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Causes of Family Homelessness in the Dublin Region during the Covid-19 Pandemic (March 2020–August 2021)

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This study builds on previous research conducted by Focus Ireland on the causes of family homelessness. The Focus Ireland's *Insights into Family Homelessness* Series is available at www.focusireland.ie.

Acknowledgements



The authors would like to acknowledge the invaluable support of all Case Managers from the Focus Ireland Homeless Action Team in facilitating this study. Particular thanks to Niamh Lambe and Hester Rodenhuis.

This project would not have been possible without the families who took part in this survey and bravely shared their stories and experiences. Without their courage and honesty this initiative would not have been possible.

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Summary of Key Findings

The study

- This survey is a point-in-time analysis of a small proportion of the families that entered homelessness during the height of the Covid-19 pandemic (March 2020–August 2021). It does not claim to offer a representative insight of all families experiencing homelessness in the Dublin region during that period. While the findings give a valuable insight into the experiences of the families covered by the study, they cannot be generalised to the experiences of all families entering homelessness during this time.
- This study presents the findings from a telephone survey with 14 families with experiences of emergency accommodation during Covid-19 (March 2020–August 2021). The survey comprised open-ended questions on participants housing histories, and experiences of seeking accommodation in the private rented sector.
- Sample size for this study (n=14) is smaller than previous samples in the *Insights into Family Homelessness* series. The number of families presenting as homeless dropped in Ireland during the pandemic and, for a variety of reasons, it proved harder to gain consent to contact and follow up with families for research purposes. Focus Ireland customers may have also moved on quicker from emergency accommodation due to more housing options being made available during the pandemic, and families may have exited homelessness before surveys were initiated.

Demographic profile

- 79% of survey participants were women, while 21% were men.
- 57% were 20–29 years of age.
- 71% identified as single.
- 57% had one child, and the 5–10 age group were the highest number of children at 43%.
- 64% of participants were from Ireland (non-migrant).
- 71% stated that they were unemployed.

Housing history

- The majority of participants (n=10, 71%) in this survey reported that their last accommodation had been in their parental family home.
- For the 10 participants in this survey whose pathway into homelessness was because of overcrowding in the family home, or a breakdown in the relationship with a family member(s), all of them had children and for 5 (50%) of them they had never lived outside of the family home before.

- Two survey participants reported that their last stable accommodation had been in the private rented sector with their partner, but they had had to leave due to domestic violence and safety concerns.
- 21% (n=3) of the families had a fairly stable housing history prior to entering homelessness. 35% (n=5) had a housing history that was precarious; while 7% (n=1) had what is defined in this research series as a 'chaotic' housing history. The rest of the participants could be categorised as 'locked out' of the housing market and reported particular housing marginality (n=5, 36%).
- The majority of participants (n=10, 71%) had left emergency accommodation at time of survey. The average length of time spent in EA for these families was 3 months. 4 participants were residing in emergency accommodation at time of survey. The average length of time spent in EA for these families was 10 months.
- All 10 participants who had exited emergency accommodation done so into a HAP tenancy in the private rented sector.

Trends identified

- The main cause of homelessness for the families in this survey was overcrowding in the family home, or a breakdown in the relationship with a family member(s).
- Most participants reported a precarious and unstable housing history prior to this experience of homelessness.
- Lone mothers were over-represented in the sample, compared with the overall population. This echoes previous research by Focus Ireland on 2016, 2017 and 2018 data.
- There were negative reports from the majority of participants on the impact of Covid-19 on the services and supports provided in emergency accommodation.
- All participants reported difficulties with trying to obtain accommodation in the private rented sector through HAP.
- Majority of participants had not experienced homelessness before, and this was their first time.

Discussion

- During much of the period covered in this survey, the Government had introduced additional Covid-related protections for households which prevented tenancies being terminated during this period. The number of households presenting as homeless during this period declined very significantly, but even during the period of complete lock-down some families continued to present as homeless.
- Earlier research on trajectories of families entering homelessness identified the termination of private rental tenancies as the most significant route into homelessness. Nevertheless, every study showed a consistent significant proportion of households who had never held a private (or public) tenancy, and entered homelessness from either chaotic housing experiences or due to pressures in their own parental home.
- The findings of this survey, give a valuable insight to the experiences of households who were not protected by the Covid-related protections as they did not have a tenancy to protect.

Introduction

This report is part of a series of research reports entitled *Insights into Family Homelessness* and follows on from telephone surveys conducted by Focus Ireland with a sample of families every quarter during 2016–2019 which culminated in a major study detailing the findings of surveys with 237 families in June 2019¹. This regular reporting identified the root causes of family homelessness and how this can change over time. These reports also capture key demographic profile information on families who are presenting as homeless.

The principle aim of this report is to capture the accommodation trajectories of families who presented as homeless in Dublin during an 18-month period of the Covid-19 pandemic, (March 2020–August 2021). The primary focus of the research is to capture the housing histories of the families before they presented to homeless services and the key factors which impacted on their loss of housing. The analysis also captures demographic information of these families as well as patterns around help-seeking. It is hoped that the generation of data will help to inform policy and service responses to family homelessness in Ireland today.

Focus Ireland was appointed by the Dublin Region Homeless Executive (DRHE) as the Family Homeless Action Team (FHAT) for families across the Dublin region. When a family presents as homeless to their relevant local authority, they are routinely provided emergency accommodation in the form of commercial hotels or B&Bs. They are then referred to Family HAT who contacts the family as soon as possible to set up an initial assessment. More recently, ‘Family Hub’ accommodations have been expanded significantly, drawing in a range of different non-governmental organisations such as Peter McVerry Trust, Crosscare and Respond to provide accommodation and support.

Research on homeless families carried out by Focus Ireland in 2019 found that 68% of families reported that their last stable home had been in the private rented sector, with most of these tenancies ending due to rent affordability issues, landlords selling up, landlords renting property to a family member, and renovation. These reasons are often referred to as ‘no fault’ evictions.

¹ Long, E., Sheridan, S., Gambi, L. & Hoey, D. (2019) *Family Homelessness in Dublin: Causes, Housing Histories and Finding a Home*. Dublin: Focus Ireland.

To prevent people becoming homeless during the COVID-19 pandemic, a range of temporary policies and measures were introduced by the Irish Government in March 2020 to protect those living in the private rented sector. The two major measures that were introduced were the moratorium on evictions and a rent freeze for the private rented sector. While the numbers of homeless families had been on the decline since September 2019, numbers fell further between March 2020–March 2021, reducing dramatically by 39%. By the time the last lockdown in Ireland ended in April 2021, numbers for homeless families were at their lowest since June 2016 at 925. However, while the temporary policy measures did help prevent more families becoming homeless, there was still a smaller group entering homelessness and into emergency accommodation during this time.

Methodology



This survey was qualitative in nature and consisted of 21 questions. While the number of families presenting as homeless during the time this survey was administered decreased, it was important to capture the experiences of those who were experiencing this, and how Covid-19 impacted on emergency accommodation services and the risks associated with shared living spaces.

The survey seeks to capture pathways into homelessness, the demographic profile of respondents, and interactions with services prior to families presenting as homeless. Questions pertaining to the last four accommodations – which formed the main component of the survey – captured change and transition in the respondents' living situations and to (partially) capture the dynamics of their housing history. This section also included duration of time spent in these four accommodations, self-reported reasons for leaving each accommodation, and details around rental supplements. One of the main aims of this survey was to try and understand customers experiences of emergency accommodation during the Covid-19 pandemic (March 2020–August 2021), and questions were asked about this, including the challenges during this time.

There were 14 surveys completed, out of a possible 62 eligible customers, with a response rate of 23%. The eligibility criteria for participants were that they had to have become homeless during an 18-month period of the Covid-19 pandemic (any time between March 2020–August 2021).

Data was inputted and analysed using Microsoft Excel for the graphs and charts. For the longer-form qualitative questions, the data was analysed through coding based on themes and topics that came up time and again by the participants. Quotes in this report are direct quotes from participants and were recorded in note form by the Research Officer and then inputted into Microsoft Forms for analysis.

Ethical considerations

Focus Ireland's Data Protection and Customer Confidentiality policies, as well as Focus Ireland's Ethical Guidelines for Conducting Research, were always adhered to in the completion of this study. The respondents were made aware at the beginning of the call that involvement in the study was entirely voluntary and that they were under no obligation to participate. It was also made clear at the start of the call that they could stop the interview at any time and could skip a question if they didn't want to answer. All details emerging from the research were anonymised and this was also explained to participants.

Verbal consent was obtained from families interested in taking part in this study by the Family HAT team prior to the Research Officer calling them. Consent was also sought at point of call before the survey was administered by the Research Officer.

At the research stage, several families were then not contactable (i.e., phones were always engaged or out of service) or, the families did not answer their phone or return voicemail messages. Other families were not surveyed due to a language barrier problem and informed consent was not possible. There were also some families that chose not to take part at the time of the survey phone call, they were busy, or it was not a good time for them. The Research Officer attempted to call each participant with consent, three times.

At the beginning of the phone call, the Research Officer stated the purpose of the telephone call and what was involved in taking part in the survey. While there were set questions, some participants set the tone for the call and were free to expand on their answers and indeed this proved insightful and provided some rich answers on their experiences and thoughts of homelessness and housing histories. The surveys usually took around 15–20 minutes each, but sometimes calls were longer, and duration depended on the level of detail offered by a participant.

In cases where information was requested by the family in relation to their homelessness or housing situation, the Research Officer made a note of the issue and details and forwarded this information on to the relevant staff on the Family HAT team.

Demographic Profile

All 14 of the participants were adult parents (i.e., over the age of 18 years) and were accompanied by one or more of their children. The majority of participants were women at 79%, compared to men (21%). The majority (71%) had exited homelessness into a HAP tenancy at the time of the survey and for 79% of participants this was their first-time experiencing homelessness. The majority were in their twenties (57%), and 71% identified as single. 57% had one child, and 5–10 years had the highest number of children at 43%. 64% of participants were from Ireland, and 71% stated that they were unemployed.

Living situation at time of survey

At the time of this survey 10 (71%) of the participants had exited homelessness and had moved onto a HAP² tenancy in the private rented sector. 4 (29%) were living in emergency accommodation including 1 person living in a family hub.

Table 1: Breakdown of living situation of survey participants

| Living situation | Number of respondents | Percentage of total |
|------------------------|-----------------------|---------------------|
| Moved into HAP tenancy | 10 | 71% |
| Living in EA | 4 | 29% |
| Total | 14 | 100% |

Time spent in emergency accommodation

All 14 of the families surveyed became homeless during the Covid-19 period (March 2020–August 2021). 2 people became homeless in May 2020, 2 in July 2020, 1 in August 2020, 1 in September 2020, 1 in October 2020, 3 in November 2020, 2 in January 2021, 1 in March 2021 and 1 in May 2021. The moratorium, or ban on evictions, came into effect every time Ireland went into a strict lockdown and a 5-kilometre limit was set for all citizens. The ban on evictions prohibited the ending of rental tenancies on all grounds between March and August 1st, 2020. Evictions were permitted under limited circumstances during the 2nd and 3rd lockdowns, between October 2020–November 2020 and January 2021–April 2021 respectively.

For those that had left emergency accommodation at the time of this survey (August 2021, n=10) the average length of time for living in emergency accommodation was 3 months. All 10 of these participants entered the private rented sector with the support of HAP.

2 HAP (Housing Assistance Payment) is a form of social housing support provided by all local authorities. Under HAP, local authorities can provide housing assistance to households with a long-term housing need.

On average the families still living in emergency accommodation at the time of this survey (August 2021), was 10 months. Out of the four families that were still in some form of temporary emergency accommodation, two of them were larger families, with five or more children, and may explain why they were finding it more difficult to move on.

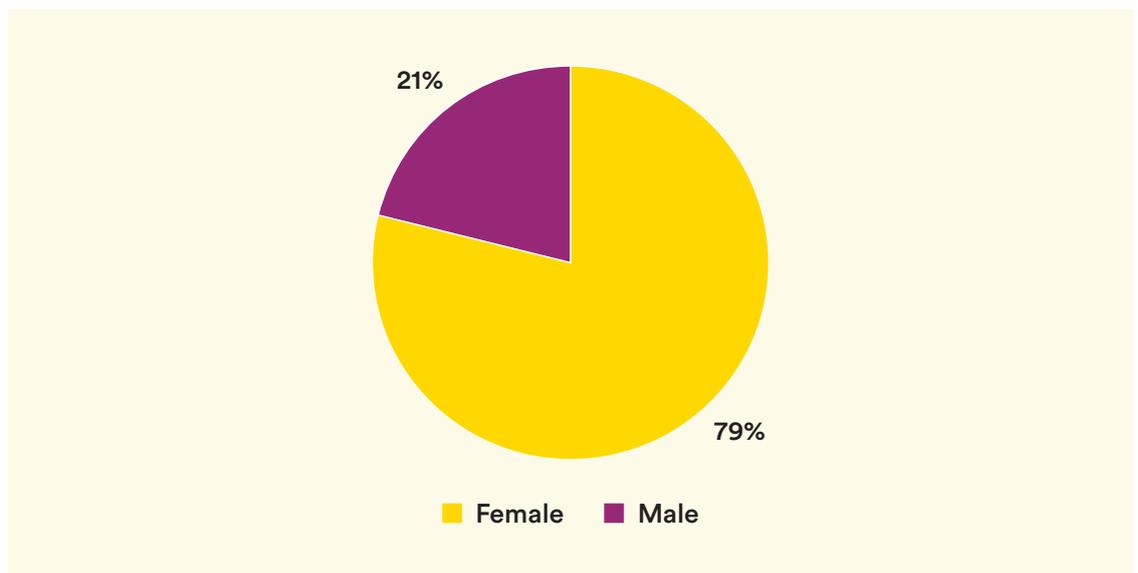
Table 2: Approximate length of time (in months) respondents had resided in emergency accommodation – inclusive of month survey conducted – categorised, by frequencies and percentages (n=14)

| Length of time spent in emergency accommodation | No of participants | Percentage |
|---|--------------------|-------------|
| < 1 month | 4 | 29% |
| 1–6 months | 7 | 50% |
| 7–11 months | 2 | 14% |
| 12–23 months | 1 | 7% |
| Total | 14 | 100% |

Gender

11 (79%) survey participants identified as women, 3 (21%) identified as men.

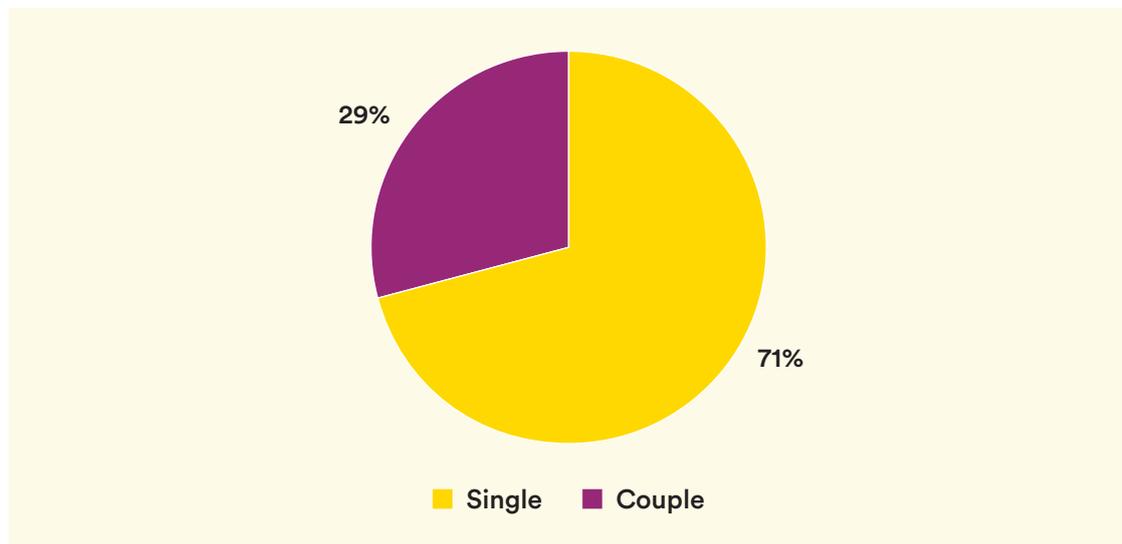
Graph 1: Gender breakdown of participants



Family type

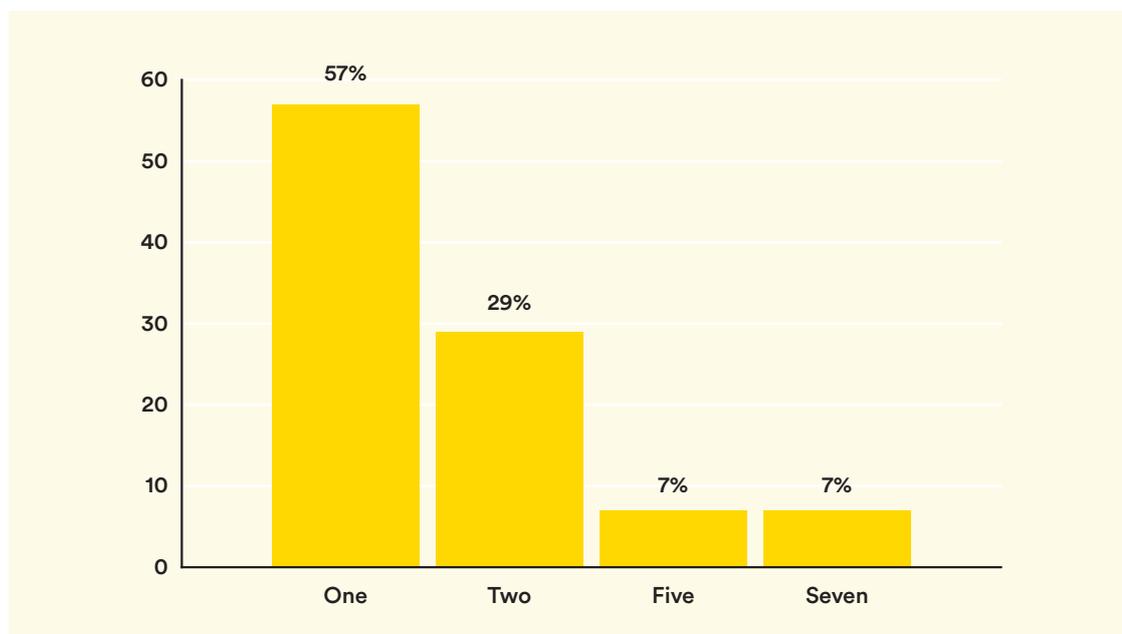
10 (71%) of the participants identified as single and 4 (29%) said they were in a couple. Out of the 10 participants who said they were single 9 (90%) were women and 1 (10%) was a man.

Graph 2: Relationship status of participants



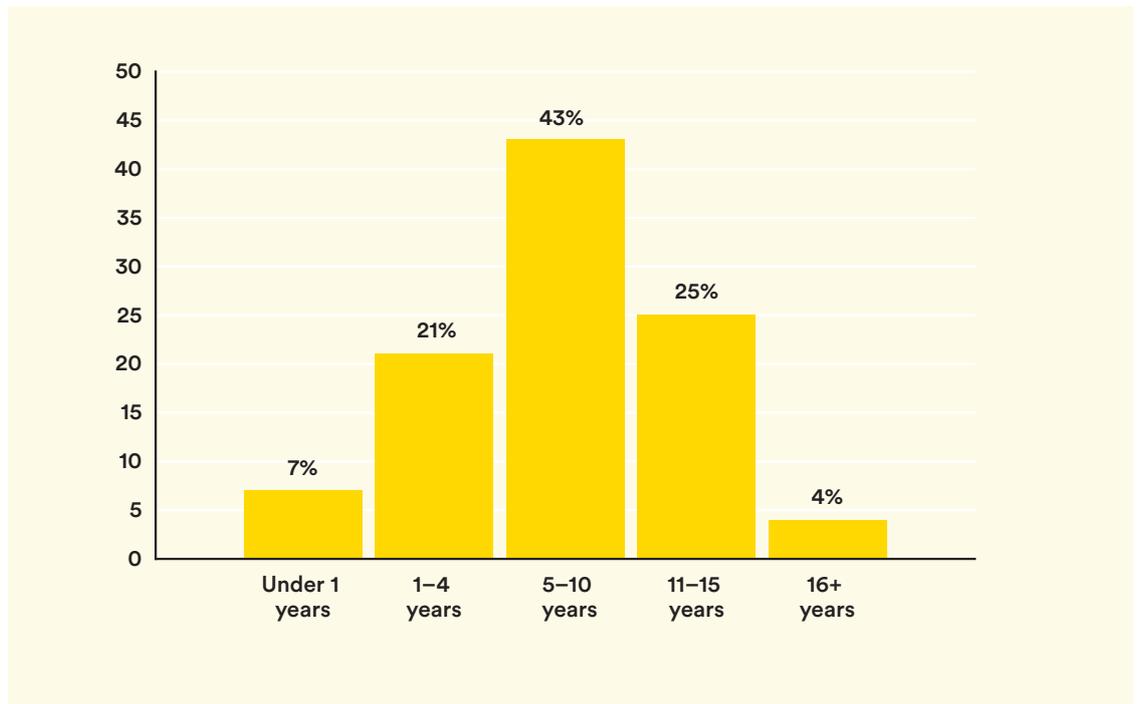
8 (57%) of the participants had one child, 4 (29%) had two children, 1 (7%) had five children, and 1 (7%) had 7 children.

Graph 3: Number of children per participant



Altogether there were 28 children. Out of the 28 children 2 (7%) were under the age of 1 years, 6 (21%) were between the ages of 1–4, 12 (43%) were between the ages of 5–10 years, 7 (25%) were aged 11–15 years, and 1 (4%) was over the age of 16.

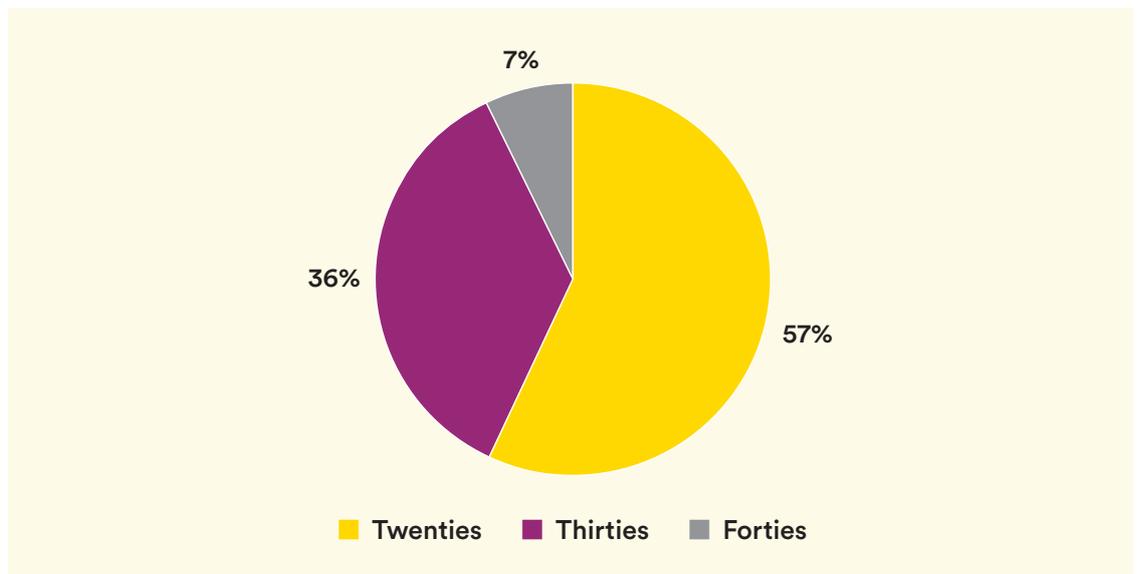
Graph 4: Age range of children



Age

Age range of participants was between 21–40 years old. 8 (57%) were in their twenties, 5 (36%) were in their thirties, and 1 (7%) was in their forties. The average age of this group of participants was 29 years old.

Graph 5: Age range of participants in survey



Country of origin and ethnicity

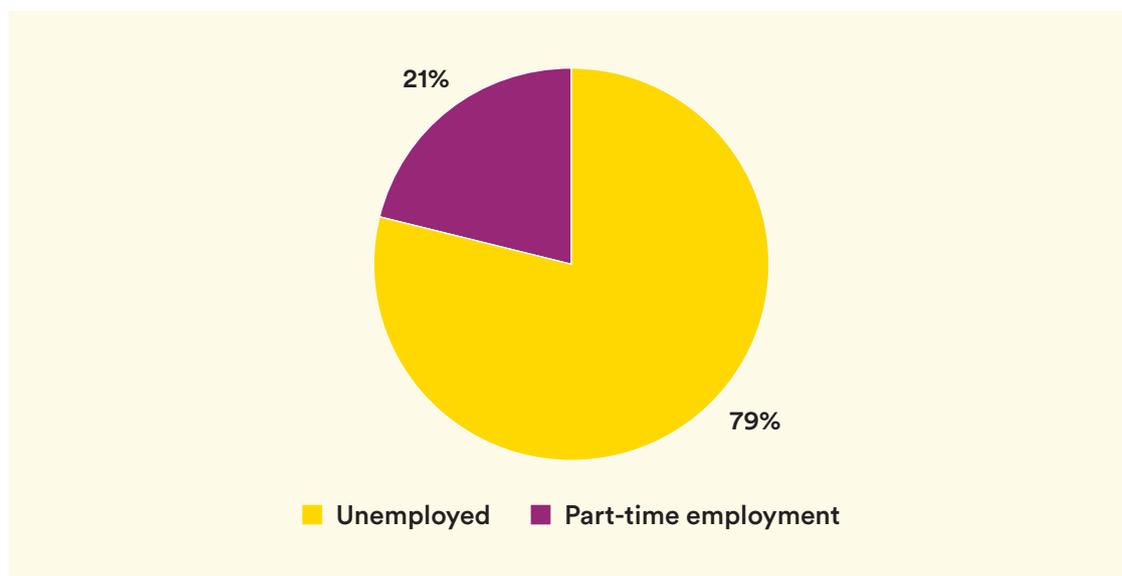
64% of the participants (n=9) were from Ireland, 4 (29%) were from an EU country, and 1 was from Africa. The participant from Africa had been living in Ireland for 17 years.

9 (64%) people identified as White Irish, 4 (29%) identified as Other White background, and 1 (7%) person identified as African.

Employment status

10 (71%) of the participants stated that they were unemployed, 3 (21%) were working part-time and 1 (7%) person stated that while they were not currently working, they considered their status as a full-time parent. All of those that identified as being unemployed in some form at the time of the survey (n=11), were in receipt of Social Welfare payments. 1 participant's income had been affected by Covid-19, but she had received the wage subsidy scheme instead.

Graph 6: Employment status of participants



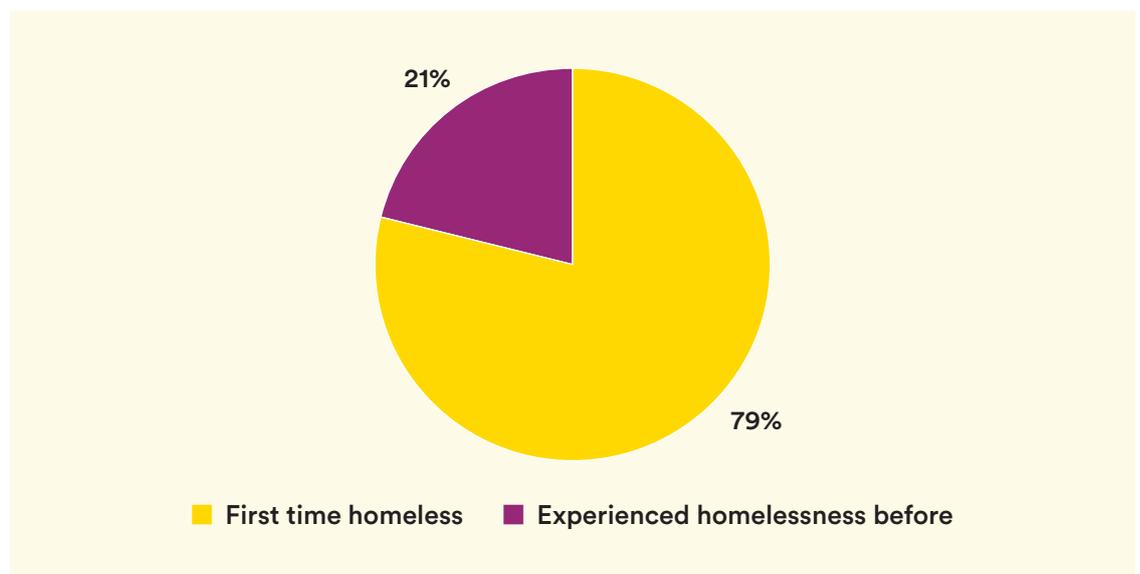
Location of last stable home

Like previous surveys in this series a question was asked about the location of the participant's last stable home. In contrast to other surveys, the Dublin 5 area emerged as the most reported location for a family's last stable accommodation before becoming homeless (n=3). After Dublin 5, Dublin 15 and Dublin 22 were the most reported location for last stable home (n= 2 for each). The rest of the participants had lived in various places across Co. Dublin, including Dublin 7, Dublin 8, Dublin 9, Dublin 11, Dublin 14, D24, and K32.

Past experiences of homelessness

11 (79%) out of the 14 participants reported that this was their first-time experiencing homelessness, while 3 (21%) stated that they had previous experiences of homelessness. This was reflected in some of the more open-ended answers in this survey and gives much better insight into these patterns that some families may experience in their housing history.

Graph 7: Participants' history of homelessness



Reasons for Homelessness



This survey aimed to capture the housing history and reasons for homelessness of families who presented as homeless during March 2020–August 2021. Questions were asked on the last four accommodations prior to families becoming homeless and included details on the duration, tenure, and reasons for leaving. These questions were asked to understand these families' experiences of housing and accommodation as well as possible triggers or events, which may have led to them experiencing homelessness.

Last stable accommodation and triggers to homelessness

The majority of participants (n=10, 71%) in this survey reported that their last accommodation had been in their parental family home. This deviates somewhat from other surveys in this trajectory series, where previous participants reported that their last stable home had been in the private rented sector. However, as will be discussed later in this report many families had experiences of the private rental sector, and indeed many had had to move back into their family home due to being unable to afford rental prices, or not enough available accommodation.

The reason that this group may not have directly experienced homelessness because of eviction from their private rental property may also be testimony to the moratorium on evictions during Covid-19.

Two survey participants reported that their last stable accommodation had been in the private rented sector with their partner, but they had had to leave **due to domestic violence and safety concerns**. These 2 women had to leave their home and enter a refuge due to domestic violence issues with their partners. These two participants both then entered emergency accommodation with Focus Ireland. One person had to leave their private rented accommodation due to a **relationship breakdown with her partner and was unable to afford the cost of renting by herself**.

One other family had their **last stable accommodation in local authority housing** but had to leave the tenancy as there were anti-social issues with their neighbours and they didn't feel safe.

Table 3: Reasons for leaving last stable property

| Reasons cited for leaving last stable property | | No of respondents | Percentage |
|--|---|-------------------|-------------|
| Family/ parental home | Overcrowding | 6 | 43% |
| | Breakdown in family relationship | 4 | 29% |
| Other | Domestic violence | 2 | 14% |
| | Relationship breakdown | 1 | 7% |
| | Surrendered tenancy due to issues with neighbours | 1 | 7% |
| Total | | 14 | 100% |

For the 10 participants in this survey whose pathway into homelessness was because of overcrowding in the family home, or a breakdown in the relationship with a family member(s), all of them had children and for 5 (50%) of them they had never lived outside of the family home before.

4 (40%) of these 10 participants had to move back to their family home after a relationship breakdown with their partner as they had no other option, even if the family home was too small or there was tension with other family members. One of these participants had previously lived for a few years abroad in Europe with her partner and children, but after that relationship broke down, she moved back home to her mother's house in a suburb in Dublin. She had to leave as the house was too small for all of them. These 4 participants had previous experiences of renting privately and had been living in relatively stable accommodation before the relationship breakdowns.

A recurring theme with all the participants pathways into homelessness was relationship breakdown, or conflict of some sort, which led to housing precarity and due to an oversubscribed and expensive rental market, very few options.

Housing trajectories and routes into homelessness

For this group their direct route into homelessness was normally because of a relationship breakdown of some kind, with a family member, partner, or even neighbours. This is not surprising as these families became homeless during Covid-19, and most tenancies in the private rented sector were heavily protected with the moratorium on evictions. However, this does not tell the full story of their housing histories and trajectories, and they are not a homogenous group. There is a lot of complexity and nuance involved in each circumstance and it is important to delve deeper into these narratives. While relationship breakdown is the over-arching theme, there are also sub-categories, which will be discussed in more detail below.

21% (n=3) of the families reported a fairly stable housing history. 35% (n=5) reported that their housing history was somewhat more precarious; while 7% (n=1) had what is categorised as a 'chaotic' housing history. A fourth category developed in a previous *Insights into Family Homelessness* report,³ was also utilised in this data analysis. This category included families who reported being 'locked out' of the housing market and reported particular housing marginality (n=5, 36%). These were broken down into two sub-categories in which 21% (n=3) of the sample recorded were second generation migrant background and were also under the age of 25. While 2 (14%) were from an Irish background but had never lived outside of the family home and moved out due to a relationship breakdown with the family and overcrowding.

Group 1: Stable housing history (n=3, 21% of total)

- First experience of homelessness
- History of lengthy and stable tenancies with the Private Rental Sector (PRS)
- Only one person stayed with family before presenting as homeless
- All 3 reported that they had been unable to enter the PRS as they could not afford it on a single income
- Specific triggers to homelessness:
 - Relationship breakdown with partner
 - Domestic Violence
 - Larger family and lack of housing

Key characteristics of group:

- 2 out of the 3 in this group became homeless due to a relationship breakdown, or domestic violence, while the other person became homeless due to overcrowding in her mother's home
- All 3 families were from a migrant background, 1 of whom had been born outside the EU before coming to Ireland
- 2 out of the 3 had sought help prior to becoming homeless. The other person had to leave her home due to domestic violence and was unsure of who to contact for her situation
- All 3 were lone parent families
- This was the first experience of homelessness for all 3 participants
- All 3 had previous experience of stable long-term accommodation in the Private Rented sector
- 2 families sought help prior to presenting as homeless; 1 person approached their Local Authority as first point of contact, and the other contacted Focus Ireland for advice and support

³ Causes of Family Homelessness in the Dublin Region during 2016 and 2017.

Group 2: Precarious housing history (n=5, 36%)

- Broadly stable housing histories in PRS with some degree of housing instability in the past
- Greater reliance on informal arrangements for longer periods (for years)
- History of moving in and out of family home over the years

Key characteristics of group:

- 2 out of the 5 in this group had experienced homelessness in the past
- 1 person in this group became homeless due to domestic violence, 2 became homeless due to a relationship breakdown and the tenancy had been in their partner's name and 2 people had to leave the family home due to overcrowding, but had also split with their partner before this
- All 5 were lone parents
- 4 out of the 5 families were from an Irish background
- 5 families sought help prior to presenting as homeless; 4 of whom approached their Local Authority as first point of contact, 1 person contacted a homeless organisation in the first instance

Group 3: Unstable chaotic housing history (n=1, 7%)

There was 1 family (7%) who had experienced numerous moves in the last few years and had moved back and forth to their mother's house in between tenancies. This participant had had to leave a previous PRS accommodation as they were unable to afford the rent, the family then moved into emergency accommodation before being offered a local authority tenancy. The family moved from this place back into emergency accommodation as they had to surrender their tenancy as there were anti-social behaviour issues with their neighbours and they didn't feel safe living in that area.

This family was from a white Irish background with 5 children and were living in emergency accommodation at the time of the survey.

Group 4: 'Locked-out' of housing market (n=5, 36%)

- No experience of living independently
- Triggers to homelessness:
 - Having a baby or second baby leading to overcrowding and family conflict
 - Difficulties accessing private rented sector
 - Affordability problems and unable to access any form of housing

There were two age groups for this cohort, those in their 20s (n= 3, 21%), and those in their thirties (n=2, 14%). However, both groups had never lived outside of the family home before and all had children and had to leave due to overcrowding or breakdown in a relationship with their family.

Key characteristics of group:

- 3 out of the 5 families were from an Irish background
- 4 out of the 5 families were lone parents
- This was the first experience of homelessness for all 5 in this group
- 4 families sought help prior to presenting as homeless; and all of them approached their local authority as first point of contact

Help-seeking before becoming homeless

As outlined in the previous section the vast majority (13 out of 14) of participants did contact an outside organisation for advice before they became homeless. For the one person who did not, her pathway into homelessness was a result of domestic violence from her husband. She stated that she first spoke to a friend who gave her the number for a refuge. The Guards were also involved and encouraged this woman to leave her house to protect her children. This was a big step for this participant as she had no immediate family or support around her and had to do this on her own for the safety and wellbeing of her family.

“Didn’t have anybody, had to make a big change to protect my children.”

This is not unusual where an individual becomes homeless because of domestic violence, and they may not seek advice beforehand, and may become ‘hidden homeless’ for some time before getting the support and services they need.

For 10 out of the 13 participants who contacted someone before they became homeless, they stated that it was their local authority they first went to. For the other 3, they contacted a homeless organisation for advice and information on their situation.

Lack of information and the complicated housing application system was cited as a barrier and an area of support need for some of the participants in this survey. They were already dealing with the stressful situation of homelessness as well as being responsible for a family and the confusion was present in their answers.

“can’t say enough (about Focus Ireland), had brilliant key workers. Hit a wall with (name of a County Council in Dublin), as was waiting on documents from my Mam when I was in the B&B. Needed these documents to move on.”

“For me I need help with all the paperwork, filling it in and understanding it.”

“(Name of County Council) could have done more to help. They just pushed me off when I said I had nowhere. They give you the run around, they wanted a letter from my mother to say she’d thrown me out, but she wasn’t talking to me, so it was hard to get. They ask for a lot of letters.”

Experiences in Emergency Accommodation



A question was posed to survey participants about needing a particular service or support while in emergency accommodation. Two of the participants in this survey did not have any feedback in relation to this question and reported that everything was fine for them.

Six other participants also did not feel that there was any particular service or support that was needed while they were in emergency accommodation, however, they did receive timely and appropriate support which seemed to make a positive difference. However, this was not the experience of everyone, and shows the inconsistent nature of supports and services in the homeless sector, particularly for emergency accommodation. The comments below outline some of the experiences of survey participants' time in emergency accommodation.

“Had Social Workers who were a big help.”

“No, was very happy in the emergency accommodation because someone was looking after me. Got me this house. My support worker with Focus Ireland was very kind and helped me with everything.”

“I contacted a girl from (name of housing service), she helped me out a lot with welfare payments, emergency accommodation, because nothing was happening before this. She helped me with my housing application, and when I got a place in the Hub, Focus Ireland got in touch.”

“No, it was really good actually. The key worker was ringing me all the time, got me a LEAP card, helping me to get viewings. Any information I needed she helped me.”

“No, I thought it was good. The Focus Ireland key worker helped to push through my Homeless HAP. I had been on to someone in (name of other homelessness service) who said that I wasn't really homeless because I was sofa surfing and to come back when you're really homeless.”

6 (43%) out of the 14 participants in this survey had negative feedback for this question. Themes that emerged was the unsanitary conditions of some emergency accommodation, lack of support from relevant services, the damaging effect on children and families due to unstable/ unsuitable housing, mental health issues due to the stresses and demands of moving around and living in emergency accommodation. Each theme will be discussed in more detail below.

Unsanitary/unsuitable conditions of emergency accommodation

This issue was mentioned by 2 (14%) out of the 14 participants in this survey, however, the unsuitability of shared spaces in emergency accommodation will be mentioned again in a later question related to Covid-19 and public health measures.

“The hotel was not very clean, and you didn’t want to stay, there was not enough cleaning being done there, and you had to share the showers and bathrooms. Didn’t want to stay and wanted the kids to have their own place.”

“Yeah, when I was there in emergency accommodation, I didn’t like the shared public toilets and showers.”

The quality of the food provided by hotels was also mentioned as an issue by one of the participants, and he was concerned about the health and wellbeing of his family.

“No healthy meals in hotels and emergency accommodation, and no regards for other people’s stuff.”

Lack of support from relevant services

There was a noticeable difference in the responses from the three participants who had received the relevant and timely support for their circumstances, and those who did not receive as reliable support and advice when they needed it. There is a sense of foundering in a complex and stressful situation.

“The situation came so quickly in becoming homeless, about a week. I emailed (name of homeless service), had an appointment the next day, and was offered accommodation after 2 days. The first 2 months weren’t great as I couldn’t reach Focus Ireland. Numbers kept being changed and no one was answering my messages. I didn’t hear back from anyone, until finally I heard from my new case manager. Apart from that I did not hear from anyone from the time I moved in at the end of October until the end of January.”

“When we came back to Ireland it was really a shock to me, everything had completely changed, I didn’t know anything.”

Mental health issues due to unsuitable/unstable housing

Previous research from Focus Ireland⁴ found that a family becoming homeless and entering emergency accommodation can have a detrimental impact on the mental health and wellbeing of the family, and participants in this survey also echoed these findings. While the need for more mental health supports was called out specifically by a participant, there is mention of this issue throughout the survey and while sometimes not overtly mentioning mental health, there is elements of this throughout their answers. This issue also came through more strongly in relation to the question on the impact of Covid-19 on emergency accommodation and services and will also be discussed later.

The participant who talks about the need for mental health supports, spoke about this in terms of the needs of his children and family, and the detrimental impact this can have on the stability of the family.

“Yeah, mental health problems from being stuck in a room, causes families to break up. There’s just constant stress, big ball of stress, does break families apart.”

The needs of their children were to the forefront for participants, and they worried about the repercussions of the constraints of living in emergency accommodation and the upheaval this caused the family.

“It’s like the kids are in prison, sitting in their room all the time, watching TV. In the hostels living out of black bags, the kids have to leave loads of things behind like their bikes and scooters.”

“The kids need someone to talk to, to adjust to this situation. They have a lot of feelings that they might not want to burden me with. They’ve moved around a lot and had a lot of changes. We’ve been looking for a place, but it’s been really difficult.”

“My son was 6, so he knew what was happening. It knocked him back a bit.”

4 Siersbaek, R., Loftus, C., (2020) *Supporting the mental health of children in families that are homeless: a trauma informed approach*. Available at: https://www.focusireland.ie/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/Supporting-the-mental-health-of-children_FINAL.pdf (Accessed 2nd February 2022)

Emergency accommodation and services during Covid-19

4 out of the 14 participants felt that they did not experience challenges in emergency accommodation because of Covid-19. However, the majority 71% (n=10), talked about the difficulties they and their family went through, and the pandemic appeared to exacerbate an already stressful situation.

Some of the participants talked about the even more restrictive nature of living in emergency accommodation during strict lockdowns. Their answers highlight the importance of the need for suitable affordable housing, and while the pandemic is most likely a once in a lifetime event, the repercussions will be felt for some time.

They also expressed feelings of isolation because of these restrictions and the impact on their children in not being able to use communal facilities and trying to keep them entertained in difficult circumstances.

“Yes, it was much more difficult, can’t do anything, can’t go out because of the rules around Covid.”

“The owner of the hotel said that I was only allowed out for 40 minutes a day because that would mean I would be outside of my 5km. I couldn’t visit my sister, or see her and I was very, very lonely and it did get to me a bit.”

“Near the end of it there was a case in the (Family) Hub, and we weren’t allowed out for a week. Other than that, it was good.”

“Yeah, during Covid-19 you weren’t allowed to stay out, the kids’ communal rooms were blocked off, had to be in your own room all the time. Kids had to be kept in the room and couldn’t interact.”

“(we were in a) small hotel, and you were only allowed out for 60 minutes a day. It was quite restrictive and tried to keep my little girl occupied. Nothing too bad though.”

Three of the participants talked about their experiences of using shared facilities in emergency accommodation with other families and the difficulties and safety issues this presented due to Covid-19. These answers highlight the higher health risks that families were exposed to in emergency accommodation through the use of shared facilities. The lack of control with their housing stability was also then compounded by a lack of control in the rules implemented by accommodation providers, unsanitary conditions, and other residents not following public health guidelines.

“Only difficulty is not having my own kitchen. I would like to be in my own kitchen.”

“In the building we had to use a shared kitchen, which had no windows, and only 2 people were allowed in there to cook. It was hard to breathe with the mask on.”

“I had a shared toilet and shower in one of the places. During Covid it wasn't very clean the place I was in.”

This issue of exposure to Covid-19 and the risks associated with emergency accommodation was mentioned by another participant who felt that others in the accommodation were not complying with the public health measures, and it made him, and his family feel uneasy and not safe.

“It was hard for me and the kids. Not suitable where we were, not everyone would wash their hands properly or wear masks. People just come and go.”

Experiences of Looking for Accommodation with HAP

The vast majority of participants in this survey had experience in looking for accommodation with HAP, including successfully obtaining a rental property through HAP.

HAP is the main type of tenancy that an individual will obtain when exiting homelessness, and in this survey those who had exited homelessness (n=10), all of them had entered the private rented sector with support from HAP. Half the participants in this survey (n=7) had a history of renting in the private rented sector, however, as will be discussed below, they struggled to obtain viewings and for all of them who did find a HAP tenancy it was through the support of Focus Ireland.

10 out of the 14 participants were asked how many properties they had applied for with HAP, 1 (10%) said '4–5', 3 (30%) said 'more than 10', 2 (20%) said 'more than 20', 2 (20%) 'more than 50', 1 (10%) 'more than 100', and the last person was unable to recall how many. The conversion rate of applications to HAP viewings was quite low with 5 participants reporting that they attended 1–3 viewings, 1 attended 4–5, 1 said 6–10 and 1 person said they had been offered zero viewings.

Table 4: Number of properties applied for in the private rented sector

| Number of properties applied for in PRS | Number of respondents | Percentage of total |
|---|-----------------------|---------------------|
| 4–5 | 1 | 10% |
| More than 10 | 3 | 30% |
| More than 20 | 2 | 20% |
| More than 50 | 2 | 20% |
| More than 100 | 1 | 10% |
| Unknown | 1 | 10% |
| Total | 10 | 100% |

Participants reported a frustrating and stressful search for HAP properties. There were many disappointments and long waits, with none or very little response from the landlord or agency. Participants were constantly trying to search and contact relevant properties, but rarely, if ever, were they successful.

“It was very hard looking for accommodation with HAP. I had to send emails, but I didn’t hear back from them.”

“I applied to loads of properties, more than 100, and even ones outside Dublin. I was looking for 2 years when I was in my Mam’s.”

Elements of discrimination from landlords against HAP tenants also came through strongly in some of the responses from participants.

“Have got no viewings. When I contact landlords and as soon as they ask me, “do you have kids?”, they don’t get back to me.”

“It was complicated looking for a HAP property because not many landlords or agents would look at you if you were on HAP.”

“Applied for loads, but only heard back from a few of them, as soon as they see HAP, they don’t want you. I viewed one in (area in Dublin) but it was too expensive, and I wasn’t getting enough HAP.”

There was also a sense of honesty and wanting to play fair with landlords, even if this wasn’t always reciprocated towards them.

“I have to tell them I’m on HAP, no point in lying, it starts off on the wrong foot.”

“I wanted to play fair with them and let them know my situation. I am very honest, maybe I should change that. I let them know I’m a single mother with 2 kids, that I’m on HAP, but heard nothing.”

“I don’t want to be dishonest with the landlord, so I tell them how many kids I have.”

Where participants had managed to find rented accommodation with HAP, this was normally with the support of services, showing how complex and resource intensive this process has become for those with children and on a low income.

“When I was looking for HAP properties, they weren’t suitable as they weren’t in the local areas, and it was too far for me. I had a nice girl from Focus Ireland, and she used to help me with every single thing. She used to help me a lot.”

“I was very lucky because my support worker helped me out with finding my current place.”

“I applied for around 35–40 HAP properties, but only got three viewings, one of these was from Focus Ireland.”

“I found it really difficult to find somewhere with HAP, it was only when I got on to Focus Ireland that I got a key worker and got a place. Other than that, no one got back to me, and I only got one viewing. It was okay once I got a key worker.”

Families on low incomes were trying to compete in a private rented property market that is oversubscribed, and their experiences were disheartening and not fruitful, despite every effort to look for and obtain accommodation.

“I had viewings, and sometimes I wouldn’t mention HAP in the application. When I got there, there would be 20–30 other people going to the same viewing as you.”

“I sent a few emails, but no one got back to me. Before this I was working full-time so I could afford rent.”

As mentioned in one of the previous quotes, not only was there a struggle with finding HAP properties and viewings, but there was also the issue of the location of these properties. All the participants had at least one child, and there are implications for having to stay in a particular area. There are schools, their friends, and a lot of parents were already worried about the upheaval caused by becoming homeless and moving so much.

“Would have taken anything to get my myself and my son out of homelessness. Went to 3 viewings, but 2 weren’t suitable, they weren’t in the right area.”

“I wished to stay in (area in Dublin), because my kids are in the school there.”

Another issue that emerged from this question was the amount of paperwork involved and the complexities and stresses that arose because of the HAP system. One participant even mentioned that it was not just tenants that struggled with this system, but landlords as well.

“HAP doesn’t make it easy for landlords either, they want tax certs from landlords.”

“It was okay (getting accommodation with HAP), but it took a while for my Homeless HAP to go through and there was a lot of problems with the forms going through. I ended up in 3–4 months of arrears, but luckily it was an agency, and they knew as they had dealt with HAP before.”

“One person said he never did HAP before, and that he’d be waiting 2–3 weeks for a payment.”

Mistrust of HAP and private rented sector

The experiences of participants with difficulties in obtaining private rented accommodation and the inequality of tenure in PRS more generally, is also reflected in research by Byrne & Sassi on the experiences of tenants in the Irish private rental sector during the pandemic⁵. When participants in this survey were asked why they hadn't looked for accommodation with HAP, or if they had mentioned that they had stopped looking, their answers conveyed a sense of mistrust and reticence in engaging with this system. A lack of security and experiences of a kind of revolving door system of entering homelessness from the private rented sector and into emergency accommodation was also mentioned.

“There’s no security. They should have a 10-year lease guarantee, so that I know I’m here for at least a few years and I won’t be back in a hotel.”

From previous responses participants spoke about how frustrating it was to not hear back about properties they had applied for and being kept waiting in a kind of limbo. There was also a sense of this eating away at their confidence as silence or rejections for their situation rendered them unable to rent a home for their family.

“Only one place texted back to say that I didn’t get the place, but normally you don’t hear back, you’re on a cliff-hanger.”

“My daughter is 19, and she’s been emailing loads of agencies, but getting no response, they won’t call you back.”

“It was very hard looking for accommodation with HAP. I had to send emails, but I didn’t hear back from them.”

For those participants in this study who obtained a HAP tenancy there was a sense of ‘luck’ and being in the right place at the right time in order to be offered private rented sector accommodation.

“I was very lucky because my Support Worker helped me out with finding my current place.”

“The place I ended up getting, the landlord knew my parents’ neighbours as he saw my address.”

5 Byrne, M., & Sassi, J., (2021) *Experiences of ‘home’ in the Irish private rental sector: a qualitative research study of the experience of tenants during the COVID-19 pandemic*. Working Papers 202109, Geary Institute, University College Dublin.

Conclusion

The purpose of this regular telephone survey exercise with families presenting as homeless is to produce a concise and targeted examination of the accommodation trajectories, demographic profile and help-seeking patterns of families experiencing homelessness. This Insight into Family Homelessness series allows Focus Ireland to track the experiences of families who became homeless between 2016–2021. Different trends and patterns emerge year on year, and the similarities in profile of families and their experiences of emergency accommodation and looking for alternative housing is also recorded and analysed.

For this survey the experiences of families in emergency accommodation during an 18-month period of Covid-19 pandemic (March 2020–August 2021), and the reasons for becoming homeless were of particular interest.

While this is a small sample size of homeless families who presented as homeless during this time period (n=14), it nevertheless provided some useful insight into the patterns of family homelessness during this unique period, and the key themes emerging from this survey will be discussed below.

- **The main cause of homelessness for the families in this survey was a result of overcrowding in the family home, or a breakdown in the relationship with a family member(s).** For two of the participants in this survey domestic violence had been the main cause for them becoming homeless.
- **Most families reported a precarious and unstable housing history.** Only 3 families (21%) had relatively stable experience of living in the private rented sector.
- **Continued over-representation of lone mothers.** 9 survey participants (64%) identified that they were women and lone parents. This compares to an average of 60% across data for 2016, 2017 and 2018.
- **There were negative reports from the majority of participants (71%) on the impact of Covid-19 on the services and supports provided in emergency accommodation.** The accommodation and shared spaces were more restrictive, some were not cleaned properly or regularly, and it was noted that some of the other tenants in this shared accommodation did not always adhere to public health guidelines.
- **All participants reported difficulties with trying to obtain accommodation in the private rented sector.** This was related to affordability issues, lack of suitable accommodation and discrimination from landlords in relation to HAP tenants.

- **Majority of participants (79%) had not experienced homelessness before, and this was their first time.**
- **Migrant family numbers presenting as homeless have dropped somewhat compared to previous surveys in this Insight series.** In this survey 5 out of the 14 participants (36%) were from a migrant background. This rate compares to 56% in the previous survey⁶. Also, for 3 out of the 5 with a migrant background they had grown up in Ireland and spent the majority of their life here and could be what is considered second generation migrants.

6 Long, E., Sheridan, S., Gambi, L. & Hoey, D. (2019) Family Homelessness in Dublin: Causes, Housing Histories and Finding a Home. Dublin: Focus Ireland.

Appendix

Telephone survey instrument

Telephone survey with families

SCRIPT and OPT-IN

Hi [insert name]! My name is [insert name] and I'm calling from the Focus Ireland research team. How are you?

Sorry to disturb you, but I'm calling families in our service to ask some questions about your housing history. We spoke to your keyworker on the Family team and they said that it was okay to contact you and that you had given consent for this.

The information you provide will help us to better understand and respond to family homelessness, and everything you say to me is completely confidential, unless there's a risk of harm to you or someone you know.

The call will take approximately 10 minutes. Is that ok?

| | |
|------------------------------|-----------------------------|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Yes | <input type="checkbox"/> No |
| Date: | Ref e.g. FHR01: |

If No

That's no problem at all, have a good day.

If Yes

Great! This call is completely voluntary and you are free to end the call whenever you wish or not answer any question you wish. O.K. let's get started....

Section I: Accommodations Prior to Homelessness

Q1 Where are you living at the moment? [Probe for accommodation type]

| Homeless | | |
|--|--|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Hotel / Hub / Emergency Accommodation | <input type="checkbox"/> With Friends / Family | <input type="checkbox"/> Moving between places |
| Exited Homelessness | | |
| <input type="checkbox"/> HAP tenancy | <input type="checkbox"/> RS tenancy | <input type="checkbox"/> LAH |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Other (please state) | | |

Q2 When did you first move to emergency accommodation?

| Moved in | Moved out (If applicable) |
|----------|---------------------------|
| | |

Q3 Please describe your previous 4 accommodations **before** you entered emergency accommodation.

(Note: No.1 relates to accommodation **immediately before** entering emergency accommodation)

| | | | | If you were in PRS | |
|---|-------------|------------------|-------------------------|---|---|
| | Tenure type | Duration of stay | Main reason for leaving | Were you in receipt of rent supplement? | Was this a HAP property? |
| 1 | | | | <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No | <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No |
| 2 | | | | <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No | |
| 3 | | | | <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No | |
| 4 | | | | <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No | |

Q4 Would you describe this as the first time you have experienced homelessness?

| First time homeless | Have experienced homeless before | Don't know |
|---------------------|----------------------------------|------------|
| | | |

Q5 In what area was your last stable home? (before you became homeless)

| |
|--|
| |
|--|

Q6a Did you contact anyone or any service before you lost your home?

| | |
|------------------------------|-----------------------------|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Yes | <input type="checkbox"/> No |
|------------------------------|-----------------------------|

Q6b If Yes, 'who did you contact first?'

Q6c If No, why did you not contact anyone **before** you became homeless?
What was holding you back? (please give details)

Q7 If your accommodation prior to becoming homeless was in the Private Rented Sector, can you please describe the process and how your landlord went about it? What happened?

Q8 Was/is there a service/support that you feel/felt you particularly need(ed) living in emergency accommodation? (please give details)

Q9 Was/is there any particular challenges you encountered in homeless services as a result of COVID-19 and related public health measures? Was it more difficult to find accommodation in the Private Rented sector?

Section II: Exits from Homelessness

Q10 Have you experience of looking for accommodation with HAP?

| | |
|--|-----------------------------|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Yes | <input type="checkbox"/> No |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Currently living in HAP | |

If respondent **answered Yes** or **currently living in HAP** proceed to next Question (Q7).

If respondent **answered No** skip to **Question 9**.

Q11a How many properties have you applied for with HAP?

| 1-3 | 4-5 | 6-10 | More than 10 | More than 20 | More than 50 | More than 100 |
|-----|-----|------|--------------|--------------|--------------|---------------|
| | | | | | | |

Q11b How many viewings have you gone to?

| 1-3 | 4-5 | 6-10 | More than 10 | More than 20 | More than 50 | More than 100 |
|-----|-----|------|--------------|--------------|--------------|---------------|
| | | | | | | |

Q12 Can you **briefly** provide some further details about your experience of looking for accommodation with HAP?

Q13 Is there a reason/s why you haven't looked for accommodation with HAP?

O.K., I'd like to finish up the survey now with some general questions about age, nationality, employment, things like that...

Section III: Demographic Profile

Q14 What age are you?

Q15 Gender

| | | |
|-------------------------------|---------------------------------|--------------------------------|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Male | <input type="checkbox"/> Female | <input type="checkbox"/> Other |
|-------------------------------|---------------------------------|--------------------------------|

Q16a What country are you originally from?

| | | |
|--------------------------------|-----------------------------|---------------------------------|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Irish | <input type="checkbox"/> EU | <input type="checkbox"/> Non-EU |
|--------------------------------|-----------------------------|---------------------------------|

Q16b If from EU or non-EU, ask 'What year did you arrive in Ireland?'

Q16c If you were born outside Ireland, have you ever resided in Direct Provision accommodation in Ireland?

| | |
|------------------------------|-----------------------------|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Yes | <input type="checkbox"/> No |
| If Yes, for how long? | |

Q17 What is your ethnic or cultural background?

| | | | |
|---|--|---|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Irish | <input type="checkbox"/> Irish Traveller | <input type="checkbox"/> Another White background | <input type="checkbox"/> African |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Any other Black background | <input type="checkbox"/> Chinese | <input type="checkbox"/> Any other Asian background | <input type="checkbox"/> Other / Mixed |

Q18a What is your current employment status? (If unemployed, ask 15b)

| | | | |
|-------------------------------------|----------------------------------|--|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Unemployed | <input type="checkbox"/> Student | <input type="checkbox"/> PT Employment | <input type="checkbox"/> FT Employment |
|-------------------------------------|----------------------------------|--|--|

Q18b If unemployed, ask ‘Are you in receipt of a weekly social welfare payment?’

| | |
|------------------------------|-----------------------------|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Yes | <input type="checkbox"/> No |
|------------------------------|-----------------------------|

Q18c Was your income/employment affected by Covid-19?
If participant answers ‘yes’, ask for more details.

| | |
|--|-----------------------------|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Yes More details | <input type="checkbox"/> No |
|--|-----------------------------|

Q19 Are you single or in a couple?

| | |
|---------------------------------|---------------------------------|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Single | <input type="checkbox"/> Couple |
|---------------------------------|---------------------------------|

Q20 How many children are living with you?

| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5+ |
|---|---|---|---|----|
| | | | | |

Q21 What age are your children?
(insert number of children in relation to age categories)

| Age in years | Number of children |
|--------------|--------------------|
| Under 1 year | |
| 1–4 | |
| 5–10 | |
| 11–15 | |
| 16+ | |

Thank you very much for taking the time to take part in this survey.
It is very much appreciated and will help us in delivering our services in the future.



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