Young people leaving home and living alone

Why do young people leave or run away from home?
Some young people leave home through choice. Others feel forced to. Young people leave home for many different reasons:
- like Faith, thrown out by their parents/grandparents (for bad behaviour/breaking house rules)
- they may be escaping violence or sexual abuse
- they may be living in unsuitable or unsafe accommodation
- their parents may have died or left home.

Some, like Donnie and Ava, have been in local authority care and don’t want to live with a foster family, in a hostel or in bed and breakfast accommodation.

What problems do they face when they leave home?
Like Faith, Donnie and Ava, young people who have left home are without money, food, warm clothes, shelter or any idea of where to get help.

They desperately need housing and money but they can become lost in a maze of rules and regulations. It's little wonder that Faith, Donnie and Ava ended up squatting in an empty house in Albert Square.

Some can even become homeless. Many – like Faith – become ‘sofa surfers’. Homeless teenagers can end up sleeping on the streets where they are exposed to drugs and alcohol and are at risk of being attacked or abused.

How many young people are homeless?
Government statistics on homeless people do not include the ‘invisible’ homeless, like Faith, Donnie and Ava. Research shows that between 78,000 and 80,000 young people experience homelessness in the UK in a year (Centrepoint/University of York study).

Can young people rent accommodation?
Only someone aged 18 or over can hold a tenancy. However a landlord can grant a joint tenancy if one of the tenants is 18 or over.

An 18-year-old can apply to a local authority for housing as a ‘homeless’ person. To be ‘statutory homeless’ you must have nowhere suitable to live, be eligible for help, be in priority need, not be ‘intentionally’ homeless and have a connection with the local area.
Young people in rented accommodation can claim housing benefit but under 25s with no children get a limited amount.

People who rent a room in a hostel or share a flat or a house can claim housing benefit. However those aged 16 or 17 who have been in local authority care are not entitled to housing benefit. The local authority has a duty to accommodate them.

Are people under 18 entitled to housing?

- **under 16s**
  People under 16 can't make an independent decision to leave home. Legally, they are still the responsibility of an adult.

- **16 and 17 year-olds**
  Over 16s can leave home without the consent of parents or carers. A parent can try to force the young person to return home but a court would be unlikely to make them return against their will.

  Almost all 16 and 17 year olds are judged to be in ‘priority need’ and the local housing department should help to find them somewhere to live.

  If the young person is not a British citizen, or – like Donnie and Ava - has been in care or is ‘a child in need’, the social services department is responsible.

- **‘Children in need’**
  These are children under 18 who need local authority services to help them ‘maintain a reasonable standard of health or development’, or who are disabled.

- Under the Children Act, a local authority also has a responsibility to look after someone if:
  no-one has parental responsibility
  s/he is lost or abandoned
  s/he has no suitable carer or accommodation
  s/he is 16 or 17 and his/her welfare would be seriously at risk without accommodation.

What financial help can young people get?

- **Bank accounts**
A child or young person can have a bank account but they will be refused credit cards and they are unlikely to get an overdraft.

- **Jobseeker’s Allowance**
  Unemployed people aged 18 or over and capable of work get Jobseeker’s Allowance. Unemployed 16 and 17-year-olds, not in full-time education can sometimes claim.

- **Income Support**
  Helps those on a low income with day-to-day living costs. Usually only those aged 18 and over can claim. 16 or 17 years olds may qualify if they are pregnant, have a child or are on a training course. 16 or 17 year olds who have been in care don’t usually qualify.

- **Crisis loans**
  Young people may claim a crisis loan from the Social Fund in an emergency. A local authority can give a young person a loan, a cash payment, or payment in kind, for example, vouchers for a particular shop, or an item of food, clothing or furniture.

**Where can young people go for help and advice?**

**The Runaway Helpline** is a national 24-hour freephone for anyone aged 17 or under who has run away or been forced to leave home: 0808 800 70 70

**Childline** has a free and confidential helpline for children and young people who need help: 0800 1111

**Shelter** has a free housing advice helpline staffed by trained housing advisers: 0808 800 4444