

Impact case study (REF3)

Institution: University of Birmingham		
Unit of Assessment: 24 – Sport and Exercise Sciences, Leisure and Tourism		
Title of case study: Transforming social inclusion and well-being of homeless young people across the UK		
Period when the underpinning research was undertaken: 1 May 2007–31 July 2020		
Details of staff conducting the underpinning research from the submitting unit:		
Name(s):	Role(s) (e.g. job title):	Period(s) employed by submitting HEI:
Dr Jennifer Cumming	Professor of Sport and Exercise Psychology	2 September 2002–present
Prof. Joan L. Duda	Professor of Sport and Exercise Psychology	1 January 1999–present
Dr Victoria E. Burns	Professor of Science Education	1 January 2002–present
Prof. Janice L. Thompson	Professor of Public Health Nutrition and Exercise	16 September 2012–present
Period when the claimed impact occurred: 1 February 2014–31 December 2020		
Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014? No		
1. Summary of the impact		
<p>We have improved social, educational and employment opportunities for 60,000 homeless people across the UK by collaborating with three charitable organisations to co-develop the My Strengths Training for Life™ (MST4Life™) programme and, in doing so, securing them better access to finance opportunities. Participation in MST4Life™, the first sport psychology intervention delivered to homeless young people, has been shown to dramatically increase social welfare and equality for homeless people, increasing the likelihood by 30 percentage points that young people will exit homelessness through education, employment and training. The work has also been translated more broadly, improving the mental health and well-being of 2,380,000 higher education students who now receive access to mental skills training via the Fika app.</p>		
2. Underpinning research		
<p>Homelessness is a major social issue in the UK, costing the Government over £1b annually and resulting in the large-scale deterioration of mental and physical health along with low life expectancy. Young people aged 16–24 are disproportionately affected, and problems will persist and escalate into adulthood unless those affected are supported to overcome their own multiple and complex barriers. Our research has identified and described the mental skills and practices required to support healthy adolescent development in sport and physical activity, and we have pioneered adapting these approaches to improve the well-being and social inclusion of homeless young people.</p> <p>Recognising a lack of mental skills as a key factor perpetuating homelessness, Cumming worked in partnership with the St Basils charity between 2014–2020 to co-develop MST4Life™ (MST: My Strengths Training) — the first sport psychology programme delivered within a housing service to homeless young people. St Basils helps over 5,000 young people across the West Midlands each year, including Birmingham — a city whose level of youth homelessness was five times the national average in 2013–2014.</p>		

The key research findings underpinning MST4Life are as follows:

KF1: Mental skills are essential if young people are to recover from homelessness, experience well-being and thrive. We have provided evidence of the successful and novel adaptation of using mental skills training to engage socially excluded homeless young people across a wide range of support needs [R1]. We also produced the first research to use a ‘person-centred approach’ with homeless youth, to identify their own personal beliefs and associated mental strengths and to demonstrate that these strengths are associated with increased well-being [R2].

KF2: Young people require a diverse set of personal and interpersonal mental qualities to be successful, and the nature, development and regulation of these qualities depends on features of the surrounding social environment [R3]. The content and delivery style of MST4Life™ was directly informed by research undertaken by Cumming and Duda with the Scottish Institute of Sport Federation and Scottish Rugby (2007–2010), investigating how best to develop, implement and evaluate mental skills training interventions for youth in sport and dance. Significant others (e.g., coaches, parents and sport administrators) play an important role by creating an autonomy-supportive climate for the development and implementation of mental skills and offering meaningful opportunities for the athletes to reflect on experiences [R4].

KF3: Using unfamiliar and challenging environments can be beneficial when providing mental skills training. The ‘Messing About on the River’ project (2011–2012), co-led by Cumming and Burns, identified the key factors influencing the transfer of mental skills from a training context (e.g., an outdoor adventure education course) to education and work opportunities (e.g. transfer context) for higher education students [R5]. Based on these findings, an outdoor adventure component was embedded within MST4Life™ to provide a meaningful opportunity for young homeless people to practise their self-regulation abilities in an unfamiliar and challenging environment. They were then able to transfer these mental skills back to their supported accommodation environment and take positive steps towards living independently by addressing long standing health issues, becoming more involved with their community, and engaging with education, employment and training opportunities [R6].

3. References to the research

[R1] Cumming, J., Quinton, M. L., & Holland, M. J. G. (2014). Recommendations for enhancing mental skills of young people living at St Basils: Results of a training needs analysis. University of Birmingham, UK: Authors.

[R2] Cooley, S. J., Quinton, M. L., Holland, M. J. G., Parry, B. J., & Cumming, J. (2019). The experiences of homeless youth when using strengths profiling to identify their character strengths. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 10. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2019.02036>

[R3] Woodcock, C., Holland, M. J. G., Duda, J. L., & Cumming, J. (2011). Psychological Qualities of Elite Adolescent Rugby Players: Parents, Coaches, and Sport Administration Staff Perceptions and Supporting Roles. *The Sport Psychologist*, 25, 411–443. <https://doi.org/10.1123/tsp.25.4.411>

[R4] Sharp, L., Holland, M. J. G., Woodcock, C., Cumming, J., & Duda, J. L. (2013) A qualitative evaluation of a mental skills training program with youth athletes. *The Sport Psychologist*, 27, 219–232. <https://doi.org/10.1123/tsp.27.3.219>

[R5] Cooley, S. J., Cumming, J., Holland, M. J. G., & Burns, V. E. (2015). Developing the Model for Optimal Learning and Transfer (MOLT) following an evaluation of outdoor groupwork skills programmes. *European Journal of Training and Development*, 39, 104–121. <https://doi.org/10.1108/EJTD-06-2014-0046>

[R6] Parry, B. J., Thompson, J. L., Holland, M. J. G., Quinton, M. L., & Cumming, J. (2020). Improving Outcomes in Young People Experiencing Homelessness with My Strengths Training for Life™ (MST4Life™): A Qualitative Realist Evaluation. *Children and Youth Services Review*. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chilyouth.2020.105793>

Key Research Grants

Cumming, J. (2017–2020). Mental skills training with St Basils. Monday Charitable Trust (sub-contracted by St Basils). £366,000.

Cumming, J. (2014–2017). Mental skills training for St Basils. Monday Charitable Trust (sub-contracted by St Basils). £240,000.

Cumming, J., & Burns, V. E. (2011–2012). Messing about on the river: Evaluating the transfer of skills developed in the outdoors into academia and employment. Higher Education Academy. £6,996.

Duda, J. L., & Cumming, J. (2007–2010). The development and testing of a Mental Skills Training (MST) Programme for Young Male Scottish Rugby Players. Scottish Institute of Sport Federation. £154,647.

4. Details of the impact

Improving social, educational and employment opportunities for homelessness people

By **widely collaborating with homelessness charities**, we have intensively supported homeless young people in Birmingham and, more broadly, across the UK, transforming their **quality of life**. We have worked with St Basils to embed MST4Life™ [KF1–KF3] into practice, along with Youth Voice (a national advocacy group for homeless young people) and Homeless Link (a national charity for organisations working directly with people who become homeless in England) to develop a simplified 'Mental Skills Training Toolkit' based on MST4Life™. The toolkit has been shared with 40 UK organisations who collectively support over 60,000 young people across the UK [S1]. The training programme is also included in resources for professionals created by the Association for Young People's Health [S2] and the Young People's Health Partnership [S3] to address health and social inequalities in vulnerable young people.

MST4Life™ and the Mental Skills Training Toolkit allow the gap to be narrowed between participants and their 'housed' peers. MST4Life™ has been shown to improve **social welfare and equality** by significantly increasing the resilience, educational inclusion and self-worth of individuals [S4]. These benefits are hugely significant given that although 10.5% of the UK's population is 16–24 years, this age group makes up 21% of the UK's homeless population. As a group, they face disparate long-term physical and mental health inequalities, including a low age of death (47 years for male; 43 years for women).

Independent evaluation has highlighted that MST4Life™ can **secure poverty alleviation** by increasing the likelihood that homeless young people transition into education, employment or training and subsequently exit homelessness by 30 percentage points [S5]. In Birmingham, intensive use of the programme by St Basils has **contributed to the 37% reduction in Birmingham's statutory youth homelessness** in the period of 2013–2014 to 2017–2018 during a time when the national average *increased* by 34% [S6]. Improving these outcomes provides **public sector savings** from forgone tax revenues, unemployment benefits and healthcare costs leading to an estimated lifetime savings of £26m for 1,040 young people who exited homelessness in the first three years of project [S5].

Improving the mental health of young people

The impact of MST4Life™ on individuals is best exemplified by testimony. As one MST4Life™ participant stated:

[MST4Life™] really helped me because with my mental health, I fail to speak out when I'm feeling low and the other day, I had a bit of a rough patch and I knew who to call, because it was, 'ah I've done this, I know who I need when I'm in a crisis, so why am I not doing it?' And it inspired me to just make that call and it saved a meltdown. [S7]

These mental health benefits can also be translated more broadly. The research underpinning MST4Life™ has been embedded into two apps to **improve health and well-being** in different settings:

1. KF2 contributed to an emotional workout fitness app 'Fika' to help higher education students to train their mental skills and improve well-being. The app is available to the UK's population of 2,380,000 higher education students and has been adopted by over 55 organisations and institutions. It has been found to reduce mental health decline and improve well-being and educational attainment in students [S8].
2. The Covid-19 pandemic has had a disproportionate impact on young people's mental health and has contributed to high rates of homeless youth (there has been an estimated increase of 36%–47% between 2019 and 2020). In response, we translated KF1 and KF2 to provide the evidence base for 'matchFit', an app co-created in partnership with the Street Soccer Foundation, Crisis and Shelter charities. The freely available resource is being used by homeless youth across the country who have faced loneliness, isolation and other difficulties accessing services during lockdown restrictions [S9].

The work of a charitable organisation has been transformed by the research

The success MST4Life™ has been confirmed by its inclusion into St Basils core offer, helping to provide **better access to finance opportunities**. It has enabled St Basils to win new contracts and grants in excess of £7m to assist with their work, despite this being a time of constrained funding from traditional sources for housing services [S10]. Uses of this funding include:

- Appointing new frontline staff, including an in-house clinical psychologist;
- Delivering psychologically informed programmes (including MST4Life™) to young people in their service and the staff who support them;
- Developing spin-off projects such as a psychologically informed programme (related to MST4Life) for parents of young people as part of upstream prevention of homelessness and winning a contract to deliver in a hospital setting (e.g. Sandwell and West Birmingham NHS Trust);
- The production of national recommendations (including MST4Life™) for a pathway out of the youth justice system as part of homelessness prevention.

Overall, MST4Life™ has contributed towards St Basils achieving their: "strategic aim to work with University partners, codify and publish their experiences and practices, and influence policy and commissioning at regional and national levels" [S10].

5. Sources to corroborate the impact

S1: Clarke, F. J., Quinton, M., Parry, B., Fenton, S-J, & Cumming., J. (2020). *Closing the knowledge to practice gap: Advancing strengths-based practice in youth homeless services through co-created knowledge translation*. University of Birmingham, UK: Authors.

S2: Association for Young People's Health (n.d.). [Addressing Health Inequalities in Homeless Children, Young People and Families: A Learning Resource for Public Health Nurses](#). Report.

S3: The Young People's Health Partnership (n.d.). [Closing the employment gap for young people: A toolkit for those supporting 16–25 year olds experiencing common mental health problems to gain and stay in work](#). Report.

S4: Cooley, S. J., Quinton, M. L., Holland, M. J. G., Parry, B. J., & Cumming, J. (2016). *MST4Life™ at St Basils: Year 2 report*. University of Birmingham, UK: Authors.

S5: Jabbour, L. & Siu, J. (2019). *Economic Evaluation of Psychologically Informed Environments: Cost-Benefit Analysis of BOOST and MST4Life™ Programmes at St. Basils*. University of Birmingham, UK: Authors.

S6: Centrepoint: [The Youth Homelessness Databank](#). - Centrepoint's Youth Homelessness Databank collects local data from across the UK concerning the scale and impact of homelessness among young people. [Accessed 4 February 2021]

S7: Testimonial from a young person who has completed the MST4Life™ programme. This is a copy of the speech written and given by a young person at a symposium event, co-hosted by St Basils and the University of Birmingham (21st April 2016)

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S8: Testimonial from Dr Fran Lonstaff, Head of Psychology, Fika.

S9: University of Birmingham press release: [matchFit app uses football to provide resources and support to vulnerable groups](#) [Accessed 4 February 2021]

S10: Testimonial from Jean Templeton, CEO of St Basils.