

Research Aim

This study explores how institutional and professional arrangements shape the scope and limits of social work in responding to young people who are at risk of or experiencing homelessness.



A Study of Social Work's Role in Responding to Youth Homelessness in Scotland

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Research Objectives

- ✓ Examine how institutional and professional arrangements shape social work responses to care leavers at risk of or experiencing homelessness.
- ✓ Explore how care leavers experience and respond to support from social work and homelessness services.

- ✓ Q1a: How are the responsibilities and boundaries of social work and homelessness services defined and coordinated within existing welfare and housing policies?
- ✓ Q1b: How do social work and homelessness services interact in service delivery, and what are the consequences of this interaction for the role and position of social work?
- ✓ Q2a: How do care leavers experiencing or at risk of homelessness understand and engage with the support offered by social work and homelessness service, and what factors influences their (dis)engagement?
- ✓ Q2b: How do care leavers' experience of seeking and receiving support reflect or challenge the institutional boundaries of social work practice?

Research Question

Method

Research Design

A constructionist qualitative design combines document analysis and semi-structured interviews.

Participants

Around 18–26 participants will be recruited from Scotland, including:

- Care leavers
- Social workers
- Housing professionals

Data Collection

- Policy documents
- Semi-structured interviews
- Reflexive field notes

Data Analysis

- Natural Language Processing analysis (NLP)
- Thematic coding

Why This Study Matters

For care leavers

- Centre their voices
- Make visible how they experience and navigate support systems
- Ensure their perspectives inform the development of more accessible and meaningful services

For practitioners

- Reveal the structural roots of everyday challenges
- Explain why cross-sector collaboration is often difficult to sustain in practice
- Propose more workable organisational arrangements

For policy makers

- Show how policies translate into everyday practice
- Reveal boundaries and blind spots across welfare, housing, and social care
- Guide the design of more coherent, ground-level policies

For academics

- Reconsider the role of social work at the intersection of multiple systems
- Clarify its boundaries and possibilities in addressing youth homelessness

Preliminary Insights (From Literature)

- **Limited research attention:** Very few studies focus on social work involvement in youth homelessness, particularly concerning care leavers and transitional situations.
- **Focus on collaboration but lack of mechanisms:** The small number of existing studies mainly discuss multi-agency collaboration yet offer little explanation of how such collaboration is institutionally organised or maintained in practice (Scottish Government, 2023a: p11; Simcock & Machin, 2019; Pooler, 2019; Manthorpe et al., 2015).
- **Insufficient theorisation:** There is little conceptual or theoretical analysis of the limitedness of social work's role—how institutional arrangements define and constrain what social work can do in this field (Nadan et al., 2024; Hagan & Ahmed, 2025).

What Is The Next Step

- ✓ **Who I am / stage:** Preparing fieldwork phase of a study on youth homelessness & social work.
- ✓ **Who I'm seeking:** Practitioners supporting care leavers and/or young people with housing insecurity (statutory, third sector, lived-experience roles welcome).
- ✓ **What I'm asking for:** Short conversation or written reflections—ideas, challenges, promising practices, gaps.

