

Abridged Report

Young Families in the Homeless Crisis: Challenges and Solutions

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Study Vignette

Abbey is a 20 year-old woman from the Dublin area, who grew up in social housing with her mother and four siblings. She became pregnant shortly after entering college and she decided it was necessary to put her education on pause for a few years while she raised her daughter, who is now 1-year-old. Abbey continued to reside dependently in her family home until her relationship with her mother became strained – there were constant arguments and parenting conflicts, and the house was considered overcrowded. After being unsuccessful in her attempts to secure a home for her and her daughter through the Housing Assistant Payment (HAP), Abbey felt her only option was to present as homeless as living conditions became unbearable. The welfare of her daughter was a key reason for leaving her family home. Abbey now resides in family emergency accommodation. She has since made numerous attempts to secure a home through HAP, but was met with what were described as impossible odds at viewings with competition from more ‘desirable’ tenants. Trying to secure housing while being a first-time mother was described by Abbey as very challenging as she attempts to give her daughter a positive and stable upbringing in the context of significant uncertainty surrounding her future housing options.

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The views expressed in this research report are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent the views of the funders Focus Ireland and Human Dignity Foundation.

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Contents

| | |
|--|-----------|
| Preface | 1 |
| Acknowledgements | 2 |
| Introduction | 3 |
| Methodology | 4 |
| Key Findings – Young Families Experiencing Homelessness | 7 |
| Key Findings – Stakeholder Perspectives | 13 |
| Conclusions and Recommendations | 18 |

Preface

The purpose of this study is to understand the housing and support needs of young parents (aged 18–24 years) whose first step away from their home of origin leads to them and their children entering homelessness and being accommodated in emergency accommodation.

A large majority of the families that become homeless in the current crisis have previously lived in the private sector before losing their home. These families face particular problems in maintaining their family life and protecting their children in the context of living in emergency accommodation.

However, Focus Ireland research and services experiences have consistently identified that for between 20–25% of homeless parents are between the ages of 18–24 years, and 9% of these families' first experience of living outside their own family of origin is in emergency homeless accommodation.¹ These families typically report family conflict together with overcrowding before leaving the family home, and in the context of the current housing crisis, they are unable to secure their own housing. These families are likely to have limited experience of living as independent adults, let alone as parents.

In ordinary circumstances, young parents setting up a home on their own for the first time face difficult challenges; parents attempting this transition from temporary emergency accommodation face unique and potentially overwhelming obstacles. Preliminary research² suggests that these young families are likely to remain in emergency accommodation for longer periods than the more established families, and there is concern about the long-term impact homelessness has on them and their children.

The experiences, views and unique needs of this group of young, newly-formed families has, to date, been under-researched and, for this reason, policy and service responses may not be appropriate or sufficient to their needs. This research is a first attempt to listen to the perspective of these parents and it is hoped will contribute to changes in policy and practice so that we can better support these families through homelessness and into independent living.

One of the central themes emerging from the interviews with the young parents is that all their decisions and choices were driven by what they understood to be the long-term needs and well-being of their children. Without exception, every decision they made in relation to their housing – whether to remain in emergency accommodation or to return to a family member or seek private rented accommodation – was informed by the long-term interests of their children. To be effective, responses to the needs of these families must be based on a respect for these decisions and should concentrate on providing them with routes out of homelessness that provide a better and more secure option than is currently available.

¹ Gambi, L., Sheridan, S. and Hoey, D. (2018) Insights into Family Homelessness No. 16: Causes of Family Homelessness in the Dublin Region during 2016 and 2017. Dublin: Focus Ireland.

² Dublin Region Homeless Executive (2018) Report to Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government. Dublin: DRHE. https://www.housing.gov.ie/sites/default/files/publications/files/report_of_drhe_to_department_of_housing_planning_local_government.pdf

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To the stakeholders in professional support roles who participated in interviews, we give thanks for your willingness to support this study and for offering your perspectives and understanding of the subject. The knowledge provided added a depth to this report that was only made possible through your engagement, and for that we are grateful.

To the staff from homelessness services or otherwise who facilitated and organised interviews with young parents, your kindness and patience in assisting the research process were of significant value to us and, thus, we express our gratitude.

Finally, to members of the Focus Ireland Research Advisory Group (sub-committee of the Focus Ireland Board of Directors), we express sincere thanks for your continual support, patience and guidance throughout the research process. It is with your assistance that this report reached its final stages, and we are grateful for your contribution. Separately, we would also like to extend specific thanks to this study's dedicated research steering group who assisted with recruitment and feedback to the draft report.

Specific thanks to this study's dedicated research advisory committee:

- › Catherine Maher (Focus Ireland)
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- › Aidan Waterstone (Tusla)

Focus Ireland

Focus Ireland is one of Ireland's leading housing and homeless organisations working with people who are homeless or at risk of losing their homes across Ireland. The organisation supports anyone who is homeless but has particular expertise in Housing First, youth homelessness and family homelessness. Focus Ireland not only provides services to support people experiencing homelessness but also presents an evidence-based analysis of the dynamics of homelessness and policies to deal with it.

This independent study was commissioned by Focus Ireland as part of its research programme to better understand family homelessness, the effectiveness of the services in place and the experiences of the families themselves.

Introduction

The purpose of this study is to understand the housing and support needs of young adult parents (aged 18–24 years) whose first step away from their home of origin leads to them being accommodated in emergency homeless accommodation. Around 20%–25% of the families becoming homeless in Dublin constitute this youth cohort – 9% of whom are ‘new family formations’ coming from the family home, with the remainder having some period of established family life, usually in the private rented sector, before becoming homeless. This group of young families coming straight from the family home and experiencing homelessness has, to date, been under-researched and, for this reason, policy and service responses may not be appropriate or sufficient to their needs.

The research was conducted throughout the first half of 2018. Young parents and key stakeholders were interviewed with the broad objective of understanding their experiences of homeless services and to examine the potential barriers they face in exiting homelessness. The specific research aims which guided this study included:

- › To understand the pathways into homelessness for young adult parents.
- › To provide an insight into how these young parents contact, and interact with, statutory housing and homeless services.
- › To collate the perceptions of both the young parents themselves and those working in front-line services with respect to this interaction.
- › To investigate the impact of homelessness on the families with respect to family well-being, parenting skills, and how current policies influence these outcomes.
- › To explore whether young people face particular barriers in exiting homelessness and to capture their perceived housing options in this regard.

Homelessness in Ireland

The total number of people presenting as homeless in Ireland has increased rapidly over the past number of years, with families and children making up an increasing proportion of the number. In August 2018, 9,527 people were residing in emergency accommodation across the country (Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government, 2018), including 5,834 adults and 3,693 children. 1,698 families were officially recorded as homeless in August of 2018 and 1,307 (77%) of these families were located within the Dublin area. Furthermore, single-parent families make up a disproportionate number of homeless families, with 1,046 single-parent families experiencing homelessness in Ireland at the end of August 2018. A recent Dublin Region Homeless Executive analysis reported that 24% and 23% of families entering emergency accommodation during 2016 and 2017, respectively, were aged between 18 and 24 years (Dublin Region Homeless Executive, 2018).

Methodology

A qualitative methodological approach was adopted in this study to explore young participants' own perspectives on their housing and homeless situation. The research team conducted semi-structured interviews with a sample of 18 participants aged between 18 and 24 years (inclusive), all of whom were living in emergency accommodation with their children.³ Additionally, semi-structured interviews were carried out with seven professionals via telephone, which included those working in front-line support services and local authority staff. Data collection took place between February and July 2018.

Family Interviews

The 18 family participants were identified through purposive and snowball sampling with the support of Focus Ireland Homeless Action Team service staff. The interview schedule centred on the following:

- › Pathways into homelessness;
- › Housing history;
- › Parenting in the context of homelessness;
- › Experience in current accommodation and of services;
- › Housing options for young families;
- › How families feel they could be best supported.

Stakeholder Interviews

Semi-structured interviews were carried out with seven professionals (statutory and non-statutory) via telephone, including those working in front-line support services and local authority staff. The 7 stakeholders who participated included:

- › 3 support staff of a homelessness NGO
- › 2 local authority staff
- › 2 staff members of NGOs providing support to this cohort beyond housing issues.

³ Ethical approval was granted from the School of Applied Psychology, University College Cork, and high ethical standards were maintained at all times, in line with Focus Ireland Research Ethical Guidelines. Families were given a €50 voucher as a gift of gratitude following participation and, in line with research ethical guidelines, this was unknown to the participants in advance of participation.

The aim of the stakeholder interviews was to capture their experiences of catering to the housing and support needs of young parents experiencing homelessness. Interviews were carried out by telephone and were on average 15 to 25 minutes in length. Discussions with stakeholders focused on the following:

- The nature of their role and their interactions or experiences with young families.
- Their understanding of the pathways into homelessness for young families.
- Suggestions of the best housing options for the cohort.
- Service delivery challenges and opportunities.

The analysis stage of the research process took place between June and July 2018. Recordings of all interviews were transcribed, coded and thematically analysed. Themes from both groups were then combined and compared to form an overarching report, inclusive of both groups.

Demographic Profile of Participants

The study was primarily focused on Dublin where families in homelessness are in greater numbers. Of the family participants, 15 of the families were living in Dublin and 3 in Cork city, while 6 of the stakeholders were based in Dublin and 1 in Limerick. Fifteen of the family respondents were female and three were male. Across all 18 family participants, there were 23 children.

The youngest family participants were 20 years of age, while the majority were towards the top of the age bracket at 24 years, as shown in Table 1.

| Age in Years | Number of Family Participants |
|--------------|-------------------------------|
| 20 | 3 |
| 21 | 1 |
| 22 | 3 |
| 23 | 3 |
| 24 | 8 |

Table 1: Age of participants

Sixteen of the eighteen participants were Irish nationals. Two were migrant families; one participant was born outside the EU, and one was from within the EU (who identified as Roma).

None of the participants was enrolled in full-time education at the time of interview, though one participant stated that she attends a part-time course twice a week while her children are in school. Six of the participants reported interrupted education pathways as adults. Reasons for inability to remain in education were related to childcare considerations, being homeless, or a combination of both. Some parents intend to return to education or training after they secure housing for their family.

Housing History

The majority of participants became homeless directly from their family of origin. In terms of tenure of their last stable accommodation, Table 2 shows how the majority of participants (n=12) came from a family of origin who lived in local authority housing. One participant grew up in a privately owned home with their family, while another participant grew up in rented accommodation.

While the majority of participants reported stable housing histories in their family home, with little or no movement, four participants reported a more precarious housing history growing up. As outlined in Table 2, two participants spent most of their childhood in State care (both were living with family in social housing before entering the care system) and reported considerable transience during their time in care. Another participant reported moving between the homes of relatives throughout much of his childhood and one reported a nomadic housing history growing up with their family.

| Type of Housing (family of origin) | Number of participants |
|--|------------------------|
| Local authority housing | 12 |
| Foster care | 2 |
| Private rented | 1 |
| Private owned | 1 |
| Hidden homelessness (staying with relatives) | 1 |
| Nomadic | 1 |

Table 2: Family home of origin accommodation types

Current Accommodation

A total of 10 (56%) families were residing in hotel accommodation at the time of interview (2 of whom were in Cork, while the rest were in Dublin), while 7 (39%) were residing in B&B accommodation (all of whom were Dublin). One family was residing in a family emergency accommodation facility in Cork. The duration of time spent in emergency accommodation was not captured by the researchers.

Key Findings – Young Families Experiencing Homelessness

Pathways into Homeless – The Family Home

Some participants reported being forced to leave the family home, while others made the decision to do so, with the welfare of their child(ren) as the central motive. While some families transitioned directly from the family home straight into emergency accommodation, many experienced forms of ‘hidden homelessness’ (i.e. sofa-surfing or staying with relatives) prior to presenting as homeless with their local authority.

There was a common theme that concern for their child’s well-being, both current and long-term, was central to the ultimate decision to leave the family home. Even where the experience of emergency accommodation was very negative, the parents saw this as preferable to the other options that appeared open to them.

Reaching a ‘Tipping Point’

Homelessness often occurred for families following what can be referred to as a ‘tipping point’ within their family home. According to the participants, the challenging nature of an overcrowded, multi-generational home could make for a chaotic family dynamic, wherein young children required continual childcare and where parents and grandparents were deprived of privacy. Several family members were frequently sharing bedrooms and this could be challenging according to the varying needs and lifestyles of family members.

‘There was five of us in the house, in a three-bedroom house, like. I was sharing a room with me sister, like, and, like, she was the typical eighteen/nineteen-year-old. She was at the time, an’ all, out partying and drinking or whatever like ... She’d no kind of respect for [child] like.’ Patricia, 24

In the context of these strained family dynamics, an event could occur which was a ‘tipping point’, which made the situation entirely untenable. This represented the culmination of overlapping factors and was ultimately triggered by a particular event, relationship breakdown, or personal crisis.

‘She’d obviously be stressed out and then I’d be stressed out as well and then I just had so much going on, like, so I just couldn’t live there and then she just said get out, like, you know what I mean, like, we had a big huge fight then and I had to leave.’ Niamh, 24

Care Burden and Tensions within the Family Home

In several cases, the tipping point was the arrival of a second child which resulted in the unsustainable situation in the family home.

‘Yeah, it was stable up until I had me first child ... when she told me I was never allowed have any more kids in her house and then I went on to have another kid.’ Grainne, 24

The defined roles of an established family unit can be challenged with the addition of a young child, and this can affect the relationship between the young parent and grandparents living in the same home, often with limited space. These conflicts can be heightened if there are pre-existing tensions between family members.

‘The relationship between me and me ma was already fragile but the minute I said I was pregnant with [child], it was completely gone, like ... She doesn’t seem to look past me as a daughter, like, I’m disowned now.’ Bea, 24

Not all participants were given the choice to leave the family home, as some were ejected by a parent from the family home.

‘My mom kinda made the decision for me ... ’cos she gave me a letter before, about a year and a half ago, when the baby was 10 months old. She gave me a letter and told me I wasn’t allowed to live there ... she doesn’t want me to be there and she doesn’t want to have the fuss of everything every day with the baby.’ Quinn, 23

Where attempts were made to return to the family home, this resulted in further relationship breakdown and more instability for children.

‘The initiative was [child]. That she wasn’t living in that, like, volatile environment and more of constant arguments, constant, like, she being looked down upon. I’ve been looked down upon, you know.’ Bea, 24

These accounts indicate an opportunity for family mediation to help to resolve conflict to either prevent entry into homelessness or, in cases where this is not feasible or appropriate, to improve and foster natural supports for young people beyond a departure from the family home.

Mental Health, Physical Illness and Substance Misuse in the Family Home

Adversity and parental ill health and/or parental substance misuse were also reported by several participants. There were a number of participants who had experienced sustained and high degrees of adversity and trauma during childhood, with parental mental health issues and/or substance misuse, being separated from a parent and having a parent incarcerated or homeless.

‘My dad’s on hero-, well, he was on heroin. And, emm, I was put into care when I was eight, with my little sister and we were living there for about ten years but she was, like, vicious, so I left ... She was a worse alcoholic than my mother was ... like she drank every night of the week.’ Danielle, 24

This ultimately led some parents to leave the family home so their children weren't in what they considered to be an inappropriate and, in some cases, unsafe environment.

'It wasn't stable for me daughter and wife, and eventually ended up having to go homeless over it ... When I lost me job and I was getting abuse over it and he was throwing us out, I decided that, we, we had en-, had enough so we signed onto homeless.' John, 22

'Yeah, me ma started suffering with depression and she started taking it out on us and the kids.' Elaine, 22

Pathways into Homelessness – Navigating the Housing Market

A central issue for these young parents in emergency accommodation was the challenge associated with the housing market and barriers to accessing and sustaining affordable housing. Due to a combination of their young age, childcare demands, lack of financial resources, no landlord references and often no work references, these parents face multiple disadvantages in negotiating the private rented sector. Furthermore, their young age meant that they were likely to be placed very low on the social housing local authority waiting list.

Early parenthood had a particular impact on these young people's ability to engage with training or education, which made the young people more likely to have lower financial resources to navigate the housing market. Having a child frequently interrupted education pathways which was further compounded by homelessness or precarious housing situations.

'Yeah, I was thinking of going up for education but I ended up falling pregnant while I was actually in FÁS, like ... it was just so hard.' Abbey, 20

Given the high demand and limited availability of private rented housing, landlords routinely require evidence of a proven track record as a reliable tenant. Young people who were trying to access the private rented sector for the first time had to do so without a proven history of independent living and, in the main, they did not have references from landlords or work references.

'Yeah, you need references, yeah, I don't-, I have ne-, I've never worked. I don't have references, like. Just from, say, the principal in the school or the priest, our local priest, like, just them kinda references.' Gráinne, 24

Indeed, their unstable housing situations impacted on their capacity to secure employment or pursue training or education, which further increased their capacity to exit unstable housing situations. So their marginality in all arenas compounded their difficult situation. Thus, their chances of accessing private rental accommodation – regardless of whether they are fully eligible for rental supports such as Housing Assistant Payment or Rental Supplement – were already compromised when considering their lack of references or rent history.

Parents reported that unsuccessful efforts to secure a rented property often made them feel judged and dejected. This worsened after repeated unsuccessful attempts to secure a home for themselves and their children. Enduring this process exacerbated already low levels of self-esteem.

‘Like, when you’re going into viewings, like, there’s, like, six other people there and, like, you know they’re all walking in, you know, with their briefcases and everything and there’s me with him [child]. Is there even a point of me being here?’ Niamh, 24

The participants detailed unfavourable experiences with landlords and felt that the attitude of many landlords prevented them from securing housing for their family. Many participants reported that they felt that their age and the presence of a child were perceived unfavourably by landlords, and therefore led to them being refused as tenants.

‘He just wanted to know everything, you know. You’re so young and you’ve a child, kind of discriminating against me because of me age, you know, and because I had a child and everything else ... Oh, I don’t want parties ... Like, I might have been young but I’m responsible. I’m not like that.’ Patricia, 24

Participants reported that the number of landlords who decline to accept HAP also made it very challenging to secure private rented accommodation: ‘nobody’s taking it’.

Perceived Housing Options for Young People

Given the extremely limited housing options for these young parents, most longed for local authority or social housing which they believed could offer them and their family a stable and sustainable route out of homelessness. This pursuit of social housing was intimately linked to their inability to access the private rented sector, the fact that they were likely to remain on the local authority waiting list for a long time due to their age,⁴ their precarious housing histories and, importantly, concerns for the welfare of their children. These families are acutely aware of their own marginalisation from the housing market, and fear of returning to homelessness at a later point permeates their reluctance to exit homelessness into the private rented sector.

‘It’s not working. And even ... some of the people that I know that have been in HAP and they just tell ... they stay there for, like, six of seven months then the landlord would just tell them “I want to sell the house” or “You need to move out”. Well, normally they will say they need to sell the house. It’s not secure.’ Lisa. 20

‘I’d take HAP if they told me I won’t be back in this position I’m in again [homelessness].’ John, 22

The young people compared private rented accommodation (including PRS with rental subsidy such as HAP) unfavourably to social housing as they felt they could not access rental accommodation, it was not affordable to them, and it could ultimately result in future experience of homelessness.

⁴ All participants were on local authority housing lists.

'Like, at the same time they're telling ya to go into rent allowance or HAP or whatever and in five years' time all the people that have taken HAP thinking "alright this is grand", they're gonna be back and homeless again in five years. 'Cos ... renting is not a permanent solution.' John, 22

This fear of finding a private rented home, losing the home, and having to start the process again generated high levels of anxiety for these families because of the impact that instability would have on their children.

'There was nothing to guarantee me anything so ... That's what put me off. I don't wanna go into a HAP house for two years or five years, whatever it may be, and be homeless again.' Fiona, 24

Trying to establish a stable family life for the first time at a young age, together with an experience of homelessness, can result in a feeling of precariousness and uncertainty. And for some, residing in family hubs and other emergency accommodation are seen as the only viable options until they secure affordable and appropriate accommodation. This can lead to feelings of dependency in emergency settings and, ultimately, institutionalisation.

Service Interactions

Participants in the study discussed the difficulty of living with uncertainty. Some of the families were frustrated with a lack of information and this had an influence on their perceived housing options.

'What I would like is a timeframe. That would, that'd be a little bit easier, like two years' time or, on average ... Obviously they know, at this stage how long, how many of the bloody numbers, how long the homeless crisis is going on now, they know on average how long I'm gonna be staying. We don't get told anything.' John, 22

'I just want someone that will actually sit down and talk to us and tell us where we're going from here and ... tell us how long we're gonna be here.' Fiona, 24

Keyworker engagement was an important support for many of the families as they felt they had the right information about their options and were supported in their efforts to exit homelessness in a way which was tailored to each family.

'Ah, yeah, yeah, big time, yeah. Like they, we always have key worker meetings, like every second week or so. Good communication. Everyone gets one key worker. She's specific to me. 25 families in this place.' Rona, 23

When key worker support is delayed or interrupted, this can be stressful for a family. There were a number of cases where participants stated that their key worker changed suddenly and without prior notice. This required families to form a new relationship with a different key worker, relay again their family's needs, and start again on developing rapport.

'Yeah, and then all of a sudden it was just changed. Like, we had a new person and nobody told us and they didn't know about our situation.' Tom, 23

However, as described by Quinn below, regardless of keyworker support, the highly constrained and competitive housing market means that, regardless of the right information and support provided, accessing affordable housing is highly problematic.

‘There’s nothing they can really do to be honest unless they find a place or a viewing that they could tell ya about. That’s all they can do.’ Quinn, 23

Summary

The interviews with these young parents highlight a range of pathways into homelessness. The majority suffered housing deprivation in their own family homes, in contexts of significant socio-economic disadvantage and, in a small number of cases, homelessness during childhood. The catalyst for entering homelessness for these young parents was characterised by these underlying disadvantages but they were propelled into homelessness due to a personal crisis within their family home, such as family conflict and overcrowding (and often both). This crisis typically occurred shortly after having a first (or second) child.

While there may be differences in pathways into homelessness, there are similarities in the experiences of navigating the housing system. Due to their age, these parents were likely to be very low on the local authority waiting lists. As a result, they feel that they have no alternative but to seek housing in the competitive private rented market, with the support of HAP. However, access to this sector requires evidence of a track record of proven stable tenancies and appropriate references, which they do not have. Fear of returning to homelessness by taking options which prove to be insecure featured strongly in their accounts. As a result, this sample of young parents largely felt ‘locked out’ of the housing market. They saw social housing as the most attractive option for them because it offered them and their children real security of tenure. Their pursuit of security of tenure came with a cost however, as many of the parents reported that they were willing to undergo significant hardship, by living in emergency accommodation for long periods of time, in the hope of achieving a secure home for their children.

These perceived housing options were embedded in an extremely limited landscape of housing choices for these young parents, a landscape which must be fully understood in order to build policy and service responses which adequately cater to the needs of young parents.

Key Findings – Stakeholder Perspectives

Seven stakeholders took part in interviews. These included:

- › 3 support staff of homelessness NGOs
- › 2 local authority staff
- › 2 staff members of NGOs providing support to this cohort beyond housing issues.

Young Families Entering Homelessness

In common with the family interviewees, the stakeholders identified family conflict as a key precipitating factor for homelessness. Similarly, some stakeholders identified the tension arising over caring for children. One stakeholder in a support service suggested that some very young parents may not have fully matured into adulthood themselves, which adds to the challenges of sharing the care burden of young children in a shared space.

‘The parent in the younger family can sometimes be immature ... Drawing the family lines can be difficult. How much will the grandmother contribute to the care of the grandchild when she must also care for her own?’

Caroline, Support Service (beyond housing)

All stakeholders agreed that young parents were at a distinct disadvantage in securing housing either through social housing or private rented tenure channels. Because social housing allocations are broadly decided on the basis of ‘time on list’, young parents will find themselves very low down on the list which, given the current demand and low output for social housing, is slow moving. Some stakeholders were of the view that many young people underestimate housing list waiting times.

‘Now there is a much higher demand for social housing, and this younger group are now less likely to get a house [than their parent’s generation]. Because most local authorities have moved to giving housing on the list basis ... they are going to be behind the curve in terms of social housing.’

Dee, local authority

Stakeholder participants recognise discrimination towards younger tenants within the private rented market as landlords see them as unattractive tenants, particularly without any landlord references or if landlords are aware that the young family are currently in emergency accommodation.

‘References are a huge block to accessing housing ... Landlords would feel safer letting to a more settled family.’ Eddie, Homeless NGO

In terms of solutions to homelessness among young families, there were some variations in opinion across the stakeholders.

‘There is also far too high of an expectation on the private rented sector to solve all the housing problems ... The private rented sector cannot be expected to fill the gap in social affordable housing.’ Fae, Support Service (beyond housing)

Other stakeholders felt that some of these barriers to private rented accommodation can be partially overcome by helping young parents to upskill to help them to navigate the housing market and to compete for private rented accommodation.

Additionally, stakeholders reported observing the negative long-term impact that residing in an emergency accommodation setting can have on the well-being of young families. In certain cases, the stakeholders identified a need for additional supports to assist some families to exit homelessness, supports that may go beyond housing. Related to this, there was a concern among stakeholders that these needs are not being met after they exit homelessness.

‘When you become a young parent, you do need a significant amount of emotional support. Even when their housing need might be met, there’s a definite need for comprehensive support structures to be put in place for the young parent to ensure they can meet their own needs as well as their child’s needs.’ Fae, Support Service (beyond housing)

The Family Home of Origin

Where it is safe and appropriate, the family home was identified as the ideal housing option for young parents, and some suggested that providing mediation services could help to avoid families entering homelessness accommodation. Even in cases where families do leave the family home, mediation can improve relations or perhaps resolve conflict between the young parent and their family of origin.

‘Going back to family of origin is sometimes the best housing option when the family home is safe.’ Anne, Homeless NGO

Ultimately, though, there comes a time when all young adults outgrow their family home and require homes, as they have their own families to care for.

Private Rented Sector and Housing Assistant Payment (HAP) Scheme

Some stakeholders recognised the benefits of the scheme and suggested it as the most feasible option for families exiting homelessness. Due to the lack of alternative housing, young parents’ options are severely limited, making HAP an important option for young parents after the family home, according to stakeholders.

‘People will have to consider HAP, and people may not want it, but that is the reality. Any service that doesn’t recognise that reality is facilitating the fact that there aren’t other alternative housing models there other than emergency accommodation at the moment.’ Dee, local authority

'If someone tries something and it works out, it can change the views for other people. HAP is probably the best option for them, considering the waiting lists are so long and their limited background in terms of renting.'

Breda, Homeless NGO

However, the barriers for young parents accessing HAP can be very challenging. Indeed, awareness of these barriers can contribute to a better understanding of why some young families are declining HAP – the lack of suitable, affordable housing and the risk of losing that tenancy over time. In this way, the problem can be seen not as these families 'declining' HAP but rather the HAP scheme not adequately catering to the needs of this young cohort.

'The HAP scheme would be perfect for the group, if it worked. The trouble is people can be HAP approved but there is no housing.' Caroline, Support Service (beyond housing)

There were widespread concerns about the long-term effects of residing in homeless accommodation for extended periods of time, which was described as 'very deskilling' by one stakeholder. In this way, some of the stakeholders felt that the lack of housing options available to young families can serve to institutionalise them into congregate emergency living situations.

'Transitional Housing' for Young Families

Several stakeholders recommended some form of what they called 'transitional housing' to be made available for families who have higher support needs, which would include having a key worker working with a family who could perhaps serve as a liaison with a landlord.

'... with a sympathetic landlord. It is something that needs to be implemented as it is so difficult to get housing even with references.' Eddie, Homeless NGO

Even in cases where this housing with supports could be offered on a transitional basis, this could offer a family an opportunity to pay rent which may enable them to access housing in the future.

'Any new housing schemes should incorporate increased supported accommodation.' Caroline, Support Service (beyond housing)

'Transitional housing with supports' is usually associated with a homeless system which regards certain households as not 'housing ready' (i.e. those who are not deemed suitable for independent housing options due to one or more support needs), so that they require a period of 'socialisation' and training before they can enter the mainstream housing market. This approach is at odds with the Housing First approach which informs current policy. These stakeholders indicate a need for low level supports for some families, and greater emphasis on creating a 'set of good references' for others.

Support Required for Young Families

Stakeholders who were interviewed were asked to identify areas of support necessary for these young parents to increase their chances of exiting homelessness and to improve their quality of life.

Advice and Information for Families

There was a perception amongst some stakeholders that the hopes of the young parents are disconnected from the realities of the current housing crisis. These stakeholders argued that key workers have an important role in making families aware of all the relevant information required to navigate their route to stable housing. It was also suggested that families be made aware of their housing rights and be given support with advocacy when required. Stakeholders provided examples of insecurity in the private rented sector which influence the perceptions of young families as to whether it represents a secure option.

‘It is impossible to believe that from all the notices of termination that have been received, that all of those landlords moved in relatives. Many landlords do try to simply get a higher rate.’ Dee, local authority

Tailoring support for families to exit homelessness could help them to negotiate with landlords.

‘A lot of young families don’t have experience of that, they have no experience in dealing with something going wrong with a landlord ... A lot of young families are presenting with worries about landlord issues happening a second time and what it means for them.’ Bernie

Appropriate support must also be given even when families exit the emergency accommodation system, without moving into a new home. Stakeholders reported that some families leave their homeless accommodation to live with friends or relatives after they realise that their housing options are so limited.

‘Often, these young parents leave accommodation to stay with friends and disengage with services, and therefore lose support.’
Caroline, Support Service (beyond housing)

Related to this, families may transition between friends and family before presenting to emergency accommodation. Preventative measures are made more difficult in these cases.

‘If someone presents from a family home, the first instinct would be to try and prevent that happening. Someone might be sent to the family home, or the family might be approved for homeless HAP.’ Dee, local authority

Yet it is considered important for support services to ensure that families maintain their autonomy throughout, so that families do not become overly dependent on the service system at a young age. Related to this, service providers identified a support need for developing life skills and realise the difficulty of the situation that these young families are experiencing.

‘Some younger families can have a sense of entitlement ... At times, they can be quite demanding on staff time and other services. They want someone to support them through a crisis because they may not have the life skills to deal with it.’ Eddie, Homeless NGO

‘There is a lack of structural routine for them. Young people don’t always have the life experience or resources to cope with the challenges.’
Caroline, Support Service (beyond housing)

There are some very strong terms used here by some of the professionals in relation to young people; words such as ‘immature’, ‘sense of entitlement’, ‘demanding’, etc., appeared throughout some of the interview transcripts and reflect a framework of understanding that could be considered problematic.

Summary

There was a strong recognition that young families entering homelessness services from their home of origin are a distinct subgroup of families experiencing homelessness who need specific supports. The same barriers to housing were identified by the stakeholders as had been identified by the parents. Social housing was less available than many of the young families had expected, and some stakeholders considered them to be out of touch with this reality. Similarly, the difficulties young people face in accessing private rented accommodation was also recognised. Notwithstanding the shared awareness of these challenges, there were different views about the role that HAP and the private rented sector could play in supporting young people out of homelessness. Some considered that a range of measures could be taken to boost the take-up of HAP among young parents. Other stakeholders emphasised the practical and prejudicial barriers that make this option inaccessible and insecure for these families and so it should be a priority to help vulnerable young families to access social housing.

Some stakeholders used language which could be described as unsympathetic (‘immature’ and ‘demanding’), suggesting that the development needs of this still maturing cohort may not be fully understood by the system, which may result in less effective supports. The challenges these young parents face in transitioning from child to adult services is similar to those documented in the literature in areas such as medicine, social work and justice. This indicates a need to create a developmentally informed language and practice in working with young parents who are in emergency accommodation.

Conclusions and Recommendations

This research helps us to understand the landscape of choice faced by these young vulnerable parents. Many described a sense of hopelessness as they try to compete in a highly competitive private housing market, and a repeated lack of success in this pursuit can significantly impact on motivation and self-esteem. Thus, some families felt that their only option was to remain in emergency accommodation until such time as a more sustainable solution emerged. This creates the risk of deteriorating physical and mental health for their family, and can possibly result in these young parents becoming institutionalised in emergency accommodation.

Policy responses to this challenge must recognise that what was fundamental to all of the decisions and choices these parents made were the needs and well-being of children. Without exception, every decision they made in relation to their housing – whether to remain in emergency accommodation or to return to a family member or seek private rented accommodation – was informed by a strong view of what was in the long-term interests of their children. To be effective, responses to the needs of these families must be based on a respect for these decisions and should concentrate on providing them with routes out of homelessness that provide a better and more secure option than is currently available.

Recommendations

Overarching recommendations

- **A comprehensive strategy to tackle family homelessness.** The range of unmet needs and the absence of policy responses to the particular problems faced by these young vulnerable families is symptomatic of the absence of any overarching strategy to deal with the escalating crisis of family homelessness. *Rebuilding Ireland* recognises that family homelessness raises different challenges than homelessness among adults, but offers no analysis or policy responses to these challenges (other than the commitment to end the use of commercial hotels by July 2017). Where the complex social, health, housing and educational needs of all homeless families are so neglected in policy terms, it is not surprising that the particular needs of this vulnerable cohort are unmet. A comprehensive and coherent strategy for addressing family homelessness is urgently needed and would provide a context to respond to the specific needs of young parents who are experiencing homelessness having just left the family home of origin.

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- › **A ‘developmentally informed’ approach to working with young parents.** A number of stakeholder interviews discussed the needs of these young parents in terms that were not necessarily conducive to positive service responses. This is symptomatic of the absence of a service model that reflects the complex needs of these young adults, who have the legal rights and responsibilities of adults but may require support as they move into adulthood in very challenging circumstances. We recommend the adoption of a ‘developmentally informed’ approach to support the needs of all homeless young adults. Such an approach would recognise that they are a distinct subgroup with specific needs arising from their age and experience and would provide a tailored policy and practice to meet these needs. This ‘developmentally informed’ approach should be adopted across all sectors (statutory and voluntary).

Preventing homelessness

- › **Establish a family mediation and support service.** It was widely agreed that in many circumstances, remaining in the family home of origin would be the best option for families while they seek a home of their own. Where the young family presents as homeless as a result of family conflict arising from different generations trying to navigate a single family home, skilled family mediation may support those who can stay at home to do so. Successful mediation services for adolescents at risk of homelessness due to family breakdown have recently been developed by Tusla and Focus Ireland; these would provide an effective model for a new service for young parents.
- › **Information and advice.** Many of the young people in this study reported limitations in their knowledge of navigating the housing market. A targeted information campaign directed at young adults who are living at home and at risk of leaving home, highlighting the reality of the system and the preventative supports that exist, may help such families to avoid homelessness. Information-targeting strategies could be developed based on the ‘tipping point’ research finding (i.e. homelessness frequently arises after the birth of a second child). For example, information provided through maternity units, GPs, community nurses, etc.

Homeless services

- › **Provision of sufficient key workers for all families.** The important role of key workers in supporting families during homelessness and out of it emerged strongly from the research. However, over 400 families do not have access to a key worker. It is essential to ensure that all families who are homeless have a key worker, with a case load appropriate to the support needs of the families. Where possible, it would be preferable for a keyworker to remain consistent throughout the homeless to housing journey to facilitate consistent support for parents as they negotiate independent living, perhaps for the first time.
- › **Specific skills and supports.** In line with the ‘developmentally informed’ approach set out above, case management and other staff require upskilling and access to other supports in order to meet the needs of this cohort. Access to physical and mental health services is also of vital importance.

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- › **Retaining the link with the family of origin.** Many providers of emergency homeless accommodation and family hubs have regulations which result in a family's homeless status being reviewed if they return to their family of origin too frequently. While it is important to ensure that public money is not wasted on emergency accommodation that is not being used, this needs to be balanced with recognition of the social and well-being benefits of facilitating and supporting such partial returns to the family of origin and exploring through mediation whether they can become more secure returns.
 - › **Child support workers.** The pressures reported by the young parents are likely to manifest themselves in greater challenges in addressing the health and educational needs of children. As a matter of urgency, all children who are assessed as needing child support workers should have access to this support.
 - › **Preparing families to transition out of homelessness.** Many young families have no track record or experience of living independently. This absence of a track record of maintaining a home and keeping up with rent and other bills presents a significant barrier to families leaving homelessness. Emergency accommodation such as family hubs should have administrative arrangements that facilitate families in being able to demonstrate payment histories (rent, bills, etc.).

Exits from homelessness

- › **Access to social housing.** Given the difficulty that these families experience in accessing private rented accommodation and the vulnerability of some of the families concerned, local authority letting schemes should include clear and effective mechanisms to prioritise housing allocations to families who are assessed by social workers as particularly vulnerable.
- › **Making HAP more attractive.** Given the current housing crisis and the severe shortage of social affordable housing in urban areas, the private rented sector (with HAP) is set to remain the most likely route out of homelessness for many of the families. The review of the barriers (perceived and real) to availing of HAP, promised after the publication of the Homeless Inter-Agency Group Report, should be completed, published and acted on with urgency. Issues that need to be addressed include the problem of excessive 'top-ups', the risk of a return to homelessness through notices of termination and fear of loss of place on the social housing list.
- › **Reducing landlord barriers.** A number of the barriers faced by these families seeking private rented accommodation with HAP arise from the perceived risk they present to landlords. These barriers could be partially overcome through supports to the young parents in presentation and negotiation skills. It could also be reduced through information campaigns targeted at landlords and agents, as well as better implementation of the existing anti-discrimination legislation.

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- **Transitional supports from families moving out of homelessness.** A number of stakeholders recommended exploration of some form of intermediary or transitional process for these young families, in which they could be supported and mentored in non-homeless accommodation for a period while they established the household management skills and track record to maintain an independent tenancy. A specialist strand of the existing SLI scheme and the creation of a group of ‘sympathetic landlords’ might provide such a supportive route.
 - **Accelerate the building and acquisition of social housing.** Many of these families are likely to have income and support needs that suggest that social housing will be their only secure long-term housing option. As such, they will remain vulnerable in private rented or poorly housed with their families of origin until there is a sufficient supply of social housing to accommodate them. While the measures mentioned above play an important role in mitigating the harm that will come to them and their children in the interim, it is always important to reassert the fundamental importance of an adequate social housing supply in sustainable communities as a solution to this problem.



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