



Executive Summary

# Young People, Homelessness and Housing Exclusion

Paula Mayock · Sarah Parker · Andrew Murphy

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“

*I'm trying to find me own person now because I don't know who I am like; I don't know who I am like. I want to be who I was when I was thirteen . . . it's like I want me childhood back.*

**Fiona, 19**

”

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In order to protect the identity and privacy of research participants, names in this document have been changed.

The views expressed in this report are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent those of Focus Ireland.







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# Background to the Study

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The available evidence indicates that youth homelessness remains a significant issue in Ireland and throughout Europe. Children and young people who experience homelessness, or are 'at risk' of homelessness, warrant particular attention because of the specific legislation that affects them, the highly vulnerable position they hold by virtue of their age, and their limited access to education, employment, and housing markets.

This research aimed to build upon and extend earlier studies of youth homelessness in Ireland (Mayock and Vekic, 2006; Mayock *et al.*, 2008; Mayock and Corr, 2013) and to advance knowledge and understanding of the processes associated with young people becoming and/or remaining homeless. The research was also designed to examine facilitators to exiting homelessness and to

enhance understanding of the dynamics of youth homelessness, with particular attention to unfolding processes of change over time.

The findings presented in this executive summary are drawn from Phase 1 of a qualitative longitudinal study designed to track the experiences of homeless youth over time. While the research privileges young people's accounts, it makes an innovative departure from existing research on homeless youth in Ireland by extending its scope to include the perspectives of the *families* of a sub-sample of the participants. The integration of the views and experiences of both young people and their carers has the potential to shed new light on the complex and under-researched family dynamics that may propel young people to leave home prematurely, as well as on those family processes that facilitate a resolution to their homelessness.

## Research Aims and Objectives

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This research set out to generate in-depth knowledge and understanding of the life experiences of homeless or 'out of home' young people and their families in Ireland. More specifically, the study aimed to:

- 1 Identify young people's routes or paths out of home;
- 2 Examine their experiences (of accommodation, education/training, daily life, and so on) after leaving home;
- 3 Track young people's interactions with services and systems of intervention over time; and
- 4 Identify facilitators and barriers to housing stability.

# Research Methods

This qualitative study was designed to examine the phenomenon of youth homelessness through the collection of rich narrative data. Forty 'out of home' young people (25 young men and 15 young women) aged between 16 and 24 years were recruited to the study. Of these, 21 consented to a family member being contacted, yielding interviews with 10 further participants, including five parents and five siblings. The data collection phase of the research was conducted over an eight-month period between May 2013 and January 2014.

While the conduct of interviews with homeless youth and their family members was designed to make a stand-alone contribution to existing knowledge and understanding of youth homelessness, it is hoped that these data will constitute the first phase of a longitudinal study that will 'track' the young people and their families over a two- to five-year period.

## Recruitment and Inclusion Criteria

The participating young people were accessed through a range of statutory and non-statutory services in Dublin (34 young people) and Cork (6 young people) targeting homeless, 'out of home', and 'at risk' youth. The types of services contacted included: Supported Temporary Accommodation (STA) services; Crisis Intervention Services; drop-in centres; education, training and employment services; residential aftercare services; emergency short-term accommodation services; adolescent 'out of home' services; and residential settings for young people 'in crisis'. Both male and female, and Irish and non-Irish young people were eligible for participation in the study; in addition the young people had to be:

- Currently homeless or living in temporary, insecure, or unfit accommodation;
- 'At risk' of homelessness by virtue of having experienced housing instability or a previous episode of homelessness; and
- Aged 14–24 years.

## Data Collection

Following the broad methodological approach utilised in previous studies of youth homelessness in Ireland (see Mayock and Carr, 2008; Mayock and Corr, 2013; Mayock and Vekic, 2006; Mayock and O'Sullivan, 2007; Mayock *et al.*, 2008), young people were interviewed using a *life history approach*. All interviews commenced with an invitation to the young people to tell their life 'story' and the following specific issues were probed as the interview progressed: housing/homeless history; family circumstances; schooling; health and mental health; and young people's perspectives on their situations, past, present and future. The life history approach allowed the researchers to capture relevant biographical details and also encouraged young people to articulate their views and to elaborate on 'critical moments', transition, and change in the telling of their stories.

Where appropriate, permission was sought from the young people to make contact with a family member. Qualitative in-depth interviews were subsequently conducted with those family members who agreed to participate in the study. These participants were invited to express their views on current service provision for 'out of home' young people and their families, as well as their perceptions of the young person's current needs (e.g. in relation to housing, education and health/mental health). They were also asked to reflect on their relationship with the young people (past and present) and to discuss their personal experiences of housing instability or homelessness where relevant. These interviews encouraged family members to raise personally relevant issues in relation to their son, daughter, sister or brother's experiences of housing instability and homelessness.

# Sample Profile

## The Study's Young People (n = 40) (25 young men and 15 young women)

### Age, Birthplace and Ethnicity

The young people were aged between 16 and 24 years (average age = 19.9 years) at the time of interview. Just under one quarter (n = 9) were aged 17 years or younger. Thirty-five were of Irish origin,

three of whom self-identified as Irish Travellers. The remaining young people were born in the UK (n = 2); had migrated to Ireland during childhood (n = 2); or did not know where they were born (n = 1).

### Current Living Situation

Young people were living in the following accommodation types at the time of interview:

Accommodation Type	Male (n = 25)	Female (n = 15)	Total (n = 40)
Under 18s 'Out of Home' Provision	9	0	9
Temporary Emergency Accommodation (TEA) (ages 18–23 years)	0	2	2
Supported Temporary Accommodation (STA) (ages 18–25/26 years)	10	6	16
Semi-Independent Accommodation	1	0	1
Residential Aftercare	0	2	2
Adult Supported Temporary Accommodation (STA)	1	0	1
Adult Emergency Hostel (on a night by night basis)	2	3	5
Bed and Breakfast (B&B) Accommodation	1	0	1
Rough Sleeping	1	0	1
Private Rental Accommodation	0	1	1
Supported Lodgings	0	1	1



## Education and Employment

Four young people were attending a second-level school at the time of interview. Ten had left school without any formal educational qualifications, while 21 had progressed to Junior Certificate level and five had completed their Leaving Certificate examinations. One young woman was completing a third-level course at the time of interview. None of the young people were employed (either full- or part-time), although a small number had been employed at some time in the past.

## Family Situation and Parenthood

Seventeen young people reported that a parent ( $n = 13$ ) or sibling or half-sibling ( $n = 4$ ) was deceased. The parents of eight of the young people were living together at the time of interview; however, a majority reported that their parents had separated and many had subsequently lived in 'blended' or step-parent families. Six of the young people in the sample were parents (mothers in four cases and fathers in two cases) and one young man was an expectant father.

## Inter-generational and Intra-generational Homelessness

Reports of inter-generational and intra-generational homelessness were commonplace. One-quarter of the young people (eight males and two females) reported periods of homelessness along with their parent(s) as children, while 12 stated that they were aware of a family member(s) (sibling, mother or father) who had experienced 'single' homelessness at some time in their lives. Overall, 17 family members were identified as either currently homeless or as having previously experienced homelessness.

## Care History

Twenty-six young people (65%) reported a history of State care and a further eight (20%) had spent lengthy periods in the (informal) care of a family member(s).

## The Study's Family Member Participants ( $n = 10$ ) (5 parents and 5 siblings)

### Age and Current Living Situation

The study's participating parents and siblings were aged 39–57 years and 16–29 years, respectively. Three family members (two siblings and one parent) were homeless at the time of interview and living in either transitional housing ( $n = 2$ ) or emergency hostel accommodation ( $n = 1$ ). The remaining family members lived in owner-occupied residences ( $n = 3$ ), RAS (Rental Accommodation Scheme) housing ( $n = 2$ ), the private rental sector ( $n = 1$ ), or were currently in foster care ( $n = 1$ ).

### Employment/Training Status

Six family members were either engaged in education/further study ( $n = 3$ ) or employed on a full-time basis ( $n = 3$ ) at the time of interview. The remaining family members were retired due to illness ( $n = 1$ ), caring for their children full-time ( $n = 1$ ), or unemployed and not participating in education or training ( $n = 5$ ).

### Experiences of Homelessness

Two of the participating family members (one parent and one sibling) had experienced family homelessness and a further five (one parent and four siblings) reported experiences of 'single' homelessness at some time in their lives.

# Key Findings

## Young People's Pathway's Out of Home

Following previous studies (Mayock and Carr, 2008; Mayock and O'Sullivan, 2007), the analysis aimed to generate typologies in order to capture the events and experiences associated with young people's premature home-leaving. It is important to emphasise that, while each of the four typologies has distinctive features, there were also many shared experiences across all four pathways, including experiences of poverty, economic disadvantage, social exclusion, housing instability, parental substance misuse, and/or domestic violence. The four dominant pathways identified are as follows:

### **Pathway 1: Histories of State Care**

### **Pathway 2: Household Disruption and Family Instability**

### **Pathway 3: Family Conflict, Family Violence**

### **Pathway 4: Problem Behaviour and Neighbourhood Stressors**

#### **Pathway 1: Histories of State Care (14 young people)**

These young people had spent extended periods in foster and/or residential care settings. A majority reported high levels of anxiety and uncertainty at the point of entering care and most subsequently experienced placement disruptions and breakdown. Preparation and support for the young person for life after care was identified as crucial, particularly at the point of transitioning from children's (under-18's) services to adult services or in the event of returning to the care of a family member(s). These accounts highlight the complexities and challenges associated with the provision of care and aftercare services to 'out of home' children and young people, and reaffirm the need for children's perspectives to be placed at the centre of assessment and review processes.

“

*I think the social workers put like the children that are in care, I think they just throw them in there for a while just to see how you're getting on like. It's probably just what happened with me.*

**Christopher, 16**

”

#### **Pathway 2: Household Disruption and Family Instability (9 young people)**

The impact of significant and often traumatic life events such as parental separation, bereavement, social deprivation, and housing instability dominated the accounts of these young people. Numerous overlapping adversities were typically reported and several also stated that their parent(s) had and/or continued to struggle with hardship and adversity in their own lives. Disruptions to schooling emerged as a common barrier to educational participation for many young people in this pathway. Exposure to traumatic life experiences and events appeared to be factors that 'pushed' young people towards negative coping strategies and behaviours such as truancy, substance misuse, and/or criminal activities. Engaging in these strategies often further complicated their already fragile family relationships.

“

*I was staying out all the time and I was taking Es [ecstasy], I was smoking hash and all, I was blocking everything out, I didn't want to know anything like.*

**Sophie, 20**

”

#### **Pathway 3: Family Conflict, Family Violence (9 young people)**

Experiences of childhood neglect, abuse, parental substance misuse, and/or domestic violence were central to these participants' reports of the events and circumstances leading to their premature home-leaving. Some had witnessed violence and/or

experienced neglect as children and these patterns had often persisted into adolescence. Some of these young people were often excluded from the family home, while others left voluntarily in order to escape increasingly volatile situations. Attempts to intervene by social workers were often reported to be unsuccessful due to the privileging of parental accounts of home-based circumstances. This was often compounded by fears of the negative repercussions associated with a full disclosure by the young person of the precise nature of their family situations (e.g. escalation of abuse, separation from siblings, placement in care). For these reasons, the full extent of their experiences often went unrecognised by professionals. These findings suggest that young people's perspectives on their situations do not receive adequate attention and highlight a need for increased understanding and support of young people who are vulnerable and seeking help.

“

*[Social workers] never listen to me, what I have to tell them or anything. Like when they ask me the reasons why I don't want to be at my ma's and I've told him the reasons and showed him the marks and the things that I've had while I was there and they never even bothered doing anything about it.*

Aaron, 16

”

#### **Pathway 4: Problem Behaviour and Neighbourhood Stressors (8 young people)**

Substance use and the influence of negative peer associations made a significant impact on the lives of the young people in this pathway. Among them, deteriorating family relationships and school experiences were frequently described alongside reports of substance use and/or anti-social behavior, which sometimes resulted in criminal justice contact as well as exclusions from their local communities. The accounts also point to the limited responses and appropriate supports available to young people and their families who are presenting with high risk and challenging behaviours.

“

*I got arrested loads of times for drinking and a load of ASBOs [Anti-Social Barring Order] then as well. I found that nearly most weekends I was goin' out getting locked [drunk], I was getting brought home by the police for getting drunk; that was at the same age maybe 14, 15 . . . the fact that I was goin' out and sniffed out of me head and even the come downs, stoned, drunk—the arguments we used to have, you know like, I don't really blame [mother] for [putting him out].*

Paul, 21

”

### **Young People's Pathways Into and Through Homeless Services**

A large volume of data was generated on young people's movements, and the impact of various living situations on their lives, following what they identified as their first 'out of home' experiences. Their interactions with services featured strongly in their accounts but, for a large number, contact with services did not occur until long after they had left home for the first time. A considerable number reported multiple and often overlapping challenges—related to substance use, criminal justice contact, and mental health problems—issues that emerged as potential and/or ongoing sources of instability in their lives.

#### **Hidden Homelessness**

Experiences of early childhood adversity, as well as difficult and often fraught family relationships, were strongly implicated in the early home-leaving of a large number of the study's young people. Very often, a pattern of leaving and returning home for short or more lengthy periods began during the early or mid-teenage years and the vast majority recounted at least one episode of 'hidden homelessness', that is, time spent living in the homes of relatives, friends or boyfriends/girlfriends prior to making first contact with services.

“

*I suppose really since I left residential care, it was always in the back of me head really, you know. But like the times when, like I'd stay, the time I stayed with me auntie in England, the times I'd stay with me nanny and granddad, I'd be saying to meself, 'What are you talking about, like you know, I'm not homeless, I'm never going to be like that'. But then at the back of me head I'd be always sort of telling meself, 'Well, cop on Craig, you are homeless'.*

**Craig, 22**

”

These temporary living situations were often perceived as positive 'stop gaps' and as a preferable alternative to sleeping rough or entering homeless or child protection services. Reported episodes of 'wandering' the streets throughout the night in order to avoid sleeping rough also emerged as a common practice among young people who were attempting to negotiate home-based conflict and simultaneously navigate early experiences of homelessness.

### **The Out of Hours Service**

Nine of the young people reported contact with the Out of Hours Service, which targets 'out of home' young people under the age of 18 years in the Dublin region. Experiences of this service were diverse: some reported long-term cycles of service use as well as the unsettling impact of frequent movements between emergency accommodation types; while others (particularly more recent users of the service) reported more positive experiences, describing relatively speedy responses to their situations and more immediate access to more stable accommodation options.

### **The Transition to Adult Services: Narratives of Resistance**

Thirty-one of the young people were over 18 years old at the time of interview and had accessed an adult hostel or other adult emergency accommodation, such as B&Bs, often on multiple occasions and over a considerable period of time. The transition from youth to adult services was typically abrupt and always identified by young people as a point when all supports were removed.

“

*I mean, just because I turned 18 [pause] I was supposed to move into [under-18s service] and obviously that didn't happen . . . but I mean the difference from before I turned 18 and when I turned 18; it was like, 10<sup>th</sup> June I had my social worker and key worker and the staff in the [under-18s] hostel and then, on the 11th, like that all went away. There was no support there, there is no, I don't know where? I mean, the only reason I knew about the free phone to get a bed in a hostel was because when I was under 18 I rang it for other people so I knew the number.*

**Maria, 23**

”

Issues such as the stigma of homelessness, lack of knowledge about available support services, and the fear of entering adult homeless accommodation dominated reports of first engagement with these services. Practically all accounts described some form of resistance to entering the adult service system and, very often, first access coincided with a personal crisis or transpired when all other options were closed. Furthermore, young people typically first entered adult hostels at a point of extreme vulnerability. These accounts highlight the numerous risks posed to young people as they attempt to negotiate the transition to adult homeless services.

### **Adult Emergency Services: "They're just putting a band aid on it"**

The experience of navigating the adult service system was frequently described in extremely negative terms. Typical accounts emphasised the transience and unpredictability that characterised hostel life and many feared for their personal safety and their personal belongings. Difficulties related to access, a lack of understanding on the part of staff members, and the poor standard of accommodation (overcrowding, unsanitary, and so on) were commonly reported and these experiences served to generate feelings of alienation, disconnectedness, and anxiety. A considerable number of young people also reported occasions when they could not access emergency accommodation because of capacity restraints. Negative coping strategies, including increased consumption of alcohol and drugs, were reported by most of the young people following their



entry to the adult service system. Young people and their family members were critical of the omnipresent drug and alcohol use in these emergency service settings and of the lack of appropriate accommodation targeting youth.

“

*There needs to be more places like this [Supported Temporary Accommodation] than places like [lists three adult hostels]. They are not helping the situation. You know, they're just putting a band aid on it, you know, 'We'll figure it out later'.*

**Maria, 23**

”

### **Experiences of Supported Temporary Accommodation**

Almost half of the young people were currently accessing Supported Temporary Accommodation (STAs) and typical accounts of these accommodation settings were far more positive: they provided far greater stability and supported young people in their efforts to acquire essential living skills and to re-engage with education and training. Several young people emphasised the important role of individual staff members in supporting them to develop positively and gain confidence. Nonetheless, those currently living in STAs invariably expressed concern about the future and about their limited move-on options, in particular. Family members typically shared these concerns and a number highlighted the risks posed by the current structure of services, which was likened to a ‘revolving door’ response to young people’s needs by one of the mothers interviewed.

“

*It's [homeless support services] a recycle programme, they're taking people in to put people out. If they're putting people out, where's them people going to be in the next few weeks? Back in [adult emergency service] and back in their services. It's just going around, the problem ain't going away.*

**Tracy, mother, 39**

”

### **Instabilities and Risks**

A large number of young people reported criminal justice contact, as well as substance use issues and/or mental health problems. These difficulties were often overlapping and were invariably exacerbated by the young people’s homelessness.

#### **Criminal Activity**

There were notable gender differences in reported patterns and types of offending behaviour. All 25 of the young men interviewed reported contact with the Gardaí at some point in their lives and 10 had spent time in prison. Ten of the 15 young women reported contact with the Gardaí, although none had received a custodial sentence. First contact with the Gardaí was often linked to substance use and typically occurred in the young people’s home neighbourhoods during their early to mid-teenage years. For most of them, involvement in criminal activity increased following their entry into the ‘official’ network of homeless youth.

#### **Substance Use**

Thirty-seven of the 40 young people had experimented with an illegal drug at some point in their lives and the vast majority first used a drug during their early to mid-teenage years. Polysubstance use was the dominant pattern of consumption and 22 young people reported the problematic use of drugs and/or alcohol. Young people invariably reported that their use of substances became more regular and intense following their first experience of homelessness, often because of their increased exposure to alcohol and drugs within the homeless service system. A large number also reported substance use as a coping or survival strategy.

#### **Mental Health Problems**

Most of the study’s young people recounted past and present experiences of psychological distress and a considerable number reported a diagnosed mental health problem(s). There were also numerous reports of suicidal ideation and deliberate self-harm. Issues related to unresolved grief and loss, traumatic childhood experiences, household instability, family conflict, and disruptions to care placements were frequently implicated in the distress experienced

by young people. Reports of a preference for self-medication through the use of illegal drugs and/or non-prescribed benzodiazapines and a corresponding reluctance to engage with psychological services featured strongly in their accounts, highlighting the complexity of delivering appropriate mental health services to 'out of home' young people.

## Young People, Family and Family Relationships

All of the young people reported unique family situations and circumstances. However, their accounts demonstrate the numerous ways in which family processes, dynamics, and mechanisms can shape and influence the lives and experiences of 'out of home' young people.

### Family Relationships and the Role of Family Support

Despite reporting difficult or fraught home-based circumstances, a majority of young people expressed a strong desire for family contact, highlighting the value they place on their connectedness to family and the perceived symbolic importance of 'family' and familial bonds. The process of renewing family relationships was typically incremental and was often depicted by young people as challenging. For many, finding a balance between distance and closeness appeared to be crucial to their efforts to re-establish relationships with their parents and/or other family members. Thirty-three of the study's young people had maintained some level of contact with their family, and typical accounts reveal the strong value they placed on maintaining family links.

“

*If I didn't have my ma to help me I would be lost, I wouldn't know what to do, do you know what I mean.*

**Kevin, 23**

”

However, many young people and their family members did not feel adequately supported by the existing service systems to re-build and maintain family relationships, and most expressed a desire for accommodation that would allow them to see their families more frequently and under better circumstances.

“

*These young people, the parents should be allowed in to sit with them . . . why can't they do this? [That would actually be] teaching them for going into a living accommodation on their own, that they can have people with them . . . So you need to be doing that, and that needs to be brought in.*

**Tracy, Eric's mother, 39**

”

The accounts of young people who reported little or no contact with family members (n = 7) reveal a distinct absence of material resources as well as a perceived lack of practical and emotional support in their lives in general. Very often, these young people attempted to form supportive attachments or 'family-like' relationships with adults or peers within care of homeless service settings.

### Young People with Histories of State Care: Concepts of 'Family' and Family Relationships

Young people with histories of State care described particularly complex understandings of 'family' and family relationships. Many recounted feelings of abandonment, rejection, and dislocation, as well as a fractured sense of belonging related to the lack of tangible familial bonds. A lack of intimate knowledge and understanding of family and family life also appeared to negatively impact these young people's ability to develop and maintain positive social bonds and/or supportive relationships, leading to feelings of marginalisation and dislocation.

“

*I felt a serious like lack of love, so like feeling unwanted constantly definitely had a serious effect on me. It still affects me in a way with my relationships—probably pushing them away and going; ‘You don’t love me’ or you know? It hurts a lot, you know, it’s hard to come to terms with that.*

**Chloe, 22**

”

Despite having complicated experiences of ‘family’, young people with histories of State care clearly attached emotional and symbolic importance to family ties. Of the 14 young people categorised as having taken a care pathway into homelessness, 10 reported some level of contact, ranging from daily to yearly visits or phone-calls, with at least one parent. Maintaining links or re-establishing relationships with members of their birth family, particularly siblings, provided emotional support and also enhanced their ability to establish positive inter-personal relationships.

### **Experiences of Inter-generational and Intra-generational Homelessness**

One-quarter of the young people (eight males and two females) reported periods of family homelessness, which ranged in duration from many weeks to several years. Reports of intra-generational homelessness, that is, homelessness within families (among siblings or parents, for example) were also common. Twelve participants (just over one quarter) were aware of a family member(s) (sibling or parent) who had experienced ‘single’ homelessness at some stage in their lives. Perhaps significantly, family members who had current or prior experience of homelessness appeared to provide valuable support to young people, often because of their personal knowledge of the homeless service system. Siblings, in particular, frequently ‘connected’ young people with the services and provided advice on how to navigate homeless support systems.

“

*My sister put me on to this place here [homeless support service for under 18s] as well you know, like she used this place before I did and like they help me now with everything.*

**Sam, 19**

”

A smaller number of young people had experienced ‘single’ homelessness during their late teens or early twenties alongside a sibling (in three cases) or their mother (in one case). In these instances, it appeared that entering homeless accommodation along with a family member engendered feelings of safety and protection and facilitated a smoother transition to hostel life. In some cases, however, young people became separated from a sibling at the point of seeking access to a service due to capacity constraints, a situation which generated enormous anxiety for both the young person and their family member. Whilst having a family member present had the advantage of reducing the stress associated with living in adult hostels, in particular, a number of young people also described the responsibility placed upon them to constantly “look out” for that family member.

“

*We weren’t close sisters, but just became close, we had to, well I had to mostly because she’s me little sister like, I had to look out for her. She hadn’t got a clue what she was doing coming into town.*

**Susan, Alison’s sister, 22**

”

### **Young People and Parenting in the Context of Homelessness**

Of the 40 young people interviewed, six—four young women and two young men—were parents and one was an expectant father. Five of the six young people reported patterns of housing instability and experiences of homelessness prior to becoming a parent, and five became parents (or learned of a pregnancy) when they were living in homeless accommodation or situations of hidden homelessness. Parenting in the context of homelessness was invariably depicted as difficult, disruptive, and distressing and several of these

young people expressed strong feelings of guilt and shame associated with their inability to provide a secure home for their children. A number highlighted the challenges of providing adequate care and material resources to their children whilst simultaneously attempting to address their own housing and financial needs under strained circumstances.

“

*Like it's kind of mixed up, you can't actually do your own routine with [children], the way things are right now like [in emergency hostel]. Obviously you'd be happier in your own home where you can do your own thing, you know things like that.*

**Collette, 20**

”

This was particularly the case for a number of young women who had experienced numerous adversities (such as domestic violence, mental health problems, post-natal depression, and/or substance use issues or problems) subsequent to moving from homeless support services to independent accommodation after the birth of their child.

Four of the young people reported that their child had either been placed in foster care (n = 2) or was in the care of their ex-partners (n = 2). The experience of separation from their children was always distressing; it impacted negatively on young people's mental health and well-being and also contributed to increased substance use, in some cases. All of these young people expressed a strong desire to reunite with their child or, alternatively, to acquire housing that would allow them to see their child more frequently. Being a parent appeared to act as a motivating force in the young people's lives, with many detailing their efforts to find secure accommodation and/or address substance use issues in the hope that these positive changes would enable them to see their children more regularly.

“

*My main priority is get an apartment and moving on out of [Supported Temporary Accommodation] so I can take my son for the weekend because I haven't been seeing as much of him and I miss him.*

**Warren, 23**

”

However, parent-child reunification was generally depicted as a difficult and protracted process that was invariably exacerbated by the experience of housing instability and homelessness.

## **Family Member Perspectives on Services and Service Provision**

Family members identified gaps in service provision, particularly in relation to early intervention and the support services available to the families of young people who are living 'out of home'. Many emphasised the need for improved information, advice, and support for parents that might help them to better understand and respond to their children's situations and needs. The need for support was particularly emphasised by the parents of young people with mental health problems and/or engaging in 'risk' behaviours (e.g. substance use, criminal activity).

“

*They [services] should be helping the parents as good as they're helping the child, you know. But they don't . . . I think they [services] could've been giving me more information, maybe a bit of counselling or something – help me, educate me towards the drink and the drugs like and help me to recognise what drugs that was available out there.*

**Jacqui, Rebecca's mother, 57**

”

Some parents struggled to interact positively and effectively with service providers, often because they felt side-lined or not adequately informed about the nature of their child's problems. A number also noted that services were invariably less responsive and/or available to them when their son or daughter reached the age of 18 years:

“

*To be honest with you I think when they're kids it's all about getting them to eighteen and that's it then. Once they're eighteen, off you go.*

**Teresa, Paul's mother, 49**

”



Perhaps significantly, a number felt strongly that family was neglected and that there was little effort to engage with family members, particularly after the young people left home:

“  
*Family can help, they should be able to help*

**Tracy, Eric’s mother, 39**

## Young People Negotiating a ‘Way Out’ of Homelessness

Irrespective of the young people’s circumstances and experiences, past and present, many were focussed strongly on the future and were actively seeking ways to achieve stability in their lives. Access to housing, education and training were almost consistently singled out by young people as critical to securing housing and employment.

### Education, Training and Employment

In general, educational levels were low for the sample; over half had left school before the age of 16, 10 of them without any formal educational qualifications, and a further 11 left at the age of 16 years. Only four young people were attending school at the time of interview. A majority reported negative school experiences, as well as high levels of disruption to their schooling, often related to difficult family situations, multiple housing transitions and/or conflict with teachers which, in turn, led to a perceived sense of failure and alienation, in many cases.

Twelve of the young people were attending a post-school education or training programme at the time of interview and a further 13 had completed a training programme (e.g. FÁS, Youthreach), apprenticeship, and/or FETAC accredited courses in the recent past. In general, young people valued the routine and personal sense of accomplishment that accompanied attendance.

“  
*My confidence would have been shot and my self-worth and my hope for myself going into a situation like that I would have been terrified. So, yeah, definitely that was a huge confidence boost.*

**Conor, 21**

It was very often the case, however, that participation in education and training was compromised by the absence of secure housing, and most were acutely aware of the challenges they are likely to face in securing employment due to a lack of formal qualifications. A number of the young people were worried about the impact that histories of criminal justice contact and/or mental health problems might have on their employment prospects. None were employed at the time of interview, although several had endeavoured, without success, to find work. Believing that educational qualifications were critical to securing a better future, most had concrete plans to return to, or pursue further opportunities to engage in, education and training.

“  
*Like this is what life’s all about; gettin’ out on your own, gettin’ your education and doin’ it, you know? Just like doin’ what you have to do. Because I always thought like, ‘How am I gonna get out of this situation?’, and I thought like, education is the best way out of poverty, you know?*

**Bryan, 22**

### Finding a Place to Call Home

All of the young people interviewed expressed a desire to find a stable home. However, they typically expressed anxiety about the future as they contemplated a route to housing stability, and a large number articulated a need for support and preparation ahead of their move to independent living.

“

**Q** *And have you ever tried looking for a place yourself?*

**A** *No. I want to get everything going well first. Just in my head, you know . . . I'm not right in meself and I will just lose all motivation . . . gonna wait until I'm fully with it all and then.*

**Patrick, 20**

”

Perhaps significantly, the family members of several of the young people questioned their readiness for independent living, and some particularly expressed concern about mental health issues such as depression and self-harm. A number also worried about their ability to cope with practical aspects of daily life, such as budgeting, cooking, and managing peer relationships—issues they felt could potentially compromise their future efforts to sustain housing.

“

*I think Paul, I suppose you know . . . I think he wants, I suppose, he wants his own place that he can come and go and and have people in and, do you know? And I suppose the biggest thing, he needs support, like you know . . . especially at the beginning like to, to learn to manage.*

**Teresa, Paul's mother, 49**

”

A large number of the young people had some experience of seeking accommodation, particularly in the private rented sector. However, all talked repeatedly about the multiple barriers they faced in securing housing and their accounts highlight multiple economic and systemic constraints of access, including: the challenge of saving enough money to pay a deposit; a rental market that discriminates against those in receipt of rent supplement; the poor standard of available rental properties; and discrimination by landlords due to age-related stereotypes and their status as homeless.

“

*I don't know how I'm going to afford my own place like because with the rent allowance you still, it's still your responsibility to pay at least €30 of the rent every week. I'm on €100, so that's €30 gone; then bills, then shopping, then college like.*

**Michelle, 20**

”

“

*I suppose like just more frustration about what's the situation with housing, what's possible and what's not possible. I think I got a bit of a run around . . . so I suppose I felt a bit left to the wayside that way or being treated differently . . . but to find residence is very tough, you know, to get somewhere in Dublin.*

**Conor, 21**

”

Other problems that most young people encountered included their limited experience of dealing with landlords and agents, not having a trusted individual to help them to view rental properties, the inability to supply references from previous landlords, and the lack of regular or reliable internet access.

### **Identity, Self and the Future**

Young people's perspectives on the future were connected to their past experiences and, in particular, with their ongoing struggles with stressful or traumatic life events such as bereavement, histories of State care, experiences of abuse or violence, and/or family breakdown. However, despite the challenges the young people faced, there was a strong sense from the narratives that they were actively seeking ways to re-build their lives.

“

*I'm trying to find me own person now because I don't know who I am like; I don't know who I am like. I want to be who I was when I was thirteen . . . it's like I want me childhood back.*

**Fiona, 19**

”

Many talked about the transformative effect of moving to accommodation that offered greater stability and provided them with a space to work towards the achievement of personal goals, such as addressing a substance use problem, preparing for independent living, or completing a training course. This experience tended to provide young people with a renewed sense of personal growth and also engendered (more) positive perspectives on the future, even if many continued to experience challenges.

“

*Like I pay rent here [Supported Temporary Accommodation] every week and I have somewhere to come, you know. I consider this, while I'm here I'll consider this me home, you know. I keep me flat tidy and I have all me stuff, you know, I read, I do a lot of reading, I've got a lot of books and stuff, I've me own telly. Like everything in there is mine. I'm quite self-sufficient, you know, I look after myself. I try not to rely on people too much.*

**Craig, 22**

”

However, the reflections of some of the other young people, particularly those who were navigating emergency systems of intervention, on their experiences and on their aspirations for the future, were complex, often replete with concerns about the past as well as anxieties about long-standing issues in their lives. Many were dealing with marginality and stigma on several levels, as well as associated problems of mental ill-health, alcohol or drug use, and abuse histories, in many cases. These young people's narratives frequently pointed to a strongly devalued self because of their homelessness and substance use problems, and a number struggled to see a 'way out' of homelessness. Furthermore, many considered that their situations had deteriorated and would continue to do so in the absence of a route to housing stability.

“

*Where I'm going to end up? I don't want to be ... homeless. I just don't know. Just to be able to see a way out sometimes.*

**Michael, 24**

”

# Recommendations for Policy and Service Provision

The recommendations arising from the findings of this study address the following issues:

- › **Prevention**
- › **Early Intervention**
- › **Crisis Intervention**
- › **Aftercare Provision**
- › **Education and Training**
- › **Supporting the Family Relationships of Homeless Young People**
- › **Housing and Housing Supports for Young People**

## Prevention

Preventative strategies focus on children and young people who may be 'at risk', but who are not actually homeless, and these measures and actions need to start at the earliest possible juncture. The *Youth Homelessness Strategy* (Department of Health and Children, 2001) placed a strong emphasis on prevention and this emphasis requires renewed impetus. All agencies working with children and young people within local communities have a role to play in preventing homelessness by providing early warning signs of risk factors and ensuring that there are referral arrangements with agencies targeting children, young people and their families. Since homelessness cannot be attributed to a single cause, multi-agency work, involving housing, social work, education, justice and health sectors, will be necessary components of effective prevention.

### Raising Awareness of Youth Homelessness

Raising awareness of homelessness among children, young people, parents and teachers is an important component of any attempt to prevent homelessness within local areas. A key challenge is to raise awareness about homelessness in a way that creates an understanding beyond 'rooflessness'. If this is not

achieved, many recipients of messages that aim to raise awareness may well feel that they (and others) are invulnerable to 'homelessness'. Additionally, young people may not recognise that they are living in situations of 'hidden' homelessness when they find themselves moving between the homes of friends and/or extended family members.

### Family Support Services

Family support services play a critical role in supporting children and young people 'at risk' of becoming homeless. Current thinking suggests that to be most effective, family support services must be integrated, community-based, and targeted at children and families who are most in need. More than anything, family support must seek to identify and encourage the strengths and problem-solving abilities of all families and foster confidence in their ability to overcome adversity.

The findings of this research indicate that earlier occurrences of homelessness during childhood pose a significant risk of subsequent homelessness during later life. This finding points to the fundamental importance of ongoing support for families who have experienced homelessness, particularly in relation to issues around early home-leaving and informal care arrangements, patterns which tend to precede young people's entry to the 'official' network of homeless youth.

### Engaging Young People

This study's findings suggest that young people frequently rely on peer and family networks and 'word of mouth' for information about available services. It is also significant that many of the study's young people conveyed little or no sense of entitlement to help and assistance at times when they felt they were 'in trouble' or having difficulties in their own homes. Children and young people need to know more about services and they also need to feel that seeking help is a positive step toward resolving home-based difficulties.



## Recommendation 1

**School and youth services are settings where work on raising awareness can potentially be achieved. Schools in local areas where there is a known high risk of youth homelessness should be identified and engaged with. A prevention package should be designed and delivered to these schools, in collaboration with teachers. This awareness raising process should be youth-friendly.**

## Recommendation 2

**The Child and Family Agency (Tusla) should establish a Working Group to:**

- **Prepare a training pack for family support services to support them in identifying and recognising the early warning signs of young people ‘at risk’ of homelessness. This pack should also identify processes to enable family support services to respond to the needs of ‘at risk’ young people.**
- **Develop a communications strategy which sets out a plan to raise awareness among young people of available services and their rights/entitlements. This awareness campaign should involve a range of communication approaches (such as the use of social media, youth cafés etc.).**

## Early Intervention

While the aim of preventing youth homelessness is clear in Irish youth homelessness policy, the language and concept of early intervention is far less visible. Early intervention involves providing assistance to young people who are obviously ‘at risk’ or who are in the early stages of homelessness (McKenzie and Chamberlain, 2003). Young people who live on the streets or in hostels are just one segment of the homeless youth population and there are many more who alternate between unstable living situations (the homes of family members, friends and so on). This study’s analysis of young people’s early trajectories into homelessness indicates that a very considerable number lived in situations of ‘hidden’ homelessness, often for considerable periods, prior to making initial contact with homeless services. Their reports

also suggest that at least some young people (and their parents) may have been motivated to resolve their difficulties at this juncture. This finding strongly suggests that a substantial number of young people could be prevented from entering the homeless service system through earlier intervention to resolve problems within their families.

## Parent and Young Person Mediation Services

This research has identified family conflict and arguments with parents or carers as key factors leading to a pattern of young people moving ‘in and out’ of home and, ultimately, to their becoming homeless. In the immediate aftermath of a family argument, it is understandable that young people may think that the breakdown is permanent. Where there has been physical, emotional or sexual abuse a return home is unlikely to be a suitable option. However, for others who leave home after a family argument, it is often feasible to seek to resolve these underlying problems. Parent and young person family mediation provides a good mechanism for the exploration of relationship difficulties. Young people may perceive mediation to be less threatening than individual counselling, as the focus is on the family as a unit and not on them personally.

## Information, Advice and Guidance for Parents

The study’s findings indicate that the parents of participating young people frequently felt isolated in their efforts to deal with challenging issues—including mental health problems, substance use and/or anti-social behaviour—that appeared to become more marked as their children transitioned from early to late adolescence.

Very often, parents were reluctant to disclose problems because they feared getting their children into ‘trouble’ or being taken into care.

Many parents in this study did not understand, or had no access to information on, the homeless service system. Information on the range of services and supports available to ‘out of home’ or homeless young people needs to be more accessible to parents (see also later recommendations on Supporting the Family Relationships of Homeless Young People). It should not be assumed that parents are not in contact with their children, or that young people have limited or no contact with family members.

### Recommendation 3

**The Child and Family Agency should fund, on a pilot basis, a Parent and Young Person Mediation Service to support families. This model of mediation work could be provided by a family resource centre.**

- › **Parent and young person mediation should consider the involvement of extended family members where appropriate, as many young people who are ‘at risk’ of homelessness appear to maintain relationships with grandparents, aunts, uncles, and others in their extended families.**
- › **Where possible, fathers need to be included in family work. Likewise, young fathers, such as a number in this study, need to be supported and encouraged to maintain contact with their child(ren).**

### Recommendation 4

**The Child and Family Agency should develop a handbook for parents on the homeless service system and on the rights and entitlements of ‘out of home’ young people.**

### Recommendation 5

**Homeless services should ensure that staff engage and work with family members with the consent of, and on a basis deemed appropriate by, young people. Services also need to be aware that young people’s perspectives on family may change over time, which means that family reconnection and/or reconciliation is a *process* for many.**

## Crisis Intervention

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Where preventive measures and early intervention initiatives fail, there will be a need for emergency or crisis intervention. Crisis intervention services are also required for young people who suddenly or unexpectedly find themselves out of home. There is clearly a need for continued investment in crisis/emergency accommodation. However, our findings

suggest that consideration needs to be given to community-based services and interventions in particular. While Garda stations are visible in local areas and remain open and accessible for longer than most community-based services, their use as the venue of first contact for ‘out of home’ children and young people is problematic and requires a policy change (as recommended on numerous occasions over the past decade or more).

### Community-based Services and Interventions

It is rarely in the interest of young people ‘at risk’ of homelessness to leave their home neighbourhoods. However, this study’s findings indicate that the vast majority of young people commuted to city-centres to avail of services, a move which often served to weaken their existing social and family ties. Where possible, young people need to consider services located within their local communities as a first option. As it currently stands, service delivery in the form of city-centre-based emergency and short-term hostel accommodation runs the risk of prolonging the duration of young people’s homelessness (often, perhaps ironically, because of their reluctance to access ‘homeless’ services).

### Recommendation 6

**While continued investment in city-centre based service provision is required, the development of local emergency and long-term accommodation for young people aged 18–26 years requires specific attention by local authorities in their future homeless action plans.**

### Recommendation 7

**Emergency accommodation for young people under the age of 18 years must be used for the purpose for which it is intended—as an entry point for young people in crisis—and should not become an interim or long-term response. In keeping with existing policy, young people must be transferred to an appropriate accommodation or care setting within two weeks and also need to be consulted and informed of new developments in relation to future placement possibilities.**

## Aftercare Provision

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Despite recent improvements in aftercare provision, many young people currently leaving care in Ireland do not receive the ongoing supports required to make a successful transition to independent living. Furthermore, those young people who are accommodated under Section 5 of the *Child Care Act, 1991* do not have a legal entitlement to an aftercare service. While the Section 5 Policy, which came into effect in 2012, stipulates that this group should receive “on-going support”, this does not include eligibility for a range of other services, including residential aftercare or financial support packages, nor does it include the allocation of an aftercare worker. This relatively small cohort includes young people with some of the highest needs among those ‘looked after’ by the State.

Those young people who reside in Crisis Intervention residential services and who are on full or voluntary Care Orders are entitled to an aftercare service if they have been in care for 12 consecutive months. However, these young people typically have complex needs, and many will require residential aftercare provision where they can be supported to make the transition to independent living.

### Recommendation 8

**All young people who are accommodated under Section 5 of the *Child Care Act, 1991*, should be entitled to a full aftercare service as outlined in the National Aftercare Policy (HSE, 2012).**

### Recommendation 9

**Currently, the range of residential aftercare placement options is extremely limited and this situation requires urgent attention. The Child and Family Agency should pursue a policy of making an additional and wider range of residential aftercare placement options available.**

## Education and Training

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Full-time participation in education and training is critical to ensuring that young people are equipped for a successful transition to secure work and independence. Successful entry to what has become an extremely competitive labour market is strongly dependent on the acquisition of the appropriate mix of academic credentials, training and employability skills (Department of Training and Workforce Development, 2013). Indeed, this study’s young people recognised and strongly emphasised the importance of education and training, with several depicting education as critical to finding a ‘way out’ of homelessness. However, a large number articulated a sense of dissatisfaction with existing training courses. This finding points to a need for Intreo<sup>1</sup> to review the range and suitability of current educational programmes targeting marginalised youth.

### Recommendation 10

**Homeless or ‘out of home’ young people who are participating in education/training and living in services targeting ‘out of home’ or homeless youth need the requisite income support to ensure they have the financial security to complete their education/training and engage in all aspects of society.**

### Recommendation 11

**All young people’s aftercare plans should continue to include education and training pathways that are adequately resourced.**

## Supporting the Family Relationships of Homeless Young People

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This study has documented the positive role of family contact in the lives of young people who are living out of home, and has also highlighted the value attached by young people and their family members to maintaining connections and re-building relationships. In part, because fractured family relationships and

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<sup>1</sup> Intreo is a new service from the Department of Social Protection and is the single point of contact for all employment and income supports.

family environments characterised by conflict are factors known to precipitate homelessness, work with families is frequently neglected or not prioritised by those organisations charged with meeting the needs of 'out of home' young people.

### **Recommendation 12**

**Work with the families of young people who are homeless needs to be given greater priority within the homeless service sector, with a particular emphasis on collaborative approaches to working with 'out of home' young people and their family members.**

### **Recommendation 13**

**Accommodation services (whether hostels, STAs, residential care or aftercare services) should develop mechanisms—as well as safe spaces—that permit and encourage visits by the family members and children (in the case of young parents) of residents. The provision of such spaces should be considered in the development of the National Quality Standards Framework for Homeless Services in Ireland.**

## **Housing and Housing Supports for Young People**

Young people who experience homelessness are not a homogeneous group: they enter services with a diverse range of experiences and from home circumstances that vary widely. It follows that they have different needs in terms of housing and other supports, and these needs must be assessed at the earliest possible juncture. Returning home may be an option for some but not for all and, for the latter group, the provision of age and 'stage'-appropriate housing options is essential.

### **Accommodation for Young People aged 18–26 Years**

The findings of this study indicate that young people who are facing the prospect of moving out of services targeting under-18s experience extreme anxiety about their future and, for a majority, the transition to adult services constituted a crisis point.

The risks associated with the transition from child welfare to adult homeless services are very apparent in this research and have also been highlighted in earlier Irish studies.

### **Housing and In-Housing Support**

The need to get young people into housing with appropriate supports at the earliest possible juncture must be seen as paramount. This means that a range of models of accommodation and support for young people will be required in order to respond appropriately to young people's differing developmental stages and individual needs. Housing First approaches (that is, immediate routes of access to housing with no housing readiness requirements) need to be viewed as one of a number of potential solutions for homeless or 'out of home' young people. Crucially, there is a need to provide a range of supports *in* housing to those who move quickly to independent housing, and often for extended periods.

### **Supporting the Transition to Independent Living**

The findings of this research suggest that a considerable number of young people, particularly those who have experienced traumatic life events and/or are struggling with substance use and mental health issues, may need an interim model of housing that provides a supportive environment, as well as a range of specific supports that aim to maximise the prospect of a successful transition to independence. Importantly, models of housing that aim to support the transition to independence should cater for small numbers of young people in any one setting; they must also be time-lined, support a clear pathway to independence, and provide the requisite supports at the point when young people move to independent living situations.

Irrespective of their personal circumstances and past experiences, all young people who experience homelessness are likely to need some level of preparation *prior to* moving to independent living situations. They will also need support *following* this transition and this needs to include both housing (e.g. advice on dealing with landlords, help in the event of problems arising etc.) and personal (e.g. encouragement, therapeutic intervention etc.) supports.



## **Specialist Services**

This study's young people reported a range of pressing issues beyond those associated with the absence of a secure home – including substance use and mental health problems – that are likely to pose risks to their future and their ability to secure and sustain housing. Young people need to be supported to engage with mainstream drug/alcohol treatment and/or harm reduction services as appropriate, both prior and subsequent to moving to independent living situations.

### **Recommendation 14**

**An immediate move to independent housing, with no housing readiness requirements, should be seen as a viable option for some young people. Equally, however, the needs of many of these young people are likely to be multi-faceted and will invariably extend beyond the need for accommodation alone; most will also need skills training, drug/alcohol treatment, as well as preparation and support both prior and subsequent to the move to independent living situations. Support *in* housing must be provided, and the nature and duration of this support needs to be ascertained in consultation with young people.**

### **Recommendation 15**

**Interim models of housing in the form of supported accommodation may be the most appropriate option for young people who have high and complex needs and who need a supportive environment to enable them to develop the skills and confidence to live**

**independently. Equally, the period spent in such accommodation needs to be time-lined and young people's stays in these setting should not be prolonged. The planning of appropriate move-on options needs to be initiated early and in consultation with young people.**

### **Recommendation 16**

**Young mothers need specialised support following the move to independent living situations, particularly in relation to parenting, post-natal depression and domestic violence, in some cases. This support should be provided by mainstream services, such as family resource centres.**

### **Recommendation 17**

**Young people who are out of home and on the reduced social welfare rate should have access to an adequate level of income support. This could, for example, be linked to an education plan and their engagement in education or training.**

### **Recommendation 18**

**The transition from Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) to Adult Mental Health Services is problematic and is also a juncture when young people may discontinue treatment. More fluid systems are required to ensure a less abrupt transition to mainstream adult mental health services and to ensure the continuity of treatment in the case of vulnerable young people, in particular.**

# Concluding Remarks

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The main goal of this research was to enhance understanding of the social problem we call 'youth homelessness'. The study's biographical approach has permitted a detailed exploration of the events and circumstances leading to young people's homelessness, as well as their experiences from the point of first leaving home. Although the category of youth homelessness is clearly marked by diversity, what united the young people in this study was their restricted access to stable housing and their lack of experience of independent living. All also invariably referred to difficult and sometimes traumatic

life experiences, dislocation, relocation(s), and fragmentation and loss because of the instability of their housing. Youth homelessness is distinct from adult homelessness, both in terms of its causes and consequences, and it follows that the services, strategies, and interventions aimed at resolving the problem of youth homelessness must be distinct from the adult sector. Services and interventions need to be age and 'stage' appropriate, and simultaneously recognise that a speedy move to stable housing is paramount if ongoing cycles of housing instability are to be prevented.





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