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Incoherent and Indefensible? A Normative Analysis of Young People's Position in England's Welfare and Homelessness Systems

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Abstract

Young people experience different treatment compared to older adults in the English welfare and homelessness systems, encountering varying levels of protection and disadvantage. This paper uses a value-pluralist perspective to explore the normative rationales for and the ethical defensibility of these policy differences. Evidence from 38 key informant interviews suggests that the English homelessness system is shifting towards a vulnerability-oriented response to young people. But an inconsistent value framework within the welfare system systematically disadvantages them without offering a corresponding degree of protection. As such, these closely-connected areas of social policy pull in opposing directions. Although individual positions targeting young people may (to greater and lesser extents) be justifiable, this disparity in values creates an incoherent and indefensible welfare policy landscape for this group.

Keywords: young people; normative analysis; homelessness; vulnerability; welfare policy

Introduction

As a group, young people are disproportionately affected by rising inequalities and increased social risks, including elevated rates of unemployment and destitution (Antonucci *et al.*, 2014; Fitzpatrick *et al.*, 2016; Bessant *et al.*, 2017), but they are also subject to national and international commitments to promote their wellbeing (for example, UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, 1989; 'Every Child Matters', UK Government, 2003). In normative terms, 'youths' are simultaneously portrayed as passive 'dependents' who have minimal agency and need supervision and protection, and 'deviant' actors capable of engaging in 'troublesome' transgressive behaviour (Wenham, 2016; Collins and Mead, 2020). This tension is exemplified by discourses that address a near-identical population as 'children in need' in social work departments and 'young offenders' in the criminal justice system

(Goldson, 2000). These associations with both vulnerability and culpability raise questions about how young people ought to be positioned in the policy sphere. This paper develops a normative analysis of the treatment of young people in England's welfare and homelessness systems, asking how these policies might be justified, and to what extent these justifications are compelling and stand up to scrutiny.

Within the UK welfare system, which is administered centrally by the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP), under-25s have lower minimum wage and benefit entitlements than older adults (Watts *et al.*, 2015; DWP, 2020; Low Pay Commission, 2021). They also receive a lower rate of housing benefit (the Shared Accommodation Rate, SAR), which applies to adults under 35. Whilst some groups of young people are exempt from the SAR, including care leavers up to the age of 22 and over-25s who have spent at least three months in a homeless hostel (Wilson, 2015), it applies to many others who are at elevated risk of housing need (Watts *et al.*, 2015). In 2017, the Westminster government attempted to remove housing benefit entitlements for 18-21s unless they met an exemption (DWP, 2018; Wilson *et al.*, 2018). Although this policy was later retracted, it is thought to have negatively impacted young people's access to housing by increasing the reluctance of social sector and private sector landlords to let to this group (Homeless Link, 2018).

Despite their disadvantaged position in the welfare system, young people experiencing homelessness have significant protections compared with older adults. The English homelessness system is administered by local authorities following a national Code of Guidance from the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (formerly the Ministry for Housing, Communities and Local Government, MHCLG, 2018). It confers a statutory entitlement to settled accommodation for groups in 'priority need', to which young people aged 16-17, care leavers under 21 and vulnerable care leavers under 24 were added in 2002 (Homelessness Act, 2002). However, this protection is not absolute: homelessness legislation in all parts of the UK includes an 'intentionality test' which removes local authority duties to applicants who are deemed homeless due to their culpable act or omission (Robson and Poustie, 1996).

The apparent disjuncture between the treatment of young people in the welfare and homelessness system raises questions about how this policy landscape ought to be understood. What normative and non-normative factors can be drawn upon to explain how young people are treated? How defensible are these policy positions, either in isolation or in conjunction?

The next section reviews the merits of, and strategies for, normative work in social policy, and introduces a test of 'defensible coherence' as a means of pragmatically engaging with these issues. A brief account of the qualitative study and key informant interviews informing this paper follows, before applying techniques of normative analysis to assess the treatment of young people in England's welfare and homelessness systems. Whilst some positions may be open to normative explanation, a systemic tension between the values driving welfare policy and homelessness policy shows they fail to form a coherent or defensible landscape as a whole.

Adopting a normative approach

Why do normative work in social policy?

In ideal terms, social policy can be understood as a combination of facts and values: the latter informing the aims of a policy, with evidence about 'what works' guiding how this should be achieved. In practice, it is acknowledged that there is a 'complex interdependence' between social norms, policy positions and social outcomes, which have a particular impact where value-laden issues such as poverty and inequality intersect with questions of state provision (Dean and Brady, 2015; Farrugia and Gerrard, 2015; Shutes, 2015; Vizard, 2015). Welfare and homelessness policy are highly value-laden areas, associated with emotive debates around who should receive help (Zufferey, 2014; Gross and Wronski, 2019) and how (Watts, 2014; Watts *et al.*, 2018). These arguments often rest at the intersection of moral philosophy and policy in debates about distributive justice.

A normative approach pays explicit attention to the values at play in policy, offering opportunities to develop conceptual clarity and accurate description of the policy positions (Bengtsson, 1995; Wolff, 2011). It asks what values are being drawn upon in the construction of a policy, or – if this is not stated outright – with what normative perspectives it is aligned. Together with evidence of the policy's effects, such clarity can inform a process of ethical scrutiny and evaluation (King, 2011; Taylor, 2018), addressing questions such as the policy's coherence with popularly held values and whether it achieves its stated aims (Gerring and Yesnowitz, 2006; Wolff, 2011; O'Leary and Simcock, 2020). Finally, the work of evaluation leads naturally to considerations of how to develop and justify policies in the future. These range from practical discussions about bringing their impact in line with stated aims or accepted norms, to developing theoretically- or ideologically-informed cases about what those aims should be (Bengtsson, 1995; King, 2003; Stears, 2005). As such, normatively-informed social policy can both build public acceptance by bringing policy in line with commonly-held values, and articulate visions of the future that inform new aspirations (Wolff, 2011).

Two approaches to normative work in social policy: 'ideal' and 'non-ideal' theory

Approaches to normative work in social policy can be differentiated according to their adoption of 'ideal' or 'non-ideal' theory. The former is concerned with articulating the best possible social structures, by applying ideas about what is right or good to some idealised assumptions about society. Normative goals are defined first and the shape of society follows, meaning that the value-based perspective is implemented 'top down'. Richard Titmuss, a keen proponent of clarity about values in social policy who argued the discipline will "inevitably be concerned with ... what we (as members of society) want (the ends); and how we get there (the means)" (1974: 132), has been described as an ideal theorist because he conceptualised social policy as a tool for bringing about pre-defined goals, such as reducing inequality and strengthening social solidarity (the ends), through the delivery of universal welfare rights (the means) (Rodger, 2003; Offer, 2006).

Work tracing the history of normative thought in social policy suggests that the idealist approach dominated for much of the 20th Century (Offer, 2006), but such

positions encounter several challenges when applied to real-world problems. First, different but equally valid foundational principles cannot be meaningfully weighed up or traded off against one another, and tensions between such 'incommensurable' values can create conflict or unclarity about the appropriate course of action in policy (Nagel, 1979; Raz, 1986; Berlin, 2002; Lukes, 2008). Second, empirical evidence shows that people's everyday moral reasoning, including in realms of social policy and distributive justice, draws on multiple values (Miller, 1992; Haidt and Graham, 2007; Fletcher and Redman, 2022; Gandenberger *et al.*, 2022), and the prevalence of different value judgments in the public sphere may vary with socioeconomic conditions (McArthur and Reeves, 2019; Noureddine and Gravelle, 2020). This suggests that dogged application of ideal theory in a social policy context risks being *"undemocratic, practically challenging, and strategically unwise"* (Watts-Cobbe and Colliver, 2022: 193). The permanence and significance of pluralism in contemporary society is such that application of an 'ideal theory', or a single coherent normative position, is increasingly accepted as impractical in a policy setting (Raz, 1986; Young, 1990; Mendus, 2002; Wolff, 2011; Valentini, 2012).

In contrast to a values-led approach, 'non-ideal' theory uses social realities as its starting point. This approach attempts to engage with the array of normative and non-normative factors (e.g. public opinion, political interests and the status quo) from the 'bottom-up'. It draws upon tools from political theory and moral philosophy to help make sense of the moral difficulties associated with social issues and move the policy conversation forward in a more normatively-informed manner (King, 2011; Wolff, 2011; Valentini, 2012). A degree of pragmatism is involved in finding policy solutions that can meet with public and political support. Amongst other advantages, a non-ideal approach has been praised for its use of empirical information to gain an accurate understanding of a policy problem 'as it is' within an imperfect social context, and taking people 'as they are', meaning that principles and solutions can be tailored to their capacities (Anderson, 2010). As such, it responds to diverse values held within the population and seeks areas of consensus that may guide policy actions, even where underlying beliefs about what is right or good continue to differ (Wolff, 2011; 2019).

The framework presented below is informed by this 'non-ideal' approach. It assesses what values are at play within a given policy sphere, asking what justification they might offer for a particular policy position. This forms a basis for exploring whether the policy implementation is a defensible expression of such values.

Seeking defensible coherence

This paper introduces the idea of 'defensible coherence' as a simple test or rule of thumb for assessing the ethical defensibility of a policy landscape. It starts with the assumption that a policy's actions and associated outcomes ought to reflect its normative commitments i.e. it should achieve its aims. But influences on policy development and implementation are diverse, including potentially hidden objectives and conflicting public and private goals. For instance, factors such as local structures, budgets, availability of affordable accommodation, service attitudes and working culture are known to affect the way that welfare and homelessness policies are interpreted and implemented (e.g. Dwyer *et al.*, 2014; Alden, 2015; Midgley, 2016;

Dobson, 2018; Ahmed *et al.*, 2019). As such, policy must be understood as the product of multiple compromises rather than an expression of 'ideal' solutions (O'Leary and Simcock, 2020). Policy success cannot, therefore, be assessed solely according to the fulfilment of stated goals.

The test of defensible coherence is a strategy of normative evaluation that aims to account for the 'messiness' of policy in practice. It seeks to establish conceptual clarity around policy values, looks at a policy's inward- and outward-facing normative coherence including potential explanations for deviances or discrepancies, and makes an evaluation based on the balance of these factors. A policy's internal coherence refers to how far its stated values or normative alignments are reflected in its practices and outcomes. Coherence is high when the values and other influential factors are 'pulling in the same direction' and undermined when they conflict (May *et al.*, 2006). A policy landscape is likely to be defensible as a whole where this coherence is apparent between an array of related policies.

As it is not realistic to expect an exact correspondence between policy and practice, it can be informative to look for signs of 'progressive realisation' of normative commitments (Lynch, 2005; Brems, 2009). This involves considering whether values are being partially or incrementally expressed in a policy area and whether its overall trajectory is consistent with its stated principles. An apparently incoherent policy may be considered defensible if a 'consistent' normative position is factored into decision-making but subordinated to other policy influences i.e. there is evidence of an attempt to strike an appropriate balance between multiple influences. Nonetheless, deviations from stated values should be explicable with reference to overriding alternative priorities and, where they are not, this will raise questions about the defensibility of the position and could indicate a need for greater scrutiny and accountability in that area.

Method

This paper draws upon a multi-method doctoral research project comparing the treatment of different statutorily-defined household groups (families with children, young people, and single adults) within the divergent homelessness systems of England, Scotland and Wales. The study was funded by the Economic and Social Research Council, and fieldwork received ethical approval from Heriot Watt University.

A literature review identified ethical issues and normative discourses relevant to the national homelessness policies. Challenges around the allocation of finite resources stood out: for instance, means-testing benefits, use of conditionality, and prioritising 'vulnerable' groups for support (Housing Act, 1996; Welfare Reform Act, 2012). These concerns reflect principles of distributive justice: values around need, desert and vulnerability were particularly prominent in relation to the treatment of young people, whilst others such as rights, equality and utility were present across the broader policy landscape. Literature from political philosophy and ethics was used to develop a conceptual map of potential relationships between principles of distributive justice and the treatment of different household groups in the national homelessness systems.

Empirical research combined documentary analysis of national homelessness policy texts and policy-relevant reports with semi-structured qualitative interviews. The 38 key-informant interviews (England n = 20, Scotland n = 9, Wales n = 9) were designed to offer insight into the presence and nature of normative considerations during the creation and high-level implementation of homelessness policies. Participants were purposively selected on grounds of expertise in homelessness and/or involvement in influencing national homelessness policy, and included government actors and civil service employees, local authority service managers and leaders from third-sector organisations. Interviews were conducted in 2018 in person or by telephone. Audio recordings were transcribed by the researcher and imported into a QSR NVivo 11 project file for coding and analysis. Analysis of texts and interviews used techniques from thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006), in combination with the normative strategies outlined above.

The final evaluative portion of the project drew together its theoretical and empirical aspects, using the normative framework above to assess the defensible coherence of the national homelessness policy landscapes and their treatment of different groups. The next section demonstrates the approach in relation to the treatment of young people in England's welfare and homelessness systems, an intersection that stood out for its varied and inconsistent normative rationales.

Findings: Applying the normative lens

The distributive principles of desert, need and vulnerability stand out in connection to young people's position in the English homelessness and welfare systems. This section outlines these concepts from a philosophical standpoint before exploring their plausibility as normative justifications for this treatment. Combining the theoretical perspectives with interview evidence, it finds significant tensions between desert- and need-driven state welfare policy and increasingly vulnerability-oriented rationales within the homelessness system.

Desert

'Desert' captures the principle that the distribution of social goods or benefits should reflect something about the recipient's behaviour or 'performance'. Assessments of desert can be influenced by factors including effort (dedication to the performance), contribution (merit of the performance), motivation (degree to which the performance was intentional) and luck (degree to which the performance was – or was not – in the agent's control) (Miller, 1976; Olsaretti, 2008). As such, the agent's responsibility for their actions is key to the assessment, and a person who acts 'deservingly' is understood to earn a fitting form of treatment.

Within the UK welfare and homelessness systems, desert-based reasoning is reflected where entitlements are conditional upon an applicant's actions. Examples include the DWP's Claimant Commitment, which requires recipients of Universal Credit to engage in a range of job search activities to receive out-of-work benefits (UK Government, 2021), and the 'intentionality test' which ends local authorities' duty to provide settled accommodation to homelessness applicants if they are assessed

as responsible for their circumstances (Robson and Poustie, 1996). The contributory principle is visible in the different rates of unemployment benefit paid according to an individual's history of national insurance contributions (White, 2003; Watts and Fitzpatrick, 2018). It is an influential form of desert-based reasoning amongst welfare recipients and policymakers alike: for example, benefit claimants may justify drawing welfare entitlements with reference to their own actions, such as making tax contributions (Dwyer, 2004).

This principle of contribution offers a potential explanation for young people's lower rates of minimum wage and benefit entitlements. Their employment entitlements could be linked to a 'lower offer' – both in terms of the *quality* of their contribution when at work and the *quantity* of their contribution over time.

> Maybe young people earn less and are protected less under minimum wage legislation because there's a view that they've potentially got less to offer in the workplace. So . . . they should be paid less. (Third-Sector Organisation, England)

The rationale for lower benefits follows from the lower minimum wage: paying young people the same rate of unemployment benefit as older adults risks creating a 'perverse incentive', potentially discouraging them from entering work.

But despite this *prima facie* plausibility, there are reasons to be concerned about such an expression of desert-based policy. Key to the principle of desert is that it responds to individual performance (Miller, 1976). Treatment based on aggregate performance across the category of young people crucially misses this element, inappropriately determining one person's treatment according to anticipated performance across the group. This means that individual young people may experience an unfairly low wage that fails to capture their true contribution: ". . . young people would say they work just as hard, if not harder, than people who are older than them," (Third-Sector Organisation, England). Such an outcome is illegitimate from a desert-based perspective and, as such, it fails to offer a satisfactory normative explanation for the welfare system's differential treatment of young people compared with older adults.

In relation to homelessness, the intentionality test can be understood as a desert-based policy because it links applicants' acts or omissions to their housing entitlements. Whereas the test applies in full to young people presenting as homeless in England, policy developments in Scotland and Wales have attempted to reduce its impact upon this group (Housing (Wales) Act, 2014; Scottish Government, 2019).[1] The appropriateness of doing so hinges upon whether there is a meaningful difference in the bases of desert between younger and older adults – do effort, contribution, motivation or luck affect their actions to different degrees?

Interviewees, including those attached to national government, drew on common conceptualisations of young people as 'inexperienced' or 'immature' (Harding, 2004) to imply that they were less responsible for their actions than older comparators: "I do not think you can be expected to take that level of responsibility if you're sixteen. And that's to do with physiology and maturity and everything," (National Government, England). If this is the case, then assessments of desert must account for this

discrepancy, perhaps combined with less extensive life experience, in considerations of motivation and intent. To the degree that developmental stage inhibits reasoned control over action, then it would be consistent to reduce the impact of desert-based policies on young people.

Need

Concepts of 'meeting need' range from preconditions for avoiding serious harm ('thin' views, e.g. night shelter homelessness provision), to everything required to live a good life ('thick' views, e.g. access to long-term settled accommodation) (Doyal and Gough, 1991; Dean, 2010; 2013). Reflecting the reality of constrained resources, the UK welfare system takes a thin 'sufficientarian' approach to distribution – the needier a person is, the more they receive, up to a minimally sufficient threshold (Crisp, 2003; Brock and Miller, 2019). For example, although its sufficiency is contested (Fitzpatrick *et al.*, 2016), the DWP's non-contribution rate of unemployment benefit represents a minimum income 'safety net' below which no one should fall (Wolff *et al.*, 2015). The system also recognises that the level and type of resources required to bring people up to the same sufficiency threshold can vary (Dworkin, 1981): for instance, the Personal Independence Payment (PIP) benefit provides additional resources to support disabled people with living and mobility costs.

If young people were shown to have fewer or less significant needs, such as lower outgoings or "less responsibilities I guess – they're less likely to have children" (Third-Sector Organisation, England), then their lower benefit entitlements might be justified because they would require fewer resources to meet the sufficiency threshold. But interviewees contested this premise, arguing young people have the same basic needs and require the same level of resources as older adults:

> They don't have any fewer housing needs, just because they're a young person. It's not as if they eat less food or take up less space, or any of those things that mean therefore they need less money to live. (Local Authority, England)

Instead of being consistent with a needs-based response, young people's structural disadvantages within the welfare system leave them with fewer resources to meet their basic needs. This is borne out by evidence that young people receiving the SAR experience severe difficulties finding affordable accommodation (Watts *et al.*, 2015) – their lower benefit entitlement and minimum wage make it more difficult to top up housing benefit to meet rental costs (Fitzpatrick *et al.*, 2017; Greaves, 2019) – with rates of hidden homelessness increasing as a consequence (Simcock, 2022).

An alternative explanation for their lower benefits is that young people could be more likely to receive familial support in meeting their needs, meaning they require less state support. This reflects a normative position advanced by former Prime Minister David Cameron during the introduction of the SAR, that "the only time a young adult should leave the family home is once they have reached financial independence" (Wilkinson and Ortega-AlcÁzar, 2017: 334). Family plays an important role in supporting some young people: growing exposure to social risks and

inaccessibility of the housing market has resulted in increasing numbers of young people living at home (Wong, 2019), and returning to the family home is one of the main routes out of homelessness for young people (Mayock and Parker, 2019). But not all young people have recourse to such support, and for many – particularly women and LGBT people – 'home' does not represent a place of safety (Wilkinson and Ortega-AlcÁzar, 2017). Basing entitlements on aggregate expectations is at odds with the individual means-testing rationale operating elsewhere in the DWP's social security system. Young people who are eligible for benefits have, by definition, been assessed as requiring state support. In this context, their lesser entitlements appear to contradict the principle of responding to instantiated need.

Although England's statutory homelessness system represents an over-arching response to acute housing need, needs-based reasoning is not an obvious driver of young people's treatment within that domain. The groups picked out for settled accommodation through the priority need test are identified in terms of risk characteristics rather than instantiated need, meaning it is more accurately conceptualised as an instance of vulnerability-based policy (discussed below).

Outside of the statutory system, interviewees suggested that a needs-based response to young people experiencing homelessness should look different to that for older adults. Accommodation options were a particular focus, with calls for local authorities to "make sure your supply, your commissioned supply in particular, meets [their] needs," (Third-Sector Organisation, England). This was often couched in terms of providing additional on-site support:

> Supported accommodation in particular, which is the type of accommodation that is typically provided for young people. So that's people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness with what are termed support needs. The idea is that those issues they've got are addressed and they're supported to think about what they want to do with their lives in future. (Third-Sector Organisation, England)

Supported communal accommodation is a popular service model for young people experiencing homelessness (Steen and MacKenzie, 2016), and some evidence suggests stays in this kind of temporary accommodation contribute to more successful transitions to independent tenancies (Crane *et al.*, 2013). Although these 'housing readiness' models have met with some criticism (Stewart, 2019; Hoolachan, 2020), the provision of support represents an attempt to address more than young people's thin need for shelter, contributing to thicker need-fulfilment through developing a 'plan of life' (Doyal and Gough, 1991; Dean, 2010). As such, whilst the statutory system does not formally respond to acuity of need, elements of third-sector practice are sensitive to the types of needs young people have compared to older adults, aiming to tailor services accordingly.

Vulnerability

The concept of vulnerability is prominent – even fashionable – in everyday discourse around welfare, but its meaning is not always clearly articulated. Kate Brown (2015) describes vulnerability as a 'shadow concept' of risk, and

I distinguish 'vulnerability' from 'need' as the difference between the *potential* for harm and the *instantiation* of harm. It is also useful to distinguish two types of risk that might render an individual or group 'more vulnerable': a) *higher likelihood* of incurring harm, and b) likelihood of incurring *more severe* harm. Some people may be vulnerable in both respects. For example, young people with experiences of multiple disadvantage are more likely to become homeless (Fitzpatrick *et al.*, 2017) and, compared to their peers, young people experiencing homelessness are more likely to incur harm due to mental ill-health, violence and sexual exploitation (Hodgson *et al.*, 2013; Heerde *et al.*, 2015; Heerde and Patton, 2020). These factors can also intersect with other sources of oppression such as class, gender and sexuality that exacerbate the severity of these harms (Fraser *et al.*, 2019; Norris and Quilty, 2020; Watt, 2020).

Causes of vulnerability span multiple dimensions, ranging from those 'innate' to an individual, to situational and 'structural' factors like exposure to social risks (Fineman, 2008; Brown, 2019). Reflecting the 'thin' and 'thick' concepts of need described above (Dean, 2010; 2013), these risks range from physical to social and psychological forms of harm (Caraher and Reuter, 2017). Individual-level sources of vulnerability might include a person's characteristics, experiences or behaviours – for instance, young people's ongoing neurodevelopment and lack of life experience (Brown, 2015; Emmel, 2017). Structural vulnerability from social risks includes material deprivation – for instance, through poor nutrition and shelter – and is shaped by environmental factors including access to key resources such as welfare state provision (Caraher and Reuter, 2017; Emmel, 2017). As such, a person or group's vulnerability can be understood as a product of internal and external influences.

Within the English homelessness system, the term 'vulnerability' is commonly deployed as grounds for targeted exceptional treatment: in particular, the priority need test gives some young people an entitlement to settled housing (Homelessness Act, 2002; Brown, 2015). But the level of protection afforded to individual young people is determined by an uneven policy landscape, involving complex interactions between statutory requirements: "What I see at the moment is there's kind of inequality depending on what route a young person goes down" (Local Authority, England). For example, whilst English homelessness policy makes long-lasting provision for care leavers, including them in priority need up to at least age 21, there is a drop-off in protection for most other young people after the age of 18 (MHCLG, 2018). Multiple interviewees reported that these differences in treatment feel unfair to young people who are not care-experienced and that the current system can fail to recognise or respond to vulnerabilities in that group:

A few young people I've talked to who haven't been in that system and protected by that children's care services legislation have said to me, 'I'm just as vulnerable as James living next door'. (Third-Sector Organisation, England)

So for example, seventeen and a half-year-old walks through the door of a local authority saying, "I'm homeless," has never been in the care of the local authority before ... how the local authority then goes around assessing and deciding on the duty it owes to that young person is really difficult. And I think, with the

financial climate where it is, people are making the wrong judgements, and the wrong decisions, because finances are telling us to do one thing rather than making a proper assessment of the young person's needs in the longer term. (Local Authority, England)

There was a widespread sense that vulnerability-based considerations for young people in policy were failing to translate into the expected protections in practice. Whilst the English Code of Guidance for implementing homelessness legislation states there must be special consideration about youth when assessing vulnerability (MHCLG, 2018), interviewees suggested this may count for little when resources are constrained:

Because it's guidance . . . as long as you can show you've had regard to it, and you've not been unreasonable, then you can [do] whatever. And the prevailing conditions in an area mean that actually, a lot of the time, they're not going to fare any better. (Independent, England)

As young people age, a gradual drop-off in protections could be consistent with vulnerability-based policy because risks stemming from immaturity and inexperience may diminish over time. But interviewees suggested that expectations and practice in the statutory homelessness system are contradictory, with young people aged 18 and over facing higher risks of harm compared with 16-17 year-olds because of barriers to accessing priority need. In this sense, whilst vulnerability-based reasoning appears to provide a sound normative basis for the treatment of young people in English homelessness policy, current practice falls short of delivering on this goal.

Rather than providing vulnerability-based protection, the welfare system was highlighted as a source of vulnerability for young people: "At a policy level it's quite clear that young people, by their very nature, are vulnerable. Because of . . . their vulnerability in terms of the benefits system," (Third-Sector Organisation, Wales). Their experiences echoed evidence that young people's lower rates of benefit entitlement place them below the destitution line for single people living alone (Watts *et al.*, 2015; Fitzpatrick *et al.*, 2016; Homeless Link, 2018):

Young people that I work with are being left destitute by the benefits system. Or with an amount of money to live on that really pushes them, in terms of having to go without food. (Third-Sector Organisation, England)

Young people's disadvantaged position in DWP employment and unemployment policy makes it more difficult to top up housing benefit to meet rental costs, issues which were exacerbated by the 2016-2020 Local Housing Allowance freeze (Fitzpatrick *et al.*, 2017). The cumulative impact of their position has made young people more susceptible to the rising cost of living and less likely to be able to afford rent in their area. As such, the realities of young people's position in the welfare system are highly inconsistent with arguments that they should be treated as 'more vulnerable' due to their comparative immaturity and inexperience (Brown, 2015).

The search for defensible coherence

The findings above illustrate a normative conflict between vulnerability-oriented protections for young people in the homelessness system and the desert- and need-based rationales that might inform their welfare benefits. The final part of this paper applies the test of defensible coherence to evaluate these policies' ethical justifiability, both as standalone positions and constituent parts of young people's welfare policy landscape in England. In conclusion, it observes that the practical expression of these policy ideals is partial at best, and the reality of young people's position in the centrally-controlled welfare system represents a significant impediment to their protection when facing homelessness.

Within the English homelessness system, interviewees involved in both national and local government talked about young people's reduced responsibility due to developmental immaturity and lack of life experience. Whilst homelessness policy 'on paper' reflects both desert- and vulnerability-based principles, the interview evidence suggests a strong leaning towards vulnerability-based reasoning for this group. But whilst these values may dominate normative thought, the policy landscape reveals a highly uneven application. Only certain groups of young people are placed in priority need, and interviewees suggested many struggle to get help because of the high bar for qualifying as 'vulnerable' after ages 16-17, and access to settled accommodation still being conditional on the intentionality test. As such, whilst trends in the position of young people within the homelessness system show signs of normative coherence, tensions around the uneven application of vulnerability-based protections and ongoing exposure to desert-based risks reveal inconsistencies in practice.

On balance, homelessness policy trajectories suggest some 'progressive realisation' of vulnerability-oriented norms (Brems, 2009). Where practices fall short of the normative ideals, non-normative factors such as the scarcity of housing in the social rented sector could explain English local authorities' adoption of strategies to limit their duties to homeless applicants (Cowan, 2011; Meers, 2019), and ongoing use of the intentionality test. As such, it is possible to understand deviations from vulnerability-based treatment of homeless young people in terms of a trade-off between normative and non-normative considerations. In this respect, young people's position in English homelessness policy can be said to satisfy the test of defensible coherence.

Treatment of young people within welfare policy is less amenable to normative explanation. Common interpretations of the DWP-administered benefits system suggest a balance between considerations of need (it is a means-tested system that targets resources towards the worst-off) and desert (contributory elements and welfare conditionality link entitlements to assistance to behaviour). However, arguments around contribution and desert have failed to explain young people's lower entitlements: these principles are properly applied when benefits reflect individual performance, but it would be a gross misapplication to determine individual treatment based on group-level trends.

Where a young person receives social protection from a family unit, then it is plausible that they might not need the same welfare benefits as an older adult. Good-quality support could act to mitigate youth-related vulnerabilities and

maintain them above a sufficiency threshold. In such cases, young people could defensibly be deprioritised when distributing limited resources within the welfare system, justifying their lower minimum wage and benefit entitlements. But, as with desert, the plausibility of this position rests on a flawed conflation of group trends and individual circumstances. The result is that, whilst the DWP demands that young people demonstrate considerable need in order to access benefits, those needs are met with fewer resources than for older adults in the same situation. The evidence shows that current practice creates systemic disadvantages for young people without a corresponding degree of systemic protection. Whilst the position could be explicable with reference to non-normative factors, it cannot be considered defensible when evidence of a coherent normative position is so lacking.

This paper has shown that it is challenging to locate a coherent normative explanation for the position of young people within the welfare system. It pulls in opposition to the vulnerability-oriented trajectory of English homelessness policy, as young people's lower benefit entitlements severely constrain their access to settled accommodation. Taken as a whole, the policy landscape fails to satisfy a test of defensible coherence because it is neither normatively consistent nor are its inconsistencies explicable in terms of dialogue and balance between normative and non-normative concerns. Contrary to the national and international commitments to protect young people's well-being, current policy arrangements leave the group at a significant disadvantage and elevated risk of destitution. Such a disparity between aims and outcomes ought to spur those involved in welfare and homelessness policy to reflect on their normative commitments and begin adapting practices so that they 'pull in the same direction'.

Note

1 In 2019, Wales commenced the section of the Housing (Wales) Act 2014 that grants 'intentionally homeless' young people under 21 (and care experienced young people under 24) settled accommodation unless they have already been intentionally homeless in the past five years, whilst Scotland made assessment of intentionality optional for local authorities and required them to consider 'youth' as a mitigating factor in their decisions.

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