselves marry. In Scotland, over one-third of young people have left home by the age of 19, while in Britain as a whole around half have left home by the time they are 21 years of age. People may be leaving home younger than they were a decade or so ago.

Between 1987 and 1991, proportions of 19-year-olds who had left home rose from 31% to 37% among men, and from 39% to 42% among women (Scottish Young People's Surveys).

Women tend to leave home at a younger age than men. This is partly because women still tend to leave home to live in partnerships with men around two years older than themselves.

## Choice and constraint

Young people cannot always choose whether and when to leave home. Some have to leave because there are no local education, training and employment opportunities. Young people from rural areas are far more likely to have left not only their parental homes but also their home communities by the end of their teens. Many younger men still leave home in order to take up work or look for it, although the youth labour market has shrunk. Other young people leave home because of family conflict, sometimes exacerbated by poverty and overcrowding. Most 16-year-old women who leave home, do so for this reason. Frequent family rows, or violence in the family, may result in a young person having to leave for the sake of their personal safety, or being told they must go once the legal responsibility of their parents to house them has ceased.

It would be hard to argue that there can be a 'right age' for young people to leave home, nevertheless there is increased concern to prevent young people from

'leaving home prematurely', and government policies often assume that people can and should remain at home until they can afford to leave.

In practice, the economic viability of the move away may not be the over-riding consideration.

The problem of youth homelessness cannot be resolved through regulating patterns of leaving home. Policies based on this assumption could instead lead to its increase. Young people who *have to* leave home will continue to do so, despite their lack of economic resources, and even though the risk of becoming homeless is increased.

## Households and housing 'careers'

When they leave home, young people do not usually form new households. Between leaving the family home of one's parents, and establishing an independent home of one's own, with a partner, perhaps, there may be an intermediate stage. Many go to live with relatives; others live in housing associated with their work or studies, such as in barracks, nurses' homes, hotels, or student hostels. 'Intermediate households' of these types do not represent a true move to independent living, but they may be the only way a young person can leave home, if affordable housing is scarce. The quality and security of such situations vary. Job-related or tied housing is only as secure as the job itself. Accommodation may range from having a key and a room to oneself, to sleeping on a friend's floor. Some of those living with friends or relatives, or unable to leave their parental homes at all, could be regarded as 'hidden homeless'.

Leaving home is often just the start of a housing career which involves a gradual transition into more permanent households and more secure independent housing. During the period of youth, many young people are in need of housing which is not only affordable, but also provides the flexibility to allow them to move to find work or start a course. Home-ownership, even if they could afford it, would not necessarily be an ideal solution for young single householders. Some increase their consumer power by pooling resources with other single people and sharing accommodation, though this is more common among students. Others, mainly young women, increase their housing chances by living with partners.

## A demand and supply mismatch

With more single people leaving home in their teenage years, housing demand has not only become greater, but has also become more varied. The housing market has in contrast become more polarised, so that housing is available for those wealthy enough to purchase or poor

enough to qualify for social housing, but there is little that is suitable for people between these two extremes.

Young people need a variety of affordable housing in a flexible housing market which allows them the geographical mobility to respond to education, training and employment opportunities.

### Support for setting up home

The extension of post-school education and training has resulted in young people leaving home earlier. The parallel erosion of opportunities for an independent income from employment, allowances, grants or benefits, mean that young people remain longer in a state of dependence on their parents. Leaving home is an expensive business, and cannot be easily and successfully achieved without parental help, especially since state benefits and grants have been cut. The types of intermediate household described above may provide 'solutions' for many young people, at least in terms of reducing the cost of setting up home; furnished rented flats are often expensive; unfurnished flats need to be equipped. In contrast, joining the armed forces is an easy and common way of leaving home in one's teens.

Among those who had left home, only 40% of 18-year-olds who had been living with a step-parent received financial help, compared with 65% of those who had been living with both natural parents (Scottish Young People's Survey, 1991).

Parents do not always help their children set up in homes of their own. Some parents may not be able to afford to, while others may not be willing to. Poverty and family breakdown may both, in different ways, affect the availability of financial help to young people leaving home. Furthermore, young people may be reluctant to ask for help from their parents when they are trying to assert their independence from them.

The book quotes interviews which suggest that young people leaving home without family support faced a very high risk of homelessness. Nevertheless, family support alone may not be enough. Even those who receive parental help are more likely to be successful in setting up home if they live with a partner who can also help.

### Returning home

Increasingly, people leave home more than once: in other words, they leave home, return to live for a while, and then leave again later, perhaps for a different reason.

Between 1987 and 1991, the proportion of home leavers who returned home to live by age 19 doubled, from 15% to 29% (Scottish Young People's Surveys).

Patterns of leaving home vary in their 'permanence': leaving home to marry is a more permanent move than leaving home to study, for example, and students often return home to live when their studies are over. So, as more people leave for non-marriage reasons, the more temporary their move away from the parental home is likely to be. The reasons are likely to lie partly in the income and housing opportunities of young people. Couples have a more favoured position in the housing market than single young people.

In a recent study of young Scots, a surprisingly high proportion (44%) of young people who had left home because they did not get on with their parents, returned home again by the age of 19 years. The main reason for returning, given by 41% of these, was that their parents wanted them back. In-depth interviews show how important it is that young people in these circumstances are invited back home. It was easier to return, though, when the possibility of returning had been arranged with parents prior to leaving home. Young people do not like to ask if they can go back home: they may face rejection, or a loss of independence.

These findings suggest that young people do not have a right to live in their parents' homes, either in legal or moral terms. Their parents may not accept a moral responsibility to house them. In legal terms, they live as 'licensees' in the parental home from the age of 18 in England and Wales, and from the age of 16 in Scotland. They depend on the good will of their parents, and this may not be forthcoming.

### Homelessness

The risk of homelessness is not equally spread among young people, although the housing market makes few concessions to the age group as a whole. Access to housing depends to a great extent on income, and under-18s are thus particularly handicapped, lacking incomes sufficient to allow them either to set up home, or to sustain ongoing housing costs. The risk of homelessness is increased when their leaving home is

more a matter of constraint than of choice, for example when they leave home because of the lack of local opportunities or because of family conflict, and when they do not receive parental support.

A recent study of homeless young Scots found that most (60%) homeless young people left home because of family conflict; around one-third had been in care since the age of 14; and one-quarter lived with a step-parent at the age of 16 years. Family relationships are therefore an important element in youth homelessness. The current shifting of responsibility for young people from the state onto families puts a strain on families which may be ill-equipped to cope. Where there has been family breakdown, young people are less likely to obtain family support for leaving home, though they are also more likely to leave.

### **Implications for policy and practice**

- Young people need support for the transition to adult life. Economic, practical and emotional support are not always available from their families. Formal sources of help and advice are needed to supplement informal ones.
- Young people leaving home need a variety of affordable housing in a flexible housing market.
- Temporary 'respite care' should be considered as a means of supporting young people and their parents where there is family conflict.
- As they take on adult responsibilities of their own, young people's relationships with their parents can improve. In some cases, mediators may be able to re-establish positive family contacts which have been broken.
- Young people leaving care should be offered the opportunity to return to care if they need it, so that they too have a safety net.
- The financial needs of young people setting up an independent home with little or no parental support should be recognised.

### **Further information**

For more information, contact Dr Gill Jones at the Centre for Educational Sociology, University of Edinburgh (Tel: 0131 650 4195).

The views expressed in this *Briefing* are those of the author.

*Leaving Home* is published in June 1995 by Open University Press and is available from bookshops or direct from the publishers (Tel: 01280 823388), c. 192 pp, price £12.99 paperback (ISBN 0 335 19284 X) and £37.50 hardback (ISBN 0 335 19285 8).

### ***CES Briefings***

This new series will provide regular information about the work of the Centre for Educational Sociology. *CES Briefings* are designed to make our research accessible to a wider audience, and to enhance its value for policy and practice. The following *Briefing* is also available, free of charge from the CES:

No 1: "The participation of 16-19 year olds in Education and training: recent trends," by Paula Surridge and David Raffe.

Other *CES Briefings* will cover curriculum, guidance, young people's incomes and many other areas of our work.